

# PREFACE

In the curricular structure introduced by this University for students of Post-Graduate degree programme, the opportunity to pursue Post-Graduate course in Subjects introduced by this University is equally available to all learners. Instead of being guided by any presumption about ability level, it would perhaps stand to reason if receptivity of a learner is judged in the course of the learning process. That would be entirely in keeping with the objectives of open education which does not believe in artificial differentiation.

Keeping this in view, study materials of the Post-Graduate level in different subjects are being prepared on the basis of a well laid-out syllabus. The course structure combines the best elements in the approved syllabi of Central and State Universities in respective subjects. It has been so designed as to be upgradable with the addition of new information as well as results of fresh thinking and analyses.

The accepted methodology of distance education has been followed in the preparation of these study materials. Co-operation in every form of experienced scholars is indispensable for a work of this kind. We, therefore, owe an enormous debt of gratitude to everyone whose tireless efforts went into the writing, editing and devising of proper lay-out of the materials. Practically speaking, their role amounts to an involvement in invisible teaching. For, whoever makes use of these study materials would virtually derive the benefit of learning under their collective care without each being seen by the other.

The more a learner would seriously pursue these study materials the easier it will be for him or her to reach out to larger horizons of a subject. Care has also been taken to make the language lucid and presentation attractive so that may be rated as quality self-learning materials. If anything remains still obscure or difficult to follow, arrangements are there to come to terms with them through the counselling sessions regularly available at the network of study centres set up by the University.

Needless to add, a great part of these efforts is still experimental—in fact, pioneering in certain areas. Naturally, there is every possibility of some lapse or deficiency here and there. However, these do admit of rectification and further improvement in due course. On the whole, therefore, these study materials are expected to evoke wider appreciation the more they receive serious attention of all concerned.

**Professor (Dr.) Subha Sankar Sarkar**  
Vice-Chancellor

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# POST GRADUATE : ENGLISH

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Paper – V : Modules : 1—4

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# **Paper-V • Module - 1**



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## **Unit – 1   □   Aristotle's *Poetics***

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### **Structure**

- 1.0   Aristotle's Life**
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- 1.2   Brief Notes on a) Comedy ; b) Complex Plot ; c) Epic Poetry**
- 1.3   Aristotle's theory of mimesis/Contrasted with that of Plato**
- 1.4   Aristotle's definition of tragedy**
- 1.5   Formative elements of tragedy**
- 1.6   Aristotle's idea of catharsis**
- 1.7   Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero/Hamartia**
- 1.8   Comprehension Exercises**
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### **1.0 Aristotle's Life**

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Aristotle was born in the little town of Stagira, in Macedonia, in 384 B.C. His father was court physician to King Amyntas III. The medical profession was indeed hereditary in his family, but he had in him the makings of a philosopher. He had a comprehensive and analytical mind and an outlook that was objective and undogmatic. At the age of seventeen or eighteen he was mature enough to take the most significant decision of his life. He went to Athens and joined Plato's Academy where he stayed till Plato's death in 347 B.C. After leaving Athens he spent three years in Asia Minor, concentrating on the study of marine biology. In 343 B.C. king Philip of Macedon appointed him tutor to his thirteen-year-old son, later Alexander the Great. Philip was assassinated in 336 B.C. and on Alexander's succession to the throne in 335 B.C. Aristotle returned to Athens. He was put in charge of the Lyceum,, a 'gymnasium' sacred to



Apollo Lyceus, which was something like a private university. His habit of walking up and down in the grounds while discoursing with his disciples earned his academy the label 'Peripatetic'. After Alexander's death in 323 B.C. there was an anti-Macedonian reaction in Athens and he was in some quarters regarded with suspicion as an evil counsellor of Alexander's. He was charged with impiety, though his real offence was his connexion with Macedon. In 322 B.C. Aristotle fled to Chalcis in Euboea, where he died in the same year.

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## 1.1 Introducing the Poetics

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The *Poetics*, by far the most popular of Aristotle's works, has influenced theorising about literature, especially dramatic poetry, ever since it was written. Though fragmentary in nature and occasionally ambiguous or ambivalent in tone, it is an outstanding specimen of literary criticism, characterized by Aristotle's objectivity of approach, generalizing power and critical perceptiveness which is sharp-pointed. It is a cogent and careful answer to Plato's furious attacks on poets and poetry. Gilbert Murray acknowledges its true value and beauty, its freedom from arbitrary assumptions and its excision of capricious irrelevancies, and observes :

The book is of permanent value as a mere intellectual achievement ; as a store of information about Greek literature ; and as an original or first-hand statement of what we may call the classical view of artistic criticism.

The form and nature of the *Poetics* have often been discussed, but the book cannot be precisely dated. It, however, appears to be a late work by Aristotle because for a proper understanding of its contents the reader must have previous acquaintance with other mature works by Aristotle, especially the *Ethics*, the *Politics* and the *Rhetoric*.

The first three chapters of the *Poetics* are largely a discussion of imitation (*mimesis*), in Plato's later use of the word, under the heads of the media of imitation, the objects of imitation and the manner of imitation. The next two chapters trace the origins and development of poetry, focusing on the exclusivities of such genres as lyric and lampoon, tragedy, comedy and epic. In chapter VI Aristotle gives his definition of tragedy and discusses its six formative elements, plot, character, thought, diction, melody and spectacle. Chapter VII deals with the scope of the plot, while chapter VIII lays emphasis on the organic unity of the plot. In the digressive chapter IX Aristotle argues that 'poetry is something more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history'. Then follow his discussions of simple and, complex plots, 'reversal', 'discovery

or realization', and 'calamity', and the main parts of tragedy (like the prologue, the episodes, the exode and the choral odes). Chapter XIII contains Aristotle's definition of the ideal tragic hero while in chapter XIV the reasons for his association of pity and fear have been explained. The next two chapters are devoted to characterization and the reasons why it is less important in tragedy than plot. Chapter XVI describes the various kinds of discovery that are appropriate to tragedy, and the following two chapters contain what might be called 'rules' for the tragic poet. Chapter XIX contains a brief discussion of thought and diction ; Chapters XX, XXI and XXII consist largely of definitions — of letters, syllables and parts of speech — of figures such as metaphor — of what constitutes suitable diction ; and the final four chapters (XXIII to XXVI) underscore the importance of epic poetry, its scope, plot, structure and subject-matter. In chapter XXVI, however, after making a comparative estimate of tragedy and epic poetry, Aristotle comes to the conclusion that the former is a better form of art — superior to the latter in all respects.

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## 1.2 Brief Notes on a) Comedy ; b) Complex Plot ; c) Epic Poetry

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**a) Comedy :** Aristotle might have written a second part of the *Poetics*, dealing with the theory and praxis of comedy, but no evidence of such an endeavour has survived. Yet no less a critic than Lane Cooper believes that the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, a brief treatise on comedy as a dramatic genre (belonging possibly to the first century B.C), contains the substance of Aristotle's theory of comedy as was presumably enunciated in the lost second book. In Chapter V of the *Poetics* we have, however, his well-known definition of comedy :

As for Comedy, it is an imitation of men worse than the average ; worse, however, not as regards any and every sort of fault, but only as regards one particular kind', the Ridiculous, which is a species of the ugly. Aristotle observes that the comic springs from a sense of inferiority (suggested by deformity, deficiency, distortion etc. in human nature or appearance), a theory which finds its most succinct representation in Hobbes's formula of 'a sudden glory, arising from a sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison of the inferiority of others or with our own formerly'. The Ridiculous is defined as as a mistake or deformity not productive of pain or harm to others ; the mask, for instance, that excites laughter, is something ugly and distorted without causing pain. Comedy represents and ridicules the forms of ignoble inferiority, and what is held up to ridicule is also held up for correction — through the provocation and curbing of the harmful excesses of pleasure and laughter. Modern reconstructions

of Aristotle's lost notes have naturally proposed that he would have claimed for comedy a purgative effect comparable with that of tragic *catharsis*.

**b) Complex Plot :** Aristotle is never in favour of a simple plot/action which is episodic — 'one in which the sequence of the episodes is neither probable nor necessary'. He prefers the complex plot whose pivots are *peripeteia* (sudden reversal, an acute form of *metabasis* or change of fortune) and *anagnorisis* (discovery, recognition or realization). In Chapter X Aristotle defines a complex action (*peplegmene praxis*) as 'one in which the change is accompanied by a discovery or a reversal, or both'. In the light of the Aristotelian example from *Oedipus Rex* (the Messenger from Corinth who came to cheer Oedipus and relieve him of his fear about his mother did the very opposite by revealing to him who he was), it would seem that *peripeteia* means something very much like a reversal of expectation or intention. On the basis of the same example *anagnorisis*, growing naturally from the well-developed, organic whole of a plot, would mean the tragic hero's discovery or realization of the truth about himself, the full meaning and impact of his erroneous judgement or intellectual inadequacy. Both *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*, surprising but natural, are key incidents in a tragic *mutheos* and Kenneth Muir, in his essay on Tragedy in *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*, cites examples of both from Shakespearean drama, *Peripeteia* is when Macbeth, who thinks himself safe because he cannot be harmed by a man born of woman, discovers that Macduff was delivered by Caesarian section. *Anagnorisis* is when Gloucester, in the scene of his blinding, realizes that Edgar is innocent, or when Lear realizes that he has taken too little care of the poor naked wretches 'that bide the pelting of this pitiless storm'.

**c) Epic Poetry :** Characterized by dignity and stateliness, written in an elevated style, having a large canvas and a magnificent perspective, epic poetry has the form of narrative rather than dramatic verse. Its plots should be dramatically constructed and centre upon a single action, whole and complete, with a beginning, middle and end 'so as to enable the work to produce its own proper pleasure with all the organic unity of a living feature.' (Chapter XXIII) In chapter XXIV Aristotle tells us that epic differs from tragedy both in the length of the composition and in the metre used (the heroic hexameter, to be sure, which has the greatest weight and stability). Being narrative, it can, moreover, represent many incidents that are being simultaneously enacted and include in its expansive orbit more of the inexplicable, which is the chief element in the marvellous. Aldous Huxley claims that epic poetry can tell the Whole Truth which is beyond the grasp of tragedy. Quoting from the twelfth book of the *Odyssey* he shows how Homer attached a good deal of importance to such trivial things as the needs of

'drink and food' and the consolations of 'sleep' for the battered and bereaved companions of Ulysses. Yes, to Aristotle, tragedy seems superior to epic in the ultimate analysis. In his verdict, epic is more accommodative in scope than tragedy, more diversified in its plurality of episodes, but tragedy has a unity of action that makes its structure cohesive and can produce a 'poetic effect', evoking a rare feeling of pleasure.

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### **1.3 Aristotle's theory of mimesis/contrasted with that of Plato**

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Aristotle says in the *Metaphysics* that the basic concept of mimesis as well as the term itself is as old as Pythagoras. In Book III of *The Republic*, Plato uses the term in a rather specialized sense, perhaps best translated as 'impersonation'. In Book X, however, he greatly enriches and deepens the sense of the term, using it to signify 'imitation' or 'representation' in the much wider sense of the copying of reality as it exists by means of literature and the visual arts. After attacking poets and poetry on theological and moral grounds, Plato sets himself to indict them, giving the grounds of his indictment in terms of his Theory of Ideas. While evolving this theory Plato conceives of three orders of reality : the ultimate or original order consisting of forms or ideas which may be described as eternal verities, changeless and universal ; the world of nature and of human beings with all their manufactured articles ; and the poetic (or artistic) creations which give us only the shadows or reflexions of objects and phenomena which belong to the second order. Plato is unambiguous in his assertion that the terrestrial existence, perceptible to our senses, is only an imitation of the world of forms or ideas and that the poet's work, being an imitation of this imitation, is at three removes (according to the classical or inclusive method of counting) from what is 'truly real'. Dwelling on Plato's theory of imitation S. C. Sengupta, in *Towards a Theory of Imagination*, says that in the world of sensuous experience we deal with particular objects, but our acquaintance with them can hardly be called knowledge, for there can be no knowledge of sensible objects which are mere imitations of the forms or ideas that belong to the ultimate or original order of reality. At a still lower level stands the poet who draws images of sensible objects, his image-drawing being an imitation of imitation.

R. L. Nettleship, in his *Lectures on The Republic of Plato*, investigates the nature and significance of Plato's theory of imitation. He observes :

Imitation, which both the painter and the poet exercise, is a certain kind of production of making ... but what kind ? According to Plato there are three grades of making and three corresponding makers to be distinguished. There is, first, the making

of that which is in the order of nature ... of which the only maker is God, who is therefore called the maker of the original or natural. Secondly, there are the ordinary artificial things used in life, which are made by the craftsman or artisan ; he makes, Plato tells us, something like that which God makes, a particular form of the thing God is maker of. Thirdly, there is a product which consists in the appearance of such things (particular concrete objects) as the artisan makes, and the maker of this product is the artist, who makes the appearance as a man might make it by holding up a mirror before a thing. Plato does not consider whether the artist (or the poet) originates. He believes that the artist (or the poet) merely holds up the mirror to nature and puts before us certain appearances only.

It is hardly necessary to point out that Aristotle's interpretation of *mimesis* substantially counters the main argument of Plato, as set fourth in Book X of *The Republic*, that the poet holds a mirror to the objects of the actual world around him and beguiles us with their shadows or reflexions. Aristotle, on the other hand, avers that the poet must impose order on the chaos of life and create a cosmos governed by rational norms, removing all that is illogical and adventitious in human nature. His imitation is thus a conscious and creative process which illuminates reality or idealises it, and the poetic fiction that emerges from this process is not the shadow or reflexion of an actual object but the image of a better or higher reality (*belition* – a term which constitutes a part of Aristotle's general metaphysics of form, growth, direction or ideal). The chief concern of poetry is the imitation or representation of the permanent and general possibilities of human nature and the poet transcends the limits of real life to gain the image and essence of the concrete universe without violating the fundamental laws which govern its operation. The poet in his mimetic exercise shows his interest in order, design and symmetry, responds to all that is marvellous and striking, and seeks to comprehend the ideal and represent what may or should happen rather than what happens.

The possible objects of poetic imitation, says Aristotle in Chapter II, are not only men as they are in real life, but men either better (in tragedy) or worse (in comedy) than they are. In Chapter XXV Aristotle further says :

The poet being an imitator just like the painter or other maker of likenesses, he must necessarily in all instances represent things in one or other of three aspects, either as they were or are, or as they are said or thought to be or to have been, or as they ought to be.

In the same chapter a comparative evaluation of Sophocles and Euripides has

been implied with a view to driving home the implications of the expression *hoia einai dei* ('things as they ought to be') :

If the poet's description be criticized as not true to fact, one may urge perhaps that the object ought to be as described — an answer like that of Sophocles, who said that he drew men as they ought to be, and Euripides as they were.

Aristotle's emphasis is obviously on the ideal — as he says in the treatise *On the Generation of Animals* : 'Nature works either through mechanical necessity or through a drive toward the ideal.' Questions have been raised as regards the ideal which should be presented in the mimesis of poetry. S. H. Butcher, in his excellent commentary on the *Poetics*, says that the Aristotelian expression denoting the ideal must be taken not in a moral but simply in an aesthetic sense.

From the contrast between the actual and the ideal we may proceed to that between history and poetry, the former dealing with particulars, the latter with universals. Aristotle's observations in Chapter IX, distinguishing between historian and poet, or between poetry and history, may be quoted in this connection :

The distinction between historian and poet is not in the one writing prose and the other verse .... poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By 'a universal statement' Aristotle means the kind of thing a certain type of person will probably or necessarily say or do in a given situation. Poetry registers universal statements, envisages and includes universal truths ; it does not seek to describe what has actually happened, but the kinds of thing that may happen — that is, 'that could happen because they are, in the circumstances, either probable or necessary' ; and, lastly, it prefers impossible probabilities to improbable possibilities. The poet does not perform the task of the historian : his function is to liberate poetry from slavish adherence to the particulars of life lived ; he may collect his material from actual history, but he invests whatever is probable or conforms to the law of necessity with both purpose and persuasiveness. S. H. Butcher asseverates that the aim of poetry is 'to represent the universal through the particular, to give a concrete and living embodiment of a universal truth'. And when Aristotle speaks of poetic universality, he means that the poet who is a maker of plots finds it achievable not so much in the conception of character as in the sequence of action awakening pity and fear, which is at once probable and necessary.

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## 1.4 Aristotle's definition of tragedy

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After some consideration of the various modes of literary representation and the origins and development of poetry and literary forms in the previous chapters of the *Poetics*, Aristotle, in Chapter VI, embarks upon the most important subject of his discussion, tragic drama. He first gives a comprehensive definition of tragedy before making a perceptive investigation of its constituent parts. He says :

A tragedy ... is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude complete in itself ; in language with pleasurable accessories, each kind brought in separately in the parts of the work ; in a dramatic, not in a narrative form ; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions. The 'pleasurable accessories, in the definition mean rhythm and harmony, while by 'the kinds separately' Aristotle suggests that some portions are worked out exclusively with verse, while others in turn with song.

Words like 'pity' and 'fear' in Aristotle's definition of tragedy require explanation. I. A. Richards, in *Principles of Literary Criticism*, explains 'pity' as 'the impulse to approach' and 'fear' as 'the impulse to retreat'. We have, however, a strikingly insightful interpretation of these two words in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* where the hero Stephen says in Chapter 5 : 'The tragic emotion, in fact, is a face looking two ways, towards terror and towards pity, both of which are phases of it', Explaining the implications of the twin emotions of pity and fear (terror) Stephen specifies the terms of his definitions :

Pity is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the human sufferer. Terror is the feeling which arrests the mind in the presence of whatsoever is grave and constant in human sufferings and unites it with the secret cause.

The tragic emotions of pity and fear may be adequately clarified with reference to Sophocles's Oedipus who unknowingly committed two of the most 'unspeakable' crimes, patricide and incest, and willingly suffered the wretched plight of being a blind and excommunicated beggar. We feel pity for Oedipus for his undeserved misfortune and at the same time become afraid because if Oedipus, a mere puppet in the hand of *moira* (lot) or *tuche* (chance), suffers today, we may have to suffer tomorrow in a similar way, battered by the blows of Fate.

Equally important is the term *catharsis* used once, without any explanation, in

Aristotle's definition of tragedy – a term which has become as much a part of critical vocabulary as has *mimesis*. Generally speaking, a catharsis is a purgation, and Aristotle appears to regard it as a beneficial effect of tragedy, one that ensures a more balanced and disciplined emotional state. Harry Blamires, in *A History of Literary Criticism*, expresses the view that the notion of purgation seems to be the nearest Aristotle comes 'towards a moral justification of imaginative literature which would refute Plato's criticism of poetry for its tendency to arouse feelings irresponsibly and perturb the heart to no rational end. D. W. Lucas, in his commentary on the *Poetics*, notes that the term *catharsis* is customarily interpreted either from a medical basis, as an 'evacuation of morbid substances from the human system' or from a religio-medical one, as a psycho-therapeutic treatment of emotional disorders by ritual or music. A. J. A. Waldock, in *Sophocles the Dramatist*, says that the 'medicinal' interpretation of *catharsis* as an aperient or laxative assumes that 'a theatre-goer is a person on the brink of hysteria.' Gerald Else is however of the opinion that there is no hint given by Aristotle that the end of drama is to 'alleviate pathological states'. Aristotle, on the contrary, believes that tragedy's function is the spontaneous evocation/arousal of the emotions of pity and fear, which at once presupposes and envisages normal responses in the audience. What the audience does with these emotions thereafter is something which he does not consider. Whatever be the interpretation given by the exegetes of Aristotelian *catharsis*, traditional (purification - theory of Lessing), the emotional effect produced by tragedy is the removal of all our untoward passions and the enrichment of our deeper sensibilities. The pleasure we derive from tragedy is a relief after emotional orgy — a state, not only of moderation, but of the transcendental, where our pity and fear are purified from or purged of personal associations.

Many scholars and critics are frank enough to admit that the feeling they have at the end of a tragedy is not akin to the feeling of having been purged of the emotions of pity and fear. Aristotle certainly hit upon the idea of emotional purgation (entailing ethical rationalism and aesthetic depersonalization) because he felt that he had to counter Plato's animadversions on poets and poetry. He would have been on better ground if he had claimed that the true tragedy gives form to our emotions and thus controls them, making of them something far removed from the emotions furiously denounced by Plato in the *Republic*. Aristotle's focus is always on the beauty of form ; hence his emphasis is on tragedy's well-constructed plot, its symmetry and magnitude, its action complete in itself, consisting of a beginning, a middle and an end. In chapter VII Aristotle says : 'Beauty is a matter of size and order'. The term 'beauty' (*to kalon*) is used in the Platonic dialogues to refer to a wide spectrum of natural objects, institutions and ideas.



In the *Philebus* we have the specific concept of beauty as measure and proportion, though in the *Memorabilia* of Xenophon Socrates produces the concept of the beautiful as the convenient or functional. Aristotle's emphasis on form (logical, ethical and emotional) as implied in his idea of beauty is integrally related to his concept of the whole as explained in the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics*. His definition of tragedy bears witness to his interest in and fascination with the formal design and progression of dramatic praxis.

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## 1.5 Formative elements of tragedy

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After giving the definition of tragedy Aristotle describes its formative elements : plot (*muthos*) character (*ethos*), thought (*dianoia*), diction (*lexis*), melody (*melos*) and spectacle (*opsis*). Aristotle expresses the view that of the six formative elements of tragedy the most important is the plot, the arrangement of the events, by which he does not mean, of course, the mere summarizable, the epitome of events, but the way in which the action proceeds at each point. Commenting on the basic structure of Aristotelian plot, David Daiches lays emphasis on its cogency, naturalness and mode of organization and brings out its exclusivity. The plot of a Shakespeare play is not to be identified with the story he found in his source — in Holinshed or in an Italian *novella* or in an earlier Elizabethan play — even though the summarizable plots may be almost identical. Similarly, the plots of Aeschylus or Sophocles are not identical with the myths on which they based their tragedies, even though the tragedies did in fact use the stories as known in the myths. Plot is something fuller and subtler than this ; it is the way in which the action works itself out, the whole causal chain which leads to the final outcome. In this sense, plot is 'at once the first and the most important thing in tragedy' — 'the first essential, the life and soul, so to speak'. Character is important, too, but, as Daiches rightly points out, it is important as a causal element in the plot. In a dramatic monologue by Browning, character is interesting because Browning explores the deeper interiorities of the soul and focuses on 'Action in Character, rather than Character in Action'. A novel like Jane Austen's *Emma*, no less than tragedies like Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, however, develops its meaning through the progression of the action.

According to Aristotle, plot is of supreme importance in tragedy, and character takes the second place. He is interested in action that is ordered and coherent — not only in external action but also in inner action, the contemplative life of man. In Chapter

VI of the *Poetics* he draws a line of demarcation between action and character and goes so far as to say that there could not be a tragedy without action, but there could be without character. Aristotle's observation is philosophical rather than aesthetic :

All human happiness or misery takes the form of action ; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions — what we do — that we are happy or the reverse. Character he looks upon as revealing the moral purpose of the agent — it is 'that which reveals personal choice, the kinds of thing a man chooses or rejects when that is not obvious.' The third formative element of tragedy, thought (one of the principal vehicles of which in Greek tragedy is the chorus), registers the ability to say what is possible and appropriate in any given circumstances — 'it is what, in the speeches in the play, is related to the arts of politics and rhetoric'. Of the other constituents of tragedy, diction means the expressive use of words, having the same force in verse and in prose ; melody is the more important of the pleasurable additions to the play ; and spectacle, or stage effect, despite being an attraction, has the least to do with the playwright's craft or with the art of poetry. Thought is however, more important than diction, melody and spectacle, and, in the ultimate analysis, it determines both' the art of plot construction and that of character-drawing. Aristotle is led to emphasize this element in Greek tragedy not only because of his own philosophical predilections but also because it helps the playwright to make dramatic representation of well-known myths more interesting and meaningful by giving 'argumentative plausibility to alternative courses.'

The phrase quoted above has been used by S. C. Sen Gupta who believes that in spite of Aristotle's championship of the primacy of plot, we can say that there can be no serious drama without plot, character and thought. Bernard Shaw hates plots as the deadest of dead wood, but many of his plays are full of exciting action. Maeterlinck's plays are said to be static, but the inner action they contain energise the whole texture of symbolism they seek to weave. In the structure of a good drama plot and character are inseparably intertwined. *Oedipus Rex* has a faultlessly articulated plot, while the Theban King, shattered by the blows of ruthless Fate, is no less absorbing in his moral choice that prompts him to blind himself and suffer the lonely anguish of a penitent. Again, the importance of plot and character has been linked up with that of thought in *Antigone*, where the encounter between a high-handed ruler and a suffering woman has been interpreted (by no less a philosopher-critic than Hegel) as a collision between two equally justified principles of the same ethical substance. Thought seems to be ascendant in the 'problem' plays of Ibsen and the 'discussion' plays of Shaw — much more

prominently of course, than in Greek tragedy — but, under any circumstances, there can be no basic consideration of character and action separately. We may quote here a penetrating comment made by Henry James in *The Art of Fiction*: ‘What is character but the determination of incident ? What is incident but the illustration of character ?’ Aristotle is however reluctant to acknowledge or approve of the interdependent relationship between plot and character. He maintains ‘That tragedy is primarily an imitation of action, and that it is mainly for the sake of the action that it imitates the personal agents.’ The action of a play is not laid out ‘to portray characters’. Characters exist for the sake of the action. It is interesting to note that the central bulk of the Poetics concentrates on the prioritisation of plot.

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## 1.6 Aristotle’s idea of catharsis

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Plato in *The Republic* condemns poetry partly because it calls into play certain emotions, including pity and fear, which prevent a man from thinking rationally or sensibly. Aristotle in the Poetics does not deny that pity and fear are strongly experienced by those who see or read a tragedy, but in rebutting Plato’s argument he evolves the idea of purging or cleansing of these twin emotions, taking a hint from the current use of music in the treatment of mental disorder. With the help of the term *catharsis* (which has had a poetic explanation in Milton’s *Samson Agonistes* as ‘calm of mind, all passion spent’), Aristotle seeks to explain the feelings of exaltation, relief and pleasure rather than despondency, frustration and anguish that playgoers commonly experience during and after the catastrophe (which invariably foregrounds suffering, defeat, and even death). S. C. Sengupta supplies us with the information that Aristotle uses the term in the sense of clearing off or evacuation in the *Historia Animalium*, where he speaks of menstrual discharge and birth discharge in females. The purgational idea suggesting the restoration of emotional equilibrium (in the *Poetics*) has been explained and emphasised with reference to a passage in the *Politics*, where Aristotle refers to the curing method of mystic frenzy by means of requisite melodies.

The notion of *catharsis* as purgation has been developed in its most acceptable form by Ingram Bywater who observes thus in his commentary on the *Poetics* :

The Drama has a therapeutic rather than a directly moral effect ; and the excitement it supplies is required by us at times to carry off or purge away certain emotions, and relieve the soul of the disquietude they would cause if defrauded of the satisfaction naturally due to them.

The therapeutic aspect of tragedy, its evacuation/purgation of pity and fear, has been stressed by Clifford Leech who examines the whole phenomenon by referring to a mode of treatment in Aristotle's time. He speaks of the practice to increase the degree of violence in the mentally-disordered patient by the playing of musical instruments, until a state of exhaustion sets in. As recently as twenty years ago in the Arabic-speaking world, the practice of ez-zar was basically what Aristotle knew in Hellas : only it had become semi-rationalized in associating particular tunes with particular spirits, and the patient who was regarded as possessed was abandoned by his demon when the right tune was played.

The term *catharsis* is used once in the *Poetics*. It is introduced suddenly, without any explanation, into the definition of tragedy in Chapter VI and is not heard of again. The relevant passage is translated as follows, by Ingram Bywater : 'with incidents arousing pity and fear, where with to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions', and by L. J. Potts : 'by means of pity, and fear effecting its purgation of these emotions.' The traditional interpretation of the passage is still represented in D. W. Lucas's commentary on the *Poetics*, published in his edition of 1968. Lucas notes that the term is customarily explained either from a medical basis, as an 'evacuation of morbid substances from the human system' or from a religio-medical one, as a psychotherapeutic treatment of emotional disorders by ritual or music. Lucas himself believes that 'the horror and crudity of pity and fear in real life are purified and transformed into something valuable but still true by the introduction of aesthetic distance'. He observes that tragedy does in fact purify or diminish the emotional capacity of the spectators over a considerable period of time after the performance thus affecting their 'subsequent emotional stability.' Like Bernays and many other exponents of the purgational idea, he explains this process by references to ancient rituals leading to *enthusiasmos*, a *condition* of trance or a state of hysteria, as described in Book VIII of Aristotle's *Politics*, where enthusiastic music is said to put the soul into 'an orgiastic state' and subsequently moderate, compose and balance it by a mode of therapy.

There has been a good deal of controversy as regards the origin and interpretation of the term *catharsis*. Indeed, the excoetes of Aristotelian *catharsis* have concentrated their attention over the question whether the term is a medical metaphor or a religious one — whether it implies the purgation of our harmful emotions (which may run to violent excesses) or suggests the purification of these emotions, underscoring the dignity of the tragic experience. The first or hygienic view was known to the critics of the Italian Renaissance ; Jacob Bernays cogently revived it in modern criticism in 1857. Of

the modern critics it is F. L. Lucas who asserts that *catharsis* in the context of Aristotle's definition of tragedy 'is a definitely medical metaphor — a metaphor of an aperient. He has however, expressed his strong disapprobation of the idea of purgation, saying that 'the theatre is not a hospital'. The second or lustratory view, advocated by Lessing on the basis of Plato's interpretation of *catharsis* as purification in the *Phaedo* and in the *Sophist*, was adopted by S. H. Butcher in *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, published in 1894. The major objection to the traditional theory is that it considers the Platonic view of the emotions as 'morbid or irrational' and assumes that *catharsis* is, for Aristotle, the *telos* of tragedy. As A. J. A. Waldock, in *Sophocles the Dramatist*, says, the 'medicinal' interpretation of *catharsis* as an aperient or laxative assumes that the playgoer is a person on the brink of hysteria and that 'the ideal audience for (say) the *Medea* would presumably be an audience of neurotics.' Gerald Else, in his comprehensive discussion of *catharsis*, observes that the traditional interpretation of the term is a therapeutic one, directed towards the audience, and 'presupposes that we come to the tragic drama (unconsciously if you will) as patients to be cured, relieved, restored to psychic health'. Else, however, finds not a single word to support this in the *Poetics*, 'not a hint that the end of the drama is to cure or alleviate pathological states'. He would rather argue that *catharsis* is not an end-product but a process, effected by the whole structure of *pathematon* ('painful or fatal arts') throughout the play.

The interpretation of *catharsis* as a kind of ceremonial purification from religious impurity has been strengthened by Aristotle's use of the word *katharseous* in its normal ritual sense of purification to describe the escape plot of Euripides's *Iphigenia in Tauris* in Chapter XVII of the *Poetics*. Religious impurity originates in an excess of religious enthusiasm, but, says Humphry House, this enthusiasm is not to be dealt with by suppression, which merely makes it stronger, nor by letting it have an uncontrolled sway, where it becomes disorderly and wild. What is necessary is the *catharsis* of this enthusiasm by means of religious music. Gilbert Murray, in his Preface to Bywater's translation of the *Poetics*, stresses the notion of purification in a different perspective. He tells us that at any rate the Dionysus ritual itself was a *katharmos* or *Katharsis* — 'a purification of the community from the taints and poisons of the past year, the old contagion of sin and death? In the days of Thespis the greatest importance was attached to the *catharsis* of human *pathemata* ('passions' or 'sufferings') which had a mimic representation on the stage. It is to be noted in this connection that in the year 361 B. C. during Aristotle's lifetime, Greek tragedies were introduced into Rome, 'not on artistic but on superstitious grounds, as a *katharmos* against a pestilence.'

According to Humphry House, what ultimately matters is not the nature of the metaphor of *catharsis* – whether it is medical or religious. He expresses the view that the broader principle to which catharsis has to be referred is to be sought in the wider context of Aristotle’s thought as a whole, and the guide to it is the principle of ‘mean’, derived ultimately from Pythagoras, and discussed comprehensively in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The result of *catharsis* is emotional equilibrium, emotional health, and the goal achieved may be described as that of adjustment, balance and rightness, a perfect state of poise free from all manner of untoward passions. With reasonableness and eloquence Humphry House dwells on the notion of *catharsis* thus :

A tragedy rouses the emotions from potentiality to activity by worthy and adequate stimuli ; it controls them by directing them to the right objects in the right way; and exercises them, within the limits of the play, as the emotions of the good man would be exercised. When they subside to potentiality again, after the play is over, it is a more ‘trained’ potentiality than before ... Our responses are brought nearer to those of the good and wise man.

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## **1.7 Aristotle’s definition of the tragic hero/Hamartia**

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With the exception of the definition of tragedy itself, probably no passage in the *Poetics* has given rise to so much critical discussion as the definition of the tragic hero in Chapter XIII. The qualities requisite to the tragic hero are deduced from the primary fact that the function of tragedy is to produce the catharsis of the twin emotions of pity and fear — pity being felt for a person who, if not spotlessly innocent or virtuous, meets with suffering beyond his deserts and fear being aroused when the sufferer is a person of like nature with ourselves. Aristotle is emphatic about the rejection of three types of imperfect characters for constructing the finest form of ‘complex’ action in tragic drama. In the first place, an eminently good man undergoing the change from prosperous to adverse fortune awakens neither pity nor fear, but shocks or repels us. Next, and utterly devoid of tragic import, is the representation of the thoroughly bad man who experiences the contrary change from adversity to prosperity. The emotion aroused in this case is neither pity nor fear, but that of righteous anger or moral indignation excited by undeserved good fortune. Again, there is the overthrow of the extremely bad man, the utter villain, a catastrophe that satisfies the moral sense and may arouse the human feeling in us, but surely lacks in the distinctively tragic qualities.

After discussing the ‘imperfect’ characters Aristotle evolves the idea of the tragic

hero which, in his view, answers all the requirements of tragic art. It is that of a man who morally stands midway between the two contrary extremes. He is not eminently good or just, though he leans to the side of goodness. He is involved in misfortune, not however as a result of deliberate vice, but through some flaw of character or error in conduct. He is, moreover, illustrious in rank and fortune; the chief motive doubtless being that the signal nature of the catastrophe may be more strikingly exhibited. Thus, according to Aristotle, the tragic hero is the intermediate kind of personage, a man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgement, of the number of those in the enjoyment of great reputation and prosperity : e. g. Oedipus, Thyestes, and the men of note of similar families.

The most significant term in Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero is *hamartia* (translated by Ingram Bywater as 'error of judgement', though a few lines later in the same chapter Aristotle uses the phrase *megale hamartia*. Ingram Bywater's translation of *megale* is 'great', but some translators have gone, for a more interpretative or explanatory translation : 'some, mistake of great weight and consequence' (Gerald Else), 'substantial error' (T. C. W. Stinton), 'momentous mistake' (D. W. Lucas).

*Hamartia* occurs more than one hundred twenty five times in Aristotle's works, though the term admits of a wide range of meanings in diverse contexts. The root meaning of the term is simply 'missing the mark', a phrase commonly used in the game of archery to denote an unskilful, though not morally culpable act. Aristotle's use of the term in the *Poetics* is, however, metaphorical and fraught with far-reaching significance. S. H. Butcher translates the term as 'some error or frailty' Leon Golden prefers 'miscalculation, while Stephan Halliwell suggests 'fallibility'. The postulate of 'miscalculation' is generally accepted, although it does not prove entirely satisfactory, because it implies only an intellectual error. Since for signifying a moral frailty or transgression Aristotle uses the term *mochthesia* in Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Hamartia* is looked upon exclusively as a defect of judgement, an intellectual shortcoming. Nevertheless, Halliwell expresses the view that it is 'an appositely flexible term of Greek moral vocabulary to signify the area opened up in Aristotle's theory by the exclusion both of full moral guilt and of mere subjection to the irrational strokes of external adversary.' If, however, 'miscalculation' or something like it, is accepted the term must still be understood in relation to the larger argument of the *Poetics* and in relation to Greek tragedy, particularly *Oedipus Rex* which Aristotle cites as an illustration. A miscalculation can involve misunderstanding by the tragic hero of 'things as they

are'. This interpretation of *hamartia* is rather broad, but it is found in S. H. Butcher and, in a still looser form, in A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* where the tragic conflict is viewed as a Hegelian tension/collision leading eventually to synthesis/restitution through the defeat-victory of the tragic hero.

A much narrower, and hence perhaps preferable, meaning is suggested by Gerald Else and Martin Ostwald. Both critics interpret *hamartia* as a tendency to err, occasioned or created by lack of knowledge, and suggest that the lack of knowledge characterizes the tragic hero from the beginning and that it is complemented at the crisis of the play by the recognition or realization scene (*anagnorisis*) when he realizes the truth for the first time and experiences a sudden change from ignorance to knowledge. Else vindicates his argument with reference to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Books III and V, adding that in Greek tragedy the ignorance is that of the blood-relatives : Oedipus does not recognise his mother Jocasta, nor does Jocasta recognise her son, and it is undoubtedly their ignorance of each other that forms the basis of the excruciating tragedy they suffer. Ostwald speaks of the tragic hero's ignorance of self-identity which intensifies his tragic experience in his quest for knowledge. He stresses the point that in *Oedipus Rex* the source of the *hamartia* is the hero's ignorance of who he is, while the recognition or realization scene supplies him with this information at the same time that it ensures the fatal ending of the play. To interpret *hamartia* as ignorance implies that even the most virtuous or reasonable man may lack the knowledge necessary for making the right decisions and that ignorance, though, by no means, a moral flaw in itself, may give rise to wretched or disastrous occurrences in the life of the man who suffers from it.

For the clarification of *hamartia* we may refer to what Wimsatt and Brooks say about the different senses in which the term has been used :

And according to one school of thought *hamartia* in Greek drama is mainly an accent upon a larger tragedy of fate, man's larger suffering, unpredictably and without measure, at the hands of the gods, and man's stoic endurance.

As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods ;

They kill us for their sport.

But the term may also be thought to have implications of moral responsibility (it means *sin* in the Greek of the New Testament). And according to another school, *hamartia* is the crux of a deeply moral (and even Christian) kind of tragedy, the story of man's culpable weakness and his due punishment. (*Literary Criticism : A Short History*) It should, however, be noted that whatever be the meaning of the term, the concept of



*hamartia* helps us to reassess and revise our conventional ideas about the relativity of pre-determination and free will in Greek and Shakespearean tragedy. Oftener than not it has been assumed that in Shakespearean tragedy 'character is destiny', while in Greek tragedy the emphasis is on the inexorable domination of Fate — the tragic hero ultimately proves a puppet in the hand of the Sophoclean 'more than man' which is akin to moira (Lot) or dike (justice). Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, however, 'strives for a formulation of the integral relationship between states of fortune and action of those who experience them.' (Stephen Halliwell)

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## 1.8 Comprehension Exercises

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1. Critically examine Aristotle's theory of mimesis. How does it differ from that of Plato ?
2. Critically analyse Aristotle's observation that 'poetry is something more philosophical and more worthy of serious attention than history.'
3. Critically examine Aristotle's definition of tragedy as set forth in Chapter VI of the *Poetics*.
4. What, according to Aristotle, are the formative elements of tragedy ? Which one of these elements does Aristotle consider to be the most important, and why ?
5. Comment on Aristotle's views on plot and character.
6. Elucidate Aristotle's statement that 'beauty is bound up with size and order'.
7. Explain Aristotle's idea of *catharsis*, focusing on its medical and religious associations.
8. Attempt a critical evaluation of Aristotle's theory of imitation and pleasure.
9. Critically discuss what Aristotle says about the emotional effect of tragedy.
10. Critically examine Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero in Chapter XIII of the *Poetics*.
11. Write a critical note on Aristotle's use of the term *hamartia* in Chapter XIII of the *poetics*.
12. Assess Aristotle as a literary critic.

13. Write brief notes on the following :
  - a) Aristotle's definition of comedy
  - b) Complex plot : its components
  - c) Aristotle's views on Epic Poetry

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## 1.9 Suggested Reading

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1. Blamires, Harry. *A History of Literary Criticism*.
2. Butcher, S. H. *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*.
3. Bywater, Ingram, *Aristotle On the Art of Poetry*.
4. Daiches, David. *Critical Approaches to Literature*.
5. Dorsch, T. S., *Classical Literary Criticism*.
6. Else, Gerald F. *Aristotle's Poetics : The Argument*
7. Fyfe, W. Hamilton. *Aristotle's Art of Poetry*.
8. Golden, Leon. *Aristotle's Poetics*.
9. Halliwell, Stephen. *Aristotle's Poetics*.
10. House, Humphry. *Aristotle's Poetics : A Course of Eight Lectures*.
11. Leech, Clifford. 'Catharsis in English Renaissance Drama' in *The Dramatist's Experience and Other Essays*.
12. Lucas, D. W. *Aristotle Poetics*.
13. Sen Gupta, S. C. *An Introduction to Aristotle's Poetics*.
14. Stinton, T. C. W. 'Hamartia in Aristotle and Greek Tragedy' in *Collected Papers on Greek Tragedy*.
15. Wimsatt, W. K., Jr., and Cleanth Brooks. *Literary Criticism, A Short History*.

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# **Unit – 2 □ John Dryden - ‘An Essay of Dramatic Poesy’ (1668)**

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## **Structure**

- 2.0 Objectives**
- 2.1 Introduction**
- 2.2 Later Works**
- 2.3 As Dramatist and Critic**
- 2.4 As Satirist**
- 2.5 Study of Text**
- 2.6 Annotations**
  - 2.6.1 English vs. French drama**
  - 2.6.2 Definition of a Play : Unites and Ancient Drama**
  - 2.6.3 Tragedy, Comedy and Tragi-Comedy**
  - 2.6.4 Shakespeare vs. Ben Jonson**
  - 2.6.5 Use of Rhyme in Drama**
- 2.7 Neo Classicism**
- 2.8 Dryden’s Essay and Neo Classicism**
- 2.9 Dryden’s Prose Style**
- 2.10 Comprehension Exercises**

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## **2.0 Objectives**

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The objective of this unit is to estimate Dryden’s contribution as a poet and literary critic to the world of English literature.

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## **2.1 Introduction**

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Early life and background

Dryden was born in the village rectory of Aldwinkle near Oundle in Northamptonshire, where his maternal grandfather was Rector of All Saints. He was the eldest of fourteen children born to Erasmus and Mary Dryden, Puritan landowning gentry who supported the Puritan cause and Parliament. As a boy Dryden lived in the nearby village of Titchmarsh where it is also likely that he received his first education. In 1644 he was sent to Westminster School as a King's Scholar where his headmaster was Dr. Richard Busby, a charismatic teacher and severe disciplinarian. Recently re-founded by Elizabeth I, Westminster at this time embraced a very different religious and political spirit encouraging royalism and high Anglicanism, not yet having also absorbed the liberal influence of Dryden's contemporary John Locke. Whatever Dryden's response to this was, he clearly respected the Headmaster and would later send two of his own sons to school at Westminster.

As a humanist grammar school, Westminster maintained a curriculum which trained pupils in the art of rhetoric and the presentation of arguments for both sides of a given issue. This is a skill which would remain with Dryden and influence his later writing and thinking as much of it displays these dialectical patterns. The Westminster curriculum also included weekly translation assignments which developed Dryden's capacity for assimilation. This was also to be exhibited in his later works. His years at Westminster were not uneventful, and his first published poem, an eulogy with a strong royalist feel on the death of his schoolmate Henry, Lord Hastings from smallpox, alludes to the execution of King Charles I, which took place on 30 January 1649.

In 1650 Dryden went up to Trinity College, Cambridge where he would have experienced a return to the religious and political ethos of his childhood. The Master of Trinity was a Puritan preacher by the name of Thomas Hill who had been a rector in Dryden's home village. Though there is little specific information on Dryden's undergraduate years, he would have followed the standard curriculum of classics, rhetoric, and mathematics. In 1654 he obtained his BA, graduating top of the list for Trinity that year. In June of the same year Dryden's father died, leaving him some land which generated a little income, but not enough to live on.

Arriving in London during The Protectorate, Dryden obtained work with Cromwell's Secretary of State, John Thurloe. This appointment may have been the result of influence exercised on his behalf by the Lord Chamberlain Sir Gilbert Pickering, Dryden's cousin. Dryden was present on 23 November 1658 at Cromwell's funeral where he processed with the Puritan poets John Milton and Andrew Marvell. Shortly

thereafter he published his first important poem, *Heroique Stanzas* (1658), a eulogy on Cromwell's death which is cautious and prudent in its emotional display. In 1660 Dryden celebrated the Restoration of the monarchy and the return of Charles II with *Astraea Redux*, an authentic royalist panegyric. In this work the interregnum is illustrated as a time of anarchy, and Charles is seen as the restorer of peace and order.

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## 2.2 Later Works

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After the Restoration Dryden quickly established himself as the leading poet and literary critic of his day and he transferred his allegiances to the new government. Along with *Astraea Redux*, Dryden welcomed the new regime with two more panegyrics; *To His Sacred Majesty: A Panegyric on his Coronation* (1662), and *To My Lord Chancellor* (1662). These poems suggest that Dryden was looking to court a possible patron, but he was to instead make a living in writing for publishers not for the aristocracy, and thus ultimately for the reading public. These, and his other nondramatic poems, are occasional, that is they celebrate public events. Thus they are written for the nation rather than the self, and the Poet Laureate (as he would later become) is obliged to write a certain amount of these per annum. In November 1662 Dryden was proposed for membership in the Royal Society, and he was elected an early fellow. However, Dryden was inactive in Society affairs and in 1666 was expelled for non-payment of his dues.

On December 1, 1663 Dryden married the royalist sister of Sir Robert Howard – Lady Elizabeth. Dryden's works occasionally contain outbursts against the married state but also celebrations of the same. Thus, little is known of the intimate side of his marriage. Lady Elizabeth however, was to bear him three sons and outlive him.

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## 2.3 As Dramatist and Critic

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With the reopening of the theatres after the Puritan ban, Dryden busied himself with the composition of plays. His first play, *The Wild Gallant* appeared in 1663 and was not successful, but he was to have more success, and from 1668 on he was contracted to produce three plays a year for the King's Company in which he was also to become a shareholder. During the 1660s and 70s theatrical writing was to be his main source of income. He led the way in Restoration comedy, his best known work being *Marriage*

*A-la-Mode* (1672), as well as heroic tragedy and regular tragedy, in which his greatest success was *All For Love* (1678). Dryden was never satisfied with his theatrical writings and frequently suggested that his talents were wasted on unworthy audiences. He thus was making a bid for poetic fame off-stage. In 1667, around the same time his dramatic career began, he published *Annus Mirabilis*, a lengthy historical poem which described the events of 1666; the English defeat of the Dutch naval fleet and the Great Fire of London. It was a modern epic in pentameter quatrains that established him as the preeminent poet of his generation, and was crucial in his attaining the posts of Poet Laureate (1668) and historiographer royal (1670).

When the Great Plague closed the theatres in 1665 Dryden retreated to Wiltshire where he wrote *Of Dramatick Poesie* (1668), arguably the best of his unsystematic prefaces and essays. Dryden constantly defended his own literary practice, and *Of Dramatick Poesie*, the longest of his critical works, takes the form of a dialogue in which four characters – each based on a prominent contemporary, with Dryden himself as ‘Neander’- debate the merits of classical, French and English drama. The greater part of his critical works, introduce problems which he is eager to discuss, and show the work of a writer of independent mind who feels strongly about his own ideas, ideas which demonstrate the incredible breadth of his reading. He felt strongly about the relation of the poet to tradition and the creative process, and his best heroic play *Aureng-Zebe* (1675) has a prologue which denounces the use of rhyme in serious drama. His play *All for love* (1678), was written in blank verse, and was to immediately follow *Aureng-Zebe*.

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## 2.4 Satirist

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Dryden’s greatest achievements were in satiric verse ; the mock-heroic *MacFlecknoe*, a more personal product of his Laureate years, was a lampoon circulated in manuscript and an attack on the playwright Thomas Shadwell. It is not a belittling form of satire, but rather one which makes his object great in ways which are unexpected, transferring the ridiculous into poetry. This line of satire continued with *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681) and *The Medal* (1682). His other major works from this period are the religious poems *Religio Laici* (1682), written from the position of a member of the Church of England and *The Hind and the Panther* (1687) which celebrate his conversion to Roman Catholicism.

When in 1688 James was deposed, Dryden’s political and religious ethos left him

out of favour at court. Thomas Shadwell succeeded him as Poet Laureate, and he was forced to give up his public offices and live by the proceeds of his pen. Dryden translated works by Horace, Juvenal, Ovid, Lucretius, and Theocritus, a task which he found far more satisfying than writing for the stage. In 1694 he began work on what would be his most ambitious and defining work as translator, *The Works of Virgil* (1697), which was published by subscription. The publication of the translation of Virgil was a national event and brought Dryden the sum of £1,400. His final translations appeared in the volume *Fables Ancient and Modern* (1700), a series of episodes from Homer, Ovid, and Boccaccio, as well as modernized adaptations from Geoffrey Chaucer interspersed with Dryden's own poems. *The Preface to Fables* is considered to be both a major work of criticism and one of the finest essays in English. As a critic and translator he was essential in making accessible to the reading English public literary works in the classical languages.

Dryden died in 1700 and is buried in Westminster Abbey. Dryden's influence as a poet was immense in his lifetime, and the considerable loss felt by the English literary community at his death was evident from the eulogies which it inspired. In the 18th century his poems were used as models by poets such as Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson. In the 19th century his reputation waned, and it has yet to fully recover outside of specialist circles. One of his greatest champions, T. S. Eliot, wrote that he was 'the ancestor of nearly all that is best in the poetry of the eighteenth century', and that 'we cannot fully enjoy or rightly estimate a hundred years of English poetry unless we fully enjoy Dryden.'

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## 2.5 Study of Text

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### A Brief Summary

#### Four Critics :

1. **Eugenius—favours the moderns over the ancients**, arguing that the moderns exceed the ancients because of having learned and profited from their example.
2. **Crites—argues in favor of the ancients** : They established the unities; dramatic rules were spelled out by Aristotle which the current—and esteemed—French playwrights follow; and Ben Jonson—the greatest English playwright, according to Crites—followed the ancients' example by adhering to the unities.

3. **Lisideius—argues that French drama is superior to English drama**, basing this opinion of the French writer's close adherence to the classical separation of comedy and tragedy. For Lisideius "no theater in the world has anything so absurd as the English tragicomedy ... in two hours and a half, we run through all the fits of Bedlam."
4. **Neander (thought to represent Dryden)—favours the moderns, but does not disparage the ancients. He also favours English drama—and has some critical things to say of French drama** : "those beauties of the French poesy are such as will raise perfection higher than where it is, but are not sufficient to give it where it is not : they are indeed the beauties of a statue, but not of a man."

**Five issues :**

- 1) **Ancients vs. Moderns**
- 2) **Unities**
- 3) **French vs. English Drama**
- 4) **Separation of Tragedy and Comedy vs. Tragicomedy**
- 5) **Appropriateness of Rhyme in Drama**

Dryden is a neoclassical critic, and as such he deals in his criticism with issues of form and morality in drama. However, he is not a rule bound critic, tied down to the classical unities or to notions of what constitutes a "proper" character for the stage. He relies heavily on Corneille—and through him on Horace—which places him in a pragmatic tradition.

