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E-mail: ddceprinting@col.du.ac.in
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SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

William Blake

Rachel Mathew

1. INTRODUCTION

William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* was first published in 1794. This study material will introduce you to the historical background of the poet and his times, and discuss his religious beliefs. Blake's language is simple but there is a wealth of symbolism behind his poetry. Each poem is analyzed in detail. After going through this study material, you should;

- become familiar with the historical and literary background to Blake's poems;
- understand the symbols and poetic devices used by Blake; and
- appreciate Blake's unique perspective on Christianity.

2. ROMANTIC POETRY

The European Romantic movement covers a period of about a hundred years, from the middle of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century. There was a vast upheaval in every sphere of life – social, political, literary, and religious. The changes were not sudden - there was a gradual rejection of traditional beliefs and institutions. England, Germany and France were the epicenters of the Romantic Movement.

In the field of literature, England led the way and by the seventeen-sixties, the Romantic Movement was well under way. Though the term Pre-Romanticism has been used to describe the literary tendencies of poets writing in the middle of the eighteenth century, and particularly in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, some of these tendencies may be seen in some earlier writings also. Some of these poets are Thomas Gray (1716-1761), William Cowper (1731-1800), Oliver Goldsmith (1730-1774), James Macpherson (1736-1796), Charlotte Smith (1749-1806), Robert Burns (1759-1796), and William Blake (1757-1827). The term Pre-Romantic is not strictly definable since most of these poets did not completely break with the traditions of eighteenth-century poetry, while they definitely



anticipate, in their writings, the Romantic poetry of the nineteenth century. The Pre-Romantic poets sought new subjects, new poetic forms, and fresh modes of feeling and expression.

The Augustan Age may be called the age of prose and reason and the Romantic Age the age of poetry and imagination. During the period of transition, the Pre-Romantic poets began to display imaginative and emotional qualities, a sense of heightened perception, a new awareness of nature, and a strong sense of individualism. Classical models of poetry were discarded and poets began to depend on nature and also on their own individual bent of mind. Their poetry became a personal record of their ideas about man and nature.

It would be useful, at this point, to consider some of the basic differences between Classical or Neo-Classical poetry and Romantic poetry. Classical poetry is a product of the intelligence; Romantic poetry of emotion, passion, and imagination. Classical poetry deals with city life and civilization, whereas Romantic poetry deals with nature and rural life. A strong feeling for the picturesque, the splendid, the wild and the remote are characteristic of the Romantic poet when s/he depicts rural life.

The Augustan poets employed a formal, artificial style and showed a marked preference for the rhymed couplet. The Romantic poets did away with artificial poetic diction and substituted it with the language of everyday speech. They chose simple subjects and elemental themes from everyday life. They advocated the use of simple diction and a variety of verse forms.

In the writings of the Augustans, everything was precise, polished, and correct. On the other hand, the guiding principle of the Romantics was spontaneity. They believed that the poetic genius was inspired. Their enthusiasm and their love of splendour led them in search of the supernatural and mystic elements in life.

English Classicism flourished in an atmosphere of scientific and critical rationalism which had been fostered by Newton and Thomas Hobbes. The eighteenth-century poets adopted an objective approach in their appraisal of common, everyday experience. The Romantic poets worked through intuition and allowed free play to the imagination.

The Romantics revolted against the doctrine of Reason which their predecessors had upheld. Empirical philosophers, especially John Locke and David Hume had reduced the universe to a mechanical universe. The Romantics, on the other hand, marvelled with awe and wonder; at the majesty, the beauty, and the glory of the world. They rejected the concept of a fixed, mechanistic universe and substituted it with the theory of an evolutionary society,



gradually moving towards perfection. With their optimistic approach, they refined the doctrine of the perfectibility of man.

The first guiding principle of the Romantic Movement – “Return to Nature” – was not merely a love of the picturesque or a heightened awareness of the natural beauties of the world. It was pitting the world of nature against the world of so-called civilization. The Romantic spirit responded to the wildness, grandeur, and sublimity of landscape. The Romantics were aware of the bond between man and nature. With their sensibility and heightened vision, they interpreted nature and endowed every aspect of it with new meaning. They re-established harmony between Man and Nature. The creed of Nature worship was ultimately perfected by William Wordsworth. In the eighteenth-century, writers had already begun to imbue their poetry with a feeling for the exquisite beauties of nature.

James Thomson (1700-1748) in “The Seasons” was one of the early eighteenth-century poets to depict the real and natural landscape. Mrs. Radcliffe wrote her novels against a picturesque background. In William Cowper’s poetry, the benign and spiritual influence of nature is felt. A strong love for the Scottish countryside runs through the poems of Robert Burns. The love of nature becomes increasingly important in the poetry of Cowper, Gray, and Blake.

The Romantics sought solitude and isolation. This often gave rise to melancholy, which led from the pleasing melancholy of early Romanticism to the bleak “*weltschmerz*” (world-weariness) of the nineteenth century, displayed particularly by Goethe’s characters. As early as the mid-eighteenth century, the gloomy, melancholic strain gave rise to what is known as the “Graveyard” school of poetry. Edward Young wrote “Night Thoughts” (1742) and Robert Blair “The Grave” (1743). Thomas Gray’s “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751) is the most famous of these poems. It is a tribute to the obscure life as well as a commentary on the vanity of human wishes.

A doctrine that was encouraged by the philosophers, particularly Rousseau in the eighteenth century, was the doctrine of natural goodness. This resulted in the glorification of the natural man and the “noble savage.” It was believed that men - savages and peasants - retained their innate goodness by living close to nature. Oliver Goldsmith, in “The Deserted Village,” grieved over the loss of rural virtues, with the shift in population from the village to the city, as a result of the Industrial Revolution. William Collins wrote in favour of a simpler pattern of life, similar to that of his forefathers. The simple, primitive man received the highest treatment at the hands of Wordsworth, who exalted him into the “noble dalesman.”



At the same time, a glorification of the child and childhood took place. It was felt that the child, with its intuitive faculties and free from the intervention of analytic reason, absorbed beauty, goodness and truth from nature by being in close communion with it. Wordsworth and Coleridge believed in the intuitive wisdom of the child. Blake was the first poet to invest the child and the state of childhood with a mystical aura. For Blake, childhood was more than a mere condition of life: it was a spiritual state that adults could attain.

The eighteenth century, being an age of enlightened reform, saw an increase in philanthropic activity. The poor, the oppressed, and the social outcasts were viewed with sympathy. Dr. Johnson defended them, James Edward Oglethorpe worked to improve the conditions of their lives, and John Wesley was engaged in the salvation of their souls. Blake took up their cause and made a searing attack on the forces responsible for reducing a large section of the population to a state of abject poverty and deprivation. Along with the emerging compassionate attitude towards children and the poor, there developed a new feeling for, and an understanding of ordinary country folk, tradesmen, and workmen. There was a realization that even ordinary, humble people have their role to play in the vast arena of life. People began to look upon even dumb animals with concern. All creatures great and small were thus brought together as part of God's scheme for the world. Blake's poetry bears witness to the sacramental view of life.

The eighteenth century was also an age of revolution. It witnessed two political revolutions - the American Revolution (1776) and the French Revolution (1789). There was ferment in the intellectual and social spheres as well. No poet of the age was untouched by these changes. Blake, Wordsworth, and Coleridge were inspired by revolutionary ideas. Blake was influenced by Thomas Paine, who wrote *The Rights of Man* (1791); William Godwin, who wrote *Political Justice* (1793); and Joseph Priestley, who wrote fiery verses in defense of liberty. Freedom to Blake and the Romantics meant not only political freedom but, above all, it meant freedom for the human spirit.

Thinkers of the eighteenth century were stimulated by ideas of the French Enlightenment. Rousseau had declared that man was essentially good and retrograde forces in society were responsible for destroying his potential: "Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains" (1). Rousseau emphatically refuted the doctrine of Original Sin. According to him, mankind could be redeemed by the exercise of Reason. By the exercise of the "general will," a just and equitable society could be established. Poets like Blake accepted part of Rousseau's teaching; they felt that the social order should be changed. For Blake, the



redemption of man lay not in Reason, which he denounced, but in the force of the imagination.

The final but lasting current of thought which helped to mould the Romantic imagination was the Idealistic philosophy of Germany; the philosophy of Schelling, Schlegel, and Kant. They showed how the real and the ideal worlds could be united through goodness and beauty, that the world within the mind of man was more important than the world outside, and that the mind alone can give unity and validity to thought. Thus, arose the doctrine of the individual man. Poets from Blake to Wordsworth and Coleridge, who valued individualism, defined the role of the Poet-Prophet. The poet became the creative interpreter of Man and Society.

3. THE LIFE OF WILLIAM BLAKE (1757-1827)

William Blake, poet and artist, was born in London on 28 November 1757. He was the second son of a respectable hosier of Broad Street. Except for three years in the country, he lived his entire life in the city. He knew both the city and the surrounding countryside. The great river, Thames, which he later represented as the River of Life, had a strong hold on his imagination. Early in life, he displayed the power of visual imagination. He claimed that he saw visions of God, the angels, and the major prophets. Blake had no formal schooling. At the age of fourteen he entered into a seven-year apprenticeship with an engraver, James Basire and when he had finished his training, he entered the Royal Academy of Arts. Blake started writing poetry during this period.

In 1782, Blake married Catherine Boucher, the uneducated daughter of a market gardener. It turned out to be a happy marriage and she was an ideal companion to Blake. They lived in 23, Green Street, Leicester Fields for two years and then in 1784 moved to 27, Broad Street where Blake set up a print-shop. He earned his living by engraving his own designs or those of others for books or prints, and by the sale of his paintings and illuminated books – which were first printed, then coloured by hand. He remained poor but many great painters of the day; including John Flaxman, George Cumberland, and Thomas Stothard befriended him. Another friendship that Blake formed at this time, in spite of his growing dislike of the clergy, was with the Reverend Henry Mathew and his wife, who provided him with financial assistance to set up his print-shop. Blake was shattered by the death of his younger brother Robert, who died of consumption in 1787. He claimed that he continued to converse with and was inspired by his dead brother's spirit.



In 1787, the Blakes moved to Holland Street where they lived for five years. Blake devoted his time to the activities he loved – writing poetry, making sketches, engraving and composing music. He wrote and illustrated “The Book of Thel” and *Songs of Innocence*, using a method of his own invention, called illuminated printing.

About this time began the association of Blake with the Swedenborgians. Blake and his wife became members of the New Church. In 1789, the year which marked the outbreak of the French Revolution, Blake began to spend a great deal of time in the company of the greatest revolutionaries of the day; Thomas Paine, Henry Fuseli, and Joseph Johnson. He wrote books on both the American and French Revolutions.

Blake was living in Lambeth, struggling to eke out a meagre existence when, in 1800, his second patron, William Hayley offered him accommodation at his cottage in Felpham on the Sussex coast. It was a welcome change for Blake, who found it a peaceful place to study. In 1803, Blake moved back to London, where he lived for twenty-four years. Blake’s misfortunes increased and his genius was not easily recognized. Leigh Hunt attacked Blake’s designs, while his brother Robert Hunt described him as a lunatic.

Blake’s later years were brighter for the friendship of a group of artists – John Linnell, Samuel Palmer, John Varley and their set - who called themselves the Ancients and Blake’s two rooms at Fountain Court the Interpreter’s House. Two years before Blake’s death, Henry Crabb Robinson wrote this of him: “Shall I call him Artist or Genius, or Mystic or Madman? Probably he is all” (qtd. in Symons 254). Blake died on 12 August 1827 and was buried in Bunhill Fields, in a common grave which has not been located. Blake did not achieve much success or recognition during his own lifetime but in the early twentieth-century, critics began to recognize his poetic genius.

4. BLAKE’S THOUGHT

In order to understand the poetry of Blake it is essential to study his thought. Blake has been variously labelled a visionary, a mystic, and a prophet. But none of these terms will suffice to define the unique nature and profundity of his thought. He was a daring and original thinker who strove to arrive at a vision of truth. The key word to an understanding of Blake’s poetry and thought is “vision.” His poetry is a visionary interpretation of life.

Blake was a man of vision who thought he had found the original, ineffable secret. He was a mystic, but not a mystic in the traditional sense of the term. There is some resemblance between Blake and the English poets Thomas Traherne and Henry Vaughan; who belonged to



the tradition of mystics who experienced mystic trances and in super-sensory moments, beheld the Beatific Vision of God. For Blake, it was a quality that he experienced daily in life; he possessed a special vision, the “double vision.” He saw with the inner eye, with a kind of mental illumination which enabled him to behold the ultimate truth. He attempted to explore that region of the human mind which became the region of Eternal Worlds. Blake said, “I rest not from my great task! /To open the Eternal Worlds/ To open the immortal Eyes of Man / Inwards into the Worlds of Thought /Into Eternity” (*Jerusalem* 233).

This was Blake’s task; to record in his poetry, this experience of the Eternal and to communicate it to all men so that they too may develop their faculty of vision and understanding and, through understanding, learn to act rightly - in love and mutual forgiveness.

5. BLAKE’S SYMBOLISM

To present his world-view, Blake invented a set of symbols as he could not find satisfaction in any established system. He is startlingly modern in his creation of a set of private symbols and a forerunner of W. B. Yeats, who also invented an elaborate system of private myths and symbols. Blake valued, above all else, the creative power of the imagination which helped him to create his own system.

Blake’s complicated system of symbols is not a consistent one. This has led to confusion and bewildered many readers. His symbols are derived from old English myths and folklore. There are elemental figures embodying thought and meaning. The four main figures are Urizen (Reason), Los (Imagination), Luvah (Passion), and Tharmas (Instincts).

Blake was an erudite scholar. His reading included the works of the mystics Emanuel Swedenborg and Jacob Boehme; the philosophy of Locke, Hume, Berkeley and, above all, the Holy Bible. Though Blake’s works are permeated with Christian doctrine and Christian symbols, Blake is not a traditional Christian; his beliefs at times verge on heresy.

In the first place, Blake makes a clear distinction between the God of the Old Testament, Jehovah, and the God of the New Testament, Jesus Christ. In his abhorrence of institutionalized religion, Blake identifies Jehovah with Urizen - the false God of Reason, who is responsible for the divisions in man. His other attributes are intolerance and over-zealousness in safeguarding his own authority. He is not a loving Father, but a Nobodaddy, a clock-work God in a clock-work universe. Blake constantly denounces eighteenth-century



rationalism and logical empiricism. He blames the analytics of Newton and the skepticism of Voltaire for the elevation of cold, abstract Reason.

Opposed to Urizen is Los or Imagination, whom Blake identifies with Jesus Christ. Blake had learnt from Jacob Boehme that Imagination is the first Emanation of Divinity. Christ is the Poetic Genius who dictates words of eternal salvation to poets like Blake. Blake wrote that “the Eternal Body of Man is the Imagination, God Himself, the Divine Body - Jesus Christ” (*Laocoön* 273).

Christ is incarnate within the mind of man. Blake did not believe in a God who was wholly the other, a God who was out there but in an immanent God, the Godhead within man. The Divine Imagination in man gives rise to intuition, or “spiritual sensations,” and teaches man that “Thou also dwell’st in Eternity./ Thou art a man: God is no more./ Thine own humanity learn to adore” (“The Everlasting Gospel” 521).

The cardinal sin for Blake is “hindering;” whether it is an attempt to hinder oneself or another, to hinder one’s Energies, natural feelings or instincts. “Murder is Hindering Another. Theft is Hindering Another. Backbiting, Undermining, Circumventing and whatever is Negative is Vice” (qtd. in Frye 55). Urizen/ Jehovah, with his iron book of laws and prohibitions, is responsible for “hindering.” Urizen, with his jealousy, cruelty, secrecy, hatred of life and joy has been created by men out of their own vices. Urizen must be overthrown. For Blake expression is good, repression is evil.

Blake was very conscious of his role as a Poet-Prophet or Bard. “Mark well my words! They are for your eternal salvation . . . I am inspired. I know it is truth! I sing according to the inspiration of the Poetic Genius who is eternal all-protecting Divine Humanity” (*Milton* 95). Blake, the poet, is the intermediary between God and Man. He reveals the words of God to men, sleepers in the land of shadows. He proclaims God’s plan for the future. What the Bard has to offer to man is the abundant life. The final consummation, the regeneration of Man will take place when, after having listened to the poet, the human spirit is renewed and the human soul re-integrated. In conclusion, Blake may be said to have fulfilled his aim in writing poetry.

6. A NOTE ON BLAKE AND NATURE

Blake was a pre-Romantic poet standing mid-way between the Augustan poets; Dryden, Pope, and Johnson, and the Romantic poets; Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats. For the eighteenth-century poets, nature meant human nature; studied against a background of



drawing rooms, coffee-houses, or trimmed gardens. For the Romantics, Nature was all in all. They, especially Wordsworth with his Pantheism, established a creed of Nature-worship.

Although Blake and the other forerunners of the Romantic Revival - Goldsmith, Collins, and Cowper, broke with eighteenth century traditions, they did not advocate the “Return to Nature” evident in Romantic poetry. They were at an early stage in the development of a new awareness of Nature. They merely present the outward aspects of Nature. But there is already a shift in perspective - the wild, picturesque, remote, or splendid aspects of Nature are highlighted.

Although Blake spent most of his life in London, he was familiar with and enjoyed the beauties of the countryside. He appreciated the fresh, green fields of rural England but was aware of the horrors inflicted on the countryside by the Industrial Revolution. He witnessed both “a pastoral heaven” and “a hell of dark, satanic mills”:

It is characteristic of his whole philosophy that he took both into account. A less courageous soul might well have hated the city and loved the fields, or like Dr. Johnson, loved the coffee-houses and shrunk from the solitudes of nature. Blake felt with full intensity the martyrdom of the toiling, suffering humanity of London, and he loved fields, green mountains, summer trees, but he saw the human spirit at work alike amid the furnaces of hell and the fountains of paradise. He desired to see a ‘marriage of heaven and hell’ and for him, the innocence of pastoral man did not seem lost in the satanic mills. The hell of experience is, for Blake, only the turning of the Wheel of life. The indestructible purity of the human spirit returns, at the end of the circle of destiny, to its original innocence again; the furnaces of the fallen world become once more the fountains of Eden. It seems likely that much of Blake’s vision of a reconciliation of two contraries – of good and evil, innocence and experience - arose out of his own early memories of city squalor and suffering, side by side with the world of hay-fields and harvesters under the hedgerow elms of Kent on the south bank of the Thames. (Raine 387)

Appreciative as Blake was of the beauties of the natural world, it was not his duty to enhance the readers’ appreciation of it as Keats, for example, did in his “Ode to Autumn.” Blake’s approach was to see the symbol first and then the natural object, the reverse of Wordsworth’s approach.

Blake was not concerned with the world of outward senses. He apprehended the world through the mind, the Imagination. The trees that Blake drew did not exist in Nature; the



Poison Tree or the Tree of Mystery bearing fruits of Deceit. Blake was concerned with the world of external nature only insofar as it could provide symbols for the world within the mind of man. In his poems, the sun-flower represents the desire of youth for love and freedom, the lily stands for the purity of love, and the sick rose is symbolic of human beings attacked by evil, destructive forces.

The world that Blake's characters inhabit is not the world of nature, but a world of their own making, which exists in their own minds. The carefree joy of a child who delights in the flowers, the birds, and the streams is but a reflection of the joy in its own heart.

7. BLAKE'S POETRY

Blake's first book of verse, *Poetical Sketches* (1783), is written partly in imitation of Shakespeare, the Elizabethan song-writers, and Spenser. This collection includes the well-known lyrics "My Silks and Fine Array" and "How Sweet I Roam'd from Field to Field." These poems have neither the exquisite lyrical quality of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* nor their originality, yet there is present in them a quality of "unreality" which is typical of Blake and which marks the advent of a new poetic era.

In the *Songs of Innocence* (1789), Blake recaptured the innocence and joy of childhood. Through visionary insight, Blake discovered that the sense of freedom and happiness he experienced as an adult corresponded to the condition of childhood, which was a state of innocence, happiness, and primal unity. Blake uses simple language and the verse forms are akin to the jingle, the nursery-rhyme, the ballad, and hymns for children. The setting is pastoral and the imagery conventional; drawn mainly from the Bible. The vision of the world that Blake presents is that of the child - a world of joy, peace, love, purity, happiness, and security. The poems echo with the happy, carefree laughter of children.

The *Songs of Experience* (1794) present an altogether different world. Blake raises his voice in protest against the evils that he saw in society. He vehemently attacks the Church, priestcraft, kingship, and the state - all that fetters the free mind of man. Blake writes with passion, anger, and indignation but there is compassion as well, for poor children exploited by a hardened society. His anger is directed especially against priests and their agents who are symbolized as ravens, serpents, worms, and caterpillars; the imagery is of sickness and disease.

There is a pervasive mood of fear. Fear and hatred, hypocrisy and selfishness have entered the hearts of men with the worship of the false God Urizen, of the false religion,



Mystery. The free and innocent love of the *Songs of Innocence* is turned into cankerous selfishness. Among the powerful poems of Experience is “The Garden of Love,” which has “Thou shalt not” written on the chapel door. Such prohibitions lead to guilt, misery, and despair. In place of the benevolent guardians of the *Songs of Innocence* there are hostile adults, nurses, priests, and howling animals of prey.

The poems in *Songs of Experience* are characterized by disillusionment. Blake was appalled by man’s inhumanity to man and his revolutionary ardour quelled by the excesses of the French Revolution. But Blake is not a mere social reformer. His aim in the *Songs* is to present the contraries of the human soul; contraries which are an inalienable part of human existence: “Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate are necessary for human existence” (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 35). When the contraries are resolved through Vision and Imagination, the soul is re-integrated. The *Songs* begin with delight and end in wisdom.

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell (1790), written at the same time as the *Songs of Innocence* is a satire. Written mainly in prose, in the form of aphorisms and proverbs, it deals with the religious concepts of good and evil. Blake points out that Good has come to be equated with a conventional code of morality and Evil as working in opposition to it. Both Good and Evil are necessary, they are complementary. The true dualism is not between Good and Evil but between Wisdom and Folly; not Body and Soul but Energy and Reason. It is the mind, the Imagination, which is of importance. The purified mind will be able to perceive the infinite in everything

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the Palm of your Hand
And Eternity in an hour.
(From “Auguries of Innocence”)

“The Song of Liberty” with which *The Marriage* ends is a short prose-poem of revolution; it is an appeal to the nations to cast off their bondage - political, moral, and religious.

Blake wrote two symbolic books, *Tiriel* and *The Book of Thel* (1789). In *Tiriel* (unpublished) he exposes the folly of substituting the restrictions of law for the freedom of the imagination. *The Book of Thel* is a lyrical narrative, in which Blake deals with the theory of pre-existence, making use of Greek myths and symbols. The virgin Thel is afraid as she gazes from her abode of Innocence into the World of Generation. To be born into this world



of division, terror, and strife, would be death for her and she flees back to her original home. It is an allegory of a pre-existent soul refusing to enter into the grave of earthly life.

Blake's symbolic or prophetic works have proved to be a stumbling-block for many who otherwise understood and appreciated his poetry. They were incomprehensible to most of his contemporaries. In the early nineties, Blake spent a good deal of time in the company of revolutionaries. Thomas Paine was one of his friends. Having witnessed two revolutions, the American War of Independence and the French Revolution, Blake set about writing three social prophecies: *The French Revolution* (1791), *America: A Prophecy* (1793), and *Europe: A Prophecy* (1794). They are a mixture of history, drama, and allegory and constitute an impassioned plea to men to cast off their shackles and be emancipated. Blake attacks materialism, the Church, the State, the Pope, and current Christianity; as opposed to true Christianity.

In *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), Blake deals with the miseries of loveless but indissoluble marriage and enforced chastity. He criticizes marriage-laws on account of which a man and a woman may remain trapped in a love-less marriage. This work is understood to be a declaration of belief in the purity of the instincts, the evils of repression, and even as a plea for free love.

In the Prophetic books: *The First Book of Urizen* (1794), *The Book of Ahania* (1795), *The Book of Los* (1795), *The Song of Los* (1795), and *The Four Zoas* (unpublished), Blake passes from history to mythology, from Time to Eternity, using the familiar story of the war among the gods. Blake retells the story of the divisions in man caused by the warring elements in him; Mind, Body, Heart, and Spirit. He calls them Urizen (reason), Tharmas (Instinct), Luvah (Emotion), and Los (Imagination). Blake believed that man can be fully re-integrated and return to his true home, Eternity, only after the contraries or different forces in him have been re-unified in a perfect balance, and this is possible only through the power of Vision and Imagination. The forces responsible for hindering man's progress are conventional morality, Church, State, and other man-made institutions.

The mythology of Blake's later prophecies; *Milton* (1804-1810), and *Jerusalem* (1804-1820) is based on Christianity or rather, Blake's version of Christianity. Man is no longer at war with external forces but is divided against himself. Vision or Imagination can assist him regain his primal identity. Imagination, which was formerly Los, is now clearly discernible as the Divine Imagination, Jesus Christ. Blake, the Poet-Prophet, has finally achieved what he set out to do; pierced the mystery of existence. He wishes to share his knowledge with all men. In his preface to *Milton*, he had appended the words; "Would to God



that all the Lord's people were Prophets.” (95) He has taught men, through his poetic faith, how to re-build Jerusalem in England.

The cycle of life is complete. Blake has passed from a state of innocence, through the dark night of experience, into a higher state of organized innocence. It is a hard-won fight against selfhood, self-sufficiency, and codified law; victory over which leads to the realm of spiritual truth. Blake's poetry ultimately illustrates the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount - love, kindness, and the mutual forgiveness of sins among men.

8. SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE: AN ASSESSMENT

Blake published the *Songs of Innocence* in 1789, the year of the French Revolution, using a process of his own invention, known as 'Illuminated Printing.' He claimed that the secret of this process was revealed to him by his dead brother in a vision. In 1794, he reissued the volume together with the *Songs of Experience* to form a single book: *Songs of Innocence and Experience Showing Two Contrary States of the Human Soul*.

The *Songs* are Blake's unique contribution to English poetry. The appeal of the *Songs* lies in the simplicity of their pattern and diction, and in their pure lyricism. Echoes of the Spenserian and Shakespearian lyric, evident in the early *Poetical Sketches*, may still be heard in the *Songs*; in their spontaneity and gaiety, their lightness and melody. But the subject matter of Blake's *Songs* is of a far more serious nature and critics have found complexities of meaning in what otherwise appear to be simple, charming lyrics. Blake may perhaps be credited with having produced a new genre, the "serious lyric."

Blake's *Songs* are linked, however tenuous the link may be, to a form of poetry popular in the eighteenth century - poems and hymns for children, particularly Isaac Watts' *Divine Songs Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children*. However, the similarities are confined to the framework of the hymns. Both in form and content, Blake's *Songs* are remote from those of other hymn writers; such as Isaac Watts, William Cowper, or Anna Barbauld; with their sentimental notions of piety and their rather complacent, at times even uncharitable, moralizing. Similarly, though Blake used the pastoral form, his *Songs* have a more serious intent than pretty pastoral poems do.

The vital element in Blake's poetry is the visionary element and the *Songs* are a visionary interpretation of life. Blake said, "The Nature of my work is Visionary or Imaginative," and "it is an Endeavour to Restore what the Ancients called the Golden Age" (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 36). As Northrop Frye says, "By vision he meant the view



of the world, not as it might be, still less as it ordinarily appears, but as it really is when it is seen by human consciousness at its greatest height and intensity” (8). Blake’s understanding and evaluation of human experience in the *Songs* are illustrative of this statement. Blake’s imaginative vision helped him to see, not with, but through the eye. To him a tree appeared, not only a tree but as a paradise of angels.

Joseph Wicksteed says that Blake, when he wrote the *Songs*, possessed a double vision; “Blake saw all things two-fold. If the Soul had its contrary states, words and images had their secondary and deeper meaning . . .” (196). Blake’s imaginative vision helped him to see, not with, but through the eye. To him a tree appeared, not only a tree but as a paradise of angels.

A cardinal feature of Blake’s poetry is his use of symbols. The symbols of the *Songs* are easily intelligible. The lamb, the Lamb of God, the Good Shepherd, and the Guardian Angel are all drawn from the Bible; particularly the Twenty-third Psalm and the New Testament. They give substance to Blake’s sacramental view of life.

Raymond Lister refers to the *Songs of Innocence* as “happy evocations of the innocence and joys of childhood” (28). Blake’s purpose is not limited to presenting pictures of childhood or describing various stages in the cycle of life. Grierson considers Blake’s poetry “a reading of life and death, Heaven and Hell, that should harmonize the painful antinomies of life, the contrast between the innocence, joy, and confidence seen in the child and the irrational sense of guilt, the haunting sorrow, the cramping inhibitions of adolescence and maturity” (32). Blake viewed with anguish, the sufferings of human beings and their futile attempts to reconcile the reality of suffering with the concept of a God of love. Blake’s *Songs* are a statement of this problem, which he undertook to solve in the Prophetic Books. Robert F. Gleckner finds Blake’s method in the *Songs* simple:

its roots lying in his concept of states and their symbols. Like many other artists Blake employed a central group of related symbols to form a dominant symbolic pattern; his are the child, the father and Christ, representing the states of innocence, experience and a higher innocence. (92)

C. M. Bowra considers *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* as “contrasted elements in a single design. The first sets out an imaginative vision of the state of innocence, the second shows how life challenges and corrupts and destroys it” (29). For Blake, childhood is both an actual state and a spiritual state. It is a symbol of a state of soul, which may be found not only in childhood but also in maturity. The qualities of this spiritual condition are innocence, joy, and trust. As Bowra comments:



For him all human beings are in some sense and at some times the children of a divine father but experience destroys their innocence and makes them fellow specters and illusions. Blake does not write at a distance of time from memories of what childhood once was, but from an insistent present anguish at the ugly contrasts between the childlike and the experienced conceptions of reality. (30)

Blake believed that human beings can redeem themselves only through the imagination. For him, “Imagination is the Human Eternal Body in Every Man. Imagination is the Divine Body in Every Man” (qtd. in Bowra 7). For Blake, God, in the person of Jesus Christ, and the Imagination are one. In other words, God is the creative and spiritual power in man; the divine essence which exists potentially in every human being.

In the *Songs of Innocence*, Blake extols the divine qualities present in man - Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love. (“The Divine Image”) These qualities are debased in the state of experience; especially love, which becomes selfish and possessive. Blake realized that the state of experience, where man becomes aware of the sordid realities of life, is an essential stage in the cycle of being. As C. M. Bowra writes:

Blake knew that experience is bought at a bitter price, not merely in such unimportant things as comfort and peace of mind but in the highest spiritual values. His *Songs of Experience* are the poetry of this process. They tell us how what we accept in childlike innocence is tested and proved feeble by actual events, how much we have taken for granted is not true of the living world, how every noble desire may be debased and perverted. When he sings of this process, he is no longer the piper of pleasant glee, but an angry, passionate rebel. (37-38)

Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* are therefore “mild and gentle” and his *Songs of Experience*, “terrific numbers” sung by the Poet-Prophet. However, even after exploring the states of innocence and experience, Blake was still unable to find full and exhaustive answers. In the *Songs of Innocence and Experience* he has studied the human crisis; man’s predicament in a hostile and seemingly meaningless universe.

The consummation is yet to come, it is only hinted at, but the road is open to a state of higher, organized innocence: “Innocence that dwelleth with wisdom, never with ignorance” (*The Four Zoas*, 300). As yet, there is only religious affirmation and acceptance. Blake can accept Experience as a state of purgation, from which one may emerge with a clearer perception of life and of the interconnected contraries that give meaning to life. The unified



soul which undergoes division may be re-integrated through imagination; through passion, power and energy.

Blake's conclusions are phrased in Christian terminology, though not necessarily traditional Christian terminology. His gospel is the gospel of liberty, his creed the brotherhood of man. Blake rejects the prohibitions of a tradition-ridden priesthood; the "Thou Shall not . . ." of Jehovah; the angry, jealous, selfish God. Blake believed that Christ came into the world not so much as to atone for the sins of mankind as to offer a new law of freedom, love and the mutual forgiveness of sins; "Mutual Forgiveness of Each Vice/ Such are the Gates of Paradise" ("For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise" 259). To enter the gates of Paradise one has to become a little child; "Except ye be converted and become as little children ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven" (*New Jerusalem Bible*, Mathew. 18: 3-5).

9. STUDY GUIDE

9.1 "The Lamb," *Songs of Innocence*

Introduction

The lamb is a symbol of innocence in *The Songs of Innocence* and the tiger, in the *Songs of Experience*, a symbol of experience. Since the two contrary states of the soul are not completely independent and often coexist, it has become customary to read the poems together and contrast them. However, it is better to read the two poems independently, as the poet desires us to do. The lamb symbolizes all that is gentle, meek, and innocent; as the infant Jesus. For Blake, Innocence is a state of mind and Experience crucifies this state of mind. The poem "The Lamb" celebrates this state of mind and the speaker is totally unaware of his/her future or its corruption at the hands of Experience.

In the "Introduction," the first poem in the *Songs of Innocence*, the child on the cloud asks the piper to pipe a song about a lamb. He then commands him to sing the song. The child on the cloud appreciates the music and weeps with joy. In a child-like, peremptory manner he orders the piper to write down the poems and vanishes. We can assume that the poem "The Lamb" is written by the piper/poet in the "Introduction."

Although the lamb is a recurring symbol in many of Blake's poems, it stands for different things in each poem. The lamb in this poem is not the lamb imagined by the speaker in "The Little Black Boy," joyfully dancing round the tent of God, in the other world. There, the lamb in heaven is a consolation or a comfort for the suffering innocents. It is not the



idyllic or the innocent lamb of the poem “Night,” where the lion and the lamb live together. The lamb in this poem is a real lamb and the speaker, an innocent child, believes that it is a symbol of Christ. It is this child-like faith that Blake equates with the state of Innocence.

The Lamb

Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
Gave thee life & bid thee feed.
By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly bright;
Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice!
Little Lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb I'll tell thee!
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.
Little Lamb God bless thee.
Little Lamb God bless thee.

Study Notes

- 2 *Dost thou know*: old English for ‘Do you know?’
- 4 *mead*: short for meadow.



- 5 *clothing of delight*: soft, virgin wool, a pleasure to watch, feel and wear.
- 8 *vales*: valleys.
- 13 *For he calls himself a Lamb*: in the Gospel of John, it is John the Baptist who gave Jesus the title Lamb of God; “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” The imagery of Jesus as a lamb originated in Old Testament descriptions of the suffering servant of God.
- 16 *He became a little child*: a reference to the belief in the incarnation of God, the Son, as Jesus Christ.
- 18 *We are called by his name*: we are known as Christians, followers of Christ.

Critical Analysis

In this poem, the child questions the lamb about its origins. The questions are rhetorical: it's not as if the child doesn't know the answers but s/he is reaffirming her/his faith in Jesus Christ. By doing so, s/he is able to remind the lamb about God; the Father, the Creator, and the watchful Shepherd. S/he reminds the lamb of God's bountiful goodness - the gift of life, warm and protective clothing, and a pleasant bleat.

This poem, steeped in Christian doctrine, passes from the image of the Good Shepherd (the Shepherd of the parable of the lost sheep) to the great paradox of Christianity; that God himself took on a human form and dwelt on earth as a man – as gentle, meek, and mild as a lamb. Blake's emphasis in this poem is not on Christ the man but on Christ the child– the infant Jesus. The child, the lamb, and Christ are unified in a sacramental view of life.

The world presented in this poem is one of joy, innocence, and meekness; a world as yet untainted by suffering and pain. And the God of this universe is an immanent, not transcendent God. He becomes the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep. He is also led like a sheep to the slaughter; a reference to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

The child's unquestioning acceptance of Christ as a lamb is to be noted. In this beautiful little hymn, Blake would like us to appreciate the ability of the child to see the outside world in terms of Christian symbols. It is an intuitive, rather than rational approach to life.

**Check Your Progress**

- i) Who is the narrator in this poem?
- ii) Mention some of the Christian symbols used in this poem.
- iii) Explain the line: “He became a little child.”

9.2 “The Tyger,” *Songs of Experience*

In the first poem of the *Songs of Innocence*, the “Introduction,” a Piper is inspired by a child on a cloud to write happy songs, and happy they are. Although “The Lamb” and “The Chimney Sweeper” are both about the most exploited sections of society, the outlook of these poems is joyful. The speakers demonstrate faith in Christian teachings and, with their imagination, are able to transcend their painful circumstances.

In the two poems from *Songs of Experience* that you will study, you will notice a change in tone and atmosphere. The speakers in “The Chimney Sweeper” and “The Tyger” have no faith in redemption or salvation. The speaker of “The Tyger” has none of the joyful belief in the external world, as the child in “The Lamb” does.

Introduction

This poem, which is considered Blake’s masterpiece, has been variously interpreted by critics. On a superficial reading it appears to be a presentation of contraries, good and evil, but the implications are far greater than a mere conflict between good and evil.

The speaker expresses his wonder at the beauty, the power, and the sheer magnificence of the tiger. The poem is framed as a series of questions. Some questions are incomplete in form, suggesting that the poet is overwhelmed by awe. The terror which the beast inspires is communicated through the repetition of such words as ‘dare,’ ‘dread,’ and ‘terrors.’ To the narrator, it appears daring, even for God, to undertake such an awesome act of creation. It seems incredible that the God who created the lamb could also create the tiger: “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?”

The tiger is Blake’s symbol for regeneration and for Energy, which is opposed to Urizen or Reason. Urizen, the false God with his iron laws, has crushed man. For Urizen, the Energies (which Blake equated with human emotions, especially love) are evil and shameful. Blake believed that the Energies should not be suppressed for they are inspiring and powerful forces in life. Only by giving expression to the Energies can man attain happiness and fulfilment. In this poem, the tiger symbolizes these Energies. However, even without



reference to Blake's symbols, the poem can be read as an expression of awe at the paradoxical nature of divine creation.

The Tyger

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies.
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat.
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp.
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night:
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?



Study Notes

- 1 *Tyger*: Blake uses the older, archaic spelling of tiger; most probably for poetic effect.
- 1 *burning bright*: the tiger's vivid orange colour resembles a fire in the forest.
- 2 *forests of the night*: symbols of Church and State.
- 3 *immortal hand or eye*: the speaker imagines that the creator/ God has a human form.
- 5 *deeps*: valleys.
- 7 *wings*: a reference to God. In Blake's print "The Elohim Creating Adam," God is represented as a winged figure.
- 8 *dare seize the fire*: the courage of the creator reminds the speaker of the Greek myth of Prometheus, who dared to steal fire from heaven.
- 9 *art*: here, it means the craft of the ironsmith, a person who makes articles from iron.
- 10 *sinews*: tendons, that join muscle to bone in the body.
- 12 *What dread hand? & what dread feet?*: here, 'dread' is used as an adjective and it means 'to cause fear and worry.' The narrator wants to know which hands and feet could dare to seize the tiger, once its heart started to beat.
- 13 *the chain*: an image of fettering and binding. It is implied that no one can chain the ferocious tiger.
- 14 *furnace*: the speaker imagines the creator is perhaps an ironsmith, and that the tiger was created in the furnace in his workshop.
- 15 *anvil*: block of iron, on which metal can be hammered and shaped.
- 17 *stars*: interpreted by several critics to symbolize the angels, particularly the rebel angels, followers of Lucifer.
- 20 *the Lamb*: the Tyger is the counterpart of the Lamb. God created both the lamb and the tiger. Both the meekness and gentleness of the lamb and the power and passion of the tiger are necessary for human evolution.

Critical Analysis

In the poem, "The Lamb," from *Songs of Innocence*, the little child asks questions and joyfully answers them himself; secure in his innocent belief in a benevolent creator. Like this poem, "The Tyger" is also a poem where the speaker wonders about the Creator but with a crucial difference; in "The Tyger," the questions remain unanswered. The narrator gazes on the ferocious creature, wondering at the skill and power of its creator. The poem is in the



form of a series of questions that have no answers; all that he can conclude is “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” The speaker’s understanding is limited; he can think of the creator only in human terms, with hands and eyes. It is difficult for him to accept the existence of God without questioning it. Compare this to the speaker’s attitude in “The Lamb,” where the little child is secure in his knowledge of a benevolent Christ, imagined as a lamb. Experience questions whereas innocence accepts without doubt.

Another way to read the poem is with reference to Blake’s symbolism: as a celebration of the imaginative power of the human soul - symbolized by the tiger. The tiger has the ferocity to break the “mind-forg’d manacles” and burn the “forests of the night.” According to C.M. Bowra, Blake believed that “the creative activity of the imagination and the transformation of experience through it are possible only through the release and exercise of awful powers. He chooses his symbols for these powers in violent and destructive things” (47). Blake wrote that “the tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction,” the wrath which Blake found in Christ, his symbol of the divine spirit which will not tolerate restriction but asserts itself against established rules, was the means by which he hoped to unite innocence and experience in some tremendous synthesis (*The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* 40).

The poetry of this desire and what it meant to Blake can be seen in “The Tyger.” This is the pure poetry of his trust in cosmic forces. The tiger is Blake’s symbol for the fierce forces in the soul which are needed to break the bonds of experience. “The forests of the night,” in which the tiger lurks, are ignorance, repression, and superstition. The tiger is created by unknown, supernatural spirits, who beat out living worlds with their hammers. Martin K. Nurmi considers “The Tyger” as

a kind of dialectical struggle in which Blake strives to bring his emblematic tiger’s two ‘contraries’ - ‘its deadly terrors’ and the divinity in which it participates by having been created by an immortal hand or eye’ – into the ‘fearful symmetry symbolized by the animal’s natural symmetry of ferocity and beauty and even by its contrasting stripes . . . the final poem thus emerges quite clearly as a complex but essentially positive statement affirming the dread tiger’s divinity, and not a probing of good and evil, as it has sometimes been interpreted. (669)

D.W. Harding dismisses all interpretations of “The Tyger” as a conflict between good and evil:



At simplest reading the poem is a contemplation of the fact that besides peacefulness and gentleness the world includes fierce strength terrifying in its possibilities of destructiveness but also impressive and admirable, a stupendous part of creation and seemingly a challenge to the idea of a benign Creator. To see that the tiger's fierceness and the lamb's gentleness are also contrasting qualities of the human mind is a very slight extension beyond the simplest literal sense. The theme is a commonplace, and also a fact of supreme human significance, the focus of sharp, psychological conflict in human minds and of unending theological and philosophical discussion. What Blake's fine poem does, is to let us contemplate the facts in their emotional intensity and conflict, and to share his complex attitude of awe, terror, admiration, near bafflement and attempted acceptance. (33)

Check Your Progress

- i) Describe the creator of the tiger, as visualized by the speaker.
- ii) Discuss the structure of the poem, as a series of unanswered questions?
- iii) Comment on the tiger as a symbol of the creative imagination.

9.3 "The Chimney Sweeper," *Songs of Innocence***Introduction**

The poem was published in 1789 and at that time it was common for little boys, and sometimes girls, as young as six years old, to be employed as chimney sweeps. They were usually little children sold off by their poor parents or orphans from the workhouses; apprenticed to adults known as master sweeps, who were paid by the parish to train these children. The chimneys in the houses had very narrow flues and they required regular cleaning of soot deposits so that fires could burn efficiently. Because the chimneys were very narrow (the standard size was 14x9 inches) and angular, little boys were made to crawl up the chimneys; pushing themselves up with their knees and elbows to clean the soot with their brushes. They were not paid money for their labour; only food and lodging were provided. They slept on the same sacks they used to collect soot, got up around 3 a.m., bathed once a week, and had only one holiday in the year. Working and living in such horrific conditions; many of these little children suffered from cancer, died of suffocation or burns, and were ill-



treated. They wore black clothes and would go around the streets, calling out “Sweep’ sweep” to let people know that they were around. Blake was distressed to see the condition of the sweeps and, as he does in many of his poems, he connects the social problem to the spiritual malaise in society. If you search on the internet, you can see old photographs of chimney sweepers in Europe.

There were humanitarian concerns about little boys being forced to climb chimneys, resulting in inadequate laws. In one such influential pamphlet, Jonas Hanway’s *A Sentimental History of Chimney Sweeps in London and Westminster*, published in 1785, the author advocates opening of Sunday schools to teach the chimney sweepers about Christianity; “in Sunday schools, young chimney sweepers are collected and taught their duty instead of permitted to loiter and indulge in vice” (52). But Blake’s poem raises wider political issues of exploitation and indoctrination. The Angel in “The Chimney Sweeper” from *Songs of Innocence* represents the way in which organized religion and the Church exploit poor children and offer them religious teachings to maintain discipline. It was not until 1875, that a bill was passed in the British parliament to put an end to this inhuman practice.

The narrator in the poem is a little sweeper and the central event from which the moral is drawn is a dream. The dream is only an illusory comfort; like the golden lambs dancing round the tent of God in “The Little Black Boy.” Blake here is protesting the exploitation of the impoverished or deprived class by the ethical dogmas of the dominant class. Blake hated this kind of Christianity and its Church and the morality imposed by it. The illusory comfort which the angel inspires in Tom Dacre’s dream is not freedom, but a kind of prison to manipulate the child to be a good boy and continue doing his duty in a disciplined manner. Such religious preaching persuades innocent, deprived humanity into submission and passive acceptance of suffering.

The Chimney Sweeper

When my mother died I was very young,
And my father sold me while yet my tongue
Could scarcely cry “weep! 'weep! 'weep! 'weep!”
So your chimneys I sweep & in soot I sleep.

There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head
That curled like a lamb's back, was shaved, so I said,
“Hush, Tom! never mind it, for when your head's bare,
You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.”



And so he was quiet, & that very night,
As Tom was a-sleeping he had such a sight!
That thousands of sweepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, & Jack,
Were all of them locked up in coffins of black;

And by came an Angel who had a bright key,
And he opened the coffins & set them all free;
Then down a green plain, leaping, laughing they run,
And wash in a river and shine in the Sun.

Then naked & white, all their bags left behind,
They rise upon clouds, and sport in the wind.
And the Angel told Tom, if he'd be a good boy,
He'd have God for his father & never want joy.

And so Tom awoke; and we rose in the dark
And got with our bags & our brushes to work.
Though the morning was cold, Tom was happy & warm;
So if all do their duty, they need not fear harm.

Study Notes

- 3 'weep! 'weep!': the young child's pronunciation of the word sweep. Ironically, it sounds like a cry of pain.
- 4 soot: a black powder, composed mainly of carbon, produced when coal or wood is burned. The little boys were made to collect it in sacks, as it could be sold for use as fertilizer.
- 5 Tom Dacre: another chimney sweeper, who works with the speaker.
- 6 like a lamb's back: the simile of the lamb recurs frequently in Blake's poetry. Here, the shaving of Tom's hair is connected to the image of Jesus as the sacrificial lamb.
- 6 was shaved: the little chimney sweeps were forced to get their heads shaved to prevent the soot from sticking to it when they climbed up the chimneys.



- 8 *white hair*: for Blake, white symbolizes innocence and purity.
- 10 *had such a sight*: the dream that Tom Dacre has.
- 11 *thousands of sweepers*: a disturbing image. In London alone, at the time this poem was written, there were a thousand boys working as sweeps.
- 12 *coffins of black*: the narrow and dark chimneys the little boys climb up resemble the inside of coffins. An ironic comment on their death-like existence.
- 13 *by came an Angel who had a bright key*: the Angel is a messenger of God and the key is an apparent reference to death as deliverance.
- 16 *wash in a river*: once a week or so, the little chimney sweeps were taken to the river and allowed to wash and play. This was, perhaps, the most pleasant part of their difficult lives. That is why Tom Dacre's dream is a recreation of that experience.
- 17 *their bags left behind*: in terms of dream symbolism, it could be freedom from their punishing work. The bags hold their cleaning brushes.
- 21 *rose in the dark*: the little boys would begin work before dawn as people would get their chimneys cleaned after the fires had burnt all night.

A Critical Study

The opening lines of the poem are dramatic. The chimney-sweep narrates his poignant story in a matter-of-fact tone; almost an understatement. Blake presents a Dickensian situation of squalor and suffering. The presentation is all the more compelling because Blake avoids cynicism and bitter irony. He is even able to transform the suffering of the child to a spiritual triumph, by equating it with the quiet and unresisting suffering of Christ – the meek and mild Lamb of God. Blake shocks the reader by the manner in which the child recounts the death of his mother and the cruel manner in which his father sold him when he was still a young child. There is horror in the spectacle of the child sleeping, on a cold winter night, on a bed of soot.

In the second stanza, the main actor in the drama, Tom Dacre is introduced. Tom was deeply distressed when his fair hair was shorn. It was customary to shave the hair of chimney sweeps to prevent it from catching soot. There is an obvious reference here to the Prophet Isaiah's description of Christ as a lamb before its shearers. Tom was inconsolable till his friend offered him words of spiritual comfort. The little chimney-sweep, himself a sufferer becomes the guardian of Tom Dacre. That night Tom had a dream that he, along with thousands of chimney-sweeps, was released from earthly bondage and led into the presence of God. The moral of the poem is uttered by the Angel - that if Tom were a good boy and did



his work, he would not lack joy. When Tom awoke the next morning, he was comforted by the thought that if he did his duty he would come to no harm.

Into the world of innocence, Blake introduces distress, sorrow, and care. But the miseries of the world are transcended by Tom Dacre's dream of a visionary existence beyond the skies, in Heaven, which he will attain after having been washed clean in the River which forms the boundary between Life and Death and on the far shore of which stands God, the Father, waiting to comfort His children. This vision which has descended on Tom like Grace, warms his heart and fills it with hope and joy. He is convinced that the ills of the world can be borne, if they are but a prelude to the joys of Heaven. This is evidence of the inner purity of the children which cannot be destroyed by outward circumstances.

Even though Blake fills the heart of the chimney-sweeper with Pity, Mercy, and Love which constitute the "human form divine," he cannot refrain from indicating that the words of consolation spoken by the chimney-sweep are words of cold comfort; "So if all do their duty they need not fear harm." There is scathing criticism implied here - the irony is that all are not doing their duty. The little chimney sweeper himself is unaware of the irony in his words. Blake is sharply critical of the work-ethic preached by the ministers of the Church and supported by the upper classes, the vested interests of the day, that every calling is a vocation; a divine calling, howsoever humble it may be. Blake is voicing his protest against the injustices inherent in a hardened society which can thrive only at the expense of the poor, who have no other choice but to remain entrenched in the lowest stratum of society.

Check Your Progress

- i) Who is the narrator of this poem?
- ii) Why is little Tom Dacre upset? Describe his dream?
- iii) What does the Angel tell Tom?
- iv) Explain why the last line of the poem is ironical?

9.4 "The Chimney Sweeper," *Songs of Experience*

Introduction

The sorrow of the chimney sweeper in the *Songs of Innocence* is temporarily put to rest by the promise of some kind of reward in the world to come. This reward is marketed by the



ruling class; the Priest and King, so that they can live in comfort. All the doctrines and dogmas, and the institutions of mercy thrive because they can imprison innocent minds and condition and inhibit their spiritual growth. In *Songs of Innocence*, the chimney sweeper lacks the knowledge of experience and therefore, is easily tricked into accepting some kind of illusory reward and is prepared to suffer and still feel happy.

The chimney sweeper of the *Songs of Experience* has a clearly disillusioned view of religion. The eye of experience sees through the hypocrisy hidden from the eye of innocence. The tragedy of experience lies in the fact that it demystifies the knowledge imparted by the institutions of Church and State. These rulers invest for their seat in heaven through the kind of mercy and pity they show towards the poor and the weak. Therefore, poverty must prevail. The child of innocence can comfort himself by inventing a heaven out of the dogmas thrown to it and morals taught to it. But the child of experience can only weep. There is no comfort for him, only woe.

We should not imagine that innocence is about childhood and experience is about adulthood; they are the two contrary states of the human soul. The state of the soul which finds comfort in protection and is capable of imaginative invention is innocence, and the state of soul which realizes that all security is futile is experience.

