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Contents

	Title	Prepared by	Edited by	Pg. No.
Unit-I				
1.	Toni Morrison: <i>Beloved</i>	Dr. Seema Suri Payal Walia Dr. Iram Fatima	Dr. Seema Suri	1
Unit-II				
2.	Kate Chopin: <i>The Awakening: A Solitary Soul</i>	Udita Garg	Dr. Neeta Gupta	44
3.	Herman Melville: “Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street”	Nalini Prabhakar	Nalini Prabhakar	102
Unit-III				
4.	Walt Whitman: (i) O Captain, My Captain by Walt Whitman (1819-1892) (ii) Passage to India (lines 1-68) by Walt Whitman	Akansha Goswami	P. K. Satapathy	114
5.	Sherman Alexie: (i) “Crow Testament” and (i) “Evolution”	Akansha Goswami	P. K. Satapathy	130



TONI MORRISON, *BELOVED*

STRUCTURE

1. *Introduction*
2. *Learning Objectives*
3. *Toni Morrison: A Brief Biography*
4. *Historical Background of Beloved*
5. *Plot Overview*
6. *Study Guide*
7. *Themes in Beloved*
8. *Symbols*
9. *Characters*

1. INTRODUCTION

Dr Seema Suri



If you google ‘Whipped Peter,’ the disturbing image of a Black slave appears, sitting with his back to the camera, deep scars crisscrossing his back: the image somewhat resembling a tree. The photograph, widely circulated at the time, is of Peter Gordon, a slave who ran away from a Louisiana plantation and reached a Union camp in 1863, after an arduous journey, undertaken barefoot. His photograph was published in *Harper’s Weekly* in July 1863, the most widely read magazine during the Civil War in America. Abolitionists distributed his picture all over America as visual evidence of the brutality inflicted on slaves.

[Source: <https://www.history.com/news/whipped-peter-slavery-photo-scourged-back-real-story-civil-war>]



In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, its central character Sethe is a former slave and, like Gordon, escapes a Kentucky plantation to reach Cincinnati, in the state of Ohio. Her back is scarred from a beating she got from her cruel slave master and the scars resemble a tree in appearance. This is just one example of how history permeates the novel, which is replete with references to an important chapter in American history, the Civil War (1861-65). Fought over four years, in a nation deeply polarized over the issue of slavery, it resulted in innumerable casualties—changing the course of their history. However, President Abraham Lincoln's *Emancipation Proclamation*, announced on 1 January, 1863, set nearly 3.5 million enslaved people “forever free.”

The sights Paul D sees, wandering around the Southern states; the dead bodies of Confederate soldiers; the ruins of structures damaged in the most terrible war on American soil; Sethe's escape from Sweet Home in Kentucky; the brutal killing of Sixo; schoolteacher bringing the sheriff to catch her; and the haunting race memories of *Beloved* are grim reminders of the institution of slavery. The Underground Railroad and the Ku Klux Klan are also integral to the landscape of the novel. In addition to these, there are subtle reminders of discrimination and deep-rooted racial prejudice even after the end of the war. Baby Suggs delivering shoes to white people at the back door, a piggy bank in the shape of a Black servant in the Bodwins' house, and Mrs Garner's smile when Sethe says she wants to get married; all these are indications that even the best-meaning people harbour racial prejudice. It is impossible to appreciate the power of *Beloved* without this historical context.

In the opening line of her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Toni Morrison said, “Fiction has never been entertainment for me . . .” *Beloved* is as much political statement as a work of fiction. Morrison's novel is a tribute to the suffering inflicted on innocent victims of slavery: infants snatched from mothers, young girls kept in captivity for sexual exploitation, babies killed to save them from enslavement, and countless others who perished on the slave ships, while being brought from Africa to work on the plantations in the South. Even after gaining freedom, the emotional and spiritual stigma of slavery tortures their psyche. Toni Morrison's dedication in *Beloved* is an attestation to the painful legacy of slavery that America is still grappling with:

Sixty Million and more

It is important for you to understand that this number is loaded with political significance. Historians would immediately recognize it as the estimated number of Jews killed during the Holocaust. By adding ‘and more,’ Toni Morrison underlies the magnitude



of the suffering endured by a whole race. The approximation of numbers points to the absence of proper documentation of the number of casualties. In prose that touches poetic heights, and with the help of supernatural elements, Toni Morrison gives a voice to this suffering.

A Note on the Language

Here, I would like to draw your attention to certain terms to be used with caution while writing about the novel. In *Beloved*, you will notice that many characters disparagingly refer to themselves as “niggers.” In moments of dejection, Baby Suggs calls herself a “nigger,” as does Paul D. Slave owners, like schoolteacher, almost always refer to their slaves as “niggers.” For the purpose of historical accuracy, the word *nigger* is used throughout the novel. The word *nigger* is a derivative of the Latin word for black, *niger*. In the South, it was used in the derogatory sense, in the eighteenth century. Many abolitionists insisted that a more acceptable alternative would be ‘colored’ or ‘negro,’ as a marker of racial identity. Remember, *nigger* is a racial slur and considered insulting. It should not be used either in writing or conversation. Even in dictionaries, it is described as offensive. However, it is acceptable for a Black person to refer to himself/herself as a ‘nigger.’

After the civil rights movement in the US, in the 1960s and 1970s, ‘African-American’ or ‘black’ was used to refer to the racial group; the former term encapsulating pride in their African heritage. However, slaveholder labels like *nigger* and *black* have now been phased out. The word ‘black’ is not considered appropriate, as it would be a description of colour; again, politically incorrect. In this study material, you will notice that while describing people of African descent, the ‘b’ in Black is capitalized; following modern conventions. Read this quote from *The Washington Post* (July 29, 2020), announcing their style change to identify America’s largest racial community:

Beginning immediately, *The Washington Post* will uppercase the B in Black to identify the many groups that make up the African diaspora in America and elsewhere . . . The use of Black is a recognition and acknowledgement not only of the cultural bonds and historical experiences shared by people of African heritage, but also the shared struggles of enslaved people, families who immigrated generations ago and more recent immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean and other corners of the world.

You must understand that using politically correct language is the first and most important step towards eradicating racial prejudice. The students are advised to follow this practice in writing.



2. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Payal Walia

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* was first published in 1987. Read the novel carefully before going through the study material. After reading it, the student will be:

- familiar with the historical background to the novel;
- able to place the novel in the larger context of the legacy of slavery in the US;
- able to write about the major themes and characters in *Beloved*; and
- appreciate Toni Morrison's narrative style.

All references to the novel are to the following edition: Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Vintage Books: London, 1997).

3. TONI MORRISON: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Toni Morrison, is one of America's greatest novelists, who immortalized the lives of Black African people brought to America as slaves. She was an editor and an academic; authored eleven novels, some non-fiction books, and many children's books. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1977) is about an adolescent black girl during time of the Great Depression, who believes she is ugly because of her dark skin, leading to tragic consequences. Some of her other acclaimed novels are *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), and *A Mercy* (2008).

Toni Morrison was the pen name of Chloe Anthony Wofford, born on February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, US. She was the second child of George Wofford, a welder by profession and Ramah Willis Wofford, a domestic worker. From childhood, she was an avid reader and her parents encouraged her to read. Her favourites were Jane Austen and Leo Tolstoy. Morrison completed her graduation in English in 1953 from Howard University and her master's degree in American Literature from Cornell University, New York in 1955. Toni taught at Texas Southern University for two years (1955-57). After that, she returned to teach at Howard University; where she met Harold Morrison, an architect by profession, whom she married in 1958. In 1964, she joined a textbook publishing house as an editor, and worked there for eighteen months. By the end of that time, she had divorced her husband and moved to New York City with her two sons. There she joined Random House as an editor, becoming their first Black female editor of fiction. Morrison worked with Random House from 1965-1983; interacting with many well-known authors like Gayl Jones and Angela Davis. During that time, she joined a group of writers and



poets who met regularly and discussed their work. To participate in those discussions, she prepared a short story, which she further expanded into a novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1977). This was the beginning of her literary career. In the same year, Toni Morrison became the Robert F. Goheen Professor in the Council of Humanities at Princeton University. This was another achievement as she was the first African-American woman writer to hold a named chair at an Ivy League University.

For her novel *Beloved*, she won the Pulitzer Prize for Literature in 1988. In 1993, Morrison won the Nobel Prize for her contribution to literature: the first African-American woman to receive this honour. In 2012, she was endowed with the Presidential Medal of Freedom presented by President Barack Obama. In 2016, she was also awarded the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for achievement in American Fiction. Morrison died on August 5, 2019 at Montefiore Medical Centre in New York. She was 88.

Toni Morrison is unparalleled in her depiction of the Black experience, seen through the lens of history. She explores issues of race and gender in her books. The novels attest the redemptive power of community and the role played by women in keeping tradition alive. Populated almost entirely by Black people, most of her fiction has non-linear plots and delves into the deepest recesses of the human spirit.

4. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF *BELOVED*

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is based on a true story, which Morrison read as a newspaper clipping, while reviewing material for *The Black Book*; a collection of photographs, illustrations, essays, and other documents, showcasing the lives of slaves in the US and edited by Morrison herself. That clipping was the story of a young African American mother named Margaret Garner. In 1856, she escaped from slavery in Kentucky and ran to Ohio, a free state, by crossing the Ohio River. When she was recaptured by her master, she killed her infant daughter to save her from the clutches of slavery. She was arrested for this brutal act and the headline in an American newspaper at the time read; "A Visit to the Slave Mother who Killed Her Child." This incident acted as a catalyst for activists who were fighting against the Fugitive Slave law passed in 1850. This law allowed slave owners to capture those slaves who had run away to the free states and take them back to their plantations in the slave states.

Beloved is set during the years preceding, during, and after the American Civil War, fought between 1861 and 1865. After the American Revolution (1775-1783), independent states in the US gradually outlawed import of slaves and in 1808, Congress passed a federal law, abolishing international slave trade. But not all states in the US favoured this ban. Domestic slave trade still flourished within the country and in 1860, there were



around four million slaves in the country. Some states like Kentucky, Virginia, Georgia, South Carolina, Delaware, and Tennessee were in favour of slave trade, as their agrarian economy depended on slave labour. To avoid confrontation, as a compromise between the Northern and Southern states, The Fugitive Slave Act, also known as the Compromise of 1850, was passed by the Union. This Act allowed the slave holders in the Southern states to capture slaves who ran away to the free states.

Between 1830-60, the movement to abolish slavery had gained momentum. The westward expansion in the US had led to the debate over the new states' right to continue this practice. In 1860, Abraham Lincoln won the election and his openly anti-slavery Republican party wanted to completely abolish slavery, when eleven states broke away from the Union to form the Confederate States of America. The US was split into two parts; the Northern free states that wanted to abolish slavery completely and the Southern states which supported the slave trade as they needed cheap labour for their indigo, tobacco, and cotton plantations. The economy of the Northern states was more modernized, with industrial output many times that of the South. This economic disparity was one of the factors that contributed to animosity between the North and South.

The Civil War was the culmination of decades of growing friction over slavery. The Confederates were fighting to establish an independent country, based on Southern institutions like slavery. The four-year war led to immense loss of life and property, especially in the South. The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, that declared enslaved people in Confederate occupied areas free, was a wartime measure, but The Thirteenth Amendment to the American Constitution, passed by Congress on 31 January 1865, granted citizenship rights to free slaves. The Confederates surrendered on April 9, 1865, and on 14 April, John Wilkes Booth, an actor and a Confederate sympathizer, assassinated President Lincoln.

The Civil War ended with the defeat of the Confederate forces in 1865. However, the fight against racial discrimination and exploitation did not end. It was a long uphill struggle. The civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s was another landmark in the struggle for Black rights and against institutionalized discrimination.

More than a hundred and fifty years later, the legacy of slavery is something the US is still dealing with. On 25 May 2020, George Floyd, an African-American, was arrested by the police in Minneapolis, for allegedly using a fake bill in a store. He died as a result of police brutality and bystanders filmed and shared the video on social media. It was not the first time this had happened, but the first time it was caught on camera, triggering outrage across the country. Demonstrations, marches, and violent protests spread to more than a hundred cities in the US, and many other cities all over the world to express solidarity



with Floyd—exposing the fault lines in American society. Racism is an uncomfortable reality that the US and many other nations are still struggling with.

5. PLOT OVERVIEW

Beloved is set between 1855-1874 and revolves around a runaway slave Sethe, who when hunted down by her master, kills her infant daughter to save her from slavery. She is haunted by the ghost of her dead child for 18 years. The story is narrated through many flashbacks and interior monologues, moving back and forth in time. The novel dispenses with the unity of time; sometimes moving along in the present, and suddenly stepping into the past. This overview of the plot of *Beloved* summarizes the main events in a chronological manner.

Sethe, a former slave, has been living at 124 Bluestone Road, in Cincinnati, with her eighteen-year-old daughter, Denver since 1855, when she fled from a Kentucky plantation to Ohio, a free state at the time. From the beginning, it is clear that something ghostly is happening around the house. Sethe's two sons, Howard and Buglar, have run away from home, scared of the ghost. Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, died many years earlier, shortly after the two brothers left. Sethe works a cook at a restaurant near the town and earns her living. It is 1873, the year of the Emancipation Proclamation.

One day Paul D, a former slave who worked with Sethe at the Kentucky plantation, lands up at her house. Meeting after eighteen years, both of them share their past memories. She was sold to the Garners, kind owners of Sweet Home, when she was thirteen years old. There are other slaves living there—Sixo, Paul D, Paul A, Paul F, and Halle. Sethe chooses Halle to marry as she is touched by Halle's love for his mother, Baby Suggs. He buys his mother's freedom by working on weekends for five years. Halle and Sethe have four children—two sons and two daughters. The name of the elder daughter is never revealed.

When Mr Garner dies, Mrs Garner asks her brother-in-law to help her run the farm. He is known as schoolteacher among the Black slaves on the farm. He is very brutal and inhuman. Due to his brutality, the slaves plan to run away to the free states. Sethe and Halle also make up their mind to escape. After months of planning, she waits for Halle to take her to the meeting point but he doesn't turn up. She sends her three children with a caravan of Negroes crossing the Ohio River, to Cincinnati, where they will be safe with Baby Suggs, her mother in-law. Sethe, who is pregnant with her fourth child, stays back to wait for Halle. She doesn't know that Paul D and Sixo have been caught, and Sixo has been killed. Schoolteacher catches Sethe and her attempt to escape infuriates him. The



schoolteacher's nephews hold Sethe down and take milk from her body, meant for her infant daughter. Unknown to Sethe, Halle was hiding in the loft and saw schoolteacher's nephews treat Sethe like a cow, milking her breasts. Sethe complains to Mrs Garner about this violent act. When schoolteacher comes to know this, he has her whipped on her back, leaving a scar shaped like a tree. After this, Sethe runs away from Sweet Home. On the way, she falls down and delivers her child with the help of a white girl named Amy Denver, who is an indentured servant running away to Boston. Sethe names her newly born daughter Denver. An old Black man, Stamp Paid, comes to her help and ferries her and the new born baby across the river; where Ella takes over, helping Sethe reach Baby Suggs' house safely. Baby Suggs takes care of her and she spends the next twenty-eight days, happily, with her four children.

Schoolteacher hunts down Sethe and her children and comes to 124 to take them back to Sweet Home. Sethe runs to the woodshed behind the house with her children and tries to kill them but has killed only her elder daughter, when she is stopped by Stamp Paid, who happens to be there. Realizing that Sethe has lost her mental balance and won't be much use in the farm, schoolteacher goes away. Sethe and her infant daughter, Denver, are sent to jail and later she is released in a few months due to the Bodwins' efforts. After that Sethe arranges, somehow, for the dead baby's headstone to be carved with the words 'Beloved.' Sethe comes back to 124, Bluestone Road, to live with her family. Baby Suggs goes into a depression and stops preaching. The whole Black community avoids Sethe's family and they are forced to live in isolation.

Paul D tells Sethe that he was sold off to Brandywine, another slave owner. Fed up with the torture, Paul D tried to kill him and was sent to jail in Georgia. But luckily, due to a rainstorm, he and the other Black prisoners managed to escape. After wandering around for eighteen years, he has landed up at Sethe's house. Paul D starts living with Sethe at 124, but Denver does not like sharing her mother's love with Paul D. One day when Sethe, Paul D, and Denver are returning from a carnival, they see a strange young woman outside their house. She calls herself Beloved. Thinking that she is a runaway slave and needs shelter, Sethe allows her to stay in her house although Paul D cautions her. There are clear hints that Beloved is Sethe's daughter, come back from the dead.

Paul D tells Sethe that Halle did not abandon her, as she always thought; he went insane after witnessing the abuse unleashed on Sethe. Paul D last saw him sitting by a churn, with butter slathered all over his face. At that time Paul D was forced to wear an iron bit in his mouth and couldn't talk to Halle. Sethe is convinced that Halle must be dead as no man could survive, broken like he was.



Beloved's behaviour is strange; she clamours for Sethe's attention, like a baby. Many unusual things start to happen. She talks as if she knows about Sethe's past. Paul D starts feeling very uncomfortable in sharing a bed with Sethe. He tries to sleep in other rooms in the house but is not able to find solace. Finally, he shifts to the woodshed. On the other hand, Denver finds a companion in Beloved.

One night, when Paul D is sleeping in the woodshed, Beloved persuades him to have sex with her. This goes on for some time and Paul D wants to confess everything to Sethe. But he is unable to do that; rather he shares his desire to have children with her. Paul D comes to know about Sethe's infanticide through Stamp Paid. He confronts Sethe and accuses her of behaving like an animal, and leaves 124. In the absence of Paul D, Sethe and Beloved come closer to each other. Assured that Beloved is her daughter, come back from the dead, Sethe fulfils all her demands and tries to make her understand why she killed her. Beloved controls Sethe's life in her own way. Sethe leaves her job and there is no food left. Seeing all this—Denver, for the first time, leaves 124 to seek help from Lady Jones, her former teacher to save her mother. She also gets a job at the Bodwins' home. The community of Black women come together to help Sethe exorcise the ghost of Beloved. They all come to Sethe's house and, at the same time, Mr Bodwin also comes there to collect Denver. Sethe attacks Mr Bodwin with an ice pick, mistakenly thinking he is schoolteacher, who has come once again to take Sethe and her daughter to the plantation. But Sethe is stopped by Ella and Denver. In the midst of all this, Beloved disappears.

Paul D finally returns to Sethe who is still mourning over Beloved's disappearance and has confined herself to Baby Suggs' bed. Paul D makes her realize that there is a life ahead of her, and assures her of his love.

6. STUDY GUIDE

Beloved has three parts. Each part is divided into unnumbered chapters. For the ease of the students, these have been numbered. Part I has 18 chapters, Part II has 7 chapters, and Part III, the shortest part, has only 3 chapters. The narrative is not linear, moving around its terrible human tragedy. The narrative style changes with each section.

6.1 PART I

CHAPTER 1

Summary

The novel is about a former slave, Sethe who lives in 124, Bluestone Road, in Cincinnati, Ohio. She lives there with her daughter, Denver. The house is haunted by the ghost of



her dead infant daughter. At the very outset, we are told that the house is “palsied by the baby’s fury at having its throat cut” (6). Sethe’s two sons, Howard and Buglar, ran away the moment the ‘troublesome ghost’ got personal. Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law, went into a depression and died.

Sethe does not want to remember her dreadful past but one particular incident troubles her. She remembers how she agreed to have sex with a mason for ten minutes, as she didn’t have money to pay him to engrave the seven letters, “Beloved” on her baby’s headstone. She remembers how Baby Suggs told her that she had eight children and how all of them, except Halle, were taken away from her. Sethe was lucky that she had four children; one is living with her, one is dead, and the two boys chased off by the dead one. The memory of her two sons is fading with time.

Suddenly, Paul D, who also worked with Sethe in Sweet Home, comes to meet her after eighteen years. Paul D enquires about Baby Suggs and comes to know that she is dead. Paul D and Sethe share a painful past. Sweet Home was owned by Garner, a kind slave owner. When he died, Mrs Garner became ill and she sold that farm to her brother-in-law, to pay off the debts. He was popularly known as schoolteacher and was cruel. At Sweet Home farm, there were six slaves: five men—Paul D, Paul F, Paul A, Halle Suggs, and Sixo, and one woman, Sethe. Sethe remembers her husband, Halle, who left her in 1855 when she was pregnant. Then she had loaded her three children in a caravan of Negros which left them safely at Baby Suggs’ home in Cincinnati.

Paul D feels the presence of a ghost as soon as he enters the house, in the pool of red light. Sethe explains that it is her dead baby ghost. However, she doesn’t tell him how the baby died. Sethe tells Paul D that only she and Denver live here and she works as a cook at a restaurant in the town. Paul D remembers the time Sethe first came to Sweet Home. She was only thirteen years old and all the five men looked at her with lusty eyes. They waited patiently for her to choose one of them as her husband. Sethe took one year to choose Halle as her husband. The reason was that he bought his mother Baby Suggs’ freedom with the money earned by working as a slave every Sunday for five years.

Denver comes down and Sethe introduces Paul D to her. Denver says that since her grandmother’s death twelve years ago nobody has visited their house. Seeing her mother give Paul D too much attention, Denver feels jealous. At dinner, she cries that she cannot live in this haunted house. Paul D suggests they should move into another house but Sethe is adamant that she will never run from anything again. Angrily, Denver goes into the keeping room.

Sethe starts crying and Paul D sees the scars shaped like a tree on her back. He enquires about it from Sethe. She tells him that she got whipped by schoolteacher because



she complained to Mrs Garner that schoolteacher and his boys took milk from her breasts. She also says that the white girl who helped Sethe deliver Denver told her that the scars on her back looked like a chokecherry tree. Paul D comes near her and pulls down her top to see the scars and kisses every branch and leaf on it. Suddenly he realizes that the house has begun to shake. Sethe manages to get back into her dress. Paul D shouts and throws a table around to chase the ghost away and finally it is gone. Then Sethe and Paul D go upstairs and leave Denver alone to have her dinner.

Critical Analysis

The beginning of the novel “124 was spiteful,” hints at a malicious presence in the house, where Sethe lives with her daughter (3). The missing number 3 signifies the missing third child of Sethe. There is something ghostly that is harassing Sethe and Denver. The outrageous behaviour of the ghost is described: “turned over slop jars, smacks on the behind, and gusts of sour air” (4). At one time she slams the family dog, Here Boy, against the wall and physically assaults him. The frightened dog runs away. The baby ghost also behaves aggressively when Sethe comes close to Paul D.

The burden of brutality Sethe bore as a slave is so heavy on her heart and mind that it haunts her in the form of ‘ghost baby,’ as she is called in the novel. It has made the lives of her other three children miserable. The two boys flee from the house by the time they are thirteen years old and Denver’s life is getting affected in many ways. She is lonely, has nobody to talk to, and cannot live in that house. The Black community has boycotted Sethe and her family after the murder of the little girl.

Check Your Progress

1. Who is haunting Sethe’s house?
2. Who is Paul D?
3. How did Sethe get the scars on her back?

CHAPTER 2-3

Summary

Sethe leads Paul D upstairs to one of the two rooms where both have sex but it gets over quickly. Paul D has waited for this moment for twenty-five years. Both feel guilty and cannot talk to each other. As Sethe is lying on her back, Paul D sees the wrought-iron tree on her back; reminding him of his special tree at Sweet Home which he called Brother. Under this tree, he spent good times with Halle and the others; and often with Sixo, another slave in Sweet Home.



We learn that Baby Suggs had eight children from six husbands. She lost all her children, except Halle, whom she was able to keep for twenty years. On the other hand, Sethe is lucky—as she was married for six years and all her children are from one husband. Sethe and Paul D recall the time when Halle and Sethe got married. Sethe informed Mrs Garner that she and Halle wanted to get married. She wanted some ceremony or celebration for her marriage but Mrs Garner smiled at her naïveté. So, Sethe stitched a wedding dress for herself and Halle and Sethe spent their private time in the cornfield. All the other men at Sweet Home enjoyed the night by having a corn party.

Denver has a solitary place in the woods behind 124. Five boxwood bushes planted in a ring towards each other form a circle, almost like a room. Denver used this place as a playroom in her childhood, and then as a refuge from her brothers' fright and now it is a place where she can escape from her loneliness. Once, returning from her secret place, Denver saw her mother kneeling in prayer and a ghostly white dress next to her, with its sleeves around her mother's waist. Seeing the ghost's friendly gesture, Denver is convinced that it has some 'plans' for them.

Sethe has told Denver how she ran away from Sweet Home while she was pregnant; with her swollen legs. She got help from a white girl, Amy Denver, who was going to Boston to buy velvet. Sethe could not walk so she crawled like a snake; she was also very hungry. Amy cushioned a place with leaves, for Sethe to put her swollen feet, and she massaged her feet. Then Sethe tells Denver about schoolteacher who always brought his two sons or nephews with him. They liked the ink made by Sethe. Both boys always questioned the slaves at Sweet Home and noted down their answers as if they were writing a book on them. But Sethe never tells Denver the whole truth; leaving out the painful part of her past.

Meanwhile, Paul D is mending the furniture that he broke while fighting with the ghost. He is also singing the songs that he had learnt in Georgia, that remind him of his dreadful past. There he was tied with chains and his body did walk, eat, sleep, and sing but his heart was all closed up. Now by spending time with Sethe, his heart is gradually opening up. Sethe also tells Paul D that schoolteacher found her and put her into jail with Denver. She leaves out the part about killing her daughter.

Critical Analysis

With no freedom to interact with other people outside the plantation, the young slaves all lust after Sethe when she comes there. Not only are their movements restricted, their natural sexual urges are repressed; forcing them to have unnatural sex with animals. Sethe remembers Halle's love for her which was not like "a man's laying claim" (31). Their



marriage didn't have a legal status and due to their work at the farm, Halle does not get time to spend with Sethe.

Being frustrated by loneliness, Denver finds salvation in her “emerald closet” which is surrounded by trees. Sethe does not talk much about her past but Denver likes to hear the stories from her mother, especially the story of her birth. Here, the image of an ‘antelope’ has been used for the baby in Sethe’s womb. The struggle of baby Denver in her mother’s womb runs parallel with the struggle of Sethe.

House 124 is barren. The walls are slate-coloured, the floor is earth brown, and the curtains are white. There are no dark and bright colours visible, except two orange squares in a patchwork quilt in the house. The orange squares were added when Baby Suggs wanted to see colour around her. As for Sethe herself, she lost all awareness of colour after she saw her daughter’s pink headstone. Since then, she has been “as colour conscious as a hen” (46).

Check Your Progress

1. Who is Baby Suggs? What happens to all her children?
2. Describe the wedding of Sethe and Halle?
3. Who is Amy Denver? How does she help Sethe?

CHAPTER 4-6

Summary

On the third day, Denver asks Paul D how long he is going to stay, which hurts him very much. Sethe gets angry with Denver and asks her to stop asking such questions. Sethe feels sorry for her behavior. But she will not hear any criticism of her daughter. Paul D says that it is not good for a slave to love anything so dearly. He tells Sethe that he has come there not to force her to make choices in relationships, but to make space for himself, along with Denver. Paul D assures her of a happy future ahead with him. Paul D takes the two women to a carnival organized for Black people. Other people in the community nod and smile at her. Denver is reluctant to join Paul D but she enjoys herself.

We are told that a fully dressed woman walks out of the water and rests under a mulberry tree for a day. The strangest part is nobody saw where she came from. The next morning, she sits down on the stump near the steps of 124. When Sethe, Paul D, and Denver return from the carnival they notice a girl sitting there. Suddenly, Sethe feels an uncontrollable urge to urinate, which reminds her of her water breaking in the boat when Denver was born. Meanwhile, Denver and Paul D take the girl inside the house. When



asked by Paul D, she says her name is Beloved and falls asleep on Baby Suggs' bed. This name touches Sethe, as it is the name etched on her daughter's headstone.

Beloved sleeps for four days, getting up only to have water. Denver takes care of Beloved. After recovering a little, Beloved has still not told them about herself. Everyone thinks that the fever has caused her to lose her memory. But Paul D notices something strange about Beloved. She acts sick, sounds sick but does not look sick at all; with good skin and bright eyes. She cannot walk properly but he and Denver see her picking up the rocker with one hand.

Day by day Beloved gets attached to Sethe. She is always eager to spend time with Sethe. Once Beloved asks Sethe about her diamond earrings, and Sethe tells her that those crystal earrings were a wedding gift from Mrs Garner. Then she recalls how she had made her wedding dress by stitching together stolen pieces of fabric. Denver enquires about those earrings as she has never seen them. Sethe answers that they are gone.

Beloved asks Sethe about her mother. Sethe answers that she saw her but a few times out in the fields. She says that her mother had been hanged but she does not know why. She only remembers a one-armed lady named 'Nan' who took care of her after her mother died. Nan and her mother had been together on the ship that brought them to America. Her mother was repeatedly raped by the crew members and she threw all the children born by those white men into the water. She only kept Sethe because her father was Black and she loved him.

Critical Analysis

Noticing Sethe's love for Denver, Paul D remarks that it's dangerous for a "used-to-be-slave woman" to love so much (54). At the same time, Paul D reassures Sethe of comfort and security. The hope for a happy future soon gets disrupted by the mysterious entry of Beloved, who reminds Sethe of her dead daughter. Beloved's emergence from the water, Sethe's incontinence, Beloved's name turning out to be the same as the name engraved on her dead child's tombstone, her smooth skin like a baby, her continuously sleeping like a small baby for four days; these are the signs that suggest that Beloved is an embodiment of Sethe's dead child.

Paul D is reminded of countless young women like Beloved that he has seen; dazed and lost, roaming around, looking for lost family members, unaware that the Civil War has ended. He finds her new shoes and hat suspicious but remains silent. There is an ominous reference to the Ku Klux Klan, roaming the countryside, like a dragon "thirsty for black blood" (79).



Here Boy has also disappeared. It seems that, like all animals, it has sensed the ill-fated entry of Beloved. Paul D also senses some unusual things about Beloved, who shows an infantile attachment to Sethe. Denver is thrilled to have the company of another young woman, covering up for her so that she continues to stay at 124.

Check Your Progress

1. Where has Beloved come from?
2. Why does Sethe allow Beloved to stay with them?
3. How did Sethe's mother come to America?

CHAPTER 7-8

Summary

Beloved has been living with them for five weeks and they do not know much except her name. Many things about Beloved bother Paul D and he decides to find out where she has come from. He also notices that Beloved 'shining' but cannot determine whom she is shining for.

Sethe rebukes Paul D for being very hard on Beloved and then Halle's name comes up in their conversation. Paul D reveals that Halle did not abandon Sethe, as she has always believed. They had been planning to run away from Sweet Home for months but Halle never showed up to take her to the corn fields; where all the slaves had decided to meet. Paul D gives his version of events: leaving the reader to reconstruct the exact sequence of events. We know that their attempt to escape was aborted and Sethe, who had sent her children ahead of her, was picked up by schoolteacher. Halle was hiding behind the loft and saw what schoolteacher and his nephews did to her. That incident broke him completely and he became insane. The last time Paul D saw Halle, he was sitting by the churn and had butter all over his face. Paul D could not speak to him as he had an iron bit in his mouth, like an animal.

Paul D tells Sethe that it was not the iron bit that made him crazy but a rooster named 'Mister' who was moving freely in front of him; better than the black Sweet Home men; one crazy, one sold, one missing, one burnt, and Paul D, with a bit in his mouth. The brutality of schoolteacher has changed Paul D so much that he has learnt to suppress his emotions.

Denver asks Beloved how she got her name. In a mysterious way, Beloved replies; "in the dark" (88). Denver excitedly asks what it was like, whether she had seen anybody, and how she got there. Beloved says that it was a dark place and lots of people were there, some dead. She waited and got on the bridge. Then Denver asks why she came back and Beloved smiles and answers that she has come there to see Sethe's face.



Beloved asks Denver to tell her the story of her birth. Denver tells Beloved how Amy, a white girl helped her mother, how she massaged her swollen feet and rubbed her back. The two women spent the whole night in a lean-to shelter, where Amy took care of her and took her down to the Ohio river. Next morning, they saw a boat with one oar and lots of holes. As soon as Sethe got into the boat, her water bag burst. Amy helped Sethe deliver the baby safely inside the boat itself. She wrapped the baby in her skirt and tied it to Sethe's chest. Then Amy said good bye to her and requested her to tell her baby how she brought her into the world. Sethe fell into a deep sleep and waited to cross the river Ohio to reach her home.

Critical Analysis

Sethe is devastated when she learns that Halle, her husband, saw all that was done to her by schoolteacher and his boys. Sethe is convinced that Halle must be dead by now, as no man could survive such a mental breakdown. Paul D does not want to share more of his terrifying memories as he has locked them “in that tobacco tin buried in his chest” (86). This is a recurring image in the novel, drawing our attention to Paul's emotional suppression.

Beloved's description of the place where she has come from is unclear. Beloved says the place was dark and hot, surrounded by water, and heaps of people were there; some were dead and they did not have any names. The place symbolizes the ‘Middle Passage’: the forced voyage of enslaved Africans, through the Atlantic Ocean. Africans were kidnapped, traded, transported in ships, and sold to Americans. In those ships, conditions were inhuman.

Beloved says “I belong here,” establishing the connection between the dead baby and herself (89). Denver has heard the story of her birth so many times that now it is embedded in her memory. Amy Denver, herself an indentured servant, stays back to help Sethe deliver the baby and massages her feet. In addition to Black slaves, many poor Europeans worked as servants on the plantations. The young girl is running away to Boston to buy carmine coloured velvet; symbolizing the quest for joy and beauty.

Check Your Progress

1. What does Paul D tell Sethe about Halle?
2. Which place has Beloved come from?
3. What is the Middle Passage?



CHAPTER 9

Summary

Sethe is disturbed by Paul D's revelation about Halle and misses Baby Suggs' presence. So, she takes Denver and Beloved with her to the Clearing, to pay tribute to Halle. The Clearing is where Baby Suggs, a redeemer and saviour figure, used to preach to Black people. Sethe remembers the day she came to 124 with a new born baby tied to her chest, wrapped in Amy's underwear. After Amy went away, Sethe walked along the riverside and met an old Black man and two boys. They were fishing in the river. The old man, Stamp Paid asked one of the boys to take off his jacket and wrapped the baby in that jacket. He ferried her across the river and after some hours, a young woman named Ella, who was an organizer with the Underground Railroad, came to help Sethe reach Baby Suggs.

When Sethe reached 124, Bluestone Road with her baby, Baby Suggs cleaned Sethe's wounds and bathed her. Baby Suggs noticed something knotted up in Sethe's petticoat. They were the earrings presented to her by Mrs Garner, as a wedding gift. Sethe jingled those earrings for the pleasure of her elder daughter. Those twenty-eight days were a blessing for her; living a life free of slavery.

Sitting on Baby Suggs' preaching rock in the Clearing, Sethe feels invisible fingers massaging her neck. Gradually, those fingers start to strangle her. Denver and Beloved are shocked to see that and come to Sethe's help and the fingers stop. Beloved kisses the bruises that Sethe has got on her neck. But Sethe pushes Beloved away by saying "You are too old for that" (115). Sethe is sure that it wasn't Baby Suggs who tried to choke her. Next day, Beloved sees Sethe and Paul D together and this agitates her. She runs into the woods and Denver follows and asks if she choked Sethe. Beloved adamantly refuses and runs to the other side of the woods.

