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## UNIT 42 MODERN BRITISH POETRY : AN INTRODUCTION

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### 42.0 OBJECTIVES

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**Our** aim in this unit is to provide a map of modern British poetry. Starting with the end of the nineteenth century it tries to give you some idea of the major movements and figures making brief references to American poetry. **This** larger perspective will help you to understand an individual poet or a particular tendency in terms of literary tradition and historical change.

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### 42.1 INTRODUCTION

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Putting the High Modernist mode of the 1920s in the centre this unit examines its ~~anticipations~~ in the late Victorian era as well as its lasting influence up to the present day. At the **same** time, it considers the rival tendency to recover the native English tradition wary of the Franco-American element in Modernism. Each decade seems to react against the poetic idiom of the previous one. The Irish and Welsh situations are analysed separately but always in relation to the main stream.

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### 42.2 THE END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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The origins of modern British poetry are not unexpectedly to be found in the poetic cross-currents and developments towards the end of the nineteenth century. **Although** the reigning Victorian poetic fashions and standards were challenged from diverse directions, many modern poets were indebted to Browning, **Hopkins**, Hardy and the late Victorian, 'fin-de-siècle' poets. When modern poetry broke with the past, the rebellion became particularly visible in the rejection of conventionally bejewelled and smooth poetic diction which could no longer articulate the raw, disturbing experience already handled in the avant-garde novel of Lawrence and Joyce. The debt of Eliot's *The Waste Land* to Joyce's *Ulysses* is well known.

The point of affinity between Browning and modern poetry is in his obscurity and irregularity of diction. While this initially may have sprung from a mind prone to rambling parentheses and therefore often became a vice, it **carried** Browning's imagination through a rapid succession of associations. For Eliot and the moderns, he thus linked the past, the 'Metaphysical' poets, with a poet like **Hopkins**. **Browning's** ability to create the natural articulation of a voice, which necessitated syntactical obscurity, remains a **permanent** legacy to modern poetry.

The contrast that the poetry of Hardy and Hopkins offered to contemporary models lies in their use of ambiguity and shifting tonalities, their adoption of an ironic mode in short. At times, Hardy's poetry seems to be boldly experimental, characterised by frequent flashes of daring imagination. His experiments orchestrate the use of dialect words, abbreviations, archaisms, and 'kennings' (or verbal riddles in the style of Anglo-Saxon poetry), some of which would be found barbaric according to orthodox aesthetics. Nevertheless, Hardy functions largely within the traditional forms, presenting the drama of unresolved contradictions: he has himself described his poems as unadjusted impressions. If he tended to relate the local and individual to cosmic pessimism, he was characteristically tentative, holding his judgement in suspense. Ultimately his vision is ironic, involving the rapid and unsettling juxtaposition of images and counter-perceptions that anticipates modernist techniques.

Both Robert Bridges and Hopkins experiment with prosody. The former's attempts stem from Greek and Latin prosody, resulting in much charm and delicacy at the cost of poetic concentration and intensity. For these qualities we must go to Hopkins whose 'sprung rhythm,' borrowed from Anglo-Saxon prosody, was reinforced by fresh imagery and compact structure. By keeping the number of stressed syllables fixed and varying the number of unstressed syllables, Hopkins was able to revive the 'Metaphysical' mode linking it to modern poetry. This mode, submerged through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was characterised, as we all know, by ingenious analogy—the extended or cryptic 'conceit'—the yoking of contraries and irregular rhythm and diction. Such a sensibility was sharply different from the Romantic and Victorian, banishing the bogey of 'high seriousness' from the concept of poetry and locating the poem's value not in ideas or autobiography but in the psychological process of creation in the poet's mind. In this sense, the modern movement amounts to a rejection of expressivist categories in favour of the Aristotelian theory of mimetic representation, although the former were never suppressed. The modern poet's unconscious was a storehouse of heterogeneity stirring him obscurely, prompting him, as it were, to get rid of excessively accumulated experience. The disparateness and breadth of the cultural tradition made for impersonality of expression. The 'metaphysical' poet brought together dissimilars—secular and divine love, for instance—so that the discord plunged him deep into the theme, the greater awareness of the conflict demanding greater poetic technique.

Such are the larger implications of Hopkins's achievement of forging a style capable of conveying the discords and conflicts in his mind. Apart from the contrapuntal play of regular metrical form and irregular speech rhythms, the intermeshing of 'inscape' and 'instress' anticipates the techniques adopted in much modern poetry. If 'inscape' is a variation on the principle of individuation (as defined by Coleridge), a focus on *quidditas* or haecceitas—the thisness and whatness of things—'instress' is the force and energy holding together the 'inscape.' In Hopkins's concern with the outer reflection of a thing as a thing, we encounter the modern mind's awareness of objects in their essential particularity and its simultaneous search in and through artistic form, that is, the poem itself, of the universal.

In the 1880s and 1890s the interrelated and overlapping tendencies of aestheticism, impressionism, and symbolism contributed to the rejection of Victorian priggish moralism and scientific materialism. Aestheticism or the movement known as *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake) stressed impersonal craftsmanship and a stylized rhetoric of passion. These new elements later became the basis for the ironic and somewhat cold detachment so distinctive of modernist poetry. Stylization was closely related to decadence, that is, the desire to understand the deeper and darker resources of the psyche guided in turn by a sense of overwrought aestheticism. The symbolist movement often aimed at suggesting an inner richness and mystery, and was thus part of the pervasive reaction against the positivist attitudes bred by technological smugness: it fell back upon symbols in order to capture the life above or below

pragmatic reality. In France, symbolist suggestiveness was contested by the Parnassian School of poetry with its emphasis on precise and economical description, of clinical self-observation.

The drive towards hard precision and clarity which represents perhaps the **most** decisive break with traditional poetic diction found expression above all in Imagism just ~~before~~ World War I. Accuracy, concreteness, and unadorned economy characterised the direct presentation of the objective world without discursive reflection. To this ~~project~~ an evocative dimension was added not only by symbolism but also by impressionism which **loosened** or dissolved an object into a group of impressions. The modern poet was thereby able to render the passage and dissolution of impressions so distinctive to the new, unsettling experience of the modern megalopolis, of rootless and heterogeneous cosmopolitan culture. Juxtaposing impressions or images apparently disconnected, the poet learnt from the arrangement of multiple planes in sculpture or movements in music the fundamental technique of discontinuous composition. This is how modernism held up a faithful mirror to fragmented reality and in doing so, produced an open *gestalt* or transformed, indeterminate structure of coherence. *The Waste Land* may be a mimesis of the heap of broken images that modern European civilization has been reduced to but the final effect, that is, the poem, remains a mastery of fragmentation.

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## 42.3 THE GEORGIANS AND THE WAR POETS

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The colloquial accents and unsentimental economy of Eliot and the later Yeats were, as we have already seen, anticipated at the turn of the century. These features are discernible even among the more conservative Georgian poets at the time of the First World War, although the excesses and exoticisms of decadence as well as the discontinuities of impressionism are absent. These poets include Rupert Brooke and Edward Thomas. Brooke was the most popular and typically Georgian who, somewhat ironically, began as a rebel against Victorian gentility with its fondness for vapid sweetness. But like many of his contemporaries, he could not break out of the orderly bounds of liberal humanism. Edward Thomas's strength lay in nature poetry, which he started to write on the encouragement of Robert Frost. Somewhat like Frost, Thomas meditates on a natural scene and using a plain and direct idiom, creates the effect of a questioning honesty resisting all temptations to abstract conceptual finality. Such a modernity of temperament was reinforced by a certain casual and homely intonation. The American Robert Frost's public image of a Yankee farmer-poet is not entirely unjustified: he turned against the Romantic tradition by choosing the localized authenticity of rural New England. Although the reader may miss in his or Thomas's work the impact of modern psychology, science, and politics, their use of the spoken language has been rightly admired for its unmistakable modernity.' Frost in particular was eminently successful in creating and modulating a fictional speaking voice.

The trauma of the First World War was first expressed by poets in the trenches challenging patriotic and military humbug; it then coloured the sensibility of an entire age. The later war poets like Siegfried Sassoon, Isaac Rosenberg, and Wilfred Owen increasingly saw the War as organized and motivated insanity: their poetry bore witness to the ugly truth seen through the eyes of the common soldier. In Sassoon, war encouraged a direct, colloquial vigour to reinforce the gruesome imagery, anger, and ridicule. Both Sassoon and Owen used realism in order to shock readers out of their complacency and **expose** the naked reality of dehumanized violence. After the war, Sassoon's poetry acquired an ironic quality through an unsettled juxtaposition of viewpoints. Owen, despite his unparalleled mastery of realistic detail, achieved a truly complex, sometimes visionary detachment and distancing. Isaac Rosenberg also attempted this imaginative distancing and often used a rapid succession of images. Thus we can see that war poetry prepared the ground for the Modernist poetry of the 1920s.

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## 42.4 IMAGISM

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Both in subject matter and form, modern American poetry was more innovative than British. While free verse (*vers libre*) did not last as a vogue, the technique of impressionistic juxtaposition without the links of smooth transition had a much longer life in Ezra Pound, and above all, in T.S. Eliot. Support came not only from the new insights of psychology and psychoanalysis but from the larger mood of a disintegrating civilization. The technique of discontinuous composition was highlighted in Imagism, particularly under the aegis of Pound who no doubt took his cue from T.E. Hulme and Ford Madox Ford. Hulme, in his *Speculations*, not only set out a philosophical basis for rejection of Romantic sentimental meliorism but appended some imagistic fragments as aesthetic equivalents of a new, austere classicism. A threefold Imagistic manifesto was announced in the magazine *Poetry* in March 1913: (i) direct treatment of the 'thing' whether subjective or objective (ii) scrupulous avoidance of any word that did not contribute to the presentation (iii) rhythmical composition in the sequence of the musical phrase, not of a metronome.

Among the poets originally grouped as Imagist were Pound himself, Amy Lowell, H.D. Richard Aldington, and John Gould Fletcher. Soon divisions surfaced, especially between Pound and Amy Lowell; in any case, the anthologies often included poets like D.H. Lawrence and James Joyce. In the ultimate analysis, Imagism had a historical importance; it survives, variously modified, in the bloodstream of modern poetry, in the search for a hard precision and economy. Lawrence never really fitted the Imagist bill, despite his animal and flower poems, because although he valued accuracy and rhythmic freedom, he rebelled against what he perceived as the cerebral, somewhat academic impersonality of Imagist poetry. His eroticism and intensity authenticated immediate experience—the unceasing fecundity of life unharnessed of teleology—in the tradition of Walt Whitman.

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## 42.5 YEATS AND IRISH POETRY

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The Irish situation was different particularly because of the largely agrarian society and the complex history of Irish nationalism. The struggle against British colonialism not only produced political verse but extended to a search for identity through Irish history, mythology, folklore and peasant culture. The so-called 'Celtic Twilight' (actually the name of a collection of stories or sketches Yeats published in 1873) brought together poets like George Russell (AE) and Lionel Johnson along with Yeats. Its primitivism was, however, somewhat sentimental and nostalgic, and its opposition to scientific, rationalistic dogma was largely a Romantic survival. Although the poets turned away from the sunny, Southern European or Alpine landscape celebrated in Romantic poetry to authentically Celtic mists and overcast skies, the general mood was one of world-weariness and disillusionment prompting ultimately escapist journeys into a land of heart's desire, away from the joyless squalor of modern urban life.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Irish literature consciously moved away from dreaminess to a genuine historical awareness, a passionate vigour and coarseness of experience. This reaction was the hall-mark of the Irish Dramatic Movement. Some Irish writers like John Millington Synge went to peasant life for fresh sources of poetry. George Russell's criticism of Yeats's shadowy insubstantiality was vigorously endorsed by the latter himself when he broke decisively with his earlier poetic style in *The Green Helmet* (1910) and *Responsibilities* (1914).

The poetic life of W.B. Yeats falls into two phases, earlier and later, opposed to each other and yet linked by the same longing for escape from this world. If in his early poetry, Yeats wishes to escape to a dreamy fairyland, in the later poetry the nostalgia is of the spirit, for a world of pure ideas. The poetic influence of the Pre-Raphaelites

as well as his early interest in the occult fortified his opposition to mechanistic conceptions of the universe, an opposition that remains a common link among modern writers otherwise widely different from each other. Yeats's early poetry is characterized by somnolent rhythms, symbolist evocativeness and obscure mystic calls. What gave this mixture credibility was his peculiarly ambivalent Anglo-Irish identity: as a member of the Protestant Anglo-Norman Ascendancy, Yeats was passionately involved in Irish politics and yet distrustful of its nationalist zeal. He was no doubt drawn into politics by his unrequited love for Maud Gonne; at the same time, he remained aloof discovering a mythically resonant, tragic heroism in the futile Easter Rebellion.

The quest for identity led Yeats to resolve his own self into a dialectic, into the antithetical categories of self and soul. Socially he tried to locate himself in the declining aristocracy among the big houses and estates, ideologically bound to the peasant, the servant or the tramp against the emerging threat of a bourgeoisie that was relatively new to Ireland. Failure in love, practical experience, especially of running the Abbey Theatre and contempt for the *nouveau riche* brought in a sturdier note into his poetry chastened by bitterness and disillusionment. The discovery in himself of double selves was aided by the knowledge received at seances supposedly through the 'medium' of his wife; this knowledge grew into Yeats's philosophical system *A Vision* (1925; rev. ed. 1937). Here, as elsewhere, we encounter the central symbolism of interpenetrating gyres or cones and the phases of the moon. Along with the doctrine of the Mask, these metaphors enabled Yeats to impose a certain pattern or order on the history of Western civilization somewhat in the manner of Spengler.

Yeats's pursuit of a world of pure ideas, a Byzantine abstraction-monuments of unageing intellect—was anchored in the concrete vitality of the imagination. Thus his poetry dramatises the fundamental dichotomy of the flesh and the spirit on different levels: as a result, a dispassionately cold style unleashes passionate intensity by virtue of its magisterial control. From *The Tower* (1928) onwards, Yeats's system of opposed personae or split selves is largely unburdened of its occult trappings: it is as though in his last poems Yeats rises above his system to the existential conflict between affirmation and renunciation, art and nature, passion and conquest, old age and the disturbing promptings of the flesh.

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## 42.6 MODERNISM, EZRA POUND AND T.S. ELIOT

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The High Modernist mode popular in British and American poetry from the early 1920s to the 1950s was of course dominated by Pound and Eliot. Modernist poetry was characterised by a prodigious appetite for assimilating the disparate and fragmentary experiences of a complex and heterogeneous civilization. *Fin-de-siècle* formalism and aestheticism, impressionism, symbolism and imagism all combined to produce the modernist mode. While we have to wait till the thirties for the poetry of political commitment, the impact of discoveries in psychology and anthropology are clearly discernible. Poetry attempted to explore the new territory of the irrational and associative surge of consciousness, neurosis, dream, and the Collective Unconscious with its storehouse of myth and archetype. This is why the poets adopted what has been described above (42.2) as the technique of discontinuous composition.

Pound's wide and disparate reading extended the range of modern poetry, especially in his intertextual use of literary traditions. Poetry, as he believed, must be as well written as prose. By 1911, his poetic idiom was relatively stripped of 'poetic diction': his syntax became more direct and natural. Apart from compression and excision, Pound concentrated on images against the uninspired abstractness of language. His *Vorticism*, as a movement, was a continuation of *Imagism* and its dynamic interplay of images. He moved to a non-mimetic model of the Image, a form produced by an emotional energy, a cluster, an arrangement of planes as in sculpture. After the War and the economic difficulties he went through, in *Homage to Sextus Propertius*

(1934) Pound uses, over and above the concentrated economy, an ironic persona whose mental ability and emotional variety introduced a shifting point of view. There is even the pose of foppery and tone of self-deprecation associated with Jules **Laforque** and Eliot. By the time of *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) and the first seven Cantos (1915-20), the extraordinarily compressed, oblique, learned, elliptical, and allusive style had been well established. In these two works Pound uses **the** masks of two poets in order to produce a critique of contemporary European civilization. In comparison to the pictorial and musical avant-garde, however, he remained a little backward-looking and modishly archaic.