Dryden wrote this essay as a dramatic dialogue with four characters representing four critical positions. These four critical positions deal with five issues. **Eugenius** (whose name may mean "well born") **favours the moderns over the ancients**, arguing that the moderns exceed the ancients because of having learned and profited from their example. **Crites argues in favour of the ancients** : they established the unities; dramatic rules were spelled out by Aristotle which the current—and esteemed—French playwrights follow; and Ben Jonson—the greatest English playwright, according to Crites—followed the ancients' example by adhering to the unities. **Lisideius argues that French drama is superior to English drama**, basing this opinion of the French writer's close adherence to the classical separation of comedy and tragedy. For Lisideius "no theater in the world has anything so absurd as the English tragicomedy ... in two hours and a half, we



run through all the fits of Bedlam.” **Neander favours the moderns, but does not disparage the ancients. He also favours English drama—and has some critical things to say of French drama :** “those beauties of the French poesy are such as will raise perfection higher than where it is, but are not sufficient to give it where it is not : they are indeed the beauties of a statue, but not of a man.” **Neander goes on to defend tragicomedy :** “contraries, when placed near, set off each other. A continued gravity keeps the spirit too much bent; we must refresh it sometimes.” Tragicomedy increases the effectiveness of both tragic and comic elements by way of contrast. Neander asserts that “we have invented, increased, and perfected a more pleasant way of writing for the stage ... tragicomedy.”

**Neander criticizes French drama essentially for its smallness :** its pursuit of only one plot without subplots; its tendency to show too little action; its “servile observations of the unities ... dearth of plot, and narrowness of imagination” are all qualities which render it inferior to English drama. **Neander extends his criticism of French drama into his reasoning for his preference for Shakespeare over Ben Jonson. Shakespeare “had the largest and most comprehensive soul,” while Jonson was “the most learned and judicious writer which any theater ever had.”** Ultimately, Neander prefers Shakespeare for his greater scope, his greater faithfulness to life, as compared to Jonson’s relatively small scope and French/Classical tendency to deal in “the beauties of a statue, but not of a man.”

**Crites objects to rhyme in plays :** “since no man without premeditation speaks in rhyme, neither ought he to do it on the stage.” He cites Aristotle as saying that it is “**best to write tragedy in that kind of verse ... which is nearest prose**” as a justification for **banishing rhyme from drama in favour of blank verse** (unrhymed iambic pentameter). Even though blank verse lines are no more spontaneous than are rhymed lines, they are still to be preferred because they are “nearest nature”: “Rhyme is incapable of expressing the greatest thought naturally, and the lowest it cannot with any grace: for what is more unbecoming the majesty of verse, than to call a servant, or bid a door be shut in rhyme ?”

Neander responds to the objections against rhyme by admitting that “**verse so tedious**” is **inappropriate to drama** (and to anything else). “**Natural**” rhymed verse is, however, **just as appropriate to dramatic as to non-dramatic poetry :** the test of the “naturalness” of rhyme is how well-chosen the rhymes are. Is the sense of the verses tied down to, and limited by, the rhymes, or are the rhymes in service to, and an enhancement of, the sense of the verses ?

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## 2.6 Annotations

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Students are requested to study this section with the original text. The line numbers of Dryden's text are also indicated.

### Dedication To Charles Lord Buckhurst

He is Eugenius in the dialogue, though he was at the sea-battle of June 1665.

#### 2.6.1 English Vs. French Drama

##### To The Reader

Dryden writes

*The drift of the ensuing Discourse was chiefly to vindicate the honour of our English Writers, from the censure of those who unjustly prefer the French before them. This I intimate, least any should think me so exceeding vain, as to teach others an Art which they understand much better than my self. But if this incorrect Essay, written in the Country without the help of Books, or advice of Friends, shall find any acceptance in the world, I promise to my self a better success of the second part, wherein the Virtues and Faults of the English Poets, who have written either in this, the Epique, or the Lyrique way, will be more fully treated of, and their several styles impartially imitated.*

He thus lays out his aims : **defence of English over French writing**; and the criticism of English writing.

##### *The characters*

It is 3 June 1665, the day of the English victory over the Dutch. Men hear the sound of the cannon in London.

– The characters : Eugenius (Buckhurst); Crites (Sir Robert Howard) ; Lisideius (Sir Charles Sedley); Neander (**Dryden**). The names mean well-born, censorious, a Latinized anagram and new man. **Dryden** says three of them have been given cover names.

75 – Crites is “a person of a sharp judgement, and somewhat too delicate a taste in wit” – he doesn't want to read the verses inevitably about to be written if England

wins a victory. Such verses include **Dryden's** own.

*The two extremes of contemporary poetry – ridiculous ornamentation/rhetoric or dull plainness*

– **Crites is indeed censorious** : argues “ill poets should be as well silenced as seditious preachers”. Takes exception particularly to “two poets, whom this victory with the help of both her wings will never be able to escape”: see n., probably Wild and Flecknoe who both wrote on the battle.

The other extreme, Crites says, is a poet who “style and matter are everywhere alike”, writing in extremely simple language – “he doubly starves his verses, - first, for want of thought, and then of expression...He affects plainness, to cover his want of imagination”. **Two extremes : blundering floridness or dull plainness.**

*Ancient vs. modern poetry; poetry of last age vs. this age*

- Crites argues poets in this age “neither rise to the dignity of the last age, nor to any of the ancients...nature, which is the soul [of poetry], is not in any of your writings.”

- Eugenius disagrees; he thinks “we equal the ancients in most kinds of **poesy**, and in some surpass them.” – **what is this age's status relative to the classics ?**

78 – **THE CHALLENGE** : if Crites thinks today's **poesy** is inadequate in comparison with the ancients, what area of **poesy** would he choose to defend ancient against modern ? **Past vs. present** : Crites sets out to prove “either that the ancients were superior to the moderns, or the last age to this of ours.”

- For Eugenius, **the contest is old vs. new English drama** : whilst modern English drama is better than that of the ancients, the current **dramatic poesy** is not as good as that of “the last age”. Hence “if we are overcome, it will be only by our own countrymen” – **supremacy of England established from the start**. And in all other areas of **poesy** this current age is better than the past.

- No-one opposes the view that, other than in **dramatic poesy**, there is no contest with current writers – conveniently limits discussion to the subject in hand.

79 – Current writers were the first to 1) mould thought into easy and “significant

words”; 2) “retrench the superfluities of expression”; 3) “make our rhyme so properly a part of the verse, that it should never mislead the sense, but itself be led and governed by it.”

## 2.6.2 Definition of a play : Unities and Ancient Drama

- **A PLAY DEFINED** : “a just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject, for the delight and instruction of mankind.” Hence **conditions of a play include** :

- Must be interesting and faithful to human nature
- Must represent human psyche – passions and humours
- Must contain change(s) of fortune (Aristotle)
- Must delight and teach (Horace)

*Crites : three unities; French observe them well*

81 – **We owe all dramatic rules to the ancients**, specifically to Aristotle’s Poetics, “We have added nothing of our own”. Claims the *three unities* were “extracted” out of Horace and Aristotle.

- Unity of time : “the time of the feigned action or fable of the play should be proportioned as near as can be to the duration of that time in which it is represented”. Similarly “all the parts of it are to be equally subdivided” – acts should cover equal lengths of time.

- **Direct correlation of sign and signified**; “no act should be imagined to exceed the time in which it is represented on the stage”. **Stage time = real time**; the disparities of time should fall between acts.

82 – Unity of place : “the stage...being but one and the same place, it is unnatural to conceive it many, and those far distant from one another” – **again, unity of sign and referent**.

- **CRITES PRO-FRENCH** : “next to the ancients, the French are to be most commended” for observing the unity of place; **political dimension** to the argument

- Third unity, of action : the poet should aim at “one great and complete action, to the carrying on of which all things in his play...should be subservient” – one *finis* or *telos*. If this is broken “it would no longer be one play, but two” – any

multiple actions must be subservient to the main action, as subplots.

83 – None of these unities are regularly observed in modern English drama.

- In order to fully appreciate the ancients “we should understand them better than we do”. If Macrobius can show us things in Virgil’s language we wouldn’t otherwise perceive, the same capacities must exist in Terence.

- To Crites, Ben Jonson was “the greatest man of the last age” because he “was willing to give place to them in all things”

*Eugenius : imperfections of ancient drama (failure to follow unities; deficiencies in delighting and teaching)*

84 – Whilst the ancients provided “assistances”, modern writers have “joined our own industry” – though they needed the help of the ancients they have surpassed them. PROGRESS is the aim – cf. Hegel’s view of culture and *Zeitgeist*.

- They don’t imitate only the ancients, but rather follow nature.

- In order to win the argument Crites must show how the ancients “wrought more perfect images of human life than we” – this he has not done, so Eugenius will argue the moderns have done this better.

85 – **Imperfections of ancient drama** : not divided into acts.

The Greeks did not perfect the division of a play, not having “confined themselves to a certain number” of acts – hence any success they have is down to “fortune”.

- **Greek drama failed to delight** : the plots were taken from the same sources over and over again – the audience knew what was going to happen, the novelty wore off, the delight stopped.

87 – As for Roman drama it is limited in its imitation of the same few types : “The characters are indeed the imitations of nature, but so narrow as if they had imitated only an eye or a hand.”

- **Refutes ‘unity of place’ fallacy** : the ancients wrote nothing about the unity – it is only made “a precept of the stage” by the French poets.

- As for the unity of time, even Terence, “who was the best and most regular of them”, neglected it.

- And Euripides breaks the unity of time – in one play Theseus' messenger travels 40 miles within 36 verses of the chorus.

89 – **Ancient drama fails to instruct** : “they have often shown a prosperous wickedness and an unhappy piety”, e.g. Medea's escape, Priam and Astyanax murdered etc. Therefore any “indecorum” in modern plays can be traced back to the ancients.

- All these failings are the more inexcusable because ancients specialized in only tragedy or comedy – more specialist than moderns.

Eugenius “seemed to have the better of the argument”. **Dryden's bias lies with Eugenius.**

- **LITERATURE AS CONFLICT** : Eugenius says “we are as well able to vanquish them with our pens as our ancestors have been with their swords” – but passes argument over to Neander. **Dryden defends English drama from the French.**

94 – Lisideius says until 40 yrs. ago the English were the best poets – now, however, “the muses, who ever follow peace, went to plant in another country”. **Civil war disrupts poetry.**

- The French recently have scrupulously observed the unities.

- He incidentally complains about subplots in English drama – if there are two plots, they are seldom tied together till the last moment.

- “There is no theatre in the world that has anything so absurd as the English tragicomedy” – **did Dryden himself condemn tragicomedy ?**

### 2.6.3 Tragedy, Comedy and Tragi Comedy

95 – **Tragedy/comedy incompatible** : “the poet must of necessity destroy the former by intermingling the latter”, as mirth is incompatible with compassion, the end of tragedy.

- The French poet “interweaves truth with probable fiction” – surpasses ancients' treatment of plot.

96 – **Shakespeare's histories criticised** : condensing 30-40yrs into 2.5 hrs :

“This, instead of making a play delightful, renders it ridiculous” as it does not faithfully imitate nature; “for the spirit of man cannot be satisfied but with truth, or at least verisimilitude”. **Realism** is key.

- The French choose one good-sized action, not too much plot – gives them space for good verse.

- The only English play to have a uniform and unified plot is the anonymous *The Bloody Brother* (aka *The Tragedy of Rollo*)

97 – **ROYALIST DRAMATICS** : it is right for one character to be more important than the rest – “we see it so in the management of all affairs – even in the most equal aristocracy”. In French drama, every character is needed for the main action, but one is central.

98 – **Action vs. passion** : whilst all passions must be represented by the actor, “there are many actions which can never be imitated to a just height” – hence French are right not to show battles, duels etc. on stage.

99 – “some parts of the action are more fit to be represented, some to be related”.

100 – With the French “you never see any of their plays end with a conversion, or simple change of will”, as the English poets end their plays.

101 – **Defends rhyme in drama** : Lysideus likes the French’s use of rhyme – though it is used in English drama it is often used badly, but should be done well.

*Neander defends English drama from the French*

102 – “neither our faults nor their virtues are enough to place them above us” as “**lively imitation of nature**” is the criterion.

- The beauties of French drama are “beauties of a statue, but not of a man, because not animated with the soul of **poesy**, which is **imitation of humour and passions**”.

- French have begun “imitating afar off the quick turns and graces of the English stage”, producing tragicomedies – Moliere, Corneille the younger, Quinault et al.

103 – “humours” – temperaments – are “thin sown” in these imitative French plays – lack the life of English drama.

- **Defends tragicomedy** : “why should he [Lisideius] imagine the soul of man more heavy than his senses ?” If the senses can take in two contrasting scenes then so can the soul.

104 – Uses example from the old Ptolemaic astronomy to argue “contrary motions” in drama follow the natural order – but this astronomy has been disproved by 1668 - ?

- **HIERARCHICAL POLITICS/POETICS** : “co-ordination [opposite of subordination] in a play is as dangerous and unnatural as in a state.”

- French verses criticized : they are lacking in life, dull and long.

105 – The French, he argues, go to plays “to make themselves more serious”, hence the long and serious speeches.

- “swiftly managed” dialogue is best in tragedy and in comedy – nobody suffering painful passions speaks at length, and in comedy short exchanges are more amusing.

- Admires the “**labyrinth of design**” of English drama – so long as “the beauty of the whole be kept entire”, and unity be preserved, this is a good thing.

- **Volpone criticized** : “there appear two actions in the play, - the first naturally ending with the fourth act, the second forced from it in the fifth” – i.e. Volpone's victory then his downfall. The fifth act is excellent in rewarding vice and punishing virtue but does not follow easily on from the fourth.

106 – Representing fights and duels on the stage is no bad thing – it is possible to be convinced by them.

107 – **Suggests “a mean”** in relations of drama – French represent too little, the English perhaps too much.

- **French unities criticized** : they follow their unities too closely, leading to “dearth of plot and narrowness of imagination”. “The French poets are often forced upon absurdities”, esp. in adhering to unity of place.

108 – It is far easier to write a “regular French play” than “an irregular English one, like those of Fletcher and Shakespeare” – **Fletcher and Shakespeare's irregularity is to be praised.**



109 – We are not guilty of “servile imitation of the French” – English plots are original and verse is varied and has precedents pre-dating the French.

- **REGULARITY AND IRREGULARITY** : in regular plays (like

*Neander’s analysis of Shakespeare, Beaumont/Fletcher, Jonson*

- **Claims Fletcher “came nearer to perfection” than Shakespeare!**

- To prove the regularity of which English drama is capable he will take Jonson’s play *The Silent Woman*.

## 2.6.4 Shakespeare vs. Ben Jonson

110 – **PRAISE OF SHAKESPEARE** : he was “naturally learned. He needed not the spectacles of books to read nature. He looked inwards, and found her there.” SP naturally perceived and imitated nature (including human nature). Though he sometimes degenerates, he never fails to be great when a great occasion presents itself.

- **Beaumont and Fletcher** had “great natural gifts improved by study” – Shakespeare lacked learning but was naturally brilliant.

111 – Beaumont and Fletcher “understood and imitated the conversation of gentlemen much better” than Shakespeare did – and their plays are generally more regular.

- **B/F mastered language** : English in them “arrived to its highest perfection”. Compared with their language SHAKESPEARE’s is “a little obsolete”. **Shakespeare does not compare well consistently against Fletcher.**

- Jonson is “the most learned and judicious writer which any theatre ever had.” **Jonson was the master of humour**, especially in representing “mechanic” or vulgar people.

112 – “what would be theft in other poets is only victory in him”.

- **JONSON VS. SHAKESPEARE** : Jonson “more correct”, Shakespeare has “more wit”; **SP is Homer to Jonson’s Virgil.**

*Examen of The Silent Woman (Neander)*

112 – The action is “all included in the limits of three hours and a half”

- Unity of place : remains “all within the compass of two houses, and after the first act in one”.

- Continuity of scenes “not broken above twice or thrice at most in the whole comedy” [broken when no characters from last scene appear in the next]

- “The action of the play is entirely one”.

113 – Jonson’s humour is well achieved : “humour is the ridiculous extravagance of conversation, wherein one man differs from all others.”

- In old Greek comedy the aim was “not so much to imitate a man as to make the people laugh at some odd conceit” – effectively what Jonson does.

- In the New Greek comedy, expression of character was paramount – but this amounted only to general character types.

114 – English comedy represents “some extravagant habit, passion, or affection, particular...to some one person” – **comic characters are comically unique** in English. Jonson has nine or ten of these characters, but they all contribute to the main action.

- The plot is “extreme elaborate, and yet withal easy”.

115 – Does not go into detailed analysis of the ease of the plot – “I must unravel every scene in it to commend it as I ought”.

- This is especially impressive as in comedy “everyone is a proper judge of all he sees”, common life being represented.

- One of Jonson’s tactics : the character who demonstrates his highest skill is recommended to the audience before he appears on stage.

116 – Jonson’s play is **climactic** : “the business of it rises on every act”.

- **Dramatist as chess-player** : “by little and little he draws out his men, and makes his pawns of use to his greater persons.”

- **REPUBLIC = DEATH OF POESY ; restoration = restoration of poesy.**  
After the civil war rule was given to “a barbarous race of men, enemies of all

good learning'' who 'buried the muses under the ruins of monarchy''. **Fate of poetry directly linked to the fate of the monarchy.**

*Crites argues against rhyme used on the stage*

117 – Crites thinks rhyme is "not allowable in serious plays".

- Great plays of SHAKESPEARE, Jonson, Beaumont/Fletcher were written without rhyme.

## 2.6.5. Use of Rhyme in Drama

- 118 – **Rhyme unnatural, unrealistic** : no man speaks in rhyme naturally, "neither ought he to do it on the stage".

- Should write in verse closest to prose – blank verse : blank verses are not spoken naturally either but, "as nearest nature, they are still to be preferred".

- In comic exchanges, how can we expect a man to catch the rhyme as well as the wit of his opponent ?

119 – "**Probability of truth**" makes us suspend disbelief : we need a probability of truth in order to go along with the play as "an imitation of nature".

- "we may write better in verse, but not more naturally".

Neander defends use of rhyme in serious plays

120 – Blank verse is as unnatural as rhymed verse – cites verb inversion in Fletcher.

- **Rhyme can come naturally** without being forced – in the Fletcher example he proves that it is down to the poet's arrangement of the words.

121 – All rhyme needs to be natural is "an election of apt words and a right disposing of them".

- "the necessity of a rhyme never forces any but bad or lazy writers to say what they would not otherwise."

- "Variety of cadences" is needed so that rhymed verse does not become dull.

122 – The good poet will succeed in "making art and order appear loose and free as nature" – **art concealed and made natural is the aim.**

123 – Another defence of rhyme is “the universal consent of the most civilized parts of the world” that it be used.

- If on the whole “the words be placed as they are in the negligence of prose” that is well.

- **Need for originality** : the material of the poets of the past age has been worn out – “they could never equal themselves were they to rise and write again.”

125 – Tragedy represents “nature wrought up to a higher pitch”, for which rhyme is entirely appropriate.

- “**Blank verse is acknowledged to be too low for a poem**” – soon to be disproved by Milton.

126 – Rhyme justified as the equivalent of *stychomythia* in ancient drama.

128 – “The labour of rhyme bounds and circumscribes an over-fruitful fancy”.

129 – “**Judgement is indeed the master-workman in a play**” – and rhyme helps the judgement. A poet with perfect judgement makes no mistakes in rhyme or out of it; one with judgement so bad nothing can help him should not write. For all others, rhyme is a tool to aid the judgement.

130 – **French people** walked past at the end, “dancing in the open air, and nothing concerned for the noise of guns which had alarmed the town that afternoon”.

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## 2.7 A Brief Note on Neoclassicism

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The neoclassic ideals of drama that developed in Renaissance Italy had their greatest influence in France, so much so that in the 17th century France replaced Italy as the center of both neoclassic theory and practice. At the beginning of the century, French playwrights mixed classical, medieval, and popular elements much as their contemporaries in England and Spain. By 1636, however, when *Le Cid* by Pierre Corneille opened a golden age of French theater, France’s leading dramatists and theorists generally agreed that drama should strictly follow what they felt were the rules of classical theater. Among these were the unities of time, place, and action and the strict separation

of comedy and tragedy, rules generally ignored by the great Renaissance writers of England and Spain.

French writers of the 17th century carefully observed the dictates of Aristotle and his Renaissance interpreters, in part at the wishes of their aristocratic patrons. Cardinal Richelieu, a statesman and avid literary patron, along with the French Academy he founded (to standardize the French language), decreed the sanctity of the neoclassical unities for all tragedy, without regard for popular taste or theatrical logic. When the historical tragedy *Le Cid* (1636 ; translated 1637) by Pierre Corneille achieved immediate success on the Parisian stage, an artistic war erupted. Critics of *Le Cid* forced its retraction because the play concentrated on character and departed from the neoclassical restrictions on time and place. In the late 17th century Jean Baptiste Racine produced the greatest tragic plays of French neoclassicism; these include *Berenice* (1670; translated 1701) and *Phedre* (1677; translated 1756). Racine simplified poetic dialogue and action while also satisfying the exacting requirements of court censors and contemporary critics.

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## 2.8 Dryden's Essay and Neoclassicism

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Dryden's *Essay* is in many ways a radical revisioning of the neoclassical traditions. Taking his cue from Horace, Dryden maintains that the primary aim of art is to "instruct while pleasing". The strong moral and social emphasis on art places Dryden squarely in the neoclassical tradition. In fact, he is critical of classical drama because it does not often arrive at moral endings. However his discussion on the techniques of art shows a flexibility. Unlike the French dramatists he is not concerned about the unities of time and place and allows space for the imagination of the audience. Most importantly his defense of tragicomedy violates the classical emphasis on the sanctity of the genres. Dryden correlates the infinite variety of life with the sense of variety that tragicomedy opens up. Thus Dryden is opening up an important new aesthetic where the French strictures of Neoclassicism are made flexible. The importance of Dryden in creating this new critical stance would be taken up later by Dr. Johnson in his Preface to Shakespeare where Johnson defends Shakespeare's violation of the unities and his use of Tragicomedy .

The question remains why Dryden initiated this new theory of drama. One possibility is the new sense of nationalism that England was witnessing. While Charles II had been restored from France, the sharp sense of antagonism between England and

France that had been witnessed in the century spilled over into the cultural sphere. Thus poets like Dryden were attempting to seek a salient position. Thus Shakespeare was being held up by the Augustans as a new national icon. The other reason might be the Augustan search for a new modernity that attempted to create a more dynamic classical spirit. Whatever the reason Dryden realized that for theatre to survive it must look for variety and imagination and Dryden's theory of drama acknowledged this need. Thus Dryden follows some of the basic tenets of Neoclassicism but questions and revises certain neoclassical rigidities.

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## 2.9 Dryden's Prose Style

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The structure of Dryden's *Essay* uses the dialectical pattern based on the Socratic pattern of dialogue. This is an interesting ploy that offered Dryden a strategy of moderation in articulating his views on the debate between the Ancients and the Moderns and the English and the French. The prose is easy and graceful, exploratory and spirited. Dryden favours balance, counterpoint and argument. What is interesting is the suavity of the tone : despite their differences the four speakers maintain a perfect harmony. However the essay is slow at times even bordering on the pedantic. Dryden's easy, relaxed and conversational style is as Matthew Arnold once commented, "such as we would all gladly use if we only knew how". As Dryden himself was to write, "A man should have a reasonable, philosophical and in some measure mathematical head to be a complete and excellent poet; and besides this should have experience in all sorts of humours and manners of men; should be thoroughly skilled in conversation and should have a great knowledge of mankind in general". His formulations are frequently witty and his advice cogent as in his preface to the *Fables* : "An author is not to write all he can but all he ought". He respects authority and tradition without being weighed down by them. His tone is urbane, cultured and civilized and like Matthew Arnold his criticism benefits from his wide experience in creative writing. For example, the tone of moderation that he uses is startlingly similar to his technique in *Absalom and Achitophel*.

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## 2.10 Comprehension Exercises

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1. Examine Dryden's discussion of the debate on Ancients and Moderns in *Essay*

*of Dramatic Poesy*. How does Dryden establish the superiority of the English dramatists over the French ?

2. Examine the role of Crites in Dryden's *Essay*.
3. What are Neander's views in Dryden's *Essay* ?
4. To what extent can Dryden's *Essay* be called neoclassical ? What are the major departures from neoclassicism ?
5. Examine the salient aspects of Dryden's prose style in his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*.

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## Unit – 3 □ Dr. Samuel Johnson–‘The Life of Milton’ (1777)

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### Structure

- 3.0 Introduction
- 3.1 Analysis of the *Life of Milton*
  - 3.1.1 Distinction
  - 3.1.2 On Areopagitica
- 3.2 Criticism of Milton’s poems
  - 3.2.1 Dr Johnson and the early poems of Milton
  - 3.2.2 *Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes*
  - 3.2.3 *Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes*
- 3.3 Milton’s Style and versification
- 3.4 Model Questions
- 3.5 Select Bibliography

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### 3.0 Introduction

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‘The Life of Milton’ is one of the essays, included in Dr. Samuel Johnson’s ambitious project *Lives of the Poets*, published in 1777. ‘The Lives’ is undoubtedly a work of Johnson’s old age, since he started work on it when he was 68, and he completed it when he was 72. *The Lives of the Poets* may, therefore, be regarded as the maturest expression of Dr. Johnson’s literary and critical genius. Indeed, ‘The Lives’ in its own capacity has a multi-dimensional importance of its own, as John Wain comments : “The special importance of *The Lives of the Poets* in that it gathers in a rich harvest that might have noted in the fields.” (Wain Led). *Lives of the English Poets*, Introduction, px). The book introduces Dr. Johnson as a careful biographer, an able critic, a perceptive literary historian, and over and above all, an intellectual who had developed a sense of history of his own. The great mind of Dr. Johnson, capable of independent thinking, and complimented much frequently and on different occasions by Bosnell, Mr. Thrale and Fanny Burney, gets itself projected



in the different 'essays' of the 'Lives'. It is significant to note that Dr. Johnson had taken into account nearly all the representative poets and satirists of the Restoration and the eighteenth century, including Abraham Cowley, John Milton, Earl of Rochester, John Dryden, Joseph Addison, Richard Savage, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, James Thomson, William Collins and Thomas Gray. The list of literary personalities is quite impressive in the sense that Dr. Johnson takes into consideration the poets and litterateurs, both major and minor and thereby he attempts to give a comprehensive view of the literary scenario, and intellectual, moral, religious and political contexts of the Restoration and the eighteenth century. The multi-faceted signification of the 'Lives' may also be realised, when we take up for our reading, 'The Life of Milton.'

The question that may disturb any curious reader is why Dr. Johnson takes up for deliberation, both biographical and critical, the life of Milton. We may perhaps suggest different reasons for the choice of Milton as the subject of Dr. Johnson's critical attention. The primary reason is perhaps Milton's classical control and discipline in his poetic are with which he wrote *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* or a play *Samson Agonistes*, which is modelled an ancient Greek tragedy. The other important reason that Milton had not only a literary/poetic career of his own but he was deeply involved in various movements and activities of his own time, political, religious and moral, and finally that Milton impressed Dr. Johnson as one who aimed at beauty and precision in his poetic style. Accordingly *The Life of Milton* is broadly divided into two parts. In the first part Dr. Johnson devotes himself to the writing of Milton's biography, and in the second he attempts to give a comprehensive assessment of Milton's poetic and literary works.

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### 3.1 Analysis of The Life of Milton

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The biographical part of 'The Life' of Milton' may easily be divided into different parts. In the initial section (Paragraphs 1-7) the readers are informed of Milton's parentage, his ancestral background, the place of his birth, and the year when he was born. About the Poet's father Dr. Johnson mentions the following important facts. First, by profession he was a scrivener (a professional penman; a scribe, a copyist). Temperamentally, he was inclined to music and literature, and "he was a man, eminent for his skill in music, many of his compositions being still to be found." (The Life P. 1). The poet's mother "of the name of Caston", belonged to a Welsh family.

Johnson's descriptive references to Milton's parents, his ancestry, early life and academic career are well documented, and authentic. The descriptions are supported by Dr. Johnson's adequate references to the important chronological years in the life of Milton. For example, he mentions when and where Milton was born : 'John, the poet, was born in his father's house, at the Spread Eagle in Broad Street, December 9, 1608 between six and seven in the morning. (p. 2). The significance of the above-quoted sentence may be attributed to the fact that Dr. Johnson mentions with particular care and specific attention the month, year and the hour of the poet's birth. It is this exactitude that distinguishes Dr. Johnson as a biographer. Indeed Dr. Johnson believes in the selective mode or method, while dealing with his subject. For instance, he mentions how even as a young poet Milton delighted "in the products of his vernal fertility." (p. 2). He talks about his education, his burgeoning literary poetic talent, his intellectual curiosity, his interest in matters academic and his European tour.

Dr. Johnson appreciates Milton's excellence in the writing of Latin verses in which he notes down the quality of "classic elegance." He also writes about the partial success of Milton as a poet writing elegies in the classical tradition.

Several other aspects of Milton's life, emphasized and highlighted by Dr. Johnson are his formal academic career at the University of Cambridge, his choice of the profession of a schoolmaster and his European tour. Dr. Johnson particularly elaborates Milton's visits to different European countries and he rightly suggests that his Italian tour was enriching for him. While in Italy, he came across persons like Galileo, then "prisoner in the Inquisition for philosophical heresy" (p. 8). Apart from Galileo. Milton had a meeting with Hugh Grotius, the Dutch jurist, famed to have fathered the International Jurisprudence. It is significant to note that Milton's personal visit to Galileo, his tours through the Italian cities of Rome, Florence left an indelible impression on his mind and imagination. One remembers in this connection his reference to the 'Tuscan artist' (Galileo) in one of the excellent epic similes in *Paradise Lost* (Book-I), and further his description of the innumerable fallen angels, floating helplessly in the take of liquid fire and in that context, his fond remembrance of the floating autumn leaves at Vallambrosa.

Dr. Johnson is fairly impartial in his description of and references to various important incidents in the life of Milton, although at times he violates the principle of impartiality. For instance, Dr. Johnson comments : Let not our veneration for Milton forbid us to look with some degree of merriment on great promises and small performance, on the man, who hastens home, because his countrymen are contending

for their liberty, and, when he reaches the scene of action, vapours away his patriotism in a private boarding-school.” (pp. 8-9). This is, no doubt, an unworthy sarcasm, Milton, when abroad, was misled as to the actual state of affairs in the political scenario of England and thus on his return found no scope for an active interference in political matters.

### 3.1.1 Distinction

At this stage of my discussion I may draw the attention of the students to the distinction between biography and ‘hagiography’. ‘Biography as a literary term is defined as a story of a person’s life written by somebody else.’, while hagiography is primarily looked upon as “writings about the lives of the saints” and derivatively “biographical writing that is too full of praise for its subject.” (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English*). The further derivative meaning of the term may however refer to the biographical writing where the subject concerned is unnecessarily decidered, or unreasonably criticised and denounced. It is quite unfortunate that Dr. Johnson, now and then, exhibits a hagiographical attitude towards his subject. The reasons are more personal than anything else. Dr. Johnson who, in his political belief, was a Tory, subscribed to the conservative forces of politics, and for that reason he could not perhaps adjust himself to the anti-monarchical, progressive liberal and republican political faith or ideology of Milton, just as he failed to accept Milton’s anti-Catholicism, and his siding with Puritanic Protestantism. In this connection one may recall Dr. Johnson’s observations on *Areopagitica* (published November, 1964). It was addressed to the Parliament, urging them to repeal an Ordinance they had passed in June, 1643, for the Regulation of the Press by a staff of official Censors. The title is associated with Areopagus, The Hill of Ares at Athens, to the West of the Acropolis. Mythologically the Hill is associated with trial and judgement. At a more extended level the title alludes to a Council, called The Council of The Areopagus’. Besides supreme judicial authority in cases of wilful murder, this council possessed very large social influence, having the general undefined superintendence of religion, morals, education, and the like. It appears to have been strongly conservative in tone, and seems to have Occupied a somewhat similar position in the Athenian republic to that of the House of Lords in the British constitution. Milton in this particular pamphlet criticises the conservative role played by The House of Lord in respect of the freedom of the press and he made an advocacy for the same in a democratic social and political set-up. Dr. Johnson, however, murmurs words of criticism against Milton’s view, as he writes : “...if every dreamer of innovations

may propagate his projects, there can be no settlement; if every murmurer at government may diffuse discontent, there can be no peace; and if every sceptick in theology may teach his fathes, there can be no religion.” (p. 15).

### 3.1.2 On *Areopagitica*

Dr. Johnson’s sceptical ambiguous statements on *Areopagitica* are followed by his description of Milton’s political engagements—particularly his anti-monarchical attitude, his ardent support for the republican faith of Oliver Cromwell and Milton’s consideration of Cromwell as the Protector of the rights of people, the champion of liberty, fighting against an authoritarian tendency of English monarchy. At this stage of my discussion I may quote one specific passage that establishes Dr. Johnson’s conservative political attitude and the consequent criticism of Milton, the Republican. The passage quoted below has the relevance and meaningfulness of its own for two different reasons. First, there is an attempt on the part of Dr. Johnson to locate Milton in the context of a specific historical time, and secondly, to reinstate the idea that a true biography is, on the one hand, a description of the life-story of a person, and on the other, an analysis of the place and time to which the subject belongs.

“Cromwell had now dismissed the parliament by the authority of which he had destroyed monarchy, and commenced monarch himself, under the title of Protector, but with kingly and more than Kingly power. That his authority was lawful, never was pretended, he himself founded his right only in necessity; but Milton, having now tasted the honey of public employment, [Milton’s appointment as the Latin Secretary to Cromwell is referred to] would not return to hunger and philosophy, but continuing to exercise his office under a manifest usurpation, betrayed to his power that liberty which he had defended. Nothing can be more just than that rebellion should end in slavery. That he, who had justified the murder of his king, for some acts which to him seemed unlawful, should now sell his services, and his flatteries to a tyrant, of whom it was evident that he could do nothing useful.” (p. 20).

Dr. Johnson’s observations on Milton’s political ideology and his participation in contemporary politics are more ambivalent than anything else. Dr. Johnson, however, does not forget to mention some of the prose writings of Milton, which were designed and written to defend his own political faith, and thereby to speak against the monarchical rule in England, which, according to him, was nothing but authoritarian and dictatorial. The biographical account of Milton embraces largely his political career and attachment with which Dr. Johnson at times is hardly sympathetic.

At the same time, he intends to present Milton as an individual who had his own personal habits and domestic life. The paragraphs beginning with 154 and ending with 172 introduce to the readers Milton as a private individual being. The following are some of the interesting observations of Dr. Johnson on Milton's book and deportment, his domestic habits.

(a) "Milton has the reputation of having been in his youth dominantly beautiful, so as to have been called the Lady of his college."

(b) "He was vigorous and active, and delighted in the exercise of the sword, in which he is related to have been eminently skilful."

(c) "His domestic habits, so far as they are known, were those of a severe student. He drank little strong drink of any kind and fed without excess in quantity, and in his earlier years without delicacy of choice."

(d) "When he did not care to rise early he had something read to him by his bedside, perhaps at this time his daughters were employed. He composed much in the morning, and dictated in the day, sitting obliquely in an elbow-chair with his leg thrown over his arm." (pp. 44-45). In this part of 'Life' Dr. Johnson seems to be accepting the basic requirements of the art of biography the presentation of the subject concerned not simply as more than common but also as somebody belonging to the common run of men. [\*\* In this context the students may be advised to read W. H. Auden's poem 'A Shilling Life').

After having discussed Milton as an individual with some of his personal habits and eccentricities, Dr. Johnson writes about the 'greatness' of his literary works—his skill in learning languages like Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, French and Spanish—the poets like Spenser, Shakespeare and Cowley he liked and favoured.

Otherwise objective and impersonal, Dr. Johnson at times sounds prejudiced and partial, particularly in his assessment of Milton's political faith, particularly in his assessment of Milton's political faith. He gives a distorted view of Milton's republicanism (\*\* paragraph 166) p. 48).

which, according to him. "was founded in an envious hatred of greatness and a sullen desire of independence, in petulance impatient of control, and pride disdainful of superiority." (p. 48). No one can miss the offensive note in the language used by Johnson. Together with this, there is the controversial statement "...there appears in his books something like a Turkish contempt of females as subordinate and inferior beings." (p. 48).

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## 3.2 Criticism of Milton's poems

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From paragraph 173 onward till the end, the 'Life' turns out to be the first ever full-length critical estimate of Milton's poetical works. The importance of this assessment is manifold. It introduces in the first case Dr. Johnson's excellent critical sense, his intellectual acumen, his perceptive reading of literature and his incisive manners of looking into the complexity, and thematic core of any literary piece, written mainly in verse. At the preliminary level, Dr. Johnson stratifies the poetical career of Milton into three broad phases—his early poems, written in Italian, Latin and English, including the sonnets and lyrics. The poems in the middle phase of his literary/poetic career, which include *Lycidas*, *L'Allegro*, *Penseroso*, *Comus* and lastly, the poems which contribute to the greatness of Milton—*Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*, The last, however, is a drama rather than a poem proper. The 'Life' ends with a general assessment of Milton as a versifier and as a stylist of poetry.

The concluding section of 'Life' is thus more critical than biographical. The significance of this section is manifold. It is, in the first case, the first ever complete assessment of Milton's works; and it is here that Dr. Johnson introduces himself as a neo-classical critic. Before I summarise Dr. Johnson's observations on the works of Milton, it is perhaps appropriate to write a few sentences on Johnson as a critic. When we say that Johnson is an Augustan, then, perhaps, we associate with his name that period of English civilization which valued the correct, the balanced, the conscious. It was this period that looked back to the Rome of Augustus, when Horace and Virgil were at work, Neo-classicism as a formative force was found to be initially working at the close of the seventeenth century, but Dryden, who is ordinarily considered as belonging to the new style of writing and criticism, in his *Essay of Dramatic Poesy*, shows himself a living example of openmindedness in criticism. Johnson was born nine years after Dryden's death. By the time he grew up, the Augustan assumptions had been unquestioned for many years. They had, in fact, hardened into an orthodoxy. In the criticism that Dryden wrote during his middle years, there are signs that he saw the too-rigid application of the neo-classic theory as an enemy. For example, he defended Shakespeare against the charge that his plays by neglecting the 'three unities', dissipate their dramatic interest. The same kind of pleasant and desirable flexibility may be perceived in his criticism of Milton's literary works.

### 3.2.1 Dr. Johnson and the early poems of Milton

Milton's early compositions in verse were in Italian, Latin and English. Dr. Johnson honestly confesses that, because of his unfamiliarity with the Italian language, he cannot speak about them as a critic, the Latin poems are commended by him as "lusciously elegant", although they are emulative of the writing of ancient writers. From the point of view of style, these poems are distinguished by "the purity of diction, and the harmony of the numbers" (p. 50). Yet, all the poems do not have the uniformity of standard. The elegies written during this period are superior to odes in their literary qualities. The poems, written in English, "make", comments Dr. Johnson, "no premises of *Paradise Lost*", although the thematic and structural designs of the poems are "original and unborrowed." (pp. 50-51). Dr. Johnson is in his own characteristic style adversely critical of Milton's shorter poems, particularly the lyrics, odes and sonnets. He admits that in these shorter pieces there is the unmistakable touch of neatness and elegance, but, notwithstanding their grace and structural beauty, they fail to impress the readers. According to Johnson, Milton hardly feels comfortable in writing the lyric poems. His poetic genius is intended for what is vast and epic, grand, and magnificent. Dr. Johnson suggests these ideas with the help of a statement which has assumed almost proverbial signification of its own : ... "he was a *Lion* that had no skill in *dandling The Kid.*" (p. 51).

About Milton's other poem, better-known and more popular, *Lycidas*, Dr. Johnson's views are not much favourable. He observes that the diction of the poem is 'harsh', its rhymes uncertain, and the numbers "unpleasing." He is particularly critical of the use of myth and mythical figures and images in the poem. According to him, the use of myth on a broad scale had obstructed the spontaneous expression of grief on part of the poet. As a result, the feeling of bereavement in this pastoral elegy sounds artificial, mechanical and stereotypical. In Dr. Johnson's opinion *Lycidas* is sometimes unjustly praised simply because its writer is nobody else than Milton. In this connection Dr. Johnson goes against the poetic strategy of mingling the Christian with the pagan, the ecclesiastical with the pastoral.

Perhaps because of his neo-classical background he never liked the romantic *aura*, associated with the poem; and the violation of the principle of propriety and appropriateness, so typically ingrained in the neo-classical perception of literature.

Among the early poems of Milton, *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* occupy a position of special importance. Dr. Johnson is fairly elaborate in his appreciation of the two

poems of Milton—the poems which, according to him, stand opposed to each other in respect of mood, style and characterisation. The way Johnson writes on them suggests his close intimacy with the texts, his in-between reading of the poems and his sensitive responses to the different states of mind, as they are arrested and poeticised by Milton. A few lines may be quoted from the 'Life' in order to substantiate the arguments.

(1) "The cheerful man hears the lark in the morning, the pensive man hears the nightingale in the evening. The cheerful man sees the cock strut, and hears the horn and hounds echo in the woods; then walks not unseen to observe the glory of the rising sun, or listen to the singing milk maid and view the labours of the plowman and the mower....." [ Dr. Johnson's p. 53. observation on *L'Allegro*].

The pensive man, portrayed in *Il Penseroso*, offers a completely opposite picture to the cheerful man. Accordingly, Dr. Johnson's description presents an individual, sullen of glory, lonely and self secluded. Thus the lines in the 'Life' read like the following :

(b) "The pensive man, at one time, walks unseen to muse at midnight; and at another hears the sullen curfew. If the weather drives him home, he sits in a room lighted only by *glowing ambers*; or by a lonely lamp outwatches the North Star."

Further, the pensive man contemplates "the magnificent or pathetic scenes of tragic and epic poetry" (p. 53). In addition to the wonderful reproduction of the thematic contents of the two poems, he refers to the appropriateness of the poetic style and thereby he expresses his neo-classical concern for 'decorum' in poetry.

The critical deliberation on Milton's early poems ends with detailed and elaborate references to *Comus*, qualified by Dr. Johnson as the "Greatest of his juvenile performances." (p. 54). It appears that Johnson appreciates the 'musque' primarily because of its poetic quality, and secondly because it satisfies his neo-classic idea of poetry as combining in itself "The praise and defence of virtue" (p. 54) with what is "truly poetical in the form of allusions, images, and descriptive epithets. (p. 55). In spite of its poetic appeal *Comus* has a deficiency of its own in so far as the improbability in its dramatic action is taken into account Johnson, however, appreciates *Comus* for its musical elements to be found in the song of Comus. The supernatural elements are handled with delicacy and care. Johnson finally sums up his ideas about *Comus* in the following manner : "It is a drama in the epic style, inelegantly splendid and tediously instructive" (p. 56).



### 3.2.2 *Paradise Lost, Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes*

Dr. Johnson begins his appreciation of *Paradise Lost* by making the following observations : “those little pieces (i.e. The works of lesser literary poetic qualities) may be dispatched without much anxiety ; a greater work calls for greater care. I am now to examine *Paradise Lost* a poem, which, considered with respect to design, may claim, the first-place, and with respect to performance the second, among the productions of the human mind.” (pp. 56-57). The ‘greater care’, and the meticulous attention with which Dr. Johnson examines *Paradise Lost* qualitatively are possibly due to his neo-classical bent of mind – the specific manner or way he looks upon literature. The neo-classical tendency in his criticism of Milton’s poetical works in general, and *Paradise Lost*, in particular is explicit when for example, he gives the epic poem, a glorified position or status : “By the general consent of critics, the first praise of genius is due to the writer of an epic poem, as it requires an assemblage of all the powers which are singly sufficient for other compositions.” This is followed by his famous definition of poetry that may remind us of the Horatian idea of poetry which ensures the blending of edification with entertainment, instruction with pleasure : “Poetry is the art of uniting pleasure with truth, by calling imagination to the help of reason.” (p. 57) After having defined poetry : Dr. Johnson writes about the specific attributes of epic poetry. Thus he refers to epic poetry as undertaking “to teach the most important truths by the most pleasing precepts, and therefore “relating” some great event in the most affecting manner.” (p. 57). While highlighting some other major attributes of epic, Dr. Johnson refers to its dramatic quality, amplitude, magnitude, grand imagination and moral precept inherent in its narrative.

The critical deliberation on the generic features of epic poetry is followed by a moderately elaborate description of *Paradise Lost* as an epic. In this context Dr. Johnson comments on Milton’s art of characterisation, his handling of scriptural materials and the touch of elegance in his poetic style. To include, Dr. Johnson refutes the charge of Dryden that *Paradise Lost* is an ‘uneven’ poem.

The characters in *Paradise Lost* are differently grouped. There are the good and evil angels, and the four good angels are suitably portrayed. Clarke objects to some of Satan’s speeches as impious. Johnson thinks there is little in them to shock piety. Moloch’s ferocity is consistently displayed. Both the innocence and the guilty state of Adam and Eve are suitably shown by their language. The superiority of Adam is diligently sustained in both states.

Dr. Johnson appreciates the structural compactness of the power. He writes

“To the completeness or integrity of the design nothing can be objected, it has distinctly and clearly what Aristotle requires, a beginning, a middle and an end.” (61) There are digressive passages in the poem. At times, they read superfluous, “but superfluities so beautiful, who would take away?” (61). Indeed, the digressions in *Paradise Lost*. in spite of their apparent sense of superfluity always generate pleasurable feelings in the minds of readers. *Paradise Lost*, according to Dr. Johnson, satisfies the condition which, a neo-classicist would say, are the requisites of poetry. On the one hand, the digressions intend to give pleasure, and on the other, they situate the poem against historical, mythical and theological contexts. [The reference in this connection may be given to the famous lines that describes the fallen angels in Book I of *Paradise Lost*.] Thus the end of *Paradise Lost*, like a typical neo-classical poem, is to combine in itself pleasure with instruction and delight with edification. The appreciative comments with regard to the poem are focused on its thought and spirit, the way the parents of mankind are presented and the passions of man in his unfallen state are portrayed. What is to be specifically commended in *Paradise Lost* is the prevailing quality of sublimity, as Dr. Johnson writes : “...sublimity, the general and prevailing quality in this poem; sublimity variously modified, sometimes descriptive, sometimes, argumentative.” (65)

Dr. Johnson claims that the impartial criticism cannot be indifferent to “the defects and faults of the object of criticism. Accordingly, he mentions the following limitations of the poem. First, there is in the poem an inconvenience of plan, excluding human action and manners. Hence the reader has little curiosity or sympathy, Secondly, the truths taught lack novelty, and are neither new nor unexpected. Third, the solemnity of the subject obstructs rather than arouses imagination. The good and evil of eternity are too great for poetical treatment. Fourth, Milton has displayed the power of study and genius in accumulating and selecting materials to adorn his poem, and to present the subject in a new form with fresh adornments, but has not succeeded in supplying the want of human interest. Fifth, the agency of spirits is not consistent throughout. Philosophy has confused poetry by partially but not wholly, investing the spirits with form and matter. Sixth, allegorical persons having no real existence are introduced. The personification of Sin and Death is faulty. This “unskilful allegory” is one of the greatest faults. Lastly, the more insignificant faults are too frequent play upon words, equivocations, and improper use of the terms of art.

Notwithstanding his enumeration of the faults and defects of Milton as a poet of *Paradise Lost* Dr. Johnson refutes some of the offensive arguments of Dryden,

directed against *Paradise Lost*. Dryden's rather adverse comment appeared in his critical note on the epic poem in 'Preface to Second Miscellany'; "Milton's *Paradise Lost* is admirable, but am I therefore bound to maintain, that there are no flats among his elevations, when it is evident he creeps along sometimes far above an hundred lines together?" Dr. Johnson feels the necessity of refuting Dryden's charge against *Paradise Lost*. He argues that the uniformity of standard cannot be always maintained in a long narrative poem like *Paradise Lost*. The intellectual and imaginative power of the poet may not be always bright and blazing. Thus he writes : "It is no more to be required that wit should always be blazing them that the sun should always stand at noon." (p. 70). It is therefore, no limitation on the part of Milton that now and then his work reads ordinary and pedestrian. No poet is ever able to maintain the elevation in the flight of his poetic imagination with consistency and regularity.

### 3.2.3 *Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes*

Dr. Johnson's critical observation on *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* are not however, as elaborate as those on *Paradise Lost*. Dr. Johnson appreciates the poem for its elegance and also for its didacticism. It combines in itself the imaginative effusion with the "exalted precepts of wisdom." (p. 71). He, however, claims that, if this poem would have been written by any poet, other than Milton, it would have perhaps received universal acclaim of readers and critics.

With regard to *Samson Agonistes* Dr. Johnson does not hold much favourable opinion. He discovers in Milton's attempt the futility of writing a tragedy by the grand exhibition of his "bigotry of learning." (p. 71) Further, he finds the play structurally defective. By following the Aristotelean critical formula, Dr. Johnson considers *Samson Agonistes* structurally flawed and defective. The "beginning middle, and end formula", to be worked out in the writing of a tragedy, has not been taken up and put into practice by Milton. As a result "the intermediate parts" of the play "have neither cause nor consequence, neither hasten nor retard the catastrophe." (p.71) Dr. Johnson's view about the absence of the 'middle' in *Samson Agonistes*, has been subjected to debates and controversies among the critics. The 20th century critics of Milton like Prof. Tillyard, Frank Kermode and J. B. Broadbent are of the opinion that the play has a definite middle of its own, comprising the Manua, Dalita and Haraphe episodes. They contribute to the mental and spiritual development and uplift of the protagonist. They hasten the progress of the dramatic action leading itself to the final catastrophe.

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### 3.3 Milton's style and Versification

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The final assessment is focused on Milton as the stylist of poetry, as a grand versifier, a fine manipulator of rhymes lines. In this respect Milton is a true classical poet, intensely aware of the significance of form and instructure poetry. It is for this reason that Dr. Johnson, himself being a neo-clamistic, admires Milton. The following are the general remarks, made by Dr. Johnson, on Milton's style of writing.

a) Diction, uniform throughout greater works, in otherwise, peculiarly his own. His chief admirers attribute this to grandeur of ideas, Johnson, to his love of foreign idiom. In his prose this is condemned, in his poetry it is admired. Style in not modified by the subject.

b) Milton wrote no language, but formed a Babylonish dialect, harsh and barbarous in itself, but appearing graceful by the pleasure it conveys. Copiousness, variety, diligent selection of melodious words, are to be praised.

c) *Dr. Johnson's observations on versification.* According to him "English heroic verse without rhyme is probably an imitation of Italian verse. Milton thought-rhyme not necessary to true poetry. Johnson, on the contrary, considers that "The music of metre" is required for the English language which in highly unmusical. "The artifice of rhyme" makes each line a distinct system of sounds and preserces the music of the English heroic line blank verse which "seems to be verse only to the eye has not the ease of prose, nor the melody of members, and soon tires the reader. Milton is to be admired rather than initiated.

d) Milton copied Homer who contrived the first epic poem, but "of all borrowers he in perhaps the least indebted." Milton's writings are entirely his own work, performed in spite of great difficulties. Homers' epic excels that of Milton only by having preceded it. Dr. Johnson reader the conclusion of 'Life of Milton by warm and sincere words of praise : "From his contemporaries he neither courted nor received support; there is in his writings nothing by which the pride of other authors might be gratified, or favour gained ; no exchange of praise, nor solicitation of support. His great works were performed under under discountenance, and in blindness, but vanquished at his touch, he was born for whatever is arduous; and his work is not the greatest of heroic poems, only because it is not the first." (p.74).

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### 3.4 Comprehension Exercises

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1. Discuss Dr. Johnson's views on the early poems of Milton.
2. Analyse Dr. Johnson's appraisal of *Paradise Lost*.
3. Write a short note on Milton's style and versification.
4. Critically examine Dr. Johnson's observations on Milton's political ideology.