Denver has never been to the other side of the woods. This reminds her about the day when she was seven-years-old, went to another house and peeped into Lady Jones's house where she was teaching some Black children. Lady Jones called her inside and also started teaching her, along with the others. Denver had been going to school for a year, when her classmate, Nelson Lord asked her if it was true that her mother had killed her sister. She stopped going to school and turned deaf. She recovered her hearing two years later, when she heard the crawling of ghost baby in their house; this was the first time the ghost baby appeared in 124.

Critical Analysis

Before Paul D's revelation, Sethe had been hoping that Halle would return. Feeling in need of solace, she goes to the Clearing; the place where Baby Suggs used to provide healing



and comfort to her people, teaching them self-love. But something happened twenty-eight days after Sethe arrived in 124. Sethe was sent to jail and the Black community abandoned them, keeping a distance from the house and the family.

Sethe feels comforted in the Clearing, massaged by invisible fingers; but suddenly those same fingers try to strangle her. She remembers Baby Suggs touch, so she is sure it couldn't be her. Denver's isolation is reflected in the fact that she has never been outside 124 or the field behind it. She never went to school as the children of slaves did not have the right to get an education. The loss of her hearing for two years is a metaphor for her refusal to acknowledge the terrible truth about her mother.

Check Your Progress

1. What is the Clearing? Why does Sethe go there?
2. Who is Stamp Paid?
3. What is the 'Underground Railroad'?
4. When does baby ghost first appear at 124?

CHAPTER 10-11

Summary

Paul D recalls how he was sent to jail for trying to kill Brandywine; the man schoolteacher sold him to. He was with forty-six other Black prisoners in Georgia. At night, they all slept in wooden boxes; five feet deep, five feet wide and fitted into the earth. During the day, they were taken out to work, chained together. White jailors were brutal with those prisoners.

Once it rained heavily for many days; giving Paul D and his companions a chance to escape. They fled together as they were tied to a single chain. They run and run till they find a camp of Cherokee, people of an indigenous tribe, who cut their chains with their axes. After being released, Paul D goes North, under the guidance of the Cherokee. They advise him to follow the tree flowers and he reaches Delaware. There he lived with a weaver woman for eighteen months.

Beloved forces Paul D to move out of the house. It starts when Paul D, involuntarily, falls asleep on the rocking chair. It goes on that way. After that, Paul D moves to Baby Suggs' room and sleeps on her bed and again he does not understand why. He believes that he is having 'house-fits.' After some days, he moves to the storeroom and eventually, to the cold house. Paul D has been forced out of 124. One night, Beloved comes to the cold house to seduce Paul D and he succumbs. As he touches her, he repeatedly says the words 'Red heart,' sometimes soft and sometimes so loud that it wakes Denver.



Critical Analysis

The escape of Paul D and the other prisoners shows how solidarity with their community saves the Black slaves. Many other incidents highlight the importance of community; Amy helps Sethe deliver Denver, the Cherokee help Paul D, Ella and Stamp Paid help Sethe reach 124, and Baby Suggs' house is a sanctuary for runaway slaves. Sethe allows Beloved to live in her house, convinced that the young girl is running away from torture and needs shelter. Denver also seems happier in her company.

Beloved comes between Paul D and Sethe. She seems to have supernormal powers, forcing Paul D to move out of Sethe's bed and shift to the cold house behind the house. Beloved seduces Paul D and forces him to sleep with her. It is clear that Beloved wants to drive a wedge between Sethe and Paul D.

Check Your Progress

1. Why is Paul D sent to prison?
2. Describe the condition of the Black prisoners in Georgia?
3. Why, in your opinion, does Beloved seduce Paul D?

CHAPTER 12-14

Summary

Sethe occasionally asks Beloved about her mother but Beloved only remembers a woman, from whom she was snatched away, the bridge where she was standing, and one white man. She cannot recall from where she got the new dress and shoes. Sethe is convinced that Beloved was locked up by some white men and sexually exploited.

Denver doesn't tell Sethe about the cold house as she's afraid that Beloved may leave her. One day, Beloved and Denver go into the cold house to get cider. But as they enter the cold house, Beloved seems to vanish. Denver starts crying as she is sure that Beloved has left her. Suddenly, Beloved appears in front of her and she smiles. Denver pleads with her to never leave her.

Paul D decides to tell Sethe everything that's been happening between him and Beloved for the last three weeks. He meets Sethe, when she is returning from work. But he cannot bring himself to say what he had planned to, and says something else: "I want you pregnant, Sethe. Would you do that for me?" (151). Sethe laughs and asks him "Don't you think that I'm too old to start all over again?" (151). They both go back home, holding hands. Beloved feels resentful on seeing them together. Sethe announces that Paul D will sleep upstairs now, in her room.



When Sethe and Paul D go upstairs, Beloved asks Denver to make Paul D go away from there. Denver replies that Sethe might be angry with her if Paul D leaves. Then one of Beloved's teeth falls out and she wonders if, like the tooth, all her body parts would drop one day. Beloved starts to cry and Denver takes her in her arms.

Critical Analysis

The brutality of slave owners like schoolteacher has a lasting impact on the physical, emotional, and psychological well-being of the slaves. Schoolteacher would comment that slaves are less than animals, and Beloved's control over Paul D makes him tend to agree with schoolteacher's views. Paul D does not want to lose Sethe so he decides to start a family with her; "suddenly it was a solution: a way to hold on to her, document his manhood and break out of the girl's spell – all in one" (151). But Sethe does not agree, thinking that, "Unless carefree, mother love was a killer" (155).

Denver knows all that is happening between Paul D and Beloved but she does not tell Sethe. She is afraid of losing Beloved, whom she is getting very attached to. She is sure that Beloved is the "true to life presence" of the ghost baby (141). In the cold room, Beloved points out chinks of light to Denver. The setting is also significant; it is here that Sethe had killed her infant daughter. The chinks of light on the roof resemble the inside of a ship's hold, dark and with only little light visible. Slaves were transported to America in the holds of ships, in sub-human conditions; many perishing on the way.

Check Your Progress

1. Why doesn't Denver tell her mother about Beloved and Paul D?
2. What happened in the cold room many years ago?

CHAPTER 15-16

Summary

Again, the narrative goes back to the time when Sethe first came to Cincinnati. Twenty days after Sethe reaches 124 with her new-born baby, Stamp Paid goes there with two full buckets of blackberries. Baby Suggs organizes a feast for ninety Black people, to celebrate the arrival of Denver. But they feel jealous and angry. They think an ex-slave has no right to always be at the centre of attention; preaching and helping fugitives. They resent the fact that Baby Suggs did not have to run away from bondage. Her son Halle bought her freedom and, on top of that, her owner personally brought her to Cincinnati, where the Bodwins, who were very generous people and hated slavery, gave Baby Suggs a two-floor house to live in. Bodwin also gave her some work, in return for rent.



Soon after the feast, four horsemen come to Bluestone Road; schoolteacher, his nephew, one slave catcher, and the sheriff, to recapture Sethe and her children. On seeing them, Sethe must have run to the shed with her four children. When the men open the door to the shed, they see her holding her dead her infant daughter, whom she has killed with a handsaw. She is about to throw Denver against the wall when Stamp Paid, who happens to be there, catches her. Sethe has only managed to wound Buglar and Howard, her sons. After watching all this, the sheriff suggests that schoolteacher and the other two should go back as, now, it is no use taking Sethe back. Schoolteacher and his boys realize that mishandling and overbeating make the slaves crazy.

Meanwhile Baby Suggs comes and takes the boys inside the house. She takes Denver from Stamp Paid and gives her to Sethe to feed her. Sethe starts nursing the baby by putting her bloody nipple into her mouth. That infuriates Baby Suggs and she shouts at Sethe and fights with her to take the baby back. Meanwhile, the sheriff comes with a wagon and takes Sethe and Denver to prison.

Critical Analysis

The account of Baby Suggs' past; how she got the house after sixty years of working as a slave and built a life for herself in Cincinnati; preaching and healing, brings the horror of Sethe's deed into sharp relief. Baby Suggs celebrates the arrival of Sethe and her grandchildren by organizing a feast for the Black community, but they feel jealous. Baby Suggs senses bad luck coming to 124; "she smelled another thing. Dark and coming" (163). For the first time in the novel, there is a description of the events on that terrible day. Till now, there has been no direct account.

The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, allowed slave owners to recapture those slaves who had fled to the free states. Kentucky was a slave state and Ohio a free state. This explains the arrival of the four horsemen that ends the happy and peaceful life of 124. These horsemen are the evil that Baby Suggs senses. Not a single community member informs Sethe about the horsemen. Seeing them, Sethe tries to kill her children but is able to kill only one. After murdering her child, she doesn't show any remorse for her act. Seeing Sethe with her dead child, schoolteacher thinks that his nephew went too far in mistreating her, though he had told him not to beat them beyond a point.

Check Your Progress

1. Why does Baby Suggs organize a feast for the Black community of Cincinnati?
2. Who are the four horsemen and why have they come to 124?
3. What do they see when they open the door of the cold room?

**CHAPTER 17-18****Summary**

Paul D and Stamp Paid work at the slaughterhouse where pigs are killed, cut, and skinned to export to the Northern states. Stamp Paid shows Paul D an old newspaper clipping about Sethe's killing of her baby. Paul D sees Sethe's picture and, not being able to read, argues that the picture is not hers. Stamp Paid narrates the whole incident to Paul D and reads out the words slowly from the newspaper article.

Paul D goes to 124 with the newspaper clipping and shows it to Sethe. She tries to explain to him that she could not let herself or any of her children go back to Sweet Home. When she saw schoolteacher and his boys approaching Bluestone Road, she could only think, "No. No. Nono. Nonono" (192). She took all her children outside that house where they could be safe. Killing her children with a handsaw was the only way to protect her children from slavery. Paul D replies, "Your love is too thick" (193). Paul D criticizes Sethe for her idea of safety for her children; she does not know where her two sons have gone, one daughter is dead and another cannot leave the house. He tells her what she did was wrong; "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (194). Paul D leaves 124, telling Sethe to put his meal aside because he might be a little late. Sethe knows that he will never come back.

Critical Analysis

Stamp Paid's decision to tell Paul D about Sethe's past is surprising. He is the same man who has devoted his life to help runaway slaves and helped Sethe cross the Ohio river. He compares Sethe to a hawk who, after seeing the schoolteacher and his boys, "flew, snatching up her children like a hawk on the wing; how her face beaked, how her hands worked like claws" (185). Paul D does not believe the news about Sethe published in the newspaper.

Paul D asks Sethe about her act of killing her baby. She explains to him because she feels obliged to him; he is the only one who gives her hope for the future. She answers that she did it to save her children; "They ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got them" (194). She can only talk about how her children were not hers to love in Kentucky. But Paul D does not understand it and tells her that she loves too much. Sethe believes that love can never be halfway. He thinks this act of Sethe's is the dehumanizing act of an animal. Paul D is unable to accept this side of Sethe's love and leaves 124.



Check Your Progress

1. What does Stamp Paid show to Paul D?
2. What explanation does Sethe give to Paul D for killing her daughter?
3. Why does Paul D leave 124?

Dr Iram Fatima

6.2 PART II

CHAPTER 19

Stamp Paid has been feeling guilty since he got to know that Paul D left 124, on the day he showed him the newspaper clipping. He realizes that, maybe, Sethe's self-sufficiency irked him and he was also influenced by the feelings of the entire community towards her. He feels a sense of obligation towards Baby Suggs and feels duty bound to check on her family.

Stamp Paid recalls how, let down by her community, Baby Suggs gave up preaching. He had urged her to return to the Clearing, not understanding that she was tired. All she wanted to do was to lie down and think of colour. The last time Stamp met her, Baby Suggs was delivering some shoes to a white household, at the back door. He told her not to lose her faith as it would be like conceding defeat to white people. But she replies, referring to herself, that all she can see is "a nigger woman hauling shoes" (211). Now, years later, he can understand her spiritual fatigue. The red ribbon he has found in the river, with the hair and scalp still attached to it, has tired him out too.

Sethe takes the girls ice-skating, trying to show them that she is unaffected by Paul D's departure. One night, Sethe hears Beloved humming a song that was composed by Sethe for her own children. Sethe finally understands who Beloved is; overjoyed by the miraculous return of her daughter.

When Stamp Paid goes to 124, he hears loud voices; the only word he can discern is "mine" (203). He tries to go in but holds back. After many attempts, he goes again and knocks on the door. When no one answers his call, Stamp tries to look for Denver and Sethe through the window but sees the back of a girl he doesn't recognize. Distraught, he goes to meet Ella, to find out if she knows anything about the new girl. From her, Stamp learns that Paul D is now living in the basement of a church.

Sethe's inner voice addresses Beloved. She is hopeful that her baby will understand her actions. Life at Sweet Home was becoming unbearable. When Halle didn't show up,



Sethe sent her little children ahead of herself; staying behind to wait for her husband. Sethe talks about the time she spent in jail, where Baby Suggs would bring her food and news of her boys. She tells Beloved about the white jailor who took her diamond earrings, telling her it was in case she tried to harm herself with them. She was allowed to attend her daughter's burial, and the coloured ladies of Delaware signed a petition for her release. She was released after three months. In her mind, she goes over the difficult journey she undertook to reach her daughter; "You remember that, don't you; that I did? That when I got here, I had milk enough for all?" (233).

Critical Analysis

In this chapter, Stamp Paid's feelings of guilt are interspersed with Sethe's memories of schoolteacher and Sweet Home. Sethe recalls how schoolteacher treated his slaves like animals. Sixo is the only one who was openly defiant. He ate corn from the fields, refusing to admit that he was stealing it.

Stamp Paid feels that Black people work extremely hard because they wish to dissociate themselves from white people's image of them as a savage, animalistic species. Stamp Paid thinks that the harder they work to demonstrate their humanity, the more bitter and angry they become. He recalls Baby Suggs who, in his opinion, lost her faith towards her last days. He didn't understand that she was tired but now feels the same fatigue.

Note how the narrative style begins to change; becoming more personal. Sethe addresses Beloved directly in her interior monologue. She tells herself that she does not need to explain anything to Beloved, because Beloved already understands. She shares memories of her days at Sweet Home; caring for her three little children, worrying about them.

Stamp Paid understands that the voices he hears from inside 124 are "the mumbling of the black and angry dead"; sounds of the collective suffering of the slaves (234). Morrison makes it clear that, escaping from slavery does not imply freedom from its burden. Sometimes they get tired of fighting, as in the case of Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid.

Check Your Progress

1. What does Stamp Paid hear outside 124, Sethe's home?
2. What happened to the diamond earrings that Mrs Jones gifted Sethe for her wedding?
3. Where does Stamp Paid go after seeing Beloved in Sethe's house?



CHAPTER 20

Summary

This chapter, and the next three as well, use the stream of stream of consciousness technique: following the thoughts and feelings of the characters. Sethe remembers the devotion with which she looked after Mrs. Garner when she was unwell, like a daughter. She remembers how she cried when Sethe told her how she had been milked like a cow. She wonders if Mrs Garner is alive now. Her memories of schoolteacher's nephews milking her breasts are interspersed with those of her own traumatic childhood. Her mother couldn't care for her and a wetnurse, Nan fed her; but there was never enough milk for her. Her mother had a permanent smile on her face, made from constantly having a bit in her mouth. Sethe lives with the tortuous uncertainty of not knowing why her mother was hanged.

Sethe knows Beloved is her own daughter, who has come back to her. She decides to show the colours and smells of the world to Beloved; rich purple carrots and yellow flowers. Sethe criticizes Paul D for distracting her—otherwise, she would've recognized her daughter the moment Beloved asked her about the diamond earrings: the same earrings she played with as a baby. She would also have noticed the marks of her fingernails on Beloved's forehead, made when she held her head up, before using the handsaw on her neck.

For the first time, Sethe confesses that when she ran to the shed with her children, she wanted to kill them all and then herself: "My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is" (240). Fortunately, she was stopped after killing Beloved. Sethe also tells Beloved that she wanted to end her life when her daughter was laid to rest, but she could not do so because of the three surviving children.

Critical Analysis

Sethe's stream-of-consciousness combines memories of her own mother, her wet nurse Nan, and Mrs. Garner; the last two being mother figures. She is doubly tormented by memories of her mother's sufferings, and of the daughter she killed with her own hands.

Now that Beloved has come back to her, Sethe wants to look at things around her and introduce her daughter to the beauty of the world. In this chapter, Sethe shares with Beloved, thoughts that she has never shared with anyone before. She did explain her fears to Paul D when he confronted her about killing her daughter. But here, for the first time she talks about her original plan; to kill all her children first and then herself. Sethe mentions her fears about her daughters being sexually assaulted by white men or burnt alive somewhere. There is an emotional urgency to her thoughts.

**Check Your Progress**

1. Why is Sethe certain that Beloved is her daughter, come back to her?
2. What was Sethe's plan when she ran to the shed with her children?

CHAPTER 21**Summary**

This chapter follows Denver's stream-of-consciousness. Denver feels that it is her duty and responsibility to protect Beloved, in case Sethe tries to kill her again: "Beloved is my sister" (242). She recalls a recurring nightmare that she had when she was a girl; where Sethe decapitated her every night and carried her head downstairs. Denver has always waited for her father to come back. She considers her father an ideal man, an "angel man" and she loved listening to her grandmother, Baby Suggs talk about Halle (243).

Denver remembers the assurance given by Baby Suggs that the baby ghost is "greedy for love" and it would never harm her as she had drunk its blood, along with her mother's milk (247). When Sethe's sons run away, everyone thinks that it's because they're frightened of the ghost. However, Denver's thoughts go back to the time her brothers expressed fear that their mother could kill them; saying she had something in her that made it alright to kill her own (247).

Critical Analysis

Sethe braiding the hair on Denver's decapitated head in her nightmare, reflects Denver's subconscious fear of Sethe. As in the previous chapter, a lot of new things come to the fore. Denver's revelation of the talks she had with her brothers, Howard and Buglar, make us realize that, more than the baby ghost, it was Sethe who scared them away. Denver shares her fears about the baby ghost with her grandmother, who assures her that it is just hungry for love. She longs for her father Halle's presence and is resentful of Paul D.

Check Your Progress

1. What does Baby Suggs tell Denver about the baby ghost?
2. Why did Howard and Buglar run away from home?

CHAPTER 22**Summary**

This is the most complicated and difficult of the four chapters, using the stream of consciousness technique. There is an abrupt change in the narrative style: sentences become



shorter and disjointed. As Beloved says, it is difficult to describe pictures. She remembers the face of her mother and claims that she is not disconnected from her. She does not want to lose Sethe. There are images of clouds and water in this chapter. Sometimes, she has been standing in the rain and sometimes, she curls up like a foetus. Time and again, there's a recurring reference to "a hot thing" – maybe a reference to the hold of a ship. It is her cherished desire to join her face with Sethe's face. By the end of this chapter, Beloved has been restored to life, emerging from the water and sitting outside Sethe's house. She recognizes her: "Sethe's is the face that left me" (252).

Critical Analysis

Morrison conveys the impression of a child speaking. Beloved's words make it clear that she recalls lying in a ship's hold, but it is difficult to comprehend why Beloved is in a ship, among dead bodies. This chapter is an example of race memory or genetic memory. Beloved's memories are embedded with the pain of countless Black slaves before her, who lost their lives during the voyage from Africa to America; memories that she has inherited. Beloved did not die in the water but if Beloved is seen as a representative of her race; her suffering makes sense. Schoolteacher and the slave traders are referred to as "men with no skin" and "white men." There are strong suggestions of sexual abuse on the ship. Beloved craves to be born again so that she can go back to Sethe, who is the unnamed "she." She comes back to Sethe from the dead.

Check Your Progress

1. What is 'race memory'? [Look it up in an online dictionary.]
2. Describe the hold of the ship.

CHAPTER 23

Summary

Beloved reiterates her need to join Sethe. Sethe withdraws her face. Beloved is not willing to lose that face again. The three disembodied voices speak to each other. They are the voices of Sethe, Beloved, and Denver. Sethe asks Beloved to forgive her, but Beloved is not willing to. In haunting poetic prose, Morrison weaves the thoughts of mother and daughters together. Short sentences are packed with intimacy; mother and daughter are one; they are "like laugh and laughter" (255). Beloved has come back from "the other side" to feel Sethe's love; "You are mine. You are mine. You are mine" (256).



Critical Analysis

Beloved fails to distinguish between herself and her mother. Denver warns her sister not to love their mother too much. Sethe is overjoyed at her daughter's return. Toni Morrison's prose does away with formal structures and is pure expression of emotion. Beloved's unfulfilled longing, "coming from the other side" is moving (254).

Check Your Progress

1. Comment on Toni Morrison's narrative style in this chapter.
2. Whose are the three voices in this section?

CHAPTER 24

Summary

The chapter begins with Paul D's thoughts. He has never met his father and he cannot recall much about his mother; Paul A and Paul F were his half-brothers. Paul D remembers when one of his brothers was sold off. At Sweet Home, he had Halle, Baby Suggs, and his brothers, so he had a family of sorts.

Paul D's thoughts go back to when the slaves at Sweet Home had planned to make an escape on the Underground Railroad after schoolteacher took over the farm. They planned months in advance but everything went wrong on that night. They had all planned to meet in the corn fields and move ahead from there. But only Paul D, Sixo, and The Thirty Mile Woman showed up. Someone saw Paul A going ahead but nobody knows what happened afterwards. Halle went to give a message to Sethe, who was looking after Mrs Garner but he never got to her. Sethe waited for him and sent all her three children to Cincinnati when Halle didn't turn up. Nobody knows exactly what happened. Maybe schoolteacher got suspicious and Halle hid in the barn.

Schoolteacher reaches there with other white men and arrests Sixo and Paul D. The Thirty Mile Woman manages to run away and Sixo starts to sing; schoolteacher thinks he has gone mad. They try to burn Sixo alive, but the flames are weak. Sixo is still singing and laughing when he is shot dead. The white men and schoolteacher discuss the problems they face with 'niggers.' For the first time, Paul D comes to know his price, which is 900 dollars.

Critical Analysis

Paul D feels that he should have died along with Sixo. Sitting on the steps of the church he thinks how he never really had a family of his own, except the slaves he worked with at Sweet Home. He always envied Black people who had numerous family members to call their own.



Again, the events of that night are recounted but with details never added before. The mystery of Halle not turning up to collect Sethe can only be speculated about. Most probably, Paul A has been killed; Sixo is shot but his pregnant lady love manages to escape; and Halle goes mad after witnessing the bestiality unleashed on Sethe. Sethe is sexually assaulted and whipped on her back, leaving deep scars. Schoolteacher and the other white men talk as if they are discussing breeding animals and how it is profitable to have a female slave, as she will produce more slaves for free. When Paul D is captured, he hears schoolteacher fixing a price for him. He doubts his masculinity and is unsure of his own worth as a human being.

Check Your Progress

1. What happens to the slaves from Sweet Home when they try to escape?
2. How did Sethe get the scars on her back?

CHAPTER 25

Summary

Stamp Paid tries to convince Paul D to think again about his decision to leave Sethe. He narrates the story behind his name to Paul D. His name used to be Joshua. His wife had been taken away from him by their master's son at a young age. Stamp had not touched his own wife for a year. When his wife came back, he became very angry. He felt like breaking her neck. Instead, he changed his name to tackle his anger. He defends Sethe; saying that she did what she did out of love; "She ain't crazy. She love those children" (276). Paul D discloses to Stamp that he fears Sethe and Beloved. Stamp is anxious to know about the whereabouts of Beloved. He tells Paul D that a few months ago, a white man was killed by a Black girl, whom he had kept forcefully in his house since she was a child.

Critical Analysis

Like Baby Suggs, who took the name used by her husband, Stamp Paid has rejected the name on his bill of sale. His name is a badge of what he has gone through and survived in his life. He attempts to atone for his misdeed by telling Paul D not to commit the mistake he did by leaving his wife, Vashti. The poor girl was sexually exploited by her owner's son; yet Stamp Paid left her when she came back to him. It is clear that now, years later, he regrets his action. He doesn't want Paul D to leave Sethe; urging him to be more understanding about her motives. Paul D seems to be at the end of his tether: "How much is a nigger supposed to take?" (277).

**Check Your Progress**

1. Why did Joshua change his name to Stamp Paid?
2. What advice does Stamp Paid give to Paul D?

6.3 PART III**CHAPTER 26****Summary**

Sethe and Beloved spend their time playing games. Sethe uses up all her savings to make colourful dresses for the trio, making them look like “carnival women” (283). She gets late for work every day and, as a result, loses her job. She becomes obsessed with pleasing Beloved. One day Sethe notices a small scar on Beloved’s neck. It is the scar left by the handsaw, and the intensity of her love increases. In the beginning, Denver is concerned for Beloved, but with the passage of time she becomes more concerned for her mother. Beloved has been growing fat and expanding whereas Sethe is wasting away. Sethe tries to redeem herself in her daughter’s eyes and Beloved complains about her abandonment. Denver understands that, “Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw: Beloved was making her pay for it” (295).

Eventually Denver decides to ask someone for help. Beloved is ruining her mother; they are all “locked in a love that wore everybody out,” and Denver is afraid for her mother’s life (286). She gathers the strength to go out of 124 and goes to Lady Jones, her former teacher. Without mentioning or describing the ghost, Denver informs Lady Jones that Sethe has been ill for a long time. She asks Lady Jones for some food, which she gets but refuses her offer of help from the church. A couple of days later, Denver begins to find baskets of food, left outside 124. The baskets have pieces of paper on which the names of the senders are written. Denver personally goes to return the baskets and say thanks; getting acquainted with the Black community of Cincinnati.

The house has begun to resemble a lunatic asylum. Denver decides to get a job as she cannot depend on her neighbours to feed her forever and she goes to the Bodwins for help. The Bodwins, unlike other whites, have been very kind and generous to the Black community. Janey, the servant at the Bodwins’ place, still works for them but Denver is employed to work the night shift, to take care of Ms Bodwin.

When Denver is leaving their house, she notices a piggy bank in the form of a Black boy with exaggerated features. She sees the words “At Yo’ Service” written on the base (300). Janey quickly spreads an altogether different tale; that the dead baby of Sethe



has come back to punish her. The rumour grows and spreads all over the community. Ella hears that Sethe is being whipped by the ghost. She doesn't believe in "past errors taking possession of the present" (302). She is instrumental in mobilizing the women to come forward and help her free 124 of the evil presence. Ella too has suffered in her own way; she recalls how she was shared by a white man and his son years ago. She gave birth to a baby and neglected it until it died, a few days later.

Edward Bodwin comes to 124 to collect Denver for her first day of work. He sees a group of Black women standing outside the house and Denver sitting on the steps. They are praying and singing. Hearing the noise, Sethe and Beloved come out of the house, holding hands. The women, who are praying, are amazed at the sight of Beloved. Seeing Mr. Bodwin coming up the road, Sethe mistakes him for schoolteacher and attacks him with an ice pick.

Critical Analysis

This chapter charts the metamorphosis of Denver. She has spent her young life without her father's protection or her brothers' company, but her concern for her mother forces her to seek assistance and she begins to feel responsible for her mother. Denver knows that Beloved has come back to demand her mother's love but is not willing to forgive her.

The Bodwins are friends and well-wishers of the Black community. They gave Baby Suggs a house and work when she first came to Cincinnati, and helped Sethe get out of jail and find a job. However, there is an object in their home, a piggy bank in the shape of a caricatured and servile Black boy, that indicates that even the most well-meaning of white people are unaware of deep-rooted racial prejudices.

After Sethe came back from jail, the Black community shunned her family. Sethe was considered too proud and she, in turn, isolated herself. But the women respond to Ella's plea to rid the house of its evil presence and come forward to drive the ghost of Beloved away. They come, bringing their "Christian faith" with them (303). On their knees, the thirty women begin to pray. Enveloped in their sound, Sethe is "baptized," feeling that the sacred Clearing has come to her (308). It is the first step that re-establishes the family's link with their community.

Check Your Progress

1. Describe the behaviour of Sethe towards Beloved, in this chapter?
2. To whom does Denver go to ask for help?
3. Who brings the community of Black women together, to help save Sethe?



CHAPTER 27

Summary

Stamp Paid informs Paul D that 124 is quiet now. Mr. Bodwin wants to sell 124, but it may take some time because it is difficult to find a buyer. He decides not to press any charges against Sethe for the attempted murder, because he was engrossed in looking at Beloved and did not even realize that Sethe was rushing at him with an ice pick. Before Sethe could reach him, the women, including Denver and Ella, pushed her to the ground. Beloved disappears and is nowhere to be seen. There are rumours that a little boy saw her running through the woods, fish in her hair.

Paul D runs into Denver, who discloses that she knew that Beloved was the ghost of her dead sister, maybe more. She tells Paul D that her mother is not well. Walking to 124, Paul D thinks about how he has been unsuccessfully trying to run away most of his life; first from Sweet Home, then prison in Georgia. Over the years, he worked for the Northpoint Bank and Railway, then joined a coloured regiment and picked up dead bodies for the Confederates. At the end of the Civil War, he was in Alabama, from where a Union boat took him to West Virginia. Trudging to Trenton, he earned his first coin and bought some turnips; observing the confusion around him: Black people roaming around, unaware that the war had ended. Paul D recalls how, after wandering around for seven years after the war ended, he had come to meet Sethe.

He reaches 124 and comes to know from the presence of Here Boy, Sethe's dog, that Beloved has gone. Sethe seems to have lost her mind; lying in bed, having lost all desire to live or work anymore. Sethe recalls all the people whom she loved and lost; Howard and Buglar, Baby Suggs, her mother, and Beloved. She cries, telling Paul D that Beloved was her "best thing" (321). Looking at Sethe, he remembers Sixo's description of the Thirty Mile Woman; "She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man" (321). He is at peace with himself now.

Critical Analysis

In this chapter there's a long description of Paul D's experiences over the years, after he escaped from Sweet Home. The historic events of the period are touched upon; the terrible human tragedy of the Civil War, the dead piling up on both sides, and the joy of earning his first coin as a free man. Paul D comes back to 124. Though Beloved has gone, Sethe doesn't seem to have healed. She lies depressed on Baby Suggs' bed; remembering all those she loved and lost. Paul D assures her that he will care for her.



Check Your Progress

1. What happens to Beloved?
2. Describe Sethe's condition after Beloved goes away.
3. What does Denver tell Paul D?

CHAPTER 28

Summary

In the first paragraph, the narrator talks of “a loneliness that roams,” unlike the loneliness within that can be rocked away (323). This is an oblique reference to the ghost of Beloved, looking for her mother's love. In the second paragraph, she is the one who “erupts into separate parts,” making it easier for people to forget her (323). The ones who saw her on the porch were the first to forget her, like a bad dream.

Those closest to her forget her words and know that remembering is “unwise” (324). They forget whose face she was looking for and the “smile under her chin”—a reference to the scar on her neck (324). Gradually, the memories are locked in the mind. Occasionally, there are gentle indications of her presence; as in a soft touch, a rustle of a skirt or footprints at the back of 124. But it goes away. There is a refrain after each paragraph; “It was not a story to be passed on” (324). It could be a cautioning to the reader, that this is *not a story*, indicating that it's not a piece of fiction but the painful history of a race.

Critical Analysis

Forgetting about Beloved is the first step towards healing. With the passage of time, Sethe, Paul D, and Denver realize that they cannot remember or repeat a single thing that she said. In fact, they are unsure that whether she was ever really there.

Interpretations of the sentence; “It was not a story to be passed on” vary among critics. Morrison ends the novel with a gentle reminder that this is not a tale to be forgotten; it is a painful account of suffering.

Check Your Progress

1. Comment on the sentence: “It was not a story to be passed on.”



7. THEMES IN *BELOVED*

Slavery

There is no doubt that slavery is the main theme of the novel. Both in the dedication and epigraph to the novel, Morrison draws our attention to her theme. The institution of slavery impacts the physical and emotional well-being of slaves. Traded like commodities, it is impossible for them to sustain their familial bonds. Living with the constant fear of being separated from their children, they train themselves not to get attached to them, as Baby Suggs does. Almost all the women in the novel have been subjected to sexual abuse of some kind: Sethe, her mother, her wet nurse Nan, and Ella. Schoolteacher makes his slaves the subject of study, noting down their physical characteristics and comparing them to those of animals. More than the physical scars on her back, Sethe is disturbed by her memories of being measured and schoolteachers' nephews noting details in notebooks.

Sethe's infanticide, more than anything else, illustrates the extent to which slavery can hinder a person's sense of judgement. Driven to desperation, terrorized by schoolteacher's appearance at her doorstep, she decides to kill all her children but is stopped by Stamp Paid; but not before she kills her nine-month-old infant daughter. She escapes the death penalty but lives with the ghost of her baby daughter, stoically putting up with the mental agony. Her innermost thoughts, directed at Beloved, form the emotional core of the novel. Her unfulfilled longings as a mother affect her mental health.

However, there are other, former slaves like Stamp Paid and Baby Suggs, who have not let their personal pain kill them from the inside. Baby Suggs becomes a beacon of hope for her community; preaching self-love in the Clearing. It is only after Sethe kills her daughter that she gives up the struggle; unable to either condemn or support Sethe's act. Finally, she is devastated when her grandsons, Howard and Buglar, run away from 124. Her last advice to her family is that "there's no bad luck like white people." Stamp Paid does all he can to help the runaway slaves; selflessly ferrying them across the Ohio river. Yet, a small red ribbon with the scalp of a child attached to it demoralizes him.

The Past: its Memory and Burden

The past and its memory form an important component of *Beloved*. Each character carries the burden of past suffering. The novel begins in the year 1873, but the plot covers the period from 1855 to 1873, through flashbacks. There are many historical events that form the background to the painful and traumatic memories of many characters of the novel.

Baby Suggs spent sixty years of her life as a slave; not even trying to memorize the faces of her new born babies because she knew they would be taken from her. She



lost seven of her children, who were either snatched away and sold off or ran away. Her only remaining son Halle buys her freedom, and she finds redemption by preaching love to her people.

Denver's childhood memories are of an absent father, brothers frightened of a spirit in the house, and a mother who has been in jail for killing her sister. Denver learns to live with the ghost of her dead sister, retreating to her green room in the woods when lonely. Although she doesn't say anything to her mother directly, she lives with the knowledge of her sister's murder. In a reversal of roles, Denver becomes a caregiver for her mother. She emerges a stronger person, instrumental in helping Sethe drive Beloved's spirit away. Like Baby Suggs, Sethe too has lost her husband and children. She is tormented by her ultimate act of love that ended in infanticide. Beloved was only nine months old when Sethe killed her with a handsaw. Sethe puts up with the consequences of her tragic act for eighteen years, drowning in a self-destructive love for her daughter, till she is saved by her community.

Each character in *Beloved* carries the cross of pain. Paul D never had a family and hungers for one. Most of his life he has been running away from bondage and has learnt to lock up his feelings in his chest. Ella was sexually exploited by a white man and his son for a year. Stamp Paid left his wife because he couldn't bear to have her back after his owner's son slept with her. Both these characters turn their grief into positivity, helping slaves running away from cruel masters. They ferry them across the Ohio river and help them reach their destinations.

Not all memories in the novel are painful. The story of Denver's birth, narrated a number of times in the novel, is a story of triumph over adversity. Denver's birth is a miracle. Like an angel, Amy Denver comes to help Sethe when she is almost dead, after she has been whipped by schoolteacher's nephew. Sethe feels the healing touch on her feet.