Pound's contributions to the modern movement derived more from his editorial and talent-scouting abilities. Real stylistic innovation came from T.S. Eliot even before he had come in contact with the former. In Eliot at last we encounter the fracturing and re-fashioning of received idiom that had been achieved in music and the visual arts. Largely on the basis of his reading of Baudelaire, Laforque, and Jacobean drama, Eliot quite independently forged a style that not only surpassed Imagist practice but seamlessly incorporated the self-examining, self-deprecating persona timidly withdrawing from traditions of passionate immersion and confession. Such a persona or attitude was no doubt the legacy of Jules Laforque. If discontinuous composition is the hall-mark of modernist poetry, then Eliot remains its finest practitioner. Moreover, what gives coherence to the so-called heap of broken images is an essentially musical structure of relationship between part and whole. **Apart** from music (or for that matter, sculpture), Eliot's use of an organized whole, a web of relationships, seems to have been inspired by the notion of *gestalt* in contemporary psychology. The *gestalt* psychologists believed that a random collection of marks or dots on a page would reveal a certain pattern or design to the observing spectator. If these marks were re-distributed continuously, the effect would never be that of disorder but of constantly renewed configurations. Thus we have in Eliot's poetry the genesis of a **form** that is harmonious without being closed or rigid, characterised, rather, by its appetite for inclusiveness.

Such a form is no doubt exemplified by *The Waste Land* (1922). But it is discernible even in the earliest poetry of Eliot as it was for him the aesthetic equivalent of fragmentation, rootlessness, and lack of belief in modern European civilization. **From** this viewpoint, not only is *The Waste Land* anticipated by 'Gerontion' or 'The Love-Song of J. Alfred **Prufrock**' but even the *germ* of *Four Quartets* (1943) contained within the early verse. In 'Prufrock' or 'The Portrait of a Lady,' sardonic self-deprecating attitudes located within a context of drab boredom, timidity, seediness, and sexual unease are juxtaposed with glimpses of horror and glory. This sets the tone for Eliot's masterly use of squalor and beauty in the *Sweeney* poems. The need for unrelenting self-observation, for introspective distrust found its proper outlet in a withdrawal from passion related to the loss of faith and certitude in modern civilisation. **Thus**, in 'Gerontion' an accurate, authentic cosmopolitan setting dramatizes the shrivelled-up life of reminiscence produced by spiritual atrophy. We have in this poem a central pattern in Eliot's poetry: fear of the full-blooded, spontaneous urgency of life with its structure of desire, wish, and expectation leading to an astringent, ascetic renunciation prompted by the history of tainted, destructive passions that European civilization offers.

Even as Eliot veered towards conservative values and preoccupation with religious dogma through *Hollow Men* (1925) and *Ash Wednesday* (1930), stylistically he remained as innovative as ever. After his fairly successful experiments in verse drama, Eliot moved to the more contemplative, somewhat **philosophical Four Quartets** with **its** intertwined themes of time, experience, memory, communication and the possibilities of reconciliation. '**Burnt** Norton,' the first quartet, seems to begin the polyphonic **structure** with abstract speculation and memories in a rose-garden. 'East Coker' is the name of the Somerset village **from** which Eliot's ancestors had emigrated to **America**, and the quartet thus takes us to the past. In 'The Dry Salvages' (a group of rocky islands off the coast of Massachusetts) Eliot's own lived past in

America is recaptured. Finally, in 'Little Gidding,' war-time England is related to the past of the village which had held a religious community in the seventeenth century and had its church destroyed by Oliver Cromwell's troops. The poem Four Quartets continues effectively to use the technique of discontinuous composition, the structure of music, and a subtly permeated self-reflexivity. We recognize through the moving drama of faith the old dry, ironic, detached persona, the unremitting self-observation and preoccupation with language, communication, and poetic form.

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## 42.7 THE POETRY OF THE THIRTIES

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As we move on to the 1930s, some changes from the Pound-Eliot era become noticeable at once, especially in the circle of W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis, and Louis MacNiece. These poets turned against their predecessors' absorption in poetry as an autotelic art, and were influenced by the stark contrast between their privileged public-school upbringing and the spectre of economic depression and Fascism in Europe. Their fight against Fascism not only centred around the Spanish Civil War but extended to sympathy for Marxism and the achievements of the Russian revolution. By contrast, Eliot, Pound, and Yeats had in their different ways distrusted democratic tendencies in politics. As the focus shifted out of literary tradition or myth into social and political commitment, the poets of the Thirties rejected the discontinuous or disjointed style, a Franco-American import, in favour of a less obscure or gnarled idiom closer to native English speech. This reaction against esoteric poetry packed with recondite allusions aimed at an engagement in immediate and insistent problems. We could mention in passing Auden's Poems (1930), Spender's Poems (1932), and C. Day Lewis's The Magnetic Mountain (1933). In the anthology New Signatures (1932), Michael Roberts clearly rejected the traditions set in the Pound-Eliot era. New Verse, a poetry magazine founded by Geoffrey Grigson in 1933 brought out an anthology in 1939 which foregrounded current speech and actual socio-political issues in poetry. The concern for contemporary events was reinforced by the need for intelligibility and wider readership, and the poets reverted towards more traditional syntax, metres and forms like the sonnet, the heroic couplet, *terza rima*, and so on.

Apart from Marx, Freud was an important influence in the poetry of W.H. Auden, the outstanding poet of the generation. In The Destructive Element, Stephen Spender also believed in the fusion of Marx and Freud. From his earliest volume of verse, Auden struck a remarkably individual note but always within a traditional framework. Ideological de-mystification and psychoanalytic revelations led to the sense of a doomed civilization with constant references to disease and the death-wish, the latter symbolized as a mysterious Enemy. Even as the heroic and the modern are brought together, the imagery is ingeniously drawn by Auden from guerrilla warfare, ruined industry, railheads, and frontiers. Using light verse, parody, and the popular song, he was often successful in making the banal a vehicle of serious meanings. The flippancy may have been reminiscent of Eliot, dismissive of solemnity, but Auden betrays a self-protective irony and tonal uncertainty. As he progresses as a poet, he moves from a taut and elliptical style to an easier, more fluent one, but in the process he loses the pressure and urgency of feeling. Where the emotion or personal experience controls the technique, Auden is at his best. He is particularly good at poems starting with the mood of a place and expanding to general meditation—the technique of 'paysage moralise,' the use of geography and landscape to symbolize spiritual and mental states. After his emigration to America and the beginning of the Second World War, Auden shows a more serious and explicit concern with religion, and the place of Marx and Freud is taken by Kierkegaard and the modern Protestant theologians.

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## 42.8 THE POETRY OF THE FORTIES

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The Forties saw a reaction against the poetry of social reporting and political commitment in the surrealist, neo-romantic poetry of the New Apocalypse,

anthologized in *The White Horseman* (1941) and focussed almost exclusively on self-unravelling. Dylan Thomas set the example for this expressive style marked by mystery, inarticulate terrors, and a dream-like quality. In Thomas's early poetry there is almost a pantheistic presence of God in Nature, enabling him to relate vitally energies creative as well as destructive. A non-Welsh-speaking Welshman, he was influenced on the one hand by the Welsh bardic tradition with its verbal and metrical skills. On the other hand, Welsh Non-conformism made him confront the problems of sin and salvation. From his troubled personal life and embattled Welsh identity, Thomas extracted an elemental and innovative richness of vocabulary and diction that went much deeper than the concerns of the Auden circle. From July 1931 till November 1934 he composed *Eighteen Poems* and *Twenty-five Poems* on the basis of his localized experiences at Swansea. The spectre of impending death due to alcoholism coloured his later poetry but at the same time he never gave up the discipline of the craftsman, submitting himself to the restraining demands of narrative verse and drama. With *Deaths* and *Entrances* (1946) and the radio play *Under Milk Wood* (1954) his poetic reputation was established on a sure basis. Thomas, and to some extent poets like George Darker or G.S. Fraser, rejected the self-conscious, intellectualized, ironic style of modernism in favour of an intoxication with words, myths, and Gothic effects. But in comparison to the poetry of Yeats, Eliot, and Pound, that of even Dylan Thomas does not extend far beyond a combination of sex and the Bible, Freud and the Old Testament.

This neo-romantic style in its extreme forms was unnecessarily involved and prolix, emphasizing the mysterious, mystical and subconscious. When it influenced a later generation of poets like Kathleen Raine and Edwin Muir it was fortunately divested of its violence. Much before the Fifties finally rejected such 'apocalyptic' fashions, the finest challenge to the excesses and defects of this style came perhaps from the poetry of Keith Douglas whose untimely death in the Second World War **was** a major loss to British poetry. Although his linguistic economy and compactness became an urgent vehicle of a controlled and **unblurred** vision of death and mutability, his poetry found true recognition only in the Sixties.

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## 42.9 THE POETRY OF THE FIFTIES

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The Fifties were marked by rejection of the poetic of the previous decade. The process perhaps began with the wry conservatism of Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, and John Wain who were together at Oxford. Robert Conquest's influential anthology, *New Lines* (1956), brought in six other poets: Elizabeth Jennings, John Holloway, Thom Gunn, D.J. Enright, Donald Davie, and Conquest himself. Known as 'The Movement,' this body of poetry cultivated elegant perspicuity and economy against extravagantly figurative language and shapeless syntax of any kind. In place of theoretical systems and ideology, these poets chose withdrawal from intellectual, public issues; instead of plumbing the unconscious depths they attempted to operate on the register of ordinary and orderly commonsense. This has resulted often in a dry and somewhat stolid academicism, a poetry of the unenthusiastic imagination, as it has been called. But its primary importance lies in the play of intelligence and **intelligibility**, manifest in the skilful use of traditional metres and forms mixed with low-key speech rhythms and observation of daily detail in the middling sections of contemporary society largely excluded from modern poetry.

The most accomplished Movement poet, Philip Larkin, goes far beyond the manifesto in his use of deflationary rhetoric and teasingly casual irony. Larkin's early verse *The North Ship* (1945), suffers from rhetorical flourishes and an uneasy indebtedness to Yeats. He soon changes his poetic master, by-passing the supposed 'dislocations' of modernist diction and arriving at the poetry of Hardy. As a poet he opened up territories previously dismissed with contempt: provincial-suburban life with its humdrum values invites his cool, somewhat affectionate scrutiny. His poetic fame rests on *The Less Deceived* (1955) *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *The High Windows* (1974). If the emotional range appears to be narrow, the shortcoming is

redeemed not only by exemplary craftsmanship but also by a stark exposure of all wishful deceptions that keep us settled in life. Though not marked by defiance, subversive energy or literary allusions, his poetry offers a distillation of the bleakness and loneliness of modern life in a minor key.

Despite the importance of **Larkin** as a poet, the Movement and its allies signalled a withdrawal into insular parochialism and elegance bordering upon triviality. The return to traditional modes and styles often concealed a decline in vigour, range, complexity, and passion. As **Kingsley Amis** wrote in *Poets of the 1950s* (edited by D.J. Enright), 'Nobody wants any more poems about philosophers or paintings or novelists or art galleries or mythology or foreign cities or other poems.' In the same anthology, Philip **Larkin**, expressing his dislike of Mozart publicly, was more dismissive: he had no faith, he declared, in 'tradition' or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems or poets.

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## 42.10 THE POETRY OF THE SIXTIES AND AFTER

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In the mid-Fifties some student poets met regularly in Cambridge to discuss their work. On the basis of this, Philip Hobsbaum founded 'The Group' in London including poets like George MacBeth, Peter Porter, Ted Hughes, and Alan **Brownjohn**. A more tightly knit circle than the Movement, it was opposed to the sedate formalist poetics of the latter: along with a distrust of polished irony and crystalline forms it took an interest in natural and violent imagery. Obsessively autobiographical in his best work, MacBeth was boldly experimental even if he was not always successful. Peter Porter made intelligently sardonic use of his status as an Australian, a compassionate outsider. He resisted the parochial tendencies in British poetry by allusions to European culture, and turned towards dream and the irrational resources of language under the influence of American poets like Wallace Stevens and John **Ashbery**.

In fact, American poetry, as we have seen, remained always more innovative and intellectually challenging. The Forties, for instance, saw the emergence of a new generation of poets in America whose influence extended fruitfully to the British poets of the Sixties. The most important of these American poets were Robert Lowell and John Berryman, along with their contemporaries and successors like Elizabeth Bishop, Theodore Roethke, Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath. Lowell and Berryman, unlike the British poets, intelligently assimilated the legacy of the **Pound-Eliot** era although they broke with the conventions of impersonality in favour of personal experience captured usually on the verge of disintegration. Thus Lowell, in particular, beginning in a literary milieu, struggled with his bouts of mania towards what has come to be known as 'confessional' poetry, which directly influenced Sexton and Plath. Despite the obsession with psychoanalytic processes, Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) remains a landmark in the poetic representation of self-dismantling (which of course is ultimately an authentically modern mode of self-making) in a language of stark, compelling power.

Sylvia Plath, a legatee of the 'confessional' tradition, settled in England after her **marriage** to Ted Hughes. Her proneness to suicide can be traced to the profound insecurities of her life brought on by her ambivalent attitude to parental authority. Even as she wrote out of a strange kind of terror and despair she was able to approach, through her masterly control of language, the calm centre of hysteria. Unlike Auden, she located her psychological crises in a larger social and historical context, the equivocating anxieties of gender in a patriarchal society. Her early poetry consisted largely of exercises or 'pastiche' of Dylan Thomas, **Yeats**, and Marianne Moore. From 1960 onwards, she was able to observe and **analyse** with unflinching honesty her imprisoned psyche, creating and exploring a surreal landscape specific to it. From her mingled response of fascinated terror of death she perilously extracted the heroic courage of liberation. She controlled her obsession with death by means of an intelligent use of rebirth or renewal already evident in her

first collection, *The Colossus* (1960), and her novel *The Bell-Jar* (1963). As she moved on to *Ariel* (1965), her last poems, another theme, that of redeeming the meaninglessness of existence through art, lends an existential headiness to her picture of disintegration.

The British poets of the Sixties were exposed not only to American 'confessional' poetry but also to the freewheeling and open-structured verse of the 'Beat' movement—the latter influenced the British 'pop' poets. From East European poets like Vasco Popa ((Yugoslavia) and Miroslav Holub (Czechoslovakia), the British poet could pick up elements of black comedy.

The resulting enlargement of poetic vision is seen in Ted Hughes and **Thom Gunn**. Hughes shattered the wry placidity of the Movement with his very first volume of poems *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), reviving, as it were, the Romantic concept of inspiration based in the instinctual and atavistic. His harsh, jagged, and abrasive style rejected urbane effects in favour of a turbulent energy and violence that at times go out of control. A serious interest in archaeology and anthropology gradually drew him towards the primitive, the exotic, and the alternative mythical traditions that lie behind *Crow* (1970). Even as he has extended his horizon, Hughes has remained rooted in Yorkshire life, returning to fresh and mundane country-life, to a regionalism that is in fact one of the common features of much recent British poetry, in *Gaudette* (1977) or *Remains of an Elm* (1979). Beginning with primordial savagery captured in language and imagery, particularly in his poems on caged or uncaged predatory animals, Hughes introduced a distancing irony as early as *Lupercal* (1966). The quasi-Darwinian struggle for survival is increasingly shorn of self-indulgent or sensational elements and fits into a relentlessly bleak landscape in *Wodwo* (1967). By the time of *Crow*, Hughes approximates to a Beckett-like grim and sardonic vision, a black comedy that nihilistically strips off all human pretensions. It is a bitter parody of all myths of Creation in which sexuality is not procreative but becomes a mutual devouring. The element of comic whimsy finds expression also in traditional metres and forms, especially in poems for children.

Like Hughes, **Thom Gunn's** poetic arrival was also explosive. In *Fighting Terms* (1954) and *The Sense of Movement* (1957) we encounter a reckless immersion in energy and 'happening' as opposed to timid and cautious wisdom. Although Gunn has been accused of admiring instinctual brutality, his **untrammelled** egotistical heroes articulate an essentially existential situation. His honesty and self-analysis lead to a shift in *My Sad Captains* (1961) to a more humane tone. The poetry that he produced under the influence of hallucinatory drugs only intermittently achieves a surreal insight. This weakening of poetic control is reflected in his later poetry where his honesty is diluted by sentimental nostalgia. Of late a note of nihilism and confused disillusionment has entered his poetry suggesting perhaps a turning point in the future.

Among his contemporaries, **Geoffrey Hill** seems to strike a different note by virtue of his **religious preoccupation**. He relates it to the history or memory of **Europe** and the more personal imperatives of memory through a dense **intertextuality**.

