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CAMPUS OF OPEN LEARNING, SCHOOL OF OPEN LEARNING, UNIVERSITY OF DELHI

Twentieth Century Poetry and Drama

[FOR LIMITED CIRCULATION]

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Twentieth Century Poetry and Drama

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Twentieth Century Poetry and Drama

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T. S. Eliot:
(i) ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’
(ii) ‘The Hollow Men’

Aanchal Awasthi

Structure

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1. Introduction: Biographical and Literary Background

T.S. Eliot was one of the most prominent and acknowledged poets, playwright, essayist and literary critic of the Modern era. He was born on September 26, 1888, in St. Louis, Missouri. Eliot's love for literature developed at a very early age. As a child, he could not participate in several physical activities due to a health condition and hence, found repose in literature. He became obsessed with books, particularly fairy tales which narrated stories of savage lives. Robert Sencourt, a friend of Eliot, wrote in his memoir that Eliot in his childhood “would often curl up in the window-seat behind an enormous book, setting the drug of dreams against the pain of living” (*T.S. Eliot, A Memoir*, page 18).

Edward Fitzgerald's translation of the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam left a deep impact on Eliot and it inspired him to write his first poetry at the age of fourteen. Eliot studied at Smith Academy till 1905, where he learnt French, German, Latin and Ancient Greek as a part of the curriculum. Thereafter, he attended Harvard University and Merton College,



Oxford. After the First World War broke out in 1914, Eliot decided to settle in London. He married Vivienne Haigh-Wood in 1915. After his marriage, he took many teaching jobs, including working as a lecturer at Birkbeck College, University of London. He went on to become a British citizen, renouncing his American citizenship in 1927. Peter Ackroyd, one of Eliot's biographers, commented on this conversion that "the purposes of [Eliot's conversion] were two-fold. One: the Church of England offered Eliot some hope for himself, and I think Eliot needed some resting place. But secondly, it attached Eliot to the English community and English culture." (*Voices and Visions Series*)

Eliot's marriage with Vivienne was an unhappy one and they separated in 1932. In 1957, at the age of 68, he married Esmé Valerie Fletcher, who was 30 years old at that time. In the early 1960s, Eliot started developing health related issues and later died of emphysema on January 4, 1965, at his home in Kensington, London.

Eliot had started publishing right from his early days; however, he got recognition after he published "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" in 1915. He rose to further prominence after "The Wasteland" was published in 1922. It is still considered as one of the masterpieces ever written. His other famous poems include, "The Hollow Men", "Ash-Wednesday", "Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats" and "Four Quartets". He also wrote some famous plays like *Sweeney Agonistes*, *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion*, *The Cocktail Party*, *The Elder Statesman*, *The Rock* and *The Confidential Clerk*. Eliot also made a mark through his literary criticism such as "Tradition and the Individual Talent", "Hamlet and his Problems" and "The Metaphysical Poets".

2. Learning Objectives

To closely understand and appreciate the themes, imagery and motifs in T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and "The Hollow Men", the present study material is segregated into different sections which will guide you to:

- a. Locate and recognize the historical context as well as the background of Modernism and the aftermath of the First World War, in which the present poems are situated.
- b. Clearly comprehend the poems and a detailed stanza-wise understanding of the poems.
- c. Understand the psychological thought process of a modern middle-aged man and all the possible dilemmas of his life.
- d. Think subjectively as well as objectively on how wars affect the psyche of people and imbue the idea of hopelessness among them.
- e. Recognize that the themes of these poems still resonate with us in several ways.



3. Aftermath of the First World War

The First World War ended with Germany surrendering on November 11, 1918. A peace treaty, The Treaty of Versailles, was signed on June 28, 1919, between Germany and the Allied Nations (Britain, Russia, Italy and France). This marked the formal ending of the war. As per the clauses of the treaty, Germany had to take all the blame for the war and they were required to pay 132 billion gold marks in order to compensate for the damages caused during the war.

World War I ended with a ray of hope and holding on to the same hope and expectations of a better future, one of the war veterans, Lieutenant Richard Dixon of the Royal Field Artillery said:

“The bloody war is over! It’s over! No more slaughter, no more maiming, no more mud and blood, no more killing and disembowelling of horses and mules. No more of those hopeless dawns, with the rain chilling the spirits, no more crouching in inadequate dugouts scooped out of trench walls, no more dodging snipers’ bullets, no more of that terrible shell fire. No more shovelling up of bits of men’s bodies and dumping them into sandbags” (“Armistice 1918”, *Wartime* 44 (2008) 46–49).

However, even after the war finally ended, its impact remained etched in the minds and lives of people, particularly the war veterans. Most of the people could not go back to live as they lived before the war. Those who had directly participated in the fight were shell-shocked and filled with despair and guilt, while others felt a sense of hopelessness and restlessness. Violent deaths of millions of people across the globe disrupted societies. Millions of others who participated in the war returned to their homes with physical disabilities, ill-health and mental trauma. They found it extremely difficult to see themselves as an inclusive part of the post-war societies.

After the war ended, a new, modern society emerged which was filled with tension, confusion, frustration and hopelessness. While the world was progressing on several fronts and people had high ambitions in life; their mental state was deteriorating because the war had damaged humanity. T.S. Eliot has represented these thoughts, psychological tussle and nervousness of man to match pace with the modern society in a very vivid and lucid manner.

4. The Poem

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”

*S’io credesse che mia risposta fosse
A persona che mai tornasse al mondo,*



*Questa fiamma staria senza piu scosse.
Ma perciocche giammai di questo fondo
Non torno vivo alcun, s'i'odo il vero,
Senza tema d'infamia ti rispondo.*

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question...
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes,
The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes
Licked its tongue into the corners of the evening,
Lingered upon the pools that stand in drains,
Let fall upon its back the soot that falls from chimneys,
Slipped by the terrace, made a sudden leap,
And seeing that it was a soft October night,
Curled once about the house, and fell asleep.



And indeed there will be time
For the yellow smoke that slides along the street,
Rubbing its back upon the window-panes;
There will be time, there will be time
To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet;
There will be time to murder and create,
And time for all the works and days of hands
That lift and drop a question on your plate;
Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

In the room the women come and go
Talking of Michelangelo.
And indeed there will be time
To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?”
Time to turn back and descend the stair,
With a bald spot in the middle of my hair—
[They will say: “How his hair is growing thin!”]
My morning coat, my collar mounting firmly to the chin,
My necktie rich and modest, but asserted by a simple pin—
[They will say: “But how his arms and legs are thin!”]
Do I dare
Disturb the universe?
In a minute there is time
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.



For I have known them all already, known them all—
Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons,
I have measured out my life with coffee spoons;
I know the voices dying with a dying fall
Beneath the music from a farther room.

So how should I presume?

And I have known the eyes already, known them all—
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,
Then how should I begin
To spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways?

And how should I presume?

And I have known the arms already, known them all—
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
[But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!]
Is it perfume from a dress
That makes me so digress?
Arms that lie along a table, or wrap about a shawl.

And should I then presume?

And how should I begin?

.

Shall I say, I have gone at dusk through narrow streets
And watched the smoke that rises from the pipes
Of lonely men in shirt-sleeves, leaning out of windows? ...

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

.



And the afternoon, the evening, sleeps so peacefully!
Smoothed by long fingers,
Asleep... tired... or it malingers,
Stretched on the floor, here beside you and me.
Should I, after tea and cakes and ices,
Have the strength to force the moment to its crisis?
But though I have wept and fasted, wept and prayed,
Though I have seen my head [grown slightly bald] brought in upon a platter,
I am no prophet—and here's no great matter;
I have seen the moment of my greatness flicker,
And I have seen the eternal Footman hold my coat, and snicker,
And in short, I was afraid.

And would it have been worth it, after all,
After the cups, the marmalade, the tea,
Among the porcelain, among some talk of you and me,
Would it have been worth while,
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,
To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question,
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—
If one, settling a pillow by her head,
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all.
That is not it, at all."

And would it have been worth it, after all,
Would it have been worth while,
After the sunsets and the dooryards and the sprinkled streets,



After the novels, after the teacups, after the skirts that trail along the floor—
And this, and so much more?—

It is impossible to say just what I mean!

But as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns on a screen:

Would it have been worth while

If one, settling a pillow or throwing off a shawl,

And turning toward the window, should say:

“That is not it at all,

That is not what I meant, at all.”

.

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;

Am an attendant lord, one that will do

To swell a progress, start a scene or two,

Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,

Deferential, glad to be of use,

Politic, cautious, and meticulous;

Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;

At times, indeed, almost ridiculous—

Almost, at times, the Fool.

I grow old... I grow old...

I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled.

Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?

I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach.

I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.

I do not think that they will sing to me.

I have seen them riding seaward on the waves



Combing the white hair of the waves blown back
When the wind blows the water white and black.

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown.

5. Summary and Analysis

T.S. Eliot wrote “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in February 1910. However, it was first published in June 1915 in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* after Ezra Pound convinced Eliot to do so. This poem is considered to be his first professional published poem and it got him much recognition and appreciation. T.S. Eliot’s poetry, in general, uses many allusions and is apparently much influenced by Dante. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” also reflects Dante’s heavy influence. He has used the technique of stream of consciousness in his poem. This poem is narrated as a dramatic monologue which happens inside the mind of the protagonist, Prufrock, who is an urban man filled with anxiety, restlessness and anguish.

T.S. Eliot initially named the poem “Prufrock among the Women”, however, he later decided to call it a “love song”. He seems to have taken the inspiration of the title from Rudyard Kipling’s poem, “The Love Song of Har Dyal”. In one of his works dedicated to Kipling, he has clearly stated the influence of Kipling on his poetry. He mentions:

Traces of Kipling appear in my own mature verse where no diligent scholarly sleuth has yet observed them, but which I am myself prepared to disclose. I once wrote a poem called “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”: I am convinced that it would never have been called “Love Song” but for a title of Kipling’s that stuck obstinately in my head: “The Love Song of Har Dyal” (Eliot, “The Unfading Genius of Rudyard Kipling”, *Kipling Journal*, p. 9)

5.1 Epigraph

The epigraph of the poem is taken from the 27th Canto of Dante’s *Inferno*. These lines suggest a meeting between Dante and Guido da Montefeltro in Hell. Guido has been in Hell for a long time and after Dante reaches, he asks him the reason why he was there in Hell. Guido confides in Dante and agrees to tell him about all the sins he had committed while he was alive because he would never be able to go up from Hell and hence, his secrets would never reach above. He states that once a person reaches Hell, he cannot take an exit.



Eliot's use of these lines from Dante's *Inferno* suggest that he wants Prufrock to directly address the readers and confide in them. This allusion also informs the readers of Prufrock's present mental state of living in a psychological hell. It seems that Prufrock too, like Guido, is trapped in this state from where he cannot escape and he wants to share it with someone who would not share it with anyone else. Through this, Eliot very dexterously makes the reader Prufrock's confidant and sets up a foundation for his poem.

5.2 "Let us go then... Talking of Michelangelo"

In the very first line of the poem, the first person speaker directly addresses the reader, setting up the idea that the poem should be read as an internalized dramatic monologue and it remains between them. He asks the reader to accompany him so that he can share his feelings. The atmosphere set up here is apparently miserable and lonely as the images he uses, convey the idea of a post-apocalyptic world. For instance, he paints the evening "Like a patient etherized upon a table", streets are almost "deserted" and the image of "sawdust restaurants" depicts as if nobody has visited these restaurants in a long time. It seems as if the world is dissolving and coming to an end. Another aspect to look at in this description by the narrator is that the world might not be this way and it is only Prufrock's perception of his surroundings because he is feeling hollow on the inside. Eliot has very dexterously used objective correlative here as "by interpreting aspects of imagery one can easily assess Prufrock's views of life. His interpretation of everyday life can be described as vacant, bleak and repetitive." (Rai'a A. Abdul Aziz, 3)

While in the first stanza, we only feel the presence of Prufrock and the reader whom he is addressing, but right after that, we see that he wants to take the reader to a room where women are talking about Michelangelo's work. This explanation takes us to a different mood altogether. It appears as if Prufrock is in a sophisticated gathering or a party where women are busy in their conversations which he feels disconnected with.

5.3 "The yellow fog... Talking of Michelangelo"

It is pointed out by many critics that the way "The yellow fog" is personified, it gives us the imagery of a cat. Although he does not state it directly, the words used here like "rubs", "licked", "slipped" and "curled" hint towards the same. Eliot has subtly used objective correlative in these lines as well by using the imagery of "the yellow fog" symbolized with the actions of a sulking cat to convey Prufrock's mental state. Prufrock describes the actions of a cat in a fragmented way, in order to emphasize the idea that he does not see the world as one, rather it is, for him, fragmented and ghostly. He feels terrified to mingle in the society and he deliberately uses the symbol of a cat to reiterate his feelings of being distanced from the society, despite the presence of people around him.



He clubs all the women in one category, “talking about Michelangelo” as he wants to present them in fragments as well. By doing so, he tries to shed light on the broken society which is filled with emptiness and only exists on a superficial level. Prufrock repeats the word “time” several times to create a sense of urgency in the reader. He wishes to make the reader realize that the world is breaking into pieces every moment and there might actually be no time left.

He comes back to the same room where women are talking to each other, which enforces the theme of stream of consciousness as he keeps on going back and forth in his mind.

5.4 “And indeed there will be time... a minute will reverse”

Another interpretation of the affirmation of “there will be time” comes out in this stanza, which also comments on Prufrock’s indecisiveness and hesitation. He is in a constant fight inside his head whether to go and mingle with people around him or not. He assesses all the possible remarks and questions or taunts that are likely to come at him and pin him down with embarrassment. Lines like, “With a bald spot in the middle of my hair”, “How his hair is growing thin!” and “But how his arms and legs are thin” take us to the psyche of Prufrock and his reservation against going inside the room and talking to people. The line, “there will be time to murder and to create” strikes again on his indecisiveness. Prufrock isn’t literally talking about murdering someone, he is rather using this expression as a metaphor for his thought process on how to create an artificial persona for himself after subduing his former self, in order to talk to the women.

Prufrock is using fragmented images to describe himself too while he talks about his “morning coat”, “necktie”, “arms” and “legs”. This again spheres back to the idea that he can’t see anything as a whole and only sees them in parts.

5.5 “For I have known them... And how should I begin?”

These lines reveal that the people present in the party are those that Prufrock meets on a daily basis. He asserts that he already knows all of them and also knows what sort of questions they will ask if he goes to talk to them. The line, “I have measured out my life with coffee spoons” states that he has spent his life in routine and trivial matters. It also indicates that he has attended many such meaningless gatherings. The line also suggests that Prufrock has always lived a repetitive life and is not someone who takes risks in life and this is why he is not able to voice out his thoughts freely. It seems as if he has come to this party as a social or professional obligation but knows not how to interact with women. He feels very insecure about his personality and thus, prefers to remain at a distance from the crowd.



The imagery of Prufrock being pinned on the wall by the stares of all those women is quite interesting. Earlier, he was talking about his hesitation in general, but soon he shifts his focus on a particular woman, whom he describes, again in parts and fragments. He feels petrified in approaching her and feels that they don't have a future together as he can't keep her happy. He constantly directs his thoughts based on his assumptions. On one hand, he desires to go and talk to her; on the other hand, he doesn't know what to say to her or how to begin the conversation.

5.6 “Shall I say... the floors of silent seas”.

Prufrock talks about lonely men to subtly hint at his own loneliness. The bleak atmosphere of “dusk” adds on to his gloomy mood. Thereafter, he chooses to bring in the imagery of an animal and compares himself to an inanimate object that lives in the darkness of an ocean. He tries to explain that since he is aware of his loneliness, he feels more tormented. Had he been like an animal living deep inside the ocean, he wouldn't have been tormented by these feelings.

5.7 “And the afternoon... That is not what I meant, at all.”

These lines act as a revelation to Prufrock's real personality. So far, he had been talking about his inability to approach women or talk to them. The way he uses such refined and articulate expressions in these lines, we know for sure that he does possess a good linguistic hold. It might just be the trauma or hesitation of voicing his thoughts which is probably stopping him from going ahead.

He seems to have been convincing himself really hard to talk to the woman. When Prufrock fantasizes himself as “Lazarus”, he not only flaunts his academic and biblical knowledge but also pictures himself as rising from the dead, which means overcoming his shyness. He is constantly questioning himself, if he overcomes his fear and talks to the woman, would it be worth it?

5.8 “No! I am not Prince Hamlet... Till human voices wake us, and we drown.”

There is a sudden change of mood and thoughts from the previous section. While Prufrock began contemplating on giving his thoughts a chance and approaching the woman in the previous lines, he immediately succumbs to his incompetence in this section.

After striking a comparison with Lazarus and Prince Hamlet, he reduces himself to a fool, “an attendant lord”. He imagines himself as Lazarus, Prince Hamlet and John, the Baptist as a part of his imaginary conversation with the woman. He believes that he is quite learned and has enough knowledge not only to strike a conversation with the woman



but also to impress her. However, he quickly calls himself an “attendant fool” which shows that he has again lost all hopes and courage. He shirks away from challenging himself and creates an absurd image in the reader’s mind. He comes to the conclusion that the woman is unattainable by comparing her with a “mermaid” and hence, absolutely out of his reach. He ends up deciding not to talk to her.

5.9 Check Your Progress

- a. What is the importance of the epigraph in this poem?
- b. Why does Prufrock make the reader his confidant?
- c. Prufrock uses vivid imagery and expressions to define his feelings and thought process, yet he fails to talk to the woman whom he likes. Why?
- d. Do you think that Prufrock has an indecisive personality? If yes, why?
- e. Why does Prufrock say that he already knows all of those present at the party?

6. Themes and Motifs

6.1 Indecision and Inaction

Prufrock is seen to be in a state of conflict with himself throughout the poem. Moreover, the turmoil that goes on in his head does not lead him anywhere. The poem’s momentum keeps on breaking as he digresses from the main point of concern, every now and then. Although he constantly tries to make a decision, whether to talk to the woman or not, he fails to come to a decision and finally ends up not doing anything.

This brings us to another theme, which is inaction. The first line of the poem suggests action where Prufrock tells the reader to “go” somewhere. However, we immediately observe a juxtaposition as there is no path to take to complete this action since the streets “follow like a tedious argument of insidious intent”. Prufrock’s mind is time and again stopped by his own reasons which halts any kind of action in the poem.

The speaker is filled with anxiety that compels him to become indecisive. He doesn’t seem to ask “the overwhelming question”, rather ends up asking the reader questions like, “how should I presume?”, “how should I begin?” and “do I dare?”, which again circles around the same two themes.

6.2 Desire and Disappointment

Although Prufrock is filled with contradicting and indecisive thoughts, his desires are pretty clear. The poem hints towards his utmost desire to establish a romantic relationship with the



woman whom he talks about in the second half. He feels lonely and wishes for companionship. This theme also brings out the irony of the title. Despite its title, “the love song”, the poem never talks about the idea of love, rather it negates all the efforts and desires of attaining love, resulting in disappointment. Prufrock’s urge to communicate and express his feelings is shot down by his own indecision, which not only disappoints him but also the readers.

The idea of desire is emphasized even more when the speaker describes the physical features of the woman which makes it apparent that he wants to become romantically involved with her. But this thought again leads to disappointment as he does not feel competent enough to be with her and give her happiness. It is only the sense of thwarted communication that follows throughout the poem.

6.3 Alienation and Isolation

“The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” is considered to be one of the quintessential “modernist” poems. It reflects much on the social as well as psychological state of the early 20th century. While we apparently see hints of a modernist and a sophisticated society, we are constantly reminded of alienation and isolation throughout the poem. We do not observe the speaker involved in any human interaction, while women in the room are talking to each other. This emphasizes the idea of alienation as he feels distant from the crowd and does not consider himself to be a part of that group. The poem represents a modernist progressive society but at the same time emphasizes on how it is isolating people who fail to connect with each other.

6.4 Check Your Progress

- a. Mention the images and expressions in the poem which suggest indecisiveness of Prufrock.
- b. Compare and contrast the themes of desire and disappointment in the poem.
- c. The speaker talks about communication throughout, but it is the last thing to be seen in the poem. Comment.
- d. How is “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” a quintessential modernist poem?

7. The Poem

“The Hollow Men”

Mistah Kurtz-he dead

A penny for the Old Guy



I

We are the hollow men
We are the stuffed men
Leaning together
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion;

Those who have crossed
With direct eyes, to death's other Kingdom
Remember us-if at all-not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men.

II

Eyes I dare not meet in dreams
In death's dream kingdom
These do not appear:
There, the eyes are
Sunlight on a broken column
There, is a tree swinging
And voices are



In the wind's singing
More distant and more solemn
Than a fading star.

Let me be no nearer
In death's dream kingdom
Let me also wear
Such deliberate disguises
Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves
In a field
Behaving as the wind behaves
No nearer-

Not that final meeting
In the twilight kingdom

III

This is the dead land
This is cactus land
Here the stone images
Are raised, here they receive
The supplication of a dead man's hand
Under the twinkle of a fading star.

Is it like this
In death's other kingdom
Waking alone
At the hour when we are
Trembling with tenderness
Lips that would kiss
Form prayers to broken stone.



IV

The eyes are not here
There are no eyes here
In this valley of dying stars
In this hollow valley
This broken jaw of our lost kingdoms

In this last of meeting places
We grope together
And avoid speech
Gathered on this beach of the tumid river

Sightless, unless
The eyes reappear
As the perpetual star
Multifoliate rose
Of death's twilight kingdom
The hope only
Of empty men.

V

*Here we go round the prickly pear
Prickly pear prickly pear
Here we go round the prickly pear
At five o'clock in the morning.*

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act



Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

Between the conception

And the creation

Between the emotion

And the response

Falls the Shadow

Life is very long

Between the desire

And the spasm

Between the potency

And the existence

Between the essence

And the descent

Falls the Shadow

For Thine is the Kingdom

For Thine is

Life is

For Thine is the

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

This is the way the world ends

Not with a bang but a whimper.

8. Summary and Analysis

“The Hollow Men” was written and published in 1925. Like most of Eliot’s poems, this too deals with the themes of World War I and fragmentary nature of society post the war. This poem, written in free verse, depicts the hopelessness and trauma that has been caused by the war. Like the previous poem, Eliot uses an epigraph before beginning the



poem. This modernist piece of writing puts emphasis on the death and decay that the society suffered after the traumatic event of the First World War. The title of the poem is a combination of the titles of two literary works. Eliot has used the title of *The Hollow Land* by William Morris and “The Broken Men” by Rudyard Kipling.

8.1 Epigraph

Eliot has used two epigraphs in this poem. The first line, *Mistah Kurtz - he dead* is taken from Joseph Conrad’s *The Heart of Darkness*. It alludes to the character of Kurtz in Conrad’s novel, who was an ivory trader in colonial Africa. His character is perceived as that of a demigod, who comes to Africa with the purpose of bringing enlightenment to the land but ends up in the hollows of darkness. This reference to the character of Kurtz sets up a premise that the poem is going to reflect upon the declining European culture after the First World War. Just like Kurtz’s accomplishments die at the end of the novel, Eliot fears that his society is also coming to an end after the war.

The second epigraph, *A penny for the Old Guy* refers to the historical figure, Guy Fawkes. He was one of the members of the provincial English Catholics group who was involved in the Gunpowder Plot. He, along with other members, concocted the failed plot of blowing up the Parliament in the early 1600s. He was arrested on November 5, 1605 and later sentenced to death. From then onwards, that day is celebrated as Guy Fawkes Day. On this day, children would make effigies of Guy Fawkes with sticks, straw and clothes and burn them on November 5. To collect the material, children would usually go around and ask for a penny from strangers. These effigies become a reference to “hollow men” themselves and hence, this imagery has been used several times in the poem.

Eliot uses these two epigraphs to establish the setting, tone and central motif for the poem. Both Kurtz and Fawkes lived an immoral life, filled with violence and inhumanity and both of them died ignominious deaths. The melancholic tone suggests lamentation on the death of these hollow men.

8.2 Section One: “We are the hollow men... The stuffed men.”

The poem begins with a sense of collective feelings. The speaker speaks on behalf of many other men just like him, who feel hollow from the inside. Paradoxically these hollow men are filled with straw, with lifeless material, presenting before us an imagery of a scarecrow as the speaker says, “Headpiece filled with straw”. Their voices have gone dry and although they produce sound, it is as meaningless and irritating as the sound produced by wind over dry grass or “rats’ feet over broken glass”. Eliot, by describing these men as lifeless, stuffed creatures, is bringing out the imagery of a scarecrow.



He further goes on to explain the condition of the hollow men by saying that they do not have any definite “form”. Using the oxymoron to describe their “shade without colour”, “paralysed force” and “gesture without motion” Eliot is implying that their words and thoughts are both meaningless and purposeless. He comments that those “with direct eyes” with faith, and who have crossed over to death’s other kingdom i.e., heaven, will remember them either as “hollow men” or “stuffed men” and not as violent or lost souls. Their voices have gone dry which hints towards the meaninglessness of their thoughts. Even though they wish to talk, they are unable to convey their thoughts.

8.3 Section Two: “Eyes I dare... In the twilight kingdom.”

After describing the basic structure of hollow men, the speaker now speaks in first person and moves on to put forward more features. For instance, he mentions that they cannot look anyone directly into their eyes as if they are guilt ridden or are afraid of facing someone. Eyes are a running motif in the poem and are symbolic of judgement and “moral certainty”. This depicts that the hollow men are in fear of something or someone and hence, are keeping their eyes down. “Death’s dream kingdom” is the first reference made by the speaker which suggests afterlife or heaven. These hollow men seem to be afraid of the souls which rise above from earth. “Broken column” again takes us to the idea of existing in fragments and broken culture.

The next stanza makes it a bit clearer that the hollow men do not want the souls rising above and joining them, to come near them. He asks them to maintain a distance from them. Next, the men are attributed another imagery, that of a scarecrow, which we also come across in the second epigraph. These hollow men appear like scarecrows and they are deliberately disguising themselves in “crowskin” and “crossed staves”. This hints that they do not want to be recognized. In the final two lines of this section, the speaker voices the plea from the men that their final judgement should be delayed. Eliot uses the term “twilight kingdom” more than once in the poem to put forth the idea of gradual reduction of light which is yet again, a metaphor for approaching death and decay. The kingdom that these hollow men are wishing for, is not only surreal, but also darkening.

8.4 Section Three: “This is the dead land... prayers to broken stone.”

In this section, the speaker reveals the setting they are currently in. It is a broken and “dead land” which is just like their condition. The words like “cactus land” and “stone images” are suggestive of lifelessness around them. The imagery of the twinkling star brings in some hope in the poem, however, readers’ expectations are immediately thwarted as he mentions that the star is very distant from them.



When the speaker talks about “death’s other kingdom”, it indicates that they have still not reached their final destination and are somewhere in the middle, like in a purgatory. They stand between life and death, keeping minimal hopes with them. He further compares their place and the other kingdom of death and believes that both must be similar to each other.

8.5 Section Four: “The eyes are not here... Of empty men.”

Stanza one of section four brings back the imagery of eyes. The speaker informs the readers that they are not able to see and follow men in the “valley of death”. This particular reference takes us to Psalm 23 which also talks about “walking through the valley of the shadow of death”, however, unlike the Psalm, these men are not guided by God, nor do they have any sense of comfort to hold on to. “Broken jaw of our lost kingdom” indicates the fact that they already have lost their previous lives, and their spirits are broken.

The speaker informs the reader that the hollow men won’t be able to see anything unless the eyes reappear as the star. They are stuck in this situation and it seems that there is no way out for them. Although the hollow men yearn for a life of freshness and youth which is denoted by the expression “multifoliate rose”, they know that it is nothing but a far-fetched dream. The rose can also be interpreted as the symbol of Jesus being the incarnation of God.

8.6 Section Five: “*Here we go round the prickly pear... Not with a bang but a whimper.*”

This section appears to be differently constructed than the entire poem. Here, the speaker is conveying his thoughts in the form of a song, a nursery rhyme. Some lines and words are repeated constantly throughout this section, which adds to its rhythm. The hollow men are singing, “*Here we go round the prickly pear*” to state that they are in motion and haven’t reached their final destination. This distorted use of a nursery rhyme where “mulberry bush” is replaced with “prickly pear” brings in the idea of infertility and emptiness. The words, “prickly pear” are repeated many times, in order to emphasize on the ordeals that they are facing on their way. It also adds on to the imagery of a desert and cactus which Eliot has used earlier.

“For Thine is the Kingdom” refers to the prayer, which Eliot chooses not to complete here as he stands on his theme of fragmentation. He possibly wants to convey that despite these men praying too hard, their wishes are not going to be turned into action. The presence of “shadow” represents an atmosphere of darkness and loss of hope in life. The repetition of the line “falls the shadow” brings out the idea that the shadow of death and decay is preventing them from bringing any change in their lives and society. The



lines, “Between the essence and the descent” also emphasize on the intensity and power of the “shadow” of hopelessness that exists in every part of human existence. The line, “Life is very long” could be interpreted in two ways— one, that the poet is using is sarcastically as these men are already dead and life had not been too long for them; second interpretation could be that these men are still somewhere between life and death and hence, still feel assured that their life has not yet ended.

In the final stanza, the poet wants to convey that when the world comes to an end, it will not end with a giant explosion or catastrophe, rather, it will cease to exist just like men do, with a “whimper”.

8.7 Check Your Progress

- a. What do you understand from the title of the poem?
- b. Why has Eliot particularly used these two epigraphs?
- c. Comment on the setting of the poem, “The Hollow Men”.

9. Themes and Motifs in the Poem

9.1 Emptiness and Decaying Society

The very title of the poem suggests a sense of hollowness or emptiness. Although the poem begins by talking about the physical hollowness of a person, it progresses to comment on a mental, emotional and spiritual hollowness that people were experiencing post World War I. This emptiness is further extended to represent the cultural decay of European society.

The hollow men, along with the speaker, are described as inanimate creatures that are incapable of taking any decision or action. Like dry grass, their voices have also become lifeless as they have lost their humanity. They have not only become empty, but are also someone to be scared of. They have no hope to hold on to and even a slightest ray of hope is in the form of a star, which is extremely far away. The star stands as a symbol for an impossible dream, a fantasy of recuperation from this decaying society. It also stands for the Christian faith that is perpetually fading away.

The poet basically uses several metaphors and imagery like that of a scarecrow where he points them out as “stuffed men” and perpetual star that stands for Christian faith and hope, in the poem to show the desolate society after the war and how it has snatched away humanity from people and made them hollow from the inside.



9.2 Faith and the Idea of Hope

The poem, in the second half, makes few allusions to the Bible and touches upon the idea of faith only to thwart the expectations of readers. The hollow men are existing in despair and see no scope of hope or faith that could help them in resurrection. Although they are walking on a path, which leads them to one of the kingdoms of death, they have lost all connection with God. They are blindly walking on the path, not knowing exactly where they are heading to. This sightlessness is not just restricted to physical blindness, but also to an eternal darkness that lies ahead of them.

9.3 Check Your Progress

- a. The poem iterates several religious allusions, yet it cannot be termed as a religious poem. Why?
- b. What has compelled the hollow men to move towards darkness?
- c. Why do you think European society is moving towards death and decay?

10. Summing Up

While both the poems talk about different issues, they are still connected by a single thread and that is of cultural decay. In both the poems, Eliot is expressing his views on the modernist society and how the war has created a void in everyone's lives. People are only living a superficial life, without caring about others. In both these poems, we observe a sense of indecisiveness and incapability on the part of the speakers. While Prufrock does not seem to be able to take concrete steps according to what he is thinking, the representative of the hollow men states their incapability to bring a change in the already decaying world. Many critics have also pointed out that T.S. Eliot has based these poems on his personal life as well and they subtly hint at his failed marriage with Vivienne Haigh-Wood. Since both these poems are set in the post-World War I society, we do not find a sense of hope.

11. Suggested Readings

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W. B. Yeats: (i) 'The Second Coming' (ii) 'Leda and the Swan'

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Structure

1. Introduction: Biographical and Literary Background
2. Learning Objectives
3. "The Second Coming" by W.B. Yeats
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6. "Leda and the Swan" by W.B. Yeats
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1. Introduction: Biographical and Literary Background

Born on June 13, 1865, in Sandymount, Ireland, W.B. Yeats was one of the prominent figures of the twentieth century. He is considered to be an eminent poet, writer and dramatist of the modern era. At a very early age, he became fascinated by Irish legends which ignited his interest in poetry. Yeats was raised as a Protestant, however, as he saw the power shift to Irish Catholics throughout his childhood and early adulthood, he underwent an identity crisis. At the turn of the 19th century, i.e., around the 1890s, the Irish Catholics became even more prominent. This also left a deep impact on his poetry.