Blake wanted to destroy all that binds man to exploitative institutions and he also wanted to destroy man's obedience to those moral precepts that hinder the full power of his creative will to assert and revolt. God, the father, has become a source of exploitation in the hands of religious hypocrites who want to earn their heaven out of the miseries they inflict upon the poor and the oppressed.

The Chimney Sweeper

A little black thing among the snow,
Crying "weep! 'weep!" in notes of woe!
"Where are thy father and mother? say?"
"They are both gone up to the church to pray.

Because I was happy upon the heath,
And smil'd among the winter's snow,
They clothed me in the clothes of death,
And taught me to sing the notes of woe.



And because I am happy and dance and sing,
They think they have done me no injury,
And are gone to praise God and his Priest and King,
Who make up a heaven of our misery."

Study Notes

- 1 *a little black thing*: the narrator sees a little child in the snow, covered with black soot. Note how Blake uses the contrasting colours (black and white) to highlight the child's pitiable condition.
- 2 *'weep! weep! in notes of woe'*: The weeping of the innocent chimney sweeper is easily converted into joy, but the weeping of this chimney sweeper is condemned to permanent woe.
- 3 *'Where are thy father and mother? say?'*: the narrator asks the little chimney sweep about the whereabouts of his parents.
- 4 *They are both gone to the church to pray*: at first the little sweep's answer seems to be without resentment but in the next few lines, he complains about their neglect of their parental duties and their hypocrisy.
- 5 *heath*: an area of land where grass and small plants grow.
- 7 *clothes of death*: the chimney sweeps wore black clothes so that the soot couldn't soil them. Black is a colour associated with death.
- 8 *notes of woe*: the little child is forced to work as a chimney sweeper. When he calls out 'sweep' sweep,' in the streets, as was customary in the trade, his voice carries the pain of his suffering.
- 11 *God & his Priest & King*: the child expresses his anger at his parents who have sold him off and think he is happy. There is bitterness in the child's narration; he indicts the Church, the caretakers of religion, and the state - for failing to do their duty.

Critical Analysis

The narrator sees "a little black thing" in the snow and notes the sorrow in his cry. The chimney sweeper is out in the cold, dressed in his black work clothes, calling out for work in the street. The reader's attention is immediately drawn to the child's pitiful condition. The



narrator asks him about his parents and the implication is clear - he wants to know why this little child is wandering alone. The child is suffering the misery and fate of an orphan. The chimney sweeper's replies are an expression of his anger and resentment at his condition; he tells the narrator that his parents have effectively killed his childhood by apprenticing him to a master sweep. The parents believe that because the child still dances and sings, he is happy with his work.

The parents are guilty of neglecting their duty towards the child. But Blake doesn't stop there. In the last two lines, there is a powerful indictment of those institutions which should have protected the little boy instead of allowing him to be exploited;

'And are gone to praise God & his Priest & King,
'Who make up a heaven of our misery.'

Note that the first letters of 'Priest' and 'King' are capitalized. The little child is not taken in by religious doctrines; especially the one that considers suffering as a prelude to a place in heaven. He understands that his misery is the foundation on which religious institutions thrive. At this point, it is essential to compare the poem to "The Chimney Sweeper" in the *Songs of Innocence*, where little Tom Dacre finds comfort in the words of his friend, whereas the little chimney sweeper in this poem, demonstrates an awareness much beyond his years. He is disenchanted with religion and sees through the hypocrisy of religious institutions.

Check Your Progress

- i) What does the narrator see in the snow? What does he ask the little boy?
- ii) What are the little chimney sweep's feelings towards his parents?
- iii) Comment on the significance of the last line.

10. SUMMING UP

In the preceding two sections you have read about the four poems in your course. Although each poem can be read independently, and appreciated without reference to the others, you need to form a wider perspective and identify the common thread in each section of the *Songs of Innocence and Experience*.

The first point you need to remember is that the narrator in each poem is different; what you hear is not the voice of the poet but a narrator. For instance, the narrator in the first poem of the *Songs of Innocence* is a piper and in "The Chimney Sweeper," it is a little



chimney sweep. The speakers in these poems, as well as “The Lamb” are all innocent but not in the conventional sense of the word, as being simple and uncorrupted. Their faith in God/ Jesus is unquestioning and they have the imagination to look beyond suffering and exploitation at the possibility of heaven. The little chimney sweep’s words of comfort for his friend Tom Dacre are couched in Christian terminology and the belief in a benevolent God. You might wonder - is William Blake suggesting that the solution to some of society’s most pressing problems lies in unquestioning faith in the will of god. That is not the case. Although Blake presents childlike faith as an admirable quality in humans, he knew that such a state of mind will eventually be contaminated by experience - an inevitable step in the progression of the human soul. The chimney sweep of the *Songs of Innocence* becomes the chimney sweep of the *Songs of Experience*; he is not taken in by religious platitudes and has realized that his misery feeds the Church and its priests. He is full of anger and resentment towards his parents. Similarly, the speaker in “London,” is unable to see beyond the suffering he witnesses in his depressing walk through the city. His consciousness is essentially flawed; unable to perceive any redeeming feature in the world around him. Experience, for Blake, was a state of soul that has lost its divine ability to see; for instance, the speaker in “The Tyger” can only question.

For Blake, individual redemption or salvation lay in breaking free of the chains imposed by society, with the help of the imagination. His poem, “The Tyger” is a celebration of the spiritual forces in the human soul that can empower him/her to break free of the mental bonds created by a false religion. Though Blake was sharply critical of the concept of heaven peddled by Christian preachers, he didn’t reject the core teachings of Jesus Christ. What he objected to was the refusal of the Church to alleviate the sufferings of the poor and innocent. He felt that Christianity had not been interpreted in its true spirit.

Assignment Questions

- i) Compare and contrast “The Lamb” with “The Tyger.”
- ii) Discuss various symbols used in Blake’s poems.
- iii) With reference to “The Lamb” and “The Chimney Sweeper,” from the *Songs of Innocence*, explain what Blake meant by a state of ‘innocence’?
- iv) With reference to “The Tyger” and “The Chimney Sweeper,” from the *Songs of Experience*, explain what Blake meant by a state of ‘experience’?
- v) Discuss William Blake as a social critic, with special reference to the two “The Chimney Sweeper” poems.



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(i) “TINTERN ABBEY” (ii) “LONDON”

William Wordsworth

**P. C. Khanna
Dr. Neeta Gupta**

1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This study material aims to do the following:

- Introduce you to the poet.
- Bring out Wordsworth’s significance as a Romantic poet.
- Familiarize you with aspects of Wordsworth’s poetry.
- Understand the role of Nature in his poetry and how he draws upon simple everyday occurrences for his themes.
- Draw your attention to the simplicity and beauty of Wordsworth’s language.
- Understand the role of the poet as envisaged by Wordsworth.
- Help you understand and appreciate the two poems under consideration – “Tintern Abbey” and “London”.

2. A SHORT BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was the son of John Wordsworth and Anne Cookson and was born at Cockermouth. His boyhood was spent among the wild hills of his beloved Lake District. He lost his mother when he was eight and his father when he was thirteen, but relatives helped to educate Wordsworth and his brothers and their sister Dorothy. His schooldays at Hawkshead are vividly described in *The Prelude*. In 1787 he went to St. John’s College, Cambridge where he read a great deal, but paid little attention to the prescribed courses of study.

In 1790 and in 1791-92 he was in France, where he became a convinced revolutionary. In 1793 he was back in England and the outbreak of war with his beloved



France caused him anguish. When the excesses of ‘The Terror’ broke out, he lost his belief in the Revolution and turned to Godwin’s anarchical doctrines for consolation: barren stuff for a poet whose huge inspiration was struggling to find adequate expression. In 1795 a legacy enabled him to set up a house with his sister Dorothy in the Quantocks, and in her companionship, he rediscovered joy in Nature. His friendship with Coleridge released the creativity within him. In 1798 *Lyrical Ballads* was published, and in the following year he returned to Lake District. From then until 1805 he succeeded in writing his greatest oeuvre of works. He had discovered the true purpose of his life; his marriage with Mary Hutchinson in 1802 brought him joy, his belief in Nature was “the nurse, the guide, the guardian of [his] heart, and soul of all [his] moral being was unimpaired” (“Tintern Abbey”, lines 100-111).

The great 1807 volume of poetry was the golden harvest of these fruitful years. The loss at sea of his brother John in 1805 was a deep grief, and his poetry lost much of its spontaneous joy after this. Nor was it John’s death alone and the decay of Coleridge that saddened him; the glories of his visionary powers were waning and he felt that he had exchanged youth for middle age:

“Whither is fled the visionary gleam? Where is it now, the glory and the dream?”
 (“Immortality Ode” line 60, in Selincourt, 460).

He turned to Duty and the memories of “the dream” to prop his remaining years. Throughout the rest of his long life, he met with increasing evidence of the esteem in which he was held. The abuse that had greeted the *Lyrical Ballads* was exchanged for honours, pensions and the Laureateship. He died in 1850 and was buried at Grasmere. After his death *The Prelude* was published. He had finished it as early as 1805 but deliberately held it back for posthumous publication, knowing the publicity that must attend this autobiographical epic. Wordsworth is one of our greatest poets. His greatness lies principally in his power of expressing the awe and rapture that a sensitive man experiences when confronted by the grandeur of natural beauty.

Wordsworth was the first poet who raised simple, bare and naked words to the level of poetry. He did not depend upon any poetic cliché, mythology, or any other stereotyped rhetoric. What distinguished Wordsworth from all other poets, is not only his attitude towards Nature, or his language but also his views on the role of a poet as an individual and his special concern for the “still sad music of humanity”. We shall here consider how these aspects of his poetry are realized in some of his finest poems.

Wordsworth’s claim to the title of a great poet, as many critics believe, rests upon the work of a single decade: his poetic genius showed at its best in what he wrote between 1798



and 1808. *The Lyrical Ballads*, (which Coleridge and Wordsworth conceived together), the *Lucy* poems, some of his great *Sonnets* and “The Immortality Ode” all belong to this period. “Tintern Abbey”, which was the last poem of the first volume of *The Lyrical Ballads* and which, it is believed, contains the central theme of all his major works, was written in 1798, the year which marks the shaping of the great soul of a poet in the making.

In his “Preface to the Lyrical Ballads”, Wordsworth asks “What is a poet?” and answers by saying that “he is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endowed with more lively sensibility more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind, a man pleased with his own passions and volitions and who rejoices more than others in the spirit of life that is within him: delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe and habitually, compelled to create them where he does not find them,” (*Preface*, in Bret and Jones, 250).

Wordsworth is a man speaking to men in a language which rejects all poetic ornaments and mechanical devices. As Coleridge observes in *Biographia Literaria*, in *The Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth for his part was “to give the charm of novelty to things of every day and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us.” He attempts to give charm and novelty to things of everyday life by “awakening the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom,” (Coleridge, 53), to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate and describe them, throughout, as far as possible, in a selection of language really used by men, and at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect, and further, above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which he associates ideas in a state of excitement. For this reason, “humble and rustic life was generally chosen, because in that condition the essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity and because in that condition passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature” (*Preface*, in Bret and Jones, 284). The rustic and humble people lacked sophistication, spoke a language which contained the elemental force of pure and primal emotions and showed human nature untrammelled by the conventions of upbringing, custom and education. “All good poetry, he believes, “is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings and takes its origin from emotions recollected in tranquility. The emotion is contemplated till by a series of reactions the tranquility gradually disappears and an emotion kindred to that which was before the subject of contemplation, is gradually



produced and does itself actually exist in the mind” (*Preface*, in Bret and Jones, 240). In this mood, successful composition begins and it is in this mood that it is carried on. We shall actually see it happening when we study “Tintern Abbey”. Here the powerful role of memory in retaining certain images, and the contemplation of this memory in tranquility, recreates the entire experience and growth of his mind in arriving at a certain maturity of vision and thought. The language and movement of the poem is simple, natural and powerful. It is always true to the emotion, the objects which caused this emotion and the philosophy or view of life which sprang from this emotion.

Wordsworth is a poet speaking to men and his main concern is man and his mind. But he regrets that man’s basic or inherited tendency is to lose the paradise naturally gifted to him. Wordsworth regains this paradise in Nature and is therefore regarded as a poet of Nature and a worshipper of Nature. But Wordsworth’s basic preoccupation is not with the paradise he regains, but with man, who is gradually losing his paradise, or the “still sad music of humanity”(“Tintern Abbey”, 94).

Wordsworth’s basic conviction is that man by alienating himself from Nature is unconsciously orphaning himself. Away from the parent Nature there is no rest for his mind or peace for his soul. Nature, with all its loveliness, is a living presence to him and co-exists in the mind of man. The soul which is in unison with Nature is blessed by her peace. He sincerely believes that the natural piety which binds all men together is best sustained with a simple communion with Nature.

Wordsworth’s attitude towards Nature is different from that of other Romantic poets. In them we find that the poet’s joy or melancholy is transferred to natural objects or rather, a selection is made of natural objects in which a sympathetic analogy can be traced and then these objects are endowed with the appropriate mood. For Wordsworth, however, Nature has her own life, a sense sublime, which also dwells in the mind of man. Mind and Nature always act and react upon each other. It is a continuous process, consisting mainly of three phases, the “glad animal moments” of childhood, the “passions” and ‘appetites’ of youth, and lastly that serene and blessed mood in which mind and nature achieve complete harmony and “we are laid asleep in body and become a living soul,” (“Tintern Abbey”, 42-47). Nature thus plays an active role in shaping the soul of man. So, in Wordsworth, we find that the great union of Mind and Nature is consummated by a process of association which links up at every stage of his life, experience and the experiencing self, leading from sensation to feeling, from feeling to thought and then creating a union of all these faculties when the mighty world of eye and ear ceases to exist; and the same sublime sense which dwells in



Nature becomes coexistent with the mind of man, and though the same impulse animates all objects and all thought, the mind rises above the objects it contemplates to the creation of a moral being, a soul.

In “Tintern Abbey” and “The Immortality Ode” we experience this pilgrimage of the poet’s soul inspired by Nature. We also realize the moral influence it exercises on him while shaping his soul. The “still sad music of humanity”, and man’s inherited tendency to lose his paradise, haunts his songs.

Wordsworth’s concern for mankind’s slow march to doom with the growth of industrialization and neglect of Nature can be felt in “London”. This shows that the poet Wordsworth is a man speaking to men and although he finds a temple for himself, his main worry was the fate of mankind which was gradually drifting from that temple.

The two poems we are going to study combine in them the essence of Wordsworth’s poetic achievement and indicate the major milestone of the growth of his mind.

3. “Tintern Abbey”: THE POEM

“Lines Composed a Few Miles Above “Tintern Abbey”, On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour. July 13, 1798.”

Five years have past; five summers, with the length
Of five long winters! and again I hear
These waters, rolling from their mountain-springs
With a soft inland murmur.—Once again
Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
That on a wild secluded scene impress
Thoughts of more deep seclusion; and connect
The landscape with the quiet of the sky.
The day is come when I again repose
Here, under this dark sycamore, and view 10
These plots of cottage-ground, these orchard-tufts,
Which at this season, with their unripe fruits,
Are clad in one green hue, and lose themselves



'Mid groves and copses. Once again I see
These hedge-rows, hardly hedge-rows, little lines
Of sportive wood run wild: these pastoral farms,
Green to the very door; and wreaths of smoke
Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!
With some uncertain notice, as might seem
Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods,
Or of some Hermit's cave, where by his fire
The Hermit sits alone. 20

These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blind man's eye:
But oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart;
And passing even into my purer mind,
With tranquil restoration:- feelings too 30
Of unremembered pleasure: such perhaps,
As have no slight or trivial influence
On that best portion of a good man's life,
His little, nameless, unremembered acts
Of kindness and of love. Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world 40



Is lightened: that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

If this
Be but a vain belief, yet, oh! how oft — 50
In darkness and amid the many shapes
Of joyless daylight; when the fretful stir
Unprofitable, and the fever of the world,
Have hung upon the beatings of my heart
How oft, in spirit, have I turned to thee,
O sylvan Wye! thou wanderer thro' the woods,
How often has my spirit turned to thee!

And now, with gleams of half-extinguished thought,
With many recognitions dim and faint,
And somewhat of a sad perplexity, 60
The picture of the mind revives again :
while here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years. And so I dare to hope,
Though changed, no doubt, from what I was when first



I came among these hills; when like a roe
I bounded o'er the mountains, by the sides
Of the deep rivers, and the lonely streams,
Wherever nature led: more like a man 70
Flying from something that he dreads than one
Who sought the thing he loved. For nature then
(The coarser pleasures of my boyish days,
And their glad animal movements all gone by)
To me was all in all. – I cannot paint
What then I was. The sounding cataract
Hunted me like a passion: the tall rock,
The mountain, and the deep and gloomy wood,
Their colours and their forms, were then to me
An appetite; a feeling and a love, 80
That had no need of a remoter charm,
By thought supplied, nor any interest,
Unborrowed from the eye—That time is past.
And all its aching joys are now no more,
And all its dizzy raptures. Not for this
Faint I, nor mourn nor murmur; other gifts
Have followed; for such loss, I would believe,
Abundant recompense. For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes 90
The still, sad music, of humanity,
Nor harsh nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy



Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused.
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky. and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels 100
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods.
And mountains; and all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear, –both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognize
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse.
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul 110
Of all my moral being.

Nor perchance,
If I were nor thus taught, should I the more
Suffer my genial spirits to decay:
For thou art with me here upon the banks
Of this fair river; thou my dearest Friend,
My dear, dear Friend; and in thy voice I catch
The language of my former heart, and read
My former pleasures in the shooting lights
Of the wild eyes. Oh! yet a little while
May I behold in thee what I was once.
My dear, dear Sister! and this prayer I make,
Knowing that Nature never did betray



The heart that loved her: 'tis her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life, to lead
From joy to joy; for she can so inform
The mind that is within us, so impress
With quietness and beauty, and so feed
With lofty thoughts, that neither evil tongues,
Rash judgments, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life, 130
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold
Is full of blessings. Therefore let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
And let the misty mountain-winds be free
To blow against thee: and, in after years,
When these wild ecstasies shall be matured
Into a sober pleasure; when thy mind
Shall be a mansion for all lovely forms, 140
Thy memory be as a dwelling-place
For all sweet sounds and harmonies; oh! then,
If solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief,
should be thy portion, with what healing thoughts
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,
And these my exhortations! Nor perchance-
If I should be where I no more can hear
Thy voice nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams
Of past existence— wilt thou then forget
That on the banks of this delightful stream 150
We stood together; and that I so long



A worshipper of Nature, hither came
Unwearied in that service: rather say
With warmer love-oh! with far deeper zeal
Of holier love. Nor wilt thou then forget
That after many wanderings, many years
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,
And this green pastoral landscape, were to me
More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake!

4. “Tintern Abbey”: AN ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

Written in 1798 “Tintern Abbey” is a reflective and meditative piece that explores the relationship between nature, memory, and the human mind. The poem is set against the backdrop of the River Wye and the ruins of Tintern Abbey, which Wordsworth visited after a five-year absence. He reflects on how his memories of the landscape have changed over time and how his experiences with nature have shaped his sense of self.

The poem was composed on Friday, July 13, 1798. It concluded the *Lyrical Ballads*, written partly in collaboration with Wordsworth’s friend Coleridge. It is not only a great poem of flawless and noble beauty but also one of his most personal pieces, wrought from his inmost mind and heart. It sums up all that Nature, Man, and his own history meant for him in the light of his own thinking and impassioned observation, quickened by the constant companionship of Coleridge and Dorothy.

Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy went to Bristol to see *Lyrical Ballads* through the press. During their stay they did a tour on foot and by boat up the Wye valley to Tintern. At Tintern Abbey Wordsworth recalled his earlier visit there five years ago in the tumultuous period of revolutionary enthusiasm when war with France had lately broken out. He meditated on the new quality he had found in Nature since that time. And as was usual with him, meditation led to composition. Verses formed in his head as he walked back to his lodging near Bristol.

The setting of the poem is significant for several reasons. First and foremost, the Abbey itself serves as a physical and historical marker of the passage of time, reminding the speaker of the changes that have occurred in both the natural world and in his own life since



he last visited the site. The ruins of the Abbey also serve as a symbol of the transience and impermanence of human existence, standing as a testament to the way that even the most enduring monuments of human history are ultimately subject to the ravages of time and the forces of nature.

At the same time, the Abbey's location in the Wye Valley is significant for its natural beauty and restorative power. The surrounding landscape is described in rich and evocative detail, with Wordsworth using vivid language to capture the sights, sounds, and sensations of the natural world. By placing the Abbey within this context, Wordsworth is suggesting that nature has the power to heal and renew the human spirit, providing a source of solace and inspiration that can help us to transcend the challenges and difficulties of daily life.

Finally, it's worth noting that the Abbey's location along the River Wye is significant for its symbolic value as well. The river serves as a kind of metaphorical current that connects the speaker to his past and to the larger rhythms of the natural world, providing a sense of continuity and connection that transcends the boundaries of time and space. Overall, the setting of Tintern Abbey is essential to the poem's larger themes of memory, nature, and the human spirit, providing a rich and evocative backdrop against which Wordsworth's meditations can unfold.

4.2 Subject and Theme of the Poem

Wordsworth describes in "Tintern Abbey" his attitude to Nature at different stages of his life - the "glad animal movements" of childhood, the "passions" and "appetites" of youth, and lastly "that serene and blessed mood" when "we are laid asleep in body and become a living soul".

"Tintern Abbey" is at once a Hymn of Praise, and a Confession of Faith. Nature is extolled for she still enlarges her bounty to the measure of man's growing needs:

"Knowing that Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her; it's her privilege,
Through all the years of this our life, to lead
From joy to joy."

Nature is described here as Man's "prime teacher", exercising a purifying influence on him. It enables him to "see into the life of things" and brings to him the sense of an all-pervading spirit that "rolls through all things". Wordsworth recognizes Nature as not merely the guide of feeling and heart but also as the "soul of all his moral being".



Overall, the poem is a celebration of the beauty and power of nature and its ability to inspire and uplift the human spirit.

4.3 Summary

Wordsworth is revisiting Tintern Abbey, after five years. The setting is full of great natural beauty and quietness. It is the same landscape as he had seen before. Only now does he have a more sober appreciation of it. The quiet scene gives rise to deep thoughts in his mind. The steep hills and the poet's own thoughts connect the landscape with the quiet of the sky. The plots of cottage ground, the orchards with the green unripe fruits mix easily with the groves and bushes. The smoke going up in silence reminds the poet of some wanderers, settled for the time being somewhere inside the woods, or of some holy man, sitting alone by his fire.

The scenes haunted the poet's mind even when he was away from them. They calmed his mind in the midst of the fever and the fret of city life. They influenced him in his small acts of kindness and love, such as a good man performs daily, almost unconsciously, forgetting them soon afterwards. These forms of Nature have, moreover, brought to him spiritual knowledge beyond the reach of the physical senses.

The river is addressed, as though it were a human being. The poet acknowledges the happiness which its remembrance brought to him in days of despair. He knows, moreover, that the memory of this scene will make him happy in the future also.

The poet in his early boyhood felt pure animal delight in roaming about in the mountains by the riverside; with adolescence and youth, his passionate delight in Nature did not require any promptings of a thoughtful mind. The pleasure was absolute and sensuous. He became aware of unknown modes of being in Nature that disciplined his mind. With the passage of time the poet loses that acute pleasure in Nature, but he gains something instead. In his mature years he looks upon Nature as a manifestation of the divine spirit, which is present everywhere in everything whether animate or inanimate. The poet now realizes the beauty and the sadness of human life which has sobered him in his attitude to Nature. The realization of this essential unity of all universe has given new dimensions to the love of Nature. The beauty which enters the poet's mind through his senses is further nourished by his imagination. The poet acknowledges Nature as his teacher, guardian and friend, the source of all his purest thoughts and the guide of his morality.

Dorothy's presence reminds him of his own youthful delight in Nature. She is told that if ever in future she meets with any misfortune, Nature will surely come to her aid. Nature never fails one who is really devoted to her and fills his mind with joy and tranquillity. The



poet affirms that the landscape is loved by him both for its own sake and because it is associated with the presence of Dorothy.

In this way, we learn of the development of Wordsworth's mind through this poem. In a nutshell then the growth of the poet's mind in his relationship with Nature has passed through three stages.

- The first one related to the purely animal delight of his boyhood days.
- The second stage was of the poet's adolescence and youth. At this stage he felt a purely sensuous and passionate delight in Nature.
- Lastly, in his sober and mature years, with his knowledge of human sorrow, he learnt to look upon Nature with a chastened and subdued spirit. He came to realize that Nature is infused with the divine spirit that pervades everything, animate or inanimate.

He acknowledges his debt to Nature and regards her as his friend, philosopher and guide, the unfailing fountain of his mental peace and the source of his spiritual knowledge of the ultimate reality. And thus, the poem is rounded off with a hymn sung in praise of Nature, the object of this total devotion.

Check Your Progress

1. Under what circumstances was "Tintern Abbey" written?
2. How does Wordsworth describe nature in "Tintern Abbey"?
3. What is the difference in the poet's attitude towards Nature in his mature years as compared to when he was a boy?
4. Describe briefly the three stages in the development of the poet's attitude to Nature.

5. DETAILED ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

5.1 Stanza I (Lines 1-21)

Wordsworth is revisiting Tintern Abbey after five years. After "five summers" and "five long winters!" as he puts it. By using the words "revisiting" and "five long winters" the poet



invites us to share with him some very crucial and important moments of his life. Whenever we revisit a place we start travelling back in time. Our memory is activated, and it activates our awareness of our present and confronts it with the recollection of our past. It keeps on uniting as well as contrasting our present with our past. The revisit is always a value-based probe to determine where we have reached in our thinking after all these years. The seriousness of this confrontation of past and present and the gravity of the consequent value-based probe depends upon many factors:

- It depends upon the experiences of the life spent during this interval (the phrase ‘five long winters!’) thus becomes significant and the sign of exclamation makes the agony of the winter more poignant.
- It depends upon the mood when he first visited the place and the nature of impressions it then left on his mind.
- It depends upon the present mood, the reasons which have persuaded him to revisit the place and the expectations with which he is revisiting it.

All this is a very common human experience. That is why it can be considered that by using the words “revisiting” and “five long years!” Wordsworth has invited us to share his poetic experience and to join his value-based probe which raises a big question as to whether his capacity to live life has increased or decreased. Life is a very relative term but to all discerning and sensitive people it means living meaningfully in harmony with the universe outside.

The revisit begins when the poet says, “again I hear.” The poet catalogues all the components of the landscape just to reassure himself. By saying “again” (2) or “once again” (1, 4, 9 and 14) the poet is trying to re-establish his “I-thou” relationship with Nature. His first contact with the landscape or his revisit is auditory. Leaving behind the “din” of the city life, he now hears “the soft inland murmur” of “these waters rolling down from their mountain springs. It is a soft inland-murmur since the poet is still outside the scene. The scene is not within his visual grasp. But the “din” of cities is annihilated. The visual communication is soon established when the poet beholds the lofty cliffs which “connect the landscape with the quiet of the sky” (L.8). As Benziger observes:

The “quiet of the sky” (L.8) is perhaps the most significant phrase in the poem. ... Nowhere more magnificently than in “Tintern Abbey” does Wordsworth’s imagery express this quietist phase of his philosophy. The greatly not-to-be desired life of the cities is characterized by *din*. The nature which in his earlier days had aroused in him



dizzy raptures had spoken through the sounding cataract. Now in the valley of the Wye upon his second visit the sounds are less insistent... Indeed, in the imagery of the poem there are two progressions to quiet rather than just one: from din to murmur to silence, and from human life to vegetable life to the cliff and sky. (Benziger, pp 238-39).

Auditory communication indicates a moment of descent and visual communication indicates a movement of ascent. The entire poem is one long record of these moods of ascent and descent which alternate with each other and help the poet to see visions of his romantic ideas without losing grasp over reality.

The “steep and lofty cliffs” perform two functions simultaneously. They elevate the poet from his horizontal plane of reality to a vertical plane of “thoughts of more deep seclusion” and they also “connect” the landscape with the “quiet of the sky,” Thus we perceive there are two movements in the poem as the poet describes the landscape, the movement of his physical eye and the movement of “inward eye”: the eye of his soul. His physical eye reminds him of his earthly reality and his inward eye craves for “the quiet of the sky”.

We see a harmony is established between the landscape, the mind of the man and the quiet of the sky. This is the great Cosmic Harmony, Wordsworth now “reposes” (19) and “views” (10) the same harmony on the horizontal plane. The “cottage ground” the “orchard-tufts” and “groves and copses” all lose their individual identities and get dressed in the same green garment. The first seventeen lines, which celebrate the poet’s visit to Tintern Abbey after a gap of five long years are soaked in an atmosphere of peace, tranquility, calm and harmony inspiring in the poet thoughts of more ~~deep~~-seclusion and deeper realization of Nature and its Oneness.

The poet first hears’ the waters rolling down, then he “beholds” the steep mountain cliffs which impress upon him thoughts of more deep seclusion. He then reposes and views a cosmic harmony. So far he is a passive receiver of certain sensations and impressions which are tranquil and speak of harmony. But when the poet comes to hedge rows and smokes, the poet also “sees” (14). Seeing is different from hearing, beholding, reposing and viewing. When you “see” you not only behold and view but also interpret. That is what the poet does when he says, “once again I see”. The hedgerows he imagines are not dividing woods from the cultivated land. They are uniting man with nature and they run wild with happiness in this game of theirs. Then there is smoke among the trees! The poet is rightly surprised when he sees “wreaths of smoke/Sent up, in silence, from among the trees!”(L.14). The words “sent



up” and “silence” contrast this smoke with the industrial smoke of the cities which is always associated with noise, and being heavier than air, always falls down rather than go up. But this smoke, a product of silence is moving heavenwards, to join the “quiet of the sky”. The poet’s imagination traces the smoke to the activity of some vagrant dwellers or to a lonely Hermit who is sitting by his fire all alone in a cave. The stanza begins with a great cosmic unity of Nature, uniting man and “quiet of the sky” and ends in a solitary human activity.

We must observe that the landscape description of stanza I is far less objective than might be thought on a purely superficial reading. The strong sensory assertions (“I hear”, “I behold”, “I see”) unexpectedly lead to a somewhat dubious statement that the smoke - which the poet does “see”, gives some indication “Of vagrant dwellers in the houseless woods / Or of some hermit’s cave, whereby his fire / The Hermit sits alone” (Wordsworth, 20 - 22).

In a way, this intimation of human presence brings the landscape description to a climax. Wordsworth had endowed the conventional eighteenth-century hermit with a significance that goes beyond the merely picturesque: his solitariness exemplifies the highest form of contemplation and wisdom; hermits are men stripped of all un-essentials, living in intimate communion with nature. As observed by Gerard “the hermit in his cave carries a faint suggestion of human ideals towards which Wordsworth was striving at that time, and which he was to define with greater assurance in later poems” (Gerard, pp. 60-61).

Study Notes

2. *of five long winters!*: The adjective “long” lends a subjective colour to an objective description of the landscape. Winter symbolizes lack of warmth, read stanza II (25). The sign of exclamation emphasizes the poet’s personal loss and complaint during five years of separation which include five long winters.

2. *again I hear*: The poet is visiting the place once again and his first contact with the landscape is auditory.

3. *inland*: from within the valley. The poet is still at a distance.

6. *wild*: untamed, here means a place which has not been urbanized or industrialized. The poet has a special dislike for cities and towns. Read stanza II and III.

6. *secluded*: A secluded place is quiet, private and undisturbed.

7. *thoughts of more deep seclusion*: thoughts which have nothing to do with ordinary routine life of cities which to the poet mean only a “fretful stir” (stanza III 1. 52)



6-8. steep and lofty.... quiet of the sky: The lines reflect the poet's emotional response to the scene. The steep and lofty cliffs perform two functions. They connect the horizontal landscape with the "quiet of the sky" and also lift the poet's mind to great heights.

8. quiet of the sky: The poem is a journey from the noise of cities to the "quiet of the sky". It is a gradual ascent from noise to soft inland murmur and ultimately to "quiet of the sky" which according to some critics is a symbol of the Divine Quiet, the Eternal Silence as it is called in *The Immortality Ode*.

11-18 These plots of cottage... very door: The world of man of pastoral forms and plots of cottage ground merges gently, through orchard and hedgerow, into Nature's copses and woodland, and the world of organic nature by way of the lofty cliffs, merges gently with the inorganic "quiet of the sky".

13. One green line: green symbolizes peace and protection. Through the green landscape Wordsworth hints at the great cosmic harmony in Nature.

17-18 sent up in silence....the trees!: The use of passive voice (sent up) denotes a human activity. The sign of exclamation (the trees!) emphasizes the poet's surprise at the presence of human life among the trees and contrasts Wordsworth's personal loneliness of five long winters with the loneliness of "The Hermit" or the "vagrant dwellers". Wordsworth is surprised by the presence of life among "trees" and is compelled to compare his personal loneliness of "five long winters" with the loneliness experienced by the person or persons living in the lap of this Great cosmic harmony. Perhaps the loneliness among the trees reflects what Wordsworth later calls the "still, sad music of humanity." The two signs of exclamations in stanza 1 symbolize two kinds of loneliness. The loneliness of the cities which is a compulsion forced by the society (which means cities divorced from nature) and the loneliness of the wild secluded landscape which is a refuge and shelter.

19. uncertain notice... might seem: So far Wordsworth has been sure of what he is describing. He has been using the words, "I hear", "behold", "see" but when it comes to a human activity Wordsworth suddenly switches to conjecture. The phrases "uncertain notice" and "might seem" show that while describing nature Wordsworth is certain but while describing a human activity or a human condition Wordsworth can only guess. Wordsworth had a great fascination for these "solitaries" ("The Solitary Reaper", "Resolution and Independence") and he always tried to guess what they sang or said but the mood is always of great tragedy which is at once chaste and chastening.



20. Of vagrant dwellers... woods: houseless woods express Wordsworth's dislike for urbanization or cities which are full of houses, housing lifeless people or all the forces which are inimical to nature. That is why they become homes for "vagrant dwellers", persons who refuse to adopt the city and its ways or to Hermits who know the significance of "the quiet of the sky".

21. Hermit: a hermit is a person who lives alone with a very simple lifestyle away from people and normal society, especially for religious reasons. That is why perhaps Wordsworth uses a capital letter for Hermit.

Check Your Progress

1. What is the significance of the fact that Wordsworth is visiting the place after five long years?
2. What is the poet's purpose behind inclusion of the Hermit?
3. How does the poet compare the city with the verdant surroundings of the Wye?

5.2 Stanza II (Lines 23-50)

Five Years Separation

The poet now speaks of the five years which separated him from Tintern Abbey. The stanza is a tribute to the beauty of Tintern Abbey. Here the poet talks about the influence on his mind of the "beauteous forms" that he sees and the role of memory that helps to recreate these forms in his mind's eye whenever he requires them. Memory thus contrasts the actual physical return to Tintern Abbey of Stanza I with the mental returns which he experienced while he was far away from it, alone in the "lonely rooms" of cities. These lines also contrast the condition of the "Vagrant dwellers" and the lonely "Hermit" with that of the lonely poet. The vagrant dwellers and the lonely Hermit are living in peace, in harmony with nature whereas the lonely poet is vainly struggling with burden of city life even though the memory of these "beauteous forms" always comes to his rescue. The "I-thou" relationship made unreflectingly with the landscape is refreshingly retained by the memory. The memory of these beauteous forms healed him not only physically but induced in him certain sweet sensations which he could feel in his blood and heart and these sensations travelled to his purer mind, restoring in him a unique tranquility. This tranquility in its train brought feelings of unremembered pleasures. The poet calls them "unremembered" since they are ordinary or



routine pleasures. But they are very significant, since it is these pleasures which spring into “little nameless” acts of kindness and love and which constitute the best part of a good man’s life.

The poet is struggling with the weariness caused by the din of cities. These “beauteous forms” induce in him a tranquil restoration. This sensation is transformed into a feeling of pleasure. This pleasure governs the best part of a good man’s life. The memory of the scene becomes more important than the actual scene itself. The ‘Vagrant Dweller or the ‘Hermit’ in the cave living away from mankind (although living in the lap of nature) cannot experience these little acts of love and kindness. The poet now remembers another debt which he owes to the memory of these beauteous forms. He recalls a phenomenon almost supernatural and mystical in its nature, of a “blessed mood”, of some “sublime” moments, when “the mystery of this unintelligible world”, the “vast unknown”, was suddenly revealed to him and he felt intensely relieved. But the poet is not very certain whether these moments were inspired by these beauteous forms:

... Nor less, I trust,

To them I may have owed another gift (31 -32)

His physical self is now laid asleep to cut the barriers which the body creates between man and man, and man and Nature. So profound and enormous was the impact of “this blessed mood”, that he felt that he ceased to live physically and became “a living soul”. The soul, the essence of being which is common to all living things and “the life of things” dictates his entire being. In these moments the eye is “made quiet” by the power of harmony and the deep power of joy. This is similar to the significance the poet attaches to “the quiet of the sky” in Stanza I.

The journey begins from Tintern Abbey, its harmony and its lonely Hermit and takes the poet back to the lonely rooms of the cities where the memory of Tintern Abbey restores him from the fatigue caused by the din of the city life. The tranquility thus achieved is transformed into a feeling which accounts for the best portion of a good man’s life. And this good man, he ardently hopes, is in the “blessed mood” transformed into a lonely Hermit of the cities who understands the mystery of this universe and the “quiet of his eye” and need not view and interpret “the life of things” since it sees through them. As Wordsworth turns from an objective, symbolic description of external Nature to an analysis of his inner self, Nature appears as the main causal factor in his moral evolution.



The first sentence deals with two “gifts”- “sensations” and “feelings” which are presented as undoubtedly originating in Nature. It also deals with the psychological and moral consequences of those gifts: in the first case, the sensations sweet, have wrought a “tranquil restoration” of the poet’s “purer mind”; in the second, a note of diffidence creeps in as Wordsworth passes from the psychological to the moral plane: his feelings of un-remembered pleasures have perhaps led him to acts of kindness and love. There is thus a gradual ascent from the sensory to the psychological and moral. On the other hand, slight undertones of doubt are introduced in the passage from the psychological to the ethical. This pattern is reproduced and developed in the second sentence too. Besides the sensations and feelings, Wordsworth’s recollections of nature have also kindled in him a blessed mood; this mood is described at a great length and with considerable eloquence.

Study Notes

22-23. “*beauteous forms ... long absence*”: Remember “long winters” in stanza I.

24. “*As is a landscape ... blind man’s eye*”: Wordsworth attached great importance to the faculty of sight. One can refuse to listen, smell, touch or taste but one cannot refuse to see. Visual impressions get embedded in one’s mind. It is through these visual impressions that a person animates his present with his past. Wordsworth is celebrating the role of memory. A blind man’s memory and his imagination perhaps work differently.

25. “*mid the din of towns and cities*”: Wordsworth equated cities with “din”, a meaningless noise.

26 – 30 “*... I have owed to them tranquil restoration*”: After a period of five years to witness this great majesty and cosmic harmony he now tries to recollect the role played by the memory of “these beauteous forms”. The first impact of their memory induced in him a “tranquil restoration”. He begins to receive “sweet sensations”, which relieve him from the “din” in the cities and hours of weariness and bathe him in a tranquil restoration.

31. “*Unremembered pleasure*”: Small ordinary pleasures, which come and pass away unnoticed without becoming a part of one’s memory unlike great happy events (like the visit to Tintern Abbey) which stayed in his mind.

30-35. “*feeling too ... of kindness and love*”: The second impact of the memory is psychological. The memory of the valley used to uplift him morally and make him do little acts of kindness and love in his daily life, A man is good not because of some great things he does for the entire mankind but for his little acts of kindness and love in his everyday life while dealing with other men. (Read Wordsworth’s complaint in stanza V. “Nor greetings



where no kindness is” 130). It is these acts which account for the “best portion of a good man’s life”.

35-36. “*Nor less, I trust... To them I may ... of aspect more sublime*”: The words “trust” and “may” depict a note of diffidence and uncertainty. Wordsworth was very certain when he was describing the sensory or psychological impact. But when he talks of aspect more sublime, he is not certain whether the memory of the Wye was responsible for this gift.

39-41. “*The burthen of mystery ... lightened*”: One gets awakened to the very essence of life and its meanings, and the mystery of life is revealed to us.

43. Corporeal: means involving or relating to the physical world rather than the spiritual world.

48. “*an eye made quiet*”: an eye which sees and understands and not an eye which sees, reacts, interprets and records accordingly. An eye which sees and becomes at once attuned to what it sees. There is no difference between the image and the object.

41-49. “*The serene and blessed mood ... into the life of things*”: The poet now achieves a trance-like state in which all the physical functions which separate man from man and man from Nature are suspended. Only the soul dictates. “This living soul” with “an eye made quiet” can understand and see “into the life of things”. The entire green landscape which gets connected with “the quiet of the sky” in Stanza I gets embodied in his “living soul” through the “eye made quiet”.

Check Your Progress

1. How is the poet able to return to the beauty of Tintern Abbey even when he is in the city?
2. How does the lonely poet compare with the lonely hermit?
3. What according to the poet constitutes the best part of a man’s life?
4. What role does memory play in the poet’s life?

5.3 Stanza III (Lines 50-57)

The Blessed Memory

Stanza III begins with a note of doubt. If this “Be but a vain belief” that those “beauteous forms” could inspire in him a “blessed mood” in which the mystery of the “unintelligible



world” was revealed to him and he could “see into the life of things”, then he is grateful to the memory of the river Wye for many other comforts. He now addresses the river Wye, the Wanderer of woods, as if it were a living person and recalls the various occasions when it brought relief to his troubled soul. He talks of his frustrated moments of despair and confusion, his fruitless struggles for existence and the fever which such useless daily worldly struggles inflict upon his body and mind. His spirit, in all such desperate moments, turned to the memory of the river Wye and he felt cured. In Stanza I he had described the great cosmic harmony of the landscape. Later in stanza 11 he celebrates the memory of this harmony. There is a lingering doubt whether this memory is also responsible for certain mystical moments in which he could see “into the life of things.” That is why lines 37-48 which describe his great trance-like experience begin with “Nor less. I trust” . . . To them 1 may have owed another gift (35-36). And in stanza III he confirms his suspicion when he says, “If this/Be but a vain belief.” He then recalls the numerous ways in which the memory of the river Wye had been helping him physically in his hours of meaningless distress.

Study Notes

50. *vain*: empty

52. *joyless daylight*: It is the daylight (or light) which enables us to see. It becomes a joyless daylight since we are not pleased to see what we see. Seeing becomes a mechanical ritual. (See “light of the common day”, in *The Immortality Ode* in stanza V).

51-52. “*Many shapes....daylight*”: The various moods of the day from dawn to sunset are all joyless, since they are all meaningless. Cities express the same fever from morning till evening.

52. *fretful stir*: an unhappy struggle

54. “*have hung heart*”: They have weighed upon the free movements of my heart. They did not allow my heart to pulsate naturally,

56. *Sylvan*: belonging to woods and trees

56-57: “*O Sylvan Wye !.... thee!*”: The memory of Sylvan Wye always came to his rescue in his moments of meaningless “fretful stir” and “the fever of the world”. The lines contain two signs of exclamations. The poet finds a solution for his loneliness in the memory of the river Wye and not in the inspired moments in which he is able to see into “the life of things”. The river Wye therefore becomes more important for him. The natural conclusion is



that the blessed mood did not cure him of the fever of the world and hence his spirit depends once again upon the memory of the Sylvan Wye.

Check Your Progress

1. Comment on the importance of the river Wye in this stanza. How does its memory help the poet?

5.4 Stanza IV (Lines 58-111)

His Loss and His Gain

In this stanza Wordsworth brings us to his immediate present with the words - “And now” (58) This “now” is very significant. It is kindled by “the gleams of half-extinguished thought” and contains “many recognitions but they are dim and faint.” The poet’s problem is that he does not know why and how the thought was half-extinguished. He wants to know what made the recognitions dim and faint. That is why, the “now” is pregnant with as a sad perplexity.” The poet hopefully believes that Nature will continue to be a source of comfort in his future years. “And so, I dare to hope/though changed, no doubt from what I was” (165-66). But his present pleasure is only a pleasing thought. The word “sad perplexity” describes the tragic dilemma of his mood and compels him to contrast his entire past with his present. As a boy his love for Nature was simply physical. He enjoyed nature with the unthinking delight of a healthy child whose playground she was. The second stage was reached at the time of his first visit to Wye in 1793 (“Five years have passed”) like a roe he ran along the rivers, across the mountains wherever Nature could lead him. His efforts were more like that of a man who is seeking to escape from something he fears, rather than those of a person who is finding pleasure in something he likes. This passionate love for Nature which involved only his physical being was an attempt to run away from something sinister. The sounding cataract, the tall rock, the mountain, the deep and gloomy wood, all thrilled him with a physical appetite, a feeling that amounted to sensuous love for all those objects. This physical pleasure never involved his mind or stirred his imagination.

The time of maddening physical raptures and aching joy is over now. He is a changed man and he does not react to Nature the way he used to. But he does not weep over this loss. This loss has been more than compensated. But the words “I would believe” (87) remind us of his sad perplexity. The words “I would believe” and “I have learned” (88) provide us with the reason of his sad perplexity. This uncertainty regarding the role of Nature was seen earlier



also in stanza II, “Nor less 1 trust/To them I may have” (35-36). Whenever the poet is transported into a “blessed mood” of sense sublime,” the poet is perplexed. He has learnt to look upon Nature differently. He has grown out of his thoughtless youth and hears in Nature the “still, sad music of humanity,” which is not harsh enough to compel him to revolt but is sufficient to chasten and tone down his physical delight. He does not attempt to run away from the still sad music of mankind and seek selfish refuge in Nature, which he did in his first visit. The healing influence of Nature (i.e., of its memory) during his hours of darkness and despair, before he visits Tintern Abbey again, has enlarged his vision and chastened his pleasures.

The poet now feels in Nature the presence of a spirit, a being which kindles him with the joy of elevated thoughts. Nature is no more a physical manifestation of certain beautiful objects which inspire sweet sensations. It is a sublime spirit, a holy being which he feels everywhere in the light of setting suns, the round ocean, the blue sky and also in the mind of man. The realization of the essential Oneness of mind of Man and Nature, of all living things, all objects of all thought gives a new dimension to his love for Nature. The poet in this elevated mood reaffirms his love for Nature in all its manifestations, all that we behold from this green earth, meadows, woods and mountains. The physical harmony of stanza I of the greenest of the landscape with the “quiet of sky” now becomes spiritual harmony. The mighty world of eye and ear is always imbibing what it sees. There is a continuous mating between the senses and the objects of sense. The mighty world of eye and ear “half creates what it perceives”. What is half created is recreated when he transforms his perceptions into thoughts, and Nature thus becomes the anchor of his purest thoughts. In his reaffirmation of his faith in Nature, he feels it to be his nurse, his guide, the guardian of his heart and the “soul of all my moral being.”

His sad perplexity anticipates another kind of uncertainty, which is the subject of stanza IV and which is concerned with his valuation of changes -the losses and the new gifts which time has wrought in him. In those introductory lines, past, present and future are closely correlated; so are sadness and pleasure. The reason for the sadness and perplexity is the plain fact that his pleasing thoughts: “That in this moment there is life and food for future years”, although deduced from his past experience are less assured than the tranquil, self-possessed praising might suggest: they are not more than a “hope” which the poet dares to entertain.

As the poet contrasts what he is with what he was. We again notice the three-stage ascending travel already perceived in stanza II; from “the glad animal movements” of



his boyhood, through the passionate love of natural forms characteristic of his youth to the more thoughtful attitude of his early maturity. But in this respect too, the repetition is incremental: the ascending movement, we might say, takes us higher up in stanza IV than in stanza II. It takes us to a more sweeping vision of cosmic unity. In the former passage, the poet merely “sees” into the life of things; in the latter, man is included in his vision and the life of things is seen to reside in an all-pervading presence, which is described in grandiose terms.

Study Notes

58. And now: The poet so far has been telling us what the memory of the river Wye has been doing for him for five years after he first visited Tintern Abbey. When Wordsworth says, “And now”, he suddenly turns to his immediate present. “And now”.... the picture of the mind revives again” (61) in the picture retained by his memory which gains new life when Wordsworth stands once again in the Wye valley.

58. gleams: if an object or surface gleams, it reflects light because it is shining and clean

58. half-distinguished thoughts: thoughts which have lost half their significance.

59. “recognitions dim and faint”. Wordsworth’s response to landscape especially when he compares it with its memory, is not very sharp and bright.

60. sad perplexity: the poet is sadly confused and worried. There is a confusion in stanza I when the poet is not sure of the source of the smoke’s origin. The poet is confused in stanza II when before talking about the blessed mood he says “Nor less, I trust/To them I may have owed another gift”..... and confusion travels to stanza III when he says, “If this/Be but a vain belief.”

In stanza IV when he talks of “now,” the confusion haunts him all the more and acquires a tragic dimension - this confusion lies in his fear whether Nature will continue to inspire him in the same way, for in lines 111- 14 (“Nor perchance if I were not thus taught”) the poet almost confesses that Nature has stopped teaching him.

61. revives again: The use of word “again” is in continuation of stanza I where “again I hear once again/ Do I behold”. “again repose” and “once again I see” were used to describe the landscape. Here it is used to describe his present mental landscape.

63-67. “With pleasing thoughts... came among these hills”: The poet does not allow this “sad perplexity” to destroy his present pleasure. He even becomes optimistic that this present moment will be good for his future years in the same way as his first visit helped him for five



long years, but he only “dares to hope” so (65) and he confesses that on his second visit he finds himself a changed person. The significance of this present moment will be clear in stanza V. Wordsworth hopes that the scene will provide not only immediate pleasure, “but life and food/for future years.” And this hope is entertained in spite of the knowledge that his earlier and more spontaneous joy of nature - a joy, which was passionate and unreflecting, has been left behind with the growth of a new mode of feeling.

70. “Wherever nature led”: all his movements and reflexes were controlled by nature.

70. bounded over: frisked about; leaped about.

73. Flying from something: the fear that Nature inspires rather than the love she instils.

74-85. When the poet first came to the valley there was a passionate zeal and intense desire for the objects of nature. The falling water, the dark forest and the lofty mountains inspired in him a spontaneous feeling of love. He loved the objects of Nature for their own sake.

76 coarser pleasures: his delight in the sights and sounds of Nature was dominated by the animal instinct of physical enjoyment.

75-76. I cannot... I was: Wordsworth is afraid to contrast his present self with what he was. Perhaps it involves immense pain and is one of the reasons for his sad perplexity (70).

76. the sounding cataract: The cataract was sounding in 1793 and today it is the “soft inland murmur” (4)

80-81. “remoter charm supplied”: The physical gratification was so complete and fulfilling that he never had to resort to spiritual pleasures which are provided by elevated and inspired thoughts. Read stanza I (7) “thoughts of more deep seclusion” and stanza II (41) “that serene and blessed mood”.

83. unborrowed from eye: The physical visual pleasure provided by the beauty of Nature was consummate and complete and it was never accompanied by elevated thoughts. There was no need for him to stir his mind.

83. That time is past... dizzy raptures: Wordsworth begins this stanza with the words “And now”. His life, not only of “the five years” interval about which he talked in stanza II & III and in which restoration was mixed with some transcendental moods, but his entire lifespan gets sandwiched between lines 58-60 and 83-85. The poem has moved through one complete circle of his life which begins with “coarser pleasures” and moves on to dizzy “raptures” and ends in a “sad perplexity.” The poem does not grow in such a linear manner,



or we can say that the timewise growth of the poem is not chronological or historical. There is double time in the poem, the inner time i.e., the time which describes the movements of his inward eye and the physical time which says that he is five years older and different. In counterpoint to this outer time, is the inner time which makes the experience of the poet's visit recoverable in the memory. It is a time which is not homogeneous but is full of ups and downs, of ascents and descents.