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### 3.5 Suggested Reading

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1. Deighton, K. (ed.) *The Life of Milton*  
(Macmillan & Co. Ltd. NY. 1965)
2. Hill, Christopher — *Milton and the English Revolution*,  
(Faber and Faber, London. 1977)
3. Wain, John (ed.) — *Lives of the Poets*  
(Universal Book Stall, New Delhi, 1990)

# **Paper - V ● Module - 2**



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## Unit : 1 □ William Wordsworth: 'Preface to Lyrical Ballads'

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### Structure :

- 1.0. Objectives
- 1.1. Introduction to William Wordsworth
- 1.2. Introduction to the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*
- 1.3. A Brief Survey of the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*
- 1.4. Humble and Rustic Life
- 1.5. Language of Poetry
- 1.6. Poetry and its Effect on the Readers
- 1.7. What is a Poet
- 1.8. The Preface to Lyrical Ballads : Critical Issues
- 1.9. Summing Up
- 1.10. Comprehension Exercise

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### 1.0. □ Objectives

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In this unit we shall give you some idea of Wordsworth's theory of poetry as spelt out in the 'Preface' to the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*. His view of poetic diction and Coleridge's estimate of Wordsworth's view of poetic diction would also be briefly taken up.

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### 1.1. □ Introduction to William Wordsworth

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William Wordsworth (1770-1850) was born at Cumberland. His mother died when he was only eight, and his father died five years later. He was sent to a school at Hawkshead, where he led a life of solitary freedom. The many hours that the boy



Wordsworth spent wandering about the hills and the woods prepared him for the two principal achievements in his life - the production of some of the finest poetry on nature written in any language, and the leadership of the early part of the English Romantic Movement. After graduating from Cambridge, he visited France, and was infected by the fervour of the French Revolution. The Reign of Terror that followed the revolution caused private distresses for him and the young poet vented his pessimism in some of his early writings. However, he regained his balance under the influence of nature and with the help of his sister and life-long companion, Dorothy. His first volumes of poetry show the characteristic tone and diction of the eighteenth century nature poetry, but *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), jointly written by Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, marks a new departure. Some of the qualities of this collection - the uncompromising simplicity of its language, the concern for the poor and the marginal, the fusion of description of nature with inward states of mind - caused this volume to be viewed as the starting point of the English Romantic Movement. As he grew older, Wordsworth's revolutionary ardour and liberalism cooled down, and when Robert Southey died in 1843 Wordsworth was sufficiently staid and conservative to succeed him as the Poet Laureate.

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## 1.2. □ Introduction to the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*

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After *Lyrical Ballads* was published, Wordsworth later wrote a *Preface* to the 1800 edition of *The Lyrical Ballads*, in order to inform readers of his purpose in writing poems such as the ones contained in this volume. The new poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge published in *Lyrical Ballads* was so new and strange that Wordsworth was "advised ... to prefix a systematic defence of the theory upon which the Poems were written." This *Preface* is widely considered to be a literary manifesto of the English Romantic Movement which announces the revolution against the neo-classicism. One main point of this preface is to relate Wordsworth's intention to depict the common man, using the common language of man in his poetry. Another goal outlined in the preface is to show how feeling "gives importance to the action and the situation." A third goal of Wordsworth's poetry - as explained in this preface - is to illustrate the way in which poetry is a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings."

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### 1.3. □ A Brief Survey of the *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*

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The *Preface* covers a number of issues and is wide-ranging in its survey of the place of the *Lyrical Ballads* on the contemporary literary scene. The topics covered include the following :

Wordsworth places the emphasis on the attempt to deal with “natural” (as opposed to cosmopolitan) man, arguing that such men live much closer to nature and, therefore, are closer to the well-being of human nature. In this, we do not fail to understand how much Wordsworth owes to the late eighteenth century intellectual preoccupation with “natural Man”, as we find in the writings of Rousseau. Wordsworth sees his poetry, in its concerns with the lives of men such as Michael (as shown in his poem, *Michael*), as an antidote to the artificial portraits of Man presented in eighteenth century poetry. The principal object of poems, according to Wordsworth, is 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 at the same time, it is the object of the poet to throw over these incidents and situations a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect. Wordsworth also argues that - above all - it is the object of the poet to make these situations and incidents interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement. Wordsworth makes it very clear in the *Preface* that he wants to depict the common man in a “selection of language really used by men.” He achieves his goal of using common language with lines such as “And I must think, do all I can / That there was pleasure there” from *Linen Written in Early Spring*, that use very simple language. His goals are also achieved as Wordsworth often chooses poor rustic settings to write his poetry about, rather than writing about the fancy courts in which Kings and Queens dwelt. For example, the main character in *Mad Mother* dwells “underneath the hay-stack warm.” Also, the characters of Wordsworth’s poetry, such as the “little cottage girl” in *We are Seven* are very simple people.

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### 1.4. □ Humble and Rustic Life

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In the *Preface* Wordsworth outlines his reasons for dealing with “humble and rustic life”. Humble and rustic life is generally chosen, because in that condition, the

essential passions of the heart find a better soil in which they can attain their maturity, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language. Wordsworth also contends that in that condition of life, our elementary feelings co-exist in a state of greater simplicity, and consequently, may be more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated; because the manners of rural life germinate from these elementary feelings. He further says that, from the necessary character- of rural occupations, these feelings are more easily comprehended, and are more durable. Lastly, Wordsworth writes, in that condition the passions of men are incorporated with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature. Wordsworth uses these simple\* people in their simple settings to illustrate how feeling “gives importance to the action and situation and not the action and situation to the feeling” In *Mad Mother* Wordsworth Writes “Sweet babe! They say that I am mad, / But nay, my heart is far loo glad” These lines convey the feeling and emotion that the mother feels. Her feelings give importance to the poem, because they illustrate the sadness she feels from having society-looking clown oh her as mad, They also show how happy she is for finding one person, her baby, to love her. Without these strong emotions, the situation in the poem is nothing more than a mother holding her baby But with the feelings expressed, the *Mad Mother* is able to give the situation feeling and meaning.

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## 1.5. □ Language of Poetry

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For Wordsworth this choice of subject matter necessarily involves a rethinking of the language of poetry. In the *Preface* Wordsworth says that in his poems the language of humble and rustic people has been adopted (purified from what appear to be its real defects - all lasting and rational causes of dislike and disgust) because such men hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is- originally derived. Wordsworth argues that these people are less influenced by social vanity, because of their rank in society and the sameness and narrow circle of their intercourse. Thus, they convey their feelings and notions in simple and/unelaborated expressions Accordingly, Wordsworth writes, such a language - arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings - is a more permanent, and a far more philosophical language, than that which is frequently used by the contemporary poets. Here Wordsworth joins issues with the contemporary poets by saying that they think that

they are conferring honour upon themselves and their-art, in proportion as they separate themselves from the sympathies of men, and indulge in arbitrary and capricious habits of expression, in order to furnish food for fickle appetites, of their own creation. It is clear, therefore, that Wordsworth is all for natural language of natural men. It should be noted, however, that Wordsworth admits to some licence in “tidying up” the language of “ordinary men”. Some critics believe that this affects the persuasiveness of his theories’ about “natural men”.

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## 1.6. □ Poetry and its Effect on the Readers

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Wordsworth here also makes an attempt to define poetry and its effects on the reader. Wordsworth’s project is an idealistic one, and clearly poetry, for him has a vital role in educating the mind and sensibility of his readers, a moral purpose. In, the *Preface* Wordsworth illustrates how important this benevolent effect is for the reader. He argues that not only is all good poetry the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling, but he also adds that poems to which any value can be attached were never produced in any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. He says that our continued influxes of feeling are modified and directed by our thoughts, which are indeed the representative of all our past feelings. He also points out that by contemplating the relation of these general representatives to each other, we discover what is really important, to men; similarly, by the repetition and continuance of this act, our feelings will be connected with important subjects. Finally, he says, if we are originally possessed of such sensibility, such habits of mind will be produced, that by obeying blindly and mechanically the impulses of these habits, we shall describe objects, and utter sentiments of such a nature, and in such connection with each other, that the understanding of the reader must necessarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections strengthened and purified.

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## 1.7. □ What is a Poet?

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Inevitably, perhaps, the above leads Wordsworth towards asking, What is a Poet? His answer illustrates the underlying assumptions about the poet as a genius, as a

special person, capable of re-articulating thought and feeling so as to educate the reader. The poet is, according to Wordsworth, a man speaking to men: a man endowed with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than one supposed to be common among mankind. He is a man pleased with his own passions and volition, who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him. He takes delight in contemplating similar volition and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and is habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them. Wordsworth further adds that to these qualities a poet has added a disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present; an ability of conjuring up in himself passions, which are indeed far from those produced by real events. He also says that the poet is able to remember the passions produced by real events more vividly than the other men, especially with regard to those parts of the general sympathy which are pleasing and delightful. Thus, the poet has acquired a greater readiness and power in expressing what he thinks and feels, and especially those thoughts and feelings which, by his own choice, or from the structure of his own mind, arise in him without immediate external excitement.

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## 1.8. □ *The Preface to Lyrical Ballads* : Critical Issues

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In his *Preface* Wordsworth presents his poetic manifesto, indicating the extent to which he saw his poetry, and that of Coleridge, as breaking away from the 'artificiality', 'triviality' or over-elaborate and contrived quality of eighteenth century poetry. The *Preface* is itself a masterpiece of English prose, exemplary in its lucid yet passionate defence of a literary style that could be popular without compromising artistic and poetic standards. Yet it is also vital for helping us to understand what Wordsworth and Coleridge were attempting in their collection of verse, and also provides us with a means of assessing how successfully the poems themselves live up to the standards outlined in the *Preface*.

Wordsworth focuses on issues of style. He claims, "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, are less under restraint, and speak a plainer and more emphatic language". He believes that feelings "coexist in a state

of greater simplicity” and, as a result, are “more accurately contemplated, and more forcibly communicated”. From this perspective, Wordsworth is aiming the success of poetry as an art form at the human experience. His premise depends on the notion that poetry is meant to be a communication tool first and foremost. As a result, it is the responsibility of the poet to express himself in a manner appropriate. Wordsworth assumes that when readers cannot gain pleasure from reading something they do not understand, the poet should descend from his or her “supposed height” and “express himself as other men express themselves”. This statement lies at the very heart of Wordsworth’s notion.

The *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* was a turning point and it made a huge impact on the writing world. Wordsworth was very unique for his time and certainly an individual in a profession that had largely become accustomed to overly decorated speech. In the process, Wordsworth had felt that the true heart and centre of the poems were often covered up by the unnecessary word choice. The “gaudiness and inane phraseology” of the contemporary poets, he felt, had encumbered the contemporary verse. Wordsworth wanted to return to a natural poetic style exhibiting simplicity and stated strongly in the first section: “The principal object then, which I proposed to myself in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate, or describe them, throughout, as far as was 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 way. This quotation shows the creativity Wordsworth possessed and his desire for language for the common man. It must be noted, however, that Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797), in her *A Vindication* written a few years earlier than the publication of the *Preface*, had called for an end to “flowery diction”.

Another one of Wordsworth’s ideas on the subject of poetic language that has captured the critical attention is: “Accordingly, such a language, arising out of repeated experience and regular feelings, is a more permanent... language, than that which is frequently substituted for it by poets...” The usage of the word “experience” reflects that it is often the “common man” that is more in tune to poetry and nature than the aristocrat, because they have lived through the many battles of life. In that same token, the “regular feelings” of our lives can often possess the deepest meanings because they are universal in design. Later, Wordsworth explores this idea again. He

says about a poet: "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..."

Finally, one must refer to Wordsworth's definition of poetry as we find in the last section - "Emotion Recollected in Tranquillity". The opening, "I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" gives rise to the idea that emotions drive the writer into new directions. Wordsworth takes this element to a new level by stating that the emotions take on a new form into tranquillity. He states that "poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity 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."

While through his poetry, Wordsworth achieves most of the goals outlined in the *Preface*, he does not seem to be completely able to show how poetry is a "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings." It is difficult for him to prove this, because the reader cannot see the state that Wordsworth was in when writing the poetry. Nothing in the poetry itself can clearly indicate the emotions felt by the poet. One can merely guess from their own experiences, that Wordsworth was driven by strong emotions, which helped to guide his poetry.

For the most part, Wordsworth's collection of poems is a manifestation, illustration, and example of his ideas about poetry. He outlines the goals of his poetry in his *Preface*, and these goals can be easily seen in his poetry. His poetry shows how important the use of common language and common situations are to him. His poetry also illustrates the way that importance comes from the feeling itself, and not the situation. While Wordsworth is unable to prove to his reader that his poetry is derived from his overflowing feelings, his poetry still serves as an excellent example about his beliefs of poetry.

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## 1.9. □ Summing Up

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Wordsworth holds that the artist is not essentially an imitator but a man who expresses

his feelings. A poet's vision, he argues, is more inward than outward; the work of art is not an imitation of the external world, but an expression of the internal world -the embodiment of an emotion. By showing us how he sees and feels something, the poet may pluck the blinkers from our eyes and melt the ice around our heart. He may jolt us out of our usual rut, and widen the area of our sensibilities. Wordsworth's view of the daffodils may force upon us the awareness that our own views are narrow. An awareness of how other people feel is, after all, a way of expanding and enriching one's own personality.

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## 1.10. □ Comprehension Exercises

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1. What are Wordsworth's views on 'humble and rustic life' in the *Preface*?
2. Discuss some of the critical issues in the preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*.



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## **Unit : 2 □ Samuel Taylor Coleridge : Biographia Literaria (Chapters XIII, XIV, XVIII)**

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### **Structure :**

- 2.0. Objectives**
- 2.1. Introduction to Coleridge**
- 2.2. Introduction to *Biographia Literaria***
- 2.3. A Brief Survey of the Important Topics of the *Biographia Literaria* (Select Portions)**
- 2.4. Distinction between Prose and Poem**
- 2.5. Poem and Poetry & What is a Poet?**
- 2.6. Language of Poetry and its Difference from Prose**
- 2.7. Coleridge's View on Metre**
- 2.8. *Biographia Literaria*: Critical Issues**
- 2.9. Summing Up**
- 2.10. Comprehension Exercises**
- 2.11. Suggested Reading**

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### **2.0. □ Objectives**

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In this unit we shall take up Coleridge's major critical work *Biographia Literaria* with special attention to his theory of Imagination and his view of poetry. In doing so we shall also touch upon the influence of German thinkers on his thought.

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### **2.1. □ Introduction to Coleridge**

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Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), English poet and critic, was gifted with a scholarly and enquiring mind, but lacked the tough moral fibre of Wordsworth. Son of a Devon clergyman, he was educated in London and Cambridge, although he never completed his degree. In 1794, along with Robert Southey (who was later to be his

brother-in-law), Coleridge evolved a communistic scheme called 'Pantisocracy' under the influence of the French Revolution. He met Wordsworth around 1796 and the two poets lived close to each other for a time in Somerset. The joint publication of Wordsworth and Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads* - which heralded the beginning of the Romantic Movement in English literature - took place in 1798. It was around this time that Coleridge lost his faith in the French Revolution, as expressed in his poem, *France, An Ode*. In 1798-99, he travelled to Germany and came under the influence of the German philosophers like Schlegel and Kant. Early in his life, Coleridge had been reliant on opium, and never fully recovered from the addiction. In his later life, he quarrelled with Wordsworth, and became increasingly conservative in politics and Anglican in religion. Coleridge's poetic achievement has been given more widely varying assessments than that of any other English literary artist, though there is a broad agreement that his enormous potential was never fully realised in his works. Coleridge's poetic output is small and diverse, but immensely important. His symbolic works, such as *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, *Kubla Khan* and *Christabel* explore new psychological and emotional depths. He also has a reputation as one of the most important of all English literary critics, largely on the basis of his *Biographia Literaria* (1817).

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## 2.2. □ Introduction to *Biographia Literaria*

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*Biographia Literaria* is an autobiography in discourse by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, which he published in 1817. The work is long and seemingly loosely structured, and although there are autobiographical elements, it is not a straight forward or linear autobiography. Instead, it is meditative, with numerous essays on philosophy. In particular, it discusses and engages the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling. Being fluent in German, Coleridge was one of the first major English literary figures to translate and discuss Schelling, in particular. Critics have reacted strongly to the *Biographia*. Early reactions were that it was a demonstration of Coleridge's opiate-driven decline into ill health. Recent re-evaluations have given it more credit. While contemporary critics recognise the degree to which Coleridge borrowed from his sources (with straight lifts from Schelling), they also see in the work far more structure and planning than is apparent on first glance. In *Biographia*, Coleridge presents his philosophy of poetry and a critique of Romantic ideals in life and art. It is also taken as his longer-term reaction

and comment on William Wordsworth, earlier (at the time of *Lyrical Ballads*) his close collaborator. Much of the literary criticism in this book is devoted to detailed analysis and appreciation of Wordsworth's artifice. The critical analysis of poems by Shakespeare and Wordsworth - which occupies much of the second volume of this book - displays a very modern sophistication in its treatment of metre and diction.

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### 2.3. □ A Brief Survey of the Important Topics of the *Biographia Literaria* (Select Portions)

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**Primary Imagination, Secondary (imagination & Fancy:** In Chapter XIII of the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge makes his famous observations on primary imagination, secondary imagination and fancy. He says, "The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition of the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM." According to David Daiches, Coleridge views primary imagination as the great ordering principle — an agency which enables us both to discriminate and to order, to separate and to synthesise which makes perception possible. We understand, therefore, that according to Coleridge primary imagination is something without which we have only a meaningless collection of sense data. The function of primary imagination is thus conceived as an act of creation that is essential and perpetual, bringing order out of chaos by making its parts intelligible by the assertion of the identity of the designer. So, according to Coleridge primary imagination is essentially creative - "a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I am", as Coleridge says.

Primary imagination, *in*, is a power, Coleridge views secondary imagination as the conscious human use of this power. He says:

The secondary imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the *kind of its* agency, and differing only in *degree*, and in the *mode* of its operation It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealise and to unify, It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

Coleridge argues here that when we employ our primary imagination in the very act of perception we are not doing so with our conscious will but are exercising the

basic faculty of our awareness of ourselves and the external world, in this sense, the secondary imagination is less elemental and more conscious than the primary imagination; but it does not differ in kind from the primary imagination. While the primary imagination generates meanings from the sense data, the secondary imagination projects and creates new harmonies of meanings. Thus, the employment of the faculty of secondary imagination is in a larger sense - a poetic activity. According to Coleridge, a poem is always the work of a poet - of a man employing the secondary imagination and so achieving the harmony of meanings and the reconciliation of opposites. The value of secondary imagination thus lies in the fact that by the exercise of this faculty a poet is able to achieve a special kind of creative awareness which results in harmony and reconciliation.

About fancy, Coleridge says the following:

Fancy ... has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; while it is blended with, and modified by that empirical phenomenon of the will, which we express by the word CHOICE. But equally with the ordinary memory the fancy must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association.

One would suspect that Coleridge here attaches less importance to the faculty of fancy. And certainly, he views fancy as an activity which has no other counters to play with, but fixities and definites. The notion that Coleridge attaches less importance to fancy (certainly less than primary imagination and secondary imagination) is largely true, because - according to him fancy simply juxtaposes memories and impressions. Fancy constructs surface decorations out of new combinations of memories and perceptions, while imagination "generates and produces a form of its own." However, it is also true that although fancy is dependent on and inferior to imagination and is merely associative, it is nevertheless creative, too. It is the faculty of the power of conceiving and giving artistic form to that which is not existent, known, or experienced.

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## 2.4. □ Distinction between Prose and Poem

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Wordsworth, in his *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, was clear enough in expressing his view of what the poet did and why what he did was valuable. But he did not touch upon the question of how the poet's aim affected his way of writing and how a poem - as a work of literary art - differs from other forms of expression. The problem of

the relationship between the form and the content was thus kept untouched. In attempting to remedy this defect of Wordsworth, Coleridge, in Chapter XIV of the *Biographic*, makes a philosophical enquiry into the nature and value of poetry and poems on an entirely new footing. The argument of Coleridge is highly philosophical. What Coleridge is enquiring into are the differentiating qualities of poetry and the *raison d'être* of these qualities. The approach that he adopts may be called the ontological approach. According to him, "A poem contains the same elements as a prose composition." In both, words are used. The difference between poem and prose cannot therefore lie in the medium as both employ the same medium. A poem combines words differently, because it is seeking to do something different. At one level, Coleridge says, all that a poem seeks to do is to facilitate memory, as in the following lines:

Thirty days hath September,  
April, June, and November

Coleridge says that rhyming tags of this kind yield a particular pleasure. However, he argues that here metre and rhyme have been 'superadded': they do not arise from the nature of the content but have been imposed on it in order to make it more easily memorised. Essentially, then, it is a piece of prose cast into rhymed and metrical form so that we can remember it better. The "superficial form"; Coleridge thus contends, provides no profound logical reason for distinguishing between poem and prose.

According to Coleridge, "A difference of objects and contents supplies an additional ground of distinction." He seeks to characterise the way of handling language in a poem by pointing out what it seeks to achieve and how that aim determines its nature. Here he insists that one must be able to distinguish between the ultimate end and the immediate end. The immediate aim of a poem, according to Coleridge, is to provide pleasure. Truth may nevertheless be the ultimate end; but Coleridge says that - while in an ideal society nothing that was not truth could give pleasure - in our real society a poem might communicate pleasure without having any concern for "truth, either moral or intellectual."

But here, again, we face another problem. The communication of pleasure may be the immediate object of a literary work not metrically composed, for example, the novels. Do we make these into poems simply by superadding metre with or without rhyme? Coleridge solves this problem by saying that one cannot derive true and

permanent pleasure out of any feature of a work that does not arise naturally from the total nature of that work. If metre is added, all other parts must be made consonant with it. A poem must be an organic unity; while in a poem we should be led to note and appreciate each part of a poem to which the metre and rhyme draw attention, our pleasure in the whole as well should be developed cumulatively out of such appreciation. Our appreciation of a poem is therefore pleasurable in itself and at the same time conducive to an awareness of the total pattern of the complete poem.

Thus, according to Coleridge, a poem differs from a work of prose in having as its immediate object pleasure and not truth, and it differs from other kinds of writing which have pleasure as their immediate object by the fact that in a poem the pleasure we derive from the whole work is compatible with and led up to by the pleasure we take in each component part. A legitimate poem is a composition in which rhyme and metre bear an organic relationship with the total work. To quote Coleridge, in a poem "the parts mutually support and explain each other ... supporting the purpose and known influences of metrical arrangement."

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## 2.5. □ Poem and Poetry & What is a Poet

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While discussing the differences between poem and prose, Coleridge says that the differentiating quality of a poem is its special kind of form. From this, many critics have concluded that Coleridge's contribution to critical theory consists simply of the notion that in a 'legitimate' poem the relation between the parts and the whole is so intimate, so 'organic', that a total harmony of expression results, and form and content become different aspects of the same thing. In other words, they believe that Coleridge's view of what constitutes a poem is unrelated to any larger view of the nature of imaginative literature in general. However, Coleridge's view in fact is much more comprehensive than this. The clue to his general theory is to be found in a distinction he proceeds to make, in Chapter XIV of the *Biographia*, immediately after his definition of a 'legitimate' poem. Poetry, for Coleridge, is wider than poem. Poetry is a kind of activity which can be engaged in by painters and philosophers and is not only confined to those who employ language. Poetry, in this larger sense, brings "the whole soul of man" into activity, with each faculty playing its role according to its "relative worth and dignity." This takes place whenever the "secondary imagination" comes into operation. Thus Coleridge defines poetry through an account of how the poet works - the poet works through the exercise of his imagination. In

his own words :

What is poetry? is so nearly the same question with, what is a poet? that the answer to the one is involved in the solution of the other. For it is a distinction resulting from the poetic genius itself, which sustains and modifies the images, thoughts, and emotions of the poet's own mind.

Whenever, the synthesising and integrating powers of the secondary imagination are at work, bringing all aspects of a subject into complex unity, poetry of the highest order results. Thus, according to Coleridge, a poem is poetry in the narrower sense; it uses the same elements that we find in a work of poetry, but it differs from the work of poetry in the larger sense by combining its elements in a different way, "in consequence of a different object being proposed." This 'different object' is the immediate communication of pleasure. But since a poem is also poetry, the communication of pleasure may be its immediate object, but is not its whole function. It is here that a poem differs from poetry, where we find that the whole function is achieved. A poem, according to Coleridge, also differs from other forms of poetry by the fact that its medium is language. To discuss what poetry is, Coleridge affirms, equals to discuss what a poet is. A poet is a person endowed with a peculiar ability to conciliate discordant qualities, a person endowed with a special ability to feel emotions combined with an unusual mental order. So, according to Coleridge, a poet is not necessarily someone who simply writes a poem; he also seeks to include in that category all those who employ secondary imagination for the purpose of bringing all aspects of a subject into a complex unity, until synthesis and integration result.

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## **2.6. □ Language of Poetry and its Difference from Prose**

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Wordsworth, in his *Preface*, says, "There neither is nor can be any essential difference between the language of prose and metrical composition." However, Coleridge disagrees and - in Chapter XVIII of *Biographia* - he seeks to demolish Wordsworth's argument. First, he says that the language of prose, especially "in all argumentative and consecutive works", differs from the language of conversation. Then, he proceeds to argue that there exists a still greater difference between the ordonnance of poetic composition and that of prose, than is expected to distinguish prose from ordinary conversation. So, here Coleridge disagrees with Wordsworth's view that, in poetry, the language that one should use is the language of the ordinary men (in fact, in Chapter XVII of the *Biographia* Coleridge asserts mat the best parts of poetic language are the product of philosophers, not of the low and rustic life).

Coleridge argues that as the architectural style of the Westminster Abbey differs from that of St. Paul's - although both have been built with blocks from the same quarry - so the language of poetry is different from that of prose. He contends that the modes of expression, the construction, and the order of sentences that we find in a serious prose composition "would be disproportionate and heterogeneous in metrical poetry." Similarly, he argues, in the language of a serious poem we find the use and selection of figures of speech, which - if used in such frequency - "would be vicious and alien in correct and manly prose." Thus, he says, is the 'essential difference' between the language of prose and that of poetry, something which Wordsworth has denied.

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## 2.7. □ Coleridge's View on Metre

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In defence of metre in poetry Coleridge says in Chapter XVIII of the *Biographia*, "This I would trace to the balance in the mind effected by that spontaneous effort which strives to hold in check the workings of passion." Metre, according to him, is the necessary check to the undue effervescence of emotional language. It is "a supervening act of the will and judgement, consciously and for the foreseen purpose of pleasure." Naturally, therefore, Coleridge argues, there must be two necessary characteristics of metre: first, it should be accompanied by the natural language of excitement (since the elements of metre owe their existence to a state of increased excitement), and second, traces of a voluntary act - "with the design and for the purpose of blending delight with emotion" - must be discernible in it. So, the stir of feeling and metrical form are like impulse and law to the poet - both are necessary. When there is no stir of feeling in the poet, there can be no poetry; but when there is no metre, poetic expression cannot acquire the finish and regulated articulate energy which the metre can alone provide. Coleridge thus says that the employment of metre increases "the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and of the attention." Where metre is not provided, Coleridge argues, "there must needs be a disappointment felt." He thus deduces that metre is the "proper form of poetry", and poetry is "imperfect and defective without metre." This, he says, is "an essential difference" between the language of prose and that of a poem.

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## 2.8. □ *Biographia Literaria* : Critical Issues

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In the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge presents his argument in an elaborate and



ambitiously conceived chain of reasoning which embraces all his general philosophical views and proceeds through a series of apparently casual - but deeply meaningful - digressions. He never sums up his views on the nature and value of poetry in a brief and cogent manner. On the contrary, he puts his arguments in a manner which, though brilliant and exciting to those who read him carefully and closely, appears disconcerting to anybody who wants to get at his argument quickly.

Coleridge's theory of the "Imagination" is worthy of being examined and analysed. He divides "Imagination" into two parts, which are "the Primary Imagination" and "the Secondary Imagination". His interpretation of the subject sounds scientific, and close to the field of philosophy. "The Primary Imagination" is, as Coleridge defines it, creating the world by our perceptions at the conscious mind. "The Secondary Imagination", in his definition, is creating an ideal world of reality by recreating the perceptual world we know. In "the Primary Imagination" we have no choice but to see the world as it is, but in "the Secondary Imagination" we have the will to create another world. Coleridge explains that "Secondary Imagination" differs from one person to another. This has been interpreted by many signifying that if a person has a vast "Secondary Imagination", then he is capable of writing poetry. Coleridge's definition of "Imagination" reminds one of Plato, who states that all poets are liars, and that feelings should be controlled by the mind. But while Plato looks at the subject as a defect of poetry, Coleridge sees it as a privilege.

Coleridge's attitude to poetic language is not the same as Wordsworth's. He criticises Wordsworth's primitivistic assumptions as well as the implications which are derived from them with respect to poetic language. Coleridge does not share Wordsworth's faith in the intrinsic virtues of the cottagers and country life. He believes in the value of culture and education, rather than in "untutored minds" in contact with nature. He points out that Wordsworth's definition of "the language of real life" is equivocal—on the one hand, he identifies it with the language of the lower classes; on the other, he insists that this language is to be a "selection". Language, for Coleridge, does not spring immediately from nature in the way Wordsworth would have it: it is the product of a whole society, and it has a long history, in which the role of the learned is fundamental.

According to Coleridge, a poem is that species of composition which is opposed to works of science by proposing for its immediate object pleasure, not truth; and from all other species (having this object in common with it) it is discriminated by proposing to itself such delight from the whole as is compatible with a distinct

gratification from each component part. We may note that Coleridge has defined the whole of the poem as a system, a structure. This is only possible not merely through Wordsworth's orderly mind feeling spontaneously, but through reflection, consciousness and hard work. About the poet, he says that the mind of the poet may seem disorderly at first sight, but in fact this appearance conceals a much more basic order: the poet is in tune with the universe, The universe is orderly, and the mind of the poet is orderly as well. His whole imaginative activity is one of ordering, of distinguishing the similar from the same, in this sense, poetry is a kind of repetition of God's creative act which is also an act of adoration of God. Like Wordsworth, Coleridge insists on the necessity of objectivisation in the poet. In shaping a poem, it is essential to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. He also says that the communication of pleasure is the only legitimate way for a poet to moralise his readers.

For Coleridge, metre is the proper form for poetry. It favours, when it is successful, the most perfect blend of content and form, it must be adequate to the content of the poem and become one with its meaning. The role of metre is to intensify the attention of the reader to every element in the poem, as well as to the whole. Metre tends to increase the vivacity and susceptibility both of the general feelings and of the attention. This effect it produces by the continual excitement of surprise, and by the quick reciprocation of curiosity still gratified and still re-excited. However, it is not a necessary element for poetry: only the most suitable form. And this is so because the language of poetry is not the same as the language of prose, even if its vocabulary is the same. It is peculiar to the Romantic era that poetry is defined not only with respect to science, but also with respect to other kinds of literature.

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## 2.9. □ Summing Up

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*Biographia Literaria* is one of the greatest books of criticism in English, and one of the most annoying, too, in any language. It is a major document in Western literary inquiry, but its intricacies have baffled and infuriated generations of readers. Many have argued that Coleridge's brilliance comes shrouded in an obscure, infuriating intricacy. However, for a text so often described as unreadable, it has been read more often and valued more highly than quite makes sense. Coleridge's autobiographical

format presents a richly metaphorical self whose literary life has led to the now-famous doctrine of secondary imagination. In its proper context within the whole *Biographia*, this doctrine anchors Coleridge's attempt to reconcile traditional ideas about literature's cultural and moral value with post-Kantian beliefs in the mind's dynamic powers. The hovering central idea of the work is: imagination and emotion are the principal characteristics of a poem, and are indeed the principal characteristics of a poet as well. If this governing central unity of the work is properly taken note of, then much of the alleged obscurity and intricacy of the *Biographia* would disappear.

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## 2.10. □ Comprehension Exercises

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### Long Questions :

1. How does Coleridge define Primary Imagination, Secondary Imagination and Fancy? (Hint: see section 2.1)
2. Critically comment on Coleridge's view on Imagination. (Hint: see sections 2.1 & 3.2)
3. How does Coleridge distinguish poem from prose? (Hint: see sections 2.2 & 3.4)
4. What is Coleridge's view on the importance of metre in a poem? (Hint: see sections 2.5 & 3.5)
5. Critically comment on Coleridge's ideas on poetic language, and show how he differs from Wordsworth in this respect. (Hint: see sections 2.4 & 3.3)
6. What, according to Coleridge, are the qualities of a poet? (Hint, see sections 2.3 & 3.4)
7. Sketch the importance of *Biographia Literaria* in the history of English literary criticism. (Hint: see sections 1.2, 3.1 & 4)

### Short Questions

1. According to Coleridge, what is the common element in both prose and poem? (Hint: see section 2.2)
2. What, according to Coleridge, is the immediate object of a poem? (Hint: see section 2.2)

3. What, according to Coleridge, is the relationship between poetry and secondary imagination? (Hint: see section 2.3)
4. What are the two characteristics of metre according to Coleridge? (Hint: see section 2.5)
5. Why is *Biographia Literaria* difficult to read? (Hint- see section 3 1)

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## 2.11. □ Suggested Reading

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### FOR UNITS 1 & 2

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## **Unit : 3 □ Matthew Arnold, ‘The Study of Poetry’**

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### **Structure :**

- 3.1. Biography**
- 3.2. Writings : Poetry and Prose**
- 3.3. Arnold and Literary Criticism**
  - 3.3.1. The social role of poetry and criticism**
  - 3.3.2. A moralist**
  - 3.3.3. Return to Classical values**
  - 3.3.4. Preface to Poems of 1853**
  - 3.3.5. The Function of Criticism**
- 3.4. *The Study of Poetry***
- 3.5. *The Study of Poetry* : a shift in position - the touchstone method**
- 3.6. *The Study of Poetry* : on Chaucer**
- 3.7. *The Study of Poetry* : on the age of Dryden and Pope**
- 3.8. *The Study of Poetry* : on Burns**
- 3.9. Arnold on Shakespeare**
- 3.10. Arnold’s Limitations**
- 3.11. Arnold’s Legacy**
- 3.12. Comprehension Exercises**
- 3.13. Suggested Reading**

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### **3.1. □ Biography**

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Matthew Arnold was born in Laleham, Middlesex. He attended Rugby, and then Balliol College, Oxford, becoming a Fellow of Oriel in 1845. “During these years,” writes Thomas Arnold the younger in *Passages in a Wandering Life*, “my brother was cultivating his poetic gift carefully, but his exuberant, versatile nature claimed other satisfactions. His keen bantering talk made him something of a social lion among Oxford men, he even began to dress fashionably.’ In 1847 he became private secretary

to Lord Lansdowne, who in 1851 secured him an inspectorship of schools, which almost to the end of his life was to absorb the greater part of his time and energies, and may have been partly responsible for the smallness of his poetical output. But it shortly enabled him to marry Frances Lucy Wightman, daughter of Sir William Wightman, a Judge of the Queen's Bench. He sought, but was not appointed to, the post of Librarian to the House of Commons Library in 1867.

In 1849 he had published his first book of poetry, *The Strayed Reveller*, which he soon withdrew: some of the poems, however, including "Mycermus" and "The Forsaken Mermaid," were afterwards republished, and the same applies to his next book, *Empedocles on Etna* (1852), with "Tristram and Iseult." Arnold's work as a critic begins with the Preface to the *Poems* which he issued in 1853 under his own name, including extracts from the earlier volumes along with "Sohrab and Rustum" and "The Scholar-Gypsy" but significantly omitting "Empedocles." His emphasis on the importance of subject in poetry, on "clearness of arrangement, rigor of development, simplicity of style" learned from the Greeks, and in the strong imprint of Goethe and Wordsworth, may be observed nearly all the essential elements of his critical theory. He was still primarily a poet, however, and in 1855 appeared *Poems, Second Series*, among them "Balder Dead."

He was later appointed Professor of Poetry at Oxford, an honour which, though it did not pay much, must have felt like vindication for Arnold who had never been a star pupil when he was a student there and struggled to make his artistic mark as a poet. Ironically, however, he coined the term "Dreaming Spires", which has become something of a catchphrase for Oxford.

He wrote most of his best-known poetry before the age of forty, after which he turned to literary and cultural criticism and theology. His principal writings are, in poetry, *Poems* (1853), containing "Sohrab and Rustum," and "The Scholar Gypsy;" *Poems 2nd Series* (1855), containing "Balder Dead;" *Merope* (1858); *New Poems* (1867), containing "Thyrsis," an elegy on Arthur Hugh Clough, "A Southern Night," "Rugby Chapel," and "The Weary Titan". In prose he wrote *On Translating Homer* (1861 and 1862), *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867), *Essays in Celtic Literature* (1868), *Essays in Criticism, 2nd Series* (1888), *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), *St. Paul and Protestantism* (1870), *Friendship's Garland* (1871), *Literature and Dogma* (1873), *God and the Bible* (1875), *Last Essays on Church and Religion* (1877), *Mixed Essays* (1879), *Irish Essays* (1882), and *Discourses in America* (1885). He also wrote some works on the state of education in mainland Europe.

In 1883 he received a pension of £250. Never fully free from financial troubles (including his son's gambling debts), he left the same year for a lecture tour of America. There his daughter would fall in love and marry an American. Five years later, when racing to meet his daughter and new granddaughter, he would suffer a fatal heart attack. He is buried in All Saints' Churchyard, Laleham, Middlesex.

His niece (daughter of his younger brother Thomas), Mary Augusta Arnold, was a novelist under her married name of Mrs Humphry Ward.

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### **3.2. □ Writings: Poetry and Prose**

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Arnold wrote during the Victorian period (1837-1901), and is sometimes called the third great Victorian poet, behind Alfred Tennyson, and Robert Browning. Arnold himself was keenly aware of his place in poetry, and in an 1869 letter to his mother, discussed the merits of his work and his two more famous peers: "My poems represent, on the whole, the main movement of mind of the last quarter of a century, and thus they will probably have their day as people become conscious to themselves of what that movement of mind is, and interested in the literary productions which reflect it. It might be fairly urged that I have less poetic sentiment than Tennyson, and less intellectual vigour and abundance, than Browning. Yet because I have more perhaps of a fusion of the two than either of them, and have more regularly applied that fusion to the main line of modern development, I am likely enough to have my turn, as they have had theirs."

His 1867 poem 'Dover Beach', which depicted a nightmarish world from which the old religious verities have retroceded, is sometimes held up as an early, if not the first, example of the modern sensibility. In a famous preface to a selection of the poems of William Wordsworth, Arnold identified himself, a little ironically, as a "Wordsworthian." The influence of Wordsworth, both in ideas and in diction, is unmistakable in Arnold's best poetry.

Some consider Arnold to be the bridge between Romanticism and Modernism. His use of symbolic landscapes was typical of the Romantic era, while his skeptical and pessimistic perspective was typical of the Modern era. The rationalistic tendency of certain of his writings gave offence to many readers, and the sufficiency of his equipment in scholarship for dealing with some of the subjects which he handled was called in question; but he undoubtedly exercised a stimulating influence on his time;



his writings are characterised by the finest culture, high purpose, sincerity, and a style of great distinction, and much of his poetry has an exquisite and subtle beauty, though here also it has been doubted whether high culture and wide knowledge of poetry did not sometimes take the place of true poetic fire. Henry James wrote that Matthew Arnold's poetry will appeal to those who "like their pleasures rare" and who like to hear the poet "taking breath."

Although Arnold's poetry received only mixed reviews and attention during his lifetime, his forays into literary criticism were more successful. Arnold is famous for introducing a methodology of literary criticism through his *Essays in Criticism* (1865, 1888), which influence critics to this day. Arnold believed that rules for an objective approach in literary criticism existed, and argued that these rules should be followed by all critics. In 1861 his lectures *On Translating Homer* were published, to be followed in 1862 by *Last Words on Translating Homer*, both volumes admirable in style and full of striking judgments and suggestive remarks, but built on rather arbitrary assumptions and reaching no well-established conclusions. Especially characteristic, both of his defects and his qualities, are on the one hand, Arnold's unconvincing advocacy of English hexameters and his creation of a kind of literary absolute in the "grand style," and, on the other, his keen feeling of the need for a disinterested and intelligent criticism in England.

This feeling, a direct result of his admiration for France, finds fuller expression in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" and "The Literary Influence of Academies," which were published as the first two of the *Essays in Criticism* (1865) in which collection the influence of French ideas, especially of the critic Sainte-Beuve, is conspicuous, both in matter and in form — that of the causerie. The *Essays* are bound together by a scheme of social rather than of purely literary criticism, as is apparent from the Preface, written in a vein of delicious irony and culminating unexpectedly in the well-known poetically phrased tribute to Oxford.

*Essays in Criticism: Second Series* which he had already collected, appeared shortly after his death. This volume, introduced by the essay on "The Study of Poetry," with the celebrated discussion of poetry as "a criticism of life," contains, together with *Essays in Criticism: First Series* the prose work by which Arnold is best known.

He was led on from literary criticism to a more general critique of the spirit of his age. Between 1867 and 1869 he wrote *Culture and Anarchy*, famous for the term

he popularised for a section of the Victorian era population: "Philistines", a word which derives its modern cultural meaning (in English - German -language usage was well established) from him.

Matthew Arnold "was indeed the most delightful of companions," writes G. W. E. Russell in *Portraits of the Seventies* : "a man of the world entirely free from worldliness and a man of letters without the faintest trace of pedantry." A familiar figure at the Athenaeum Club, a frequent diner-out and guest at great country houses, fond of fishing and shooting, a lively conversationalist, affecting a combination of foppishness and Olympian grandeur, he read constantly, widely, and deeply, and in the intervals of supporting himself and his family by the quiet drudgery of school inspecting, filled notebook after notebook with meditations of an almost monastic tone. In his writings, he often baffled and sometimes annoyed his contemporaries by the apparent contradiction between his urbane, even frivolous manner in controversy, and the "high seriousness" of his critical views and the melancholy, almost plaintive note of much of his poetry. "A voice poking fun in the wilderness" was T. H. Warren's description of him.

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### 3.3. □ Arnold and Literary Criticism

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Matthew Arnold (1822-1888), the Victorian poet and critic, was 'the first modern critic', and could be called 'the critic's critic', being a champion not only of great poetry, but of literary criticism itself. The purpose of literary criticism, in his view, was 'to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas', and he has influenced a whole school of critics including new critics such as T. S. Eliot, F R. Leavis, and Allen Tate. He was the founder of the sociological school of criticism, and through his touchstone method introduced scientific objectivity to critical evaluation by providing comparison and analysis as the two primary tools of criticism.

Arnold's evaluations of the Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, and Keats are landmarks in descriptive criticism, and as a poet-critic he occupies an eminent position in the rich galaxy of poet-critics of English literature.

T. S. Eliot praised Arnold's objective approach to critical evaluation, particularly his tools of comparison and analysis, and Allen Tate in his essay *Tension in Poetry* imitates Arnold's touchstone method to discover 'tension', or the proper balance

between connotation and denotation, in poetry. These new critics have come a long way from the Romantic approach to poetry, and this change in attitude could be attributed to Arnold, who comes midway between the two schools.

### 3.3.1. The social role of poetry and criticism

To Arnold a critic is a social benefactor. In his view the creative artist, no matter how much of a genius, would cut a sorry figure without the critic to come to his aid. Before Arnold a literary critic cared only for the beauties and defects of works of art, but Arnold the critic chose to be the educator and guardian of public opinion and propagator of the best ideas.

Cultural and critical values seem to be synonymous for Arnold. Scott James, comparing him to Aristotle, says that where Aristotle analyses the work of art, Arnold analyses the role of the critic. The one gives us the principles which govern the making of a poem, the other the principles by which the best poems should be selected and made known. Aristotle's critic owes allegiance to the artist, but Arnold's critic has a duty to society.

To Arnold poetry itself was the criticism of life: The criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty', and in his seminal essay *The Study of Poetry*' (1888) he says that poetry alone can be our sustenance and stay in an era where religious beliefs are fast losing their hold. He claims that poetry is superior to philosophy, science, and religion. Religion attaches its emotion to supposed facts, and the supposed facts are failing it, but poetry attaches its emotion to ideas and ideas are infallible. And science, in his view is incomplete without poetry. He endorses Wordsworth's view that 'poetry is the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all Science', adding 'What is a countenance without its expression?' and calls poetry 'the breath and finer spirit of knowledge'. Matthew Arnold echoes the thoughts of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle's views of poetry when he declares that the ultimate function of humankind lies in exercising its creative power. Arnold therefore is able to link criticism with creative power in his essay, ultimately asserting that writing criticism actually produces in its practitioner a sense of ecstatic creative joy very similar to that enjoyed by the person who engages in creative writing.

Matthew Arnold goes on to equate the emotional experience of writing criticism with the emotional experience of creative writing in order to undermine the typical

rap against criticism that it serves no purpose, or is just the sour grapes expression of one who criticizes something that he can't do as well himself.

Throughout the essay, Matthew Arnold very carefully delineates the personal function of criticism, but he also leaps from the personal to the universal in his argument that one of the functions of criticism is to propagate the best ideas so that they trickle down to the masses. According to Arnold, truly great literature and thinking springs forth from an epoch of great ideas, and these epochs are manifested when the great ideas reach the masses.

For Arnold, the "eternal objects of poetry" are actions: "human actions; possessing an inherent interest in themselves." Those actions are "most excellent. . . which most powerfully appeal to the great primary human affections." Arnold believes that there is an elementary and shared part of human nature—"our passions." "That which is great and passionate is eternally interesting ... A great human action of a thousand years ago is more interesting . . . than a smaller human action of today." In keeping with this necessity to appeal to human passion, the poet must not deal with the outer circumstances of a man's life, but with the "inward man; with [his] feelings and behavior in certain tragic situations." Arnold regarded the classical poets as superior to the moderns in this respect: the classical poets emphasized "the poetical character of the action in itself," while the moderns emphasize "the separate thoughts and images which occur in the treatment of an action." The classical authors "regarded the whole." The moderns "regard the parts." Arnold also prefers the simplicity of classical poetic language to the "overcuriousness of expression" found in Shakespeare, who "appears in his language to have tried all styles except that of simplicity."

### 3.3.2. A moralist

As a critic Arnold is essentially a moralist, and has very definite ideas about what poetry should and should not be. A poetry of revolt against moral ideas, he says, is a poetry of revolt against life, and a poetry of indifference to moral ideas is a poetry of indifference to life.

Arnold even censored his own collection on moral grounds. He omitted the poem *Empedocles on Etna* from his volume of 1853, whereas he had included it in his collection of 1852. The reason he advances, in the Preface to his Poems of 1853 is not that the poem is too subjective, with its Hamlet-like introspection, or that it was a deviation from his classical ideals, but that the poem is too depressing in its subject

matter, and would leave the reader hopeless and crushed. There is nothing in it in the way of hope or optimism, and such a poem could prove to be neither instructive nor of any delight to the reader.

Aristotle says that poetry is superior to History since it bears the stamp of high seriousness and truth. If truth and seriousness are wanting in the subject matter of a poem, so will the true poetic stamp of diction and movement be found wanting in its style and manner. Hence the two, the nobility of subject matter, and the superiority of style and manner, are proportional and cannot occur independently.

Arnold took up Aristotle's view, asserting that true greatness in poetry is given by the truth and seriousness of its subject matter, and by the high diction and movement in its style and manner, and although indebted to Joshua Reynolds for the expression 'grand style', Arnold gave it a new meaning when he used it in his lecture *On Translating Homer* (1861):

I think it will be found that that the grand style arises in poetry when a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with simplicity or with a severity a serious subject.

According to Arnold, Homer is the best model of a simple grand style, while Milton is the best model of severe grand style. Dante, however, is an example of both.

Even Chaucer, in Arnold's view, in spite of his virtues such as benignity, largeness, and spontaneity, lacks seriousness. Burns too lacks sufficient seriousness, because he was hypocritical in that while he adopted a moral stance in some of his poems, in his private life he flouted morality.

This is where Arnold apotheosizes poetry :

"More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, so sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry."

Arnold outlines three ways in which poems may have importance: 1) they "may count to us historically"; 2) "they may count to us on grounds personal to ourselves"; 3) "they may count to us really." A poem may be regarded as important due to its position in the development of a language—but this does not say anything about its intrinsic merit. A poem may appeal to readers for personal reasons which have nothing to-do with intrinsic merit. For a poem to be of real quality, it must possess

both a “higher truth” and a “higher seriousness.”

Matthew Arnold’s 1864 essay on “The Literary Influence of Academies” examines how the absence of a centralized academic system shapes English thought. Arnold takes the French Academy as an example of “a recognized authority in matters of the highest literary opinion, a recognized authority in matters of intellectual tone and taste”. In contrast to the way the French academy creates a centralized institution of learning, English provinciality represents the fragmentation of cultural thought. Arnold outlines the problem with provinciality in these terms:

The less literature has felt the influence of a supposed centre of correct information, correct judgment, correct taste, the more shall we find in it this note of provinciality ... For here great — even the greatest — powers of mind most fail a man. Great powers of mind will make him inform himself thoroughly, great powers of mind will make him think profoundly, even with ignorance and platitudes all round him; but not even great powers of mind will keep his taste and style perfectly sound and sure, if he is left too much to himself, with no ‘sovereign organ of opinion,’ in these matters, near him.

### **3.3.3. Return to Classical values**

Arnold believed that a modern writer should be aware that contemporary literature is built on the foundations of the past, and should contribute to the future by continuing a firm tradition. Quoting Goethe and Niebuhr in support of his view, he asserts that his age suffers from spiritual weakness because it thrives on self-interest and scientific materialism, and therefore cannot provide noble characters such as those found in Classical literature.

He urged modern poets to look to the ancients and their great characters and themes for guidance and inspiration. Classical literature, in his view, possess pathos, moral profundity and noble simplicity, while modern themes, arising from an age of spiritual weakness, are suitable for only comic and lighter kinds of poetry, and don’t possess the loftiness to support epic or heroic poetry.

Arnold turns his back on the prevailing Romantic view of poetry and seeks to revive the Classical values of objectivity, urbanity, and architectonics. He denounces the Romantics for ignoring the Classical writers for the sake of novelty, and for their allusive (Arnold uses the word ‘suggestive’) writing which defies easy comprehension.

The modern spirit is synonymous with the positive and critical spirit, the refusal

to take things on authority. The Greeks of the great period are, according to Arnold, modern in this sense and therefore much nearer to us than the men of the Middle Ages. He was later to praise the Greeks, not only for being positive and critical, but also for achieving what we too must achieve if we are to carry through our modern experiment successfully—the union of imagination and reason.

### 3.3.4. Preface to *Poems* of 1853

In the preface to his *Poems* (1853) Arnold asserts the importance of architectonics; ('that power of execution, which creates, forms, and constitutes') in poetry - the necessity of achieving unity by subordinating the parts to the whole, and the expression of ideas to the depiction of human action, and condemns poems which exist for the sake of single lines or passages, stray metaphors, images, and fancy expressions. Scattered images and happy turns of phrase, in his view, can only provide partial effects, and not contribute to unity. He also, continuing his anti-Romantic theme, urges modern poets to shun allusiveness and not fall into the temptation of subjectivity.

He says that even the imitation of Shakespeare is risky for a young writer, who should imitate only his excellences, and avoid his attractive accessories, tricks of style, such as quibble, conceit, circumlocution and allusiveness, which will lead him astray.