Yeats moved to England with his family in 1867 and it was in 1881, when he resumed his formal education at Dublin's Erasmus Smith High School. He was heavily influenced by the works of Edmund Spenser and P.B. Shelly. During this period, he wrote poetry that reflected their impression on him. He also drew on the diction of Pre-Raphaelite poems as well as showed the same characteristics in his work as William Blake -- turning Irish folklore and mythology into verse. In 1885, his first poems were published in the *Dublin University Review*. His essay, "The Poetry of Sir Samuel Ferguson" was also published in the same review. Yeats also had an interest in the occult, mysticism and spirituality.



In 1892, he wrote, “If I had not made magic my constant study I could not have written a single word of my Blake book, nor would *The Countess Kathleen* ever have come to exist. The mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write.” (Yeats: *The Man and the Masks*, Richard Ellmann, p. 97)

One of the major turning points in Yeats’s life was when he met Maud Gonne, who was an English heiress and also an Irish nationalist. Yeats became obsessed with Maud Gonne which is also evident in his poetry. In his later years, the poet confessed, “it seems to me that she [Gonne] brought into my life those days—for as yet I saw only what lay upon the surface—the middle of the tint, a sound as of a Burmese gong, an over-powering tumult that had yet many pleasant secondary notes.” (“William Butler Yeats”, BBC Four) Although Yeats was infatuated towards her, he showed much reluctance in joining forces with her in the Irish nationalist movement. In 1891, Yeats first proposed to Maud Gonne and was rejected. Later, he re-attempted his proposal thrice, but was repeatedly rejected. They kept meeting even after Maud Gonne’s marriage and its failure but could not continue for long. Years later, he even proposed to Maud Gonne’s daughter, Iseult Gonne, but was rejected again.

Yeats emerged as one of the eminent Irish authors and was also known to have established the “Irish Literary Revival” movement. In 1923, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. Some of his best-known works include, *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (1889), *The Countess Kathleen and Various Legends and Lyrics* (1892), *In the Seven Woods* (1903), *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933) and many more.

2. Learning Objectives

To closely understand and appreciate the themes, style, imagery and motifs in W.B. Yeats’s “The Second Coming” and “Leda and Swan” the present study material is divided into different sections which will guide you to:

- ◆ Locate and recognize the historical context as well as the background of Modernism and the Irish Movement, in which the present poems are situated.
- ◆ Clearly comprehend the poems with a detailed stanza-wise analysis of the same.
- ◆ Read and relate the poems imbued with various spiritual, Christian myths and stories with Yeats’s personal life as well as the political situation of that time.
- ◆ Recognize that the themes of these poems still resonate with us in several ways.



3. “The Second Coming” by W.B. Yeats

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

4. Summary and Analysis

“The Second Coming” was written in 1919, soon after the First World War ended. The poem is based on the Christian mythological idea of the Second Coming, however, with a twist. According to the Christian idea of the Second Coming, Jesus’s return to the earth was



prophesied so that he could save the humankind and make the world a Kingdom of Heaven, but here Yeats plays with the same idea not only to present the desolate and chaotic state of the society but also to emphasize that it is almost impossible for anyone to save humanity. In his poem Yeats foretells the coming of a “rough beast” which could symbolically point towards the rise of Nazism and Fascism in the world leading up to World War 1.

Just like many other poems of W.B. Yeats, “The Second Coming” is also imbued with a lot of symbols and imagery. It is a poem written in free verse in the iambic pentameter and consists of 22 lines and is divided into two stanzas.

4.1 “Turning and turning in the... full of passionate intensity.”

The poem opens in a very chaotic and unsettled state. The very first line of the poem locates it in a “widening gyre” that is in motion, signifying that everything around is changing and hence, the world won’t be the same. On one hand, gyre is symbolic of a spiral motion that continues and signifies change, on the other hand, it also refers to the cycle that began with the birth of Christ which is coming to an end and ready to be replaced with a newer cycle of chaos. The change here doesn’t seem to be constructive and gives an ominous feeling, as if something bad is going to happen. The symbolic image of the “falcon” represents humanity and “falconer” is the controlling force. This image of the falconer could be a reference to Christ whose voice is now not able to reach humanity as the orderly gyre mentioned above is ending. However, because of the constant motion and all the chaos that surrounds it, the falcon has lost touch with the falconer, which is suggestive of an anarchical state. The line, “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold” re-emphasizes the same idea that like a gyre, the universe has also lost its centre and hence, everything is falling apart and resulting in chaos.

Because of this lost touch between the falcon and the falconer, the falcon or humanity has gone out of control and become directionless and thus, the imagery of violence and turmoil are made evident with images like the “blood-dimmed tide” and “the ceremony of innocence”. This is to show that once the controlling force is gone, people go astray, leaving behind their sense of humanity and sympathy. The poet laments on the present situation stating that the good men have resigned from taking any action and have become silent on the state of events, while the evil men have taken control over the world and are running it the way they want, creating violence and chaos all around.

4.2 “Surely some revelation... Bethlehem to be born?”

In the second half of the poem, the speaker shifts from the vision of the gyre to a dream state where he comes out of his material body and meets the *Spiritus Mundi*, a collective-



consciousness or the soul of the world. By this, the poet is trying to convey that all humans share a common past memory filled with various archetypes and mythical as well as mystical images. In this surreal dream-like state, the speaker sees a lot of mythological figures and archetypes, ancient and strange in form. Thereafter, the speaker envisions a desert where he also sees a sphinx, a lion with a man's head roaming around in the desert. The birds flying not very high, seem to be angry and are casting their shadows on the sand.

We observe a sudden transformation from scorching sun to darkness that falls upon. This hints that the speaker is back again in his own body and has come out of his dream sequence. Although he is awake now, he is unable to forget what he has seen. He feels that there would be such a big change which would shake the foundation of everyone's existence. Instead of a second coming of Jesus, the speaker sees a beastly creature in his dream which is "slouching" towards Bethlehem to be incarnated. Bethlehem is the birthplace of Christ. Yeats has deliberately used Bethlehem to emphasize that the beast was sleeping in the same city for more than two thousand years, i.e., since the birth of Christ and now the time has come when it will wake up and supersede the power of Christ. This beast-like figure will surely bring some change, but it is highly doubtful if this would be for the good of humanity. The poem concludes with the foreshadowing of the arrival of a monstrous and evil figure which will push the world towards devastation and decay.

4.3 Check Your Progress

- a. How does the title of the poem break the expectations of the readers from positive to negative?
- b. Why has Yeats used Bethlehem to be the birthplace of the beast?
- c. Comment on the ending of the poem.

5. Themes and Motifs

5.1 Prophecy

The poem is deeply ominous as right from the beginning we get a sense that some change is going to come very soon. Just like the old oracles who prophesied coming events, Yeats too incorporates foreshadowing of event(s) ahead. He is assertive and certain of the fact that the world is undergoing some sort of transformation and there will come a big change that could shake up the entire foundation of human existence, however, it remains unclear until the end. It becomes evident in the final two lines that the beast is going to bring destruction to humanity.



5.2 Violence and Chaos

This poem was written soon after the First World War ended and hence the impact of the war runs through it quite evidently. The poem opens with chaos, confusion and a sense of anarchy. There is no central power to hold the universe together and hence it adds on to the confusion even more. Lines like “blood-dimmed tide” and “mere anarchy is loosed upon the world” clearly indicate the violence that took place in the war and the aftermath of it.

5.3 Christianity

As stated above, Yeats draws heavily on the themes of Christianity, myths and the occult. The title of the poem itself invokes the popular Christian concept from the “Book of Revelations” that there will be a Second Coming of Jesus to save humankind once again. However, it is interesting to see how Yeats plays with this idea and brings up a different imagery of the birthplace of Christ to make his poem more realistic and relatable. It adds on to the danger that is awaited.

5.4 Check Your Progress

- a. What does the poet envision in his dream sequence and how is it a foreshadowing of events that might come ahead?
- b. Critically comment on the title of the poem.
- c. Comment on the use of myth in the poem.

6. “Leda and the Swan” by W.B. Yeats

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
And how can body, laid in that white rush,
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?



A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.
Being so caught up,
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
Did she put on his knowledge with his power
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

6.1 Summary and Analysis

W.B. Yeats composed “Leda and the Swan” in the form of a traditional sonnet in the year 1923. The poem talks about the mating of Leda and Lord Zeus who came in the garb of a swan. Since the poem is written from Leda’s perspective it terms the copulation between the two as “rape”. Leda was deceived by Lord Zeus. The poem is based on the Greek mythology of Leda, who is considered to be the mother figure and Zeus who is perceived as the father of all. The poem delves into foreshadowing events which took place as a domino effect of this mating.

“Leda and the Swan” is written in the form of a Petrarchan sonnet with an octave and a sestet in iambic pentameter. The irony however is that the form of the love sonnet is being used here to describe a rape.

The poem begins with the description of Lord Zeus who disguised himself as a big swan. He catches hold of the helpless Leda with “a sudden blow” and rapes her. Yeats uses several images like “her nape caught in his bill”, “terrified vague fingers”, “helpless breast” to emphasize that the swan/Zeus uses his force upon Leda due to which she couldn’t retaliate. All these expressions also point towards the enormous force of nature and how humans feel helpless and powerless in front of it, just like Leda. She had to surrender herself to Lord Zeus as she did not have the strength to throw him off.

This assault on Leda led to the birth of Helen of Troy that further resulted in the destruction of the Trojan Civilization in the war between the Greeks and Trojans. This is indicated by the words “broken wall” and “burning roof and tower” which are a clear reference to the fall of Troy. “Agamemnon dead” again refers to a violent and brutal event, the killing of King Agamemnon, the commander of Greek army, by his wife Clytemnestra who also was the daughter of Leda. These two lines sum up the events that changed the course of history. Yeats uses these references to relate with the ongoing situation of his time. It could be a reference to the Irish Movement that was going on at that time. Yeats



could be using the metaphor of rape to criticize the British involvement in Ireland. Just as Leda's rape had set off a chain of events in Greek history so too metaphorically Yeats tries to indicate that war and violence not only bring changes in the present but also lay a foundation for the events to come in the near or distant future. An act can thus have lasting repercussions.

In the final stanza of the poem, the poet makes this event universal by turning the tone more philosophical. He hints towards the idea that Lord Zeus might have imparted his wisdom to Leda because of this mating. Leda, having been impregnated by Zeus now has the power to create the future but does she now also have a foreknowledge of that future like Zeus would have? The poem ends with this rhetorical question.

6.2 Check Your Progress

- a. Why do you think Lord Zeus metamorphosed into a swan before coming to mate with Leda?
- b. Why, according to you, does the poet use this event to make it a subject of this poem?
- c. Explain the lines, "The broken wall, the burning roof and tower. And Agamemnon dead."
- d. Comment on the ending of the poem.

7. Themes and Motifs

7.1 The Classical Age

W.B. Yeats bases his poem on the classical theme where he not only talks about the present event of the sexual act between Leda and Lord Zeus but also encapsulates the essence of the Trojan War and presents it as the consequence of the former event. Leda gave birth to Helen, who was abducted by Paris of Greece which resulted in the Trojan War. The Trojans not only lost the battle but were destroyed and an uncountable number of warriors, including Agamemnon died in the war.

7.2 Sex and Violence

The poem evidently talks about the sexual act between Leda and Lord Zeus and at the same time Yeats makes sure to put across that this sexual act was violent and forced. Although Yeats presents this act as rape, he neither tags it right, nor condemns it. It is as if he consciously took a step back to comment on this. He rather goes on to understand



and show the complexity of the situation by elaborating its mythological significance. Lord Zeus undoubtedly uses violence while mating with Leda, but Yeats's depiction is also suggestive of its importance in the history

7.3 Fate and Free Will

This poem is a classic example of how fate takes us to our destinies irrespective of all the attempts we take to avoid it. The fall of Greece was predestined even before the birth of Helen and even her birth was planned by the God himself so that things align as destined. Leda's rape by Zeus could be seen as a symbol of the debate of Fate versus Free Will that continues since time immemorial. The debate between fate vs free will continues even today and this poem somewhere indicates how human beings are the puppets of their fate and no matter how much they plan and try, all roads lead to their predestined places.

7.4 Check Your Progress

- a. How do you see this poem as a symbol of 'Fate versus Free Will' debate? Explain in detail.
- b. Do you think that Leda surrenders to Zeus at the end of the poem?
- c. What according to you is W.B. Yeats's stand on the violent sexual act between Leda and Zeus?
- d. How do you think Yeats relates this classical event with the Irish Movement and violence attached to it?

8. Summing Up

W.B. Yeats uses a plethora of imagery, mythological references, political context and his personal life instances in both the poems. If read closely, it would not be difficult to understand that Yeats very cleverly uses symbols and images to convey his opinions and thoughts. For this reason whatever he says is left open to multiple interpretations and the readers are left pondering. He takes references from Greek and Christian mythologies to comment on the present situation,

9. Suggested Readings

- ◆ Barnwell, W. C. "The Rapist in 'Leda and the Swan.'" *South Atlantic Bulletin*, vol. 42, no. 1, South Atlantic Modern Language Association, 1977, pp. 62–68, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3199055>.



- ◆ Harper, Margaret Mills. "A Vision and Yeats's Late Masks." *Yeats Annual*, no. 19, Open Book Publishers, 2013, pp. 147–66, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/yeatsannual.19.147>.
- ◆ Jeffares, A. Norman. "Yeats's 'The Gyres': Sources and Symbolism." *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 1, University of California Press, 1951, pp. 87–97, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3816261>.
- ◆ Scott, Clive. "A Theme and a Form: Leda and the Swan and the Sonnet." *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 74, no. 1, Modern Humanities Research Association, 1979, pp. 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3726899>.
- ◆ Weeks, Donald. "Image and Idea in Yeats' the Second Coming." *PMLA*, vol. 63, no. 1, Modern Language Association, 1948, pp. 281–92, <https://doi.org/10.2307/459419>.
- ◆ Wheeler, Richard P. "Yeats' 'Second Coming': What Rough Beast?" *American Imago*, vol. 31, no. 3, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974, pp. 233–51, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26303059>.



Edith Sitwell, “Still Falls the Rain”

Palak Dawar

Structure

- 3.1 Learning Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction to the Poet
- 3.3 Edith Sitwell as a Modernist Poet
- 3.4 Introduction to the Poem
- 3.5 Detailed Summary and Critical Analysis
- 3.6 Structural Analysis and Poetic Devices
- 3.7 Theme of Suffering and Redemption
- 3.8 Summing Up
- 3.9 Questions
- 3.10 References

3.1 Learning Objectives

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

- ◆ Critically analyse “Still Falls the Rain” in terms of its theme and style;
- ◆ Understand the poem as an account of the Blitz during World War II; and
- ◆ Discern the religious message of the poem.

3.2 Introduction to the Poet

Edith Sitwell was born into a rich aristocratic family known for their valuable contribution to art, literature and music. It comprised Sir George Sitwell, his wife, Lady Ida Sitwell and their three children- Edith Sitwell, Osbert Sitwell and Sacheverell Sitwell. The Sitwell siblings grew up to be renowned members of the literary circle. However, Edith Sitwell was the one who became most famous.

Dame Edith Louisa Sitwell was born on 7th September 1887 at Scarborough, England. Her childhood was filled with unhappiness. In an interview with Johann Freeman, she



says that she hardly ever saw her father who was a tyrannical presence. She suffered from Marfan syndrome, which led her to have a curved spine. Her father made her forcefully undergo a treatment for an assumed spinal deformity. To cure this, she was locked into an iron frame. Her mother had severe fits of anger and her childhood was marked by eccentricity even though she was privileged. She was devoted to her younger siblings but she was always lonely.

She was home-schooled at Renishaw by her governess, Helen Rootham, and she spent most of her childhood under her care. Her governess rescued her from the eccentricities of her family and introduced her to the French symbolists. Arthur Rimbaud, particularly, fascinated her and had the strongest impression on her as a young writer. In 1914, the 26 years old Sitwell began living with her governess.

Sitwell, being a neglected child, frequently craved for love and attention from men. At the age of twenty-six, she got attracted to Alvaro De Guevara, an artist and boxer. Being a violent addict, he got involved with another woman, which affected Sitwell deeply. Later, she developed an interest in Siegfried Sassoon, who was homosexual. Almost a decade later, she fell in love with Pavel Tchelitchew, a gay Russian painter. He was often inconsistent in his temper and could not meet her expectations, letting Sitwell down. In 1932, Sitwell moved to Paris with her former governess who underwent a surgery for cancer. Rootham finally died in 1938.

Edith Sitwell began writing in her early 20s. Through her poetry, she challenged the pre-existing notions of Georgian poets like Rupert Brooke, Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, D.H. Lawrence, Walter de la Mare, and John Drinkwater, whose poetry was characterised by ordinary language in free, rhymeless verse. Sitwell's poetry was, however, characterized by its abstraction and subjectivity. She thus retained fanciful and dream-like qualities in her poems; creating a world of fairy tales and childhood memories. This phase in British poetry was marked by a change in tone in terms of searching for faith as the old civilisation was collapsing and a new one was arriving. One war was already over, having left its imprint, and the other one was signalling its arrival.

She published her first poem "The Drowned Suns" in the *Daily Mirror* at the age of twenty-three. Later, the Sitwell siblings together compiled an anthology. Next year, she published her first collection titled *The Mother and Other Poems*. Her famous works include *The Wooden Pegasus* (1920), *Facade* (1922), *The Sleeping Beauty* (1924), *Gold Coast Customs* (1929), *Street Songs* (1942) and *Gardeners and Astronomers* (1953). Her other works are *The English Eccentrics* (1933), *Aspects of Modern Poetry* (1934), *Three Poems of the Atomic Age* (1942). Sitwell was made a Dame Commander of the British Empire in 1954.



Alongside being a poetry performer, she also wrote commentaries on Alexander Pope and a biography of Elizabeth I. She wrote her own biography *Taken Care of*, published posthumously in 1965. Sitwell had joint problems all her life and she began using a wheelchair in 1957. The year before her death in 1964, she was given the title of “Companion of Literature” by the Royal Society of Literature, the first woman ever to be honoured with such a title. Her poem “Still Falls the Rain,” published in 1942, showcases her talent as a political poet as she opposes England’s role in the first world war.

3.3 Edith Sitwell as a Modernist Poet

The Victorian poets, like Tennyson and Browning, used vivid imagery and ensured the reader’s engagement through the senses. They wrote about Religion and Science; and Nature and Romance. These poets wrote with a touch of reality, which led to pessimism, rather than idealism. Moreover, Victorian poetry was influenced by the aestheticism of the “Arts for Arts’ sake” movement. The use of myth and folklore and their engagement with history also makes their poetry unique. The Georgian poets, who wrote during the transition the Victorian and the Modern eras, went against the romanticism of the early 20th century and offered a fresh approach to literature. The Georgian poets usually refers to a group of writers who appeared in four anthologies entitled *Georgian Poetry*, published by Edward March between 1912 and 1922. M. H. Abrahms writes that “Georgian poetry has come to connote words which are mainly rural in subject matter, deft and delicate, rather than bold and passionate in manner, and traditional rather than experimental in technique and form” (285).

Around the early twentieth-century, writers were experimenting with different forms in both fiction and poetry. They made inventive use of language and allusions. These writers had witnessed the horrors of the first World War and wrote out of the trauma that followed thereafter. Writers were struggling to evolve a new style of writing that could capture the deepest experiences of a generation struggling with both; the pain brought forward by the war and the excitement of fresh political initiatives and developments in science. These poets thus lamented for a past but also looked forward to fresh opportunities.

Sitwell’s poetry is appropriately modernist as it shows her experimentalism and eccentricity, truly reflecting the turmoil of her age. She writes on themes such as alienation, nostalgia, and search for identity, stemming from her own personal experiences. Her solid techniques put forth her painstaking craftsmanship to her readers. Sitwell called her poems “patterns in sound,” adding further that they are “virtuoso exercises of an extreme difficulty,” as they were meant for performance. Sitwell’s major experimentation in modern verse lies in the aspect of performativity.



Her poetry oscillates between symbolism and nonsense verse and, according to David Daiches, “they were brilliant if brittle productions, sometimes very amusing, of needing to be read aloud (as Miss Sitwell used to do herself) to achieve the proper effect” (1142). Her experimentation lies in the patterns created by her words and the impact of sound. Her allusions to Dr. Faustus and the imagery of Christ’s crucifixion to depict the sufferings of the London Blitz are part of her attempt to restore faith in the redeeming power of Christ. “Her enquiring mind, love of history and instinct for religious belief” also predicted her turn to Christianity (Phillips 23).

According to Cecil and Tate, Sitwell’s work can be divided into three phases. First, the “impish, modish, light verses of façade”; second, “the romantic evocations of fairy-tale and childhood” and third, “the macabre satire . . . and poignant lamentations” (640). Each phase is marked by her responsiveness to her age and, as a child of the aesthetic movement, Sitwell is loyal to her symbolist roots and ultimately inspired by her sensitivity to the beautiful. As symbolists believed in the use of images and metaphors to create poetic effect, Sitwell uses the imagery of the Crucifixion to suggest faith in Christ even during such turbulent times. Sitwell’s choice of subject - the London Blitz - is also aligned with the modernist preoccupation with the impact of the World War on western civilization.

Sitwell’s Conversion to Christianity

There were many reasons for Sitwell’s conversion to Christianity. Primarily, it was because of her governess, Rootham, who was a Catholic. Influenced by her, Sitwell sought solace in religion. Her life was marked by tragedy and pathos, owing to the desolation of her family life and she was quite mentally and physically unstable at the point of her conversion. This new-found faith in Catholicism provided her with the required anchor, to the extent that she believed that, devoid of religion, she would have reached her decline sooner. She thus held her Catholic beliefs close to her heart, till the end. “Still Falls the Rain” is permeated, not only with Catholic imagery, but the poetic voice is one that is coloured by the true faith of a believer in Christ.

3.4 Introduction to the Poem

Sitwell’s “Still Falls the Rain” first appeared in the collection *Street Songs* (1942). It is a thirty-four-line poem, comprising seven stanzas. She wrote this poem in the backdrop of the London Blitz of 1940-41. Its subtitle, “The Raids, 1940. Night and Dawn,” indicates its backdrop. Written during World War II (1939-1945), the poem seeks to portray the suffering caused by the war and how it led to turbulence in the lives of human beings, through the symbolism of rain. She uses the imagery of Christ’s crucifixion to symbolise



pain and injustice. Sitwell writes from a position of faith, suggesting the possibility of redemption even from such a fallen state of mankind. It combines the realistic with the mystical.

During the second world war, the Allied powers; led by Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union were fighting against the Axis forces - led by Germany, Italy and Japan. Between 7 September 1940 and 11 May 1941, the city of London was bombarded by the German Luftwaffe. These bombs were a part of Adolf Hitler's strategy to destabilize Britain through a military invasion. However, London survived the blitz and prevented Germany from invading Britain. In such tough times, Londoners found respite in their unity and solidarity. During the blitz, many Londoners took refuge in underground tube stations and ordinary citizens came to the forefront as warriors; working as firefighters and ambulance drivers. They chose to prioritise their ordinary life, which went on as normally as possible; showcasing their courage, resilience, bravery and defiance in the face of life-threatening circumstances. A nationalistic ethos emerged and the unshakeable spirit of Londoners could not be broken by the Blitz. Instead, it strengthened their willpower to fight their oppressor and arise from their ashes. Even today, the remnants of the London blitz remain as signs of British resilience and valour.

The horrors of the war have also been depicted by Wilfred Owen, a contemporary of Sitwell, in his poem "Dulce et Decorum Est," in which he describes the physical and psychological trauma experienced by soldiers in the trenches of World War I. The following lines from the poem illustrate the horrors of the war:

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—

Sitwell, however, uses the imagery of Christ to showcase the possibility of redemption even through such bloodshed caused by the ongoing war.

3.5 Detailed Summary and Critical Analysis

Stanza I

Still falls the Rain—
Dark as the world of man, black as our loss—
Blind as the nineteen hundred and forty nails
Upon the Cross.



In the first stanza, the imagery of ‘rain’ descending upon the world as ‘dark’ and ‘black’ refers to the ongoing Nazi bombings on the city of London during the Second World War, known as the ‘London Blitz.’ Sitwell uses similes to compare the rain to the world of man, where both are dark. The world of man is dark as it is at war. The rain is as ‘black as our loss’ – maybe because the bombings were mostly carried out at night. Sitwell compares this darkness of the world of man and the losses incurred by this world. The rain becomes a metaphor for pain and suffering.

Sitwell further compares the rain to the nails that were used to hang Christ on the cross during his crucifixion; equating the rain with the ‘nineteen hundred and forty nails’ on Christ’s cross. The rain is thus sharp, piercing, and more importantly, ‘blind’ as it is oblivious to the pain it is causing. The Nazi bombs falling incessantly on the city of London are described in religious metaphors. It also highlights the moral blindness of the aggressor as they keep on hurling atrocities on the sufferers.

In this stanza, ‘nineteen hundred and forty’ is believed to be an allusion to the year in which the poem was written. It also marks the number of years that have passed after Christ’s death. The year 1940 also marks the year of the beginning of the London Blitz, which began on 7th September 1940; continuing for almost eight months and ending on 11th May 1941.

Sitwell has used the poetic devices of simile, personification and imagery to depict the continuous, falling rain and Christ’s suffering. She attempts to highlight the plight of Londoners during the Blitz by juxtaposing it with the suffering of Christ. It also suggests the desolate situations created by war which leads to severe loss of human lives, causing pain and despair. However, the figure of Christ, symbolizes the presence of faith and the promise of redemption, in the midst of destruction.

Check Your Progress

- (i) What imagery does Sitwell use to describe the rain in the first stanza?
- (ii) What is the significance of the year “nineteen hundred and forty” in the context of Sitwell’s poem?

Stanza II

Still falls the Rain

With a sound like the pulse of the heart that is changed to the hammer-beat

In the Potter’s Field, and the sound of the impious feet

On the Tomb:

Still falls the Rain



In the Field of Blood where the small hopes breed and the human brain
Nurtures its greed, that worm with the brow of Cain.

The second stanza is full of biblical allusions and references: the Potter's Field, Field of Blood, and Cain. The speaker begins by describing the sound of the incessant, falling rain. The sound of the rain changes from the soft sound of the pulsating heart to the hard and fearful sound of the beating hammer in the Potter's Field; a reference to the place where the poor and the unknown are buried after death, from Matthew 27: 7-8. Judas is known to have betrayed Christ by revealing his whereabouts in exchange for thirty silver pieces. Jesus was arrested after this, faced a trial and was subsequently crucified. In remorse, Judas threw the money in the temple and committed suicide, ironically, in the Potter's Field, which was later acquired by the priests with his money. Hence, this money is also called "blood money" in the Bible. This field was then used for the burial of strangers, the poor, the unknown and criminals.

The pulsating heart evokes an air of fear and anxiety. This sound changes to the beating of a hammer, suggesting that graves are being prepared for the common men and strangers who are innocent victims of the war. The fear arises as impure feet march upon the tomb, signifying their arrival. The rain continues to fall in the "Field of Blood"; another biblical allusion to the Potter's Field as it was purchased with Judas' 'blood money.' Here, the brain nurtures greed, yet small hopes continue to breed. In order to symbolise greed, Sitwell has used the biblical figure of Cain. He is the first murderer in the Bible, who killed his own brother Abel, as Abel's offering of the first-borns of his sheep to God was considered more worthy (Genesis 4). It draws attention to the prevalence of jealousy and greed that leads to strife and killing; appropriately mirroring the immediate situation of the war, in which, greed and jealousy have led to massive bloodshed. The biblical allusions in this stanza also point to Sitwell's Catholicism: her belief in the redemptive powers of Christ. She had converted to Catholicism in 1955, with the famous writer Evelyn Waugh as her godfather.

Check Your Progress

- (i) What is the significance of the transition from the sound of the pulsating heart to the beating hammer in the stanza?
- (ii) Explain the biblical allusion to the Potter's Field and its connection to the theme of the poem.
- (iii) How does Sitwell use the biblical figure of Cain to symbolise human greed and jealousy?
- (iv) What does the "Field of Blood" symbolise?

**Stanza III**

Still falls the Rain

At the feet of the Starved Man hung upon the Cross.

Christ that each day, each night, nails there, have mercy on us—

On Dives and on Lazarus:

Under the Rain the sore and the gold are as one.

In the third stanza, Sitwell continues with biblical imagery to heighten the effect of the ongoing German bombings on London during the Second World War. The speaker says that the rain continues to fall at the feet of “Starved Man” hanging on the cross. The “Starved Man” is a reference to the idol of Christ, nailed to the cross for the redemption of human sins “each day, each night.” The speaker implores this generous, bountiful “Starved Man” to have mercy on both Dives and Lazarus.

Dives and Lazarus are part of Jesus’ parable about a rich man and a poor man; about judgement and the afterlife. Dives, a rich man, ignores the sufferings of Lazarus, a poor beggar at his doorstep. In the afterlife, Lazarus is sent to heaven and Dives goes to hell. This suggests that those who live a life of deprivation and suffering are sent to heaven, and those who live a heavenly life full of pleasure and luxury are confined to hell in their afterlife. Such is God’s judgement.

However, Sitwell writes that under the perpetually falling rain, “the sore” (Lazarus) and “the gold” (Dives) are commensurate. This highlights the core nature of war, where there are no winners in the end and pain is the consequence for both powers involved. It is difficult to decide who is right and who is wrong, so the speaker implores for mercy for both.

In this stanza, Sitwell has used the literary devices of synecdoche and metonymy. Synecdoche refers to a literary device in which one part is used to represent the whole or vice versa; for example, a crown for a King. Metonymy refers to the substitution of an attribute for the object signified; for example, ‘good heads’ suggests intelligent people. In this poem, “the sore” refers to Lazarus and “the gold” is a metonymic device to represent Dives.

Check Your Progress

- (i) Who is the “Starved Man” in the third stanza, and what significance does this reference hold in the context of the poem?
- (ii) Explain the parable of Dives and Lazarus and its relevance to the theme of the poem.
- (iii) What is the significance of Sitwell’s comparison of “the sore” and “the gold”?



Stanza IV

Still falls the Rain—
 Still falls the Blood from the Starved Man's wounded Side:
 He bears in His Heart all wounds,— those of the light that died,
 The last faint spark
 In the self-murdered heart, the wounds of the sad uncomprehending dark,
 The wounds of the baited bear—
 The blind and weeping bear whom the keepers beat
 On his helpless flesh... the tears of the hunted hare.

In this stanza, Sitwell continues with the imagery of Christ's suffering, comparing it with the havoc caused by the London Blitz. The continuous falling of the rain is juxtaposed with the continuous falling of blood from Christ's wounds as he bears all the sorrow and pain of humanity in his heart. Christ had five main wounds - one on his side, two on his hands and two on his feet. The incessant falling of rain and blood highlights the suffering of Christ. As men continue to sin, Christ's wounds continue to bleed for the absolution of man's sins. Christ agreed to die on the cross and atone for man's sins.

Sitwell compares suffering humanity to a "baited bear," calling its heart "self-murdered." This suggests that man is both the cause of such fury on fellow humans and is himself baited through his own greed for power. In other words, she means that man leads to his own ruin through these wars. Cruelty towards animals is used as a metaphor for man's cruelty towards man. The keepers keep beating the bear and tears of the hare fall on its skin. These keepers are neglectful of the pains of the sufferer and as they continue to hurl pain even as the body continues to bleed through the wounds and cry in pain. This highlights the predicament of the common people who suffer because of the leaders who choose to fight in wars for power and greed.

Check Your Progress

- (i) How does Sitwell continue with the imagery of Christ's suffering in this stanza?
- (ii) What do the "baited bear" and "hunted hare" refer to?
- (iii) How does Sitwell's portrayal of Christ's suffering in this stanza reflect themes of redemption and forgiveness?