87. “I would believe”: Wordsworth is not certain of what he is saying. The poet is not certain whether nature is really responsible for this “abundant recompense”. This confusion is there in the earlier stanza also and perhaps accounts for his sad perplexity.

88. “I have learnt”: Wordsworth does not elaborate this learning process; he does not say whether nature taught him and therefore he learnt or certain other things made him learn to look upon nature differently from what he used to do. The poem now ushers in a different phase and acquires a new dimension.

88-93. “For I have learnt... chasten and subdue”: The still sad music of mankind is not harsh and jarring. It does not make him revolt because this music is the ultimate fate of all men or Mankind, therefore the music is “still,” (remember the phrase “quiet” of the sky and Hermit with capital H in stanza I) and it has a chastening effect. This is a mood of resignation and simultaneously a mood of universal sympathy.

93-99. “And I have felt... in the mind of man”: This is the second ascent of the poet's mind - the first ascent is seen in stanza II where he can see into the life of things. In this second ascent of the mind the things get rarefied. He feels a special “presence deeply interfused” and its dwelling place is the light of setting suns, the round ocean, the living air and the “blue sky” and “in the mind of man.” All these places are animated by this special presence, or a “living soul” but they are living silently (Remember the emphasis on “quiet” in stanza I and his dislike, for “din” in stanza II) and without any turbulence. The second ascent of mind in stanza IV is different from that of stanza II in the sense that it includes mankind, the “universal mind of man” and not the mind of an individual though all this happens in the mind of an individual, the poet Wordsworth.

100-102. “A motion ... all things”: There is great emphasis on the “All(ness)” of the universe and this all(ness) is vibrated through a motion and a spirit. “Both motion in the physical world and spirit in the mental world that which not only prompts the thoughts of men but also sustains the laws (of gravity) by which all objects move; and which therefore is doubly present in all experience (rolls through all things).



102. *Still*: despite the loss and despite his uncertainty regarding the source which compensates for this loss, he still maintains his relationship with Nature since it can still animate his present with his past by activating his memory.

102-106. “*Therefore, I am ... and ear*”: This reminds us of Stanza I, “The steep and lofty cliffs”, “the ... cottage ground “all clad in one green line” and “the quiet of the sky” The only difference is that the great cosmic unity of the stanza I is here invested with a living presence and includes the mind of man.

106-107. “*Both what they half create and what perceive*”: Take in at once the landscape of the world ... and half create the wondrous world they see.

109. “*anchor of my purest thoughts*”: Nature becomes the anchor of his purest thoughts.

111. “*Soul of all my moral being*”: In Stanza II, III, IV Wordsworth lives on two planes. He talks of “lonely rooms” and “fever of the world”. He also talks of “life of things” of a presence which unites the “life of things” with the “mind of man”. Wordsworth, here, is more concerned with his moral being, an elevated self which sees beyond his personal problems into “the still sad music of mankind”. Nature is the soul of all his moral being. The word “all” includes the world of Nature and the world of man.

Check Your Progress

1. Trace the three stages of the poet’s response to Nature.
2. Discuss how Nature elevates the poet morally.

5.5 Stanza V (112-159)

Brother-Sister and Mother Nature

Wordsworth feels obliged that but for the education given to him by Nature the pain being inflicted by the gradual decay of his genial powers would have been unbearable. The rest of the poem is addressed to his sister Dorothy who is accompanying him on the present tour, Wordsworth sees in his sister Dorothy his earlier self. Her voice, and the shooting lights of her eyes, express the same delight that he experienced on his earlier visit. He assures her that Nature never fails a person who is devoted to her. By reliving his past through his sister, Wordsworth is trying to assure himself that Nature never betrays. Nature continues to teach and elevate a person to higher levels of happiness. Nature will always help her in her hours of darkness and despair during the dreary course of daily life and the belief that all we behold in



Nature is full of blessings will be more firmly rooted. While talking to his sister, Wordsworth is again meditating over what he has gained and lost during the five years which separate the two visits. The presence of Dorothy on this second occasion, who is almost an image of his former self, dramatically juxtaposes the two visions and recreates the tortuous but sacred Pilgrimage which his soul undertook during these five years. He prays the same benign influence should smile on Dorothy. Here he again emphasizes the role of memory which is the “sacred” dwelling place for all sweet sounds of harmonies and always comes to the rescue of a person in his hours of despair and agony and elevates him with the healing thoughts of tender joy. Wordsworth, while exhorting his sister, is recapitulating his personal experience and unconsciously seeking shelter in his love for Dorothy. That is why the elevated moods of stanzas II and IV are suddenly substituted by his dear friend. He finds his past reflected in her eyes and he wants his present to be Dorothy’s future.

We must remember that Dorothy was not a child as it appears in this stanza. Dorothy was only two years younger to Wordsworth. On his second visit when he finds that his response to the great landscape is no longer the same, and though he tries to reassure himself that the loss has been more than compensated, yet his need for her love suddenly becomes more intense. That is why he wants to share his present mood with her. He wants her to remember in future that they stood together once on the bank of this delightful stream. Dorothy is not merely a companion but also a co-observer of the green pastoral landscape. She is herself a part of Wordsworth’s sober pleasure in the “steep and lofty cliffs” which are the more precious to him for her sake. The nobility of the human heart and its need for honest love feed on this green pastoral landscape. Wordsworth rediscovers himself in Stanza V when the landscape becomes dearer, not for the comfort its memory always provided him. The landscape is more precious to him, because of his love for Dorothy which is real and sustaining. The poem is a journey from loneliness to human love. The poem is a proclamation of the belief that lonely flights of imagination may solve the mystery of the unintelligible world and enable him to “see into the life of things and may unite” “all living things with all objects of all thought” but do not sustain a man for long. It is human love which is real and certain that makes Nature more meaningful.

The address to Dorothy is an indirect way for Wordsworth to turn back to his own self and such assurance as he may have gained so far. Indeed, the last stanza repeats, on a smaller scale, the ambitious time scheme of the whole poem. In his sister’s present Wordsworth relives his own past as recreated in stanza IV. The imaginary landscape which surrounds Dorothy, with its misty mountain winds is reminiscent of the picturesque presentation of Nature in stanza IV rather than the quiet harmony of stanza I. Likewise Dorothy’s “wild

There is hardly a line in the last stanza which does not refer to some earlier passage. But it contains nothing that might be considered as echoing those parts of the poem where, clearly, Wordsworth's poetic power is at its most intense: the end of stanza II and IV. Nor is there any reference in it to acts of kindness and love or to the "still sad music of humanity"; indeed, human society is invoked in negative terms (128-31) strongly reminiscent of the first part of stanza II and III. In other words, all the elements which carry with them overtones, however slight, of diffidence or uncertainty, are left out of the concluding stanza. And the last description of Nature's benevolence (122-34) is couched in terms as general as those of stanza III.

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the intensity of accompanying emotion, his intellectual honesty prevents him from presenting as fact what is only conjectural. Hence the perplexity. For if the other gifts are but vain belief, the loss, obviously is total and irrevocable. (Albert Gerard. *Exploring Tintern Abbey*. pp 65-67).

Study Notes

112-119. “*For thou art with me ... may I behold in thee what I once was*”: The poet pays a glowing tribute to his sister, Dorothy Wordsworth. She lifted him out of the depression and helped to resolve the mental conflict which afflicted the poet from 1793 to 1797. She not only restored his faith in life but also facilitated his return to Nature. The poet knows that had Dorothy not helped him, he might have remained a frustrated and depressed individual. See, how he is grateful to his sister Dorothy in whose eyes he sees the gleams of his past existence. In her he finds the same wild exultant delight in nature that he had experienced in his earlier years.

These lines contain a confession that Nature does not teach him anymore. If he were not “thus taught” he might seek inspiration in his sister’s less tutored sense of Nature, which, echoes that of his own youth when his pleasure was not in “the joy/of elevated thoughts,” but a spontaneous life reflected in her “wild eyes”. The beginnings of Stanza IV and Stanza V reflect Wordsworth’s longing to reject his present and relive his past. In this stanza Wordsworth turns from nature to his sister who is a companion of his heart, his “dear, dear friend”. Wordsworth is trying to recreate his past, but not alone through the memory of those beauteous form but through his dear friend, his sister Dorothy.

122. “*Knowing that Nature never did betray*”: When he says Nature never did betray he is trying to reassure himself or even trying to conceal and contain a doubt that though Nature remains the same, man does not react to it in the same way. Stanza IV does express his longing for the past. He now wants to relive his past by recreating it in his sister’s innocent self. Nature never betrayed was his experience in the past - but it may betray.

125-134. “*From joy to... is full of blessings*”: Wordsworth recounts his experiences – “from joy to joy, with quietness and beauty, that all which we behold is full of blessings.” But it is not the joy of elevated thoughts, the quiet is not the quiet of the sky. There is nothing elevated here. Wordsworth paints in these lines all those factors which are inimical to Nature as well as to an innocent heart such as “evil tongues”, “sneers of selfish men” “greetings where no kindness is”; “the dreary intercourse of daily life”. The lofty thoughts will not help them by not allowing these inhuman factors to “prevail against” them. Wordsworth focusses Nature’s blessing and its role to a very limited canvas of the “dreary intercourse of daily life.”



There is no mention of the “blessed mood”, “the living soul” and the “presence” of a sense sublime. Wordsworth’s doubt, his confusion, his sad perplexity is turning real. He avoids them and turns to his love for his sister which is real.

134-137. “*Therefore, let the moon... against thee*”: Wordsworth imagines these experiences for his sister.

137-146. “*In years after... my exhortations*”: Wordsworth says that Dorothy’s mind will mature in the same way his own mind matured. Memory will play a similar role and will help her in fighting solitude, fear, pain and grief. He does not mention the still sad music of humanity.

146-155. “*Nor perchance ... we of holier love*”: The fact we stood together becomes more significant than everything else. The present scene is not valuable for its actuality but only for its memory. He is a worshipper of Nature and he has come untired to perform his duty to pay his tribute, but the moment is of special significance since the beauty of Nature is reanimated because of Dorothy’s presence.

155-159. “*Nor... though ... for thy sake*”: The landscape of stanza I which was beautiful, quiet and serene which spoke of Great Cosmic Harmony now becomes more meaningful because it is full of human love, the human presence is not the Hermit or the vagrant dwellers who were remote for him. The human is his sister Dorothy, his “dear dear friend.” The poem celebrates the victory of human companionship of the holy heart. He loves nature but loves man first. In the end Wordsworth connects his love for Nature with his love for human affections and finds that this is a “holier love”.

“Tintern Abbey”, as you have noticed, is not primarily about a place. It is about Wordsworth revisiting a place and about the change that has come over him in these five years. Five years ago, young Wordsworth was not disillusioned with the French Revolution. His response to Nature was ecstatic and passionate. “The sounding cataract” haunted him like a passion. But that time has passed. All its “aching joys” and “dizzy raptures” are no more. He now looks on nature with a sober eye, linking his joy in it with the “still sad music of humanity”.

6. SUMMING UP

“Tintern Abbey” is a celebration of the connection between humans and nature and a reminder of the importance of embracing the natural world as a source of inspiration, comfort, and renewal.



The poem is notable for its focus on the relationship between nature and memory. As Wordsworth suggests, Nature has the power to awaken memories and connect us to our past experiences and emotions. He also explores the spiritual and emotional connection between people and Nature, suggesting that Nature has the power to uplift and inspire us.

The last stanza celebrates the need for human love and human relationships. Nature becomes a living language through which this relationship can flourish peacefully. Wordsworth becomes united with his past and aspires to a living continuity with his future through his love for Dorothy. The entire process of ‘Hermitization’ of escape into spiritual or mystical flights is deliberately avoided. Although man’s world is dehumanized and dehumanizing, it has to be borne through love which feeds upon the memory of “the beauteous forms.”

“London”

7. INTRODUCTION

The poem “London” is a sonnet written by Wordsworth in the same year but published in 1807 in *Poems in Two Volumes*. At that time England was in the midst of the Industrial Revolution and its neighbouring country France was still reeling under the aftermath of the French revolution. It was a time of sweeping changes which poets like Wordsworth felt were taking people away from the simple beauty of Nature and leading to a moral and spiritual degradation of society.

The main theme of “London” is a call for the restoration of moral and social values in England, which the speaker sees as having been lost or corrupted in their own time. The poem expresses a longing for a return to the heroic virtues of the past and sees the poet John Milton as an exemplar of these virtues who could help bring about this restoration. The poem begins therefore, with a call to Milton with a suggestion that he should be living at this hour as England needs him and only he can pull it out of its present degraded state. The implication of course is that the values of Milton’s era hold a promise of restoration of England to its former glory.

The theme of “London” is thus a call for the restoration of traditional English values, and an appeal to the example of John Milton as a way of achieving this restoration. The poem speaks to the anxieties of its own time, and its themes of loss and restoration continue to resonate with readers today.



“London” is a sonnet and follows the Petrarchan tradition. It has fourteen lines where the first eight lines form the octave and the last six form the sestet. It is written in iambic pentameter and follows the rhyme scheme ABBAABBACDDECE.

8. THE POEM – “London”

Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee: she is a fen
Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen,
Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,
Have forfeited their ancient English dower
Of inward happiness. We are selfish men;
Oh! raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.
Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

9. ANALYSIS

The poem begins with an apostrophe to Milton and jolts the reader into attention immediately. The exclamation mark after Milton's name serves the purpose of underlining the anxiety in the speaker's mind. “England needs thee” asserts the speaker and the next few lines paint a dismal picture of what England has become in present times.

Lamenting the state of English society, the speaker describes it as a “fen” which means a marshy swamp whose waters are “stagnant”. Metaphorically speaking the poet implies that England has lost its former glory and moved towards moral and spiritual degradation. There is no movement or progress in any area of life whether it be religion (“altar”), military power (“sword”), literature (“pen”), domestic life (“fireside”), or wealth



("hall and bower") - and suggests that these things have lost their essential qualities of happiness, heroism, chivalry, and cultural identity. The speaker acknowledges that he and his contemporaries are "selfish men", because they are passive and disinterested towards the immense suffering that the French Revolution has caused for their fellowmen. He implores Milton to return and restore English society to its former greatness - to show people the right way of life, with manners, virtue, morality, freedom, and power.

The octave or the first eight lines of the sonnet have presented the problem before us. The last six lines of the poem that form the sestet are a tribute to Milton through whom Wordsworth is presenting a solution to the problem.

"Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart:
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea:
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay."

The speaker goes on to praise Milton's character, describing him as a star that shines the brightest, and as possessing a voice that was as powerful as the sea. The similes are drawn from the natural world. Unlike the image of the marshy swamp to which the poet had compared present England, Milton is compared to a shining star, and the powerful sea which are positive images drawn from Nature. The Romantics' belief in Nature as being symbolic of divinity is glimpsed here.

The speaker characterizes Milton's soul as pure as the "naked heavens" or the clear skies and also majestic, and free, and notes that even though he travelled the same path as others, he did so with a cheerful godliness, and remained humble and dutiful despite his great talent. Milton though being a successful poet still lived as a simple and humble man. In him Wordsworth has presented the ideal that his countrymen must emulate.

In conclusion we can say that "London" is a poem that expresses the speaker's concern about the state of England at the time, and his belief that the country needs a figure like Milton to help restore its virtues and ideals. The poem combines an apostrophe to Milton with a reprimand to the people of England to recognize and uphold the values of "manners, virtue, freedom, and power." The poem concludes with a call to emulate Milton whose purity, simplicity, modesty and humility shows the way.



Study Notes

Fen: a marshy swamp with stagnant waters. The image is used by the poet as a metaphor to describe the state of inertia that England is in. The lack of movement in the swamp metaphorically means lack of progress in England.

Altar: used as a synecdoche where a part represents the whole. Here the word refers to the Church. The image is used to refer to the state of religion in England.

Sword: the sword here suggests the whole army. Once again used as a synecdoche.

Pen: writers and artists

Fireside: used as a synecdoche and refers to the fireplace in homes thereby meaning the domestic space which according to the poet is also in decline.

Bower: refers to a grove or a retreat most often in a castle and meant for ladies. Such places are also in decline. The poet is hinting that chivalry is on the decline.

Dower: is that money which is given to the bride by the groom at the time of marriage to support her in case she becomes a widow. It may also be used for “dowry” which the bride’s family presents to the groom. It is a kind of inheritance. The word is used as a synecdoche to refer to the greatness of England which the people had inherited but have now forfeited. Along with it they have forfeited their happiness.

Dwelt apart: the poet is trying to say that Milton stood apart from others as he was unique.

Lowly: here it means that Milton was humble and modest and never made a show of his greatness. He graciously accepted the ordinary duties of a citizen.

Check Your Progress

1. Who is the poem addressed to?
2. Why does the speaker invoke Milton?
3. Why is the poet unhappy with the present state of England?
4. What is the solution being presented in the last six lines of the poem?



10. SUMMING UP

“London” argues that England needs to return to the values of the past in order to address its present problems and sees Milton as a key figure who can help bring this about. Milton is praised for his purity, his steadfastness in the face of adversity, and his ability to live a life of humble devotion to duty. The poem suggests that by following his example, England could rediscover its moral and social centre and begin to move forward once more.

In terms of theme, “Tintern Abbey” and “London” both explore the human experience and the relationship between the individual and society. However, “Tintern Abbey” focuses on the restorative power of nature and the importance of human connection to the natural world, while “London” emphasizes the need for moral reform in the face of societal decay and a return to the values of the past.

11. QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Point out lines that show/describe the following:
 - (a) Wordsworth’s belief that the Universal Spirit pervades every object of nature.
 - (b) his love of nature in his boyhood.
 - (c) the mystical experience that enables him to see into the life of things.
2. Describe briefly the three stages in the development of the poet’s attitude to Nature.
3. Explain the following phrases /lines:
 - (i) sensations sweet
 - (ii) that serene and blessed mood
 - (iii) life of things
 - (iv) fretful stir
 - (v) fever of the world
 - (vi) still sad music of humanity
4. “Nor less I trust. /To them I may have owed another gift” What is this other gift the poet is referring to ?
5. Explain the following lines with reference to the context :

The picture of the mind revives again;



While here I stand, not only with the sense
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts
That in this moment there is life and food
For future years.

6. These beauteous forms,
Through a long absence, have not been to me
As is a landscape to a blindman's eye;
But oft, in lonely rooms and mid the din /Of towns and cities,
I have owed to them, / In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood and felt along the heart,
(a) Identify the passage.
(b) What does the poet mean by "sensations sweet"?
(c) What "beauteous forms" is the poet referring to?
7. . . . that serene and blessed mood, / In which the affections gently lead us on, /-Until,
the breath of this corporeal frame, / And even the motion of our human blood / Almost
suspended, we are laid asleep /In body, and become a living soul:
(a) Identity the passage and relate it to its context.
(b) Comment on the significance of the phrases: "serene and blessed mood" and "a living soul".
8. "In the renewed presence of a remembered scene, Wordsworth comes to a full understanding of his poetic—self." Discuss this view of "*Tintern Abbey*".
9. ... nor all
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e'er prevail against us, or disturb
Our cheerful faith, that all which we behold
is full of blessings.
(i) Identify the passage. What, according to the poet, is the dreary intercourse of life?
(ii) Comment on the last two lines of the passage quoted above.



10. Discuss “Tintern Abbey” as a poem that concerns itself with the “still, sad music of humanity”.

11. Nor less, I trust,

To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,
Is lightened :- that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.

- (i) Analyse this passage and relate it to its context.
- (ii) Briefly elucidate these phrases: “The burthen of the mystery” and “an eye made quiet by the power of harmony”.

12. ...That neither evil tongues,

Rash judgement, nor the sneers of selfish men,
Nor greetings where no kindness is, nor all,
The dreary intercourse of daily life,
Shall e’er prevail against us, or disturb
Our Cheerful faith, that all which we behold
is full of blessings.



- (a) Analyse the lines and place them in their context.
- (b) Does the poet place Dorothy and himself against the rest of mankind? If so, why? What is that “cheerful faith” which he believes (morally) belongs to them alone.
- 13. Wordsworth’s escape into Nature in “Tintern Abbey” is short-lived. The last stanza of the poem is “a fatigued attempt to convert his loss into a negative triumph”. Discuss.
- 14. Discuss the title of the poem “London”.
- 15. Why does Wordsworth invoke Milton in his poem “London”?
- 16. Discuss some of the figures of speech in “London”.
- 17. Discuss the form of the poem “London”.

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(i) “KUBLA KHAN”
(ii) “DEJECTION: AN ODE”

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

P. S. Nindra

1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This study material would enable you to:

- Know about the life and times of the poet.
- Be familiar with the characteristics of Romantic poetry.
- Understand the two poems prescribed for you – “Kubla Khan” and “Ode to Dejection” through a detailed analysis of both.
- Appreciate Coleridge’s contribution to the poetry of the Romantic movement.

2. ABOUT THE POET

Samuel Taylor Coleridge was born on the 21st of October 1772, in the town of Ottery, Devonshire. His father was a simple-minded clergyman. The poet, the youngest of thirteen children, displayed from his earliest years a great fondness for reading, and entered Grammar School when six years of age. When he was eight years old, he ran away from home after a quarrel with his brother who had provoked him and slept that night on the bank of a stream, an adventure which he dated as the beginning of his continuous later ill-health.

In 1782, Coleridge’s father died, and a place was found for him at Christ’s Hospital, the London charity school where Charles Lamb was his junior. In 1791, he entered Jesus College, Cambridge. His years at the University were spent in stirring and stormy times. He firmly embraced democratic and communistic views and had deep sympathy with the French Revolution of 1789. In religion, as in politics, his views were strongly radical. An interesting development took place at this time: owing to debt, and disappointment in love, Coleridge disappeared in December 1793 and enlisted in the Light Dragoons at Reading under the name of Silas Tomkyn Comberbach (Coleridge retained the initials). In April 1794, he was discharged after his family and friends intervened on his behalf, and he returned to



Cambridge. His marriage to Sara took place on October 4, 1795, at Bristol. The couple settled in a cottage in Clevedon in Somerset. In September 1796 their first child Hartley was born.

Coleridge had no means of supporting a home, beyond an offer of payment, for a verse he might write, made by a publisher named Cottle. He tried several schemes for gaining a livelihood: delivered lectures on various topics, literary and political, published his first volume of poems, wrote for the press, and finally started *The Watchman*, a magazine devoted to politics and literature. But with the tenth number, the publication of the magazine came to an end.

On the marriage front, Coleridge did not enjoy domestic harmony. In fact, there was no real sympathy and understanding between him and his wife. Thus, domestic anxieties and depression of spirits brought on attacks of neuralgia and it was probably at this time that he began the use of opium as a relief, a habit which was to mar his best years, and indeed the whole of his life.

In 1797, began his famous friendship with William Wordsworth and his sister, Dorothy. The friendship between the two poets stands as one of the most famous and most fruitful in the annals of English literature. The stimulus of Wordsworth's companionship helped to mature his poetic genius, and the sympathetic, intelligence of Dorothy Wordsworth also had the happiest effect upon Coleridge's imagination. Free for a time from domestic anxiety, and happy in the new company, Coleridge rose to the zenith of his poetical career. Their walks together on the Quantock hills resulted in the epoch-making volume of poems called *The Lyrical Ballads*. (1798). *The Ancient Mariner* formed part of the *Ballads*. Indeed, during the short time—from June, 1797 to September, 1798 — that this close friendship lasted, Coleridge wrote almost all his best poetry—"The Ancient Mariner". "The Nightingale", the first part of "Christabel", "The Ode to France", "Fears in Solitude". "Frost at Midnight", "Kubla Khan", and so on.

This brief and fruitful period also marks the completion of Coleridge's poetical career. Two poems alone of later date can claim to rank with those just mentioned: the second part of "Christabel" (1800) and the melancholy "Dejection: An Ode" (1802).

After the publications of *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge started for a tour through Germany with Wordsworth and Dorothy, to learn the language and study contemporary philosophy and science. German philosophy and literature peculiarly fascinated Coleridge.

On his return to England in 1800, Coleridge aimlessly moved from place to place. When Wordsworth married and settled at Grasmere in the Lake district, Coleridge and his family followed in July 1800, where they, in turn, were followed by the Southseys.



Relations with his wife worsened, and Coleridge plunged into depths of misery. He fell in love with Wordsworth's sister-in-law, Sarah Hutchinson, a woman of deep sympathy and understanding. He even toyed with the idea of taking a separation from his wife.

Failing health induced him to try the effect of warmer climates. So, he left for Malta in June 1804, where he was very well received by the English Colony. He was appointed there as the temporary secretary to the governor Sir Alexander. Cut off from friends and a congenial intellectual environment, he found life unbearable and returned to England after two years but soon got involved in a miserable quarrel with Wordsworth which was never completely patched up.

Separation from his wife took place at this time, and this was followed by estrangement from many old friends too. Continuing ill-health at last forced him to place himself in the hands of a sympathetic doctor from Highgate, in the year 1816. He lived in the doctor's house until his death, eighteen years later, and under his care he gradually overcame the craving for opium and regained some measure of restored health. He renewed old friendships, formed new ones and showed occasional flashes of genius. During this period, he produced the *Lay Sermons*, *Biographia Literaria*, with its invaluable analysis of the principles and language of poetry, *The Aids to Reflection*, and the *Notes on Shakespeare*.

Coleridge had extraordinary powers of conversation, and it was as a talker, a marvelous talker that he is noted for during the last ten years of his life. His reputation and his attractive personality brought to Highgate some of the finest minds of the day. In fact, he became the sage of Highgate, and the house a place of pilgrimage for writers and thinkers.

He died on 25 July 1834 and was buried at Highgate churchyard.

3. A BRIEF NOTE ON THE CHARACTERISTICS OF ROMANTIC POETRY

Let us take a brief look at the development of English poetry to place Romantic poetry in its context. Of course, you must supplement this account with a reading from any good *History of English Literature*.

Modern English Poetry is about six hundred years old. It can be conveniently discussed under the following headings.

1. Age of Chaucer.
2. The Elizabethan Age.



3. The Puritan Period.
4. Restoration Period.
5. The Classical Period.
6. The Romantic Revival.
7. The Victorian Age.

Now follows a brief estimate of all these periods.

3.1 Age of Chaucer (1340-1400)

Geoffrey Chaucer (1340-1400) has rightly been called the father of modern English poetry. He was a many-sided genius. He adopted an eleven-syllable line as his favourite verse-form from the Italian poet Boccaccio.

Chaucer's most important and endearing work is *Canterbury Tales*. This poem is the finest narrative in English literature, abounding as it does in story-interest, humour and characterization.

The Age of Chaucer is notable for the development of the popular ballad, metrical romance, dream allegories and satire.

3.2 The Elizabethan Age

Broadly speaking the period (1580-1620) may be regarded as the Elizabethan Age. It is one of the greatest periods in English literary history. Its two main characteristics were:

- (i) Growth of Nationalism.
- (ii) The influence of Renaissance learning.

Both these tendencies are reflected in contemporary literature. Amongst the foreign influences Italian, French and Spanish were more pronounced.

The Elizabethan Age was primarily the age of drama. Shakespeare wrote all of his famous dramas between 1591 and 1611. In poetry, however, new verse forms like the "sonnet" and "blank verse" were introduced and experimented with. Songs, pastoral poems, and sonnets were extremely popular. Spenser was the greatest Elizabethan poet, and his masterpiece, *The Faery Queen* was written during 1589-96. The sonnets of Spenser, Sidney and Shakespeare were also quite popular.

The general trend of Elizabethan literature was "Romantic". Display of imagery and emotion were two marked traits of poetic diction.



3.3 The Puritan Period

This period covers the years (1625-1660). It is also known as the Age of Milton as he was the most prominent poet of this period. This age was characterized by a reaction against earlier Elizabethan extravagance and imaginative enthusiasm. The poetic pendulum swung towards sober intellectuality and controlled emotion. Milton perfected blank verse as an instrument of poetic expression.

This period was one of gradual transition from the vigour, gaiety and imaginative freedom of the Elizabethan to that of artificial cheer, philosophic melancholy, and Puritan sobriety.

3.4 Restoration Period

Also known as the Age of Dryden, it extends over the years 1660-1700. John Dryden was the greatest poet of this age. Poetry was marked by intellectual verve, wit and polish, and dominated by classical traits—balance, exactness and elegance. It lacked emotion and high imagination: and it was didactic (moralistic) or satirical in intention. The ode was also a favourite form. Blank verse was replaced by the heroic couplet.

3.5 The Neo-Classical Period (1700-1750)

It is also known as the Age of Pope or the Augustan Age. Alexander Pope was the greatest poet of this period. Classicism dominated English Poetry throughout the greater part of the eighteenth century. Main characteristics of classicism were as follows:

- (a) Reason and common sense were preferred to “emotion and imagination”.
- (b) Nature and supernaturalism were seldom the subjects of poetry.
- (c) Mostly it was the poetry of urban rather than rural settings.
- (d) Poetry was chiefly in the Heroic couplet.
- (e) It was satirical or didactic in intention.
- (f) Diction and imagery were conventional.
- (g) Poetry abided by rules which were practiced by the Age of Dryden and the contemporary French poets.
- (h) Metrical regularity was strictly adhered to.
- (i) Poets widely cultivated conciseness and a didactic spirit.
- (j) Elizabethan qualities of rhetoric, eloquence, conceit and bombast were discarded. In their place “classical” qualities of balance, exactness and polish were encouraged.



Pope's contribution to the development of classicism in England was the largest. He perfected the heroic couplet. He also laid down rules for writing poetry by publishing his famous "Essay on Criticism". He taught his contemporaries to "Follow Nature"—but in a different sense. What he meant was an exact reproduction of everyday life and manners, as opposed to anything wild or extravagant. It was not to describe flowers and the trees and the changes of season,—it was to copy the men and manners of polite society.

3.6 Romantic Revival and Romantic Revolt (1798-1832)

In English, this period was ushered in by Wordsworth and Coleridge with the publication of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, as a protest and revolt against the so-called classicism of the previous century. The movement started as a conscious reaction against the Neo-classical poetry of the 18th Century. In this sense, the movement was known as the Romantic Revolt. But it is also known as the Romantic Revival, in the sense that the romantic qualities, earlier suppressed in the Age of Pope, were revived during this period as was interest in Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton. Since the spirit of Romantic poetry was akin to that of the Elizabethan age, the Elizabethan literary forms and subjects were revived again—the sonnet, the lyric, the pastoral, the blank verse, the Spenserian stanza, the ballad, and so on. The same fullness of imagination, richness of language, vastness of conception, lyricism and picturesqueness which pervaded the great Elizabethan works are to be found in Romantic Poetry. In it was revived passion, restlessness and curiosity, The sense of wonder and mystery, which marked the age of Elizabeth was once again witnessed in the poetry of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Shelley and Keats

We can sum up the main characteristics of the Romantic poetry as follows:

- (i) Emotion and Imagination were once again preferred to reason and common sense.
- (ii) "Individualism" as opposed to obedience to "Authority" was revived. The poet was not bound to follow the "Ancients" or "fixed rules". He was free to write as he pleased.
- (iii) Interest in Nature and the Supernatural was revived.
- (iv) Interest in the common man—the peasant, the labourer, the shepherd—was revived,
- (v) Interest in the Past, the Middle Ages, was a marked feature of Romantic poetry,
- (vi) Interest in Greek art, myth and literature was another characteristic feature.

The Romantic Revival was the "second great creative period" in English Poetry—the first being the Elizabethan Age. Poets who enriched the romantic tradition by making significant



contributions flourished during this period. Thus, Wordsworth revived an interest in Nature by authoring such poems as “Tintern Abbey”. He struck a democratic note by publishing his short lyric, “The Solitary Reaper”. Coleridge revived the elements of wonder and mystery by writing “The Ancient Mariner”, “Kubla Khan” and “Christabel”. Shelley enriched lyricism by penning such immortal lyrics as “Ode to the West Wind”, “The Cloud”, etc. Keats’s contribution was no less outstanding. He revived interest in the Middle Ages in his poems “The Eve of St. Agnes” and “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”. Besides, he was a great Hellenist (a lover of Greek art and literature), as is evident from his “Ode on the Grecian Urn”. Byron popularized the qualities of romantic sadness by creating the Byronic Hero. All these famous poets were lovers of nature, although they appreciated it in their own individualistic manners.

3.7 The Victorian Age (1832-1870)

Romantic rather than classical spirit prevailed during this period. It was, however, modified to reflect current attitudes in science, religion, politics and philosophy.

The two famous poets of this period are Tennyson and Browning. Poetry of this period was romantic in so far as:

- (i) It was dominated by imaginative and emotional elements
- (ii) It experimented with new verse forms.
- (iii) It was dedicated to the worship of beauty.

The Victorian Poetry differed from the poetry of the Romantic Revival in three important aspects:

- (i) It was more intellectual in tone,
- (ii) It treated serious problems of society,
- (iii) It evinced a higher degree of technical perfection.

The Lyric remained a favourite form during this period. Robert Browning developed a new type of lyric known as the dramatic monologue.

Coleridge’s name, in the history of English poetry, is always associated with Wordsworth. Keats, Shelley, and Byron for all these poets were subject to the same influences and present such characteristics that link them together into a group. The tendencies that they show and the qualities which they impart to their poetry have won for them the name of Romantics, and the movement which they represented has come to be known in English literature as the Romantic Movement. Coleridge’s poetry reveals that he



had a marvelous power of imagination that helped him to dream and see visions which he translated into great poetry.

4. “KUBLA KHAN”; OR A VISION IN A DREAM. A FRAGMENT

In Xanadu did “Kubla Khan”
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.
But oh! That deep romantic chasm which slanted
Down the green hill athwart a cedarn cover!
A savage place! As holy and enchanted
As e’er beneath a waning moon was haunted
By woman wailing for her demon-lover!
And from this chasm, with ceaseless turmoil seething,
As if this earth in fast thick pants were breathing,
A mighty fountain momentarily was forced:
Amid whose swift half-intermitted burst
Huge fragments vaulted like rebounding hail.
Or chaffy grain beneath the thresher’s flail:
And “mid these dancing rocks at once and ever
It flung up momentarily the sacred river.



Five miles meandering with a mazy motion
Through wood and dale the sacred river ran,
Then reached the caverns measureless to man,
And sank in tumult to a lifeless ocean:
And “mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war!
The shadow of the dome of pleasure
Floated midway on the waves;
Where was heard the mingled measure
From the fountain and the caves.
It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny measure—dome with caves of ice!

A damsel with a dulcimer
In a vision once I saw:
It was an Abyssinian maid,
And on her dulcimer she played,
Singing of Mount Abora.
Could I revive within me
Her symphony and song,
To such a deep delight “twould win me.
That with music loud and long,
I would build that dome in air,
That sunny dome! Those caves of ice!
And all who heard should see them there,
And all should cry. Beware! Beware!
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread.



For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

5. “KUBLA KHAN”: AN ANALYSIS

“Kubla Khan” presents certain serious problems for the readers as well as critics. On the first reading, especially without any background knowledge, everyone is bound to ask the question: what is it all about? Is there any connection between the first and the second part? Is it merely a fragment?

These questions are not easy to answer. But it definitely stirs up an old argument: Should we enjoy the poem as it is—as a self-contained independent unit? Or should we seek background knowledge—poet’s life, his other interests and preoccupations, and so on.

Votaries of the former belief, no doubt, have some point. But “Kubla Khan” presumably supports the latter view—that we do need to understand the background in order to comprehend and appreciate this poem.

This poem, written probably in 1797-98, was published for the first time in 1816. A few lines from Coleridge’s Preface to the poem are worth quoting. He wrote:

“In the summer of the year 1797, the Author, then in ill health, had retired to a lonely farmhouse between Porlock and Lynton, on the Exmoor confines of Somerset and Devonshire. In consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed, from the effects of which he fell asleep in his chair at the moment that he was reading the following sentence, or words of the same substance, in Purchas’s *Pilgrimage*: “Here the Khan Kubla commanded a palace to be built, and a stately garden thereunto. And thus, ten miles of fertile ground were enclosed with a wall”. The Author continued for about three hours in a profound sleep, at least of the external senses, during which time he has the most vivid confidence, that he could not have composed less than from two to three hundred lines; if that indeed can be called composition in which all the images rose up before him as *things*, with a parallel production of the correspondent expressions, without any sensation or consciousness of effort. On awakening he appeared to himself to have a distinct recollection of the whole, and taking his pen ink, and paper, instantly and eagerly wrote down the lines that are here preserved. At this moment he was unfortunately called out by a person on business from Porlock, and detained by him above an hour, and on his return to his room, found, to his no small surprise and mortification, that though he still retained



some vague and dim recollection of the general purport of the vision, yet, with the exception of some eight or ten scattered lines and images, all the rest had passed away like the images on the surface of a stream into which a stone has been cast, but, alas without the after restoration of the latter” (From “Kubla Khan” text (victorianweb.org))

Modern readers do not give much credit to the *Preface* that Coleridge wrote much after the composition of the poem. They hold the *Preface* responsible for much of the confusion and mystery that the poem has given rise to over the years.

What is the position of modern criticism? For one, it does not consider the poem as a “fragment”, as claimed by Coleridge. For another, it detects an essential unity between the two parts (Lines 1-35, and Lines 36-54). Further, regarding its theme, there is also a measure of consensus that the poem is about the act of writing poetry. As George Watson claims with an assertiveness: “What is “Kubla Khan” about? This is, or ought to be, an established fact of criticism: “Kubla Khan” is a poem about poetry. It is probably the most original poem about poetry in English” (p. 122). For others like Graham Hough, what underlies the poem is the theme of poetic inspiration.

Earlier critics like Livingstone Lowes (*The Road to Xanadu*), tracing the references that Coleridge gathered from his immensely wide reading of these months, concludes that the poem is meaningless. He treats the relation between the parts as “inconsequential”. He also talks of the “vivid incoherence” of the second part. All this is indeed the result of having been told beforehand that the poem was a dream, or the result of a dream. And Humphry House’s pertinent questions acquire an added force when he asks:

“If Coleridge had never published his *Preface*, who would have thought of “Kubla Khan” as a fragment? Who would have guessed it as a dream? Who, without the confession, would have supposed that “in consequence of a slight indisposition, an anodyne had been prescribed”? (House, p. 114).

Is the poem a fragment?

The *Preface* to “Kubla Khan” had stirred up a great deal of critical activity. The best way to approach the poem is to adhere to a simple and easily accepted approach. We proceed with the premise, then, that “Kubla Khan” is not a fragment; it is a complete whole, with the two parts having a basic unity. What is this basic unity? It is this point which remains to be discussed.



We know one thing for certain that this poem contains echoes and reminiscences of a number of other books which were sub-consciously influencing Coleridge's thoughts and fancies. The elements of the remote, of the distant in time and space, of luxury and extravagance, of art and music and dance, of incredible sweetness and glamour are all suggested at once.

All these are established facts, but can lead us nowhere in so far as the basic question is concerned: what is the poem about? Medical evidence brushes aside the notion that opium produces either dreams in sleep or waking hallucinations. Of course, this poem may have been written in great speed, but it does not follow that it was written "in waking" up after dreaming a dream. It seems to have been written deliberately, consciously, with a lot of preparation (reading etc.) and a definite critical theory about poetry.

The first 35 lines of the poem

Let us take the poem as it is and see what it offers. The fifty-four lines of the poem divide clearly at line 36. The first section, often in coldly literal detail, describes Khan's "rare device". Purchas's *Pilgrimage* (1613) tells hardly more than that the Khan built a movable palace in a beautifully enclosed park. Coleridge is much more specific, and concentrates many of Purchas's details, and some others, into a closely consistent picture.

To begin with the beginning: what do we find in the first thirty-five lines? Somebody (Kubla Khan, in fact) did something specific—decreed the erection of a pleasure dome; its shadow "Floated midway on the waves"; and it was a "miracle of rare device" since, though it was "sunny" it contained "caves of ice". But right in the beginning, the importance of river Alph is emphasized: the pleasure-dome is ordered to be built where the river Alph ran, and it is "sacred".

The "so" of line 6 conveys the impression that the location was chosen deliberately by the Khan: *because* the sacred river ran here, *so* he ordered the pleasure-dome to be built here.

Then follows a detailed description of the setting: the size of the tract of fertile ground that Kubla had walled as an immense garden, with walls and towers, gardens and rills; flowers borne by the plants and trees were fragrant like incense; there were sunny spots of green lawn amidst thick forests—a place of paradisaal happiness.

But most of all, the description deals with the sacred river with special reference to the chasm from which the river issued, the fountain hurling up the huge fragments, and the disappearance of the river into the "caverns measureless to man".



You will notice that the impression that we get is that the setting is more important than the pleasure dome itself.

Besides, what sort of atmosphere is sought to be evoked through these images? (12-30). Well, an atmosphere of fear, enchantment, violent and uncontrollable energy, oblivion and death, and forebodings of strife and struggle.

Thus, this work of art, so to speak, is not set down just anywhere in nature but has been very carefully accommodated to its natural setting. It crowns nature.

The place indeed is special: it is dominated by the sacred river; it is carefully walled off and set apart, a kind of earthly paradise, walled off like Milton's paradise.

But we must pay attention to the opening of line 12, which presents a curious grammatical problem. What is the force of "But"? in the opening of the line? Does it mean: but how unlike the rest of the garden was the chasm? Or: In what sharp contrast to the enfolded sunny spots of greenery was that awesome chasm? The landscape is cleft by the chasm and it makes the place "savage".

At any rate, the "But oh" signals a shift in mood, from sunlight to shadow, or from sunlight to moonlight.

The place is savage, holy and enchanted, and the appropriateness of the spot as one in which a woman might wail for her demon lover connects the place with the darker aspects of the supernatural. The more sunlit and paradisiacal aspects of its sacred character have been emphasized in the first eleven lines. The description of the chasm completes the picture of a place suffused with feeling of holiness and mysticism.

It is sacred in all the senses of that word—not merely the divine but including the demonic—in short, the supernatural as primitive man apprehends it.

The river Alph participates in this quality. If it waters the blossoming garden of the incense-bearing trees and sparkles in the sun, it is also violent and darkly mysterious. The river is associated with both the past and future. In its tempestuous descent "Kubla Khan" can hear the voices of the past ("ancestral voice") predicting the future ("prophesying war"). The river Alph has metaphorical significance as well. It represents the surge of imagination, of the creative powers of the poet. (See Study Notes).

The pleasure dome as a thing of art, then, is imposed upon a very special portion of nature. It is located very precisely in the enclosed tract. Its shadow is reflected in the waves of the river at a point midway between the bursting forth of the river and its disappearance—



at a point, at least, where the sound of the source fountain and of the waterfall into the abyss can both be heard as a “mingled measure.”

The dome crowns and dominates but it also incorporates some of the polarities” of nature. The sunny dome imitates the heavens, but it imitates the earth as well with its ice caves. Its holding together in one artifact such extremes is referred to as *miraculous*:

“It was a miracle of rare device,
A sunny pleasure – dome with caves of ice.”

Indeed, harmony and reconciliation are the essential features of the dome. Or should we say reconciliation of opposites, which makes it a “miracle of rare device”.

But the walled garden, reminding one of an earthly Paradise, contains knowledge of the threat of its own possible destruction. Kubla Khan’s fortune is precarious. According to the prophecy, he faces war. Earthly paradise is not held as a permanent gift, it is subject to change, subject to destruction. In other words, the ideal life is always open to forces of evil.

The last 18 lines

Now we come to the real problem-the last eighteen lines of the poem. Here is the most characteristic dream-feature of the poem-the sudden switch from Kubla and the Xanadu landscape.

As stated earlier, many scholars who regard this poem as a fragment do not see any logical connection between the first thirty-six and the last eighteen lines. But it can be argued that the last eighteen lines actually complete the poem, and that the break between the two parts is a “meaningful” break.

No doubt, with the second part, we come to a new topic, and the poet now speaks in the first person and has a vision of an Abyssinian maid singing of Mount Abora. If the first section of the poem might have been read from a book or presented in a dream or sketched in reverie, suddenly we now have a person speaking. “I once saw a damsel with a dulcimer in a vision.”

The damsel is from a far-away land, playing a music of unutterable melody and sweetness. And now comes the crucial line “Could I revive within me.” As Humphry House points out, this line can be interpreted in two ways. If a strong emphasis (and therefore necessarily also a strong metrical stress) is put upon “could”, the word can be taken to imply “If only I could, but I can’t,” and the whole poem can be made to appear to be about the failure and frustration of the creative power. But if the emphasis on “could” is slight, then the



condition is an “open” condition, like “Could You make it Wednesday instead of Thursday, it would be easier for me”, then it would imply that there is every possibility of creative achievement.

The second interpretation, of course, seems to be more appropriate because, as House says: “not only is it biographically relevant to point out that in 1797-98 Coleridge, so far from bemoaning the loss of creative power, was only just discovering its strength; but also, the whole rhythmic character of the paragraph requires this view” (115).

Coming back to our discussion of the poem, we observe that the “I” of this poem will not, of course, build the dome as Kubla did, He will build it with music. But he sets a condition: if he could revive in himself the music of the maid in the vision, it would so stir him to joy, that he would become truly creative and could himself produce a musical recreation of the Khan’s pleasure dome. Or, we can say, he will build that dome in words, in poetry. But, if the speaker could indeed recover the vision and build the dome for us, he would pass beyond the bounds of poetry as we know it and become himself a *numinous* thing—a creature to be held in awe and dread as one who had indeed been in paradise and tasted its milk and honeydew. Poetry reaches beyond itself and aspires to a vision so intense that the poet becomes seer and prophet, the teller of truth. In proportion as the poet succeeds, he becomes the man set apart from his fellows, to be viewed with superstitious dread.

Notice that in the line “I would build that dome in air”, the speaker seems to be challenging a comparison with the Khan. Of course, the Khan is an oriental despot -- all powerful—who has merely to decree and Lo! There is this pleasure dome. But the poet seems to say something to this effect: “I will build what Kubla built”. But his mode of building sets him at the other extreme from the great Khan. He becomes not emperor or ruler, (in order to bring into existence a miracle of rare device”, a person has to be no less than an all-powerful ruler), but a poet who needs nothing but divine inspiration; he needs to be in a state of poetic frenzy. He becomes a man cut off from his fellows by a magic circle and of whom all cry, “Beware, beware”. If the shudder of awe and the warning whispered by those listening to his song are a compliment and a testimony to his power, they also mark his exile and his isolation. In other words, to recover the joy excited by the revived visionary music would involve its penalties as well as its triumph.

By now, perhaps, the relationship between the two parts is somewhat clear to you. It is just because the first part presents the dome and the river with all its setting so completely, beautifully and finally, that we accept the authenticity of the creative impulse in the second part and find in the last word “Paradise” a fact, not a forlorn hope. “Kubla Khan”, observes



Humphry House, “is a triumphant positive statement of the potentialities of poetry. How great those potentialities are is revealed partly in the description of its *effects* at the ending of the second part and partly in the very substance and content of the first” (115).

To reinforce the argument that “Kubla Khan” is a poem about poetry, let us quote George Watson here in *Coleridge the Poet*: Anyone who objects that there is not a word about poetry in it should be sent at once to the conclusion and asked, even if he has never read any Plato, what in English poetry this is like:

“Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise”.

There are dozens of parallels in Renaissance English to this account of poetic inspiration, all based—though rarely at first hand—on Plato’s view of poetic madness in the *Ion* or the *Phaedrus*—The “flashing eyes” and “floating hair” of Coleridge’s poem belong to a poet in the fury of creation. Verbal resemblances to the text of Plato itself confirm that the last paragraph of the poem is a prolonged Platonic allusion. Socrates, in the *Ion* compares lyric poets to “Bacchic maidens who draw *milk and honey* from the rivers when under the influence of Dionysus” and adds that poets “gather their strains from *honied fountains* out of the gardens and dells of the Muses. ..Ion himself, describing the effects of poetic recitation, confesses that when I speak of horrors, my hair stands on end...The very phrase “holy dread” is Platonic (Laws 67 ID). That “*Kubla Khan*” is in some sense a comment on Plato’s theory of poetry is not really in doubt (Watson, p.122).

6. STUDY NOTES

L 1: **Xanadu**: province of Tartary; the name of a town said to be not far from Peking, the ancient capital of the Chinese Empire and the summer capital of the emperors. Its Chinese form is Shangtu. “Kubla Khan” (1216-1294), was the founder of the Mongol Dynasty in China, and one of its greatest rulers. He conquered China in 1267, and thus overthrew the Ling dynasty, which had ruled for 319 years. The Chinese capital of Peking was built by him; also, the grandson of Genghis Khan, the notorious world conqueror, who made an inroad into India, Kubla lived in great style and grandeur. Marco Polo spent seventeen years at his court.

These two names —**Xanadu, Kubla Khan**— sound the note of remoteness and romance arising from unfamiliar objects and names.



L 2: **Pleasure-dome**: a palace for pleasure or holiday enjoyment

dome: rounded top of a building. Here dome stands for a grand, magnificent structure with all the usual architectural features.

Decree: order to be built.

L 3: **Alph**: a legendary river. Rivers and springs are commonly associated with poetry in classical and Renaissance poetry, “The very name “Alph” offers an easy clue in its resemblance to the Alpheus of Milton’s *Lycidas*, where it is associated with the Sicilian Muse of pastoral poetry. And the river of poetry was a preoccupation of some Romantics too... The sacred river is the most traditional element in a poem otherwise evasive in its sophistication” (Watson, p. 134).

Why the river was sacred has not been made clear. This idea is particularly Hindu or Eastern, for only in the East do people treat rivers as holy. For example, the Ganges is a sacred river in India.

L 4: **Caverns**: Caves, underground gorges. One of the widespread beliefs about rivers is that they run underground for some distance.

Measureless to man: the depth of which cannot be ascertained by man.

L.5. **Sunless Sea**: not exposed to the rays of the sun. Some dark, subterranean lake. This is another detail which is hard to imagine but which makes for the picturesqueness of the description.

L.6. **twice five mile**: an archaic form of saying ten miles.

L.7. **girdled**: encircled.

L.8. **sinuous rills**: streams winding in and out like serpents; tortuous rivulets.

L.9. **incense-bearing tree**: Trees laden with fragrant blossoms. (A sensuous phrase) This is an echo of Shakespeare’s description of Arabian trees yielding gums which are fragrant like incense.

L.11 **sunny spots**: ground exposed to the warm rays of the sun.

L.12. **But oh! etc.**: Suddenly, the poet rivets his attention on a different scene which he views with awe and wonder, as shown by the exclamation.

Romantic chasm: a narrow ravine, gorge or deep hollow is called *romantic* in the sense of its being mysterious and fearful to look into.



L.13. **athwart**: across

Cedarn cover: through a wood of cedar trees; the cedar is an evergreen tree,

L.14. **Savage place**: the place was strange, primitive and fearful. Why fearful? Because it held unknown terrors of magic and witchcraft. The words *holy* and *enchanted* reinforce an atmosphere of vague fears and magic associations.

L.15. **a waning moon**: The waxing and waning moons are ascribed different powers and virtues in magic and witchcraft.

L.16. **demon-lover**: ghostly lover; those who claim that the poem achieves its effect mainly by “far-reaching suggestiveness” cite particularly lines 12-16 as an example. Other lines being 29-30. Furthermore, the proper names used are also highly emotive and suggestive: Xanandu, Kubla Khan, Alph, Abyssinian and Mount Abora, even Paradise. These names undoubtedly add to the total effect of the poem.

About *demon-lover*: it is important to point out that this is a reference to Eastern legends where a woman, after falling in love, discovers that her lover is a demon (or a supernatural spirit), and thereafter seeks for him in places such as this chasm.

L.17. **seething**: coming up with a hissing or bubbling noise; bursting forth.

L.18. The whole line stands for one word: “earthquake”, when the earth seems to pant and feel suffocated and bursts out in cracks and other fearful noises.