Motherhood

In many ways, *Beloved* is a story about motherhood and how slavery crushes the natural instincts of women. Mothers could not nurture their children properly and lived with the fear of having their children taken away from them to be sold off. The common wisdom was that a slave shouldn't form a strong attachment to her children. As Paul D points out to Sethe, her love is "too thick" (194).

Almost all the Black women in the novel suffer through separation. Baby Suggs had eight children and except for Halle, all of them were taken away. She barely remembers them. Sethe's own mother was too exhausted from working in the plantation to feed her daughter and a wet nurse would do that. On the ship that brought her to America, she



was repeatedly raped by the white crew and threw the children, born out of the forced unions, into the sea. Sethe and her mother could never develop a bond and nurture their relationship. Like Sethe, her mother too committed infanticide out of desperation. Ella is raped by a white man and his son and gives birth to a white child whom she refuses to care for, leading to its death.

Sethe doesn't want to see her children become slaves; hence she tries to kill them. Everyone feels that Sethe has committed a sin. However, Sethe's act has to be viewed in the broader context of her desperate decision to kill all her children and then herself. Unfortunately, she is stopped by the time she kills her infant daughter. Sethe is able to escape punishment because of the Bodwins' efforts. After a few months in jail, she comes to live with her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs. For the next eighteen years, a spirit haunts their house; referred to as baby ghost. It takes on a human shape with the appearance of Beloved. Sethe's regret and guilt for having failed her children turns into an obsessive love for her daughter. It sends her to the edge of madness.

Sethe's pain and her living with that pain forms the emotional core of the novel. The interior monologues in Part III of the novel are pure expressions of her unfulfilled love. The terrible human tragedy of slavery and the emotional trauma are important themes in the novel.

The Importance of Family and Community

Slaves were considered private property and hence slave owners broke up families by buying or selling individual family members. Baby Suggs' children, Paul D's brother, and Paul D himself, are sold off at will. Though slavery makes it almost impossible, the Black slaves have very strong bonds with family and community. Sethe hardly remembers her mother and she doesn't want this to happen to her children. Hence, she has a very strong attachment and connection with her children. Baby Suggs welcomes Sethe to her home, embracing her daughter-in-law and her four grandchildren. She nurses Sethe who lands up at her home, and even organizes a feast for the community to celebrate Denver's arrival. Her son Halle sacrifices his only holiday, Sunday, for five years to buy his mother's freedom. At Sweet Home the slaves look out for each other.

The familial bonds that are strengthened by slavery are sometimes dangerous too, as shown by the severity of Sethe's motherly instincts. Sethe attempts to protect her children by trying to kill them. Paul D tells Sethe, her motherly love is "too thick" but Sethe contradicts him: "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't no love at all" (194).

Individuals need the support of their community in order to survive. After reaching Cincinnati with her baby, Sethe experiences what it is to be a part of a larger community,



with people coming up to talk to her and ask her things. But her joy is short-lived. After she returns from jail, the interactions end. Paul D and forty-six prisoners manage to escape from prison in Georgia by stepping in tandem with each other, in spite of the heavy chains around their legs. It is the community that saves Sethe from mistakenly killing Mr. Bodwin and committing another sin. Cincinnati's Black community plays a major role in helping Sethe exorcise her demons. At the end of the novel, the women try to make up for their willful indifference by gathering at 124 to collectively pray for Sethe.

8. SYMBOLS

Symbols are basically objects, figures, characters or colours that represent certain abstract ideas or concepts; visible signs of invisible things.

Colour

Colour makes its appearance at crucial points in the novel; giving the narrative an additional dimension. The carmine-coloured velvet that Amy Denver is going to buy from Boston, symbolizes her quest for a hopeful and bright future, whereas the “red heart” of Paul D signifies feelings and emotions. The colour red symbolizes both life and death. For instance, the red roses lining the path to the carnival denote the beginning of a new life for Sethe, Denver and Paul D. But the colour red also has strong associations with death—such as Beloved's blood, mixed with Sethe's milk, that Denver drinks. The red rooster roaming free while Paul D is chained, makes him go insane. It is a reminder of the freedom that is denied to him. When Paul D enters 124 for the first time, he sees a red pool of light, the baby ghost. Stamp Paid cannot wipe out the memory of a red ribbon he found floating in the Ohio river, with the hair and scalp attached to it: a disturbing image of young lives lost in a bid to escape slavery.

Sethe's memory is filled with the red colour of her daughter's blood and the pink mineral of her gravestone. After burying her daughter, she stops noticing colours around her. When Baby Suggs is confined to bed, she complains of the lack of colour around her and Sethe puts two orange patches on her patchwork quilt. When Beloved first comes to 124, she wants those two orange patches in her sight, when she is recovering in bed. Colour symbolizes joy in life. These former slaves have had little of it. When Sethe leaves her job, she stitches colourful dresses for her daughters, to express her love. She wants to show the beautiful colours of nature; in vegetables and in flowers, to Beloved.

Trees

Trees are a traditional source of healing, shade, comfort and life. Denver's “emerald closet” of boxwood bushes is a place of solitude and peace. Paul D had his own tree at Sweet



Home; he called it Brother, almost like a family member. Paul D is able to walk to his freedom by following the flowering trees to the North. Amy Denver think the scars and marks on Sethe's back look like a "chokecherry tree." Marks of trauma and brutality take on a beautiful form, it is almost as if the tree grows.

The Tin Tobacco Box

Paul D's heart is a "tin tobacco box." He locks and puts his feelings and memories in the symbolic box that has rusted completely by now because of his traumatizing experiences at Sweet Home and especially at the prison camp in Alfred, Georgia. He has been repressing his memories to feel protected and secured. But his sexual encounter with Beloved leads the box to burst and his heart glows red once again.

Milk

Mother's milk symbolizes life and love. Sethe herself was deprived of her mother's milk, as she was always working in the plantation fields, and was fed by a wet nurse. Sethe worries about giving enough milk to her children Sadly, her breast milk gets "stolen" by the schoolteacher's nephews. This incident haunts and terrorizes Sethe; firstly, because she has been sexually assaulted, and secondly, because she feels she has failed as a mother. Mother's milk occupies a very significant role in Sethe's life. It is both a symbol of defilement, as well as her love for her children. When Halle witnesses the brutality unleashed on Sethe, he goes insane, rubbing butter all over his face. Butter is also a form of milk.

The Supernatural

"124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" (3). The novel starts with this line. The beginning of the novel shows Sethe's house, where she lives with her daughter Denver. Along with them lives baby ghost, as they call her. Morrison uses conventional tropes to establish that the house is haunted; mournful noises, frightened animals, objects falling off tables, and floors shaking. The other two parts of *Beloved* begin with references to the haunted house; "124 was loud" (Part II); and "124 was quiet" (Part III). The ghost of the dead child continues to trouble the house until the ending of Part II, when the members of the community come forward to help Sethe come out of its clutches.

When Paul D first comes to 124, he drives away the baby ghost. But it reappears a few days later. The supernatural spirit returns in the form of Beloved. Her appearance at 124 is surrounded by mystery; it is as if she has come back from the dead, walking out of the water, fully clothed in a new dress and shoes. She seems to possess extraordinary powers; making Paul D follow her will. However, Beloved's disappearance is as mystifying as her coming. The group of women who see her naked and pregnant outside 124, and are



singing to rid the house of the evil presence, see her vanish magically. The whole novel is based on the premise that Beloved is the dead infant daughter who has come back to demand her share of Sethe's love and exact revenge. The community accepts this story, reflecting their belief in the existence of the supernatural.

9. CHARACTERS

Sethe

Sethe is the main protagonist of *Beloved*. She was born on a distant plantation that she hardly remembers, though she has faint memories of her own mother. When she was in her early teens, she was brought to Sweet Home, where she takes Halle Suggs as her husband. She has four children, and when she is pregnant with the fourth child, she runs away all alone. Sethe carries physical marks of the brutality inflicted on her: she has a mass of scars on her back that resemble a tree. Schoolteacher, who is the brutal master at Sweet Home, tracks her down. But Sethe decides to kill her children instead of surrendering.

Sethe is haunted by her baby daughter's ghost, first as a spectre, then as Beloved. Her relationship with Beloved is a working out of her guilt at killing her child, of not getting the chance to nurture her and love her. Sethe's character is Toni Morrison's powerful imagining of a tortured soul.

Denver

Denver is Sethe's youngest daughter, born during Sethe's flight to the North. She is eighteen years old and has had a very lonely existence; she has never ventured out of 124 by herself. She is bright and intelligent but went to school only for a year. She stopped going when a classmate questioned her about Sethe's killing of her own daughter. Denver and Sethe have a close bond, as they only have each other. Sethe has isolated herself and the neighbours avoid them after Baby Suggs' death.

Denver is jealous of Paul D when he starts living at 124; not only jealous of the fact that Paul D shares a past with Sethe but also because he seems to have formed a romantic relationship with Sethe. This causes Denver to act rudely. After Beloved comes to 124, Denver forms a special bond with her; caring for her when she is recuperating and listening to her secrets. They are like real sisters. Even before Sethe realizes that Beloved is her daughter, Denver knows who she is. In the final chapters of the novel Denver fights, not only for her independence but also for her mother's wellbeing, breaking the cycle of suffering and isolation at 124.



Beloved

Beloved's identity is never left in doubt, although it begins as a mystery. She asks Sethe about the diamond earrings she would play with as a baby, and sings the same song that nobody but Sethe and her children know. The scar on her neck, made by the handsaw, and the marks of Sethe's fingernails on her forehead leave no doubt in Sethe's mind that she has come back to her from the "other side." She develops an infantile attachment to Sethe. On an emblematic and metaphorical level, Beloved also represents the legacy of slavery which comes back to haunt and torment the present. She evokes strong emotions in Paul D and Denver as well, changing the dynamics of their relationships.

Beloved is supernatural and represents the spirit of multiple people. Her memories of her past force the reader to wonder if she is really Sethe's dead infant daughter come back. Beloved represents not only Sethe's unnamed child but also the unnamed Black people, innocent victims of slavery, who died and were forgotten.

Paul D

Paul D is one of the slaves at the Sweet Home farm. His life is a long chronicle of suffering. After the aborted attempt to escape from Sweet Home, he is sold off to another slave master, tries to kill him, spends time in jail, escapes from there along with other prisoners, and wanders around the country. The physical and emotional torture suffered by Paul D is hidden and buried in the "rusted tobacco tin" of his heart. He represses his painful and traumatic memories and experiences. He feels that the key to life and survival is not becoming too attached to anything. At the same time, he is quite good at making others, especially women, confide in him.

Paul D reaches 124 and Sethe welcomes him. He is not aware of what has happened to Sethe in all these years. He becomes her lover and stays on, promising to take care of Denver as well. After Beloved's arrival, he becomes the object of Beloved's jealousy. He is powerless against Beloved, who seduces him in an effort to come between him and Sethe. His relationship with Sethe provides him with stability but Stamp Paid's revelation makes him react without empathy and he leaves Sethe, saying "You got two feet, Sethe, not four"; implying that she behaved like an animal (194). Ironically, it is Stamp Paid who convinces him to return to Sethe; asking him not to commit the same mistake he did.

Baby Suggs

Baby Suggs is Halle Suggs' mother and Sethe's mother-in-law. Baby Suggs travels to Cincinnati after her son buys her freedom. Freedom transforms Baby Suggs; giving her a new understanding of what it means to be alive. She evolves into a kind of holy woman for Cincinnati's Black community: a source of emotional and spiritual inspiration for the



former slaves in the city. After Sethe kills her baby, she is so shocked and disheartened that she withdraws and takes herself to a sickbed to die, remaining there for eight years. Tired of fighting she finally gives up; devoting her last days to the contemplation of colour.

Baby Suggs continues to be a source of inspiration even after her death. When Sethe feels broken after learning from Paul D that Halle went insane, it is to the Clearing that she goes to seek solace. In Part III of the novel, the memory of Baby Suggs motivates Denver to go out and look for help. It is because of respect for Baby Suggs that the community responds to Denver's requests for support.

Halle Suggs

Halle Suggs is Sethe's husband and the father of her children. On the day they planned to escape Sweet Home, he doesn't turn up as decided beforehand. Halle was nowhere to be seen when he was supposed to be with Sethe. It is during the latter part of the novel, that we get to know that Halle was hiding in the loft of the barn, where Sethe was violated and saw everything. Halle had gone insane when Paul D saw him for the last time; sitting next to a butter churn, smearing butter all over his face. Though absent from the novel, he comes across as a loving and considerate son; sacrificing a lot for his mother. Denver has never met her father but thinks he's an angel.

Stamp Paid

Like Baby Suggs, Stamp Paid is a saviour. He is welcomed by every person and in every house of the town. He was an agent of the Underground Railroad, a secret route of hidden paths and houses that fugitive slaves could follow; he is an "agent, fisherman, boatman, tracker, saviour, spy" for runaway slaves (160). He helps Sethe, soon after she gives birth to Denver. He saves Denver's life, by catching her just before Sethe is about to hit her head against the wall in the wooden shed. His wife was sexually exploited by his master's son and when she came back, he felt like killing her but abandoned her instead. Feeling that he has fallen low, he renames himself 'Stamp Paid' and decides to pay off his moral debts for the rest of his life by helping Black people.

Schoolteacher

Schoolteacher is Mr. Garner's brother-in-law. After Mr. Garner's death, schoolteacher takes charge of Sweet Home. He finds pleasure inflicting pain upon others; finding several ways to break the will of his slaves. His habits are extremely simple and frugal. He eats little, sleeps less, and works hard.

His arrival at Sweet Home is the trigger that forces the slaves to plan their escape but he aborts their attempts. He is cold and calculating; when he sees Sixo singing, he



is convinced a mad slave is of no use and orders him to be killed. When he comes to capture Sethe and her children and Sethe kills her infant daughter, he goes away empty handed because she is dangerous and unhinged, hence of no use to him.

Lady Jones

Lady Jones is a light-skinned Black woman who hates her own blond hair. She is of the view that everyone hates her for being a woman of mixed race. To assert her identity, she marries a Black man but suffers from feelings of alienation. She teaches the underprivileged children of Cincinnati at her home.

Ella

Ella is a Black woman who was locked up and sexually abused by a white man and his son. She was a co-worker of Stamp Paid on the Underground Railroad. Like Stamp Paid, she plays an active role in helping fugitive slaves from the South reach their homes. She helped Sethe and her new-born baby reach 124, but kept a distance from her after she committed infanticide. It is Ella who convinces the women that they should help Sethe. At the end of novel, she organizes the group of women who come to rescue Sethe from Beloved.

Mr. and Mrs. Garner: the kind-hearted owners of Sweet Home.

Paul A and Paul F: Paul D's brothers, also slaves at Sweet Home.

Sixo: another fellow slave. He's different from the other slaves, in his open defiance of his new owner, schoolteacher. He refuses to speak in his language or apologize for taking corn from the fields. Sixo will walk thirty miles to see his lady love. When Paul D, Sixo, and Thirty Mile Woman are caught trying to escape, the woman manages to run away. She is pregnant and Sixo is delighted and starts laughing. He is assured that his seed will live on, long after schoolteacher kills him. He dies laughing and singing, the most defiant of the slaves. His captors try to burn him alive and finally shoot him.

Amy Denver: Amy Denver is a compassionate girl who works as an indentured servant. She helps Sethe deliver Denver. Amy says that the scars of Sethe resemble a tree. The kind girl runs away in a quest to buy red velvet.

Mr. and Miss Bodwin: The siblings Mr. and Miss Bodwin are white abolitionists who play a major role in saving Sethe from the gallows. They also help Baby Suggs by giving her 124 to live in when she first comes to Cincinnati from Sweet Home, and help her earn a living. They are members of a group of abolitionists known as the Society. It is at their home that Denver gets a job as a night maid for Ms. Bodwin. It is on the day that Mr Bodwin comes to collect Denver for her first day at work that Sethe mistakes him for



schoolteacher and attacks him with an icepick. However, Mr Bodwin is kind enough not to press charges and saves her from punishment by law.

Questions

1. Sethe is, no doubt, the central character of *Beloved*. Write, in detail, about her life after she comes to live at 124, Bluestone Road.
2. Who is Beloved? Why has she come to Sethe's house?
3. How has slavery impacted Paul D.? Discuss in detail.
4. Write a note on any one, with special focus on their role in the Black community:
 - Baby Suggs
 - Stamp Paid
 - Mrs Jones
 - The Bodwin siblings
 - Ella
5. Describe how Denver transforms from a lonely, insecure young girl into a responsible woman.
6. Write a note on the supernatural element in *Beloved*.
7. Describe Morrison's narrative style in *Beloved*.



THE AWAKENING: A SOLITARY SOUL

Kate Chopin

Udita Garg

STRUCTURE

Part-1

1. *Learning Objectives*
2. *About the Author*
3. *Introduction*
4. *Contextualizing the Novel*
5. *Critical Summary*

Part-2

1. *Learning Objectives*
2. *Characterization*
3. *Plot Structure, Narrative Style, and Technique*
4. *Themes*
5. *Critical Perspectives*
6. *The Title*
7. *The Ending of the Novel*
8. *Summing Up*

Part-1

1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading Part 1 of the study material, you would be able to:

- Understand the life of Kate Chopin, the novelist, and the biographical context of the novel.
- Understand and briefly discuss the social and historical context of the 19th century America including the American Civil War, slavery, patriarchy, women's rights, etc.



- Be familiar with literary traditions and women's writing in 19th century America including influences on the author and the text.
- Study and analyze the plot of the novel closely.

2. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate Chopin or Katherin O'Flaherty was born on 8 February 1850 in St. Louis, Missouri, USA. She was the daughter of Thomas O'Flaherty, an Irish immigrant, and Eliza Faris, a Creole. Her father passed away in an accident in 1855 and Chopin was brought up by three women: her great grandmother, grandmother, and her mother. They mentored her along with the Sacred Heart nuns and Chopin was deeply influenced by them. Much of her work features female friendships and companionship. Her childhood was traumatic with the deaths of her father and great grandmother and the experiences of the American Civil War and slavery. She authored a little sketch, "Emancipation: A Life Fable" in 1869.

Kate Chopin took a keen interest in music and writing. She was a talented musician and her first published story entitled "Wiser than God" was about a pianist who refuses to marry. In *The Awakening* too, music has an unmistakable presence like in the character of Mademoiselle Reisz and the effect of music on Edna. We also find several references to the musician Frederik Chopin and his works. Kate married Oscar Chopin in 1870 and had six children with him. The Chopins travelled all over Europe. Her husband had a business as a cotton factor. They lived in New Orleans and the place offered great music. Further, in all the years, they spent at New Orleans, and taking vacations at Grand Isle, like other affluent families, Kate Chopin must have found material for her writing. In fact, her fiction is said to have the local colour as she writes of lives and places she closely observed. Oscar Chopin died in 1882.

Elaine Showalter in her introduction to the novel mentions that she sees a parallel between the literary awakening of Kate Chopin and the spiritual awakening of Edna Pontellier. She points out how Edna Pontellier struggles to break away from the traditions of domesticity and womanhood in the novel, similarly Kate Chopin in her works breaks away from literary traditions of her time. (Showalter "Introduction" x).

Chopin was a celebrated writer during her literary career. She published in famous magazines like *The Vogue*. Several writers influenced Chopin but the chief among them was Guy de Maupassant. She published her first collection of stories in 1889 in the St. Louis Post Dispatch. In 1890, her first novel called *At Fault* was published. She led an active literary life and published many novels and collections of stories from 1880s until 1902 when she died of a brain haemorrhage.



3. INTRODUCTION

The Awakening: A Solitary Soul, was first published in 1899. Written by Kate Chopin, an American woman writer writing at the turn of the 19th century, the novel details the life of Edna Pontellier's solitary journey towards a spiritual and sexual awakening in a patriarchal society.

The novel is set in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast of Louisiana. Louisiana is a state in the South Central region of America. Surrounded by the Mississippi river on its east and the Gulf of Mexico towards its south, the region is heavily forested and fertile. Apart from native settlers, Louisiana was home to various immigrants including the French, the Spanish, and the European settlers after the 17th century. It is a multicultural and multilingual state reflected in the novel's fair share of foreign words and phrases. As a slave state, it was one of the original members of the Confederate States of America during the American Civil War. The novel too is a post-bellum narrative as it was written after the American Civil War that lasted from 1861 to 1865.

The Awakening gathered mixed responses from its early readers despite being a stylistic marvel combining realist and early modernist modes of narration. Due to its theme of Edna's struggle against orthodox femininity and motherhood, the novel that remained virtually unnoticed for years began to acquire a canonical status in early feminist literature since 1980s for its statement regarding women's autonomy. In this unit, we shall try to understand the literary, biographical, and historical contexts that shape up this novel as we read the text closely. It was also adapted into a film called *Grand Isle* in 1991 by director, Mary Lambert. Since the novel is set in the 19th century, multilingual and multiracial Louisiana, it contains many French and Spanish phrases. You should try to consult an annotated text that shall help you with the foreign words, literary, and artistic references in the novel. Let us now go through a brief overview of the plot.

3.1 Plot Overview

The Awakening opens at a summer resort in Grand Isle, Louisiana, with 28-year-old Edna Pontellier vacationing with her Creole husband, Léonce, and their children, Etienne and Raoul. While Léonce works during the week, Edna tends to the children. She predominantly spends her time with Madame Adèle Ratignolle, who becomes her friend and companion. Madame Ratignolle, beautiful and diffident, embodies the ideal "mother-woman," fully dedicated to her family's needs. Ironically, Madame Ratignolle triggers Edna's "awakening." Growing up as a Creole woman, Madame Ratignolle is quite uninhibited, which encourages Edna to express her emotions freely and shed her inhibitions.



Edna's "awakening" quickens through her association with Robert Lebrun, a charming young man on the island. Initially platonic, their bond deepens as they spend time together, making Edna resent the "mother-woman" role. Through Robert, she discovers a self beyond societal and domestic expectations, reviving youthful desires and rekindling her passion for painting. Music profoundly affects her, especially when Mademoiselle Reisz, an old and disagreeable woman, plays the piano, moving Edna to tears. Despite unsuccessful attempts, Edna finally learns to swim one night that marks a significant moment in her awakening and gaining a sense of self-confidence and independence.

By the end of summer, Edna and her husband drift apart, while her romantic association with Robert strengthens. To prevent the relationship from getting intimate, Robert decides to leave for Mexico, promising to write to Edna. His departure devastates her. Upon returning to New Orleans, Edna abandons her domestic duties to focus on her painting. She sustains friendships with Madame Ratignolle and Mademoiselle Reisz, the latter occasionally sharing Robert's letters. Mademoiselle Reisz hints at Robert's love for Edna, advising her to acknowledge and act on her feelings. Concerned about Edna's change in behaviour Leonce consults Dr. Mandelet who is shrewd enough to guess the possibility of an affair but not saying anything he only advises him leave Edna alone for a while and to let her be.

Léonce follows the doctor's advice, leaving for an extended business trip while his mother takes their children. Alone at home, Edna experiences tranquility and decides to move out, calling her new house the "pigeon house." Striving for financial independence, she sells her paintings and engages in a sexual affair with the town's womanizer, Alcée Arobin, as she misses Robert, who is presumed to be in Mexico.

One afternoon, Edna encounters Robert while waiting for Mademoiselle Reisz. Their meeting is awkward, and Edna questions why Robert did not seek her out upon his return. Their awkwardness continues until Robert visits the "pigeon house," bringing back a sense of intimacy. After his departure, Edna is still confused, but the next visit culminates in a mutual kiss. Despite admitting his love, Robert claims he cannot be with Edna since she is married. Edna declares that she belongs to no one, but this moment is interrupted by news of Madame Ratignolle feeling sick. As Edna tends to her friend, she asks Robert to wait for her.

Upon Edna's return home, she discovers Robert has left, leaving a note expressing his love and bidding her farewell. That sleepless night, she reflects on her desires and relationships, realizing that only Robert matters to her. Yet, she foresees a time when even he will fade from her existence. Edna then revisits Grand Isle, greets Robert's brother, and heads to the beach. Stripping naked, she wades into the water, determined not to be



possessed by anyone, even her children. Swimming away, exhaustion sets in, and among the waves, she drowns.

4. CONTEXTUALIZING THE NOVEL

4.1 Historical and Cultural Context

19th century America witnessed great transformations in its political, economic, literary, cultural and social spheres. The most significant of these were the American Civil War (1861-1865) and the Industrial Revolution. As we know, America is divided into two continents: North and South America. Although North and South America had a long history of political and social differences and bitterness, the fundamental issue during the civil war was their take on slavery.

America, a land of diverse topography, attracted many settlers and invaders from around the world. As various parts of the world were colonized including America, slave trade flourished. While, North America had rapidly grown as an industrial economy, the South primarily depended on plantations and was richer than the North owing to slavery. Upon Abraham Lincoln's victory in the 1860 presidential election as the candidate of the explicitly anti-slavery Republican Party, seven Southern states (South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas) followed through on their threat to secede. They subsequently organized themselves as the Confederate States of America. Kate's family supported Confederacy during the Civil war and owned slaves just as most of their neighbours did.

The novel is set in Grand Isle, New Orleans, and the Gulf of Mexico. New Orleans became the trading center where immigrants from Germany, West Indies, and Ireland settled. It was the port city and the seat of political conflict. However, postbellum (after the war), Louisiana again became conservative. The novel's setting visibly highlights an amalgamation of culturally, racially as well as politically different people. Kate herself grew up in just such an environment.

Due to its history of immigration and slavery, people of mixed races inhabited Louisiana. The Creoles and the Anglo-Americans dominated this population. The Creoles were mostly Catholics and conservative. In the novel, Adele Ratignolle, a Creole woman is shown to be both open and uninhibited in mentioning her pregnancy and childbirth in front of men or responding favorably to the flirtations of a younger Creole man, Robert Lebrun. Yet she always maintains absolute chastity. On the other hand, Edna Pontellier, who is a Presbyterian from Kentucky married to an older Creole man, is shocked by the openness of the Creoles and their ways. However, later in the story, it is Edna who feels



attracted to Robert and takes his advances seriously which leads to her sexual transgression. Adele advises Robert to stay away from Edna because she fears that Edna might take him seriously since she is not a Creole.

Throughout the story, we find references to various races. The slaves and the servants are usually shown as blacks or mulattoes and their labor sustains affluent families like the Pontelliers and Ratignolles. In fact, several critics have suggested that Edna is able to afford her freedom at the expense of these colored nameless servants since they free her of every responsibility. Moreover, the Spanish women like Mariequita are described as sensuous beauties. Edna, who does not belong to the same community, suspects their closeness with Robert Lebrun, her love interest.

When Robert announces his decision to leave for Mexico in order to further his business prospects, Madame Ratignolle and others warn him about the Mexicans. The narrator says,

“Madame Ratignolle hoped that Robert would exercise extreme caution in dealing with the Mexicans, who, she considered, were a treacherous people, unscrupulous and revengeful. She trusted she did them no injustice in thus condemning them as a race” (Chopin, *The Awakening: A Solitary Soul*. David Campbell Publishers, 1992, p.81. All further page references are from the same edition).

In fact, Robert returns from Mexico since he finds the Mexicans to be “not very congenial” (Chopin, 187). The beliefs about the Mexicans can be attributed to the Mexican-American War that happened between the United States and Mexico from 1846 to 1848.

4.2 Literary Tradition

The literary and intellectual traditions of a given work influence its writing. Kate Chopin read widely and a number of issues like Darwinism, Naturalism, Romanticism, women’s rights, slavery, etc. had become part of public discourse at the time. Ann Heilmann in “*The Awakening and New Woman fiction*” writes,

“an admirer of the strong-minded heroines of Madame de Staël’s and George Sand’s early nineteenth-century novels, she named her daughter after the latter’s Lélia and between 1894 and 1898 translated eight of Guy de Maupassant’s fin-de-siècle stories; two of these, ‘Solitude’ and ‘Suicide’, bear direct relation to themes she explored in *The Awakening*, originally entitled ‘*A Solitary Soul*’” (Heilmann, 88).

Maria Mikolchak places *The Awakening* in the literary tradition of the 19th century novels whose prominent theme was adultery like Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* or Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. It is interesting to note that in a repressive and patriarchal society, the



choice of subject for many writers was female sexuality and female sexual transgression that is also a part of this novel.

Showalter traces the female predecessors of Chopin in antebellum novelists like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, etc. who focused on veneration of motherhood and passionless female relationships. As mothers, women were supposed to be nurturers. They were portrayed as passionless in comparison to their male counterparts. Due to this lack of sexual passion, they enjoyed a morally superior position in society. It also led to strong homosocial relationships as women bonded with other women. The female authors also perceived the writing of fiction to be equivalent to giving birth and considered writing as a profession. The structure of these novels followed a patchwork quilt pattern. All these features led to writing of sentimental fiction that prioritized maternal feelings, but also challenged patriarchal powers (Showalter, xv-xvii).

With regard to postbellum women's fiction, Showalter says that the female homosociality began to decline. In their writings, they sought an entry into the male world of art and prestige. The theme of motherhood no longer attracted these writers. In 1890s, some New Woman writers discussed free love in their novels. Instead of falling into the same patterns, the New Woman writers demand a freedom and innovation in their themes and narrative styles (Showalter xvii-xviii). Consequently, in *The Awakening*, we find the subservient and motherly woman in Adele Ratignolle while Edna emerges as the New Woman.

The novel greatly experiments with freedom in the subject and the style of the narrative. We have tried to understand the politics of the female writers in the nineteenth century. The portrait of Madame Ratignolle as the typical mother-woman or Edna as the new woman is discussed in the next unit. However, we must understand that these terms are indicative of the position and status women had in the 19th century American society that we shall now examine briefly.

4.3 Women's Position and Rights

Towards the end of the 19th century, the woman question had become popular in the public domain after developments in the debate around women that were happening for the last fifty years. The suffrage movement demanding the rights to vote for women had already taken place twice. It signals towards an attempt to improve the status women enjoyed in the late 19th American society.

Married women were considered to be the legal property of their husbands. The Napoleonic code still governed state laws concerning the marriage contract. We see in Chapter 1 of the novel how Mr. Pontellier looks at his wife as a piece of property. A



married woman had the rights over any inheritance acquired only before marriage, but after marriage, all of her inheritances belonged to her husband. Edna Pontellier receives a sum of inheritance from her father, the Colonel, which she cites as her own.

The husband was the legal guardian and got custody of the children in the event of a divorce. Divorces could be granted only after the completion of one year of separation. Women had limited legal rights barring them from signing any contracts without their husband's consent, appearing in court, or holding any public office.

Louisiana was largely inhabited by the Catholics and divorce was seen as a scandalous rather than a rare affair. Edna, a Presbyterian from Kentucky, functions as an outsider in the predominantly Creole community. Perhaps this is why even though Edna Pontellier grows increasingly apart from her husband a divorce is not mentioned. In fact, the grounds for a divorce rest with Leonce Pontellier, and not Edna. Very few women in Louisiana were employed. We see Edna, Adele, Madame Lebrun, Mrs. Merriman and Mrs. Highcamp in the novel, but they are not portrayed as working women. Edna makes a little money by selling her paintings or her wins at the horse race. Mademoiselle Reisz is a pianist, but her earnings are not mentioned.

Edna Pontellier's struggle for independence is set against this social context and so were the first readings of the novel where Edna's adulterous relationship and her unabashed sexuality were condemned.

5. CRITICAL SUMMARY

The novel is divided into thirty-nine chapters of varied lengths. Let us try to examine them closely:

Chapter 1

The chapter begins by describing a caged parrot repeating the same phrase, and a mockingbird, the only one who understands the meaning behind the entire nuisance that the repetition causes to Mr. Pontellier. The symbol of the birds is an evocative symbol within the book that helps to unify the novel. The caged parrot here refers to the protagonist trapped in her domestic roles. The bird symbolism although sparse works effectively in setting the tone for the protagonist's awakening.

Mr. Pontellier, forty years old and of a medium height and slender build, having brown hair is a vacationer at the Grand Isle residence while Madame Lebrun is engaged in her household duties.



This introductory chapter establishes for the reader the family, the setting, and introduces us to the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Pontellier. Mr. Pontellier is interrupted by the noise in the house that interferes with his reading, and he observes his surroundings. Despite the story being the journey of his wife's awakening, the novel begins with the gaze of the husband.

We are told that the Pontelliers have two children of ages four and five. A quadroon looks after them while Mrs. Pontellier interacts with the young Robert Lebrun. Mr. Pontellier looks at Mrs. Pontellier who had bathed in the afternoon and exclaims, "You are burnt beyond recognition," The narrator says, "(Mr. Pontellier) looking at his wife as one looks at a valuable piece of property which has suffered some damage," (Chopin 3) Mr. Pontellier's remark reiterates the sociocultural context where the wife was the husband's legal property and the author does not shy away from saying so bluntly. The relationship between Robert and Mrs. Pontellier looks friendly and innocent and foreshadows their affair later. Mr. Pontellier is disinterested in the happenings at the house and leaves for Klein's and the game, bidding his children goodbye. The children are fond of their father.

The nameless woman in black goes around counting her beads and surfaces repeatedly in the novel as a reminder of total submission of one's will. Society dictates that being a widow she ought to have no desires of her own and she seems to have bowed down to that diktat.

The quadroon who looks after the Pontellier children is a reminder of the racism simmering in the background.

Glossary: (Sourced from Chopin, Kate. *The Awakening* ed. Cynthia Brantley Johnson and Alyssa Harad. Simon & Schuster Paperbacks: New York, 2004.)

"Allez vous-en! Sapristi: French phrases meaning "Go away! For God's sake!"

Grand Isle: a summer resort island frequented in Chopin's day, primarily by the Creole community of the port city of New Orleans, Louisiana. It is about fifty miles south of New Orleans, about eight hours by boat. It forms a single community with Chênrière Caminada, an island a brief boat ride away. Chopin had stayed at these islands during the years she lived in New Orleans. However, at the time *The Awakening* was published in 1899, the resort area and its population had been largely destroyed by a great hurricane in 1893.

Zampa: a popular opera written by French composer Ferdinand Herold (1791-1833). In it, a character drowns at sea.

Pension: a term used in France and other continental countries for a boardinghouse.

Chênrière Caminada: a small island lying between Grand Isle and the Louisiana coast



Croquet: Croquet is a sport that involves hitting wooden or plastic balls with a mallet through hoops embedded in a grass playing court

Lugger: a small sailing ship with two or three masts and a lugsail on each.

Quadroon: a person who is one-quarter black by descent, now considered derogatory

Chapter 2

Through the conversation between Mrs. Pontellier and Robert Lebrun, we learn more about their background and aspirations. The narrator describes their physical appearances and mentions that their complexion is similar. Robert works as a clerk. He is not very well off and mentions his intention of going to Mexico rather casually to further his prospects. Edna is an American and her French **lineage is diluted**.

Glossary

“The Poet and the Peasant”: an operetta by Franz von Suppé (1819-1895), Austrian conductor and composer of popular operettas.

Quartier Français: French Quarter, also known as the Old Quarter; the oldest part of New Orleans and the area in which most New Orleans’ Creoles lived.