**Stanza V and Stanza VI**

Still falls the Rain—

Then— O Ile leape up to my God: who pulles me doune—

See, see where Christ's blood streames in the firmament:

It flows from the Brow we nailed upon the tree

Deep to the dying, to the thirsting heart

That holds the fires of the world, — dark-smirched with pain

As Caesar's laurel crown.

Sitwell offers a sense of hope in the redeeming figure of God and the tone of the poem becomes more optimistic, than painful. In the current and continuous falling of rain, the speaker will leap up to God for hope and redemption. Sitwell alludes to Dr. Faustus' final speech from Christopher Marlowe's *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus* (1588) right before he was taken to hell by the devils, where he invokes Christ, the saviour, whose blood can save him. His cries go unheard and he is unable to redeem his soul. He regrets his decision to sell his soul to the Devil, Mephistopheles, in exchange for knowledge and power. He calls for the ever-gracious Christ to save him but he also realises that he is beyond redemption, as he agreed to the pact with Mephistopheles. He is thus condemned to hell for eternity. Sitwell alludes to the fate of Dr. Faustus in order to highlight the condition of mankind, that seems hopeless. Yet, it suggests that Christ is kind and can still become the saviour of man through his mercy. Ellen Misko writes that: "the analogy between modern man and Faustus with his diabolic powers is clear enough. But there is also the frightening possibility that [the] modern man like Faustus will not be able to raise himself to repentance. Yet in the words of Marlowe is contained the possibility of the poet's and man's renewal of faith" (63).

The speaker then draws the reader's attention to Christ's blood streaming in heaven as it flows from Christ's "Brow" that was nailed upon a tree. In Deuteronomy 21:23 of King John's version of the Bible, it is mentioned that Christ's body was hung upon a tree. Sitwell's allusion to this version of the Bible suggests a deep involvement with Catholic values. Christ's head was adorned with a crown of thorns. His crown is compared to Caesar's "Laurel crown" as a symbol of victory over the sins of humans. His heart, all encompassing, holds the heated fires of the world.



Check Your Progress

- (i) How does Sitwell introduce a sense of hope and redemption in the fifth stanza?
- (ii) Which line suggests the shift in tone of the poem in this stanza?
- (iii) What literary allusion does Sitwell make in the fifth stanza? How does it contribute to the theme of redemption in the poem?
- (iv) What does "Caesar's laurel crown" symbolise?

Stanza VII

Then sounds the voice of One who like the heart of man

Was once a child who among beasts has lain—

"Still do I love, still shed my innocent light, my Blood, for thee."

In the final stanza of the poem, Sitwell draws the reader's attention to Christ's atonement. The speaker can now hear the voice of the "One," who was once as innocent as a child, just like the heart of man. The child symbolises the innocence of Christ, who was born among animals ("beasts") in a stable. Amidst this chaos, Christ's voice showers mankind with a ray of hope as it says "Still do I love, still shed my innocent light, my Blood for thee." Christ bestows mankind with hope by assuring his love, light and blood for the continuous redemption of man as against man's continuous execution of sins against fellow humans. Sitwell uses this image of Christ as redeemer to counter the meaningless violence all around.

The speaker suggests that if Christ can forgive his people, we as subjects can also do the same and be merciful to fellow humans. Sitwell spreads the message of conquering hate by love and mercy on humans through the figure of Christ. Misko writes that "His Blood, still being shed, is the proof of His Love and can be purifying and life-giving in contrast to the rain of bombs" (64).

Check Your Progress

- (i) How does Sitwell offer a message of redemption in the final stanza of "Still falls the Rain"?
- (ii) How does Sitwell use the image of Christ shedding his innocent light and blood to convey a message of love and forgiveness to humanity?
- (iii) Discuss the symbolism of Christ's voice.



3.6 Structural Analysis and Poetic Devices

Sitwell in her poem, “Still Falls the Rain” writes about a world in dire need of change, a modern world that hopes for redemption through Christ’s blood. In her attempt to depict the predicament of the modern man, Sitwell does not write her poem in traditional patterns of Georgian poetry. She writes in free verse, with an irregular pattern as it mimics the confusion that follows a war. Moreover, it parallels the irregular pattern and unpredictable nature of Nazi bombings of London city during the Blitz. She also uses enjambment to create a sense of tension and urgency. Enjambment refers to the continuation of a sentence from one line of the poetry to the next, without a pause; such as a comma or a full-stop. It ensures a smooth and swift reading of the poem without any line breaks. Thus, as the lines flow from one to another, they engage the reader with the rising and falling of emotions. The use of enjambment also gives a fractured structure to the poem, conveying the shattered reality of the time; making her poem a quintessential work of Modernism that contemplates the consequences of war.

The subtitle of the poem: “The Raids, 1940. Night and Dawn,” suggests that incessant falling of bombs (symbolised by rain) from the skies of London, especially during the night. Christ’s blood falling like the rain symbolises suffering humanity. However, the poem leads its readers from despair to a sense of hope. The cross not just symbolises the collective pain of people in the face of an ongoing war but also symbolises faith in the powers of Christ.

Sitwell is known for vivid imagery in her poems. “Still falls the Rain” uses the imagery of the ceaseless falling of rain on the dark world of man. “Dark as the world of man, black as our loss” creates a bleak and claustrophobic world that had destroyed itself beyond redemption. The impact of the war is highlighted by Biblical imagery, such as: “still falls the Blood from the Starved Man’s wounded Side” and “still falls the Rain/ In the Field of Blood.” The poem is imbued with Catholic imagery; such as the “Starved Man,” reminiscent of the idol of Christ. If Christ’s falling blood symbolizes suffering humanity, it is also a symbol of hope for Christians.

The poem is full of biblical allusions, suggesting Sitwell’s preoccupation with Catholicism; such as the allusion is to the Cross with nineteen hundred and forty-one nails on it, the Potter’s Field, the Field of Blood, Abel and Cain, and the parable of Lazarus and Dives. The “Starved Man” is a reference to the idol of Jesus Christ, whom Catholics pray to. It suggests his love for mankind. The “wounded Side” is a reference to the five main wounds on Christ’s body, of which one was on his side. These balance the gloom and despair caused by the bombing with hope in redemption.



Sitwell's poem, however, depends on the use of repetition to create an impact. You must have noticed how the first six stanzas begin with the same line: "Still falls the rain." The refrain creates a mood of incessant suffering; while, at the same time, reminding the reader constantly about the presence of divine grace in the midst of suffering.

3.7 Theme of Suffering and Redemption

The poem highlights the suffering of mankind during the London Blitz and shows faith in Christ's redeeming power. The theme of suffering and redemption is invoked in the poem through a parallel contrast between the ongoing Nazi bombings during World War II and the suffering of Christ. The continuous falling rain symbolises both, the physical destruction caused by the bombings and the emotional turmoil experienced by those affected. Through vivid imagery and biblical allusions, Sitwell portrays the grief and suffering endured by humanity during times of war. She explores the theme of redemption through references to Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Despite the bleakness of the situation during the Blitz, there is a glimmer of hope in the idea of Christ's enduring love and willingness to forgive. By invoking Christ as a symbol of redemption, Sitwell suggests that even in the face of immense suffering, there is the possibility of spiritual renewal and salvation.

Sitwell clearly attempts to suggest the corrupted nature of mankind, inclined towards sin, through various allusions to the deceivers in the bible; such as Cain, Dives, and indirectly, Judas. Mankind is portrayed as inherently corrupt and morally degenerate; leading to strife and territorial wars. Yet, she suggests through the biblical allusion to Christ's crucifixion and the Cross, that there is still hope as humans are capable of receiving mercy from God, if implored upon, as God's heart is replete with love and mercy. She suggests that God is kind and still loves his people even though they are sinners. He is still the saviour and will continue to protect them by shedding his blood for their atonement.

Sitwell has portrayed the destructive effects of war through her vivid imagery in the poem. However, she emphasises war as paradoxical, by juxtaposing the brutality and devastation of conflict with moments of hope and redemption. She seeks to suggest that there are no victors in a war, only losers. Innocent humans lose their lives and shed their blood. War creates a paradoxical situation in two ways. One, as it makes it difficult to decide who is winning and who is losing the battle of greed. And, second, even in such turbulent and hopeless times, little sprouts of hope erupt in the heart of sufferers, who are optimistic, just like Sitwell, that the situation will get better soon, in their anticipation for normalcy.



3.8 Summing Up

In this unit, you have learnt about “Still Falls the Rain” by Edith Sitwell. It is a poem in seven stanzas, written during World War II. It specifically focuses on the London Blitz of 1940-41. The poem delves into the suffering caused by the war, drawing parallels between the turmoil of war and the crucifixion of Christ. Sitwell employs vivid imagery and biblical allusions to convey the devastation of the war and the possibility of redemption through Christ’s sacrifice. Sitwell utilises free verse and irregular patterns to mirror the onslaught of the Nazi bombings on London. Throughout the poem, rain symbolises the relentless bombing raids. She vividly describes the impact of war through imagery, invoking the fear and devastation caused by the bombings. Despite the bleak portrayal of war, Sitwell offers a glimmer of hope in the final stanza. Christ’s voice is heard, promising love and redemption for humanity, even in the face of destruction. Towards the end, she hints at the possibility of eventual salvation. “Still Falls the Rain” serves as a powerful commentary on the human cost of war and the persistent hope for redemption amid despair.

3.9 Questions

- (i) Can Sitwell be called a Modernist Poet? Discuss with reference to her poem “Still Falls the Rain.”
- (ii) Critically comment upon Sitwell’s use of Biblical allusions to refer to the turbulence caused by the London Blitz?
- (iii) How does Sitwell’s use of free verse, repetition, and varying line lengths contribute to the poem’s overall impact and meaning?
- (iv) How does Sitwell use Christ’s suffering and redemption to add to the overarching theme of war and resilience in the poem “Still Falls the Rain”?

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Anne Michaels, “Memoriam”

Palak Dawar

Structure

- 4.1 Learning Objectives
- 4.2 Introduction to the Author
- 4.3 Detailed Summary and Critical Analysis
- 4.4 Themes in “Memoriam”
- 4.5 Poetic Devices in “Memoriam”
- 4.6 Summing Up
- 4.7 Questions
- 4.8 References

4.1 Learning Objectives

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

- ◆ Appreciate Anne Michaels as a modern poet;
- ◆ Analyse the Poetic Language, Theme and Style of “Memoriam”;
- ◆ Describe her treatment of memory, grief and trauma in her poem.

4.2 Introduction to the Author

Anne Michaels is a Canadian poet and novelist of international repute, who has dozens of literary awards to her credit. Her works span the latter part of the 20th century and into the 21st century. Her exploration of themes like history, memory, love, loss and the human condition resonates with readers across generations.

Michaels was born on 15th April 1958 in Toronto, Ontario. She received her school education from Vaughan Road Academy and later joined the University of Toronto for a Bachelor of Arts in English. She was also awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in Creative Arts for fiction and was the Poet Laureate of Toronto for three years, from 2016-19. She is currently an adjunct professor of English at her alma mater, where she founded the long-distance Creative Writing Program at the School of Continuity Studies. Michaels’



first poetry collection *The Weight of Oranges* (1986) won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize for the Americas. In 1991, she published her second collection of poems, *Miner's Pond*. Her first two poetry collections established her reputation as a writer with deep insight into humanity.

In 1996, she published her first novel, *Fugitive Pieces*, which took almost twenty years to write. It deals with issues of history, memory, love and loss in the post-Holocaust world. Her second novel, *The Winter Vault* (2009) also deals with the themes of trauma, grief, and history. In 2013, she wrote *Correspondences*, a book-length poem. In 2017, she published her new poetry publication *All We Saw*. Subsequently, her third novel, *Held*, appeared in 2023. The same year, she became the Royal Society of Literature International Writer.

Her poems showcase lyrical beauty through her descriptive capabilities and emotional depth. She writes on themes that resonate deeply with her readers as she captures the complexities of human experiences and the interplay between subjective and collective histories. Her writing delves into the everlasting impact of trauma and the ways in which individuals navigate their way out of trauma, in order to discover their identity.

4.3 Detailed Summary and Critical Analysis

“Memoriam” by Anne Michaels was published in the collection *The Weight of Oranges* (1986). The overall tone and mood of the whole collection is melancholic and nostalgic (Ruiz 382). This poem explores themes of memory, loss, grief, and the passage of time. It talks about how we carry the weight of our memories and how they turn into grief in the present moment and the effect it has on the mind and the body of the mourner. It emphasises the enduring presence of those we have lost and the ways in which they continue to shape our lives.

Stanza 1

In lawnchairs under stars. On the dock
at midnight, anchored by winter clothes,
we lean back to read the sky. Your face white
in the womb light, the lake's electric skin.

This stanza establishes the tone of the whole poem. There is a sense of darkness pervading the scene. It introduces the reader to the poetic subjects, who are both leaning back “on the dock” and watching the sky full of stars. This passive activity creates a mood of



tranquillity and contemplation. The “womb light” is a reference to the moon; denoting fecundity and a sense of security. The face of one of the poetic subjects is white, as it reflects the moon’s light: also reflected on the surface of the lake, making it almost human-like. Michaels’ poetry is characterized by her use of light to measure the changes in time. Antonio Ruiz notes:

Michaels frequently measures time through the changes in light. Some of her poems develop a temporal structure that goes from night to day. . . Not only the presence of light, but the lack of it, is something to take into account when approaching many of these poems, especially because the night is considered by Michaels as the appropriate moment to remember those people who left us. (383)

Michaels’ depiction of night is as a time for contemplation and meditation. At the outset, the poem appears to be a love lyric, as the two subjects appear to be sharing a romantic moment together, under the light of the moon.

Check Your Progress

- (i) What does the phrase “leaning back to read the sky” imply about the subjects’ state of mind?
- (ii) How is the imagery of the “lake’s electric skin” linked with the face described in the first stanza?
- (iii) How does Michaels’ use of light serve as a measure of time in the poem?

Stanza 2

Driving home from Lewiston, full and blue, the moon
over one shoulder of the highway. There,
or in your kitchen at midnight, sitting anywhere
in the seeping dark, we bury them again and
again under the same luminous thumbprint.

The second stanza presents a transition in terms of space. It’s a movement from Lewiston to home, driving under the light of the “blue” moon. Note how Michaels continues with the imagery of the moon, covering everything with its luminous light. In the first stanza, the mood was intimate: two people watching the sky on the dock. However, there is an abrupt change of mood. No matter where the speaker is, the “seeping dark” is always present. You may wonder why the kitchen is dark, but remember that, here, the phrase is



metaphorical. The memory of dead ones comes alive under the “luminous thumbprint” of the moon, which is now associated with the sense of loss that refuses to diminish with time: “we bury them again and again.” This stanza establishes the moon as a symbol of memory. Painful memories can surface at any place: “sitting anywhere/ in the seeping dark.” Note that the “womb light” is now transformed into a “luminous thumbprint.”

In the second stanza, there is a physical movement from the dock in the first stanza, to the highway, and further to the kitchen. This movement from the outside (the natural world) to the inside (domestic world) establishes the immanence of memories, which follow the individual wherever they may go. In the light of a “full and blue” moon, memories create an emotional void. The poem has transitioned from a mood of tranquillity to one of sadness.

Check Your Progress

- (i) What is the significance of the moon in the second stanza?
- (ii) What does the phrase “bury them again and again under the same luminous thumbprint” suggest about the nature of memory?
- (iii) What does the movement from the dock, to the highway, to the kitchen suggest?

Stanza 3

The dead leave us starving with mouths full of love.

This one-line stanza is the shortest stanza of the poem, but is replete with meaning. Antonio Ruiz divides the poems in *Weight of Oranges* into two categories: Love poems and Elegies (a poem as a lamentation for the dead). He further divides the elegies into two categories: genetic and individual. Genetic elegies are “lyrical reflections on the human mortal condition, the past and the role that the dead and the ancestors play in our daily lives” (381). This line is a general observation about the effect of the death of a loved one on those who outlive them. “Starving” conveys the profound longing for the presence of a loved one; an unfulfilled hunger. Don’t miss the juxtaposition of “starving” with “mouths full of love.” The intense love and connection we feel for those who are no longer with us, coexists with the emptiness their absence creates. Our love for those gone does not find an outlet and has a physical impact. Note how Michaels uses bodily images to capture the sense of loss.



Check Your Progress

- (i) How does the line “the dead leave us starving with mouths full of love” capture the paradoxical nature of grief?
- (ii) What is a genetic elegy? How can we classify this poem as a genetic elegy?
- (iii) Why do you think Michaels chose to isolate this stanza into a single line?

Stanza 4

Their stones are salt and mark where we look back.
Your mother’s hand at the end of an empty sleeve,
scratching at your palm, drawing blood.
Your aunt in a Jewish graveyard in Poland,
her face a permanent fist of pain.
Your first friend, Saul, who died faster than
you could say forgive me.
When I was nine and crying from a dream
you said words that hid my fear.
Above us the family slept on,
mouths open, hands scrolled.
Twenty years later your tears burn the back of my throat.
Memory has a hand in the grave up to the wrist.
Earth crumbles from your fist under the sky’s black sieve.
We are orphaned, one by one.

This is the longest stanza in the poem and begins with an allusion to the biblical story of Lot, who was Abraham’s nephew in the Book of Genesis. On Abraham’s request, God sent two angels to Sodom to save Lot from the destruction about to befall the sinful city. The angels asked Lot and his family not to look back as they were fleeing, as one who looks back at God’s wrath, turns into a pillar of salt. However, Lot’s wife looked back and was turned into a pillar of salt. This religious reference seems to suggest that looking back is akin to a defiance of God’s will. The speaker looks back and finds the past is irredeemable, as the loved ones have turned into salt stone.



Michaels infuses this stanza with intense and disturbing images of grief. Illness has reduced the mother's arm to nothingness, an "empty sleeve," and her hand scratching her child's hand in pain "draws blood." The memory of the mother's suffering is agonizing; expressed through the image of blood. The "aunt in a Jewish graveyard in Poland" is, most probably, a reference to the horrors of the Holocaust. The aunt's face, which is a "permanent fist of pain" evokes the inhuman atrocities faced by the Jewish community in Europe, around the time of the Second World War. Note that this is the only point in the poem where a specific historical context is provided, helping us understand the source of the speaker's pain. Otherwise, "Memoriam" is a philosophical contemplation on the nature of grief and its impact on our life.

You would be interested to know that Michaels deals with the plight of the Jews during the Holocaust in her novel *Fugitive Pieces* and it is a theme she goes back to in many of her other works. Michaels' father was a Jewish immigrant from Poland and, as she mentions in an interview to *The Guardian*: "when we were born, everyone had just come back from war, or lost someone in the war, or emigrated because of the war – it was inescapable."

The speaker recounts a nightmare when s/he was a child of nine years. The "you" had said consoling 'words' to quell the fear of the speaker. Above them, the family slept on, oblivious of the child "crying from a dream." Their open mouths and scrolled hands could be because they are in a deep slumber. It is possible that the relationship between the two poetic subjects is a familial one; most probably they are siblings, with a shared past. Twenty years later, the speaker still holds the memory of the nightmare, at the back of her/his throat. Painful memories manifest themselves as tears.

In the next four lines, Michaels uses powerful metaphorical images: "memory has a hand in the grave up to the wrist." Memory is not just about skimming the surface of the past but is deeply immersed in it, almost as if it is physically digging into the earth where the dead are buried. Memories have a firm grip on the mourner's psyche, much like a hand firmly embedded in the ground. This image echoes that of the mother's hand and the aunt's face, like a "fist of pain" in the first half of this stanza.

In another powerful image: "earth crumbles from your fist under the sky's black sieve," the poet draws attention to the tragic futility of attempting to hold on to the dead – as their bodies have turned to dust. Subject to the laws of nature and inevitable decay, the bodies of the loved ones are part of the earth now. The sky is imagined as a "black sieve," which fails to retrieve anything for those left behind. As in earlier stanzas,



Michaels uses the natural elements to reflect a sense of gloom. The sense of deprivation is encapsulated in the last line: “We are orphaned, one by one.” The tone of the poem becomes progressively sadder, documenting the effect of loss on the speaker’s psyche. Any attempt to retrieve the past is met with futility and hopelessness.

Check Your Progress

- (i) Explain the reference to “salt stone”?
- (ii) Comment on the different images of grief, as portrayed by Michaels in this stanza?
- (iii) What does the line “Memory has a hand in the grave up to the wrist” suggest?
- (iv) Explain “earth crumbles from under your fist”?

Stanza 5

On the beach at Superior, you found me
where I’d been for hours, cut by the lake’s sharp rim.
You stopped a dozen feet from me.
What passed in that quiet said:
I have nothing to give you.

This stanza reminds one of the setting of the “dock and lake” in the first stanza of the poem. At the beach of Lake Superior, the speaker has been resting for hours; the feet hurting. This time, the separation between the two subjects is merely “a dozen feet,” but the emotional distance is insurmountable. The line: “I have nothing to give you” is a comment on the debilitating nature of grief, which hinders communication. Loneliness, isolation, and pain come in the way of speech, even between those who share a painful past. This reminds us of the American poet, Emily Dickinson’s “After Great Pain” (1862) where she explains the impact of emotional damage and turmoil after facing traumatising events, as she appropriately describes “after great pain, a formal feeling comes –/ The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs” and heart becomes stiff. Similarly, Michael’s “Memoriam” establishes how memories continue to invade the body, mind and heart of the mourner.

Grief arising out of trauma cannot be put into words. Hence, the silence between the two individuals, who are disconnected from each other. As a child, the speaker was comforted at night, but now there is a sense of disconnectedness.



Check Your Progress

- (i) How does the spatial setting of the beach at Lake Superior relate to the earlier setting of the dock and lake in stanza 1?
- (ii) Explain the line “I have nothing to give you.”
- (iii) In what ways does this stanza highlight the personal and subjective nature of grief?

Stanza 6 and 7

At dusk, birch forest is a shore of bones.
 I’ve pulled stones from the earth’s black pockets,
 felt the weight of their weariness – worn,
 exhausted from their sleep in the earth.
 I’ve written on my skin with their black sweat.

The lake’s slight movement is stilled by fading light.
 Soon the stars’ tiny mouths, the moon’s blue mouth.

The sixth stanza brings us back to the natural landscape through the image of “birch forests” at “dusk.” The forest is a “shore of bones,” because of the white colour of the birch trees reminds the poetic subject of death. The earth that crumbled from the fist in stanza 4 now has “black pockets,” from which stones are pulled out - a metaphor for delving deep into the past, into buried memories or the depths of grief. These stones represent the heavy weight of past memories. “Black pockets” implies hidden, dark places within the earth—symbolising the concealed and often painful memories or emotions buried in the subconscious. These heavy stones of memories are “wearied—worn, exhausted from their sleep in the earth.” The term “worn” indicates that these stones have been subjected to time and pressure, becoming smooth and weathered. This can be interpreted as a metaphor for the way memories and grief are shaped over time, becoming an integral, though perhaps exhausting, part of one’s existence. Resting inside the earth, the stones (memories) have become dark; deeply engraved in the psyche of the mourner. Hence, the speaker writes these memories on its skin with the “black sweat” of the worn-out stones. Antonio Ruiz suggests that Michaels seeks to establish that “we are like the earth, burdened with our own past”, further adding that, for Michaels, the dead “are in us: in our bodies, in our memories” (381).

In the seventh stanza, the poet shifts the reader’s attention to the “lake’s slight movement [which] is stilled by fading light.” It signals the arrival of night, when the stars



and the moon will be reflected on the lake's surface. However, in the changing natural landscape, grief remains constant.

Check Your Progress

- (i) How does the imagery of the lake's slight movement and the fading light reflect the passage of time?
- (ii) Why does the speaker describe the stones as being "wearied — worn, exhausted from their sleep in the earth"?
- (iii) What is the significance of the "earth's black pockets" from which stones are pulled?
- (iv) Comment on the last two lines of this stanza.

Stanza 8

I have nothing to give you, nothing to carry,
some words to make me less afraid, to say
you gave me this.

Memory insists with its sea voice,
muttering from its bone cave.

Memory wraps us
like the shell wraps the sea.

Nothing to carry,
some stones to fill our pockets,
to give weight to what we have.

The final stanza of the poem has shorter lines, compared to the rest of the poem but also reiterates the major themes at work in the poem. The speaker recalls the words that made him/her "less afraid," when they were nine years old (stanza 4) and, twenty years later, the memory of it is all that the speaker has to carry. The absence of communication between the family members, in spite of a shared past, is reinforced here. It echoes the sense of disconnectedness, expressed in stanza 5.

Memory, Michaels writes, "insists with its sea voice/muttering from its bone cave." As if from a cave of bones, the voices from the past constantly call out to us. The voices are unclear, "muttered." Though the memories of loved ones slip through our fingers, like dust, they call out to us from the past, like the sound of the sea. The overriding presence of the sea is picked up again in the simile, where memories of the dead wrap the living



“like the shell wraps the sea” and leave them with “nothing to carry” - only “some stones to fill our [their] pockets” and these stones “give weight” to what they have, their life and their experiences. These experiences then shape their life. This stanza is the most important stanza of the poem as it communicates the main thought of the poem: though memories of loved ones are painful to carry, they give weight to the existence of an individual living ‘in memory of’ (Memorial) the loved one, with a mouth full of love, yet starving in their absence (stanza 3).

Check Your Progress

- (i) Explain the metaphor “Memory wraps us like the shell wraps the sea.”
- (ii) What does the poem convey about the role of memory in giving weight to our existence?
- (iii) What is the significance of the speaker saying, “I have nothing to give you”?

4.4 Themes in “Memorial”

Time, Memory, and Grief

The poem delves into the nature of memory, illustrating how memories turn into grief with the passage of time. Even though time is supposed to function as a healing force, in the poem time is powerless to mitigate suffering, as the mind goes back to the past again and again. The poem illustrates how memories, particularly of lost loved ones, shape our lives and persistently influence our present. The dead are described as leaving us “starving with mouths full of love,” indicating an unfulfilled longing and a sense of incompleteness. With time, it may reduce but it cannot dissipate as reminders of the dead keep on surfacing everywhere, just as the moonlight that follows us around.

Michaels presents a very sad picture of the power of memory. Her subjects are imprisoned in their painful past, unable to retrieve any joy. Their memories of the past are images of suffering, pain, trauma, and loneliness. There seems to be an inability to accept mortality and the eventual loss of loved ones as a part of life. However, what is notable about the poem is the emotional power of images that capture the powerlessness of the individual to retrieve the past and the burden that the psyche has to carry. Especially moving is the image of memory, which has “a hand in the grave up to the wrist.” It is these beautiful images, inspired by nature; such as moonlight, lakes, and the sounds of the sea that contribute to the theme of the poem. Though “Memorial” does not have its origin in any one tragic event in the poet’s life, it resonates with readers because of its evocation of a sense of loss.



Pain of the Holocaust

Through her evocative imagery and references to pain are of a general nature, Michaels alludes to the sufferings of the Holocaust. During the Holocaust, Hitler carried out the systematic persecution of more than five million Jews: relegating them to ghettos and concentration camps. The old and feeble were sent to be exterminated in the gas chambers or by mass shooting. Many lost their loved ones and some of them managed to escape. There emerged a diaspora of survivors as well as their descendants. However, prolonged targeted violence over the years impacted the collective psyche of the Jewish population. These survivors have grappled with intergenerational trauma, which has stood against time to remain in their consciousness and cause pain through memory. It is important to remember that Michaels' father was a Polish Jew. In the poem, her mention of the Jewish aunt in a "graveyard in Poland" with "her face" compared to "a permanent fist of pain" recalls the horrors of the Holocaust, which forcefully snatched away loved ones from their families. The aunt's positioning in a graveyard could be an allusion to the collective grief of the Jewish community, which the poet has inherited.

The Natural Landscape in "Memoriam"

Michaels often chooses natural landscapes as settings for her poems. In this poem; stars, lake, birch forest, moonlight, the sea and stones create a connection between the subject (grief, memories) and the universe (nature, cosmos). It serves to create an atmosphere in the poem, that reflects the inner turmoil of the poetic subjects. For instance, in stanza 1, the white light of the moon reflected upon the face suggests tranquillity and peace at this hour of contemplation, midnight. In the next stanza, the moonlight becomes a metaphor for memory, that follows the subject everywhere. In the last two stanzas, the sound of the sea is a metaphor for the inescapable presence of the past in our lives. Black stones are used to symbolize the burden of our memories that we carry all our lives.

The Significance of the Title: "Memoriam"

The title "Memoriam" is rooted in the Latin phrase "in memoriam," which means "in memory of." This poem's focus is on the act of remembering and commemorating loved ones who have died. It resonates with the overall poem and provides an elegiac form to the poem, immediately invoking the ideas of remembrance and mourning. It reminds one of Tennyson's "In Memoriam A.H.H." (1850) which is an elegy for his friend Arthur Henry Hallam; a lamentation for the deceased, that prepares the reader for an engagement with the themes of loss, memory and the continuous presence of the past in the present. The title also encapsulates this intertwining of time in terms of past and present, where the



act of remembering keeps the past alive in the present. Throughout the poem, Michaels illustrates how memories of loved ones resurface in the daily lives of the living, shaping their experiences and emotions and how memories keep the living trapped in the grave of the dead.

The title of the poem resonates with the reader on an emotional level, each of whom would have suffered such a loss in their lives, at some point or the other. While the poem recounts individual experiences of loss and memory, it also touches on broader themes of communal grief and the shared human condition of dealing with the inevitability of mortality. The title suggests that memory and mourning are both deeply subjective and, at the same time, universally shared experiences. It invites readers to engage and reflect on their own experiences of loss and memory and prepares them for an introspective journey within.

4.5 Poetic Devices in “Memorial”

Michaels makes liberal use of figurative language. In the final stanza, the simile “memory wraps us like the shell wraps the sea” compares the engulfing of memory to the wrapping of the sea by the shell. In the first stanza, the metaphor “your face white in the womb light, the lake’s electric skin” points to the nurturing and enveloping quality of the moonlight, while “the lake’s electric skin” conveys the shimmering, dynamic surface of the water. In stanza 2, the moon’s light is a “luminous thumb-print.” In stanza 4, the metaphor of the Jewish aunt’s face, “a permanent fist of pain,” captures the immense pain faced by Jews. The sky is a “black sieve,” highlighting its inability to retrieve that which has turned to dust. Michaels also uses personification: “Memory insists with its sea voice/muttering from its bone cave,” which represents the permanence of sorrow. The stones, like humans, are “Wearied – worn” and “exhausted from their sleep in the earth.”

Michaels also uses alliteration in some lines, to give a musical quality to her poems. In the sixth stanza, “weight of their weariness – worn”. She uses consonance (repetition of the consonant sounds in words of the same line or words placed close to each other) in “the dead leave us starving with mouths full of love.” The repetition of the ‘l’ and ‘v’ sounds in “leave,” “starving,” “full,” and “love” creates a harmonious effect and adds a musical quality in the poem.

Symbolism

Michaels uses the symbolism of moon, light, night, stones, hands and the human body in the poem. The moon’s light is described as “womb light,” suggesting birth, creation, and



nurturing. This symbolises the origins of life and the inherent connection between the living and the memories of those who have passed away. “The moon over one shoulder of highway” symbolises memory, guidance, and the passage of time in the poem, connecting the physical journey with emotional and temporal transitions. Later, the moonlight is referred to as a “luminous thumbprint,” symbolising the lasting and unique impression that memories of the dead leave on the living. The moon thus represents both the beginning of life and burying, the end of life. The transition from dusk to night symbolises the passage of time and the intrusiveness of darkness, which often induces reflections on loss. The stilling of the lake’s movement by the fading light implies how grief can halt the natural flow of life.

Referencing Lot’s story, stones here symbolise the weight and permanence of grief. They mark the past and the places we return to in our memory; suggesting how the past can crystallise into a burden that one has to perpetually carry, as they move forward in life. The stones pulled from the “earth’s black pockets,” described as “wearied” and “exhausted,” symbolize the heavy, worn-out memories that emerge from the depths of grief. The stones’ weariness reflects the emotional fatigue of carrying the past. The symbolism of the hand is used in two ways. One, the mother’s hand symbolises the spectral presence of the deceased and the other, the hand of the memory “in the grave up to the wrist” symbolises the deep and unrelenting grip that memories of the dead have on the living.