L.19. **Momently**: every moment, always; this is a peculiar use of the word.

Was forced: gushed forcefully.

L.20. **half-intermittent burst**: the bursting of the current being but now and then.

L.21. **vaulted**: made a circular motion or somersault; in other words, huge fragments leapt up, and then fell down in a semi-circular movement.

Rebounding hail: like hailstones leaping up after striking the earth; a picturesque simile and the result of close observation: as hail falls and is shattered, it flies in fragments. So did the objects thrown up by the current inside the cavern.

L.22. again, an apt simile from day-to-day life; the flying pieces of rock were like the grains flying up when struck with a flail by a farmer.

Thresher, a person who threshes grain that is, one who separates grain from chaff with an instrument known as flail.



- L.23. **at once and ever:** continuously; the water intermittently threw up pieces of rock.
- L.24. **It:** the fountain.
- L.25. **meandering:** winding with a mazy motion; the river Alph followed a tortuous, bewildering course. Note the musical effect of this line; it is onomatopoeic—the sound echoes the sense; alliteration leads to the musical effect.
- L.28. **sank in tumult:** flowed tumultuously, noisily, only to become silent afterwards.
- Lifeless ocean:** This can mean that the sea was calm, with no waves in it. Or perhaps there were no living creatures in it.
- L.29. **Ancestral voices ...war:** highly suggestive and elusive line; much is left to our imagination. The impending war can only mean that Kubla's earthly paradise is under threat of destruction. It is claimed by some critics that the line, like others in the poem is of value for its sonority and suggestiveness rather than for its "meaning."
- L.31. **dome of pleasure:** the dome is a characteristic feature of Islamic architecture and is appropriate to the Khan referred to as the emperor of China in the poem.
- L.32. Since the pleasure-dome stood on the banks of the river Alph, the shadow of that magnificent luxury-palace fell in the middle of the river.
- L.33. **mingled measure:** mingled sounds of the gushing waters of the fountain and the swift current of the river Alph flowing through deep hollows.
- L.35-36. It was the work of cunning artists and designers. Rare and marvellous human skill had gone into its construction; "it was most wonderfully planned"; the rarity consisted partly in the contrast between the sunny dome and the caves of ice. Line *A sunny...ice:* Note the contrast between the sun at one end and ice at the other. The oxymoron promotes wonder instead of incredulity.
- Line 37. An abrupt transition, but we have already established the basic connection between the two parts. **Dulcimer:** a musical instrument; a kind of primitive piano; the word has an archaic and musical appeal.
- L.39. **An Abyssinian maid:** a girl belonging to Abyssinia (in Ethiopia); introduced apparently as another element of romance.
- L.41. **Mount Abora:** seems to be reminiscent of "Mount Amara" in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Book IV, L.218)



Mount Amara: was a high mountain, said to be near the source of the river Nile. The children of Abyssinian Kings were brought up in beautiful garden palaces on the top of this mountain, lest they should rebel. The place enjoyed perpetual spring and was claimed by many to be the true Paradise. The girl of Coleridge's dream probably sang in praise of Mount Abora. What sort of praise? She probably sang in praise of its exotic splendour, eternal charm and exquisite beauty.

L.42-47. The lines depict the power of poetic imagination. The poet needs only "inspiration" to emulate Kubla's feat; he does not need to be a tyrant with full authority over his surroundings.

L.43. **Symphony and song:** melody and music of her song.

L.44. **could win me:** enrapture, enthuse, enchant me.

L.45. **that music...long:** the inspired poet would also come out with such impassioned verse, may be sung to the accompaniment of some musical instrument, that those who "heard" him would be able to clearly visualize that "sunny pleasure-dome" and those caves of ice in their imagination, i.e., his poetry would call up in the imagination so vivid a picture that the hearers would think they saw the real objects. The power of music is well-known.

L.49-54. **Beware! Beware!** Why? Because people would take him to be a magician. Only a magician can attempt such a feat.

L.51. **Weave...thrice:** i.e., perform magic incantations for protection from him, since his ability to call up this vision proves that he possesses occult powers.

An inspired poet is almost like a magician with glittering eyes and disheveled hair. He radiates a mysterious and uncanny power and has to be contained within a circle, so that others may not be affected by him. (a common practice in magic; you are already familiar with the importance of the word "thrice"). He is nearly divine in his inspiration, for he is brought up on the food of the gods. His exaltations, ardours and enthusiasms are the result of poetic inspiration: and poetic inspiration is sustained by divine visions and immortal longings. He is on the earth, but his mind and soul are lost in heavenly pursuits.

Such a poet can produce the illusion of reality in the minds of listeners.

Notice that Lines 49 to the end mark a further transition in the poem: from the lady with a dulcimer to the poet inspired by magic powers.



L.50. **His flashing...hair:** the typical signs of one under the influence of supernatural powers; poets are supposed to be under such an influence when visions come to them.

Flashing eyes: “the seeing eyes” as Carlyle puts it, of the poet.

Floating hair: poets are usually found growing their hair long.

L.53-54. These are the signs of his being a favoured or immortal creature. He is not a man like other men.

According to Coleridge, the poet is specially gifted, being endowed with special susceptibilities and sustained by food which comes to him direct from heaven. That is, he lives on divine impulses and inspirations more than other men.

Holy dread: the sacred idea of divine awe and reverence which is due to the poet.

For he...Paradise: for the poet has partaken of the same divine food as was dropped from Heaven to save the hungry Israelites.

Honey-dew: in this word the allusion is to the book of Exodus of the Old Testament of the Holy Bible: God Almighty appeared before Moses in a dream and commanded him to lead the Israelites, the chosen people of God, out of Egypt and added that He himself would appear before them in the form of a cloud by day and the Pillar of Fire by night to show them the way in the wilderness and He showered Manna or Divine Food upon the hungry Israelites and the milk of Paradise to quench their thirst.

All this means that the poet had received the gift of divine inspiration by reviving the song of the Abyssinian maid.

L.54. **Paradise:**

Here is what House has to say:

“Positively, it causes a distortion of the poem if we try to approximate this Paradise either to the earthly Paradise of Eden before the Fall or to the Heavenly Paradise which is the ultimate abode of the blest. It may take its imagery from Eden, but it is not Eden because “Kubla Khan” is not Adam. “Kubla Khan” himself is literally an oriental Prince with his name adapted from Purchas. We may, if we persist in hankering after formal equations, incline to say he is the Representative Man, or Mankind in general: but what matters is not his supposed fixed and antecedent symbolic character, so much as his activity. Within the



landscape treated as literal he must be of princely scope, in order to decree the dome and gardens: and it is this decree that matters, for it images the power of man over his environment and the fact that man makes his Paradise for himself. Just as the whole poem is about poetic creation at the imaginative level, so, within the work of the imagination, occurs the creativeness of man at the ethical and practical levels. This is what the poet, of all men, is capable of realizing... the name of Kubla is repeated only once after the first line, and the place of its repetition is significant:

“And” mid this tumult Kubla heard from far
Ancestral voices prophesying war”.

This is essential to the full unity of the conception: Paradise contains knowledge of the threat of its own possible destruction. It is not held as a permanent gift; the ideal life is always open to forces of evil; it must be not only created by man for himself, but also defended by him. It is not of the essence of this paradise that it must be lost; but there is a risk that it may be lost.” (*Coleridge*).

Towards the end, we quote Allan Grant:

“Many of the features of the landscape of “Kubla Khan” are referable to specific sources in books of oriental travel and history. One could not, however, even if one wanted to, map out or diagrammatize the relationship of the river, plain and caverns. Yet within the poem they seem to suggest very powerfully a sense of the surging up of the river of life, Alph (or Alpha, the first letter of the Greek alphabet), and the fertilizing of the garden of life before it sinks into an unfathomable sea of death.” (*A Preface to Coleridge*).

Check Your Progress

1. What is the full title of the poem?
2. What is the poem about?
3. What is the significance of the name “Kubla Khan?”
4. Is the poem just about a dream?
5. ““Kubla Khan” is an ecstatic reverie on the power of the poet.” Discuss.
6. Is “Kubla Khan” a poem about Poetry? Give a reasoned answer.



7. Give a brief appreciation of the poem “Kubla Khan”.
8. Would you regard “Kubla Khan” as a fragment? If not, then show how is it a complete poem possessing basic units.
9. Discuss the romantic elements in the poem.

7. “DEJECTION: AN ODE”

*Late, late yestreen I saw the new Moon,
With the old Moon in her arms;
And 1 fear, 1 fear, my Master dear!
We shall have a deadly storm.
(Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence.)*

I

WELL! If the Bard was weather-wise, who made
The grand old ballad of Sir Patrick Spence,
This night, so tranquil now, will not go hence
Unroused by winds, that ply a busier trade
Than those which mould yon cloud in lazy flakes,
Or the dull sobbing draft, that moans and rakes
Upon the strings of this Aeolian lute,
Which better far were mute.
For lo! the New-moon winter-bright!
And overspread with phantom light
(With swimming phantom light o’erspread
But rimmed and circled by a silver thread)
I see the old Moon in her lap foretelling
The coming-on of rain and squally blast.



And oh! that even now the gust were swelling,
And the slant night-shower driving loud and fast!
Those sounds which oft have raised me, whilst they awed,
And sent my soul abroad,
Might now perhaps their wonted impulse give,
Might startle this dull pain, and make it move and live!

II

A grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear,
A stifled, drowsy, unimpassioned grief,
Which finds no natural outlet, no relief.
In word, or sigh, or tear-
O Lady ! in this wan and heartless mood.
To other thoughts by yonder throstle woo'd,
All this long eve, so balmy and serene,
Have I been gazing on the western sky,
And its peculiar tint of yellow green:
And still I gaze-and with how blank an eye!
And those thin clouds above, in flakes and bars,
That give away their motion to the stars;
Those stars, that glide behind them or between,
Now sparkling, now bedimmed, but always seen:
Yon crescent Moon, as fixed as if it grew
In its own cloudless, starless lake of blue;
I see them all so excellently fair,
I see, not feel, how beautiful they are!



III

My genial spirits fail;
And what can these avail
To lift the smothering weight from off my breast?
It were a vain endeavour,
Though I should gaze for ever
On that green light that lingers in the west:
I may not hope from outward forms to win
The passion and the life, whose fountains are within.

IV

O Lady ! we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live:
Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud !
And would we aught behold, of higher worth,
Than that inanimate cold world allowed
To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd,
Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
Enveloping the Earth-
And from the soul itself must there be sent
A sweet and potent voice, of its own birth,
Of all sweet sounds the life and element !

V

O pure of heart ! thou need'st not ask of me
What this strong music in the soul may be!
What, and wherein it doth exist,



This light, this glory, this fair luminous mist,
This beautiful and beauty-making power.
Joy, virtuous Lady ! Joy that ne'er was given,
Save to the pure, and in their purest hour,
Life, and Life's effluence, cloud at once and shower, Joy,
Lady! is the spirit and the power,
Which wedding Nature to us gives in dower
A new Earth and new Heaven,
Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud
Joy is the sweet voice, Joy the luminous cloud
We in ourselves rejoice!
And thence flows all that charms or ear or sight,
All melodies the echoes of that voice,
All colours a suffusion from that light.

VI

There was a time when, though my path was rough.
This joy within me dallied with distress,
And all misfortunes were but as the stuff
Whence Fancy made me dreams of happiness:
For hope grew round me, like the twining vine,
And fruits, and foliage, not my own, seemed mine.
But now afflictions bow me down to earth:
Nor care I that they rob me of my mirth;
But oh! each visitation
Suspends what nature gave me at my birth,



My shaping spirit of Imagination.
For not to think of what I needs must feel,
But to be still and patient, all I can;
And haply by abstruse research to steal
From my own nature all the natural man
This was my sole resource, my only plan:
Till that which suits a part infects the whole,
And now is almost grown the habit of my soul.

VII

Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind,
Reality's dark dream!
I turn from you, and listen to the wind, .
Which long has raved unnoticed. What a scream
Of agony by torture lengthened out
That lute sent forth ! Thou Wind, that rav'st without,
Bare crag, or mountain-tarn, or blasted tree,
Or pine-grove whither woodman never clomb,
Or lonely house, long held witches' home,
Methinks were fitter instruments for thee,
Mad Lutanist! who in this month of showers,
Of dark-brown gardens, and a peeping flowers,
Mak'st Devils' yule, with worse than wintry song,
The blossoms, buds, and timorous leaves among.
Thou Actor, perfect in all tragic sounds !
Thou mighty Poet, e'en to frenzy bold !



What tell'st thou now about?

“Tis of the rushing of an host in rout,

With groans of trampled men, with smarting wounds –

At once they groan with pain, and shudder with cold !

But hush ! there is a pause of deepest silence !

And all that noise, as of a rushing crowd,

With groans, and tremulous shudderings -all is over-

It tells another tale, with sounds less deep and loud!

A tale of less affright

And tempered with delight,

As Otway's self had framed the tender lay,-

“Tis of a little child

Upon a lonesome wild,

Not far from home, but she hath lost her way:

And now moans low in bitter grief and fear,

And now screams loud, and hopes to make her mother hear.

VIII

“Tis midnight, but small thoughts have I of sleep:

Full seldom may my friend such vigils keep !

Visit her, gentle Sleep! with wings of healing.

And may this storm be but a mountain-birth,

May all the stars hang bright above her dwelling,

Silent as though they watched the sleeping Earth !

With light heart may she rise,

Gay fancy, cheerful eyes.



Joy lift her spirit, joy attune her voice;
To her may all things live, from pole to pole,
Their life the eddying of her living soul!
O simple spirit, guided from above,
Dear Lady ! friend devoutest of my choice,
Thus mayest thou ever, ever more rejoice.

8. “DEJECTION: AN ODE”: AN ANALYSIS

This poem describes the feeling of apathy and despair which was at once a cause and a result of Coleridge’s indulgence in drugs and which finally destroyed the best part of his poetic career. Before we take up the poem for discussion, it would be appropriate to understand the term “Ode”.

8.1 The Ode

The Ode is a form of a Lyric poem, characterized by its length, intricate stanza forms, grandeur of style and seriousness of purpose, with a long and venerable history in classical and post-Renaissance poetry. It is often written in celebration of some special event.

The Greek poet Pindar (518-438 B.C.) established this form. His odes were written to glorify the winners of the Olympic and other games. His poetry is marked by elevated thought, bold metaphor, and the free use of myths. He modelled his stanzas on the dramatic *chorus*, using a threefold pattern like the dance rhythm of strophe (moving to left), antistrophe (moving to right), and epode (standing still); the rhyme scheme is fixed.

Some English poets like Gray in “The Progress of Poesy” (1754) followed the *regular* or Pindaric ode. Others, like Cowley, came out with the modified form of the Pindaric Ode, called the *irregular ode*: each stanza follows its own pattern with varied line lengths, rhyme schemes and number of lines.

Cowley’s modified version of the *Pindaric ode*, with its freedom to alter the form in accordance with changing argument, subject matter and feeling, proved quite influential.

Coleridge and Wordsworth use irregular ode form for their “Dejection” (1802) and “Intimations of Immortality” (1807) poems respectively.



8.2 Dejection: An Ode

“Dejection: An Ode”, belongs to a group of poems popularly known as “Conversation Poems” composed between August 1795 and April 1798. “The Eolian Harp”, “Frost at Midnight”, “This Lime Tree Bower my Prison”, “Fears in Solitude” are some of the other poems in this group. “Dejection: An Ode” is considered to be the most extended of the *Conversation Poems*. Though a conversation is an exchange between two people, these poems are rather monologues addressed to either wife, son, a loved one or a friend. They display a distinctive style and have been called “meditations in blank verse.”

“Dejection: An Ode” was first written as a poetical letter of 340 lines, dated 4 April 1802, and sent to Sara Hutchinson. An intermediate version-shortened and with considerable revisions, and this time addressed to Wordsworth, appears in a letter sent to a friend, William Sotheby, on 19 July 1802. The final version was published for the first time in *The Morning Post* of October 1802. Where “Edmund” is substituted for the “Sara” of the first version. In his collected works of 1817, *Sibylline Leaves*, Coleridge uses the word “Lady !”, and is addressed to his wife Sara.

Watson sums up the position thus: “It seems best to think of the first version of 1802 as a conversation poem which, by some vagary, has been cast into the form of a rough-and-ready ode. In the ensuing months it was trimmed to less than half its original length, purged of most of its private reference, and set forth upon the world as one of the oddest compromises in English poetry: an intensely, bitterly, almost indecently private poem of an unhappily married poet, cast into that most public of all forms, the neoclassical Pindaric. The language swirls upwards and downwards from a studiously conversational opening (“Well! If the Bard was weather-wise...”) to passages of a grave sublimity that Coleridge had scarcely ever achieved.... It is by this startling contrast of the formal and the informal that the poem lives, and for just this reason there can be no doubt of the superiority of the final version, where the original 340 lines have been reduced to a tight-packed 139. Coleridge is so exuberant a poet, and so little self-critical in his creative moments, that it is exceptional to watch him at work, as here, with the pruning-hook..... On the whole, it is surely clear, the reduction of the ode to its familiar form is a continuous triumph of critical acumen,” (George Watson, p.74-75).

“Dejection: An Ode” is one of a number of poems written in the early months of 1802 by Coleridge and Wordsworth. They include Wordsworth’s “Resolution and Independence”, and Intimations of Immortality ode. Each of them is a response to a sense of irreparable loss, and the phrase “There was a time” from “Dejection: An Ode” becomes the opening line of



the Immortality Ode. Each poet seems to be suffering a crisis of confidence in his poetic gift, fearing the loss of his creative imagination; and each uses the word “Dejection: An Ode” to describe the accompanying mood. Each poet conceived of and responded to the crisis in his own way and the paradoxical result was the creation of three Romantic poems on the subject of the loss of the poetic imagination. The paradox is most clearly stated and felt in the final “Dejection: An Ode” which had by now become a poem about the inability to make poetry.

An interesting point about this poem is that in it we find a change in Coleridge’s attitude to Nature. And you can understand this change better if you read two of his earlier poems: “The Eolian Harp” (1795) and “Frost at Midnight” (1798). In the first poem the poet expresses the idea that the same Divine Spirit pervades the entire universe. The poet thinks that one cannot help loving all things in a world which is so permeated by the Divine spirit. The poet shows his keen sensitivity to Nature and to every object of Nature. Wordsworth, you should remember, firmly believed in this idea.

“Frost at Midnight” shows Coleridge’s attitude to Nature much more clearly, and Wordsworth’s complete and overwhelming influence is quite evident. In the third stanza of the poem, the poet says that God speaks through Nature and that Nature will educate and mould his child. Nature exercises a great educational influence.

This is one attitude to Nature. But in the first stanza of this poem itself, we find the poet expressing the belief that outward objects merely reflect or mirror our own thoughts and moods. This idea provides us with a clue to Coleridge’s later view of Nature. It is in “Dejection: An Ode” that we find the above belief fully developed :

O Lady ! we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live:
Ours is her wedding garment, ours her shroud !

He now believes that Nature can give no joy to those who have no joy already in their hearts. Bitter failures and disappointments in life led Coleridge to lose faith in Nature as a healing power.

The final version of the Ode is often compared with the original verse letter addressed to Sara Hutchinson. Many critics feel that the original version is more personal and painful and therefore more “sincere”. That may be the case, but we must guard ourselves against giving undue importance to Coleridge’s private griefs during the period preceding the composition of the original version. For, it was not for nothing that he reworked the poem so as to cut out all the associations that had occasioned the poem originally. He wanted to bring before the



public a finished work of art, and not a mere rambling sort of piece. But does the Ode convey a sense of completeness and unity? Humphry House on this point observes: “I think it is the opinion of many readers of the Ode, that brilliantly successful as most of it is, as parts, yet it fails to achieve complete artistic unity. By comparison with “Frost at Midnight” or “The Ancient Mariner” or “Kubla Khan,” it is not a whole poem” (p. 134).

One more point needs your careful attention. The poem will make complete sense only if you do not forget that after cutting and pruning the original version, it was brought forth as an Ode addressed to William Wordsworth. It was only after some estrangement with his friend that Coleridge substituted “Lady” for “Edmund” and the poem was altered so as to erase all allusions to their friendship. But that does not alter the fact that Wordsworth’s personality is all pervading in the Ode. What is more, as we mentioned earlier also, “Dejection” and “Immortality Ode” have interesting points of comparison and contrast. In the VI stanza, Coleridge refers to his past joy and describe his present mood of grief. Wordsworth, in the opening stanza of his Ode, expresses the same idea: “It is not now as it hath been of yore.” But in Wordsworth’s Ode grief finds relief and ends in joy; in Coleridge’s poem grief finds no relief and ends in dejection.

Both poems reveal the irregular rhyme pattern and the interspersing of long and short lines. (See C. M. Bowra’s, *The Romantic Imagination*, for a discussion of the two Odes).

8.3 Study Notes

The poem begins with the speaker recalling a few lines from the ballad of Sir Patrick Spence. The first four lines form a part of this ballad from “Percy”’s *Reliques* – “Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence.” In this ballad, Sir Patrick Spence has superstitious fear of “new Moon/with the old Moon in her arms”, as it portends a “deadly storm,”. Coleridge incorporates this idea in his poem. Thomas Percy’s collection of ballads *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) made a great impression on the Romantic poets.

8.3.1 Stanza I

In the first stanza the speaker asserts that if the poet of the ballad had a good understanding of the weather then a storm was likely to break out on this night too because the appearance of the moon is similar to how it has been described in the ballad. The speaker wishes the storm would break out hoping that it would pull him out of the depressed mood that he is in. In the past nature has made him feel alive. He hopes that the forces of nature would be able to do the same even now.



Well: The conversational tone of the opening line gives the poet the opportunity to make his whole poem a gradual crescendo.

Bard: The poet who wrote the Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence, which describes the wrecking of Sir Patrick's ship off Aberdeen shire in a violent storm, Sir Patrick had correctly foreseen the advent of a "storm."

Weather-wise: having the ability to speak wisely about the weather.

that.....trade: winds which are more busy, i.e., more rough, and stormy.

lazy flakes: mild wind, as compared with active wind, breaks the cloud in pieces or fragments which move about in the sky lazily.

dull....draft: dull, melancholy breeze

rakes upon: touches gently

Aeolian lute: While discussing the poem *The Eolian Harp*, Allan Grant Comments: The aeolian or wind-harp was a German invention of the early seventeenth century consisting of a sounding board designed to amplify, as in any stringed instrument, the vibrations of the strings stretched over it. Lying near an open window it would produce a thin "ethereal" sound in response to the wind blowing over it, producing a "natural" music. Its appropriateness as a metaphor for Romantic poetry is obvious. Compare its appearance in "Dejection: An Ode": *an ode.....* Wordsworth used it in his verse.... (*Prelude*, 1805. Book I)... Shelley and Hazlitt both referred to it explicitly when attempting to define the nature of poetry. (Allan Grant: *A Preface to Coleridge*, p.106).

(Aeolus in ancient mythology was the god of the wind).

For lo !: The poet now gives reasons for the lute to remain silent (the preceding line).

Winter-bright: as bright as in winter.

I see lap: The new moon is covered with an unearthly light and is thus encircled by a thread-like circular line producing the impression that the old Moon is in the lap of the new. (There was a superstition that if the old moon was seen in the lap of the new, there would be heavy rains and furious storms. Coleridge takes this idea from *Ballad of Sir Patrick Spence*.)

And oh!. so far the poet has only stated the possibility of the coming of a furious storm. But now, in these lines, the poet already notices the wind developing into a storm and rain falling in a slanting direction.



those sounds... and live: There was a time when natural objects moved him deeply. But it is not so now. The poet's heart is benumbed by pain; he welcomes the approaching storm, hoping that it would "shake" him out of his paralyzing pain. It may not relieve his pain, but certainly it will at least give some life to that pain and break the sluggish monotony of that pain.

8.3.2 Stanza II

The first four lines of this stanza give expression to Coleridge's grief. But these are not ordinary lines. Sadder lines than these were never perhaps written by any poet in a description of his own grief. What has actually occasioned this feeling of intense dissatisfaction, this sense of utter "Dejection: An Ode" and hopelessness? A large part of it was occasioned by an increasing awareness of the fact that his inborn gift of imagination was decaying and that his interest was shifting to philosophy and metaphysics, or "abstruse research"—as he calls in this "Ode". In other words, he was becoming more and more of a philosopher or thinker and less and less of a poet. The "shaping spirit of Imagination" was deserting him. This change greatly distressed him and finds expression in this heart-rending and deeply pathetic poem.

A pang: a deep-rooted sense of pain

Void: empty

Drear: desolate, dull and monotonous.

Stifled: suppressed *unimpassioned grief*; grief which manifests no deep feeling, no sense of total involvement.

A grief... or tear: Intensely moving lines, expressing the poet's dilemma and pathos in the choicest of words.

O Lady: This may be considered as the second part of the stanza. Originally, in the manuscript, the expression was "O William", i.e., William Wordsworth, you will realize that this makes far more sense.

The poet now gives a beautiful picture of the skyscraper late in the evening. But he views everything with a "blank" gaze. He cannot *feel* the beauty of the sky and the stars.

Wan: pale, cheerless

heartless: joyless

throstle: a kind of singing bird.



woo”d: induced, persuaded. The song of the bird persuades the poet to forget his grief and think of other things—things which can give him some relief.

blank an eye: with a vacant eye ; without any expression in the eyes ; without reacting to the scene in anyway ; empty of emotion and intelligence.

Crescent Moon: semi-circular moon.

I see them... they are: The poet can “see” but cannot “feel”. Coleridge here gives expression to an experience of double consciousness. His sense perceptions are vivid and in part agreeable ; his inner state is faint, blurred, unhappy. The power of “feeling” has been paralyzed by metaphysical or abstract investigations. The power of “seeing”, less dependent upon bodily health, stands aloof, somewhat indifferent, and yet mournful and critical. By “seeing” he means perceiving and judging; by “feeling” he means that which induces one to react. We can call these Coleridge’s different modes of perception. But, as Humphry House insists, this is “not primarily a poem about modes of perception. It is a poem about unhappiness, love, and joy. Of the later autobiographical poems there is least of self-pity in it, the self-analysis being all the clearer and more mature therefore, because the sense of love and of joy is so strong. This idea of joy was a guiding principal of Coleridge’s life.” (Humphry House, p.138).

Humphry House is of the view that in our zeal to find some sort of philosophy reflected in his poems, we should not overlook the presence of affections and feelings in them.

8.3.3 Stanza III

The mood, in this stanza as well as the previous one. is peculiarly modern, recognizable as free-floating anxiety to the psychoanalyst or as existential dread to the existentialist philosopher. Its chief characteristic is that it is a generalized and inexplicable feeling which cannot be located in any particular source,

(Existentialism is a philosophical trend which stresses the importance of existence, as opposed to the view held by most philosophies and theologies that man’s actual existence in the world is less significant than some pre-existing essence. In general, existentialism takes the view that the universe is an inexplicable, meaningless, and dangerous theatre for the individual’s being, his existence. Everyone has to assume the responsibility of making choices that determine the nature of this existence. This freedom puts man into a state of *anxiety*, surrounded as he is by infinite possibilities, while remaining ignorant of the future, except for the fact that his life is finite, and will finish, just as it began in nothingness.)



genial spirits: sympathetic, sociable; or happy, cheerful spirits.

smothering weight: pressing, crushing burden.

passion: stirring of feelings ; excitement.

whose.... within ; whose real source of joy, happiness and creativity lie in the heart itself. (The metaphor of the fountain is, like the aeolian lute, an important Romantic image. It appears in “Kubla Khan” and in Wordsworth’s definition of poetry in the 1800 *Preface* as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings.” Fountain is used as a metaphor for creativity).

I may not within: We can also explain it like this: “I cannot hope to derive from external Nature the life and depth of emotion which have their source in the soul.”

8.3.4 Stanza IV

An important stanza, depicting Coleridge’s changed attitude to Nature, contradicting his own earlier stand, and also Wordsworth’s philosophy of Nature—the belief that Nature has a life of its own, that a Divine spirit passes through all objects of Nature, and so on.

In this stanza, the poet says that Nature has no life of its own, and that we transfer to it our own moods and our own feelings.

O Lady !: The poet addresses, Sara, his wife.

We receive...give: We find in Nature whatever we have transferred to it from our own hearts. In other words, we see things according to our own moods.

And in...live: Nature lives only in our imagination. It has no life of its own. If it seems full of life, it is because we have endowed it with life.

Ours.... shroud: Wedding garments symbolize festivity, joy and happiness. *Shroud* is a cloth in which a dead body is wrapped. Hence it is a symbol of grief or mourning. What the poet wants to convey is that it is our thoughts which make Nature bright and attractive or dark and gloomy, as the case may be. If we are happy, Nature too seems to be joyous, as though celebrating a festival. But if we are sad, Nature too seems to be in mourning. In other words, it is our thoughts which make Nature seem happy like a bride or wretched like a dead man. Thus Coleridge here is contending against the Wordsworthian doctrine of the influence of Nature. (Recall here *The Ancient Mariner*, Lines 244-247; then lines 313-317, depicting a close affinity between the outside world and the mental state of the poet. This is what links the two poems together.)



And would....Earth: If we wish to see anything of high and noble quality in nature, so that it may give some solace to the wretched, ever-worried mankind, then from our own souls some light should come forth and envelop the whole Earth. We pretend to read a deep significance in Nature (as Wordsworth did, and Coleridge himself did in his earlier poems like *The Eolian Harp*). But in fact, the cold and lifeless objects of Nature do not lend any inspiration to care-worn mankind, nor can they teach us moral or spiritual lessons. The light which illumines dark Nature comes from our own hearts and minds.

And from, . . . element: The soul of a human being must itself send forth a sweet and powerful voice which will endow the varied sounds of Nature with sweetness.

Of its own birth: having its origin in the soul itself and not in any external object.

Of all...element: a sweet and powerful voice, coming out of the soul itself, gives life and cheerfulness to all the sweet sounds of Nature. Thus, the joy, the radiance, the inspiration to stir and stimulate a man come from his inner self and not from Nature.

The above stanza shows Coleridge's complete disillusionment with Nature and as we said earlier, contradicts Wordsworth's view of Nature as expressed in the following lines in *Tintern Abbey*:

And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:

8.3.5 Stanza V

In this stanza, the poet touches upon the source of the "light", the radiance, the bright mist which pervades all objects of nature. The source lies in the joy in one's heart. And it is this joy which leads to acts of poetic creation.

What is this "joy" anyway? According to Humphry House, "the joy of 'Dejection: An Ode' must be understood as involving the 'deep delight' which 'Kubla Khan' shows at the centre of creative happiness" (p.138). It is a special kind of joy, a solemn joy, a state of being when the emotional and intellectual faculties are in equipoise. It is closely related to the



“shaping spirit of imagination”—something which activates the poet’s imagination, which in turn “creates” and forms.

This beautiful...power: The power of the soul, or the mental light, is not only beautiful in itself but is also capable of creating beautiful things. In other words, the poet, with his fertile imagination, can make beautiful objects.

Life...and shower: Joy is at once life and the thoughts and feelings which arise from life; joy is at once that cloud which pours forth the shower and the shower itself.

Joy...Heaven: in other words, if we ally or unite ourselves with Nature, i.e., open our hearts and minds to the influences of Nature, then it is joy, and joy only, in our hearts which enables us to view the Earth and Heaven in a new light.

We...rejoice: It is because of the joy in our own hearts that we feel happy,

We thence...sight: From there flows all that delights our eyes or ears.

All melodies...light: All the sweet sounds of the external world are echoes of that sweet and powerful voice, and all the beautiful colours that we see in the external world reflect that light (which flows from the joy in our own hearts). In other words, an artist’s main source of inspiration is the joy in his own heart. External nature cannot help him at all if there is gloom or distress in his heart. (This was the case with Coleridge, and hence his dejection).

8.3.6 Stanza VI

The opening line should remind you of some other poem—also by a Romantic poet. Which poem?

This stanza throws light on the real cause of the poet’s sense of dejection and grief.

This joy,...,distress: The joy within me enabled me to make light of my sufferings.

And all happiness: “All misfortunes served merely as material for my Fancy” to weave new visions of happiness.”

For hope, ... seemed mine: a beautiful simile, merging into a metaphor. Hope is compared to a climbing plant which twines round a tree. Just as the fruits and leaves of a plant growing around a tree seem to belong to the tree itself, similarly many bright prospects, spawned by hope, seemed to belong to the poet, even though they belonged to someone else.

But now...birth: Earlier, hope kept his spirits high, but now sufferings and misfortunes have almost crushed him ; the poet doesn’t care if these sufferings have robbed him of his native joy.



But Oh!...Imagination: Now comes the real crush. What galls him most is that every fit of mental dejection obstructs the operation of that faculty which enabled him to “create” and “form”, and which he was endowed with by nature at the time of his birth. In other words, his sorrows and misfortunes have weakened his inborn creative imagination.

my shaping...Imagination: “my imagination, which creates and forms”.

For not ...all I can ; Coleridge says that his only resource against his increasing melancholy was deliberately to divert his mind from his feelings, to cultivate a quiet mode of life, and to immerse himself in deep metaphysical studies, in the hope of changing his nature and conquering his excessive sensitiveness.

Till that...my soul: the metaphysical speculations which at one time formed only one small part of his nature, gradually took possession of his whole being; with the result that speculative and philosophical strain in him has become the “habit” of his “soul”, weakening thereby his creative faculty. In other words, abstract or metaphysical investigations, which he began as a bulwark against “afflictions”, have completely taken possession of his soul. It is this fact which he regrets, for it has led to a complete drying up of his creative powers.

8.3.7 Stanza VII

We said in the beginning that some critics claim that the *Ode* fails to “achieve complete artistic unity” and is brilliantly successful only *in parts*. And it is Stanza VII which primarily comes in the way of accepting the *Ode* as a *whole*. Let us see what Humphry House has to say on this point.

“In the received text, the opening of stanza VII especially, and its placing and relevance, are serious obstacles to accepting the poem as a whole. The stanza opens with a sudden twist of thought, in very awkward language :

Hence, viper thoughts, that coil around my mind,

Reality”s dark dream!

I turn from you, and listen to the wind, .

Which long has raved unnoticed.

And the “viper thoughts” against which this revulsion occurs are the famous meditative stanza about the loss of his “shaping spirit of imagination”, ending with the lines :

Till that which suits a part infects the whole,

And now is almost grown the habit of my soul.



The phrase “reality”’s dark dream”“ then applies to the firm, sad honesty of self-analysis which make the greatness of that stanza” (Humphry House, p. 134). The purpose of quoting House”’s views at length is to enable you to form your own opinion also. Let it also be remembered that House”’s analysis of the poem is based on his close comparison between the published Ode and the original version. If we forget the original version, then perhaps we can find coherence and unity in the poem.

Viper thoughts: poisonous thoughts ; a *viper* is a kind of poisonous snake.

that coil...mind: “poisonous thought which wind about my mind just as a snake coils itself round its victim”. The bite of a viper is deadly. Similarly, the poet seems to say, if he remains engrossed in thoughts of “Dejection: An Ode” and sorrow, and if he continues to mourn the loss of his “shaping spirit of “Imagination”, then his own will and mind would be totally paralyzed and benumbed.

“Viper thoughts”, perhaps, can also be applied to the ideas expressed in the previous stanzas. For, even though the thought-process is somewhat rambling and loose, a clear theme emerges—the poet”’s intense pain and a sense of desolation. And in this stanza he wants to get away from all this— “reality”’s dark dream”. Reality is too cruel, and makes life appear like a frightening dream.

turn, . . . unnoticed: During all these thoughts, the wind has been raging furiously for a long time. It is as though the poet suddenly remembers the wind which he mentioned in the first stanza.

What . . . forth: (The place of the lute in this poem is in sharp contrast to the speculations it gives rise to in *The Eolian Harp*.) Beginning in a “sobbing moan” the kite sends out a scream of agony by torture lengthened out at the wind”’s height. In other words, to the poet, the sound of wind playing upon the lute seems to be the lengthened scream of one who is being tortured and who cannot bear the pain. (In “The Eolian Harp”, the lute gives rise to different speculations.)

The verse gathers momentum here.

Crag: rock

mountain-tairn: small mountain lake.

clomb: the old past tense of *climb*.

peeping flowers: flowers peeping from amongst the leaves.



Mad Lutanist: The wind is called a frenzied, reckless lute-player because of “Devils” “Yule” that it makes.

Devils” Yule: Christmas weather, with wild revelry fit for devils. Yule: Christmas.. The wind is supposed to be celebrating Devils” Christmas, hence, an unholy Christmas.

The idea is that if Devils were to celebrate Christmas, (which can’t be a happy occasion for them) they would scream and shriek and make a terrible noise—the like of which was being made by the wind at present.

With worse...song: The wind is making sounds which are even worse than those which are heard during the bleak months of winter. (There is more of howling and shrieking of the wind - storms etc.- in the winter season.)

Thou Actor: The poet now imagines new roles for the wind: as a tragic actor, and as a bold mighty poet.

perfect.... sounds !: it can produce all the sounds that are sorrowful.

thou.....bold: thou powerful poet who, in a state of frenzy (poetic inspiration) can boldly express whatever you want to describe.

host in rout: army running away in defeat. (The poet now guesses the meaning of wind”s sounds.)

deepest silence: the fury of the storm subsides: the wind is now silent, but in this mood also, she is not inactive (to the poet, of course).

It tells....loud: the poet is now reminded of a different story.

Otway: Thomas Otway (1652-85) was a dramatist, noted for *The Orphan* and *Venice Preserved*, both plays containing heroines whose sorrows drowned contemporary audiences in tears. In the original draft of the poem, Coleridge wrote *Wordsworth”s* for *Otway”s* and the allusion in lines 121-5 is to Wordsworth”s *Lucy Gray*. There is no similar episode in Otway”s works. In a way Coleridge is paying tribute to Wordsworth in these lines.

(The emphasis in this stanza is not so much upon the creativeness of the wind (as Actor and poet) as upon the evils, torments, and sorrows which it appears to create.)

8.3.8 Stanza VIII

This stanza ends on a quieter note. The poet, though still restless himself, is full of tenderness and good wishes for his wife. It presents quite a contrast with the previous stanza.



Full keep: The poet does not want his wife Sara to keep awake.

Vigils: sleeplessness: to keep vigils means to remain awake.

but a mountain-birth: this has been taken for an allusion to the mountains in travail which will bring forth nothing of importance. Another explanation is *May the storm be only local, confined to the mountains*. The first interpretation seems to be more appropriate. The line should be taken as a wish that what seems to be terrible and destructive (“may this storm”) may turn out after all to be a mere nothing, or a trifle that cannot disturb Sara’s peace.

Joy... Voice: joy should raise her spirits and lend a sweetness to her voice.

from pole to pole: from one end of the world to the other end.

To her ...live: all things may live for her sake only.

eddy: a whirlpool; a whirlwind ; as a verb, to move round and round.

The metaphor of the whirlpool in connection with the spirit or soul is quite apt. All things of this world may not only dedicate their existence to her but may also become a vital force like a whirlwind, to add energy and strength to her spirit.

guided from above: guided, getting inspiration from Heaven. The last three lines seem more appropriate as being addressed to Wordsworth. Wordsworth, still a child of Nature and getting divine inspiration, has not lost his inborn joy, which is the life-breath of poetry. But since Coleridge himself is out of the race now, he seems to be passing on the torch of poetic creation to his best friend.

Check Your Progress

1. What is an Ode? Describe some of its features.
2. How many versions of the poem are there?
3. Is the poem a poem about the inability to write poetry?
4. “I think it is the opinion of many readers of the Ode, that brilliantly successful as most of it is, as *parts*, yet it fails to achieve complete artistic unity.” Do you agree with this assessment of the *Ode*. Give a reasoned answer.
5. Write a note on the “mood” of the poet in the *Ode* and account for it.



6. What attitude does Coleridge express towards Nature in “Dejection”? In what way does this attitude differ from that of Wordsworth and from his own earlier attitude?
7. Give a brief critical appreciation of “Dejection: An Ode”.
8. *The Ode* “is a psychological analysis as acute as it is tragic, of his own mental, emotional state viewed throughout in conscious and deliberate contrast with that of his poet friend, Wordsworth.” Comment on this statement.

9. SUMMING UP

“Kubla Khan” and “Dejection: An Ode”, are both beautiful and thought-provoking poems and distinctly different in their content, structure, and themes. Though both deal with the creative process and the power of imagination, “Kubla Khan” uses symbols, metaphors, and images to show the poet’s creative power at work while “Dejection: An Ode” talks about the loss of that power and the resultant despair. Paradoxically however, even while exploring what happens when the poet loses his power of creativity, the poem simultaneously shows that agency at work in the creation of the poem.

“Kubla Khan” is a dream-like poem that describes a fantastical vision of Xanadu, the summer palace of the Mongol ruler Kublai Khan. The poem is filled with vivid and surreal imagery, and it uses musical language and a fragmented structure to create a sense of fragmentation and a dream-like quality. The theme of “Kubla Khan” is the power of the imagination, and the poem suggests that art and creativity have the ability to transport us to a higher plane of existence.

In contrast, “Dejection: An Ode” is a more introspective and personal poem that explores the themes of loss and melancholy resulting from the loss of the creative process. The poem begins with a description of the speaker’s emotional state, and then goes on to explore the relationship between creativity and despair. Unlike “Kubla Khan”, “Dejection: An Ode” is written in a more traditional structure of the Ode beginning on a conversational note, having a speaker addressing a person (who is absent in this case). It is an irregular ode



having varying stanza and line lengths, rhyme and meter and uses a more simple language which is at the same time richly descriptive.

The stress on imagination and the creative process as well as the concept of the poet as creator in these poems are distinct features of poetry of the Romantic period. The emphasis on the role of nature in our lives as explored in these poems is yet another feature of the same. While both poems deal with themes of creativity, they take different approaches in exploring this concept. “Kubla Khan” celebrates the imagination as a transcendent force, while “Dejection: An Ode” recognizes the darker side of the creative process and the emotional turmoil that often accompanies it especially with a constant and nagging fear of losing the power of creativity.

10. SUGGESTED READINGS

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(i) 'ODE TO THE WEST WIND'
(ii) 'OZYMANDIAS'

Percy Bysshe Shelley

K. Ojha
Ankita Sethi

1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This lesson will enable you to:

- Understand and appreciate the poetry of Shelley
- Critically engage with the genre, form, themes and literary devices used by the poet
- Comprehend the attitude of the poet towards the idea of decay and mortality/immortality
- Acknowledge the impermanence of power and glory

2. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Shelley: Life and Works

P.B. Shelley was born on August 4, 1792 at Horsham in Sussex. He was the eldest son of a country squire, Sir Timothy Shelley, a man of ancient and distinguished race. Shelley was the darling of his parents and his grand-father Sir Bysshe Shelley, a fabulously rich landlord, and a gentleman. All of them had great expectations from the young boy. His father started teaching him at an early age and his mother read poetry to him. He also began to study Latin from the curate a Welshman named Evan Edwards. Shelley became an exceedingly good scholar. His parents wanted him to follow his father's footsteps as a politician, as a man of time, as a landowner and also as a practical agriculturist in short, as a capable Sussex squire.

Shelley wrote pamphlets in support of the Irish cause. He was tremendously influenced by Godwin's political thought. He read avidly and became a radical, who believed that all religious, social, political and cultural institutions were redundant and corrupt. They crushed man's individuality and liberty. Society needed an overhauling. He continued to



write pamphlets against oppressive laws and suffocating social values. His ideas were not acceptable to the conservative authorities, and created problems for the Shelleys. Law-Keepers were after him. He could not live in peace. His family life was made miserable by his wife, the pretty, empty-headed Harriet, and dominating sister-in-law Eliza. Shelley and Harriet separated. Harriet remarried but later became morbid and insane and committed suicide. Shelley married Mary, Godwin's daughter from his first wife. His children from Harriet were taken away by law and were entrusted to Harriet's father. Harriet's death and then the separation from his children were great blows to Shelley.

Shelley was utterly out of sympathy with the England of his days-he could not live within the constraints laid down by the conventional thinkers and administrators in learning, religion and morality. He wrote articles, pamphlets, and poems criticizing and condemning social and political laws, striving at reforming the society, creating a Utopian world, based on liberty, fraternity, love and equality, a world where there will be no oppression, no exploiter, no cares and no anxieties. His unorthodox views were not acceptable and he created hostility everywhere. Before settling in Italy, Shelley visited Naples and travelled in the Italian lakes. He described his journey in his letters to Thomas Love Peacock. At Venice he met Byron. In the splendid poem *Julian and Maddalo* (who are actually Shelley and Byron) he threw vivid light upon his brother-poet. The poem is remarkable for the poetical treatment of ordinary things. *Prometheus Unbound* and his great tragedy *The Cenci* were published in 1819. Before the publication of *Prometheus Unbound* a number of poems were written by Shelley. They were *Lines written among the Euganean Hills*, *The Mask of Anarchy*, *Peter Bell the Third*, *Popular songs*, *Rosalind and Helen*. Commenting on Shelley's early poems Stephen Gurney in *Bloom's Period Studies: English Romantic Poets*(2004) writes, "Shelley, in short, was a seer; and despite his faith in the inexhaustible goodness of human nature, his utopian visions were millenarian and apocalyptic. It is this mix of revolutionary politics and sidereal perfection that makes his early poems an often incongruous farrago of contradictions."(p.303) According to him, it is in "Prometheus Unbound" that Shelley "successfully integrated the two sides of his complex nature..."(p.307)

In the year following 1821, Keats died and Shelley wrote the great elegy- *Adonais*. *Adonais* not only mourns the death of Keats but also establishes the supremacy of death which liberates human soul from chains of sufferings and humiliation. *Adonais* was followed by *Hellas* which was inspired by the keen interest Shelley took in the then raging war of Greek independence, and *The Defence of Poetry* an essay dealing with Shelley's concept of poetry and the role of the poets.



In 1822 the Shelleys, with their friends Mr. and Mrs. Williams, spent the summer at Lerici, on the Gulf of Genoa. Shelly enjoyed yatching in his yatch *Don Juan*. He also began writing *The Triumph of Life* and a tragedy, *Charles I*, which he could not complete. Accompanied by Mr. Williams and a sailor Shelley set sail for Lerici. On his way back to Leghorn, on July 7 a great storm arose and the yatch capsized. After eleven days the poet's body was found near Via Reggio. After cremation, the poet's ashes were buried in the Protestant Cemetery at Rome, so beautifully described by himself in *Adonais* as the burial place of Keats, and his own son, William.

3. ODE TO THE WEST WIND

K. Ojha

In Shelley's notebook, presented by Sir John Shelley-Rolls to the Bodleian Library, this *Ode* begins under the simple heading 'October 2'. His own published note on it amounts to an instance of his success as a weather-prophet (and Mary Shelley thought him a good one) and a marine botanist. In the draft the much-quoted final line was in the form of an assertion; as a question it is far superior. If any literary model was in Shelley's mind as he wrote, it was Coleridge's *Ode on the Departing Year*, which was largely inspired by the political upheavals of Europe. Shelley's is so much of a personal 'confession' that even the withered leaves round him are compared with his own early grey hairs.

1.

O WILD West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,
Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed
The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow
Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill



(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odours plain and hill:
Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!

2.

Thou on whose stream, mid the steep sky's commotion,
Loose clouds like earth's decaying leaves are shed,
Shook from the tangled boughs of Heaven mid Ocean,
Angels of rain and lightning: there are spread
On the blue surface of thine: aery surge,
Like the bright hair uplifted from me head
Of some fierce Maenad, even from the dim verge
Of the horizon to the Zenith's height,
The locks of the approaching storm. Thou dirge
Of the dying year, to which this closing night
Will be the dome of a vast sepulcher,
Vaulted with all thy congregated might
Of vapours, from whose solid atmosphere
Black rain, and fire, and hail will burst: oh, hear!

3.

Thou who didst waken from his summer dreams
The blue Mediterranean, where he lay,
Lulled by the coil of his crystalline streams,
Beside a pumice isle in Baiae' s bay,
And saw in sleep old palaces and towers
Quivering within the wave's intenser day,
All overgrown with azure moss and flowers
So sweet, the sense faints picturing them! Thou



For whose path the Atlantic's level powers
Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below
The sea-blooms and the oozy woods which wear
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know
Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,
And tremble and despoil themselves: oh, hear!

4.

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share
The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, O uncontrollable! If even
I were as in my boyhood, and could be
The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven,
As then, when to outstrip thy skiey speed
Scarce seemed a vision; I would ne'er have striven
As thus with thee in prayer in my sore need.
Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!
A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud

5.

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! be thou me, impetuous one!
Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!



And, by the incantation of this verse,
Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawakened earth
The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

3.1 Introduction

‘Ode to the West Wind’ is one of the best lyrics written by Shelley. It was written at Florence in the autumn of 1819. According to Shelley’s own notes the poem “was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno near Florence and on a day when that tempestuous wind, whose temperature is at once wild and animating, was collecting the vapours which pour down the autumnal rains. They began as I foresaw, at sunset with a violent tempest of hail and rain, and attended by that magnificent thunder and lightning peculiar to the Cisapline regions.” (As quoted in Bloom, 1959, p.69)

The poet addresses the wild west wind of autumn and identifies his spirit with its spirit. *Ode to the West Wind* consists of five stanzas. In the first three stanzas the speaker invokes the spirit of the west wind, which is the ruler of the vegetation of the earth (stanza I) of air (stanza II) and water (stanza III) and highlights its inevitability—its unconquerable force. He appeals to this wild spirit-impetuous spirit- to use him as a lyre. Irene H. Chayes in “Rhetoric as Drama: An approach to the Romantic Ode” points out that in the concluding stanza the speaker does not ask the wind to enable him to merge his character with its own, and become its instrument, rather he wants the wind to become him.

‘Be thou. Spirit fierce,
My spirit! be thou me impetuous one’

3.2 A Detailed Analysis

Stanza I

Shelley invokes the Spirit of the Wild West Wind. “To invoke the Spirit that is in the wind is not to invoke the wind or the autumn only. Again the helpful analogue is in the Biblical poetry; the God of Job is not the God of the whirlwind or in the whirlwind, but He is the God of the whirlwind also. This also is *Thou* but this is not *Thou*. The Spirit that moves in the west wind need not be a Spirit that moves in the west wind only.” (Bloom, 1959, p.75) In



Stanza one the unseen presence of the Spirit manifests itself in the west wind as a magician, an enchanter, “a necromancer who also exorcises.” (Bloom, 1959, p.75) Like a magician/an enchanter he drives away the dead and dry leaves the leaves fly away like ghosts. The dead leaves are driven to destruction but the winged seeds (live seeds) are *charioted with* full protection to their *dark wintry bed*. The wild west wind-the tempestuous powerful wind- is not an indiscriminate destroyer. He is a protector, a preserver also.

The first five lines of the stanza one concentrate on the theme of destruction. The wind destroys whatever is useless and dead. The leaves are dead, they are sapped of all life, they are ‘yellow, black, pale and hectic red’ (the colours indicate they are dying) and they are also compared to ‘the pestilence-stricken multitudes’ they are like diseased human beings who are on the verge of death. The breath of autumnal tempestuous wind, with its thunder and lightning frightens the decaying leaves (leaves dead) and they flee like ghosts-they are driven to their death-beds. Very skillfully the poet introduces another theme-man and his relationship with nature, by comparing the dying leaves with pestilence-stricken multitudes.

The same wind gently chariots the winged seeds to their wintry bed, in the bowels of the earth. These seeds allow themselves to be carried. They have a full potentiality for more abundant life so they are well-protected in the bowels of the earth. They sleep peacefully in the earth-thus they escape ‘the grounding mutable death of everything taking place on the surface of the earth during the autumn and winter season.’ Each seed lies like ‘a corpse’ within its grave - so long the seeds don’t germinate, they are almost dead. The west wind protects them from sure death.