Despite the popularity of **Dylan Thomas**, Welsh poetry took much longer than Irish poetry to extract a new power from its native resources. The austere verse of **R.S. Thomas**, a Welsh clergyman, achieves this by bringing to life a bleak and arid landscape in which he describes the harshness of the farmer's life. Starting with Wales and peasant farmers in the priest's parish he reaches out to the experience of God. The peasants' mental vacancy that matches the emptiness of the setting reduces them to a dehumanizing existence. Thomas takes an **unsentimental view** of a community cut off from its nourishing traditions. The new directions in his later poetry like *Hm* (1972) suggest an extension of viewpoint beyond the Anglo-Welsh,

In recent decades, Northern Ireland has produced a new breed of powerful Irish poets. Both Derek Mahon and Paul Muldoon were part of the Belfast Group: both the poets attempt to situate the plight of growing up in Northern Ireland within a larger background. Mahon achieves this through his irony and sense of an apocalyptic bleakness. The opposition in Paul Muldoon between rural and cosmopolitan, an Irish dichotomy reminiscent of the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh, expresses itself in a tension between the Northern Irish Catholic identity and English literary tradition.

Although **Seamus Heaney** now lives in Southern Ireland, his poetic roots go back to the farms and bogs of Northern Ireland. As he vividly portrays Irish farm life with its skills and activities, the relationship with the land gives a rugged power to his verse, including his use of northern dialects and speech-accent. The bogs become a metaphor for the dark, subterranean deposits of history and the psyche. The evidence of ritualistic violence recently excavated enables him to relate the violent history of Northern Ireland to the Early Iron Age. Although Heaney's intellectual sources are different, his sense of artistic responsibilities recalls that of **Yeats**, even in the note of ambivalence and distancing from the violence.

On the basis of Viking deposits discovered in Dublin, Heaney opens up a link between Ireland and Scandinavia and constructs a 'northern' mythology in *North* (1975). But if his bog poems deal with pagan codes of revenge and ritual slaughter, that world is countered by poems highlighting childhood serenity and tender personal relationships. Under the strange beauty of the bog lie the archaeological layers of violence: this informs Heaney's unusual assurance in the power of the poetic imagination to transmute its raw, embedded sources into beauty. This confident artistic ego is reflected in the honesty of language and uninvolved, disinterested confrontation of political violence.

With *Field Work* (1979), Heaney moves in a new direction, towards the ordinary social world and its plain, conversational manner. From *Station Island* (1984) onwards, even as he returns to the somewhat traditional themes of the role and abiding value of poetry, he articulates the need both to face political violence and to be free of it. Yeats's example is further discernible in Heaney's search for wisdom and interweaving of personal memories with historical images. Memory not only plays a consolatory and absolving role but draws him into a sense of Catholic community. At the same time, his non-committal individuality pulls him in an opposite direction, as evident in *Sweeney Artray* (1983) and *The Haw Lantern* (1987): perhaps the anti-poetry of Eastern Europe has provided the impetus for a detached, hard economy.

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## 42.11 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit you have learnt about the history of modern British poetry from the late Victorian age to the present day. You have seen how the search for precision and economy along with irony dominates the modernist movement. Political commitment or social reporting, neo-romanticism, and assertion of Englishness are some of the other interwoven themes.

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## 42.12 EXERCISES

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1. In what ways do **Browning, Hardy and Hopkins** anticipate modernity in poetry? (See 42.2)
2. Write short notes on i) aestheticism, ii) impressionism, iii) symbolism. (See 42.2 and 42.5)

3. Assess the contribution of the poets of the First World War to modern British poetry. (See 42.3)
4. Write short notes on: i) Imagism (see 42.4 and 42.2), ii) discontinuous composition (see 42.2, 42.4 & 42.6).
5. Bring out the Imagist elements in Eliot and Pound. (See 42.2, 42.4 & 42.6)
6. Write an essay on the speaking voice in modern poetry. (See 42.3 & 42.6; also 42.2, 42.5, 42.7, 42.9 & 42.10)
7. What in your view is Yeats's contribution to modern poetry? (See 42.5)
8. Write short notes on:
  - i) the poetry of social reporting (see 42.7)
  - ii) 'confessional' poetry (42.10)
  - iii) neo-romanticism (42.8)
  - iv) the rejection of modernism (see 42.9; also 42.8)
  - v) the Movement (42.9)
  - vi) the Group (42.10)
  - vii) the theme of energy and the imagery of violence (42.10).

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### 42.13 SUGGESTED READING

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- Alvarez, A. *The Shaping Spirit* (London, 1958)  
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 Leavis, F.R. *New Bearings in English Poetry* (rev. edn. London, 1950)  
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 Williams, Raymond. *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (London, 1958)  
 Wilson, Edmund. *Axel's Castle* (New York, 1931)  
**Contemporary Poets** ed. James Vinson (London, 1975)  
*Great Writers of the English Language: Poets* ed. James Vinson (London, 1979)  
**Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry** ed. Ian Hamilton (Oxford, 1994)  
*Writers and Their Work* (published by the British Council)

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## UNIT 43 W.B. YEATS: BACKGROUND, SYSTEM, AND POETIC CAREER UP TO 1910

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### Structure

- 43.0 Objectives
- 43.1 Introduction
- 43.2 The Quest for Irishness
- 43.3 Magic, Mythology, and Symbolism
- 43.4 A Less Dream-Burdened Will
- 43.5 Yeats's Ireland
- 43.6 The System: Mask, Moon, and Gyre
- 43.7 Poetic Career (1889-1910)
- 43.8 'Adam's Curse'
- 43.9 'No Second Troy'
- 43.10 Let Us Sum Up
- 43.11 Questions

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### 43.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit will introduce you to the historical and intellectual background to the poetry of W.B. Yeats, one of the most important poets of the twentieth century. It will also trace his poetic development up to 1910 since from around that time there is a sharp change in style. It will consider two poems from this early period for close reading.

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### 43.1 INTRODUCTION

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W.B. Yeats won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923. His poetic career moves from the pre-modern to the modern: he was master of both the styles. Always interested in magic and the occult, Yeats challenged mechanistic conceptions of the universe by foregrounding the former along with Celtic mythology and symbolism. Soon enough the actual world enters into his poetry. He constructs a philosophical system in order to organize the anarchy of modern civilization. His entire poetic career is stamped with a dialectical schematism, essentially of flesh and spirit. Beginning with escape to a fairyland he searches for another kind of escape, into a world of pure ideas.

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### 43.2 THE QUEST FOR IRISHNESS

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W.B. Yeats was born in Ireland to John Butler Yeats, a painter, and Susan Pollexfen, who came from a family of shipowners. Through his father's family and the literary company that met at their house, Yeats was exposed early to the ferment of ideas and intellectual conversation in London and in Howth, near Dublin. By contrast, the Pollexfens offered an alternative model of instinct, physical prowess and practical wisdom. Yeats's father thought that the fusion was poetically fruitful for his son. This may well have been the basis for a cast of mind that habitually expressed itself in terms of polarities and antitheses. As Yeats himself has put it in *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1918), when we quarrel with others we produce rhetoric but when we quarrel with ourselves we produce poetry. His doctrine of the Mask, his lunar symbolism, and his symbol of the interpenetrating gyres of history are all characterised by a dialectical schematism: the self versus the anti-self, the new or dark moon versus the full moon, the widening and narrowing gyres. The schematism which helped Yeats order a disintegrating civilisation may have been prompted by the duality of his Anglo-Irish identity and reinforced by his reading of Blake, Swedenborg and ultimately the earlier Neo-Platonist thinkers. The existential antinomy of flesh and spirit finds resolution in Yeats's pursuit of passionate wisdom which promises deliverance from the disturbing aspects of the life of flesh unmitigated by the onset of old age.

His mother's family lived in Sligo, on the west coast of Ireland where, apart from London, he spent much of his youth. A few miles north of Sligo was the mountain of



Ben Bulbin (immortalised in poems like 'Under Ben Bulbin') under which was Drumcliff churchyard, Yeats's chosen place of burial. The Sligo landscape, evocatively captured in his early poetry, like 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' or 'The Stolen Child' is steeped in Gaelic folklore and superstition. As Yeats's notes to his *Collected Poems* explain, after *Crossways*, his subject matter, especially in *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889) became Irish. For reasons spelt out in an essay, 'Ireland and the Arts' (*Essays and Introductions*), Yeats decides to give up Arcadian and Indian scenes and never to 'go for the scenery of a poem to any country but my own, and I think that I shall hold to that conviction to the end.' But at this stage of his poetic career, Sligo remained a nostalgic and escapist refuge from the harshness and fragmentation of modern urban civilization.

While Yeats's attempt to construct a distinctively Irish identity was overlaid with antiquarian and sentimental recovery of Celtic myth, magic, legend, and folklore, his father introduced him to the English poetic tradition, the Pre-Raphaelites and *fin-de-siècle* aesthetes in particular. Being Irish, he had difficulties in his London school; in Ireland, his Anglo-Norman origins linked him to the Protestant Ascendancy, a class that had its loyalties divided between England and Ireland, and was virtually wiped out in the 1916 Easter rebellion and the Civil War. Of course, this dilemma of Anglo-Irishness did not extend to the Catholic peasantry; in history it went back to the eighteenth century.

Although Yeats was of a religious temperament and delighted in reverie, he imbibed from his father's circle a lack of enthusiasm for institutionalized religion. The dissatisfaction with Christianity springs in part from the dogmatic rationalism of the orthodox Protestant tradition but largely from the attempt to recover the Fenian traditions of pre-colonial Ireland. In contrast to the exhausted sense of coming at the end of a tradition that affects the work of English poets like Hardy and Edward Thomas, Yeats hopes 'to create some new *Prometheus Unbound*; Patrick or Columcille, Oisín or Finn, in Prometheus's stead; and instead of Caucasus, *Cro-Patrick* or Ben Bulbin' (*Autobiographies*). Thus in challenging the drabness of a civilization dominated by calculating rationalism, technology, and the mercenary ethic, Yeats was spiritually akin to Eliot, although unlike the latter he turned to the heterodox tradition and studied the occult sciences.

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### 43.3 MAGIC, MYTHOLOGY, AND SYMBOLISM

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Magic and the mystical life became for the young Yeats the most important pursuit of his life after poetry. If Christianity offered Eliot a unifying design to accommodate the fragmentation of modern society, for Yeats this role was performed by magic and mythology. The first mythology was to be historical, pantheistic, prophetic as well as local and patriotic: 'Have not all races had their first unity from a mythology that

marries them to rock and hill?' (Autobiographies). This unity of being, equally relevant to race and individual personality and often symbolized in the perfectly proportioned human body, is rooted in the *Anima Mundi*, a version of the Collective Unconscious, a vast storehouse of images. Unity of being can be attained through the projection into consciousness of men's common ancestral memories: 'Nations, races, and individual men are unified by an image, or bundle of related images, symbolical or evocative of the state of mind' (Autobiographies).

Yeats was probably introduced to cabbalistic experiments by George Pollexfen, his astrologer uncle. As early as 1885, when his first poems were published in the Dublin *University Review*, Yeats chaired the first meeting of the Dublin Hermetic Society. Katharine Tynan, the poetess, first took Yeats to a seance and in 1887 he met the magician **MacGregor Mathers** and in 1890 joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn founded by the latter for the study and practice of magic. In the same year Yeats had joined the Theosophical Society of Madame Blavatsky. From her law of periodicity **Yeats** may have acquired the cyclical conception of history with a divine incarnation at the beginning of **each** cycle, as the stories in *The Secret Rose* (1897) as well as his later poetry show.

Even as he was exploring the occult, Yeats was actively engaged in the literary world of his time, in editing and journalism. He was a founding member of the Rhymers' Club and the Irish Literary Society in London (1891) and Dublin (1892). As Richard Ellmann has shown (Yeats, *The Man and the Masks*), Yeats's discovery of split selves within, of a self and anti-self, which gave rise to his doctrine of the Mask was aided by the aesthetes' conception of the artistic personality as really two men. From his roots in decadent aestheticism, Yeats expanded his symbolist vision by giving it an Irish identity as well as tapping the **resources** of magic, myth, and superstition that were available **among** the Irish Catholic peasantry. Like Lady Gregory he collected Irish folklore and his three anthologies of nineteenth-century Irish literature—*Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888), *Stories from Carleton* (1889), and *Representative Irish Tales* (1891)—show his wide reading which informed his early poems like *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889), plays like *The Countess Kathleen* (1892), and *The Land of Heart's Desire* (1894), and of course his own collection of Irish stories *The Celtic Twilight* (1893, revised and enlarged 1902). Throughout this latter book there is a desire to enlarge beyond folk-literature to a vision of the unity of man and nature that reason, science and the abstracting Anglo-Saxon mind had ruptured, and that could be recovered through the 'symbolic correspondences' of Swedenborg and Blake.

As he moved among Celtic heroes and heroines in a wistfully primitivist, pre-Christian landscape, his growing interest in symbols was strengthened by his experience of editing Blake's *Works* (1893) and by his friendship with Arthur Symonds. The latter initiated him into Symbolist **doctrines**, and in 1894 in Paris, he attended a performance of Villiers de l'Isle Adam's *Axel* which affected him **deeply**. The influence of the French symbolists, including Mallarmé, and that of Maurice Maeterlinck is **discernible** in *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899). Magic offered to the symbolists a reinforcement of their belief in the power of word or symbol to **evoke** a reality otherwise inaccessible. As a movement it challenged the hegemony of science and rationalism. In a letter to O'Leary, Yeats wrote of 'a voice of what I believe to be a greater renaissance [sic]—the revolt of the soul against the intellect—now beginning in the world.'

For Yeats's early symbolism we have to go to *The Rose* (1893) and *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899). The symbols are drawn from the natural world, say, of woods, waves, winds or stars, which resolve themselves into the four **elements**—earth, water, air, fire—and their conjunctions and oppositions. The moon usually stands for weariness (as often in Shelley), water for the fugitive nature of beauty, the rose for the principle of **Eternal** Beauty, and the veil for the life of ecstatic reverie hidden from the world. Into the four basic elements merge the Irish mythological figures. The **unifying** bond is that of the lover to his mistress and thereby to Nature. But the abundance of pale waters, white stars, dim sea, dim sand and so on ultimately build

up a shadowy and languorous world. Even the esoteric and secret symbol of the Rose, so central to the Order of the Golden Dawn and so various in its meanings, cannot quite break the mood of dreaminess. However, it is in Yeats's control of a simple and passionate diction and rhythm that an intellectual sturdiness becomes discernible.

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#### 43.4 A LESS DREAM-BURDENED WILL

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The various factors that helped bring a less dream-burdened will into Yeats's poetry include embittered disillusionment in love, experiences at the Abbey Theatre, political involvement and anguish at violence sweeping across Europe. His friendships and liaisons with women managed to draw him out of his shell. He met Maud Gonne in 1889, an encounter that was to transform his life. His infatuation for her drew him into nationalist politics about which, despite strong patriotic feeling, his attitude remained ambivalent. Despite remaining aloof from her brand of incendiary zeal, Yeats came to play an increasingly important role in Irish public life becoming a Senator of the Irish Free State (1922-28) and winning the Nobel Prize in 1923. Maud Gonne's stubborn refusal to marry him led to his happy marriage to George Hyde-Lees. Even as Yeats came to see Maud Gonne and other such female revolutionaries in terms of a tragic fate whereby unity of being was mutilated, she became a recognizable, flesh-and-blood individual freed of the patina of early symbolism. From *The Green Helmet* (1910) onwards, she enabled Yeats to link the anarchy of his private life to the larger context of Civil War and the First World War.

After his first meeting with Lady Gregory and Synge in 1896, Yeats spent the summer of 1897 at Lady Gregory's house, Coole Park, near Galway. Their collaboration bore fruit in the Abbey Theatre as a director of which Yeats was plunged into 'theatre-business, management of men.' This experience not only brought out the practical man in him but deeply enriched his style through the influence of speech and dialogue. Ezra Pound, his secretary from 1913-16, introduced him to the anti-naturalist and symbolical art of the Japanese Noh drama and encouraged him towards a resolutely concrete diction. The resultant sparseness of language and style is evident in his play *At the Hawk's Well* (1916).

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#### 43.5 YEATS'S IRELAND

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Lady Gregory offered an alternative to Maud Gonne by virtue of her caring support for Yeats's writing. Her Coole Park estate not only gave him the time and place to write but also became a model of aristocratic nobility. Ireland in the early twentieth century was not only different from England but even from the Ireland of Synge and O'Casey. It was the least industrialized country in western Europe with virtually no middle class outside the big cities. The people who impinged on Yeats's consciousness and on Irish history were the peasants and the landlords in the big houses. Yeats's obsession with ancestral houses like Coole Park which were in decline or burnt down in the agrarian unrest of the Civil War was coloured by a nostalgic view of the bond between landlord and servant. Since the landlords were mostly Protestant in origin and Unionist in sympathy while the common people mostly Catholic, the former in their search for identity were drawn to the world of myth, ritual, legend, and imagery rejected by Protestant nationalism but nurtured by the Catholic peasantry. In highlighting the rooted affinity of the dream of the noble and the beggar-man, Yeats expressed his contempt for and distrust of the newly-emerging middle-class. Aristocracy thus offered a vantage-point from which Yeats, like Pound and Eliot in their admittedly different ways, attempted a critique of capitalist-democratic values. The metaphor of horseman and the races in 'At Galway Races' harks back to an age when poetry was central to human existence: 'Before the merchant and the clerk/Breathed on the world with timid breath.' As the poem, 'September 1913,' from Yeats's middle period shows, such timidity is the product of the nexus between acquisitive instinct and calculating piety: half pence is added to pence as prayer to shivering prayer until the marrow is dried from the bone.