Finally, the body is symbolised as a storehouse for memories of the past and as a vehicle to carry the burden and weight of memories; manifested in different parts of the body. Grief is manifest in the throat and the dead leave us with a “mouth full of love”; the hands are stuck in the grave, up to the wrist and the hands dig out black stones from the earth. The speaker writes on his/ her skin, with the “black sweat” of the stones, symbolising the physical manifestation of grief. It indicates how deeply and permanently the pain of loss is inscribed on the mourner’s body and soul.

4.6 Summing Up

In this unit, you have learnt about “Memoriam” by Anne Michaels. It is an introspective poem that engages with the themes of memory, loss, and the enduring presence of the deceased in the lives of the living. Through descriptive imagery and sensory use of language, Michaels captures the weight of grief and the persistence of memory. The dead are described as leaving behind a hungering emptiness; those left behind desperately yearning for their presence. The poet intertwines subjective experiences with broader themes of collective mourning and the passage of time.



This poem explores various ways in which memory shapes our experiences of loss and how the act of remembering becomes a way to honour and preserve the essence of those we have lost, however painful their hold is. Through its masterful use of imagery borrowed from the natural landscape and emotional depth, the poem has attempted to engage its readers to reflect on their own experiences of grief and remembrance.

4.7 Questions

1. How does Anne Michaels use natural imagery in “Memoriam” to convey the themes of memory and loss? Provide specific examples from the poem.
2. How does the recurring motif of light and dark symbolise the process of remembering and mourning? Discuss with reference of Anne Michaels’ “Memoriam.”
3. Is language inadequate in dissipating grief and alleviating trauma? Discuss with examples from Michaels’ “Memoriam.”
4. Comment upon the nature of memory in connection to grief through various metaphors and symbols used by Michaels in her poem “Memoriam.”

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Philip Larkin:
(i) “Whitsun Weddings”
(ii) “Church Going”

Suchitra Singh

Structure

- 5.1 Learning Objectives
- 5.2 Introduction
- 5.3 Larkin as a Modern Poet
- 5.4 Philip Larkin as a Member of the Movement
- 5.5 Themes in Larkin’s Poetry
- 5.6 “Whitsun Weddings”
- 5.7 “Church Going”
- 5.8 Questions
- 5.9 References

5.1 Learning Objectives

After reading this unit you will:

- ◆ Become familiar with Larkin’s poetry as a reflection of post-war Britain;
- ◆ Understand the thematic as well as stylistic aspects of “Whitsun Weddings” and “Church Going”; and
- ◆ Appreciate Larkin as a modern poet.

5.2 Introduction

Philip Larkin was born in 1922 in Coventry, an industrial town in the Midlands, to Sydney Larkin, and Eva Emily Day. Larkin’s upbringing was marked by his father’s appreciation for literature, despite his sympathetic views towards the Nazi regime, and dominating control over his wife and family. His mother’s nervous disposition fostered a close, albeit suffocating relationship with Larkin. Growing up with an older sister, Catherine, known



as Kitty, Larkin's early years were shaped by his father's introduction to poets like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence, and W.B. Yeats.

He emerged as a towering figure within the literary milieu of post-war Britain, asserting his influence across multiple domains; encompassing poetry, fiction, and criticism. Born in England and educated at Oxford University, Larkin epitomizes T. S. Eliot's assertion that "A great poet, in writing of himself, writes of his age." Larkin also fulfills one of Wordsworth's criteria for a poet: he speaks directly to the common reader. Despite his refusal of the prestigious title of Poet Laureate, following the demise of John Betjeman, he was popular as "England's *other* Poet Laureate" and garnered widespread acclaim, John Press, extolled Larkin as an "artist of the first rank" (14).

Despite struggles with poor eyesight and stuttering, Larkin found solace in literature; immersing himself in reading and beginning to write poetry regularly. Formally educated in Coventry, Larkin's childhood was marked by a sense of dullness and monotony, which he later humorously depicted in poems such as "I Remember, I Remember." During his teenage years, Larkin engaged in prolific writing, both prose and verse, largely unpublished, while also developing a lifelong passion for jazz.

In 1940, Larkin commenced his studies in English at St John's College, Oxford, anticipating military conscription within a year. During his time at Oxford, a pivotal period in both his personal and literary journey, Larkin formed enduring friendships with Kingsley Amis and John Wain; prominent literary figures of post-war England. Oxford's wartime environment left a profound impact on Larkin, shaped not only by the individuals he encountered but also by the prevailing atmosphere of uncertainty, austerity, and diminished student numbers. This period fostered a sense of realism and humility in Larkin, as he reflected, "At an age when self-importance would have been normal, events cut us ruthlessly down to size" (2). This awareness of constrained possibilities and a pragmatic outlook permeated Larkin's literary works consistently.

Philip Larkin started his career as a librarian in Wellington, Shropshire, after graduating, where he wrote his first two novels, *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947), along with his debut poetry collection, *The North Ship* (1945). His novels explore the disillusionment of youth with the harsh realities of life.

Despite initial struggles, Larkin gained recognition with his 1955 poetry collection, *The Less Deceived*, marking his prominence as a British poet. Initially influenced by modernists like T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden, Larkin evolved a style marked by emotional detachment and sharp observation, influenced by Thomas Hardy. His mature style is evident in poems like "Church Going" and "Toads," and critics like Louise Bogan and John Press noted his departure from earlier poetic influences towards a more profound exploration of human



experience. John Wain, writing in *The Sewanee Review*, declared, “there was no one poet who dominated the rest. There is, however, one who is, by common consent, the best of them - Mr. Philip Larkin.” Alun Jones added that Larkin’s poetry distinctly captured the essence of the 1950s in English verse.

Philip Larkin’s poetry skilfully melds lyricism with discontent, employing colloquial language and ironic understatement to explore themes of loss, including the loss of modernism and of England, as seen in “Going, Going.” His major works, “The Whitsun Weddings” (1964) and “High Windows” (1974), cemented his status as a leading British poet; with themes of mortality and societal decline. In addition to his novels and poetry, Larkin wrote *All What Jazz?* (1961-71), a collection of jazz reviews, and *Required Writing* (1955-82), a series of book reviews and essays, influencing jazz criticism. Despite his literary success, Larkin was a private figure, famously declining the Poet Laureateship. He continued writing until his death in 1985, leaving a legacy of poignant, reflective verse.

5.3 Larkin as a Modern Poet

The “Age of Anxiety,” a term coined in the late nineteenth century, coincides with the era of modern poetry. This period, marked by a profound sense of unease, gave rise to new poetic expressions aimed at exploring and explaining the human condition. Modern poets like Eliot, Yeats, and Ginsberg delved into the subconscious to probe the meaning of human life, while others such as Elizabeth Bishop and Wallace Stevens examined the interaction between the mind and the physical world. Philip Larkin, however, revisited a traditional dualistic view, proposing that human nature exists in a tension between the ideal and the real. For Larkin, the essence of human nature is the ongoing conflict between our consciousness of an ideal state and our recognition of real-world limitations.

He explores the tension between the individual and societal constructs through his nuanced depiction of personal experiences and emotions. In his poems, such as “Broadcast” and “Spring,” Larkin emphasizes the individual’s struggle for recognition and meaning against the backdrop of historical and technological advancements. He portrays characters who are often loners or outsiders, asserting their individuality by resisting societal norms and the deterministic forces of nature.

His style and thematic concerns position him as a modernist who engages with the complexities of the human condition, highlighting the fleeting nature of the present and the inevitable disillusionment that comes with the passage of time. Larkin’s focus on the individual’s internal conflicts and his acknowledgment of time as a pervasive adversary



reflect a modernist preoccupation with existential themes, making him a distinct voice in twentieth-century poetry.

He employs dramatic monologue and internal dialogue to explore the complexities of human psychology and social interaction. In his poetry, the poetic persona often reveals deeper layers of character through nuanced expressions, subtle tones, and reactions to the environment. This method effectively unveils the speaker's rationalizations and self-deceptions, as seen in poems like "Mr Bleaney," "Self's the Man," and "Dockery and Son." These poems demonstrate how Larkin uses the form to dissect the intricacies of self-protection, such as comparison, contrast, and the attribution of blame or guilt.

5.4 Philip Larkin as a Member of the Movement

Larkin belonged to a collective of like-minded poets like Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, D. J. Enright, John Wain, Elizabeth Jennings, Ted Hughes, Thom Gunn, and Robert Conquest, who proclaimed themselves as a school called The Movement. In the mid-1950s, the movement was characterized by a return to the purity of English verse, emphasizing provincial values and ordinary experiences. The Movement was a term coined in 1954 by Jay D. Scott, literary editor of *The Spectator*, to describe a group of writers essentially English in character. Two influential anthologies, "Poets of the 1950s" (1955) edited by D. J. Enright, and *New Lines* (1956) edited by Robert Conquest, played a pivotal role in establishing the reputation of the Movement. Read this extract from an anonymous letter to *The Spectator* on Oct. 1, 1954:

It is bored by the despair of the Forties, not much interested in suffering, and extremely impatient of poetic sensibility, especially poetic sensibility about 'the writer and society.' So it's goodbye to all those rather sad little discussions about 'how the writer ought to live,' and it's goodbye to the Little Magazine and 'experimental writing.' The Movement, as well as being anti-phony, is anti-wet; sceptical, robust, ironic, prepared to be as comfortable as possible in a wicked, commercial, threatened world which doesn't look, anyway, as if it's going to be changed much by a couple of handfuls of young English writers. (9)

Larkin's association with the Movement stems from his shared stylistic traits with fellow members, including emotional restraint, plain and colloquial language, wry humor, and a preference for ordinary subjects over heroic themes. More significantly, Larkin, like others in the group, articulates the perspectives of the middle and lower middle classes, often termed as 'scholarship boys', who feel both stifled by the effects of Britain's Welfare State and resentful towards the evident privileges of wealth and high society.



Similar to the ‘angry young’ novelists and playwrights of the time, the Movement poets reject the elitist approach and intricate symbolism of the earlier, 1914 group of poets. Instead, they aim to engage with ‘The People’, the substantial portion of society between the minimally literate and the intellectual elite. Their language and subject matter eschew the extremes of society—the affluent elite and the marginalized: opting instead for themes and expressions that resonate with a wider audience. The overarching goal of the Movement was to bridge the ‘credibility gap’ between poetry and the general public. By employing accessible language and addressing universal concerns, they seek to make poetry more relatable and relevant to everyday life.

Despite being labeled as anti-romantic; elements of romanticism can be discerned in the works of both Larkin and Hughes. The Movement poets were unified in their revival of traditional poetic forms; emphasizing simplicity, sensuality, and dignity in content and structure. Charles Tomlinson, a contemporary poet, criticized the Movement poets for their excessive ordinariness and modesty, suggesting their aspirations were too limited. Similarly, Donald Davie, a member of the Movement, lamented the group’s reluctance to challenge both poets and readers, accusing them of being overly deferential to audience expectations and being colloquial, provincial in its concerns and imaginations: “These poets are getting rid of pretentiousness and cultural window-dressing and arrogant self-expression by creating an English poetry which is severely limited in its aims, painfully modest in its pretensions, deliberately provincial in its scope” (Rodway 68). Describing Larkin’s poetry as deliberately provincial in scope might mislead, especially in an era where distinctions between provinciality and urbanity, as well as formal and informal language, are blurred. Larkin’s poetry diverges from the visionary, emotional, and wordy tendencies often associated with contemporary verse. Instead, it aligns with a tradition of British poetry emphasizing thoughtfulness, plain language, moral consciousness, and reason. Larkin’s poetry views the universe as a physical process and humanity as small, unheroic, and conflicted. While his poetry may contain elements of lyricism, Larkin remains steadfast in preserving the individual voice amidst a world devoid of universal harmony. “Larkin writes poetry which communicates primarily to the mind, not to the intellectual mind, but to the understanding, the mind that apprehends ideas in experience.”

5.5 Themes in Larkin’s Poetry

Philip Larkin’s poetry encapsulates the essence of mid-twentieth-century England, portraying both its urban and rural landscapes with vivid detail. In works like “The Less Deceived” and “The Whitsun Weddings,” he captures the post-war urban renewal, suburban expansion, and industrial grittiness; alongside moments of tranquil rural solitude. His poems evoke a



rich tapestry of settings, from the open spaces of Lincolnshire to the bustling city centers of Sheffield, depicting scenes ranging from polluted canals to municipal parks.

More significantly, Larkin adeptly portrays the ordinary experiences of everyday life during this era. His verses resonate with themes of enduring routine, dissatisfaction, and fleeting moments of happiness; offering glimpses into the struggles and aspirations of the common people. While some poems like “Wedding-Wind” and “An Arundel Tomb” hint at optimism, the predominant tone often leans towards a bleak portrayal of existence, characterized by meagerness and disappointment.

Larkin’s urban settings reveal the commercialized materialism of supermarkets and the impersonal nature of city life, where individuals are caught in the monotony of routine and occasionally confronted by fear. However, amidst this urban backdrop, moments of pastoral contentment emerge, offering solace and clarity away from the pressures of modernity. In poems like “Here,” Larkin celebrates the isolation of the countryside, where one can confront deeper instincts and find solace in the cyclical rhythms of nature. The pastoral, for Larkin, serves as a reminder of humanity’s insignificance in the face of nature’s indifference, chastening our vanity and restoring a sense of perspective. Through his keen observations and introspective verses, Larkin paints a poignant portrait of England during the mid-twentieth century, capturing both its beauty and its challenges.

Larkin’s poems portray individuals who are vividly depicted, yet also representative of broader societal types. Through keen observation and attention to detail, Larkin crafts characters like “Mr Bleaney” or the wedding party attendees, whose habits and routines reveal their imprisonment within familiar societal norms. While Larkin’s skill in character depiction resembles that of a novelist, his focus is not on individual uniqueness, but rather on the typicality of human experience.

In Larkin’s view, individualism is illusory, overshadowed by societal pressures and expectations. Many of his poems depict individuals trapped in circumstances beyond their control, alienated, and subject to remote forces. The theme of individuals being absorbed into an impersonal crowd recurs frequently, highlighting the struggle for identity and autonomy in a mass society.

Yet, amidst this portrayal of conformity and alienation, Larkin also hints at a shared humanity and commonality among individuals. His poems often move from the particular to the general, seeking to identify common threads of human experience and emotion. Larkin’s poems repeatedly explore the theme of failed personal relationships, portraying individuals doomed to disappointment and disillusionment. Throughout his collections, he delves into the futility and fragility of romantic connections, depicting characters caught in the traps of unfulfilled desires and unmet expectations.



From the very beginning to the end of his works, Larkin returns to the theme of the inevitability of failure in relationships. In “The Less Deceived,” he mourns over the lost potential of a woman whose future lies with someone else, while “An Arundel Tomb” examines the significance of a sculpture depicting a knight and his lady holding hands. While some poems, like “The Whitsun Weddings,” offer a glimpse of optimism regarding the transformative power of love, Larkin ultimately suggests that idealized notions of romantic fulfillment are often unattainable. Love, portrayed as an elusive and illusory ideal, ultimately leads to disappointment and disillusionment for many of his characters.

In the face of life’s inherent disappointments and disillusionments, Larkin’s poetry deals with the search for purpose and meaning. While many of his poems depict the struggles and failures of human existence, some suggest the possibility of happiness and fulfillment. For instance, poems like “Wedding-Wind,” “Broadcast,” and “The Whitsun Weddings” hint at moments of joy and connection amidst life’s challenges. These poems offer glimpses of optimism and the potential for happiness, even in the midst of uncertainty and impermanence.

Poems like “Church Going” explore the idea of finding meaning through ritual and tradition, even in the absence of religious faith. Despite the speaker’s initial skepticism, the church becomes a symbol of our deepest desires and the need to preserve moments of significance in life, such as birth, marriage, and death.

In several poems, there is a desire to transcend time and self in pursuit of ultimate truth and fulfillment. “Wants” and “Absences” celebrate the idea of vacancy and release, while “Here,” “Water” and “The Whitsun Weddings” end with visions of freedom and tranquility, symbolized by elemental imagery. Although Larkin may not adhere to religious beliefs in the conventional sense, his poetry reflects a deep appreciation for symbols of permanence and endurance. These symbols provide a sense of solace and stability in a world fraught with uncertainty, offering a glimpse of transcendence and meaning amidst life’s complexities.

5.6 “Whitsun Weddings”

“The Whitsun Weddings” (1964) is a collection of thirty-two poems: the most widely anthologized and popular poems in English literature since 1945. Inspired by a train journey from the Paragon station at Kingston-upon-Hull in the North to Peterborough, London in the South on a Whitsun Saturday in 1955, “The Whitsun Weddings” encapsulates the poet’s reflections on this transformative experience. Its enduring appeal lies in its faithful portrayal of familiar experiences, capturing the essence of a hot summer day’s train journey,



the landscapes of post-industrial England, and the bustling wedding parties encountered at railway stations along the way. It begins with a vivid recreation of the sensations of train travel on a summer's day: the oppressive heat, the sense of relief after the rush to catch the train, and the snapshot details observed through the carriage window - as the urban landscape gives way to the countryside. Moreover, the poem exhibits remarkable technical proficiency in its language, carefully navigating the development of feeling and attitude.

This recollection underscores the poem's profound exploration of human experience and emotion amidst the backdrop of a train journey through England's changing landscapes. Reflecting on the genesis of the poem, Larkin recalled after a quarter of a century:

I caught a very slow train that stopped at every station and I hadn't realized that, of course, this was the train that all the wedding couples would get on and go to London for their honeymoon: it was an eye-opener to me. Every part was different but the same somehow. They all looked different but they were all doing the same things and sort of feeling the same things. I suppose the train stopped at about four, five, six stations between Hull and London and there was a sense of gathering emotional momentum. Every time you stopped, fresh emotion climbed aboard. And finally between Peterborough and London when you hurtle on, you felt the whole thing was being aimed like a bullet - at the heart of things, you know. All this fresh, open life. Incredible experience. I've never forgotten it. (*Further Requirements* 411)

In Larkin's poetry, the settings and characters possess striking realism, evoking a sense of familiarity and authenticity. He demonstrates a keen eye for detail, vividly portraying particularized individuals who also serve as representatives of broader societal types. This skill is evident in "The Whitsun Weddings," where the wedding parties are characterized by distinct identifying details, such as fathers wearing "broad belts" and exhibiting "seamy foreheads," or girls bidding farewells while "gripping their handbags tighter." Despite their individuality, Larkin's characters ultimately serve to exemplify societal norms and expectations rather than unique personalities. Indeed, Larkin challenges the notion of individual uniqueness, arguing that societal pressures and conformity blur the lines of distinctiveness. He sees humanity as being what it is with respect to time, choice, morality, love, sex, work, history, and self-image as a result of that simultaneity or duality. The concrete cases of his poems, the existential events of ordinary lives, manifest an essential condition that is laden with the undercurrent of duality as well as homogeneity of the desires and validations.

"The Whitsun Weddings," considered one of Larkin's finest poems, achieves significance by exploring unity within the diversity and disparity of perceptions. Whether



depicting the changing landscapes of town and country or the evolving tastes and values of society, the poem delves into different cultural attitudes characteristic of a transitional period. As Regan suggests, the poem's interest lies not only in what is seen but in how it is seen. At its core, "The Whitsun Weddings" aims to establish a common understanding among the varied perspectives prevalent during this period of societal flux. Through a panoramic portrayal of contemporary urban and rural Britain, the poem's speaker asserts an inherent homogeneity amidst the apparent social and cultural differences rooted in geographical and historical contexts.

The intricate rhythm and rhyme scheme in Larkin's poems reflects the detailed development of thought in his work. For instance, both "Church Going" and "The Whitsun Weddings" have larger stanza units and complex rhyme structures that enhance the exploration of themes. "The Whitsun Weddings" is a carefully constructed poem with eight ten-line verses, establishing it as one of his lengthiest works. The rhyme scheme, like Keats' odes (a b a b c d e c d e), brings to mind the rhythmic chug of a steam engine, as it accelerates away from a station. Specifically, the shortened second line in every stanza enhances the unique rhythm of the poem. Larkin uses enjambment, where lines and verses flow without pause, to depict a continuous forward motion, reflecting a train's journey along its path. Told with careful pacing, the poem vividly captures the unhurried rhythm of a train voyage from Hull to London. Symbolically, the journey symbolizes life, as Larkin watches young couples briefly unite before diverging onto their individual paths towards the future. The phrase "frail/ Travelling coincidence" embodies the fleeting nature of human connections within life's overarching journey.

5.6.1 Critical Analysis

The narrator of the poem starts the poem in a conversational style, by remarking on his tardy arrival. He talks about the sights and scents of the cities and rural areas and comments that the trains traveling through are mostly empty. The first stanza employs some alliteration in lines like "behind the backs," and "sunlit Saturday." The poem also captures the strong scents and stifling heat that permeate the area rather well:

That Whitsun, I was late getting away:
Not till about
One-twenty on the sunlit Saturday
Did my three-quarters-empty train pull out,
All windows down, all cushions hot, all sense
Of being in a hurry gone. We ran



Behind the backs of houses, crossed a street
 Of blinding windscreens,
 smelt the fish-dock; thence
 The river's level drifting breadth began,
 Where sky and Lincolnshire and water meet. (1-10)

At first, the poem's pace is slow as it reaches the river's estuary, emphasizing the sense of vastness and calm; where the elements of sky, Lincolnshire, and water converge. It also captures a sensation of tranquility and amplitude, following the previous scenes of fleeting details, like the street, blinding windscreens, smell of fish docks as something of vague engagement. The journey inland continues in the second stanza, amidst the oppressive heat stretched to miles. The speaker is observing, but his senses are not completely focused on what he is seeing since, first and foremost, he is alone on the train and only has a fleeting sight of the outside world through a window. He observes but does not participate, and the flow of details in this stanza suggest that the speaker is a little bored:

All afternoon, through the tall heat that slept
 For miles inland,
 A slow and stopping curve southwards we kept.
 Wide farms went by, short-shadowed cattle, and
 Canals with floatings of industrial froth;
 A hothouse flashed uniquely: hedges dipped
 And rose: and now and then a smell of grass
 Displaced the reek of buttoned carriage-cloth
 Until the next town, new and nondescript,
 Approached with acres of dismantled cars. (11-20)

Nonetheless, Larkin paints a familiar and recognizable image of the English countryside, complete with "wide farms," "canals with floatings of industrial froth," and "new towns approached with acres of dismantled cars" which contrasts with the pastoral serenity and spirit-lifting aspects. The smell of grass outside the train disrupts the reeking odor of carriage cloth; perhaps leather or some synthetic fabric. This stanza also presents the undistinguished nature of a new town, which resembles all the other towns in its accumulation of new kinds of debris and junk. Note the tone of disdain.

In the following stanza, the speaker expresses an initial annoyance and admits his obliviousness of the wedding parties assembled on the platforms at each station they pass.



But as soon as he registers the disruption caused by outside commotions, filled with giddy noises and excited laughter, “bustle on the platforms,” he is made aware of the wedding parties’ presence:

At first, I didn’t notice what a noise
The weddings made
Each station that we stopped at: sun destroys
The interest of what’s happening in the shade,
And down the long cool platforms whoops and skirls
I took for porters larking with the mails,
And went on reading. Once we started, though,
We passed them, grinning and pomaded, girls
In parodies of fashion, heels and veils,
All posed irresolutely, watching us go,
As if out on the end of an event
Waving goodbye
To someone that survived it. Struck, I leant
More promptly out next time, more curiously,
And saw it all again in different terms:
The fathers with broad belts under their suits
And seamy foreheads; mothers loud and fat;
An uncle shouting smut; and then the perms,
The nylon gloves and jewellery-substitutes,
The lemons, mauves, and olive-ochres that

Marked off the girls unreally from the rest. (21-41)

The speaker’s tone is apparently mocking and scornful. He describes the participants in, what appears to be, a crude and exaggerated manner, referring to the “girls in parodies of fashion” and the “mothers loud and fat and uncles shouting smut.” This disdainful portrayal suggests the speaker’s detachment from and, perhaps, even contempt for the conventions and traditions represented by these weddings. His cynicism is particularly evident in his description of the young women’s attire, which he finds cheap and lacking



in genuine elegance or beauty. He seems to view the weddings and their participants with a mix of amusement and pity, highlighting the superficiality and perhaps emptiness of these social rituals.

The critical observations in the subsequent lines reflect a deeper exploration of human behavior and relationships, and what the event signifies about the participants: the children's boredom; the fathers' swaggering self-importance; the women's knowingness, sharing "The secret like a happy funeral" and the younger girls' uneasy somberness which challenges the conventional notions of romance and celebration. The substitution of "wholly" for "holy" is a deliberate play on words, underscoring the speaker's ambivalence towards the institution of marriage. Additionally, the presence of oxymoronic phrases such as "happy funeral" and "religious wounding" further highlight the complex and contradictory nature of marital relationships;

Yes, from cafés
And banquet-halls up yards, and bunting-dressed
Coach-party annexes, the wedding-days
Were coming to an end. All down the line
Fresh couples climbed aboard: the rest stood round;
The last confetti and advice were thrown,
And, as we moved, each face seemed to define
Just what it saw departing: children frowned
At something dull; fathers had never known

Success so huge and wholly farcical;
The women shared
The secret like a happy funeral;
While girls, gripping their handbags tighter, stared
At a religious wounding. Free at last,
And loaded with the sum of all they saw,
We hurried towards London, shuffling gout of steam.
Now fields were building-plots, and poplars cast
Long shadows over major roads, and for
Some fifty minutes, that in time would seem



Just long enough to settle hats and say
I nearly died,
A dozen marriages got under way.
They watched the landscape, sitting side by side
—An Odeon went past, a cooling tower,
And someone running up to bowl—and none
Thought of the others they would never meet
Or how their lives would all contain this hour. (42-68)

The speaker's attitude towards marriage emerges as the newly-wed couples board the train and this new kind of sojourn serves as a focal point for the poem's thematic development. Initially characterized by a sense of isolation and detachment, the speaker's perspective gradually shifts to one of closer involvement and ultimately, moving compassion. The poem begins with the speaker's observation of the newly-wed couples; sharing the train journey, prompting him to reflect on their collective experience. Despite his initial detachment, the speaker acknowledges his growing connection to the couples, symbolized by his use of the first-person plural: "We hurried towards London," indicating a sense of shared experience. As the journey progresses, the speaker's attitude toward the couple evolves, culminating in a moment of profound compassion. While the landscape they observe is one he also witnesses, the speaker's perspective extends beyond mere observation. He takes a position of empathy and understanding, acknowledging the significance of this fleeting moment in the couples' lives. By doing so, the speaker elevates himself from passive observer to active participant, imbuing the journey with his sense of collective memory and significance that extends beyond individual experiences.

Despite the couples' individual journeys and futures, the speaker recognizes the significance of this shared moment on the train, symbolizing a new beginning in their lives. Larkin juxtaposes the landscape with the couples' experiences, reflecting his own ambivalence towards marriage and the future it represents. The landscape, described as both beautiful and potentially oppressive, mirrors the uncertainty and complexity of marital relationships. This ambivalence is echoed in the imagined thoughts of the couples themselves who contemplate their future lives and the places they are soon to inhabit. Despite the uncertainty and unpredictability of the future, there is a sense of progress towards happiness and fulfillment:

I thought of London spread out in the sun,
Its postal districts packed like squares of wheat:



There we were aimed. And as we raced across
 Bright knots of rail
 Past standing Pullmans, walls of blackened moss
 Came close, and it was nearly done, this frail
 Travelling coincidence; and what it held
 Stood ready to be loosed with all the power
 That being changed can give. We slowed again,
 And as the tightened brakes took hold, there swelled
 A sense of falling, like an arrow-shower
 Sent out of sight, somewhere becoming rain. (69-80)

In the poem's conclusion, the speaker reflects on the significance of the couples' journey, describing it as a "frail travelling coincidence" ready to be "loosed with all the power being changed can give." This sense of impending destiny underscores the transformative nature of marriage and the profound impact it has on the lives of those involved.

Larkin's description of the arrows as a "shower" implies a multitude of trajectories, each representing an individual life journey. This climactic imagery takes on a complex and evocative form, particularly with the image of the "arrow-shower." This metaphor, while initially seeming fanciful, extends beyond the realm of Cupid's darts to symbolize the projection of lives from the present into the future. The image of arrows falling out of sight, eventually becoming rain, suggests a process of procreation and growth, with the metaphor of fertility.

While some critics argue that Philip Larkin's "The Whitsun Weddings" concludes with a sense of foreboding, the poem ultimately emerges as one of celebration. Initially, the speaker regards the wedding parties with suspicion and haughtiness, but Larkin's language suggests a shift in perspective. Though the thread that binds the travellers is "frail," the speaker has a heightened sense of the common trajectory of the lives of the newly-wed couples. However, instead of filling him with dismay, it makes him aware of the regeneration and renewal that their lives represent at this moment of arrival in London: symbolized by the rain.

The poem captures a sense of regeneration in the anticipation of London's abundance lying ahead. Marriage ceremonies serve as symbolic expressions of transformation. The journey itself becomes a metaphor for time and change, showcasing the human capacity to alter the course of life. Larkin himself had pointed to the significance of the last two lines of the poem; commenting that it is here that the poem really "takes off the ground."

**Check Your Progress**

- (i) What inspired Philip Larkin to write the poem “The Whitsun Weddings”?
- (ii) Describe the initial sensations and experiences of the narrator at the beginning of the poem?
- (iii) How does Larkin contrast the urban landscape with the countryside, as observed from the train?
- (iv) Why are all the newly wed couples travelling to London?
- (v) Do you think that Larkin is critical about the appearance of the wedding parties? Explain.
- (vi) How does the speaker’s attitude towards the wedding parties evolve throughout the poem, and what literary devices does Larkin use to convey this change?
- (vii) Analyze the significance of the metaphor “arrow-shower” in the final stanza of “The Whitsun Weddings.”

5.6.2 Summing Up

In “The Whitsun Weddings,” Larkin’s portrayal of wedding parties documents the social norms of the time; the evolving landscape, growing urbanization, and its impact on the rural landscape. Despite the surface cynicism of Larkin’s tone, the poem’s climax suggests a tug for something more profound, driven by the mesmerizing occasion witnessed by the speaker. In a letter, he described the urge to note the scene he witnessed, as it seemed to him a sort of “verbal photography” (Thwaite 57).

However, the poem’s true triumph lies in its mastery of language, precisely rendering the shape and feel of experience. The regularity of rhyme and rhythm creates a sense of inevitability, mirroring the pattern of movement observed in contemporary England’s landscapes. Notice the vivid compactness in phrases like “hot-house flash ‘uniquely’,” where abstract language aligns with the momentary alignment of sun, glass, and observer. Similarly, the description of the train as a “frail/ Travelling coincidence” underscores the arbitrary nature of human existence, reminding us of the chance occurrences that shape our lives. The poem’s conclusion, with its metaphorical expression of the future being unpredictably launched from the present, captures the physical sensation of falling forward as the train slows toward a stop. Despite the poet’s sense of defeat, language remains a powerful tool for conveying the complexities of human experience and emotion.

Beginning as an observer, the poet ends as a participant in this transformative journey. He is acutely conscious of the significance of this moment of arriving in London; which



marks a moment of regeneration. All the newly-wed couples, together in this “Travelling coincidence,” will proceed to a fruitful future, symbolized by the rain.

Glossary

Whitsun: (White Sunday). Also called Whitsunday or Whitsuntide is the feast of the Pentecost, which falls on the 7th day after Easter, commemorating the descent of the Holy Spirit on the apostles of Christ. Considered to be very auspicious for weddings. During the 50s it was a favoured time for marriage and honeymoon due to the long weekend.