In the first five lines the wind’s awesomeness and wrath have been highlighted. But when Shelley uses ‘charioted’ the wind’s new aspect is revealed. “The chariot, the vehicular form of divinity when it is conveyed as man in many traditions, including Hinduism and Judaism- Christianity” suggests ‘the divine impulsiveness of the force that drives the seeds, that moves the cycle of life, that destroys and preserves, inexorably.’ (Bloom, 1959, p. 76)

The second part of the stanza (line six onwards) projects the image of the preserver and the creator. The tempestuous wind preserves the seeds (which have full potentiality of life encased within themselves) so that his azure sister, the harbinger of spring, may help them to germinate. The useless, the dead, the unwanted, the diseased are completely destroyed, The west wind’s azure sister will, then, usher in a new living world. She will blow her clarion. At the call of the clarion the soundly sleeping winged seeds will wake up, will get out of their earthly bed and appear on the surface to have fresh air and then the ‘frosty’ earth will be covered with ‘living hues’ and ‘odors’. The lines suggest ‘a submerged image of



human, of quasi-Christian resurrection.’ The clarion here is not merely the clarion of judgement (reference to The Day of Judgement), but also of a shepherdess (or a shepherd). The azure sister (of the spring) is a shepherdess at whose call the seeds come out like the flocks of sheep to feed in the air. The clarion will not only proclaim the end of temporal, annual winter but also the end of the eternal winter, on the Day of Judgement, “The image is religious pastoral”. When Shelley refers to the flocks he has perhaps Jesus Christ in mind. Jesus is the harbinger of peace and love. ‘The sweet buds driven over the landscape prophesy a finally redeemed nature (by implication the world) which will accompany the last change of season’.

The final couplet joins the two parts of the first stanza; the wind is both the preserver and the destroyer-the emphasis is on the present, the wind is moving ‘everywhere’ implying the prophetic call to the individual to turn now. The second and third stanzas follow the pattern of the first. Each stanza ends with an appeal “oh, hear!” -a prayer of the I of the poet to the *Thou*, the wind.

The poet describes the impact of the wind on the earth, air and water with great precision. But the focal point of the poem, according to Harold Bloom is *Thou-I* relationship-the mythmaking and the prophetic voice.

Check Your Progress

1. How are the two contrary aspects of the west wind described by the poet?
2. What image of the west wind is projected in the second part of the stanza?

Stanza 2

In the second stanza the sky is likened to a stream or an ocean (deep), thus the word *deep* connects the stanza with the next one (3rd) and when the poet talks of “the tangled boughs’ the stanza automatically gets linked with the first one. *Deep* also means that the sky looks like a bowl. Exploiting the natural-phenomena of the evaporation, Shelley creates an image of destruction and preservation. The water of the ocean evaporating, rising up, forming clouds in the sky is skillfully presented. Shelley is describing natural phenomena through a poetic imagery.

Thick water vapours are rising from the ocean, going up, higher and higher, and then spreading in the sky, forming dense solid clouds. It appears that a tree has grown out of the



ocean and its boughs and leaves have spread in the sky. The wind blows fiercely and seems to shake “the tangled boughs of Heaven and Ocean” consequently the clouds are scattered in the deep sky from horizon to the zenith’s height like the ‘decaying leaves. But the clouds are not dead sky leaves’ they are angels of rain and lightning. Why angels? They will revive life (natural) and give sustenance to the earth, Angels thus are associated with the winged seeds; destruction and regeneration occur simultaneously.

The formation of the clouds from the ‘dim verge of the horizon to the Zenith’s height’ is presented through the image of frenzied Maenad’s scattered, uplifted hair. The dark clouds with accompanying storms are as terrifying as the frightening appearance of Maenad with her loose uplifted hair. Maenad symbolises the destructive force here. Shelley through the image of Maenad is once again presenting the wind as a destroyer. The west wind here “prophesies a storm (a revolution) which tears down kingdoms human lives as well as trees and leaves... The sound of the wind moving through the forest is dirge like, commemorating the death of the year. The year and all that lived with it are sepulchered by the blackening dome of the storm-driven sky, the association being manifold but here, especially political mainly.” (Bloom, 1959, p. 81)

Check Your Progress

1. Analyze the image of destruction and preservation created by the poet.

Stanza 3

The impact of the wind is felt both by the peaceful Mediterranean and the vast Atlantic, The Mediterranean is lulled by the gentle waves and is dreaming of the glory of the ancient Greece and Rome. ‘The calm of the Mediterranean idealizes the best of the past’. The outward appearance of the sea is the reminder of ‘a graciousness and peace that is Elysian and that can be found in this life at its best movements.’ The reflection of old palaces and towers in the crystal-clear calm water of the sea are his summer dreams. The old palaces and towers are the emblems of once despotic power, but now they have been subdued and mellowed, have become ‘that regret for what has passed and is passing’.

The Mediterranean is rudely awakened by the west wind from its dreams. Even the great Atlantic is terrified. The waves of the Ocean cleave themselves into chasms to allow the wind to move without any hindrance. The sapless foliage, plants, flowers and woods, growing inside the ocean, on hearing the thunderous voice of the wind, grow gray and shake



with fear and drop themselves - they surrender to the might of the wind. The poet appeals to the wind to hear him. But the wind is so much engrossed in its' activities that the poet's appeal goes unheeded.

Reference to summer is significant in this stanza. Summer is over, it is autumn which will soon be followed by spring. The present is thus linked with the past as in the first stanza. The present autumn also refers to the future spring when all the gloom will disappear and there will be resurrection, rejuvenation of life.

By implication (in the first three stanzas) Shelley asserts that only a radical revolution can destroy the values, ideas, institutions and beliefs which have become useless and which have chained human beings. This revolution will be a blessing for it will lay down the foundations of a Utopian world. The wind-the uncontrollable, powerful and fierce wind - becomes the symbol of the revolution, Shelley, the visionary, had always dreamt of it.

In these stanzas "Shelley has also established the supremacy of the wind over the earth, the sky and the ocean and highlighted the ferocious and destructive nature of the wind as well as its power of preserving life." He concentrates on "*thou-I*" relationship and realizes that *Thou* is both a destroyer and the preserver. It is omnipresent and omnipotent. Shelley's 'I' has been persistently appealing to the '*thou*' of the wind,' Oh, hear! In the next stanza-he has to make a choice-either he should surrender himself to the wind as an object for it to experience (like a leaf, a cloud or a wave) or to command the wind to be one with him.

Check Your Progress

1. How does the west wind-the uncontrollable, powerful and fierce wind-become the symbol of the revolution?
2. Comment on the 'I-Thou' relationship.

Stanza 4

He realizes that his enthusiasm for a change in the world for the welfare of mankind has been subdued by the adverse circumstances, yet he is not fully 'dead'. The 'spark' is still there-it only needs to be enkindled. The poet, the reformer, the dreamer in him is still alive.

He continues to address the wind as *Thou* (in stanzas 4+5) and also recognizes his human situation. He cannot be *it* like the leaf, the wave and the cloud to be carried away by the wind-his 'I' needs the wind's protection. The poet asserts that he is not an object - a thing



without emotions, feelings, intellect, understanding and imagination. If he were a dead leaf, a swift cloud or a wave, he would have surrendered himself to the powerful wind and allowed it to lift him up, throw him around and share its might. But he belongs to human species-hence he has been an active participant in humanity's successes and failures. As a young boy he has been as uncontrollable as the tempestuous wind and had always challenged it, tried to outstrip it, but now he has fallen on the thorns of life and is bleeding. Is Shelley indulging in self-pity here? Or is he drawing our attention to the failure of the French Revolution, to the set-back received by the freedom fighters in Europe and also the mass movement of the workers which ended in a massacre? Being a radical, a rebel, a visionary, and a fighter for human liberty, he is upset at the sufferings of human beings at the hands of anarchists, tyrants and tyrannical institutions (religious, political, social and educational). Out of disgust and despair he appeals to the wind.

Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf and a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!
A heavy chain of hours has chained and bowed
One too like thee.....

The tone of the stanza is a little bit subdued. Shelley the poet-who was "once like thee"-uncontrollable-and who often competed with the 'speed' of the wind in his boyhood days has been 'chained' and 'bowed' by hours, has fallen upon the thorns of life and is bleeding-the "depth of the protagonist's alienation 'from the indomitable spirit of the wind is highlighted". When Shelley says that he has fallen upon the thorns of life and is bleeding, he is presenting himself as a Prometheus, Orpheus and Jesus figure.

'In this *Ode* the song that breaks in the fourth stanza has lost in timelessness, swiftness, pride, when it rises again in the final stanza, but it has gained 'a deep autumnal tone, sweet though in sadness'. (Bloom, 1959, p.85)

Check Your Progress

1. 'Oh! lift me as a wave, a leaf and a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!
A heavy chain of hours has chained and bowed
One too like thee...'. Explain.



Stanza 5

The myth-making (that is *Thou-I* relationship between the west wind and the poet) takes a new-shape in the final stanza. In this stanza the wind is still *thou* for the poet, but the poet's / has almost changed into *it* and so in the concluding stanza he first identifies himself with the forest trees. What Shelley implies here is that the dead thoughts (despondent thoughts) have crippled him and symbolically he has become 'useless' or 'dead' like a leaf, a wave, and a cloud. He desires the wind to destroy all that is not required, remove this despondency so that his prophetic voice is not subdued.

Harold Bloom explains the stanza five thus: "The thoughts are dead only in that they have also become it, they are poems already written. But the I (spirit) of the poet is not yet dead, nor is it to be submerged in the wind... when the poet says 'Let your spirit be my spirit', he implies that the impetuosity, and energy of the wind may be his, and 'my message may be your message'. As the Prophet needs God and God also needs the Prophet, the poet needs the wind as the latter needs the Poet. No mystical merging into a larger Identity but mutual confrontation of two realities is what is involved here." (Bloom, 1959, p.87)

Let the aeolian harp (lyre) of the forest be combined with the 'mighty harmonies' of the wind's spirit for producing 'the deep autumnal tone'. Both the Poet's spirit and the spirit of the wind must join together to sound "the trumpet of prophecy," before the clarion is blown by the spring. What's the prophecy?

If winter comes, can spring be far behind?

And thus Shelley in his "Ode" has achieved his goal - he has made the '*thou*' of the wind, '*I*' of the poet.

.....Be thou. spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one.

The Oneness has been achieved.

The visionary poet in Shelley has established a rapport with the Spirit of the Wild West Wind/This coming togetherness will sound 'the trumpet of the prophecy', the poet's words will be scattered among mankind. The voice of the wind will be the voice of the poet himself and the un-awakened earth (not yet aware of its liberating power) will wake up and then winter would disappear forever and spring-joy, happiness, liberty, love, equality and brother-hood will reign the earth.

**Check Your Progress**

1. How does the *Thou-I* relationship between the west wind and the poet, take a new-shape in the final stanza?
2. What kind of togetherness does Shelley envisage with the Spirit of the wild West Wind?
3. '*If winter comes, can spring be far behind?*'. Analyze this line in the context of the entire poem.

4. OZYMANDIAS**Ankita Sethi****4.1 Introduction**

An unconventional sonnet in the iambic pentameter, *Ozymandias* deals with crucial themes like role of art, the idea of decay and mortality. Like the poet who rejected religion and defied social conventions, the poem also defies the set pattern of a sonnet. Shelley formed his own rhyming scheme for the poem which was a radical innovation in his day. The poem follows *ABABACDCDEFEF* rhyming scheme which is a far cry from the traditional one. The poem is also unconventional because sonnets are usually written by the men who profess their love in the form of verse and the subject in such traditional sonnets is the beloved. This poem takes Egyptian King/Pharaoh Ramses the Great, the Greeks knew him as Ozymandias. He was considered as one of the most powerful and eminent ancient Egyptian King.

4.2 Critical Analysis**Lines 1-8**

*I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;*



The poem starts with narrator's recollection of a memory of a traveller who came from an ancient and exotic empire. The traveller told him a tale of desolation and ruined state of the empire which used to be great. In the second line '*two vast trunkless legs of stone*' vividly depicts the derelict and broken statue of a seemingly great man who is unknown to both the narrator and the reader. Near by the statue, its head, '*a shattered visage*' lay '*Half sunk*' in the sand. The narrator appreciates the sculptor who carved it out of the stone. The sculptor was deft and perceptive enough to understand visage's emotion and imprinted it with the same *passion*. Shelley also comments on the romantic ideal of the timelessness of art. Here, the poet/reader knows about the statue not because of the sculptor but because of the statue's symbol as an art that lasts forever.

Check Your Progress

1. What does the title refer to?
2. Elaborate upon the kind of feelings that words like '*frown*', '*wrinkled lip*' and '*sneer of cold command*' induce?

Lines 9-14:

*And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."*

The next verse or sestet informs the reader about the identity of the shattered and sunken visage in the previous verse or octet. The noble language of the inscription instantaneously reflects megalomania (obsession/delusion about one's power) and vainglory. The treatment could be seen in a way which inspires awe in the same way epic poetry does. The statement by Satan in the great epic, *Paradise Lost*, '*Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven*' serves as an example of such psyche. The very next line immediately negates the idea with a powerful irony. The king who so proudly boasted his achievements that others would *despair* at his feet, was laid waste by time and history. Ozymandias's once great empire was reduced to nothing. The poet shows decay everywhere and the great statue of the 'supreme Egyptian



emperor' is now but a *colossal wreck*. Here Shelly comments upon the ephemeral nature of civilizations where everything is bound to be lost into oblivion. The statue which was symbol of strength and power is now humbled. The great civilization of Egypt is long gone and only crumbling vestiges of the old empire remains.

The poem also acts like a double metaphor. The first one symbolizes political metaphor. During Shelley's time, King George III was the ruler of Great Britain. He ruled longer than any monarch before him and was quite oppressive as the country was involved in many militaristic conflicts around the world. Shelley abhorred the idea of such an oppressive regime and thus the poem was written as a scathing criticism of unchecked power. Influenced by the ideals of French Revolution, Shelley voiced his criticism against monarchy. Through this poem, he comments upon human pride and the downfall of monarchy; no matter how great it is, time and history will ultimately level it. The second metaphor acts on a general level, for the didactic purpose of reader. The broken statue of Ozymandias also symbolizes the pride of humanity. The proverb, "pride comes before fall" fits rightly as Shelly asserts upon its short and glorious life followed by its decline and eventual ruin. Pride is also an emotion which is manifested in violent ways. It must also be noted that Shelley believed in peaceful protest as opposed to violent protests. Thus, the reader can understand his disapproval of anything that incites violence.

Check Your Progress

1. Comment on timelessness of art in context of this poem.
2. Comment upon the poem as a metaphor.
3. "My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" What do you understand by these lines?

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- (i) 'ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE'**
- (ii) 'ODE ON A GRECIAN URN'**
- (iii) 'ODE TO AUTUMN'**

John Keats

**Mary Samuel
Ankita Sethi**

1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The lesson will enable you to:

- Understand and appreciate the lyric form of poetry- the Ode
- Critically analyze the three Odes by Keats prescribed for your study

2. GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Keats's adopted ode form in place of narrative form as it gave him an opportunity to invoke the spirit of the 'object' described and identify his I with the spirit. "Like prayer, lyric apostrophe addresses the other in the hope that the act of speech will lead to communication between the "I" of the poet and the presence invoked...The Odes' unforced quality comes not just from the spontaneity with which they were composed, but Keats's discovery of a form which is built on tension between what is and what might be. The very nature of the lyric ode assumes the subject and object are not one. Keats's complex urges to affirmation, questioning, and doubt are allowed full and unselfconscious play by the Odes' clear distinction between speaker, object addressed, and reader. The admitted subjectivity of the genre is the basis of the Odes' hard won objectivity." (Barnard, 1987, p.98)

Keats's famous Odes appeared in *Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes, and Other Poems* published in 1820. In this collection of poems Keats seems to concern himself with the attitude of the Victorian public who were influenced by Bentham's theory of Utilitarianism towards poetry. The Benthamites ridiculed poetry because it had no utilitarian purpose, and propagates unprofitable idealism. In many of these poems Keats shows the conflict between



the visionary or imaginary world and the actual mundane life on this earth.” Whatever we see ‘imaginatively’ is short-lived for the perplexed or retarded mind is forced to come back to the actual existence.

Compared with “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, the “Ode to A Nightingale” is a more mature and complete poem. John Barnard writes, “Its tensions between flux and stasis, process and annihilation, being and non-being, are integral to structure and meaning. Means and end match perfectly. With consummate ease, the ‘Nightingale’ plays backwards and forwards between the spontaneous song of an actual bird and the poet’s conscious and deepening reflections. Neither a goddess nor an object, the nightingale allows for an unforced meditation, an internal dialogue which is simultaneously an exchange between human and non-human.” (Barnard, 1987, p.108)

Keats is always concerned with felt experience and common experience for he is a poet of sight. His Odes “are not about landscape, but about figures and people, and are concerned about how it feels to be puzzled and pained, yet joyful and ecstatic.” His ‘essential experience is the Oxymoronic realization that the pain is indivisible from joy.’ (Barnard, 1987, p.112)

In order to write the Odes he made certain adjustments in the stanzaic forms. He experimented with the sonnet. He invented a stanza which allowed thought to be developed across several stanzas without losing ‘the interwoven and complete’ (Keats’s words) character of the sonnet. Keats refashioned the sonnet form to suit his requirements in the Odes. The ten-lined stanzas are formed with the combination of a quatrain (*abab*) and sestet (generally *cdecde*). The quatrain gives an anchor to the verse and the sestet provides enough room to the verse to expand. In ‘Ode to A Nightingale’ the line eight has been shortened while in ‘To Autumn’ a septet has been used in place of a sestet.

The figure of personification gives vitality to inanimate objects or abstractions. Autumn is given a subtle personification—‘conspiring with the sun,’ sitting careless on a granary floor.’

Keats has also used alliteration (repetition of consonant sounds) and assonance (repetition of vowel sounds) in these Odes. The musicality of the Odes is often dependent upon the sound sequence and very often they reinforce in sound the sense which the words express. The sound of insects is clearly present in the nasal *on* and *n* and in the *s* sounds of “murmurous haunt of flies on the summer eves” as is the effervescence of wine in the explosive *bs* of “beaded bubbles winking at the brim”



Check Your Progress

- ### 3. ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
 My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk.
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
 One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
5
 But being too happy in thine happiness,
 That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
 In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
 Singest of summer in full-throated ease. 10
O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
 Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country-green,
 Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth!



O for a beaker full of the warm South! 15
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim: 20
Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs, 25
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow. 30
Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night; 35
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways. 40
I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,



But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Where with the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild: 45
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast-fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves. 50
Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die, 55
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod. 60
Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path 65
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn. 70



Forlorn! The very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! The fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! Adieu! Thy plaintive anthem fades 75
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep? 80

3.1 Introduction

The “Ode to A Nightingale” was written in May 1819. The speaker (the poet) is overpowered by the spontaneous melodious song of a Nightingale, he hopes to follow it into the forest dim, leaving behind the spectacle of human death, suffering, fret and fever, and die so as to perpetuate the ecstatic moment. The poet on the viewless wings of poesy moves into ‘the eternal realm of song’ and is able to feel the charm of the embalmed beauty of nature and experience and visualise the magical effect of the song of this immortal bird not only on himself but also in remote times on Ruth, Kings, Clowns and the maidens imprisoned in the castles located on the shores of perilous seas. The poet is transported to a world of eternal joy and immortality, his return to actuality is very shattering. The nightingale impresses upon him the consciousness of his own mortality and sharpens the contrast between sensation and thought. The poem also highlights the contrast between the raptures of the bird’s song and consecutive reasoning of the perplexing and retarding “dull brain.” Like the “Ode to Psyche” this “Ode on a Nightingale” extols the autonomous power of imagination which can create ‘beauty as a compensation of the life’s losses’. The bird’s song also reveals how beauty consists of ‘the ecstasy’ of fulfilment as well as the “plaintive note” of disillusionment. If Keats suspects the power of visionary experience in the “Ode to Psyche”, in this Ode he is unable to sustain the ecstasy of that experience till the end of the poem and he is forced to return to the actual world, from the realm of fancy. The ending of the poem—*Do I wake or sleep*—undermines the poet’s song-inspired visionary flight and casts doubt on the whole nightingale episode.



3.2 Summary

Keats listens to the song of the nightingale. He feels extremely happy at its happiness. He experiences an aching pleasure (pleasure felt as pain) on listening to it. He seems to have forgotten his surroundings. The poet longs for a cup of wine to escape into the happy world of the nightingale. He is then acutely reminded of the tragedy of human life -- the fever and fret of life. Keats then seeks the help of poetic imagination. With Poesy, he finds himself transported into the world of the nightingale which has all the beauty of early summer. His happiness is intense and he is completely lost in that happy world. The pleasure that he feels is so rich and true that he wants to make this luxurious moment a permanent one. So he yearns for death. 'It is rich to die' in that temporary heaven. It would be a luxurious experience for him because the nightingale is singing in ecstasy and he would die listening to it. Thus death would become a boon, a positive, healthy experience for Keats now. Soon he realizes the impossibility of the fulfilment of his desire. The idea of death reminds him strikingly of the immortality of the bird (its song), nature's music as contrasted with human mortality (change and decay). The nightingale is immortal in the sense that its song knows no death. The beauty and joy of the nightingale's song do not change with the passage of time. Its song is the same today as it was heard ages back, by kings and peasants, by Ruth, the Moabite woman in the days of the Old Testament and by princesses in forlorn fairy land in the middle ages of magic and romance. So the song of the nightingale knows no historical or geographical limits. The closing of the 7th stanza with the word 'forlorn' wakes him up from the world of poetry. He realizes that he cannot escape from the realities of the world as easily as he had desired and pretended to. He bids the bird good-bye and imagines the bird fading away into distant lands. The poet returns to the realities of life, somewhat dazed – 'Do I wake or sleep?'. He is uncertain what is real—the little happiness that he was lulled into or this dull life he was living.

Check Your Progress

1. In what sense is the nightingale immortal?
2. Why does Keats think it is 'rich to die' while listening to the nightingale's song?



3.3 Stanza-wise Summary with Study Notes

Stanza I

Keats describes here the effect of the song of the nightingale upon his mind. As the poet listens to the song of the nightingale, his heart aches, it is a feeling experienced due to excessive joy at the bird's song. That is to say, the happiness that he shares is so intense that it becomes an *aching pleasure, a pleasure felt as pain*.

The poet feels that a numbness creeps over him—that his senses have been paralysed as if he had taken some sleep inducing drink (narcotic) like hemlock or some sedative drink made from opium. This again is due to excessive happiness at the bird's song, the joy that he feels overpowers his senses. In a minute the poet seems to forget his surroundings and is rapt in the song of the nightingale. He feels as if he had sunk into *Lethe* (the river of forgetfulness in Greek and Roman mythology, one of the rivers of the underworld or Hades).

The souls of the dead, according to ancient Greek belief, had to drink from *Lethe* before they entered the *Hades*, the home of the dead.

The aching pleasure that the poet feels is not because he is envious of the bird singing so joyously but because he feels too happy in the happiness of the nightingale. The result is that he is completely lost in it.

The poet loves the bird as it sings like a Dryad (wood nymph) who is supposed to be the presiding deity of the forest in Greek mythology. The poet regards the bird as the spirit of joy that is found in the woodland world. The poet imagines the nightingale to be a spirit of the wood-land singing of the glories of summer so spontaneously in some "far off scene, of woodland mystery and beauty".

Melodious green: a green plot of ground, overgrown with beech trees and resounding with the melody or music of the bird's song.

Shadows numberless: light and shade falling upon the grassy plot as the light of the sun filters through the foliage of trees.

Singest of summer: Probably it was due to the drugging effect that the poet felt as the poem was written in the spring season.

Full throated ease: a rich and condensed expression. Like an expert musician, the nightingale is straining her throat to the fullest, yet the song is not strained but natural and spontaneous.



Check Your Progress

1. How does 'The Ode to a Nightingale' open?
2. What is a Dryad? What is its point of comparison with the Nightingale?

Stanza II

The Poet shows an intense desire to escape or pass into the delightful world of the nightingale, leaving the miserable world of the Man. He seeks the help of wine to affect this escape.

Keats longs for a draught of the richest wine, rare old wine cooled in the deep cellars of the earth for long years. It should be rich with the romantic spirit of the spring-season when festivities are held in honour of Flora, the goddess of spring, by the grape gatherers in the warmer regions of Southern France (Provence).

In other words, the wine that the poet would like to drink, should be rich with its associations of the rustic and merry making activities like song and dance held in honour of Flora in the country green (the village common) by the sunburnt Italian and French grape gatherers.

Italy and Provence being in South of Europe are comparatively warm hence the natives of these regions are 'sunburnt' as we Indians are. People in South regions of Europe are more cheerful and romantic because the climate itself is inspiring these qualities.

Warm South: wine prepared in the warm regions of Italy and Provence. The poet does not want ordinary wine, but one rich in contents and distilling all the romantic associations and spirit of the warm southern regions especially of France and Italy. The greenness of the happy earth, the sweetness of the flowers, the mirth and mystic of the sunburnt children of Provence. All things should combine to add to its flavour, taste and delicacy.

Blushful: red. Note that good wines are generally colourless. But the poet, to indulge his taste for rich colours, must have it red.

Hippocrene: Greek word for the fountain of Horse. A fountain on Mt. Helicon in Greece, is said to have arisen where Pegasus kicked Helicon. It was sacred to the Muses



who preside over all arts and poetry. Its waters were said to be capable of imparting poetic inspiration. Here it means stimulant of fancy or poetic inspiration.

Beaded bubbles: bead like bubbles.

Winking...brim: it is a graphic description of the idea of effervescence. As old, well-fermented wine is poured into a glass or beaker, bead like bubbles rise to the brim of the glass and then burst and disappear.

Purple stained mouth: the mouth of the glass or its brim is stained purple with the frothy wine.

The poet desires for a beaker full of the wine of the fountain of Hippocrene with the bubbles I shining at the surface and even the mouth of the beaker may be stained with the purple or red colour of the wine.

Note: “The poet desired wine as a means of escape from the pain of his own thoughts and of the world”. By drinking the wine Keats hopes to be absorbed wholly in the nightingale’s song and thus be happy with the bird in the shady wood.

These lines bring out clearly one of the characteristics of Keats as a romantic poet—his sensuousness.

We have an abundance of sensuous imagery in this stanza where the poet expresses a passionate desire for some Provençal wine or wine from the fountain of muses. The original and highly expressive phrases like “blushful Hippocrene, ‘beaded bubbles winking at the brim’, ‘embalmed darkness’, ‘are highly pleasing to the sense of sight and sense of taste. Matthew Arnold says, “Keats as a poet is abundantly and enchantingly sensuous”.

Check Your Progress

1. What kind of wine does the poet wish to drink? And why?
2. Comment on the imagery.

Stanza III

Pain and misery of life is depicted. The stanza starts with the poet’s intense longing to escape from the world of pain and misery and to become one with the bird and its happy woodland life. In the very effort to forget his own misery or melancholy, Keats remembers



only too acutely, the universal tragedy of human destiny, the ills that assail life from all quarters sparing neither age, nor sex nor beauty. Man suffers from boredom, disgust and despair, from irritation and feverish excitement. Misery is widespread. People helplessly hear each other groan. All those things which we value most—youth, beauty and, love—are subject to disease and decay. A thinking person is subject to grief and trouble. Keats *feels* bitterly that Love and Beauty, the two things that he desired most are short-lived. The thought of it fills him with sadness.

Check Your Progress

1. Why does the poet long to escape from this world?

Stanza IV

Gloomy thoughts about human destiny are soon dismissed together with the possibility of wine as an escape from them. Soon, the vehicle of flight is no longer wine but poetic fancy or imagination- ‘viewless wings of poesy’. He is already with the nightingale among the branches of trees in a summer garden hidden from the light of the moon who like a fairy queen holds her court in the sky surrounded by her courtiers i.e. the stars. [Poetic imagination helps the poet to pass from the real world to the ideal world.] Although the moon is shining in majestic glory in the sky, it is only when the night breezes sway the branches and part the leaves that the gleams of moonlight somewhat lessen the darkness under the trees full of green foliage and along the zigzag moss-covered paths between them.

verdurous glooms — the green shadows of the forest

heaven — the (moonlit) sky

Note: Poetic fancy is a state of mental exaltation.

Check Your Progress

1. What does Keats consider as the ‘viewless wings of poesy’?



Stanza V

The poet is already with the bird in the forest in imagination. The place is dark but filled with the perfume from the flowers growing on the bushes around his feet. Though he cannot see, from the scent emanating from the flowers he can guess what flowers are at his feet or what blossoms are above his head. He can feel more than the sensory eye can see. The atmosphere is filled with the sweet fragrance of flowers. From the sweet smell he can name several flowers and plants that bloom there. He calls the darkness ‘embalmed darkness.’ He guesses that the white hawthorn, the eglantine, the violet, the wild fruit trees, the first flower of mid-summer (middle of May) the musk rose which is soon to blossom and which is full of dew and honey to which the buzzing bees are attracted by its fragrance, are around the place.

Soft incense: a delicate, soothing perfume (A reference to the sense of smell).

The seasonable month: the month which is favourable to the growth of season’s flowers (Spring).

Pastoral eglantine: a kind of wild rose which grows in country places.

Fast fading violets: short lived violets.

musk: a substance with a very strong smell, obtained from the male musk deer and used for making perfumes.

Mid-May’s eldest child: the first flower to bloom in the middle of May,

The coming musk rose: the musk rose with the fragrance of musk which is about to bloom. This was most probably written in early May.

Dewy wine: full of dew and honey (dew drops in the cup of the flower are referred to as wine by the poet).

Murmurous haunt: haunted by flies or bees with a murmuring or buzzing sound.

embalmed darkness: The whole darkness of the garden has been made fragrant by the flowers of the season (darkness filled with a balmy fragrance). Embalmed is also associated with death.

Stanza V shows the delighted response to the sensuous beauty of the physical world. The poet is not describing what he actually sees around him. He tells us explicitly that there is no light for him to distinguish the flowers growing on the ground from the blossoms on the trees and hedges. He can only guess what they are from their scents.



Notice that ‘soft incense’, ‘embalmed darkness’, ‘dewy wine’, ‘seasonable month’, are word pictures. Only Keats who is abundantly and enchantingly sensuous can convert incense and perfume into something virtually solid. In this stanza we can say he has woven scent, warmth, colour, taste and sound into a texture of unforgettable beauty.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Keats use scent, warmth, colour, taste and sound to create a texture of unforgettable beauty?

Stanza VI

While listening to the song of the nightingale in the dark, the poet feels that it would be ‘a luxurious experience’ to die at such a moment, to fade away from existence without suffering any pain at the mystic hour of midnight while listening to the rapturous and ecstatic song of the nightingale. In fact, the poet wants to perpetuate this moment of enchantment, and ecstasy. It will be rich to die now for the nightingale’s song will be a funeral prayer for Keats and he will die listening to it. The nightingale would go on singing even when he is dead and can no longer hear it.

Note: By the end of this stanza human and nightingale’s worlds have been entirely separated.

Call’d...names: have addressed him by many endearing epithets.

Check Your Progress

1. What kind of death does Keats wish for in this stanza?

Stanza VII

The idea of death gradually brings him back to reality. The process starts in stanza 7 and ends in stanza 8.

The poet calls the nightingale an immortal bird. The nightingale has now been transformed into a symbol of its race and the song of the nightingale heard by countless generations over centuries is symbolised by its permanence. The poet here means that the



song or voice of the nightingale carries the same freshness and music as it did in the past and it will continue to do so in future (though this particular bird will die).

Generations of nightingales follow one another, and they remain immortal in their songs, their song is as sweet and charming today as it was in ancient days, in the Bible-history or even in fairy romance.

Immortal bird: The epithet is justified if the nightingale is taken as the type and symbol of its race.

No hungry...down: the bird is not crushed to death in a savage struggle for existence such as is waged in human society.

The song of the nightingale that the poet now hears is exactly the same song that was heard in ancient times. It is this characteristic that makes the poet give the title of immortality to the nightingale. The bird's song opens the flood-gates of the poet's memory and takes him into the far-off age of legendary romance. It is the same song that the nightingale has been pouring out since the beginning of the world, the same song which in ancient days must have been heard by king and peasant alike; the same song which Ruth heard when she stood sad and lonely in the cornfield of a strange land; the same song to hear which maidens dwelling in magic castles, must have opened their casement windows in desolate fairy lands. The magical effect of the song has been highlighted.

These castles are built on rocks of stormy seas in forlorn fairy land. The song of the nightingale must have cheered the heart of a disconsolate princess held in duress by her demon lover.

this passing night: to-night.

emperor and clown: the greatest and the humblest. Clown here means common person.

the sad heart of Ruth: A reference to the story of Ruth in the Old Testament.

Ruth, a woman of Moab, was married to a Jew in Moab whose father had come from Bethlehem of Judea. After her husband died, she migrated with her mother-in-law Naomi to the distant ancestral land of Judea i.e., Bethlehem. There she began to glean corns of barley left by the reapers in the field of Boaz, a distant relation of her father-in-law. He treated her kindly and afterwards married her.

The Bible story does not say that Ruth was homesick or sad, but this would be natural even if the sense of duty to her mother-in-law had led her to leave her home.



sick: pining, longing.

alien corn: foreign fields as she migrated from Moab.

The poet explains why he considers the nightingale immortal.

In Romantic stories like *Arabian Nights*, we hear of enchanted castles in which princesses are imprisoned in magic castles and their magic windows open on the stormy waves of a wild sea; opening and shutting automatically by magic. As the nightingale passes over the enchanted castle singing its magic song, windows open of themselves to allow some imprisoned princess to hear its song.

fairy lands forlorn: some far off deserted uninhabited lands of the fairies or legendary countries of romance as in the *Arabian Nights*.

forlorn: solitary or deserted.

“These two lines condense the whole world of romantic imagination and conjure up by their suggestion, the very world of romance. In all poetry, there is no better expression of the spirit of romance than these lines”.

We see the voice of the nightingale is made immune first to history then to geography; it can establish a rapport with dead generations or fairy lands.

Check Your Progress

1. Why does the poet call the nightingale an immortal bird?
2. Who is Ruth?

Stanza VIII

The mood of exaltation is over. The use or thought of the word ‘forlorn’ acts as a rude reminder to the poet of his own forlorn or solitary condition (Mention of the word ‘forlorn’ has broken the spell of imagination). The word has brought him back to reality. It is just like the tolling of a bell that reminds him of some forgotten work. It reminds the poet of the realities of life which he had forgotten on account of the nightingale’s song.

The poet finds that after all the powers of fancy are exaggerated. Man cannot ignore the sad realities of life even with the help of fancy or imagination. As the spell of imagination breaks, the poet feels that the bird has flown away and he bids good-bye to the nightingale. He is disappointed in man’s imaginative faculty, which is commonly believed to have great



powers of making people forget themselves and their surroundings. In his case, the spell of imagination has been short lived, he is already awake to the sad realities of life.

The poet is not sure whether he had been seeing a vision in sleep or dreaming while awake. “Was it a vision of a waking dream? Fled is that music. Do I wake or sleep?” There is at least one clear change in the situation. He has ceased to hear the nightingale’s song. How is he to explain this?

plaintive anthem: song full of complaint. It refers to the legendary story of the nightingale. Her human name was Philomel. They were two sisters. Her elder sister married and went off with her husband. But she loved her so much that she sent back her husband to fetch Philomel. On the way, he raped her and to conceal his secret, he cut off her tongue. The gods turned her into a nightingale, and she goes about pouring out her complaint against that injustice.

Check Your Progress

1. How does the ode end?

3.4 Summing up

Ode to a Nightingale contains the spirit of romance and is extremely passionate and sensuous in its descriptions and expressions. The sensuousness of Keats should not be misunderstood for delight in cheap sensual pleasures. Keats’s sensuousness is in fact a higher conception of beauty. He presents the details with such expressions that the reader’s eyes, ears and other senses perceive and appreciate and feel what he describes.

The descriptions of the poet’s desire for a cup of cool Provencal wine tasting of flowers, dance and sunburnt mirth and his longing for a beaker of the warm southern wine which would inspire him like the water from the fountain sacred to the muses (Hippocrene) are highly sensuous and appeal to the reader’s sense of sight, and smell. Equally pleasing to the senses is the description of the flowers and plants in the embalmed darkness of the forest and of the white hawthorn, fast fading violets, mask rose, mid-may’s eldest child etc. These are concrete pictures which the reader can see easily with his inward eye and derive an aesthetic satisfaction.

Allied to his sensuousness is the love of nature, again an aspect of romanticism revealed in this poem. The Nightingale’s song is dear to the poet. Nothing can surpass the



delicate beauty of the heavenly light that falls when blown by the breezes, on the ‘verdurous glooms’ and ‘winding mossy ways’. In this ode as in several others, we find a note of sadness, in the background of the music of Nature and Art. Melancholy is again a romantic quality. Stanza III depicts the pain and misery of life and transitoriness of the things we value most—youth, beauty and love. Keats sees this in contrast to the happiness of the nightingale’s world.

The last three lines of the Stanza VII, “The same that oft times hath/Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam/Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn” breathe the spirit of romance. Keats’s love of the sensuous luxury of the medieval atmosphere is also visible here.

It may also be noted that the poem is highly self-revealing which is again a romantic quality. With all these qualities, the poem finds a responsive echo in the hearts of the reader.

The poem is an expression of an intense personal mood of the poet, a sense of pity for himself (presented obliquely) and sympathy for humanity, and as such it possesses much human interest. It expresses a familiar mood, a desire for death, for release from this worldly life of sorrow and struggle, from fever and fret of this life into the world of the nightingale which to the poet is a world of lasting peace and happiness, of music, joy and beauty. Thus we get a painful contrast between the world of Man and the world of the Nightingale. The world of the Nightingale appeals to the poet for it is a world of richness and beauty, of deep sensuousness and of natural loveliness.

4. ODE ON A GRECIAN URN

Ankita Sethi

4.1 Introduction

Written by John Keats in the year 1819, the poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn* describes the curiosity and fascination of the speaker for the Grecian urn. The poet raises a number of questions on themes like art, beauty and immortality. Inspired by his visits at the British museum and witnessing the aesthetics of the Grecian urns, the poem idealizes beauty as the highest and the eternal truth. The images on the urn and its depiction by the poet, represent the complex nature of art and the innate contradictions.



4.2 Critical Summary

Stanza 1

*Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?*

The poem begins with Keats addressing the Grecian urn as ‘the unravish’d bride of quietness’ which immediately establishes the urn as an object to whom poet’s reflections are directed. In the first stanza, the poet is speaking to the urn and addresses it as an *offspring of silence and slow time*. The urn is a result of an artist’s skill and creativity on a piece of stone. The aging process of earth is much slower and in a way it projects the illusion of ageless continuity, whereas art itself exists on a plane which is beyond the temporal. Thus, the poet sees it as an eternal object of art unaffected by decay. The poet also addresses it as a *Sylvan Historian*, the etymology of this word comes from ‘Silvanus’ the Roman god of forests. It has been addressed as a peaceful and pleasant historian who is recounting a tale of a distant past through pictorial language on its body. Keats plays with the ambiguity of the narrative and represents a mere ambiguous outline of men chasing women. It must be noted that ancient Greece wine jars also called *amphora*, depict many mythological and legendary tales including chase and seduction of women by men.

Check Your Progress

1. What has the urn been referred to?
2. How does the urn become an object of poet’s reflections?



Stanza 2

*Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!*

The theme of ambiguity develops further in this stanza. The writer does not define the images in the strictest sense and reiterates his approach with the same subtlety. '*Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter*', connotes that anything that attracts our physical senses is definitely beautiful and sensuous, but the ones that appeal to our soul or deeper consciousness are invisible to the senses and are metaphysical in nature. The ode's focus is mainly on art, beauty, love, transcendence and eternity. These ideas are enumerated in the second part of the second stanza when he addresses the bold lover who cannot kiss his timeless beloved as she exists beyond the temporal plane, the same way the Grecian Urn exists. However, the urn represents art as timeless, whereas the beloved represents love or lover as eternal. Keats also subtly conveys paradox as a meta-narrative; the lover cannot kiss his beloved, thus unable to bring fruition or consummation of their love, it stays eternal. In the same way, in the first stanza, the pictures of men chasing women convey motion and yet they never seem to get hold of any of them. Both are representations of objects/ideas frozen in time.

Check Your Progress

1. What is the relevance of the phrase '*those unheard are sweeter*' in context of the poem?
2. How has the beloved been compared to the urn?



Stanza 3

*Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.*

The poet keeps addressing things and people so as to bring the wider themes to the reader. In the third stanza Keats talks to a tree who doesn't *bid the Spring adieu* by holding on to its leaves. The imagery of frozen in time is maintained throughout and especially in three lines which repeatedly use words '*forever*' referring to the paradoxical and timeless idea of art, beauty and love as symbolized in the '*unheard melodies*'. However, a novel paradox arises; since everything is timeless, everything is youthful and motionless. This living-death confounds Keats and he tries to reach a resolution in the next stanza by introducing a new perspective.

Stanza 4

*Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore*



Will silent be; and not a soul to tell

Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

Keats now turns his focus to the idea of sacrifice as expressed in the paintings by Claude Lorrain and Raphael. The poet imagines the crowd of citizens and speculates whether such a place exists outside the realm of art. He now challenges art itself for its limiting beliefs but arrives at a conclusion that one can never ascertain the credibility, location or existence of the subject concerned. Thus, the questions remain without any possibility of a definite answer.

Stanza 5

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede

Of marble men and maidens overwrought,

With forest branches and the trodden weed;

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought

As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!

When old age shall this generation waste,

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe

Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

Thus, Keats comes back to subject of his poem, the Grecian urn and declares it being a work of timeless art. Since it is timeless, it is cold and distant from mortal and ageing human beings. Its existence as an object of eternity is incomprehensible to the mortal beings. Despite that, it was shaped with emotions by a human being and the urn will be able to instruct humanity like a 'historian'. It becomes an ambiguous task for the reader, to find whether in the conclusion, the Grecian urn is a mouthpiece of the poet who explicates his philosophy or is simply recounting romantic ideal 'beauty is truth, truth beauty'. In fact, one doesn't really know if it is Keats interacting with the urn or if it is the reader interacting with the work of art.



Check Your Progress

1. What according to the poet is the function of art?
2. What did you understand by the concluding lines of this poem?
3. What do you understand by ageless continuity in context of the poem?

5. ODE TO AUTUMN

Mary Samuel

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
 With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
 And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
 To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
 With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
 For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells.
Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
 Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
 Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
 Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook



Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers:
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.
Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,
—While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river salallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-cricket sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

5.1 Introduction

In his spring Odes written in 1819 Keats deals with the themes of the inevitability of change and death. He reveals that we can imaginatively create a world of permanent joy and beauty, but this visionary world is not 'eternal', since imagination or poetic fancy is a deceiving elf. We are soon transported to the real world of mutability, hardships and changeability. The theme of inevitable change is once again taken up in the *To Autumn*. The pictures of warm autumn with its stubbles inspired Keats to write "To Autumn". The poet graciously accepts the beauty of Autumn without probing the meaning of its transience.

For Keats, "Autumn is the time of fulfilment, plenitude and harvest. The whole poem is structured in answer to the question posed at the beginning of the third stanza, "Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?" This powerful threat to the celebration of autumn calls up the alternative image of autumn as the melancholy precursor



of winter and death. The Ode's reply is silently argued through its images and its plot. The annual cycle of the seasons, the movement from rebirth to death, is as natural to man as it is to nature. Without autumn's movement into winter there could be no spring. Human and natural life are intrinsically tied to the pattern of the change and renewal. Autumn's beauty is particular, to itself, dependent upon the fact that it is neither winter, spring, nor summer. Hence *thou hast thy music too*." (Barnard, 1987, p.138)

Check Your Progress

1. What according to John Bernard is the basic theme of 'To Autumn'?

5.2 Critical Summary

Stanza-1

The poem consists of three stanzas, each depicting a particular aspect or picture of autumn—its beginning to its end. The plot develops from the pre-harvest ripeness (stanza one) to the contented country side human beings busy in 'harvesting' (stanza two) and concludes with the poignant emptiness following the completion of the harvest. Each stanza shows one phase of autumn and nature in a different relationship to mankind.

The opening line—"season of mists and mellow fruitfulness"—sums up the character of autumn. Autumn is a 'productive' season, a season of 'ripeness' and 'maturity'—'mellowness'. And its mists herald the approach of cold and damp winter season. The first stanza is loaded with meanings. Autumn is "the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness", conspires with the "maturing sun" to fill "all the fruit with ripeness to the core." The sun and the Autumn are "close bosom friends" so they secretly conspire to fill the fruits to the core. The maturing sun may be considered a male figure and "Autumn" a female—they mysteriously conspire to overload fruit and flowers. There is no indication of the presence of human beings although *the thatch eves, the moss'd Cottage-trees, gourd* and *bees* point to the houses of the inhabitants who might have planted these trees earlier. But it is the mysterious conspiracy of the sun and the autumn which loads and blesses with fruit the vines, bends the cottage-trees with apples and fills all fruit with ripeness to the core. The poet has predominantly used tactile imagery to highlight nature's strange power to "plump" and "swell" the vegetable world. Thus the first stanza is crammed with images suggesting plenitude and fullness of vegetation—"load", "bend", "swell", "plumps"—we get an insight into the fullness and ripeness to the core—of the hazel nuts. The seemingly endless budding



of flowers is also a result of the conspiracy. The bees are befooled. They think that the summer will never end as if they pay no attention to the *mist*. “For summer has o’er brimmed their clammy cells.”

The scene of stanza one is a cottage garden. The intimacy of the setting is suggested by “close-bosom friend” and by the image of the bees’ clammy cells. It appears to be “a small, tightly knit world.”

Check Your Progress

1. What is the setting of stanza-1?
2. What aspect of Autumn is portrayed by the various images used in this stanza?
3. Who are the “close bosom friends”?

Stanza-2

There is mobility in time and space as we go from stanza to stanza. The poem moves outwards in space and time. The first stanza also suggests morning and space with the reference to mists, but in the next stanza we come across the languor of mid-day heat. From the cottage the poem moves to the wider, yet limited, span of space—to the fields, the granary, the cider press etc. The second stanza concentrates on human activities associated with the ripeness and abundance of the autumn. In the early hours of the day—nature has been actively engaged in producing abundant fruits, flowers and warmth. Now it is noon time. Autumn is presented ‘as four figures completing harvest tasks.’ This stanza is the greatest example of personification in English poetry. Autumn is seen assuming the shape of people in various scenes typical of the season—winnowing, reaping, gleaning, cider-making. With that intimacy and concreteness of detail Keats presents Autumn! The last four lines are fine instances of enactment. Autumn now figures as a gleaner who is seen stepping across a small stream with a bundle of corn on her head. The very movement of the gleaner can be visualised in the words, ‘keep’ and steady’.

The first figure is perhaps that of a woman, ‘sitting carelessly on the granary floor, Her hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind’. ‘Soft’ is used to frame a compound world—soft-lifted, once again we have *soft* in the third stanza “soft-dying day.” ‘Soft is a word of harmonious warmth.’ The second figure is presumably that of a man who is asleep “on a



half-reaped furrow” “drowsed with the fume of the poppies.” He is so much drugged that he cannot finish the job. If the two figures are pictures of the “blissful lethargy,” the third one—a gleaner (apparently a woman for women and children usually did the gleanings when the reaping was completed) is pictured walking on the bridge across a brook, trying to balance herself so that the load on her head does not fall down. The last figure could be a man or a woman. The figure is patiently and leisurely watching the oozing from a cider press. ‘All these figures are ordinary human beings at their autumn occupations.’

It is interesting that the reaper is depicted with “a hook not with a scythe. This description associates the figure with the eighteenth-century portrayals of Autumn as a man with a sickle, while the poppies in the cornfield ‘suggest the presence of Ceres, the Roman goddess of corn and harvests.’” (Barnard, 1987, p.139) The reaper is *sound asleep* not because he is exhausted with work but because he is drugged by poppies “is arrested in mid action in reproach for the necessary destruction of the beauty of ‘the next swath and all its twined flower.’ That is why with the exception of the gleaner, other figures are inactive and satiated.” (Barnard, 1987, pp.139-140).

The stanza two stresses the role of nature. The wind not only winnows the grain, but also idly lifts the sleeper’s hair, the poppies drug the reaper, the cider-press’s “last oozy hours by hours” seems to be ‘more accomplished by the fruits themselves than by any human intervention. Human labour of harvesting is dependent on nature’s generosity for its accomplishment. The stanza abounds in visual imagery—pictorial presentation of activities.

Check Your Progress

1. What is the setting of stanza-2?
2. Which human activities are described in this stanza?
3. How is Autumn personified in this stanza?

Stanza-3

In the third stanza we move towards evening and setting sun and our attention is focused on the distant land and the sky.’ The shift is from human beings to autumn’s music. The stanza takes us to the evening when we observe the “barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day/And touch the stubble plains with rosy hue.” It is not ‘a maturing sun’ of the morning



it is the soft-dying day—the time sequence runs from morning to evening, from early to late autumn, from the maturity of the fruits on trees to the gathering and reaping of harvest, to the evening when only stubbles are left in the fields—on the plains. The sounds of non-human life could be heard. The music of autumn ranges from “the wailful choir of gnats” to the bleatings of “the full-grown lambs”—the music includes ‘the sounds of natural life, beyond man’s control and the animals reared by human beings. The robin whistling from a “garden croft” is something between the wild and the tame. Swallows twittering away indicate the temporary loss of something beautiful they build their nests in buildings to which they return annually, but now they are flying away.’ If swallows remind us of the pattern of loss and return which governs both human and non-human life, the full grown lambs represent ‘the inevitable return of spring and renewal of life.’ In the third stanza the auditory imagery has been used. Commenting on the third stanza Brian Stone says “The poem lifts from the serenely swelling and sweetening of the insides of fruits, nuts and flowers in the first stanza, to the human efforts to store the autumnal plenitude made possible by nature in the second stanza. In the third stanza it must lift again, not only to universalise and consolidate these two experiences, but to take the reader into the acceptance of autumn’s essential farewell, with its suggestion of death.... Keats’s device for this is two-fold: he opens out from the local human scene of the second stanza to the natural perimeters of the English rural world, with its skies, clouds, winds, hills and rivers; and he does this largely, but not exclusively, by sound symphonies which complement the visual symphonies of the second Stanza”.

In the first four lines of the stanza two or more senses have been synthesised. The “rosy” reflection of sunlit evening clouds (the barred clouds) can be seen on the stubble-plains. Their visual effect is described as ‘music’ associating it with the first, two lines. To this ‘imagined music’ is added the music of mourning gnats, full grown bleating lambs, singing crickets, whistling robins and twittering swallows. *Twitter* and *whistle* the two onomatopoeic words make the last lines more poignant with “the notion of departure and possibly death”. Thus, we see in the third stanza, the music of Autumn is introduced in a scene of sun set glory. The little birds, the small insects, the gurgling brook, the whistling winds, the gentle breeze, the bleating lambs, in short small and big things of Nature are instruments of music and contribute their share in Autumn.

**Check Your Progress**

1. What is the setting of stanza-3?
2. How is the evening described?
3. What do the swallows and the lambs represent?
4. '...thou hast thy music too' - explain in the context of stanza-3.

5.3 Poetic Devices

In *To Autumn* Keats has added a line to the ten-line of the Spring Odes and made a couplet before the final line. The poem uses eleven-line regular iambic pentameter rhymes in each stanza. The rhyme scheme is *abab cd ed cce*. The poet gives 'a rounded power' to the rhythm of each stanza statement in the poem, the whole of which is unassailably tranquil. The language is simple, more mono-syllabic and Saxon, full of vowels and clusters of consonants, so one has to go slowly. Beginning with the phrases such as "close bosom friend," "mossed cottage-trees", with a sweet kernel to "until they think warm days," we have 'a meditative slowness of utterance'. The poem appeals to the senses, it is 'made up of the sights, sounds, scents and particular feel of things which Keats evokes.' 'Alliteration is used effectively. 'P' sound in stanza one suggests ripeness to the core and fullness to bursting, 'f' and 'w' sounds are used for the light wind in the next and 'z' sound in 'oozings' brings before our eyes the picture of juice of the apple dripping drop by drop slowly and leisurely into the vessel from the cider-press. Keats deliberately ends a line with a little pause to stress the opening of the next line.