Chapter 3

Mr. Pontellier returns home late at night in high spirits. Edna is sleepy and does not respond adequately to him that disappoints him. He checks upon the children and informs Edna that Raoul has high fever and accuses her of “habitual neglect of the children” (Chopin, 10). Edna checks upon the child and sits crying outside after Leonce’s unkindness. Their relationship and marriage is full of oppression and stereotypical gender roles and expectations where Mr. Pontellier as the rich provider of the family is ironically the “best husband in the world” (Chopin, 13), despite ill-treating his wife. The theme of awakening first appears in this chapter as Edna cries after her husband’s insensitive remarks and sits outside reflecting on her emotions.

Glossary

peignoir: a loose full dressing gown worn by women while combing their hair after a bath.

Carondelet Street: the financial district, home of the New Orleans Cotton Exchange, a New Orleans version of Wall Street.

friandises: sweets.

pâtés: pastries



Chapter 4

Mr. Pontellier atones for his behavior of the previous night. We have looked at the literary tradition in the previous section that glorified motherhood and the turn away from it in the character of Edna who is not a mother-woman unlike the women at Grand Isle. Mrs. Pontellier's beautiful and feminine friend, Adele Ratignolle fits the role perfectly. Adele is very fond of Edna. She is constantly "in condition" (pregnant) and likes to speak about it. Mrs. Ratignolle is a Creole (so is Mr. Pontellier) and speaks freely of her pregnancy and childbirth whereas Edna is not. She is inhibited and is baffled by the freedom of expression in Creoles. This chapter foreshadows the awakening of Edna Pontellier, whose main catalyst ironically is Adele Ratignolle, the mother-woman. The narrator is sarcastic in his description of the mother-women in Grand Isle. However, ironically it is the mother-woman, Adele, who leads to the awakening of Edna Pontellier striving to become a New Woman. Mrs. Pontellier, who is married to a Creole husband, is also established as an outsider. She is taken aback by the frankness of the Creole women as she, as an outsider has never witnessed such openness, and is much reserved and inhibited.

Glossary

Creole: a person descended from the original French settlers of Louisiana, especially of the New Orleans area. As used by Chopin, an aristocrat of French and Spanish heritage

accouchement: childbirth.

Check Your Progress

1. Describe the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Pontellier.
2. How does Mrs. Pontellier feature in her traditional domestic role as wife and mother?

Chapter 5

The intimacy and friendship between Robert and Edna grows. Robert habitually "devotes himself" (Chopin, 19) every year to some beautiful woman. His subject of admiration this year is both Adele and Edna. Mrs. Pontellier is fascinated by the beauty of the fair Madonna, Adele Ratignolle, and chooses Mrs. Ratignolle as her subject for painting. Although the painting does not resemble Adele, but it is a "satisfying" piece of art. This chapter hints at Edna Pontellier's journey as an artist. She is said to dabble into painting and her first subject is a woman whom she greatly admires and is a foil to her character. While Edna uses her art sporadically to express her individualism, Adele's art is maternal as she sews beautifully for her children. The children cling to her and she showers her affection on them like a typical mother-woman.



Glossary

Daudet: Alphonse Daudet (1840-1897), a French novelist of the naturalist school.

prenez! adieu! allez vous-en!: Go on! Good-bye! Go away!

blaguer! farceur! grosse bête, va!: Comedian! Clown! Silly beast, away with you!

mais ce n'est pas mal! elle s'y connaît, elle a de la force, oui: But that's not bad at all! She knows what she's doing, she has a talent.

Chapter 6

Robert insists that Edna go for her bath but she politely declines. She reconsiders her decision and begins to “recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her” (Chopin 25). She finds that the “the voice of the sea is seductive” and holds the body in a “soft, close embrace” (Chopin 26). The spiritual awakening in terms of a desire and individualism that Edna begins to feel is related to the sensuousness of the sea indicating that this awakening is also sexual in nature. The sea becomes a major symbol in the novel for Edna's awakening and the same sentence of the voice of the sea being seductive is found at the end of the novel too. It emphasizes a spiritual and a sexual awakening in Edna Pontellier who is naturally susceptible to sensuous beauty. The symbol of the sea also contributes to the sensuousness and romantic quality of the novel helping to unify the various aspects of the story. We shall discuss the symbol of the sea in detail in the next unit.

Chapter 7

In this longish chapter, after the very brief chapter six, the relationship between Edna and Adele is described. At the time of the writing of the novel, as mentioned above, friendship and solidarity in female relationships was a recurrent theme in women's' writing. Edna was reserved in her childhood but under the influence of Madame Ratignolle and Edna's “sensuous susceptibility to beauty,” (Chopin, 27) she starts being more open. They undertake a walk to the beach and spend time together. Edna and Adele are described in vivid and sensual details of dress and gait. Edna begins to reflect on her childhood and her adolescence including her Presbyterian upbringing, the absence of her mother, her sisters, Margaret and Janet, her intellectual interests, etc. This chapter helps us peek into the psyche of Edna as developed in her childhood and adolescence and the role that a parent's absence play in the development of an individual from a psychoanalytic point of view. As Edna lacked a mother figure in her growing up years, she looks for a mother surrogate (in Adele) and cannot be a mother-woman since she has never experienced motherly affection.

She recounts her adolescent infatuations towards a cavalry officer and a tragedian later. Her marriage with Mr. Pontellier is described as “purely an accident” (Chopin, 35),



where he fell in love with her and she accepted him for his “absolute devotion” (35) toward her, a likeness of thought and taste she imagined that they shared at the time. In addition, her family’s opposition to the match propelled her towards accepting Leonce for her husband. Her romantic interests suggest an unfulfilled romantic fantasy that is unconventional and transgressive in nature. They hint toward a possible cause of her frustrations with life.

Edna reflects on different aspects of her marital life without mentioning it all to her friend. She thinks that she is fond of her children “in an uneven and impulsive way”(Chopin, 36). She forgets about them sometimes and their absence is a relief to her, which signifies that she is not the typical mother-woman. She leans on Adele’s shoulder and enjoys a candor intoxicated by the freedom of her expression, which she experiences for the first time. Edna’s mood is reflexive and meditative here as she loses herself in her memories and in the ease of her companionship with Adele Ratignolle.

Chapter 8

As Robert grows more intimate with Edna, Adele warns him to leave Mrs. Pontellier alone, saying that “she is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the blunder of taking [him] seriously” (Chopin, 38). Their conversation employs a generous use of French and adds to the realism and local flavour of the narrative suggesting the multilingual and multiracial history of Louisiana. Adele Ratignolle is shown to be a caring and protective friend of Edna Pontellier, who wishes to save her from getting into trouble.

Robert is painted as a pretentious fellow by Adele to which he vehemently protests. Alcee Arobin is mentioned for the first time. The chapter proceeds to detail the activities that Mrs. Lebrun engages herself in with the help of the black servant girl that suggests the slave trade that was crucial to the history of the American South. Their labour contributes to the comfort of these affluent families. Victor Lebrun, the younger brother of Robert Lebrun, is also introduced as a nineteen-year-old who wishes to follow his brother’s example when it comes to women.

Glossary

ma chère: my dear.

pauvre chérie: poor dear.

Tiens! Voilà que Madame Ratignolle est jalouse!: Finally! It appears that Madame Ratignolle is jealous!

Blagueur: Clown

Ma foi!: For Heaven’s sake! (Literally “my goodness”).



Biloxi: Coastal resort in Mississippi.

Bouillon: a clear broth, usually of beef.

Sèvres: a type of fine French porcelain.

bon garcon: Good fellow and literally good waiter (Robert is both, here).

Ether: the upper regions of space; clear sky.

Goncourt: Edmond Louis Antoine Huot de Goncourt (1822-1896); French novelist and art critic.

tête montée: hot-headed person.

Check Your Progress

1. Adele Ratignolle's beauty fascinates Edna Pontellier. What does it indicate?
2. Describe the relationship between Mrs. Pontellier and Madame Ratignolle.
3. How is Robert Lebrun's attitude different towards Edna Pontellier and Adele Ratignolle? Why does Madame Ratignolle ask Robert to stay away from Edna?

Chapter 9

In this chapter, another important influence on Edna in the character of Mademoiselle Reisz is introduced. Robert specifically asks Edna whether she would like to have the pianist play for her after the festivities of the night had dampened. Mademoiselle Reisz is an old and disagreeable woman who stays recluse. However, Robert says that she likes Edna and will come to play for her. Mademoiselle Reisz requests Robert to ask for Mrs. Pontellier's preference and Edna is embarrassed to be singled out by the "imperious little woman" (Chopin, 48). She asks Reisz to play whatever she likes. Mademoiselle Reisz is the portrait of the artist in the novel while Adele and Edna also dabble into arts of various kinds like sewing, painting, playing music, etc.

Edna's relationship with music is discussed. A piece that Adele plays and Edna titles, "Solitude" (which symbolizes the solitary journey of Edna) against its original title is mentioned. Edna's visual imagination is said to be triggered by music.

"Solitude" evoked the image of a naked and dejected man by the seashore in her mind who looks at a flying bird. The symbol of the bird in flight foreshadows Edna's awakening. While here, she can only relate a naked man to independence as only men enjoyed certain freedom in society, it foreshadows Edna's own awakening in the final chapter when she strips naked and drowns in the sea, with no one in sight, looking at a bird with broken wings.



After Reisz begins to play, Edna trembles under the force of the music and is teary-eyed. Mademoiselle Reisz notices Edna's reactions and patting her on her shoulder, she asks Edna about her music telling her, "You're the only one worth playing for..." (Chopin, 50). However, the narrator mentions that everyone was in awe of the pianist. She had played a piece from Frederic Chopin. As we know, the author shares her name with the celebrated musician. Chopin. Nancy K. Miller has called the references to 'Chopin' the internal female signature in women's writing (qtd. in Showalter, "Introduction, xxiii).

Chapter 10

As everyone starts returning home from the hall, Edna realizes that she has started liking Robert. She notices that Robert held away from her at times, and she missed him. She had tried to learn how to swim all summer, but her efforts proved futile. However, Edna feels different that night. She is overtaken by power and joy and swims out far. This is a significant moment in the text and marks Edna taking control over her body and her soul. Everyone watching applauds her but Edna's triumphant moment also establishes her as an example of female transgression. The narrator says, "She wanted to swim far out, where no woman had swum before" (Chopin 53).

She looks back at the distance covered only to realize that it was not very far from the shore. Swimming back, she also experiences the terror of death that she mentions to no one except her husband. This foreshadows her death in the final chapter and enriches the symbolism of the sea that is interwoven with the protagonist's awakening. In this moment, she transgresses and fancies solitude. The narrator writes, "As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself" (54). She defiantly walks away alone paying no attention to the others who call out to her. However, Robert catches up with her.

Edna speaks to him about the music and her swimming, half comprehending the thousand emotions she has felt that night. Robert flippantly narrates a story to her about spirits of the sea that have helped her swim. He offers his hand to Edna, which she takes, and assists her to rest in the hammock. He stays by Edna until he thinks she has fallen asleep. This chapter is pivotal to the awakening of Edna. Her swimming is compared with a toddler learning to walk, emphasizing the childlike and impulsive qualities in Edna but also a moment of growth in her awakening, as she wakes up from its stages of infancy. As she walks away from the group, she marks her sense of individualism and freedom.

Chapter 11

For the first time in the novel, Edna seems to exercise her power, in her own company, against her husband. She refuses to yield to his repeated requests of coming in to sleep



despite his growing impatience. She stays all night in the hammock consumed by exhaustion. She denies her husband's requests and asserts herself. She is stubborn and resistant and tells her husband to go to bed and never to speak to her again like that. She is now a self-assertive and changed woman who wants to exercise her own power. Finally, at dawn, she feels sleepy and goes inside. The contrast between the state of sleep due to physical exhaustion and an inner awakening that she has experienced is brought out beautifully.

Chapter 12

Edna follows her impulses the following day, waking up quite early. She sends for Robert without realizing that it was odd, and she had never done so before. Robert is in Mariequita's company, a beautiful Spanish girl, whom Robert knew. Edna notices and asks Robert about her. They go to the beach and grow more familiar and comfortable with each other. Robert and Edna again after the swimming episode indulge in fantastical romantic tales showing their imaginary world where they wish to escape reality knowing that their relationship is out of bounds.

Glossary

Grande Terre: an island adjacent to Grand Isle.

pirogue: a flat-bottomed boat propelled by rowing or sails; a dugout canoe

Chapter 13

At the church of Our Lady of Lourdes, Edna starts to feel drowsy during the service. Robert takes Edna to rest at Madame Antoine's, as she is feeling unwell. She washes herself and there are suggestions of autoerotism here. Later, she sleeps lightly and wakes up listening to Robert and Madame Antoine's son, Tonie.

Edna is not the typical picture of femininity. We find that she enjoys a good appetite and is physically strong unlike the demure and exceedingly feminine, Adele, as described in chapter 7. Edna pretends to have had a sound sleep and engaging in dialogue with Robert, she asks him, "How many years have I slept" (Chopin, 72)? Robert plays along telling her that he has slept a hundred years, and their framing of romantic adventure tales continue. It is noteworthy that Robert engages Edna perfectly even in her fancies and imaginary stories. Edna and Robert grow closer as he picks "at the helm of her muslin gown" (Chopin, 74) and they spend some time alone listening to Antoine's stories. There is a dreamlike quality in the fanciful stories that Edna and Robert engage with. Robert indulges Edna in her romantic fantasies while Edna does not realize the extent of the social trappings that bind her.



Glossary

Acadian: French-speaking resident of Louisiana descended from French Canadians who in 1755 left Acadia, a former French colony (1604-1713) on the northeast coast of North America. They were expelled by the British from Nova Scotia.

poudre de riz: face powder

Cheniere Caminada: was a fishing community located in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana that was destroyed by what is considered one of the deadliest United States hurricanes that was unnamed but referred to as the 1893 Cheniere Caminada hurricane.

Baratarians: pirates and smugglers, primarily organized by Jean Lafitte, from the islands and nearby Baratarian Bay.

Check Your Progress

1. Who is Mademoiselle Reisz? What are the reasons she states for preferring Edna?
2. Describe the episode where Edna learns to swim. What changes are seen in her thereafter?

Chapter 14

Raoul and Etienne are the two children of the Pontelliers, While Edna was away, Madame Ratignolle had been taking care of them. Upon her return, Edna coddles and caresses her children. Leonce Pontellier too was very worried about Edna's absence. However, he was no longer there as he had left for some business. Robert also takes Edna's leave. From the throbbing of desire that Edna and Robert felt at the cottage listening to fantastic stories, they are pulled back to the realities of life: Edna is a married woman with children and a husband to take care of.

Nevertheless, Edna feels like a different woman and that everything around her has changed. She has come to admire Robert even more and she hums the song, "Ah! Si tu savais" that Robert sings. She finds his voice musical and true. This shows how Edna is a complete romantic who ignores realities for her romantic illusions, but we may also note that Edna's awakening is not directed at the world around her, but the world within herself.

Glossary

“. . . savais”: “Ah! If you knew.”

Chapter 15

Robert, however, realizes the social codes of the real world and wants to avoid the consummation of their relationship hence he decides to leave for Mexico. Edna is shocked



to find that Robert is leaving for Mexico suddenly. She feels betrayed as his close companion. She feels that Robert had never mentioned it to her whereas everyone else knows about it. His parents are also shocked by his sudden decision. Madame Ratignolle warns Robert about Mexicans. While discussing Robert's decision to leave for Mexico, several comments are made about Mexicans which stem from the Mexican-American war and the racial conflict between the two regions as we discussed earlier in this unit.

Edna is so angry and irritable at Robert that she leaves instantly to be alone. She declines to accept Madame Lebrun's request to stay until Robert leaves since she is so upset and cannot hide her feelings. Robert meets Edna before he leaves but he is distant. Edna clings to his hand and asks him to write to her, growing desperate.

Robert gives a cold response and Edna feels devastated. For the first time, she recognizes that her infatuation towards Robert has led her to behave in a childlike fashion. Her passion is overtaking her newly awakened self. Many a time when Edna wishes to exercise her will paying no heed to social conventions, she is called a child. This infantilization of Edna points towards the ways in which society attempts to subjugate women. As we observed earlier, Mr. Pontellier makes a huge fuss about Edna not going to bed on time while he himself can choose his own bedtime. Adele Ratignolle too will call Edna childlike later for following her impulses.

Glossary

court bouillon: usually a soup stock made with vinegar to poach poultry or fish. Here, it seems Edna has eaten the stock and is now working on the fish it was used to cook.

Indulgence: Blessing purchased from Catholic Church to remove sin.

Chapter 16

Mademoiselle Reisz asks Edna about her feelings regarding Robert. Edna's "existence was dulled" (Chopin, 87) and she searched for Robert's presence and memories everywhere. She visited Madame Lebrun's home every morning, read his letters, watched his pictures, etc. She feels jealous. Even her husband asks her how she is getting on without him. Edna admits that it was dull without him. She does not realize that she should not admit that to her husband. However, Mr. Pontellier is unperturbed by his wife's despondence regarding another man's departure from the town. Creole husbands were never jealous, and he suspects no romantic affair between them since their wives were their property.

A conversation ensues between Edna and Adele where Edna emphatically states that she would never sacrifice herself for her children, or for anyone. As she tells her friend,



“ I would give my life for my children; but I wouldn’t give myself” (Chopin, 90). Adele, the mother-woman, is flabbergasted and cannot comprehend her.

While talking about bathing, Edna recollects that Reisz is averse to water and it is “believed to accompany the artistic temperament” (Chopin, 91). Edna looks for excuses to talk about Robert and speaks to Mademoiselle Reisz about him. She informs him that Victor is Madame Lebrun’s favourite son rather than Robert. They discuss about Robert and Victor. Mademoiselle Reisz appears to be physically attracted to Edna and “raved much over Edna’s appearance in her bathing suit” (Chopin 93). Edna feels uncomfortable in her presence. This chapter includes both foils to Edna: Adele and Mademoiselle Reisz. Edna struggles to choose between either model for herself. She is uncomfortable in the company of Mademoiselle Reisz who is unabashed and unreserved, and she cannot submit herself to the role of the mother-woman that Adele seamlessly fits in either.

Check Your Progress

1. Why does Robert decide to go to Mexico? Why is Edna upset over his decision?
2. What are the differences between Madame Ratignolle’s and Edna Pontelleir’s opinion on motherhood?

Chapter 17

The setting shifts to New Orleans now. The chapter begins by describing the posh Pontellier home on Esplanade Street in New Orleans. Mr. Pontellier loves to display his wealth and “values his possessions, chiefly because they were his” (Chopin, 94). We are told that Mrs. Pontellier customarily attended to her visitors on Tuesdays dressing up in her reception gown. However, upon asking, Edna confesses that she did not do so because she did not want to. This enrages her husband, and he accuses her of ignoring her duties. Mr. Pontellier tries to reason with Edna that it is necessary to follow social conventions and she should have left a valid excuse. He checks for the visitors himself and is angry with the servants for not serving a delicious dinner. He blames Edna for ignoring her responsibilities and leaves the house. The household responsibilities were entirely assigned to women in the 19th century and Edna’s neglect there upsets her conventional husband.

Edna, who is accustomed to such outbursts, but is unhappy after them usually, finishes her dinner alone. She now seeks to discover and recover her identity that was submerged under her husband’s. She flings away her wedding ring in anger and tries to crush it under her heel. This is Edna’s assertion that she is not his property, and it signifies the end of their relationship even when she wears the ring again upon her servant handing it over to her. Edna and her husband are very different from each other, and their conversations and attitudes are alienated.



Glossary

Esplanade Street: a prestigious address, it indicates the Pontelliers were part of the Creole aristocracy.

Reception day: one day each week, an upper-class woman was expected to stay home and receive visitors. The day of the week was established when a woman married, and custom demanded she entertain on that day from then on.

Mulatto: a person who has one black parent and one white parent.

Les convenances: social conventions; protocol

Chapter 18

Edna feels alienated from the world around her. She misses Robert. She visits the Ratignolles where the complete contrast between Edna and Adele is established as Adele excels at her domestic life. Whereas the last few chapters show us Edna's failing marriage, the ideal and perfect Ratignolle marriage leaves Edna feeling depressed, not out of longing, but for its "appalling and hopeless ennui" (Chopin, 107). The contrast between Edna and Adele is established once more. Adele finds happiness in abiding by the social codes to have domestic bliss, but Edna finds it boring. This shows us that Edna is not seeking domestic happiness. It is not just her difficult relationship with her husband that prompts her to find love outside marriage, but it is indeed a part of her awakening where she starts reflecting on the delirium of life. It is indicative of her spiritual awakening that prompt her to seek her individual self beyond her roles as wife or mother, which Adele Ratignolle unwittingly submits to.

Glossary

Banquette: a raised wooden sidewalk.

porte cochère: a large carriage entrance or covered gateway into a courtyard.

Soirée musicale: a social gathering in the evening where amateur musicians played for their friends.

"Better a dinner of herbs": Refers to the biblical passage Proverbs 15:17: Better a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fattened ox and hatred therewith

Chapter 19

Edna does as she pleases. Mr. Pontellier who is accustomed to her tacit submissiveness is shocked and angry at her "disregard" towards wifely duties. Edna wants to paint rather than manage the house and Mr. Pontellier compares Edna and Adele saying, "And she's more of a musician, than you are a painter" (Chopin 109). For Edna, her art does not



become a means of individual expression, but a tool of rebellion. Mr. Pontellier is so aloof from Edna's awakening that he regards her disregard towards domestic duties, as a sign of losing her mental balance, so normalized were the gender roles in his life. Looking at Edna's behavior, Mr. Pontellier begins to think whether she is losing her mental balance. There are suggestions that Edna is probably clinically depressed as she isolates herself and is usually unhappy without knowing why.

Glossary:

En bonne menagerie: as a good housewife.

Atelier: a studio or workshop, especially one used by an artist

Chapter 20

Edna visits Mademoiselle Reisz to listen to her music despite the last unpleasant encounter with her. Mademoiselle Reisz has shifted houses and Edna goes hunting for her uncaring of Reisz's unpopularity. She meets Victor in an effort to find the address of Mademoiselle Reisz from Mrs. Lebrun. Victor shares his misadventures and Edna is unable to distance herself from the scandalous stories as is appropriate. Edna's disregard towards social customs and propriety indicates the theme of individual autonomy in conflict with social conformity. The Lebruns observe that she looks like a changed woman.

Glossary:

Chambres garnies: furnished rental rooms.

Régime: (1766-1803) the period of time when the Spanish ruled the territory containing New Orleans.

Vera Cruz: Port city and state of Mexico, along the Gulf, often used as a resort area.

Check Your Progress

1. Describe the Pontellier home on Esplanade Street.
2. Why does Mr. Pontellier believe that Edna is disregarding her domestic duties? Why does Edna do so?
3. How does Edna feel after witnessing the ideal marriage between Mr. Ratignolle and Adele Ratignolle? What prompts her to feel so?

Chapter 21

Edna meets Mademoiselle Reisz who greets her dismissively. Later, Edna's candour pleases Mademoiselle Reisz and she tells her about Robert's letters that always mention her. Edna



insists that Mademoiselle Reisz play Chopin's "Impromptu" for her. Edna declares that she is becoming an artist and Mademoiselle Reisz says, "to succeed, the artist must possess the courageous soul . . . the soul that dares and defies" (Chopin 120). Mademoiselle Reisz admits that she feels captivated by Edna.

Edna feels overwhelmed by the music played. Music is another symbol that pervades the novel. In the 19th century, the effect that music had on young women was a popular theme. The conversation regarding art and the artist is also crucial: just as Kate Chopin, the novelist, challenges literary tradition by combining various styles in her novel, similarly Mademoiselle Reisz also tells Edna to go beyond tradition and prejudice to become an artist. However, it does not seem to be Edna's prerogative. She does not wish to become an artist channelizing her desires and her new sense of freedom in her art yet her art aids her finances. Mademoiselle Reisz, on the other hand, is the portrait of a true artist. Uncaring of social conventions, she has distanced herself from society. Edna Pontellier is not inclined to choose a similar path.

Glossary

La belle dame: The beauty, the beautiful lady. With possible overtones of John Keats's famous poem, "La Belle Dame sans Merci," (the beautiful merciless lady), in which a knight is seduced into rescuing a beautiful silent woman who turns out to be a witch and becomes a ghostly wandering soul.

Isolde's song: the Irish princess of medieval legend who was betrothed to King Mark of Cornwall and loved by Tristram, the king's nephew. The legend was made into a famous opera by Richard Wagner

Chapter 22

Mr. Pontellier visits Doctor Mandelet to speak about Edna's odd behavior lately. The doctor enquires about the company Edna keeps, and if she engages with any "pseudo-intellectual" (Chopin, 125) women, (referring to women's clubs of the time that focused on women's rights). He pacifies Mr. Pontellier asking him to let his wife be alone for a while. He promises to visit them and check on her later. Listening to Mr. Pontellier's complaints, the doctor suspects another man in Edna's life but he keeps mum thinking Leonce would not make such a blunder.

Even the doctor's remarks indicate the repression of women in 19th century society. Creole husbands were thought to be commanding and owned absolute rights over their wives. Leonce Pontellier is never jealous or suspicious regarding his wife owing to that.



Glossary

en bon ami: as a friend.

Ribbons: Reins

à Jeudi: until Thursday.

Chapter 23

Edna's father visits them to prepare for Janet's wedding. He is a strict disciplinarian and has been a colonel in the Confederate army. She shares a good relationship with her father and is happy during his stay. Adele warns Edna about Mr. Pontellier's continual visits to the club asking her to restrain him. However, Edna misses the point since they are so alienated from each other. The Pontellier marriage is passionless and owing to their differences cannot be overcome. From a psychoanalytic point of view one can say that Leonce is a substitute for the father figure in her life as although she shares a good relationship with her father, he was a strict disciplinarian.

Doctor Mandelet happens to visit her too and finds her charming and happy. At the dinner table, as Edna's father (Colonel) talks about meeting Mrs. Mortimer Merriman, Mrs. Highcamp, and Alcee Arobin who were a lively company for horseracing, they share stories. Edna invents a story about a woman who elopes with her lover one night never to be found which reiterates Edna's romantic illusions and her yearnings for Robert that have not yet subsided. The Doctor reflects on Edna's behavior that night and mutters to himself, "I hope to heaven it isn't Alcee Arobin" (Chopin 134). It foreshadows the sexual affair that Edna will soon begin with the town's womanizer, Alcee Arobin.

Glossary

soirée musicale: an event or party dedicated to musical performance.

coquetry: the behavior or act of a coquette; flirting.

grosbec: any of various passerine birds with a thick, strong, conical bill. Usually spelled grosbeak.

pirogue: a dugout canoe

Chapter 24

Edna refuses to attend her sister's wedding much to the dismay of her father. He demands Mr. Pontellier to intervene saying that he is too lenient with his wife. According to the 19th century marital codes, Edna's father believes that men should be dominant and coercive towards their wives. He tells Leonce, "Authority, coercion are what is needed. Put your foot down



and hard; that is the only way to manage a wife” (Chopin 118). However, Leonce follows the Doctor’s advice and does not object. Edna grows affectionate towards Mr. Pontellier as he prepares to leave but soon feels at peace in her solitude. Edna is distant from her own family too. She refuses to attend her sister’s wedding and is somehow relieved to find her father leave. The anchorage and the kind of familial bonds that Edna expects from her family seem to be missing. She enjoys her solitude more and more in the subsequent chapters.

Glossary

à point: Just right. To the right moment.

marron glacé: marrons in syrup or glazed with sugar; candied chestnuts.

Emerson Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882): an American poet, philosopher and essayist of the Transcendental school. One of the most famous essays is “On Self-Reliance” (1841).

Eiderdown: a quilt stuffed with the soft, fine breast feathers or down of the eider duck.

Check Your Progress

1. Give a brief account of the discussion regarding art and artistic temperament between Mademoiselle Reisz and Edna.
2. Why does Mr. Pontelleir visit Doctor Mandelet? What suggestion does the doctor give him?
3. Why does Edna decide to shift to the pigeon house?
4. Briefly discuss Mademoiselle Reisz’s feelings towards Edna.

Chapter 25

Edna had started to go for horseracing regularly with her father. After he leaves, she is accompanied by Mrs. Highcamp and Alcee Arobin. Alcee Arobin, who was mentioned earlier in the novel as a scandalous womanizer, appears now as a fashionable man who admires Edna. Edna enjoys horseracing and knows more about horses than even her male counterparts. She derives her knowledge about horses from her childhood experiences and is unbeatable, much to the surprise of everyone watching. A strange confidence and exultation overtakes Edna after winning the races and she waits for something exciting to happen. In her excitement, she realizes that she had forgotten to write her usual letter to her husband.

Arobin and Edna go for the race alone and she grows comfortable with Arobin who has devised a plan to be alone with Edna. Following a conversation, Edna seems to be



physically attracted to Arobin but tells him “I don’t like you” (Chopin, 146), to maintain her distance from him. However, Arobin is insistent and kisses her hand. Edna rebukes Arobin for doing so and “feels like a woman who in a moment of passion is betrayed into an act of infidelity” (Chopin 147). It is significant to note that she thinks that she is being unfaithful to Robert by growing intimate with Arobin, and not her husband whom she had married without love. Arobin means nothing to her, but her sensuous appetite is also awakened with him.

Glossary

Drag: Heavy coach pulled by four horses. They signified a wealthy man of leisure and sport, since they were expensive and designed to be “driven” by the owner himself rather than the coachman.

Jockey Club: an elite and very exclusive New Orleans social club.

gelding: a gelded animal; especially, a castrated male horse.

Dante: Dante Alighieri (1265-1321); Italian poet: wrote *The Divine Comedy*. The “reading” is probably a woman’s social club, meeting to read the book aloud and discuss it.

Grieg: Edvard Grieg (1843-1907), Norwegian composer and conductor.

cicatrice: scar.

Chapter 26

Arobin writes a letter of apology to Edna. Edna feels that she has overreacted as kissing hands was a social custom, and she should not have made much of it. Arobin becomes tacitly subservient to Edna, and they grow intimate and friendly very quickly.

Edna visits Mademoiselle Reisz again and informs her that she is moving away from her house on Esplanade Street. Mademoiselle Reisz believes that she might be headed to New York to Mr. Pontellier, or her children in Iberville, or her father near the Mississippi River. However, Edna declares that she is now making her move towards her own space even if it is just beside the “main house.” She reasons that the house and the money is not hers. Therefore, she has decided to move away from it.

Mademoiselle Reisz, who can understand that Edna is hiding something, denies accepting it as the real reason. This conversation between Mme, Reisz and Edna where she challenges Edna by asking questions that abide by societal norms also indicate that Edna consciously chooses to challenge them. This is Edna’s move towards her assumed independence.



A popular Modernist writer writing in the 20th century, Virginia Woolf, delivered a series of lectures wherein she discussed the significance of “A Room of One’s Own” for a female, especially an artist. Woolf says that having financial independence and a room of her own is essential for any woman, especially an artist. Although, Woolf discusses this idea much later than the writing of *The Awakening*, but it can be an interesting lens to see the text. We may note that Edna is meeting an artist in the text (Mademoiselle Reisz); she had declared she is becoming somewhat of an artist herself, and she has begun to earn her own money from horseracing and painting.

Mademoiselle Reisz points out to Edna that it is her husband’s money, therefore, also hers as his wife. However, Edna asserts that she is now making her own money. She earns from her inheritance, the horseraces, and from selling her sketches. She reveals that the real reason behind leaving the house is for the feeling of freedom and independence and “never again to belong to another than herself” (Chopin 153). Therefore, she has not even told her husband of her decision. She also plans to host a dinner party before leaving and invites Mademoiselle Reisz to it.

Edna expects that Mademoiselle Reisz would give her any letters she received from Robert. Mademoiselle Reisz says that Robert never writes to Edna because he loves her and avoids her since she is not free (unmarried) to belong to him. Upon Mademoiselle Reisz’s insistence, Edna also admits her love for Robert for the first time ever (even to herself). Mademoiselle Reisz keeps reminding Edna of social propriety and customs, telling her that she ought not to love him, yet she says she does. Edna loses herself in a reverie in trying to provide reasons for her love for Robert. She is happy to find out that Robert will return soon from Mexico. At the end of the chapter, she writes a letter informing her husband about her decision to move and the farewell dinner she plans to host.

Glossary

grand esprit: great spirit

ma reine: my queen (or my love).

Chapter 27

Edna is extraordinarily happy both with her decision to move and about Robert’s return. She enjoys Arobin’s company and his soft touches. She asks Arobin if he knows Mademoiselle Reisz. She says that Mademoiselle Reisz has a queer personality, and she feels strange around her. The metaphor of the bird is again employed here but it is the flying bird that chooses to go beyond tradition and prejudice that is evoked referring to Edna’s flight



beyond societal practices. She ponders over Mademoiselle Reisz's apprehension who warns her that unless she has strong wings she would not be able to soar high enough and it would then be sad to see her as the "weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (Chopin, 136).

Arobin kisses Edna on her lips and she responds with inflamed desire. She has come to recognize and accept her sexuality and does not hold back anymore.

Chapter 28

Edna was upset the night Arobin left her due to the shock of the unusual. She imagined her husband and Robert reproaching her. Later, however, she felt no shame but regrets that not the kiss of love, but of passion, had kindled her desire. Although Edna strives towards an autonomous and independent existence, she holds on to her fancies about love. She requires validity and expects her lovers to assess her acts of transgression.

Chapter 29

Edna busies herself immediately in the preparations of moving to the "pigeon-house", the little house around the block near the extravagant home on Esplanade Street. She tries to make a house out of her own income signifying a move away from her husband's opulence to simplicity. She says that one servant has named it the "pigeon house." The pigeon house again evokes the symbol of the bird. Edna insists on having a room of her own, rejecting the opulence of the big house signifying a step in her spiritual awakening.

Arobin insists on helping and Edna finally lets him. She does not want to be alone with Arobin and keeps a servant working by their side. Arobin calls the farewell/birthday dinner the "coup d'état". Edna is extremely excited and says it will be lavish and she will let Leonce pay the bills. Edna told Mademoiselle Reisz when announcing her departure from the main house that the house is built on her husband's wealth that is not hers. It is ironic that she wants Leonce to pay the bills for her farewell party from the house knowing that he shall disapprove of her decision. Arobin wishes to be alone with Edna, but she flinches from him.

Glossary

pigeon house: small bird house for domesticated pigeons.

coup d'état: the sudden, forcible overthrow of a ruler or government, sometimes with violence, by a small group of people already having some political or military authority.



Check Your Progress

1. How does Alcee Arobin treat Edna? How does Edna feel about him?
2. Describe Edna's feelings upon learning of Robert's return.
3. Describe Edna Pontellier's relationship with her father.
4. How does Mademoiselle Reisz feel about Edna? Why does Edna find her peculiar?
5. Why do you think Arobin calls Edna's farewell dinner a "coup de'etat"?

Chapter 30

This chapter witnesses the culmination of the longest sustained episode in the novel: the grand affair of the dinner party. The chapter begins with the list of the attendees and the absentees from the dinner. Unlike what Edna portrayed, the dinner is a cozy affair with around ten members present. Madam Ratignolle has excused herself as she is pregnant.

Edna reveals to her close company that it is her twenty-ninth birthday, and the decorations and preparations are quite unusual and lavish. Edna is dressed extravagantly and presides over the dinner table wearing a shimmery satin gown. The narrator says, "There was something in her attitude, in her whole appearance... which suggested the regal woman... who stands alone." (Chopin 170).