Lincolnshire: historic county in the east of England

industrial froth: the layer of dirt or scum spread on top of the canal, due to the industrial effluents cast from the factories nearby.

hothouse: a heated building used for growing plants.

whoops and skirls: shouts and shrieks

larking: cavorting; enjoy oneself by behaving in a playful and mischievous way.

seamy: sordid, disreputable, sleazy

smut: obscenity; here the uncle is cracking indecent jokes at the expense of the newlyweds.

perms: a term in hair dressing; permanent wave

confetti: small pieces of coloured paper traditionally thrown over a bride and bridegroom by their wedding guests after the marriage ceremony has taken place

confetti and advice were thrown: a figure of speech named ‘zeugma’ or ‘syllepsis’ is used here, in which one single phrase or word joins different parts of a sentence, which may actually befit only one part. Zeugma means ‘yoking’.

farcical: extremely ludicrous

happy funeral: is an oxymoron, where contraries are yoked together to describe the indescribable. Ironical comment about marriage which may begin in joy and happiness but may end in tears and sorrow.

religious wounding: the tense girls cannot make out their mothers laughing at a shared secret. The ritual of marriage seems to be sanctioning a ‘deflowering’ of the virgins, ratified by society.

poplar: A tall tree found in the North Temperate Zone. It is called Chinara in North India

Odeon: a movie theatre chain, popular in Britain

cooling Tower: heat removal devices used to transfer process waste heat to the atmosphere



Pullman: a railway carriage with special amenities, designed by George M. Pullman of America. During Larkin's times, these had gone out of fashion. The image adds to the poem's sense of an idyllic, static Old England

this frail travelling coincidence: being co-travellers in a journey. 'Coincidenza' in Italian, is a transfer station in railroad travel. Larkin's "coincidence" may be an interlingual pun. Like both "frail" and "traveling," it may just be a way of naming the brief encounter that the poem stages, between the speaker and those he observes.

there swelled/A sense of falling, like an arrow: Larkin passes on from the particular to the universal; loaded with meanings and significations. Falling is a sensation that accompanies when the brake is applied to a moving train. Sense of falling may be 'Felix Culpa', a happy fall – a reference to the married couples' future life. Larkin creates a complex symbolic image into which we might read overtones of fertility, aggression, joy, sadness, and delayed consequences—all things often associated with marriage.

5.7 "Church Going"

In May 1954, *The Church Times* highlighted an initiative spearheaded by the Historic Churches Preservation Trust with a feature titled "Save our Churches Week." Concurrently, Philip Larkin experienced a formative moment during a cycling holiday in Ireland. He encountered a derelict church, a sight that profoundly impacted him. Unlike the war-damaged churches he had seen previously, this was a church that had merely been abandoned. Larkin explained on a BBC Radio broadcast on 3 July 1964, nearly six months before the Monitor film was televised, 'Church Going' was not only written in Belfast but was inspired by an Irish scene:

One Sunday afternoon in Ireland when I had cycled out into the country I came across a ruined church, the first I had seen. It made a deep impression on me. I had seen plenty of bombed churches, but never one that had simply fallen into disuse, and for a few minutes I felt the decline of Christianity in our century as tangibly as gooseflesh. The poem I subsequently wrote [is] called 'Church Going'. (FR, 83)

Larkin's depiction of the modern man as agnostic, materialistic, and spiritually adrift underscores the broader societal trends of the post-war era, characterized by a shift away from religious piety towards secularism and rationalism. The essence of "Church Going" revolves around the existential crisis of the modern era, characterized by a disconnect from traditional beliefs and values. Larkin's speaker, often identified with the poet himself, questions the relevance of the church in an increasingly secular society. As Larkin



himself noted in an interview, the poem does not espouse religious sentiment but rather explores the humanist struggle to find meaning amidst spiritual ambiguity.

While the poem acknowledges the loss of traditional faith, it also suggests the possibility of finding meaning and purpose beyond religious dogma. The speaker's contemplation of the church as a "serious house on serious earth" reflects a deeper longing for existential significance and spiritual fulfillment. Through its use of irony, satire, and introspection, "Church Going" challenges simplistic interpretations of atheism and resignation. Rather than resigning himself to despair, the speaker looks beyond the complexities of existence to search for meaning.

Philip Larkin also demonstrates a meticulous attention to form, evident in the rhythmic structure of the poem. Consisting of seven stanzas with nine lines each, Larkin maintains the traditional iambic pentameter, alternating between unstressed and stressed syllables to establish a rhythmic flow. For instance, in the line "For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff," the stressed syllables are emphasized, maintaining the rhythmic pattern. Additionally, the poem follows a strict rhyme scheme of *abab cdcd*, further contributing to its rhythmic coherence. Through the deliberate utilization of form, Larkin enhances the poem's aesthetic appeal while emphasizing its thematic resonance.

"Church Going" presents a contemplation of the perpetual search for meaning and purpose in the midst of uncertainty and flux. The speaker's introspection and skepticism reflect a broader exploration of the tension between tradition and modernity, belief and skepticism. Every line and stanza is infused with layers of meaning, leading the reader to uncover the profound uncertainties and complexities inherent in existence. It also serves as a testament to Larkin's ability to navigate the complexities of the human psyche and confront the existential dilemmas of modern life. By interrogating the role of religion in society, the poem offers a thought-provoking examination of the enduring quest for meaning and purpose in the face of uncertainty and change. As John Press suggests, the poem challenges simplistic assertions about the implications of atheism, inviting readers to explore alternative reactions to the predicament of isolation in a seemingly indifferent universe (Press, 1).

In essence, "Church Going" stands as a timeless meditation on the human quest for meaning in an increasingly secular and uncertain world. Larkin's exploration of religious themes and existential angst resonates with readers, inviting them to confront the complexities of faith, doubt, and the search for transcendence in the face of existential uncertainty.

5.7.1 "Church Going": Critical Analysis

"Church Going" was first published in Larkin's poetic collection "The Less Deceived" (1954). The poem delves into the significance of places of worship, particularly against



the backdrop of post-war Britain's shifting cultural landscape. Philip Larkin engages in a multifaceted exploration of the human condition and the evolving role of religious institutions within modern society.

“Church Going” appears as an expression of loss and disconnection from traditional beliefs, reflecting the decline of religious adherence and erosion of traditional values prevalent in the post-war era (Lewis, 2004). By portraying the church visitor, Larkin underscores the societal shift during a period of significant decline in church attendance.

The poem begins with the speaker's casual and somewhat irreverent attitude towards visiting churches. He enters the building with a sense of boredom and indifference, seeking a momentary distraction from the monotony of life:

Once I am sure there's nothing going on
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off
My cycle-clips in awkward reverence. (1-9)

The line “Once I am sure there's nothing going on,” suggests a reluctance to engage with religious rituals or services. Instead, the speaker views the church as a mere historical curiosity or a temporary escape from meaninglessness. The dismissive tone towards religious practices is highlighted in phrases like “superstitious observances” and “habitual failure to perceive the possibility of religious experience.” As the speaker explores the church, he reduces its sacred symbols and rituals to mundane objects devoid of meaning.

The deliberate omission of the definite article in phrases like “matting, seats and stone and little books” neutralizes their significance, emphasizing their materiality over their spiritual connotations. Even the altar, traditionally the focal point of worship, is described simply as “brass and stuff,” reflecting the speaker's ignorance or disdain towards religious symbolism.

However, beneath the facade of indifference lies a deeper curiosity and contemplation. The speaker acknowledges an unspoken recognition of the church's significance, despite his attempts to feign disinterest. This is evident in his awkward gesture of reverence, such



as removing his cycle clips, and his lingering presence within the church despite his initial intention to leave. The poem suggests that despite the decline of religious faith, there remains a lingering fascination with the cultural and historical significance of churches.

The second stanza of “Church Going” delves deeper into the speaker’s ambivalence towards religious practices and the church itself:

Move forward, run my hand around the font.
 From where I stand, the roof looks almost new –
 Cleaned, or restored? Someone would know: I don’t.
 Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few
 Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce
 ‘Here endeth’ much more loudly than I’d meant.
 The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door
 I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,
 Reflect the place was not worth stopping for. (10-18)

Initially, the speaker engages in a sort of antiquarian exploration, running his hand around the font in a quest for tangible a connection to history. The borrowed language of a guidebook momentarily lends an air of scholarly inquiry, but the speaker quickly disavows any pretensions to antiquarianism. Instead, he resorts to mimicry, mounting the lectern to read from the Bible in what he perceives as appropriate tones. However, his attempt at mimicking a clergyman’s booming voice backfires, as the echoes within the church seem to mock his irreverence. Faced with the church’s silent rebuke, the speaker retreats, but not without attempting to assert his own significance through ritualistic gestures. He signs the visitors’ book and donates an Irish sixpence, perhaps in a futile attempt to assert his presence and leave a mark, however small, within the sacred space. Yet, his actions betray a sense of insecurity and discomfort, as he ultimately concludes that the church was “not worth stopping for.”

In the next stanza, the speaker speculates on the future of churches in a secular society. He imagines a time when churches will be abandoned and left to decay, becoming objects of historical curiosity or superstition, where people come to seek cures. However, the subsequent lines dismiss any notions of heavenly powers or power politics, instead envisioning a future dominated by a new form of paganism. This new paganism, much like its predecessor, is characterized by doubt and uncertainty, with individuals resorting to religious observances and superstitions in hopes of practical benefits rather than genuine belief:



Yet stop I did: in fact I often do,
And always end much at a loss like this,
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,
When churches fall completely out of use
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep
A few cathedrals chronically on show,
Their parchment, plate and pyx in locked cases,
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places?

Or, after dark, will dubious women come
To make their children touch a particular stone;
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some
Advised night see walking a dead one?
Power of some sort or other will go on
In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;
But superstition, like belief, must die,
And what remains when disbelief has gone?
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky (19-35)

The speaker imagines a scenario where rituals and practices from past religions persist in a diluted form, serving as substitutes for genuine spiritual conviction. Larkin suggests that these substitutes for religious belief, whether they be superstitions or organized rituals, ultimately prove inadequate in providing a meaningful understanding of existence. There are parallels to T. S. Eliot's exploration of similar themes in *The Waste Land*, where various rituals and practices are depicted as futile attempts to make sense of life's complexities.

Despite this skepticism towards organized religion and superstition, the speaker acknowledges a persistent draw towards churches, even in the face of their eventual decline. He speculates on the fate of these sacred spaces, pondering whether they will become museums or fall into ruin, and imagines potential future visitors drawn to them out of curiosity or sentimentality. The poem suggests that while organized religion and superstition may fade into obscurity, the significance of churches as repositories of cultural and personal history will endure. The speaker finds value in the church as a symbol of life's most crucial moments; such as birth,



marriage, and death, and recognizes its role in reminding individuals of the seriousness and transitoriness of life. In this way, the church continues to serve as a place for introspection and contemplation, even as beliefs and practices evolve and change over time.

In the subsequent stanzas of “Church Going,” the narrator’s demeanor shifts towards isolation and introspection, revealing a deeper contemplation of the church’s significance amidst its decline. The once-familiar structure becomes increasingly unrecognizable as nature overtakes its physical form, symbolizing the erosion of its original purpose and the diminishing relevance of religious practices:

A shape less recognisable each week,
 A purpose more obscure. I wonder who
 Will be the last, the very last, to seek
 This place for what it was; one of the crew
 That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?
 Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
 Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
 Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
 Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
 Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
 Through suburb scrub because it held unpilt
 So long and equably what since is found
 Only in separation – marriage, and birth,
 And death, and thoughts of these – for which was built
 This special shell?
 For, though I’ve no idea
 What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
 It pleases me to stand in silence here; (36-54)

Larkin ponders the future visitors to the church, questioning whether they will seek it out for its original intended purposes or for more superficial reasons. Some may come to inspect the condition of the church’s architectural features, while others may be drawn



by a fascination with antiques or a love for the traditions of Christmas. However, amidst these varied motivations, the narrator himself emerges as a recurring visitor, despite his professed boredom and lack of knowledge about churches.

As the narrator reflects on the accumulated “ghostly silt” of religious history, he feels burdened with the metaphorical weight of faith and its enduring impact on human consciousness. Despite the encroachment of urban life and the dilapidation of the church, the fundamental mysteries of birth, marriage, and death remain potent symbols of human existence.

The sixth stanza ends with a sense of ambivalence and resignation, as the narrator acknowledges his simultaneous attraction to and detachment from the church. Though, in the previous stanza, Larkin calls the Church an “accoutred frosty barn,” the last stanza is an acknowledgement of the role of the church:

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round. (55-63)

The juxtaposition of the church’s humble origins with its former grandeur highlights the complexity of human spirituality and the enduring power of religious symbolism, even in the face of skepticism and disbelief. Through its evocative imagery and introspective tone, “Church Going” invites readers to contemplate the enduring significance of sacred places in an increasingly secular world.

In the final stanza of “Church Going,” the narrator elevates the significance of the church to that of a “serious house on this serious earth.” Here, all human compulsions converge in the blended air of the church, recognized and enshrined as destinies. This portrayal underscores the enduring relevance of the church as a place for serious contemplation and growth, particularly in the presence of the deceased, who hold the ultimate truth about the afterlife. The narrator suggests that despite the waning influence of traditional religious beliefs, the church remains a symbol of reason and order in the universe.



The poem, indeed presents a journey from skepticism or indifference towards the church to a more nuanced, ambivalent perspective. Initially, the narrator approaches the church with an agnostic or atheist viewpoint, viewing it as a relic of superstition or tradition. However, as the poem progresses, subtle shifts occur, leaving the narrator with a sense of ambivalence towards the spiritual significance of the church. The phrase “here endeth” serves as a poignant reminder of both the conclusion of the narrator’s exploration within the church and the potential demise of religion itself. It hints at the narrator’s perception of religion’s decline and the possibility that they may be among the last to engage with the church in such a manner.

The poem employs a conversational tone, punctuated by numerous interrogatives, inviting readers to contemplate the narrator’s exploration of religious themes. Larkin employs a blend of religious imagery and words, some used traditionally and others with blasphemous undertones, adding depth to the poem’s exploration of faith and skepticism. A notable characteristic of Larkin’s poetry is the subtle shift from the first-person singular (I) to the first-person plural (we or our), engaging readers in the narrator’s journey. This technique, evident in “Whitsun Weddings” as well, relies on readers’ agreement, drawing them into the narrative.

Initially portraying himself as ignorant about churches, the speaker reveals knowledge of religious artifacts like “parchment, plate and pyx,” albeit with contempt for those who obsess over them. However, as he delves deeper into the church’s allure, the language becomes richer, reflecting a shift towards thoughtful introspection. The speaker’s affinity for the church grows as he acknowledges its role in preserving what is now only found in separation. The metaphor of the church as a vessel holding precious contents undisturbed over time emerges, enhancing its significance. As the speaker and his representative gravitate towards the church, navigating through the challenges of modern life represented by the “suburb scrub,” the language likewise gravitates towards a more abstract and meditative tone. The initial brevity of phrases expands into a rhythmic and assured flow by the poem’s conclusion, mirroring the narrator’s journey towards certainty.

Larkin employs the motif of inside versus outside and explores the binaries of inside and outside, with the church representing human construction and enclosure while Nature symbolizes the external world. Larkin sharply contrasts these realms, emphasizing man’s separation from Nature through architecture. However, as the poem progresses, these distinctions begin to blur, suggesting a merging of the church with the natural world. The gradual merging of the church with its natural surroundings reflects a larger theme of decay and impermanence, suggesting that even the most sacred human institutions are subject to the relentless passage of time and the forces of nature.



Ultimately, “Church Going” offers a complex meditation on the intersection of faith, doubt, and the passage of time. The poem navigates the boundaries between the sacred and the secular, inviting readers to contemplate the enduring significance of religious institutions in an increasingly secular world.

Check Your Progress

- (i) What is the initial attitude of the speaker towards visiting churches?
- (ii) What does the phrase “Power of some sort will go on” suggest about the speaker’s view on religion?
- (iii) Which phrase in the poem suggests that the speaker is trying to mimic a clergyman?
- (iv) How does Larkin use the imagery of decay and nature to convey the church’s changing role in society?
- (v) Elaborate the context of the poem “Church Going” and its significance for the speaker’s attitude towards the Church and religious faith.
- (vi) How does the speaker’s behaviour inside the church reflect his ambivalence towards religious practices?

5.7.2 Summing Up

In many interviews Philip Larkin has insisted that “Church Going” is not at all a religious poem, but a secular one; embodying humanity’s yearning for the transcendent and mystical. The poem begins with scepticism and detached observation, but proceeds to an affirmation of churches as the places people will come to; if only for the simple reason that so many dead people lie buried in its shadows.

In the end, Larkin acknowledges that our need for something akin to churches will persist. Even in ruin, the church will draw people, who will recognize its sacredness and the role it played in the lives of others, regardless of their personal beliefs. While the poem grapples with the desire for a comforting “happy ending” embodied by God and religion, it offers no easy consolation. Larkin neither outright rejects faith nor embraces it; rather, he presents religion as an intangible system that promises to meet human needs, albeit often failing to do so in visible terms. The poem’s conclusion encapsulates this complexity, as the speaker, despite his uncertainty about the church’s worth, finds solace in standing in its silence. His actions, socially appropriate yet spiritually devoid of conviction, reflect the enigmatic nature of faith and belief. Larkin’s portrayal is dramatic, encapsulating the essence of the poem: a soul following prescribed behavior, unsure of its beliefs, yet finding a certain satisfaction in the ritual.



In our reading of Philip Larkin's works, particularly his poems "Church Going" and "Whitsun Weddings," we've journeyed into the heart of postwar British society and delved into the essence of Movement Poetry. Larkin, as a representative of this era, offers us a departure from the nebulous complexities of early Modernist writings, instead embracing the rhythmic cadence and lucidity of traditional provincial poetry. Through his keen observations of institutions like the Church and marriage, Larkin implores us to view the world not through the rose-tinted glasses of romanticism, but with the unflinching gaze of realism. His poetry serves as a poignant reminder to be 'less deceived,' urging us to scrutinize the dead conventions that linger in our society, awaiting eradication.

Glossary

organ: Also called pipe organ is a musical instrument used in churches

musty: stale and dank smell

cycle-clips: These are worn around pants to keep them from catching in a bicycle chain.

font: stone basin containing holy water to baptize people.

lectern: decorated podium or stand used by the priest to place the bible and deliver the sermon

Here endeth: the last lines which usually signify the ending of the sermon or the mass. Here it may ironically refer to the ending of the church.

parchment: writing material made of animal skin.

plate: metal plate made of precious metal, which is passed around to collect donations in the church. Also called Collection Plate.

pyx: a small round container used in the Catholic and Anglican Churches to carry the consecrated host.

Let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep: the church falling into disuse and ruin; leaks when it rains and becomes a shelter for wandering sheep. Irony lies in the fact that believers are considered to be the sheep and the priest, the shepherd.

Dubious women: an ambiguous expression. 1. May refer to women who are doubtful of church and its benefits and yet are lured by a possibility of cure. 2. May refer to women of questionable character

simples: medicinal herbs collected to cure an ailment

walking a dead one: seeing a ghost haunting the place

brambles: weeds; prickly scrambling shrub of the rose family, especially a blackberry



buttress: a structure of stone or brick built against a wall to strengthen or support it
grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky: Notice the manner in which Larkin starts from the ground and moves skywards.

rood-lofts: a gallery on top of the rood screen of a church. Rood is a crucifix, especially over the entrance.

ruin-bibber: one who loves or is addicted to ruins

randy: excited; here, excited to possess antiques

Christmas addict: one who loves Christmas celebrations

counting on a whiff: counting on a small amount of joy obtainable through Christmas celebrations with gowns, bands, organ pipes and myrrh

myrrh: aromatic resin used as incense in church

accoutred: adorned, decorated

frowsty: warm, stuffy, close

blent: blended (archaic)

5.8 Questions

1. Describe Philip Larkin's association with The Movement. How did his style and thematic concerns align with the principles of this literary group?
2. Write about the observer's transition from ironic observer to participant in a common journey, in "Whitsun Weddings."
3. What does the speaker speculate about the future of churches in a secular society? How does this speculation reflect the poem's themes?
4. Comment on Larkin's depiction of England in the 1950s, in "The Whitsun Weddings" and "Church Going."
5. Discuss the role of the narrator in both "The Whitsun Weddings" and "Church Going." How does Larkin's use of a detached observer/ outsider impact the reader's understanding of the themes in these poems?

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Ted Hughes:
(i) “Hawk Roosting”
(ii) “Crow’s Fall”

Suchitra Singh

Structure

- 6.1 Learning Objectives
- 6.2 Introduction
- 6.3 Achievements as a Poet
- 6.4 Themes in Ted Hughes’ Poetry
- 6.5 “Hawk Roosting”
- 6.6 “Crow’s Fall”
- 6.7 Questions
- 6.8 Works Cited

6.1 Learning Objectives

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

- ◆ Appreciate Hughes’ unique form of nature poetry;
- ◆ Understand the theme and narrative style of “Hawk Roosting”; and
- ◆ Comprehend the mythological and religious context of “Crow’s Fall.”

6.2 Introduction

Edward James “Ted” Hughes, one of the towering figures of 20th-century British poetry, was born on August 17, 1930, in Mytholmroyd, West Yorkshire. Growing up amidst the rugged moorlands of Yorkshire, Hughes developed a profound connection with nature, influenced by the harsh elements of wind, rain, and rocky terrain. His early affinity for animals, observing their predatory instincts, deeply impacted his poetic imagery, as seen in works like “Hawk Roosting.”



The spectre of war loomed large during Hughes's upbringing, as his father, a World War I veteran, imparted vivid memories of conflict. This awareness of wartime shadows influenced Hughes's perception of Yorkshire, infusing it with a sense of perpetual mourning for the Great War. Hughes's emergence as a poet of formidable stature was evident early on, with his works appearing in publications like the grammar school magazine *The Don and Dearne*. Despite his early poetic inclinations, Hughes's creative journey experienced a hiatus during his university years at Pembroke College, Cambridge, where he pursued studies in English literature, archaeology, and anthropology. However, a transformative encounter with a Penguin anthology of contemporary American poets reignited his passion for verse, inspired by the works of John Crowe Ransom and Robert Lowell. Figures like Yeats, Hopkins, T.S. Eliot, and Dylan Thomas exerted a profound influence on his early poetic sensibilities, shaping the contours of his nascent literary style. Hughes's poetic evolution defies easy categorization, oscillating between various literary movements and influences, from the Romantic tradition to the modernist ethos. His exploration of the tensions between human nature and the natural world, often symbolized through animal imagery, underscores his thematic preoccupations.

In 1956, Hughes met and married fellow poet Sylvia Plath, marking a significant chapter in his personal and artistic life. Plath encouraged Hughes to submit his poetry manuscripts, signalling a resurgence in his creative output. His early experiences in Mexborough, surrounded by the stark realities of rural life, imbued his poetry with a raw authenticity and a deep reverence for the natural world. In 1957, Hughes and his wife Sylvia Plath relocated to the United States, coinciding with the publication of his debut volume of verse, *The Hawk in the Rain*. The trajectory of Hughes' personal life intertwined with his artistic journey. Their relationship, marked by passion, creativity, and tragedy, became a subject of intense scrutiny. Hughes' affair with Assia Wevill and the subsequent separation from Plath underscored the complexities of his personal life, influencing his poetry's thematic depth and emotional resonance. Despite personal upheavals, including Plath's tragic suicide in 1963, Hughes's poetic output remained prolific. Works such as *Lupercal* (1960) and *Selected Poems* (1962), co-authored with Thom Gunn, marked significant milestones in his career. Hughes's oeuvre encompassed a wide range of themes and styles, from mythic and elemental explorations to introspective reflections on personal relationships. His enduring fascination with animals, exemplified in works like *Crow* (1970) and *Wolfwatching* (1989), underscored his poetic sensibilities.

Beyond poetry, Hughes made significant contributions to children's literature, notably with *The Iron Man* (1968), and collaborated on projects combining poetry with photography and art. He also ventured into translation, criticism, and editing; leaving an indelible mark on the literary landscape. Hughes's reputation as a poet of international stature



remained undiminished and his appointment as Britain's Poet Laureate in 1984 underscored his enduring influence on the literary scene. Hughes's life and work were shaped by his deep-rooted connection to the rural landscapes of his youth and his relentless pursuit of poetic expression. His legacy continues to resonate, illuminating the enduring power of language and imagination in confronting the complexities of human existence.

6.3 Achievements as a Poet

At the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, Ted Hughes's reputation as a poet reached unprecedented heights, both within academic circles and British culture at large. His significance in literary education is evident, with his works featuring prominently in school and university curricula. This heightened recognition extends across the Atlantic, where American critics and educators have increasingly acknowledged Hughes's contributions to poetry; a shift that began to gain momentum after largely overlooking his work during his lifetime.

Hughes is often the sole post-war English poet considered in influential works like Lawrence Buell's *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001) and John Felstiner's *Can Poetry Save the Earth?* (2006). His translation of *Tales from Ovid* (1998) not only garnered literary awards but was also adapted into a successful play by Tim Supple and Simon Reade in 1999. This late flourish as a playwright, along with his translation work, significantly elevated his profile in his final years, surpassing the recognition of individual volumes of his poetry earlier in his career.

Narrative and dramatic tensions are essential elements of Hughes's poetry. Each collection is constructed as an enquiring journey, and it is often a mistake to seek a comprehensive Hughesian vision within a single poem. Each volume of poems needs to be read as an enquiring journey that is carefully constructed. Hughes's accomplishments extend beyond poetry into translation, where he is regarded as one of the most important translators in the English tradition. This aspect of his work, continuous throughout his career, has gained significant recognition posthumously. The publication of *Letters of Ted Hughes* (2007) reveals a previously unknown depth and seriousness in his work, drawing comparisons to the letters of Keats.

Hughes' tenure as Poet Laureate from 1984 until his death in 1998 marked a culmination of his literary career. His advocacy for poetry, dedication to writing, education through initiatives like the Arvon Foundation, and contributions to children's literature solidified his legacy as a multifaceted literary figure. Hughes' posthumous publications,



including *Birthday Letters* (1998) and the *Collected Poems* (2003), provided insight into his complex relationship with Plath and offered a retrospective examination of his poetic oeuvre. From his early academic pursuits to his tenure as Poet Laureate, Hughes' poetry transcends temporal and thematic boundaries, inviting readers into a world of primal energy, mythic resonance, and poetic brilliance.

Hughes also had a notable career as a broadcaster for the BBC. The British Library's production of CDs featuring his readings and talks underscores his commitment to educational broadcasting. His published talks in *Poetry in the Making* (1967) highlight his support for creative writing, particularly for children. Hughes's role in founding the Children's Laureate and the Arvon International Poetry Competition, as well as his support for the Arvon Foundation's residential courses, further demonstrate his dedication to nurturing literary talent.

6.4 Themes in Ted Hughes' Poetry

Ted Hughes's emergence onto the literary scene in the late 1950s marked a significant departure from the prevailing poetic sensibilities embodied by The Movement, a group of English poets who had risen in postwar England. The Movement poets, characterized by their polite detachment and intellectual reserve, sought to capture the drab facts and emotions of ordinary life, avoiding direct involvement in political or social issues. In the previous section, you have read about Philip Larkin's depiction of provincial life in England in the 1950s, which exemplifies this kind of poetry. In contrast, Hughes's debut collection of poetry, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), introduced a new vitality and intensity to English verse. His poetry, imbued with themes of war, suffering, and violence, stood in stark contrast to the complacency and domesticity favoured by The Movement. Hughes's work confronted life's complexities with raw honesty and primal energy.

Hughes's distrust for societal constraints and cultural hypocrisies led him to reject society as a guide to artistic expression. Instead, he embraced nature as a source of primal honesty, viewing civilization as an evolutionary error that ignored the inherent violence and destructiveness of human existence. His poetry reflects a heavy sense of history and suffering, with a particular focus on violence in its various forms. Hughes distinguished between violence inherent within nature and violence that opposes it, the latter being the kind that produces war and which he found pervasive and disturbing in postwar society. By confronting issues of violence, suffering, and the environment, Hughes opened the door to introspection and improvement, leaving a lasting impact on English poetry. His



exposure to American literary figures like Emily Dickinson, John Crowe Ransom, and Marianne Moore; as well as American anthropologists and trickster tales, contributed to his artistic sensibilities. His engagement with American environmentalists during his visit to the US in 1958–59 significantly influenced his work. This shift in worldview translated directly into his poetry, focusing on the relationship between nature and the inner lives of humans; and the role of poetry in addressing ecological dynamics.

The Hawk in the Rain (1957) also showcases his adherence to formalist principles and received acclaim from influential literary figures like W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, and Marianne Moore. However, it was with his collection *Lupercal* (1960) that Hughes's poetry reached a heightened level of refinement. Poems like "Otter" demonstrate Hughes's keen observational skills, depicting the otter as a symbol of the Jungian "Self" and the Hindu Atman, serving as an allegory for the human condition and evoking themes of exile, consciousness, and dual existence. Hughes's critique extends to Christianity, which he sees as perpetuating humanity's estrangement from nature and offering false promises of salvation. The phrase "treed to deflect death" encapsulates Hughes's skepticism towards religious doctrines that seek to mitigate the inevitability of mortality.

Wodwo, published in 1967, marked a departure from traditional poetic forms, employing precise and simple diction coupled with free verse. The poems in this collection exude a primal energy, exploring themes of nature, existence, and the human psyche. Hughes' collection *Crow* (1970), delved deeper into the darker aspects of nature and animal life. The poems in this collection present a visceral and often violent portrayal of the predatory world inhabited by birds and animals. Hughes drew inspiration from the stark simplicity of a crow's hypothetical song, envisioning a universe where moral norms are subverted, and brutality reigns supreme. The poems confront themes of physical pain, suffering, and instinctual violence without moral judgment, presenting them as inherent components of the natural order. His poetry captures the raw power of nature, exploring themes of primal instincts, elemental forces, and the human psyche. Hughes' engagement with myth, shamanism, and esoteric practices reflected his belief in poetry's transformative potential to heal the fractures of the human psyche.

6.5 "Hawk Roosting"

"Hawk Roosting" is in the form of a dramatic monologue, featured in his 1960 collection *Lupercal*. In a dramatic monologue, a single character, who is distinctly not the poet, speaks to an unseen audience, revealing his inner thoughts, feelings, and motivations in a particular moment. This form was famously utilized by Robert Browning in poems



like *My Last Duchess*. Hughes adopts this structure to delve deeply into the psyche of a hawk, presenting the bird's perspective in a manner that reveals its instinctual brutality and inherent arrogance. It is perhaps the only poem by Hughes that uses this technique.

The hawk in Hughes's poem embodies natural power and authoritarian control, expressing a God-like self-assurance that underscores its predatory dominance. Unlike traditional poetic representations of birds as symbols of freedom and spiritual upliftment, Hughes's hawk is grounded, pragmatic, and ruthlessly efficient. It views the world from its roost, high in the trees, a strategic position that highlights its mastery and control over life and death. "Hawk Roosting" challenges the reader to reflect on human nature. By adopting the hawk's voice, Hughes forces us to confront the more uncomfortable aspects of our own dominance over nature and each other. The hawk's unquestioning acceptance of its predatory instincts raises questions about the complexities of human power, control, and moral choices. Through the hawk's voice, the poem explores the darker aspects of self-assurance and control; mirroring the authoritarian attitudes found in human governance.

Written in the first person, "Hawk Roosting" allows the hawk itself to articulate its worldview, revealing its predatory nature without remorse or moral consideration. The hawk's assertion is chillingly insightful: "I kill where I please because it is all mine." This line encapsulates the massive egotism that permeates the poem, suggesting a universe where might equates to right and where power is self-justifying. The hawk's monologue resonates with despotic phrases, revealing a creature and, symbolically, any ruler governed solely by its own laws: "No arguments assert my right."

Yet, beneath this surface reading of the hawk as tyrant lies a complex reflection on nature itself. Hughes does not merely present the hawk as a brutal dictator; rather, he suggests that the hawk's personality and its unyielding dominion are shaped by natural forces. In this sense, the hawk is not just a symbol of tyrannical power but also an embodiment of nature's amoral and survival-driven imperatives. As Hughes himself noted, the poem represents a realization that "Nature is no longer so simple," indicating a nuanced exploration of natural law and the instinctual behaviors it necessitates. The poem can be read as a celebration of the bird of prey's instinctual self-sufficiency, and its freedom from rational and moral distinctions.

Further, Hughes points out that some sort of thought akin to this line had been hovering over his mind, but the end product of the writing came out differently and 'not so simple': "That bird is accused of being a fascist . . . the symbol of some horrible totalitarian genocidal dictator. Actually, what I had in mind was that in this hawk Nature is



thinking. Simply Nature. It's not so simple maybe because Nature is no longer so simple. (Bentley 35)

The allegorical dimension of "Hawk Roosting" addresses the dangers inherent in unchecked power among humans. By drawing a parallel between the hawk's soliloquy and human despots, Hughes critiques the way that absolute power, when corrupted and left unrestrained, inevitably leads to oppression and tyranny. "Sophistry" and "arguments" mirror the strategies often used by autocrats to exempt themselves from ethical norms and rules.