And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook.

The-pause after 'keep' and the emphasis on "steady" make us feel the efforts of the gleaner to balance herself and to save herself and her bundle from toppling into the water. The rise and fall of the cloud of gnats synchronise with the rise and fall of the verse at the end of one line and beginning of the next.

Among the river swallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies.

The poem uses concrete images and personification has been used with great subtlety creating an intimate relationship between the season and the poet. Autumn, being a close



bosom friend of the conspiring sun, *loads, blesses, bends, fills, plumps* etc. It is a benevolent deity blessing the earth with plenitude. In the next stanza Autumn appears as human beings engaged in various activities. The poet addresses Autumn in the third stanza “think not” of “the songs of springs “for” thou hast thou music too”. But by the time we reach the end of the poem the Autumn flies away like the frittering swallows. “The nostalgic effect is created with the description of the ‘soft dying day’ and the end of the season. But the note of hope for the renewal is also implicit for the swallows will return in due course of time, the revolution of the seasons is a continuing process.”

Check Your Progress

1. What is the rhyme scheme of the poem?
2. Write a note on the effective use of imagery, personification and alliteration in the poem.

5.4 Study Notes

Stanza I

bosom-friend: intimate friend.

Maturing: ripening, bringing to fruition or full growth.

conspiring: joining together in a plot, used here playfully. The plot here is to bring about a profusion of fruit and flower.

bless: the word indicates the beneficent quality of the sun and the season to endow vines and trees with fruit and plants and creepers with flower.

vine: the creeper that bears grapes.

thatch-eves: over-hanging edges of the thatched roofs.

core: centre, inner-most part, the fruit is fully ripe, not half ripe.

L.7. Note the careful selection of the words, ‘swell’ to describe the round shape of the gourd and ‘*plump*’ to suggest the softness and juiciness of the hazel nut.

plump: used here as a verb meaning to fatten.

hazel: hazel nuts.



kernel: Soft, edible part inside the hard shell of hazel-nut.

later-flowers: summer, the season of flowers is over, but early Autumn is still warm enough for flowers to bloom.

clammy: sticky.

Stanza II

careless: relaxed, free from cares.

L.15. Autumn is sitting at ease in her granary.

winnowing: it is the process by which grain is separated from the chaff after threshing, that loosens the chaff from the grain.

soft-lifted: moved gently by the breeze.

LL 16-17. Autumn is seen in another aspect. Autumn is out in the field where the corn is being cut.

half-reaped: half cut (corn) with a sickle.

drows'd: put to sleep. Poppies are often found growing with the wheat. Autumn half-way through reaping is over-come with the fragrance of the poppy flowers, and falls asleep on the furrow. Opium is extracted from the poppy flowers—here the fragrance of the poppies is shown having a sleep producing effect.

Furrow: long, deep cut in the ground made by a plough.

hook: sickle for cutting the corn.

swath: ridge of grass, barley wheat etc. lying after being cut.

L-18. Half the corn is cut on the furrow, the rest with which the poppy flowers are twined are spared for the moment while Autumn has fallen asleep.

LL.19-20. Another activity of harvesting is described here. Autumn has been busy gleaning. Gleaning is the gathering of the ears of corn that are left behind after reaping is complete. Peasant women gather for their own use what the reapers have left behind. Autumn, seen as the gleaner here carefully walks with the bundle of corn on her head, over the stepping stones or a narrow bridge across the little stream, on her way home. A lovely picture of a woman balancing a load on her head.



L.21-22. Here the poet takes us where the ripe apples that have been gathered are being squeezed in a machine to make cider (drink made from apples) Autumn is seen patiently standing and waiting, watching the last drops to fall from the cider-press (machine for pressing juice from apples) into the vats where they are collected.

L.22 Note the slow, lingering movement of the line: 'Thou watchest, the last oozings hours by hours.' There are six long sounds here and only four short. You really get an idea of the long and patient waiting of the Autumn standing by the cider press, watching the last drops of the juice slowly falling one by one.

Stanza III

barred clouds: streaky clouds, clouds that gather at sunset in long lines or 'bars' above the west. Clouds through which the sunrays pass.

bloom: touch with colour, a beautifully suggestive word evoking memories of flowers.

Soft-dying day: long twilight of northern climates is referred to here. The twilight lingers and fades away slowly, not suddenly as in the tropical regions where the darkness descends as soon as the sun sets.

the stubble plains: the fully reaped fields left with only the stumps of the wheat plants sticking up after the harvest. Their yellow and brown colour is made rosy by the touch of the soft rays of the setting sun, giving them a beauty and a warmth Keats described in his letter to Reynold.

wailful choir: the mournful orchestra of nature. The music i.e. the sounds of late Autumn are described in clear and concrete terms. The sounds of the gnats, full-grown lambs, hedge crickets and the red-breasts and swallows are not joyous but sad and low. Hence wailful choir.

sallows: a kind of low-growing willow tree. The willow is a symbol of mourning and the mournful sounds of gnats produce the effect of sadness.

Lines 28-29 the sound is carried by the breeze and comes to the ear by fits and starts. *Borne aloft*: carried over.

sinking: fading out, becoming inaudible.

bound: boundary The lambs are bleating in the distance where they are enclosed for the night in their pens.



hedge crickets: insects like grass-hoppers that chirp in the hedges.

treble: high-pitched sound.

the red breast: Robin red breast, a common bird in England; brown all over except for a red patch on the breast. It does not migrate.

garden croft: a small, enclosed garden adjoining a house.

Line 33. The line indicates that this is the end of Autumn. The approach of winter is clearly shown by the swallows getting ready to migrate to the warmer southern climates for the winter.

5.5 Summing up

To Autumn, the last of the great Odes of Keats, is a superb specimen of analysis. In the three stanzas Keats describes three stages of the season. Early, mid and late Autumn is described with a wealth of details and with rich imagery. In the first stanza he presents before us a wealth of details of the objects seen in Autumn with great clarity and concreteness. The second stanza is the greatest example of personification in English poetry. Autumn is seen assuming the shape of people in various scenes typical of the season—winnowing, reaping, gleaning, cider-making. The third stanza captures the music and beauty of Autumn.

5.6 Work Cited:

1. Barnard, John. *John Keats*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.



FRANKENSTEIN

Mary Shelley

Dr. Neeta Gupta

1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The aim of this study material is to:

- Introduce you to the author with a special emphasis on aspects from the author's life that have a direct bearing on the novel.
- Familiarize you with the circumstances surrounding the writing of the novel especially the various developments taking place in the scientific world.
- Acquaint you with a new genre of writing, namely Science Fiction.
- Explain the gothic elements in the novel and help you understand why it is a gothic novel with a difference.
- Help you identify the myriad other issues in the novel that are philosophical, social, moral and even psychological in nature.
- Bring to the fore the amazing relevance of the novel even today.
- Facilitate you to appreciate the novel in all its complexity.

2. ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Shelley was the daughter of two very famous radical intellectuals whose seminal works have become landmarks in their respective fields of thought. Her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, was a pioneer in the feminist movement and her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) had jolted the patriarchal world out of its complacency. In this work she argued vociferously for women's education, their independence and an overall improvement of their circumstances. Mary Shelley's father, William Godwin was a philosopher who revolutionized political thought through his study entitled *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793). Here he argued for an ideal state along the lines of the



French Enlightenment thinkers. His political treatise was translated to fiction in a later work by him called *Caleb Williams* (1794).

Being the daughter of such eminent radical literary personalities, it is not surprising that Mary Shelley would give the world a work which would become a cultural myth and a point of reference to explain man's predicament, his aspirations and his limitations in all times to come.

Mary Shelley was born on 30th August 1797 and her mother died within ten days of giving birth to her, out of complications arising from childbirth. Within a year William Godwin married Mary Jane Clairmont, a woman who was not Godwin's intellectual equal. She had two children of her own.

Though Mary's stepmother looked after all her physical needs, yet she could not channelize her intellectual curiosity. She did nothing to encourage her reading but rather decided that she had no need to go to school and could very well study at home. Even though Godwin recognized his daughter's intellectual superiority as compared to her sister Fanny or Mrs. Clairmont's children, yet he too fell in line with Mrs. Clairmont and agreed that Mary needed no formal education. So, Mary Shelley never went to a school but her innate capabilities and the strong desire for intellectual stimulation found sufficient gratification in the numerous books in her father's library and in the company of his friends such as Charles Lamb and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The favourite pastime of this child of famous personalities was to write stories.

The conflict-ridden relationship between Mary and her stepmother worsened over time and ultimately Godwin decided to send his daughter off for a long stay with a family acquaintance in Scotland. This was the Baxter family and Mary was shipped off to them in 1812. With the Baxters however, Mary had her first experience of a loving and close-knit family where members depended on one another for emotional sustenance and followed the right values in their lives. Mary came to idealize the bourgeois family as 'a community of emotionally dependent, equally respected and equally self-sacrificing individuals' (Anne Mellor, p.16). Her experience with the Baxter family was to have an important influence in the writing of *Frankenstein* and particularly in her portrayal of the De Lacey family. In fact, in her 1831 'Introduction' to the novel she recalls these times in that particular context.

On November 10, 1812, Mary returned to London for a visit that lasted seven months. It was during this visit that she met Percy Shelley, who was the latest addition to her father's circle of friends and admirers. Shelley was accompanied by his wife Harriet and a sister-in-law too but that did not deter this good-looking and flashy young man to be drawn towards



Mary who was extremely beautiful at sixteen. In addition to her exceptional beauty, she carried within her the legacy of her parents' extraordinary intelligence, a sharp poetic awareness and a commitment to revolutionary ideals. The two eloped to France on July 18, 1814, and took Mary's stepsister Jane along as a chaperone. Percy Shelley, educated at Eton and Oxford and having published works like *The Necessity of Atheism* and *Queen Mab*, never considered Mary's literary talents as equal to his and assumed the role of her guide in these matters. He controlled her reading and studying and together the two would sometimes spend hours reading and discussing various works. This had an important bearing on the revisions of *Frankenstein* by Shelley.

The trio (Percy, Mary and Jane) toured various parts of France, Switzerland, Germany and Holland. Mary kept a journal for these days and wrote long letters home to Fanny, describing the innumerable places they visited. Later, a published account of their travels came out of these letters and journal entries. The descriptions of the beautiful and sublime landscapes in *Frankenstein* were witnessed and experienced by Mary and she dwells extensively on them while writing the novel. On September 13, 1814, they returned to London.

After Mary's elopement her father had broken off all contact with her and refused to communicate with her even when she returned to London. He continued, however, to persuade Jane to return home. Percy's wife Harriet, who was six months pregnant at that time, sued him for financial support and demanded legal guardianship for her children. Percy fell into financial difficulties and was pursued by his creditors for the next eight months. Meanwhile Mary conceived her first child. As her pregnancy advanced and it became difficult for her to accompany Percy on his walks and visits, he began moving towards Jane for company and the two often left Mary at home while they went out together.

Percy's 'harem psychology' and his proclamations of 'free-love ethic' made it easier for him to flit from one woman to the other. Earlier he had even invited his wife Harriet to join his group when he was travelling around Europe with Mary and Jane. Harriet of course had refused in disgust. Percy tried to encourage Mary to have an affair with his Oxford friend Thomas Hoggs. But, as Anne Mellor has observed, what Percy was trying to do here was to work out a 'sexual quid pro-quo' (p.30) with Mary — her affair with Hoggs for his affair with Jane. Mary tried to do as her husband desired but only got increasingly annoyed with the situation and particularly with Jane. Her daughter was born two months premature and did not survive. Percy conveniently left the job of consoling Mary to Hoggs and went about his daily life taking Jane as his companion.



Mary went into depression after losing her child. Childbirth for her became associated with death. She had caused her mother's death when she was born and now her own child had died and she blamed herself for it. She became increasingly anxious about ever being able to create life. Her experience with childbirth too had an important bearing on the writing of *Frankenstein* as the novel has been read as a story about Mary's own anxieties about pregnancy and childbirth. After losing one daughter Mary gave birth to a healthy baby boy William, on Jan 24, 1816.

Jane meanwhile had begun pursuing Lord Byron and the trio set off for Switzerland to stay with the renowned poet. Byron and Percy immediately became good friends and Byron's house at Villa Diodatti became their home for some time to come.

It was at Villa Diodatti that these friends decided to write one ghost story each to pass the time. In her 1831 'Introduction' to the novel, Mary admitted that *Frankenstein* was a part of that ghost story contest. The year 1816 saw the birth of Mary's son William but the same year ended with two suicides. Fanny Imlay, Mary's half-sister, committed suicide in October 1816 and Percy's wife Harriet killed herself by drowning in the month of December.

After Harriet's death, Mary and Percy Shelley married immediately. This led to reconciliation between Mary and her father. All these events that took place in Mary's life form a backdrop to the writing of *Frankenstein* because while these things were happening on the personal front Mary was busily writing her novel. The theme of parental irresponsibility, which is a major concern of *Frankenstein*, stems from the behaviour of both William Godwin, her father and Percy Shelley, her husband. Their irresponsibility towards their respective offspring was in sharp contrast to the close bonding that Mary had witnessed and experienced while staying with the Baxters in Scotland.

Her third child Clara was born in September 1817 and *Frankenstein* was published the following year. The first published version of the novel did not carry the author's name. A 'Preface' by Percy Shelley led readers to assume that the novel was written by him. The couple left for Italy and were constantly on the move despite the ill-health of the two children. Finally, both William and Clara succumbed to illness and died. In 1819, the only surviving child of Mary and Percy was born and was named after his father Percy Florence Shelley. But just two years later tragedy struck again when Percy Senior drowned in the Gulf of Spain. Mary was heartbroken and returned to London. She never remarried and continued to write. She even edited her husband's *Poetical Works* and his *Essays*. She died in London at the age of fifty-three on February 1, 1851.



Her Works

Mary Shelley was a prolific writer and began writing from a very young age. Her writing covered a variety of genres including essays and reviews, travel writings, mythical dramas and biographies. The short story was also a favourite form of writing with her and she was a regular contributor to 'Keepsake' Annuals. Some of her stories show her preoccupation with the issues she had tried to tackle in her novel *Frankenstein*. Notable among these are her stories 'Transformation' (1831), 'The Mortal Immortal' (1834) and 'The Mourner' (1830). The theme of monstrosity, immortality, scientific invention, the role of domestic affections is variously taken up in these stories.

Mary Shelley was deeply concerned with the role of the family and domestic affections and what happens if man alienates himself from these positive influences. She had dealt with the theme in *Frankenstein* and deals with it again in her later novels *Valperga* (1823), *The Last Man* (1826) and *Perkin Warbeck* (1830). Her other novels include *Mathilda* (written in 1819 but published posthumously); *Lodore* (1835) and *Falkner* (1837). These later novels are concerned with the father-daughter relationship. The family and its values are upheld once again but with a critical eye on the circumscribing of those women who do not look beyond the family circle.

The most well-known and the most enduring of all Mary Shelley's works has of course been *Frankenstein* which she referred to as her 'hideous progeny' when she bade it to go forth and prosper. The future showed it prospering all right. A second edition came out in 1831 and carried a lengthy 'Introduction' by Mary and revisions to the 1818 text. Since that time there has been no looking back. Innumerable editions, stage productions and film versions have turned Mary Shelley's novel into a cultural myth. It is now an essential reading for understanding the nineteenth century as well as understanding the modern consciousness.

3. INTRODUCTION

It is amazing how a story written in the nineteenth century, by a nineteen-year-old girl, as part of a ghost-story contest could carry within it such astounding relevance for the times to come. *Frankenstein* has become one of our most enduring cultural myths. It has emerged as a metaphor for the modern consciousness and a grim reminder of the human predicament in a world that relies more and more on scientific inventions that often go out of hand. Even two centuries after the novel was first published, its popularity has not waned as each successive generation of readers has located within it a frame of reference relevant to its own time. The



book lends itself to various readings, the most recent among them being the feminist readings of *Frankenstein*.

This was not always the case, however, initial responses to the novel were mixed, ranging from William Beckford calling it ‘the foulest toadstool that has yet sprung up from the reeking dunghill of present times’ to Sir Walter Scott’s admission that he preferred *Frankenstein* to any of his own romances (The Blackwood’s Magazine, 1818). As the readership grew, so did the interpretations and responses to the novel and the various re-workings of it in stage productions and films. Today it would be next to impossible for any first-time readers to approach the novel without having preconceived notions about it. These notions may have their source in either a film or a stage production or even just hearsay. The extent to which the actual text may have been embellished or improvised is evident from the fact that those of us who may not have read the novel, believe that ‘Frankenstein’ is the name of the monster that a mad scientist creates. The factual reality of the text however is that the monster is nameless and it is the scientist who is called ‘Frankenstein.’ Interestingly enough, the error that accompanies this popular conception is the first indication of the ambiguity and the ambivalence that characterizes the novel. What has withstood all improvisations and has defied time, however, is the continuing relevance of the novel for any age and all circumstances. It is difficult to believe that a slip of a girl could have looked so far ahead into the future and been able to warn successive generations of the dangers that lie buried within individual aspirations. Aspirations that fail to see the monstrous consequences of their acts. One is surely intrigued to know how such a novel came to be written.

3.1 How *Frankenstein* came about

It was in the summer of 1816 that a group of friends ensconced in the Villa Diodatti in Switzerland, decided to pass their time reading and telling stories about ghosts and supernatural matters. This group of friends included Lord Byron (to whom the Villa belonged), Percy Shelley, Mary Godwin (not yet married to Shelley), Mary’s stepsister Jane and Byron’s personal friend and physician John Polidori. It was at one of the tale-reading sessions that Byron suggested they each write a supernatural tale.

In her 1831 ‘Introduction’ to the revised edition of *Frankenstein*, Mary traces in some detail the events that were linked to the conception of the idea of *Frankenstein* and the writing of it. When the idea for writing a ghost story was floated, Mary recounts how she was the only one whom the creative inspiration eluded. As she recalls:



‘I felt the blank incapacity of invention which is the greatest misery of authorship, when dull Nothing replies to our anxious invocations: “Have you thought of a story?”’

Not only was her contest at stake, more importantly her claim to an intellectual heritage was at stake too. This minor event became a platform where she had to prove herself worthy of her heritage as well as prove her intellectual worthiness as Percy's companion. Her literary capabilities were never thought to equal those of her parent's or her lover's and in this group of eminent literary personalities like Byron and Shelley, she had to struggle hard to come up with something that would be worth a consideration. Finally, she writes in her ‘Introduction’:

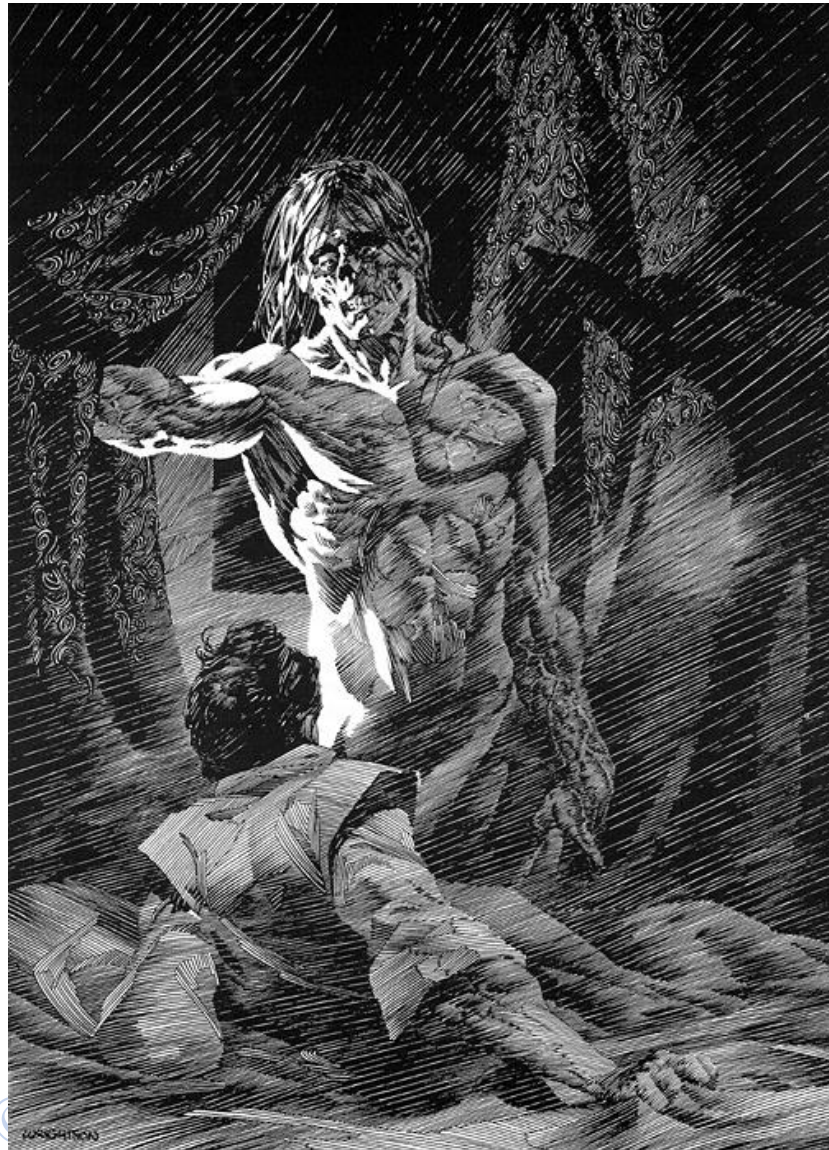
‘I busied myself to think of a story -- a story to rival those which had excited us to this task. One which would speak to the mysterious fears of our nature and awaken thrilling horror -- one to make the reader dread to look around, to curdle the blood and quicken the beatings of the heart’.

Inspiration for such a story still eluded her until one night, after having listened to and participated in a discussion about galvanism and Dr. Darwin's successful experiment in causing a piece of vermicelli to move voluntarily, she had a ‘waking dream.’ She writes:

‘My imagination unbidden, possessed and guided me ... I saw -- with shut eyes, but acute mental vision -- I saw the pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together. I saw the hideous phantasm of a man stretched out, and then, on the working of some powerful engine, show signs of life, and stir with an uneasy half-vital motion.’

She saw how the pale student of unhallowed arts felt terror after having animated the hideous corpse with a spark of life and tried to wish it away by sleeping but is awakened. She writes further:

‘. . . he opens his eyes; behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains and looking on him with yellow, watery but speculative eyes.’



https://i0.wp.com/www.blackgate.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/wrightson_frankenstein.gif

With the coming to life of that ‘horrid thing’ Mary Shelley’s ‘hideous progeny’ is born!

Such was the genesis of *Frankenstein*. An idea was born in the creative unconscious but we must not forget that the immediate occasion for writing the novel involved not just a desire to write a compelling ghost story that would ‘curdle the blood’, but also lengthy



discussions on serious intellectual issues concerning the developments going on in the scientific world as well as on the political matters arising out of the French Revolution whose aftermath had not been forgotten or put behind as yet. Mary Shelley's *Monster* therefore lends itself to scientific as well as political and social readings. As we discuss the novel we will realize that a lot more has gone into it than just the contemporary scientific and political scenario. An intellectual temperament inherited from her parents and nurtured by her husband considered the various seminal texts from the world of literature and philosophy as well. Milton, Rousseau, Locke, Burke, Plutarch, the Enlightenment thinkers, the Romantics, Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft — all these and many more writers, philosophers and thinkers lend their ideas in the shaping of the story. The same, however, are affirmed and upheld or subtly refuted by the young writer after being filtered through her own intellectual processes her intellectual consciousness. It would be worthwhile to take a look at these various shaping influences working in *Frankenstein* in order to see the connections it makes with the author's life as well as with the literary heritage and the contemporary scene.

3.2 What influenced the writing of *Frankenstein*?

The major influences that shaped the writing of *Frankenstein* fall broadly into four categories — biographical, literary, historical, and scientific.

3.2.1 The Biographical Influences

The circumstances in the life of Mary Shelley that surrounded the writing of *Frankenstein* subtly and artistically make their way into the novel and influence the presentation of certain major concerns. The death of Mary's mother, in childbirth, for example, leads to a near absence of women in the story and they are mostly disaster-prone too. Childbirth gets linked to death once again in her life -- this time with the death of her own daughter in 1815, just a few months before she starts writing *Frankenstein*. The novel thus articulates the anxieties in a woman's mind regarding the process of giving birth and creating a new life. There are fears whether things will go alright. There are concerns for the consequences whether the end result will be good. For Mary Shelley, the dominating concern was whether she will ever be able to give birth to a healthy child. Feminist readers and critics such as Ellen Moer have read the novel as a 'birth myth' and also seen it as reflecting Mary Shelley's own birth as an author.

Another off shoot of biographical circumstances is that of parental neglect. In her own life Mary had borne the brunt of Godwin's indifferent parenting as a child. Later she witnessed and experienced a similar insensitivity from her husband Percy towards their children. This leads to an extremely important alternative reading of the Monster's actions in



the novel and one tends to sympathize with him when he says that he was not born evil, but his creator's as well as society's neglect has made him a fiend. Mary Shelley's tale carries within it a warning for all creators to love their creations or be prepared for unthinkable consequences.

In Mary's own life the suicides of Fanny and Harriet once again forcibly underline the disastrous results of paternal indifference. Both women died isolated and lonely -- one abandoned by her adopted father and the other abandoned by the father of her children. These suicides too form a backdrop to the writing of *Frankenstein* and contribute towards Mary Shelley placing an important emphasis on the role of nurture in a child's life. The theme of the orphaned child, alone and unguided in this world is a direct result of the theme of parental neglect (especially paternal neglect because mothers rarely live for long in Mary Shelley's novels). A number of characters in *Frankenstein* are orphans -- Victor, Elizabeth, Justine, Walter and finally the Monster himself. In fact, Mary identified closely with the Monster in this regard. Anne Mellor has traced these links in her insightful book on the works of Mary Shelley titled *Mary Shelley: Her Monsters and Her Art*.

3.2.2 The Literary Influences

The genre of the Gothic and the Romantic Movement were two major literary forces that influenced the writing of *Frankenstein*. Mary Shelley's Gothicism, however, differs from her predecessors in the sense that she does away with the conventional trappings of the haunted castles and other medieval paraphernalia and replaces it with experimental science. She combines science with supernatural or the supra-natural to stake a claim to another branch of literature which is known as Science Fiction. In fact, *Frankenstein* has been hailed as the work that pioneered the genre of Science Fiction. Mary Shelley on her part read and incorporated imaginatively and creatively many of the recent findings and theories of science to write her own tale.

The novel has also been seen to be a work that has significant connections with the Romantic Movement. This was hardly avoidable as Mary lived through that movement surrounded by some of the best exponents of the age such as Byron and Shelley. A close reading of the novel, however, reveals that rather than celebrating Romantic ideals, *Frankenstein* emerges as a critique of the same. The literary influence of the Romantic Movement is evident in the novel no doubt, but its presence indicates and points to all that was wrong in this movement. Mary Shelley subtly questions the Romantic excesses of imagination. While Romanticism glorifies the individual artist who tries to recreate the world through his poetry, Mary Shelley points an accusing finger at him. The artist as creator, in



trying to usurp the power of God, is no different from Mary Shelley's scientist as creator who too is trying to do the same. In showing the disastrous consequences in the latter case Mary Shelley is warning the Romantics of the dangers inherent in their enterprise.

A similarly ingenious and insightful use of material from seminal literary texts is evidenced in the title of the novel, its epigraph and its dedication. Subtitled '*The Modern Prometheus*' the novel immediately draws attention to the Greek myth of the great Titan, Prometheus, who created man from clay and then stole fire from the Gods for benefiting his creation. He was punished by the angry Zeus and condemned to never-ending labour and physical torture. (See Maya Joshi's 'Introduction' to the Worldview edition of *Frankenstein*)

The novel's subtitle indicates that it may be a reworking of this myth of Prometheus and the theme of the over-reacher or the figure of the rebel against authority would play an important role here. Given the literary setting in which the work was undertaken, it would seem to contemporary readers that the challenge to authority would be celebrated here since the Promethean figure was a hero for the Romantics -- both as a rebel and also as a creator. He was a prototype of the Romantic artist who was also seen both as a creator and as a rebel.

As we move on, however, we read the epigraph from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and an interplay of another ground-breaking literary work guides our responses to the title. The creature's anguished questioning here casts a doubt on the romantic perception of the creator and we are checked in our acceptance of the Romantic glorification of the Promethean figure. At the same time, we realize that by pitting the title and the epigraph against one another Mary Shelley has subtly and ingeniously indicated that the Romantic ideology would come under her critical gaze here, and the novel may pose to be a critique rather than a celebration of the same. Mary Shelley's focuses more on the egoistic, almost misanthropic tendencies of Romanticism. Tendencies that make men anti-social and self-absorbed which in turn lead to their alienation and isolation.

A similar surreptitious criticism is intended in the dedication to William Godwin who is referred here not as Mary's father but as the author of *Caleb Williams* which is a fictional rendition of his political treatise *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Political Justice*. In his above mentioned most influential philosophical work Godwin had envisioned a future form of humanity which would be the result not of sexual intercourse but of social engineering. He dispenses with mothers and children and envisions a world populated only by a race of men who would be immortal. It was a thoroughly male-oriented utopia. A 'Dedication' normally suggests a celebration of ideas upheld by the person/s to whom the work has been dedicated. One would expect the same here. But by placing the 'Epigraph'



very strategically before the 'Dedication' Mary Shelley has indicated her intentions of critiquing rather than embracing Godwin's political and philosophical ideas. Here the new creation is crying out in anguish at being created at all!

3.2.3 Historical Influences

The late eighteenth and early nineteenth century was a time of great social and political upheaval in Britain which in turn was the result of the inroads made into the world of science and technology. While on the one hand technology had resulted in the industrial revolution mechanizing human life, the scientific discoveries on the other hand were gradually chipping away at the traditionally held age-old beliefs about God and Religion and man's place in the universe. The Luddite disturbances of 1811-17 were an expression of revolt by the working classes which were feeling increasingly threatened by the technological advances that would leave many jobless. One machine could now do the work of ten people and out of those ten, nine stood to lose their livelihood. Thus, factories were attacked and machines were destroyed.

The Pentridge Uprising of 1817 threatened Britain's government with a working-class Revolt and brought back memories of the horrific French Revolution of 1789 when just such a revolt had ultimately led to the execution of the king. By extension this meant that the word of God was defied since the king is supposed to be the representative of God on earth.

A large section of the people in Britain had supported the French Revolution especially the Romantics who saw it as a sign of the beginning of a new era in the history of Europe. The sad part is that though the intentions of the revolutionaries were good and were aimed at overthrowing a despotic regime and replacing it with a more democratic one, yet the path adopted was a bloody one and also, somewhere along the line, the original intentions got blurred. This resulted in chaos, anarchy and a lot of bloodshed in the end. In fact, many critics such as Anne Mellor and Lee Sterrenburg have read a direct analogy between the French Revolution and Shelley's *Monster*. The *Monster* is seen to represent 'a gigantic body politic... originating in a desire to benefit all mankind... but so abandoned and misused that it is driven into an uncontrollable rage' (Mellor, p.82).

Lee Sterrenburg points out that Shelley uses the symbolism of the French Revolution but scales it down to domestic size. In a symbolic manner, however, her novel too points at the social injustice that can ultimately result in revolutionary violence. The desire for reform is greatly felt in face of social injustice and yet there is no hope of any better alternatives. The end result of an overthrow of an oppressive regime is merely anarchy and not reform. The



novel thus takes its cue from the French Revolution to debate upon the issues of suppression, oppression revolt and anarchy.

3.2.4 Scientific Influences

At the centre of Mary Shelley's novel is a scientist who creates a monster with an apparent aim of benefiting mankind, but then abandons his creation and refuses to take responsibility of the consequences that follow in the aftermath. Mary Shelley is here commenting strongly on the various scientific developments and discoveries taking place around that time. Most notable among these was the works of Humphry Davy, Luigi Galvani and Erasmus Darwin. In fact, Mary Shelley follows Davy's pamphlet *A Discourse, Introductory to a course of Lectures on Chemistry*, very closely in writing out material for Professor Waldman's lectures in *Frankenstein*. These scientists working to uncover the secret of life indulged in a number of experiments to locate the source of that life. In his pamphlet, Davy distinguishes between those scientists who sought only to discover and understand the secret of how Nature works and those that sought to interfere with the workings of Nature and to alter it and control it. Mary Shelley, while agreeing with this distinction, expresses her fear of the scientist who seeks to control nature and applauds only the ones who seek to understand. In this respect she admires scientists like Erasmus Darwin who constantly endeavour to understand nature. The distinction between a good scientist and a bad scientist is therefore quite clear-cut and Victor, who is a creationist rather than an evolutionist like Darwin, belongs to the latter group who seeks to interfere with the workings of nature and seek to control it.

Mary Shelley was keenly aware of the developments going on in the scientific world because of her temperament and also because of Shelley's immense interest in the same. Discussions on the subject were a common feature in the Shelley household and Galvani's experiments on 'animal electricity' impressed them most and became the basis for Mary Shelley's novel which highlights the darker side of these interferences.

Galvani talked about a secret life force, 'animal electricity' which later came to be known as 'galvanism.' He argued and partly proved that we all carry within us a vital force, similar to electricity that animates us and gives us life. There is a difference in this electricity and that produced by lightning. He further argued that this animal electricity was produced by the brain and used nerves to conduct it to the muscles which in turn were animated by it. He proved his theories by re-animating corpses momentarily and we can see where the germ of Victor Frankenstein's idea of animating his monster comes from. The consequences of Victor's creation however are a grim warning of what the future will hold if man usurps the role of God and takes the process of creation in his own hands.



4. A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Frankenstein has been referred to as ‘a text in process’ or ‘a novel in transmission’ because of the time and changes it took to bring it to its present version. From the manuscript of 1816 that was written for a group of friends, to the first published version of 1818 that carried some initial changes made by Percy and also a ‘Preface’ written by him, to the final mature product, the second edition of 1831. The 1831 edition carried extensive revisions by Mary and also reflected her adult views. The changes wrought in Mary’s life by her personal experiences matured and mellowed her and the same is reflected in the 1831 edition when the more radical elements are either revised or changed.

The 1818 edition was published anonymously partly because of the sensibilities of the nineteenth century reader who would have been appalled to know that this ‘hideous progeny’ is of an eighteen-year-old young girl. It was turned down by publishers twice and ultimately published by Lackington Allan and Company -- a rather obscure publisher of cheap popular sensational books. Due to the Preface written by Percy Shelley, many thought that he had authored the novel too. Yet because of the ‘Dedication’ to William Godwin and also because of the social themes of the novel, many others thought that Godwin himself was the author. When it was reprinted in 1823 the mystery of authorship was solved and the work was acknowledged by Mary Shelley to be hers. The 1831 edition came out after a gap of fifteen years.

In her ‘Introduction’ to the 1831 edition, Mary was careful to point out that she has left the ‘core and substance of it untouched.’ She also points out in the same ‘Introduction’ that even though Shelley urged her to develop the idea of a ghost story into a full length novel, yet she says ‘I certainly did not owe the suggestion of one incident, nor scarcely of one train of feeling, to my husband...’ It was entirely her own, her ‘hideous progeny’ which she sends into the world to ‘go forth and prosper.’ And prosper it did as we have seen in our short estimate of its abiding relevance.

5. A SHORT SUMMARY OF *FRANKENSTEIN*

Frankenstein is a novel in flashback mostly, where Victor Frankenstein relates the experiences of his life to Robert Walton, a British sailor who has found him on the icy shores of the Arctic Ocean. The flashback of Victor’s life does not begin however till four letters from Walton to his sister have been written. The narrative therefore follows a pattern of one



narrative within another and as we proceed into the novel we realize towards the middle of it that there is yet another narrative embedded inside Victor's narration too. So, Walton's letters to his sister provide a framework for the story of Victor and his monster and the novel also ends with a letter from Walton, thus completing the frame.

The first four letters inform us about Walton's early life, his interest in the life of a sailor and his resolve to find a tropical Paradise at the North Pole. We are given details of his preparations for the expedition to the North Pole, his progression as he sets out on his quest and we are brought to the point when due to bad weather conditions Walton's ship gets stuck in ice and he is stranded in the Ocean along with his crew.

In Letter 4, Walton catches a glimpse of the Monster riding in a sleigh. His crew on the other hand rescues Victor and takes him on board. After talking to Victor, Walton realizes that he may have found the friend he had yearned for all his life. Yet, he finds that this friend is greatly agitated and disturbed. Walton informs Victor about his quest which only increases the latter's agitation and he tells Walton that a similar ambition had driven him to despair. He decides to tell Walton the story of his life and we are brought to the first chapter of the novel which launches the flashback.

Victor begins from the very beginning by giving us an account of his family background. Starting from the moment that his parents got married, he tells of the peaceful, affectionate domestic life they enjoy at Geneva. He recounts the inclusion of Elizabeth in the household, of the birth of his younger brother and so on. He mentions his interest in science and tells of his unguided reading of outdated scientists. He goes on to relate how his keen interest in science takes him to the University of Ingolstadt where his experiments lead him to a discovery of the secret life-force. With this knowledge he is able to animate a gigantic human form that he has pieced together from various corpses. When his Monster comes to life, Victor is horrified and abandons him and has a nervous breakdown himself. Henry Clerval, Victor's close friend, looks after him and nurses him back to health. Meanwhile, the Monster just disappears and is not to be seen anywhere.

While Victor is recovering from illness, he receives a letter from his father informing him of his brother William's death. Victor is overcome with grief and sets off immediately for Geneva. As he nears the city he catches sight of the Monster. Seeing him there he at once concludes that he is the one responsible for William's murder. But Justine, a member of the Frankenstein household is held responsible. Her guilt is proved by circumstantial evidence and she is executed. Victor, knowing she is innocent, is still unable to tell the world that the misdeed is of the Monster's doing. He watches Justine go to the gallows even though he is



tormented by guilt and almost goes mad. Victor decides to go to the Alps in search of some peace but meets the Monster face to face in the wilderness. On seeing him Victor is filled with rage but the Monster compels him to listen to his side of the story before concluding how much he ought to be blamed for what happened.

We are now taken back into time once again by the Monster and he relates the history of events which took place after he found himself abandoned by his creator in a world that was new and alien. It was also a world where people rejected and mistreated him for no apparent reason except that he was monstrous and ugly. The Monster recounts how he hid in a hovel next to the De Lacey's household and how he taught himself to read and speak by observing the members of that family. The Monster at this point is only monstrous in looks. At heart he is kind and tries to help the De Laceys and feels great affection for them. But when he presents himself before them, they are aghast! All their generosity, their compassion vanish and they drive him out in horror.

On being mistreated the Monster becomes violent and burns the De Lacey's house down. From some papers that he has in the coat he had worn when leaving Frankenstein's laboratory, he comes to know of Victor Frankenstein, the man who created him. On thus learning the identity of his creator he sets off immediately to seek him out and take his revenge upon him. He reaches Geneva, murders William on learning who he is and incriminates Justine. His narrative now reaches the point where Victor is listening to him and the Monster entreats him to understand before condemning. He goes on and expresses a desire to have a mate with whom he can share his life and thus drive away loneliness that threatens to overwhelm him. He promises to disappear and become like his original benevolent self if Victor creates a female monster for him, to be his companion.

Victor is swayed from his earlier hatred for the Monster and sees a point in what the latter has related. The Monster's demand for a companion is however loathsome but he agrees, thinking that probably that would control and check the monster in his evil deeds. He agrees to make a female companion for the Monster. Meanwhile, Victor's father expresses his wish that Victor and Elizabeth should now get married. Victor delays the marriage and instead goes to England to accomplish the horrible task the Monster has set for him. Clerval accompanies him without having any idea of the real reason for this trip to Britain. He stays with him till they reach Perth in Scotland and leaving him there Victor proceeds alone to the Orkney Islands.

At Orkneys, Victor begins work on constructing a female monster but just as he is about to finish he has second thoughts about it. While debating what he should do he looks up



at the window and sees the Monster peering in quite gleefully and being visibly happy at the prospect of a female companion. The sight makes Victor decide immediately against the whole exercise and he tears his work to pieces thus destroying the Monster's half-finished female companion. Seeing his dreams destroyed thus, the Monster goes mad with anger and promising to be with Victor on his wedding night he vanishes from the scene.

Victor puts his laboratory apparatus and the remains of the female monster in a boat with the intention to throw it all into the sea. He manages to get rid of the disgusting cargo but his boat drifts off to the coast of Ireland. There he is arrested for the murder of a young man. On seeing the body of the man, he is supposed to have murdered, Victor is filled with horror for it is none other than Henry Clerval. Immediately he knows that this has been the doing of the Monster but is unable to explain the same to people around him. His father, informed by the magistrate, comes to see him through the trial. Victor is proved innocent and both he and his father leave for Geneva.

Victor's marriage to Elizabeth takes place and as promised by the monster Elizabeth is murdered by him on the wedding night. This proves to be the last straw for Victor and he vows to destroy the Monster and begins pursuing him with an obsession akin to madness. It is this pursuit that has landed him in the Arctic Ocean when he is rescued by Walton's crewmen.

Victor's narrative comes to an end here but the story is carried forward by Walton in yet another letter to his sister in which he informs her of Victor's death. He writes of how he had found the Monster mourning over Victor's dead body -- experiencing remorse at what he had done. He tells of the Monster's determination to destroy himself by fire surrounded by the icy waters of the Arctic. He concludes the letter by relating how after expressing his determination to destroy himself, the Monster jumps from the cabin window and is lost to sight -- gone -- presumably forever.

6. DETAILED SUMMARY WITH CRITICAL COMMENTS

6.1 Walton's Letters

6.1.1 Letter - 1

The novel begins with a letter addressed to Mrs. Saville of England from Robert Walton. As we read it is revealed that Mrs. Saville is Walton's sister. Walton writes of his safe arrival in St. Petersburg and of his plans to go on an expedition to the North Pole. We are informed about Walton's desire for discovering the secret of the gravitational force or of discovering an



easier direct passage to those countries which at present seem inaccessible due to the long sea routes to them. Walton prepares for the expedition with mixed feelings -- both apprehension as well as excitement. We are given a brief account of his life where he recounts to his sister how he had been attracted to the seafaring life right from his childhood. Though his father's injunction against such a thing had restricted him for some time -- he had been unable to resist the lure once he had money at his disposal which came to him as he inherited his cousin's fortune. So, Walton has decided to put his plans into action and we are given details of how he goes about procuring a ship and crewmen for his voyage to the North Pole.

Critical Comments

Mary Shelley opens her novel in an epistolary style where Walton's letters to his sister are going to provide the broad frame narrative to the main story. The rest of the narratives will be embedded within this frame narrative. Walton and Victor are similar in many ways. Like Victor, Walton's education too has been neglected and he has tried to chart out an unguided course for his life. Thus, he too has set out to seek the impossible and has rejected a life of ease and luxury in favour of discovering the unknown. But it is not a philanthropic or totally utilitarian exercise. There seems to be a desire for personal glory along with a desire for working for the betterment of mankind. A similar desire for personal glory will be noticed in Victor's quest for the secret of life and this brings us to the big question. Are both these men using the apparent stated objective of their quests merely as a cover up for their own unchecked ambition that seeks to cross all limits? If that is so then Mary Shelley is making a subtle comment on all such endeavours which are undertaken in the guise of altruistic motives but actually have personal ambition as the driving motive behind them.

Similarities between the figures of Walton and Victor are established at the outset even though we will become aware of them only after having proceeded well into the narrative. Since Walton is seen as Victor's double we need to notice not just the similarities between the two men but also the differences and the most important of these differences is that Walton is not as isolated or alienated as Victor is. He values domestic affection, longs for friendship, looks after his crew and discharges his responsibility towards them when the time comes. These differences draw attention to the flaws in Victor's character which become partly responsible for his fate.



Check Your Progress

1. What is the purpose of Walton's letters in the narrative structure of the novel?
2. How does Walton anticipate Victor?
3. What is the difference between Walton and Victor even though both of them are ambitious?

6.1.2 Letter - 2

In the second letter dated 28th March Walton has reached Archangel and informs his sister of his having hired a ship and his crew members. He once again experiences a deeply felt need for an intimate friend -- one whom he has been unable to locate from amongst his crew. Though he praises his lieutenant for being a man of wonderful courage and enterprise, he is as desirous of glory as Walton is himself. The master is singled out for his gentleness and mildness and we are given a brief glimpse of his noble nature when Walton relates how in the past he has helped the girl he loved to marry a man of her choice and gives the couple all his material wealth.

Critical Comment

As Walton moves further and further away physically from his home, his sense of isolation and alienation increases and correspondingly the need for a friend increases in equal proportion. The theme of alienation is an important theme of *Frankenstein* and is thus introduced at the outset. We see Mary Shelley illustrating and analyzing it through the characters of Walton, Victor and later through the Monster. Mary Shelley is pointing at ambition being an important reason for alienating and isolating people. The reference to the albatross serves as a reminder of the figure of the Wanderer who has to carry the burden of his guilt everywhere along with him. We are being subtly prepared for the events that will unfold.

The ship's master is seen as a corrective to ideas of extreme individualism. His quest is thoroughly disinterested and divorced from any quest for personal glory. He is an embodiment of goodness and of values that give importance to affection and emotions. According to Anne Mellor, the master's character functions in this novel 'as a moral touchstone of disinterested sympathy from which to measure the fall of both Frankenstein and Walton' (p.21).

**Check Your Progress**

1. How is the theme of alienation introduced?
2. Write a short note on the shipmaster. How is he a corrective to the extreme ideas of individualism?

6.1.3 Letter - 3

The third letter is dated July 7th and merely reiterates Walton's hope and belief in his expedition at the same time highlighting the dangers it entails. The voyage commenced with nothing much untoward happening till this stage.

Critical Comment

Walton's wish that he be remembered to his English friends, and his obvious affection for his sister in the manner of signing as 'most affectionately yours' — are subtle indications of the loneliness and isolation that is increasing as Walton's ship moves away from inhabited places. Walton's question 'What can stop the determined heart and resolved will of man' (Shelley, p.13), anticipates the events to come in the next letter.

Check Your Progress

1. How do we know that Walton's loneliness is increasing?

6.1.4 Letter - 4

This letter is written in three parts and takes the form of a journal with the entries dated 5th Aug., 17th Aug and 19th Aug. In the first entry we are told of the bad weather conditions that have led to the freezing of the sea. As a consequence, Walton's ship is stuck in ice and unable to move. There is an atmosphere of gloom amongst the crewmen. While waiting for the ice to crack Walton along with his crew beholds a strange sight -- of a gigantic man being drawn in a sledge driven by dogs. The sledge proceeds rapidly towards the north and is soon lost to sight. A short while later the ice cracks thus freeing the ship but Walton decides to wait for morning in order to avoid the ice boulders that might be floating around.

The morning brings another strange occurrence when Walton discovers his sailors talking to a man 'dreadfully emaciated with fatigue and suffering' (Shelley, p.15), and trying to persuade him to come aboard. From his looks he seems to be a European and speaks



English with an accent. He agrees to come aboard only after confirming that they are bound on a voyage of discovery towards the North Pole. It is revealed later that the man they have taken aboard is in fact Victor Frankenstein. While conversing with him Walton learns that Victor has been in pursuit of the gigantic man they had seen earlier. He refers to the giant as a demon and is most eager to be on the deck and watch for his sledge.

Walton seems drawn towards this strange but gentle and benevolent man. He finds him 'attractive and amiable' and daily his affection grows for him till he begins 'to love him as a brother' (Shelley, p.16).

The second part of the letter is concerned with Walton's comparison of his ambitions to his newfound friend. The stranger is at once pleased with Walton's confidence but at the same time is overcome with gloom and despair at the memory of all that he has lost. In the third part of Walton's letter we get to know the reason for his grief and his apprehension at Walton's enterprise. As he says: 'you seek for knowledge and wisdom as I once did, and I ardently hope that the gratification of your wishes may not be a serpent to sting you as mine has been.' He decides to relate his life's adventures and misadventures to Walton so that the latter may take heed and decide against continuing his quest. Walton, on his part decides to record faithfully all that Victor is going to narrate to him and decides to send the same to his sister.

Critical Comment

This letter brings into focus the problems of perception that we are going to face in this novel. While Walton and his crewmen perceive Victor's creature as a human being -- Victor refers to him as a demon. Then, Walton's perception of Victor as a noble, gentle, benevolent, and almost divine being is not sustained by the narrative that follows. Mary Shelley is here creating one kind of expectation and then will be putting it to the test in the subsequent narrative. What is noteworthy however is the fact that it is the stranger's eloquence that draws Walton the most towards him. Language plays an important role in this novel. Even the monster will be able to win Victor over to see his point of view due to his eloquence in presenting his case. The similarities between Walton and Victor are once again brought into focus by Victor's comment that he too had been a seeker after knowledge just as Walton but had met with gloom and despair.

Our curiosity is aroused on many counts. Who is this wanderer? Why is he pursuing the gigantic being? Why does he call him the demon? Why is he so full of despair and why does he dissuade Walton from his quest? Very effectively Mary Shelley has prepared the ground for the main narrative to unfold.

**Check Your Progress**

1. How does the author introduce Victor and the Monster to the readers?
2. What is your impression of Victor?
3. What is Victor's warning to Walton?

6.2 Volume I**6.2.1 Volume 1 ~ Chapter I**

Victor's account begins with a brief mention of his antecedents -- his coming from a family of counselors and syndics in Geneva, and goes on to recount his parent's courtship and marriage. His father, a respected public servant holding high office had a friend who had fallen on bad times and had retreated into oblivion. Victor's father makes concerted efforts to seek him out only to find him dead with his beautiful daughter Caroline weeping beside his coffin. Victor's father brings the girl back with him to Geneva and becomes her protector, placing her with relatives. After an interval of two years, he marries Caroline and retires from public life desiring to devote more time to his family. Victor is born in Naples and remains the only child for six long years filled with domestic bliss when his parents look after him and guide him. Victor's father had a sister who had married an Italian gentleman and left the country with him. They have a daughter Elizabeth who becomes the next addition to the Frankenstein family after the death of her mother. Caroline Frankenstein decides at that early stage itself that Elizabeth would prove to be a good wife for Victor. She becomes Victor's play fellow and friend.

Continuing the account of his upbringing Victor informs us of two more inclusions into the family -- his brother Ernest who is six years younger to him and William who is the youngest. In addition, Victor's close friend Henry Clerval is introduced who is fond of daydreaming, romanticizing and acting out the tales of Robin Hood, Orlando, Amadis and the like. Victor's interest however is in the scientific aspect of things and he recalls the moment when he comes across a volume of Cornelius Agrippa, a German scientist whose science borders on the occult. When Victor approaches his father for guidance on his reading of the works of Agrippa, he brushes him aside and forbids him from wasting time on such 'sad trash' (p.24). As children normally do, Victor is attracted more towards Agrippa's works because he has been forbidden and becomes obsessed with a desire to find the secret of life. A thunderstorm reveals to him the immense power of electricity which his father



demonstrates for him through an experiment with a kite. All these modern experiments should have dissuaded him from studying the outdated works of Agrippa and Paracelsus. But as fate would have it, Victor is unable to attend the lectures on modern science and consequently loses interest in it. He busies himself with a study of the languages and of mathematics spends the remaining time in instructing his siblings and looking after them. The chapter ends with a close -up of the Frankenstein family warm with the glow of domestic bliss where ‘mutual affection engaged us all to comply with and obey the slightest desire of each other’ (p.27).