Sandra M. Gilbert in her essay, "The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin's Fantasy of Desire", has extensively commented on this chapter which, she argues, has remained unnoticed. Basing her argument on this chapter, she posits that Edna Pontellier, a hitherto realistic protagonist, is described here more like a regal woman in a romance as Chopin tries to reinvent the genre of fantasy and romance from a feminist perspective. Moreover, she alludes to Christ's last supper and compares it with Edna's party where she becomes a powerful goddess of love and art, like Venus (Gilbert, "The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin's Fantasy of Desire", 43-46). According to her, it foreshadows the final chapter when Edna, just before her drowning, visits Victor and Mariequita and he compares her to Venus.

Almost simultaneously, however, the ennui and the hopelessness surround her and she realizes that her break from it was only temporary. The guests chat and enjoy themselves. Victor starts singing *Ah! Si tu savais*, the song that makes Edna miss Robert. She forces him to stop. All the guests begin to bid farewell to Edna and take her leave.



Glossary

souffrante: used to describe a fretful, anxious or ill woman. Here, a reference to the late stage of pregnancy.

shallow pate: a person lacking depth or intelligence.

lorgnette: a pair of eyeglasses attached to a handle.

nom de guerre: a pseudonym.

mets: main dish or main course.

entre-mets: a dish served between the main courses or as a side dish.

pompano: a type of fish.

Bonne nuit, ma reine, soyez sage: “Good night, my queen, be good.” (Literally, “be wise/well behaved”).

Ce que tes yeux me disent: What your eyes are saying to me

The Last Supper: It is the final meal that, in the Gospel accounts, Jesus shared with his apostles in Jerusalem before his crucifixion (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Last_Supper)

Chapter 31

Arobin stays back after dinner to help Edna shift to the ‘pigeon-house.’ She is exhausted and wishes to rest. Arobin caresses her seductively.

Chapter 32

Mr. Pontellier is appalled with Edna’s decision to shift to the pigeon house. He suspects that she is acting on impulse but remembering her recent moodiness handles it with businesslike tact. He is a thorough conformist and is worried that Edna’s move might be perceived as a decline in their socio-economic status by society that may hamper his professional growth and social reputation. Hence, he provides instructions to protect them from infamy effectively and covers it up as a need for an opulent renovation of the house that requires Edna to shift to the pigeon-house before they move abroad.

Edna feels happy in the pigeon house. To her, it meant a descent in terms of social scale but rise in the spiritual signifying her spiritual awakening. She meets her children, who have been living with their grandmother, after a long time. She showers them with love and affection. They are excited about the renovation. She leaves her children with a pang in her heart but she feels alone again when returning. Although Edna is not the typical mother-woman, she loves her children. However, we may also notice that it is on the account of her husband and children’s long absence that Edna is able to proceed conveniently into her awakening.



Glossary

ménage: a household; domestic establishment.

snuggery: a snug or comfortable place, room, and so on.

Chapter 33

Madame Ratignolle visits Edna for the party call. She tells her, “In some way you seem to me like a child, Edna. You seem to act without a certain amount of reflection which is necessary in this life” (Chopin 184). She advises her not to act on impulse and warns her about her rumors with Alcee Arobin.

Edna visits Mademoiselle Reisz in her absence sometimes. Later that afternoon, Edna is waiting for Mademoiselle Reisz alone in Reisz’s apartment when suddenly Robert Lebrun appears. Edna is shocked to see him since she had not expected him at Mademoiselle Reisz’s place at all. Robert informs Edna that he had been there since the past couple of days. Edna is disturbed and is unable to comprehend the situation while Robert speaks in a matter-of-fact way. Contrary to Edna’s expectations who thought Robert would have returned for her, Robert says he came back because the business was not profitable in Mexico. Edna’s romantic expectations are completely shattered, and she is unable to believe it all. She had thought that the moment Robert returned he would first visit her.

Robert too did not expect to see Edna at Mademoiselle Reisz. He is nervous and distant at the chance meeting. Edna has many complaints against Robert not writing to her. However, when she senses that Robert is distant, Edna gets up immediately to leave. Robert accompanies her out of courtesy. She wishes to spend some time alone with Robert but he refuses to, bound by conservatism. Checking out Edna’s room, he finds the pictures of Alcee Arobin there and they talk about him. Robert is curious about Arobin’s picture in Edna’s room and starts questioning her. Edna replies saying that Arobin is her friend and she had been sketching him. There is a transition that we witness in Edna’s choice of subjects for her painting. She had painted her friend or father earlier, but now she paints her lover and keeps his picture too uncaring of what anyone might think. Edna is a little cheeky now with Robert, trying to understand his interest in her now after she suspects he might have liked someone else in Mexico.

Glossary

party call: it was a custom to call on the hostess of any gathering one was invited to, shortly after the event.

vingt-et-un: a card game, twenty-one. Also called blackjack.

**Check Your Progress**

1. Discuss Edna's dinner party.
2. How does Mr. Pontellier react to the news of Edna's decision to live in the pigeon house?
3. Describe Robert's sudden encounter with Edna.

Chapter 34

Edna requests Robert to stay for dinner and they are ceremonious over it after the shock of the unexpected meeting. Edna notices a new tobacco pouch that Robert is carrying and asks him about the same. Robert replies that a girl had given it to her. In both conversations, it seems that the lovers grow jealous and try to understand if there is someone else in each other's lives.

Alcee Arobin enters while Edna and Robert are having dinner. Arobin and Robert exchange greetings. Robert prepares to leave. Arobin carries a message from Mrs. Merriman asking for Mrs. Pontellier but Edna refuses to go. Arobin is again his charming self with Edna wanting her to return his favors. However, Edna is disturbed by Robert being cold and distant and asks Arobin to leave. She is jealous imagining a Mexican girl with him. The longing in her heart increases with Robert's scanty words. These chapters heighten Edna's alienation and prepare the readers for her tragic end. She is unable to receive Robert's affections which are so crucial to her.

Glossary

tignon: her hair is twisted with a scarf and coiled around her head.

patois: generally, a dialect used primarily for oral rather than written communication. Here probably, a mix of French, English, Spanish, German and American Indian common in Creole New Orleans.

Check Your Progress

1. What causes Edna to be shocked and hurt when she finally meets Robert?
2. Why does Robert return to United States? Why is he cold and distant?
3. Compare Edna's feelings towards Robert Lebrun and Alcee Arobin.

Chapter 35

Edna is initially joyous and preoccupied with thoughts of Robert. She recalls Mademoiselle Reisz's words about Robert loving her. She receives a letter from her husband informing



her about his plans to return in March after which they would leave for abroad. Arobin also writes a reassuring letter to her about his devotion that he finds faintly returned. She does not respond to it. She is waiting for another exchange with Robert. Robert, however, has not made any mention of intending to meet. Arobin visits Edna and they go out on a drive, Arobin senses a latent sensuality in Edna that had begun to blossom. Again, the next morning Edna awakens with hopelessness. Everyone around Edna has begun to notice changes in her. The doctor had also observed them when he first visited her and thought of Edna as a sleek animal waking up in the sun which signifies her awakening.

Chapter 36

Edna has an accidental meeting again with Robert in the suburb garden at a quaint place owned by an old mulatresse Catiche. Robert is embarrassed to see Edna who in turn wants to be as indifferent and reserved with Robert as he was with her the last time. However, her heart melts after seeing him. She asks him about his reserve openly. She says she has gotten into a habit of expressing herself freely even if it makes her seem “unwomanly”(Chopin, 207). Edna also remarks that she loves to walk and she feels sorry for women who do not. Edna openly challenges social conventions surrounding women.

Robert accompanies her back home and she does not insist on him staying. After freshening up, she notices Robert is still there and she kisses him tenderly. Robert also responds. He admits that he loves Edna but he has been fighting his feelings because she is “not free. You were Leonce Pontellier’s wife,” he tells her (Chopin 205). He thinks of her in conventional ways and cannot imagine a transgression in a relationship outside marriage. He says he dreamt of husbands setting their wives free. Edna kisses him and says he had been wasting his time dreaming of impossible things. She tells him “I am no longer one of Mr. Pontellier’s possessions to dispose of or not. I give myself where I choose. If he were to say, “Here, Robert, take her and be happy, he is yours,” I should laugh at you both” (Chopin 206-7).

Edna no longer remains her husband’s property as he used to look at her. She only wishes to belong to herself. The patriarchal idea where women are treated as a property of one man and can only be given from one to another stands challenged here. Further, we must also note that now Edna is no longer called Mrs. Pontellier or even Edna Pontellier, but just Edna. Mr. Pontellier had never imagined and could never imagine his wife in an adulterous relationship as husbands assumed absolute trust in their wives as they felt entitled to them like a piece of property. Hence, he has never felt jealous of Robert even when he noticed their intimacy.



Before they could continue their conversation, Edna is called upon by Mrs. Ratignolle who is about to give birth. Edna and Robert confess their love to each other and kiss. Edna asks Robert to stay until she returns from the Ratignolle's.

Chapter 37

Edna arrives at the Ratignolle house and heads to meet Madame Ratignolle in the salon where she was sick and suffering. Doctor Mandelet is attending to her. Adele Ratignolle is impatient. The nurse, Josephine, also pacifies her. During Madame Ratignolle's childbirth, Edna feels uneasy. Her own experiences of childbirth are half-remembered and she feels that she should not have come to witness the "scene of torture" (Chopin, 211). Adele reminds Edna of her children and implores her to think of them.

It is interesting to note that Edna is so uncomfortable with the scene of childbirth even though she is a mother of two. This chapter acts as an interruption and a reminder for Edna. Whereas in the previous chapter, she fancies her breaking away from all social customs to be with her lover, this chapter is a stark reminder that as a mother and a part of a community, she is not allowed to do so. Edna is sickened by the scene as she remembers her children and childbirth that are her natural nurturing instincts, which she is attempting to escape.

Glossary

Griffe: A term such as "quadroon" and "mulatto" that was part of the complex French colonial caste system based on amounts of black and white "blood". Griffe designated a person of three-quarters black and one-quarter white blood.

Check Your Progress

1. Why is Robert cold and indifferent towards Edna? What happens at their second meeting?
2. How does Edna feel during Adele's childbirth?

Chapter 38

Edna is accompanied by Doctor Mandelet on her way out. The doctor tells Edna that she should not have come to witness Adele in her situation since he perceives Edna to be an impressionable woman. The doctor asks her about her husband's plan of taking her abroad. Edna answers, "I'm not going to be forced into doing things..." (Chopin 213). The doctor senses that Edna is disturbed and offers to speak with her. Edna refuses to; she does not want sympathy.



She is ecstatic as she expects Robert to be waiting for her after their intimate encounter. However, Robert is not around. He has left a note that says, “I love you. Good bye-because I love you” (Chopin, 215). This is the final step in Edna’s disillusionment with the social order in which any kind of bonding becomes bondage. Robert cannot move beyond the confines of society and Edna who has moved beyond, is unwilling to be bound by them.

Glossary

coupé: a short four-wheeled carriage with two enclosed seats and one on top for the driver, commonly used by doctors.

Chapter 39

Victor and Mariequita are in conversation when they see Edna coming. Victor describes her as “Venus rising from the foam could have presented no more an entrancing spectacle than Mrs. Pontellier, blazing with beauty...” (Chopin 216). Mariqueta assumes that Victor is in love with Mrs. Pontellier and feels insecure. Edna visits the Lebrun house, and they are surprised to see that the purpose of her visit is only to rest. Victor is very hospitable arousing Mariequita’s suspicion. Edna asks about dinner plans and says she will go to the beach for a little swim. Both try to stop her.

Edna’s walk to the beach is mechanical. She is thinking to herself realizing that no relationship is meant to stay. She also understands the meaning of a statement she made long ago to Adele. She had said that she would give up the unessential, but she would never sacrifice herself for her children. She begins to acknowledge the essential loneliness that the human experience entails. She thinks of her children as antagonists driving her into soul slavery, but she will not submit anymore. This is the moment of Edna’s final awakening where she realizes the truth of solitude. Everything seems despondent and oppressive to her. Critics have commented variably about the significance of this episode but one interpretation by Nancy Chodorow states that “she realizes that she cannot find a loving attachment to Raoul and Etienne...she cannot “reproduce mothering” that she has never experienced.” (qtd. In Walter Taylor and Ann B. Fineman, “Kate Chopin: Pre-Freudian Freud”, 44). Edna had lost her mother at a young age and she has never found another. She represses finding the mother figure surrogate in Adele too.

“The voice of the sea is seductive ... inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude” (Chopin 220). This sentence reappears in the text after chapter 6 where Edna’s journey towards her awakening had just begun. The symbol of the sea is at its most powerful now standing for her power, awakening, freedom, chaos, etc.. She discards her bathing suit, and naked- almost freeing her from constraints and masks of any kind- she



begins to swim. The disrobing motif that has been used in the novel to indicate Edna shedding her masks to awaken her true self now finds its culmination as she strips naked. Earlier, Edna's dressing and undressing also referred to her sexual awakening.

She is the one who gives a certain form to the sea. For the first time ever, instead of being shaped up by her environment, she begins to shape it. She goes on and on. Eventually, she begins to tire, recalling the first terror of death in the sea.

She thinks of her husband and children and denies that they have any rights of possession over her. She recalls Mademoiselle Reisz's statement about the artist having a courageous soul. Snippets from her life pass through her memory including Robert's confession of love. She thinks of Doctor Mandelet too, who had wished to listen to her until she finally surrenders herself to the sea. These multiple voices including the narrator's that Edna imagines before drowning in contrast with hers is said to contribute to the heteroglossia in the novel. The ending has been interpreted variously as a suicide, a death by drowning, a tragic end of a woman trying to fight patriarchy, etc. We shall look at some of these readings along with the symbol of the sea as the liberating and poignant force in the protagonist's life in the next unit.

Glossary

Lucullean: the first-century Roman general Lucullus was famous for his banquets.

houris: Beautiful virgins who await righteous men in Muslim Paradise. Victor may be thinking instead of the sea nymphs who found the naked Aphrodite clothed her, and took her to Mount Olympus

Check Your Progress

1. Why does Doctor Mandelet tell Edna she should not have come to see Adele during childbirth?
2. Do you think Edna committed suicide? Why does she do so?



Part-2

In Part 1 of the study material, we discussed in detail the plot summary and the biographical, social, historical, and literary context that defines the novel. Let us now delve into understanding the novel through a critical lens.

1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you would be able to:

- Arrive at an understanding of the characters in the novel.
- Comprehend the plot structure and the narrative style.
- Analyze the major themes in the novel.
- Examine the novel from various critical perspectives.

2. CHARACTERIZATION

Chopin's art of characterization in *The Awakening* is subtle and complex, as she portrays the inner lives of her characters through their actions, words, and interactions. Chopin uses a variety of techniques, such as symbolism, imagery, contrast, and irony, to reveal the personalities and motivations of her characters. She also employs a third-person omniscient narrator, who sometimes comments on the characters' thoughts and feelings, but often leaves them ambiguous or open to interpretation. Chopin's characterization allows the reader to empathize with the characters, especially Edna Pontellier, the protagonist, who undergoes a radical transformation from a conventional wife and mother to an independent and rebellious woman.

2.1 Edna Pontellier

Edna Pontellier, a young Presbyterian woman from Kentucky, is the twenty-eight-year-old protagonist of the novel. Born and brought up in Kentucky she is the daughter of a Colonel who served in the Confederate army in the American Civil War. She is married to a Creole man from New Orleans, called Leonce Pontellier, who is twelve years her senior. She is the mother of two young boys Etienne and Raoul. She calls herself an artist later in the novel as she dabbles into painting. In describing her unconventional beauty, Chopin writes:

“The charm of Edna Pontellier's physique stole insensibly upon you. The lines of her body were long, clean and symmetrical; it was a body which occasionally fell



into splendid poses; there was no suggestion of the trim, stereotyped fashion-plate about it. A casual and indiscriminating observer, in passing, might not cast a second glance upon the figure. But with more feeling and discernment he would have recognized the noble beauty of its modeling, and the graceful severity of poise and movement, which made Edna Pontellier different from the crowd” (Chopin, 28).

The novel describes Edna’s solitary journey towards attaining autonomy and freedom in a patriarchal society bound by the moral codes of chastity, domesticity, and motherhood. She is called Mrs. Pontellier in the beginning, but as the narrative proceeds and she distances herself from her husband, her name appears first as Edna Pontellier, and then just Edna. She is particularly attracted to beauty and sensuality. Although not conventionally feminine or beautiful, she has a strong and attractive personality and a sumptuous appetite, in contrast to other women such as Adele Ratignolle who are ideals of feminine beauty and motherhood. Of a reserved nature due to her Protestant upbringing Edna finds the other married Creole women a bit forward in their conversations and behaviour. “A characteristic which distinguished them and which impressed Mrs. Pontellier most forcibly was their entire absence of prudery. Their freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible to her, though she had no difficulty in reconciling it with a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable” (Chopin, 17).

Edna undergoes a transformation in the novel as she awakens to her sexual and spiritual self after a vacation at Grand Isle. She meets and befriends other vacationers, such as Madame Ratignolle, Robert Lebrun, and Mademoiselle Reisz. She falls into adulterous relationships with two young men, Robert Lebrun (who is her idealization of romantic love) and Alcee Arobin, the womanizer, with whom Edna achieves sexual gratification. As the novel focuses on the story of Edna’s awakening and transformation, it has raised a lot of critical debate that we shall examine in the following sections. Some critics interpret her as a romantic and hedonistic woman doomed to fail, while others see her as a rebellious and self-assertive woman trying to achieve a personal identity, freedom, and autonomy for herself that requires the rejection of the regressive norms of nineteenth-century American society. Consequently, the final act of Edna’s alleged suicide can also be interpreted either as an act of failure or an act of emancipation.

2.2 Leonce Pontellier

Léonce Pontellier, Edna’s spouse, is a Creole businessman from New Orleans. Chopin describes him as “a man of forty, of medium height and rather slender build (who) stooped a little” (1). He embodies conventionality, snobbery, and generosity, though he remains emotionally distant. Edna’s marriage to Léonce is described as accidental. Initially, Edna confuses his devoted flattery for a shared “sympathy of thought and taste.”(Chopin, 35).



However, she later learns that this is far from the truth. Due to religious differences, Edna's family protests against the marriage. Edna looks at it as a romantic adventure, marrying Leonce against her family's wishes and quickly accepts his proposal.

Léonce is driven by orthodox patriarchal gender roles as a father and husband. He holds Edna responsible for neglecting her domestic duties. He appears to be adept at handling difficult worldly matters using his business acumen. He is a materialistic man who enjoys keeping up a social reputation and enjoys the pleasures of life. Léonce considers and treats Edna as "a valuable piece of personal property" (Chopin, 3). as was the case with most men in the nineteenth century. He is acutely conscious of his class and social status. The uppermost worry in his mind when he learns of Edna's decision to move to the "pigeon-house" is "what people would say" (146). A scandal or an affair is farthest from his thoughts. All he worries about is that "it might get noised about that the Ponteliers had met with reverses and were forced to conduct their menage on a humbler scale than heretofore" (146). He is able to camouflage it well and save appearances by hiring an architect for a remodeling of his home.

In his own way he does care about Edna and is worried when he cannot understand her behaviour on their return to New Orleans. As he seeks Dr. Mandelet's help in the matter he tells him,, "I don't know what ails her...she's not like herself. I can't make her out," (103). The Doctor is astute enough to guess the possibility of an affair, but the thought never once enters Leonce's mind. Being a Creole, he expects nothing but fidelity from his wife. As Chopin observes "the Creole husband is never jealous; with him the gangrene passion is one which has become dwarfed by disuse" (Chopin, 20).

2.3 Robert Lebrun

Robert Lebrun is a catalyst for Edna's "awakening" and her romantic fantasy of ideal love. He works as a clerk. He is the son of Madame Lebrun, who offers a vacation house at the summer resort of Grand Isle. Robert customarily dedicates each summer to a light romantic involvement with a young woman, who could be married or a widow. Possessing charm and a leisurely disposition, Robert finds himself deeply in love with Edna Pontellier. Following an evening swim together, Edna senses a sexual and spiritual awakening within her. Sensing the intensity of his feelings for Edna, Robert attempts to distance himself from the her as she is a married woman and travels to Mexico, avoiding an adulterous relationship. However, his reunion with Edna upon his return appears to fulfil her recently awakened yearnings. Robert confesses that he loves her and wants to marry her, but she belongs to another man. Although Edna prioritizes their relationship over her marriage



and children, Robert abandons her for the sake of societal conventions and respectability. His parting words are “I love you. Good-bye - because I love you.”

2.4 Adele Ratignolle

Madame Ratignolle is the embodiment of both femininity and motherhood and serves as the foil for Edna and the typical mother-woman in the novel. She has been married for seven years and has three children with Mr. Ratignolle, who runs a prosperous drugstore. They share a perfectly harmonious conjugal bond, in contrast to Edna’s failing marriage. She is a “white” Creole woman and is quite open and frank, as she does not hesitate to mention her “condition” or respond to Robert’s admiration of her. However, unlike Edna, she remains loyal to her husband. Edna greatly admires Adele Ratignolle for her physical and sensual beauty. As Chopin describes her she writes: “The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. . . One of them was the embodiment of every womanly grace and charm. . . the spun-gold hair that neither comb nor confining pin could restrain; the blue eyes that were like nothing but sapphires; two lips that pouted, that were so red one could only think of cherries or some other delicious crimson fruit in looking at them... One would not have wanted her white neck to be mite less full or her beautiful arms to be more slender. Never were hands more exquisite than hers, and it was a joy to look at them when she threaded her needle. (Chopin, p 16.) She is the first person in the novel that Edna sketches.

Adele Ratignolle is primarily responsible for Edna’s awakening. Before her friendship with Adele, Edna had never experienced a close female bond, and Adele initiated her in the rituals of female love and self-discovery. Chopin calls their bond “love.” As the mother-woman, she also encourages Edna to hone her artistic talents and guides her from time to time. Adele Ratignolle is the voice of social conformity in the novel, whereas she also prompts in Edna her awakening, which ironically leads to her transgression. Adele is motherly, excessively affectionate, and protective of her children. Edna, a motherless woman, looks for a mother surrogate in Adele. Adele is protective of Edna. She warns Robert to leave Edna alone telling him that “she is not one of us; she is not like us. She might make the unfortunate blunder of taking [him] seriously” (Chopin, 38).

Mr. Pontellier compares Edna with Adele. He tells her that Edna is not even as much of an artist as Adele (who plays music and sews) and that she cannot manage the house as well as Adele. For Adele, art is maternal, while for Edna, it is a means of breaking away from tradition. She reminds Edna to think of the children and warns her about the scandalous association with Alcee Arobin. Although Adele is the one who is responsible for Edna’s awakening, her association with another foil figure, Mademoiselle Reisz, strengthens it.



2.5 Mademoiselle Reisz

She is introduced in the novel as “a disagreeable little woman, no longer young, who had quarreled with almost everyone, owing to a temper that was self-assertive and a disposition to trample upon the rights of others.” (Chopin p.48) She is an excellent pianist who is particularly fond of Edna and prefers to play only for her since she believes in her taste and rebellious potential early on in the text. There are suggestions that Mademoiselle Reisz finds Edna physically attractive too. She, as an eccentric artist and remains distant from society.

The older woman undeniably presents Edna with a different and viable role model than Adèle Ratignolle, who unwittingly remains a captive of the gender roles assigned to mother, woman, and wife. Mademoiselle Reisz’s residence serves as a sanctuary for Edna, and the pianist comes closest to establishing a connection and offering guidance that could assist Edna in integrating her newfound awakening into the world. They hold discussions about art, music, and love. Mademoiselle Reisz prompts Edna to see beneath the surface of her assumed awakening and love for Robert. However, Mademoiselle Reisz’s role in the narrative is fraught with challenges, as she is an imperfect model whose positive attributes are counterbalanced by her abrasive and egocentric tendencies. Chopin highlights the musician’s peculiarities when introducing her to the story.

Alcee Arobin

Alcee Arobin is a young and attractive gentleman who is mostly found at races and opera houses. He has the reputation of a womanizer, and his scandals spread throughout New Orleans. Edna meets Arobin with Mrs. Merriman and Mrs. Highcamp at the races. Arobin is fond of Edna and awakens in her a sexual hunger in Robert’s absence. When Edna first kisses Arobin, she wishes that it were a kiss of love. Edna’s attraction to Arobin is completely physical, although he is not ungentlemanly in his conduct. Her affair with Arobin only strengthens her romantic illusions and love for Robert.

Doctor Mandelet

Doctor Mandelet is first introduced in the text when Mr. Pontellier suspects something wrong with Edna’s mental balance. The old doctor only visits a very few patients of his close acquaintances. He observes Edna’s mixture of sadness and vibrant charm. However, Chopin portrays that he struggles to comprehend that Edna’s discontent, and that of women in general, goes beyond conventional notions of mental fragility. He advises Leonce Pontellier to let Edna be, for the time being, and he is unable to help her. Despite his good intentions, the well-meaning doctor proves to be of limited assistance to his female patients.



Etienne and Raoul Pontellier: They are the two young sons of Mr. and Mrs. Pontellier. The children are taken care of by the quadroon or their paternal grandmother. They are fond of both parents. However, while Leonce Pontellier is usually absent and understands his fatherly duty to only provide for the children on account of gender roles assigned to the father in nineteenth-century American society, he visits them one night and blames their mother for being negligent when he finds that Raoul is suffering from fever. Their mother, Edna, too, is conflicted about her children. Although she loves them, she is not overly protective or affectionate towards them. Consequently, the children appear to be on their own at most times or in the care of the quadroon. Edna calls them antagonists and, in the course of her awakening, makes them responsible for her soul's slavery.

Edna's Father, The Colonel: Edna's father was a colonel in the Confederate army and enjoyed high rank and reputation in society. He visits Edna and her husband to prepare for his younger daughter's wedding. He is fond of horseracing and toddies. Although Edna seems to be happy in the company of her father, as they enjoy sports and a good time together, the image of him shooing his grandsons while trying to maintain his perfect pose is a telling clue to Edna's childhood and the formation of her personality. Her father is a strict disciplinarian and a misogynist. He tells Mr. Pontellier that he is too lenient with his wife, Edna, and understands wife-beating as a necessity for a healthy marriage. He operates within the traditional gender roles, and Edna is relieved that her father has left, even though they seemed to enjoy a good time. Edna misses a father figure that she searches for in her twelve years older husband, Leonce Pontellier.

The Lovers

In "On Characters as Foils to Edna", Barbara H. Solomon comments on the pair of lovers. She says that in the initial stages of the novel, Chopin portrays the young lovers as peripheral characters, existing exclusively for each other and deliberately avoiding engagement with the communal life centered around Mrs. Lebrun's hotel. This isolation is a pivotal point for Chopin. Later in the narrative, when Edna expresses indifference towards Léonce Pontellier and envisions a future with Robert, she essentially suggests abandoning the familial and social community, anticipating a potential scandal. Edna aspires, or wishes to believe, that she and Robert can prioritize their relationship without regard for others, encapsulated by the romantic notion of sacrificing "all for love." However, this envisioned connection would inevitably lead to their estrangement from the comfortable Creole society they currently inhabit, akin to the ethereal lovers who detach themselves from worldly engagements (Solomon, p.60).

Although Edna, being a romantic and believing in the notion of idealized romantic love, cherishes this fancy, her spiritual and sexual awakening is a result of the interaction



with the Creole community that she values greatly in her quest for personal freedom and autonomy.

The Woman in Black

In the first chapter itself, we are introduced to the woman in black with the rosary. She remains nameless and is always busy counting her rosary and praying. She represents religion and tradition. Her role in the novel is to symbolize the conventional Victorian ideal of the widowed woman, who devotes herself to the memory of her husband and to religion, and who does not seek any independence or passion in her life. She stands in contrast to the protagonist, who defies all religious and traditional beliefs and pursues her individual freedom.

The widow in black also foreshadows the eventual failure of Edna's relationship with Robert Lebrun, as she follows the young lovers throughout the novel.

Check Your Progress

1. What makes Adele Ratignolle a foil to Edna Pontellier?
2. Write a short note on the contribution of Mademoiselle Reisz to the awakening of Edna Pontellier.
3. Compare and contrast Robert Lebrun and Alcee Arobin as Edna's lovers.
4. What is Leonce Pontellier's attitude towards his wife Edna?
5. Adele tells Edna that she sometimes thinks that Edna is like a child. After reading Edna's character description, why do you think Adele says so?

3. PLOT STRUCTURE, NARRATIVE STYLE, AND TECHNIQUE

The Awakening is a novel with non-uniform chapter lengths. Some chapters are as short as a page or two, while others are much longer. It has thirty-nine chapters in total. Elaine Showalter writes in the introduction to *The Awakening* that "formally too, the novel has moved away from conventional techniques to an impressionistic rhythm of epiphany and mood" (Showalter, xix). Although the lengths vary, the novel is tied up beautifully using the symbols and refrains of music, birds, and the sea. Chopin's stories fall into the genre of continental novels as they describe the lives of local people of the south, whom she knew very well. Her fiction blended a variety of narrative styles, such as realism, naturalism, and romanticism, and employed literary devices like symbols. We have already discussed the plot summary in the first part of the study material. We shall now try to understand



the narrative style and techniques that Kate Chopin employs in narrating the story of her defiant heroine, Edna Pontellier.

The novel is told mostly from the point of view of Edna, who is the protagonist. She is also an outsider to the Creole community that surrounds her. Xianfeng Mou, in the essay “Kate Chopin’s Narrative Techniques and Separate Space in *The Awakening*,” examines the narrative style in the novel, especially Chopin’s use of free indirect discourse. Mou writes:

“An author chooses free indirect discourse to represent what a character is thinking or speaking while simultaneously indicating the narrator’s attitude toward the character. For instance, when describing Edna’s relationship to her husband Leonce, Chopin’s narrator first relates what Edna thinks, then adds her authorial comment: “[Edna] fancied there was a sympathy of thought and taste between them, in which she was mistaken” (Chopin 62). The first half of this statement describes Edna’s belief that she and her husband share similar thoughts and tastes. In her opinion, they are very compatible. The second half reveals the narrator’s opinion that Edna’s perception is quite wrong. Chopin uses similar techniques extensively throughout the novel” (Mou, “Kate Chopin’s Narrative Techniques and Separate Space in *The Awakening*”, 103).

According to Mou, this distance between Edna and the narratorial voice adds to the irony and the dialogic nature of the novel and intensifies Edna’s solitude with no one to understand her. It also makes accessible Edna’s innermost feelings as the narration switches between Edna expressing herself and the narrator recounting her feelings to the reader. For example, Edna, displaying her powerful and bold awakening, carries out the dialogue during the chance meeting between Robert and Edna, and when Edna is missing Robert while he is away, it is mostly the narrator who tells the readers how she feels.

In any literary work, the plot and the character are inextricably linked with each other. The end of the novel, whether interpreted as a tragic failure of a flawed protagonist or an optimistic liberation of a woman fighting against the moral codes that dictate her life, has also influenced the perception of the plot of the novel. Hence, whether or not the suicide of Edna represents the resolution of narrative conflicts is a question that has remained open for discussion. While Elaine Showalter views the novel optimistically and in terms of a transformation, critics like Ruth Sullivan and Stewart Smith disagree. The novel, written at the turn of the 19th century, marks the transition period in literature from Victorian to modern. The shift is from realistic writing to one where literary experiments and influences from artistic movements, like symbolism, revolutionized narrative styles.



Let us discuss some aspects of the narrative style and literary trends that Chopin uses, in the next few subsections.

3.1 Realism

Realism, as the name suggests, encourages literary works to be lifelike and capture the daily lives of ordinary human beings. Realism was characterized by its focus on detachment, objectivity, and precise observation, as well as a clear yet measured critique of societal norms. It became popular in the 1860s and 1970s in Europe.

In *The Awakening*, Creole society has been portrayed realistically. The novelist also ensures an accurate description of the setting of New Orleans, the Grand Isle, and the Gulf of Mexico, including its inhabitants and their lifestyles. The manner of narration is also straightforward and direct. To enhance the authenticity of the narrative, bilingual conversations have been used, involving French and Spanish dialogues with English ones to depict a multiracial and multilingual society. The third-person narrator practices detachment from the protagonist, Edna, while making comments on her and her peers that reflect on society, sometimes ironically. For example, while Adele is open to discussing her childbirth and her pregnancy in front of male companions, she remains like Madonna in her demeanor. She seems to respond favorably to Robert's flirtations but advises him to stay away from Edna. She warns Edna about her husband visiting Klein's Hotel too often and suggests that Edna should remain careful of rumors surrounding her and Alcee Arobin. Hence, the novel uses realism predominantly, which adds to the authenticity and reliability of the narrative.

3.2 Romanticism

As we read the novel, we identify in Edna's character an inclination towards a good deal of romanticism. She tells fanciful stories, and Robert plays along. In fact, Robert also indulges her fancy, whereas her husband, Mr. Pontellier, being the rational businessperson that he is, rejects them. When Edna takes a swim for the first time and is overwhelmed by the experience, Robert tells her the legend of a sea monster looking for a companion. Edna, too, invents a story of two lovers eloping from society into unknown realms at the dinner table. Within Edna's fancy is an ideal romance from her childhood and adolescence—a love for a cavalry officer, a tragedian, or an engaged man—that is not for her. In fact, Edna is to be reminded to come face-to-face with her realities, which she does not enjoy. There is also a fair share of sensuousness and mysticism in the novel that arises out of not only the symbols and imagery used but also the romance embedded in the protagonist's imagination. At one point, Adele Ratignolle tells Edna that she is like a child because she acts on her impulses, unmindful of the consequences.



American Romanticism in the 19th century focused on the themes of individualism and exploration of the self beyond the rigidity of religion or rationality. Edna's foray into her sexual and spiritual awakening abides by these themes. Edna is childlike since she is unaware of her autonomous self, which she discovers through the course of the novel. She becomes aware of her needs, desires, feelings, sexuality, artistic creativity, and beliefs beyond the moral and household duties of a patriarchal society and family. She not only disregards her duties as a mother and wife in the process, but she does as she pleases, also refusing to attend her sister Janet's wedding. She is growing into her own individual self, and she gains newfound confidence in the process.

3.3 Foreshadowing

Another narrative technique that Chopin uses is that of foreshadowing. The Cambridge English Dictionary defines foreshadowing as “the use of details, description, and mood that will take on more meaning later in a written work.” There are three stark examples of foreshadowing that we see in the novel that contribute to its depth and intensity.

In the first chapter itself, the close bond that Robert Lebrun and Mrs. Pontellier share becomes evident and foreshadows their relationship later. We know that Edna's love for Robert is one of the major factors that lead to her awakening. Robert, in chapter 7, unheeding Adele's warnings to not flirt with Edna, tells her that he wishes that Edna takes him seriously, and it foretells Robert's love note later in the novel, where he confesses his love. In addition, the bird symbolism that we shall discuss a bit later tells us that Edna will remain trapped in the societal codes and lead a solitary life because no one else will understand her.

Edna's death by drowning is also foreshadowed when she first learns to swim. The author repeats the same sentence to indicate the lure of the sea that offers liberation to Edna. Swimming far out, she fears death, with the insurmountable gap between her and the people (although she had not swum that far), and in the end, she is completely alone with no one in sight to experience the same dread of drowning once again. It foreshadows her tragic end.