Hughes's portrayal of the hawk reflects his broader metaphysical concerns about the interplay between culture and nature, between the cerebral and the primal. The hawk, embodying both the head and heart of nature, ultimately adheres to the cyclical laws of the natural world, despite its seeming defiance of these laws. This duality serves as a profound commentary on the balance between inherent nature and the constructs imposed by civilization. "Hawk Roosting" is not merely a celebration of the bird's instinctual self-sufficiency; it is a complex meditation on the nature of power, the essence of predatory dominance, and the reflection of these elements in human society. Through the monologue of the hawk, Ted Hughes invites readers to question the morality of absolute power, the nature of freedom, and the deep-seated instincts that drive both human and animal behavior.

6.5.1 Critical Analysis

The opening stanza of "Hawk Roosting" introduces the hawk's monologue, delivered in a straightforward tone as it perches atop the forest. The hawk is depicted as self-possessed, with closed eyes, reflecting on its dominion over the prey it hunts. The punctuation in the second line sets a tone of directness that extends through the fourth line, revealing the hawk's unflinching, murderous intent:

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.

Inaction, no falsifying dream

Between my hooked head and hooked feet:

Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat. (1-4)

Here, the hawk describes its precision in killing, free from any deceit or illusion. This clarity of purpose is reflected in the sharp imagery of the third line, connecting the instinctual precision of the hawk to its physical form, capable of turning instinct into lethal action: "no falsifying dream/Between my hooked head and hooked feet."



In the second stanza, the hawk articulates its complete control over the earth, able to kill at will from its vantage point high in the trees, leveraging both the “air’s buoyancy” and “the sun’s ray” to swoop down on its prey:

The convenience of the high trees!
The air’s buoyancy and the sun’s ray
Are of advantage to me;
And the earth’s face upward for my inspection. (5-8)

This abstract diction not only emphasizes the hawk’s predatory nature but also its militaristic precision, viewing the earth as a territory to be surveyed and dominated.

The third stanza heightens the hawk’s sense of divine supremacy. It remains perched in the tree, similar to the openings of the previous stanzas, with the power of its “hooked feet” firmly “locked upon the rough bark.” The hawk makes a bold, rhetorical declaration of its preeminence:

My feet are locked upon the rough barn
It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot. (9-12)

Here, the hawk boasts of its unique creation by Nature, suggesting that the crafting of its foot and feathers was a cosmic event. This assertion underscores the hawk’s belief in its own sovereignty over all Creation, without hyperbole or ambiguity.

In the fourth and fifth stanzas, the poem unfolds the most dangerous aspect of the hawk’s power. It reigns supreme over all it surveys, killing at will, for everything is perceived as its possession. The hawk’s description of itself lacks any trace of refinement or civilization:

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly -
I kill where I please because it is all mine.
There is no sophistry in my body:
My manners are tearing off heads -

The allotment of death.
For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living.
No arguments assert my right: (13-20)



These lines strip down any pretense of civility, portraying the hawk as a natural force of pure, unbridled aggression, which is integral to understanding the poem's exploration of power, autonomy, and the natural order - as envisioned by Ted Hughes. The poem concludes its examination of the hawk's ruthless predatory instinct in the fifth stanza, encapsulating the bird's merciless nature. In these lines, the hawk dismisses any notion of reason or moral restraint, embodying the harsh realities of Darwinian survival. It exists solely through predation, executing its role in the natural world with brutal efficiency.

The final stanza transitions from this stark portrayal of killing to a broader self-reflection, though the entire poem could be considered an extended exploration of self-identity. This stanza returns to the calm, declarative tone established in the opening stanza, positioning the sun merely as a backdrop to the hawk's dominion. The hawk describes its immutable perception of the world, a world it governs with a terrifying calmness that belies its lethal nature:

The sun is behind me
Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this. (21-24)

Hughes employs vocabulary typical of nature poetry, with references to 'wood,' 'trees,' 'air,' 'sun,' and even 'God'—the creator of nature. Yet, contrary to the idyllic scenes often depicted by Romantic poets like Wordsworth or Keats, Hughes presents a vision of nature that is starkly ruthless. Dominated by the hawk's predatory power, this natural world is far from benign; it is a realm where the hawk, akin to a deity dispensing death, reigns supreme, ensuring that all aspects of nature conform to its merciless will.

Check Your Progress

- (i) The poem "Hawk Roosting" is part of which collection and when was it published?
- (ii) How does Ted Hughes depict the hawk in "Hawk Roosting"?
- (iii) What does the hawk reflect upon in the opening stanza of "Hawk Roosting"?
- (iv) What literary technique does Hughes use to depict the hawk's inner thoughts?
- (v) Analyze how the hawk's sense of divine supremacy is depicted in "Hawk Roosting." Provide examples from the poem.



6.5.2 Summing Up

“Hawk Roosting” is in the form of a dramatic monologue, presenting the bird’s view: focused solely on its primal instincts and the immediacy of its existence, believing in its inherent right to dominate and kill, stating it lives by its own rules where “No arguments assert my right.” In this poem, Hughes employs the hawk’s voice to explore the complexity of nature and the violence inherent in it, but it is projected as part of the natural order.

It is impossible for the reader to miss the unmistakable echoes of despotic behaviour in humans, in the egoistical assertions of the hawk, and also to draw a parallel to human capacity for violence. Commentators have remarked on the similarities with the strategies employed by tyrants in politics. However, the poem’s achievement lies in its nonjudgemental depiction of the violence that exists in the ecosystem. It is the hawk’s nature to kill and Hughes has successfully imagined its inner thoughts: its pride, its authority, and its lack of mercy.

6.6 “Crow’s Fall”

Ted Hughes’s fascination with animals in his poetry often transcends mere representation, imbuing them with symbolic and mythic significance that explores broader human experiences and emotions. In his collection *Crow: From the Life and Songs of Crow* (1960) Hughes employs the figure of Crow to embody an ideological challenge to Christianity. As outlined by Keith Sagar in his essay on Hughes, Crow was created amidst a mythical narrative involving a debate between God and his Nightmare about the adequacy of humanity. God had a Nightmare in which his creation – Man – was mocked. God challenged Nightmare to do better and Crow was created. This narrative foregrounds the inception of Crow; conceived during a moment of divine dissatisfaction with humanity, where Crow is birthed from the Nightmare’s challenge to create something superior to man. Courage, cunning, the indomitable will to survive, and the sharpness of eye and talon are the characteristics of Crow in Hughes’ world. Though belonging to the animal poetry genre, the Crow group of poems recreate the story of Creation, the Fall, and the crucifixion.

This genesis of Crow is crucial to understand the broader thematic scope of Hughes’s work, particularly his engagement with environmental and existential questions through the lens of various cultural perspectives including Trickster legends, Eskimo myths, Shamanism, and Sufism. These influences are pivotal in shaping the environmental vision that Hughes articulates throughout the Crow poems. Crow, as a character, is not merely an animal or a mythic creature; he embodies a critique of modernity’s discontents, its scientific hubris, its ecological shortsightedness, and its spiritual void.



Ferber notes: “The raven and the crow are not consistently distinguished in biblical or classical literature, and in English literature they are both sometimes grouped among such similar birds as the chough, daw (or jackdaw), and rook” (167). The white colour of the Crow in Hughes’s poem, ironically, highlights his internal conflict. In classical literature, a “white raven” was proverbial for something extremely rare or unheard-of, much like a black swan. Typically, the crows’ black colour represents power, domination, and wisdom. However, in “Crow’s Fall” the Crow is unique compared to others of his kind, as he is white. The line, “The sun was too white/ He decided it glared much too whitely,” illustrates the Crow’s despair.

Despite the conflicts and efforts to escape his inherent nature, Crow ultimately transforms into his true identity as a black bird. Cameron describes black birds, including ravens and crows, as archetypes associated with higher realms and symbolic of higher intelligence, thought, and ideas (4). “Crow’s Fall” also echoes the mythical fall of Adam and Eve in Christianity, wherein Eve tasted the apple of knowledge, which would make them “be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Moses 4:11). This curiosity brought about the fall of both Adam and Eve, but also gave humanity the chance to seek knowledge and distinguish between Good and Evil.

In Ted Hughes’s poem “Crow’s Fall,” the narrative revolves around the mythological transformation of the crow, originally white, symbolizing purity and innocence, into a black bird as a result of its own hubris—excessive pride and arrogance. The poem delves into the theme of downfall through overreaching one’s limits, depicted through the crow’s envy towards the sun’s superior brightness and its disastrous attempt to surpass it. Blinded by ambition, the crow challenges the sun, only to be scorched black by its heat, symbolizing a profound moral and physical transformation.

This metamorphosis serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of hubris and the inevitable consequences of attempting to transcend natural boundaries. Classical Greek mythology abounds with this theme and Hughes uses this transformation to explore deeper human traits such as envy and ambition, attributing to the crow qualities that resonate with human failings. The poem not only depicts the crow’s fall from grace but also questions the nature of power, the complexity of identity, and the dual perceptions of reality shaped by individual perspectives.

6.6.1 Critical Analysis of “Crow’s Fall”

In the opening lines of “Crow’s Fall,” the crow is presented in an unconventional and mythic form, possessing white feathers—a stark contrast to the colour black typically as-



sociated with crows. This depiction of the crow in a state of purity, suggested through the metaphorical use of “white,” serves as a foundational element for the poem’s exploration of hubris and defiance. The crow, stirred by the brilliance of the sun, which surpasses the luminosity of its own feathers, grows envious and sets out to challenge and outshine this celestial body:

When Crow was white he decided the sun was too white.

He decided it glared much too whitely.

He decided to attack it and defeat it. (1-3)

This ambitious endeavor parallels the narrative of Satan’s fall; reinforcing the sun as a symbol of divine authority, akin to God. The crow’s decision to confront and overpower the sun mirrors the biblical account of the fallen angels who, led by Satan, rebelled against divine order; only to be cast down as a result of their rebellion. This poem also has a striking similarity to the Greek myth of Icarus, who flew too close to the Sun, despite his father’s warning. The wax holding the feathers together on his wings melted and he fell into the sea. This allegorical connection underscores the theme of overreaching ambition leading to inevitable downfall; a common motif in literature. In the following lines, irony and humor become the primary note, reflecting the crow’s misguided conviction that he could challenge and defeat the sun:

He got his strength up in full glitter

He clawed and fluffed his rage up.

He aimed his beak direct at the sun’s centre.

He laughed himself to the centre of himself

And attacked.

At his battle cry trees grew suddenly old,

Shadows flattened. (4-10)

This depiction of the crow’s preparations for battle underscores not only the humor but also the profound delusion, stemming from his arrogance. The crow, perceiving the sun as smaller and presumably weaker than himself, becomes emboldened by a misguided sense of superiority.

The phrase “He laughed himself to the center of himself,” indicates the crow’s deep plunge into self-deception, driven by an overwhelming surge of overambition. This laugh-



ter is not of joy but a dark, ironic mirth that highlights the crow's lack of self-awareness about the gravity and absurdity of his actions.

As the crow launches his assault, aiming his beak directly at the sun and propelled by a fierce battle cry, Hughes intensifies the dramatic tension through vivid imagery. The moment the crow obscures the sun, the surrounding trees are cast into premature aging by the shadows, a metaphorical reflection of the natural order being momentarily disrupted by the crow's hubris:

But the sun brightened—

It brightened, and Crow returned charred black.

He opened his mouth but what came out was charred black.

“Up there,” he managed,

“Where white is black and black is white, I won.” (11-15)

This passage in “Crow’s Fall” is pivotal as it illustrates the crow’s audacity in attempting to usurp a celestial body; a feat that is both humorously absurd and tragically hubristic. Hughes’s use of this imagery not only escalates the poem’s tension but also underscores the thematic exploration of hubris and its inevitable consequences in the natural order.

In the concluding lines of the poem, the consequences of the crow’s overambition are starkly portrayed. Having attempted to surpass the sun’s brightness, the crow returns defeated and transformed: its feathers are now “charred black,” and even its voice emits nothing but “charred black” remnants. The crow’s excessive pride has not only altered its physical appearance but also tainted its essence, burning away its former purity.

This poem is a deviation from the typical themes found in Hughes’s poetry, which generally engages with more somber or reflective subjects. “Crow’s Fall” reflects the post-war ethos of destruction and renewal, prevalent in the literary explorations of that era. The structure of the poem is cyclical, beginning and ending with the crow’s hubristic actions and their dire consequences, thus encapsulating the existential motif of recurring human folly and the inevitable downfall that follows. This cycle mirrors the broader existential and philosophical concerns of the period, highlighting the perpetual human struggle against, and succumbing to, one’s own hubris.



Check Your Progress

- (i) Describe the physical transformation of the crow in Ted Hughes's poem "Crow's Fall."
- (ii) What symbolic role does the sun play in "Crow's Fall"?
- (iii) How does Ted Hughes use imagery to convey the theme of hubris in "Crow's Fall"?
- (iv) Analyze the significance of the crow's laughter in the poem. What does it reveal about the crow's character and its understanding of its own actions?
- (v) Compare the crow's ambition in "Crow's Fall" with a similar theme in a mythological or literary context

6.6.2 Summing Up

"Crow's Fall" is a simple poem to read at first, resembling Hughes' other creation tales, written for children; such as the tale "Why the Owl Behaves as it does" from *The Dream-fighter and Other Creation Tales* (1963), where Hughes builds up a fictional account about the reason why owls sleep in the day and hunt for prey at night. "Crow Falls" is a tale about how the crow acquired its black colour. Even without reference to the poet's alternate mythology, that challenges Christianity, one can appreciate the poem, for its sheer inventiveness.

The reader, however, cannot miss the biblical echoes in the word 'Fall' in the title. Like the fallen angel, Satan, the crow is full of pride, envy, and rebelliousness. The similarity of the crow with the figure of Icarus; and the theme of hubris add another dimension to the poem. The crow does not learn from his fall, but declares his own victory, though charred.

6.7 Questions

1. How does Hughes's hawk embody both natural power and authoritarian control?
2. Compare and contrast the portrayal of power in "Hawk Roosting" with the portrayal of power in "Crow's Fall." How does Hughes use these animal figures to reflect on human nature and authority?
3. In what way are "Hawk Roosting" and "Crow's Fall" different from the nature poetry of the Romantics?



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Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

Shrimi Gupta

Part-1

Structure

1. Learning Objectives
2. Introduction
3. About the Author
4. About the Play
5. Character List
6. Detailed Summary
7. Background: Understanding Key Literary and Philosophical Contexts
8. Relevance Today

1. Learning Objectives

This lesson is divided into two parts. Part 1 will enable you to:

- ◆ Understand how the conditions surrounding the post World War era influenced Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.
- ◆ Learn about the life and important works of Samuel Beckett.
- ◆ Learn about the characters and plot details of *Waiting for Godot*.
- ◆ Explore the existentialist themes, avant-garde, tragi-comic, modernism and postmodernism elements in the play.
- ◆ Assess the relevance of the play in contemporary society.

Part 2 will enable you to analyse the critical aspects of the play against the plot details and also discuss some key literary and philosophical contexts of the play.



2. Introduction

The post World War era, in which Samuel Beckett penned *Waiting for Godot*, was marked by profound devastation, disillusionment, and **existential angst**¹. Society grappled with the aftermath of the Second World War (1939-45), facing the stark realities of destruction and over 60 million casualties, including the tragic loss of 6 million Jews and others in the Holocaust. In the wake of this catastrophe, many found themselves grappling with a world that seemed devoid of meaning. In addition to the above, there were also significant geopolitical tensions and ideological conflicts that influenced the cultural and intellectual landscape of the time. The emergence of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, characterised by political rivalries, nuclear arms race, and the threat of mutually assured destruction, added another layer of anxiety and uncertainty to the global consciousness.

Moreover, the post-war era was a time of profound social change, with movements for civil rights, women's liberation, and decolonization gaining momentum around the world. These struggles for equality and justice reflected a growing awareness of the need to confront systemic oppression and injustice, while also fuelling debates about the nature of freedom, democracy, and human rights in the modern world. Add to this, the rapid technological advancements and societal transformations the postwar period witnessed that challenged traditional beliefs and values. The advent of nuclear weapons, space exploration, and the proliferation of mass media contributed to a sense of alienation and disorientation, as people grappled with the implications of these developments for human existence and the future of civilization.

The existential anxieties and uncertainty that pervaded the zeitgeist² are vividly mirrored in Samuel Beckett's profound body of work. Let's acquaint ourselves with the life and important works of this remarkable literary figure.

1. Existential angst refers to a profound sense of anxiety, dread, or unease that arises from the awareness of one's existence and the seemingly inherent lack of meaning or purpose in life. It is a fundamental aspect of existential philosophy, which explores questions about the nature of existence, freedom, choice, and the search for meaning in an indifferent or absurd universe. Existential angst often arises when individuals confront the existential realities of human existence, such as the inevitability of death, the uncertainty of the future, the absence of inherent meaning in life, and the responsibility to make choices and create meaning in spite of these existential uncertainties.
2. 'Zeitgeist' is a German term that translates to "spirit of the time" or "spirit of the age." It refers to the prevailing mood, attitudes, and cultural norms of a particular period in history.



3. About the Author

Samuel Beckett, one of the most influential and enigmatic figures in 20th-century literature, was born on April 13, 1906, in Dublin, Ireland. He grew up in a middle-class Protestant family and received his education at Trinity College Dublin and later at the University of Paris. Beckett's early life was marked by a fascination with literature and languages, and he was fluent in several languages, including French, German, and Italian.

During World War II, Beckett joined the French Resistance and worked as a courier, risking his life to smuggle messages and supplies across enemy lines. These experiences would later inform much of his writing, particularly his exploration of themes such as mortality, trauma, alienation, and existential despair.

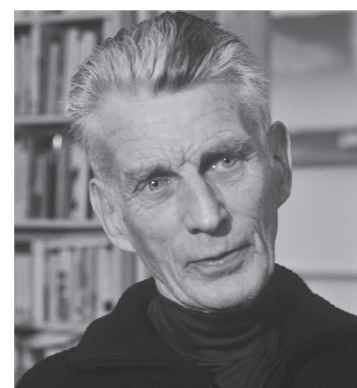


Figure 1: Samuel Beckett

Beckett's literary career began in earnest in the 1930s, with the writing of his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, though it remained unpublished during his lifetime. However, it was his association with the Parisian literary and artistic avant-garde that would come to define his early years as a writer. Beckett was deeply influenced by the Surrealist movement and developed close friendships with figures such as James Joyce and Marcel Duchamp. He was deeply influenced by modernist writers such as Joyce and Franz Kafka, whose innovative approaches to language and form paved the way for Beckett's own experimentation. From Joyce, Beckett adopted a keen attention to language and the intricacies of human consciousness, while Kafka's existential themes and absurd situations resonated deeply with Beckett's own exploration of the human condition.

It was in the post-war period that Beckett produced some of his most famous and enduring works. In 1948, he wrote *Waiting for Godot*, a play that would revolutionise modern theatre and establish Beckett as a leading figure in the **Theatre of the Absurd** (discussed in Section 7.4). The play's minimalist setting, fragmented dialogue, and existential themes have made it a landmark of 20th-century literature, earning Beckett the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1969. It was first published in French as *En Attendant Godot* (1952), and later translated into English by Beckett himself for its London premiere in 1955. Through its innovative style and provocative themes, *Waiting for Godot* continues to captivate audiences and provoke thought about the human condition in the modern world.

Beckett went on to write numerous other plays, novels, and poems that further solidified his reputation as a literary innovator. His works, such as *Happy Days*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp's Last Tape*, are characterised by their bleak, existential outlook, their exploration



of the human condition in the face of futility and absurdity. In fact, Beckett's writing is often marked by its spare, economical style, its use of repetition and silence, and its exploration of themes such as memory, identity, and mortality. His characters are often trapped in existential crises, grappling with meaninglessness and the inevitability of death. Yet, amid the darkness and despair, there is also a sense of resilience and humanity, an acknowledgment of the absurd beauty of life in all its complexities.

In his later years, Beckett continued to write prolifically, experimenting with new forms and styles while maintaining his commitment to exploring the limits of language and consciousness. He died on December 22, 1989, leaving behind a legacy of literary achievement that continues to inspire and challenge readers and artists around the world. Samuel Beckett's life and works stand as a testament to the power of literature to illuminate the darkest corners of the human soul and to find meaning and beauty in the midst of chaos and uncertainty.

4. About the Play

Waiting for Godot is a captivating and enigmatic play that invites its readers into a world of existential uncertainty and profound introspection. Set against the backdrop of a desolate landscape with a single tree, the play follows the meandering conversations and absurd antics of two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, as they anxiously await the arrival of someone named Godot, who never seems to come. As they pass the time, they engage in philosophical debates, witty banter, and moments of profound reflection, all while grappling with the fundamental questions of existence, meaning, and purpose. Through its minimalist setting, stylistic choices, and ambiguous characters, *Waiting for Godot* takes its readers on a journey of intellectual exploration, challenging them to confront and introspect on the absurdity of human existence.

With its timeless themes and novel approach to storytelling, *Waiting for Godot* continues to captivate and inspire its readers around the world, cementing its status as a timeless masterpiece of modern theatre.



Figure 2: *Waiting for Godot*, 2001
movie release poster



It is recommended that you experience this immersive recording of the 1997 Canadian Broadcast Corporation radio adaptation of the play at some point during your engagement with the text: https://archive.org/details/WaitingforGodotCBC1997_201902/Act+One.mp3

To spark your interest, here's also the trailer of one of the best recent renditions of the play, brought to life by Pavilion Theatre: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W-KYm4-mKNXI>

5. Character List

The characters in the play in the order of their appearance:

- ◆ **Vladimir and Estragon** are the two main characters, often referred to as “Didi” and “Gogo” respectively. They are tramps who are waiting for someone named Godot. Throughout the play, they engage in philosophical discussions, nonsensical banter, and futile attempts to pass the time while waiting.
- ◆ **Pozzo** is a wealthy landowner who appears in both Acts of the play. In Act I, he is accompanied by his servant, Lucky, and appears confident and domineering. In Act II, he has become blind and dependent on Lucky.
- ◆ **Lucky** is Pozzo's servant, who is characterised by his long, rambling monologue in Act I. He is subservient to Pozzo and carries out his commands, but he also appears to be burdened by his role and suffers mistreatment.
- ◆ The **Boy** is a messenger who appears in both Acts to inform Vladimir and Estragon that Godot will not be coming today but may come tomorrow. He serves as a recurring reminder of the characters' futile wait for Godot.
- ◆ **Godot** is the elusive figure for whom Vladimir and Estragon are waiting. He never appears in the play, and his identity and intentions remain ambiguous. He represents an abstract concept of hope or salvation that the characters cling to amidst their existential despair.

6. Detailed Summary

The summary has been divided into sub-parts for each Act to facilitate understanding, as well as to draw attention towards the circular structure of the play, i.e., how the plot unfolds in repetitive cycles without reaching a definitive resolution.



6.1 Act I

6.1.1 Vladimir and Estragon Wait for Godot



Figure 3: Vladimir and Estragon waiting for Godot

The play opens in the sparse, desolate setting of a country road, with two tramps, Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo), waiting for someone named Godot. The stage is minimalistic, with only a solitary tree against the backdrop of evening. Estragon, struggling to remove his boot, expresses frustration as he wrestles with it. Vladimir enters, advancing with stiff strides, and they engage in conversation, reflecting on their resigned acceptance of their situation.

Vladimir reminisces about their enduring friendship and expresses relief at seeing Estragon again. However, their reunion is not without tension, as Estragon rebuffs Vladimir's attempt to embrace him. As they converse, Vladimir reflects on his lifelong struggle to find meaning, ultimately resigning himself to their current predicament.

Estragon reveals that he spent the night in a ditch and was beaten, though the details are unclear. Vladimir reflects on their past adventures and the respectability they once had, contrasting it with their current state of destitution.

Their dialogue shifts between philosophical musings and practical concerns, with Vladimir criticising Estragon for neglecting to remove his boots daily. Estragon expresses frustration and pain as he struggles with his boot. Vladimir dismisses his complaints, implying that he himself suffers more, and attends to minor tasks like buttoning his fly. Meanwhile, Estragon finally succeeds in removing his boot but finds nothing inside it. Vladimir remarks on the tendency of humans to blame external objects for their own faults, using boots as an example. He then becomes preoccupied with his hat, repeatedly inspecting it and expressing concern over something inside it, suggesting a growing sense of unease or confusion.



The conversation turns to the story of two thieves crucified alongside Jesus Christ, with Vladimir attempting to recount it to Estragon. They debate the details of the story, including whether one thief was saved from hell or death, highlighting their existential ponderings. As they debate their uncertain situation and whether they will continue waiting if Godot doesn't come, Estragon suggests they stop talking for a minute to break the cycle of existential questioning. He falls asleep briefly, prompting Vladimir to wake him, but Estragon becomes distraught, lamenting that Vladimir never lets him sleep. Vladimir admits he felt lonely and Estragon shares a dream he had, but Vladimir refuses to hear it, preferring to keep their nightmares private.

Their conversation turns to the idea of parting ways, with Estragon suggesting it might be better for them. However, they ultimately embrace albeit briefly, before Estragon recoils, complaining that Vladimir smells of garlic. They then discuss the idea of hanging themselves, with Estragon becoming excited about the prospect until Vladimir points out the potential complications. They ultimately decide to wait for Godot, expressing curiosity about what he will offer them and what they asked of him.

The conversation becomes disjointed as they debate their lost rights, including the right to laugh, and whether they are tied to Godot. They listen intently for signs of Godot's arrival but conclude that they heard nothing but the wind in the reeds. Estragon expresses hunger, and Vladimir offers him a turnip, which Estragon mistakes for a carrot. Vladimir eventually finds a carrot for Estragon to eat and they engage in a conversation about being tied to Godot.

Their conversation is abruptly interrupted by the sudden appearance of Pozzo and Lucky.

6.1.2 Pozzo and Lucky Arrive



Figure 4: Pozzo, Vladimir, Estragon, Lucky (L-R)



Pozzo, a pompous and arrogant figure, drives Lucky, his servant, onto the stage. Lucky is tied with a rope around his neck and carries various items while Pozzo carries a whip.

Vladimir and Estragon initially mistake Pozzo for Godot, the person they are waiting for, due to the dim light and their strained anticipation. Pozzo corrects them by introducing himself and confronts Vladimir and Estragon about their presence on his land, expressing disdain for their situation. Despite Pozzo's initial aggression, he attempts to smooth over the situation, though he remains condescending towards them.

Pozzo then turns his attention to Lucky, commanding him to rise and carry on. However, Lucky struggles under the weight of his baggage and frequently falls, prompting Pozzo to chastise him. He engages in self-indulgent monologues about his loneliness, punctuated by commands to Lucky to perform various tasks. Throughout Pozzo's speech, he oscillates between moments of arrogance and vulnerability, revealing the complexities of his character.

As Pozzo eats and drinks, Vladimir and Estragon tentatively approach Lucky, inspecting him with curiosity. They wonder why Lucky doesn't put down his bags, but Vladimir admits he doesn't know the reason. Estragon suggests speaking to him. As they approach Lucky, Vladimir points out a running sore on Lucky's neck, likely caused by the rope tied around it. Estragon acknowledges the sore and attributes it to the rubbing of the rope, considering it inevitable due to the knot. They continue inspecting Lucky, focusing on his face.

As Pozzo finishes eating and lights his pipe, he notices Estragon eyeing the chicken bones left on the ground. Estragon timidly asks Pozzo if he's finished with them. Pozzo, initially surprised, confirms that he doesn't need them anymore but suggests that the bones belong to Lucky, the carrier, and encourages Estragon to ask him directly. After a brief hesitation, Estragon approaches Lucky and asks if he wants the bones. Pozzo instructs Lucky to respond, but Lucky remains silent, prompting Pozzo to declare the bones as belonging to Estragon.

As Estragon eagerly starts gnawing on the bones, Pozzo expresses concern over Lucky's unusual behaviour, noting that he's never refused bones before and worries about the consequences if Lucky falls sick. As Pozzo contemplates, Estragon puts the bones in his pocket, and Vladimir suggests they leave. Estragon hesitates, surprised at the sudden decision to depart. As Vladimir urges to leave, Pozzo insists on staying a little longer, claiming Vladimir cannot endure his presence anymore. Pozzo then decides to sit down, instructing Lucky to move the stool with his whip. He fills his pipe and engages in a contemplative dialogue about the sweetness of smoking, human nature, and the passing of time.



Pozzo then engages in a confusing monologue about Lucky's role and his own intentions, ultimately revealing that he indeed wants to get rid of Lucky but plans to sell him at the fair for profit, instead of simply dismissing him. Lucky, overwhelmed with emotion, begins to weep, surprising Vladimir and Estragon. When Estragon tries to wipe Lucky's eyes, Lucky violently kicks him, causing Estragon to recoil in pain. Vladimir and Estragon express outrage at Pozzo's treatment of Lucky, with Vladimir likening Lucky's situation to being discarded like a banana skin after being used. They confront Pozzo about his cruelty, but he remains indifferent. He merely observes that "tears of the world are a constant quantity. For each one who begins to weep, somewhere else another stops" (Beckett, Act 1), implying thereby that one has to learn to live with one's misery.

Vladimir expresses frustration at the delay of nightfall. Pozzo offers to wait until nightfall and tries to lift Vladimir's spirits by discussing the twilight. He tries to engage everyone in observing the sky, but only Vladimir and Estragon pay attention, while Lucky dozes off. Pozzo describes the transition from day to night in a poetic yet prosaic manner, highlighting the subtle changes in the sky. However, he concludes on a gloomy note, remarking on the unpredictability of life on earth. There is a long silence, punctuated only by Estragon's resigned acceptance of their situation.

Pozzo reflects on his desire to cheer them up and contemplates how to do so, eventually suggesting that Lucky, his servant, can dance or think for their amusement. Lucky, upon Pozzo's command, performs a lacklustre dance, which Estragon mocks. Pozzo reminisces about Lucky's past talents and explains that Lucky believes he is entangled in a net. Despite their efforts to engage Lucky, he remains unresponsive.



Figure 5: Lucky's dance (centre), the two tramps (L) and Pozzo (R)



As they prepare to leave, Vladimir suggests telling Lucky to think, but Pozzo insists that Lucky needs his hat to do so. Estragon refuses to give Lucky his hat due to a previous altercation, prompting Vladimir to try, but Lucky remains unresponsive. The segment ends with silence as they wait for something to happen.

6.1.3 Lucky's speech

When Lucky begins his speech, it is a stream of consciousness speech (a continuous flow of thoughts and feelings, lacking a sensible structure) that appears to be nonsensical and fragmented. The speech covers a wide range of topics, from theology to physical activities to geographical locations, and is filled with repetitions, contradictions, and absurdities. The speech reflects Lucky's mental state and the chaotic nature of the world in which the characters find themselves.

As Lucky recites his speech, the reactions of the other characters fluctuate. Vladimir and Estragon initially pay close attention, while Pozzo becomes increasingly despondent and disgusted. Then, Vladimir and Estragon begin to protest, causing Pozzo's suffering to intensify. Despite this, Vladimir and Estragon return to attentiveness, while Pozzo becomes more agitated and starts groaning. Finally, all three characters engage in a violent struggle with Lucky as he continues to recite his speech.

Pozzo demands Lucky's hat and Vladimir seizes it, leading to silence from Lucky followed by his collapse. The victors, Vladimir and Estragon, pant in the aftermath. Pozzo reacts triumphantly by trampling on Lucky's hat, expressing his disdain for Lucky's thinking abilities. Vladimir expresses concern about Lucky's ability to walk after such treatment.