Arnold commends Shakespeare's use of great plots from the past. He had what Goethe called the architectonic quality, that is, his expression was matched to the action (or the subject). But at the same time Arnold quotes Hallam to show that Shakespeare's style was complex even where the press of action demanded simplicity and directness, and hence his style could not be taken as a model by young writers. Elsewhere he says that Shakespeare's 'expression tends to become a little sensuous and simple, too much intellectualised'.

Shakespeare's excellences are 1) The architectonic quality of his style; the harmony between action and expression. 2) His reliance on the ancients for his themes. 3) Accurate construction of action. 4) His strong conception of action and accurate portrayal of, his subject matter. 5) His intense feeling for the subjects he dramatises.

His attractive accessories (or tricks of style) which a young writer should handle carefully are 1) His fondness for quibble, fancy, conceit. 2) His excessive use of imagery. 3) Circumlocution, even where the press of action demands directness. 4) His lack of simplicity (according to Hallam and Guizot). 5) His allusiveness.

As an example of the danger of imitating Shakespeare he gives Keats's imitation of Shakespeare in his *Isabella or the Pot of Basil*. Keats uses felicitous phrases and single happy turns of phrase, yet the action is handled vaguely and so the poem does not have unity. By way of contrast, he says the Italian writer Boccaccio handled the same theme successfully in his *Decameron*, because he rightly subordinated expression to action. Hence Boccaccio's poem is a poetic success where Keats's is a failure.

Arnold also wants the modern writer to take models from the past because they depict human actions which touch on 'the great primary human affections: to those elementary feelings which subsist permanently in the race, and which are independent of time'. Characters such as Agamemnon, Dido, Aeneas, Orestes, Merope, Alcmeon, and Clytemnestra, leave a permanent impression on our minds. Compare *The Iliad* or *The Aeneid* with *The Childe Harold* or *The Excursion* and you see the difference.

A modern writer might complain that ancient subjects pose problems with regard to ancient culture, customs, manners, dress and so on which are not familiar to contemporary readers. But Arnold is of the view that a writer should not concern himself with the externals, but with the 'inward man'. The inward man is the same irrespective of clime or time.

### 3.3.5. The Function of Criticism

It is in his *The Function of Criticism at the Present Time* (1864) that Arnold says that criticism should be a 'dissemination of ideas, a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world'. He says that when evaluating a work the aim is 'to see the object as in itself it really is'. Psychological, historical and sociological background are irrelevant, and to dwell on such aspects is mere dilettantism. This stance was very influential with later critics.

Arnold also believed that in his quest for the best a critic should not confine himself to the literature of his own country, but should draw substantially on foreign literature and ideas, because the propagation of ideas should be an objective endeavour. Acknowledging criticism's inferiority to creative artistic activity, Arnold nonetheless claims that England is in dire need of skilled critics, if for no other reason than to prepare the soil for future artists. According to Arnold, the creative power "works with elements, with materials," "with data"; these materials are the "best ideas, on every matter which literature touches, current at the time". And it is the job of critics to "establish an order of ideas, if not absolutely true, yet true by comparison with that which it displaces".



For Arnold, the crucial quality for criticism, and the chief lack in English criticism, is “disinterestedness,” an “aloofness from practice” .Political and practical allegiances distort intellectuals’ abilities to look clearly at ideas, to evaluate them fairly, and simply to approach new ideas with “curiosity,” and a “free play of the mind” .2 Intellectual honesty ‘and integrity always suffer when the, intellectual is tied to a cause or a party, and thus, the ideas produced by the intellectual are second-rate.

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### 3.4. □ The Study of Poetry

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In *The Study of Poetry*, (1888) which opens his *Essays in Criticism: Second series*, in support of his plea for nobility in poetry, Arnold recalls Sainte-Beuve’s reply to Napoleon, when the latter said that charlatanism is found in everything. Sainte-Beuve replied that charlatanism might be found everywhere else, but not in the field of poetry, because in poetry the distinction between sound and unsound, or only half-sound, truth and untruth, or only half-truth, between the excellent and the inferior, is of paramount importance.

For Arnold there is no place for charlatanism in poetry. To him poetry is the criticism of life, governed by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty. It is in the criticism of life that the spirit of our race will find its stay and consolation. The extent to which the spirit of mankind finds its stay and consolation is proportional to the power of a poem’s criticism of life, and the power of the criticism of life is in direct proportion to the extent to which the poem is genuine and free from charlatanism.

As he writes-

“THE FUTURE of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialised itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea is the fact. The strongest part of our religion to-day is its unconscious poetry.”

Arnold’s remedy for anarchy—the failure to rise sufficiently above the level of

one's ordinary self—is, it is hardly necessary to say, culture. The warfare that Arnold waged on the Philistine in the name of culture is not to be confused with the romantic revolt from convention. To the respectability of the Philistine, Heine opposed, Arnold complains, positive disrespectability. So far from favoring Bohemianism, Arnold was not willing to pardon any outer irregularity even in a Dante. What the romanticist attacked first of all in the Philistine was his lack of aesthetic refinement; what Arnold attacked first of all was his lack of wholeness. The opposite of the man who is aiming at totality is the man who suffers from a stunted growth, who has partial and provincial views. 'I hate all over-preponderance of single elements.' This sentence more perhaps than any other that could be cited gives the key to Arnold's prose writings. In working out his model of a rounded human nature that he sets up for imitation he turns to the past; for if the positivist is not willing that the past should be imposed on him as a dogma he admits its validity as experience. The human law is not susceptible of final abstract formulation. It is many-sided and elusive. For this or that aspect of it we need to go to this or that country or individual or period. Greece can supply certain elements, Judea certain other elements, to the man who seeks to live proportionately. Arnold always assumes a core of normal experience, a permanent self in man, and rates a writer according to the degree of his insight into this something that abides through all the flux of circumstance, or, as he himself would say, according to the depth and soundness of this writer's criticism of life. It was inevitable, as Professor Sherman points out, that Arnold should be comparatively indifferent to that great fetish of modern scholarship, the historical method, which tends to deny the enduring scale of values, and to see everything relatively, to account for everything in terms of time and place.

The few writers, chiefly poets, who seem to Arnold to tend to imaginative wholeness, to combine ethical insight in an eminent degree with excellence of form, or, as he would say, high seriousness of substance with the grand style, he puts in a class apart; they differ from other writers not merely in degree but in kind. Tin's general distinction, which goes back to Aristotle, is surely sound, and those who have sought to discard high seriousness in favor of intensity or some other criterion are simply compromising poetry and literature; they are playing into the hands of the utilitarian, who would relegate literature to the recreative side of life, who has no place in his scheme of things for the literature of wisdom, literature that ministers to leisure in the Aristotelian sense. It must be granted, however, that Arnold is not always as clear or consistent as he might be in the working out of his main distinction. When we ask him for a definition of the grand style in poetry and of the special

quality of imagination, the ethical imagination, as one may say, that underlies it, he supplies us instead with brief passages from the great poets that we are to use as touchstones, a method not always easy to reconcile with his previous assertion that the worth of a poem is determined, not by separate passages, but by its architectonics, its total structure. He fights shy of theory because 'the critical perception of poetic truth is,' he feels, 'of all things the most volatile, elusive, and evanescent.' So far as he means by theory the merely metaphysical, every type of positivist will sympathize with him. But there seems to be something more than this in his avoidance of theory— some survival, namely, of the romantic fear of precise analysis. I have already mentioned Aristotle, and as a matter of fact Aristotle is almost necessarily the master of those who, like Arnold, seek to put humanistic and religious truth on a critical basis. Now two things are needed to make the complete Aristotelian: in the first place, hard consecutive thinking in working out principles, and in the second place, the utmost flexibility in the application of them. For, though fixed principles exist, one must grant Bergson that life in the concrete is 'a perpetual gushing forth of novelties.' If one is to bridge correctly the gap between the general law and the particular instance, one cannot be too finely perceptive, too 'undulating and diverse.' Unfortunately, Arnold seems at times to carry over into the realm of principle, where hard consecutive thinking is the prime requisite, the fluidity that is only permissible in the realm of practice.

Inasmuch as high seriousness of substance and the grand style coexist only in the best poets, Arnold is led to set up the best poetry as a substitute for philosophy and religion; to proclaim that what is best in philosophy and religion themselves is their unconscious poetry. Various correctives to statements of this kind may be supplied from Arnold himself, yet, even so, this remains his dubious side. One may affirm that the man of today will be more aided in his struggle toward standards by the study of Aristotle (perhaps the most modern of the ancients), especially of the Ethics and Politics, than by reading Homer, the chief of poets; and one may at the same time refuse to go to the opposite extreme with Plato and indict Homer for his lack of religious seriousness. Yet Aristotle's excellence of substance, so far from being associated with the grand style, is associated with something that at times comes perilously near jargon.

Thus Arnold seeks to discuss the stream of poetry since it is the bridge to knowledge. What is interesting is how Arnold fuses Victorian ideas of science, imagination and knowledge with true poetry :

“More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry. Science, I say, will appear incomplete without it. ‘for finely and truly does Wordsworth call poetry ‘the impassioned expression which is in the countenance of all science’; and what is a countenance without its expression? Again, Wordsworth finely and truly calls poetry ‘the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge’; our religion, parading evidences such as those on which the popular mind relies now; our philosophy, pluming itself on its reasonings about causation and finite and infinite being; what are they but the shadows and dreams and false shows of knowledge? The day will come when we shall wonder at ourselves for having trusted to them, for having taken them seriously; and the more we perceive their hollowness, the more we shall prize ‘the breath and finer spirit of knowledge’ offered to us by poetry.”

It is therefore that the identification of true poetry becomes so important:

The best poetry is what we want; the best poetry will be found to have a power of forming, sustaining, and delighting us, as nothing else can. A clearer, deeper sense of the best in poetry, and of the strength and joy to be drawn from it, is the most precious benefit which we can gather from a poetical collection such as the present. And yet in the very nature and conduct of such a collection there is inevitably something which tends to obscure in us the consciousness of what our benefit should be, and to distract us from the pursuit of it. We should therefore steadily set it before our minds at the outset, and should compel ourselves to revert constantly to the thought of it as we proceed.

In *The Study of Poetry* he also cautions the critic that in forming a genuine and disinterested estimate of the poet under consideration he should not be influenced by historical or personal judgements, historical judgements being fallacious because we regard ancient poets with excessive veneration, and personal judgements being fallacious when we are biased towards a contemporary poet. If a poet is a ‘dubious classic, let us sift him; if he is a false classic, let us explode him. But if he is a real classic, if his work belongs to the class of the very best... enjoy his work’.

Arnold is thus redefining the Aristotelian notion of the superiority of poetry over history and philosophy:

“Only one thing we may add as to the substance and matter of poetry, guiding ourselves by Aristotle’s profound observation that the superiority

of poetry over history consists in its possessing a higher truth and a higher seriousness ([Greek]). Let us add, therefore, to what we have said, this: that the substances and matter of the best poetry acquire their special character from possessing, in an eminent degree, truth and seriousness. We may add yet further, what is in itself evident, that to the style and manner of the best poetry their special character, their accent, is given by their diction, and, even yet more, by their movement. And though we distinguish between the two characters, the two accents, of superiority, yet they are nevertheless vitally connected one with the other. The superior character of truth and seriousness, in the matter and substance of the best poetry, is inseparable from the superiority of diction and movement marking its style and manner. The two superiorities are closely related, and are in steadfast proportion one to the other.”

As examples of erroneous judgements he says that the 17th century court tragedies of the French were spoken of with exaggerated praise, until Pellisson reproached them for want of the true poetic stamp, and another critic, Charles d’ Hericault, said that 17th century French poetry had received undue and undeserving veneration. Arnold says the critics seem to substitute ‘a halo for physiognomy and a statue in the place where there was once a man. They give us a human personage no larger than God seated amidst his perfect work, like Jupiter on Olympus.’

He also condemns the French critic Vitet, who had eloquent words of praise for the epic poem *Chanson de Roland* by Tuoldus, (which was sung by a jester, Taillefer, in William the Conqueror’s army), saying that it was superior to Homer’s Iliad. Arnold’s view is that this poem can never be compared to Homer’s work, and that we only have to compare the description of dying Roland to Helen’s words about her wounded brothers Pollux and Castor and its inferiority will be clearly revealed.

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### **3.5. □ The Study of Poetry: a shift in position - the touchstone method**

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Arnold’s criticism of Vitet above illustrates his ‘touchstone method’; his theory states that in order to judge a poet’s work properly, a critic should compare it to passages taken from works of great masters of poetry, and that these passages should be applied as touchstones to other poetry. Even a single line or selected quotation will serve the purpose.

From this we see that he has shifted his position from that expressed in the preface to his *Poems* of 1853. In *The 'Study of Poetry'* he no longer uses the acid test of action and architectonics. He became an advocate of 'touchstones'. 'Short passages even single lines,' he said, 'will serve our turn quite sufficiently'. Arnold writes:

"Indeed there can be no more useful help for discovering what poetry belongs to the class of the truly excellent, and can therefore do us most good, than to have always in one's mind lines and expressions of the great masters, and to apply them as a touchstone to other poetry. Of course we are not to require this other poetry to resemble them; it may be very dissimilar. But if we have any tact we shall find them, when we have lodged them well in our minds, infallible touchstone for detecting the presence or absence of high poetic quality, and also the degree of his quality, in all other poetry which we may place beside them. Short passages, even single lines, will serve our turn quite sufficiently."

He follows up by arguing:

"These few lines, if we have tact and can use them, are enough even of themselves to keep clear and sound our judgments about poetry, to save us from fallacious estimates of it, to conduct us to a real estimate. The specimens I have quoted differ widely from one another, but they have in common this: the possession of the very highest poetical quality. If we are thoroughly penetrated by their power, we shall find that we have acquired a sense enabling us, whatever poetry may be laid before us, to feel the degree in which a high poetical quality is present or wanting there. Critics give themselves great labour to draw out what in the abstract constitutes the characters of a high quality of poetry. It is much better simply to have recourse to concrete examples;—to take specimens of poetry of the high, the very highest quality, and to say: The characters of a high quality of poetry are what is expressed there. They are far better recognised by being felt in the verse of the master, than by being perused in the prose of the critic. Nevertheless if we are urgently pressed to give some critical account of them, we may safely, perhaps, venture on laying down, not indeed how and why the characters arise, but where and in what they arise. They are in the matter and substance of the poetry, and they are in its manner, and style. Both of these, the substance and matter

on the one hand, the style and manner on the other, have a mark, an accent, of high beauty, worth, and power. But if we are asked to define this mark and accent in the abstract, our answer must be: No, for we should thereby be darkening the question, not clearing it. The mark and accent are as given by the substance and matter of that poetry, by the style and manner of that poetry, and of all other poetry which is akin to it in quality.”

Some of Arnold's touchstone passages are: Helen's words about her wounded brother Zeus addressing the horses of Peleus, suppliant Achilles' words to Priam, and for Dante; Ugolino's brave words, and Beatrice's loving words to Virgil.

From non-Classical writers he selects from *Henry IV* Part II (III, i), Henry's expostulation with sleep - 'Wilt thou upon the high and giddy mast...'. From *Hamlet* (V, ii) 'Absent thee from felicity awhile ...'. From Milton's *Paradise Lost* Book 1, 'Care sat on his faded cheek . . .', and 'What is else not to be overcome ...'

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### 3.6. □ The Study of Poetry: on Chaucer

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The French Romance poetry of the 13th century langue d'oc and langue d'oïl was extremely popular in Europe and Italy, but soon lost its popularity and now it is important only in terms of historical study. But Chaucer, who was nourished by the romance poetry of the French, and influenced by the Italian Royal rhyme stanza, still holds enduring fascination. There is an excellence of style and subject in his poetry, which is the quality the French poetry lacks. Dryden says of Chaucer's Prologue 'Here is God's plenty!' and that 'he is a perpetual fountain of good sense'. There is largeness, benignity, freedom and spontaneity in Chaucer's writings. 'He is the well of English unde filed'. He has divine fluidity of movement, divine liquidness of diction. He has created an epoch and founded a tradition.

Arnold writes:

“If we ask ourselves wherein consists the immense superiority of Chaucer's poetry over the romance-poetry—why it is that in passing from this to Chaucer we suddenly feel ourselves to be in another world, we shall find that his superiority is both in the substance of his poetry and in the style of his poetry. His superiority in substance is given by his large, free, simple, clear yet kindly view of human life,—so unlike

the total want, in the romance-poets, of all intelligent command of it. Chaucer has not their helplessness; he has gained the power to survey the world from a central, a truly human point of view. We have only to call to mind the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*. The right comment upon it is Dryden's: 'It is sufficient to say, according to the proverb, that here is God's plenty.' And again: 'He is a perpetual fountain of good sense.' It is by a large, free, sound representation of things, that poetry, this high criticism of life, has truth of substance; and Chaucer's poetry has truth of substance."

Some say that the fluidity of Chaucer's verse is due to license in the use of the language, a liberty which Burns enjoyed much later. But Arnold says that the excellence of Chaucer's poetry is due to his sheer poetic talent. This liberty in the use of language was enjoyed by many poets, but we do not find the same kind of fluidity in others. Only in Shakespeare and Keats do we find the same kind of fluidity, though they wrote without the same liberty in the use of language.

Arnold praises Chaucer's excellent style and manner, but says that Chaucer cannot be called a classic since, unlike Homer, Virgil and Shakespeare, his poetry does not have the high poetic seriousness which Aristotle regards as a mark of its superiority over the other arts. Arnold's argument is as follows:

"The substance of Chaucer's poetry, his view of things and his criticism of life, has largeness, freedom, slirawdness, benignity; but it has not this high seriousness. Homer's criticism of life has it, Dante's has it, Shakespeare has it. It is this chiefly which gives to our spirits what they can rest upon; and with the increasing demands of our modern ages upon poetry, this virtue of giving us what we can rest upon will be more and more highly esteemed... To our praise, therefore, of Chaucer as a poet there must be this limitation; he lacks the high seriousness of the great classics, and therewith an important part of their virtue. Still, the main fact for us to bear in mind about Chaucer is his sterling value according to that real estimate which we firmly adopt for all poets. He has poetic truth of substance, though he has not high poetic seriousness, and corresponding to his truth of substance he has an exquisite virtue of style and manner. With him is born our real poetry."



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### 3.7. □ 'The Study of Poetry': on the age of Dryden and Pope

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The age of Dryden is regarded as superior to that of the others for 'sweetness of poetry'. Arnold asks whether Dryden and Pope, poets of great merit, are truly the poetical classics of the 18th century. He says Dryden's post-script to the readers in his translation of *The Aeneid* reveals the fact that in prose writing he is even better than Milton and Chapman.

Just as the laxity in religious matters during the Restoration period was a dire outcome of the strict discipline of the Puritans, in the same way in order to control the dangerous sway of imagination found in the poetry of the Metaphysicals, to counteract 'the dangerous prevalence of imagination', the poets of the 18th century introduced certain regulations. The restrictions that were imposed on the poets were uniformity, regularity, precision, and balance. These restrictions curbed the growth of poetry, and encouraged the growth of prose.

Hence we can regard Dryden as the glorious founder, and Pope as the splendid literary priest, of the age of prose and reason, our indispensable 18th century. Their poetry was that of the builders of an age of prose and reason. Arnold says that Pope and Dryden are not poet classics, but the 'prose classics' of the 18th century.

As for poetry, he considers Gray to be the only classic of the 18th century. Gray constantly studied and enjoyed Greek poetry and thus inherited their poetic point of view and their application of poetry to life. But he is the 'scantiest, frailest classic' since his output was small. Arnold writes:

"Gray is our poetical classic of that literature and age; the position of Gray is singular, and demands a word of notice here. He has not the volume or the power of poets who, coming in times more favourable, have attained to an independent criticism of life. But he lived with the great poets, he lived, above all, with the Greeks, through perpetually studying and enjoying them; and he caught their poetic point of view for regarding life, caught their poetic manner. The point of view and the manner are not self-sprung in him, he caught them of others; and he had not the free and abundant use of them. But, whereas Addison and Pope never had the use of them, Gray had the use of them at times. He is the scantiest and frailest of classics in our poetry, but he is a classic."

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### 3.8. □ 'The Study of Poetry' : on Burns

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Although Burns lived close to the 19th century his poetry breathes the spirit of 18th Century life. Burns is most at home in his native language. His poems deal with Scottish dress, Scottish manner, and Scottish religion. This Scottish world is not a beautiful one, and it is an advantage if a poet deals with a beautiful world. But Burns shines whenever he triumphs over his sordid, repulsive and dull world with his poetry.

Perhaps we find the true Burns only in his bacchanalian poetry, though occasionally his bacchanalian attitude was affected. For example in his Holy Fair, the lines 'Leeze me on drink! it gives us mair/ Than either school or college', may represent the bacchanalian attitude, but they are not truly bacchanalian in spirit. There is something insincere about it, smacking of bravado.

When Burns moralises in some of his poems it also sounds insincere, coming from a man who disregarded morality in actual life. And sometimes his pathos is intolerable, as in Auld Lang Syne.

We see the real Burns (wherein he is unsurpassable) in lines such as, 'To make a happy fire-side clime'/ to weans and wife/ That's the true pathos and sublime/ Of human life' (Ae Fond Kiss). Here we see the genius of Burns.

But, like Chaucer, Burns lacks high poetic seriousness, though his poems have poetic truth in diction and movement. Sometimes his poems are profound and heart-rending, such as in the lines, 'Had we never loved sae kindly/ had we never loved sae blindly/ never met or never parted/ we had ne'er been brokenhearted'.

Also like Chaucer, Burns possesses largeness, benignity, freedom and spontaneity. But instead of Chaucer's fluidity, we find in Burns a springing bounding energy. Chaucer's benignity deepens in Burns into a sense of sympathy for both human as well as non-human things, but Chaucer's world is richer and fairer than that of Burns.

Sometimes Burns's poetic genius is unmatched by anyone. He is even better than Goethe at times and he is unrivalled by anyone except Shakespeare. He has written excellent poems such as Tarn O'Shanter, Whistle and I'll come to you my Lad, and Auld Lang Syne.

When we compare Shelley's 'Pinnacled dim in the of intense inane' (Prometheus

Unbound III, iv) with Burns's, 'They flatter, she says, to deceive me' (Tarn Glen), the latter is salutary.

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### 3.9. □ Arnold on Shakespeare

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Praising Shakespeare, Arnold says 'In England there needs a miracle of genius like Shakespeare's to produce a balance of mind'. This is not bardolatry, but praise tempered by a critical sense. In a letter he writes. 'I keep saying Shakespeare, you are as obscure as life is 1.

In his sonnet 'On Shakespeare' he says; 'Others abide our question. Thou art free./ We ask and ask - Thou smilest and art still,/ Out-topping knowledge'.

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### 3.10. □ Arnold's Limitations

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For all his championing of disinterestedness, Arnold was unable to practise disinterestedness in all his essays, in his essay on Shelley particularly he displayed a lamentable lack of disinterestedness. Shelley's moral views were too much for the Victorian Arnold. In his essay on Keats too Arnold failed to be disinterested. The sentimental letters of Keats to Fanny Brawne were too much for him.

Arnold sometimes became a satirist, and as a satirical critic saw things too quickly, too summarily. In spite of their charm, the essays are characterised by egotism and, as Tilotson says, 'the attention is directed, not on his object but on himself and his objects together'.

Arnold makes clear his disapproval of the vagaries of some of the Romantic poets. Perhaps he would have agreed with Goethe, who saw Romanticism as disease and Classicism as health. But Arnold occasionally looked at things with jaundiced eyes, and he overlooked the positive features of Romanticism which posterity will not willingly let die, such as its humanitarianism, love of nature, love of childhood, a sense of mysticism, faith in man with all his imperfections, and faith in man's unconquerable mind.

Arnold's inordinate love of classicism made him blind to the beauty of lyricism.

He ignored the importance of lyrical poems, which are subjective and which express the sentiments and the personality of the poet. Judged by Arnold's standards, a large number of poets both ancient and modern are dismissed because they sang with 'Profuse strains of unpremeditated art'.

It was also unfair of Arnold to compare the classical works in which figure the classical quartet, namely Achilles, Prometheus, Clytemnestra and Dido with Heamann and Dorothea, Childe Harold, Jocelyn, and *The Excursion*'. Even the strongest advocates of Arnold would agree that it is not always profitable for poets to draw upon the past. Literature expresses the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the contemporary age. Writers must choose subjects from the world of their own experience. What is ancient Greece to many of us? Historians and archaeologists are familiar with it, but the common readers delight justifiably in modern themes. To be in the company of Achilles, Prometheus, Clytemnestra and Dido is not always a pleasant experience. What a reader wants is variety, which classical mythology with all its tradition and richness cannot provide. An excessive fondness for Greek and Latin classics produces a literary diet without variety, while modern poetry and drama have branched out in innumerable directions.

As we have seen, as a classicist Arnold upheld the supreme importance of the architectonic faculty, then later shifted his ground. In the lectures *On Translating Homer*, *On the Study of Celtic Literature*, and *The Study of Poetry*, he himself tested the greatness of poetry by single lines. Arnold the classicist presumably realised towards the end of his life that classicism was not the last word in literature.

Arnold's lack of historic sense was another major failing. While he spoke authoritatively on his own century, he was sometimes groping in the dark in his assessment of earlier centuries. He used to speak at times as if *ex cathedra*, and this pontifical solemnity vitiated his criticism.

As we have seen, later critics praise Arnold, but it is only a qualified praise. Oliver Elton calls him a 'bad great critic'. T. S. Eliot said that Arnold is a 'Propagandist and not a creator of ideas'. According to Walter Raleigh, Arnold's method is like that of a man who took a brick to the market to give the buyers an impression of the building.

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### 3.11. □ Arnold's Legacy

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In spite of his faults, Arnold's position as an eminent critic is secure. Douglas Bush says that the breadth and depth of Arnold's influence cannot be measured or even guessed at because, from his own time onward, so much of his thought and outlook became part of the general educated consciousness. He was one of those critics who, as Eliot said, arrive from time to time to set the literary house in order. Eliot named Dryden, Johnson and Arnold as some of the greatest critics of the English language.

Arnold united active independent insight with the authority of the humanistic tradition. He carried on, in his more sophisticated way, the Renaissance humanistic faith in good letters as the teachers of wisdom, and in the virtue of great literature, and above all, great poetry. He saw poetry as a supremely illuminating, animating, and fortifying aid in the difficult endeavour to become or remain fully human.

Arnold's method of criticism is comparative. Steeped in classical poetry, and thoroughly acquainted with continental literature, he compares English literature to French and German literature, adopting the disinterested approach he had learned from Sainte-Beuve.

Arnold's objective approach to criticism and his view that historical and biographical study are unnecessary was very influential on the new criticism. His emphasis on the importance of tradition also influenced F. R. Leavis, and T. S. Eliot.

Eliot is also indebted to Arnold for his classicism, and for his objective approach which paved the way for Eliot to say that poetry is not an expression of personality but an escape from personality, because it is not an expression of emotions but an escape from emotions.

Although Arnold disapproved of the Romantics' approach to poetry, their propensity for allusiveness and symbolism, he also shows his appreciation of the Romantics in his *Essays in Criticism*. He praises Wordsworth thus: 'Nature herself took the pen out of his hand and wrote with a bare, sheer penetrating power'. Arnold also valued poetry for its strong ideas, which he found to be the chief merit of Wordsworth's poetry. About Shelley he says that Shelley is 'A beautiful but ineffectual angel beating in a void his luminous wings in vain'.

In an age when cheap literature caters to the taste of the common man, one might fear that the classics will fade into insignificance. But Arnold is sure that the currency and the supremacy of the classics will be preserved in the modern age, not because of conscious effort on the part of the readers, but because of the human instinct of self-preservation.

In the present day with the literary tradition over-burdened with imagery, myth, symbol and abstract jargon, it is refreshing to come back to Arnold and his like to encounter central questions about literature and life as they are perceived by a mature and civilised mind.

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### 3.12. □ Study Questions

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1. Explain how poetry stands in relation to religion, philosophy, and science for Arnold.
2. What does Arnold mean when he says “poetry is a criticism of life”? Is this a mimetic or a pragmatic statement, or both?
3. What are the “historical” estimate and the “personal” estimate? What’s wrong with them?
4. Does Arnold agree or disagree with Hericault’s ideas that we should not declare certain art works classics?
5. What do you think of Arnold’s “touchstone” method? Who does it remind you of? What does this method say about organic unity? How does it avoid the fallacies of historical and personal estimation?
6. What are Arnold’s criteria for determining poetic worth?
7. What does Arnold’s praise of Chaucer show us about his criteria for good poetry?  
What does Chaucer imitate?
8. Why is Chaucer not as great a poet as Dante, according to Arnold? Do you agree’?

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### 3.13. □ Bibliography

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# **Paper - V ● Module - 3**





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## **UNIT : 1 □ T. S. ELIOT**

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### **Structure :**

- 1.1. Objectives**
- 1.2. Introduction**
- 1.3. Trends in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Criticism**
- 1.4. T.S. Eliot : Biographical**
- 1.5. (a) 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'— Introduction**  
**(b) The Text : Critical Commentary**
- 1.6. Achievements of T.S. Eliot**
- 1.7. Comprehension Exercises**
- 1.8. Suggested Reading**

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### **1.1. Objectives**

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In this unit our focus is on T.S. Eliot's seminal text 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'. Before we attempt to explore and analyse the text, we have tried to introduce you to the climate of critical thinking that prevailed among some of Eliot's contemporaries or near contemporaries.

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### **1.2. Introduction**

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The theory and practice of English criticism was radically altered in the 1920s and 1930s by a group of Anglo-American critics and their disciples— namely T S Eliot, I.A. Richards, William Empson and others. Till the early twentieth century, literary criticism was dominated by impressionistic criticism and the judgements and practices of Romantic literature and criticism. T S Eliot broke away from this trend to focus attention on the poem itself rather than the poet. Instead of vague theorisation, he sought to draw attention to the actual process of composition of a poem.

This was a sort of revolution in criticism and initiated a new perspective which subsequently led to the elaborate analytical strategies of New Criticism. Thus Eliot redefined the nature of literary criticism by transmuted the methods and assumptions

of historical criticism. By this time Eliot was established as the foremost poet of his age and this gave a power and prestige to his critical pronouncements. His views helped to bring about a revaluation of literary movements such as Romanticism, Elizabethan drama and of individual poets such as Milton, Shelley and the Metaphysical poets. T S Eliot initiated a new view of the poetic process and can be placed beside literary stalwarts like Dr. Johnson and Matthew Arnold who helped define literary taste. His significance is considerably reduced in the atmosphere of new critical ideas of the post-modern literary scene which is dominated by post-structuralism, deconstruction, reader-criticism and the like. So Eliot's critical precepts and those of the New critics are now more of historical interest since the 1960s.

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### **1.3. Trends in Early 20th Century Criticism : T S Eliot and Some Contemporaries**

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#### **Before Eliot :**

The establishment of literature as an academic discipline must begin with Matthew Arnold. His importance as a spokesman for criticism is immense and as a canonical figure in the sphere of literature, his influence over many of the leading critics of the 20th century is discernible.

Arnold feared that the decline of religion would leave an increasingly divided society with no common system of beliefs and values, leading to potential disaster for society. He saw literature as a possible replacement for religion. He also felt that the middle-class, the bearers of democracy, had been debased by materialism and philistinism. The critic would help people to recognise 'the best that has been known and thought of' and thus enable them to evaluate the canon of great works which had emerged through the collective wisdom of the ages. Arnold's most significant thinking is contained in the essays '**The Function of Criticism in the Present Times**' and '**The Study of Poetry**'. He stresses that literature should remain disinterested and literary criticism should be 'pure' 'disinterested knowledge', to appreciate "the object as in itself it really is."

T. S. Eliot asserted that Arnold was rather "a propagandist for criticism than a critic.' Nevertheless it has to be recognised that many key ideas and terms of modern theoretical debate owe their origin to Matthew Arnold— e.g. the organisation of

literature as an academic discipline, of literary criticism as a separate branch of this discipline.

The early 20th century saw the emergence of several critics who brought new ideas to the study of literature, specially poetry. They also interacted on and often influenced each other. In this section we will briefly discuss some critics who influenced Eliot's thoughts on poetry and criticism or shared with him certain common ideas.

In Anglo-American literature where the influence of Romantic emotion and Victorian morality had persisted till late nineteenth century, modernism arrived through the influence of T. E. Hulme and Ezra Pound as thinkers who influenced Eliot, its most notable writer-critic. As a poet, Hulme's output was small but his claim to fame lies in founding the principle of Imagism. From Hulme Eliot derived the idea that a specifically 'poetic' subject does not exist. The great aim of the poet should be accurate, precise description. The business of the poet is not personal expression but fine craft. Like the Symbolists and Hulme, T. S. Eliot believed that the essence of poetry is images and metaphor. Hulme believes that the poet must, through language, reproduce exact and fresh perception of experience. Conventional words must be given freshness of meaning through metaphor. The complexity of poetry is not mechanical but organic; therefore each part modifies and is modified by other parts. Ezra Pound too, wanted poetry to be direct and austere and emphasized the necessity of accurate description and gave priority to the importance of the role of good language in poetry.

Any discussion of modern criticism must consider the contribution of I.A. Richards, the British critic who influenced almost all modern critics of the first half of the 20th century. His early work, the **Meaning of Meaning** brought to bear on ideas regarding the influence of art and language on human experience. His two most noteworthy works were **Principles of Literary Criticism** and **Practical Criticism**. Richards demands that poetry should be judged by the mental experience it offers and how successfully that experience has been communicated. Subjective and emotional considerations should not play a part in critical judgement. Richard's most influential work was **Practical Criticism** which aimed at teaching students of literature how to appreciate and judge poetry. He can be seen as a pioneer of the decontextualised approach to literature which prevailed in Britain from the 1930's to the 60's and was

known as Practical Criticism. His critical methods directly influenced the new English curriculum at Cambridge University. A significant contribution to language was the distinction he proposed between the **emotive** language of poetry and the **referential** language of science. Through his critical writings Richards attempted to establish a systematic basis for the study of literature. The skills and techniques he fostered for a close reading of literature had a vital impact on the development of New Criticism. He also stimulated critics such as Eliot to explore new horizons.

William Empson was a critic and poet and a student of I. A. Richards. As a critic he has been very influential, specially through his analysis of the nature of language when it is used in imaginative writing, specially poetry. Empson's teacher I A Richards in his **Principles of Literary Criticism** discussed the kinds of truth that are to be found in poetic statements and how these truths differ from those of philosophy and scientific statement. Empson's first and most influential book, **Seven Types of Ambiguity** discusses the ways in which various kinds of semantic ambiguities can be used by poets. Empson was stimulated to this kind of criticism by I A Richards and F R Leavis but also owes much to the rediscovery of the importance of the early 17th century metaphysical poets by Eliot and other critics. The ideas of 'complexity' and 'ambiguity' have, after Empson, become subjects of exploration by critics.

F R Leavis, the third of the leading English literary critics of the twentieth century, was not like T S Eliot, an artist using criticism to serve the ends of his art, but a teacher using it for the ends of education. Like many other 20th-century. English and American critics, he worked in and through a university system. Leavis belongs to the 'great tradition' of English literary critics to which Dryden, Dr. Johnson, Coleridge and Matthew Arnold belonged. His aim— expressed in *The Idea of a University*— was to make universities the centres of thought and systematic thinking, enabling society with positive criticism. This line of thinking aligns him to Matthew Arnold in the **Function of Criticism**. He was a teacher-critic whose approach to literature was close attention in evaluating the text. Like Arnold, he too believed that study of literature could bring about a healthy society and civilisation. The most significant contributions are his books on English fiction. His book on fiction **The Great Tradition** indicates that the novel also deserved the kind of criticism that had hitherto been given to poetry and drama. His concern led Leavis to an extensive reevaluation of the English literary tradition. Many of his revaluations are to be found in **Scrutiny** (the

great review he edited from 1932—1953), and **Revaluations** (1936) While Eliot confined himself to the criticism of poetry and drama, Leavis gave equal attention to the criticism of poetry and prose, treating imaginative writing as a single tradition. F. R. Leavis as a teacher at Cambridge University as well as theorist and interpreter of literature helped, along with Richards, to fix the early dimension of literary criticism as an institutional practice.

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#### 1.4. T. S. Eliot : Biography

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Thomas Stearns Eliot was born in Missouri in a renowned family of Boston. At Harvard he studied philosophy and later worked for his Ph. D. thesis on the philosophy of F. H. Bradley. This had a considerable influence both on his criticism and his poetry. He later studied at Sorbonne University in 1910-11 and at Oxford in 1914 where he joined Merton college. In 1927 he settled in London as a British citizen and also entered the Anglican church. Eliot began his working life as a banker and worked in Lloyds Bank for eight years. He gave this up to join Faber and Faber, a publishing firm of which he eventually became the director. His first collection of essays, **The Sacred Wood**, was published in 1920. 'The Criterion', a literary journal which he founded, appeared in 1922. In 1924 he published **Homage to John Dryden** (studies of Dryden and Metaphysical poets.) **The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism** followed in 1933 and **Notes Towards a Definition of Culture** in 1949. His first major poem **The Lovesong of J Alfred Prufrock** was published in 1915 and announced the arrival of a poet who would change the existing course of poetry. In 1922 with the publication of **The Waste Land**, Eliot came to be recognised as the spokesman of his age. His best known poems are to be found in the **Collected poems 1909-1935** and **The Four Quarters**, 1944. Among his verse plays and poetic dramas, *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) and the **Cocktail Party** (1950) are the finest. In 1922 he established **The Criterion**, one of the two journals he published.

Eliot's critical writings can be said to fall into three periods. During the first he wrote for journals like the **Egoist**, **The Athenaeum** and **The Times Literary Supplement** published his writings between 1918 and 1930. His later criticism was confined mostly to lectures and essays. Towards the beginning of his career, T S Eliot focussed on literature, both ancient and modern. Gradually his critical writings broadened out to include elements of 'culture', popular art, religion, education. These

are covered in **Notes Towards a Definition of Culture**. Though all his essays are thought provoking, his early essays exerted most influence as they helped to create an affinity between forward-thinking critics and teachers of literature in universities. In 1948 TS Eliot's career received its finest recognition with the award of the Nobel Prize for literature and the Order of Merit.

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## **1.5. (a) Tradition & The Individual Talent**

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### **Introduction :**

The text selected for your study, **Tradition and the Individual Talent** was published in **The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism (1920)** and proved to be a landmark in critical thought. The essay is divided into three sections : The first part defines the concept of "tradition" and its bearing upon the individual poet, in part two Eliot introduces the "Impersonal theory of poetry" and follows it with a brief concluding third part.

Before we attempt an analysis of the text, it would perhaps be a good idea to take a look at the preface to the 1928 edition of **The Sacred Wood**.

### **Preface to the 1928 edition of the Sacred Wood**

TS Eliot states that the central literary problem this volume of essays addresses is the issue of the integrity of poetry. In introducing his topic Eliot affirms that poetry must be considered primarily as poetry. For instance, the relation between poetry and belief takes us beyond the scope of poetry. He calls this volume of essays "logically as well as chronologically the beginning." This is a significant statement because there are different stages in the development of his literary criticism, his later views being very different from the earlier. His view of tradition, for example, changes with successive works.

He tries to describe poetry and settles for the statement "Poetry is a form of superior amusement." Defining poetry, he says, is difficult, though it may be reasonably, described. He rejects his own description, as it cannot apply to all poetry. Wordsworth's definition— "emotion recollected in tranquillity" is rejected as being psychologically absurd. One cannot recollect an emotion, but only the impression of an emotion. He also questions Arnold's exposition of poetry as a "criticism of life because the word

“criticism” is not well-defined. No definition seems adequate for Eliot, but he asserts that to the criticism of poetry we must bring the sensibility and knowledge of other poetry. A working definition of poetry could be “excellent words in excellent arrangement and excellent metre.” A poem has a life of its own and the emotion or vision embodied in the poem should not be equated with the emotion or vision or feeling in the mind of the poet, though the poem necessarily grows out of it. Having rejected the idea earlier, T S Eliot finally concedes that poetry does have something to do with morality, religion or even politics. He realises that there are many issues around the realm of poetry and these essays are only a point of starting.

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## **1.5. (b) Text : Critical Commentary**

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### **TRADITION and the INDIVIDUAL TALENT**

#### **Section I**

The English mind, as T S Eliot sees it, has a hankering after individuality. The word ‘tradition’ seems to have a tinge of censure about it, or at least as if it is something related to or revived from the past. The process of reading arouses an emotion in our mind. When we appraise and articulate this emotion we are performing an act of criticism. Criticism, says Eliot, is “as inevitable as breathing.” But in the process of criticism we may tend to praise those aspects of a poet’s work which are unique and least like anyone else, i.e. what we conceive of as the poet’s originality. This is the Romantic view of originality. According to Eliot, even the most “individual” parts of a poet’s work may be those in which his ancestors are the most potent in their influence. This is the “tradition” to which any poet belongs.

Tradition, however, is not an uncritical adherence to or imitation of preceding poets, nor does it come readily to the poet but is achieved by great labour. The poet who has the true “historical sense” is possessed of the whole of past literature “in his bones.” The historical sense “involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past, but its presence.” Thus it brings with it a feeling that the whole of literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a “simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order”. A poet or artist cannot be evaluated alone. He must be assessed in relation to the past, in relation to other poets. When an artist is measured against the past, it does not follow that the



standards of judgement are those of the past critics, but by a juxtaposition of the past and the present, the old and the new. The new work is judged by comparison and contrast with the old. This makes for a dynamic relation between the past and the present. In postulating this, collation of the past and the present, T S Eliot puts forward his idea of historical sense, through which tradition manifests itself.

Tradition is not a temporal order. It presupposes the historical sense, which is an awareness of the past in the present. It is a simultaneous awareness of time and timelessness. The historical sense makes a writer aware of his place in his own time as well as aware of his own time as a part of the larger flow of time. This idea of tradition makes us aware of the permanence that underlies all change. Chronologically the past is something bygone, but as tradition it is always present as spiritual imagination. Time as a continuous flow involves not only the past also conflates the present and the future. Poets must therefore write with the awareness of his contemporaries as well as his predecessor.

Besides being non-temporal, tradition is also non-spatial. A writer must not only be conscious of the writers of his own country, but also of the larger mind within which he has his place. English writers must write with the feeling, as we have seen, that "the whole of literature of Europe from Homer... is in his bones." Within this larger unit the literature of his own country "has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order." Simultaneous order is for Eliot essentially one and essentially living. If a writer is to have significance, he must be, as consciously as possible, part of this order.

Eliot sees the totality of existing works as forming an "ideal order" which is modified by the introduction of a new work of art. This ideal order is not static but dynamic—it changes—if ever so slightly, when a new work of art is introduced. Only thus can the ideal order persist after the introduction of a new work. Thus the relations, proportions values of each individual work in relation to the whole are readjusted. Through this dynamic interactive process the old and the new are held in balance. This ideal order provides a kind of touchstone for evaluation of the new work.

In order to understand Eliot's conception of literary tradition, it is necessary to look briefly at his theory of culture. According to him there are three main approaches to culture—

- (1) culture of the individual
- (2) culture of a group or class.
- (3) culture of the whole society.

All three are interdependent, but it is in the culture of the whole society that we get the truest and the fullest idea of culture. For Eliot culture is essentially alive and operative at all levels of society. He believes also that culture can never be created or encouraged by conscious effort. According to him, the main element in the cultural unity of Europe is a "shared tradition" Tradition is largely subconscious as is the culture that stems from it, but a sense of the past, a sense of history, is essential to culture.

### **Why this emphasis on tradition ?**

(1) If a writer is not aware of the tradition of his country, his writing will be limited and he will be inclined to write parochially and provincially.

(2) No poet or artist can have his meaning in isolation, but in community with and absorption of other poets, and tradition lies in this sense of community.

(3) There is one further discrimination to a poet's absorption of tradition. He must not restrict himself to the works of a few writers or a specific period of literature. The poet must be conscious of the main current of tradition which may not always pass through the most reputed writers.

## **Section II**

In the first part of the essay, Eliot puts forward the notion of poetry as a living whole in relation to all the poetry that has ever been written. In the Impersonal Theory of Poetry he posits the relation of the poem to its author. T S Eliot ends the first part of the essay with the statement that the poet's development lies in a continual extinction of personality, and through a process which merges his personality with tradition. **"The progress of the artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."** This is Eliot's most emphatic argument for authorial impersonality against the Romantic view of poetry as self-expression. For Eliot the poet necessarily disappears as the language of the poem takes over. The poem exists as a verbal artifact, and this blocks any direct communication between the reader and the poet.

According to Eliot, a multiplicity of diverse experiences of various complexity merges in the creation of poetry. The amalgamation of these disparate experiences takes place through language in the poet's mind which as a medium, is a passive channel for these experiences to pass through. It is a receptacle which seizes and stores innumerable feelings, bits of language, phrases, images. In each poetic creation these free-flowing particles in the poet's mind unite to form a new compound. The language is pre-existent in the poet's mind.

Eliot further illustrates this concept of depersonalisation with the help of a scientific analogy of the catalyst in a scientific laboratory. The production of sulphurous acid requires oxygen and sulphur dioxide, but perhaps the most important constituent in the process is a shred of platinum which is the catalyst essential to the formation of the new product, while it remains unchanged itself. The scientific process can take place only in the presence of the catalyst, but the newly formed product contains no trace of it and the catalyst, too, remains unaltered. The mind, that is the personality of the poet, is merely a medium or receptacle for a variety of impressions. The raw materials here undergo a mysterious process and emerge in the form of a work of art which is very different from the materials. The individual as a catalyst takes no part in the action itself nor is it in any way affected by the action. In this connection Eliot says that the relative maturity of a poet determines the quality of the poet's mind as a medium.

Next Eliot proceeds to discriminate between the raw materials which constitute the experience of poetry. These are *emotions* and *feelings* and have to be carefully distinguished. An *emotion* is a powerful upsurge which causes a radical change in the person in whom it inheres. Under the influence of this the poet ceases to be his ordinary self and becomes the personified emotion. *Feelings* are sharp and intense but not as otherwhelming as emotions. Feelings generally belong to an object. An emotion is a complex thing and in it there may be an entire gamut of different feelings.

T S Eliot further emphasizes the normality of the emotions which must go towards the poetic experience. He is opposed to the Romantic tendency of searching after new and striking emotions. The novelty must consist not in the matter but in the combination of emotions and feelings. This variety of combinations gives rise to the sublimity, the greatness of poetry. This arises not because of any greatness or sublimity in the

emotions, themselves but in the intensity of the artistic process. Eliot is also careful to emphasize that these emotions, feelings or experiences which contribute towards the creation of a work of art have nothing to do with the poet's personal history, though in his poems they may assume important proportions.

Eliot now dissects the Wordsworthian formula of poetry. I am sure you remember Wordsworth's definition of poetry : “ **a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.**” (Preface, L.B. 1800) Wordsworth's theory of poetry expresses the Romantic view of poetry as the expression of personal emotions recollected in tranquillity. It is against this Romantic emphasis on the personal element that Eliot levels his charges. Eliot does not accept that the poet expresses his personality or his personal emotions and experiences. The poet's mind is only a medium operating like the transforming catalyst on the experiences of the poet as an individual and unites and transforms them into a new composition, a new work of art. It is a concentration of diverse experiences. The emotion expressed in the final work of art is not the same as the emotion which was its material. He says “**Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.**” (Trad. and Ind. Talent, Pg 58, S.W) The emotion of art is for him impersonal and the poet can obtain this impersonality by cultivating the historical sense and his consciousness of tradition.

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## **1.6. Achievements of T S Eliot**

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In the twentieth century T S Eliot led the assault against Romantic literature and impressionistic criticism. He established an atmosphere of objective criticism and created the critical perspective that led to New criticism. He changed the methods and assumptions of historical criticism thereby redefining the nature of literary tradition. His best critical writing analyses and clarifies theoretical and technical problems which had a bearing on his creative work, specially poetry. Among his significant contributions to literary criticism were ideas concerning the integrity of poetry, the process of poetic composition, the importance of tradition in the maturing of individual talent. Like Matthew Arnold earlier, T S Eliot looked upon himself as a guardian of culture. In “Tradition and the Individual Talent” he advances the view of the great

artist as a part of tradition and lays stress on the impersonality of great poetry. His term “objective correlative” has become a part of the critical lexicon. It describes how emotion can be represented in literature.

In spite of his great influence, T S Eliot has not been considered beyond criticism, F. R. Leavis, for example, acknowledges his greatness as a poet but feels his criticism falls short of a great creative writer. He says “some ideas and valuations Eliot puts into currency.... are arbitrary.” Even “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” he argues, is notable for its amiguities, its logical inconsequence.... and the aplomb of its equivocations.” Eliot’s doctrine of impersonality, too, is felt to be false as it denies the artist his individuality and openness to life. W. K. Wimsatt also lays the charge of lack of clarity against Eliot in the same essay. Eliot’s ambiguity arises from two views of the mind. In speaking of “the mind which creates” he refers to the mind as an active agent which transmutes experience. The mind is also referred to as a catalyst which brings about change without itself changing. In spite of these flaws, Eliot was the most important critic of the first half of the nineteenth century. His influence is still perceptible in the main current of English literary tradition. The change in critical modes in the second half of the twentieth century diminished his influence.

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## **1.7. Comprehension Exercises**

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1. Discuss Eliot’s view of the relationship between the individual poet and tradition.
2. Briefly discuss Eliot’s concept of tradition and its role in poetic creation.
3. Write a note on Eliot’s concept of the impersonality of poetry.
4. Examine Eliot’s criticism of Wordsworth’s theory of poetry as “emotions recollected in tranquillity.”
5. “What does Eliot mean by “historical sense” ?

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## **1.8. Suggested Reading**

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Besides the text set for you, you may read the following essays by Eliot.

1. The Function of Criticism.
2. The Metaphysical Poets.
3. Hamlet.
4. Rene Wellek— A history of Modern Criticism, Vol 5.
5. F. R. Leavis— T S Eliot as a critic.
6. Graham Clarke ed. T S Eliot, Critical Assessment, Vol - IV.

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# UNIT : 2 □ I. A. RICHARDS

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## Structure :

### 2.0 Introduction

### 2.1 Principles of Literary Criticism : A Chapterwise Summary

### 2.2 Detailed Analysis of Chapter 22

### 2.3 Detailed Critical Analysis of Chapter 24

### 2.4 I.A. Richards

### 2.5 Suggested Reading

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## 2.0. Introduction

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Ivory Armstrong Richards (1893 - 1979) was born at Cheshire, UK and was educated at Cambridge. Before serving as Professor of English at Harvard from 1944 - 63 he held various positions at Cambridge and in China at Peking. Two of his eminent pupils at Cambridge were William Empson and F.R. Leavis. His teaching was primarily concerned with mutually fruitful contact of literature with psychology; his other area of interest was to discover relationships of literature with the Science of Semantics. Richards encouraged the growth of textual study as an important academic activity. He discussed the context, nature and relevance of poetry in the context of modern life. Some of his earlier works of great importance are 'Principles of Literary Criticism' (1924), 'Science and Poetry' (1925) 'Practical Criticism' (1929). He concentrated on the study of the value of poetry as a means for better living. His concern at the problem of teaching and learning led him to a belief in the imaginative products of man. Literature is not simply a play with language but it stands as a 'support' for man in his loneliness.

His other books include 'The Meaning of Meaning' (1923), 'Coleridge on Imagination' (1934), 'The Philosophy of Rhetoric' (1936), 'Interpretation of Teaching' (1938), 'How to Read a Page : A course in Effective Reading' (1942) etc. Affective criticism may be a new name but it is also as old as Plato. Plato's view of Poetry as feeding and watering passion and Aristotle's doctrine of Catharsis are ancient versions

of 'affective criticism'. But in the nineteenth century a special stress was given to the theories of affective criticism. The impact of psychology on the 20th century criticism came through psychologists like Lipps, Freud and Jung. Freud's description of the pleasure of art as a "substitute gratification" is disappointing. He makes pleasure a specific means of the artist as well as the general end of his art. Freud, of course, never made any pretence to a total literary theory.