Critical Comment

You must make note of the fact that we have here a narrative within a narrative. Walton’s letters which form the frame narrative for the main story have now ended. The epistolary style has given place to direct narration as we embark on Victor’s narrative.

From Victor’s account of his life two things are evident. Firstly, he belongs to a family of considerable social standing and secondly the society is strongly patriarchal where a distinct division is apparent between the public world of men and the private world of women. There are distinct roles assigned to the two sexes so that while the men dominate the sphere of work and action the women hold sway over the domestic world of affections.

‘Domestic affections’ is an important theme of the novel and is seen at work in Victor’s portrayal of his family. Women of the family play a significant role in it. They are almost idealized and spiritualized and we find use of religious imagery in the description of Caroline and Elizabeth. The division between male and female spheres of occupation and interest is firmly established by the author when she shows Victor and Clerval busy ‘investigating the facts relative of the actual world while Elizabeth busied herself in following the aerial creation of the poets’ (p. 22).

Victor’s interest in natural science and his desire to discover the elixir of life that would banish disease from the human frame all seem noble ideals. But he even tries to raise ghosts and devils and it is another matter that his incantations fail. Yet, his hungering after forbidden and impossible knowledge begins to establish him as the modern Prometheus, the Over-Reacher who stole fire from the Gods. Only in this case does the secret of life lie not in fire but in electricity which becomes its scientific equivalent. The relevance of the subtitle has begun to unravel and so also the fact that Mary Shelley’s use of the myth of Prometheus will modernize it in the context of new scientific developments.



The blissful domestic circle, however, prevents Victor from spreading his wings and Mary Shelley points out the narrowness and claustrophobic nature of this world as far as realization of personal ambitions is concerned.

Check Your Progress

1. What do we learn about Victor's early life?
2. Which important theme is introduced in this section of the novel and how?
3. To which two literary figures does the author compare Frankenstein? What is the similarity?

6.2.2 Volume I ~ Chapter II

Victor's parents resolve to send him to the University of Ingolstadt for further studies for the purpose of acquainting him with customs other than those of his native country. But before he can leave, an unfortunate event occurs. Elizabeth is taken ill and Caroline nurses her back to health but herself succumbs to the illness and dies. Her dying words remind Victor and Elizabeth of her future plan for both of them and she implores Elizabeth to now take her place in the house as the protector and caretaker of her younger cousins. Elizabeth performs this duty well.

Victor leaves for Ingolstadt after three months. Clerval is prevented from accompanying him because of his father's belief that a businessman needs not a cultivated mind. Victor proceeds to the university alone -- away from the amiableness of the domestic world. Yet his ardent desire for knowledge pushes away all gloomy thoughts and gives him a sense of freedom. His meeting with Professor M. Krempe, of natural philosophy, is a rude shock for he berates him about reading. Agrippa and Paracelsus and chides him for burdening his memory, with 'exploded systems and useless names' (p.30). Victor is admonished by him and asked to begin his studies anew and the Professor gives him a list of books to read.

For Victor, the Professor's ugly and repugnant countenance inclines him towards dismissing him as a prospective teacher. What attracts him more is the grandeur of earlier scientific endeavours rather than the realities of the present one.

Victor's meeting with Professor M. Waldman goes better than the one with M. Krempe. The appearance of Waldman and his impressive lecture on chemistry both make a favourable impression on Victor's mind. He even listens patiently and without contempt to Victor when the latter tells him of his interest in Agrippa and Paracelsus. Waldman's lecture



removes Victor's earlier prejudice against modern chemists and he seeks the Professor's advice on books he ought to read. The Professor expresses his happiness at having gained a disciple like him and advises him on his future course of study.

Critical Comment

Victor's confession of feeling cooped up in one place as long as he stayed at home and of his dreams to enter the wider world hint at the suffocating nature of domestic life. He yearns to expand his horizons but his desire is thwarted by the stifling nature of domestic life and he wants to break free. He takes a step towards this freedom by moving away to the University of Ingolstadt. His persistent interest in occult sciences, however, does not bode well.

Physical appearance again plays a significant role in determining reactions and the importance of good looks is stressed once again in the contrast between the appearance of M. Krempe and M. Waldman. Physical appearance will play a key role in determining people's reaction to Victor's creature in the subsequent narrative.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Victor's domestic life get in the way of his aspirations?
2. Compare the two professors and their influence on Victor.

6.2.3 Volume I ~ Chapter III

Under the guidance of his two teachers M. Krempe and M. Waldman, Victor throws himself with full vigour into a study of the sciences. His rapid progress astonishes his fellow students and even his peers. For two years he does not visit Geneva. The study of science almost becomes an obsession with him and he pursues it to the exclusion of everything else. Just when he decides to return to his native town his interest veers suddenly towards physiology and particularly towards discovering the secret of life.

To understand life, he must first understand death and consequently spends days and nights at various vaults and charnel houses observing the progress of decay. Finally, one day he succeeds in discovering 'the cause of generation and life' and becomes capable himself of 'bestowing animation upon lifeless matter' (p.34).

The next step is to prepare a frame that will receive the animation, the life force discovered by Victor. He begins creating a human being and creates a giant because he is unable to handle the minute parts of a normal human frame. An almost frantic impulse urges



him on and he works in isolation, completely cut off from the normal life around him. He forgets his family and friends. The unhealthy pursuits take a toll on his physical and mental health too and every night he suffers from a slow fever, and extreme nervousness.

Critical Comment

Some major themes of the novel come into play in this chapter. Victor's pursuit of forbidden knowledge recalls Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit. In retrospect he can moralize about it and warn Walton against the acquirement of such knowledge that nature forbids. For his part, however, he pursues it relentlessly to the exclusion of everything else in his life. This in turn highlights once again the theme of alienation and isolation which is the outcome of such unhealthy pursuits.

Mary Shelley takes utmost care to present Victor's search for the animating principle in scientific terms. Thus, science poses a challenge here to the spiritual aspect of the theory of creation. Yet the quest for this knowledge is not glorified as it has its roots in places where death has been. Also, a question mark is put on Victor's claims of altruistic motives behind discovering the principle of life since it is obvious that he has a strong desire for personal glory. He wants to usurp the role of God and also to eliminate women from the act of creation. He wants to create a new species that would 'owe their being' solely to him. The theme of overreaching ambition which intersects with the Faust myth and also with the figure of Satan in *Paradise Lost* is thus ingeniously woven into the narrative by Shelley.

We must pay attention to the imagery used to describe the whole process of creation here. It is suggestive of the normal process of labour, and birth where nature's 'hiding places' or the 'workshop of filthy creation' (p.37) may refer to the womb. This in turn reflects on Victor's repugnance for normal sexuality which critics have seen to be the reason behind his desire to eliminate women from the process of creation altogether. The same repugnance also determines his future behaviour with Elizabeth.

Victor's narrative in this chapter is interrupted twice when he addresses Walton directly expressing regret at his unhealthy aspiration, warning him against such forbidden pursuits and advising him not to reject domestic tranquility and affections. Yet it is important to note that Victor's despair and grief result more from the end product of his efforts rather than the effort itself. He moralizes a lot and offers himself as an example of the dangers of over-ambition, of over-reaching. Yet towards the end of the narrative, he does not deny the importance of such pursuits and says that another may succeed where he had failed. Mary Shelley therefore refuses to resolve the conflict about the pursuit of knowledge.



Check Your Progress

1. What mars Victor's noble research?
2. How does science pose a challenge to the spiritual aspect of the theory of creation?
3. Is the conflict about the pursuit of knowledge resolved in the end?
4. How does the theme of the Over-Reacher come into play?
5. Why does Victor want to eliminate women from the process of creation?

6.2.4 Volume I ~ Chapter IV

It is on a 'dreary night of November' that Victor finally succeeds in his efforts. The gigantic human form that he had pieced together with infinite pain and care, ferreting for parts in vaults and charnel houses, finally comes to life. It breathes and opens its dull yellow eyes. Victor's reaction is entirely in contradiction to expectations. Instead of being jubilant at his success, he is overcome with horror and revulsion.

Victor is disgusted and horrified because the Monster is horribly ugly and repulsive. The description given is one that would prove even a mummified body to be better looking than Victor's Monster. Additionally, this creation of nightly toils is an unnatural creation. Unable to endure the aspect, Victor rushes out of the room to his bedchamber where he falls into tormented sleep. Even in sleep his suffering continues. He dreams of Elizabeth who turns into a corpse the moment he kisses her. This makes him wake up with a jolt only to discover the Monster standing by his bedside, looking at him with one hand outstretched while the moonlight streams through the window. Victor runs away from this monstrous apparition and meanders around the streets of the city all night. Next morning, he is met by Henry Clerval who has just arrived after being able to persuade his father to let him study at Ingolstadt.

Victor's behaviour suggests a physical as well as mental upheaval. Finally, he has a complete nervous breakdown. Clerval nurses him back to health after tending him for several months. Only in spring does Victor begin to recover and the chapter ends with Elizabeth's letter arriving for Victor.

Critical Comments

Mary Shelley sets the scene for Victor's unhealthy toils coming to fruition. It is a 'dreary night' (p.38) in the cold month of November with rain beating dismally against the windows.



The spark of life that animates the Monster could very well have come from the lightning that accompanies rain. However, Shelley leaves the animation part to the imagination of the readers.

The description of the Monster can be compared to the description of any newborn child in which case the initial visual impact is also not very appealing. Until the child is cleaned up and dressed in clothes it appears as a blood-covered mass of bones, muscles and skin. This immediately suggests that the process of giving birth has just occurred but it is an unnatural birth because the woman has been completely removed from the picture. It is a man who has undergone the labour of creation and has brought forth a gigantic monster. This unnaturalness also contributes to the ultimate horror and revulsion.

Pay careful attention to the fact that the physical ugliness of the Monster once again determines Victor's reaction to a considerable extent. From the Monster's point of view certain pathos is created when his creator abandons him in an alien world, rejecting his outstretched hand. This is again an important and a major theme of the novel and forms a vital component of the debate whether monsters are born or created by circumstances. One of these circumstances is paternal indifference and rejection which will be explored in some detail in the subsequent chapters.

Victor's dream is highly symbolic. On the one hand it hints at his revulsion at normal sexuality since a kiss turns Elizabeth into a corpse and on the other it foreshadows the events to come when Elizabeth will in fact die on her wedding night.

The reference from Coleridge's poem *The Ancient Mariner* once again points towards the intersecting texts in this novel. The exact quotation suggests a similarity between Victor and the Ancient Mariner — both of whom are dogged by fear, horror and guilt at the act they have committed.

Victor's physical and mental breakdown once again suggests the unnaturalness of his act. The spring buds he sees at his window when he finally recovers are, however, indicative of a new beginning and a rebirth for him as it were. Though Victor banishes the Monster from his mind yet the same lurks in the minds of the readers with questions like where would he have gone? What would have happened to him?



Check Your Progress

1. Comment on the unnaturalness of the birth of the Monster.
2. Why is Victor repulsed by his own creation?
3. How does the theme of parental indifference come into play?
4. At this point does the Monster evoke sympathy from the readers?
5. Which literary text intersects with the novel here? What are the similarities?

6.2.5 Volume I ~ Chapter V

This chapter can be divided into two parts. The first part of the chapter resorts to the epistolary style and we have Elizabeth's letter arriving for Victor and bringing him all the news about the family for the time that he has been away. The family has been safely ensconced in the warmth of domestic affections and the members are consequently well both physically and mentally. Plans for Earnest's future indicate a farming career which is an occupation in tune with nature. The rest of the letter is about the story of the beautiful, gentle girl Justine Moritz who has been given shelter by the Frankenstein family on account of her being mistreated by her parents. She is a servant in the household but is regarded more as a family member.

The second part of this chapter is directed at Victor's restoration of health, his aversion to science and a tour of the region which is aimed at a complete physical and mental recovery for Victor. The captivating scenic beauty and the idyllic images of nature revive Victor completely as he prepares to return home.

Critical Comment

Mary Shelley continues to expand on her theme of domestic affections by highlighting that those who had remained enveloped by domestic bliss have had to endure no such suffering as Victor had done by isolating and alienating himself from the world. Justine's ill-treatment at the hands of her own parents gives us a different perspective on family life. Incestuous overtones in the relationship between Justine and her father are also noticeable. This gives Mary Shelley a chance to introduce the theme of social injustice. Through the figure of Justine, Shelley also attempts to make a comparison between treatment of servants in Geneva and elsewhere.



Justine's story which begins in Elizabeth's letter, will be carried further in Victor's narrative and will finally be completed in the Monster's narrative. Her story therefore becomes a good illustration of Mary Shelley's narrative technique which makes use of interconnections between multiple narratives and narrators.

Though the chapter ends with a false sense of security arising from the idyllic descriptions of nature and community-living yet we as readers, cannot rid ourselves from the thoughts of the Monster who must be lurking somewhere and just biding his time. Thus, an uneasy calm prevails at the end of this chapter.

Check Your Progress

1. Write a short note on Justine.
2. What perspective do we get on family life from Justine's story?
3. Briefly comment on the theme of social injustice as explored through the character of Justine.

6.2.6 Volume I ~ Chapter VI

Chapter VI too begins with a letter, which bears the shocking news of William's death. The letter is from Victor's father. The death has not come about under any natural circumstances but rather the child has been found strangled to death with the print of the murderer's fingers on his neck.

Victor and Clerval are both overcome with grief and Victor sets off for Geneva immediately. He travels first to Lausanne and remains there for two days observing the sights of the beautiful mountains and lakes which had been his companions since childhood. Nothing has changed in his six-year absence yet such a great and unfortunate change awaits him at home. He visits the spot where William's body had been found and is caught in a storm.

Amidst the terrible thunder and lightning he sees the Monster he had created two years back and is immediately convinced that it is he who is the murderer. All night he wanders in the surrounding area contemplating the evil that he has let loose upon the world. As morning approaches, he takes his steps homeward and is reunited with his family amidst tears of grief. He is, however, surprised to find that Justine Moritz has been accused of William's murder. He repeatedly emphasizes her innocence but is unable to reveal his ugly



secret. Elizabeth enters the narrative and expresses her belief in Justine's innocence and hopes Victor would be able to prove it and aid in releasing the poor hapless girl.

Critical Comment

The epistolary style is used once again with yet another narrative being added to the main narrative. The purpose of Elizabeth's letter is now clear from the point of view of the plot of the novel. The chapter introduces us to those characters in the novel that will have a significant role to play in the narrative that follows. William, who was mentioned earlier as the sweetest child on earth, is dead and it comes as a shock to the reader. The long narrative about Justine and her goodness prepares us to believe in her innocence when she is accused of William's murder.

The Gothic elements of sublime landscapes, terrifying thunder and the atmosphere of gloom and foreboding are used effectively.

Mary Shelley introduces here the idea of the 'doppelganger' or the 'double.' When Victor discovers the Monster lurking around the spot where William was murdered, he is convinced of his guilt and at the same time he feels responsible. As he says the Monster is 'my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave and forced to destroy all that was dear to me' (p.56) Mary Shelley is, however, moving away from the traditional features of a Gothic novel and has begun internalizing the conflict and presenting it in psychological terms. From that perspective the Monster can now be seen as representing those aspects of Victor's psyche which he has repressed till now. His rational self too does not understand these repressions but which nevertheless threaten to explode in his face.

Check Your Progress

1. Comment on the use of the doppelganger.
2. How is Mary Shelley using the traditional features of a gothic novel? What is the difference in the use of gothic by the author?

6.2.7 Volume I ~ Chapter VII

This chapter takes the readers through the trial and the execution of Justine Moritz. During the trial a lot of circumstantial evidence casts the ballot against the otherwise innocent girl. Elizabeth vouches for her good moral character but is unable to save Justine from the gallows. Unable to hear the verdict Victor rushes out of the court.



In the morning the family learns that Justine has confessed to her crime. Justine's confession coupled with evidence against her has put a seal on her fate. But she has asked to see Elizabeth. Elizabeth goes with Victor even though her confidence in humanity is greatly shaken. When they meet Justine they learn from her that the confession had been forced from her. Unable to do anything to change the course of misdirected justice Elizabeth can only rave and rant ineffectually against it. Justine tries to comfort her but is resigned to her fate and accepts it with a smile on her lips and tears in her eyes.

Critical Comment

This chapter provides Mary Shelley with an opportunity to expound on the theme of injustice which is fostered by the corrupt legal system and an equally corrupt Church. It is part of the larger theme of critiquing an unjust society that goes on in the novel consistently as an undercurrent.

The emphasis that had been placed on beauty both in the case of Elizabeth and Justine is continually linked with goodness. But neither beauty nor goodness is able to help in the situation. Both are shown to be futile when they are pitted against a harsh and cruel world. The domestic and the public spheres therefore again stand separated and divided. Elizabeth, whose goodness is so effective in the domestic sphere is unable to influence the decision makers in the case of Justine.

The struggle is once again internalized in Victor's case who considers himself as the 'true murderer.' He compares himself with Justine and finds that his misery is greater than hers and says, '*the tortures of the accused did not equal mine.*' He even compares himself to Satan because like the latter he too '*bore a hell within him.*'

To project his struggle and his misery as greater even than that of the person who is condemned unjustly, points towards Victor's egoistic and self-absorbed nature. He finds his wretchedness of such magnitude that words fail to express his inner struggle. The importance given to the power of eloquence in this novel, a power which can be used to persuade and influence decisions elsewhere, is shown to fail here both in the case of Elizabeth when she tries to argue in favour of Justine and also in the case of Victor when he is unable to express the wretchedness inside him.

Mary Shelley's psychoanalysis takes the help of Milton's *Paradise Lost* as Victor compares himself to Satan. Hell is no external construct, Shelley agrees with Milton, but lies within us in our minds, if we have done wrong. Milton's *Paradise Lost* will continue to



reappear and constant comparisons will be made between situations in the novel and those in Milton's epic.

The social construction of a monster is hinted at in Justine's comment that because everybody was saying so she herself began to think that she was the monster that she was being made out to be.

Check Your Progress

1. Critically comment on Elizabeth's speech in defense of Justine.
2. Does the power of eloquence fail here? Why?
3. What impression do you get of Victor in this section of the novel?
4. Illustrate how Mary Shelley internalizes the conflict.
5. Which other literary text intersects here and what does it achieve?
6. What points towards the social construction of the Monster?

6.3 Volume II

6.3.1 Volume II ~ Chapter I

In this chapter the focus continues to be on the inner wretchedness of Victor who holds himself responsible for the deaths of William and Justine both. His heart is full of despair, guilt and remorse. Once again he finds language failing him when he tries to give expression to his grief. He is tempted to kill himself but is unable to because he is afraid of the tortures that his monstrous creation would inflict on those he loves. There is a sense of impending doom and foreboding that the worst is not over yet.

Victor's father decides to take the family on an excursion to the valley of Chamounix. He had earlier made a similar attempt in moving out of the city to their house at Belrive. Victor's isolation and alienation continues to increase as he wants to spend more time by himself. The scenic beauty of the places the family travels to is unable to lift his spirits.

Critical Comment

Victor continually holds himself responsible for the tragic fate of William and Justine. This carries forward the idea of the doppelganger or double. He speaks of the fiend that lurks in his heart and reiterates that he had been the 'author of unalterable evils.' He re-emphasizes his role in the crime saying "I, not in deed but in effect, was the true murderer" (p.70). Elizabeth's comment on Justine's unjust death brings into focus the problems of perception in

The scenic descriptions of the places that the family travels to accentuate the paradoxical nature of such beauty that inspires both admiration as well as terror. The descriptions are Gothic in nature and are used only as a backdrop by Shelley. She draws upon her own experiences of the tour of Switzerland undertaken by Percy and her both. This part of the novel reads like a travelogue.

Check Your Progress

- ### 6.3.2 Volume II ~ Chapter II

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Victor to muse upon the finer sensibilities that man is endowed with but which only render him less free than the brute who has none.

Victor finally reaches the summit of Montanvert and gazes at Mont Blanc which rises above all peaks in awful majesty. His heart fills with joy at this sight. But just at that moment he sees the figure of a man moving with alacrity and agility that seems superhuman. It is the Monster! Seeing him Victor is consumed with unspeakable rage and horror and rejects him even before giving him any chance to speak, calling him wretch, vile insect, demon. The Monster, however, implores him to listen to his side of the story telling him that it was he who was abandoned in an alien world. The world rejected him too and rather than feeling like Adam in Paradise he feels more like the fallen angel who has been driven from heaven.

He holds his misery responsible for making him a fiend. If only Victor would take away that misery and make him happy, he promises he would again become virtuous. Victor is thus persuaded into listening to the Monster's side of the story and they both proceed to a hut on the mountain where the Monster's narrative begins to unfold.

Critical Comment

This chapter is important as it weaves together many important themes that have surfaced in the novel so far and also blurs the distinction between good and evil, leading once again to the crucial question -- who exactly is the monster here? Victor's language is full of expletives and he addresses the Monster as the vilest creature on earth but when the Monster speaks in return we are surprised by the solemnity of his language and also by his eloquence and persuasive power.

Victor's reaction is once again determined by the physical ugliness of the Monster (as is everyone else's we learn later). Shelley is asking a vital question here -- is physical beauty or ugliness a determining factor for goodness and evil too? The Monster highlights the point when he places his hands over Victor's eyes when the latter wants to be relieved of the detested sight. If we only *hear* him and not *see* him the impression we get is not of monstrosity but of solemnity, and dignity. This is the first time we hear the Monster speak and instead of brute sounds that he should be uttering he takes us by surprise with his eloquence and his rationality. His use of Biblical comparisons to describe his own predicament is most impressive.

Victor's language on the other hand is full of insults, threats and a lot of melodrama. In comparison to the Monster Victor's words seem powerless and impotent. Though Victor



calls him an insect, the Monster can easily turn the tables on Victor and quash him like one. Yet he respects his creator and calls him his ‘natural lord and king’ (p.75).

The relevance of the epigraph drawn from *Paradise Lost* begins to emerge as the Monster repeatedly emphasizes that Victor is his creator and ‘I am thy creature.’ If Victor is seeking to usurp the role of God as creator then the Monster should be another Adam except that the analogy does not work in this manner. Rather, the Monster feels more like the fallen angel driven out of heaven but without any fault of his own. The reason he gives is that unlike God who made Adam in His image, the Monster’s creator i.e., Victor has not made him likewise. He has been made in the image of Satan, the most abhorred of beings. The fault therefore lies with the creator rather than the creature.

Victor’s ravings against the Monster show him up as more monstrous. The boundaries between the human and monstrous thus dissolve and Mary Shelley points out that one cannot ever be sure of who the real monster is.

The Monster pitifully insists that he was born benevolent and good and misery made him a fiend. He longs for acceptance, for love and affection and therefore is in no way abnormal. In comparison it is Victor who appears abnormal for he is forever seeking solitude and rejecting love and affection. The theme of Rousseau’s ‘noble savage’ thus makes an appearance here and the Monster is projected as one. Parallel to this is the theme of the critique of society -- if responsibilities are not honoured it can create monsters. Parental rejection of their children can lead to abnormalities in the latter. This is what has happened in the case of Victor’s creature. At the end of the chapter Mary Shelley succeeds in problematizing the question of perception in this novel. Who is human and who the monster? There is a blurring of roles here that can give us no clear answer.

Check Your Progress

1. Compare and contrast Victor and his creation, the Monster.
2. How is the epigraph from *Paradise Lost* relevant here?
3. How does the theme of Rousseau’s noble savage apply to the Monster?
4. Who do you think appears more monstrous in this section of the novel? Why?

6.3.3 Volume II ~ Chapter III

Beginning with this chapter we enter the innermost narrative of the novel. This is the narrative of the Monster where he relates his story from the moment he gained consciousness.



He begins his narrative by recalling the very first experiences he had when he was brought to life. There is vagueness about the Monster's first waking moments and he appears confused by the various senses that he experiences. He recalls how he had run away to a forest near Ingolstadt, how he learnt to distinguish between the senses of touch, taste, sight, smell, and hearing. He relates how he assuaged his hunger with nuts and berries found in the forest and quenched his thirst with the clear water in a brook. He goes on to tell about his discovery of fire and how he is then able to keep himself warm and even learns to roast some roots and nuts on it. He learns too that fire can give both pleasure and pain when he thrusts his hand into it and gets burnt. Food finally becomes scarce and he decides to move away. His alien appearance makes people drive him out of a village that he had entered with a lot of hope. Driven out into the open country he takes refuge in a hovel that adjoins De Lacey's cottage. He makes that hovel his home and makes it comfortable and observes the De Lacey family from the chinks in the window frame.

Critical Comment

In this novel of narrative within narratives we finally reach the innermost narrative of the tale of *Frankenstein* with the Monster's story which is spread over six chapters. We must not forget that while the first person pronoun 'I' is being used here and refers to the Monster, the narrative is in fact being written by Walton as told to him by Victor who has been told this story by the Monster himself.

Mary Shelley is able to rouse the sympathy of the reader when she shows the Monster struggling to adapt in an alien world in which he has been abandoned by his creator. He is like a child who has to learn about the world. Links with Rousseau's concept of the Noble Savage are evident here and so also his concept of the *tabula-rasa*. The Monster is a harmless being, appears to be quite benevolent in nature, does not intentionally harm anybody but is rejected because of his horrible physical appearance. Make a note of how the Monster learns to distinguish between his various senses on his own and also how he learns by himself to use the fire for his benefit. Here comes the concept of the *tabula-rasa*. He has no preconceived notions about anything. He is like a clean slate on which he has to write his experiences and learn from them.

The idea that monsters are made by society rather than be monsters by birth, begins to gain ground in this chapter itself when the Monster is shaken by the barbarity of the humans who reject him on the basis of his appearance. The way he is driven out of the village he enters prompts us to ask the question -- who is the monster here? Is it Victor's visually horrendous creation or those human beings who hurt him for no apparent reason?



The De Lacey family provides the Monster with a distinct perspective on human beings. He learns about the softer side of life. He learns about love and affection. In other words, he learns about emotions which at times can be a combination of both pleasure as well as pain.

The Monster's language had impressed us earlier and once again his reference to pandemonium and fallen angels, points to the fact that he has read Milton's landmark epic.

Check Your Progress

1. Why is the Monster's narrative the innermost core of the narrative structure of the novel?
2. How does the concept of tabula-rasa apply to the Monster?
3. Do you feel sympathetic towards the Monster? Why?
4. How do we know that the Monster is well-read?

6.3.4 Volume II ~ Chapter IV

In chapter IV the process of the Monster's self-education continues. He remains in his hovel watching the De Lacey family closely and learns from what he sees, hears, and observes. It is a patriarchal world where the duties of men and women are clearly demarcated. As he observes 'the young man was constantly employed out of doors, and the girl in various laborious occupations within.' (p.84).

The Monster finally understands that extreme poverty is the reason behind the family's despondency. Since his personal needs were only for the basic essentials, he is unable to understand this at first. But when he does he begins to help the family in his own small ways, like cutting the wood from the forest at night and constantly replenishing their stock.

Observing them talk, the Monster begins to pick up words in order to learn their language. He becomes so close to the family that even though he observes them from a distance, he feels happy when they are happy or sad when they are feeling so. He constantly admires their fine forms and beauty but is shocked one day to see a reflection of his own deformed image in a pool. He knows his ugliness will make any human reject him outright. Acquiring knowledge of their language becomes even more important now. He believes in the intrinsic goodness of the De Lacey family and also believes that if he can put his case



forward eloquently, they will accept him in their fold. On this hope he determines to acquire their language and applies himself with double effort towards it.

Critical Comment

The De Lacey family is presented here as the ideal bourgeois family and Mary Shelley has based this model on her own experiences with the Baxter family in Scotland with whom she had spent a few months of her life. Mutual affection, cooperation, emotional dependence are all values upheld by the bourgeois family unit. The Monster longs to be a part of this. His kind nature is evident in the manner in which he tries to help the family. His sensibility is glimpsed in the way he responds to their joys and sorrows. His discovery of his own monstrous ugliness, however, terrifies him and he begins to believe that he is in fact the Monster that people think him to be. The scene is a parody from a similar scene in *Paradise Lost Book IV* when Eve discovers her beauty in a pool of Eden.

A parallel process of revelation goes on constantly in this chapter. On the one hand there is the Monster's kindness, his benevolence, and his sensibility. At the moment he has no murderous or monstrous tendencies except his ugly exterior. Intrinsically, he is a kind and benevolent creature -- 'the good spirit.' On the other hand, we are constantly alerted to the fact that people can reject someone purely on the basis of their alien countenance. Thus, the power of language emerges as a force that can check this social injustice and the Monster begins to believe that if he acquires this power he will be able to overcome the disability of his physical monstrosity.

This chapter therefore establishes the fact that the Monster was not born with evil tendencies. External forces have contributed to his present state and our curiosity is appropriately raised in that area. The reader's sympathy remains with the Monster in this chapter too.

Check Your Progress

1. What are the author's views on the bourgeois family unit? Comment with special reference to the De Lacey family.
2. Why does the Monster begin to believe in the power of language? What does he think language can achieve and why?
3. How is the Monster portrayed in this part of the narrative? Does he gain the reader's sympathies?



6.3.5 Volume II ~ Chapter V

The first sentence of chapter V continues to explore the question of how are monsters made. The Monster wants to get quickly to that part of the story which will explain why he became what he is at present.

A new character is introduced in this chapter. This is Safie, a beautiful Arabian woman whose advent immediately wipes off all gloom and despondency from Felix's face thus revealing the fact that he is deeply in love with her. Safie, however, does not understand the language of the De Laceys and consequently Felix is determined to teach her so they can communicate better. The Monster avails itself of the opportunity too. Felix draws on Volney's *Ruins of Empires* to aid him in his task.

This book reveals to the Monster many things about the world. It familiarizes him with the basic facts about the history of various nations along with their politics and their religion. But more importantly he learns from Volney, a great deal about human nature. He wonders at the human being who can be 'at once so powerful, so virtuous and magnificent, yet so vicious and base' (p. 92). At one time man appears to be 'a mere scion of evil principle and at another as all that can be conceived of as noble and godlike.' He is unable to comprehend how a man can go forth and murder his own fellow and he is filled with disgust and loathing. He learns of 'the division of property, of immense wealth and squalid poverty, of noble descent and noble blood' (p.92).

The most important and relevant lesson he learns is that nothing alien is accepted by man. Either riches or noble birth can win acceptance in society. He possesses neither of these. In addition, he is saddled with an extremely ugly exterior. When he looks around he sees and hears of none like him which leads him to ask the tormenting question "Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men flee and all men disowned?" (p.92). He consistently questions his identity in this chapter. "What was I?" he asks but is answered only with gloom. He learns that the only means to overcome the sensation of pain was death. But that is a state he does not yet understand.

Critical Comment

Chapter V Vol. II carries forward the idea that monsters such as these are not born as monsters. On the other hand, there are constant revelations of human monstrosities in the novel. Thus, once again the chapter blurs the clear-cut distinction between what is monstrous and what is human. Mary Shelley's critique of society and human injustice continues. Another idea which begins to gain ground is that of Nurture. The monster expresses



regretfully: “No father had watched my infant days; no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses....” (p.93).

The theme of opposites also gains ground with the mention and illustration of man’s dual nature -- at once vicious and evil at one time but kind and noble on the other.

The Monster is carefully laying the ground that social injustice and oppression caused him to become monstrous.

Safie becomes the tool, a requirement of the plot to facilitate the Monster’s education.

Check Your Progress

1. Who is Safie? What is her role in the novel?
2. How does the Monster’s education progress?
3. Why do we feel pity for the Monster?
4. Why is Nurture given so much importance by the Monster?

6.3.6 Volume II ~ Chapter VI

Chapter VI provides the history of the De Lacey family as has been acquired by the Monster from all that he has heard and observed in the past few days. The family originally hails from France where they had a good social standing with De Lacey respected by his equals, Felix bred in the service of the country and Agatha ranking with ladies of highest distinction. All this undergoes a dramatic change, however, when the lives of Safie and her father get entangled with those of the De Laceys.

Safie’s father a Turkish merchant is unjustly accused for a minor offence and is condemned to death. Felix helps him escape because he sees the injustice of it all but at the same time falls in love with his beautiful daughter Safie. Safie, though the child of a Muslim father, is also the child of a Christian mother and has imbibed the value of independence from her and has no intention of being incarcerated in a harem of some Muslim man. Instead, she wants to be free and belong to a free society. In Felix she sees a promise of this freedom and is understandably attracted towards him.

Though Felix manages to help the merchant escape, his plan is discovered and as a punishment his father the senior De Lacey and his sister Agatha are put in prison. Felix has to leave Safie and her father and return to help his own family. He too is jailed. The case comes



up for trial and the family is stripped of all its rank and fortunes and the three of them are exiled from the country. They find refuge in a small German town where the Monster had discovered them. Safie too manages to trace them down and finally joins them.

Critical Comment

Though the events seem a bit too far-fetched to seem realistic, Mary Shelly's main purpose here is once again to highlight the injustice and corruption in society. Both Safie and the De Lacey family are aliens in a new world and have suffered social injustice. A link is therefore established between them and the monster. At the same time one can interpret it as a critique of the Monster's plea that he had turned monstrous because of social injustice. However, in the case of the De Lacey family and Safie the same adverse effect of injustice is not seen and we are prompted to look for reasons.

As a character Safie seems to be a foil to both Elizabeth and Agatha. The two latter women are characterized by spiritual goodness but also passivity and helplessness which result from their circumstances. Safie's desire for independence makes her overcome her circumstances and she emerges as a more assertive independent and effective figure who can make her own decisions and carry her plan to fruition. Safie's character is modeled on Mary Wollstonecraft's advocated ideal of a woman in her work entitled *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Thus, in Safie, Mary Shelley is presenting a critique of the way society treats women and is also showing the way to counter such treatment and assert one's independence. Passivity and helplessness need not be the only lot of women.

Check Your Progress

1. What is the purpose of the story of the De Lacey family?
2. What is the link between the stories of the Monster, the De Lacey family and Safie's family?
3. How is Safie a foil to both Elizabeth and Agatha?

6.3.7 Volume II ~ Chapter VII

Three important developments take place in this chapter. The Monster's education is further facilitated by his discovery of three books which play a key role in shaping his thinking and also his acquisition of language skills. These books are *Paradise Lost*, Plutarch's *Lives* and Goethe's *The Sorrows of Werther*. He sympathizes with and feels deeply the sorrows of



Werther; he learns about high thought from Plutarch; he begins to identify at first with Adam but then more with Satan in seeing the similarity of their fates.

The next important thing that happens is the discovery of Victor's journal which he is now able to read and thus learn of the identity of his creator and also comes to know about the circumstances of his creation. He is sorrowed and angered by his creator's revulsion and calls him 'cursed creator' (p. 101), who had created him not in his own image as God had created Adam but in an image that is only a 'filthy type' (p.101) of his creator. He laments his isolated existence and longs for a companion. Even Satan had other fallen angels as his companions whereas the Monster has none.

To overcome this loneliness, the Monster finally decides to approach the De Lacey family for succor. He approaches the senior De Lacey when the latter is alone.

The Monster is sure that the blind man's reaction will not be prejudiced by his physical monstrosity since he would not be able to see the repulsive exterior. With his eloquence the Monster puts his case before the father very effectively. But just when he is about to reveal who he is, the rest of the family members return.

As expected and feared by the Monster, they are shocked and repulsed by his physical monstrosity and without giving him a chance to explain Felix drives him away with a blow from his stick.

Critical Comment

This chapter is important from the point of view of the revelation of the Monster's character - as it develops and evolves. It is also important from the point of view of plot since a crucial turning point in the Monster's life occurs here when the De Lacey's repulse him.

We now understand where the Monster's heightened sensibilities come from and are able to trace his eloquence and the serious Biblical style of his speech to his reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. All the authors and their works teach him something. He identifies with Werther's misery which makes his own alienation more pronounced. Plutarch teaches him 'high thoughts' and the value of virtue in life. The lives of the heroes elevate him from his own miserable condition as he feels transported to different worlds. *Paradise Lost*, however, is what he identifies most with.

In the Biblical creation of Adam, he sees similarities with his own creation but striking differences too which he points out. Adam, created in the image of his creator, is happy; he is taken care of and not abandoned by his creator. He is given a companion to share



his happy life and even when thrown out of Eden he has Eve as a companion with him whereas the Monster is utterly alone. This makes him see more similarities with Satan and like him he is envious on seeing others happy.

The Monster's belief in virtue is shattered when the De Lacey family, who according to him is the ultimate paragon of virtue, also rejects him on the basis of his physical appearance. Mary Shelley is again emphasizing the point that physical appearance is a strong determinant when it comes to reactions of people. Also, a critique of the bourgeois family unit is glimpsed here when the author shows that such a family can admit no alien intrusions and is thus a closed and rigid structure.

Check Your Progress

1. How does the education of the Monster proceed?
2. The Monster identifies most with Adam in *Paradise Lost*. What are the similarities and what are the differences?
3. What is the turning point that occurs in the narrative at this point?
4. What according to the Monster is the creator's responsibility?
5. How has the author critiqued the bourgeois family unit here?

6.3.8 Volume II ~ Chapter VIII

A number of events take place in this chapter that prove to be a turning point in the Monster's life. Rejected by the De Laceys and driven out from their home, the Monster is filled with rage and feelings of revenge. Having lost all hope, he is now overcome with despair. He curses his creator who has made him so repulsive and is overpowered by negative feelings for the first time. Having taken refuge in the forest he gives vent to his feelings and howls in anguish. But going over the events he gradually convinces himself that he needs to win the trust of the senior De Lacey so that he can present his case to his children. With renewed hope he returns to the cottage only to find that the family has vacated it forever. In a fit of uncontrolled rage and despair he burns down the cottage and decides to seek out his creator and thus turns his steps towards Geneva.

A long and arduous journey brings him to Switzerland. One beautiful day, as he walks through a forest, he finds his former benevolent self-emerging once again under the calming influence of the beautiful natural surroundings. Just then he sees a young girl slip and fall into



the river flowing by. The Monster dives in and saves her but in return is shot at by the girl's rustic companion.

This is the last straw and the Monster vows vengeance on the whole human species.

He reaches Geneva and in the forest, comes across Victor's youngest brother William. Not knowing who he is but perceiving him as just a young child, the Monster resolves to make him his companion for he believes that as yet this child's mind would be free of society's prejudices. To his horror he discovers that William has already adopted those prejudices and thus rejects him as a 'wretch' and an 'ogre.' Learning who he is, the Monster is enraged and kills William and then exults over the fact that his act will bring sorrow and despair to his creator.

He finds a portrait of Caroline around the boy's neck. Gazing at this beautiful and divine looking woman, the Monster is 'softened and attracted' (p.112) but then is checked in his response by the knowledge that he would forever be denied the companionship of any such woman. His rage resurfaces and seeing Justine he is angered further as she too is a reminder of his predicament. To take further revenge the Monster slips the locket into Justine's pocket and lays the ground for her implication in the crime.

All alone and miserable, the Monster has ranged the icy mountain and now confronts Victor with a request for a mate who would be as 'deformed and horrible' (p.113) as him. He asks him to create a she-monster for him.

Critical comment

This chapter reinforces the idea that social injustice and rejection is responsible for creating monsters in society. Due to the rejection by the De Lacey family, the Monster is filled with feelings of rage, hatred and revenge for the first time. The question being asked repeatedly is once again "who is the actual monster here?" This question recurs with increased poignancy when the Monster is spurned even when he saves a drowning girl and again when William, a young child rejects him on the basis of his appearance. There are constant allusions to Satan, the arch fiend and the Monster tells Victor repeatedly that he too "bore a hell within" (p.106) him.

The transformation from Adam to Satan becomes more prominent. Mary Shelley is pointing out that this change has come over him only by his interaction with society. Society's prejudices have conditioned even a young child's response to the Monster and Shelley illustrates through William how quickly these prejudices can take hold of the mind.



The Monster's request for a female companion, however, again forges links between his situation and that of Adam but with obvious differences.

Justine's story finally concludes in the Monster's narrative.

Check Your Progress

1. How does the definition of a monster get complicated here?
2. What role does physical appearance play in creating monsters? Is it alone responsible?
3. Is the Monster's request for a female companion justified?

6.3.9 Volume II ~ Chapter IX

The Monster had placed a request to Victor for a female companion in the previous chapter. Victor now refuses such a request outright because he cannot bring himself to create another being like the Monster he has already created.

The Monster's eloquence, however, is at work again and he explains to Victor that he is a monster because he is miserable. Had people responded towards him with kindness none of this would have happened. He has now stopped expecting any kindness from man since there is an insurmountable barrier between him and the species. Thus, he makes a request for a companion of his own kind.

He assures Victor that if he had a companion it would take away his misery, his loneliness and despair and he will again become benevolent. If, however, Victor fails to do so, he will continue to wreak havoc on man but mostly on his creator till he has destroyed him completely. But leaving the threats aside, he once again implores Victor to understand his need and assures him that if he creates a female companion for him, the two of them would live by themselves in contentment, cut off from rest of the world.

The Monster's argument moves Victor and he feels there is justice in it. As his creator, he feels a sense of responsibility too for the first time. The Monster is quick to perceive the change in Victor's attitude and renews his efforts. Yet Victor is hesitant for he is afraid the Monster will return to human habitations. The Monster ultimately convinces Victor that all his vices are the result of his forced solitude. Once that is taken care of all his vices will disappear. Finally, Victor agrees to grant him his request and the Monster vanishes with a promise to appear again once the task is accomplished. Victor returns to Geneva.



Critical Comment

Mary Shelley effectively illustrates the power of words, of language, of eloquence in swaying our thoughts and influencing our decisions. The Monster's physical sight, as always, brings forth hatred and revulsion in Victor's heart but the Monster is able to overcome the disadvantage by using language very effectively in order to persuade Victor. He succeeds and the belief that he had in the power of language when he had approached the De Laceys, is now seen to be working whereas earlier it had failed.

Victor's sense of responsibility towards his creation emerges for the first time. The theme of parental indifference, says Mary Shelley, plays a strong role in the development of a child's personality. In this case the child is Victor's Monster who was abandoned by Victor, his creator/parent. The Monster's request for a female companion makes the situation a parody of *Paradise Lost* where Adam makes a similar request to God his creator.

When Victor returns to his family he feels even more alienated than before and gradually, as the novel progresses this sense of alienation continues to increase. The theme of domestic bliss, of domestic affections comes into conflict with the theme of alienation which takes Victor away from domestic happiness. The most deeply embedded narrative in this novel of framed narratives now comes to an end with this chapter.

Check Your Progress

1. What is the Monster's reasoning for desiring a female companion?
2. Comment on the power of the Monster's eloquence here.
3. Discuss the theme of parental responsibility vis a vis the Monster and Victor.

6.4 Volume III

6.4.1 Volume III ~ Chapter I

The Monster has placed a request for a female companion but doubts still assail Victor who is reluctant to fulfill his promise to the Monster. As a result, his despondency and gloom increase further as does his alienation. His father, observing his mood and his desire for solitude, brings up the subject of marriage and asks if his present mood is the result of his reluctance to marry Elizabeth for some reason or other. Victor denies this and his father then proposes that the two should think of getting married now. Victor's reaction at the thought of this 'union' with Elizabeth is one of 'horror and dismay.'



The apparent reason given is that he wants to be a free man before he embarks on any such course of domestic happiness and resolves to leave for England to complete the task that weighs heavily on his mind. He is reluctant to stay in Geneva with his family to create the she-monster. He plans to go to England and suggests that Clerval accompany him too at least initially. The rest of the chapter deals with sublime and beautiful descriptions of their travels through Germany and Holland. Mary Shelley follows the route they take from Rotterdam till they arrive at London.

Critical Comment

We are back to Victor's first-person narration and are at the point when he is forced to comply with the Monster's request. As his desire to work against nature increases, there is a corresponding alienation from family and the circle of domestic bliss. He has to dissociate himself from this circle and execute his task in isolation.

Much can be read into Victor's reaction to his proposed marriage with Elizabeth. He refers to it as a 'union' rather than marriage and his reaction is one of 'horror and dismay.' This fear, this horror has been seen by readers to stem from a horror of his own sexuality which he will have to confront once he enters into marriage.

The theme of the Monster as Victor's double appears again when Victor expresses his surety that the Monster will follow him to England.

The description of the travels through Germany and Holland, are based on such a tour undertaken by the Shelleys themselves. This part of the novel once again reads like a travelogue which was a favourite form of writing around the time. The sublime and gothic descriptions of majestic mountains and ruined castles, however, form only a backdrop to the action. Clerval is shown once again as a foil to Victor but the latter's words about him have an ominous ring to them and we begin to fear for Clerval's life.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Victor refer to his proposed marriage to Elizabeth? Why?
2. Critically analyze the reason for Victor's isolation.

6.4.2 Volume III ~ Chapter II

Having spent some time in London, Victor and Henry continue their tour of England and at the invitation of a friend decide to wend their way northward to Scotland. The chapter largely



takes up descriptions of a tour of England and continues to read like a travelogue. Victor's alienation and isolation increases with each passing day, and finally when they reach Perth, Victor tells Henry that he wishes to spend time by himself and asks him to proceed to Scotland where he proposes to meet him after a month or two. Thereafter Victor proceeds to the remote Orkney Islands and locates a site suitable for his detestable task. All the while he is at it, there is an impending sense of doom. In his first experiment there was enthusiasm. Now there is only horror.

Critical Comment

Mary Shelley's travels of Europe again find a place in *Frankenstein* in this chapter and the travelogue form of writing continues. What is noticeable is Victor's increasing estrangement and seclusion, which again indicates that his detestable task is going to be an act against the natural order of things. A premonition of imminent doom takes away from the joy of visiting new places and meeting new people. The feelings of horror and foreboding of evil begin to prepare us for the coming chapter. Though the Monster makes no appearance yet he lurks in Victor's mind all the time and the fear that he might kill Henry to take revenge on Victor proves to be only too correct. Yet, this premonition once again prompts us to think on the lines of the Monster being Victor's 'doppelganger' his double.

Check Your Progress

1. What are the indications placed by Mary Shelley to show that Victor is working against Nature?
2. In what way can we say that the Monster is Victor's double?

6.4.3 Volume III ~ Chapter III

While Victor is at his task of creating a female monster he begins to have doubts and he ultimately convinces himself that he would be doing a wrong to humanity at large by unleashing two monstrous beings into the world that would have the capacity to propagate further. The prospect chills him to the bone. Just at that moment he sees the Monster looking at him through the window. His malicious and evil countenance determines Victor's resolve and he tears his work to pieces. The Monster leaves howling in despair only to return a little later to threaten Victor with dire consequences. Victor is undeterred in his resolve and the Monster leaves with a promise to make him the most wretched being on earth. He also declares that he would keep a date with Victor on the latter's wedding night.



Victor receives a letter from Clerval and decides to join him at Perth. He puts all his instruments and the remnants of his experiments in a basket and sets off in a boat in order to throw them all into the sea. He manages to do that but as he lies down and relaxes in his boat, he falls asleep and gets lost. Finally, he is washed up on the shores of Ireland where he is received with suspicion and rudeness. He is arrested in connection with the murder of a gentleman.

Critical Comment

The power of false but persuasive arguments is highlighted once again when Victor manages to convince himself that he should not be fulfilling his promise of making a female monster, as this would only unleash further misery on the world. His destruction of the female monster sets the stage for the Monster's later destruction of Elizabeth. Victor's confrontation with the Monster in this chapter, however, is significant because it throws into high relief the fact that tables have now turned. Earlier the Monster was prepared to listen to and obey his creator but now he establishes his power saying "you are my creator but I am your master. Obey!" (p.133).

For the first time we also see a distinction drawn between man, as a species, and the Monster, thus underlining the difference. The Monster refers to Victor as 'Man' while Victor refers to the Monster as 'Devil.'

The Monster's promise that he shall be with Victor on his wedding night can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, on the literal level it means that the Monster will inflict a similar blow on Victor by killing Elizabeth on their wedding night. Victor understands this to be a threat more to him than Elizabeth. In Freudian terms, however, this can mean that on his wedding night Victor will have to come face to face with his sexuality and also with all his repressions regarding the same. The plot takes another twist when Victor is arrested for murder and the author is able to create enough suspense to keep the readers glued to the novel.

Check Your Progress

1. Do you agree with the view that Victor's irresponsible creation has gone out of his hands?
2. What does the Monster mean when he says that he will be with Victor on his wedding night?



6.4.4 Volume III ~ Chapter IV

Victor is taken to prison and is produced before the magistrate. Eyewitnesses recount how they had discovered the body of a young man on shore with black finger marks around the neck. Hearing about the black finger marks Victor becomes agitated for he remembers the murder of William in a similar manner. His agitation is interpreted in his disfavour. To ascertain his involvement in the crime the magistrate takes him to see the body of the murdered man. To his horror Victor discovers that it is Henry Clerval, his childhood friend. Groaning with despair Victor collapses in convulsions and is confined to bed for two months in a delirious state. The kind old magistrate tries to help Victor and arranges for his father to come after he discovers the address on one of the letters found in Victor's jacket. Alphonse Frankenstein comes and tries to nurse his son back to health. But progress is slow for repeatedly Victor keeps holding himself responsible for the murder of William, Justine and Clerval. Finally, he is acquitted when it is proved that he was at the Orkney Islands at the time the body was discovered. Victor's father arranges for them to leave for Geneva. Victor, however, is unable to rejoice either in his freedom or in the prospect of going home. He is full of guilt and remorse and feels wretched all the time and resolves to live out his destiny. He now decides to stay with his family and protect them from the Monster's next blow.

Critical Comment

In this chapter Mary Shelley is once again blurring the boundaries between the physical circumstances and the psychological reality. When Victor confesses to the murders of William, Justine and Clerval he is once again making a strong case for the possibility that the Monster is his own 'double' -- a manifestation of his repressed desires. Anticipating Freud, Mary Shelley has almost presented here a case of schizophrenia. Victor is ill both physically and mentally.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Mary Shelley blur the boundaries between the physical and psychological realities?

6.4.5 Volume III ~ Chapter V

Victor begins his journey homeward with a heavy heart. He continuously insists on having caused the deaths of William, Justine and Henry and thus convinces his father that he is mentally deranged. Alphonse Frankenstein tries to divert his son's mind by talking about



other subjects. A letter has arrived from Elizabeth in which she expresses her fear that Victor's misery is partly due to the fact that he loves another woman. Victor is almost roused from stupor by this letter for it comes as a reminder of the Monster's threat "I shall be with you on your wedding night." He writes to Elizabeth reassuring her of his feelings for her and tells her of his desire to share a secret with her the day after their wedding. A day is fixed for the marriage of Elizabeth and Victor. All this while Victor continues to interpret the Monster's threat as directed against his own life. He therefore goes about now armed with daggers and pistols. Victor and Elizabeth are married and set off for Evian for their honeymoon.

Critical Comment

Victor's naivety is a little difficult to understand here. It is very obvious that the Monster's threat is directed towards Victor's prospective wife. The Monster will not let Victor consummate his marriage as he has deprived the former of the same by destroying his female companion. Killing Victor's wife would consummate the Monster's revenge. The pun on the word 'consummate' (p.150) is obvious. But Victor is unable to see things as they are. He talks of "paradisiacal dreams of love and joy" (p.151) comparing himself to Adam and seeing Elizabeth as his paradise. The difference in the situation, however, is that in Victor's case the forbidden fruit of knowledge has already been eaten. The paradise is therefore lost to him even before he can gain it and he is painfully aware of it. The scenic beauties that had earlier always helped lift his mood now fail to revive his spirits. His isolation increases with each passing moment as the time of reckoning draws near.

In psychological terms Victor is fast approaching that moment when he will finally have to confront his sexuality. Victor's fear of normal sexuality and his resistance to it are all evident in his behaviour.

Check Your Progress

1. Comment on the parallels between Mary Shelley's novel and Milton's *Paradise Lost*?
2. What are Victor's reactions to his approaching marriage?