3.4 Symbolism

Chopin uses various symbols effectively to enrich the complex narrative, such as the symbol of the sea, birds, music, and disrobing, which contribute to its poignancy and sensuality and bind the story together. Let us look at some of these symbols in detail.

3.4.1 *Symbol of the Sea*

The symbol of the sea pervades and unifies the plot of the novel thanks to its setting near the port city of New Orleans and the Gulf of Mexico. Traditionally, the symbol of the sea



represents exploration, danger, power, chaos, freedom, unpredictability, transformation, mystery, and, in psychoanalytic terms, a mother's womb and our unconscious minds. Chopin explores all the connotations of the sea powerfully in the novel. In chapter 6, Chopin writes, "The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace," and in the final chapter again, "The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamouring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation." (Chopin, 220).

Edna's swimming lessons carry symbolic significance, serving as both a positive political lesson in navigating challenges and a sentimentally valuable exploration of the consequences of venturing into unfamiliar territories. This is where she learns to assert her independence and her autonomy. Beyond these aspects, the crucial element lies in how swimming immerses Edna in another realm—an element of otherness—where she experiences a mystical and mythical revitalization, renewal, and rebirth. Chopin explicitly underscores this dimension of Edna's swimming education, particularly evident during the magical occasion of her first independent swim. In addition to this, the sea is also where she first meets Robert who propels hers towards change and becomes her love interest. In the end, her plunge and consequent surrender to the sea symbolize independence and rebirth, as the present societal codes leave no choice for her. The sea thus symbolizes Edna's struggle to find her true self and finally gives her the escape that she needs.

3.4.2 *The Symbol of the Bird*

Birds, a pervasive literary symbol connoting freedom and ambition, represent captivity and helplessness when confined. While not as recurrent as the sea symbol in *The Awakening*, bird imagery plays a crucial role at significant junctures. In the initial chapter, a caged parrot and a mockingbird introduce the theme. The parrot creates a nuisance and disturbs Mr. Pontellier, who is reading the newspaper. The caged bird symbolizes Edna's captivity in societal conventions. As Edna begins to awaken, we find no caged birds, but birds in flight.

The bird image is next connected with the predominant theme of solitude in the novel and alludes to Edna's journey. Listening to Mademoiselle Reisz play, Edna feels overwhelmed by the music: "The name of the piece was something else, but she called it "Solitude." When she heard it, there came before her imagination the figure of a man standing beside a desolate rock on the seashore. He was naked. His attitude was one of hopeless resignation as he looked toward a distant bird winging its flight away from him." (Chopin, 49).

The image of the distant bird flying away signifies a possibility of freedom for Edna. Asserting her individuality and overcoming her fear she learns to swim. The novel



mentions birds for the third time when, at the dinner table with her father visiting, she remembers Robert and invents a tale of two lovers drifting into the unknown: “the beating of birds’ wings, rising startled from among the reeds in the salt-water pools; they could see the faces of the lovers, pale, close together, rapt in oblivious forgetfulness, drifting into the unknown.” (Chopin, 133)

It signifies Edna’s flight of imagination into her romantic fancies, as when she invents the story of two lovers drifting into the unknown, they hear the beating of the birds’ wings. Edna, in her love for Robert, delves into a romantic fantasy that points towards her desire to escape the patriarchal codes of conjugal conduct that bind her. However, as Robert withdraws from Edna’s defiant desire, she realizes that her flight is only solitary. Mademoiselle Reisz’s warning to Edna also uses the symbolism of the bird as she tells her, “‘The bird that would soar above the level of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised and exhausted, fluttering back to earth.’” (Chopin, 158).

Mme Reisz’s words almost signify the end. In her rebellion Edna, becomes a solitary bird with broken wings in the final chapter as we witness the sad spectacle of her drowning in the water. We are left with the last image of the bird drawing a strong parallel with Edna’s fate: “A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, and circling disabled down, down to the water” (Chopin, 220).

The bird thus becomes another unifying symbol in the novel.

3.4.3 Music, Art, and the Artist

Music persists in the novel as a symbol and a theme. Grand Isle and New Orleans offered opera houses, and Chopin visited them and was a musician and pianist herself. References to ‘Chopin’ in the text are “an allusion to an intimate, romantic, and poignant musical oeuvre that reinforces the novel’s sensual atmosphere” (Showalter, “Introduction, p. xix).

While Mademoiselle Reisz’s talent and eccentricities refer to Frederic Chopin’s genius, Edna’s reactions to his music refer to his tortured soul. All the references to music and the epiphany and mystic world it creates lend romanticism to the novel, as critics like Camastra and Gilbert assert. For an in-depth study, you may read Nicole Camastra’s essay, “Venerable Sonority in Kate Chopin’s ‘The Awakening.’”

There are multiple references to art and artists in the novel, including painting, music, literature, etc. According to Mademoiselle Reisz, an artist is a solitary being who is away from regular society. As she says “To be an artist includes much; one must possess many gifts—absolute gifts—that have not been acquired by one’s own effort. And, moreover, to



succeed, the artist must possess a courageous soul. . . . The soul that dares and defies” (Chopin, 121). Edna doesn’t conform to the typical artist archetype. Edna’s passion for art, like her passion for Robert, serves as an escape because she prioritizes the process over the product. Unlike those who pursue art for self-realization or insight as Mademoiselle Reisz does, Edna turns to art as a means of escaping the world around her.

Check Your Progress

1. Write about some features of the narrative technique used in Chopin’s *The Awakening*.
2. Edna’s story has been seen as a realist narrative. Do you agree? Give reasons.
3. Would you call Edna Pontellier a romantic? Give reasons.
4. What is foreshadowing? Give an example of foreshadowing from the novel.
5. What do the birds in the novel symbolize?
6. How does the symbol of the sea contribute to unifying the narrative?

4. THEMES

4.1 Solitude

Kate Chopin recognized the essential loneliness that underscores the human experience. She had even translated Guy de Maupassant’s story entitled “Solitude” in 1895. The theme of solitude pervades *The Awakening* right from its subtitle, “A Solitary Soul.” Elaine Showalter writes in her introduction that Edna, encompassed by the bustling neighbors in Grand Isle and her duties as wife and mother, imagines solitude at first as alien and masculine in the image of the naked man standing beside a desolate rock in hopeless resignation (Showalter, “Introduction, p. ix). The possibilities of freedom and escape could only be available to men, not women. However, later in the novel, she imagines solitude to be feminine and strips naked to take a plunge in the sea.

The theme of solitude is interwoven into the story through the symbols of the bird and art. The symbol of the flight of the caged bird to the bird with broken wings conveys it adequately. The artist, too, with the courageous soul, like Mademoiselle Reisz refers to and lives, has a solitary existence. It is the solitary journey that Edna needs to take, casting away her needs for romantic fusion, if she wishes to attain any sense of individual freedom. Some also interpret Edna’s solitude as arising from self-contained narcissism. She is trapped in her adolescent fantasies, unaware of the world around her, and cannot



come to love anyone truly. Her solitude does not take her emancipation far; as Showalter comments, she is trapped between the homosocial and heterosexual worlds (Showalter, “Introduction”, p. xxvii). Largely, Edna’s journey can be understood as a solitary struggle for freedom and identity against patriarchal forces.

4.2 Mother-Woman and the New Woman

Chopin’s narrator describes the mother-women as “fluttering about with extended, protecting wings when any harm, real or imaginary, threatened their precious brood. They were women who idolized their children, worshiped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels” (Chopin pp 14-15.) Mrs. Pontellier is not a mother-woman, while Adele is the perfect embodiment of one.

Antebellum fiction, or mid-19th-century fiction, idealized motherhood, where female sexual pleasure too was derived from breastfeeding the baby and was not heterosexual in nature. Although it was a subtle critique of patriarchal power, Showalter contends, it was limiting in aesthetic terms. This literature gave birth to the mother-woman. However, in the 1890s, the New Women writers “no longer grieved for the female bonds and sanctuaries of the past. Products of both Darwinian skepticism and aesthetic sophistication, they had an ambivalent or hostile relationship with women’s culture” (Showalter, “Introduction, xv). Sarah Grand, who enjoyed huge success for her novel, *The Heavenly Twins*, coined the term “new woman” in 1894.

It is quite paradoxical that, as a new woman, Edna Pontellier, who avowedly despises mother-women, should herself be in search of a mother surrogate and admire Adele Ratignolle greatly. As the new woman, Edna took walks, had relationships outside marriage, earned her own money, etc., and was not extremely close to her children. She cannot reproduce the maternal feelings for her children that she herself has never experienced, being motherless.

4.3 Love and Marriage

Love and marriage fill the mind of the romantic Edna Pontellier. Since her adolescence, she has imagined romantic love that was beyond her reach in the cavalry officer, the tragedian, an engaged man, etc. When she awakens to her sexual and romantic desires, she again seeks the company of Robert Lebrun, which is not permissible. Her frustrations with Leonce Pontellier not only stem from his insensitive and distant behavior but are also rooted in her ideal of love. We witness several romantic and sexual relationships in the text. Some are only alluded to in scandals and controversies, while others deeply



express the codes of sexual, marital, and domestic conduct for women in the 19th century. We must understand that patriarchal society prescribes gender roles for both men and women. These are seldom spoken about but operate mostly through internalization. There may be instances where the Colonel asks Leonce to be stricter with his wife or Adele reminds Edna to restrict Mr. Pontellier's appearances at Klein's Hotel to strengthen their relationship, but mostly these characters operate within the given gender norms without any explicit instructions.

The Ratignolle marriage is shown to be perfect as Mr. and Mrs. Ratignolle “understand each other perfectly. If ever the fusion of two human beings into one has been accomplished in this sphere, it was surely in their union.” (Chopin, p.106). Adele is the perfect embodiment of wifely and maternal norms. It arouses in the awakening Edna a hopeless ennui as she sees a life beyond marriage now. She has found herself a romantic partner in Robert, who can only partially return her feelings, causing her much hurt, and a sexual partner in Alcee Robinson, whom she does not feel any love for. She tells him openly that she does not like him, but she is also unrepentant for her sexual gratification with him, except when she wonders about what Robert will think, not her husband. Edna has presumably freed herself from her conjugal bond, casting away her wedding ring and moving away from her husband's house and money.

The loveless and passionless marriage with Leonce that Edna presupposed as an “acme of bliss” was both a replacement for the father figure and a narcissistic self-fulfillment on the part of Edna. She married him as a rebellion against her family and because Leonce was devoted to her. The relationship remains passionless and frustrates the young Edna, who looks for other suitors closer to her age who can satisfy her sexual and romantic passions. Edna is unable to explain her love for Robert, mostly resorting to his personality and physical appearance. Her romantic fantasies of elopement with the lover, however, fail, as Robert can only think of her in conventional terms. He dreams of making her his wife, and fearing consummation of their relationship, he abandons her.

Check Your Progress

1. Write a short note on the theme of solitude in the novel.
2. Why does Edna despise mother-women? Which kind of woman does she identify with?
3. What are Edna's reasons for marrying Mr. Pontellier? How would you describe their marriage?



5. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

5.1 Feminist Reading

As we read through the position of women and the rights of women being asserted in the 19th century in the previous unit, along with the concepts of the mother-woman and the new-woman, we have been attempting to read the novel from a feminist perspective. Feminism is, simply put, a belief in the political, financial, and social equality of the sexes. While reading the novel from a feminist perspective, we uncover the latent patriarchy and oppressive gender norms in the narrative.

Some notable concerns arise in the novel, including the depiction of women as possessions of men within the novel. Examining the historical context and cultural backdrop of the narrative reveals numerous instances indicating that men regarded their wives merely as personal property. It seems as though these men lacked awareness or couldn't conceive the idea that their wives were independent individuals with their own thoughts, as exemplified by Edna Pontellier. This perspective is evident in both Léonce Pontellier's comments about Edna and the narrator's voice.

The woman in focus, Edna in this instance, appears to be powerless until she experiences awakening. She senses hopelessness and entrapment in her marriage and the confines of domestic life. Edna's awakening leads to tragic consequences, culminating in her suicide towards the novel's conclusion. *The Awakening* also serves as a poignant portrayal of societal enforcement of conventional norms by isolating those who defy them, especially women challenging these norms. The novel highlights how society rewards conformity, as seen with Adele Ratignolle, while punishing non-conformity, as exemplified by Edna.

Chopin employs other female characters in contrast to her main character, serving three distinct purposes. Firstly, as Edna lacks a particularly analytical nature—there's a moment in the novel where she contemplates setting aside time to understand her true self—her interactions with foils like Adèle and Mlle Reisz provide readers with a clearer basis for comparing Edna's character and aspirations with those of other women. Secondly, Chopin's sympathetic portrayal of these two contrasting foils suggests the broad spectrum of women's behaviors during an era when women were often perceived as having similar instincts and interests, primarily seeking domestic security and comfort. Lastly, Edna's engagement with Adèle, who emphasizes the importance of considering the children, and with Mademoiselle Reisz, who encourages Edna to embrace artistic freedom and pursue her relationship with Robert, serves to convince readers that Edna's challenges are



insurmountable within the given environment, historical period, and the strength of her newly discovered, unwavering identity.

Following her awakening, particularly in terms of sexual awareness, Edna undergoes a profound transformation. She becomes a woman who values her artistic and sexual desires, rejecting the norms imposed by tradition and conventionality. Léonce Pontellier, at times, dismisses his wife's aspirations as trivial and attempts to force her into conformity, causing Edna considerable pain and frustration.

The sexually awakened Edna seeks control over her life and emotions, desiring liberation from the constraints of marriage, domesticity, and motherhood. She challenges societal expectations of motherhood, grappling with conflicting feelings and realizing the societal dictates associated with being a mother.

5.2 Race

The discussions around race in the novel are central, considering the socio-historical context of the novel. As mentioned in the last unit, Louisiana was multiracial, and it was steeped in the culture of slavery owing to the plantations and the affluent families that settled there. While some critics interpret the reference to race in the novel as Chopin's attempt to identify with the women of colour as she spoke of the Creoles, others highlight how the novel disregards the questions of race since the people of other races remain faceless, nameless, and subjugated while Edna earns her independence at their expense.

The backdrop of *The Awakening* features anonymous black women categorized by race, serving crucial roles. These women facilitate Edna Pontellier's "liberation" by performing menial tasks. One notable character is the quadroon nurse, who is a mixed-race woman tasked with caring for Edna's children. The term "quadroon" itself reflects the racial hierarchy of the time, designating someone with one-fourth African ancestry. The nurse's role is significant in the sense that she is entrusted with the care of Edna's children, highlighting the racial dynamics of power and servitude. However, the portrayal of the quadroon nurse is criticized for being stereotypical and lacking depth. She remains a somewhat one-dimensional character, serving more as a symbol than a fully fleshed-out individual. Though some of the black characters transition from nameless to individualized characters like Josephine, who takes care of Adele during childbirth; the "boy" Joe, who works for the Pontelliers in the city; and the "mulatresse" Catiche, who has a restaurant in the suburb garden, yet they remain stereotypic and demeaned. The presence of these black men, women or even children simmers under the surface of the novel as a constant reminder of the fact that in American society there were many for whom freedom was still a far cry.



Edna, though white also desires and struggles for freedom but her liberation, as pointed out by Elizabeth Ammons, is achieved at the expense of black women thus challenging the universal narrative of feminism. Her liberation is built on the labor of women from different races and classes highlighting a profound oppression beyond Edna's surface story. (Qtd in *Bloom's Guides* p. 64).

It is important to note that while *The Awakening* touches on racial themes, the primary focus remains on gender roles, female independence, and societal expectations. Chopin's exploration of race is woven into the narrative to provide a more comprehensive picture of the social landscape in which the characters navigate their lives.

5.3 Class

We understand class as a category that divides people according to their social and economic status into working classes, middle classes, and upper classes. In *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin explores the issue of class primarily through the character of Edna. Edna belongs to the upper-middle class, and her experiences and struggles are framed within the context of her privileged social status. The societal expectations placed upon her as a woman of her class play a crucial role in shaping her decisions and the limitations she faces in breaking free from traditional gender roles.

The leisurely lifestyle of the upper-middle class is evident in the setting of the novel, particularly during the summer vacations at Grand Isle and the subsequent return to New Orleans. These settings serve as backdrops for the interactions among characters and the unfolding of Edna's self-discovery within the context of her class. It is significant to note that the wealth and affluence that the vacationers on Grand Isle enjoy is sustained by the obnoxious practice of slave trade that they take for granted. The Pontellier house on Esplanade Street is an embodiment of the ostentatious display of wealth and is meticulously maintained by many servants. Edna's shift from the main house to the little pigeon house worries Leonce as he feels it will result in a social perception of a descent in class status, affecting his business adversely. He masks the shift under the pretext of a refurbishment of the house.

Class pretensions persist throughout the novel, and Edna, who claims to view a descent in economic status as an ascent in her spiritual status, cannot survive without her servants. In the pigeon house too, she takes one servant to help her. Although she insists on having her own income and living by that, her new residence too belongs to Mr. Pontellier. When Mademoiselle Reisz reminds Edna of her husband's money being hers, she refutes.

The upper-middle-class society depicted in the novel imposes rigid expectations on women, defining their roles as wives and mothers and limiting their personal and



creative aspirations. Edna's journey challenges these class-based expectations, as she seeks independence and self-discovery outside the confines of her prescribed role.

Check Your Progress

1. Louisiana is a multiracial and multilingual nation. How does the novelist depict that in the novel?
2. Examine the novel from the perspective of class.
3. What are some of the central feminist concerns in *The Awakening*?

6. THE TITLE

The Awakening: A Solitary Soul, the complete title of Chopin's novel, does not signify only the end but Edna's journey towards the awakening of a new woman in the postbellum patriarchal environment and the challenges it poses. The awakening experienced by Edna Pontellier is both spiritual and sexual. Doctor Mandelet observes, "a subtle change which had transformed her from the listless woman he had known into a being who, for the moment, seemed palpitant with the forces of life... There was no repression in her glance or gesture. She reminded him of some beautiful, sleek animal waking up in the sun" (Chopin p.132). Edna wakes up to her innate desires and wants and recognizes slavery embedded in the patriarchal notions and gender roles that bind and repress her. Consequently, she charts out her own territory as much as possible, realizing at the end that such an awakening is unacceptable to her contemporaries. It is in the wake of the movements within feminism and Darwinism that Edna's awakening is written as a call for a new society that may welcome a newly awakened woman like Edna Pontellier.

Commenting upon how the maturity of Edna that frames the title and the theme of the novel is in effect a reversal to return to the mother, in "Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening' as Part of the Nineteenth-Century American Literary Tradition," Maria Mikolchak writes:

"For Chopin, the very definition of "awakening" can thus be understood as a reversal, as in dream work. Edna is, in fact, slowly but inexorably regressing toward an attempted symbiotic union with the lost mother. Mademoiselle Reisz has been a transient revival of the maternal object, a woman who gives her music to Edna as a mother gives to and nurtures a beloved infant, but such restitutions for love objects lost early, often cannot be sustained. Edna has no art to channel her passions as Mademoiselle Reisz has and no image of adult female conduct except the "mother women" she despises. "The past," she feels, "offered no lesson which she was willing to heed" (44).



7. THE ENDING OF THE NOVEL

Several critical interpretations exist that try to place the ending of the novel in terms of emancipation, rebirth, frustration, depression, etc. The abundance of scholarship around Edna's suicide only indicates its significance for the text. While we have pointed out several of these readings throughout the course of your study material, let us try to capture some arguments briefly in this section.

Showalter writes, "But the ending seems to return Edna to the nineteenth-century female literary tradition, even though Chopin redefines it for her own purpose. Readers of the 1890s were well accustomed to drowning as the fictional punishment for female transgressions against morality." She calls drowning "traditional feminine literary death" (Showalter, "Introduction", pp. xxviii–ix).

Most critics see Edna's death as either an act of liberation from societal and moral codes or as punishment for transgression or not escaping her romantic illusions. Caught in a transitional world, they argue, it is the only option that remains for her. We also noted earlier how Edna's death is seen as an escape on Chopin's part, as she is unable to resolve narrative tensions emerging in the novel. While several readings and interpretations emerge, the novel's ending remains open for discussion.

Check Your Progress

1. Discuss the relevance of the title of the novel.
2. Write a critical note on the ending of the novel.

8. SUMMING UP

Set in 19th century Louisiana, Kate Chopin's *The Awakening: A Solitary Soul* presents the life of Edna Pontellier, awakening to her sexual and spiritual self in a patriarchal society. Having placed the novel in its socio-political, literary, biographical, and economic contexts, we understand that as a post-bellum woman's narrative, it is wrought with challenges of race, class, gender, slavery, etc. Kate Chopin interweaves into the novel various cultural codes prescribed for women at the time, namely the mother-woman and the new-woman, where women characters either accept the gender norms or struggle amid social pressures. Edna finds two alternative models in Madame Ratignolle, the mother-woman and Mademoiselle Reisz., the artist, as she takes a vacation on Grand Isle with her husband and children. Falling in love with the young Robert Lebrun and a sexual union with the womanizer, Alcee



Arobin, she comes face to face with her passionless marriage and her newly awakened desires in her adulterous relationships.

Kate Chopin effectively employs various literary styles such as realism, romanticism, symbolism, irony, contrast, etc. to correctly capture this rift in the life of the predominant Creole community, to which Edna is an outsider, giving the novel a local color and a complex plot. Consequently, the novel has generated a significant amount of critical interest and scholarship positing it as a writing in early feminist literature. Critics have attempted to understand the real meaning of Edna's awakening. She can afford it due to her class position and the black slaves who free her of her domestic responsibilities. The ending of the novel has been open for discussion where readers ponder on the literal and symbolic significance of Edna's "suicide" as an act of emancipation, a definite outcome, or an accident for the novelist introducing a character who is out of bounds in her society.

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“BARTLEBY, THE SCRIVENER: A STORY OF WALL-STREET”

Herman Melville

Nalini Prabhakar

STRUCTURE

1. *Learning Objectives*
2. *Introduction*
3. *Detailed Summary*
4. *Critical Notes*
5. *Summing Up*
6. *References*

1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This lesson will enable you to:

- Summarize the short story “Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street” in a detailed manner.
- Contextualize the story in the setting of Wall-Street.
- Analyze the main characters.
- Understand the significance of “walls.”
- Explore the theme of passive resistance.

2. INTRODUCTION

Herman Melville (1819-1891) was born in New York City, and was a novelist, short story writer, and poet. His first two novels, *Typee* (1845) and *Omoo* (1847) were well received by readers and resulted in commercial success. These novels were adventure stories, based on Melville’s experiences as a sailor on the merchant ship “St. Lawrence,” and later, on the whaling ship “Acushnet.” His sailing years came to an end in 1944. During his lifetime,



his other novels – *Mardi* (1849), *Redburn* (1849), *Moby Dick* (1851), and *Pierre* (1852), did not receive either critical acclaim, or commercial success. Melville turned to writing short stories; Putnam's Monthly Magazine published "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853), "The Encantadas" (1854), and "Benito Cereno" (1855). After a tour of Europe and the Levant in 1856, he once again went back to the novel genre, and wrote *The Confidence-Man* (1857). In 1866, he published his first book of verse *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*, for private readership. He also took up employment as a customs inspector on the docks of New York, for a regular source of income, and continued in the job for the next nineteen years. His last work, *Billy Budd*, an unfinished novel was published posthumously in 1924. Melville died in 1891, his literary genius unacknowledged during his lifetime. Today he is recognized as one of the greatest American writers, and his novel *Moby Dick* is counted among the greatest novels ever written.

3. DETAILED SUMMARY

The unnamed Narrator begins the story by first contextualizing the narrative. He introduces himself as a "rather elderly man"¹ (1), a lawyer by profession who deals with "rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title deeds"(1), who is content in applying his legal expertise to legal matters that do not necessitate ever addressing a jury in a court room. His one motto in life is, "the easiest way of life is the best"(1). His profession however, necessitated constant interaction with scriveners, or law-copyists, whom he engaged for making hand-written copies of documents.

The Narrator states that, the scriveners belong to a class of people who find no mention whatsoever in any kind of writing. The story he is about to narrate is of one particular scrivener – Bartleby – who, according to him, was the most peculiar of all the scriveners he had ever met. The life of Bartleby is a mystery; nothing is known about his antecedents except a vague report, which the Narrator comes across, much after the events described in the story.

Having firmly established that this story is about Bartleby, the Narrator moves on to describe his office, and his other employees before the advent of Bartleby. His office in Wall Street is bookended by two windows – one window opens on to a white wall of a sky-light shaft, and the other gave an "unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall"(2). He has two scriveners, Turkey and Nippers, and a twelve year old office boy Ginger Nut working for him. Turkey is a short overweight English man of around sixty years,

1 Herman Melville. "Bartleby, The Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street". Chennai: Notion Press, 2019. All subsequent references to the text are from this edition.



prone to extreme irritability in the afternoon, often leaving inkblots on the documents. He is however extremely productive in terms of work output, before noon. Although, his employer, the Narrator had tried to dispense with his services in the afternoon, citing his old age as a reason, it was resisted by Turkey, and so he continued to work for the entire day. Nippers, the other scrivener is twenty-five years old, and is a “victim of two evil powers – ambition and indigestion”(4). His ambition made him impatient with his work as a copyist, probably because he considered it inferior work as compared to the drafting of legal documents. He also expressed his dis-satisfaction with the height of his desk by constantly fidgeting with it. He however, has a clean, neat, and swift hand, and also dressed extremely well. Nippers, the Narrator tells us, is calm and professional in the afternoon, but the same could not be said of his temperament in the morning hours. Ginger Nut, is ostensibly a student at law, but we do not see him working in this capacity. He is basically an errand boy, who cleans and sweeps the office, and though he has a desk, he hardly ever uses it. One of his chores, which he accomplishes with much alacrity, is to supply Turkey and Nippers with ginger nut cakes throughout the day. This is what seemed to have earned him, his nick-name Ginger Nut.

Check Your Progress

1. Who is a scrivener?
2. How does the Narrator describe himself?
3. Write a short note on Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut.

Into this set-up, enters Bartleby, “a motionless young man...pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn!” (6). He is employed by the Narrator, owing to an increase in business, when he is made the Master of Chancery. The Narrator hopes that Bartleby’s “singularly sedate” nature will bring some amount of balance to the “flighty temper of Turkey and the fiery one of Nippers”(7). The office space of the Narrator is separated from the rest of the area with glass-doors. Bartleby is placed in a corner away from the others, near the window overlooking the “lofty brick wall”. The Narrator also puts up a green folding screen which keeps Bartleby practically hidden, but is within his earshot.

Bartleby, is an excellent worker, who accomplishes an enormous amount of copying, without taking any breaks. The Narrator comments that, Bartleby did not seem to enjoy his work, instead he did it “silently, palely, mechanically”(7). Apart from making copies of documents, the work of a scrivener also entailed checking the copies for mistakes. This is carried out, by two or more scriveners (if there are multiple copies) where one reads and the other makes the corrections. The Narrator claims that sometimes he helped out with correcting the copy. On the third day of Bartleby’s employment, when the Narrator



calls Bartleby for the correcting process, without moving from behind the green screen, Bartleby replies, “I would prefer not to”(8).

At first, the Narrator thinks he has mis-heard Bartleby. He goes over to Bartleby’s desk and repeats the request, and thrusts the copy towards him. Bartleby doesn’t take the copy, and replies as earlier with, “I would prefer not to”. Since the Narrator does not detect any “uneasiness, anger, impatience or impertinence”(8) in Bartleby’s demeanour, he lets this incident pass, and resolves to deal with it later.

A few days later, when Bartleby finishes making four copies of a lengthy testimony, the Narrator calls Turkey, Nippers, Ginger Nut and Bartleby to make the corrections. Bartleby comes from behind his screen and simply states that he “would prefer not to” be a part of it. The Narrator first asks Bartleby his reasons for the refusal, and then tries to reason with him, but to no avail. Bartleby counters everything with “I would prefer not to”. There is common agreement among the other staff that Bartleby is being unreasonable; Nippers thinks Bartleby should be kicked out, and Ginger Nut calls him a “little lunny”(9), but the Narrator once again postpones taking any action.

Due to Bartleby’s peculiar and unreasonable behaviour, the Narrator states that he started closely watching Bartleby. He observes that Bartleby never seems to step out of the office at all. His only indulgence is the handful of ginger nut cakes which Ginger Nut the office boy delivers at his table at around 11 am. It appears as though this is the sum total of his diet. The Narrator, who takes pride in being an honest man with a good conscience, admits that although aggravated by the “passive resistance”(11) of Bartleby, his conscience allowed Bartleby the benefit of doubt. The reasons for not firing Bartleby for indiscipline, however are not entirely out of pity for his condition. The Narrator decides that retaining Bartleby does not cost him much; and for this small price he can feel good about being a charitable Christian. He writes, “Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby; to humour him in his strange willfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience”(11). The Narrator is also concerned that any other employer may not tolerate Bartleby’s odd behaviour, and he might end up on the streets as a destitute.

Although the Narrator decides to accept Bartleby as he is, he admits to being irritated at times, by the passiveness of Bartleby, and occasionally tried to break the shell of passivity and draw an angry response from Bartleby. A few days later prompted by what the Narrator calls an “evil impulse”(11), he once again asks Bartleby to compare papers. He receives the same stock answer. This time when Turkey is asked about his opinion on Bartleby’s behaviour, the time being afternoon, Turkey in his drunken state offers to “black his eyes for him”(12), and almost carries out this threat, but is prevented by the Narrator.



Nippers' opinion on the other hand, is more balanced. He leaves the matter to the Narrator, with the advice that dismissing Bartleby from the job, might be a justified course of action, given the circumstances. Turkey, however, comments that Nippers change in stance from earlier, when he had proposed kicking out Bartleby, is due to the beer consumed by him at lunch. The Narrator walks over to Bartleby and asks him to collect something from the post office as Ginger Nut is not in the office. Bartleby replies with "prefer not to." When the Narrator asks him if he "will not," Bartleby repeats that he would "prefer not to." At his wits end, the Narrator calls out for Bartleby. Bartleby responds only on the third call, stands at the entrance of his part of the screened-in portion, looking "like a very ghost"(13). He asks Bartleby to call Nippers over, and again Bartleby repeats, what has now become his stock reply. Since there is no disrespect or aggression in Bartleby's tone, the Narrator reconciles himself to keeping Bartleby on the job as a copyist, without the additional duties that the job entails.

With this new understanding, the Narrator starts to appreciate Bartleby's work ethics. He observes that Bartleby is invariably the first one at the desk in the office in the morning, and the last one at the desk at night. He is consistent with his work and also trustworthy. Just to check if Bartleby's behaviour has altered, once in a while the Narrator asks Bartleby to do other work. The answer, however, continues to be "prefer not to."

Check Your Progress

1. How does the Narrator describe Bartleby?
2. What does Bartleby "prefer not to" do?
3. What is the first instance of Bartleby's "passive resistance"?
4. Why does the Narrator not take any action against Bartleby? Cite three reasons given by him.
5. How do the other employees react to Bartleby's behaviour?

One Sunday on his way to the church, the Narrator decides to stop by his office. Upon arrival there, he is unable to unlock the door, as there is already another key inserted from the inside of the office. The Narrator discovers that Bartleby is using the office as his home. Since he is "deeply engaged"(14), Bartleby prevents the Narrator from entering his own office, and asks him to return after some time. When the Narrator returns after sometime, Bartleby is not in the office. The Narrator finds a blanket, toiletries, and food, stashed under the desk, and some coins tied up in an old handkerchief, in the drawer of the desk. Initially, the Narrator is seized by pity which causes him to ruminate over the nature of loneliness and happiness. He writes, "... Ah, happiness courts the light, so we



deem the world is gay, but misery hides aloof, so we deem that misery there is none”(16). This feeling however, soon changes into repulsion, where he begins to consider his own “tame compliance”(17) to Bartleby’s unreasonable and eccentric behaviour. He concludes that the condition of Bartleby is beyond repair, as his ailment pertains not to the body but to the soul, which is beyond his reach. The Narrator heads back home and intends to dismiss Bartleby with a bonus of twenty dollars, and a promise of help in the future, should he need it. The next day however, because of a “superstitions knocking”(18) that arouses his Christian conscience, he does not dismiss Bartleby; instead he asks him to comply with all his duties and be reasonable. Bartleby replies that “he would prefer not to be reasonable”(18). The day after this incident, Bartleby refuses to do even the copying work and does nothing but “stand at his window in his dead wall reverie”(20). The Narrator notices that the others in the office, including himself, have started adopting Bartleby’s phrase, especially the word “prefer”. Before Bartleby’s attitude creates a disciplinary issue in the office, the Narrator finally gives Bartleby a six-day notice and asks him to vacate the office premises within that period. Bartleby of course, does not comply. The Narrator here refers to the murder of Samuel Adams by John colt in the office. Although this incident is not directly related to the story, the Narrator is inclined to believe that in the absence of “humanizing domestic associations,” disagreements in an office can result in fatal consequences. This time too, the Narrator’s Christian conscience, prevents him from any precipitate action. He also convinces himself that God for a reason has intended Bartleby to be a part of his life, and it is not his place to question God’s mysterious ways.

Check Your Progress

1. How does the Narrator find out that Bartleby has been living in the office?
2. What are the two conflicting emotions experienced by the Narrator?
3. Despite his resolve to dismiss Bartleby, why does the Narrator hold back?
4. What instance of resistance do you find in this part of the story?

In a lawyers meeting held in the Narrator’s office, Bartleby refuses to run an errand for one of the lawyers. In the lawyer’s circle, Bartleby’s refusal becomes a talking point, and the relationship between the Narrator and Bartleby comes under scrutiny. Perceiving a serious threat to his reputation as a lawyer, the Narrator decides to shift his office altogether to a new location, and warns Bartleby that he will be treated as a “common trespasser” if he finds him at the new premises.

The new tenant, a lawyer who has rented the Narrator’s old office arrives one day and tells the Narrator that he is responsible for Bartleby, and therefore he should make him vacate the office. Upon being told that Bartleby means “nothing” to him, the lawyer



leaves declaring that he will sort out the problem. The problem however, does not get resolved. The lawyer pays another visit to the Narrator's office, and this time he has the landlord and other tenants of the building with him. The Narrator is informed that, Bartleby on being forced out of the earlier office of the Narrator, has now taken to "sitting upon the banisters of the stairs by day, and sleeping in the entry by night" (28). The Narrator meets Bartleby once again, to convince Bartleby to vacate the premises. The Narrator not only offers to keep Bartleby at his own home, but also offers to find jobs - clerkship, bar tender, travel companion- should he be interested. This offer is rejected by Bartleby as he prefers "not to make a change at all"(30). This, however, is not the end of the Narrator's association with Bartleby. Apprehensive that he might be "hunted out by the incensed landlord," the Narrator leaves the city for the suburbs, leaving his office in the care of Nippers. Upon his return from the suburbs, he finds a note from the landlord informing him that Bartleby has been shifted to the Tombs (prison) by the police, and that the Narrator's presence is required to furnish details regarding Bartleby.

Twice, the Narrator visits the prison where Bartleby is lodged. The first time, the Narrator finds Bartleby "his face towards a high wall"(31), in the courtyard of the prison surrounded by the prison cells. Bartleby has been given this space to move about freely, as he is not violent and there is no serious charge against him. Bartleby recognizes the Narrator, but has "nothing to say"(31) to him. When the Narrator remarks that he was not the cause for Bartleby's imprisonment, and the prison by itself, is not disagreeable, Bartleby replies, "I know where I am"(32). On the way out, the Narrator gives money to the "grubman", to provide Bartleby with a good dinner. Bartleby in his customary fashion says that he would "prefer not to dine today"(32), and walks over to a "dead wall" and stands facing it as earlier.