Ironically it is this world emptied of the heroic for which the Irish martyrs, the wild geese, were laying down their lives.

Placed within the larger context of the marginalization of art and the artist in Europe, Yeats saw the poet's role in somewhat Shelleyan terms, as that of an unacknowledged legislator. If on the one hand, Yeats strives to break away from a sentimentalized Ireland, on the other, Ireland for him was a visionary project to recover buried spiritual identity which was impeded by the revolutionary politics. Thus the Easter uprising becomes for him much more than the search for political independence. In one of Yeats's last poems, 'The Statues,' we find Patrick Pearse, Irish revolutionary leader, summoning Cuchulain, the mythical hero, to his side and the moment of disintegration initiates the realization of unity of being represented in the proportioned human body:

We Irish, born into that ancient sect  
But thrown upon this filthy modern tide  
And by its formless spawning fury wrecked,  
Climb to our proper dark, that we may trace  
The lineaments of a plummet-measured face.

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#### 43.4 THE SYSTEM: MASK, MOON, AND GYRE

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Marriage not only gave Yeats stability and direction but more specifically, the supposedly automatic writing of his wife brought metaphors for poetry, the symbol of the gyre, moon, and mask that became the basis for his philosophical system *A Vision* (1925, revised 1937). Of course the doctrine of the Mask can be traced back to *Per Amica Silentia Lunae* (1918), if not even further back to the aesthetes' notion of the artistic personality. The self was contraposed to the anti-self; individuals as well as civilizations aspire to such antitheses in search of unity of being:

If we cannot imagine ourselves as different from what we are, and try to assume that second self, we cannot impose a discipline upon ourselves though we may accept one from others. Active virtue, as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a code, is therefore theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask.

(*Mythologies*)

As is evident from this extract, the doctrine possibly has its true origin in Yeats's experience as a dramatist and theatre-manager, in particular the masked theatre of the Japanese Noh or the Greeks. The masked performance of our own lives involves an artistic transformation of the disorder backstage: art is thus a mask even as aristocracy is. Human beings as well as entire epochs have their masks,

Human personality and history are divided into 28 types corresponding to the 28 phases of the moon. Phase 1 (when the moon is dark) and Phase 15 (full moon) are states of perfection accessible only to spirits or the symbols of poetry: the waxing and waning of the moon accommodate the opposition of Primary and Antithetical tinctures, of the egoist and the saint, the artist and the businessman. The underlying conception of personality fits in admirably with the doctrine of the Mask, since the antithetical Mask is 'the form created by passion to unite us to ourselves.' Starting from Phase 1, man seeks his opposite at Phase 15, and then returns to the original point achieving union in and through division.

A new corollary symbol was introduced in automatic writing: the gyre, the whirling cone, the pern or spool. European history was diagrammatically interpreted in terms of interpenetrating cones whirling inside one another, one subjective, the other objective. At the time of Christ, objectivity is at its fullest expansion while the Renaissance is the time of fullest subjectivity; in modern times, there is again a swing

towards objectivity, towards democracy, socialism, communism. As Yeats's note to the Cuala Press edition of *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* explains,

the end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is represented by the coming of one gyre to its place of greatest expansion and of the other to that of its greatest contraction. At the present moment the life gyre is sweeping outward, unlike that before the birth of Christ which was narrowing, and has almost reached its greatest expansion. . . All our scientific, democratic, fact-accumulating, heterogeneous civilization belongs to the outward gyre and prepares not the continuance of itself but the revelation as in a lightning flash, though in a flash that will not strike only in one place, and will for a time be constantly repeated of the civilization that must slowly take its place . . . the revelation . . . [will] . . . establish again for two thousand years prince and vizier.

At the dead centre of the two thousand year cycle (corresponding to the 28 phases of the moon) which define the beginning and end of modern times comes the superbly integrated art of Byzantium.

The three central symbols of the mask, the moon, and the gyres admirably represent Yeats's antinomies by remaining anchored in common experience. The mask, we have seen, is fundamentally a theatrical metaphor while the moon suggests fickle fortune and the associative cluster of female fertility, virginity, and sensuality. The gyres give new meaning to the childhood experience at Sligo where he saw 'a little column of smoke from "the pern mill," and was told that 'pern" was another name for the spool, as I was accustomed to call it, on which thread was wound' (Notes on 'Shepherd and Goatherd' in *Collected Poems*). The gyre image in particular simply haunts Yeats: the winding stair of the tower he bought, the flight of the falcon ('pern' also meant a small hawk) or the swans ('scatter wheeling in great broken rings'), the shining web wound by Loie Fuller's Chinese dancers with floating ribbons of cloth ('Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen'), the silken, embroidered cloth bound and wound round the scabbard of a sword ('A Dialogue of Self and Soul'), even the mummy-cloth in which mummies are wound ('Byzantium').

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### 43.7 POETIC CAREER (1889-1910)

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The poetic career of Yeats falls into an early and a later phase, each apparently opposed to the other and yet inspired by a similar longing for escape from a world dominated by mechanistic and positivistic conceptions. As we have seen, in the early phase his specific mode of release was somewhat escapist, his fancy spiriting him away from a busy London street to the fairyland of Sligo and its lake isles. In *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889), *Crossways* (1889), *The Rose* (1893), *The Wind Among the Reeds* (1899) and *In the Seven Woods* (1904), Yeats demonstrates the assured mastery of an evocative style woven out of Spenser, Shelley, William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites. If it lacks in sinewy strength and precision it is only in comparison with his later style. Far from being a pastiche, however, Yeats's earlier style has a harmonious integrity that established his reputation as a lyrical poet. The symbolist and somewhat hieratic tendency was balanced by a contradictory impulse towards simple passionate speech. While his plays, performed from 1899 onwards, taught him the poetic resources of dialogue, from 1896 he spent the summers at Coole Park collecting with Lady Gregory folktales from peasant cottages. In the evening she wrote them out in dialect which exposed him to the living speech of peasants later used admirably by Synge.

What Yeats learnt most from the 'tragic generation'-Lionel Johnson, Ernest Dowson, George Russell (AE)-was the need for painstaking, fastidious craftsmanship. In the 'nineties, the Rhymers' Club shared a hatred of dry, cerebral verse and of clearly-defined philosophies, believing in a sense of mystery and in melody. But even before bitterness on the private and public fronts had sharpened his vision, deepened his passion and tightened his style, Yeats went beyond the autotelic poetry of the

Rhymers and aesthetes to construct the heroic image of Ireland as the poets have imagined it, terrible and gay. The mask of the Celtic hero **triumphant** in defeat gradually changes into that of spiritual autonomy and wisdom, the magisterial shaping power of mind over circumstance confronting physical decay even as his home, the old Norman tower he had bought in 1915, was surrounded and threatened by anarchic violence. As early as 14 March 1888, in a letter to Katharine Tynan, Yeats wrote that in the process of correcting his poems he had noticed things about his poetry he had not known before, that it was 'almost all a flight into fairyland from the real world,' a poetry of 'longing and complaint, the cry of the heart against necessity.' He hoped some day to alter that and write the poetry of insight and knowledge.

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### 43.8 'ADAM'S CURSE'

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Already *In the Seven Woods* (1904) suggests a departure in Yeats's poetic career, an awareness of the actual world with its unpoetic responsibilities and political conflicts. 'Adam's Curse' remains an important instance of this stylistic evolution: it hovers between the earlier languorous idiom and rhythm and a new conversational, even **witty** tone disguising a sub-text of emotional yearning and disillusionment. Written in 1902, before the marriage of Maud Gonne to Major John MacBride, the whole poem is a controlled expression of Yeats's futile love for her. As her autobiography notes shrewdly, there is a link between unhappiness in love and beautiful poetry, a link in which Yeats's self-pity **plays** a role. But the transmutation of failure or inadequacy into poetry is more than a Romanticised self-indulgence. The very title of the poem indicates loss of innocence and idyllic happiness. In the fallen state of humanity, art as labour co-extensive with life brings together poetry, feminine beauty, and love. Each in its own way offers variations on the Yeatsian dialectic of nature and art, each is an artificial re-fashioning or idealization of life. The poem itself is a stylistic enactment of this dialectical process: the biographical self is sufficiently transformed in order for it to become available for detached examination in the mask of the courtly lover, and this love becomes visible rather like the hollow moon.

It is a conversation-poem involving Maud Gonne, her sister, Mrs. Kathleen Pilcher, and Yeats himself. Although it is addressed to Maud, the romantic conventions of intimacy are forestalled by Mrs. Pilcher's presence; moreover, Maud remains enigmatically silent and unresponsive throughout. The irony of this is heightened by the almost banal tone in which an autumnal mood is introduced ('summer's end'). Despite the elegiac tone, there is a movement away from lushness looking forward to the dry woodland paths of the autumn of 'The Wild Swans at Coole.'

Mrs. Pilcher's mild beauty and sweet, low voice (contrasted, for instance in 'Easter 1916' with Con Markiewicz's voice grown shrill in political argument) links her to femininity as the nurturing and creative principle ('On Woman'), to the beauty that is rooted in custom and ceremony ('A Prayer for My Daughter'). Maud Gonne's fiery beauty presents an alternative to this and Yeats the poet is located between the two, pulled towards both, towards involvement and withdrawal.

The talk on poetry contrasts hours of revision with a moment's thought in order to establish the paradox of living, spontaneous beauty as the product of painstaking, artificial re-fashioning of experience. As a poet Yeats was given to revising his work repeatedly. The paradox has been compared to the Renaissance notion of an art that lies in concealing art, to 'sprezzatura' or nonchalance as Castiglione had called it. It also looks forward to the timelessness that is specific to art, a theme that informs Yeats's 'Byzantium' poems. The domestic imagery of stitching and unstitching unobtrusively relates poetry to women; it also seems to anticipate that unity of the artist and the artisan that Yeats **celebrated** in Byzantine culture. After all, the golden bird of Byzantium is a handiwork of Grecian goldsmiths.

The second stanza offers a racy defence of poetry in a society increasingly dominated by the emerging bourgeois ideology. This new world, summed up by the bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen, was aggressively hostile to art and distrustful of the vital energies. The attitude of this 'noisy set' to the proposed Dublin art gallery invited Yeats's anger in *Responsibilities* (1914); as late as 'Lapis Lazuli' (Last Poems) we encounter hysterical women denouncing poets and artists for their uselessness at the time of war. This is the community that sets off the loneliness and autonomy of the artist. Withdrawn from conventionally strenuous and utilitarian obligations, the poet uses his freedom from the drudgery undergone by the housewife or the old pauper to engage in the far more challenging labour of artistic transformation. His defiant triumph is earned at the cost of self-destruction: 'Among subjective men (in all those, that is, who must spin a web out of their own bowels) the victory is an intellectual daily re-creation of all that exterior fate snatches away' (Autobiographies). The unremitting psychomachy--self versus anti-self--is directed towards the Unity of Being that is suggested, a little unsatisfactorily, in the articulation of sweet sounds together, and implicitly in the perfectly proportioned human body. More satisfactorily, the unity is mirrored in the poem itself, a whole composed of division. Mrs. Pilcher's witty parallel between the poet's labour and woman's, recorded in Maud's autobiography, relates feminine beauty to unity of being through the doctrine of the mask or the theatrical discipline of self-fashioning. Like the poet, woman also achieves spontaneity.

Feminine beauty with its implicit notion of the discipline of the mirror (or the mask) leads on in the fourth stanza to the lover emulating the artifice of the mask. As Yeats puts it, 'Each divines the secret self of the other, and refusing to believe in the mere daily self, creates a mirror where the lover or the beloved sees an image to copy in daily life; for love also creates the Mask' (Autobiographies). With autobiographical poignancy Yeats talks of lovers who, in defiance of the bourgeois ethic (stanza 2) chose the mask of courtly love. His unrequited love is thus located within the custom and ceremony of an aristocratic culture. The note of detachment and self-parody suggests a transition in the poem. The mask of the sighing and bookish courtly lover ironically merges into a literary convention, studiously archaic in its beauty like the opulently produced old books. Lofty idealization is judged now from the point of view of the everyday world and therefore dismissed as an idle trade. If Yeats extracts beauty out of futility, here we have, as it were, the reverse process at work: the troubled actual world intrudes and dialectically confronts the impulse towards autonomy.

We have here a resistance to the aestheticization of love that looks forward to the interpenetration of the purity of artistic form and unpurged, raw experience. The very mention of love draws out the emotional sub-text, the silence of which calls into question the decorums of conversation. The interpenetrating opposition is captured in the image of the moon. The approaching evening is described in a language somewhat stilted and lush. This is then questioned by a subtly unconventional use of the moon as the objectification of shrivelling bitterness which is the legacy of time. Perhaps reminiscent of Shelley's use of the moon and the shell, the symbolism suggests weariness as well as recovery, an end as well as a beginning. The recovery is manifest in the mood of unsentimental confrontation of the truth. The thought that the poet had reserved for Maud's ears alone reads like a summing-up; at the same time, there is a clear sense of waking up from a pleasant dream.

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### 43.9 'NO SECOND TROY'

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The new Yeats becomes clearly visible in *The Green Helmet and Other Poems* (1910) in which his public rhetoric and satiric control of disillusionment-anger, hatred, and bitterness in personal and public life--are in evidence. In fact, in the period 1910-14, Yeats moves away from his earlier misty symbolism and mythology to concrete, realistic detail. Yeats's style becomes more supple and economical, and Maud Gonne is here a real individual despite being identified with Helen of Troy in

terms of personal symbolism. The Trojan war, which ended with the destruction of Troy by the Greeks **after** a ten-year siege, began because **Helen** (wife of Menelaus, King of **Sparta**) was abducted by Paris, son of Priam, King of Troy. Her whole situation including the context of the Trojan War (on which Homer's epics are based) offer a parallel with a difference to Maud Gonne, Yeats, John **MacBride** and Irish nationalism. After repeatedly refusing Yeats, Maud Gonne finally **married MacBride**, one of **the** revolutionaries executed in **1916**, in **1903** but was separated from him in **1906**. When she appeared in the Abbey Theatre on 20 October **1906** after her divorce, the audience hissed her (see 'Against Unworthy Praise'); **after** this she withdrew from public life until **1918**.

That kind of public reaction sums up the narrow-minded ideology of hatred that characterised the lower middle classes in particular:

The root of it all is that the political class in Ireland--the lower-middle class from whom the patriotic associations have drawn their journalists and their leaders for the last ten years--have suffered through the cultivation of hatred as the one energy of their movement, a deprivation which is the intellectual equivalent to a certain surgical operation. Hence the shrillness of their voices.  
(Autobiographies)

Maud Gonne's revolutionary ardour becomes a kind of heroic **mask** tragically at odds with the dominant mercenary-prudential ethic of the age. Ironically, it is this class that she and her tribe of activists wished to influence and instigate to political violence: in 'No Second Troy,' she is shown to have 'taught to ignorant men most violent ways.' The poem places personal experience in the turmoil of Irish history and widens out to heroic myth: history becomes myth even as myth is linked to history.

Maud Gonne was always reproaching Yeats for not putting his art in the service of nationalist propaganda. After she withdrew from the more extreme I.R.B. (an Irish Secret revolutionary organisation) about the turn of the century, she introduced Yeats to Arthur **Griffith** of the Sinn Fein movement: she desired to keep the Irish literary movement abreast of the policies of Sinn Fein. Before her marriage Maud Gonne was increasingly involved in anti-British activities. She linked the I.R.B. with French military intelligence and offered a Boer agent in Brussels a plan to put bombs in British troopships bound for Africa. As Joseph Hone notes (**W. B. Yeats, 1865-1939**), Yeats wrote in his diary that Maud Gonne never really understood his plans, or nature or ideas: 'Then came the thought--what matter? How much of the best I have done and still do is but the attempt to explain myself to her?' That Maud did not understand him or there was a gap in communication is turned to poetic advantage by Yeats: 'If she understood I should lack a reason for writing, and one can never have too many reasons for doing what is so laborious.' While Maud had perceived that Yeats poetically thrived on his unhappiness, his own realization (see 'Words') suggests freedom from self-indulgence. With **the** help of the larger contexts of history and myth, Yeats forestalls the whining complaint of unhappiness that the opening line of 'No Second Troy' can degenerate into.