6.4.6 Volume III ~ Chapter VI

Victor and Elizabeth reach the spot they have chosen for their honeymoon. Night falls and with it comes a violent thunderstorm. Victor's agitation increases with each passing moment



and Elizabeth tries to calm him down asking him what it is that he fears so much. Pacing up and down Victor replies “...this night, and all will be safe: but this night is dreadful, very dreadful” (p.155). He sends Elizabeth to their bedroom while he goes about the house checking all doors and windows and looking into all nooks and corners. Suddenly he hears a shrill scream from Elizabeth’s room and he is paralyzed with fear momentarily. Another scream follows and he rushes to the room to discover Elizabeth murdered and her body ‘flung by the murderer on its bridal bier’ (p.156). Victor loses consciousness. On recovering he sees the Monster’s grinning face at the window and he points to Elizabeth’s corpse. Victor rushes out to try and catch him but in vain. He now fears for the lives of his father and brother Ernest and resolves to return to Geneva. On receiving the news of Elizabeth’s death, Victor’s father dies heart broken. Victor has to spend some time at a mental health facility for he behaves like a mad man. But when released from there he resolves in his heart to revenge himself. He goes and relates his story to a magistrate who, though listens to him calmly, is nevertheless incredulous and refuses to take any action. Victor’s rage knows no bounds. “Man,” he cries, “how ignorant art thou in thy pride of wisdom! Cease; you know not what it is you say” (p.160). So speaking, he leaves with a pledge to find some other means of taking his revenge.

Critical Comment

The rain and thunder prepare us once again for the Monster’s arrival. Victor’s obtuseness regarding the danger to Elizabeth’s life persists. His words to Elizabeth that “this night is dreadful” can be interpreted on the psychological level to indicate Victor’s fear of natural sexuality. The moment has come when he cannot avoid the consummation of his marriage with Elizabeth but the thought repulses him and the night therefore becomes dreadful.

The Monster keeps his promise and kills Victor’s mate just as Victor has destroyed the Monster’s female companion. A psychological reading would see the Monster become the embodiment of all of Victor’s repressed and twisted sexual desires which when unleashed on Elizabeth cause her destruction. The notion of the ‘double’ once again comes into play therefore and the Monster becomes an externalization of Victor’s unnatural sexual impulses.

Victor’s words to the magistrate are ironic when he tells him “how ignorant art thou in thy pride of wisdom” (p.160). In retrospect Victor’s own behaviour is well characterized by these words for in his relentless pursuit of knowledge he had remained ignorant of the fact that all knowledge is not beneficial. Only when it brings misery on his head does he realize that he has lost more than he gained.

**Check Your Progress**

1. Why does the Monster kill Elizabeth? What does her death signify?
2. Bring out the irony in Victor's words to the magistrate.

6.4.7 Volume III ~ Chapter VII

This last and final chapter of the novel is a lengthy one and brings Victor's narrative to a close. Continuing from the moment he resolved to take revenge on the Monster, Victor describes a visit to the cemetery where all his loved ones lie buried, murdered by the fiend. Surrounded by graves, Victor proclaims to the world his determination to seek out the Monster and destroy him. A laugh echoes around in an answer and he hears a voice whisper in his ear: "I am satisfied: miserable wretch! You have determined to live and I am satisfied" (p.162). So begins Victor's relentless pursuit of the Monster from Black Sea of Tartary and Russia and finally to the North Pole. Victor brings us to the point when he is discovered by Walton and his men, marooned on his ice raft. Enfeebled by his failing health, Victor entreats and implores Walton to continue the Monster's pursuit and kill him if Victor should die.

Victor's narrative ends here and Mary Shelley resorts once again to the epistolary style with Walton's last letter to his sister. Walton expresses his admiration for Victor calling him 'a glorious creature' and 'noble and godlike in ruin' (p.169). He feels he has finally found the friend he has been looking for and wants to restore him to life and happiness. But Victor rejects this offer saying that nothing and nobody can take the place of those who have gone. All he now desires from life is revenge on the Monster.

The weather worsens meanwhile and Walton's ship is encrusted with ice making them unable to move. The crew begins to despair and demands to return home once the ice breaks. Victor attempts to rejuvenate their spirits in a moving speech. The sailors, though moved, still demand a promise from Walton to return home once the ship is freed from ice. Walton promises even though he is disappointed.

The last letter written over the space of a few days concludes the novel. Victor once again argues with himself and justifies his desire to kill the Monster. He begs Walton to continue the quest and dies. Sometime later Walton discovers the Monster bending over Victor's body and lamenting his death. He is full of grief and also reproaches himself. When Walton reprimands him he explains his behavior, emphasizing that it was the ill treatment of others that has made him a fiend. He compares himself to Satan but with a difference that unlike Satan he is all alone. Now with Victor's death, the Monster seems to lose the purpose



for living and with the intention of killing himself on a funeral pyre he jumps out from the cabin window and is soon 'lost in darkness and distance' (p.180).

Critical Comment

The above chapter brings the narrative to a close except that we do not get a sense of 'closure' because the Monster is not killed. He is just lost in darkness and distance. Victor, however, dies and his death is lamented by Walton and his crewmen as well as by the Monster. A sense of closure eludes us also because none of the issues raised in the novel get resolved and we read the last page with a number of questions in our mind and with very few clear-cut answers.

Mary Shelley uses this chapter to put across the impression that Victor has had on the people immediately around him, Walton calls him 'a glorious creature' and 'a noble soul.' The crewmen are also full of admiration for him. Later when Victor dies, we are shown the Monster bending over his body and lamenting his death, torn by guilt and remorse at what he had done to this great man. The admiration that Victor inspires in Walton, in the crewmen and also in the Monster is somehow not very convincing. The rest of the narrative has almost nothing to support this view. Most especially, the Monster's reaction is not understandable especially after he has been accusing Victor throughout of abandoning him, denying him the right nurture which has turned him into a fiend.

The comparison with Satan continues and we find that both Victor and the Monster compare themselves to the fallen angel in their excessive misery.

In this last chapter of the novel, the power of language to persuade, finally fails. Victor is unable to convince Walton to disregard the wishes of his crewmen. Walton decides to return rather than go ahead in his dangerous pursuit of knowledge and discovery.

The Monster's last speech once again highlights the fact that society is responsible for making Monsters. At the same time, the distinction between what is monstrous and what is human is once again obscured. "Am I to be thought the only criminal, when all humankind sinned against me," (p.178), asks the Monster. Who is the monster here, the creature who *looks* monstrous or the people who shun and reject him even when he tries to help?

The injustice of it all has made the Monster what he is and Mary Shelley has effectively blurred the distinction between monstrous and human.

The final picture is that of the Monster lost in darkness and distance. He has declared his intention of immolating himself and putting an end to all the misery. The fire that gives



life will now be used to destroy life. The quest has come full circle and Shelley seems to suggest that such quests that work against nature can only end in destruction and disaster.

As against Victor, Mary Shelley has presented the figure of Walton who serves as a foil. Victor has been unable to live up to his responsibilities especially towards the being that he created. In contrast, Walton abandons his ambition for individual glory in order to fulfill his responsibility towards his crew members and is saved from a fate similar to Victor's.

Check Your Progress

1. Comment on the ending of the novel.
2. How does Mary Shelley obscure the boundaries between the monstrous and the human?
3. Is Walton a foil to Victor? Is Mary Shelley presenting him as an embodiment of knowledge with responsibility?

7. MAJOR THEMES

There is an ambiguity, an ambivalence that runs throughout *Frankenstein* and dares us to put fixed meanings on characters, roles, themes, and interpretations. Characters overlap, themes interplay and a continuous effort at resolving problems of interpretation has to be undertaken in order to understand Mary Shelley's novel. One cannot say that there is one particular theme of *Frankenstein*. One cannot even say that Victor is the creator though he has created the Monster single handedly. He also becomes the destroyer when he destroys his next creation – the female monster. On the other hand, the Monster seems to be less of a monster than the people who hurt him and shun him even when he is trying to help. A psychoanalytic reading would indicate that the Monster is Victor's double, his "own Vampire" that he carries within him which finally externalizes all of Victor's repressed savagery and violence. It is therefore obvious that in this novel roles overlap and so do interpretations. Consequently, a reading of *Frankenstein* has to take cognizance of a number of perspectives. There can be no single way of looking at a multi-layered text like this novel.

The major themes at play are those of Birth and Creation; Nature vs. Nurture; Alienation that results from self-absorption and isolation and Domestic Affections that need to be nurtured. There is also the very important theme of the 'Doppelganger' or the 'Double' that subtly intersects with an equally significant theme of the Monstrous and the Human.



Linked to this is the Critique of a Society which creates monsters and underlying all these themes is the fear of sexuality that probably leads Victor to eliminate woman completely from the process of birth and creation. Very often one has to read between the lines to fully comprehend Mary Shelley's treatment of a particular theme. Under apparent agreement there may lurk a subtle criticism or even a subversion of the obvious idea. Let us now look at some of the major themes of the novel in detail to arrive at a better understanding of the text.

7.1 The Process of Creation

Frankenstein is the story of a man's efforts to usurp the role of God in creating life and also to usurp the role of woman in creating that life in the natural way. The myth of creation, as explored in *Frankenstein* has no place in it for a woman or for God. It has therefore often been read as a parody of the Biblical myth of creation. In *Frankenstein*, the creation of life is man's unaided achievement. Yet there are indicators that Mary Shelley's attitude towards the process of birth in this case is ambivalent. Even before life can be created, death has to be explored. The living being here is created from dead matter. In his quest for the secret of life Victor is "led to examine the cause and progress of decay ...and forced to spend days and nights in vaults and charnel houses" (vol.1 chapter3). There is a secrecy involved in the whole endeavour and Victor pursues 'nature to her hiding places' (p.36). Nobody can conceive 'the horrors of [his] secret toil' as he collects bones from charnel houses and disturbs 'with profane fingers the tremendous secrets of the human frame' (p.37). The infinite secrecy that is involved in the entire process is a sure indication that the whole effort is geared against nature and Victor's 'workshop of filthy creation' will only produce an unnatural being – a monster.

Rather than creating a being in his own image as God had done in creating Adam, Victor can create only a monstrously ugly being. The analogy drawn from the Bible only serves to highlight the difference in the two situations. At the same time, it also highlights Victor's presumption to usurp the role of God. His desire and ambition for personal glory is evident in his belief that he will be able to create a species that will bless him as its creator. As he says: "A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent natures would owe their being to me. No father could claim the gratitude of his child as completely as I should deserve theirs" (p.36). He eventually hopes to renew life where death had apparently devoted the body to corruption but ends up creating a monster who curses him:



“Cursed creator!” he cries. “Why did you form a monster so hideous that even you turned from me in disgust? God in pity made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours, more horrid from its very resemblance . . .” (p.101).

Victor had hoped to be blessed but is cursed instead. He had dared to imitate the divine act of creation and presumes to become God. The end result of his nefarious endeavour proves that working against Nature can only bring harm and no good. His desire to ‘renew life where death had been’ may have a direct relevance to certain circumstances in the author’s own life. Mary Shelley might have indulged in wishful thinking as a child to have her dead mother come alive for her. Just before she began writing *Frankenstein*, her own daughter had died within few days of being born. In her journal she recalls how she dreamt that the baby came back to life again! Mary Shelley’s personal anxieties about pregnancy and childbirth are reflected in her preoccupation with the process of creation. By the time she came to write this novel she had given birth and also lost her child. It is possible that she had begun to doubt her own capability of ever being able to create life again.

If seen from a feminist point of view, the novel can be read as a book about what happens when a man tries to have a baby without a woman. Thus, we find that the novel is concerned with the natural as opposed to the unnatural modes of birth and creation of production and reproduction.

7.2 Parental Responsibility and Nurture

Closely linked to the theme of birth and creation is the theme of Nurture. Victor’s crime is double-pronged:

- He has presumed to become God and has endowed dead matter with life.
- He has abandoned his creation rather than fulfill his responsibility towards it.

Abandoning his creation seems to be a more heinous crime than endowing dead matter with life. When children are born into this world, their parents owe them the responsibility of nurturing them and caring for them till at least the alien world becomes familiar to them. Victor on the other hand abandons his child in this world that is totally alien to him. At one stage the Monster reminds Victor of his duty: “How dare you sport thus with life? Do your duty towards me and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind” (p.75).

Rejection, at first by his creator and then by the rest of society for no fault of his, turns the creature into a monster. Having listened to the creature’s eloquent defense of his behaviour, Victor is forced to accept his share of the responsibility: “For the first time I felt



what the duties of a creator towards his creature were, and that I ought to render him happy before I complained of his wickedness” (p.77).

Parental abandonment more particularly paternal abandonment had been a painful experience of the author’s personal life. She had seen its disastrous results in the case of her stepsister Fanny who had committed suicide when she learned that she had been abandoned by her natural father. Thus, the themes of Parental Responsibility and Nurture form an important aspect of the message that Mary Shelley is trying to convey through her novel. It is not merely a cautionary tale against the excesses of science and technology. It is also a mirror that shows up the fact that one has to be accountable for the consequences that may result from one’s actions. Running away from responsibility can only bring destruction in its wake.

7.3 Political Interpretation

The theme of Responsibility links up with a political interpretation of the novel where the Monster is seen to be an embodiment of the causes for as well as the consequences of the French Revolution. The desire for change, the desire to break away from the confining traditional set up of society had resulted in the French Revolution. A similar desire for change had resulted in the creation of Victor’s Creature. Just as the revolutionaries failed to shoulder the responsibility of the change they had wrought and turned destructive, so also Victor’s failure to fulfill his responsibility towards the creature turns him into a monster – hideous and destructive. (See Lee Sterrenburg’s essay ‘Mary Shelley’s Monster: Politics and Psyche in Frankenstein’).

7.4 Critique of Imperialism

Imperialism refers to a system in which powerful nations extend their influence and control over weaker regions or countries, often for economic and political gain. It involves the exploitation, domination, and subjugation of other cultures and peoples. Although not a central theme in the novel certain aspects of it can be interpreted as reflecting a critique of imperialism.

Victor Frankenstein's pursuit of knowledge and scientific ambition can be seen as a metaphor for the imperialistic mindset. He seeks to exert control and dominance over nature, disregarding the potential consequences of his actions. He operates without considering the moral and ethical implications of his creation, mirroring the exploitative nature of imperialism.

The creature created by Frankenstein can be seen as an embodiment of the marginalized and oppressed ‘Other’ in imperialistic societies. The creature is initially rejected



by society, isolated, and treated as a monster due to its appearance. Similarly, imperial powers often dehumanize and oppress the native populations of colonized lands, treating them as inferior and denying them basic rights and dignity.

The Monster's experiences of alienation and loss of identity can also be interpreted as a critique of the destructive effects of imperialism. The creature is denied companionship and acceptance, leading to a sense of isolation and a loss of connection to humanity. Similarly, imperialism often results in the erasure of indigenous cultures, and the destruction of traditional ways of life. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay "Frankenstein and a Critique of Imperialism" is of special relevance here.

7.5 The Over-Reacher

The theme of the Over-Reacher is also treated with ambivalence in this novel. In defiance of the limits that society and religion impose on man, Victor, like Faust, and Prometheus, steps over those limits and usurps the role of God in creating life. The act of creation is linked to the Promethean myth and to the Romantic notion of poet as creator. In the Frankensteinian world miracles take place more through scientific developments than through spirituality. In his lecture on chemistry Waldman talks of these scientists and pays them a handsome tribute. "These philosophers," he says, "whose hands dabble in dirt and their eyes to pour over the microscope or crucible, have indeed performed miracles . . . they have acquired new and almost unlimited powers; they can command the thunders of heaven, mimic the earthquake and even mock the invisible world with its own showers" (p.31).

Victor, intoxicated with the professed success of science and the miracles that it can now perform, fails to consider the morality or even the aesthetics of his act when he decides to create a human form and endow it with life. He oversteps the limits placed by society and by religion. The theme of the overreacher in *Frankenstein* is further complicated by the fact that as events unfold, we get the feeling that Victor's sin is not so much the act of creation as it is his refusal to take responsibility for his action. He sounds a word of caution to Walton: "Learn from me, if not by my precepts at least by my example, how dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world than he who aspires to become greater than his nature will allow" (p.35). Nevertheless, he ends his narrative by saying "yet another might succeed." From Victor's remark that another might succeed where he had failed we get a clue to understanding some of the complexity of the theme of the overreacher.

It is important to note that Mary Shelley is not discounting individual aspirations. She is acknowledging the fact that without such aspiration, stagnation may result in society that



would stifle individuals and social structures. Figures with whom Victor is implicitly compared – Faust, Prometheus, even Satan – are all overreachers but there is grandeur in their aspirations and the same is allowed to Victor too. The danger lies in the fact that such aspirations must be accompanied with a full knowledge of one's responsibilities. Victor may be a 'living parable' of the dangers of overreaching yet he is also an embodiment of that individual spirit that seeks change without which there cannot be any progress.

7.6 Rebellion

Related to the theme of the overreacher is the theme of rebellion though in this case it applies not just to Victor but many other characters in the novel. Victor rebels against the conventional bourgeois education his father had planned for him and charts out a different course for himself. He rebels against the confines of domesticity and sets off on his pursuit of alchemical wonders. In his pursuit of knowledge and his desire to discover 'whence did the principal of life proceed' he becomes a rebel against God. Yet, Mary Shelley has been extremely careful not to give her story a religious or metaphysical colouring. Her rendering of the myth is secular and consequently we have here a perfectly plausible scientific procedure which is backed by various developments and experiments going on in the scientific world at that time. Victor's rebellion, however, takes him over the limits that should govern even scientific endeavours. His failure to accept responsibility for his actions further blights his success.

Henry Clerval and Walton are the two other characters in the novel who like Victor also rebel against the idealistic bourgeois system of education which is service oriented. Henry wishes to pursue a literary career rather than indulge in commerce and Walton is interested in a seafaring life and has dreams of finding an easier route to the North Pole. Both rebel and go against the wishes of their respective fathers. Walton comes closer to Victor in having strong ambitions for personal glory. Unlike Victor, however, he is ready to sacrifice his ambition for the good of his crewmen.

The Monster too becomes a rebel in this novel but he rebels against the injustice of his creator as well as the injustice of the society that rejects him for reasons beyond his control. His ambition is not for any personal glory. He aspires to be part of a domestic circle that binds people together in love and warmth of affection. In other words, he longs for love and companionship that have been denied to him right from the moment he opened his eyes in an alien world. A desire for domestic affections makes the Monster rebel whereas in Victor's case the opposite pattern takes shape. He rebels against domestic bliss in order to achieve personal glory.



7.7 Isolation/Alienation

Isolation is a natural outcome of the rebellion that we witness in the case of two major characters in the novel. [Henry is the only one who remains in tune with society despite his rebellion against his father's wishes. His rebellion is small in scale and devoid of ambition for personal glory]. Victor's rebellion and his search for forbidden knowledge takes him further and further away from normal family life and the affections of people. Yet his isolation is self-imposed and is not just physical isolation but moral isolation as well. Victor works secretly in his 'workshop of filthy creation.' Progressing with his narrative he recalls: 'The summer months passed by while I was thus engaged, heart and soul, in one pursuit. It was a most beautiful season . . . but my eyes were insensible to the charms of nature. And the same feelings which made me neglect the scenes around me caused me also to forget those friends who were so many miles absent and whom I had not seen for so long a time' (p.37). In retrospect he realizes that 'a human being in perfection ought always to preserve a calm and peaceful mind, and never to allow passion or a transitory desire to disturb his tranquility. I do not think that the pursuit of knowledge is an exception to this rule' (p.37).

Victor, who had been surrounded by loving and caring people, exchanges this domestic bliss for the solitary chamber of his 'filthy creation.' His physical isolation is self-imposed and the moral isolation and alienation result from his knowledge that his actions are certainly unlawful and must be kept a secret.

The Monster's isolation on the other hand is neither sought by him nor desired but is imposed upon him firstly because of his hideous appearance and secondly because of his actions which become as hideous as him. Rather than rejecting domestic bliss he seeks it but is shunned and rejected by the people he approaches. He is isolated from the moment he is born and becomes a rebel because of his isolation. As he implores Victor to believe him he says: "I was benevolent, my soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not alone, miserably alone?" It is his loneliness, his isolation that turns him into a monster. As he says "I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy and I shall again be virtuous" (p.75). This leads to his demand that Victor create a female companion for him. He has stopped expecting that he will ever be accepted by human kind. Therefore, he wants Victor to make him a companion, one who would be like him.

Both Victor and the Monster rebel in their own way and both face the consequences of their rebellion. They become increasingly isolated and alienated from the rest of the world. Mary Shelley's treatment of the narrative material obfuscates the moral perspective and there are no clear-cut distinctions between what is good and what is evil. Is Victor wrong in



dreaming and then achieving the impossible? Is the Monster wrong in desiring companionship?

Isolation is imposed on both just as in society ‘any singularity is punished by the community, either by forcing isolation or by literal imprisonment.’ Yet Mary Shelley’s novel can be looked at from two perspectives. As put succinctly by George Levine, it may be ‘taken as a parable of the necessity of limits in an entirely secular world,’ but at the same time it may also be read as a ‘parable of the social and political limits that frustrate the noblest elements of the human spirit’ (Levine, p. 12).

7.8 Domestic Affections

When *Frankenstein* was first published in 1818, it carried a ‘Preface’ by Percy Shelley in which he categorically stated that the major preoccupation of the novel is with ‘the exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection and the excellence of universal virtue.’ Domesticity and the bourgeois family unit are held up as the repositories of all social and moral virtues. Domestic bliss is what the Monster craves for. The picture-perfect life of the De Lacey family derives its strength from family ties and affections in its trying times and becomes the ideal that the Monster wishes to attain. Victor too often regrets the loss of this domestic bliss due to his own misguided endeavours. Warning Walton never to forego these family ties he moralizes in retrospect:

“If the study to which you apply yourself has a tendency to weaken your affections and to destroy your taste for those simple pleasures in which no alloy can possibly mix, then that study is certainly unlawful, that is to say, not befitting the human mind. If this rule was always observed; if no man allowed any pursuit whatsoever to interfere with the tranquility of his domestic affections, Greece had not been enslaved; Caesar would have spared his country; America would have been discovered more gradually; and the empires of Mexico and Peru had not been destroyed” (p.38).

While domestic affection and family ties are thus being idealized Mary Shelley has very subtly also questioned these values and the family unit. Often Victor refers to his family as ‘the domestic circle’ from which ‘care and pain seemed forever banished’ (p.26). Yet, the idea of a circle that circumscribes rather than throws open possibilities is a sure indicator of the confining and restricting nature of this idealized bourgeois family life. As Victor leaves for Ingolstadt, he carries mixed feelings. There is sadness at leaving the loved ones behind and apprehension at what is to come yet he says, “I had often, when at home, thought it hard to remain during my youth cooped up in one place and had longed to enter the world and take my station among other human beings” (p.29).



The cord of family affections may be ‘a silken cord’ but it is a cord, nevertheless. It is such a cord that ties one down instead of allowing one to soar and rise above the given circumstances. Thus, within the family unit there seems to be hardly any scope for the fulfillment of individual aspirations. The same is the case with Henry Clerval and Walton.

Personal ambition or individual aspiration has no place in the circle of domestic bliss. Kate Ellis’s essay, ‘Monsters in the Garden: Mary Shelley and the Bourgeois Family’ is an enlightening piece of work on Mary’s surreptitious criticism of the institution of the bourgeois family. She points out how this unit circumscribes and limits individual aspirations and also results in a gendered demarcation of roles. Women, who are idolized as angels in such a system, are reduced to passive and ineffectual beings. We see this happening in the case of Elizabeth too when she is unable to help Justine despite being convinced of her innocence. Moreover, this idealized family unit can survive only if it is able to maintain its insularity. This in turn results in its exclusion of anything that does not comply with its tenets or appears to pose a threat to its security. Thus, while the beautiful and angelic Elizabeth is included in the Frankenstein household, the ugly and the hideous Monster whose very appearance poses a threat to domestic tranquility, is excluded and driven away. *Frankenstein* can therefore be read as an attack on the very tradition of bourgeois society rather than a celebration of it.

7.9 The Critique of Unjust Society

The family as a unit forms an important and integral part of Mary Shelley’s analysis of social institutions in this novel. At the same time, she examines and criticizes various other institutions of the established social order highlighting the injustice that is rampant in society in general. The history of the De Laceys is one long litany of woes stemming from corrupt social establishments. Justine too suffers, is wrongfully condemned and executed due to the corrupt and unfair justice system. The Monster suffers injustice at the hands of various people who call themselves human. Justine’s unjust execution prompts Elizabeth to make a very revealing comment on society when she says, “men appear to me as monsters thirsting for each other’s blood” (p.69).

The Monster’s monstrosity is the result of society’s injustice. He deserves our sympathy when he says: “I desired love and fellowship and I was spurned. Was there no injustice in this?” We see his point when he asks, “Am I to be thought the only criminal when all human kind sinned against me?” Felix, who drove him from his door without as much as asking him what he wanted; the rustic who shot him even though he had saved his child from drowning or the numerous other people who shunned him only because he was ugly to look



at. The Monster tells Walton how his “blood boils at the recollection of this injustice” (p.178).

Shelley’s critical examination of society once again blurs the distinction between monstrous and human, civilized and barbaric. The emerging idea is that society itself is monstrous with corruption rampant in its established social institutions as the Church and the system of law and justice.

The idea of injustice leading to a desire for revolution gains ground in the Monster’s own eloquent defense. In such a society “high and unsullied descent united with riches” is what can guarantee one an admittance in the bourgeois social circle. Without either of these, however, a man is “considered, except in very rare instances, as a vagabond and a slave, doomed to waste his powers for the profit of a chosen few” (p.92). The metaphor of the monstrous is thus problematized when in his last speech to Walton the Monster clearly states that the society that shuns him is as monstrous as he is.

7.10 The Monstrous and the Human

The word ‘monster’ as explained in the OED refers to ‘an imaginary creature, usually large and frightening, made up of incongruous elements.’ The dictionary also explains that the word originated from Latin word *monstrum* which in turn came from the word *moneo* which means ‘to warn.’ In other words, a monster was something that was huge and frightening and also served as a visible warning of wickedness or cruelty.

Mary Shelley’s Monster, though large and frightening because of his hideous appearance, questions the traditionally understood meaning of the term. His eloquence and his rationality too belie the notion that monsters are uncivilized beings. It is only his physical appearance that suggests his monstrosity. His speech is impressive and his kind and benevolent nature makes him more human than the many people who profess to be human. He turns wicked and cruel only after he is put through a lot of suffering at the hands of people whom he tries to help.

Shelley is therefore problematizing the very notion of monstrosity in this novel. Is monstrosity the result of suffering oppression and rejection? If the Monster is wicked then what about those humans he comes across who either stone him or shoot him? What about those men who send the innocent Justine to the gallows? It is almost as though Mary Shelley is voicing her personal opinion through Elizabeth when she makes the latter say, “men appear to be monsters thirsting for each other’s blood.” The crucial question is who is after all the monster here and who is human? The two are almost indistinguishable.



While society itself is seen to be monstrous in its unjust and corrupt nature, it is also seen to create monsters because of its oppression and unfairness. But are monsters created just by social factors? Shelley seems to indicate that psychological factors are equally responsible as in the case of Victor. His monstrous creation becomes an externalization of all his suppressed aggressions. This in turn gives rise to the notion of the ‘double’ or the ‘doppelganger’ where the monstrous and the human are two sides to the same personality. The Monster is Victor’s double and vice versa.

7.11 Fear of Sexuality

Not only does Victor usurp the role of God but also displaces woman from the process of creation. A psychoanalytical reading of the novel points towards a fear of normal sexuality in Victor’s mind and therefore a fear and revulsion for the normal process of birth. This is the reason why he probably has a horrific nightmare just after he has finished his creation of the Monster. He dreams of meeting Elizabeth on the streets and when he tries to kiss her she turns into a corpse. When he looks at the corpse he finds that it is not Elizabeth that he has in his arms but his dead mother. This particular nightmare has prompted readers and critics to conclude that incestuous desires lurk beneath Victor’s apparently ‘noble’ exterior and he is frightened by these desires. Whenever his father mentions marriage, Victor is appalled at the idea and says that to him ‘the idea of an immediate union with [his] Elizabeth was one of horror and dismay’ (p.119). The choice of the word ‘union’ further supports the reading that Victor is afraid of normal sexuality. Even when Victor and Elizabeth are married he looks upon the wedding night as ‘dreadful, very dreadful.’ The obvious and stated reason for his feelings of dread is of course the Monster’s threat that looms over his head. It is possible, however, to convincingly link it to his horror of sexuality.

In the context of the above reading, the Monster becomes an embodiment and an externalization of all of Victor’s repressed sexual desires. These are the desires which he rejects but is unable to obliterate completely. These savage desires are ultimately unleashed on Elizabeth by the Monster. These interpretations, however, are subjective and open to different perspectives.

The theme of the ‘doppelganger’ or the ‘double’ intersects at this point and aids in our interpretation. The fear of accepting normal sexuality only leads to perverted and savage desires which find an externalization in his double – the Monster.

7.12 The Double or the Doppelganger

The notion of the double is so strong in *Frankenstein* that the popular conception of the novel mistakenly assumes that Frankenstein is the name of the Monster. It is only when we



read the novel do we realize that Frankenstein is not the Monster but the scientist who created that Monster. As the novel proceeds, however, the notion that this Monster is actually Victor's 'double' gains ground. He often refers to him as 'my own vampire' or 'my own spirit let loose from the grave . . . forced to destroy all that was dear to me.' It is from comments like the above that one gets a strong sense of the fact that Victor and the Monster may be doubles where Victor is the civilized being and the Monster becomes an externalization of all the repressed desires and aggressions of this civilized being.

The motif of the 'doppelganger' is a very popular motif in Gothic fiction and has been put to effective use by Mary Shelley in her novel. In her depiction of the concept of the 'double' she almost anticipates Freud in presenting the double as contained within the same person giving rise to the divided self or schizophrenia. As George Levine puts it, the Monster and his creator can be seen as 'fragments of a mind in conflict with itself, extremes unreconciled, striving to make themselves whole. Ambition and passivity, hate and love, the need to procreate and the need to destroy, are seen in *Frankenstein* as symbiotic: the destruction of one is . . . the destruction of the other.' (Levine, p.16).

The doubling, however, is not limited to just Victor and the creature. It extends further and overlaps with other characters too. Thus, while Walton and Clerval both become other aspects of Victor, Elizabeth can be seen to carry within her aspects of Victor's mother, of Justine and of the female monster who is destroyed even before she is completed.

8. NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

Mary Shelley makes use of the complex device of framed narratives in *Frankenstein* just as Emile Bronte uses it later in *Wuthering Heights* or Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*. In *Frankenstein* we have not one but multiple narrators and their different narratives are embedded one within the other with the movement being from the outermost frame to the innermost core and then back to the frame narrative on the outside. We begin with the outermost frame narrative in the shape of letters from Captain Walton to his sister Mrs. Saville in which he expresses his intention of recounting his experiences as he seeks fame and glory on his expedition to the North Pole. At this stage, the narrative follows the epistolary style.

8.1 The Framed Structure

- Walton's letters provide the frame for Victor's narrative which begins to unfold from volume 1 chapter1.



- Victor's narrative thus is embedded within Walton's narrative and we have to assume that Walton is transcribing word to word whatever Victor is recounting to him. The second frame therefore is of Victor's narrative where Victor is the narrator and Walton is the listener.
- In Victor's narrative itself we take a further step inward when the Monster's narrative begins to unfold within Victor's narrative. In the Monster's story the Monster is the narrator while Victor is the listener.
- At the same time, we must not forget that ultimately the story is working outwards too since the ultimate listener/reader is Mrs. Saville to whom a written account is being sent in the shape of letters from Walton.
- If we work our way outwards rather than inwards then first the Monster is the narrator and Victor is the listener. When the Monster's story is related to Walton then Walton becomes the listener and Victor is the narrator. Ultimately when Walton writes of it to his sister then he becomes the narrator while Mrs. Saville becomes the listener or rather the reader and we too take our place beside her as readers.
- Within the Monster's narrative too there is another story embedded – that of the De Laceys and Safie in which case the De Laceys are the narrators and the Monster is the listener.
- Thus, each of these narratives is enclosed by a frame which is provided by the narrative that precedes it and the outermost frame is provided by Walton to whom the text returns towards the end for its conclusion and once again the epistolary style is resumed.

8.2 The Purpose Behind Framed Narratives

The question we might well ask is what really is the purpose behind the technique of framed narratives? While it provides a tight structure to the bizarre, horrific and often unbelievable events of the novel, the device of framed narratives by different narrators is put to further use in the novel.

- Firstly, it helps in distancing the reader from the events of the novel in order to allow for some objectivity.
- It also helps in distancing the various listeners from the narratives they are listening to. Walton, who at the beginning of his meeting with Victor is fired with a similar zeal as he moves forward in his quest for fame and glory, at the end of the various



narratives is able to make the right decision to return home as other lives are at stake. He decides against unbridled individualism for he has seen the havoc it has wrought in Victor's life. It is possible for Walton to be objective because of the distancing that is achieved through the framed narrative structure of the novel. Victor too is able to look at the Monster's request objectively once the framed narrative structure distances him from the Monster with the ending of the latter's narrative. Thus, distancing is achieved by using multiple frames.

- In addition to distancing, the framed structure of multiple narratives aims at giving us different perspectives or different points of view.

The various narratives are all written in the first person 'I' nevertheless we have to assume that it is Walton who is transcribing these various narratives. The question of point of view is therefore, not simply understood in this novel. The crucial question of who is actually the speaker gets complicated and problematized. Do we have three different first-person speakers or just one? It should be possible to make a distinction between different speakers by looking at their particular use of language. Their choice of words their sentence structures, their fluency or lack of it and so on. Unfortunately, such distinctions are not very obvious in *Frankenstein* as they are in *Wuthering Heights*. Walton, Victor, and the Monster adopt a similar use of language as far as their manner of speech and choice of words is concerned. They adopt a similar solemnity of style too which makes it difficult for us to distinguish between who really is speaking here. Yet the differences are there in the emphasis placed on the importance of the oral/heard narrative.

8.3 Use of Rhetoric

Both the Monster's narrative and Victor's narrative are spoken narratives and each has a listener. (As against their narratives, Walton's narrative is in the written form and has a reader instead of a listener). Each of their respective narratives emphasizes the power of language to persuade. Its rhetorical use is explicitly evident in the Monster's case who uses his eloquence to present his point of view forcefully and effectively and makes Victor realize his responsibility towards his creation. Similarly, Victor makes an effective use of language to persuade the ship's crew to desist from their demand to return home and ultimately he uses his persuasive powers to make Walton promise to take revenge on the Monster in case he dies. The listeners in both these narratives are thus being persuaded to achieve a specific purpose.



8.4 The Tone

What is highlighted in *Frankenstein* is the fact that this persuasive power of the word, of language is enhanced when it is delivered in a certain manner and in a certain style. We can call it the 'tone' or the 'voice.' Thus, when Victor speaks in his 'full-toned voice' with its 'varied intonations,' it sounds as 'soul-subduing music' to Walton's ears. Like the Ancient Mariner's glittering eye, Victor's voice compels the listener to pay heed. The ship's crewmen are fired with a new enthusiasm and no longer indulge in despairing thoughts. They no longer want to go back home. As soon as that voice is silenced, however, as soon as Victor breathes his last, the effect is lost and the sailors revert to their demand of returning home.

Similarly in the Monster's narrative, while the Monster speaks in his carefully chosen words and in a voice that is 'harsh but has nothing terrible in it,' he is able to persuade Victor to accede to his demand for a mate. But as soon as that voice is distanced it loses its effect and Victor tears his work to pieces. Even in Walton's case, though he may have been temporarily mesmerized by Victor's 'soul subduing' voice, once that voice is silent he is able to think objectively and take a decision that is in the larger interest of his crew. The framed narratives therefore give an opportunity to the listener/reader to distance himself/herself and consider the events objectively and dispassionately.

8.5 The Chinese Box Structure and the Links between Narratives

Beth Newman in her incisive article on the narrative technique of *Frankenstein* uses the analogy of the Chinese box to describe the structuring of the novel. In a Chinese box we have a box within a box and more such boxes. All these boxes can exist independent of one another. The analogy would imply that the various frames of *Frankenstein* can also exist independently.

What we see happening, however, is that continuous links are being forged between different narratives in the novel. Sometimes these connections are obvious and at other times they are not so obvious but are there, nevertheless. As a result, the progression of the plot is also not linear or chronological but we keep going back and forth with the events of the novel.

To understand this line of reasoning further you can think of the point at which Victor makes his entry in the story. If you look at events chronologically then Victor enters the story at a point when his own narrative is almost over. In a linear progression of his own story this moment should have come towards the end of his narrative rather than at its beginning. The



beginning of Victor's narrative is located in Walton's narrative and thus a link is forged, a connection is made.

Another good example that illustrates the point further is seen in Justine's story. Her story makes a beginning in Victor's narrative and is completed in the Monster's narrative where the pieces finally fall into place as the Monster tells us what really happened that implicated Justine in a crime she never committed. Towards the end when Walton confronts the Monster grieving over Victor's dead body, we get a moment where the narrator of the most deeply embedded narrative comes face to face with the narrator of the outermost frame.

None of the narratives is therefore complete in itself or can exist independent of other narratives. They are all interconnected and dependent on one another.

8.6 The Parallels Between Stories

The interconnectedness and interdependence of these different narratives makes for parallels between stories, situations, events, and characters. These parallels make for similarities as well as differences. There are similarities between Walton and Victor in that they both share a dream for achieving the impossible. In pursuit of their dreams, they both become increasingly isolated. But this parallel also highlights the difference in the characters of these two men. While Victor's isolation is sought by him, Walton's is forced upon him by the physical distance between him and his loving sister. As against Victor, he longs for companionship and friendship. This in turn draws a parallel between him and the Monster who likewise longs for affection and domestic happiness.

Towards the end when Walton decides to accede to his crew's demand and return home, it calls for another parallel which alternatively highlights a difference rather than show a similarity. Victor had pursued individual aspirations to the exclusion of everything else. Walton on the other hand has aspirations too but knows where to draw the line.

8.7 The Open-Ended Conclusion

The closing chapters of the novel find us returning to the outermost frame and back to the epistolary style with Walton's letters. Victor is dead and Walton has decided to return home. We know nothing decisive, however, of the Monster who is 'lost in darkness and distance.' Before vanishing he had expressed a desire to immolate himself but does he actually do so we can never be sure. It is left to our imagination. Even Victor's death does not bring a sense of closure with it because the Monster still lives. The novel therefore remains open-ended so far as the resolution of plot is concerned. It also remains open-ended so far as interpretation of events and characters is concerned as we are given multiple perspectives through the different



framed narratives. There is no one single way of looking at the various things happening in the novel nor can there be any one single explanation or interpretation of the events.

9. FRANKENSTEIN AS ‘A GOTHIC NOVEL WITH A DIFFERENCE’

Despite appearing on the literary scene in the same year as Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* was a resounding success because of its emphasis on the dark side of our nature. In addition, the novel offered immense possibilities for a variety of interpretations ranging from social, political, religious, psychoanalytical and feminist. Various adaptations for the stage followed and the image of the cruel creator and his rebellious monster was used in satirical comic strips to comment on the oppression faced by various classes and so on. The novel lent itself very effectively to a psychological interpretation and for this reason it became a precursor for later Victorian Gothic novels like Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* or Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*.

Frankenstein was ostensibly modelled on the lines of the gothic genre. We can refer here to Mary Shelley’s 1831 Introduction to the novel where she writes that her intention was to write a novel that would ‘curdle the blood and quicken the beatings of the heart.’ Her admission that she relied heavily on imagination, her ‘waking dream’ and the specific detail that tells us that the story was written for a contest of ghost stories -- all points to the fact that Mary Shelley had a Gothic tale on her mind.

Percy’s ‘Preface’ to the 1818 edition: In his Preface Percy Shelley tries to point at other features of *Frankenstein* saying that the novel is not a ‘mere tale of specters and enchantment’. He emphasizes that the novel works towards an ‘exhibition of the amiableness of domestic affection, and the excellence of universal virtue.’ On the one hand we have the writer pointing towards the gothic bent of the novel and on the other hand we have Percy Shelley pointing out that it is not just a sensational story about supernatural events. So where are the similarities with the gothic genre and where are the differences?

9.1 An emphasis on rationality and reason rather than on imagination or fancy: The first and most obvious difference is that the novel is grounded in a secular and material world. The epistolary style with which the novel begins provides a realistic frame for the actual story to unfold. The immediate occasion for the story is therefore not mere fictionality. Through Walton’s letters to his sister, we seem to be constantly in touch with the real world. Walton’s quest is lodged in science and reality too and carries within it a strong element of possible achievement. When Victor



Frankenstein's story begins to unfold we notice that that too has scientific reasoning as its basis and his experiments follow an empirical method which is apparently rational.

9.2 Traditional trappings are missing: The traditional Gothic setting of dark woods and haunted castles is absent. If at all it features in the novel it is there as a backdrop. There are no headless nuns, no uncanny apparitions, and no unexplained evil villains. The similarity, however, lies in the atmosphere of dark impending gloom and there is suspense and mystery but there is no supernatural element in the novel. The central protagonist is not a beautiful damsel in distress imprisoned by a tyrant in a haunted castle but an ambitious scientist iming at creating life single handedly.

9.3 Scientific experiments placed within the literary conventions of the gothic mode: Mary Shelley makes a very effective use of the images of darkness and repression. What is so horrific about this mad scientist is the use of reason to serve the purpose of an unnatural and unbalanced ambition. Shelley uses the traditional gothic device of the *doppelganger* but explains it psychologically. Thus, the monster is Victor's 'own Vampire' risen from the grave. The gothic trope of the dream or nightmare too is used effectively and with psychological plausibility in Victor's nightmarish vision on page 39.

Where is the difference located? How is Frankenstein a gothic novel with a difference? Horror and cruelty are the benchmarks of a conventional gothic novel which in a classic gothic novel are conveyed through the traditional trappings of the genre. We have seen that in *Frankenstein* these traditional trappings are missing. Where then is the horror located and how is cruelty generated in such a novel?

9.4 The Supernatural is replaced with Science: In a novel that is firmly positioned in a secular and material world, Mary Shelley replaces the supernatural with science which in turn becomes the instrument of the miraculous, the marvelous. Whatever happens in the novel can be rationally and scientifically explained. There is an insistence on the modern, secular setting, absence of the supernatural, emphasis on reason, a dependence on science rather than superstition.

9.5 Power of Destruction lies not with any external agency: What we find here is an attempt to take the reader directly into the midst of the horror of the situation rather than distancing him from it. Horror becomes more intense here because the power of destruction lies not with some external agency but within the human being. When horror becomes familiar and possible it becomes all the more terrifying. As long as



horror was being generated by headless nuns or ghosts and apparitions one could still deal with it but when it gets located in ordinary human beings the terror multiplies manifold. Horror of removing woman from the sphere of birth: Horror also of creating life without taking responsibility for it. Frankenstein is bothered only about personal glory. He dreams of creating “a new species ...” that would bless him (p.36). This is the fatal hubris of intellectual overreaching.

9.6 *Frankenstein's thematic content too makes it a gothic novel with a difference:*

Not only are there immense possibilities of a psychological interpretation of the events it can also be seen as an exploration of the social and political changes occurring around that time. The gothic genre had been used earlier as a means to explore the injustice in society at various levels. It gave voice to the suppressed in a covert manner. In *Frankenstein* we see this happening throughout the narrative – Justine's story, the De Lacey's story and most importantly the Monster's story. The Monster's voice brings in the created being's consciousness into the story thus inverting the usual power structure of patriarchal literature.

9.7 The Gothic as a particularly female domain: The Gothic was seen not only as a genre whose major writers were women but whose maximum readers were women too. Anne Radcliff, Clara Reeve, Charlotte Smith, Mrs. Inchbald, Mary Robinson and of course Mary Shelley. But there is yet another reason for calling it a female domain. This mode of writing afforded a convenient form to express the hitherto unexpressed feelings regarding women's sexuality. This genre of writing enabled the women writers to talk about their unfulfilled desires, their agonizing fears in a metaphorical and symbolic manner. Readers and critics like Ellen Moer, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, have looked at this aspect of the novel too and have called it the 'Female gothic.' For such readers *Frankenstein* is an exploration of giving birth and creating life – the feelings associated with it conventionally and the feelings that may actually be present in a woman's mind in such a situation. The growing child in the womb takes control of the woman's body. There is a sense of resentment, of being overwhelmed. There is revulsion too at the first sight of the child. But if the process of birth is taken away from the woman's domain it can only lead to an unnatural situation, a crossing of boundaries and will surely result in horror. Mary Shelley emphasizes the horror of birth without woman, 'the horror of a male pregnancy.' *Frankenstein* has been described as 'distinctly a woman's myth making on the subject of birth' because of its concentration of horror in the traumatic reaction to the aftermath of birth – the taboo emotions of 'fear and guilt, depression and anxiety'



which a woman might feel after the birth of her child (see Ellen Moer's 'Female Gothic' in George Levine, and U.C. Knoepfmacher, edited, *The Endurance of Frankenstein: Essays on Mary Shelley's Novel*, p.81).

Because of its differences from the classic gothic genre *Frankenstein* became a precursor to all novels and films and plays that dealt with the themes of unchecked ambition, scientific excesses, schizophrenia, nature versus nurture and other myriad issues so as to become a modern cultural myth that holds a mirror to the contemporary world. The enduring relevance of the novel even stands testimony to the fact that *Frankenstein* is not a mere horror story. With its emphasis on scientific reasoning and plausibility of events, the novel came to be viewed as a new mode of writing altogether -- that of Science Fiction.

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Appendix A

A Quick Look at the Sequence of Events

Volume 1

Letter 1

The novel begins in epistolary style with a letter from Captain Walton to his sister Mrs. Saville of England. He describes his formative years in this first letter and tells of his decision to set off on a quest to the North Pole.

Letter 2

Walton describes the progress he has made from Petersburg to Archangel. He also describes his crew, particularly the ship's master and the courageous lieutenant.

Letter 3

In this short letter Walton reiterates his belief in his quest.

Letter 4

The Monster is sighted by Walton and his crew. Victor is taken aboard the ship. Walton tells Victor of his ambition.

Chapter 1

Victor's narrative begins. He describes the circumstances of his parent's marriage, his own birth and Elizabeth's inclusion into the family.

Chapter 2

Victor's account of his upbringing continues. His friend Henry Clerval is introduced. Victor is drawn towards the works of Cornelius Agrippa discovers his interest in science. He dreams of discovering the secret of life.

Chapter 3

Elizabeth falls ill. Caroline looks after her, catches the illness and dies. After an initial delay, Victor leaves for Ingolstadt. He is impressed by Professor Waldman's lecture and returns to his quest for the secret of life with increased determination.



Chapter 4

Victor discovers the secret of life. He constructs a Monster from pieces of dead bodies.

Chapter 5

Victor succeeds in animating the Monster and infuses its huge form with life. The shocking result, however, leads to Victor's nervous breakdown. Henry arrives and nurses him back to health.

Chapter 6

A letter arrives from Elizabeth informing Victor of the general well-being of the family. Victor continues to regain his health.

Chapter 7

Victor receives a letter from his father informing him of William's death. A shocked Victor decides to return home. As he reaches the outskirts of his city he sights the Monster amidst thunder and lightning.

Chapter 8

Justine Moritz is accused of William's murder. A trial is held and she is executed.

Volume II

Chapter 1

This chapter concentrates on Victor's increasing isolation and alienation. He tries to overcome his despondent mood by going on a tour to the valley of Chamounix.

Chapter 2

Victor recovers temporarily when he is surrounded by sublime landscapes. The Monster makes an appearance and both argue. The Monster pleads that Victor at least gives him a chance to explain himself and hear his side of the story.

Chapter 3

The Monster's narrative begins. He starts from the moment he gained consciousness and describes his early life and the struggles he faced. He introduces the De Laceys.



Chapter 4

This chapter illustrates how the Monster learns from the De Lacey family as he observes them from the hovel adjoining their house where he lives. He begins to help them.

Chapter 5

Safie arrives. The Monster's lessons in human nature continue. Felix and Agatha tutor Safie in the English language. The Monster makes use of the opportunity and learns while he observes and listens.

Chapter 6

This chapter reveals the history of the De Lacey family. We are told about Safie, her father and how she and the De Lacey family came to be in Germany.

Chapter 7

The Monster discovers three books in the woods -- Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Werther* and Plutarch's *Lives*. Being able to read now he learns a lot about human nature from these books. He also discovers the identity of his creator. Having now learnt to speak he decides to approach the De Lacey family but is repulsed.

Chapter 8

The Monster goes berserk with rage. Burns down the De Lacey's cottage and decides to seek out his creator. He murders William on being repulsed by him. He makes a case for desiring a she-monster as a mate.

Chapter 9

After listening to the Monster's narrative, for the first time Victor realizes his responsibility towards his creation. He decides to make a female monster and returns to Geneva.

Volume III

Chapter 1

The senior Frankenstein wishes that Victor and Elizabeth should now get married. Victor decides to create the She-Monster before his own marriage takes place. He leaves for Britain with Clerval.

Chapter 2

This chapter reads like a travelogue and much of it is devoted to describing the various places that Victor and Henry tour. Victor leaves for the Orkney Islands and begins work on the she-monster.



Chapter 3

Halfway through the making of the she-monster Victor begins to have doubts. At that moment he sees the Monster peering in from the window and tears his work to pieces. The Monster howls in rage and leaves with a threat. Victor drifts off in his boat and reaches the shores of Ireland where he is arrested for murder.

Chapter 4

The murder-victim turns out to be Henry Clerval. Victor is delirious and is put in prison. His father is called. Victor is finally released.

Chapter 5

Victor returns to Geneva with his father. His marriage with Elizabeth takes place. They both decide to go to Lake Geneva for their honeymoon.

Chapter 6

Elizabeth is murdered by the Monster on the wedding night. Victor vows revenge.

Chapter 7

A long account of Victor's pursuit of the Monster ends Victor's narrative. A series of letters from Walton to his sister continue the story. Victor dies. Walton's sailors want to return home. Walton talks to the Monster when he discovers him mourning over Victor's dead body. With the declared intention of immolating himself the Monster disappears into darkness and distance.



Appendix B

Sources: List of Books and Articles Referred

Given below is a list of books and articles that proved of immense help in the writing of this Study Material. You may read a few of these articles or relevant essays in the books listed below. As far as the Text is concerned, you can use any of the listed editions but for the writing of this material the Worldview edition has been used.

A number of websites too proved helpful but they are too many to be listed. You can do your own search on the internet as there is always more to explore.

The Text

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Spivak, Gayatri Charavorty, "Frankenstein and the Critique of Imperialism" in "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of imperialism", *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985) 243-61.

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Appendix D

Questions for Discussion

1. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a Gothic novel with a difference. Discuss.
2. Victor Frankenstein's crime is not so much that he usurps the role of the Creator but that he fails to take responsibility for his creation. Do you agree? Give a reasoned answer.
3. Would you agree with the view that in *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley has blurred the distinctions between the monstrous and the human?
4. Domestic affections play a key role in the lives of both Victor and the Monster. Do you agree? Support your answer with illustrations from the text.
5. The theme of birth and creation as explored by Mary Shelley places more emphasis on nurture rather than creation. Do you agree with the statement? Illustrate your answer.
6. Comment on the narrative technique of *Frankenstein*.
7. *Frankenstein* is not merely a cautionary tale about the misuse of science. Do you agree? Give a reasoned answer.
8. What do the subtitle, the epigraph and the dedication reveal about Mary Shelley's intentions in *Frankenstein*?
9. Would you agree with the view that the Monster is Victor's double? Support your answer with illustrations from the text.
10. Comment on the observation that Walton, Clerval and the Monster are all foils to Victor Frankenstein.



Department of Distance and Continuing Education
University of Delhi