The Narrator returns to the prison after a few days, and finds Bartleby curled up, at the base of a wall in the courtyard, with walls of "amazing thickness"(33), all around. His body looked emaciated, and although his eyes were open, he seemed to be in deep sleep. Sensing that something is amiss, the Narrator touches him and becomes aware that Bartleby is dead. He closes Bartleby's eyes for the last time, and when the "grubman" comments that Bartleby is asleep, the Narrator replies "with kings and counselors"(34).

At this point the Narrator brings his narration to a close. He, however, discloses "one little item of rumour"(34) he had heard concerning Bartleby after his death. Prior to his employment at the Narrator's office, Bartleby had been employed as a clerk in the "Dead Letter Office" in Washington. The Narrator becomes emotional here, and notes that perhaps the task of burning dead letters must have heightened the sense of hopelessness



in *Bartleby*. He writes, “Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men?... pardon for those who died despairing, hope for those who died unhoping; good tidings for those who died stifled by unrelieved calamities. On errands of life, these letters speed to death. Ah *Bartleby*! Ah Humanity!”(34)

Check Your Progress

1. Why does the Narrator shift his office?
2. How many times does the new tenant visit the Narrator and why?
3. Describe the two visits that the Narrator makes to the prison.
4. What is the rumour concerning *Bartleby* that the Narrator refers to?

4. CRITICAL NOTES

4.1 Significance of the Title

The title of the story is “*Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*.” Although the story is primarily about *Bartleby*, the subtitle alerts us to the fact that this is also the story of the Wall Street, thereby expanding the scope of the story to include, the general condition/state of a particular set of people who occupy the Wall Street offices.

The setting of the story which is Wall Street is significant, because by 1850’s Wall Street, where the New York Stock Exchange is located became the financial capital of the country. This resulted in the movement of people from farming and agriculture to indifferent clerical jobs like the one in which we find *Bartleby*. The shift can be seen as one from free, open spaces, to an enclosed space, that is an office. The office space as seen in the story is dreary, dull, and impersonal, totally disconnected from the outside world by the two walls, one white and the other brick, blocking the view from the windows.

Throughout the story, the metaphor of “walls” is used to reinforce the sense of isolation and alienation experienced by people like *Bartleby*, in a city driven by finance, who cannot connect either with the work they do, or with the people around them. If we look at *Bartleby*’s positioning in the office, he faces two walls: one, the office wall, and the second, the brick wall outside the window. Inside the office, there is a folding screen, which acts like a wall and isolates him from the rest of the office. When we see *Bartleby* for the last time, he is “huddled at the base of the wall”(33), in a prison courtyard, surrounded by “...walls, of amazing thickness”(33), sleeping with his “dim eyes”(33) open. The Narrator, closes *Bartleby*’s eyes. In death as in life, we see *Bartleby* surrounded by walls.

**Check Your Progress**

1. Explain the significance of the sub-title.
2. What is conveyed through the metaphor of “walls”?

4.2 Character Analysis

Other than Bartleby, none of the other characters have names. The Narrator introduces himself as an elderly lawyer, but does not divulge his name. Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut are nicknames, given by them to each other in the office, and they are addressed as such. In a sense, the characters are practically anonymous, much like Bartleby. We know nothing about them, except for the work they do, and the characteristics and peculiarities they exhibit within the professional space of the office. Bartleby does not fit into the society he is in; he simply withdraws from it, and resists all attempts made by the Narrator to draw him back into the society. The others are misfits too, but cope with the situation in different ways.

The Narrator: The Narrator comes across as a good man, torn between his Christian moral conscience and his business interests. He writes, “To befriend Bartleby; to humour him in his strange willfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience”(11). In the face of Bartleby’s passive resistance, he exhibits charity and compassion, much more than any other normal person would. There are many instances (read summary), when he could have dispensed with Bartleby’s services, but he does not. He tells himself, “At last I see it, I feel it; I penetrate to the predestinated purpose of life... others may have loftier parts to enact; but my mission in this world, Bartleby, is to furnish you with office-room for such period as you see fit to remain”(25). This charitable disposition is also evident in his treatment of the other two employees, Nippers and Turkey, neither of which, does an entire day’s work. His charity, however, comes to an end when Bartleby’s presence in the office threatens his reputation and larger business interests. Even after shifting his office premises, he makes one more effort to make Bartleby see reason. He offers Bartleby not only his job back, but also the use of his own home for lodging. The Narrator despite all his efforts, is unable to connect with Bartleby. His inability to connect, makes him try harder, and the harder he tries the more is his disappointment. His emotions range from compassion, pity, and melancholy, to downright resentment, disgust and anger. For some reason, he is unable to abandon Bartleby. We wonder if this is because in Bartleby’s condition, he recognizes a general condition of all mankind in varying measures- the loneliness, isolation and the inability to connect. The story is as much about the Narrator and his complex feelings for Bartleby, as it is about Bartleby. Many critics



have pointed out that this story written after Bartleby's death, is a "dead letter" to Bartleby, expressing all the things that he could not say, when Bartleby was alive.

Bartleby: In the summary part of this lesson, we have seen how Bartleby in an incremental manner, keeps increasing the range of things he would "prefer not to" do. Let us list out the various things he prefers not to: 1. compare and correct copies of documents, 2. run errands, 3. divulge personal information, 4. vacate the office premises after work and on weekends, 5. do the copying work, 6. vacate the office even after the narrator leaves the premises and sets up office elsewhere, 7. come and live with the narrator at his home, 8. seek other kind of employment, 9. Eat nothing at all, not even the ginger nut cakes.

Although the others in the office think of him as a "lunatic", we know that this is not true. Bartleby is well aware of the choices he is making and this is evident from the conversations he has with the narrator. At one point the narrator concludes that Bartleby's affliction is not of the body but of the "soul". The growing range of his resistances, culminates in a general resistance to life itself. Perhaps it is a recognition of this aspect of his "passive resistance", which unsettles the narrator to the extent that he is unwilling to abandon Bartleby altogether. What is it about life itself, that Bartleby is putting up a resistance to? This is left to the readers interpretation. Maybe it is the materialistic culture which believes in vulgar display and consumption; or maybe it is the general condition of modern human life – lack of rootedness and compassion, inability to connect with one another, purposelessness of life, loneliness and isolation – that Bartleby prefers not to be a part of.

Check Your Progress

1. Critically analyse the two main characters of the story, citing references from the text.

4.3 Theme of Passive Resistance

The Narrator, a successful lawyer, with his office in wall street, describes Bartleby as a "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn"(6) figure who works "silently, palely mechanically"(7), separated from the rest of the office by a screen door, with only the brick wall for company, which can be viewed from the window, on his side of the wall. He copies legal documents, and initially his work output is stupendous. The Narrator tells us that, "Bartleby did an extraordinary quantity of writing. As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents."(7) He, however, refuses to comply with any other requests related to work, such as comparing copies, as this would necessitate working with others. He prefers to be in isolation and refuses to interact with others. This isolation, is not simply restricted to the office space and co-workers. As the story unravels, we see that he survives on a few biscuits, never steps out of the office more specifically his



screened-in part of the office, has no family or friends. He is later discovered to be using the office, as his home. Bartleby's statement "I like to be stationary"(30) is literal; he eats, sleeps and works at the same place. Bartleby's isolation is complete, there is a private world he inhabits which does not include anyone or anything outside himself. He is at various times described as "motionless", "sedate" and "still".

Throughout the initial part of the story he repeatedly uses the phrase "I would prefer not to", whenever he is asked to do work which is other than copying. This evokes at times a violent response from Turkey and Nippers. Jane Desmarais in the article "Preferring not to: The Paradox of Passive Resistance in Herman Melville's "Bartleby"" writes:

"In their simplicity and politeness, these five words – "I would prefer not to"- and the use of the verb "prefer" most notably - achieve a paradoxical significance within the narrative. The statement juxtaposes a conditional with a negative sense, and this lends the reply its force. On the one hand, Bartleby refuses politely, using the conditional form "would" suggesting that there might be a choice in the matter. On the other hand, this choice and therefore expression of politeness is an illusion, for Bartleby blatantly refuses to do anything asked of him. What we witness in the story is a form of resistance based on the paradox of appearing to yield while yielding not at all. Bartleby's politeness is brow-beatingly powerful, disarming both the reader and the Narrator. How could one fault such a gentle reply? Even when challenged "You *will* not?" Bartleby counters with a quiet "I *prefer* not." Like the semblance of choice in his response, "prefer" is both illusive and allusive. Unspecific in what it refers to, the word alludes to a choice which it denies. The implicit suggestion that there might be something Bartleby would prefer to do is an illusion. The use of the word, "prefer", then, appears contradictory and strikes an ambiguous note in the story. A comparative verb is articulated by Bartleby as an absolute. The Narrator declares that he is "More a man of preferences than assumptions", but Bartleby effectively turns the expression of preference into a statement which has the force of an assumption." (Desmarais para-2)

After some time, Bartleby decides that he would "prefer not to" do even the copying work, and does "nothing but stand at his window in his dead-wall reverie"(20). Moreover, the Narrator notices that the others in the office, including himself, have started using the word "prefer", and before Bartleby's attitude causes disciplinary issues in the office, he decides to dismiss Bartleby with a twenty-dollar bonus and asks him to vacate the office within six days. Towards the end of the story, inside the prison, Bartleby refuses to eat altogether, and thereby chooses not to live. In all this resistance, he is always polite and courteous. He makes no demands and refuses all offers of help in whatever form. In a nutshell, Bartleby's resistance is a series of refusals in verbal form and despite provocation from other colleagues



never takes the form of a physical confrontation. Deleuze describes the quiet, dignified, “agrammatical” Bartleby as a modern Messiah: “A schizophrenic vocation: even in his catatonic or anorexic state, Bartleby is not the patient, but the doctor of a sick America, the Medicine-Man, the new Christ or the brother to us all.” (qtd. in Desmarais para 8)

This passive resistance of Bartleby has been interpreted by many critics as a political statement against the dehumanizing and alienating effect of American Capitalism, its consumerism and greed. Bartleby, one of the many insignificant scriveners, whose work is monotonous and uncreative, refuses to accept the condition of life and work imposed upon him. He will neither consume, nor will he comply.

Check Your Progress

1. Explain the paradoxical significance within the narrative of the five words “I would prefer not to.”

5. SUMMING UP

In this lesson, we have:

- Summarized the story in detail.
- Analysed the significance of “Wall Street” in the subtitle.
- Analysed how the metaphor of “walls” informs the issue of alienation and isolation.
- Analysed the two main Characters, the Narrator and Bartleby.
- Explored the theme of passive resistance.

6. REFERENCES

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WALT WHITMAN

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STRUCTURE

Part 1: O Captain, My Captain by Walt Whitman (1819-1892)

1. *Learning Objectives*
2. *Introduction*
3. *Poem: “O Captain, My Captain”*
4. *Critical Analysis*

PART 2-Passage to India (lines 1-68) by Walt Whitman

1. *Learning Objectives*
2. *Poem: “Passage to India” (Lines 1-68)*
3. *Critical Analysis*
4. *Critical Responses to ‘Passage to India’*
5. *References (Part 1 and Part 2)*

PART 1: O Captain, My Captain by Walt Whitman (1819-1892)**1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

After having gone through this study material you would be able to:

- Place the poem in its historical context and understand the various influences that shaped the poem.
- Analyze the literary devices and imagery used in the poem.
- Explore the themes of grief, loss, and patriotism within the larger contexts of the poem.
- Appreciate the poem’s significance as an elegy on Lincoln’s death and also as a tribute to Lincoln’s legacy.



2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 Walt Whitman's Life and Work

Walt Whitman (1819-1892) not only had a huge impact on his nineteenth-century contemporaries but also on present-day American scholars. His biggest achievement was, perhaps, to give American literature an identity of its own. Ralph Waldo Emerson had said that an American scholar would liberate America from Europe. Whitman did that by creating literature that is recognizably American. The challenge for Whitman was, like any other American scholar, to create something American using the language and the literary traditions and that were inherently European and specifically British.

Whitman was born in Long Island but subsequently moved to Brooklyn. There he was influenced by Quakers, who believed in the personal relationship of man with God. The simple living of Quakers and their belief in the equality of all human beings along with the values attached to democracy, created an everlasting impact on Whitman. During the seventeenth century, English Quakers were advocates of the freedom to express their religious beliefs through their dress, language, and conduct that was symbolically aligned with their faith. Their collective actions encompassed not only public displays of their beliefs but also the willingness to endure the penalties imposed on them for the same. This was accompanied by well-argued protests, defenses, and written explanations disseminated among the public. Following persistent advocacy spanning four decades, their endeavors culminated in the establishment of public tolerance and freedoms, which were formally acknowledged through the comprehensive Act of Toleration in 1689. This significant historical event served as an illustrative model wherein a conscientious minority, through peaceful persuasion, brought about substantial changes in the mindset and legislative frameworks of the majority.²

Prior to the release of his notable work, *Leaves of Grass*, in 1855, Whitman served as an editor for three newspapers and contributed numerous reviews, editorials, and human-interest stories in and around New York City. He was an occasional writer and a hesitant teacher from 1838 to 1841 but worked as a full-time editor for well-known newspapers such as the New York Aurora and the Brooklyn Daily Eagle between 1842 and 1848. Whitman's experience in journalism prompted him to explore other means of expressing American life and convey the sentiments of the American people.

Whitman also served as a nurse in Brooklyn attending to Union soldiers injured in the Civil War. He saw plenty of weak and suffering men and saw death from very close

2 Note: Students can read more about Quakers impact on Walt Whitman's work in Susan Day Dean's essay "Quakers and Quakerism" in J.R. LeMaster and Donald D. Kummings, eds., *Walt Whitman: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998). whitmanarchive.org/criticism/current/encyclopedia/entry_620.html



quarters. This would subsequently lead him to interrogate notions of masculinity. “The Wound Dresser”, one of Whitman’s “Drum Taps” poems, is an eloquent description of his service as a nurse during the Civil War. Apart from being a teacher, writer, and journalist, Whitman emerges in this poem as a caring, gentle, and capable nurse.

To conclude, we can say that Walt Whitman’s enduring influence on American literature and culture is marked by his profound efforts to establish a distinct American voice, liberated from European traditions. Influenced by the values of equality and democracy, he ventured into journalism, education, and poetry, eventually leaving an indelible mark through his compassionate service as a nurse during the Civil War. Whitman’s multifaceted contributions embody the spirit of an American scholar, resonating with his contemporaries and continuing to captivate the attention of present-day scholars and readers alike.

Check Your Progress

1. What impact did Whitman have on his contemporaries and modern American scholars?
2. How did the influence of Quakers shape Whitman’s values and beliefs?
3. How did Whitman contribute to journalism before gaining recognition as a poet?
4. How did Whitman’s experience as a nurse during the Civil War influence his perspective on masculinity?

2.2 Walt Whitman and American Poetry

During Walt Whitman’s time in the 19th century, American poetry was undergoing a significant transformation. Prior to his groundbreaking work, American poetry largely adhered to European forms and traditions. Poets like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Edgar Allan Poe were prominent figures, emphasizing structured verse and themes often drawn from European romanticism and gothic literature. However, with the emergence of Whitman, American poetry witnessed a radical departure. He broke away from the established norms, creating a uniquely American poetic voice characterized by free verse, unconventional themes, and a celebration of the common man. Whitman’s work marked a shift towards a more democratic, expansive, and distinctly American poetic tradition that celebrated the nation’s diversity, individualism, and emerging identity. This departure from the established forms laid the groundwork for subsequent generations of American poets to experiment with form, content, and expression, paving the way for a more inclusive and innovative approach to poetic art.

Walt Whitman’s work, in his times, received a mixed reception, reflecting the divergence of opinions within the literary community. Many celebrated Whitman’s innovative



approach to poetry, recognizing the bold departure he made from the traditional forms and themes of his times. His emphasis on individualism, democracy, and the celebration of the common man resonated with those who sought a distinctly American voice in literature.

Prominent literary figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau praised Whitman's ability to capture the spirit of the American experience and his unapologetic celebration of human diversity. They lauded his use of free verse, which enabled a more natural and organic expression, as well as his candid portrayal of human experiences, which challenged the prevailing norms of the time. Whitman's work was seen as a reflection of a growing national consciousness and a departure from the rigid literary conventions that had dominated American poetry until then.

On the other hand, Whitman's work faced significant criticism and backlash from conservative literary circles. His overt celebration of sensuality, inclusion of taboo subjects such as sexuality, and his frank portrayal of the human body were deemed scandalous and offensive by many.

His rejection of traditional rhyme and meter was seen as a departure from the established norms of poetic craftsmanship leading some critics to dismiss his work as chaotic and formless. Additionally, Whitman's overt references to the body and sexuality were often seen as vulgar and inappropriate, drawing condemnation from those who adhered to stricter moral codes. Some critics also found fault with the perceived lack of structure and refinement in his work and criticized his unorthodox style as a departure from the refined and polished poetry that was favored during his time. Whitman's open embrace of democracy and his celebration of the common man also faced criticism. His work was criticized for lacking the sophistication and intellectual depth expected of serious poetry.

Walt Whitman's expansive and diverse vocabulary draws from an eclectic range of disciplines, reflecting his multidimensional approach to poetry. His work often incorporates terminology from various fields, including anatomy, reflecting a keen attention to the human body and its intricate workings. Additionally, his exploration of the cosmos finds expression through rich astronomical references, portraying a fascination with celestial phenomena and the mysteries of the universe.

Whitman's use of carpentry and construction terms, such as "kelson," points to his interest in the practical aspects of building and engineering and his appreciation for the industrious spirit of America. Furthermore, his employment of military and war-related terminology not only underscores his engagement with the tumultuous historical context of his time but also captures the intensity and gravity of wartime experiences.

Nautical terms and references to the sea permeate his work illustrating his profound connection to maritime imagery and the vastness of the natural world. Additionally, his



incorporation of businesses and professions showcases an acute awareness of the socio-economic landscape highlighting the intricacies of American society.

Finally, his inclusion of the diverse flora and fauna of America reflects his reverence for nature and the organic beauty of the American landscape.

Check Your Progress

1. How did Walt Whitman's poetry represent a departure from the established norms of American poetry in the 19th century?
2. What were the initial reactions of prominent literary figures such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau to Whitman's poetry, and what aspects of his work did they particularly praise?
3. How did conservative literary circles respond to Walt Whitman's work during his time, and what were some of the criticisms levelled against his poetry?
4. What were some of the specific elements of Whitman's work that were considered scandalous and offensive by his contemporary critics?
5. In what ways did Whitman's poetry challenge the prevailing literary conventions and contribute to a more inclusive and innovative approach to poetic art in America?

3. POEM: "O CAPTAIN, MY CAPTAIN"

O Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;
 But O heart! heart! heart!
 O the bleeding drops of red,
 Where on the deck my Captain lies,
 Fallen cold and dead.
O Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you, the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,
For you bouquets and ribbon'd wreaths—for you the shores a-crowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
 Here Captain! dear father!



This arm beneath your head!
It is some dream that on the deck,
You've fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,
The ship is anchor'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done,
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;
Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
But I with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

4. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

4.1 Background

In 1865 the poem “O Captain, My Captain” was featured in his collection *Leaves of Grass*, which garnered both controversy and widespread acclaim. Whitman was deeply affected by the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln on April 14, 1865. Despite his satisfaction with the outcome of the Civil War, Whitman experienced great sorrow over the loss of his esteemed “Captain”. Lincoln, who led the United States during the American Civil War, was also committed to secure freedom and dignity for enslaved African Americans. Despite the war’s successful resolution and the emancipation of the slaves, Lincoln tragically fell victim to an assassin’s bullet shortly after his re-election as president. Whitman delivered a memorial lecture on the anniversary of Lincoln’s assassination annually concluding with a heartfelt recitation of “O Captain! My Captain!”. The final recitation occurred in 1890, two years before Whitman’s passing away. “O Captain! My Captain!” emerged as Whitman’s most widely recited and most popular poem.

The poem uses the idea of “Lincoln as the Captain,” to highlight the challenges faced by Lincoln as a leader of a country passing through tumultuous times. Just like the captain of a ship who guides his ship through rough seas and stormy weather, Lincoln was navigating the country towards its destiny. The poet employs the imagery of a ship navigating rough waters to represent the challenges faced during the Civil War under Lincoln’s guidance, illustrating his significant achievements through the metaphor of the captain. Despite the rejoicing in the atmosphere following the war, the poet mourns the loss of Lincoln and pays a sorrowful tribute.



4.2 Stanza 1-3

The first stanza paints a picture of the nation as a ship overcoming challenges, like sailing through a storm and reaching the port safely to symbolize the end of slavery. The poet turns the nation's hardships into relatable sailing experiences using this metaphor. It starts on a triumphant note, celebrating the successful end of a tough journey. The ship, standing for the nation, conquers obstacles to claim its prize. The nearness of the port and the ringing bells bring a feeling of accomplishment and relief.

However, this feeling of exultation is interrupted by the suddenness of the captain's death. The use of vivid imagery, such as "the bleeding drops of red," changes the tone from celebration to tragedy, and the deep sense of loss. The repetition of the exclamation "O" highlights the speaker's shock and grief. The stanza captures the mixed feelings around the end of the Civil War and the death of Lincoln by using the metaphor of the ships perilous but successful journey and the tragic death of the captain at the end.

In the second stanza, the poet employs the second person to engage in a conversation with the "Captain." He expresses both his deep yearning for the captain and his profound sorrow at the captain's demise. This stylistic choice intensifies the emotional connection. The tone shifts to a more personal and intimate level as the poet implores the captain to wake from what seems like a dream on the deck, revealing the speaker's deep sorrow and disbelief.

Another metaphor surfaces in the line "Here Captain! dear father!" within the poem, suggesting a parallel relationship between a country and a family, portraying the country as a familial unit. This metaphorical association highlights the role of President Lincoln, the leader of the nation, akin to that of the head of a family.

This metaphorical association not only emphasizes the importance of the captain but also highlights the broader theme of the country as a collective entity with a shared identity and destiny. The use of familial terms adds a layer of emotional depth to the poem, capturing the profound impact of the captain's death on the nation.

In the third stanza, the poet reaches a final conclusion with the line "Walk the deck my Captain lies, Fallen cold and dead," signifying the poet's acceptance of the harsh reality of Lincoln's demise. In the initial section, Whitman utilizes phrases like "the dangerous voyage has ended," "our ship returns safely," and "thousands of people are cheering and shouting" to vividly depict the triumphant scene of President Lincoln's victory and the enthusiastic reception of the masses. The poem serves as a fervent tribute, extolling Lincoln's remarkable accomplishments. The subsequent segment portrays a spectacle of fluttering banners, and resounding horns, as well as the presence of bouquets, ribbons, wreaths, and eager faces, all of which reflect the profound admiration and affection people had for Lincoln.



The poem employs a technique that initially presents a tranquil atmosphere, followed by a sudden shift to an exuberant depiction. This stark contrast is achieved by juxtaposing the celebratory ambience with the stark reality of “the red blood drops” and the fallen captain. This contrast intensifies the poet’s and the people’s grief, heightening the poem’s artistic impact.

In the final segment, “the ship is at anchor, but the captain has fallen”, the poem affirms Lincoln’s significant historical contributions while conveying the poet’s deep sorrow at his demise. The poet delicately navigates through his mournful emotions and effectively conveys these sentiments.

4.3 Poetic Devices and Form

‘O Captain! My Captain!’ stands as one of Whitman’s notable poems characterized by its rhyme and nearly regular meter. Composed of three stanzas, each consisting of eight lines, the poem adheres to a structured rhyme scheme. This showcases Whitman’s adeptness in employing a disciplined poetic form. The poem is fundamentally an elegy, a literary form designed to express grief and sorrow for the loss of a specific individual. In this context, the poem serves as a formal and sustained lament on the death of the esteemed President Abraham Lincoln, underscoring the profound impact of Lincoln’s passing away on the American nation.

Moreover, Whitman skillfully utilizes various metaphors in ‘O Captain! My Captain!’ to represent the United States as a ship and President Lincoln as its captain. The turmoil of the Civil War waged against the Southern States is represented as the tumultuous voyage undertaken by the captain, thereby magnifying the broader historical significance embedded within the poetic lament.

Check Your Progress

1. What was the impact of Whitman’s “O Captain! My Captain!” following its inclusion in the collection *Leaves of Grass*?
2. How does the metaphor of the ship and the captain symbolize the relationship between Abraham Lincoln and the United States in Whitman’s poem?
3. What is the significance of the use of the second person and the metaphor of the captain as a father figure in the second stanza of “O Captain! My Captain!”?
4. How does Whitman’s poem transition from an atmosphere of celebration to one of mourning, and what effect does this shift have on the poem’s emotional impact?
5. In what ways does “O Captain! My Captain!” adhere to a structured poetic form, and how does it function as an elegy for the loss of President Abraham Lincoln?

**PART 2: Passage to India (lines 1-68) by Walt Whitman****1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

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

- Identify thematic shifts in Whitman's "Passage to India" that explore the significance of the past in shaping contemporary progress.
- Evaluate the impact of Whitman's use of motifs and imagery, such as the motif of connectivity and vivid sensory imagery, to point out the interconnectedness of civilizations.
- Analyze the rhythmic structure and use of poetic devices in "Passage to India," including anaphora, sensory imagery, and personification.
- Examine the critical reception of "Passage to India" by various essayists.
- Assess Whitman's transition from the poet of the body to the poet of the soul and its implications on his later works, and how "Passage to India" represents a departure from his earlier style and themes.

2. POEM: "PASSAGE TO INDIA" (LINES 1-68)

Singing my days,
Singing the great achievements of the present,
Singing the strong light works of engineers,
Our modern wonders, (the antique ponderous Seven outvied,)
In the Old World the east the Suez canal,
The New by its mighty railroad spann'd,
The seas inlaid with eloquent gentle wires;
Yet first to sound, and ever sound, the cry with thee O soul,
The Past! the Past! the Past!
The Past— the dark unfathom'd retrospect!
The teeming gulf—the sleepers and the shadows!
The past—the infinite greatness of the past!
For what is the present after all but a growth out of the past?
(As a projectile, form'd, impell'd, passing a certain line, still keeps on,



So the present, utterly form'd, impell'd by the past.)
Passage O soul to India!
Eclaircise the myths Asiatic, the primitive fables.
Not you alone proud truths of the world!
Nor you alone ye facts of modern science,
But myths and fables of eld, Asia's, Africa's fables,
The far-darting beams of the spirit, the unloos'd dreams!
The deep diving bibles and legends,
The daring plots of the poets, the elder religions;
O you temples fairer than lilies pour'd over by the rising sun!
O you fables spurning the known, eluding the hold of the known, mounting to
heaven!
You lofty and dazzling towers, pinnacled, red as roses, burnish'd with gold!
Towers of fables immortal fashion'd from mortal dreams!
You too I welcome and fully the same as the rest!
You too with joy I sing.
Passage to India!
Lo, soul, seest thou not God's purpose from the first?
The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,
The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,
The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,
The lands to be welded together.
A worship new I sing,
You captains, voyagers, explorers, yours,
You engineers, you architects, machinists, yours,
You, not for trade or transportation only,
But in God's name, and for thy sake O soul.
Passage to India!
Lo soul for thee of tableaux twain,



I see in one the Suez canal initiated, open'd,
I see the procession of steamships, the Empress Eugenie's leading the van,
I mark, from on deck the strange landscape, the pure sky, the level sand in the distance,
I pass swiftly the picturesque groups, the workmen gather'd,
The gigantic dredging machines.
In one again, different, (yet thine, all thine, O soul, the same,)
I see over my own continent the Pacific Railroad, surmounting every barrier,
I see continual trains of cars winding along the Platte, carrying freight and passengers,
I hear the locomotives rushing and roaring, and the shrill steam-whistle,
I hear the echoes reverberate through the grandest scenery in the world,
I cross the Laramie plains, I note the rocks in grotesque shapes, the buttes,
I see the plentiful larkspur and wild onions, the barren, colorless, sage-deserts,
I see in glimpses afar or towering immediately above me the great mountains, I see the
Wind River and the Wahsatch mountains,
I see the Monument mountain and the Eagle's Nest, I pass the Promontory, I ascend the Nevadas,
I scan the noble Elk mountain and wind around its base,
I see the Humboldt range, I thread the valley and cross the river,
I see the clear waters of Lake Tahoe, I see forests of majestic pines,
Or crossing the great desert, the alkaline plains, I behold enchanting mirages of waters and meadows,
Marking through these and after all, in duplicate slender lines,
Bridging the three or four thousand miles of land travel,
Tying the Eastern to the Western sea,
The road between Europe and Asia.
(Ah Genoese thy dream! thy dream!
Centuries after thou art laid in thy grave,
The shore thou foundest verifies thy dream.)



3. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

3.1 Choice of Words

Walt Whitman's opening lines of the poem "Passage to India" evoke a sense of celebration and admiration for the modern achievements of the contemporary era. Whitman's choice of words, such as 'singing' and 'strong light works of engineers,' coupled with the praise for the Suez Canal and the mighty railroad, emphasize the marvels of human ingenuity and progress. However, amid this praise for modern advancements, Whitman skillfully introduces a thematic shift by echoing the persistent cry for the past. The recurring emphasis on the 'Past,' coupled with terms like 'dark unfathom'd retrospect' and 'teeming gulf,' conveys a deep exploration of historical consciousness and the immeasurable significance of the past in shaping the present. This shift sets the tone for the subsequent exploration of ancient myths and fables from Asia and Africa. It seems like a deliberate attempt to bridge the gap between the East's historical narratives and the West's contemporary achievements.

3.2 Motifs and Imagery

Whitman's skilled use of motifs and imagery further enriches the poem's depth and meaning. He employs the motif of connectivity and union. The connectivity and union are symbolized by the network spanning the earth and the oceans being crossed. These motifs illustrate the interwoven nature of humanity and the interconnectedness of civilizations and reflects the overarching theme of unity and integration, both at a physical and metaphorical level. It also resonates with the larger context of global connectivity and cultural exchange.

The imagery of the Pacific Railroad overcoming obstacles, the locomotives rushing through scenic landscapes, and the depiction of natural wonders like the mountains and rivers accentuate the grandeur of the American continent and the monumental human endeavour to conquer nature. Whitman's choice of vivid imagery infuses the poem with a sense of vigour and vivid sensory experience, enabling the reader to have a sense of the vast and diverse landscapes crossed by the Pacific Railroad.

3.3 Structure

The rhythmic structure of the poem, characterized by Whitman's use of long, flowing lines and a cadence that mimics the movement of a train journey, contributes to the overall evocative quality of the verses. The repetitive use of the phrase "I see," coupled with vivid descriptions of landscapes and the activities along the journey, creates a rhythmic pattern that mirrors the motion and momentum of the train, thereby enhancing the immersive quality of the narrative. Whitman's rhythmic technique not only captures the essence of



the physical journey but also symbolizes the broader journey of human progress and the pursuit of collective aspirations.

“Passage to India” is a testament to Whitman’s unique ability to interweave historical contemplation with contemporary progress. This illustrates his deep appreciation for the interconnectedness of human experiences across time and space. Whitman’s profound exploration of the interplay between the past and the present is coupled with his masterful use of motifs, imagery, and rhythmic techniques. It solidifies the poem as a powerful testament to the spirit of human endeavour and the enduring legacy of historical consciousness.

3.4 Poetic Devices

Whitman’s masterful use of poetic devices further enriches the multifaceted narrative of “Passage to India.” The employment of **anaphora**, evident in the repetitive structure of the phrase ‘I see,’ creates a rhythm that echoes the steady progression of the train journey, thereby enhancing the sensory experience for the reader. This technique lends a rhythmic quality to his verses, amplifying their emotional impact and emphasizing the thematic elements central to his work.

Whitman’s use of varying line lengths and syllabic structures adds a layer of complexity and depth to his poetry. By manipulating the length and syllabic count of each line, he creates a diverse and dynamic tempo, enhancing the overall rhythm and tonal variations within his compositions. Tempo is the speed or pace of an author’s writing. In poetry, the overall tempo is called rhythm. Poets create a tempo by arranging words to create a specific rhythmic structure. This rhythmic structure is called a poetic meter. The poetic meter is a common feature of poetry. It is the systematic arrangement of words involving stressed and unstressed syllables.

The poet’s idiosyncratic approach to spelling and punctuation further distinguishes his works. His unconventional use of spelling and punctuation reflected his distinctive style and contributes to the overall uniqueness and individuality of his poetic voice, underscoring his status as a visionary and trailblazer in the American literature.

Additionally, the use of vivid sensory imagery, such as ‘the pure sky,’ ‘the level sand in the distance,’ and ‘the echoes reverberate through the grandest scenery in the world,’ evokes a real sense of place and atmosphere, inviting the reader to immerse themselves in the rich, panoramic landscapes of the American continent.

Whitman’s proficient use of personification, as seen in the depiction of the ‘gigantic dredging machines’ and the ‘shrill steam-whistle,’ infuses these industrial elements with a sense of liveliness and vigour, thereby humanizing the mechanical aspects of the journey. These poetic devices not only amplify the sensory experience but also contribute to the



overarching thematic exploration of human progress and the convergence of diverse cultures and landscapes along the demanding journey from the East to the West.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Whitman's use of words like 'singing' and 'strong light works of engineers' reflect his admiration for modern achievements in "Passage to India"?
2. What thematic shift does Whitman introduce in the poem, and how does it influence the overall tone and message?
3. Discuss how the motif of connectivity and the depiction of the Pacific Railroad's journey contribute to the overarching theme of unity and integration in the poem.
4. How does Whitman's rhythmic structure, particularly the use of the phrase "I see" and depiction of vivid landscapes, contribute to the immersive quality of the poem?
5. Explain how Whitman's use of poetic devices, such as anaphora, sensory imagery, and personification, enriches the narrative and contributes to the exploration of human progress and cultural convergence in "Passage to India."

4. CRITICAL RESPONSES TO 'PASSAGE TO INDIA'

In his essay, "A Reading of Whitman's 'Passage to India'," Harsharan Singh Ahluwalia highlights the thematic coherence and rich imagery within the poem. He is of the view that the poem is a departure from the freshness found in Whitman's earlier works. He emphasizes the shift from the Poet as a singer to the emergence of the Poet as a visionary figure. He also discusses how the poem presents the accomplishments of the 19th century in terms of geographical connections while contrasting them with the spiritual achievements.

The main argument put forth by Ahluwalia is that the poem 'Passage to India' represents a mythic creation that envisions the poet as a transformative and prophetic figure. The Poet's role is to reconcile Nature, Man, and God, achieving a harmonious unity that transcends the physical accomplishments of the modern era. Ahluwalia contends that the upward spiritual journey depicted in the poem aligns with the material progress achieved on the horizontal plane, ultimately leading to the fulfilment of God's hidden intentions for mankind.