Through I.A. Richards psychology was to make its great impact on literary criticism. Richards discriminates between emotional intensity and valuable emotional experience. He holds that Science makes statements but poetry makes pseudo statements which have no referential value.

In *Principles of Literary Criticism* Richards uses two terms 'inclusion' and 'synthesis' and these terms, he believes, define the character of the greatest and the most valuable poetry. Richards argues that *impulses* may be organised by 'exclusion' and by 'inclusion', by 'synthesis' and by elimination. The process of exclusion, inclusion and synthesis gives the coherent state of mind and by contrasting experiences we may win stability and order. In the opinion of Richards some kinds of poetry deal with a definite emotion, but they are not the greatest kind of poetry. In the greatest kind of poetry there are opposed impulses from the resolution of which experiences are generated, which cannot usually be analysed. Richards thus suggests that 'irony' is a characteristic of the highest kind of poetry. Richards tries to distinguish between the emotional effect produced in the reader and the means by which it is produced. Richards desires to discuss poetry in terms of stimulus and response; he attempts to distinguish technical remarks from critical or evaluative remarks. He denies to Poetry any truth of reference because truth, he argues, as applied to a work of art could merely mean 'internal necessity' of the work of it.

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## 2.1. Principles of Literary Criticism

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### A Chapterwise Summary :

In Chapter 1 Richards focuses attention on the chaos of critical theories and points out that while considering a work of art the critic seeks to answer a few questions which do not seem to be extraordinarily difficult. The central questions that critics ask are about the value of arts. What is the place of a particular work of art



in the system of human endeavour? The critic seeks an answer to this question also.

**In Chapter 2** Richards initiates a discussion on aesthetics. According to Richards abstract investigation into 'the Good the Beautiful and the True' will evidently lead to the phantom problem of aesthetic mode and aesthetic state. Richards argues that assumption of a peculiar aesthetic attitude may make way for a peculiar aesthetic value undermining the other values of ordinary experiences.

**Chapter 3** deals with the language of criticism. All natural turns of speech are misleading if we use them in our discussions of the work of art. In the language of criticism the ellipses are to be avoided. If the language is vague or strange, our reflections will be diminished. Moreover, the distinction between technical remarks and critical remarks is very important.

**Chapter 4** takes up the problem of communication. The artist is not consciously concerned with communication but he gets his work explained to the people for whom they are created. If the artist has proper communicative powers, the work of art will be easily explained. Now another question arises. Is desire for communication an unconscious motive? How far is the desire distinguished from the desire to produce. Anyway, communicative possibilities alongwith desires to communicate should be studied with close natural correspondence between the poet's impulses and possible impulses in his reader.

The title of **Chapter 5** is 'The critics' concern with value'. The critic always has his ideas about value. In other words he has his set standard which may or may not be flexible. The critic's occupation is an application and exercise of his ideas on the subject. But statements like 'This is good or that is bad' are either vague or arbitrary. So it may be necessary to defend and reasonably justify accepted standards.

**In Chapter 6** Richards raises a pertinent question. Should we judge the value of our experiences in psychological, moral or ethical terms? One theory is that the occurrence of states of mind which are recognized as good is regarded as an isolated fact of in experience and that 'isolated fact of experience' must not be linked up with the rest of human peculiarities. The term 'good' is connected with super sensuous ideas which cannot be apprehended by sensuous perceptions. By the adjective 'good', do we mean something which is approved? Does it suggest that anything that is

approved is good ? Is 'good' an irreducible entity ? May we think of 'Beauty' in similar terms?

In **Chapter 7** Richards takes up the psychological theory of value. Attachment of value to different things by different individuals vary according to their socioeconomic conditions, their states of mind and their impulses. Goodness or badness depend upon circumstances and necessities, present and past of the individual who is judging the experience. "Anything is valuable which shall satisfy our appetency without involving the frustration of some equal or more important appetency." But every experience of an individual involves a perfect coordination of impulses. "When any desire is denied for the sake of another, the approved and accepted activity takes on additional value ; it is converted and persuaded all the more for what it has lost." The process of organization and systemization of impulses goes on in the human mind, unconsciously, in the consideration of 'good' or 'bad'.

**Chapter 8** takes up the problem of 'Art and Morals'. The artist in his work of art is concerned with the record and perception of those experiences which he considers to be most worthy. When we consider 'virtue' and 'vice' in abstract terms we can never understand which experiences are most valuable. The basis of morality, laid by preachers cannot help the poet or the artist. Bad taste and crude responses are almost necessary parts of a whole body of human emotions and experiences, inextricably related with, the good and the finer ones.

In **Chapter 9** Richards observes that there are 'actual and possible misapprehension' with regard to artistic responses. What Richards ultimately aims at asserting in this chapter is that art does not simply aims at happy solutions and ingenious reconciliation of diverse gratifications. It is much more complex than that. Pleasure has its place in the whole accounts of values, but its scope and ground in the perspective of art must be clearly understood.

The **Chapter 10** is named 'Poetry and Poetry's sake.' In this chapter Richards discusses four points. The reading of poetry is an experience which is an end in itself, it has its intrinsic value. Apart from its intrinsic value it may be a means to culture or religion, it may convey instructions and it may bring fame to the poet. The ulterior value of poetry cannot determine its poetic worth. To be a world by itself poetry must be independent, complete and autonomous. Richards analyses these four points

suggested by A.C. Bradley. While acknowledging their general validity Richards points out certain contradictions in them and makes his own remarks about them.

The **11th Chapter** is 'A Sketch For A psychology'. Every mental event has an origin in stimulation which may come from the environment or from within the body. Conscious and unconscious mental events differ but in many respects they are similar. Whether conscious or unconscious, a mental event corresponds to the usual division in traditional psychology of thought, feeling and will. The conscious character of the mental event includes sensations and feelings. The reading of a poem is a mental process which involves the theories of knowledge, feeling, emotion and desires.

**Chapter 12** deals with 'pleasure' as an experience. The pleasantness or the unpleasantness of a sensation is a variable thing though the sensory characteristic remains the same. Pleasure and unpleasure are complicated matters in the course of activities which are directed to other ends. An activity has its goals and perhaps pleasure is generated when the goal is attained. According to Richards, it is an adequate attitude if we take up the reading of a poem for the sake of pleasure only.

In the **Chapter 13** on '**Emotion and Coenesthesia**' 'emotion' is an ingredient of consciousness. From stimulating situations the body feels repercussions. In this context the internal circumstances are more active than external stimulus. Both pleasure (which is a feeling) and sensation depend, for their character, on the stimulus. Pleasure and emotion. give us knowledge. Generally, pleasure gives us knowledge of our activities and emotions give us knowledge of our attitudes. If emotion stands for happenings in the mind, it also refers to exhibition of unusual excitements. Very often insufficient attention is paid to images of sensation and the so called 'profound emotion' excludes them. We must not forget that sensations are very important in the entire emotive process.

'**Memory**' (**Chapter 14**) is an extremely important factor in the process of critical and aesthetic appreciation of art. In every mental activity memory intervenes. Every stimulus leaves behind an imprint which can be revived later and it contributes its quota to consciousness and to behaviour.

Memory has an important part to play in our '**Attitudes**' (**Chapter 15**). What we have already done in the past controls our scheme of actions in future. If the situation is complex and delicate, it will call forth complicated goings on in the mind and coordination of a great number of impulses will be necessary. Imaginal or incipient

activity means tendencies to action; according to Richards this may be called 'attitude'. All the tendencies are not overt; many of them occur in complicated adjustments.

**Chapter 16** is a long chapter where Richards discusses the method of analysis of a poem. In this connection Richards observes that a critic must be an adept in experiencing, he must be able to distinguish experiences according to their less superficial pictures, and thirdly the critic should be a sound judge of value.

Richards discusses two poems - one by Swinburne and another by Hardy. He suggests that since the two poems are very different from each other, the reader should approach them in different ways as well. The two poets, Richards holds, have used different 'psychological means'. Richards believes that the analysis of the experience of reading a poem may be done by means of diagram, although diagram has its limitation. According to Richards the 'value' of art does not come from either the intensity of conscious experience, its thrill, its pleasure or its poignancy but from the organization of its impulses for freedom and fullness of life.

**Chapter 17** is called 'Rhythm and Metre'. The important contention of Richards in this chapter is that rhythm and metre are not purely an affair of the sensory aspects of the / syllables, nor can they be dissociated from the sense and their emotional effects come about through the sense. Metre is not simply a specialised form of rhythm, it has its hypnotic power producing an effect of continued effect of surprise. Metre can affect poetry in various ways. One of the important effects it renders is the 'frame' effect isolating the poetic experience from the experiences of every day existence.

**Chapter 18** is entitled 'On Looking At a Picture'. This is an elaborate chapter which begins with the observation that the process of reading a poem, with some modification, may be applied to the reading of a picture and a statue etc.; in fact in this chapter Richards draws comparison between literature and other forms of art. He points out that representation in painting corresponds to thought in poetry. The experiences of reading poetry and of appreciating the pictures have fundamentally the same features; the features on which their value depends are alive.

In 'Sculpture and the Construction of form' (**Chapter 19**) Richards holds that interpretation of form is a complex affair. As form varies our response to the work of art also varies. These are certain confusing and puzzling facts as to the effects of

forms and a psychological analysis of the work of art may perhaps dispel some of these misconceptions.

**In Chapter 20** ('The impasse of musical theory') Richards observes " .... The psychology of Music is often regarded as more backward than that of other arts, ...". Every element in a music form as in other forms is capable of exciting complex responses. A single note may escape notice but the summation of individual notes may seem to have striking consequences in emotion and attitude. But Richards, however, points out "The effects of happenings in the mind rarely add themselves up..... The metaphor of addition is utterly misleading." What Richards probably means to say is that the effect of a part of the whole may be exciting but the responses to individual parts do not add in the mind. In the final analysis the value lies in the total mental effect which individual parts as a whole produce.

**In Chapter 21** ('Theory of Communications') does communication mean transference of participation in identical experiences? This is not possible. What happens is that under, certain conditions separate minds may have closely similar experiences. Communication is a complicated affair; communication has its vehicles. The vehicle may be poetry or painting. In different cases the vehicle of communication must be complex, but we must remember that the effect of a word varies with its association with different sets of words. The difficulty of communication must not be confused with the difficulty of the subject matter.

**Chapter 22** discusses 'The availability of the Poet's Experience'. A poet or an artist must be accessible to external experience and he must decide if some experiences are to be retained and others to be discarded or whether he will retain all holding them in suspension. If all the past experiences are available readily his capability of communication is shaped by them. All that an artist needs to do is to revive an experience and have the peculiar state of mind at that particular moment. The revival of an experience may be distorted if only some of the original impulses are repeated and and new impulses are involved. There is a difference between understanding a situation and the more usual reactions to it. The latter is simply a welter of responses while the former is a systematized complex response. To understand a situation means responding to it as a whole in a coherent way allowing the parts their due share. The degree of vigilance of the individual at the moment when the revival of the experience is made is equally important.

**Chapter 23** discusses 'Tolstoy's Infection Theory'. Tolstoy holds that art becomes infectious in consequence of three conditions - sensation conveyed, clearness of the transmission, the sincerity of the artist's experience. Richards takes up the point of 'clearness of transmission' and asserts that clarity of transmission is a problem of communication, and 'Sincerity of the art is a vague question'. Richards concludes that completeness or wholeness is the rarest and most difficult condition for supreme communicative ability.

**Chapter 24** (The Normality of the Artist) discusses another important characteristic of the artist— his normality. The experience of the artist may not tally with the experience of those with whom he communicates. There are impulses which are not uniform in all persons. The level of impulses may be higher or lower. According to Richards if there is even a slight eccentricity on the part of the poet in the responses he makes to rhythms and verbal tunes, the effect may be disastrous. To be normal is to be standard; but the artist departs from the standard or the average. At any moment a variety of attitudes is possible. Most of the human attitudes are wasteful and the mind which is least wasteful may be taken as a standard.

**Chapter 25** (Badness in Poetry) is indeed interesting. If the communication is inadequate and ineffective, it is a bad poem. Richards tries to explain his point with examples. A poet may make an unlimited demand upon his reader but the demand must be proportional to his own contribution. There are numerous classes of readers with various 'fixations', concepts and ideas; their responses to a work of art will vary accordingly. In this connection Richards raises another interesting issue. He quotes a poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox and observes that 'communication' is successful and then asks whether the thing that is communicated is commendable. The quoted poem, Richards suggests, reproduces the state of mind of the writer exactly. The question here is about the 'value' of the readers' experience.

('Judgement and Divergent Readings') **Chapter 26** is a brief chapter which discusses the ambiguity in a poem; the ambiguity may be the fault of the poet or the reader. Experiences result from the building up of connected attitudes and also from the breaking down of some attitudes. Only a master artist can fuse the two variations and organize his work of art in such a way as to lead the reader to the effective experience of his work.

'Levels of Response and the Width of Appeal' is the **twenty seventh chapter** of the book. A common concept is that a work which appeals to all kinds and all degrees of men is greater and more valuable than another work which only appeals to some. Richards points out that a sophisticated poet often makes no appeal below a certain level. On the other hand, the impulses involved in the creation of a poet of wide appeal are general. This poet can avoid "a certain dangerous finality" and our experience of his work can never be deemed as final.

Richards names the **twenty eighth chapter** 'The Allusiveness of Modern Poetry'. The allusiveness of the poet narrows the range of the artist's communication and creates a gap between the appreciation of the expert and the ordinary reader. There are some allusions which may be considered as normal and regular resources of poetry. Some care is needed in the consideration of the problem of allusions. There are worthy allusions as well as unworthy allusions. Often allusions become a habit. But in spite of these possible dangers allusion has a justifiable place in poetry.

Richards discusses the subject of the permanence of poetry in **Chapter 29** entitled 'Performance as a Criterion'. He merely points out that obsolescence is not in general the sign of low value. It is often pointed out that a work of art survives for its immortal essences or eternal truths. In fact the great artist can go beyond popular attitudes, in fashion at a certain period of time in a social set up. The "Present-day obscurity" as Richards points out may be because of obsolescence of a many a great writer.

In **Chapter 30** Richards aims at 'The Definition of a Poem'. A poem may be praised or condemned for its communicative aspect or its value aspect. The failure of one does not indicate the failure of the other. We must be alert about the difference between the standard or normal criticism and erratic, personal and idiosyncratic criticism. Richards knows that defining a poem as the artist's experience cannot be wholly acceptable because nobody but the artist has that experience. Without taking any single experience as the poem, we may take a class of more or less similar experiences. If a reader's experience approximates to this 'class', the reading of the poem may be considered fruitful.

In 'Art, Play And Civilization' (**Chapter 31**) Richards argues that the value of experience does not lie in the exquisiteness of the moment of consciousness. The

reader or the critic should not only take into account the impulses actually concerned in the existence but also consider all the allied groups which thrive or suffer with it.

**Chapter 32** is entitled 'The Imagination'. In critical interpretation the word imagination may be interpreted in six different ways. They are (i) the production of vivid images, (ii) the use of figurative language, (iii) a necessary tool for communication, (iv) ineffectiveness, (v) relevant connection of things ordinarily thought as disparate and (vi) "that synthetic and marginal power to which we have appropriated the name of imagination".

The stimulation of a poet occurs according to the availability of his experience and then comes the completeness of the response he may be able to make. It is the imaginative synthesis of the impulses which may perhaps lead to aesthetic sublimation. Richards holds that aesthetic experiences may be shown to be very natural consequences of the diversity of their components.

In **Chapter 33**, Richards discusses 'Truth and Revelation Theories'. Richards quotes Carlyle, Wordsworth and Coleridge and examines their observations on the above subject. Richards points out the diversity of their opinions and the obscurity that they generate. The process of clarifying their obscurity will force us, Richards observes, to shed some of our powerful resistances and break down some deeply imagined habits of the mind.

In **Chapter 34**, Richards speaks of two totally distinct uses of languages. The difference emerges out of the difference in mental processes. A statement may be used for the sake of reference; this is the scientific use of language. Similarly a statement may be used for the sake of effects in emotion and attitude. This is emotive use of language.

**Chapter 35**, is entitled 'Poetry and Beliefs' where Richards points out that it is rather foolish to attempt to verify the statements which the bulk of poetry consists of. Poetry subordinates reference to attitudes. The emotions and attitudes which result from a statement need not be connected to anything which the statement refers to. Richards discusses the relationships between belief and attitude in a work of art. When an attitude is produced through beliefs, the former can hardly be healthy. We believe a scientific proposition and we believe emotive utterances; the two are different. For a work of art belief means a feeling or emotion of acceptance. The bulk of beliefs



involved in the art are provisional acceptances. These are acceptances necessary for 'imaginative experience'. When all provisional acceptances have lapsed we can still have an attitude or an emotion.

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## **2.2. Detailed Critical Analysis of Chapter 22**

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The gift of communication is a general condition common to all human beings. By gift of communication, in this context, evidently we mean 'language' or the method of using this language to express our feelings, passions, desires and needs. The communicator learns through experience noting the effect of the elements he communicates on others, on various persons at various points and in various circumstances or conditions. He learns to include, exclude and control his expressions.

The basic difference between the artist or the poet and the common man is that the artist, in a more delicate or uninhibited way, can connect different elements of his experience. The memory of the artist or the poet is an important aspect of his craft. The variety of experience is something and the ready availability of that experience from the storehouse of his memory is another thing. The poet is endowed with a richness of active memory; the more important thing is availability and not possession. So the richness of experience is an important gift; the artist knows how to revive his experience which he selects with meticulous care. Revival of an experience means making that particular state of mind available.

How far can experience be revived? Richards argues that it depends upon the interests and the impulses active in the experience. An experience is built upon certain impulses. The particular experience of the past came through these impulses; so the primary condition for the revival of the experience is recurrence of those impulses. But the revival may be distorted if some of the impulses are repeated and others are not and new impulses are involved. There are different experiences - some may have a simple impulse structure and others may be complex. There may be partial return of a single situation and that particular situation must have been a part of many complex situations; in other words a number of complex experiences may also share a common simple situation. If this common situation recurs, to which the 'whole' will refer to? To understand a situation we must respond to it as a whole and in a coherent way allowing its parts their due share. Experience, according to Richards,

has an organized character. So when it is revived, it is revived as a whole.

'Vigilance' is a term which may be considered in the context of revival of experience. 'Vigilance' refers to more discriminating and ordered responses; experiences of high vigilance are more or less available. Similarly vigilance of individual at the moment when he is trying to revive an experience is also important. Why is the past experience more easily available to the poet? It is because the experience that the poet undergoes, is more organized than what happens to an ordinary man. This happens because the poet has greater 'Vigilance' than an ordinary man.

When the ordinary man undergoes an experience he has to suppress most of his impulses because he is incapable of organizing them. The poet or the artist in a similar situation can admit far more without confusion. The poet does not need to overlook any of the impulses which a situation arouses; he can keep them at his disposal for any occasion when they may need them.

The theory of revival of an experience brings a host of questions. The experience of the author definitely includes unconscious experience also. In such a case how can the author remain 'Vigilant'? Richards believes that mind does not have any separate entity, it is only a part of the activity of the nervous system. Richards links criticism to psychology and he develops a general theory of value. Shelly wrote " Poetry is the record of the best and the happiest moments of the happiest and the best minds." We may be tempted to believe that Richard's position is similar. The poet can revive, as he says, all the impulses of an original experience and can organise properly. In fact, Richards even reminds us of Wordsworth.

Richards holds that there are two ways in which impulses may be organized - by exclusion and inclusion and by synthesis. The intention of the teacher is to discriminate good from bad. Like Eliot Richards also believes that a work of art has its independent and individual existence. So the revival of experience or the arousing of impulses connected with the original experience are only part of the process of poetic or artistic creation. Richards agrees with Coleridge's view of imagination that imagination is capable of synthesizing different and even discordant impulses which are finally ordered and organised. When impulses are balanced they will play their role in shaping the mind of the poet.

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## 2.3. Detailed Critical Analysis of Chapter 24

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This chapter almost complements the 22nd chapter where Richards initiated a discussion on the availability of the past experience as the first characteristic of the poet. Richards names his (Poet's) second characteristic 'his normality'. The poet tries to communicate his experience to his reader; if the poet's experience does not tally with the reader's experience it will be a failure in communication. By communication Richards means the ability to arouse similar impulses, in the mind of the reader, which the experience generated in the poet, in an organized manner. Richards argues that impulses, their stimuli and the subsequent course they take are more or less uniform; but he also admits that there are many impulses which are not uniform. There are two extremes. On the same occasion, some impulses will always remain the same, some others evidently change as "fashions change". Between these extremes there are many impulses which are neither very fixed nor are they very erratic. It is not possible that the reader will respond to the poet with exactly the same impulses and their effective stimuli. There will be disparities but these disparities can be overcome by imagination. When some impulses are active, the other inactive impulses can also be aroused even without their necessary stimuli by means of imagination. Imaginative construction of impulses depends on two important things - the present (what is going on now) and the past (what went on in the earlier time).

When something difficult is to be communicated it may be necessary for the artist to try to find a means to control a part of the recipient's experience so that the imaginative development is governed by that part alone. Now another important question arises : what is required in communication ? Communication requires responses. The responses are to be uniform and varied and they must be capable of being set off by stimuli which are physically negligible. In the communicative process there are dependable major impulses which control the more erratic and imaginative part of the imaginative process.

If there is eccentricity on the part of the artist or the poet, the result will be disastrous. What do we mean by eccentricity ? "To be normal is to be standard". What is normal? Even within the bounds of what we call "a standard" the artist can go beyond the average by his power of organisation. There will be no great interference between its component impulses but excellence in organisation will make it lofty.

There is another aspect of the problem. If the reader or the recipient has inadequate mental capabilities the communication will fail. Moreover, difference in situation is also an important factor.

Richards suggests that the mind which is least wasteful can be taken as a standard but the taking of the norm is for the most part unconsciously done and the choice may be a mistaken one. Another important point is that we do not change our taste; we find them changed. The poem which made us weep in delight in our youth seems dusty a few years later; thus there is qualitative change in communication.

Richards is always commendable in his clarity of statement; but in this chapter, in spite of his best efforts Richards fails to remain uniformly clear. Richards points out that communication is a two-way traffic. Thus its effectiveness depends upon both the artist and the recipient. The same thing cannot be communicated to a cross-section of recipients. Is it not, then, extremely difficult to fix up a 'standard'? Again Richards says that even when the component impulses are average, the artist may rise above the average by his excellent organization. The excellence in organization also brings the question of 'standard'. What are the parameters of excellence? How far above the average will an artist rise? Richards knows that an artist may completely bypass the standard and may set up new standards? How will the recipient view the artist then? Will he call the artist eccentric? Richards introduces two terms 'specialist poets' and 'universal poets'; but he knows that such distinctions are not tenable. As the final solution to the problem Richards says "The taking of the norm is for the most part done unconsciously by mere preference ...." and he adds that the choice is often mistaken.

Richards desires to discuss poetry in terms of stimulus and response; it is for this reason he makes various separations like the difference between the 'defective communication' and the 'worthlessness of the experience communicated'. Actually what we can do is to speculate about values that are revealed in the poem. There are problems even in Richards' organic theory of poetry. Richards believes that referential statements are not important in themselves; they may be considered as means to an end, as stages in the ensuing development of attitudes. But within a poem all parts of it are reciprocally means and ends.

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## 2.4. I.A. Richards: As a Pioneer in Twentieth Century Criticism

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In the usherance of new criticism Richards has a formidable place. He gave a new dimension to psychological criticism; he had a strong belief that psychology can help in the interpretation of literature. He also stressed the scientific explanation of poetry and an intimate study of the text. In the intimate study of the text, he included the sound analysis of language, words, imagery and metaphor. Richards in a way can be related to the Romantic theory of imagination in his belief that imagination can fuse and unify the most disparate elements of the world.

Richards classifies language into two categories—scientific language and emotive language. When language is used for reference only it is a scientific language; but when it is used for stimulating emotion and attitude, this is the emotive use of language; Richards says that a poem has a personality of its own and that the more important thing is not what the poem says but what it is. This sounds like the theory that art is autonomous and independent; it has independent existence without any reference to anything else. Or does it sound like the view of Ronald Barthes? Barthes holds that it is the 'text' (and not the author) that acts upon the reader and makes him reproduce the text in process.

Richards formulates his theory of imagination in the sense Coleridge had used it. Imagination reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite and discordant qualities. Imagination has the power of synthesis. Imaginative experience means the balancing of the impulses which may play an effective part in shaping the mind of the poet. Contradictory impulses when reconciled may facilitate the creative process.

Richards holds that that use of metaphor has a significant role in any kind of language -ordinary language of conversation, rigid language of the settled sciences, aesthetics, politics, sociology and so on. His opinion is that metaphoric language follows from metaphoric thought. Metaphor being omnipotent in language, is the chief poetic device which distorts the referentiality of language. So critics believe that Richards anticipates the concept of Derrida.

Freud had discovered how even in a scientific age we feel and think in figurative formations. He supplied to the literary critic a new science of tropes. The application of new 'Science of tropes' to literature has come more out of the influence of Richards

than that of Freud. From the very beginning the avowed intention of Richards was to discriminate good art from bad art; in focusing attention to this problem, he has to a remarkable degree stressed the organic structure of the work itself.

Richards dwells at length on the power of words. In *Principles of Literary Criticism* Richards analyses the positive power of words. Thus Richards is a pioneer in the field of semantic analysis. Richards believes that the ambiguity of words is not absolute. Language is a social fact as well as personal experience. Stable meanings derive from stable contexts. The meaning of a particular word may be sufficiently stable; but the meanings change or vary according to the change of context. Scientific terms are limited by convention but in non-technical discourse words shift their meanings, otherwise they would have lost their subtlety and suppleness. Richards includes 'rhythm' in his discussion and suggests that 'meaning' can influence rhythm. Great poems reveal an organic structure where parts are intricately related to each other. The function of the critic, as Richards seems to believe, is to make to the Reader the implicit manifold of meanings rather explicit. The modern semantic criticism is much indebted to I.A. Richards.

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## 2.5. Suggested Reading

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- **Brower R. (ed)** - IA. Richards : Essays in his Honour
- **Crave R.S.** - Critical & Historical Principles of Literary History
- **Hyman Stanley** - The Armed Vision
- **Rajnath** - Essays in Criticism
- **Welleck Rene** - Encyclopedia of World Literature 1 Concepts of Criticism
- **Wimsat William** - Literary Criticism

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## **UNIT : 3 □ NEW CRITICISM**

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### **Structure :**

- 3.1. Introduction to New Criticism**
- 3.2. Cleanth Brooks— Introduction**
- 3.3. Keats' Sylvan Historian— A Critical Commentary**
- 3.4. Wordsworth and the Paradox of Imagination— A critical Commentary**
- 3.5. Summing up**
- 3.6. Comprehension Exercises**
- 3.7. Suggested Reading**

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### **3.1. Introduction to New Criticism**

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#### **What is New Criticism?**

Over the years, the focus in literary criticism has shifted from the author to the text, the reader, and finally to theories. Exclusive concern with the text is the realm of New Criticism. The term "New Criticism" was used as early as 1911 by J E Spingarn as the title of his book "The New Criticism". Spingarn rejected the critic's concern with non-textual issues such as historical and social considerations or philological study of texts. The critic's focus should be the work itself. In studying the work the critic should pursue the poet's intention and how far this has been achieved in the work.

In the decades between 1930 to 1960, the British critics, I A Richards, T S Eliot and F R Lewis began the trends in Modern criticism which became known, specially in American literary studies, as New Criticism. Though the British critics were not categorised as New Critics, these critics paved the way for Anglo American scholars by this name. The trend set by I A Richards and T S Eliot passed through to the United States where the general drift of criticism had been towards historical studies and scholarship. The critics of the southern states reacted against this. The consequence of this reaction found expression in the school of criticism which came to be known as New Criticism. This was ushered in by a surge of both creative and critical activity

dubbed the 'Southern Renaissance'! In 1941 the two major writer-critics of this phase John Crowe Ransom and Allan Tate launched the new movement in criticism and named it after Spingarn, though their perspective was different. Criticism was now established as a profession and taken up by university scholars and academicians who aimed at setting up proper standards for criticism.

Scholars have seen the development of New criticism as arising out of certain literary and sociological needs. They see it as closely related to sociological conditions which arose out of the second World War. Following this war there was a huge expansion of population in America. English scholars and their American counterparts shared certain misgivings about the contemporary world which seemed to be driven by capitalism, the profit motive and the developments of science. All this together threatened to destroy tradition and all that which was not of immediate usefulness, such as poetry. The New critics saw poetry as a means of resisting this commodification. T S Eliot's early work, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" was perhaps the single most influential work in Anglo-American criticism. In it Eliot does two things (1) He emphasizes that writers must have the historical sense— that is, a sense of the tradition of writing in which they must situate themselves, and (2) this process reinforces the necessary depersonalisation of the poet/artist if he is to reach the impersonality to approach the condition of science. His famous statement, seized upon by the New critics was, "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotions ; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality."

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### **3.2. Cleanth Brooks and The Main Principles of New Criticism**

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**Cleanth Brooks** was one of the key figures in the rise of New Criticism in America. John Crowe Ransom and the Allan Tate were among the other writers who formed the distinguished group known as the Fugitives or Southern Agrarians. Cleanth Brooks was educated at Vanderbilt College and Tulane University in the United States and later at Oxford. He was professor at Yale and throughout his career, he was a spokesman for New Critical principles. By the mid-twentieth century New criticism had become the dominant form of literary criticism had become the dominant form of literary criticism in America. Cleanth Brooks was the most representative New critics. Together with Robert Penn Warren published *Understanding Poetry*, an



anthology of analytical essays which would demonstrate and interpret the use of New Critical Principles and techniques in teaching literature. This book was enormously influential in disseminating the tenets and techniques of close Reading which offered students and academics methods of close and subtle analysis of lyric poetry. The analysis of individual poems enabled critics the basis from which to proceed to generalisations. The basic assumptions of New criticism are set forth in Brooks' essay "The Formalist Critic." From this we can highlight the following for consideration.

[1] Literary criticism is description and evaluation of its object and concerns itself with the object itself.

[2] The primary concern of the critic is with the problem of unity.

[3] In a successful literary work form and content are inseparable. There is no separate value in the content which could be retained in a prose version.

[4] The value of a poem is inseparably bound up in its form.

[5] Literature is ultimately metaphoric and symbolic.

We may also add the following ideas expressed in other writings, some of which are also echoed in the above—

(a) Paraphrase is not literary criticism, Poetic structure is not equivalent to prove meaning, but conveys the poet's realization of complex response to human life.

(b) The unity of a poem is not mechanical but organic.

(c) The poem is central to the critic. In the act of criticism he engages with the pure, isolated text and obliterates all non-textual issues such as history, sociology, the personal biography of the poet, etc.

Keeping these in mind, how are we to proceed with the new critical technique of Close Reading ? We may isolate two steps in the process of close reading.

(1) Words in the poem are read with a view to all its possible or potential meaning.

(2) The New critic looks for images rather than symbols to isolate his themes. Images demand language that is concrete in preference over the abstract.

(3) Principal resources of language which New critics explore in their analysis of literary texts include Metaphor, Paradox, Irony and Ambiguity.

Brooks lays stress on the importance of metaphor as a principle of individuation. For Ransom, too, metaphor is the main element of poetry. Statements and images in a poem are seen to qualify and add meaning to each other. In the process of analysis, poetic devices are not to be merely listed but their functions are also to be discussed. Almost all New critics placed high value on Metaphysical poetry which employs a high degree of metaphor. They felt there was a degeneration of sensibility in the Romantic and Victorian ages which were periods of simile not metaphor.

**Irony** is another tool of poetic language which is seen as a principle of structure. When a statement is modified by context, it results in Irony. This can take various forms— tragic irony, self-irony. Since connotations and multiple meanings are important in poetry, Irony has ample scope. The best poems can fuse discordant elements through irony. Thus all good poems have ironic complexity.

**Paradox** : Brooks believes that the language of paradox is appropriate and indispensable for all good poetry. In **The Well-wrought Urn**, Brook's most influential work of criticism, he argues, through close analysis of examples, that poetic structure consists of the dynamic balance of opposed ideas, attitudes and feelings. These feelings generate what Brooks calls "tension". This verbal tension and he labels as "Paradox".

New critics held that a work of literature should be viewed as an organic whole. Its value lies in its structure which is best appreciated by close reading, that is, the way in which a work's verbal parts contribute to the whole. The new critics were united in insisting that we should value literature on the basis of how well or how poorly it has been written, not whether we agree with the ideas it represents or the characters it presents.

In his early critical writings Cleanth Brooks suggests that the best poems employ dramatic and complex figures. Brooks was particularly critical of the subjectivism of Romantic poetry and believes that the emphasis on poetic form which is found in Modern poetry is a necessary corrective to the excesses of Romanticism.

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### 3.3. Cleanth Brooks: Keats' Sylvan Historian

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#### A critical Commentary—

Cleanth Brooks' essay "Keats Sylvan Historian" is regarded as one of the best examples of New criticism in practice. In this essay Brooks interprets the **Ode to a Grecian Urn** to illustrate that the Ode achieves an integral unity that arises out of a successful resolution of oppositions and conflicts, of abstractions and concreteness, of the universal and the particular. The resolution is brought about through paradox and irony, the informing qualities of the Ode. In the New Critical lexicon this is termed '**tension**'— or states of opposed meaning.

The Ode has always baffled critics by its enigmatic nature, appearing to defy clear analysis. Brooks begins by drawing attention to the culminating lines of the poem "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty"— that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." These lines in particular have puzzled critics over the years. The utterance is attributed to the urn itself in a seemingly sententious summing up of mortal wisdom. Eliot led the general line of criticism with the disparaging remark that "the **conclusion is a serious blemish on a beautiful poem.**"— the blemish, to him, is the palpable untruth of the line. Other critics, such as Middleton Murry and Garrod are of the opinion that the line does not grow organically out of the poem but is superimposed on it. For Brooks, the final exhortation of the Urn with its equation of Beauty and Truth raises the fundamental question of the nature of beauty in the sense of goodness, perfection and Truth.— Truth of what the poem seems to assert. How then do we actually read the line ?

Taking the cue from Eliot's criticism, he regards the quotation from **King Lear** which though similarly assertive, is appropriate because in the context of the play it is qualified by the situation and dramatically appropriate to the character.

He proposes to read Keats Ode in the same fashion accepting it as the utterance of the Urn, a deliberately paradoxical riddle, but dramatically appropriate in the total context of the poem. At the outset, certain cues are provided by the critic. He suggests that instead of seeing the poem as a "beautiful description" or "sensuous picture" we may, if we look for it, find meaningful symbols and ironies, and the "riddle" of the Urn may manifest itself as an integral part of the poem.

As we have said, the whole poem turns upon and is linked by paradox. It begins with the paradoxical concept of the speaking urn. The Urn as "unravished bride" juxtaposes conflicting elements. As "sylvan historian" too the urn is rustic rural and simple, and therefore probably more truthful. It is sylvan historian also because it is a historian of the forests. The Urn is silent, still, static, yet gives a dynamic picture of scenes of wild ecstasy. The unravished bride is placed paradoxically adjacent to Bacchanalian scenes of gods and mortals.

Stanza II tells of the objects portrayed on the urn. The first lines communicate another bold paradox. After "Unravished bride" there are "unheard melodies" which are sweeter than audible music. The action then reinforces the maiden frozen short of their goals. There is also a submerged suggestion at work here : the maidens beauty is changeless because she is, like the urn is "unravished" and frozen in time ; the melody too is "forever new." Both are able to defy time and death because they are lifeless, therefore changeless. However, Brook detects a darker note. Though the song is changeless the piper is fettered to his song ("thou can't not a leave they song") and the lover frozen in his absorbed kiss (never, never can't thou kiss.") Thus an essential element of the beauty portrayed here, the changeless beauty of the evergreen forests, the unending through unheard melody, the fadeless beauty of the maiden and the lover's unconsummated love, is its lifelessness.

Stanza III reiterates the motifs of the previous stanza and Brooks considers the repetitive nature of this stanza to be a blemish falling off. The repetition of unravished lends an element of gushing "sentimentality." However Brookes finds justification for the third stanza because through repetitions it further heightens the element of paradox. "Nor can even those trees be bare" (St 2) is echoed in "happy boughs ! that cannot shed/our leaves" (St 3) The melodist and the lover may regret their unfinished fune and unattained desire, but it is this state of arrested completion that prevents satiety. The critic also reads ambiguities and ironies in this stanza. "Warm and still to be enjoyed." could suggest warm because virginal, or warm because it is still to be enjoyed. The next line generates further irony Love which had been "Forever warm" (l 26) and "For ever panting" (l 27) now changes to something beyond and above human passion ("All breathing human passion far above") This takes it outside the realm of human passion but also brings with it attendant ills— "a

heart high sorrowful and cloy'd" etc. (l 29-30). The realm of art which is beyond the ills of human life is thus superior to life.

Stanza IV renders a picture of communal life— another aspect of the history that the Sylvan urn narrates. The actual town is unseen, its nature and location only surmised, though suggestive phrases like "peaceful citadel" green altar "mountain built" hint at possible locales. The character of the town likewise can be surmised. It is a small, quiet, peaceful place where the pious inhabitants live in harmonious organicity, as the ritual figured on the urn depicts. The last four lines sound a note of sadness for the abandoned town, its people ever homeless and desolate. Brookes touches upon elements which create the 'magic' of this stanza. In 'green altar' one can Visualise the little town caught in the folds of a green mountain. It is also suggestive of blooming, verdurous nature, and 'peaceful citadel' may imply a sense of stability and repose perhaps after a period of conflict. One might even imagine arriving at this town, to be puzzled by its silence and desolation, its homes bereft of people and signs of life. But this is a far sketch of imagination, for the town is not a real town at all. It is not figured even on the urn, but only portrays its people who have life such a town to attend the sacrifice. The town, however, exists in the same way as other paradoxes such as the soundless music of the piper, the warmth and ecstasy of figured love. In the same way the urn as historian implies the rich history of the town. The imagined town comes to have as much validity as the unheard music of the untired piper.

In a shift in perspective, the final stanza perceives the Urn as an object of art ("O Attie shape). We become aware that the throbbing vitality of the life depicted on the Urn, the men and maidens, the unheard melodies which persists as a motif in the first four stanzas, are fixed and frozen in time. This ironic apprehension is the undercurrent which runs through the poem to culminate in the central paradox of the poem 'Cold Pastoral'. The Urn is cold marble and the life it depicts is deliberately shaped. In contrast, "pastoral" suggests warmth, spontaneity idyllic, simplicity. The frigidity of the urn and the warmth of its sylvan history are placed against each other. The Urn, though beautiful, is a 'silent form' and it speaks in enigmas and puzzles. In the words "O Attie shape" the poet addresses this figured and decorative object, and we are made aware of the fact that this realm of breathing passions is ultimately a marble world, lifeless and still. The beauty of the life on the Urn is not subject to death.

The marbled scenes lie beyond the ravages of time. Thus both the urn and its sylvan history will remain accessible and a source of comfort to succeeding generations.

The Urn, then, betokens both beauty and truth. The nature of its beauty lies in remoteness from the very things which destroy human beauty. What, then, is the truth it presents? The sylvan historian encapsulates history in its essence, shorn of the accured facts of times, dates, circumstances. In terms of the truth of history these accumulated facts are meaningless. What we are offered here by the sylvan historian, is the “essential” truth of history. We can therefore do without what Brooks calls its “footnotes.” Cleanth Brookes thus offers an acceptable insight into the baffling last stanza of the Ode, deriving this insight from a scrutiny of the poem itself.

The final charge is that the utterance of the Ode is a “serious blemish” as it is an extraneous comment and sententious rather than poetic utterance. This, suggests Brooks, can be rebutted by scrutinising the paradox that runs through the poem. If the Urn can tell a story, relete a historl if its figures can sing, play music and speak, the reader can also accept the philosophic comment on its own nature. The critic has involved us in the dramatisation of the Urn. through a working out of metaphors, paradoxes. We may accept that the final utterance evloves from the beauty engraved on the earn and the history its has encryptd. Hence its utterance has the same validity as King Lear’s utterance in Shakespeare’s play. The problem we should address is the nature of truth in life as opposed to truth in literature. If we perceive the urn’s utterance as emaging from a relevant context and not as an isolated adage, the poem and poet will be vindicated.

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### 3.4. Critical Commentary: Wordsworth and the Paradox of Imagination

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#### A critical Commentary—

Wordsworth’s **Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood** henceforth referred to as **Ode on Intimations** or simply **Ode** has most frequently been connected to Wordsworth’s spiritual autobiography and interpreted by personal documents. Brooks admits the importance of Wordsworth’s biography, yet emphasizes that if the poem is read as a separate poetic construct we may avoid confusion between what the poem actually ‘says’ and what we may regard as the

poet's 'intention' or what he may have meant. Note that the emphasis on the structure of a poem without supplementary information from personal or historical documents is the first mark of close reading strategy of New criticism.

At the onset Brooks focuses on the imagery of the poem. The most significant and elaborately used linguistic device is the paradox. Other devices are the use of consistent symbolism and pervasive use of irony through which themes treated in the poem are successfully related. These devices determine Wordsworth's success or failure in trying to make images carry and develop his thoughts. Brooks levels two charges against Wordsworth :—

(1) That in spite of fine passages, the Ode is not a successful poem. Only by recognising its use of symbols ambiguities and paradoxes can we establish the power and beauty of the poem.

(2) Next is his well-known statement that Wordsworth wrote the poem with "the dark side of his mind." Brooks suggests that the best of Wordsworth's poetry emanates from his "unconscious". The poet's conscious efforts to manipulate this subconscious outflow merely dulls some of the finest effects. In this poem the "conscious tinkering" has been kept to a minimum, hence its high quality.

Stanzas I and II contain the central metaphor. The common earth and all familiar scenes had once been conferred a 'glory' by the heavenly light which shone on it. This has now been lost to sight and the poet is left disconsolate. Stanza II tells of those heavenly spheres who conferred this light—the sun, the moon and stars. They possess the celestial light themselves as well as clothe the earth in this light. This ethereal light imparts to the earth a visionary quality but it also carries the unsubstantiality of a dream and its transient quality. The phrases "did seem", "of yore" support the transient nature of the experience. Later "visionary gleam" and "shadowy recollection" hint at the ambiguous nature of the child's vision as suggested in Stanza I. The use of one word with apparently different connotations is classified by Brooks as ambiguity. These multiple meanings add to and rich the poem's meaning. This makes ambiguity desirable. Here 'earth' is associated with "every common sight" and this is contrasted with the phrase "there has passed away a glory from the earth"— suggesting a pre-existing glory which surrounded the earth and all aspects of terrestrial nature. These contradictory appearances of the earth lead to ambiguity.

The word 'visionary' apostrophizing 'gleam' is invested with many meanings, thus leading to ambiguity. It may mean (a) a revelation, (b) something unreal as opposed to real, (c) something which ultimately loses both its glory and its freshness to become less intense and merge into the 'light of common day.'

The cluster of images in Stanza II describes the beauty of an emerging dawn. The sun, moon, stars, the rainbow, the rose all participate in this celebratory light. The living moon perceives this glory and delights in it. Cleanth Brooks elaborately discusses the imagery of this stanza as preparatory to linking it with stanza V.

In Stanza V he focusses on the ambiguities which again develop around some images which are picked up from Stanza II. The child had rejoiced in the visionary gleam (St I) but with his progression into youth and manhood he moves further away from the source of light (the east). In the next lines occurs the image of a prison house 'Shades of the prison house begin to close

Upon the growing way.....".

If the prison house is the ultimate repository of the childhood vision, we would expect a movement into darkness. But the child as man is still moving in light, but now it is a light shorn of its visionary gleam, "the light of common day". So sunlight which was a "glorious birth" (St II), the "celestial light" (St I) and a "visionary gleam" (st III) is now prosaic daylight. The contrast is not the obvious and the expected one between light and darkness, but between different kinds of light—prosaic daylight and gleaming dawnlight. For Brooks these ambiguities heighten and enrich the meaning of the poem.

St V is rich in ambiguities. It can be read as a submerged metaphor of the sun's progress from glorious light to the light of common day. The stanza also lends itself to a parallelism between the growing boy and the rising sun, though not a consistent parallel. Light is the dominant image of the Ode. Blindness and darkness are not easy and expected antithesis to this light. Brooks insists that these forms of light are not casual metaphors but part of a consistent symbolism. We have seen how light in various forms is a linking motif in the first five stanzas. The poem also ends with a scene where sunlight again figures significantly. The light of the setting sun has kept watch over human life, man's mortality from sunrise to sunset. Having kept this



watch, the eye of the sun is sobered as is the eye of man who has also followed the same watch.

We expect the child being born to desert realm of dreams and wake up into the light of day, whereas Wordsworth cites “sleep and forgetting” as consequences of birth. The life’s star rising is dawn and the child’s awakening into life, is awakening into reality. In a major paradox the poet declares that the child birth is nothing but a sleep and a forgetting and unlearning. It is a sleep because we are born into forgetfulness of the glorious life which precedes birth. Here Wordsworth tries to explain what follows when Man is born into the common light of day.

In Stanzas 3 and 4 the dominant images are auditory rather than visual. There is a shift in emphasis from sight to sound. The poet can no longer see the glory of the earth which has passed away but he can hear the sounds of joy made by creatures who still participate in the glory. The birds sing a joyous song, the young lambs bound to the sound of the labor. The poet hears the roaring cataracts and its echoes finally all around are the shouts of children in joyous play. All animate nature and the heavens are bound together in celebration this May morning. The poet, though he tries frantically to enter into this scene of joy, feels shut out and enveloped by a veil of sorrow. But there’s a tree, of many, one.....

A single field that I have looked upon,

Both of them speak of something that is gone.

Ambiguities also surround the use of “earth” in the Ode. In Stanza I “The earth and every common sight...”— meadow, grove, stream are all aspects of earth. These are also common sights of terrestrial nature. In the following line—

“there has passed away a glory from the earth” “earth” connotes something more than an aggregate of its terrestrial parts. It appears to envelop the whole universe. The joyous aspects of earth are interwoven with the instinctive joys of the child. But the earth also has enticed the child from its former state long seducing it with mundane, terrestrial pleasures. Its intention is good and kind, like a caring mother but it leads to the loss and forgetfulness of “that imperial palace whence he came. The earth is acting out of kindness and the deed is “natural to it.”

Stanza VI is riddled with paradox and ambiguity as an analysis shows. We notice the ambiguities which play around the word 'earth' and 'nature'. Primarily 'earth' is set against 'celestial light' and associated with "common sights". If we accept that the theme of the poem is the influence of Nature on the development of the mind, the earth contributes to this by the pleasures it endows. The same earth is also responsible for the loss of spontaneous joys by diverting the children from the celestial joys to new involvement in human affairs. This involvement is entirely, 'natural'— here used in two senses (i) as pertaining to earth and (2) as attributed to 'nature'. The earth which acts like a mother is also a 'homely nurse' where 'homely' could mean (1) where children are at home and (2) 'homely' in sense of plain, unattractive. The second alternative takes on ironic implication when we recall that the same earth was once garbed in celestial light, glorious in its beauty.

The focus of the Ode is to testify how the imagery of the poem is functionally related to the theme— defining and expressing the theme powerfully. The argument of the poem is the growth and nature of the human heart through its various stages and modulated and controlled by what I A Richards terms the 'fact of imagination'. Because of this power of the controlling imagination the most common flower can give "thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears." — thoughts that are neither sorrowful nor joyous, but deeper than both.

Stanza VIII contains high poetry, beside which the seventh stanza appears weak and insipid. In the eighth stanza once again images are embedded in Paradox. Coleridge found the paradox in this stanza rather stating. The paradox centres round the image of the child who is 'the best philosopher' and 'eye among the blind', Mighty prophet and 'blessed seen' though it is only later (St IX) that the years will bring the 'philosophic mind'. Here he has already attained those truths which still perplex the man; it is the same child who plays by the seashore on this May morning" (St VI). The child is the eye among the blind, or blessed because, in spite of the forgetfulness which comes with his birth into earth, he is still near to God's home. Since the child is also father of the man, something of this primal joy and harmony is still retained by the man. Children accept the beauty as well as the terrifying grandeur of the rolling waters with innocent joy. The child is a seer and a visionary because he is (1) close to God and the source of the heavenly light; and (2) he is close to the harmony of nature because he is 'natural'— a part of nature. The child is close to the divine,

and this is also totally natural. This is the resolution to the paradox of the child who is both divine and natural, as put forth in St. 8.

The central theme of the Oe is thus established as the growth, nature and development of the human heart. This is linked and amplified by the "fact of imagination" as Richards puts it. This is a process of changing interrelations between man, nature and the divine. Cleanth Brooks demonstrates that the poem is at its best when these interrelations are imaginatively dramatised through the imagery and the imagery functionally related to the theme.

Now let us once again return to Cleanth Books charge that though the poem has fine passages, it is on the whole not a successful poem.

Why is it unsuccessful ?

According to Cleanth Brooks it is

(1) partly successful in fusing imagery and theme in the first part of the Ode (Sts I to VI)

(2) It fails in its resolution.

In the first part of the Ode, the childhood vision is lost, but not all of the primal sympathy which the vision evoked. This still remains as a subconscious human faculty. Thus child and man are linked in a continuous chain. The failure lies in Wordsworth's depiction. Instead of presenting it dramatically he asserts it rather frenetically. This does not reach the quality of high poetry.

Secondly, some ambiguities and paradoxes in the Ode are enriching and meaningful, but others serve only to confuse and distract. One such is the ambiguity between the two states of the child— in Stanza IX (to whom the years will bring the philosophic build but who in Stanza VIII has already been acclaimed as "the best philosopher". Brooks ends by confirming the greatness of the poem and its rich imagery but is of the opinion that the loose ends and vagueness detract from the poem's excellence. Stanza VII for example, is considered a weak link which merely reiterates what had already been dramatically presented earlier. The ending has a sense of anti climax which is hardly expected in poetry of excellence.

The essay elucidates how pervasive and linking imagery is used to develop the theme of the poem— the nature, growth, and development of the human heart in close association with nature. Ambiguities are seen frequently to highlight and enrich the meaning by the multiple dimensions which they evoke. But both can be distracting and confusing as Brooks points out in the conclusion.

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### 3.5. Summing up

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Cleanth Brooks is known primarily as one of the foremost representatives of New Criticism. New critics believed that the work of literature should be viewed as an organic whole, the value of which lies in its structure. This structure is best appreciated by close reading, that is, by a careful analysis of the way the verbal parts contribute to the literary whole.

Cleanth Brooks' most influential work of criticism, **The Well-Wrought Urn** provides a succinct summary of his critical principles. In this book he demonstrates an application of these principles in exemplary close readings of many poems. He argues that poetic structure is based upon the dynamic balance of opposed ideas, attitudes and feelings. Brooks argues that verbal 'tension' or paradox is the foundation of all good poetry. Because of the emphasis he puts on poetic form, he has been accused of reducing poetic language to a fixed or static structure. In the two essays that we have read, Brooks brings out that the principles of Irony and Paradox apply to Romantic such as Wordsworth and Keats and not only to Donne and the Metaphysical poets.

He also shared Eliot's critical doctrine of the impersonal theory of art and dissociation of sensibility.