In spite of the disparity between twentieth-century Ireland and heroic Greece, the Trojan war relates Maud Gonne to the violence around her in terms of **the** Annunciation that develops in 'The **Second** Coming' and 'Leda and the Swan.' That from the eggs of Leda came love and war enables Yeats to locate his passion within a context of disintegration.

As Yeats saw it, on the one hand the rising middle classes were sunk in ignorance and superstitious piety; on the other hand, they were being incited to blind hatred of the English. At the deepest level, the blindness is an incapacity for honest self-examination and has a corrosive effect on the vital impulses and affections. Ireland must acquire an identity, a spiritual unity of its own before it can embark upon

political nationalism. Of course the coupling of ignorance and violence and timidity and desire may suggest Protestant-aristocratic prejudice about the Catholics. But when the courage did equal desire in the Easter uprising, Yeats paid a noble tribute to it.

The image of the little streets being hurled upon the great has been annotated in terms of the many little semi-literary and semi-political clubs and societies out of which the Sinn Féin movement grew. Yeats had indeed come to distrust and quarrel with them. But the image is a succinct evocation of the topography of political resentment and unrest in a city like Dublin: the narrow lanes and back-alleys from which anger spills out (often in processions) on to the big streets of power and privilege.

Instead of the ambivalence that enabled Yeats to comment on Irish politics from a distance, Maud Gonne's mind and beauty are described in terms of her single-minded intensity. If the modern sensibility is a divided one then her fiery commitment presents an antithesis to it. The fire image along with the noble simplicity or purity and restlessness of her mind telescopes the idea of a curious innocence untouched by obsequious clinging to conformity and the irony of its warped destructiveness. The comparison of her beauty to a tightened bow not only suggests the tensile and arched grace of her body but also the energy of stress, a taut and tense sexuality.

Yeats has written elsewhere that she looked as if she lived in an ancient civilisation and her face was that of a Greek statue. Yeats highlights her supremely lofty, almost inaccessible presence, her aristocratic mask of Olympian solitude and disdain set off against her populist politics in order to cast her in the sublime, tragic mould. The poem is a series of four questions suggesting a man's examination of himself rigorously pursued through the logic of feeling and thought.

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### **43.10 LET US SUM UP**

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In this unit you have learnt about the poetic career of W.B. Yeats from 1889 to 1910. Apart from tracing his poetic development, the unit has introduced you to the function of Yeats's philosophical system and occult beliefs. His poetry is related to his embattled Irish identity and to the fundamental dichotomy of flesh and spirit. Various experiences, private and public, drew him out of an imaginative fairyland to the search for insight and knowledge.

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### **43.11 QUESTIONS**

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1. Write short notes on i) the doctrine of the Mask, ii) the phases of the moon, iii) the interpenetrating gyres. (See 43.6)
2. Bring out the interrelationship of the mask, the lunar symbolism, and the gyres. (See 43.6)
3. How are magic and symbolism related in Yeats's poetry? (See 43.3)
4. What were the factors that made Yeats outgrow his yearning for escape into a land of fantasy? (See 43.4, 43.5 and 43.7)
5. Show how Yeats's choice of the aristocratic mask springs from his view of Ireland. (See 43.5 and 43.2)
6. In what way are poetry, feminine beauty, and love related to one another in 'Adam's Curse'? (See 43.8 and 43.6)
7. Bring out the significance of Troy as a symbol in 'No Second Troy.' (See 43.9 and 43.6)

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UNIT 44 THE EATER POETRY OF W.B. YEATS

Structure

- 44.0 Objectives
- 44.1 Introduction
- 44.2 A New Poetic Style
- 44.3 'Easter 1916'
- 44.4 'Sailing to Byzantium'
- 44.5 The Last Poems
- 44.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 44.7 Exercises
- 44.8 Suggested Reading

44.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will concentrate on three chosen poems representative of Yeats's later poetic style. In Unit 2 you have already been introduced to the historical and intellectual background to his poetry, The aim here will be to indicate the main directions within the later poetry and above all to undertake a close reading of the three poems in order to recover the wide-ranging ideas and issues that are packed into them.

44.1 INTRODUCTION

The rich complexity of Yeats's later poetry is best understood through detailed textual analysis. This method is used because valuable as it may be, a general discussion of background and poetic development can hardly do justice to the mastery with which Yeats accommodates the entire modern age within the concretely experienced and irreducibly imaginative life of the text. Since a mature Yeats poem is a tightly woven texture of many threads, we need to unravel the text, to take it apart as it were.

44.2 A NEW POETIC STYLE

In *Responsibilities* (1914), Yeats chooses his new poetic persona by openly declaring that he was stripping off his coat 'Covered with embroideries/ Out of old mythologies' in order to take up the stylistically more challenging task of walking naked' ('A Coat'). In contrast to the vehement political commitment of the middle classes, Yeats's ambivalence remains open to misinterpretation unless we see in it the seed of an essentially artistic detachment that allows him a vantage-point of **aloofness** and solitude despite immersion in his times. The satirical poems in this collection dealing with the Irish theatre and other controversies (the Dublin art gallery, for instance) relate the crowd, the 'noisy set' of 'Adam's Curse' or the violent, ignorant men of 'No Second Troy' antagonistically to the **victimised** poet or artist. The artist's freedom from social conventions and bourgeois values is explored in some poems through the adopted persona of the beggar and wanderer. As in the theatre of **Synge**, this outcast figure has affinities with the Shakespearean Fool, and in Yeats's *oeuvre* looks back to the play *The Hour-Glass* (1903) and forward to the Crazy Jane poems where the intuitive wisdom is deepened by the dimension of gender.

If Yeats cultivates the mask of aristocratic and bardic isolation, it is in search of a 'deep structure' of **Irishness**, of a unity of consciousness **that informs** the symbolic forms of a race, beyond the **inflammatory urgencies** of the moment. This is why he rejects the public platform in favour of solitude; 'Why should we honour those that die upon the field of battle? A man may show as reckless a courage in entering into the abyss of himself (Unpublished notes for a London lecture on 'Contemporary

Poetry'). As he saw it, Maud Gonne, Con Markiewicz and Eva Gore-Booth had all betrayed the aristocratic ideal of courtesy and femininity. While this aristocratic order heroically defies, as in the towering example of Lady Gregory and Coole Park, its own historical doom, Yeats found such tragic heroism equally in the self-destructive energies unleashed in the Easter Rebellion.

Perhaps this dialectic is most easily seen in the next two collections, *The Wild Swans at Coole* (1919) and *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), which signal Yeats's greatest period. In the former, Yeats introduces his preoccupation with ancestral houses. Poems like 'Upon a Dying Lady' and 'A Prayer for My Daughter' look forward to 'Meditations in Time of Civil War,' 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen,' 'Coole Park, 1929,' 'Coole Park and Ballylee, 1931,' 'Lapis Lazuli,' and *só on*. At the same time, *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* is Yeats's first attempt to see the Easter Rebellion as a whole, located in world history, *within* his philosophy of history. The work for *A Vision* coincides with this period, often directly influencing poems like 'The Double Vision of Michael Robartes,' 'Ego Dominus Tuus,' and 'The Phases of the Moon.'

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### 44.3 'EASTER 1916'

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The background to this poem, written in September 1916, is the Easter Rising in Dublin against British colonial **rule**. The Irish Republic was proclaimed on Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, and the heart of the city occupied by the Republican rebels. Managing to hold out until **29** April, they were defeated and many of their leaders tried and executed. Despite remaining aloof, Yeats wrote to Lady Gregory on 1 May expressing his anguish:

The Dublin tragedy has been a great sorrow and anxiety . . . I have little doubt there have been many miscarriages of justice. . . . I am trying to write a poem on the men executed--terrible beauty *há*s been born again' . . . I had no idea that any public event could so deeply move me--and I am very despondent about the future. **At** the moment I feel that all the work of years has been overturned, all the bringing together of classes, all the freeing of Irish literature and criticism from politics.

In a subsequent letter to John Quinn (23 May 1916), Yeats wrote:

This Irish business has been a great grief. We have lost the ablest and most fine-natured of our young men. A world seems to have been swept away. I keep going over the past in my mind and wondering if I could have done anything to **turn** these young men in some other direction.

Even in June, in a letter to Robert Bridges, Yeats's anguish has not abated: 'All my habits of thought and work are upset by this tragic Irish rebellion which has swept away friends and fellow-workers.'

The rebellion being much closer to Irish experience than the World War, it tied up with Yeats's view of history, producing the chiliastic terror of 'The Second Coming' and 'Nineteen Hundred and Nineteen.' Yeats had thought in 'September 1913' that romantic and heroic Ireland was dead and gone with the death of **O'Leary**. Instead of the wild geese who spread their grey wings on every tide, Ireland was now ruled by pusillanimous and petty men. In this context the sudden release of '**heroic**' energies acquired a doomed tragic dignity heightened by futility. The image stored in the Great Memory (*or Anima Mundi*) for such tragedy was of Celtic ancestry, Deirdre and Cuchulain in particular ('The Statues'). The revolutionaries organized the uprising in clear knowledge of defeat, that is, in the spirit of tragedy.

Images of personal reminiscence become figures of Irish history. The list of his **friends** begins with Constance Gore-Booth (1868-1927) in the second stanza; her

condition is described also in 'On a Political Prisoner' and 'In Memory of Eva Gore Booth and Con Markiewicz.' Although she took part in the Rebellion, her death-sentence was commuted to penal servitude for life; she was later released. Yeats had stayed at Lissadell with the Gore-Booth sisters in their late-Georgian grey granite house overlooking Sligo Bay. Such ancestral houses were built and furnished mainly in the eighteenth century ('grey/Eighteenth-century houses'). Next in the list ('This man') is Patrick Pearse (1879-1916), the founder of a boys' school, a member of the Irish Bar and an orator. Commandant-General and President of the provisional government in Easter week, he surrendered in the Post Office. The reference to the 'winged horse' or Pegasus is to his poetic talent. With the stroke of its hoof, Pegasus caused the fountain Hippocrates to flow on Mount Helicon, the abode of the Muses in Greek mythology. 'This other' refers to Thomas MacDonagh (1878-1916), poet, dramatist, critic, and academic whose literary sensibility and regard for Celtic tradition were crushed by mechanical logic so fashionable in Ireland at that time. Next in line is Major John MacBride (1865-1916), Maud Gonne's husband, who had fought against the British in the Boer War. The bitterness and contempt are biographical since Yeats had been his rival in love and since he had done wrong to Maud and perhaps to her daughter Iseult. In the last stanza, we meet James Connolly (1870-1916), a trade unionist, who had organized the Citizen Army and was military commander of all Republican forces in Dublin and Commandant in the Post Office during the Rising.

Like 'Adam's Curse,' 'Easter 1916' begins at a transitional hour and with a transitional action: people at close of day coming out of houses or offices although they are still confined to routine colonial drudgery. These are the people dismissed contemptuously in 'September 1913.' But the muted contrast between the vivid faces and the grey houses subtly prepares us for their revolutionary sacrifice which wrenches them out of an archaic monolony and links them to the eighteenth century but now to the heroic martyrs of the United Irishmen movement led by Edward Fitzgerald and Wolfe Tone.

As these men return from work, from counter or desk, Yeats passes them by with a perfunctory polite recognition: the repetition of 'polite meaningless words' locates the encounter in drab banality. But by the end of the poem, the word has recovered its power: 'I write it out in a verse.' The mocking tale or gibe to be shared with cronies around the fire at the club suggests a shallow sociability against which the revolutionary transformation is effected. The club may refer to the Arts Club in Dublin and therefore to the poet's attitude of amused complacency. This is an Ireland of aimless foolery and the particoloured costume of the clown ('motley') in its incongruous mixture looks forward to the description of random life in the third stanza. The change from motley to green in the last stanza indicates a new meaning to life, a rejuvenation, recalling the songs of the 1798 revolution, 'Green on my Cape' and 'The wearing of the Green.' At the same time, the one colour reminds us of the revolutionary dedication to 'one purpose alone,' that 'Can make a stone of the heart.'

The first two stanzas of the poem deal with change while the third and fourth accomplish a neat ironic reversal by interpreting that change as a stone-hearted, tragic incapacity for change. The utter change brings to birth a terrible beauty suddenly releasing atavistic heroic energies. The conscious change of the mask from clown to tragic hero revives "'an Ireland/ The poets have imagined, terrible and gay,'" not the "'dead Ireland of my youth'" ('The Municipal Gallery Revisited'). But Yeats's attitude remains somewhat divided, for doomed heroism is seen to spring from opinionated hatred and inflexible steadfastness. Instead of the casual comedy we have here willed tragedy, a conscious assumption of a second or new self, a deliberate re-ordering of Irish history.

While Pearse, MacDonagh, and Connolly are cut off in their prime, Con Markiewicz and John MacBride offer somewhat different models of transformation. Through the reference to harriers (pack of hounds and huntsmen) Con is related to an easy-going

aristocratic past torn apart by her ignorant good-will: her shrill voice suggests the disfigurement of youthful beauty and links her kind of politics to the Irish Civil War. **MacBride**, thought to have been a drunken, vainglorious lout, suddenly reveals the will to self-transformation: in numbering him in his song Yeats thus distances himself **from** a painful element in his life. The terrible beauty is not unrelated to the Yeatesian notion of a violent annunciation at the end and beginning of millennia ('The Second Coming' and 'Leda and the Swan').

The third stanza juxtaposes an incapacity for change (itself paradoxically the result of the change chosen by the revolutionaries) with the ever-changing spontaneity of random natural life. This contradiction is of course Yeats's quarrel with himself producing poetry. The central symbol is of the stone in the midst of the stream: Yeats moves freely between the actual stone and stream and their symbolical meaning. Natural life is characteristically captured (as later in 'Sailing to Byzantium') in images of movement: the changing seasons, the stream, the horse, the birds, the clouds, the moor-hens, and so on. Yeats's verse celebrates the energy of movement as the rider gallops in or the birds range from cloud to tumbling cloud. Mobility makes for inexhaustible variety, and the flux introduces a note of poignant intensity in the fugitive quality of natural beauty: the **repetition** of 'minute by minute' reinforces this quality.

The 'shadow of cloud on the stream' subtly introduces the concept of the higher insubstantiality of the artistic image involving a movement from the material to the immaterial. As the horsehoof slides on the brim and the horse plashes into the stream the accidental and the sudden are highlighted. Water becomes symbolic of a primal vitality, including the creatural instincts that are expressed in the diving moor-hens calling moor-cocks. The image of the stone-the unwavering commitment of the rebels-is more complex than it seems, for it is seen to trouble the living stream. This is the paradox that is at the heart of the poem: unchanging singleness of purpose has the capacity for utter **transformation** while the changing rhythms of life fall into a set routine. The last lines of the poem suggest another kind of **transformation**, the poem itself ('I write it out in a verse'), a changeless artifice that is not inimical to spontaneity (a theme already dealt with in 'Adam's Curse').

Maud Gonne's expectation that the rebels' sacrifice would ensure Home Rule for Ireland failed; moreover, the death seemed to be needless since England could revive the Home Rule Bill which had been shelved because of the War. Above all, too long a sacrifice is a denial of nature resulting in a hardening of **the heart** comparable to a surgical operation (see **2.9**). Even as Yeats aspires to an artistic detachment, interpreting the defeat of the Rebellion as sleep that pacifies the excitable restlessness of a child and trying to nurture like a mother the infant soul of Ireland, he is assailed by misgivings. But he is able to overcome them by choosing the characteristic posture of defiance brought about by the realization of **futility**: death becomes metaphor as well as fact as it becomes the tragic culmination of heroic dream and excess of love. In the final stanza this capacity for dream raises the revolutionaries far above the everyday world of prudential **conformity**. In the supremely confident tone of bardic prophecy, Yeats makes them agents of the history of the Irish race in search for identity.

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#### 44.4 'SAILING TO BYZANTIUM'

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As Yeats moves on to *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1933), the pugnacious clarity and biting precision of language increasingly perform a stylistic enactment of art as the conscious re-making of blind, instinctual nature, as a mode of deliverance from the fury and mire of human veins. The theme of ancestral houses in decline broadens out to that of the cyclical rise and fall of civilisations endorsed by the symbolism of **gyre** and moon; to this the dialectic of art and nature, the dancing floor and the sea in 'Byzantium' serves as a counterpoint. Yeats's interest in the visual arts, a family legacy, was deepened by his visits to Italy

in 1924 and 1925 where, apart from Renaissance art, he encountered Byzantine mosaic art at Ravenna and Sicily.