Similarly, Arthur Golden in his essay “Passage to Less than India: Structure and Meaning in Whitman’s ‘Passage to India.’” writes that this poem represents a significant departure from Whitman’s earlier works and focuses on spiritual themes such as death, immortality, and the soul. While critical opinion initially suggested that Whitman was capable of undertaking such an ambitious work, a closer examination of the manuscript sources revealed that he struggled to control the material. The integration of three independently conceived unpublished poems into “Passage to India” led to several defects, including a lack of full coherence in the exploration of the themes. Stylistically, Whitman’s use of traditional verse elements like archaisms and inversions was regarded as unsuccessful. Overall, Arthur Golden argues that Whitman’s earlier works, particularly those from the 1855-1865 period, highlight his abilities more effectively.

John Lovell in his essay, “Appreciating Whitman: Passage to India” writes that “Passage to India” is an excellent poem for readers in 1960. He presents compelling reasons to support this claim. Firstly, the poem is a valuable introduction to understanding Whitman not as an advocate of blind enthusiasm but as a proponent of arduous work, essential for the realization of divine aspirations. Secondly, the poem is a depiction of human evolution across different historical periods, reflecting mankind’s relentless pursuit of progress, fueled by an unending drive instigated by divine forces. Thirdly, the poem is a prophetic and explanatory piece that anticipates and elucidates the relentless pursuit of various groundbreaking endeavours, including scientific exploration, international competition, and technological advancements. Fourthly, the poem offers solace to those grappling with complex contemporary issues such as international cooperation, the challenges faced by newly independent nations, mental health issues, and the pursuit of global harmony. Lastly, the poem offers hope by demonstrating how democratic ideals can rise above the threats posed to them, both from external and internal sources.

While Ahluwalia underscores the thematic coherence of the poem and the poet’s transformation into a visionary figure facilitating the restoration of harmony between man and nature, Arthur Golden highlights the challenges faced by Whitman in integrating diverse themes within the poem, ultimately suggesting that the poet’s earlier works better showcase his abilities. In contrast, Lovell contends that the poem serves as an excellent guide for readers in the 1960s, exemplifying the relentless pursuit of progress and the potential of democratic ideals to overcome challenges. These interpretations collectively underscore the complex layers of meaning within Whitman’s work that highlight the multifaceted nature of his poetic vision and its enduring relevance in different contexts and eras.



Check Your Progress

1. What shift is emphasized in Whitman's "Passage to India," and how does it affect the overall theme of the poem?
2. According to the analysis, what aspects of Whitman's poem "Passage to India" suggest a departure from his earlier works, and what challenges did Whitman face in integrating diverse themes within the poem?
3. How do the various interpretations collectively contribute to a nuanced understanding of the significance and literary merits of Whitman's "Passage to India"?

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**“CROW TESTAMENT” AND “EVOLUTION”****Sherman Alexie****Akansha Goswami****STRUCTURE**

1. *Learning Objectives*
2. *Introduction*
3. *“Crow Testament” (Text and Explanation)*
4. *Analysis of “Crow Testament”*
5. *“Evolution” (Text and Explanation)*
6. *Analysis of “Evolution”*
7. *Extra Practice Questions*
8. *References*

1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this study material, you would be able to:

- Understand the cultural references, symbols, and historical context present in “Crow Testament” and “Evolution”.
- Analyse the literary devices, imagery, symbolism, and the language to comprehend the poem’s deeper meanings.
- Examine the structure and form to appreciate the poem.
- Understand the poet’s perspectives on issues such as colonization, cultural preservation, and the contemporary challenges faced by Native American communities.
- Interpret the themes of identity, historical trauma, and the complex relationship between Native Americans and the broader American society.



2. INTRODUCTION

Sherman Alexie, a prominent Native American author, poet, and performer, was born on October 7, 1966, in Spokane, Washington. He hails from a lineage of the Salish Indians, with a Coeur d'Alene father and a Spokane mother. (Please note that these are Native American tribes and should not be confused with our country India.) Despite facing health challenges from a young age, including critical brain surgery at the age of six months, Alexie demonstrated exceptional literary prowess.

He enrolled at Jesuit Gonzaga University to study medicine, but later transferred to Washington State University in 1987, where he embarked on his journey as a poet and prose writer. He is a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene tribal member and grew up on the Spokane Indian Reservation. Sherman Alexie has published many prize-winning books that detail the lives of Native Americans living on reservations. One of his most well-known works, a collection of short stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, won a PEN/Hemingway Award. Additionally, his poetic works earned him the World Heavyweight Poetry title, which he held for four years.

2.1 Sherman Alexie and his Works

Alexie is the author of 21 books of poetry and prose. His collections of poetry include the *Face* (2009), *One Stick Song* (2000), *The Man Who Loves Salmon* (1998), *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996), *Water Flowing Home* (1995), *Old Shirts & New Skins* (1993), *First Indian on the Moon* (1993), *I Would Steal Horses* (1992), and *The Business of Fancy Dancing* (1992). He is also the author of several novels and collections of short fiction, including *Reservation Blues* (1994), which won the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award, and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), for which he received a Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award. Among his other honours and awards are poetry fellowships from the Washington State Arts Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts and a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writers' Award. In addition, he has received the Stranger Genius Award, a *Boston Globe*-Horn Book Award, a National Book Award, a Pushcart Prize, and the PEN/Malamud Award. Alexie co-wrote the screenplay for the movie *Smoke Signals*, which is based on Alexie's short story "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona." The movie won two awards at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998 and was released internationally by Miramax Films. He lives with his family in Seattle.

Throughout his extensive body of work, Alexie delves into the themes of despair, poverty, violence, and alcoholism, vividly portraying the lives of Native Americans both within and beyond the confines of the reservation. These overarching themes serve as a lens through



which he addresses fundamental questions surrounding the contemporary Native American experience. Alexie's protagonists wrestle with the complex realities of existence as Indians in the contemporary world, the challenges of navigating traditional notions of masculinity, and the intricacies of life on an Indian reservation. Their struggles often underscore a profound sense of powerlessness within the broader context of white American society, and sheds light on the persistent challenges faced by the indigenous people.

Gritty realism and emotional introspection are frequently combined in Alexie's work to create a deep and realistic picture of the difficulties inherent in the Native American experience. His writing usually combines surrealistic imagery with magical realism, allowing the readers to interact with the rich cultural and historical traditions that shape indigenous identity. In addition, Alexie gives his characters greater depth and authenticity by using dialects and colloquial language which helps the readers identify with their goals and challenges on a personal level.

His works often confront issues of identity, belonging, and the pursuit of self-discovery. Alexie's narratives challenge conventional stereotypes and provide a platform for the voices of the marginalized, fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances of contemporary Native American life.

In terms of literary devices and writing techniques, Alexie skillfully employs symbolism, allegory, and metaphor to convey profound themes and ideas in his works. His use of evocative imagery and sensory details serves to create a rich and immersive reading experience, allowing readers to empathize with the struggles and triumphs of his characters. Moreover, Alexie's masterful use of oral tradition in his storytelling reflects the enduring power of Native American storytelling within contemporary literature.

The European Scientific Journal's April 2016 essay titled "Sherman Alexie's Literary Works as Native American Social Realistic Projections" acknowledges Sherman Alexie as a prominent and revolutionary voice in contemporary Native American literature. Alexie is recognized for fearlessly portraying the challenging realities of life on the reservation, addressing issues such as alcoholism, suicide, healthcare, unemployment, racial conflict, housing difficulties, and poverty with a blend of dark humor and poignant storytelling. The essay emphasizes Alexie's skillful juxtaposition of humor and tragedy, historical figures and modern situations, and real and fictitious characters. Additionally, the essay underscores Alexie's commitment to the representation of the struggles and complexities of Native American communities and society.

But there are also critics like Gloria Bird, a Spokane poet, who have criticized Alexie for misrepresenting Native Americans. Elizabeth Cook-Lynn viewed his work as depicting a limited perspective.



To conclude, we can say that Sherman Alexie's literary contributions have significantly enriched the portrayal of the contemporary Native American experience. His powerful narratives delve into the complexities of identity, cultural heritage, and societal challenges faced by indigenous communities. Through a skillful blend of gritty realism, symbolic imagery, and evocative storytelling, Alexie confronts issues of cultural assimilation, marginalization, and the pursuit of self-discovery. His works serve as a poignant reflection of the multifaceted realities and struggles of Native American life, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of their cultural legacy within the broader context of American literature.

2.2 Controversies

Sherman Alexie, in 2018, faced controversy following anonymous allegations of sexual harassment. Although denying specific accusations, Alexie acknowledged having harmed others and expressed deep regret for any pain caused. The allegations, primarily circulated online, triggering significant repercussions in literary and Native American communities, leading to the renaming of a scholarship and the reevaluation of awards and honours conferred on him. Alexie's impact as a writer and his evocative portrayals of reservation life have earned him accolades and widespread recognition. However, allegations of sexual misconduct have brought into question his literary standing, prompting reactions from various individuals and institutions within the literary sphere. As the controversy continues to unfold, the implications for his literary legacy remain uncertain, casting a shadow over his notable contributions to contemporary literature.

In his statement, Alexie said: "Over the years, I have done things that have harmed other people, including those I love most deeply. To those whom I have hurt, I genuinely apologize. I am so sorry."

He also said: "There are women telling the truth about my behaviour and I have no recollection of physically or verbally threatening anybody or their careers. That would be completely out of character. I have made poor decisions, and I am working hard to become a healthier man who makes healthier decisions...I am genuinely sorry." (Kiley, 2018)

2.3 Criticism of his work after 2018

After living life as one of the most celebrated Native American poets of his time, Alexie's life turned topsy turvy when the sexual harassment allegations were proven in 2018. Although he apologized, his works received harsh criticism.

Professor Elizabeth Cook-Lynn, in his 2018 essay "After Thoughts on Forked-Tongues: A Review of Sherman Alexie criticizes the contemporary trends in the study of Native American Literature, that is overwhelmingly influenced by various modern mass



media platforms, including blogs, social media, and entertainment shows. She considers Alexie's success as something that is built upon his ability to perpetuate a narrative that emphasizes tragedy and loss in Indian life in a way that caters equally to both Native American and mainstream audiences. Cook-Lynn also questions the moral implications of Alexie's work, arguing that it often lacks an authentic understanding of tribal cultures and presents a negative image of the Native American experience. Moreover, she critiques the lack of a nuanced and critical engagement with alternative perspectives in Alexie's works. Throughout her commentary, Cook-Lynn offers a critical perspective on the portrayal of Native American experiences in contemporary literature and the influence of prominent figures like Sherman Alexie in it.

Check Your Progress

1. Who is Sherman Alexie and what are his origins and early life experiences?
2. What are some of Sherman Alexie's notable literary works, and what are the central themes he explores in his writings?
3. How did Sherman Alexie become embroiled in controversy in 2018, and what were the repercussions of these allegations on his reputation and literary legacy?

3. "CROW TESTAMENT" (TEXT AND EXPLANATION)

1

Cain lifts Crow, that heavy black bird
and strikes down Abel.

Damn, says Crow, I guess
this is just the beginning.

Explanation: The title itself is quite revealing. A "Testament", apart from its Biblical references, refers to the evidence that something is true. So, a "Crow Testament" is evidence of a crow truth that, perhaps, was not recognized as such until now. The truth that the poem promises to reveal is a truth that was either hidden or suppressed till now. The opening lines refer to the biblical account of Cain and Abel from the Book of Genesis. Cain is described as striking down Abel and hoisting the Crow, a large black bird. In the Bible Cain strikes down Abel, out of jealousy or envy, with a stone. Just like the stone in the Bible, the crow in the poem is the inert tool that causes the death of Abel. As with the stone, the crow has nothing to do with either the jealousy or the consequent



bloodshed but nevertheless will suffer the consequences of Cain's action. The crow, here, represents the native Indians. The Crow has only a passive role here. It has no agency and yet it is caught up in the sordid story. The next line begins with the expression, "Damn". As an expression, "Damn" is mostly used to express anger or frustration. But in the Christian sense, and Alexie seems to be using the word in this sense, it refers to the state of being punished by God to suffer eternally in hell. Hence the line, "I guess this is just the beginning", seems to suggest that the Crow is Damned to suffer eternally not because of any flaw in its own character but because it, inadvertently, becomes the passive tool of fratricide. This situation begs the question, did the crow have a choice and did it deserve the punishment? There are no easy answers. Whether it had a choice or whether it deserved the punishment is a matter of mere academic interest now. The important thing is that, whether the crow likes it or not, it is now at the receiving end of a continuous cycle of violence and suffering.

2

The white man, disguised
as a falcon, swoops in
and yet again steals a salmon
from Crow's talons.

Damn, says Crow, if I could swim
I would have fled this country years ago.

Explanation: The symbolic contrast between the white man as a falcon and the Native American as a crow serves as a poignant metaphorical exploration. The falcon, traditionally associated with nobility, strength, and prowess, represents the dominant white culture, while the crow, often marginalized and misunderstood, embodies the Native American experience. The choice of these symbols underscores the power dynamics and cultural disparities between the two groups. The falcon, soaring above, exemplifies the historical privilege and dominance of the white settler community. The crow, though resilient, lives in the shadows, mirroring the historical marginalization and struggles of Native Americans.

The image of the falcon snatching the salmon from the Crow's grasp is interesting. The salmon is not just food. The first salmon ceremony is a religious celebration of Native Indians who, through this ceremony, thank God for providing them with salmon as food. The first salmon ceremony is conducted before the open salmon season. Snatching away the salmon, thus, would amount to dislocating the Native Indian from his cultural moorings and his way of life. Removed from his cultural roots, he loses his sense of identity. Thus, this act of snatching away represents the cultural dominance of the white



settler who subjugates the Native American through superior force and cultural domination. The Crow's lament about his inability to swim is a metaphor for the passivity of the crow people who would rather run away than fight for what is rightfully theirs.

3

The Crow God as depicted
in all of the reliable Crow bibles
looks exactly like a Crow.
Damn, says Crow, this makes it
so much easier to worship myself.

Explanation: In this stanza, the poet delves into the nature of God. The reference is, perhaps, to the Catholic Bible and the reflection centers around God in organized religion. It is ironic that, contrary to expectations, the Crow God depicted in all the reliable Crow Bibles looks exactly like a crow. In a classic inversion of the idea that God made man in his own image, we have a proposition that, perhaps, the truth is the other way around; it is man who depicts God in his own image and that is what the Crow finds worth exclaiming about. It makes sense because it is easier to worship oneself than someone who is different and has higher standards. Having a God who is exactly like us makes it easier for us to legitimize our actions, both right and wrong, in the name of God. He sanctions our virtues and vices alike. The white settler has found it convenient to justify his own greed and capriciousness in the name of God. What is ironical is that the crow people have followed suit and have abandoned their own nuanced religious practices for the White man's God. Religion, thus, has become a hegemonic tool for colonial dominance.

4

Among the ashes of Jericho,
Crow sacrifices his firstborn son.
Damn, says Crow, a million nests
are soaked with blood.

Explanation: The lines refer to the sacking of Jericho. This is the first city conquered by Joshua in the Bible. This was an impossible task because the city was protected by tall walls all around. But God aids Joseph and commands him to take over the city. In the biblical narrative, God intervenes and in the ensuing battle, the entire city is destroyed. A huge number of men, women, and children are killed. Further, the first born of anyone trying to rebuild the city is killed by Joshua, as per the commands of his Lord the God. The irony of the whole situation is that all these innocent people, including women and



children, were killed brutally following God's command. Further anyone trying to rebuild is punished in the harshest possible manner; the murder of the first born and the youngest. This unmitigated ruthlessness raises questions about the nature of God.

The Crow's exclamation, "Damn," and the reference to "a million nests" create a poignant contrast to the biblical theme of divine intervention and justice. Alexie's poetic reimagining invites readers to contemplate the consequences of Crow's decision and challenges traditional notions of sacrifice and faith, weaving a narrative that resonates with thought-provoking depth. Just like Joshua and the Israelites, the white settlers take over the Native land and kill the people brutally and any attempt at rebuilding proves disastrous. Blood in a million nests very poignantly captures the horrible fate of the Native Americans.

The biblical tale of Jericho is seen as a demonstration of faith on the part of Israelites and divine intervention by the almighty God. However, the poem presents a stark departure from the Christian narrative. Ironically, God's blessings and justice for Joshua becomes curses and injustice for the Canaanites who bear the brunt of God's anger. In a similar fashion, the Native Americans do not receive any sympathy or intervention by God. They are on their own like the Crow. The juxtaposition invites readers to critically reflect on the disparate treatment of faith and agency in the context of different cultural and religious perspectives.

The Crow's sacrifice alludes to the loss and destruction that the Native American community experienced. This highlights the issue of cultural and ancestral trauma produced by colonial tyranny and brutality perpetuated by the dominant society, conveying the significant impact of historical crimes and ongoing struggles suffered by the Native American people.

5

When Crows fight Crows

the sky fills with beaks and talons.

Damn, says Crow, it's raining feathers.

Explanation: Crows fighting, and the sky full of beaks and talons highlight the internal strife among Native Americans. This metaphor draws attention to the tensions and differences that exist among Native Americans, implying that numerous historical and modern obstacles have eroded their communities' sense of togetherness and solidarity. Further, the line, "Damn, says Crow, it's raining feathers.", alludes to the disintegration of the crow identity. The feathers here refer to all the different elements that come together to give the crow its identity. And now the glue that held these feathers together has weakened to an extent that it can't hold them together anymore.



6

Crow flies around the reservation
and collects empty beer bottles
but they are so heavy
he can only carry one at a time.
So, one by one, he returns them
but gets only five cents a bottle.
Damn, says Crow, redemption
is not easy.

Explanation: The reservation becomes the symbol of the degradation of the crow people. Dispossessed from their land and culture they are now reduced to scourging for a living around the reservations now they are confined to. They have lost their way, and the lines here point to the alcoholism and listlessness that marks their lives. Selling empty beer bottles serve as a reminder of the difficulties and daily struggles Native Americans encounter, especially regarding their restricted prospects for betterment and redemption in the economy. The poem highlights the challenging conditions and social restrictions that Native American people frequently face. The last line poignantly expresses the helpless condition that they are in. They are so far gone that, “Redemption”, whether spiritual or physical, seems like a daunting task now.

7

Crow rides a pale horse
into a crowded powwow
but none of the Indian panic.
Damn, says Crow, I guess
they already live near the end of the world.

Explanation: The reference to Crow riding a pale horse evokes imagery associated with the biblical concept of the apocalypse. In Christian theology, particularly in the Book of Revelation, a pale horse is one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. It symbolizes death and destruction. This biblical imagery is traditionally linked to the end times, divine judgment, and a reckoning for humanity’s actions.

The Crow entering a packed powwow on a pale horse symbolizes both the theme of approaching disaster and the Native American community’s perseverance in the face of constant hardships.



The absence of fear as shown in line “but none of the Indian panic”, stems from the fact that the Indians are already living on the edges and that nothing could get worse than that. The Native Americans’ tenacity is what keeps him going even though from the Native American perspective, Apocalypse is already now.

The complex interplay of cultural narratives in the poem, invites the readers to reflect on the ways in which diverse worldviews and histories intersect and influence one another in the broader context of American identity.

Check Your Progress

1. Explain the line “Damn, I guess this is just the beginningö.
2. What does the falcon stealing salmon from the Crow symbolize, and how does the Crow’s response underscore the ongoing struggles faced by Native American communities?
3. Explain the reference to Jericho in the third stanza.
4. What does the metaphor of Crows fighting in the sky signify?
5. How does the narrative of Crow collecting and returning empty beer bottles for a meager amount of money highlight the challenging conditions and social constraints faced by Native American individuals?

4. ANALYSIS OF “CROW TESTAMENT”

4.1 Native American Tradition

Sherman Alexie has evoked the traditional Native American ceremonial practice of the powwow, showcasing its significance as a recurring cultural event. A powwow is a traditional Native American ceremony or gathering that serves various cultural and social purposes within indigenous communities. Typically, powwows involve cultural festivities, including dancing, singing, drumming, and the wearing of traditional regalia. These events provide an opportunity for Native American people to come together to celebrate their heritage, share stories, and participate in cultural rituals.

The poem depicts the Crow’s presence at a powwow, emphasizing the powwow’s role as a glue that, apart from being a cultural celebration within the Native American community, binds the community together. Alexie employs the image of the White man disguised as a falcon, symbolizing the constant encroachment of dominant Western culture on Native American traditions and resources.



Through the Crow's lamentation about fleeing the country, the poem underscores the struggle of the Native American people against cultural appropriation and colonial domination. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of nature and culture serves as a central theme in the poem.

4.2 Poetic devices

Alexie **personifies** Nature through the character of the Crow, presenting it as a caretaker and a whistleblower within the context of religious and cultural events, particularly the powwow. The Crow's actions serve as a call to awaken the American Indian community, highlighting Nature's role as a guardian of the tradition and cultural identity of Native American people.

The incorporation of a bird **image** within the context of the dance ceremony reflects the community's struggle to keep their cultural traditions alive while navigating modern-day challenges. Alexie's use of humour and reflection in the poem effectively conveys the socio-cultural realities and hardships faced by American Indians.

Alexie employs **dark humour** and **irony** to shed light on the despair, poverty, and alcoholism prevalent on the reservation, portraying the challenges of daily life and the struggle for survival. The poem draws the readers attention to the disastrous impact of Christian missionaries and their attempts to erase Native American traditions. The effects of cultural assimilation and displacement of indigenous traditions beliefs results in a loss of identity and effacement of a way of life.

The religious **allusions**, to the Books of Genesis and Revelations, are used as a critique of the oppressive powers that have moulded the experience of Native Americans. The poem highlights the effects of colonisation and historical abuse of Native Americans by white settlers and missionaries. Ultimately, Alexie provides a critical viewpoint on the intricate and frequently disregarded narratives of the Native American experience through a skillful use of symbolism, and biblical allusions.

4.3 Themes

In "Crow Testament," the themes revolve around the consequences of colonization on Native American communities. The poem is centered around the challenges of maintaining cultural identity amidst displacement and cultural dislocation. It highlights the Native American's struggles to navigate their sense of self within the context of historical and social upheavals. Celebrating resilience, the poem emphasizes the strength and endurance of indigenous people in the face of historical trauma.

It shows the enduring power of myths and traditions as sources of strength and identity. The poem also addresses injustice, both historical and contemporary, and suggests



resistance as a method to overcome oppression and assert their identity and rights in the face of systemic inequality.

Additionally, environmental themes explore the impact of colonization on the land and the profound connection between Native American communities and nature. The poem touches on intergenerational impacts, reflecting on how historical events reverberate through generations, shaping the collective consciousness of Native American communities. Collectively, these themes provide a poignant exploration of the Native American experience in the aftermath of colonization.

In conclusion, we may say that Sherman Alexie's thought-provoking poem "Crow Testament" serves as a multifaceted exploration of the challenges and complex realities faced by Native American communities. By delving into the intricate interplay between cultural heritage, contemporary struggles, and historical injustices, Alexie artfully weaves a narrative that resonates with readers on multiple levels. Through the powerful symbolism of the traditional Native American powwow, the poem underscores the significance of cultural gatherings in fostering community cohesion and celebrating indigenous identity. Moreover, the incorporation of biblical allusions and the juxtaposition of nature and culture, contribute to a rich tapestry of themes that highlight the resilience, perseverance, and cultural pride of the Native American people. Alexie's astute use of dark humour and irony further amplifies the message, shedding light on the devastating impact of colonization, cultural assimilation, and socio-economic disparities on the Native American experience. Overall, "Crow Testament" stands as a testament to Alexie's unwavering dedication to amplifying the voices and experiences of marginalized communities in their struggle for social justice within contemporary society.

Check Your Progress

1. What is the role of powwow in Native American communities, and what does the falcon symbolize?
2. What is the significance of the Crow as a guardian of tradition and cultural identity at the powwow?
3. How does the bird imagery reflect the tension between cultural preservation and adaptation for Native Americans?
4. What lasting effects of cultural assimilation are highlighted in the poem, and what message does it convey about the historical abuse of Native Americans?
5. How does Alexie's use of symbolism, comedy, and biblical connections contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by Native American communities?



5. “EVOLUTION” (TEXT AND EXPLANATION)

Buffalo Bill opens a pawn shop on the reservation
right across the border from the liquor store
and he stays open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
and the Indians come running in with jewelry
television sets, a VCR, a full-length beaded buckskin outfit
it took Inez Muse 12 years to finish. Buffalo Bill
takes everything the Indians have to offer, keeps it
all catalogues and filed in a storage room. The Indians
pawn their hands, saving the thumbs for last, they pawn
their skeletons, falling endlessly from the skin
and when the last Indian has pawned everything
but his heart, Buffalo Bill takes that for twenty bucks
closes up the pawn shop, paints a new sign over the old
calls his venture THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES
charges the Indians five bucks a head to enter.

Explanation: The poem opens with the lines about Buffalo Bill opening a pawn shop on the reservation in front of the liquor store just across the border. And this pawn shop operates 24/7. The poem focuses on three things that have enormous symbolic value within the scheme of the poem. Buffalo Bill stands in here for the greedy white settlers who exploit the Native Americans, symbolized by the pawn shop, by enticing them into alcoholism.

In the second stanza we see the natives pawn their material possessions first followed by their cultural capital represented by the “full-length beaded buckskin outfit”. A buckskin outfit refers to clothing made from the skin of a buck (male deer), often associated with traditional Native American attire. It is a symbol of the rich indigenous craftsmanship and artistic traditions. It takes a long time for these traditions to crystallize and take root, and yet they are now pawned off in an instant for alcohol.

We see this slow and progressive stripping away of the natives in the third and fourth stanza as well. The imagery of pawning their hands, with the thumbs reserved for the last, serves as a stark reminder of the profound desperation and loss of agency



experienced by the Native American community. Losing their possessions and limbs bit by bit signifies the slow and steady loss of their indigenous culture, traditions, and their way of life which they are unable to protect. It marks the beginning of the end of their way of life.

The stark imagery of their skeletons falling from the skin signifies the profound loss and erosion of their identity and heritage. The callous act of Buffalo Bill in taking the last remnants of their being, their hearts, for a mere twenty dollars underscores the profound devaluation and disregard for the intrinsic worth and dignity of the Native American people. While he strips the native down, “he keeps it all catalogues and filed in a storage room.”, to be used later.

Finally, when the natives have nothing more to pawn, the pawn shop is converted into “THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES”. Ironically, the native is now charged an entrance fee to rediscover his own past through the eyes of the white settler.

Check Your Progress

1. How does the juxtaposition of Buffalo Bill’s pawn shop and the liquor store underscore the economic exploitation faced by Native American communities?
2. What does the imagery of the full-length beaded buckskin outfit symbolize in the context of the Native American cultural heritage?
3. How does the act of pawning their hands, with the thumbs saved for last, represent the loss of agency and cultural erosion experienced by the Native American community?
4. What does the transformation of the pawn shop into “THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES” signify, and how does the entrance fee charged to Native Americans underscore the commodification of their cultural heritage?

6. ANALYSIS OF “EVOLUTION”

6.1 Background

Buffalo Bill, Sherman’s character, is the nickname of an American soldier and Native American rights activist William F. Cody (1846-1917). His story is the stuff of legends. He served as a scout for the Army before he began acting in productions with Western themes and scenes from the frontier and Indian Wars. The nickname, Buffalo Bill, comes from his role as a supplier of Bison meat during the American war.



However, Alexie uses him in his poem because he is an icon synonymous with not just the subjugation and exploitation of the Native Americans, but also as a great showman who presented the white man as noble and brave in doing so. The natives were presented as savages, relics of a wild west that needed to be contained and civilized. Buffalo Bill's show company, named Buffalo Bill's Wild West not only created the myth of the savage bloodthirsty Indians but passed it off as an educational lesson on American history. What is more, ironically, he made the Indian a willing partner in that mythmaking by employing them in his show to play the role of the savage.

Despite supposedly advocating the rights of Indians, Buffalo Bill certainly contributed to their cultural confinement in his "Wild West" shows, performances that "contained elements of the circus, the drama of the times, and the rodeo," offering a "unique form of theatrical entertainment".

Like many historical leaders who promoted a dominant ideology in their pursuit of domination, Buffalo Bill is an illustrative example of the colonizing hero that is so widespread in Western culture. Interestingly, his influence, in addition to his ubiquitous stage presence, was also fueled by a media that continuously conveyed his identity. The use of personal celebrity status before the invention of contemporary media was unheard of then. He continued to be a mainstay of popular culture for nearly fifty years, appearing in dime novels and powerful theatrical productions, and directing the amazing Wild West Show on a transatlantic tour that took it to audiences ranging from small towns to the pinnacles of European society (Walsh 18). This legacy positions Buffalo Bill as a key figure in the broader context of colonialist narratives and the propagation of Western dominance.

Cody, towards the end of his life, became increasingly uncomfortable with the myth he had created and started speaking against buffalo hunting and exploitation of the natives. But the damage was already done. The highly overdetermined symbols that he had created, the grossly exaggerated stories of and white male American bravery and nobleness in the face of Indian savagery, had already become a part of a collective consciousness. The repercussions can be seen even today.

6.2 Themes

The title of the poem, "Evolution", is significant. It embodies within itself the twin ideas of American Capitalist expansion and the logic of social Darwinism. This was nothing but pseudo-scientific racism disguised as progress. The idea that social and cultural evolution also followed the Darwinian philosophy of "Survival of the fittest" was used to justify the complete appropriation. Since the native American culture was not strong enough it was natural for it to die out. This conception of evolution exonerates the white settlers of any



culpability in the decimation of the native American land and culture. Hence, the title of the poem itself is ironic. It subjects the very idea of evolution to questioning.

The poem's themes revolve around exploitation of the native Americans and the loss of cultural identity, exploring the challenges faced by Native Americans in evolving societies. The poem delves into historical trauma faced by the Native Americans and its impact on individuals and communities. Central to the poem is the theme of transformation of spaces, both personal as well as communal, where Alexie portrays the changes individuals and communities go through as they navigate cultural, historical, and personal challenges.

The interconnectedness of personal experiences with broader cultural and historical contexts is a recurring motif. Colonial exploitation and appropriation operate at the level of the individual as well as the community. Themes of conflict and reconciliation, both on a personal level and within the larger context of Native American history, is problematized in the poem through the image of the museum. The preservation and reinterpretation of cultural heritage is a major colonial project. The museum normalizes colonial expansion by becoming the sole arbitrator of value of native American history and traditions. The colonial museum exercises its choice on what would constitute authentic native American history and culture, and, in the process, it fixes them in a stereotype and denies the indigenous people their voice. The "THE MUSEUM OF NATIVE AMERICAN CULTURES", not only denies them a voice, but it also makes the natives passive consumers of their own demonization in the form of a concocted record of its own past. The museum, thus, becomes a supreme symbol of the success of the colonial project.

The poet also addresses the omnipresent problem of the commercialization and compartmentalization of culture, a subject highlighted by Buffalo Bill's conversion of his colourful stage antics into a business. The poem highlights the unsettling breakdown of cultural practices into commodities and the erosion of genuine cultural expression in favour of profit-driven endeavours. "Evolution" offers a moving reflection on the tragic consequences of degradation of the native land, its people, and commodification of its culture and traditions.

Poetic Devices

Sherman Alexie employs various poetic devices to evoke powerful imagery and convey profound themes. One notable device is the use of **symbolism**, which is evident in the portrayal of the crow as a central figure representing the Native American experience. Additionally, Alexie incorporates **personification**, attributing human qualities to the crow, thereby establishing a relatable and emotive connection between the reader and the poem's themes. The poem also features vivid **imagery**, allowing readers to visualize the



stark realities faced by Native American communities and the impact of historical and contemporary struggles on their collective identity. Furthermore, Alexie skillfully utilizes **irony** to underscore the complexities and contradictions inherent in the experiences of Native Americans, inviting readers to critically examine the societal norms and expectations that perpetuate cultural erasure.

Through these various poetic devices, Alexie creates a rich and evocative narrative that resonates with readers, fostering a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by marginalized communities and the enduring resilience of Native American culture. The poem's adept use of postmodern literary techniques not only reinforces its thematic exploration but also serves as a powerful vehicle for critiquing the systemic issues prevalent within contemporary Native American communities.

By employing fragmented narratives and blurring traditional boundaries, Alexie effectively captures the multifaceted complexities and contradictions inherent in the daily lives of Native Americans. This narrative style mirrors the intricate struggles faced by individuals attempting to navigate between the preservation of cultural heritage and the pressures of assimilation imposed by mainstream society.

The **metaphor** of the “heart” as the core of Native American identity encapsulates the profound significance and spiritual essence embedded within their cultural heritage. The devaluation of the “heart” by figures like Buffalo Bill serves as a poignant reflection of the systematic disregard and exploitation perpetuated by the American government towards Native Americans. By reducing their identity to a mere commodity, the government perpetuated a dehumanizing narrative that underscored the prevailing colonialist mentality aimed at profiting from the cultural heritage of indigenous communities. This callous treatment not only demonstrates the lack of respect for Native American humanity but also highlights the broader historical and contemporary struggles faced by Native American populations in asserting their cultural autonomy and preserving their intrinsic value within American society.

Hence, “Evolution” emerges as a poignant reflection on the broader challenges and adversities experienced by Native American communities, providing a nuanced portrayal of their ongoing battle for cultural recognition and preservation in the face of widespread cultural appropriation and erasure. Alexie's poetic mastery serves as a testament to his unwavering commitment to shedding light on the often-overlooked narratives and experiences of Native Americans, ultimately prompting readers to reconsider their understanding of contemporary society and the significance of cultural heritage within it.

In conclusion, Sherman Alexie's profound exploration of the traditional Native American powwow and the character of Buffalo Bill serves as a testament to the complex



and intricate dynamics embedded within Native American history and contemporary society. Through his evocative poetry, Alexie not only sheds light on the enduring struggles and challenges faced by indigenous communities but also offers a critical commentary on the pervasive impact of colonialist narratives and cultural commodification within the American landscape. By delving into themes of cultural identity, systemic exploitation, and the erasure of indigenous heritage, Alexie invites readers to reflect on the broader implications of cultural appropriation and the dehumanization of Native American communities within the context of a profit-driven society. Through his masterful use of poetic devices and postmodern literary techniques, Alexie effectively captures the resilience and enduring spirit of Native American culture, emphasizing the significance of cultural preservation and recognition within contemporary discourse. Ultimately, Alexie's work stands as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling and the imperative of amplifying marginalized voices in the ongoing pursuit of social justice and cultural equity.

Check Your Progress

1. How does the portrayal of Buffalo Bill in Sherman Alexie's poem "Evolution" highlight the theme of cultural commodification and exploitation?
2. In what ways does Buffalo Bill's legacy exemplify the broader context of colonialist narratives and the propagation of Western dominance in popular culture?
3. How does Alexie's use of postmodern literary techniques in "Evolution" serve to convey the multifaceted complexities and contradictions inherent in the lives of Native Americans?
4. How do the various poetic devices used by Sherman Alexie in "Evolution" contribute to the vivid portrayal of the challenges and resilience of Native American communities?

7. EXTRA PRACTICE QUESTIONS

1. In what way does the Crow's response to the depiction of the Crow God resembling a crow in the Crow Bibles emphasize the significance of embracing one's own identity and traditions as a form of resistance against cultural assimilation?
2. In what way does the image of Crow riding a pale horse into a crowded powwow, and the Indian guests' lack of panic, emphasize the resilience and endurance of the Native American community in the face of adversity and challenges?



3. In what ways does Alexie use dark humour and irony to depict the challenges faced by Native Americans on the reservation?
4. How does the poem draw parallels between biblical stories and the Native American experience, serving as a critique of colonialism and cultural displacement?

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