Besides poetry, Brooks was also a critic of fiction. In **Understanding Fiction** he showed that the principles of New Criticism could also be applied to other literary forms.

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### 3.6. Comprehension Exercises

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1. Discuss the chief features of New Criticism and name two of its exponents.
2. Is Cleanth Brooks successful in establishing that Wordsworth's 'Ode on the Intimations of Immortality' is not a successful poem ?

3. Examine the imagery of Wordsworth's Ode to Intimations of Immortality. Show image you consider to have been most successfully and consistently used.
4. Brooks essay on 'Ode to the Grecian Urn' is regarded as a classic example of New Critical analysis. Do you agree ?
5. Show how paradox is the dominant feature of Cleanth Brooks' analysis of Wordsworth's Ode on Intimations of Immortality.
6. Does Cleanth Brooks' reading of Keats' Ode to the Grecian Urn enrich an understanding of the poem ?

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### 3.7. Bibliography :

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# **Paper - V ● Module - 4**



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# Unit - 1 □ Structuralism

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## Structure

### 1.0. Structuralism

#### 1.1. Langue and Parole

#### 1.2. Phonemes

#### 1.3.1. What is Structuralism ?

#### 1.3.2. What is Semiology / Semiotics ?

#### 1.3.3. Structuralism and Semiology

#### 1.3.4. What happens when Structuralism is applied to Literature.

#### 1.3.5. Merits of Structuralist literary criticism.

#### 1.3.6. Limitations of Structuralism

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## 1.0 □ Structuralism

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Structuralism is a theory which is not applied to literature alone. It is applied to all elements of human culture. Before trying to arrive at a kind of working definition of Structuralism it is good to know that it was heavily influenced by linguistics. The beginnings of this theory are associated with the works of a Swiss linguist called Ferdinand di Saussure (1857-1913). It is useful to start with certain terms used by Saussure in studying Linguistics.

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### 1.1 □ Langue and Parole

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Saussure, during his last years of teaching at the Geneva University, taught a course of General Linguistics which proved to be very influential later. After his death, two of his students reconstructed his lecture notes and other material and published them in book form. The French book was later translated into English as *Course in General Linguistics* (1916).



The main thrust of Saussure's Linguistics was not on the history of languages but on the study of language as a system. Saussure argued that unless words existed within a system, we would not understand them. We understand them by marking their difference from other words. For example, we understand what a 'bill' is because we understand that it is not a 'receipt' or a 'cash memo' or 'paper' or a 'card' or a 'pen'. In different context, a 'bill' is a part of a bird's body, but not its legs or eyes etc. A similar speech-sound within a different system (bill) means a water-body other than a canal, a river etc.

Saussure, therefore, considers words as speech-sounds. The meaning of a word is arbitrary. We understand it because we can relate it to, and differentiate it from, other speech-sounds in the system. A speech-sound is a sign pointing to these relations and differences.

The linguistic system which you study in order to determine the network of relations and differences was called *la langue* by Saussure.

The specific speech-acts or utterances were called *la parole*. You use your knowledge of the *langue* to make the *parole* possible. Unless you are familiar with the system, you cannot use or understand the *parole*.

### **What have we learnt so far?**

- Saussure, a Swiss linguist, was one of the pioneers of Structuralism.
- Saussure considered language as a network of relations and differences.
- The relations and differences are among speech-sounds within the network. Each speech-sound is a sign pointing at those relations and differences.
- Meanings are arbitrary. The same speech-sound may stand for a different meaning in a different system.
- Langue = the system/the network.
- Parole = particular speech-act/utterance within the langue.

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## **1.2 Phonemes**

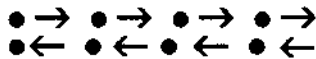
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Diachronic and Synchronic Relationship among Phonemes.

A phoneme is the smallest basic speech-sound, the smallest unit of pronunciation.

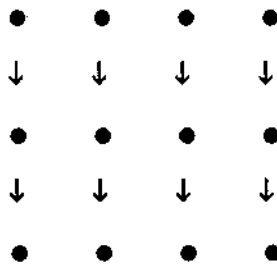
Phonemes, according to Saussure, exist in two kinds of relationship : diachronic and synchronic.

A phoneme is related to other phonemes proceeding or following it. See below :



This is a diachronic or “horizontal” relationship among phonemes. This occurs in a parole ( *i.e.* in a particular utterance/usage).

But a phoneme is also in a synchronic or “vertical” relationship with the entire langue within which different paroles have meanings. As below :



The network formed by the two kinds of relationships is the system which relates all parts of language. These parts, as seen before are different speech-sounds. As also noted above, these speech-sounds are signs. A language, according to this view, is a network of signs.

We have reached a point in our discussion where we are dealing with a study of systems and a study of signs. The two studies, though interrelated, have been given two different names : Structuralism and Semiology (or Semiotics).

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### 1.3.1 What is Structuralism?

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Structuralism is a study of humankind in which the structures or systems of relations among cultural objects (including literature) are defined and distinguished from one another.

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## 1.3.2 What is Semiology/Semiotics ?

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Semiology studies cultural objects as signs pointing to meanings.

**1.3.3. Structuralism and Semiology**, taken together, tells us : (a) social and cultural phenomena do not have essences/essential meanings, but are defined by a network of relations ;

(b) In so far as these phenomena (e.g. literature) have meanings, they are signs.

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## 1.3.4 □ What happens when Structuralism is applied to Literature?

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Structuralist poetics stands to literature as linguistics stands to language. Structuralism is not concerned with meaning or significance. It is primarily concerned with how literature is 'made', is 'constructed' : how the signs involved in a poem or a narrative are related 'vertically' or 'horizontally' to other signs and how these relationships make a structure. That is to say, images in a poem or characters in a story do not have an 'essential' meaning ; they only have a 'relational' meaning. Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory : An Introduction* explains this with an example cited below.

Suppose we are analysing a story in which a boy leaves home after quarrelling with his father, sets out on a walk through the forest in the heat of the day and falls down a deep pit. The father comes out in search of his son, peers down the pit, but is unable to see him because of the darkness. At that moment the sun has risen to a point directly overhead, illuminates the pit's depths with its rays and allows the father to rescue his child. After a joyous reconciliation, they return home together.

This may not be a particularly gripping narrative, but it has the advantage of simplicity. Clearly it could be interpreted in all sorts of ways. A psychoanalytical critic might detect definite hints of the Oedipus complex in it, and show how the child's fall into the pit is a punishment he unconsciously wishes upon himself for the rift with his father, perhaps a form of symbolic castration or a symbolic recourse to his mother's womb. What a structuralist critic would do would be to schematize the story in diagrammatic form. The first unit of signification, 'boy quarrels with father', might be

rewritten as 'low rebels against high'. The boy's walk through the forest is a movement along a horizontal axis, in contrast to the vertical axis 'low/high', and could be indexed as 'middle'. The fall into the pit, a place below ground, signifies 'low' again, and the zenith of the sun 'high'. By shining into the pit, the sun has in a sense stooped 'low', thus inverting the narrative's first signifying unit, where 'low' struck against 'high'. The reconciliation between father and son restores an equilibrium between 'low' and 'high', and the walk back home together, signifying 'middle', marks this achievement of a suitably intermediate state. Flushed with triumph, the structuralist rearranges his rulers and reaches for the next story.

Thus a structuralist reading of Milton's *Paradise Lost* might show that the war between God and the angels in revolt is a rift between God and the fallen man, between virtue and sin. The rift is healed by the son of God.

In such a structural analysis, we find that sign systems are often understood in terms of binary oppositions. These opposite terms are finally reconciled by an intermediary third term ( e.g. the reconciliation between father and son and that between God and man in the above examples.

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### **1.3.5 Merits of Structuralist literary criticism :**

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(a) It demystified literature. Much of literary criticism was loosely subjective before structuralism came to be applied to literature from the late nineteen-sixties. With its appearance, literary work came to be recognized as a 'construct' whose mechanisms could be analysed and classified like the objects in a science.

(b) Structuralist criticism showed that meaning was not a private experience or a divine ordinance, but the product of a shared system of relations and differences. Meaning was not something fixed or settled ; it depended on what the speech-act shared with the system to which it belonged. Here there were seeds of a social and historical theory. However, structuralism was unable to develop these possibilities.

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### **1.3.6 Limitations of Structuralism :**

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(a) Structuralism makes no difference between 'great' and 'trivial' literature, since

deep structures can be dug out of both cheap thrillers and Shakespeare's plays. The method pays no heed to the cultural value of the object.

(b) It does not care for the 'common-sense view' or the 'obvious' meaning of a story. It seeks to isolate underlying structures instead of surface meanings. The next is turned into ('displaced') a different kind of object.

(c) Through this displacement, the structure becomes the content. Thus, the narrative is about itself. The internal relations of the narrative becomes its subject-matter. No other sense, artistic or historical or social can be demanded from the story.

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## Unit - 2 □ Deconstruction

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### Structure

#### 2.0. Deconstruction

#### 2.1. What is Logocentrism and why does Derrida challenge it.

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## 2.0 □ Deconstruction

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Deconstruction is a mode or way of studying philosophy and literature rather than a theory of philosophy or aesthetics. The beginning of this mode is associated with the works of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) : *Speech and Phenomena* (1967), *Writing and Difference* (1967), *Of Grammatology* (1967) and *Dissemination* (1972).

Deconstruction arose as a response to Structuralism and New Criticism. Structuralism related cultural objects (including literature) to a system of signs, rejecting any essential meaning. Poststructuralism and Deconstruction are not synonymous. But among many kinds of Poststructuralist responses or challenges to Structuralism, Deconstruction is probably the most influential.

Derrida rejects the frequent use of binary oppositions in Structuralist criticism (e.g. beginning/end , high/low , conscious/unconscious, presence/absence). He suggests that these oppositions imply hierarchies. One of the terms in a pair is considered by Western culture to be positive or superior; the other term is regarded as negative or inferior or at least slightly negative. Deconstruction is a method which aims at the erasing of the boundaries between binary oppositions. In doing so, Derrida also challenges the hierarchies implied by them.

Deconstruction, then, criticises not only Structuralism but also Western culture itself. His basic criticism is stated in the following passage in *Of Grammatology* :

[In Western and notably French thought, the dominant discourse—let us call it ‘structuralism’—remains caught, by an entire layer, sometimes the most fecund, of its stratification, within .... metaphysics—logocentrism.]

It is clear from this that Derrida challenges Structuralism in particular and Western thought in general because he wants to remove metaphysics and establish some kind of material philosophy.

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## **2.1 What is Logocentrism and Why Does Derrida Challenge it?**

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‘Logos’ is the Greek term for ‘word’ or ‘truth’ or ‘reason’. Logocentrism is that belief which holds that truth resides in the word. This belief gives rise to a contradiction between ‘speech’ and ‘writing’, speech being placed above writing in the implied hierarchy. It is as if writing obliterates or bypasses the meaning held by speech. Derrida calls this theory and its development the ‘metaphysics of presence’. Such metaphysics, such logocentrism, is committed to a belief in some ultimate ‘word’, essence, truth, reality. This ultimate presence acts as the foundation of all language and experience.

Derrida is against this ‘metaphysics of presence’, a first principle or foundation upon which a whole hierarchy of meanings may be constructed. He thinks that these first principles may be ‘deconstructed’. Instead of defining these first principles by what they exclude, deconstruction brings the excluded or undermined part of the binary opposition into operation to call the first principles into question. For example, in male-dominated societies, man is the founding principle, and woman is the excluded opposite, the ‘other’. As long as the distinction is held in place, the society/system can function effectively. Deconstruction shows that man (the ‘masculine’) is what he is only by always shutting out this ‘other’, the woman, the ‘feminine’. Man’s own being is not understood unless the ‘other’ is taken into cognisance. Deconstruction thus undermines, partly or wholly the opposition between binaries by erasing the boundary between them.

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## **2.2. What is Deconstruction?**

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Deconstruction is the name given to the critical operation by which binary oppositions can be shown partly to undermine each other in the process of textual meaning.

Deconstruction makes the point that binary oppositions represent a way of seeing typical of ideologies. Ideologies like to draw rigid boundaries between what they accept and what they do not : between self and non-self, truth and falsity, reason and madness, central and marginal. Deconstruction shows how, to hold the opposition in place, a text relegates a detail to the margin ; if that detail is brought to the centre of discussion, the opposition collapses, the text contradicts itself. Deconstruction focuses exactly on those details. They are called the *aporia* or impasses of meaning.

So far we have seen only the challenge posed by Deconstruction against Structuralism. But how does it respond to New Criticism?

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### 2.3 American Deconstructionists and New Criticism

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New Criticism (see Module 3, Unit 3) assumes that a work of literature is freestanding, self-contained object. If you can analyse the relations between its various parts (allusions, images, sound-effects etc.) you discover the underlying unity. Even ambiguities serve a definite purpose in this unified whole.

A deconstructive reading, however, focuses on a more radical ambiguity where nothing is resolved. It sees works of literature as being 'undecidable': Deconstruction reveals many possibilities of a text but those possibilities are incompatible. It is impossible for the reader to decide among them. This kind of deconstruction is especially visible in the writings of American deconstructors (often called 'The Yale School') : Paul de man, J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom. Paul de Man was engaged in demonstrating that literary language constantly undermines its own meaning. Therefore, literature does not need to be deconstructed by the critic. It can be shown to have deconstructed itself. In fact, they consider this operation (self-deconstruction) to be the sole business of literature. As J. Hillis Miller says : "Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text, but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself."

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### 2.4 Critical Observation

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Deconstruction has been criticised for being too preoccupied with language and text; ignoring the social context, just as formalism, its adversary, does. But it has also been



argued that in attacking boundaries, it was not simply dismantling the logic of a particular system of thought but also exposing a system of political structures and social institutions which maintained its force by using that system of thought.

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## **2.5. Comprehension Exercises**

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1. How does Deconstruction respond to binary oppositions ?
2. Explain why Deconstruction disagrees with New Criticism.
3. Is Deconstruction an aesthetic theory?
4. What is logocentrism?
5. Name some of the major figures in the Yale School of deconstruction. How do they abiguities in a text?

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## **Unit - 3 □ Neo Historicism**

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### **Structure**

- 3.0 Objectives**
- 3.1 New Historicism: The beginning**
- 3.2 What is New Historicism?**
- 3.3 Assumptions underlying the New Historical approach**
- 3.4 New Historicism : The Study**
- 3.5 Arguments of the New Historicists**
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  - 3.8.1 Stephen Greenblatt**
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- 3.10 Conclusion**
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- 3.12 Suggested Reading**

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## 3.0 Objectives :

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**The objective of this unit is to introduce you to :**

- \* the rise and growth of the New Historic movement**
  - \* the basic assumptions of New Historicism**
  - \* the contribution and influence of the major New Historicists**
  - \* the present status of the New Historic movement**
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### 3.1 **New Historicism: The beginning :**

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Let us first trace the rise and growth of the New Historical movement. New Historicism as a contextual approach to literary criticism and literary theory, arose in the late 1970s and during the 1980s among some British and American critics. For several years, many scholars in English and American universities—ranging from Fredrick Crews, George Watson and E.D. Hirsch, on one end of the scale to Fredrick Jameson, Terry Eagleton and Frank Lentricchia on the other—had been raising a clamor for a return to historical scholarship in the academic study of literature. The historical nature of literary works, it was said, had been badly neglected over the past half century of Anglo-American criticism. The time had come to move beyond the narrowly ‘formalistic’ or ‘text-centered’ approach to literature and, in course of events, the new movement arose to meet the demand.

**New Historicism occurred mainly in response to :**

- New Criticism’s tendency to treat works of literature in a historical vacuum, as if a poem or novel had no relation to its historical context whatsoever.
- Political developments in the 1960s, especially a desire on the part of literary critics to figure out how understanding literature might help in understanding social problems.
- An influx of continental critics and literary theories into Britain and the United States.
- Large number of literary persons being trained who came from other backgrounds—female, working class, Italian-American, and, increasingly, Asian American and Latino American.

New Historicist essays began appearing in the late 1970s, but the ground-breaking text was the 1980 publication of Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self Fashioning : From More to Shakespeare*. This book was followed in 1983 by the founding of the journal *Representations*, initiated by Greenblatt and several of his colleagues at the University of Berkeley, where the journal is still published. In its volumes, and in Greenblatt's many subsequent publications, can most clearly be seen the strategies of New Historicism as well as their limitations.

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## 3.2 What is New Historicism?

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Emerging in reaction, against the successive ahistorical orthodoxies of New Criticism, Myth Criticism Deconstruction, the New Historicism draws upon post-structuralist theories of discourse, Marxist theories of ideology and the work of British literary historians and declares that a literary text can only be read with reference to the age in which it was written. A work of literature, as it holds, is not a document worthy of analysis, but only a representation of historical forces. It takes the social, cultural and the historical implications of the text and extends them to the economic and political contexts. All texts, according to New Historicism, are simply texts and works of literature are not given any special status because every kind of writing is the product of historical forces.

### **New Historicists operate by fusing :**

New Historicists operate by fusing two key issues in criticism since the 1960s: the "linguistic turn" of poststructuralist and deconstructive criticism, and a return to historical readings. These two impulses are aptly summarised in Louis Montrose's often repeated catchphrase : "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history." Texts, he insists (as do all New Historicist critics) are embedded in particular histories. Those histories, in turn, are embedded in language, since we only access those histories through the texts which represent them. Since all these texts use language which is seen as elusive and unfixed, "textual" history effectively calls for the kinds of close reading strategies which, as Stephen Greenblatt remarks in a recent essay, literary critics have as part of their "disciplinary tool kit." In their choice of text events to analyze, and in their manner of analyzing those events, New Historicists develop many of their ideas by fusing the ethnography of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz with the philosophic history of Michel Foucault.

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### 3.3 Assumptions underlying the New Historical critical approach

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Now, let's study the basic assumptions of New Historicism. The New Historicists contend—

1. “that there is no transhistorical or universal human essence and that human subjectivity is constructed by cultural codes which position and limit all of us in various and divided ways” (88).
  - Instead of the autonomous “self” or “individual”, these critics speak, of subject positions that are socially and linguistically constructed, created by various discourses of a given culture.
  - They are influenced by the work of the French theorist Michel Foucault, who focused upon the intricately structured power relations in a given culture at a given time to demonstrate how that society controls its members through constructing and defining what appear to be “universal” and “natural” truths.
  - They are skeptical toward any “universalizing” or “totalizing” claims, focusing rather on the specificities of a particular historical and cultural context.
2. “that there is no ‘objectivity’, that we experience the ‘world’ in language, and that all our representations of the world, our readings of texts and of the past, are informed by our own historical position, by the values and politics that are rooted in them.”
  - They emphasize the necessity for self-awareness on the part of the critic, who must be constantly aware of the difficulties of seeing the past except through the lenses and cultural constructs of the present.
3. “that representation ‘makes things happen’ by ‘shaping human consciousness’ and that, as forces acting in history, various forms of representation ought to be read in relation to each other and in relation to non-discursive ‘texts’ like ‘events’.”
  - Critics need to look not only at the historical causes of literary works, but also at their consequences.
  - In a process of **thick description**, they link literary works with many other cultural phenomena of a period, including the discourse of “popular culture” and of areas like economics, law, medicine, politics, etc.

New Historicism shares the above assumptions with what is often called **Cultural Studies**, but cultural critics are even more likely to emphasize the present implications of their study and to position themselves in opposition to current power structures, working to empower traditionally disadvantaged groups. Cultural critics also downplay the distinction between “high” and “low” culture and often focus particularly on the productions of “popular culture.”

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### 3.4 □ New Historicism: The Study

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New Historicist scholars begin their analysis of literary texts by attempting to look at what other texts—both literary and non-literary—a public could access at the time of writing, and what the author of the ‘original’ text might have read. They also, however, attempt to relate texts to the political and socio-economic circumstances in which they originated. For example, a well-known New Historicist reading examines the travellers’ tales and geographical works available to William Shakespeare about the discovery of the ‘New World’ and relates them to his play *The Tempest*. Therefore, this reading argues, we should interpret Shakespeare’s play less as a ‘timeless’ literary creation and more as a product of the context in which it appeared (see contextualism, thick description), and should see it as contributing to contemporary debates about colonialism.

In this shift of focus, a comparison can be made with the best discussions of works of decorative arts. Unlike fine arts, which had been discussed in purely formal terms under the influences of Bernard Berenson and Ernst Gombrich, since the 1970s nuanced discussion of the arts of design have been set within social and intellectual contexts, taking account of fluctuations in luxury trades, the availability of design prototypes to local craftsmen, the cultural horizons of the patron, and economic considerations—“the limits of the possible” in economic historian Fernand Braudel’s famous phrase.

Other than the belief that literature does not have trans-historic existence, that it ought not to be subjected to timeless criteria of value, and that therefore it should be read as history, there are certain other common beliefs that characterise New Historicism. The first is that history itself is not something homogeneous or stable. History itself is a network of interacting institutions, beliefs and cultural power-relations, practices and products. Literary texts, like all other texts, are not merely echoes of the dominant culture of ideology but also influence the existing culture and ideology, so that the

relationship is symbiotic. They influence each other. The words used for such interaction are 'negotiation', 'exchange', 'interaction' and 'circulation'.

New Historicism also considers the possession of social assets such as prestige equivalent to the possession of currency. The exchanges of these invisible assets are often ignored because they are not convertible into liquid assets. Thus, it is 'symbolic capital'. Just as the New Historicists contest the importance of materialism in literature, they also admit that they themselves cannot always make an adequate critique of the existing dominant ideology. Like the authors who produce the literary texts, the readers are themselves subject to the conditions and ideologies of their own era. If the ideology of the reader conforms to that of the text, he will 'naturalise' the text, that is, interpret the culture-specific and time-bound aspects as the features of universal and timeless human experience. If the ideology of the reader varies from that of the text, he will 'appropriate' the text, that is, make it conform to his own cultural possessions. The New Historical critic is therefore at risk of unquestioningly appropriating the texts written in the past. To reduce the possibility, they try to 'distance' and 'estrangle' an earlier text by emphasising the discontinuities and breaks in history.

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### 3.5 Arguments of the New Historicists :

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Now, the question that arises is—where do these assumptions lead the New Historicists?

The initial effort is to relocate the literary text among the other, traditionally nonliterary "discursive practices" of an age. The representation of character in the nineteenth-century novel, for instance, is said to be bound up with contemporary debates over parliamentary representation; or, Iago's plot against Othello is described as typical of Elizabethan attempts to deny the otherness of subject peoples. But the larger purpose of New Historicist inquiry is the reconstruction of the actual (as opposed to the "represented") relations in which people lived during a particular time. For example, in one of the most widely read essays by a New Historicist, Louis Adrian Montrose interprets *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as an ideological attempt to comprehend the power of Queen Elizabeth—to make sense of it and place it safely within bounds—while simultaneously upholding the authority of males within Elizabethan culture. By citing a variety of contemporary writing (in order to reinstate the "discursive practices" of the age), Montrose demonstrates the Elizabethans' ambivalence toward their queen:

abiding respect mixed with a dark desire to master her sexually. In this context, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, is reread as a fable of the restoration of male governance. Mothers are significantly excluded from the *dramatis personae* of the play, just as the danger of matriarchy (with which the Elizabethans flirted in their fascination with the myth of the Amazons) was quietly suppressed by the celebration of Elizabeth's virginity. The very real possibility that power might actually be passed from mother to daughter was concealed from women of the age by such cultural productions as Shakespeare's play, in which Elizabeth was a willing collaborator as much by her decision to remain unwed and barren as by her "cultural presence" within the play.

It is in this sense that works of literature such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are "representations" of the culture from which they emerge. They are the emanations, the active agents, of the culture's circumambient ideology. Literary works are both what a culture produces as well as what reproduces the ideology. The term "representations" is misleading insofar as it suggests a mimetic theory of literature. Nothing could be further from New Historicist truths. In fact, the New Historicism presumes that artistic fiction does not imitate human action, it mediates it. That is, fiction is defined as the lens through which a certain portrait of the human experience is brought into focus. And as mediation rather than as imitation of social practices, it can be thus be said to *shape* rather than to *reflect* an age's understanding of human experience and potentiality.

In New Historicist interpretation, as a consequence, history is not viewed as the cause or the source of a work. Instead, the relationship between history and the work is seen as a dialectic: the literary text is interpreted as both product and producer, end and source, of history. One undeniable side-benefit of such a view is that history is no longer conceived, as in some vulgar historical scholarship, as a thing wholly prior, a process which completes itself at the appearance of the work. At the same time, though, it must not be thought that the New Historicism dispenses with the cognitive category of priority. For the New Historicist it is ideology, not history, which is prior. The literary text is said to be a constituent part of a culture's ideology by virtue of passing it on; but the ideology nevertheless exists 'intact' intelligible, in a form separate from (and therefore prior to) the work. If it didn't, the critic could not discern a relationship between work and ideology; and if the ideology were not prior to the work, it wouldn't be a historical relationship.



But the apriorism of ideology in New Historicist thought raises large questions. The principal one is this: How does the critic know that the ideology located in the work of literature under discussion genuinely belongs to the past? How can he be sure that the ideology is not simply his own political sympathy which has been injected into the work and then “located” there by means of an ingenious selection of the evidence? These questions occur spontaneously to anyone who reads very widely in New Historicist writing, so much of which expresses a politically *au courant* sympathy for exploited peoples, powerless women, workers, slaves, peasants. A critic like Stephen Greenblatt is too intelligent not to acknowledge that his own sympathy for such peoples is *a priori*. In the essay that launched the New Historicist journal *Representations*, Greenblatt interprets a Dürer sketch in *The Painter’s Manual* (1525) for a monument commemorating a victory over rebellious peasants—a somewhat ludicrous design topped off by a peasant stabbed in the back—as ironic and subversive. § Greenblatt goes on to admit, though, that “[t]he bitter irony we initially perceived [in Dürer’s sketch] was constituted less by concrete evidence of Dürer’s subversiveness than by our own sympathy for the peasants, sympathy conditioned by our century’s ideology, by recent historical scholarship, and no doubt above all, by our safe distance from the fear and loathing of “1525.” He does not stop there, however. This admission, he continues, “though necessary, seems inadequate, for our solidarity with early sixteenth-century German peasants is of interest *only insofar as it seems to have been called forth by Dürer’s monument* and not simply read into it” (emphasis added). Yet how can the critic be certain that the work studied has not simply provided him with an occasion for a renewed outbreak of familiar feeling, like a pop song from our adolescence that reminds us of a girl we once ached for? Greenblatt passes silently over such a question. The real question for him “is how Dürer could have created a brilliant, detailed and coherent design that could lend itself to a strong interpretation so much at odds with his own probable intentions?” But this isn’t a scholarly question so much as it is a dilemma for a certain kind of scholar. For such a scholar (*i.e.*, one for whom the intentions of the artist are not normative), almost any work, no matter how brilliant, detailed and coherent, can be made to lend itself to almost any interpretation at all. For Greenblatt, the aim of scholarship is to square the artist’s intentions with the scholar’s own sympathy. He simply *assumes* that Dürer’s design is “at odds” with the sympathy any sensitive modern would feel. The sympathy is treated as a fact of equal importance (and comparable ontological status) with the design. No effort is made to ascertain whether

the design really is at odds with anything ; it is simply treated as a *donnee* of interpretation that it must be. The critic knows because of the way he feels.

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### 3.6 Comparison with Marxism

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Clearly in its historicism and its political interpretations, New Historicism owes something to Marxism; the fact remains that the central task of the New Historicism is the same as that of Marxist criticism: first to call into question the traditional view of literature as an autonomous realm of discourse with its own problems, forms, principles, activities and then to dissolve the literary text into the social and political context form which it issued. In fact, the New Historicism tries explicitly to solve the theoretical difficulty in Marxist criticism of relating the cultural superstructure to the material base.

Whereas Marxism (at least in its cruder forms) tended to see literature as part of a 'superstructure' in which the economic 'base' (*i.e.* material relations of production) manifested itself, New Historicist thinkers tend to take a more nuanced view of power, seeing it not exclusively as class-related but extending throughout society. This view derives primarily from Michel Foucault. In its tendency to see society as consisting of texts relating to other texts, with no 'fixed' literary value above and beyond the way specific societies read them in specific situations, New Historicism also owes something to post-modernism. However, New Historicists tend to exhibit less skepticism than post-modernists, and show more willingness to perform the 'traditional' tasks of literary criticism: *i.e.* explaining the text in its context, and trying to show what it 'meant' to its first readers.

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### 3.7 Ideology

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New Historicist critics also place much emphasis on *power and power struggles*. The rationale is that the lowest common denominator for all human actions is power, so the New Historicist seeks to find examples of power and its disbursement in text. Power is a means through which the marginalized are controlled, and the thing that the marginalized (or, other) seek to gain. This relates back to the idea that because literature is written by those who have the most power, there must be details in it that show the views of the common people. New Historicists seek to find "sites of struggle" to identify just who is

the group or entity with the most power. Relating to power in New Historicism is also contains the idea resurrected by Foucault of the panopticon, a theoretical prison system developed by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham. Bentham stated that the perfect prison/surveillance system would be a cylindrical shaped room that held prison cells on the outside walls. In the middle of this spherical room would be a large guard tower with a light that would shine in all the cells. The prisoners thus would never know for certain whether or not they were being watched, so they would effectively police themselves, and be as actors on a stage, giving the appearance of submission, although they are probably not being watched.

Foucault included this in his ideas about power to illustrate the idea of lateral surveillance, or self-policing, that occurs in the text when those who are not in power are made to believe that they are being watched by those who are. His purpose was to show that power would often change the behavior of the subordinate class, and they would often fall into line whether there was a true need to do so or not.

Insofar as Greenblatt has been explicit in expressing a theoretical orientation, he has identified the ethnography and theoretical anthropology of Clifford Geertz as highly influential.

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### 3.8 □ Exponents of New Historicism

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Let's now study the works and influence of the exponents of New Historicism.

**3.8. Stephen Greenblatt:** It was Stephen Greenblatt who introduced the label 'New Historicism' in his introduction to a special volume of *Genre* (1982) on Renaissance writing and New Historicism itself can said to be have begun with the book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980). In his introduction to the volume of *Genre*, Greenblatt claimed that the articles, he had solicited were engaged in a joint enterprise, namely, an effort to rethink the ways that early modern texts were situated within the larger spectrum of discourses and practices that organized sixteenth-and seventeenth-century English culture. This reconsideration had become necessary because many contemporary Renaissance critics had developed misgivings about two sets of assumptions that informed much of the scholarship of previous decades. Unlike the New Critics, Greenblatt and his colleagues were reluctant to consign texts to an autonomous aesthetic realm that dissociated Renaissance writing from other forms of

cultural production; and unlike the prewar historicists, they refused to assume that Renaissance texts mirrored, from a *safe* distance, a unified and coherent world-view that was held by a whole population, or at least by an entire literate class. Rejecting both of these perspectives, Greenblatt announced that a new historicism had appeared in the academy and that it would work from its own set of premises—that Elizabethan and Jacobean society was a site where occasionally antagonistic institutions sponsored a diverse and perhaps even contradictory assortment of beliefs, codes, and customs; that authors who were positioned within this terrain, experienced a complex array of subversive and orthodox impulses and registered these complicated attitudes toward authority in their texts; and that critics who wish to understand sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writing must delineate the ways the texts they study were linked to the network of institutions, practices and beliefs that constituted Renaissance culture in its entirety.

In some ways, Greenblatt's declaration of New Historicism's existence was a problematic gesture, for while his title quickly garnered considerable prestige for critics working in this area, it also created expectations that the New Historicists could not satisfy. Specifically, the scholars who encountered Greenblatt's term tended to conceive of New Historicism as a doctrine or movement, and their inference led them to anticipate that Greenblatt and his colleagues would soon articulate a coherent theoretical program and delineate a set of methodological procedures that would govern their interpretive efforts. When the New Historicists failed to produce such position papers, critics began to accuse them of having a disingenuous relation to literary theory. In response to such objections, Greenblatt published an essay entitled "*Towards a Poetics of Culture*" (1987), which has had a profound impact on the way academics understand the phenomenon of New Historicism today. In this piece, Greenblatt attempted to show, by way of a shrewd juxtaposition of *Jean-Francois Lyotard's* and *Fredric Jameson's* paradigms for conceptualizing capitalism, that the general question they address, namely, how art and society are interrelated, cannot be answered by appealing to a single theoretical stance. And since the question both Lyotard and Jameson pose is one that New Historicism also raises, its proponents should see the failure of Marxist and poststructuralist attempts to understand the contradictory character of capitalist aesthetics as a warning against any attempt to convert New Historicism into a doctrine or a method. From Greenblatt's perspective, New Historicism never was and never should be a theory; it is an array of reading practices that investigate a series of issues that emerge when critics seek to

chart the ways texts, in dialectical fashion, both represent a society's behavior patterns and perpetuate, shape or alter that culture's dominant codes.

In his introduction to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), Greenblatt indicates that his book aims to chart the ways identity was constituted in sixteenth-century English culture. He argues that the scene in which his authors lived was controlled by a variety of authorities—institutions such as the church, court, family and colonial administration, as well as agencies such as God or a sacred book—and that these powers came into conflict because they endorsed competing patterns for organizing social experience. From Greenblatt's New Historicist perspective, the rival codes and practices that these authorities sponsored were cultural constructions, collective fictions that communities created to regulate behavior and make sense of their world; however, the powers themselves tended to view their customs as natural imperatives, and they sought to represent their enemies as aliens or demonic parodists of genuine order. Because human agents were constituted as selves at the moment they submitted to one of these cultural authorities, their behavior was shaped by the codes that were sponsored by the institution with which they identified and they learned to fear or hate the other that threatened.

Since authors were fully situated within this cultural system, Greenblatt contends that their writings both comment generally upon the political struggles that emerged within the Tudor state and register their complicated encounters with authorities and aliens. To prove his thesis, he analyzes self-fashioning in a number of significant Renaissance works, and he shows that these texts record sophisticated responses to a series of cultural problems. Greenblatt demonstrates that Thomas More's late writings are the culmination of his engagement with theological controversy, for these letters reiterate his sense that his identity is shaped by his participation in the Catholic community, and they restate his belief that Protestant theology is an alien threat should be rooted out of England. Edmund Spenser's Bower of Bliss scene in *The Faerie Queene* encodes and relieves anxieties about the ways sexuality challenges the state's legitimate authority, and Thomas Wyatt's satires explore whether an aristocrat can detach himself from a court society that has become wholly corrupt.

By consistently situating the texts he studies in relation to sixteenth-century political problems, Greenblatt avoids the formalist error of consigning writing to an autonomous aesthetic realm and produces analyses that accord with the New Historicist premise that critics can understand Renaissance works only by linking them to the network of

institutions, practices and beliefs that constituted Tudor culture in its entirety. And if one of the aims of cultural poetics is to explain how texts are both socially produced and socially productive, Greenblatt addresses this question directly in his chapter on William Tyndale. He argues there that the invention of the printing press converted books into a form of power that could control, guide and discipline, and he proves that texts fashioned acceptable versions of the self by narrating the story of James Bainham, that ultimate creation of the written word. Following John Foxe, Greenblatt recounts that when Bainham publicly declared his Protestant faith, he spoke with "the New Testament in his hand in English and the Obedience of a Christian Man in his bosom," and since the "Obedience" is the title of one of Tyndale's most influential moral tracts, Greenblatt concludes that Bainham's identity has been constituted by a text.

While Greenblatt's book distinctly advances the New Historicist project of rethinking the relationship between literature and society, it also investigates the other questions that Montrose uses to define cultural poetics. Since self-fashioning is a close analogue to Montrose's own idea of subjectification, it is clear that much of Greenblatt's attention is focused on the social processes by which identity is constituted. In his chapter on Christopher Marlowe's plays, Greenblatt also offers his views on the question whether literature can generate effective resistance, and he concludes that the political ideologies and economic practices that both Marlowe and his characters seek to contest are ultimately too powerful to subvert.

Finally, concerning Greenblatt's response to the questions of theory, it seems fair to conclude that at the time he wrote *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* he had already decided that no single interpretive model could explain the full complexity of the cultural process New Historicism investigates. Although he invokes a vast array of approaches from a considerable number of disciplines, three of his theoretical borrowings are especially significant. Following Geertz, Greenblatt argues that every social action is embedded in a system of public signification, and this premise is responsible for one of the most spectacular features of his reading practice, namely, his ability to trace in seemingly trivial anecdotes the codes, beliefs, and strategies that organize an entire society. If cultural anthropology supplies Greenblatt with the techniques of thick description that he uses to interpret letters from colonial outposts, then Foucault offers him the theory of power that informs much of his work, for as his chapters on More and Tyndale demonstrate, Greenblatt views disciplinary mechanisms such as shaming, surveillance

and confession as productive of Renaissance culture, not as repressive of innate human potential. Lastly, in poststructuralist criticism from the 1970s and 1980s, Greenblatt finds corroboration of his idea that the self is a vulnerable construction, not a fixed and coherent substance, though he deviates somewhat from deconstructive analyses when he argues that culture, rather than language, creates the subject's instability.

**3.8.2 Michel Foucault :** Many New Historicists have acknowledged a profound indebtedness to the writings of Michel Foucault. A French philosophical historian, Foucault's studies of madness, reason, discipline and punishment exercised huge influence through the 1970s and into the 1980s. Attention to *Madness and Civilisation* (1961) leads to a reading of texts for silences and exclusions"; *The Order of Things* (1966) suggests a search for 'epistemes'—unconscious, regulating structures that limit what can be written in any epoch; *Discipline and Punish* (1975) encourages a more political reading, one that stresses the power effects of discourse; volumes 2 and 3 of *The History of Sexuality* (1976) sensitise the critic to the textual problematic of self-constitution. Again, like the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche Foucault refused to see history as an evolutionary process, a continuous development from cause to effect, from past to present toward THE END, a moment of definite closure, a Day of Judgment. No historical event, according to Foucault, has a single cause; rather, each event is tied into a vast web of economic, social and political factors. Like Karl Marx, Foucault saw history in terms of power, but unlike Marx, he viewed power not simply as a repressive force or a tool of conspiracy but rather as a complex of forces that produces what happens. Not even a tyrannical aristocrat simply wields power, for the aristocrat is himself empowered by discourses and practices that constitute power.

New Historicists shared with him many political experiences. Foucault had witnessed the 1968 uprisings in Paris, and had seen the force of protest crushed by the power of the republic. Similarly, New Historicists were young, liberal teachers who witnessed the campus protests in the United States, and the crushing of those protests by federal and state forces. Greenblatt and Montrose began writing while Ronald Reagan was governor of California and Richard Nixon president of the United States. Their fascination with the symbolis of power, the invisible forces manifested in a street parade or a court masque, as well as with the brute force of power, reflect this combination of personal and intellectual experiences. Greenblatt and Montrose clearly projected their own anxieties into the European past. With Foucault to assist them, they saw not

a golden age, as previous critics had done, but rather a dark mirror for their own troubled times.

The events of 1968 showed how forcefully states would seek, when threatened, to enforce their own power. What preoccupied Foucault and his New Historicist followers was not so much the defeat of “freedom fighters” but rather the capacity of the state to withstand such urgent challenges. Why had the populace not risen to support the students and workers in Paris? The answer was provided partly by Foucault and partly by the French political philosopher Louis Althusser. The state’s control of its citizenry was internal rather than external. The state subjected its peoples by creating them as subjects, devising fixed categories under which people could be described and thus controlled. This was the conjunction Foucault evoked as “power/knowledge.” The categories sane/insane, homosexual/heterosexual, male/female, slave/freed could thus be used to proscribe activity. This would happen not with regulation but with more invisible forms of ideological pressure, through institutions, literature, entertainments. The populace would have the illusion of being free to choose their status and activities; in fact they would be in thrall to an omnipresent state. For many, Foucault thus made sense of the complexity of capitalist societies, saturated with media events and spectacles of pleasure. In turn he offered New Historicists insight into the complex workings of Renaissance monarchies. Renaissance England, it seemed to them, was as beset by chaos, by enemies within and without, as the contemporary world. How could you effectively, rule such turmoil? Their explanations projected Elizabeth I as a cunning constructor of images of herself and her kingdom, purveying fictions of splendour as well as propaganda to her people. Underneath the theatrical charisma, her regime was harsh and oppressive. Rebellion might be attempted but effectively would be impossible. Renaissance writers were thus trapped in subtle webs of power politics, just as New Historicists felt themselves trapped by what Althusser calls “Ideological State Apparatuses”.

**3.8.3 Louis Montrose :** Louis Montrose in his essay, *The Poetics and Politics of Culture* (1986), provides list of concerns shared by New Historicists that agrees with and extends Greenblatt’s commentary. Like Greenblatt, Montrose insists that one aim of New Historicism is to refigure the relationship between texts and the cultural system in which they were produced, and he indicates that as a first step in such an undertaking, critics must problematize or reject both the formalist conception of literature as an autonomous aesthetic order that transcends needs and interests and the reflectionist



notion that writing simply mirrors a stable and coherent ideology that is endorsed by all members of a society. Having abandoned these paradigms, the New Historicist, he argues, must explain how texts not only represent culturally constructed forms of knowledge and authority but actually instantiate or reproduce in readers the very practices and codes they embody.

Montrose also suggests that if New Historicism calls for a rethinking of the relationship between writing and culture it also initiates a reconsideration of the ways authors specifically and human agents generally interact with social and linguistic systems. This second New Historicist concern is an extension of the first, for if the idea that every human activity is embedded in a cultural field raises questions about the autonomy of literary texts, it also implies that individuals may be inscribed more fully in a network of social practices than many critics tend to believe. But as Montrose goes on to suggest, the New Historicist hostility toward humanist models of freely functioning subjectivity does not imply that he and his colleagues are social determinists. Instead, Montrose argues that individual agency is constituted by a process he calls "subjectification," which he describes as follows: on the one hand, culture produces individuals who are endowed with subjectivity and the capacity of agency; on the other, it positions them within social networks and subjects them to cultural codes that ultimately exceed their comprehension and control.

In another section of his essay, Montrose adds a third concern to define New Historicism: to what extent can a literary text offer a genuinely radical critique of authority, or articulate views that threaten political orthodoxy? New Historicists have to confront this issue because they are interested in delineating the full range of social work that writing can perform, but as Montrose suggests, they have not yet arrived at a consensus regarding whether literature can generate effective resistance. On one side, critics such as Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield claim that Renaissance texts contest the dominant religious and political ideologies of their time; on the other, some critics argue that the hegemonic powers of the Tudor and Stuart governments are so great that the state can neutralize all dissident behavior. Although Montrose offers his own distinctive response to the containment-subversion problem, he insists that a willingness to explore the political potential of writing is a distinguishing mark of New Historicism.

A final problem Montrose expects his New Historicist colleagues to engage might be called "the question of theory." Even as he insists that cultural poetics is not itself a systematic paradigm for producing knowledge, he argues that the New Historicists

must be well versed in literary and social theory and be prepared to deploy various modes of analysis in their study of writing and culture. Montrose finds notions of textuality from Deconstruction and poststructuralism to be particularly useful for the practice of historical criticism, for their emphasis on the discursive character of all experience and their position that every human act is embedded in an arbitrary system of signification that social agents use to make sense of their world allow him and his colleagues to think of events from the past as texts that must be deciphered. In fact, these poststructuralist theories often underlie the cryptically chiasmic formulations, such as “the historicity of texts and the textuality of history,” that appeal so much to the practitioners of cultural poetics.

**3.8.4 Jonathan Goldberg:** In his introduction to *James I and the Politics of Literature* (1983), Jonathan Goldberg commends Greenblatt’s study of the relationship between Renaissance texts and society, and he claims that his book, like Greenblatt’s, will reveal “the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text” (Goldberg, *James xv*, quoting Greenblatt, *Renaissance* 5). But unlike Greenblatt who analyzes the techniques that a number of competing institutions use to discipline behavior, Goldberg tends to focus on the ways political discourses circulate around a single authority, James I. According to Goldberg, James’s Roman rhetoric is filled with contradictions, two of which are especially important. First, while James wishes to maintain the integrity of the royal line from which he descends, he also claims that he is both self-originating and the world’s secret animating force. Second, while James refers to kingship as a kind of performance in which his thoughts are fully revealed, he also characterizes public display as necessarily obfuscating and opaque.

In a characteristically New Historicist manner, Goldberg offers a political interpretation of these inconsistencies and he then proceeds to demonstrate that artistic productions replicate the structures of royal authority. Goldberg claims that James’s emphasis on self-origination is an effort to mystify his body, to free himself from his dubious family history and to derive his sovereignty from a transcendent and eternal world. This strategy allows the king to claim that all life springs from his spiritual substance, but it also enables him to argue that he is unaccountable to the social world he governs. While the king used this doctrine of mystery and state secrecy to protect his

political power, Renaissance writers appropriated his language to make sense of their own activities and experiences. *Ben Jonson* appeals to the theory of *arcana imperii* in his masques because he wants them to point beyond themselves to the royal patron who is responsible for their existence. John Donne uses James's terms to represent the undiagnosable disease that festers within him as an undisclosed policy that governs a newly founded kingdom. If the discourse of the state secret infiltrates the body here, it also pervades the Renaissance conception of the family, for in an astonishing analysis of domestic portraits, Goldberg shows that the father, modeled on royal authority, generates his lineage but remains distant and unaccountable as he dreamily gazes away from his wife and children.

From even this brief summary, we see that Goldberg shares many of the enabling assumptions of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*; he senses that all human activity is inevitably inscribed in a system of signification that organizes the ways agents understand their world; he views Renaissance literature as being inextricably related to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century social practices; and he conceives of the self as a culturally constituted entity that is shaped by structures of authority. The above account also hints that Goldberg's theoretical orientation is heavily Foucauldian, for his description of the ways the body is inscribed within discourse echoes Foucault's notion that disciplinary mechanisms swarm and produce their subtle effects even in the domains of Human experience that seem intensely private and personal.

But how does Goldberg respond to the containment-subversion problem, which is consistently investigated in New Historicist writing? We can answer this question by briefly summarizing the argument of his chapter "The Theatre of Conscience." Goldberg here examines the ways Renaissance texts replicate the second contradiction inherent in James's discourse, and he begins by suggesting that George Chapman's *Bussy D'Ambois* and William Shakespeare's *Henry V* both depict characters who gain authority by using performative arts to conceal their plans and desires. But if these works concur with James's sense that power can only be maintained through opaque self-dramatization, other texts invoke the royal rhetoric of obfuscating theatricality to challenge the king's policies. Writers such as Jonson and Donne confidently satirize the tolerated licentiousness of James's court because they recognize that if the monarch is aloof, unknowable and unaccountable, then poets can never say anything that intentionally questions royal motives. And if the censor or the king himself raises doubts about an

author's loyalty, that writer can always cloak himself in the language of regal inscrutability and claim that his works, like James's acts, were constantly being misread. Goldberg's point, then, is that subversive behavior emerges *from within* absolutist discourse itself, and he implies that while such a structure allows writers to express feelings of disgust and contempt, it also ultimately contains the threat posed by gestures of dissent and rebellion.

Goldberg's work has helped to convince many Renaissance scholars that they should become practitioners of cultural poetics, and as a result New Historicism thrives in the field of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English criticism.

**3.8.5 Clifford Geertz :** Geertz's ethnography became celebrated in the late 1960s, just as the major New Historicists were moving from graduate school into university posts. His writings have been enormously influential on New Historicist practice, especially the essays collected in *The Interpretation of Cultures; Selected Essays* (1973) and *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (1983). From the first, New Historicists were beguiled by the much anthologized "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cock Fight" (1971); and from the second, by "Centers, Kings and Charisma: Reflections on the Symbolics of Power" (1983), especially by the section evoking the pageantry which Queen Elizabeth I of England deployed with great political skill. Here Geertz showed literary critics how they might read Renaissance English culture in new ways. With Geertz as their great exemplar. New Historicists have completely changed criticism of Renaissance texts; those changes can now also be seen in the criticism of texts from many different periods and national cultures.

Geertz practices "thick description," a term he borrows from the Oxford philosopher Gilbert Ryle. Geertz "thickly describes"—in other words, unearths the underlying meaningful structures of—local events and local interactions, and from those interactions generalizes whole societies. For Geertz the concrete or the actual must always precede the abstract. He insists on what Greenblatt calls "the touch of the real." New Historicists were excited by the advantage Geertz offered them: his ethnography always focused on what had actually happened. He spun these happenings in elegant webs of significance; he turned them into elaborately constructed fictions. But their "touch of the real" meant that, in a crucial sense, they were more "real" than the literary fictions

which New Historicists had been trained to describe: plays, poems and novels. They yearned to link those fictions with the world Geertz and his subjects seemed to inhabit. Geertz might describe a cockfight, a Moroccan bazaar, an Islamic ritual: his eye would light on an apparently small object or event and through thick description evoke its meanings.

He, thus, showed New Historicists how they could read; the advantage he offered them was an enormous expansion in the range of materials they might then read. If all events were accessed through texts, critics need not confine themselves to traditional literary and canonical texts.

A standard New Historicist's essay would begin by reading an explorer's journal, an account of an exorcist, or perhaps some gossip from the court of Henry VIII or Elizabeth I. This would be read as thoroughly as, say, New Criticism might read a Shakespearean sonnet. This would then be linked with other excerpts, from quite different texts. Finally the New Historicist, in a standard move, would turn to a literary example, usually a small passage or a scene from a play. There would be no attempts at a complete, or "closed," reading of the text. Rather, the strategy would be to link together, somewhat loosely, a whole series of apparently unrelated items. From these readings the New Historicist would, like Geertz, then attempt to generalize the workings of a society.

**3.8.6 Walter Benn Michaels:** In his introduction to *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987) has used New Historicist assumptions to interpret texts drawn from a later culture. In his introduction to *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism* (1987), Walter Benn Michaels states that his aim is to study how American writing is shaped by changes in economic production, distribution and consumption that occurred after the Civil War and his thesis is that the literary mode commonly called naturalism participates in and exemplifies a capitalist discursive system that is structured by a series of internal divisions. Each significant element of American economic practice—corporations, money, commodities and identities—is intrinsically differentiated from itself, and since writing too is a part of this massive political formation, it must also display the logic of contradiction that drives mercantile culture.

Perhaps the chapter that most clearly illustrates Michaels's powers as a reader is the one from which he borrows his book's title. There Michaels discusses the late nineteenth-century debates between the goldbugs and the advocates of paper currency,

and he shows that the controversy between these groups stems from competing assumptions about the nature of money itself; while the defenders of precious metals sense that the value of gold resides in its innate beauty, their opponents think that gold is only desirable because it is a *representation* of money. Having delineated these opposing views, Michaels shows that both of these positions are illustrated in Frank Norris's *McTeague*, for the narrative's two misers are motivated by these contradictory models of wealth. Trina's hoarding of gold enacts her society's presumption that metal is the money itself, and her act encodes her culture's fear that should precious metals stop circulating, civilization will be undone. Zerckow's collecting of junk embodies his world's recognition that if wealth is an effect of representation, then anything can be converted into money, and his behavior demonstrates that a discrepancy between material and value is the enabling condition of capital. Michaels's point in producing this analysis is not that either of these theories of wealth is truer than the other but that the tension between them is a constitutive element of the discourse of naturalism and that any literary text produced at this time will display both views toward money.