W.B. Yeats II

The heart, the seat of sentimental effusion and wistful evasion of stark reality in Yeats's early verse, is increasingly troubled by a passionate imagination in a decaying body. As critics have recognized, the very capacity to imagine is redemptive. Man defiantly asserts his imagined self against futility, for to imagine heroically is to become a hero (as implied in the doctrine of the Mask). Born incomplete, man attains completeness in so far as he conceives of it; if the hero does this unconsciously, the poet does it consciously. Heroic defiance is thus anchored by Yeats in the infinite power of the mind or soul often symbolized by the tower. But this assertion of spiritual autonomy, this nostalgia for a world of pure ideas is ceaselessly disturbed by the undiminished vitality of the natural man. The psychomachy draws strength from Hindu notions of the cycle of reincarnation and escape from it. It is represented clearly in 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul': if the sophistry of the heart and the evanescent pleasures of nature turn Yeats to the artifice of eternity, the monuments of unaging intellect, if his soul draws him up the winding stair (gyre) of his tower to escape reincarnation, his self pulls him back down the same ancestral stair into time and history (see also 'The Tower' and 'Blood and the Moon'), into the fecund ditch of folly and passion. At this stage of his poetic career Yeats's landscape changes from Sligo to the countryside south of Galway-Thoor Ballylee, Coole Park, and the stony borders of Clare.

'Sailing to Byzantium,' one of Yeats's masterpieces, is organized around the dichotomy of flesh and spirit, nature and art where the sea symbolizes the energetic vitality of the former. As Yeats advanced into old age he continued to be troubled by the passions. The voyage in the poem is thus an inner spiritual voyage towards wisdom and freedom from enslavement to nature. Quite apart from the special meaning that Byzantium has in Yeats's system, historically it was the meeting-point of the pagan and Christian civilisations. As the centre of the Hellenistic world which became the capital of eastern Christianity, the holy city, Byzantium becomes a happy symbol of the unity in opposition of flesh and spirit.

In *A Vision* Yeats describes Byzantium at about the end of the first Christian millennium, a little before Justinian opened St. Sophia and closed the Academy of Plato:

I think that in the early Byzantium, maybe never before or since in recorded history, religious, aesthetic and practical life were one, that architect and artificers--though not, it may be, poets, for language had been the instrument of controversy and must have grown abstract--spoke to the multitude and the few alike. The painter, the mosaic worker, the worker in gold and silver, the illuminator of sacred books, were almost impersonal, almost perhaps without the consciousness of individual design, absorbed in their subject-matter and that the vision of a whole people.

The poem begins when the voyage is already under way. To suggest, as some annotators do, that 'that country' is Ireland is to cripple the meaning since the uninitiated outsider leaves behind the material world, the life of the flesh for the immaterial, spiritual world--the later poem 'Byzantium' begins with a similar purging of materiality. The vitality and movement of natural life are celebrated in the stanza even as the inevitable decay of the flesh makes them a disturbing presence in the life of the old man. The embracing young and the birds in the trees are completely absorbed in one another but the oxymoron, 'dying generations,' suggests the human subjection to nature, to its cycle of birth, growth, and death. Summer, the season of rejuvenation and fecundity, links the young and the birds to the salmon-falls and mackerel-crowded seas, both images testifying to procreative urge and fertility. At spawning-time salmon swim inland from the sea, biologically propelled upstream, leaping up high in the air at weirs or small dams on the river to continue against the

current. The image could be a memory of the salmon at Galway which Yeats wanted his wife to see when she first visited Ireland; the abundant shoals of mackerel may be a similar memory. The generic vocabulary with its Biblical echo--fish, flesh, or fowl--reinforces the all-encompassing biological basis of the 'sensual music.' But time, the sequential tyranny of 'begotten, born, and dies,' is the very dimension of natural beauty and pleasure. Thus the overpowering sensual life becomes a trap, an imprisonment in the perishable body. In contrast to this are the 'monuments of unageing intellect' which in their artificiality and stasis offer a mode of triumph, that of the spirit in search of wisdom and a world of pure ideas.

One basic image knits the whole poem together: the singing bird. In the first stanza birds in the trees produce sensual music. In the second stanza they are replaced by the scarecrow ('a tattered coat upon a stick'), an image of ugliness and decay in 'Among School Children'-the mask of 'a comfortable kind of old scarecrow' or the Greek philosophers as 'Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.' The song of the old man's soul takes us to the sages or the singing-masters in the third stanza--here the submerged image of the phoenix (the bird rising out of its own ashes) merges into that of the peme which also means a small hawk. Finally there is the golden mechanical bird singing to the lords and ladies of Byzantium.

The second stanza moves in thematic sequence from youth to age. As we have seen above, physical decay makes the skin-and-bones appearance comparable to a tattered coat upon a stick, skin and flesh hanging loose. In Neoplatonic terms, widely used in the Renaissance and by Blake and Shelley, the body is a coat that the soul puts on at birth and takes off at death which thus becomes a mode of ecstatic liberation. Such readiness for the spiritual voyage is appropriately expressed in the defiant gaiety (an important Yeatsian theme) of the old man celebrating decrepitude. The flat sound pattern of the second line of the stanza is lightened in the next line, and the metrical-syntactical weight on 'unless' registers the transfer from carnal to spiritual. But the competitive opposition of body and soul is resolved in wholeness and synthesis: spiritual music is represented by the dancer's rhythmic bodily movements, a Yeatsian symbol of the unity of being. Dance, in association with the parallel between body and garment, opens up possibilities of Dionysiac emancipation. In contrast to the many anonymous young men, birds, and fish of the opening stanza, here we have old age as the accumulated experience of an individual. The comparable unity of the mechanical bird suggests that individuation is hammered out of the common raw material of our lives.

In the reference to the singing school that studies monuments of its own magnificence, along with the idea of spiritual preparation and discipline ('studying') we have that of autonomy symbolized by Byzantine mosaic art. In the history of European art, the Renaissance broke away from Byzantine norms in favour of mass, volume and movement of the human body and dramatic composition. In this sense Byzantine mosaic art is a linear art, abstracted from nature and static in quality. This non-referential art has therefore an autonomy equivalent to the human soul's study of its own magnificence: it is at the furthest point from the natural energies of the first stanza. The voyage across the sea, that is, the turbulent life of the flesh, is now over and we enter Byzantium made holy not only by Christianity but by an art purged of nature and materiality.

Consequently, the third stanza introduces us to the sages through the golden mosaic art on the wall, a memory perhaps of the Christian martyrs in the frieze at S. Apollinare Nuovo at Ravenna, and an image of God's holy fire. The sages are arranged in stasis purged of all fleshly life and mobility of desire. As Yeats calls upon the sages to be the singing-masters of his soul, he links the two worlds of sage and sensual man, the rival intensities of art and life, through the interpenetrating gyres. As we have already seen above, perne means a small hawk or falcon as well as a spool or gyre. The martyred sages must perne out of their ideal stasis into the

## W.B. Yeats II

What shall I do with this absurdity--  
O heart, troubled heart--this caricature,  
Descrepit age that has been tied to me  
As to a dog's tail?

A similar image of fastening, of an uncomfortable appendage links the heart to the ageing body, the 'dying animal' (reminiscent of 'dying generations') subject to the cycle of 'begotten, born, and dies.' Desire suffers the same subjection producing the sickness of exhausted disillusionment. Unlike the soul studying the monuments of its **own** magnificence, the heart is the seat of illusion ('knows not what it is'). The **artifice** of eternity suggests the specific timelessness of art. That which is natural is in time; movement and change are the source of its beauty (stanza 1). By contrast, that which is artificial or non-natural is liberated from the sequential logic of time, of birth, growth, and death. It is in this sense that art as artifice is timeless and not in the false sense that works of art outlive time. In fact, the destruction of civilisations and their art heritages is a **common** Yeatsian theme.

## 44.5 THE LAST POEMS

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mastery over it. This mastery is manifest in the spare intensity of diction as also in the mask of the clown or circus performer and the tragic joy that now links the detached poet to the involved figures of history. Yeats watches in defiant artistic gaiety the rise and fall of civilisations ('The Gyres,' 'Lapis Lazuli') even as he anchors his re-vitalization in a ruined body.

'Lapis Lazuli' is constructed around the general theme of art and tragic joy. Instead of a more or less linear arrangement the five sections of the poem are organized like sculptural planes, a method singularly appropriate to the Chinese carving in lapis lazuli, a blue precious stone, presented to Yeats on his seventieth birthday by Henry Clifton to whom the poem is dedicated. Several of Yeats's life-long themes are brought together: the recurring rise and fall of civilisations, the millennia1 vision of the approaching end of European civilisation, the triumph of art and philosophy over ruin.

The poem begins under the shadow of the impending World War (July 1936): events like the Spanish Civil War, the German re-occupation of the Rhineland in 1936 and the **Italian** invasion of Abyssinia in 1935 built up a climate of hysteria in which poetry seems to be nothing more than an idle trade. The hysterical women betray their masks of nurturing femininity and in rejecting art in favour of politics peddled in the thoroughfares they reject custom, ceremony and the contemplative life. Zeppelin, a rigid-framed airship for bombing was anachronistic in 1936 but Yeats probably remembered the Zeppelin bombing raids on London in the First World War. Around the time he was writing the poem, Edmund Dulac, the artist, had written to him to express his terror of a bombing raid on London. The bomb-balls refer to '**The Battle of the Boyne**,' a ballad included in Irish Minstrelsy (1888), an anthology containing a poem by Yeats; there is an inscribed copy in his library. The parallel between King William of Orange (King Billy in Irish colonial memory) and Kaiser Bill or Kaiser Wilhelm **II**, German emperor at the time of the First World **War**, and the impending Second World War introduces the theme of the cyclical recurrence of history which is developed particularly in the third stanza.

The colloquial diction and speed of the first stanza in its approximation to **drawing-room** talk aesthetically controls the hysteric fear preparing us for the discipline of the theatrical mask in the second stanza. Here the long slow vowels capture the poet's calm, reflective response to popular rage and impatience that would drag him down like a **quarry** (see 'Pamell's Funeral'). We begin to encounter the familiar Yeatsian dialectic of art and life wherein the turbulence of reality is gathered with undiminished intensity into the stillness and repose of art. Art here, whether of the **theatre** or of the sculpture in lapis lazuli, means not only the individual work or object of art but the 're-creation of the man through that art' (Autobiographies). "

The apocalyptic premonition is controlled by the vision of life as tragic theatre: this distancing leads logically to the panoramic view from the mountain top (stanza 5) through the rise and fall of civilisations (stanza 3). By contrast, 'The Gyres' articulates a tragic joy somewhat marred by indifferent withdrawal: 'We that look on but laugh in tragic joy.' In 'Lapis Lazuli' we are as it were inside the theatre, simultaneously involved in and detached **from** the performance of our lives. Ophelia and Cordelia provide alternative models of femininity implicitly opposed to the hysterical women. More important, along with Hamlet and Lear they foreground the individuality that collective passions can stifle. Hamlet's strutting **and** rambling suggest Yeats's characteristically defiant pose and passion for knowledge and speculation: 'For many years Hamlet was an image of heroic self-possession for the . poses of youth and childhood to copy, a combatant of the battle within myself (Autobiographies). Lear is a later mask appropriate to an old man's frenzy with the help of which Yeats declares in '**An Acre of Grass**': 'Myself must I remake.' But Lear's rage, read in the context of 'hysteria' and in association with poems like 'A Bronze Head' or 'Parnell's Funeral' is a heroic struggle to control '**hysterica** passio': '**Hysterica** passio, down, thou climbing sorrow' (King Lear, **II.iv.57**). Yeats wrote to

Dorothy Wellesley that in producing a play in verse he would always remind the actors that 'the passion of the verse comes from the fact that the speakers are holding down violence or madness-"down *Hysterica passio*." All depends on the completeness of the holding down, on the stirring of the beast underneath.'

W.B. Yeats II

For Yeats, no tragedy is complete without arriving at a kind of joyous defiance: 'The arts are all the bridal chambers of joy. No tragedy is legitimate unless it leads some great character to his final joy.' In contrast to the wretched 'exit' of Polonius, Hamlet and the other tragic figures confront death with the energy of a defiant will (somewhat Nietzschean in origin) that is the greatest in tragedy since it struggles against an immovable object (Explorations). The unique tragedy of each man or woman is ignored and suppressed by the collectivized fanaticism on the eve of the War. In 'A General Introduction for my Work' Yeats finds the tragic protagonists of Shakespeare transformed by 'the sudden enlargement of their vision, their ecstasy at the approach of death.' Their gaiety is very different from what the fanatics mean by 'gaiety,' namely, an irresponsible expression of frivolity. The moralistic insistence of stanza 1-'For everybody knows or else should know'-is inimical to tragic ecstasy. As Yeats put it in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley (6 July 1935), 'People much occupied with morality always lose heroic ecstasy.'

The entire second stanza is built around theatre imagery reminiscent of Shakespeare and Renaissance drama. Related to the doctrine of the mask, the metaphor of the actor is one of self-making whereby man becomes an increasingly conscious agent of his own history and not the bewildered, passive victim taking refuge in 'hysterica passio.' The moment of death thus becomes a pyrrhic victory, paradoxically the moment of self-consciousness. Lady Gregory's belief that 'Tragedy must be a joy to the man who dies' is endorsed in Yeats's letter to Dorothy Wellesley (26 July 1935): 'the supreme aim is an act of faith and reason to make one rejoice in the midst of tragedy.' This emphasis on defiant will is crucial to Yeats's view of the human condition; when the will's 'limit is reached it may become a pure, aimless joy, though the man, the shade, still mourns his lost object' (Explorations).

That is why 'no actress has ever sobbed when she played Cleopatra . . . There may be in this or that detail painful tragedy, but in the whole work none' (Explorations). Yeats's search for a cold and passionate style ('The Fisherman') is thus inseparable from the wholeness of artistic form. This purposive design masters all confusion and turbulence into stillness through metamorphosis: 'Gaiety transfiguring all that dread.' The mastery is admirably suggested in 'wrought' and 'uttermost,' words which capture the pressure of experience passing into artifice. As all earthly involvements, goals, ambitions, and calculations run on to their logical end of disillusionment and despair, Yeats represents the situation in terms of a simple theatrical device: the foot-lights black out while the auditorium lights are turned on full blaze. This in turn suggests the Neoplatonic concept of spiritual, even ascetic illumination; in his Introduction to *The Holy Mountain* Yeats quotes Henry Vaughan: 'There is in God, some say/ A deep but dazzling darkness.' We may also recall the movement towards the identity of darkness and the soul in 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul' or the darkening night that reveals **Byzantium ('Byzantium')**. The re-fashioning of human experience transforms the natural into the fully **determined stasis** of art so that it cannot grow or change any further.

The 'hundred thousand stages' prepare us for the extended survey in stanza 3 of history as the specific raw material of tragedy. The somewhat remote pictorial effect of the cyclical procession of history suggests an artistic disengagement that becomes triumphant later in the final stanza. In this sense Yeats's last poems are poems of age, a time of summing-up **completed in death**. Especially in the first three lines of the stanza the style recovers its earlier colloquial sprightliness **observing** with poised, sympathetic detachment the panoramic rise and fall of civilisations. The cyclical procession of history and change is made to surround the closely observed work of art, whether of Callimachus or of China. Callimachus was a late fifth-century B.C.

Greek sculptor who was the reputed inventor of the Corinthian capital (head or cornice of pillar or column). Yeats refers to his work in *A Vision*—to 'that bronze lamp, shaped like a palm'—and in *Essays and Introductions* to his 'stylistic management of the falling folds of display, after the naturalistic drapery of Phidias.' As B. Rajan has argued, the description of Callimachus' handiwork—making marble as malleable as bronze—poetically blends the sense of beauty with that of evanescence in a **rhythm** which both absorbs and counteracts the latent tragedy of the recognition of perishability. Far **from** defeating the artist, fragility inspires him to endless creativity: thus are the destructive and the creative aesthetically poised.

In the fourth stanza Yeats describes the actual sculpture in lapis lazuli. About a year before the poem was completed, Yeats had written to Dorothy Wellesley about a present from Harry Clifton:

a great piece carved by some Chinese sculptor into the semblance of a mountain with **temple**, trees, paths and an ascetic and pupil about to climb the mountain. Ascetic, pupil, hard stone, eternal theme of the sensual east. The heroic cry in the midst of despair. But no, I am wrong, the east has its solutions always and therefore knows nothing of tragedy. It is we, not the east, that must raise the heroic cry.