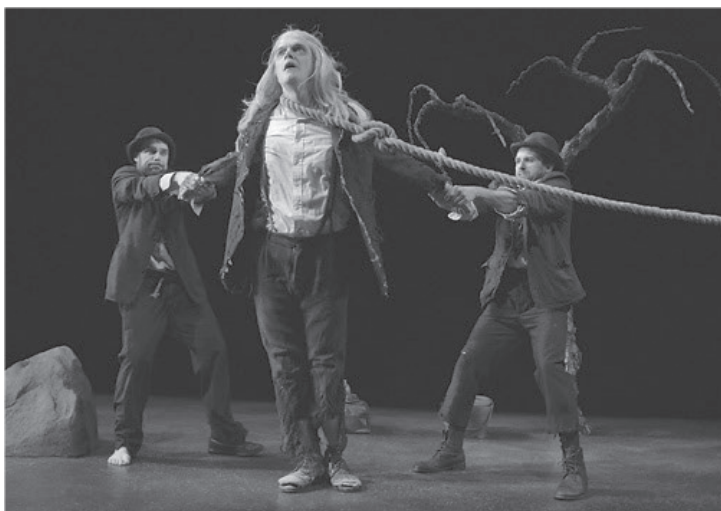


Figure.6: Lucky (centre) with the tramps on either side



Estragon and Vladimir express concern for Lucky's condition, fearing that Pozzo's actions may have killed him. Pozzo insists on trying to make Lucky walk again, despite his apparent exhaustion and possible injury. Pozzo then places bags in Lucky's hands to help him regain his senses and balance. In a sudden shift of mood, Pozzo becomes sentimental as he searches for his missing watch, lamenting its loss and becoming emotional.

There's a brief humorous moment when Pozzo attempts to listen for the tick-tick of his watch by pressing his ear to his stomach. Despite his efforts, he hears nothing, leading to a comical interaction where Vladimir and Estragon also attempt to listen.

Check Your Progress

1. Who are Vladimir and Estragon? What are they waiting for?
2. Who is Pozzo? How do the tramps react to his sudden arrival?
3. How do Vladimir and Estragon react to Pozzo's mistreatment of Lucky?

6.1.4 Pozzo and Lucky Leave



Figure 7: Lucky(L) and Pozzo(R) leave

Pozzo announces his departure, indicating that he must go. This prompts Estragon to inquire about Pozzo's "half-hunter" (pocket watch), which Pozzo realises he must have left behind at the manor. After a moment of silence, they bid each other farewell with repeated exchanges of "Adieu" among Pozzo, Vladimir, and Estragon. There is a palpable



silence after their farewells, signifying the weight of Pozzo's departure, broken only by Vladimir's remark that their interaction with Pozzo passed the time.

6.1.5 The Boy Arrives

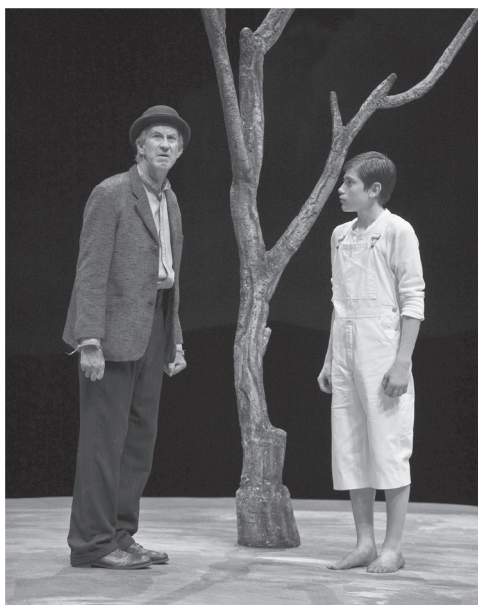


Figure 8: The Boy(R) with one of the tramps

As they converse, they experience a moment of physical discomfort as Estragon complains about his foot. Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of a Boy who brings a message from Mr. Godot, but Vladimir and Estragon become increasingly agitated, pressing him for answers about why he arrived late and why he seemed fearful. Despite their questioning, the Boy insists that he was genuinely afraid and that he is telling the truth, even as Estragon shakes him in disbelief.

The Boy conveys the message to the tramps that Godot will not come that evening but will surely arrive the next day. Despite Vladimir's attempt to extract more information from the Boy, the conversation yields little insight into their situation. The Boy reveals that he works for Mr. Godot by minding the goats and describes his relationship with Godot, mentioning that his brother, who minds the sheep, is the one who gets beaten.

6.1.6 The Boy Leaves; Vladimir and Estragon Wait for Godot

After the Boy leaves, Vladimir and Estragon engage in a brief conversation about their current predicament, during which Estragon contemplates leaving his boots behind for a future traveller. As night falls and the moon rises, they discuss their situation further,



with Estragon expressing weariness and hopelessness. Vladimir tries to reassure him by citing the Boy's message about Godot's arrival tomorrow, but Estragon remains sceptical.

Their conversation turns to the idea of waiting versus taking action, with Vladimir urging Estragon to seek shelter due to the cold. Despite Vladimir's efforts to move on, Estragon expresses doubt and reflects on their long companionship, wondering if they might have been better off alone. Eventually, they decide to leave but remain seated, unable to move as the curtain falls.

Check Your Progress

1. Describe the interaction amongst Pozzo, Vladimir, and Estragon as Pozzo prepares to leave.
2. Who arrives after Pozzo's departure, and what message does he bring from Mr. Godot?
3. How do Vladimir and Estragon react to the Boy's arrival and his message?
4. How does the conversation between Vladimir and Estragon change as night falls?

6.2 Act II

6.2.1 Vladimir and Estragon Wait for Godot

In Act II of "Waiting for Godot," Vladimir and Estragon find themselves in the same desolate location as in Act I, waiting for the elusive character Godot. The Act opens with Vladimir moving about feverishly, inspecting Estragon's boots and the surroundings. He then begins to sing a song about a dog, when suddenly, Estragon enters barefoot, his head bowed. Vladimir notices him and tries to embrace him, but Estragon resists. They eventually embrace and engage in conversation.

They discuss their past interactions, including encounters with Pozzo and Lucky, but their memories are hazy and disjointed. They discuss the changing landscape and reminisce about their experiences together. As they converse, they reflect on the nature of their existence, the passage of time, and the futility of their actions. They ponder the significance of their memories and the inevitability of their situation. Vladimir suggests starting over, but they acknowledge the difficulty of making a fresh start. Despite their struggles, they find comfort in their shared misery and continue to wait for Godot.

Their discussion then shifts to the mundane, such as eating radishes and trying on boots. After a brief exchange about socks and the boots, Estragon expresses his weariness and sits down on a mound. Vladimir tries to comfort him by singing softly, but Estragon



reacts angrily, preferring silence. Estragon attempts to sleep, but Vladimir interrupts him, insisting they walk to shake off Estragon's drowsiness. Eventually, Estragon becomes too tired to continue, and Vladimir lets him rest.

Vladimir notices Lucky's hat nearby and is pleased with the discovery. They engage in a comical exchange where they exchange hats repeatedly, with Vladimir ultimately deciding to keep Lucky's hat. As they contemplate their situation, Vladimir suggests they play a game where he imitates Lucky and Estragon imitates Pozzo. However, their attempt at the game quickly dissolves into frustration.

The scene escalates as Vladimir becomes agitated and insists they wait for Godot. Estragon becomes increasingly distressed, and their dialogue becomes more frantic. Vladimir tries to reassure Estragon but becomes overwhelmed himself.

Their conversation devolves into bickering and insults, but they eventually reconcile, embracing each other briefly before separating in silence. Vladimir and Estragon discuss what they should do while waiting. They consider doing their exercises, including movements, elevations, relaxations, and elongations, but quickly become tired and decide to stop. Vladimir suggests they do the tree exercise for balance. He demonstrates the tree pose by standing on one leg, and Estragon follows suit, both staggering in the process.

Estragon asks if God can see him, to which Vladimir responds that he must close his eyes. Estragon does so but staggers even worse.

6.2.2 Pozzo and Lucky Arrive

Suddenly, Pozzo and Lucky enter, with Pozzo now blind and struggling to move. They fall to the ground in a heap of baggage, and Estragon asks if it is Godot. Vladimir confirms that it is not Godot but Pozzo.

Pozzo cries out for help, but Vladimir and Estragon are initially unsure how to respond. They discuss the possibility of helping Pozzo only if he agrees to give them something in return. However, Vladimir becomes impassioned, urging them to take action while they have the chance. He emphasises their unique opportunity to make a difference in the world and suggests they represent their species "worthily" before it's too late.

As they debate their course of action, Pozzo continues to call for help, offering money in return. Estragon negotiates for a higher amount, while Vladimir reflects on their situation, expressing boredom and a sense of aimlessness in their actions. Their eventual attempts to help Pozzo up are unsuccessful, and Pozzo cries out for assistance as he struggles.

Vladimir and Estragon try various methods to rouse him, including calling out his name and trying other names. Once they manage to lift Pozzo up, Pozzo questions their



identity, not recognizing them due to his blindness. Estragon makes a sarcastic remark about Pozzo's ability to see into the future, and Vladimir clarifies that Pozzo is asking if they are friends of his.

Pozzo expresses relief upon learning they are not highwaymen. However, he becomes agitated and demands to know the time, which Vladimir estimates based on the position of the sun. Pozzo reminisces about his once-excellent eyesight and the sudden onset of his blindness.

Vladimir and Estragon attempt to comfort Pozzo and explain their previous encounter, but Pozzo is dismissive. They discuss their current location and the fact that Pozzo's servant, Lucky, is not responding to Pozzo's calls. Vladimir suggests that Lucky might be dead, prompting Estragon to kick him in frustration. However, Estragon injures his foot in the process and moves away, limping and groaning in pain. Estragon expresses his disdain for Lucky and sits down on a mound, attempting to take off his boot. However, he quickly gives up and settles into a position for sleep.

As Pozzo prepares to leave, Vladimir asks him questions about what they do when he and Lucky fall and how they cope. He requests that Lucky sing or think before they depart, but Pozzo dismisses the idea, stating that Lucky is dumb and unable to do such things. When Vladimir asks since when exactly Lucky has been dumb, Pozzo becomes furious and delivers a philosophical monologue about the passage of time and the inevitability of death.

Check Your Progress

1. What are Vladimir and Estragon doing in the opening scene of Act II?
2. What game do Vladimir and Estragon attempt to play, and how does it turn out?

6.2.3 Pozzo and Lucky leave

After Pozzo and Lucky leave, Vladimir wakes Estragon up. Estragon expresses frustration at being constantly disturbed from sleep. Vladimir explains that he felt lonely and wanted company. Estragon shares that he was dreaming of happiness, but Vladimir dismisses it as a passing distraction.

Their conversation then shifts to Pozzo's condition, with Vladimir wondering if Pozzo is truly blind. Estragon suggests that Vladimir might have dreamt that Pozzo could see, but Vladimir remains uncertain.

As they contemplate getting up, Estragon struggles with his boots and asks for help. Vladimir reflects on the passage of time and the uncertainty of their situation, questioning what truth there will be in their experiences.



Estragon, exhausted from his efforts, begins to doze off again. Vladimir watches him and reflects on the inevitability of ageing and death. He muses on the idea that habit numbs them to their suffering and realises his own inability to continue in their current state.

6.2.4 The Boy Arrives

As Vladimir ponders, the Boy enters and addresses him as “Mister Albert,” signalling the potential arrival of someone named Albert. Vladimir realises it’s another instance of mistaken identity, and the Boy confirms that he hasn’t met Vladimir before.

The Boy delivers a message from Mr. Godot, informing Vladimir that Godot won’t come that evening but will arrive the next day without fail. Vladimir questions the Boy about Godot’s activities, but the Boy responds that Godot does nothing. Vladimir also asks about the Boy’s brother, who is sick, but the Boy is unsure if his brother came yesterday.

Vladimir asks the Boy about Godot’s appearance, and the Boy describes him as having a white beard. As the Boy prepares to leave, Vladimir instructs him to tell Godot that he saw Vladimir. In a sudden burst of violence, Vladimir insists that the Boy must remember seeing him, indicating the desperation of their situation.

6.2.5 The Boy Leaves; Vladimir and Estragon Wait for Godot

After the Boy leaves, Vladimir and Estragon engage in a conversation about their plans and their continued wait for Godot. They contemplate suicide by hanging but realize they lack the necessary resources. They agree to return the next day with rope and discuss their uncertain future.

Estragon expresses a desire to part ways, but Vladimir insists they must wait for Godot, suggesting that their salvation depends on his arrival. They prepare to leave but hesitate, indicating their inertia and uncertainty about what to do next.

The play ends with Vladimir instructing Estragon to pull up his trousers, indicating their readiness to leave, yet they remain motionless as the curtain falls, leaving their fate unresolved.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Vladimir reflect on the passage of time and the uncertainty of their situation?
2. What message does the Boy deliver from Mr. Godot, and how does Vladimir react?
3. Why do Vladimir and Estragon hesitate to leave at the end of the play?



7. Background: Understanding Key Literary and Philosophical Contexts

Before delving into the plot details and critical aspects of the play, let's acquaint ourselves with the key literary and philosophical contexts that underpin Samuel Beckett's groundbreaking work, *Waiting for Godot*. Here, we will learn about the unique blend of tragicomedy genre that infuses the play with elements of both tragedy and comedy, the existentialist philosophy that permeates the play, the avant-garde techniques employed by Beckett to challenge conventional theatrical norms, the influence of the Theatre of the Absurd on its thematic and stylistic elements, and the play's position within the continuum of modernism and postmodernism. By delving into these interconnected contexts, we can gain a deeper understanding of the play's complexity as a seminal work of literature and theatre.

7.1 Tragicomedy

Tragicomedy is a genre of literature that combines elements of both tragedy and comedy, often blurring the lines between them to create a unique and complex emotional experience for the audience. While tragedy typically involves serious and sombre themes, such as suffering, loss, and death, comedy tends to focus on humour, wit, and light-heartedness. Tragicomedy, therefore, navigates between these contrasting tones, portraying characters and situations that are both poignant and humorous, often simultaneously.

The roots of tragicomedy can be traced back to ancient Greek drama, particularly the works of playwrights like Euripides. However, the term 'tragicomedy' itself was popularised during the Renaissance. One of the key characteristics of tragicomedy is its ability to reflect the complexities of human existence. By blending tragic and comic elements, tragicomedy mirrors the unpredictable and contradictory nature of life itself. It acknowledges the existence of suffering and hardship while also finding moments of joy and levity amidst the chaos.

Beckett skilfully blends tragic and comic elements in *Waiting for Godot*, offering both moments of laughter and reflection for the audience. Short, swift exchanges like "Charming evening we're having" followed by "Unforgettable," inject humour into the bleakness of their situation as they aimlessly wait for Godot (Act I). In another scene in Act II, Vladimir attempts to help Pozzo to his feet, but fails miserably. He tries again, only to stumble and fall himself. In a comical display of clumsiness, he struggles to get back up, but his efforts are in vain. This moment exposes the characters' incompetence and portrays them as foolish and bumbling, resembling clowns in their antics. Beckett's intention with this scene is perhaps to highlight the absurdity of the characters' predicament and their inability to accomplish even the simplest tasks. The sheer silliness of four grown men struggling to stand up adds



to the humour, eliciting laughter from the audience. This comedic reversal of a potentially tense situation involving Pozzo's vulnerability helps to lighten the mood and create a sense of amusement, providing a comedic relief from the otherwise serious tone of the play.

Amidst the humour, there are moments of outright sadness, such as Estragon's regular beatings, sore foot, and the physical ailments plaguing Vladimir. There is also a perpetual existential despair that first gets established with Vladimir's iconic statement, "Nothing to be done." But such moments of deep existential reflection are often followed by comedic exchanges, gestures, nonsensical interactions or vice-versa. For instance, while initially humorous as we witness Estragon struggling with his boots, this seemingly comical moment gradually reveals the underlying helplessness and frustration of the characters as they await the elusive Godot. Similarly, when Pozzo and Lucky enter, Pozzo's military-style attitude may elicit laughter, but it is tempered by the cruel treatment of Lucky, reminding the audience of the underlying cruelty and power dynamics at play. Scenes such as Vladimir and Estragon repeatedly exchanging hats with Lucky, inspired by circus antics, initially provoke laughter but ultimately serve as a commentary on the repetitive and monotonous cycle of life, reminiscent of the **myth of Sisyphus**³.

Thus, *Waiting for Godot* never allows for uninhibited laughter, constantly reminding the audience of the characters' helplessness, circular existence, and the existential void they inhabit. Yet, the comedic and farcical elements provide necessary relief, balancing the weight of philosophical contemplation with moments of levity. It encourages viewers to confront life's uncertainties with courage and humility, reminding them to embrace the mysteries of existence rather than seeking illusory certainties.

7.2 Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophy which explores questions about the nature of existence, freedom, choice, and the search for meaning in an indifferent or absurd universe. This philosophical movement emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries and reflects a profound shift in human understanding. It suggests that in modern times, people feel disconnected from what it means to be human. This disconnect makes life feel confusing and uncertain. They grapple with questions about existence, meaning, and purpose in a world where traditional sources of identity and meaning no longer suffice. Existentialist thinkers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre, challenged established norms of morality, religion, and identity, inspiring a new wave of expression.

3. In the Greek myth of Sisyphus, Sisyphus is condemned to roll a boulder uphill for eternity, only for it to roll back down each time he nears the summit. This eternal cycle symbolises the futility and absurdity of human existence, as Sisyphus is trapped in a never-ending task with no hope of escape or fulfilment.



A key idea in existentialism is that we are not stuck in predetermined roles. Instead, we have the freedom to make our own choices and shape who we are. But this freedom comes with a catch: the realisation that we'll all eventually die. This can make life feel scary and uncertain. Existentialism says that in the face of this uncertainty, it's important to be true to ourselves and make choices that reflect our values, even if they go against what others expect. It also recognizes that relationships with others are important, even though life can sometimes feel confusing and meaningless. Furthermore, existentialism encourages individuals to remain true to themselves, embracing authenticity while navigating the complexities of human existence.

Waiting for Godot delves into existential themes such as the absurdity of human existence and the search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. Through the characters' futile wait for the elusive Godot, the play serves as a metaphor for the existential predicament of modern humanity, highlighting the inherent absurdity and pointlessness of human existence. Vladimir and Estragon's perpetual boredom and suffering echo the existentialist notion that life is characterised by unrelenting suffering and a profound lack of inherent purpose. By confronting audiences with the stark realities of existence, Beckett prompts viewers to reflect on their own lives and confront the fundamental questions of human existence in a thought-provoking and introspective manner.

Despite their inaction and lack of direction, Vladimir and Estragon represent humanity's refusal to succumb to **nihilism**⁴. Their persistent hope and optimism, even in the face of hopelessness, highlight the human tendency to seek meaning and purpose in life, even when none may exist. Additionally, the play's minimalist setting, circular structure, and ambiguous ending contribute to its existentialist themes. The repetitive nature of the characters' interactions reinforces the sense of existential ennui and absurdity that permeates the play.

Thus, *Waiting for Godot* serves as a poignant exploration of existentialist philosophy, challenging audiences to confront the absurdity of human existence while emphasising the enduring human capacity to seek meaning and purpose in an indifferent world.

7.3 *Avant-Garde Theatre*

Unlike existentialism, which is a philosophical perspective, avant-garde refers to experimental, or radical movements, particularly in the arts; one that aims to push the boundaries of what is considered acceptable or conventional at a given time, often challenging

4. Here, nihilism refers to the philosophical belief or perspective that life lacks inherent meaning, purpose, or value.



established ideas, styles, or techniques. Avant-garde movements can manifest in various forms, including literature, visual arts, music, theatre, and film.

In the context of art and culture, the avant-garde emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a term to describe artists and movements that were innovative and ahead of their time. This period of social and political upheaval, including World War I and the Russian Revolution, led artists to seek alternative means of expression. They experimented with new artistic forms and techniques, influenced by intellectual and philosophical movements like existentialism and **surrealism**⁵. Technological advancements in electricity and film encouraged the use of multimedia elements in theatre, resulting in immersive and dynamic performances that explored themes of alienation, absurdity, and the search for meaning.

Avant-garde theatre embodies the principles of the broader avant-garde movement within the theatrical context. It involves experimentation with dramatic structure, content, and performance styles to challenge traditional notions of theatre. Several artists and playwrights have played key roles in avant-garde theatre. Antonin Artaud aimed to create intense experiences for audiences through his 'Theatre of Cruelty'. Bertolt Brecht's 'Epic Theatre' encouraged critical thinking among viewers. Some features of avant-garde theatre include:

- ◆ Adoption of an anti-establishment stance, reflected in content and style.
- ◆ Idealistic desire to change the world.
- ◆ Absence of linear story and narrative form, emphasising non-linear narratives or the absence of traditional plot structures.
- ◆ Transdisciplinary nature, blurring boundaries between art, music, literature, and performance.
- ◆ Breaking the fourth wall, blurring the lines between performers and audience.
- ◆ Incorporation of multimedia elements such as projections, music, and visual art.
- ◆ Emphasis on symbolism, abstraction, and surrealism over realism.
- ◆ Exploration of controversial or taboo subjects.

Interestingly, the avant-garde itself becomes part of tradition over time, losing its revolutionary edge and becoming susceptible to being clichéd or outdated. Therefore, the avant-garde must continually renew itself through new experiments or be replaced by the emergence of a new avant-garde.

5. Surrealism is an artistic and literary movement that explores the realm of dreams, imagination, and the unconscious mind. It often features bizarre or dreamlike imagery, unexpected juxtapositions, and irrational or illogical scenes.



Waiting for Godot stands as a landmark of avant-garde theatre, pushing the boundaries of traditional storytelling with its unconventional narrative structure. Unlike traditional plays with clear beginnings, middles, and ends, *Waiting for Godot* unfolds in a circular and repetitive manner, with the characters trapped in a perpetual cycle of waiting and uncertainty. This non-linear approach challenges audiences to rethink their expectations of theatrical storytelling and embrace ambiguity as an essential part of the dramatic experience.

Moreover, the portrayal of Vladimir and Estragon as tramps challenges traditional representations of protagonists in theatre. Instead of noble or heroic figures, Beckett presents characters who are marginalised and exist on the fringes of society, reflecting the avant-garde's interest in exploring existential themes through unconventional means. Additionally, the character of Godot, who never appears in the play, subverts audience expectations and defies conventional storytelling conventions. This deliberate ambiguity surrounding Godot's identity and significance challenges viewers to question their assumptions about narrative structure and character development, pushing the boundaries of theatrical expression.

Furthermore, *Waiting for Godot* experiments with unconventional staging and performance techniques, adding to its avant-garde appeal. The play's minimalist setting, consisting of a barren landscape with a single tree, emphasises the characters' sense of isolation and futility, reflecting the existential themes of the play. The sparse stage design serves to strip away distractions and focus attention on the core elements of the performance, inviting audiences to contemplate the deeper meanings beneath the surface.

Lastly, Beckett employs a variety of linguistic devices, including repetitive dialogue and circular conversations, to convey meaning and create a sense of ambiguity. These innovative techniques challenge traditional notions of narrative coherence and encourage audiences to engage with the text on multiple levels, interpreting the underlying existential and philosophical themes in a nuanced way.

Check Your Progress

1. Examine how Samuel Beckett's personal experiences shaped his literary work.
2. What is avant-garde theatre, and how does *Waiting for Godot* exemplify its principles and techniques?
3. Examine the tragi-comic elements in *Waiting for Godot*.

7.4 Theatre of the Absurd

'Theatre of the Absurd', a subset of avant-garde theatre, is a theatrical movement that emerged in the 1950s influenced by the aftermath of World War II and the existentialist philosophy of thinkers like Albert Camus. As the fog of uncertainty took over the lives of



people, many found themselves grappling with a world that seemed devoid of meaning. The horrors of the war, including the atrocities of the Holocaust, shattered any illusions of human progress and enlightenment. Many were left questioning the fundamental nature of humanity and the universe itself. Amidst this existential crisis, playwrights sought to reflect the absurdity of life in their works, mirroring the disjointedness and chaos that had become the new reality.

During this period, playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter began writing works that challenged audiences' perceptions and expectations of theatre. The Theatre of the Absurd was not a unified movement in the traditional sense, but rather a loose collection of artists working independently. Critic Martin Esslin played a key role in identifying and popularising the movement through his influential essay on the subject- "The Theatre of the Absurd" (1960). (refer 'Further Readings' for e-link).

For playwrights of this genre, "absurd" did not denote mere silliness, but rather a sense of disharmony with the world. This form of theatre aimed to startle audiences by shattering conventional stage techniques, posing questions without providing answers, and articulating a profound sense of bewilderment in the face of human existence.

Absurdist theatre diverges from conventional storytelling by refusing to offer tidy resolutions to its central conflicts, like the perpetual anticipation of Godot's arrival in *Waiting for Godot*, who eventually doesn't arrive. Instead of following a linear plot structure, Absurdist works often loop back on themselves, repeating patterns without clear progression. In these plays, meaning isn't solely conveyed through dialogue but also through actions, leading to conflicting interpretations and a feeling of uncertainty. Despite the presence of humour, Absurdist works juxtapose comedic elements with poignant and distressing situations, such as Estragon's comical struggle with losing his trousers while contemplating suicide. Furthermore, characters in Absurdist plays lack distinct individuality, with figures like Vladimir and Estragon sharing similarities in background and appearance, thereby underscoring the universality of the human condition within this theatrical genre.

Despite its seemingly nihilistic outlook, the Theatre of the Absurd was not devoid of hope. Esslin believed that by confronting life's absurdity head-on, audiences could achieve a sense of liberation and freedom. Rather than provoking despair, Absurdist theatre aimed to provoke laughter as a response to the recognition of life's inherent absurdity.

7.5 *Waiting for Godot: A Play at the Intersection of Modernism and Postmodernism*

Modernism and postmodernism are two key movements in the world of art, literature, and culture that emerged in the 20th century, each offering distinct perspectives on the human experience.



Modernism, which gained prominence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was a period marked by radical experimentation and a rejection of traditional norms and values. Imagine it as a time when artists, writers, and thinkers were like bold explorers, venturing into uncharted territories of creativity and pushing the boundaries of what was considered possible. In literature, modernist writers like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and T.S. Eliot sought to capture the complexities of modern life through innovative narrative techniques, fragmented structures, and introspective storytelling. Modernism celebrated the individual's subjective experience and embraced the dynamism of the rapidly changing world.

Fast forward to the latter half of the 20th century, and we find ourselves in the era of postmodernism, a time characterised by scepticism, irony, and a playful dismantling of established truths. Postmodernism emerged as a reaction to the perceived failures and disillusionments of modernism, challenging its grand narratives and celebrating the plurality of perspectives and voices, i.e., it challenged the notion of a single, objective reality by highlighting the subjective nature of truth and the multiplicity of human experiences. Postmodernist thinkers questioned the authority of institutions and systems, advocating for individual autonomy and agency. They critiqued hierarchical power structures and championed marginalised voices, emphasising the importance of diversity and inclusivity. Picture postmodernism as a hall of mirrors, where reality is fragmented and refracted into a kaleidoscope of perspectives, inviting viewers to question their assumptions and embrace ambiguity.

Waiting for Godot occupies a unique position at the intersection of modernism and postmodernism, embodying characteristics of both literary movements. As a modernist work, the play delves into existential themes, reflecting the disillusionment and existential angst prevalent in the aftermath of World War II. Vladimir and Estragon's sense of trapped existence and their grappling with questions of identity and purpose resonate with the modernist exploration of the human condition. Additionally, the fragmented plot and circular dialogue echo the fragmentation and dislocation often seen in modernist literature, emphasising the characters' sense of alienation. Beckett's use of stream-of-consciousness techniques further contributes to the modernist aesthetic, revealing the subjective nature of reality and the breakdown of traditional narrative forms.

However, the play also exhibits post-modernist characteristics, particularly in its deconstruction of meaning and narrative coherence. The play challenges traditional notions of plot, character, and resolution, leaving audiences to grapple with ambiguity and uncertainty. Through its metafictional elements- i.e. instances wherein characters themselves acknowledge that they are part of a fictional work by speaking directly to the audience or commenting in a way that draws attention to the fact that they're in a story- the play



highlights the artificiality of the theatrical experience, prompting viewers to think about their role as spectators. For example, in Act I, Estragon directs Vladimir to the “End of the corridor, on the left” for the bathroom, a direction more fitting for a theatre setting rather than the outdoor environment of the play. Vladimir reinforces this impression of being in a theatre by responding, “Keep my seat,” despite the absence of seats on stage.

In Act II, as Estragon becomes paranoid about unseen threats, Vladimir gestures toward the audience, reinforcing the sense of paranoia. Though Vladimir reassures him, Estragon reacts as if he’s terrified, suggesting he’s alarmed by the presence of people—the audience—in that direction too. Vladimir’s understanding response underscores the characters’ awareness of their fictional existence. Later, when they resort to insults, Estragon’s choice of “Crritic!” as the ultimate insult highlights the characters’ self-awareness within their fictional world. This acknowledgment of their fabricated reality serves to accentuate the absurdity not only of their own situation but also of humanity’s existence as a whole.

Thus, *Waiting for Godot* stands as a transitional work that bridges both modernist and postmodernist literature, embodying themes of existential despair, fragmentation, and the search for meaning while challenging conventional narrative forms and questioning established truths.

8. Relevance Today

Waiting for Godot remains profoundly relevant in contemporary society for several compelling reasons. Firstly, its exploration of existential themes such as the search for meaning, the human condition, and the passage of time resonates deeply with audiences across cultures and generations. In an era marked by rapid technological advancements and societal changes, individuals continue to grapple with questions about the purpose and significance of their existence, making the play’s themes as relevant today as they were when it was first written.

Moreover, the ambiguity and open-endedness of the play invite multiple interpretations and stimulate intellectual engagement among audiences. In an age where information is readily accessible and opinions abound, the play’s capacity to spark nuanced discussions about its meaning and implications offers a valuable opportunity for introspection and critical thinking.

The play also challenges traditional theatrical conventions with its experimental form, including its minimalist stage setting and absurdist dialogue. In an era characterised by a hunger for innovation and avant-garde works, the play’s unconventional approach to storytelling continues to captivate audiences interested in exploring new artistic frontiers.



Lastly, the play endures as a relevant and influential work of literature due to its timeless themes, experimental form, cultural impact, reflection of contemporary issues, and ability to inspire intellectual curiosity and discourse. As long as humanity continues to wrestle with the complexities of existence and society, the play will remain a source of inspiration and contemplation for generations to come.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Absurdist theatre challenge conventional notions of plot structure and character development?
2. How does the experimental form of *Waiting for Godot* challenge traditional theatrical conventions?
3. In what ways does *Waiting for Godot* embody characteristics of both modernism and postmodernism?
4. What factors contribute to the enduring legacy and influence of *Waiting for Godot* as a work of literature and theatre?



Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*

Shrimi Gupta

Part-2

Structure

9. Important Aspects of the Play
10. Religious Implications of the Play
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9. Important Aspects of the Play

9.1 Setting and Opening Scene

9.1.1 Act I

The opening scene sets the tone for the play as it introduces the characters, Estragon and Vladimir, and their existential struggles, immediately drawing the audience into their world. The setting of a lonely country road, dominated by a solitary tree, and the presence of only two characters creates an atmosphere of desolation and emptiness, while serving as a blank canvas onto which the characters' existential struggles and philosophical ponderings are projected.

There is a disparity between expectation and reality: the road which suggests potential for progress and change is juxtaposed with the reality of the two stagnant and stranded individuals, with the characters finding themselves trapped in a state of inertia, unable to move forward or break free from the cycle of waiting. This heightens the sense of futility and despair that permeates the play's atmosphere.

The evening setting deepens the atmosphere of anticipation and uncertainty, marking a transitional period between light and darkness, hope and despair. In this liminal space, the characters are suspended in a perpetual state of waiting, uncertain of what the future holds.



The opening scene also establishes a difference between Estragon and Vladimir with the former being preoccupied with more immediate, practical concerns like removing his boot, dealing with the ache in his foot, while Vladimir tends to engage in more existential questions, reflecting on the nature of their suffering and reminiscing better days. An example of the contrast between the two is seen in their discussions about Godot. While Estragon is primarily concerned with the practical implications of waiting for Godot's arrival—such as hunger and fatigue—Vladimir engages in deeper reflections on the significance of their waiting and the uncertainty surrounding Godot's existence.

Physically, Vladimir and Estragon are depicted as worn-out, dishevelled, and lethargic, mirroring their inner turmoil and existential fatigue.

9.1.2 Act II

Act II opens with a striking resemblance to the first act, underscoring the cyclical nature of the characters' existence. The only noticeable difference is the transformation of the once barren tree, which now bears four or five leaves. This subtle change in the environment hints at the possibility of growth or change amidst the bleakness. However, the irony lies in the fact that despite the tree's new leaves, Vladimir and Estragon's lives remain the same. The sprouting leaves only serve as a reminder that their hopes continue to be deferred, perpetuating the stagnation inherent in their circumstances. This reinforces one of the central themes of the play - the inevitability of unchanging circumstances despite fleeting glimpses of potential change.