By demonstrating that the logic of naturalism informs both the gold-standard debate and Norris's text, Michaels performs the first task expected of the New Historicist, namely, explaining how writing is a part of the culture in which it was produced. In the same chapter, he turns to Norris's *Vandover and the Brute* to consider the ways that subjectivity is constructed. By means of an intricate reading operation, he shows that Vandover's consciousness is deeply divided, for while the character sometimes conceives of his self as an extension of his own animal being, at other times he discovers that his identity is a product of textual representation. But since this split neatly replicates the contradictions inherent in the nineteenth-century understanding of money, Michaels concludes that Vandover's subjectivity is fully inscribed in the discourse of naturalism. Michaels's understanding of selfhood shapes his response to the third question that Montrose claims New Historicists should address, for Michaels strongly insists that the socially constituted character of human identity prevents individuals from imagining progressive alternatives to the society in which they live. Indeed, in a particularly memorable passage, he dismisses utopian visions as fantasies of transcendence that have haunted cultural criticism from the time of Jeremiah. Finally, on the question of method, one must acknowledge that Michaels not only borrows from other scholars but actually offers insights that complicate existing theories. Although his use of Foucault's model of discourse is fairly predictable, his discussion of the ways capitalist practices

conform to a structure of internal difference is innovative because, as Brook Thomas has noted, this idea indicates that the poststructuralist dismantling of the autonomous subject may be more complicit with mercantile economic systems than has often been recognized.

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### 3.9 Charges against New Historicism

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In spite of gaining intellectual eminence, New Historicism has had to undergo severe criticisms. Firstly, it has been alleged that New Historicism tends to reduce literature to a footnote of history, and neglects the uniquely literary qualities of the work in question. Secondly, Frederick Jameson argues that much New Historicist criticism lacks a *theory* of history. That history, to paraphrase the bumper sticker, “just happens,” without explaining why it happens in the way that it does and who is affected. The New Historicists were frequently denounced for not being intellectually coherent, for not having a proper method at all. Rather, New Historicists were seen to be arch *briocoleurs*, making up their method as they went along, concocting a paradigm stew of anthropology, Marxism, history and psychology. And thirdly, though obsessed with the processes of power, New Historicism was also thought to be a political. Its readings, on the whole, suggested the monolithic and inventive nature of the state, capable of the subtlest forms of exclusion and suppression. New Historicists, moreover, had practiced their own forms of exclusion. Though they had tried to renovate the canon, they had largely focused on highly canonical figures. They were evangelists, in other words, for the much spurned ‘dead white males, of the literary canon. They ignored writings by women and other minorities, preferring instead another reading of *King Lear*. For some critics, New Historicists were not nearly political enough.

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### 3.10 Conclusion

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None of the criticisms above is likely to dampen the enthusiasm within English departments for the New historical movement. What the New Historicism offers to students of literature is the the joy of new explanations, new paradigms. It does not designate an unexplored area of scholarly investigation. It does not raise new problems, new questions. If its attempts to “historicize” literary study were merely an inducement to look into new kinds of documents, to ask about the relation of literature to social

history in a new way, the movement would perform a service for scholarship. But it does not. The New Historicism cannot be considered a new subspecialty within the discipline of English in the same sense as the older subspecialties of textual criticism or Renaissance studies. It is instead an academic specialty in the same sense that feminism is—a school of interpretation predisposed to find the same themes in every work it reads and to explain them always in the same terms.

New Historicists like to picture themselves as challenging ‘the institution of criticism’—breaking loose from what Jane Tompkins describes as “the extremely narrow confines of literary study as it is now practiced within the academy.”

The philosopher Michael Oakeshott has pointed out that a student of the past cannot learn the history of something without first discovering what kind of thing it is. In this respect, the New Historicism is not a genuine historical inquiry; it does not inquire into the true nature of literary works, because it is confident it already knows what they are. They are agents of ideology. Contrary to appearances, the movement is not an effort to discover what it means for a literary work to be historical; it is really little more than an attempt to get literary works to conform to a particular vision of history.

By the late 1990s, New Historicism continued to inspire productive and influential work. The flagship journal *Representations* continued to publish influential material from an eclectic range of disciplines; and New Historicist studies continued to emerge.

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### 3.11 Comprehension Exercises

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1. Describe the circumstances under which New Historicism arose?
2. What are the basic assumptions of New Historicism?
3. How is New Historicism related to the Marxist theory of literary criticism?
4. Who is responsible for introducing the term New Historicism? What is his contribution to the field of literary criticism?
5. Comment on Louis Montrose’s remark: “New Historicism has a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history.”
6. What are some of the allegations against New Historicism?
7. Write short notes on:
  - a) Michael Foucault, (b) Stephen Greenblatt



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## Unit - 4 □ Cultural Materialism

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### Structure

#### 4.0 Objectives

#### 4.1 Cultural Materialism : The beginning

#### 4.2 The development of Cultural Materialist movement

#### 4.3 Cultural Materialism : Basic Premises

#### 4.4 How do the Cultural Materialists operate

#### 4.5 Cultural Materialism Vs New Historicism

#### 4.6 Cultural Materialism : Some Textual Readings

#### 4.7 Summing Up

#### 4.8 Comprehension Exercises

#### 4.9 Suggested Reading

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### 4.0 □ Objective

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This unit introduces you to:

- the rise and growth of the Cultural Materialist movement
- the basic premises of cultural materialism
- the points of difference between Cultural Materialism and New Historicism
- few examples of cultural materialist studies

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### 4.1 □ Cultural Materialism : The beginning

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During the late 1970s the dominance of the ahistorical orthodoxies of New Criticism and Myth Criticism and Deconstruction, was challenged by a new theory and practice of literary history—New Historicism in America and its British counterpart Cultural Materialism. The term ‘cultural materialism’ was made current in 1985 when it was

used by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield as the subtitle of their edited collection of essays *Political Shakespeare*. Raymond Williams, a British left-wing critic and his significant work *Culture and Society* (1965), has been a guiding force in the Cultural Materialist movement. And both the movements have produced a substantial body of work on Renaissance literature and society, on Romanticism and aesthetics.

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## 4.2 □ The development of the Cultural Materialist movement

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Cultural Materialism, being a British counterpart of the American New Historical movement, developed under the leadership of those British critics who had wholly identified themselves with the movement such as Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, and have presented a more direct challenge to conventional criticism by advocating a much more openly political form of interpretation. Central to this is the attack on what they call 'essentialism'. The fullest account of this is to be found in Dollimore's reading of Renaissance drama in his book *Radical Tragedy*. Dollimore argues that conventional Christian and humanist readings of Renaissance drama posit an essentialist ideology by assuming that 'man' possesses an unalterable essence and thus transcends history and society. Dollimore advocates a "materialist" conception of the subject which sees it as the product of specific historical conditions and social relations. He argues that conventional criticism has projected essentialist ideas on to the interpretation of Renaissance drama and has ignored the degree to which anti-essentialist ideas can be found in some of the major writers and thinkers of the period, such as Montaigne, Machiavelli, Raleigh, Burton. Indeed, he goes so far as to suggest that Montaigne's view of 'custom' has much in common with Althusser's conception of ideology. In his interpretation of *King Lear*, for example, Dollimore rejects both Christian and humanist readings, which emphasise such ideas as pity and redemption, as based on mystification, and argues that the "play is fundamentally concerned with power and property. The influence of Raymond Williams is apparent in Dollimore's view that Edmund's scepticism represents the 'emergent' although his engagement in the struggle for power and property shows how 'a revolutionary (emergent) insight is folded back into a dominant ideology'. Dollimore concludes that the play 'offers ... a decentring of the tragic subject which in turn becomes the focus of a more general-exploration of human consciousness in relation to social being—one which discloses human values to be not antecedent to, but rather in formed by, material conditions.' Anti-essentialism has been associated with a variety of modern thinkers, such as Heidegger, Derrida, Thomas S.

Kuhn, Richard Rorty and others. For example, Rorty writes of pragmatism and William James:

*My First characterisation of pragmatism is that it is simply anti-essentialism applied to nations like 'truth', 'Knowledge', 'language', 'morality', and similar object of philosophical theorizing... Those who want truth to have an essence want want knowledge, or rationality, or inquiry or the relation between thought and its object, to have an essence. Further, they want to be able to use their knowledge of such essences to criticize views they take to be false, and to point the direction of progress towards the discovery of more truths.*

Anti-essentialism is often associated with 'anti-foundationalism' and there is an important debate between the latter and 'foundationalism', the belief that one can or should try to base 'reason' or 'truth' on a firm foundation, a position whose most powerful defender is Jurgen Habermas.

Dollimore's anti-essentialism has little in common with that of Rorty or with anti-foundationalist thought generally and his use of the 'essentialism' to categorise what he wants to attack creates therefore a somewhat misleading picture of cultural materialism. The cultural materialist position seems much closer to that of Habermas and his view that, as Christopher Norris puts it, 'there must be certain positive norms—structures of rational understanding—which allow thought to criticize the current self-images of the age'. In the foreword to their book, *Political Shakespeare*, Dollimore and Sinfield write that cultural materialist criticism 'registers its commitment to the transformation of a social order which exploits people on grounds of race, gender and class', and their interpretations of texts are informed by this commitment. Rather than being anti-essentialist in a Derridean or Rortian sense, cultural materialism is better seen as opposing liberal-humanist essentialism with neo-Marxian alternative, which in Rorty's terms would be equally essentialist. Thus liberal-humanist interpretations of *King Lear* in terms of 'man' or 'nature' are rejected as false by Dollimore in favour of what he appears to regard as the 'true' reading, namely that it is 'above all, a play about power property and inheritance.'

By focusing on 'resistances' within the text which destabilise the prevailing ideology that the text would appear to support, cultural materialist critics use literary interpretation to promote social and political change. They adopt those concepts and ideas which are most useful from their point of view and discard the rest. Especially, Dollimore and

Sinfield are much more direct and straightforward in their approach and have created an interpretative mode that has something of the force of a critic like Christopher Caudwell's reflective Marxist criticism but with a more sophisticated theoretical base.

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### 4.3 □ Culture Materialism : Basic Premises

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The British critic Graham Holderness describes cultural materialism as 'a politicised form of historiography'. This can be explained as meaning the study of historical material (which includes literary texts) within a politicised framework. This framework includes the present which those literary texts have in some way helped to shape. Dollimore and Sinfield define the term in a foreword as designing a critical method which directs attention to four characteristics

1. historical context,
2. theoretical method,
3. political commitment and
4. textual analysis.

To comment briefly on each of these : firstly, the emphasis on *historical context* 'undermines the transcendent significance traditionally accorded to the literary text'. Here the word 'transcendent' roughly means 'timeless'. The position taken, of course, needs to face the obvious objection that, if we are today still studying and reading Shakespeare then his plays have indeed proved themselves 'timeless' in the simple sense that they are clearly not limited by the historical circumstances in which they were produced. But this is a matter of degree. The aim of this aspect of cultural materialism is to allow the literary text to 'recover its histories', which previous kinds of study have often ignored. The kind of history recovered would involve relating the plays to such phenomenon as 'enclosures and the oppression of the rural poor, state power and resistance to it ...witchcraft, the challenge and containment of the carnivalesque' (Dollimore and Sinfield). Secondly, the emphasis on *theoretical method* signifies the break with liberal humanism and the absorbing of the lessons of structuralism, post-structuralism, and other approaches which have become prominent since the 1970s. Thirdly, the emphasis on *political commitment* signifies the influence of Marxist and feminist perspectives and the break from the conservative-Christian

framework which hitherto dominated Shakespeare criticism. Finally, the stress on *textual analysis* 'locates the critique of traditional approaches where it can be ignored'. In other words, there is a commitment not just to making theory of an abstract kind, but to practising it on canonical texts which continue to be the focus of massive amount academic and professional attention, and which are prominent national and cultural icons.

The two words in the term 'cultural materialism' are further defined. 'Culture' will include *all* forms of culture ('forms like television and popular music and fiction'). That is, this approach does not limit itself to 'high' cultural forms like the Shakespeare play. 'Materialism' signifies the opposite of 'idealism': an 'idealist' belief would be that high culture represents the free and independent play of the talented individual mind; the contrary 'materialist' belief is that culture cannot 'transcend the material forces and relations of production. Culture is not simply a reflection of the economic and political system, not can it be independent of it'. These comments on materialism represent the standard beliefs of Marxist criticism, and they do perhaps point to the difficulty of making a useful distinction between a 'straight' Marxist criticism and cultural materialism. However, it may be added that the relevant history is not just that of four hundred years ago, but that of the times (including the present) in which Shakespeare is produced and reproduced. Thus, in cultural materialism there is an emphasis on the functioning of the institutions through which Shakespeare is now brought to us—the Royal Shakespeare Company, the film industry, the publishers who produce textbooks for school and college, and the National Curriculum, which lays down the requirement that specific Shakespeare plays be studied by all school pupils.

Cultural materialism takes a good deal of its outlook (including its name) from the British left-wing critic Raymond Williams. Instead of Foucault's notion of 'discourse' Williams invented the term 'structures of feeling'. These are concerned with meanings and values as they are lived and felt'. Structures of feeling are often antagonistic both to explicit systems of values and beliefs, and to the dominant ideologies within a society. They are characteristically found in literature, and they *oppose* the status quo (as the values in Dickens, the Brontes, etc., represent human structures of feeling which are at variance with Victorian commercial and materialist values). The result is that cultural materialism is much more optimistic about the possibility of change and is willing at times to see literature as a source of oppositional values. Cultural materialism particularly involves using the past to 'read' the present, revealing the politics of our own society

by what we choose to emphasise or suppress of the past. A great deal of the British work has been about undermining what it sees as the fetishistic role of Shakespeare as a conservative icon within British culture. This form of cultural materialism can be conveniently sampled in three 'New Accents' books: *The Shakespeare Myth* by Graham Holderness, *Alternative Shakespeares* ed. by John Drakakis and *That Shakespearean Rag* by Terence Hawkins.

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#### 4.4 □ How do the Cultural Materialists operate

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The Cultural materialist critics adopt the following strategies :

- They read the literary texts (very often a Renaissance play) in such a way as to enable us to 'recover its histories', that is, the context of exploitation from which it emerged.
- At the same time, they foreground those elements in the work's present transmission and contextualising which caused those histories to be lost in the first place, (for example, the "heritage" industry's packaging of Shakespeare in terms of history-as-pageant, as national bard, as cultural icon, and so on.
- They use a combination of Marxist and feminist approaches to the text, especially in order to recover the histories and specifically in order to fracture the previous dominance of conservative social, political and religious assumptions in Shakespeare criticism.
- They use the technique of close textual analysis, but often employ structuralist and post-structuralist techniques, especially to mark a break with the inherited tradition of close textual analysis within the framework of conservative cultural and social assumptions.
- At the same time, they work mainly within traditional notions of the canon, on the grounds that writing about more obscure texts hardly ever constitutes an effective political intervention (for instance, in debates about the school curriculum or national identity).



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## 4.5 □ Cultural Materialism Vs New Historicism

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Though cultural materialism is often linked in discussion with new historicism, its American counterpart, the cultural materialists have developed a more politically radical type of historicism, and have challenged the 'functionalism' of Greenblatt. They see Foucault as implying a more precarious and unstable structure of power, and they often aim to derive from his work a history of 'resistances' to dominant ideologies. Jonathan Dollimore, Alan Sinfield, Catherine Belsey, Francis Barker and others have adopted some of the theoretical refinements to be found in Raymond Williams's *Marxism and Literature*, especially his distinction between 'residual', 'dominant' and 'emergent' aspects of culture. By replacing the Tillyardian concept of a single spirit of the age with Williams's more dynamic model of culture, they have freed a space for the exploration of the complex totality of Renaissance society including its subversive and marginalised elements. They assert that every history of subjection also contains a history of resistance, and that resistance is not just a symptom of and justification for subjection but is the true mark of an ineradicable 'difference' which always prevents power from closing the door on change. A further important concern of Dollimore and others is with the 'appropriations' of Renaissance cultural representations which occurred at the time and subsequently. The meanings of literary texts are never entirely fixed by some universal criterion, but are always in play, and subject to specific (often politically radical) appropriations, including those of the cultural materialists themselves', Catherine Belsey has used the more neutral term 'cultural history' to describe her lively and political view of the task ahead. She urges the new history to adopt the perspective of 'change', cultural difference and the relativity of 'truth', and to give priority to the 'production' of alternative knowledges' and 'alternative subject positions', something she seeks to do in more recent works, including *The Subject of Tragedy* (1985) and *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (1994).

Dollimore's *Political Shakespeare* includes new historicist essays, and the introduction explains some of the differences between the two movements. Firstly, in a neat distinction Dollimore and Sinfield quote Marx to the effect that 'men and women make their own history but not in conditions of their own choosing': cultural materialists, they say, tend to concentrate on the interventions whereby men and women make their own history, whereas new historicists tend to focus on the less than ideal circumstances in which they do so, that is, on the 'power of social and ideological structures' which

restrain them. The result is a contrast between political optimism and political pessimism. Secondly, cultural materialists see new historicists as cutting themselves off from effective political positions by their acceptance of a particular version of post-structuralism, with its radical scepticism about the possibility of attaining secure knowledge. The rise of post-structuralism, problematises knowledge, language, truth, etc., and this perspective is absorbed into new historicism and becomes an important part of it. The new historicist defence against this charge would be that being aware of the inbuilt uncertainty of all knowledge doesn't mean that we give up trying to establish truths, it simply means that we do so conscious of the dangers and limitations involved, thus giving their own intellectual enquiries a special authority. This is rather like sailing into dangerous waters knowingly, with all sensible precautions taken, rather than being blithely unaware of the dangers. Thus, when new historicists claim that Foucault gives them entry into 'a nontruth-oriented form of historicist study of texts', this doesn't mean that they do not believe that what they say is true, but rather that they know the risks and dangers involved in claiming to establish truths. A third important difference between new historicism and cultural materialism is that where the former's co-texts are documents contemporary with Shakespeare, the latter's may be programme notes for a current Royal Shakespeare Company production, quotations of Shakespeare by a Gulf War pilot, or pronouncements on education by a government minister. To put this in another way: the new historicist situates the literary text in the political situation of its own day, while the cultural materialist situates it within that of ours. This is really to restate the difference in political emphasis between the two approaches. Indeed, it could be said that all three of the differences between new historicism and cultural materialism are located in this time-based difference of political emphasis.

In spite of the above differences the new historical and cultural materialist movement share the following characteristics:

- Both are anti-establishment and accept freedom and celebrate difference and deviance.
- Both emphasise the role of history and post-structuralism in different ways.
- Both are interested in defamiliarising canonical texts.
- Both of them absorb ideas from structural as well as post-structural approaches.

- Close reading of texts is a shared feature.
- Both encourage creative interpretation.

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## 4.6 □ Cultural Materialism: Some Textual Readings

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An example of an informal variant of this approach is Terence Hawke's essay 'Telmah' (in his book *The Shakespearean Rag*). This is the fourth piece in the book, each one being centred on the work of one of the major Shakespearean critics of the early part of the century, within an overall strategy of looking at how Shakespeare is mediated and processed to us. In this chapter the critic is John Dover Wilson, best known for his 1930s book *What Happens in Hamlet?* The opening section considers aspects of *Hamlet*, emphasising cyclic and symmetrical elements of the play, such as how the beginning echoes the end, how the same situation occurs several times in it and considering how indefinite the beginning and end of any performance are, since the play is already culturally situated in some way in people's minds before they see it. A repeated motif of looking backwards in the play (to a past which was better than the present) leads Hawke to imagine a 'reversed' *Hamlet* which shadows the actual play, the 'Telmah' of his title. The second section is entitled 'To the Sunderland Station' alluding to the title of a well-known history of the Russian Revolution called *To the Finland Station*. An account is given of John Dover Wilson on the train to Sunderland in 1917, sent by the government to sort out labour problems in a munitions factory, and reading W. W. Greg's article on *Hamlet* which argues that the king's failure to react openly to the dumb show indicates that he is a figure of some complexity, not just a story-book villain. If he is this then he begins to claim some of our attention, and distracts us from the exclusive focus on Hamlet himself which had been the traditional way of responding to the play, at least from the time of the Romantics. Wilson's excited outrage at this notion is related to financial desire for order manifested in his published writings about Russia which see it as a picturesque 'organic' feudal state, which, in turn, looks like a version of the England which his social class regards with nostalgia and fears might be lost. Dover Wilson's rushing to the defence of Hamlet, threatened cultural icon, in his reply to Greg, and later in his *Hamlet* book, are seen as symptomatic of this too. Shortly after the First World War Wilson was a member of the Newbolt Committee which reported on the teaching of English, and saw it as providing a form of social cohesion which might save the country from the fate which overtook Russia. Hawkes also quotes a letter

from Neville Chamberlain praising *What Happens in Hamlet?*, and thus creates a pattern of appeasing and containing difference. Hence, a way of interpreting the play is placed among several co-texts from twentieth-century life, and thus the play itself is culturally transformed. Hawkes' final reading of the end of the play involves inserting an extra stage direction, and his model for a criticism of this kind is that of the jazz musician who doesn't transmit a received text, but *transforms* what he *performs*. That might be taken as the characteristic of this variant of cultural materialist criticism.

Another study of Cultural Materialism can be had in the analysis of another political play *Henry V*; specifically, the difficult relationship between visions of the future and the known history presented in the play. Three particular moments of historical/cultural schism may be analyzed: between the play and the history it represents, when the final Chorus steps forward and tells us that everything Henry has won will shortly be lost; between the play and its originary moment, where a hopeful vision of the Earl of Essex returning victorious to London from Ireland is dashed only months after the play premiered; and between a modern victor in a modern battle, in a series of articles in *Forbes* magazine using Shakespeare's play to "understand" the Gulf War.

*Henry V* ends with Henry's total victory crowned with a number of visions of future peace and prosperity. Then the final Chorus steps forward and tells us what history—and the Elizabethan stage—already knows: that everything this theatrically resurrected but historically contingent Henry has won will shortly be lost. But there is another schism between visions and history in the play. The Chorus at the beginning of the last act contains a vision of the Earl of Essex, "the general of our gracious empress", returning victorious to London from Ireland; for Shakespeare's audience, this vision was soon to suffer the same fate as the famous victories of Henry V, where high expectations end in ignomy and civil unrest. A third vision of victory that came into conflict with a historical outcome when *Forbes* magazine published an article just after the Gulf War comparing George Bush's extraordinary military triumph to Shakespeare's dramatization of Henry's victory at Agincourt, complete with visions of a nation united under a strong and wise and successful leader. A year later, *Forbes* published another article that effectively served as the final Chorus in *Henry V*, recognizing that Bush lost the election just as the English eventually lost what they had gained in France. These three visions may be linked in order to offer a template for using the relationships of texts to historical moments for a better understanding of the cultural materialist approach.

In Terence Hawkes' cultural materialist dictum, "we mean by Shakespeare" (3) — a Shakespeare play doesn't have one singular inherent true meaning, but rather picks up meanings and often is made to mean particular things at particular historical and cultural moments. Similarly, current Performance Studies practitioners point out that theatre always has "excessive contextuality" (Shannon Jackson: "Professing Performance"). The theatre event is not a hermetically sealed, aesthetically stable and controlled artifact but rather is implicated within, even bursting with its own cultural, historical, social and political contexts, those "constellations of elements that comprise its habitus and its field" (David Savran: "Choices Made and Unmade"). Perhaps not surprisingly, in anticipation of both of the points above, Ralph Berry concludes his 1981 production history of *Henry V* by stating "What happens to [*Henry V*] in the future will no doubt be determined less by directors than by history" (81).

It is seen within the play itself that theatre and history have an uneasy relationship. Theatre can raise the dead, although the Chorus, ever modest, says they are only "flat, unraised spirits" on this "unworthy scaffold" and that it is the audience who must do much of the work to "piece out our imperfections with your thoughts" (Prologue 9, 10, 23). Perhaps this is slightly disingenuous. The end of the play proper is filled with visions for a glorious future; the French King starts the vision as he gives away his daughter:

King Charles                      Take her, fair son, and from her blood raise up  
Issue to me, that the contending kingdoms  
Of France and England, whose very shores look pale  
With envy of each other's happiness,  
May cease their hatred, and this dear conjunction  
Plant neighbourhood and Christian-like accord  
In their sweet bosoms, that never war advance  
His bleeding sword 'twixt England and fair France.

(5.2.332-40)

The French Queen concurs, and develops the vision further:

Queen Isabel                      God, the best maker of all Marriages,  
Combine your hearts in one, your realms in one!  
As man and wife, being two, are are one in love,

So be there' twixt your kingdoms such a spousal,  
That never may ill office, or fell jealousy,  
Which troubles oft the bed of blessed marriage,  
Thrust in between in paction of these kingdoms,  
To make divorce of their incorporate league;  
That English may as French, French Englishmen,  
Receive each other, God speak this "Amen"! (344-53)

And, fittingly enough, Henry himself has the final word to cap this vision for the future:

King Henry      Prepare we for our marriage—on which day.  
My Lord of Burgundy, we'll take your oath,  
And all the peers', for surety of our leagues.  
Then shall I swear to Kate, and you to me;  
And may our oaths well kept and prosperous be! (355-9)

But the Characters' future vision is a theatrical soft ball lobbed towards the final Chorus, who knocks it out of the wooden O into the historical future already past and the theatrical sequel already played:

Chorus                      Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crowned King  
Of France and England, did this king succeed;  
Whose state so many had the managing,  
That they lost France and made his England bleed,  
Which oftour stage hath shown...(Epilogue 9-13)

That final Chorus might be seen as reluctant, ironic, sobering, or as a bit of a sucker punch, but the final result is the same: the vision of a glorious future espoused within the fiction is met and deflated by more history and another play. The relationship between theatre and history remains, if now for a different reason from that suggested in the opening Chorus, an uneasy one.

Between the play and its originary historical moment, there is another uneasy relationship. The Act 5 Chorus contains "the only explicit, extradramatic, incontestable reference to a contemporary event anywhere in the [Shakespearean] canon" (Taylor 7)

Chorus                    Were now the general of our gracious empress,  
As in good time he may, from Ireland coming,  
Bringing rebellion broached on his sword,  
How many would the peaceful city quit,  
To welcome him! Much more, and much more cause,  
Did they this Harry.(5.0.30-5)

In order better to make the point about the historical Henry's post-Agincourt reception in London to the contemporary London audience members he is addressing at the play's historical moment, the Chorus talks about our gracious empress, Elizabeth, and the General now in Ireland, who is the Earl of Essex, and suggests an equivalence in terms of high expectations, victory, glory, honour, and a grateful and celebrating nation. This reference rather precisely dates the writing of the play at early 1599. Essex left for Ireland on March 27, 1599, by midsummer the success of the expedition was in doubt, and on September 28, 1599. Essex returned to London in shame, defeated (Taylor 5). Less than two years later in February 1601, after a failed rebellion that most pointedly did not stir the London crowds, the former general was executed by his no longer gracious or grateful empress. The topical reference and hopeful vision from the moment the play was written tells a very different story shortly thereafter; perhaps not so strangely, it is a change in story very similar to that attested by the final Chorus on the historical Henry. Like the golden boy Henry and all his achievements, Essex too is sucker-punched by history, this time from an epilogue outside the bounds of the play. The contemporary equivalence itself becomes historically contingent.

Between the play and its life in the early 1990s, there may be seen yet another uneasy relationship. Under the leadership of George Bush, US forces fought the Gulf War in February/March 1991. Shortly after that stunning victory, an article appeared in *Forbes Magazine*, using Shakespeare's historical play to better understand the current events. "Miracle in the desert: to grasp the full miraculous measure of the US victory in the Gulf", the article tells us, "you have to go back and read Shakespeare's *Henry V*" (Novak 62). The article makes a number of detailed comparisons between the Gulf War and Shakespeare's play, and points up some startling equivalencies, starting with the same number of casualties on the winning side. Henry reads the lists after the battle and finds four "of name" and "of all other men but five and twenty" (4.8.103-4); *Forbes* points out that "US forces leading the Great Coalition threw half a million soldiers

against deeply entrenched Iraqis, and in four days emerged triumphant at the cost of our 29 Americans Killed in the assault ” (Novak 62). The article ends with the recognition that in both cases providence must have been on the side of the victors : “O God thy arm was here ... and be it death proclaimed throughout our host to boast of this, or take that praise from God which is his only ... God fought for us” says Henry (4.8.104, 112-14, 118); *Forbes* concurs with “above all, though this nation owes thanks to God...God gave us our ‘Saint Crispin’s Day’ and we should thank Him for it” (Novak 63). A number of further equivalencies are drawn :

Like Bush Henry V was mocked by his foes as too weak and soft to fight Like Bush, Henry V grew in purpose and in stature from the first moments of his expedition until its bloody climax. Like Bush, Henry V was fond of terms like “kind” and “gentle,” but fiercely resolute for vindication of the right. Like Bush, before the battle Henry V prayed mightily—knowing well the probability of slaughter, massacre and abject failure (Novak 63)

The article also points to an equivalence in the ability to rise above domestic problems: “Moiling, muddling and malaise on domestic policy have not been unknown to this administration. But not in this case, not during these seven months” (Novak 63). A further equivalence might be seen in the two leaders’ powers of persuasion: “George Bush sized up Suddam Hussein almost instantly. Then slowly, ever so slowly he persuaded the rest of the world to see reality as he did” (Novak 63). One of the most interesting equivalencies comes in a verbal echo of the “band oi brothers” speech : a vision of the future, where Henry tells his men that

Then shall our names  
Familiar in [the] mouth as household words—  
Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter,  
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester--  
Be in their cups freshly remembered. (4.3.51-5)

becomes in the *Forbes* article an equally exuberant list of future heroes : after the President’s “inspired leadership” we have “the reassuring figure of Dick Cheney at Defense ; the strategic sense of General Colin Powell ; ‘Stormin’ Norman Schwarzkopf, who executed the final ‘Hail Mary’ offensive thrust, and ... Iowa’s General ‘Chuck’ Horner, who masterminded a brilliant air campaign” (Novak 63). The comparisons between the Gulf War and *Henry V* all make the case that this is a high point for a



grateful nation.

For a two-page magazine article, this is a fairly thorough reading of the play ; it is, of course, not exactly complete. Like the triumphant Henry in the play, and like Essex in Ireland in the reference, Bush-as-Henry/Gulf-as Agincourt comes to be rewritten, as we shift the cultural and historical context forward once more.

What does this article leave out? More history in the future that it doesn't yet know, and that final Chorus in Shakespeare's play. The workings of American politics supplies another equivalency between Bush and Henry, and less than two years later, *Forbes* magazine supplies the missing Shakespearean Chorus. Just as Henry's glory and achievements lasted but a "small time" (Epilogue 5), so to with George Bush. Less than two years later, Bush is out of office, and after the great victory comes a sobering letdown. "Small time, but in that small most greatly lived/ This star of England" says the final Chorus of its historically contingent hero ; "despite his reflection defeat", *Forbes* assures us, "former president George Bush has won a special place in history for what he did to prepare for and prosecute the Gulf War" (Forbes Jr.). Bush lost the reelection and, in 1993, *Forbes* can recognize the constants of Shakespeare's final Chorus : "of course, the 15th-century French eventually routed the English" (Forbes Jr.). Should one wish to compound the irony — or at least explore the possibilities for yet another historically contingent equivalence at the moment I'm writing this paper — ten years later the great leader's son is contemplating a move against the same, apparently rejuvenated enemy. We can but hope we don't find ourselves in a further series of equivalencies with Shakespeare's *Henry VI* plays.

Cultural materialism encourages us to look carefully for the places — the fault lines, to use Alan Sinfield's term—where the aims of an ideology or a power structure may reveal themselves to be incomplete. In the first *Forbes* article, the ringing endorsement of the power status quo leaves room to be undone, even in its own chosen literary template. The text of *Henry V* remains uncontained by a single or singular reading ; the ideology of Bush-and-America triumphant, like the ideology of Henry-and-England or Essex-and-England triumphant, is revealed as susceptible to historical contingencies and alternative readings.

From a cultural materialist perspective, a play by Shakespeare is both implicated and embroiled in often complex ways in its own historical and cultural moment, and can also generate more meanings, can be made to mean more things, as it is reproduced

at other historical and cultural moments. The question of how a play means often opens up into a wider question, of how a culture means — how a society may rehearse its ideologies, anxieties and desires through performances, critical readings, or even what passes for a general understanding of Shakespeare's plays at particular historical junctures. The fictional world of a Shakespeare play, once locally embodied on the stage or in a popular magazine, provides opportunities for examining and/or shaping the actual conditions of the audience's world. In the case of *Henry V*, the play acts as a magnet, picking up what is in the air — although, of course, the winds always shift and that air keeps changing.

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## 4.7 □ Suming Up

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It is quite evident from the study that the terms 'New Historicism' and 'Cultural Materialism' cover a wide range of approaches to the study of literature and history. As might be expected these new approaches have questioned the received canon of literary works in orthodox literary histories, often in conjunction with feminist, postcolonialist and lesbian criticism. In discussing the canon of nineteenth-century American literature, New Historicists such as Jane Tompkins and Cathy Davidson have drawn attention to popular and genre fiction. The sentimental novel, for example, says Tompkins, 'offers a critique of American society far more devastating than any delivered by better-known critics such as Hawthorne and Melville'. At the same time, however, it has been argued that in much New Historicist criticism, challenges to the canon have involved, 'less the detection of its 'others' ... than a repeated challenging of the familiar privileged texts which, while throwing them into a new perspective, leaves the canon itself pretty much intact'. Once more, British Cultural Materialism is thought, to present a more decisive challenge, opening up post-war British popular culture and society to a politicised analysis in areas where New Historicist techniques are enlisted by Cultural Studies. The British tradition has tried to differentiate itself from what it sees as a limited American reading of Foucault. However, there is a rich fusion of radical currents of historicist thought which suggests the possibility of converging Anglo-American streams.

Structuralist critics set out to master the text and to open its secrets. Poststructuralists believe that this desire is vain because there are unconscious, or linguistic, or historical forces which cannot be mastered. The signifier floats away from the signified, *jouissance*

dissolves meaning, the semiotic disrupts the symbolic, *differance* insets a gap between signifier and signified, and power disorganises established knowledge. Poststructuralists ask questions rather than give answers; they seize upon the differences between what the text says and what it thinks it says. They set the text to work against itself, and refuse to force it to mean one thing only. They deny the separateness of 'literature', and deconstruct non-literary discourses by reading them as themselves rhetorical texts. Nevertheless, Foucault and the New Historicists initiate a new kind of inter-textual historical theory which is inevitably an interventionist one since it assists in remaking the past. In Cultural Materialism a commitment to transgressive and oppositional voices becomes more explicit. As such, while it draws upon poststructuralism it questions the claims of some versions of it to liberate an innocent free play of meanings.

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#### 4.8 □ Comprehension Exercises

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1. Give an account of the rise and growth of the Cultural Materialist movement.
2. What are the basic assumptions of the Cultural Materialist approach to literary criticism? How do the cultural materialists operate?
3. Name two exponents of Cultural Materialist criticism. Write about their contribution.
4. How does Cultural Materialism differ from New Historicism as a critical approach to literary texts?
5. Attempt a Cultural Materialist study of Shakespeare's *Henry V*.

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## **Unit - 5 □ Marxist Criticism**

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### **Structure**

- 5.1. Basis and Superstructure : Engels**
- 5.2. Basis and Superstructure : Marx**
- 5.3. Practitioners of Marxist criticism**
  - 5.3.1. Christopher Caudwell**
  - 5.3.2. Walter Benjamin**
  - 5.3.3. George Lukacs**
  - 5.3.4. Louis Althusser**
  - 5.3.5. Pierre Macherey**
  - 5.3.6. Antonio Gramsci**
  - 5.3.7. Raymond Williams**
  - 5.3.8. Terry Eagleton**
  - 5.3.9. Fredric Jameson**
- 5.4. Marxism and other theories**
  - 5.4.1. Marxism and Russian Formalism**
  - 5.4.2. Marxism and Feminism**
- 5.5. Summing Up**
- 5.6. Comprehension Exercises**

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## **5 □ Marxist Criticism**

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The theory and practice of socialism and communism as embodied in the writings of Karl Heinrich Marx (1818-1883) and Friedrich (or Frederick) Engels (1821-1895) are known as Marxism. Marx and Engels, therefore, were principally dealing with human societies, their history and development as related to class struggles and

revolutions. They were not, primarily, literary critics. Their concern was socio-economic change. The primary concerns were the nature of a capitalist society and how class struggles within a capitalist society could lead to a better society. Of course, a social change includes changes in literature and other forms of culture. Marx and Engels knew this and did make many comments on writings of contemporary authors and on time-honoured classics. But we cannot follow them mechanically, that is, without relating them with the principal concerns mentioned above.

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## 5.1 □ Basis and Superstructure : Engels's letter to Joseph Bloch, September 21, 1890

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Any society, Marxism shows, rests on material wealth produced by labour. That section of society which possesses this wealth and the means of its production constitutes the ruling class. Marxism regards the economic situation as the material basis of society. On this basis rests the superstructure which includes the whole world of ideas (*e.g.* philosophy, religion, culture, education, law, political institutions etc).

What is the relation between the basis and the superstructure? It is not a simple one : it will not do if we say that when the basis changes, the superstructure changes with it; nor if we say that no change in the surperstructure is possible until the basis of society changes. A well-known statement on this matter of basis-superstructure relations in Marxism is contained in a letter written by Engels to Bloch in 1890. Part of it is quoted below :

... According to the materialistic conception of history, the *ultimately* determining factor in history is the production and reproduction of real life. Neither Marx nor I have ever asserted more than this. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic factor is the *only* determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, absurd phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure — political forms of the class struggle and its results, such as constitutions established by the victorious class after a successful battle, etc., juridical forms, and especially the reflections of all these real struggles in the brains of the participants, political, legal, philosophical theories, religious views and their further development into systems

of dogmas — also exercise their influence upon the course of the historical struggles and in many cases determine their *form* in particular. ... We make our history ourselves, but, in the first place, under very definite antecedents and conditions. Among these the economic ones are ultimately decisive. But the political ones, etc., and indeed even the traditions which haunt human minds also play a part, although not the decisive one.

What do we learn from Engels's comment?

- (a) The economic situation is the ultimately decisive factor in social change, but not the only determining factor.
- (b) Various elements of the superstructure also influence the course of history, especially the particular forms of historical struggles. These elements also influence each other.
- (c) Real struggles cast their reflections on the brains of the participants. What happens in the brain (*i.e.* ideas) in turn influences struggles. Therefore, it is a two-way traffic: basis and superstructure influence each other.
- (d) These arguments imply that literature is not simply the effect of some cause provided by the economic situation, social changes, real struggles. This point will be supplemented by the next paragraph.

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## 5.2 □ Basis and Superstructure: Marx's Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy

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Engels's remarks in the above letter follow from the theoretical formulations made by Marx in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) and further developed in *Capital*. In the *Critique*, Marx shows that on the "real Foundation" of society all material production is made possible; but there is an "unequal development of material production and, *e.g.*, that of art". He goes on to say :

As regards art it is well known that some of its peaks by no means correspond to the general development of society; nor do they therefore to the material substructure, the skeleton as it were of its organisation. For example the Greeks compared with the modern [nations], or else Shakespeare. It is even acknowledged that certain branches of art, *e.g.*, the epos, can no longer be produced in their



epoch-making classic form after artistic production as such has begun ; in other words that certain important creations within the compass of art are only possible at an early stage in the development of art. If this is the case with the different branches of art within the sphere of art itself, it is not so remarkable that this should also be the case with regard to the entire sphere of art and its relation to the general development of society. The difficulty lies only in the general formulation of these contradictions. As soon as they are reduced to specific questions they are already explained.

Marx goes on to explain this difference between spiritual production and material production. It is not enough to say that economic facts are the ultimate (though not the sole) foundation of literature, art etc. The fruitfulness of this assertion lies in a specific analysis, not in its universality. Material production has to be grasped in its specific historical form. Otherwise what is specific in its spiritual production cannot be grasped.

Moreover, Marx also shows that while material production has moved from one epoch to another (say, from medieval to modern) spiritual production may not have so developed. This uneven development has to be noticed in a specific analysis. Also, imagination has its own attraction. Long after society has ceased to believe in gods and ghosts, we continue to enjoy Greek epics and Shakespeare's apparitions. "The charm their art has for us does not conflict with the immature stage of the society in which it originated. On the contrary its charm is a consequence of this and is inseparably linked with the fact that the immature social conditions which gave rise, and which alone could give rise, to this art cannot recur."

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### 5.3. □ Practitioners of Marxist criticism

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**5.3.1 Christopher Caudwell :** A notable practitioner of this belief was the British Marxist Christopher Caudwell (1907-1937) who died in Spain fighting in the International Brigade. Caudwell's best-known work is his *Illusion and Reality: A Study of the Sources of Poetry* (1937) Here, Caudwell offers a Marxist analysis of the development of English poetry, somewhat crudely correlating the stages of this development with economic phases such as primitive accumulation, the Industrial Revolution, and the decline of capitalism. In the wide-ranging book, Caudwell addressed the origins of poetry, the connection of poetry to mythology and the

unconscious, as well as the future role of poetry in the struggle for Socialism. Again, in a discussion of nineteenth-century English poets entitled, 'English Poets : The Decline of Capitalism', he writes that "Arnold, Swinburne, Tennyson and Browning, each in his own way, illustrate the movement of the bourgeois illusion in this 'tragic' stage of history." He goes on to say of Tennyson's poem *In Memoriam* : "Like Darwin, and even more Darwin's followers, he projects the conditions of capitalist production into Nature (individual struggle for existence) and then reflects this struggle, intensified by its instinctive and therefore unalterable blindness, back into society, so that God—symbol of the internal forces of society—seems captive to Nature—symbol of the external environment of society." Caudwell's subsequent writings included *Studies in a Dying Culture* (1938), *Further Studies in a Dying Culture* (1949), and *Romance and Realism* (1970). All his works were published posthumously.

**5.3.2 Walter Benjamin:** Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), a German Marxist critic, was sympathetic to modernism, and in one of his most influential essays, *The Artist as Producer*, he argues that the most revolutionary art cannot merely replicate traditional forms if it is going to further social change. This will merely lead to art being consumed by a bourgeois audience, even if such art is apparently committed to Marxist ideas. Benjamin was a major advocate of the work of the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht, a committed Marxist, but one who rejected the dominant Marxist aesthetic of socialist realism, an approach to art that required it to conform to Marxist doctrine and promote socialist aims. Benjamin's *Illuminations* (1955) contains important observations on Bandelaire, Proust and Kafka.

**5.3.3 George Lukacs :** George Lukacs (1885-1971) an Hungarian Marxist critic in the Hegelian tradition, writes in his early essay *The Evolution of Modern Drama* (1909) that 'the truly social element in literature is the form'. This view undergoes a change in his later writings which move away from the Hegelian to the Marxist tradition. *The Historical Novel* (1936-37) and *The Meaning of contemporary Realism* (1957) are classics of Marxist criticism.

**5.3.4 Louis Althusser :** Marxist criticism in the later half of the twentieth century saw a shift away from the reflective model. The major intellectual influence on this change was that of the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (1918-1990) in works such as *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1971), which tended to concentrate on Marx's earlier writings. Althusser also drew on structuralist ideas and this alignment between Marxism and structuralism made Marxist criticism

more appealing to critics who were not committed Marxists but were in broad sympathy with *it* or who accepted its analysis *in part*. Two aspects of Althusser's revision of Marxism were especially influential because they allowed Marxist criticism to break away from the reflective model—the first was the concept of social formation, the second that of ideological state apparatuses. Each particular state apparatus creates its own form of ideological discourse and, through a process which Althusser defines as 'interpellation', calls upon individuals to take up a 'subject position', one which serves the interests of the dominant class.

**5.3.5 Pierre Macherey :** Pierre Macherey's *A Theory of Literary Production*, first published in French in 1966 and in English in 1978, is the first major literary study *in which* Marxism and structuralist thinking were aligned. For Macherey the ideology governing a work cannot be separated from the question of form since the literary text is "rooted in historical reality" not in a direct way "but only through a complex series of mediations". Thus history is not directly accessible in literature and so can be apprehended only indirectly. Macherey argues that literary representation is under the control of ideology and the role of criticism is to reveal history not as a presence in the text but as an 'absence' that which ideology excludes but which can be discerned in the fissures or gaps in the text which expose the incoherence of its ideology.

**5.3.6 Antonio Gramsci :** The Italian theorist Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) with his concept of 'hegemony', allows for a flexible reading of the base and superstructure model. He used the term 'hegemony' to denote the predominance of one social class over others (*e.g.* bourgeois hegemony). This represents not only political and economic control, but also the ability of the dominant class to project its own way of seeing the world so that those who are subordinated by it accept it as 'common sense' and 'natural'. He believes that ideology alone cannot explain the extent to which people are willing to accept dominant values. He also realizes, along with many other Marxist critics (see 4.5.1) that the base/superstructure model is much too rigid to account for cultural productions which do not simply reinforce those dominant values. In away, Gramsci's notion of hegemony is a continuation of the concepts behind ideology. Hegemony is a sort of deception in which the individual forgets her own desires and accepts dominant values as their own. For example, someone might think that going to college is the right and necessary step in every life, when in reality their belief is socially constructed. Literature, then, may be seen

as something that both reinforces dominant values and occasionally calls them into question. For example, nineteenth century women writers of sentimental fiction used certain narrative conventions merely to reinforce dominant values, whereas a writer like Jane Austen used many of the same conventions to undermine the same dominant values. His writings were collected partly in *Prison Notebooks*.

**5.3.7 Raymond Williams (1921-1988) :** *Culture and Society* (1958), in which Williams traced the idea of culture as it developed in England between 1780 and 1950, was probably more influential than any other book in breaking down the conventional categories of postwar English criticism. The class-oriented approach to British literature continues in his *The country and the City* (1973), *Problems of Materialism and Culture* (1980) and *Marxism and Literature* (1977). His social criticism is contained in *The long Revolution, Towards 2000* and other books. He sustained a level of Marxist Criticism which refused to be dislodged by new fashions as new orthodoxies.

**5.3.8 Terry Eagleton :** Althusser and Macherey changed the direction of Marxist criticism and Terry Eagleton, the British Marxist critic, directly felt their effect in his major theoretical study *Criticism and Ideology* (1976). Eagleton was greatly influenced by Louis Althusser's attempt to divest Marxism of Hegelian elements and to promote its scientific status. He argued that criticism must assume a scientific position beyond the domain of ideology. In this text Eagleton formulated the fundamental categories of Marxist criticism, and insisted that the text is a producer of ideology. However, Eagleton goes part of the way with Macherey in agreeing that ideology being put to work within a text exposes the gaps and silences is that ideology which can be made to speak. However, he is unhappy with Macherey's concept of 'absence', which he sees as "an essentially negative conception of the text's relation to history". He believes that it is still possible to preserve a direct relation between text and history by means of a complex series of mediations that govern the relation between text and history. He recognises that history can be present in the text only as ideology, so that reality in the text is therefore 'pseudo-reality', but he believes there can be a 'science of ideological formations.' and that one can study 'the laws of the production of ideological discourses as literature.' Thus, in looking at a writer such as George Eliot, he sees her work as an attempt 'to resolve a structural conflict between two forms of mid-Victorian ideology'—a belief in individualism taking irresponsible

forms— so that ‘the historical contradictions at the heart of Eliot’s fiction are recast into ideologically resolvable terms.’ Eagleton’s later work turned somewhat away from Althusser and was inspired instead by Walter Benjamin’s revolutionary thought. It also engaged in a sustained dialogue with many branches of recent literary theory, including feminism, deconstruction and psychoanalysis. Eagleton skillfully situated these currents within their historical and political contexts, revealing the ways in which they were subversive of, and complicit with, liberal humanism in its manifold guises. An instance of this can be had in his book *William Shakespeare* (1986) in which he writes of *Antony and Cleopatra*: “What deconstructs political order in the play is desire, and the figure for this is Cleopatra ... She is, as it were, pure heterogeneity, an ‘infinite variety’ which eludes any stable position.” Eagleton’s *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983) has commanded a wide audience in both Britain and America, and he is undoubtedly the most widely read Marxist critic now living. Overall, his work has clarified the relationship of Marxism to other discourses ; it has revaluated the tradition of Marxist criticism itself, and it has articulated a Marxist model of aesthetics both theoretically and in application.

**5.3.9 Fredric Jameson :** Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* (1981), is possibly, the most ambitious Marxist critical study of the past thirty years. According to W. R. Goodman, in his *Contemporary Literary Theory*, Jameson has strong sympathies with the Hegelian Marxist tradition as exemplified in the work of Lukacs but he attempts an ambitious reconciliation of Lukacs with Althusserian Marxism in a totalizing criticism that can also embrace non-Marxist critical perspectives, such as formalism, archetypal criticism, structuralism and post-structuralism. He sees Marxism as a “master code” which underlines all other forms of criticism. Even the most detailed formalist or textual analysis, he argues, is governed by a philosophy of history even if critics are unaware of it. Like Eagleton, Jameson does not want to give up the idea that all levels of the superstructure are essentially similar in structure to the economic base and directly determined by it. He argues that such a concept still functions in Althusser’s theory. Working with an implicitly psychoanalytical model, Jameson sees history as an “absent cause” since it does not exist separately from its products, and as history cannot be separated from politics it functions as a “political unconscious.” Jameson, like Althusser and Macherey, does not regard ideologies as forms of false consciousness, but as “strategies of containment” which repress knowledge of the contradictions which are the product of history, history for him being driven by the “collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a

realm of Necessity.” Works of art are the most complex products of ideologies as strategies of containment and the Marxist critic’s role is to restore “to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history.” Works of art for Jameson have developed complex strategies to deny the exploitation and oppression which is the reality of history since Jameson accepts Walter Benjamin’s dictum that “[t]here has never been a document of culture which was not at one and the same time a document of barbarism.” The Marxist critic looks for clues and symptoms which reveal the way : literary texts evade the realities of history or refuse to acknowledge contradictions. Since history is an absent cause and so not directly accessible except in textual form, “our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious.”

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## 5.4 □ Marxism and other theories

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Marxist literary criticism may be thought of as a reaction to many of the rigid theories of the New Critics. Unlike the New Critics, who saw the text as a self-contained whole, Marxists generally focus upon the unresolved tensions within works of literature. Similarly, although Marxist criticism has both influenced and been influenced by structuralist criticism and post- structuralist criticism, it greatly differs from them in its refusal to separate literature and language from society. Marxist criticism is materialist, so it has more in common with theories that focus upon how literature functions within social, political and economic structures, than it does with theories that focus only upon the text. Marxist criticism has had an enormous influence on feminism, new historicism, and most recently, cultural studies.

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### 5.4.1 □ Marxism and Russian Formalism

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During the earlier half of the twentieth century, a number of critics in Soviet Union attempted to combine Marxist theory with Russian Formalist criticism. These critics were associated with Mikhail Bakhtin, who, though not apparently a committed Marxist himself, cooperated with these critics to produce some important studies, notably *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1928) with P.N. Medvedev and *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (1929) with Valentin Voloshinov. Though these studies are critical of a purely formalist approach to literature (one which focuses on style, technique and literary devices rather than meaning or content), they believe that it is possible to combine Marxism and formalism dialectically in what

Bakhtin and Medvedev call a 'sociological poetics'. With the emergence of the Stalinist era in the Soviet Union, this literary critical approach was suppressed.

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## 5.4.2 □ Marxism and Feminism

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The Marxist feminist approach to literature deserves mention, in this context, which lays emphasis on the relations between capitalism and the oppression of women in capitalist relations of production.

While the Marxist critics see the social reality in terms of historical struggle, the fundamental concept of historical materialism being the contradiction between the forces and social relations of material production, the feminist critics see society as a patriarchal structure and try to expose the gender discrimination that perpetuates masculine dominance over the feminine. In this context Marxist-feminist approach involves an emphasis on the relations between capitalism and the oppression of women in capitalist relations of production. Kate Millet, a radical feminist, argues that our society is a patriarchy in which the rule of women by men is "more rigorous than class, stratification," and she implies that class division is relevant only to men, meaning that the class division in the case of women is more illusory than real. It has also been argued that the unpaid labour of women at home serves to reproduce both the forces and the relations of production. The feminists insist that Marxism should take account of women's oppression and sexual division of labour which, they hold, are embedded in capitalist relations of production.