The ascetic figure of the Eastern sage blends into the Yeatsian symbol of the wise old man. By the solutions of the east Yeats probably means the doctrine of reincarnation and karma; as opposed to this, tragic vision makes the insoluble enduring and meaningful. The contraries of sensuality and asceticism are interrelated since the latter becomes the theme and destination of the former. The long-legged crane is a symbol of longevity in Chinese and Japanese art **from** early medieval times. The **serving-man** suggests a pre-democratic, aristocratic order of a by-gone **era** but it links the past cyclically to the future since 'our scientific, democratic, fact-accumulating, heterogeneous civilisation belongs to the outward **gyre**' and the interior **gyre** of the contrary age will establish prince and vizier again for two thousand years.

In the final stanza, we seem to leave behind the panoramic perspective to examine minutely the actual sculpture. Every detail—discoloration, crack or dent—on the crafted surface is closely observed and simultaneously transformed into symbol; meanwhile, as in Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' we are drawn **from** visible art **into** the invisible, troubled experience behind it. In the process we move back from the **minute** to the cosmic, to the view from the mountain-top. As ascetic and pupil climb up towards a possible Eastern solution, 'the little half-way house' becomes the meeting-point of the east and the west, of the snows of winter and blossoms of spring. From this veritable hill of the Muses, the tragic theatre co-extensive with the scheme of things unfolds itself on the cosmic stage.

The eyes of the **Chinamen** stare in wonder at this distanced view which unburdens the human condition of the blind **fury** of passions without diluting their intensity. As the accomplished fingers begin to play the musical instrument, the link with the **fiddle**—bow in stanza 1 suggests the theme of cyclical recurrence. The accomplished artistry is **the** specific mastery that produces tragic art out of human suffering and despair. The repetition of 'eyes' foregrounds the calm and joyous consciousness, the indomitable will to create. In the wrinkled face of the old and infirm which is the **mask** of **an** ancient wisdom, the glittering eyes suggest an assertive vitality and spiritual liveliness heightened by decrepitude. At the same time, the glitter remains a **faithful** description of the quality of the precious stone, the carved artifice in lapis lazuli.

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## 44.6 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit you have been introduced to the complexity of Yeats's later poetry primarily through a close reading of three representative poems. Although the major

developments in Yeats's later poetic career are charted out, the emphasis is always on the unravelling of the densely textured poem. This exercise has been undertaken in order to demonstrate how a great poet can pack in an entire world-view into a short poem.

44.7 QUESTIONS

- 1. Comment on Yeats's poetic use of his ambivalent attitude to the Easter Rebellion in 'Easter 1916.' (See 44.3)
- 2. Who are the rebels mentioned in 'Easter 1916'? Why does Yeats mention them? (See 44.3)
- 3. Comment on Yeats's use of the theatrical metaphor in his poetry. (See 44.5)
- 4. Write a note on the imagery of 'Easter 1916.' (See 44.3)
- 5. What are the various meanings of Byzantium in 'Sailing to Byzantium'? (See 44.4)
- 6. Comment on the opposition of art and life and youth and old age in 'Sailing to Byzantium.' Are the two oppositions related to one another? (See 44.4)
- 7. Discuss Yeats's use of history in either 'Easter 1916' or 'Lapis Lazuli! (See 44.3 or 44.5)
- 8. What is the meaning of 'gaiety' in 'Lapis Lazuli'? How is it related to Yeats's tragic vision? (See 44.5)
- 9. Write an essay on the theme of heroic defiance in Yeats's poetry. (See especially 44.3 and 44.5)
- 10. How does the image of the bird provide structural unity to 'Sailing to Byzantium'? (See 44.4)

44.8 SUGGESTED READING

Bayley, John. *The Romantic Survival* (London 1957)  
Donoghue, Denis and J.R. Mulryne (eds). *An Honoured Guest* (London 1965)  
Ellmann, Richard. *Yeats, The Man and the Masks* (London 1949)  
    – *The Identity of Yeats* (London 1954)  
Henn, T.R. *The Lonely Tower* (London 1950; rev. edn. 1965)  
Hone, Joseph. *KB. Yeats 1865-1939* (London, 1942; rev. edn. 1962)  
Jeffares, A. Norman. *KB. Yeats: Man and Poet* (London, 1949; rev. edn. 1962)  
    – *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (London, 1968)  
Melchiori, Giorgio. *The Whole Mystery of Art: Pattern into Poetry in the Work of W.B. Yeats* (London, 1960)  
Rajan, B. *W.B. Yeats: A Critical Introduction* (London, 1965)  
Stauffer, Donald A. *The Golden Nightingale* (New York, 1949)  
Stock, A.G. *W.B. Yeats: His Poetry and Thought* (Cambridge, 1963)  
Unterecker, John. *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats* (London, 1959)  
Ure, Peter. *Towards a Mythology: Studies in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats* (London, 1946)  
Whitaker, Thomas R. *Swan and Shadow: Yeats's Dialogue with History* (Chapel Hill, 1964)  
Wilson, F.A.C. *W.B. Yeats and Tradition* (London, 1958)  
    – *Yeats's Iconography* (London, 1960)

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## UNIT 45 T.S. ELIOT : THE WASTE LAND (I)

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### Structure

- 45.0 Objectives
- 45.1 Introduction
- 45.2 T.S. Eliot: Life and Works
- 45.3 The Waste Land: Its Theme and Art
  - 45.3.1. Composition and Publication
  - 45.3.2. The Form of the Poem
  - 45.3.3. The Poet's Vision
  - 45.3.4. Different Points of View
  - 45.3.5. Myth, Imagery and Symbolism
- 45.4 Summary of the Unit
- 45.5 Annotated Reading List
- 45.6 Answers to Check Your Progress

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### 45.1 INTRODUCTION

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The first **fifty** years of the twentieth century saw the emergence of two major poets in Great Britain and their **contribution** to British poetry is of immense value. **First came** Walter **Butler Yeats (1865-1939)**, an **Irishman**, who, while actively **working** for the **Irish** Nationalist Movement, made rich contributions to English poetry and drama. The other, Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965), was an **American** who made **England** his home, and left behind him a wealth of literary works in prose, poetry and drama. Both the poets were modernists who came under the sway of **contemporary** European trends of art and literature. Their literary works show the **influence** of the French imagist and symbolist poets. The efforts that they made in **relating** English poetry to the ongoing European literary movements are second to none. Though differing opinions have been expressed about their relative merits as poets of international repute, it is best to regard them as two bright figures, that contributed equally to the enrichment of English literature. Both of them successfully worked for the revival of the poetic drama, which was virtually a dead literary form in Ireland and England. What is more, they inspired a young generation of English poets who **appeared** on the English literary scene in the years following the First World War (1914-18). In this Unit, we shall now tell you briefly about the life and works of T. S. Eliot. Further, we shall discuss the main features of his poetic art displayed in *The Waste Land*, a long poem of five sections that is prescribed for detailed study in the British Poetry Course of your M.A. syllabus.

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### 45.2 T. S. ELIOT : LIFE AND WORKS

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T.S. Eliot was born on 26 September 1888 in St. Louis, a large industrial city in the Missouri **State** of the **U.S.A.** His Calvinist (Puritan Christian) ancestor **emigrated** in 1667 **from** East **Coker**, a village in Somersetshire, England, to settle in a colony of New England on the eastern coast North America. Eliot's father, **W. G. Eliot**, moved in 1834 from Boston to St. Louis, and established the first **Unitarian** church there. A leading philanthropist of his time, he also founded the Washington University. T. S. Eliot was the seventh and youngest child of Henry Ware Eliot and Charlotte Champe Stearns, and the family background had an **important** role in the shaping of his poetic sensibility.

Eliot trained himself to be a **poet** from the age of eight, when he brought out eight (hand-written) issues of a magazine called *The Fire Side*. At school, his **favourite writers were** Byron, Shelley, Edgar **Allan** Poe, R.L. Stevenson, **Conan** Doyle, **Swinburne** and **D. G. Rossetti**. Eliot's Family tradition took him to the University of **Harvard**, where he spent four years in the study of philosophy. It was at **Harvard that** Eliot, for the first time, read some works of Baudelaire, the French **poet**, in whom he discovered **poetical** possibilities that he had not found in any of the English **poets**. From the same source he **learnt** how the real and **imaginary** worlds could be brought **together in literature**. The Symbolist Movement in Literature by Arthur **Symons**



introduced Eliot to the French poets of the nineteenth century. Soon after getting his M.A. degree in 1910, Eliot went to Paris for a year to study French literature and philosophy. About the same time, he came under the influence of the French philosopher, **Henri Bergson**, whose lectures he attended in Paris. But that was a passing phase. On his return to Harvard, Eliot registered himself as a graduate student in philosophy since he intended to pursue philosophy as an academic career. He also studied **Sanskrit**, Pali and Indian philosophy. The Bhagvad Gita was one of the Indian classical texts that he studied with interest. He learnt about Buddhism the influence of which remained with him for many years. The concluding section of The 'Waste Land' shows the shadow of Indian spiritual thought on Eliot's poetic sensibility.

For a short while, Eliot studied in Germany, and later went to Oxford. Spending the years of the First World War (1914-18) in England, he married Vivien Haigh-Wood in June, 1915. Though he went on a short visit to America to see his family, he had made up his mind to settle down in England. At first, he worked as a schoolmaster, but in 1917 he gave up that job for one at the Lloyd's Bank in London, where he worked for eight years. Around this time, Eliot's poems began to appear, first in magazines and journals, and later in small volumes. A collection of his poems entitled **Prufrock** and Other Observations was published in 1917, and The Sacred Wood, a book of essays, in 1920. The earlier modernists in England had rejected tradition and the freedom of a poet's expression, but Eliot in essays asserted that an individual writer needs to retain his links with the past tradition, which he should carry forward to the future generations.

It was with the publication of **The Waste Land**, in 1922, that Eliot came to be recognised as a leading light of English poetry in the period following the Great War. We shall tell you about that poem in some detail in the next section (1.3) of this Unit. Giving up his bank job in 1925, Eliot joined a newly formed publishing house, which later came to be known as Faber and Faber. Two years later, he gave up the Calvinist faith and joined the Church of England. This was not due to a sudden change of mind but the culmination of a long process, which coincided with his becoming a British citizen. He declared in the preface to a book of essays that he was a classicist in literature, a royalist in politics and an Anglo-Catholic in religion. This statement caused a flutter in the English literary circles where such firm beliefs were not publically expressed. In 1932, Eliot revisited America to deliver two series of lectures at the Universities of Harvard and Virginia; these were later published as **The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism** (1933) and **After Strange Gods** (1934).

In the years that followed, Eliot brought out several poetical works including **Four Quartets** (1943) which many knowledgeable critics consider to be his greatest poetical achievement. Its four parts are: 'Burnt Norton', 'East Coker', 'The Dry

Salvages' and 'Little Gidding.' Eliot also wrote and lectured on a variety of literary and social topics. As the editor of the *Criterion*, a quarterly journal, he exerted far-reaching influence upon the English literary world. When the magazine stopped publication in 1939, Eliot turned his attention from literary criticism to poetic drama which, for several years, he had been wanting to revive in England. He was commissioned to write *Murder in the Cathedral* for the Canterbury Festival of 1935. Its publication was followed by that of *The Family Reunion* (1939), *The Cocktail Party* (1949), *The Confidential Clerk* (1953) and *The Elder Statesman* (1958).

Eliot's first wife, Vivien, died in 1948 after a prolonged mental illness. Nine years later, he married his secretary, Valerie Fletcher, much to the disappointment of his friend, Emily Hale, whom he had known and corresponded with for more than forty years. By this time, Eliot's reputation and authority had considerably grown on both sides of the Atlantic, i.e., in England and America. If earlier he was known mainly to the younger generation of university students, now his merit as a poet, critic and dramatist acknowledged even by the traditionally conservative university scholars and teachers. While interpreting the age to which he belonged to itself, he had maintained the standards of the highest literary excellence in whatever he wrote, whether it was prose, verse or drama. Several prestigious awards were bestowed on him in the wake of his literary success. He received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948 and the Medal of Freedom (the highest American civilian honour) in 1964. After a severe illness in the winter of 1962-63, Eliot's health gradually deteriorated. He died on 4 January 1965. Among the distinguished mourners at the Westminster Abbey in London was his mentor, Ezra Pound, who told the gathering that the best tribute to Eliot would be to read his works.

### Check Your Progress.1

- a. How and where was Eliot introduced to the French poets?

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- b. Prepare a list of Eliot's major works in the chronological order of their publication.

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## 45.3 THE WASTE LAND : ITS THEME AND ART

T.S. Eliot projects several levels of modern experience in 'The Waste Land'. These are related to various symbolic wastelands in modern times, such as,

- The wasteland of religion, where there are but no water;
- the wasteland of spirit, where all moral springs have dried up; and
- the wasteland of the reproductive instinct, sex has become a means of physical satisfaction rather than a source of regeneration.

The poet communicates to the reader his own sense of anarchy and futility that he finds everywhere in the contemporary world. He has no intention of expressing the

'disillusionment of an entire generation.' But the poem remains an important document of social criticism of the world to which Eliot belonged.

'The Waste Land' is mainly concerned with the theme of barrenness in the mythical wasteland of the twentieth century. The land having lost its fertility, nothing useful **can** grow in it; the animals and crops have forgotten the true significance of their reproductive function, which was meant to rejuvenate the land. The negative condition of the land is closely related to that of its lord, the Fisher King, who too, through illness and maiming (some kind of hurt), has lost his procreative power. There is some curse on the land and its master, and this could be removed only by a concerted effort at spiritual regeneration. This idea links *The Waste Land* to the legend of the quest of the Christian **knights** for the Holy Grail (the cup used by Christ **at** the last supper with his twelve original disciples before his crucifixion), which has **been** a recurring theme in the literatures of the Christian nations. The physical sterility of the original Christian legend is replaced by **spiritual** sterility in Eliot's poem.

At a different level of meaning, one of the themes of *The Waste Land* is also death; 'Death by Water' being only one aspect of it. According to Cleanth Brooks (a critic) the poem deals with the contrast of 'two kind of life and two kinds of **death**': **Death-in-Life** and **Life-in-Death**, as you might have found in S.T. Coleridge's "Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner" (a ballad of the early nineteenth century). Life devoid of meaning is a kind of death, while death in a sacrifice is a renewal of life as it provides hope of life to come. Through all the five sections of 'The Waste Land', Eliot explores, at some length, the variations of this paradoxical theme. Along with this, he presents through his poetic art the wonderful trinity of religion, culture and sex. A combined ideal of the three concepts taken together **ought** to be the common goal of **humanity**, but, since these human impulses tend to work in **isolation**, we have the resulting **corruption** of the European civilization. **Perhaps** the Orient (Eastern World) could provide an alternative, and that is how 'The **Waste Land**' ends on a message of charity, hope and peace from the Hindu Upanishads.

### 45.3.1 Composition and Publication

The first mention of 'The Waste Land' was made by Eliot in November, 1919, in a letter to a friend, John Quinn. For many years even before that he had been writing fragments which were later included in the final version of the poem that appeared in the first number of the *Criterion* (October 1922), a literary journal edited by Eliot.

The American edition of the poem appeared two months later. The first British edition was brought out by Leonard and Virginia Woolf (the celebrated husband wife team of writers)-at the **Hogarth** Press in 1923. The published versions of the poem differed from the magazine version by the addition of Eliot's explanatory notes. The French version (1947) contains additional notes by John **Hayward** (English critic).

The poem was mostly written in 1921, when Eliot was under great strain due to a breakdown suffered by his wife, Vivien. At that time, he was **himself** feeling mentally exhausted. Hence, the writing of the poem took longer **than** he had anticipated. Part of it was written at Lausanne in Switzerland, **where** he had gone to rest and recoup. In line 182, Section **III** of 'The Waste Land', there is a reference to 'the waters of **Leman**', which is the French name of Lake **Geneva** in **Switzerland**, close to the town of Lausanne. On his way back to **London**, Eliot left the completed **draft** of the poem with **Ezra** Pound in **Paris**. After going through **the** manuscript, Pound suggested shortening of the poem by **cutting** out some long and short passages. Eliot was grateful to him for taking such pains with another's poem, and willingly deleted a long episode about a ship-wreck at the beginning of Section IV, 'Death by Water', which was inspired by his reading of the Italian poet Dante's *Inferno* (part of the **Divine** Comedy). In response to Pound's criticism, Eliot also redrafted the opening lines of Section **III**, 'The Fire Sermon': Pound diluted the dramatic and fictional elements of the poem, and removed some passages in parody or mock imitation of The Rape of the Lock of Alexander Pope, **the** early eighteenth century

English Poet. As a consequence, 'The Five Sermon' was reduced from about 200 lines to only 139. In this way, by his skilful editing, Ezra Pound helped to give '*The Waste Land*' a greater unity and meaning than was possessed by its original version,

## Check Your Progress 2

- a. What are the different kinds of wasteland that you find in *The Waste Land* of T. S. Eliot?