As in Act I, Estragon is alone when the Act begins, emphasising his perpetual loneliness and vulnerability. When Vladimir enters, he launches into a repetitive recitation of a dog beaten to death for stealing bread. This dog serves as a poignant metaphor for the characters' own suffering and helplessness, echoing the repetitive nature of their lives trapped in a cycle of waiting and despair. The condition of the dog in the doggerel (poorly constructed poetry) mirrors the plight of the two tramps, highlighting their shared experiences of violence and hardship.

Just as in Act I, Vladimir expresses concern about Estragon's well-being, indicating that he has once again been subjected to violence. This revelation adds to the ominous atmosphere of the second Act, as it begins with a sense of impending death and despair which only further worsens.

9.2 Repetitive Nature of the Interactions

The play is punctuated with repetitive gestures and dialogues, often followed by inaction, further emphasising the theme of existential paralysis, where individuals are trapped in



a state of limbo, unable to move forward or effect meaningful change in their lives. The repetition of absurd, meaningless actions demonstrates the characters' desperate attempts to alleviate their boredom, highlighting the lack of purpose in their lives.

The characters' resigned acceptance of their lack of control over their lives is evident from the very beginning, with Estragon's declaration, "nothing to be done," echoed by Vladimir shortly thereafter. This recurring phrase underscores their passive attitude and their inability to take charge of their own destinies. Moreover, Estragon's acknowledgment that "nothing happens" in their day further emphasises the emptiness and monotony of their existence (Act I).

The concise, monosyllabic language used by the characters creates a disjointed rhythm in their conversations, reflecting the frustration and despair they feel. Their dialogue is laden with existential angst, as they grapple with the meaninglessness of their lives. Additionally, Estragon's inability to remember certain events suggests the insignificance of their lives, as he fails to pay attention or recall important details.

9.3 Pozzo and Lucky: Shifting Relationship Dynamic

The relationship between Pozzo and Lucky is complex, reflecting themes of dominance, submission, and mutual dependence. While Estragon and Vladimir share a bond through their shared experiences and the anticipation of Godot's arrival, Lucky's connection to Pozzo is more tangible—he is physically tethered to him.

In Act I, Pozzo is portrayed as a figure of power and control. He dominates the other characters, exuding confidence and decisiveness. He orders Lucky around, using animalistic terms and treating him as inferior, while maintaining an air of superiority and confidence. Pozzo's behaviour, such as his condescending acknowledgment of human likeness and his ostentatious consumption of food, further solidifies his status as a dominant figure. Pozzo's characterization in the play has also been compared to a circus ringmaster, exemplified by his authoritative demeanour and commanding presence. His entrance, heralded by the cracking of a whip, evokes the imagery of a professional circus performer. However, a significant transformation occurs in Act II, where Pozzo undergoes a dramatic decline in stature and power: he is now blind and the rope between him and Lucky is shorter than in Act I. His blindness renders him helpless and pathetic, a stark contrast to his former self-assuredness. Pozzo's sudden blindness is a poignant metaphor for his loss of control, triggered by the misplacement of his watch—a symbol of his authority and mastery over time. This loss symbolises Pozzo's surrender of power and autonomy, leaving him vulnerable and disoriented. His blindness serves as a physical manifestation of his existential crisis, highlighting his inability to navigate the world without the guiding structure of



time. Additionally, the shortened rope between Pozzo and Lucky symbolises their altered dynamic, with Pozzo now dependent on Lucky for guidance. Previously, Pozzo held control over Lucky, using him as a slave and treating him as a mere object. However, as the play progresses and Pozzo's physical and mental state deteriorates, their relationship undergoes a transformation. The shortened rope signifies Pozzo's newfound dependence on Lucky for guidance and support. No longer able to maintain his former dominance, Pozzo now relies on Lucky to navigate their surroundings and provide assistance. This reversal of roles reflects the unpredictability and instability of human relationships, as well as the fluidity of power dynamics. Lucky, in contrast to Pozzo, defies easy categorization. While initially portrayed as a submissive servant, his occasional displays of intellect and creativity suggest a more complex inner life. His enigmatic monologue, characterised by its nonsensical structure and cryptic content, challenges conventional interpretations and invites deeper analysis (discussed in the next section). Thus, while Lucky appears initially as a submissive servant to Pozzo, as the play unfolds, it becomes evident that Lucky holds significant influence over Pozzo, despite his apparent servitude. This influence suggests that their relationship is not one-sided but rather characterised by mutual dependence and power struggles.

Check Your Progress

1. How does the setting of the lonely country road contribute to the atmosphere of the play?
2. How does the repetition of gestures and dialogues underscore the theme of existential paralysis in the play?
3. How does the shifting dynamic between Pozzo and Lucky from Act I to Act II reflect broader themes of power, control, and interdependence in the play?
4. How does the shortened rope between Pozzo and Lucky symbolise their changed relationship dynamic?
5. Can you identify any moments of hope or potential change amidst the despair and monotony depicted in the play?

9.4 Significance of Lucky's Speech

Lucky's seemingly nonsensical speech in Act I initially appears to be chaotic and devoid of meaning. However, upon closer examination, the speech, delivered without punctuation and at a rapid pace, mirrors the overall structure and themes of the play itself. It reflects the absurdity and formlessness of existence, while also hinting at deeper philosophical questions.



When the speech is stripped of the repetitive, insensible seeming elements, the following is what remains:

“Given [acknowledging] the existence . . .
of a personal God ...
[who exists] outside [of]
time . . .
[and] who . . .
loves us dearly . . .
and [who] suffers . . .
with those who . . .
are plunged in torment . . .
it is established beyond all doubt . . .
that man . . .
that man . . .
for reasons unknown . . .
for reasons unknown . . .
for reasons unknown . . .
[our] labours abandoned left unfinished . . .
abandoned unfinished . . .” (Beckett, Act I)

If we look to understand the literal meaning of Lucky’s speech, it reveals a contemplation on the existence of a personal God who exists outside of time and loves humanity deeply, sharing in their suffering. It suggests that despite this divine love and empathy, there remains a profound sense of uncertainty or mystery surrounding human existence. The repetition of phrases like “for reasons unknown” emphasises this theme of existential ambiguity. Furthermore, the mention of “labours abandoned left unfinished” hints at the idea of human endeavours and efforts being left incomplete or unresolved.

On delving deeper, Lucky’s speech serves as a poignant reflection of the existential uncertainties and disenchantment that permeated the post-World War II era. Remember, the post-World War II era was marked by profound existential doubts and disillusionment, stemming from the unprecedented devastation of the war and the subsequent socio-political shifts. The horrors of World War II, including the Holocaust, atomic bombings, and widespread destruction, shattered previous notions of human progress and enlightenment,



leading to a profound sense of disillusionment. Existential philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Martin Heidegger grappled with the fundamental questions of existence, meaning, and morality in the face of such cataclysmic events. This period witnessed a widespread questioning of traditional beliefs and institutions, including religion, as people struggled to find meaning and purpose in a world that seemed increasingly chaotic and indifferent.

Lucky's speech encapsulates the existential uncertainties and disillusionment of the post-World War II era. Divided into three parts, the speech delves into different aspects of human existence, echoing the scepticism towards traditional beliefs and institutions prevalent during this time. The first part questions the existence and nature of God, portraying a modern scepticism towards traditional religious beliefs, reflecting the broader questioning of established institutions in the wake of the Second World War's devastation. In the second part, Lucky laments the futility of human endeavours, extending his critique to intellectual pursuits, which are portrayed as futile attempts to understand and improve the human condition. This mirrors the existential angst and disillusionment with the efficacy of human efforts in the face of widespread destruction and social upheaval. The third part delves into themes of mortality and decay, painting a bleak picture of a world consumed by darkness and death, echoing the existential despair surrounding the transient nature of human existence. Despite the despairing tone of Lucky's speech, there is a paradoxical message of resilience and perseverance. Amidst the chaos and uncertainty, Lucky repeatedly declares, "I resume," suggesting a determination to carry on despite the existential absurdity of life. This resilience reflects the human capacity to endure and find meaning amidst the existential uncertainties of the post-war era, encapsulating the complex interplay between despair and resilience that characterised the existential condition of the time.

It is recommended that you experience this specific striking rendition of Lucky's speech performed as a part of the 1987 television text production of the play in Paris by the San Quentin Drama Workshop: https://youtu.be/a-zhUBPDitk?si=NAvM1mY_Km-dbgBv

9.5 Some Important Symbols

9.5.1 Let's Talk About Hats!

In a play where props are sparse, the significance of hats becomes pronounced, serving as a lens through which one can explore the larger theme of existential absurdity. Vladimir's preoccupation with his hat serves as a symbolic reflection of his internal turmoil and the futile nature of his actions. Through his repetitive actions of taking off his hat, peering inside, shaking it, and then putting it back on, Vladimir reveals a sense of restlessness



and agitation. This behaviour suggests that he is searching for something within himself or his surroundings, but ultimately finding nothing of significance.

The hat symbolises this search for meaning amidst the absurd, playing a central role in the characters' quest for identity. While a hat can confer a sense of self, it is also easily lost or replaced, highlighting the fluidity of identity in this meaningless realm. Vladimir's constant adjustment of his hat reflects a desperate attachment to a semblance of security, yet his repeated removal of it suggests its inadequacy in providing lasting reassurance.

Similarly, Lucky's fixation on his bowler hat underscores the fleeting nature of identity, as his ability to think is seemingly contingent upon its presence. When hats are exchanged among the characters in Act II, the precariousness of identity is laid bare, with no one retaining a clear sense of self.

Even as the characters revert to their original hats, their identities remain uncertain, emphasising the futility of seeking stability in a world defined by absurdity. Whether fixating on hats, boots, or other objects, the characters' struggle to imbue their lives with meaning ultimately proves futile, highlighting the inherent hopelessness of their plight.

9.5.2 The Tree

The lone tree in the play serves as a powerful symbolic motif, representing both the desolation of the characters' surroundings and the emptiness of their existence. Positioned prominently onstage throughout the play, the barren tree contributes to the bleak mood of the setting, establishing a sense of hopelessness before the characters even utter a word. Its stark appearance mirrors the emotional void experienced by Estragon and Vladimir as they aimlessly wait for the elusive Godot. Additionally, the tree's sudden sprouting of leaves in Act II highlights the absurdity of the play's universe, as natural processes are distorted and logic is undermined. This unexpected change underscores the unpredictable and illogical nature of the world which the characters inhabit, inviting the audience to contemplate the unreliable constructs that shape their perceptions of reality.

9.5.3 Lucky's Bags

Another significant motif in the play is represented by Lucky's bags, which serve as a visual symbol of the burdens individuals carry throughout their lives. Estragon's curiosity about why Lucky never sets down the bags prompts Pozzo's explanation that it is a means of impressing him, yet Lucky remains silent on the matter. These cumbersome bags, tethered to Lucky as he is tethered to Pozzo, metaphorically represent the weight of human suffering and oppression. Despite having no logical reason to bear this burden, Lucky is



unable to free himself from it, highlighting the senselessness and inevitability of human suffering. In a post-World War II context, this symbolism takes on added significance, reflecting the collective trauma and existential angst of the era. Just as Lucky is unable to rid himself of his burdens, individuals struggle to move on from the horrors of war and the profound sense of loss that accompanies it. Through the motif of Lucky's bags, Beckett explores themes of oppression, endurance, and the enduring impact of historical trauma on the human psyche.

9.6 Who/What is Godot?

In the play, the character of Godot serves as a central, yet elusive figure, around whom much of the action revolves, despite the fact that he never actually appears in the play. Godot is a mysterious figure whom Vladimir and Estragon are waiting for, though it is never entirely clear who he is or why they are waiting for him. Vladimir and Estragon seem to place their hopes and expectations on Godot's arrival. They believe that he may offer them some form of salvation or relief from their existential struggles. Their repeated waiting for him suggests a desperate longing for something to change in their lives, even though they are uncertain of what Godot represents or whether he will actually provide any solutions.

Some interpretations suggest that Godot symbolises a higher power or authority figure, while others view him as a representation of humanity's endless quest for meaning and purpose. Vladimir and Estragon's fixation on Godot reveals a sense of dependency and passivity. They seem to rely on the possibility of his arrival to give their lives purpose or direction, rather than exercising agency and creating meaning for themselves. This dependency underscores the theme of existential paralysis and the characters' inability to break free from their cyclical patterns of waiting and uncertainty.

Check Your Progress

1. What is the significance of Lucky's seemingly nonsensical speech and how does it reflect broader existential themes?
2. How do hats serve as symbols particularly in relation to themes of identity and existential absurdity?
3. Who or what is Godot in the play, and what does the characters' fixation on waiting for him reveal about their existential condition?
4. What does the tree symbolize in the play?



9.7 Circular Yet Asymmetrical Structure of the Play

The circular structure of the play is a fundamental aspect of the play's thematic exploration of existentialism and the human condition. It not only reinforces its thematic concerns but also enhances its impact on the audience, inviting reflection on the cyclical nature of human existence and the universal experience of waiting for meaning in a seemingly indifferent world.

The narrative unfolds in a cyclical fashion, with Act II mirroring Act I in many respects, creating a sense of repetition and stagnation. Both Acts are set in the same location at the same time. Each Act begins early in the morning as the characters awaken and concludes with the rising of the moon. The setting is a desolate road with a solitary tree, providing a backdrop for the characters' existential struggles. Despite the slight change of the tree bearing some leaves in the second Act, the overall setting remains unchanged. The exact location of the road is unspecified, adding to the sense of ambiguity and universality. The closing scene of both the Acts also share a similarity, highlighting the cyclical nature of Didi and Gogo's existence.

Act I	Act II
"ESTRAGON: Well, shall we go? VLADIMIR: Yes, let's go. <i>They do not move.</i> <i>Curtain.</i> "	"VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go? ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go. <i>They do not move.</i> <i>Curtain.</i> "

Despite their verbal agreement to leave, they remain static, suggesting a lack of progress or resolution in their situation. This repetition underscores the futility of their actions and the sense of entrapment in their routine, reinforcing the theme of existential stagnation where the protagonists feel a sense of paralysis or inertia in their search for meaning, purpose, or authenticity. throughout the play. Vladimir and Estragon find themselves in the same predicament day after day, waiting for someone named Godot who never arrives. Their lives seem to be caught in an endless loop, devoid of progress or resolution. They discuss the idea of getting used to their situation ("the muck") as they go along, highlighting a sense of resignation and acceptance.

The play's circular structure echoes the repetitive nature of historical events, such as the recurrence of war despite the lessons supposedly learned from past conflicts. Just as Vladimir and Estragon's memories fail to exert any influence on their current situation, the play suggests a broader commentary on the cyclical nature of human folly and the futility of progress. Beckett's portrayal of this nihilistic setting resonates strongly with post-war Europe, where disillusionment and existential angst were pervasive.



Moreover, the cyclical structure underscores the play's exploration of time and temporality. Time in *Waiting for Godot* is not linear but rather circular, as evidenced by the repetition of events and dialogue. This non-linear concept of time reflects the characters' subjective experience of time, which is marked by boredom, frustration, and a sense of timelessness. Additionally, the circular structure serves to emphasise the play's absurdist themes. The characters' futile attempts to break free from their predicament only lead them back to the same starting point, highlighting the absurdity of their existence. This sense of repetition and futility contributes to the overall sense of existential angst and despair that permeates the play.

However, upon closer examination, differences emerge, highlighting the asymmetrical nature of the play's structure. These disparities manifest in various elements, such as the actions of the characters and the evolution of the natural environment, highlighting a thematic progression from initial acceptance to deeper despair. For instance, in Act I, Estragon accepts a carrot, but in Act II, he rejects a radish. Similarly, his footwear journey from removing his shoes in Act I to finding his boots too big in Act II signifies a shift in his circumstances. Additionally, while Estragon rejects suicide in Act I due to concerns about solitude, in Act II, the absence of a suitable rope postpones any such consideration. The changing state of the tree, from barrenness in Act I to sprouting leaves in Act II, offers a visual representation of renewal amidst desolation. In Act II, the Boy denies being the same one who came the day before, introducing an element of uncertainty and disruption to the characters' expectations.

On a thematic level, In Act II, there is a downward movement, with the darker aspects of human existence becoming more pronounced as the play progresses. For instance, the worsening condition of Lucky and Pozzo. In Act II, Pozzo has lost his possessions, including his whip and his ability to see, rendering him helpless and dependent on others. This contrasts sharply with his dominance and control in Act I. Similarly, Lucky's condition deteriorates, as he appears even more broken and submissive, emphasising the theme of human degradation and suffering.

Additionally, Vladimir and Estragon's circumstances worsen in Act II. Their struggles with communication become more apparent, with longer pauses and strained dialogues indicating their increasing despair and sense of futility. The darker aspects of human existence are further emphasized through Vladimir's contemplation of suicide. In Act II, Vladimir's willingness to entertain the idea of ending their lives reflects a deepening sense of despair and resignation to their futile existence. This descent into hopelessness and existential angst contrasts with the relatively lighter tone of Act I, indicating the progression towards a bleaker outlook on life.



9.8 Memory and Time

Beckett delves into the themes of memory and time with intricate depth, presenting them as intertwined facets of the human condition. Throughout the play, memories are depicted as fragmented and nebulous, mirroring the protagonists' disjointed existence in the present. Beckett deliberately subverts the notion of memory as a stable foundation, highlighting its fluid and elusive nature in the face of existential uncertainty. The erosion of memory is linked to the breakdown of traditional societal values, challenging the notion of a linear timeline and underscoring humanity's helplessness in an indifferent and chaotic universe.

Beckett parallels the characters' physical deterioration with the decay of memory, suggesting that the circularity of human existence is as inevitable as ageing itself. The repetition of questions without meaningful answers emphasises the absurdity of existence and the impossibility of deriving any coherent narrative from the fragmented past. Despite serving as a fragile link to identity and meaning, memory is portrayed as inherently unreliable and subject to distortion. The characters' nostalgia for a bygone era reflects a longing for stability and purpose in a world devoid of both.

Moreover, time in *Waiting for Godot* is depicted as a relentless force that shapes and reshapes the characters' experiences. Waiting, rather than the character Godot himself, is the central theme of the play, exposing the characters to the purest experience of time's passage. Passive waiting confronts them directly with the existential questions about the nature of self, constantly in flux due to time's relentless march. The characters' experiences of waiting are intertwined with the relentless flow of time, leading to a sense of constant change and yet a feeling of stasis.

ESTRAGON – “But night doesn’t fall”.

VLADIMIR – “It’ll fall all of a sudden, like yesterday.”

ESTRAGON – “Then it’ll be night”

VLADIMIR – “And we can go”

ESTRAGON – “Then it’ll be day again” (*Despairing*) “What’ll we do, what’ll we do.”
(Beckett, Act II)

Thus, time is both hope and despair for them. Time's cycle is as meaningless as Man's existence.

Notice how frequent forgetfulness contributes to a sense of temporal disorientation for Vladimir and Estragon, perpetuating a cycle of boredom and futile hope for rescue. There is an evident difference in the attitudes toward time between the two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, who represent waiting, and Pozzo and Lucky, who represent wandering. While



Vladimir and Estragon are timeless beings tied to the concept of waiting, Pozzo and Lucky are firmly grounded in the passage of time. Each couple lives according to their own compulsions, with Pozzo's loss of his watch symbolising the changing yet unchanging nature of time for both pairs.

Beckett captures the essence of post-war disillusionment and the absurdity of the human condition through his portrayal of memory and time in the play.

9.9 The Fragmentation of Language

In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett emphasises the dialectical relationship between language and the self. The dialectical relationship between language and the self refers to the dynamic interaction between these two elements throughout the play. In dialectics, opposing forces or ideas interact and influence each other, leading to a synthesis or deeper understanding. Similarly, Beckett explores how language shapes and defines the characters' sense of self, while simultaneously revealing the limitations of language in fully expressing their innermost thoughts and emotions. Despite their attempts to communicate, the characters often find themselves at a loss for words or resort to nonsensical banter, underscoring the limitations of verbal communication in capturing the essence of their identity.

Throughout the play, repetition, monologues, pauses, and brief exchanges punctuated by long periods of silence further emphasise the difficulty of sustaining meaningful conversation and expose the inability of language to effectively convey thoughts and ideas. For instance, in Act II, the structured repetition of declarations of happiness (below) highlights the lack of authenticity behind their words. Instead of genuinely expressing their emotions, Vladimir and Estragon mechanically repeat the phrases to fill the void of their existence and pass the time.

“VLADIMIR: Say, I am happy.

ESTRAGON: I am happy.

VLADIMIR: So am I.

ESTRAGON: So am I.

VLADIMIR: We are happy.

ESTRAGON: We are happy.” (Beckett, Act I)

The breakdown of language also serves to reflect the characters' fragmented perception of reality as in the instance cited below:

“ESTRAGON: What did we do yesterday?

VLADIMIR: What did we do yesterday?



ESTRAGON: Yes.

VLADIMIR: Why . . . (*Angrily.*) Nothing is certain when you're about.

ESTRAGON: In my opinion we were here.

VLADIMIR: (looking round). You recognize the place?

ESTRAGON: I didn't say that.

VLADIMIR: Well?

ESTRAGON: That makes no difference.

VLADIMIR: All the same . . . that tree . . . (turning towards auditorium) that bog . . ."
(Beckett, Act I)

The excerpt vividly illustrates the fragmentation of language and the characters' unreliable perception of reality. Through repetitive questioning, such as "What did we do yesterday?" and echoing responses, Samuel Beckett emphasises the characters' uncertainty and the repetitive nature of their conversations. Vladimir's assertion that "Nothing is certain when you're about" underscores the pervasive sense of doubt that clouds the characters' understanding of their circumstances. This uncertainty is further compounded by Estragon's ambiguous statement, "In my opinion we were here," followed by his refusal to confirm recognition of their location. The conversation unfolds with contradictions and ambiguity, leaving the audience with a profound sense of fragmentation and unresolved tension. Vladimir's attempt to confirm their location by referencing the tree and the bog ultimately leads to no resolution, highlighting the characters' inability to reach concrete conclusions. The fragmented language serves as a reflection of the characters' fragmented understanding of their own identities and purpose, ultimately reinforcing the absurdity of human existence.

Thus, as characters struggle to communicate and understand each other, language becomes fragmented and loses its ability to convey clear meaning, highlighting the limitations of verbal communication.

As previously brought to light, the mid-20th century was marked by widespread disillusionment following the devastation of World War II and the dawn of the Cold War era. People grappled with the existential question of meaning in a world where traditional values and beliefs were being questioned and where the threat of nuclear annihilation loomed large. By depicting the fragmentation and disintegration of language and discourse in the play, Beckett underscores the existential crisis of his time, where the search for absolute meaning seemed increasingly elusive.



Another instance of language breakdown in the play would be the way Didi and Gogo engage endlessly with words, treating them paradoxically such that their actions fail to align with their words.

Act I	Act II
“ESTRAGON: Well, shall we go? VLADIMIR: Yes, let’s go. <i>They do not move.</i> <i>Curtain.</i>”	“VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go? ESTRAGON: Yes, let’s go. <i>They do not move.</i> <i>Curtain.</i>”

Here, the paradox lies in the discrepancy between Didi and Gogo’s verbal agreement to leave and their subsequent inaction. They verbally express the intention to depart, saying “Yes, let’s go,” yet their physical immobility contradicts their words. This contradiction between their expressed desire to leave and their failure to act creates a paradoxical situation where their actions do not align with their words. In another instance in Act I, Estragon’s declaration “I’m going. He does not move” underscores the disparity between words and actions in the play. Despite expressing the intention to leave, Estragon remains rooted in place. This incongruity between speech and behaviour not only reflects the limitations of language in conveying the complexities of human experience but also adds to the absurdity of their situation. By repeatedly failing to act on their words, the characters further emphasise their sense of helplessness and the futility of their endeavours in the face of an indifferent world.

Furthermore, Lucky’s speech exemplifies the breakdown of rational language. As previously discussed, he disconnects different types of discourse, disrupting the usual unity and coherence traditionally associated with language. In a sense, his speech reflects the loss of humanity’s ability to articulate thoughts and ideas coherently, as demonstrated by his permanent state of speechlessness in Act II. This deterioration of language represents a broader theme of existential decay and the breakdown of traditional forms of communication.

On the other hand, Pozzo initially embodies the “old style” of eloquence and reasoning. He represents a more conventional form of communication characterised by eloquence, wit, and logical reasoning. However, even Pozzo’s articulate speech diminishes over time, mirroring humanity’s descent into a world where fundamental concepts like time, space, and causality lose their meaning. Pozzo’s decline reflects the broader theme of existential



uncertainty and the erosion of traditional structures and systems that provide coherence and meaning to human existence. Thus, both Lucky's disarticulated speech and Pozzo's diminishing articulacy symbolise the existential crisis faced by the characters and humanity as a whole in a world devoid of absolutes and coherence.

Beckett's exploration of language in *Waiting for Godot* challenges conventional understandings of communication and rationality. By emphasising the value of the process of expression over any definitive outcome, Beckett invites us to confront the inherent limitations of language in capturing the complexity of human existence.

Check Your Progress

1. How does the circular structure of the play contribute to its exploration of existential themes and the human condition?
2. In what ways does Beckett portray memory and time in *Waiting for Godot*, and how do these themes contribute to the overall existential atmosphere of the play?
3. How does Beckett use language to convey existential uncertainty and the breakdown of traditional forms of communication?

10. Religious Implications of the Play

Beckett uses religious allusions in the play to challenge the perceived authority and stability of Christian narratives. Rather than treating religious symbols with reverence, the characters, particularly Vladimir and Estragon, often engage in absurd and comical discussions about Christianity. For instance, Vladimir's interrupted musings on the Gospels and Estragon's game of calling Pozzo by different biblical names turn traditional religious representations into farcical scenarios. In the below excerpt from Act II, Vladimir and Estragon engage in a playful yet pointed exchange about the names of characters, particularly Pozzo. When Estragon calls out the name "Abel," it evokes a reference to the biblical story of Cain and Abel. According to the book of Genesis, Abel, who worked as a shepherd, presented the Lord with the firstborn of his flock as a sacrifice. God accepted Abel's offering but did not favour the one brought by his brother Cain. Enraged by jealousy, Cain killed Abel.

“VLADIMIR: I tell you his name is Pozzo.

ESTRAGON: We'll soon see. (He reflects.) Abel! Abel!

POZZO: Help!

ESTRAGON: Got it in one!



VLADIMIR: I begin to weary of this motif.

ESTRAGON: Perhaps the other is called Cain. Cain! Cain!"

(Beckett, Act II)

The playful exchange of biblical names and lack of seriousness towards religion underscores Beckett's scepticism about its ability to provide meaningful answers in the face of existential questions. Another instance of this scepticism occurs when Vladimir attempts to discuss the story of the two thieves from the Bible, only to be continuously interrupted by Estragon.

"VLADIMIR: Two thieves, crucified at the same time as our Saviour... One is supposed to have been saved and the other . . .damned... how is it that of the four Evangelists only one speaks of a thief being saved. The four of them were there –or thereabouts– and only one speaks of a thief being saved... But one of the four says that one of the two was saved... But all four were there. And only one speaks of a thief being saved. Why believe him rather than the others?" (Beckett, Act I)

Here, Vladimir reflects on the biblical story of the two thieves who were crucified alongside Jesus, questioning the inconsistency among the four Evangelists⁶ in recounting the event. Vladimir expresses scepticism about why only one of the Gospel writers mentions the salvation of one of the thieves while the others remain silent on the matter. Vladimir's inquiry highlights the uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding religious narratives and their interpretation, suggesting that even foundational texts like the Gospels contain inconsistencies and contradictions. This can also be interpreted as an allegory for the characters' uncertainty and scepticism about the concept of salvation in the play. Godot, portrayed as a saviour figure, is awaited by Vladimir and Estragon, yet his arrival and the promised salvation remain ambiguous and unresolved. By drawing parallels between the biblical narrative and the existential predicament of the characters, Beckett emphasises the elusive nature of salvation and the inherent uncertainty in seeking answers from religious frameworks.

Additionally, the play's setting and symbolism contribute to its religious undertones. The barren landscape and desolate atmosphere evoke imagery of a spiritual wasteland, reflecting themes of spiritual emptiness and divine absence often found in religious texts. The recurring motif of the tree, which symbolises various aspects of Christian theology including the crucifixion and the tree of life, further reinforces these religious associations.

6. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are the known Evangelists, traditionally credited with recording the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the four Gospels in the New Testament of the Bible.



In fact, the character of Godot is known to have sparked considerable debate among scholars regarding its symbolism, particularly in religious contexts. Some argue that he represents a divine figure, akin to God, given the religious undertones scattered throughout the play. Vladimir's hope for salvation from Godot and his fear of potential consequences if they abandon him contribute to this interpretation. The name "Godot" itself bears resemblance to "God," further supporting this view. However, it's crucial to note that Beckett himself dismissed the idea of the play being explicitly religious. His statement, "If by Godot I had meant God, I would have said God, not Godot," underscores his intention to leave the interpretation open-ended.

By the play's end, these religious motifs serve to reinforce the idea that religion, like other constructs, ultimately fails to provide genuine meaning or guidance in the characters' futile existence.

11. Summing Up

In this Unit, we delved into Samuel Beckett's life and his seminal work, *Waiting for Godot*, uncovering its profound relevance in today's world. Amidst post-World War II devastation and existential angst, Beckett crafted a masterpiece that continues to resonate deeply across cultures and generations. Today, amidst rapid technological advancements and societal upheavals, the play's exploration of existential themes like the search for meaning and the human condition remains as pertinent as ever. Its open-ended nature invites diverse interpretations, fostering intellectual engagement in an era inundated with information. By challenging traditional theatrical norms with its experimental style and avant-garde elements, including minimalist settings and absurdist dialogue, *Waiting for Godot* offers a refreshing perspective for those craving innovative storytelling. Its enduring significance lies in its ability to provoke critical reflection on contemporary issues and to spark conversations about the complexities of existence. As we navigate the complexities of modern life, Beckett's timeless work serves as a beacon, guiding us through the existential inquiries and tragi-comic nuances of human existence, making it essential reading for anyone seeking deeper insight into the human condition today.

12. Further Readings

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14. Image Courtesy

- ◆ Fig. 1 Samuel Beckett
Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Samuel_Beckett,_Pic,_1_\(cropped\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Samuel_Beckett,_Pic,_1_(cropped).jpg)
- ◆ Fig. 2 *Waiting for Godot*, 2001 movie release poster
Source: <https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.imdb.com%2Ftitle%2Ftt0276613%2F&psig=AOvVaw3JatpObIoplpnDrCsl5bKD&ust=1714903219157000&source=images&cd=vfe&opi=89978449&ved=0CBIQjRxqFwoTCIDVq7ve84UDFQAAAAAdAAAAABAZ>
- ◆ Fig. 3 Vladimir and Estragon waiting for Godot
Source: https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&url=https%3A%2F%2Fmedium.com%2F%40SOOZ_AY3%2Fbeckett-and-the-bible-cd027f15f06f&psig=AOvVaw1EoggEXhEWvudn-ulxjXx3&ust=1714904713686000&source=images&cd=vfe&opi=89978449&ved=0CBIQjRxqFwoTCLCi_4Pk84UDFQAAAAAdAAAAABAF



◆ Fig. 4 Pozzo, Vladimir, Estragon, Lucky (L-R)

Source: <https://thewatchfulscribe.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/11-Pozzo-and-Lucky-Image.jpeg>

◆ Fig. 5 Lucky's dance (centre), the two tramps (L) and Pozzo (R)

Source: <http://revstansfilmblog.typepad.com/.a/6a0133ec96767e970b01bb09c17a62970d-pi>

◆ Fig. 6 Lucky (centre) with the tramps on either side

Source: <https://theatrestorm.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/godot.jpg>

◆ Fig. 7 Lucky(L) and Pozzo(R) leave

Source: https://static.s123-cdn-static-d.com/uploads/3433317/2000_5f0b2b1403c02.jpg

◆ Fig. 8 The Boy(R) with one of the tramps

Source: <https://www.kennedy-center.org/globalassets/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/artsedge/media/master--work/samuel-beckett--waiting-for-godot/waiting-for-godot-5-169.jpg>

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