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## 5.5 □ Summing Up

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Thus, recent developments in Marxist criticism have uprooted Marxism from being a fixed system and moved it forward through dialectical confrontations with other forms of thought, such as psychoanalysis, structuralism, post-structuralism and feminism, with the result that even at a time when Marxist politics is in crisis as a result of the break-up of the Soviet Union and the world is fast changing due to global socio-economic reforms, Marxist criticism still remains a force in modern critical theory and practice.

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## 5.6 □ Comprehension Exercise

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1. What is the Marxian concept of literature?
2. State the basic assumption of the Marxist-feminist approach to literature.
3. What are the recent developments in Marxist criticism?
4. What do you know about the Marxist critical activities in America?
5. Name some of the major Marxist critics. What is their contribution to the field of literary criticism?
6. How does Louis Althusser differ from the other Marxist critics?
7. Write short notes on the following :
  - a) Base and Superstructure,
  - b) Marxism and Russian Formalism,
  - c) Fredric Jameson.



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## **Unit : 6 □ Feminist Criticism**

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### **Structure**

- 6.0. Aims and Objectives**
- 6.1. Women's Studies: An introduction**
- 6.2. Feminist Theory and Criticism: The First wave**
  - 6.2.1. Virginia Woolf**
  - 6.2.2. De Beauvoir**
- 6.3. Feminist Theory and Criticism: The Second wave**
  - 6.3.1. Experience Economic Milieu**
  - 6.3.2. Biology**
  - 6.3.3. Discourse**
  - 6.3.4. The Unconscious**
- 6.4. Marxist Feminism/Materialist Feminism**
  - 6.4.1. Firestone**
  - 6.4.2. Ruthven**
  - 6.4.3. Mitchell**
  - 6.4.4. Barrett**
  - 6.4.5. Coward, Belsey**
  - 6.4.6. Moi**
  - 6.4.7. Kaplan & Chakravorty Spivak**
- 6.5. Gynocriticism and Women's Writing**
  - 6.5.1. Feminist and Female Stages**
  - 6.5.2. Objectives: Showaster**
  - 6.5.3. Gilbert and Gubar: Theory**
  - 6.5.4. Gilbert and Gubar: Theoretical Models**
- 6.6. Poststructuralist Feminism/French Feminist Critical Theories**
  - 6.6.1. Cixous**
  - 6.6.2. Irigaray**

### 6.6.3. Kristeva

### 6.6.4. Wittig and Butler

### 6.7. Comprehension Exercises

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## 6.0. □ Aims and Objectives :

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Feminist criticism has always been concerned with the impact of gender-bias on reading and writing. It usually begins with a critique of the ubiquitous patriarchal culture. It is concerned also with the place of female writers in the canon. Finally, it includes a search for a feminine theory or approach to texts. Feminist criticism is often revisionist. Feminism uncovers the ways in which social and cultural assumptions and structures are shaped by gender. By focusing on the extent to which traditional questions, theories and analyses have failed to take gender into account, Women's Studies (as a field) adopts a scholarly and critical perspective toward the experiences of women.

The objectives of Women's Studies include :

- finding out about women by raising new questions and accepting women's perceptions and experiences as real and significant ;
- correcting misconceptions about women and identifying ways in which traditional methodologies may distort our knowledge ;
- theorizing about the place of women in society and appropriate strategies for change ;
- examining the diversity of women's experiences and the ways in which class, race, psycho-social perspectives, sexual orientation and other variables intersect with gender.

Although studying women is its starting point, by uncovering the ways in which social and cultural assumptions and structures are shaped by gender, one must not forget that Women's Studies also studies men and the world around us.

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## 6.1. □ Women's Studies—An Introduction

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Women, like men, have always been a part of the human species and in all ages they have made up fifty percent of the human populace. The position of women however

in the cultural matrix of the west has amazingly, never been equal to that of men. Women have been looked upon as inferior beings, subordinates in a totality where the two component parts—male and female—are necessary and complementary to each other. The relation of the two sexes has always been asymmetrical. The term *Man* in general represents the all-embracing term *Human*. Man is positive as well as neutral. *Woman*, on the other hand, is someone who is not a man, she is something negative, she is a person who is lacking in certain positive qualities—physical, moral and intellectual. This view has lasted till date down the ages, right from ancient times. Womanhood has been seen as a disadvantage, as is evident in the morning hymns of Jew is men : “Blessed be God... that he did not make me a woman.” The Bible states that Eve was created by God for Adam for his pleasure and to fill his loneliness. Aristotle said that : “The female is a female by virtue of a lack of certain qualities” and that “we should regard the female nature as afflicted with a natural defectiveness.” St Thomas Aquinas, thinking along the same lines called woman “an imperfect man.” In Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* Athena grants victory after Apollo’s argument that the mother has no rights of parenthood on her child. This victory asserts the rule of male principles over the sensuality of the female Furies—in other words, the rule of patriarchy over matriarchy. John Milton’s personal conception of woman’s status and capacities is found in *Paradise Lost*, Book IV. Adam and Eve are created : “He for God only, she for God in him” (1.299). Eve calls Adam her : “author and disposer, what thou bids’t / Unargued I obey ; so God ordains :/ God is thy law, thou mine...” (1.635-637). It is astonishing that woman’s dependence has been thrust on her by men, it has not been the result of a socio-cultural change or a historical one. This shows that women have been inferiorized by culture and/or acculturated into inferiority.

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## 6.2. □ Feminist Theory and Criticism: The First Wave

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Feminism developed as a formidable force, in America and in Europe throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The main impetus for feminist criticism came from the Women’s Liberation movement focusing on Women’s Rights and Women’s Suffrage. Anglo American feminism of the early twentieth century was a reflex of these first-wave preoccupations. Around this time, many feminists were working and writing—Olive Schreiner, Elizabeth Robins, Dorothy Richardson, Katherine Mansfield, Rebecca West, Ray Strachey, Vera Brittain, Winifred Holtby, Virginia Woolf ‘the founding mother of the contemporary debate’ in Mary Eagleton’s

phrase, and Simone de Beauvoir.

**3.2. Virginia Woolf :** Virginia Woolf offered the most important literary-critical model to feminists interested in recovering the experience of women writers. *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938) can be looked upon as two key texts which are major contributions to feminist theory. The first text, *A Room of One's Own*, focuses on the history and social context of women's literary production. It gives an account of the frustrations that a fictional female researcher must go through to arrive at a theory of women and fiction. The prevalent gender bias hampers her access to the resources of the university, and historical and imaginative male accounts of woman, whether distorted by anger or by the imagination, fail history and experience. Woolf imagined historical woman writers in their social contexts and searched out the sources of the bitterness she read in their works. The second text, *Three Guineas*, examines the relations between male power and the professions of education, law, medicine among others and also analyses militarism, fascism and legal injustice as derivatives of patriarchy and early sexual division within the family. Jane Marcus, one of the active editors of Woolf collections, identifies Woolf as a socialist feminist. Like Lillian Robinson in *Sex, Class and Culture*, Marcus asserts the importance of Woolf's radical feminist work *Three Guineas* although Woolf herself disavowed the label feminist in her text. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf advanced the notion that women indeed are victims of men but they too become schemers by acting as looking glasses which reflect back to men their desired image and thus add to both domestic and professional victimization.

Woolf as a major contributor to the feminist movement, recognized that gender-identity has always been socially constructed and needs to be challenged and transformed and she also examined the problems facing women writers because women have always faced social and economic obstacles when it came to the question of literary ambitions. Toril Moi is of the opinion that Woolf was not interested in a balance between masculine and feminine types but in a total displacement of fixed gender-identities. Woolf aimed at discovering linguistic ways of portrayal of the confined life of women and she advocated her belief that when women finally achieved socio-economic equality, nothing would prevent them from developing their artistic talents.

**6.2.2 De Beauvoir:** Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949, trans., 1953) is another trend-setting text. Coming from a French feminist and a pro-abortion and

women's-rights activist, the text is an academic study that examines women from the perspectives of biology, psychoanalysis, and historical materialism, a feature in the first wave. The book slips over to the second wave feminism with its assertion of men's biological, psychological and economic discrimination against women. It traces the history of women from nomadic to twentieth-century Western culture, reviews their treatment by five literary authors and analyses their situations in contemporary life. *The Second Sex* distinguishes between biological sex and socially constructed gender and posits the destruction of patriarchy goading women to break out of men's objectification. Simone de Beauvoir viewed the relative yet hierarchical structure of gender in Western culture. She had a classic exposition of alterity (of woman as the 'Other'). Woman, she wrote, is "defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her....He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (xvi). The alterity of woman she said, was an effect of androcentrism: "The categories in which men think of the world are established from their point of view, as absolute. ... A mystery for man, woman is considered to be mysterious in essence" (257). De Beauvoir boldly stated that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (267), a being whose body and "relation to the world are modified through the action of others than herself (725). In other words, womanhood is thrust upon her in accordance with patriarchal standards and not by her own preference. Women, she said, will achieve liberation only through their own agency or "positive action [in] human society" (678).

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## 6.3 □ Feminist Theory and Criticism: The Second Wave

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Second wave feminism continued to share the first wave's fight for women's rights covering all areas, but it focused primarily on the politics of reproduction, to women's experiences and sexual differences. Women's sexuality as a form of oppression came under scrutiny. Sexual difference came under five main foci : biology, experience, discourse, the unconscious and economic milieu.

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### 6.3.1 Experience and Economic Milieu:

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A decade after De Beauvoir, Betty Friedan came up with *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). This book analysed the situation of middle-class and upper-class women in the United States and Friedan found them suffering from a serious 'problem without a name'. Friedan noticed that as men acted in the world and women retreated to the

home in the 1940s and 50s, men were empowered and women infantilised. She argued that women suffered “a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique” (77). This mystique was a complaisant femininity that made women economically, intellectually and emotionally dependent upon husbands. Women continued to be told that a woman’s place is in the home when Man’s place was in the world that was widening. Women began to be left behind again because men continued to control their destinies with the help of their minds, that part of the anatomy, which became dormant again in the case of women. Betty Friedan stated:

Women also had minds. They also had the human need to grow. But the work that fed life and moved it forward was no longer done at home, and women were not trained to understand and work in the world. Confined to the home, a child among her children, passive, no part of her existence under her own control, a woman could only exist by pleasing man. She was wholly dependent on her protection in a world that she had no share in making : man’s world. She could never grow up to ask the simple human question, “Who am I? What do I want?” ...She was, at that time, so completely defined as object by man, never herself as subject, “I”, that she was not even expected to enjoy or participate in the act of sex. “He took his pleasure with her...he had his way with her,” as the sayings went. (81)

Friedan felt that even if fathers tried to get sons to be “masculine,” to be-independent, active and strong, both parents often encouraged their daughters to be passive, weak and grasping dependence known as “femininity,” expecting her, to find “security” in a boy, never expecting her to live her own life.

Friedan’s analysis was liberal in focusing on the identities of privileged women but more importantly also radical in criticizing the so-called liberal institutions—Freudian psychoanalysis, functionalist social science and sex-differentiated education offered in most universities, consumerism—all of which supported complementary sex roles. Revealing the frustrations of white, heterosexual American women without careers and trapped in the domestic sphere, Friedan for the first time put feminism on the national agenda. She went on to found NOW or the National Organisation of Women in 1966.

Second-wave feminism was thus dominated by certain bold themes—the omnipresence of patriarchal oppression, the insufficiency for women of existing political organizations and the celebration of women’s difference as central to the

cultural politics of liberation. It led to the critical reassessment of socialism and psychoanalysis and to the radical feminism of Kate Millett and lesbian-feminism of Adrienne Rich. It also led to the emergence of Anglo-American criticism and to the 'gynocriticism' of Showalter. The contradiction between female life and authorship was the subject of papers given by two prominent American women writers—Tillie Olsen and Adrienne Rich—at a 1971 forum sponsored by the MLA Commission on the Status of Women and later published in *College English* (1972). Olsen enumerated the experiences that prevented women from writing and movingly recounted the obstacles to her own creativity: Raising four children, working at a job, and keeping house, she wrote in snatches during bus rides from work or in the deep night hours for as long as she could stay awake ("Silences : When Writers Don't Write," *Images* 110). Rich also adverted to her own experiences : she was a daughter writing for her father, a poet learning her craft from male poets, a mother jotting fragments while her children slept, a woman who thought the choice was between love and egotism. "Re-vision," she argued, the act of seeing text and life "with fresh eyes," was more than a feminist critical method ; it was "an act of survival" (18). A radical feminist literary criticism would take the text as a clue to "how we have been living, ...how our language has trapped as well as liberated us," and "how we can begin to see—and therefore live—afresh" (18). The point was "not to pass on a [patriarchal] tradition but to break its hold over us" (19).

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### 6.3.2 Biology

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Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970) consisted of "equal parts of literary and cultural criticism" verging toward political theory. Millett was a movement activist and doctoral student when she wrote this book as a dissertation. Defining sexual politics as the "arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another" (23), she analysed the politics—ideological, biological, social, economic, educational, religious, psychological and physical—that maintained the system of patriarchy. She announced her view of patriarchy that subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male and asserted that patriarchy exerts power directly or indirectly in domestic as well as civic life to constrain women. Millett distinguished between sex which is biologically determined and gender as a psychological concept which refers to culturally acquired sexual identity. She attacked social scientists who view culturally learned 'female' characteristics as 'natural'. The acting out of these gender-roles

perpetuated in women's magazines and in family ideology which have always led to unequal and hierarchical relations between the sexes and this is what she termed "sexual politics". *Sexual Politics* was an analysis of the masculinist images of women in the historical, social and literary context. She devoted chapters to D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller and Norman Mailer, who mythologized a machismo "cornered by the threat of a second sexual revolution" (335), and to Jean Genet, who saw how women and homosexuals challenged the heterosexual categories. For her radical analysis, Millett was attacked in both popular and academic reviews. They accused her of scholarly improprieties and reviled her *ad feminam*. *Time* dubbed her the "Mao Tse-tung of Women's Liberation," and Norman Mailer described her as an acolyte killer with a sawed-off shotgun ("The Prisoner of Sex", *Harper's*, March 1971). Her criticism was threatening because it was so powerful : it crossed many boundaries between disciplines, cultural domains, academic and trade readers thereby effectively revealing the pervasiveness of women's oppression in Western cultures.

Katharine M. Rogers extended the tradition of *querelle* scholarship in *The Troublesome Helpmate: A History of Misogyny in Literature* (1966). Rogers defined misogyny as direct and indirect "expressions of hatred, fear, or contempt of womankind" (xii). Her study revealed its pervasiveness in every genre—epics, lyrics, tragedies, novels, tracts, sermons, manuals and in every period from the biblical to the contemporary. Similarly, Eva Figes's *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970) maintained that patriarchal attitudes toward women, though they were transmuted, survived intellectual change. In a critique of European thinkers—G. W. F. Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Otto Weininger, she explored the connections between will and sexual domination, sexism and racism, the categorical absolutism of German philosophy and the politics of the Third Reich.

While Friedan, Millet and others protested against the biological destiny carved out for women some radical feminists however, viewed women's biological attributes as sources of superiority rather than inferiority. They appealed to the special experience of being a woman as the source of positive female values in life and in art. Elaine Showalter, focused on the literary representation of the sexual differences in women's writing. Taking a historical approach, Elaine Showalter contended that women writers had been forcibly alienated from their experiences. She found that nineteenth-century women were prohibited from writing what did not correspond to femininity and were loathed for doing so. Twentieth-century women, in turn, were trivialized for their portrayal of female experience, while male writers were admired for their "ruthless appropriation of life for their art" ("Women Writers and the Female Experience."



*Radical Feminism* 400). How we explained the contradiction thus : “Traditionally, a man’s life is his work; a woman’s life is her man. That a woman’s life might have connections with her work is a revolutionary idea in that it might—indeed, must—lead her to examine and question her place as woman in the social order” (“Feminism,” *Images* 254). Several studies of Mary Ellmann’s in *Thinking About Women* as well as of Showlater’s detailed the receptions of female-authored texts. The violent reception accorded to *Jane Eyre* was owing to its presentation of female passion and independence, thus making the sex of the author paramount in assessing it. “Many critics,” Showalter noted, “bluntly admitted that they thought the book was a masterpiece if written by a man, shocking or disgusting if written by a woman” (“Women Writers and the Double Standard,” *Woman in Sexist Society* 341). Carol Ohmann, in the same vein, discovered that reviewers who assumed *Wuthering Heights* was male-authored attributed power, originality and clarity to it, while those who knew it was female-authored considered it an interesting addition to the tradition of women’s novels in England. Ohmann found “considerable correlation between what readers assume or know the sex of the writer to be and what they actually see, or neglect to see, in ‘his’ or her work” (“Emily Bronte in the Hands of Male Critics,” *College English* 909).

**6.3.3 Discourse:** The female socio-linguist Robin Lakoff in *Language and Women’s Place* (1975) stated that women’s language too is inferior as it contains patterns of weakness, uncertainty, focusing on the trivial—the unserious, the frivolous, stressing on personal emotional responses. Dale Spender in his *Man Made Language* (1980) saw women oppressed by a male-dominated language. This is in tune with Foucault’s argument that what is ‘true’ depends on who controls discourse and thus it becomes apparent that it is natural for women to be trapped inside a world of male-truth’.

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#### **6.3.4 □ The Unconscious:**

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The psycho-analytic theories of Lacan and Kristeva provided the focus on the unconscious as discussed in unit 2.

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#### **6.4. □ Marxist Feminism/Materialist Feminism**

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Although feminists and socialists have engaged in continuous conversations since the

nineteenth century, those crosscurrents within literary theory that might be designated “materialist feminism” have their origins in the late 1960s with various attempts to synthesize feminist politics with Marxist analyses. Early work on this projected alliance directed itself, not to questions of literary criticism and theory, but to the problem of bringing feminist questions of gender and sexuality into some form of strategic dialogue with class analysis. In keeping with subsequent developments within the women’s movement, the materialist feminist problematic has extended to questions of race, nationality or ethnicity, lesbianism and bisexuality, cultural identity, including religion and the very definition of power. Writers in the United States and the United Kingdom sometimes acknowledge the influence of French feminists such as Christine Delphy and Monique Wittig but have yet to engage fully with the critiques of Marxist theory being constructed by feminists working in other international locations.

The very term “materialist feminisms” proves controversial, since there has been little general consensus whether women’s interests can, or indeed should, be addressed in terms of traditional socialist and Marxist formulas. In the United Kingdom, Juliet Mitchell’s groundbreaking essay “Women: The Longest Revolution” (1966), which she expanded to book length in *Woman’s Estate* (1971), initiated the revision of traditional Marxist accounts by analysing the position of women in terms not only of relations of production and private property but also of psychoanalytically based theories of sexuality and gender. Michele Barrett’s highly influential *Women’s Oppression Today* (1980) insisted that the way forward for feminists will necessarily involve direct engagement with and transformation of Marxist class analysis. In their editorial to the final issue of the important UK journal (1978-86), Parveen Adams and Elizabeth Cowie adopted a more extreme position, stating, “As socialist-feminists we were, opposed to the much discussed union of Marxism and feminism” and sought instead “to problematize the notion of sexual difference itself” through a fundamental critique of psychoanalytic categories (3). These differences should be understood as both intellectual and representative of a specific context of partisan disputes within the British Left. The situation however, differed in the United States, where, largely working outside the pressures of party politics but constrained by the memory of Joseph McCarthy, feminists as diverse as Lise Vogel, Zillah Eisenstein, Nancy Hartsock and Donna Haraway identified themselves as “socialist feminists,” thereby distinguishing their work from that of radical and liberal feminists, who contended that women’s oppression will end with the achievement of women’s power, or women’s equality, within existing capitalist societies, positions strangely like the traditional Marxist view that women’s oppression would end once women entered into production.

The importance of these critical positions and developments for feminist literary theory and criticism arises from their foundations in political theory, psychoanalysis and sociology rather than from traditional literary concerns with questions of canon, form, genre, author and *oeuvre*. Materialist feminist literary critics focus instead on key problems in language, history, ideology, determination, subjectivity and agency from the basic perspective of a critique of the gendered character of class and race relations under international capitalism.

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### 3.4.1. Firestone:

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Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970) combined De Beauvoir's critiques of Freudian psychoanalysis and historical materialism with analyses of such cultural themes as romance. She regarded male domination as primary and quite independent of other forms of oppression—social and economic. Her theoretical aim was to substitute sex for class as the primary determinant in history. She represented the class-struggle as a product of the patriarchal family unit. Instead of analogizing from race to sex, as some feminists had done, she declared that "racism is a sexual phenomenon" (122) and examined the relations of both categories in terms of a nuclear family engaged in Oedipal dramas and capitalist transactions.

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### 6.4.2. Ruthven:

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Marxist feminism's primary aim was to open up the complex relations between gender and the economy. K.K. Ruthven in *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction* observed :

In *The Origin of the Family* (1884) Engels bypasses the problem of primacy by arguing that 'the first class oppression coincides with that of the female sex by the male', thus legitimating the familiar equation of the husbands with the bourgeoisie and wives with the proletariat. Any social system in which a Marxist analysis uncovers oppressive practices becomes metaphorical in feminist rhetoric of the oppression of women : class, race, slavery and colonisation furnish the dominant tropes of oppression. If male-female relations are construed in class terms, for instance, men are always the ruling class.

Firestone's approach was markedly integrative at a time when many leftists saw no connection between the classicism or racism they opposed and women's oppression. Firestone pointed at the need for a psychosocial synthesis.

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### 6.4.3 Mitchell :

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The significance of Juliet Mitchell's work for feminist literary theory is indirect yet fundamental. Initially trained as a literary scholar, Mitchell focused on questions concerning the family and child rearing by means of a feminist critique of psychoanalytic theories of sexual development largely based upon a literary-critical examination of texts within the Freudian and Marxist canons. Mitchell's project, continued in her influential *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1974) and *Women: The Longest Revolution* (1984), which reprints her 1966 essay alongside exemplary studies of literary texts, inflects feminist politics with insights from Marxism and psychoanalysis. With Jacqueline Rose (in their edition of Jacques Lacan's *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the "ecole freudienne,"* 1982), she continued the engagement between the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan and materialist feminist thinking in Britain. Working from the Freudian principle that "the fate of the adult personality can be largely decided in the initial months of life" and the Marxist principle of dialectical materialism that "human society is, and always will be, full of contradictions" [*Woman's Estate* 118, 90], Mitchell criticised "the voluntarist underestimation of the great difficulty of psychic change," since, she argued, "the best-cared for child has a caretaker who has grown up with problems—this will always be the case. And these problems will be transmitted in an uneven way" (McRobbie 87). Mitchell's consistent emphasis upon critically reading Marxist, Freudian, and Lacanian discourses on sexuality and socialisation leads to questions of ideology and literary representation that are of considerable importance for such feminist literary studies as Jacqueline Rose's *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (1986) and Jane Gallop's *The Daughters Education: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (1982), which takes *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* as its "point of departure" (xiii).

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### 6.4.4. Barrett:

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For a sociologist of knowledge like Michele Barrett, literary questions were contingent rather than central. Her treatment of ideology in *Women's Oppression Today*, however, has been highly influential among feminist literary theorists. According to Barrett,

the political urgencies of women's liberation bear directly on the need for a feminist analysis of "culture," and it is here that the problematic relationship of Marxism and feminism engages questions important to literary theory, in particular questions of aesthetics, subjectivity and ideology. In "Feminism and the Definition of Cultural Politics," her 1980 lecture to the Communist University of London, Barrett addressed three issues of direct importance to materialist feminist literary theory- 1) the indeterminacy of artistic and literary meaning, 2) the relationship between women's art and feminist art, and 3) the problem of judging aesthetic value and pleasure. Barrett focused on the literary problem of "signification," the "systems of signs... through which meaning is constructed, represented, consumed and reproduced" (38). Artistic and literary meanings are determinable but not fixed, since meaning "may depend on who is reading or receiving... and how they do so" (39). This was not an argument for total indeterminacy, however, since for Barrett every work does carry a "dominant, or preferred, reading" (42) that limits the range of possible meanings. Barrett regarded literary texts, art objects, and dramatic performances as marked by inner contradictions that cannot easily be adjudicated by reference to the artist's life or intentions. She agreed with Rosalind Coward that women's art is not necessarily feminist, since feminism "is an alignment of political interests and not a shared female experience" (42), but was reluctant to follow Coward and abandon female experience entirely. Barrett approached the question as to how we distinguish cultural production in general from "art" within the framework of a historical materialist critique of ideology : "It is only the degradation of work under capitalist relations of production, including the degree to which workers have been stripped of mental control over their labour, that makes us perceive such a huge gulf between work and what we call 'creative' work" (48-49). Arguing that feminists ignore the dual question of 'aesthetic value and pleasure to their peril, Barrett found the traditional assumption that value judgments can and should be made a highly suspicious assumption for feminist politics, since such judgments about "value" invariably tend to reinforce the values of the dominant classes as apparently natural and universal. Barrett's materialist aesthetics was a seeking to democratise the relation between the producer and the consumer of art. Skills, though socially defined, are not innate but acquired and therefore improvable, while the imaginative rendering of social life in works of art and literature is typically foreclosed in much feminist criticism by an undue emphasis upon the work's content as unmediated representation. Politics came first for Barrett, since literature and art help constitute social life but do not determine it : "Cultural politics, and feminist art, are important precisely because we are not the helpless

victims of oppressive ideology. We take some responsibility for the cultural meaning of gender and it is up to us all to change it" (58).

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### 6.4.5 Coward, Belsey :

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If for Barrett questions of literature, art, and aesthetic pleasure were important but not determining—there remained those “more fundamental changes” to be worked out. For Rosalind Coward, Catherine Belsey, Toril Moi and Cora Kaplan the critical study of literary texts became of primary importance to the development and enunciation of a feminist politics firmly committed to socialism. In *Patriarchal Precedents* (1983), Coward critically historicized from a feminist perspective the various disciplines within which sexual relations have traditionally been studied. For Coward, Lacan’s observation that the unconscious is structured like a language provided the basis for a materialist feminist approach to Semiotics that addressed how different forms of popular culture help construct gendered social subjects in ways that perpetuate oppressive social relations *Female Desire*, 1984). Belsey’s *Critical Practice* (1980) argued that “the recurrent suppression of the role of language” in traditional literary criticism is an ideological move by which the “‘correct’ reading” of a text installs the reader as “transcendent subject addressed by an autonomous and authoritative author” (55). Belsey developed this bringing together of Lacanian and Althusserian theories of the subject in *The Subject of Tragedy* (1987), which rereads English Renaissance drama from a materialist feminist perspective, arguing that the emergence of liberal ideologies during the capitalist era has required the “interpellation” of women as, in part, willing subjects of their own oppression in relation to a normative and universal male Self. This critique of liberal humanism emphasized the political importance of history, as well as the need for readings of literary texts against the grain of their ideological commitments.

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### 6.4.6 Moi:

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Moi’s *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985) challenged the humanist presuppositions informing the influential feminist literary criticism of Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Annette Kolodny and Myra Jehlen. In their antisexist focus on female authors and readers, Moi contended, feminist literary critics adopt what Marcia Holly calls a “noncontradictory perception of the world” (10) that mystifies rather

than disables patriarchal assumptions by positing for itself a place outside ideology. Celebrating women writers and readers as such re-inscribe the unitary self and thereby beg the political questions of agency and resistance, “of how it is that some women manage to counter patriarchal strategies despite the odds stacked against them” (64).

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### 6.4.7 Kaplan and Chakravorty Spivak

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In Kaplan’s work, and in that of Mary Jacobus and Penny Boumelha, the collective interest “in developing a Marxist feminist analysis of literature” (61) continued, producing class-sensitive critiques of sexual ideology in various literary texts of the post-industrial era in contrast to Belseys focus on the literature of the early capitalist period. Kaplan wrote that her experience in the collective enabled her to overcome her fear of “theory,” an antipathy that persisted among the U.S. feminist literary critics. Not all US feminist critics, however, shared this fear. Some of the most important US contributions to materialist feminist criticism came from socialists and feminists working directly with the interrelated literary problems of sexuality, racial difference, the politics of language, and postcoloniality, questions barely addressed by U.K. materialist feminists.

The essays in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s *In Other Worlds* (1987) and the interviews in *The Post-Colonial Critic : Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (ed. Sarah Harasym, 1990) emphasized the complicities and dangerous instabilities of “class,” “gender” and “race” among the analytical languages needed to negotiate a global politics that will destabilize the continuing logic of capitalism in the contemporary postcolonial era.

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## 6.5 □ Gynocriticism and Women’s Writing

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In *A Literature of Their Own*, (1977) Elaine Showalter viewed the literary history of women writers, many of whom were hidden from the male-dominated history of canonical texts as it were. She traced a history which showed the configuration of their material, psychological and ideological determinants. Her study promoted both a feminist critique as well as gyno-criticism as it was concerned with women writers. She examined British women novelists since the Bronte sisters from the point-of-view of women’s experience. Though she pointed at no innate female-sexuality or female-imagination, she nonetheless found a profound difference between women’s

and men's writings. She pointed at the fact that a whole tradition of female writing has always been neglected by male critics. She argued that literary subcultures all go through three major phases of development. For literature by or about women, she labelled these stages the Feminine, Feminist and Female. Showalter's dates are not to be taken rigidly ; they overlap, and multiple phases can be seen in a single writer. Critical of the practice of selecting only great figures for analysis, in an appendix she listed two hundred and thirteen women writers with "sociological" data, writers who provide diversity and generational links. She also avoided concepts of female imagination, preferring to look at the ways "the self-awareness of the woman writer has translated itself into a literary form in a specific place and time-span" and to trace this self-awareness within the tradition (12).

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### **6.5.1 Feminine, Feminist and Female Stages**

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The first, the Feminine Stage (1840-1880) involves "imitation of the prevailing modes of the dominant tradition" and "internalization of its standards" that is, male aesthetic standards. Her "feminine" phase includes intense, compact, symbolic fiction that used "innovative and covert ways to dramatize the inner life" (27-28), as well as "an all-inclusive female realism" that was "a broad, socially informed exploration of the daily lives and values of women within the family and the community" (29). This included George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell who stuck to the immediate social and domestic circle and suffered pangs of guilt for their commitments to authorship. They also avoided coarseness and sensuality thereby abiding to limitations of expression.

The second, the Feminist Stage (1880-1920) involves "protest against these standards and values and advocacy of minority rights". "Feminists" confronted Victorian sexual stereotypes, produced socialistic theories of women's relationships to work, class, and the family, and entertained an "all-out war of the sexes" (29). This phase, she said, includes radical feminist writers as Elizabeth Robins and Olive Schreiner who protested against male double-standards and male values and fantasized sexual separatism in Amazonian or suffragette communities.

The third, the Female Stage (1920 onwards) inherited characteristics of the former phases and also developed the idea of specifically female writing and female experience in a "phase of self-discovery, a turning inwards freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search for identity." Early parts of the "female" phase



of self-exploration were seen by Showalter as carrying “the double legacy of feminine self-hatred and feminist withdrawal” (33). The phase polarized sexuality, but the female sensibility moved from sacred to self-destructive and paradoxically failed to confront the female body. The concept of androgyny, explored from the Greeks to Bloomsbury in male as well as female authors by Carolyn Heilbrun (*Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*, 1973), came under attack as an escapist “flight” in Showalter’s controversial handling of Woolf (263-97). The phase of the female novelists since 1960 operates in Freudian and Marxist contexts and for the first time accepts anger and sexuality as “sources of female creative power” (35).

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### 6.5.2 Objectives: Showalter

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“Gynocritics is the name Elaine Showalter has given to those critics who wish “to construct a female framework for the analysis of women’s literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories” (“Toward a Feminist Poetics,” *New Feminist Criticism* 131). Showalter increasingly showed willingness to talk about various schools of feminist theory. She found the social theory of subcultures useful to gynocriticism in “Feminist Theory in the Wilderness.” In “Critical Cross-Dressing,” she showed scepticism about the ability of prominent male critics, Jonathan Culler and Terry Eagleton, in particular, to turn feminist as readers without surrendering their “paternal privileges.” What she feared was that “instead of breaking out of patriarchal bounds,” they will merely compete with women, failing to acknowledge women’s feminist contributions (143). She included feminist aesthetics and French feminism in the introduction to her edited collection *The New Feminist Criticism* and began talking more about men through the category of gender in her later edited collection *Speaking of Gender*.

Feminist freedom from, male theory was a goal for Showalter, but its accomplishment remains problematic in critiques of gynocritics’ practices. For example, Myra Jehlen found the self-contained gynocritical position problematic. She felt that, if, like Archimedes, the feminist shifts the world, she must position her fulcrum on male ground—she cannot work from a totally female stance. In “Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism,” Jehlen advocated attending to confrontations along the long border conditional to dominant male traditions, achieving what she called “radical comparativism.” Jehlen’s isolation of politics from aesthetics in literature was regarded as suspect by Toril Moi, although both critics attend to unconscious ideology. By the late 1970s, major female-centred studies had begun to

appear. In *Literary Women* (1976), Ellen Moers expressed the intention not to impose doctrine on women writers—an attitude that resembles Showalter's in its distrust of theory. She presented a practical, living history of women writers from the eighteenth century through the twentieth, attempting to shape it with their concerns and language. The description featured new anecdotal details and minute observations from manuscript sources, selected for their relevance to unique experiences of women. Many of the categories she used to discuss the history and tradition of women writers in the first half of her study were derived from traditional period and genre studies, for example, "The Epic Age," "Traditions, Individual Talent," "Realism," and "Gothic". In the second half, she set out to familiarize readers with literary feminism, a heroic structure for the female voice in literature that she called "heroicism". Her categories of heroicism incorporated characters in roles of loving, performing and educating.

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### 6.5.3 Gilbert and Gubar: Theory

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Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar theorized the position of woman and the literary imagination in the nineteenth (*The Madwoman in the Attic*, 1979) and the twentieth century (*No Man's Land*, 2 volumes, 1987-89). They offered a large selection of women authors who conform to their paradigms in their edition of *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (1985). Their approach included not just historical references to the material, social and gendered conditions of authors' lives but also to literary canons and archives, and to popular movements and artifacts—typical strengths of American feminist theory. Like Showalter, they detected historical stages of a female literary tradition, but they grounded these in male comparisons and frequently made their points through metaphors and puns, as seen in their titles.

In *The Madwoman in the Attic* they argued that key women writers since Jane Austen achieved a voice which can be called distinctively female by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards. According to them, for early nineteenth-century women writers the dominant vision of literary creativity was paternal : Women had to cope further with male fantasies of the female. These fantasies came in angelic and monstrous versions and were imposed as literary models. The madwoman or monster repeatedly created by women writers they saw as the authors double, expressing her anxiety, rage, and "schizophrenia of authorship" (*Madwoman* 78). They detected asymmetrical male and female responses to the rise of female literary power. They showed how women emerged from their liminal

position in the attic to wage the battle between the sexes.

In *The War of the Words*, Volume 1 of *No Man's Land*, which offers numerous studies of male authors, the battle is manifested in tropes of erotic dueling, the advent of the “no-man” to replace the virile man, and plots of males defeating alarming forms of female sexuality through a theology of the phallus, mutilations, rapes, and campaigns against the mothers of “castrated” sons. Women begin to have literary reactions to preceding female writers, sometimes arriving at parodic or comic treatments, as well as serious and positive ones. Gilbert and Gubar's collection of stereotypes and misogynistic plot types that progress through the decades is reminiscent of Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*. Women writers express belligerence less directly and render characters who are victorious through duplicity, subterfuge, or luck. The suffragist movement gives the early century metaphors of militarism and sacrifice. Modernist women offer private triumphs. Later women writers respond to male backlash with nightmares of defeat or dreams of triumphant women warriors.

Volume 2, *Sexchanges*, sustains the model of the eternal sex war refined into the consideration of sexchanges: “The sexes battle because sex roles change, but when the sexes battle, sex itself (that is eroticism) changes” (xi). Major changes include the rebellion against the feminisation of the American woman, powerful roles assumed by women in World War I, varied lesbian arrangements and transvestism. A more tortured experience of women in war emerged in Cooper, Munich, and Squier's essay collection *Arms and the Woman*.

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### 6.5.4 Gilbert and Gubar: Theoretical Models

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Two theoretical models in Gilbert and Gubar are worthy of mention. Their concept of the “anxiety of authorship,” used perhaps too broadly to describe nineteenth-century women writers (like Harold Bloom's male-applied term “anxiety of influence”) derives from Freud's psychosexual paradigm of the Oedipus complex. If women follow a normative female decree of the Oedipus complex, the father, that is, the male literary tradition, becomes the object of female desire, and the pre-Oedipal desire for the mother or her literature is renounced. Twentieth-century women writers, they said, have the option of the “affiliation complex,” which allows them to “adopt” literary mothers and to escape the male “belatedness,” or the “anxiety of influence” theorized by Bloom, which is in effect a biological imperative for literary descent from an originatory father. Normative resolution of the Oedipus complex may leave

women anxious about the fragility of paternal power, worried about a usurping paternal primacy, and fearful of male vengeance. Non-normative Freudian resolutions of the Oedipus complex offer advantages to authors such as Gertrude Stein. The resulting “masculinist complex” grants autonomy, a new maternal relation, and the creative option of male mimicry—a departure from Freud’s negative judgment.

Gilbert and Gubar also implicated fantasies in theory. *The War of the Words* focused on linguistic fantasies, and *sexchanges* on fantasy identifications. The feminist linguistic fantasy grants an intuitive primacy in language acquisition to the mother rather than to the father. Proceeding from Woolf’s remarks on women’s language, Gilbert and Gubar suggested that women fantasize a revision not just of women’s language but of women’s relation to language. They advocated the overturning of male sentencing—the sentence as definitive—in judgment, decree or interdiction. They saw agonistic oral competitiveness and the acquisition of a privileged, priestly language, as theorized by Walter Ong, as a male fertility rite, resisting the vernacular and controlling the mother tongue. One can cite modernist men such as Ezra Pound, D. H. Lawrence, James Joyce and T. S. Eliot and the deconstructionist theory of Jacques Derrida who have mystified, claimed, or transformed the mother tongue, so as to retain priestly authority. Increasingly, women writers find enabling fantasies and roles—Sappho as a predecessor, Aphrodite as an erotic authority, and transvestism as a metaphor. In the same exchanges, men express loss and failure.

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## 6.6 □ Poststructuralist Feminism/French Feminist Critical Theories

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French feminism has been deeply influenced by psychoanalysis, particularly by Lacan’s reworking of Freud. Focusing on Woman yet again as the other, French feminist theoreticians desired to break down conventional male-constructed stereotypes of sexual difference and they focused on language as the domain around which such stereotypes are structured. Barbara Johnson stated “The question of gender is a question of language” (*World* 37), and her succinct formulation of the relationship between gender and language did much to characterize the approach of a group of feminists who drew upon the discourses of poststructuralism. This kind of feminist work takes as its starting point the premise that gender difference dwells in language rather than in the referent, that there is nothing “natural” about gender itself. In

placing their emphasis on language, however, these feminists were not suggesting a sort of linguistic or poetic retreat into a world made only of words. Rather, for them, language intervenes in such a manner that “materiality” is not taken to be a self-evident category, and language itself is understood as radically marked by the materiality of gender. The poststructuralist focus on language thus raises fundamental questions that extend beyond matters of usage. They focused on the understanding of writing and the body as sites where the material and the linguistic intersect. Questioning the political and ethical grounds of language, the poststructuralist feminists considered here share a common opponent in patriarchal discourse, a feature that emerges in their readings of literature, philosophy, history and psychoanalysis. However they all counter and define patriarchal discourse in different ways.

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### 6.6.1 Cixous :

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Helene Cixous has contributed a valuable discussion of the consequences of what she termed the “death-dealing binary thought”. She lined up a list of binary oppositions some of which are cited below :

Where is she?  
Activity / Passivity  
Sun / Moon  
Culture / Nature  
Day / Night  
Father / Mother  
Head / Heart  
Intelligible / Palpable  
Logos / Pathos  
Man / Woman

Nature / History  
Nature / Art  
Nature / Mind  
Passion / Action

Cixous showed how these binary oppositions were heavily accepted in the patriarchal value system. Each binary opposition corresponds to a hierarchy where the feminine side emerges as negative or powerless. Inevitably all oppositions get hierarchical and

organisation by hierarchy makes all conceptual organisation subject to Man making him the privileged one.

Cixous's study led in a certain way to bisexuality as man is trained for phallic monosexuality. Cixous went on to develop what she called "feminine writing" (*écriture féminine*), envisaged in terms of bisexuality. This in turn leads to the question: "it has become rather urgent to question this solidarity between logocentrism and phallogentrism—bringing to light the fate dealt to woman," how one might go about such questioning is a point of dispute (Newly 65). She affirmed that today 'writing is woman's'. Writing becomes the passageway, the entrance, the dwelling place and the exit of the other in the woman. She viewed the libido of woman as cosmic just as her unconscious which makes her writing endless and infinite, more so because unlike man she is not invited to social success or sublimation. Literature, said Cixous, is under the command of the philosophical and the phallogentric. She concluded that women must reject a philosophical mode of writing if they wish to write themselves, in other words, a specifically feminine discourse, and thereby resist any identification with the discourse controlled by the phallic tradition. Cixous engaged in a political project designed to create an alternative, nonphallogentric discourse. Like Wittig, Cixous turned to fiction (*Angst, Illa, Souffles*) and became concerned with getting rid of words like 'feminine' and 'masculine,' 'femininity' and 'masculinity/ and even 'man' and 'woman' ("Exchange" 129). Cixous relied heavily upon psychoanalysis and Derridean deconstruction.

For Cixous, the space of feminine writing cannot be theorized or defined, enclosed or encoded ("Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *New French Feminisms*, ed. Marks and de Courtivron, 253). It can, however, be understood as "the ideal harmony, reached by few, [which] would be genital, assembling everything and being capable of generosity, of spending" ("Exchange" 131). Feminine writing is also the province of metaphor, not limited to written words and possibly taking the form of "writing by the voice," a harmonic *écriture féminine* metaphorized as writing in mother's milk or the uterus (*Illa* 208, *Newly*). Although her metaphors here are maternal, biologically the province of women, according to Cixous neither biological women nor men need be condemned to the space of phallogentrism. Cixous understood feminine writing as a bisexual political act that holds open "the very possibility of change" ("Laugh" 249). Whether the emphasis is on alternative writing or subversive rewriting, what is at stake in this feminist attention to language is the relationship between the twin materialities of writing and the body. This is

perhaps most obvious in Cixous's work, which specifically stresses the importance of the connection. Cixous exhorted women to write themselves and make their bodies heard in order to make "the huge resources of the unconscious" burst forth (*Newly* 94-97). She defied and challenged the traditional phallogocentric norm. Cixous constantly emphasized the role of the body in the creation of a text. She opined that repressed sexual desires can be a source of creativity and that since women are taught in patriarchal cultures to deny their libidinal desires, they are also thwarted from becoming creative artists. Cixous stated that the woman who internalizes phallogocentric criticisms begins to accuse herself of being a monster. Cixous's insights into the effects of phallogocentric dominance of literature and aesthetic value mirror Gilbert and Gubar's findings in "Infection in the Sentence". According to them, the patriarchal control of literature has profoundly crippled the female psyche. Their thesis expands upon and revises the Bloomian notion of "anxiety of influence," and they argued that "in comparison to the 'male' tradition of strong, father-son combat, however, this female anxiety of authorship is profoundly debilitating"(293). They explained that the highly creative woman suffers from mental diseases or "dis-eases": agoraphobia, anorexia, claustrophobia (295). To Cixous a woman's artistry is in itself nonconformity, a monstrosity against phallogocentrism. Cixous argued that feminine language "will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetoric, regulations and codes."(315) She boldly stated that feminine language promises revolution on two levels. Extrinsicly it triggers social and political changes. Intrinsicly it undermines phallogocentric expectations and demands concerning syntax, grammar, linear thought, Aristotelian unity and narrative teleology.

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### 6.6.2 Irigaray

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In a rather different move, Luce Irigaray also turned to the female body in order to develop an account of woman's pleasure that does not privilege sight. Irigaray argued that all accounts of bodily pleasure have traditionally been dominated by the scopophilic drive of male pleasure described by psychoanalysis. De-emphasizing the role played by visual pleasure, which is by definition primarily patriarchal, Irigaray went so far as to argue that "woman takes more pleasure from touching than from looking" (*This Sex* 26). Woman's pleasure, she said, for which the language of psychoanalysis is inadequate, is fluid, tactile, and what is most important, plural. It must be noted that Irigaray's use of anatomical analogies to describe feminine pleasure (and thus to reinterpret the phallogocentric discourse of philosophy and psychoanalysis)

leaves her open to charges of essentialism. Yet it is also possible to think of her work as turning to biological metaphor's and images of woman already prevalent in Western discourse in order to produce a new discourse that does not *see* sexual difference as a question of pure anatomical difference.

According to Irigaray, women cannot simply step outside of phallogocentrism so suddenly so as to think and write in ways completely free of the rules of patriarchy, for language and discourse are themselves inscribed with those rules. Instead, women have to work like a virus from within patriarchal discourses to infect and radically change them, thus "leaving open the possibility of a different language" (*This Sex* 80). Not surprisingly, then, the discourses of philosophy and psychoanalysis become prime "hosts" for Irigaray's work. She explained, "Unless we limit ourselves naively—or perhaps strategically—to some kind of limited or marginal issues, it is indeed precisely philosophical discourse that we have to challenge, and *disrupt* in as much as this discourse sets forth the law for all others, in as much as it constitutes the discourse on discourse" (74). In posing this challenge, Irigaray hoped to expose the ways in which patriarchal discourses are politically determined and disrupt altogether the power structures they hold in place. With this goal in mind, Irigaray sought to disrupt the discourses of Sigmund Freud and Plato (*Speculum of the Other Woman*), Jacques Lacan and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (*This Sex Which Is Not One*), Martin Heidegger (*L'Oubli*), Friedrich Nietzsche (*Amante Marine*), and Baruch Spinoza and Emmanuel Levinas (*Ethique*), to name only a few.

Similar political interventions have been made by Catherine Clement both in her study of opera (*Opera, or the Undoing of Woman*) and in her consideration of the sorceress and the hysteric (*The Newly Born Woman*) ; by Michele Le Doeuff in her interrogation of the role of lack and the place of knowledge acquisition in Western philosophy (*L'Imaginaire philosophique*) ; by Barbara Johnson in her readings of literature and Deconstruction (*The Critical Difference and A World of Difference*) ; by Julia Kristeva in her numerous works on linguistics, psychoanalysis and literature (*Revolution in Poetic Language, De-sire in Language, Powers of Horror, Tales of Love and Black Sun*) ; and by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her analyses of the relationship between philosophy, Marxism, deconstruction and subaltern studies (*In Other Worlds*).

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### 6.6.3 Kristeva

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Julia Kristeva, like Woolf, saw women writers caught between the father and the mother. As writers they collude with phallic dominance, associated with the privileged



father-daughter relationship on the one hand, and on the other they simultaneously flee everything phallic to find refuge in the valorisation of a silent underwater body, thus abdicating any entry into history. Kristeva's works have taken as their central concept a polarity between 'closed' rational systems and 'open' and disruptive irrational systems. She viewed poetry as poised between these two types of system. Julia Kristeva's main interest was in discourse which confronts language and thinks it against itself. She focused on the signifying process, trying to answer not only the question of exactly how language means but also what is in language that resists intelligibility and signification. She argued that structuralism, which focuses on the static phase of language and attempts to fix it and describe its details, sees it as homogeneous. Semiotics, on the other hand, which studies language as discourse articulated by a speaking subject, sees it as fundamentally heterogeneous. Kristeva gave a complex psychological account of the relationship between the normal and the poetic. She viewed human beings as a space across which physical and psychic impulses flow. The indefinite flux of impulses is regulated by family and social constraints. In the earliest pre-Oedipal stage, the flow of impulses is centred around the mother which leads to a disorganised prelinguistic flux of movements, gestures, sounds and rhythms. She called this 'semiotic' as it is an unorganised signifying process, active beneath the linguistic performance of an adult. Gradually this semiotic process gets regulated and gives way to logic and coherent syntax and rationality of the adult and this Kristeva called the 'symbolic'. For women, then, access to the symbolic order is through the father, entrapping women in THE classic double bind: if a woman identifies with the mother, she ensures her exclusion from and marginality in relation to the patriarchal order. If, on the other hand she identifies with the father—makes herself in his image, then she ends up becoming "him" and supporting , the same patriarchal order which excludes and marginalizes her as a woman. Kristeva argued that women must refuse to accept this dilemma. If, as she argued, the Judeo-Christian culture represents woman as the unconscious of the symbolic order—basic instinctual, drive-related "jouissance," then, from her very marginal position she can disrupt the symbolic chain. So, women must not refuse to enter the symbolic order, but neither should they adopt the masculine model of femininity. They must, in fact, uphold the Law and sexual difference within the patrilinear frame and refuse to become one of "them." It would be interesting to add that this balancing act turned out to be much too costly for some women for whom madness and suicide became the only routes (Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Maria Tsvetaeva to name a few). She spoke of Carnavalesque language that broke through the laws of language censored

by grammar, semantics and their attempt to manage the voice of the other ; at the same time it was a social protest which came into being in the margins of the dominant culture, but from that position it was powerful enough to begin to generate social change. She said that the *avant-garde* poet, man or woman, enters the Body of the Mother and resists the Name of the Father. In literature, thus, the semiotic meets the symbolic. This liberating energy, *this jouissance*, enacts a rapture which is close to rupture which points at anarchy. This poetic revolution, she linked with a political feminist revolution and foresaw this anarchism destroy the dominance of phallogocentrism.

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### 6.6.4 Wittig and Butler

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Some poststructuralist feminists, however, have preferred to develop an alternative to patriarchal discourse in place of the strategy of subversive rewriting. Monique Wittig attempted to create completely new, nonphallogocentric discourses in her fictional works *Les Guerilleres* (1969, trans. David LeVay, 1971), *L'Opoponax* (1969, *The Opoponax*, trans. H. Weaver, 1976), and *Le Corps lesbien* (1973, *The Lesbian Body*, trans. David LeVay, 1975). As a counter to the heterosexual, patriarchal social contract, Wittig proposed a structural change in language that will destroy the categories of gender and sex. Frequently this change she said would take the form of experimentation with pronouns and nouns, which she called the “lesbianisation” of language. (“One Is Not” 53).

While poststructuralist feminists have brought us a long way, the most complex and, one must add, the most delightful analysis of the distinction between gender and sex belongs to Judith Butler. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (1999) she contends that “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature” (7). Rather, gender as a discursive element gives rise to a belief in a prediscursive, natural sex. That is to say, sex is retrospectively produced through our understanding of gender, so that in a sense gender comes before sex (7). Butler argues that in light of this counterintuitive situation, we should deconstruct the “gender fables [that] establish and circulate the misnomer of natural facts” and recognize that “it becomes impossible to separate out ‘gender’ from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (xiii, 3). The status of gender for Butler becomes a free-floating artifice, as it emerges radically independent of sex. States Judith Butler: “Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical

discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of “men” will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that “women” will interpret only female bodies.... *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one.” (10) Gender she says is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. Gender thus proves to be “performative”. That is to say, “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (25).

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## 6.7 Comprehension Exercises

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1. Discuss the three Waves of Feurinism.
2. Write Short Notes on the Contributions of :  
(a) Virginia Woolf (b) Simone de Beauvoir
3. What are the main precepts of Materialist Feminism?
- 4) Examine the concepts of Feminist and Female Stage?