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- b. In which journal and when did the poem appear for the first time in England?

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### 45.3.2 The Form of the Poem

The manner in which *The Waste Land* evolved in its composition (as we told you in the last sub-section of this Unit) raises relevant questions regarding the process of poetic creation and the form of poetry. For instance, should a long poem be a group of short poems or a unified whole? Also, what do we understand by poetic or artistic unity? It appears that Eliot himself was not quite sure about the unity of '*The Waste Land*', since he had initially wanted to divide it between two issues of the *Criterion*. (Please turn back to sub-section 45.3.1 of this Unit). Though Eliot thought of it as a 'series of poems', Pound persuaded him that the poem should appear as a single sequence. Reading the five parts together is more effective in understanding what the poet says; and the poem is likely to lose its full meaning, if its parts are taken up in isolation.

The unified pattern of *The Waste Land* appears clearly only when we regard it as a single poem of several movements comparable to those of a musical symphony, or to a play of five acts. Eliot is of the view that a poet should work out different elements of a poem separately, and then **fuse** them together to achieve the unity of an artistic whole. He disagrees with the contention of E. A. Poe (American poet, critic and short story writer of the nineteenth century) that a long poem is 'a series of short poems strung together'. Poe finds it difficult to write a long poem because he believes it should possess one mood and be without variations of style. Eliot, on the other hand, writes a long poem only for the purpose of expressing a variety of moods. This requires the bringing together of a number of different moods and themes, which could either be related in themselves or in the mind of the poet, who can visualize and combine together the diverse elements,

According to Eliot, the parts of a poem taken together form a whole which is more than the sum of the parts, and the pleasure that one gets from reading a part is enhanced by his grasp of the whole. This is what he means by the poetic unity of a work of literary art - be it a poem, play or novel. By these standards, '*The Waste Land*' is a cohesive work of poetic art in spite of being divided into five parts or sections. It is difficult to question the totality of artistic effect achieved by Eliot in this poem through a fusion of form and meaning. The five parts are interwoven and linked together through cross-references and echoes of one or several **occurring in the** others. Through recurrence of images, figures, rhythms and lines, there are constant

reminders that what we are reading is basically one long poem, and not a disjointed group of five. The desolation and sterility of the first two parts is transformed by the purifying elements of fire and water in the middle parts to achieve the spiritual peace of the Buddha in the concluding section. That is the artistically unified pattern that emerges at the end of *The Waste Land*, and points to the possibility of attaining peace and tranquility in the midst of the confusion and bewilderment of modern times.

### 45.3.3 The Poet's Vision

Eliot's wasteland is the European scene immediately after the end of the First World War. He is dismayed by the emotional and spiritual sterility surrounding him everywhere in Europe. Consequently, his poem presents a horrifying vision of the modern world. It is linked to the popular myth of the Fisher King who became impotent through sickness, and whose lands were devastated by barrenness. The location of 'The Waste Land' is a place where the people, surprisingly, pray for winter but not for spring, since all normal values are topsy-turvy in that land. The Tarot pack of cards, once used for prophesying important events, is reduced in the hands of Madame Sosostrius the 'famous clairvoyants' into an instrument of ordinary fortune telling. It is significant that she is not able to find in her pack the card of the 'Hanged Man' representing some hanged god (or even Christ on the cross), a symbol of redemption, life and fertility. This is another symbolic indication of the arid desert into which the green earth is transformed in the poet's vision.

Another picture of corruption is seen in the second part of the poem, 'A Game of Chess'. Shakespeare's Cleopatra (Queen of Egypt) amidst her affluence and wealth once again depicts the lot of the modern man of the twentieth century. The grand works of classical art no longer sustain him in his search for ideal attainments. The rape of Philomel's virginity the metaphorically repeated in Eliot's wasteland, a perverse act which is the result of a combination of man's scientific temper with his spiritual dryness. In 'The Fire Sermon', the third part of 'The Waste Land', we encounter Tiresias, the blind visionary, who pronounces his judgement upon the existing relationship between modern men and women. According to him, this very significant and vital natural relationship is reduced to a meaningless physical ritual. Even Cleopatra, that great romantic figure of ancient history, is degenerated into a psychiatric patient who needs counsel and help. What Tiresias and all other characters in Eliot's poem see is the poet's vision of the futility of human behaviour in a social context. The only positive picture is that of the Hyacinth Girl, but the flowers she carries are doomed to decay in the fog and rain. This part of the poem ends with reference to quotations from the teachings of two visionaries, the Buddha of the East and St. Augustine (a Christian saint) of the West - and they are commenting on the physical aspect of love between man and woman. Both religious philosophers significantly use the imagery of fire to convey their impression of lust. On this point, the wisdom of the East and West somehow arrives at the same conclusion.

'Death by Water', the fourth part of *The Waste Land* contains some pictures of death by drowning and comments on the decay of youth into old age. The world is a whirlpool that draws high and low, rich and poor, Christian and Jew, into its destructive vortex, as there is no permanence of human endeavour. The fifth and last part of the poem, 'What the Thunder said', begins the journey over the desert to the Perilous Castle, which is connected with the legendary quest (search) for the Holy Grail. The vision of a land without water again presents a view of dryness and sterility. However, one is encouraged by the sight of Christ, walking with a hood over his head, after his Resurrection (rising from the grave). The search is complete with the Christian knight's arrival at his destination, i. e., the Perilous Castle. At long last, water comes in the form of falling rain, and provides a refreshing vision of freedom, fecundity and flowering of the soul. The voice of *Prajapati (Brahma)* in the Upanishad follows in the form of thunder; 'Datta, *Dayadhvam, Damyata*' - give, sympathise, control. To sympathise is a kind of giving of oneself, and to control is to

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discipline and govern. This concluding message is given for saving humanity from its spiritual drought. The poem ends on a note of peace: 'Shantih, shantih, shantih'.

### Check Your Progress 3

- a. Write a **short** note on the unified pattern of *The Waste Land*.

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- b. Sum up the vision of Tiresias and other characters in Eliot's poem.

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#### 45.3.4 Different Points of View in the Poem

In his essay on William Blake (English poet of the eighteenth century, whose poems you have studied in Block Unit of this course in *The Sacred Wood*, Eliot writes, 'You cannot create a very large poem without introducing a more impersonal view, or splitting it up into various personalities'. *The Waste Land* is a poem that includes a number of fragmentary monologues of several figures. The different voices and shifting points of view merge together in a manner that makes it difficult for the reader to distinguish one **from** the others. For example, it is not easy to identify and segregate the many **speaking** voices in 'The Burial of the Dead'. It is equally hard to make a difference between the 'I' (first person singular) and 'you' (second person singular) of the several narrators who project various points of view of the poet of *The Waste Land*. Then 'I' of 'The Fire Sermon' mingles with the Fisher King of the **legend** of the Holy Grail and the Ferdinand of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The self is not, therefore, a single entity but a shifting plurality of many voices, all of whom together speak in the 'objective voice' of Tiresias, the central figure in *The Waste Land*.

There is greater poignancy in the voices of the female figures, who speak **freely** of their loneliness and fear. Among them we have the Hyacinth Girl, Philomela, the Thames Daughters, the woman at the pub, and the sophisticated lady in 'A Game of Chess'. The satirical tone of the apparently impersonal Tiresias (the chief narrator) is influenced by an allusion to the **tragic** rape of Philomela, which manifests the **recurring** image of woman as victim in *The Waste Land*. The objects of Eliot's irony are not only women in general, but also the meaningless man-woman relationships such as those of the Earl of **Leicester** and **Queen** Elizabeth 1, the clerk and the typist, the rich young men and their girl **friends**. *The Waste Land* is a remarkable poem, in which several points of view merge together to project a single central voice, which belongs as much to Tiresias as to the poet himself.

The most significant point of view emerging out of *The Waste Land* is that of its central voice, which is the prophesying voice of Tiresias, who is a 'seer' in spite of being physically blind. Although not a character but only a spectator, he is the most important figure in the poem, uniting in himself all the others. As the one-eyed

merchant merges with the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not separate from Ferdinand, Prince of Naples, so all the women are one woman, and the two sexes meet in Tiresias. What he says is' in essence, what the poem is all about; Eliot admits as much in his notes to the poem. Hence, it is evident that Tiresias is a possible mouthpiece of the poet. He also provides the connecting link between the various parts of the poem, lending it a unity of perception so important in the context of the form and meaning of 'The Waste Land'.

### 45.3.5 Myth, Imagery and Symbolism

The first line of *The Waste Land*, April is the cruellest month...' is an inversion of the popular myth that April is a time of warmth, love and joy. The Christians connect it with Easter and the Resurrection of Christ. In the fertility myths, the coming of spring is associated with the growth of potency and fertility in mankind, animals and the earth. 'The trees and plants drawing life-giving sap from the land through their roots grow leaves and flowers in their branches. The flowers eventually develop into fruits with seeds that are a promise of the life to come in the following years. But these things are anticipated in Eliot's poem with fear rather than hope, and thus April is cruel rather than kind. Tiresias observes with dismay the coming of April and its perverse effect on the people of 'the waste land'. They fear the onset of the season of life-giving rain since they are incapable of enjoying the mysterious process of the regeneration of the earth. They prefer the cold of the winter to the warmth of the summer. To them, winter is a symbol of spiritual decay, of an animalistic life that involves merely eating, sleeping and breeding, which they seem to prefer to a meaningful life of spirituality and thought. Such a way of life, of survival by instinct, is contrasted by Eliot with April, the popular symbol of growth and regeneration.

The myths, and symbols of fertility and sterility are central to the first part of 'The Waste Land'. These are noticed in the images of the Hyacinth Girl, Madame Sosostris, the Phoenician Sailor, and the corpse in the garden, which are linked to speculations on life, life-in-death, death-in-life, decay and renewal (winter and spring), memory and desire (past and present). The fertility theme is projected through the symbolism of spring rain, wet hair, vegetation and flowers. At the same time, it is contrasted with the dryness of the arid landscape. A biblical allusion (Old Testament, Ezekiel, Chapter 37) again highlights the barrenness of *The Waste Land*. The dead trees provide no shelter, the dry stones give no sound of water. Caught between two shadows of morning and evening, of youth and age, the mankind is haunted by the fear of mortality and doom.

The two episodes of love in 'The Burial of the Dead' are studies in contrast, symbolising the gulf separating the ecstasy of love from the frustration in love. The Hyacinth Girl standing in rain with flowers in her arms is an image of youthful aspiration and passion that is bound to have a tragic end. That is how Eliot, the consummate poet, conveys his impression of the frustrations suffered by his contemporary generation. The Sweeney image (which should be related to Sweeney Agonistes - Fragments of an Aristophanic melodrama, a poetic drama of Eliot, published as early as in 1932) stresses the mental paralysis of humanity, since it can neither understand nor speak about the terrible state in which it finds itself in the modern world of the twentieth century. The prophesying Tarot cards of Madame Sosostris are now used for vulgar fortune telling, which marks the decline of values in the modern European society. Here it should be noted that Eliot makes extensive use of the pack of Tarot cards as a symbolic structural device in 'The Waste Land'. The image of the drowned Phoenician Sailor is linked with the allusion to the in *The Tempest* (a Shakespearean play) in which a character named Ariel (in a song) informs Ferdinand, Prince of Naples, of his father's death by drowning in a shipwreck. The symbolic pattern of these images is repeated in the fourth part of *The Waste Land*. 'Death by Water'.

Eliot, as he admits in his notes to the poem, uses ritualistic and **mythic** allusions in *The Waste Land*. All the figures depicted in the Tarot pack of cards symbolically unite in the dominating personage of Tiresias. He is the central consciousness the

a. Whose are the different voices that you hear in *The Waste Land*?

- a. Whose are the different voices that you hear in *The Waste Land*?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with ten horizontal dashed lines, typical of primary-ruled notebook paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

- b. With which European cities could one relate the 'unreal city' of the poem, and why?

[illegible]

In this Unit, we introduced you to the life and works of T.S. Eliot, a major English poet of the first half of the twentieth century. Though born and educated in America, he made England his home, came under the influence of the Symbolist Movement in the French poetry, and at one time also studied some Indian classical texts. '*Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917) was his first published poetic work, and *The Sacred Wood* (1920) the first book of critical essays. With the appearance of *The Waste Land* (1922), Eliot came to be recognised as an English poet of great promise. He worked as a schoolmaster and later as a bank clerk before joining the publishing house of Faber and Faber. The Criterion was a literary quarterly that he started, and the writing of *Four Quartets* (1943) was, perhaps, his greatest poetic achievement. Beginning with *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935) he wrote a series of five poetic dramas. Eliot married twice, and was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948. Following a severe illness, he died in January 1965.

**The Waste Land** projects several levels of modern experience related to various symbolic wastelands, such as those of religion, spirit and the reproductive instinct. The poem is mainly about the theme of barrenness and infertility. The curse on the land and its master, the Fisher King, is linked to the quest for the Holy Grail. Death,

life-in-death, and death-in-life are some of the other themes of the poem. Life devoid of meaning is a kind of spiritual death. Eliot hopes that Eastern philosophy could possibly provide a redeeming alternative to the corruption of the European nations. *The Waste Land* was first published in the *Criterion*, and followed by its American and British editions. The poem was mostly written in England and Switzerland; it was revised and edited by Ezra Pound, Eliot's friend and mentor. It consists of five parts: I. 'The Burial of the Dead', II. 'A Game of Chess', III. 'The Fire Sermon'; IV. 'Death by Water' and V. 'What the Thunder said'. Though Eliot thought of the poem as a 'series of poems', Pound persuaded him that its five parts should appear as a single sequence, for it was likely to lose its full meaning if the parts were taken up one by one. The poem has a unified pattern like that of the different movements of a single musical composition. Hence, it is a unified work of poetic art even while having five parts. Eliot's wasteland is a poetic vision of the European scene immediately after the First World War. All normal values of society have turned upside down, and there is little hope of redemption, life and fertility. In the poet's vision, the green earth is transformed into a dry barren desert where there is no water, and hence no hope of life in the future. The vital relationship of regeneration between man and woman is reduced to a meaningless sexual ritual. What Tiresias, the prophetic central voice of 'The Waste Land', discovers and comments on is the poet's vision of the futility of human endeavour in a social context. The Buddha and St. Augustine, visionaries of the East and the West, respectively, seem to agree in their pronouncements on the physical aspect of love. The decay of youth into old age is only a pointer towards death and destruction. But in the midst of spiritual dryness there is hope in Christ's sacrifice and the message of the Upanishad: give in charity, sympathise with fellow human beings, control your desires. Eliot's poem ends on a note of peace: '*Shantih*, shantih, *shantih*'.

In *The Waste Land*, the different voices and shifting points of view merge together, making it difficult for the reader to distinguish one from the others. It is hard to separate 'I' from 'you' of several narrators projecting the different points of view of the poet. The female voices, though, speak freely of their loneliness and fear. The most significant voice in the poem is that of Tiresias, who provides the link among the five parts of 'The Waste Land'. The myths and symbols of fertility and sterility are central to the first part of the poem. The two episodes of love in the second part symbolise the gulf separating the ecstasy and frustration of love. The symbolic pattern of death and drowning recurs in the various parts. Eliot also uses ritualistic and mythic allusions in 'The Waste Land' to make his meaning clear to the readers. The 'unreal city' of the poet is any city where men, and women are ghostly figures without a vital social life. The crowds flowing over London Bridge are not independent human beings but the slavish victims of a mechanical way of life.

Now you could begin by reading the text of the poem given in the Annexure. Here, we would like to tell you something about the Epigraph that follows the title of the poem, and introduces the theme of death-in-life. It is a quotation in Latin and Greek from a speech by Trimalchio (character) in the *Satyricon*, a satire by Petronius, the Roman writer of the first century. It means: 'For once I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a cage, and when the boys said to her, "Sibyl, what do you want?" she answered, "I want to die". The Sibyls were women in ancient Rome with prophetic powers.

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## 45.5 ANNOTATED READING LIST

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This is only a suggested reading list, and will provide additional help to your understanding of T. S. Eliot and his poem, *The Waste Land*.

I. Works of T. S. Eliot:

1. 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'; an interesting early poem from '*The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot*'. (London : Faber & Faber, 1969).
2. 'East Coker' (out of Four Quartets) from the same book.

3. Essays on 'Hamlet' and 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1928; repeated 1976).
4. *The Waste Land : A Facsimile and Typescript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1971).

## II. Works on T. S. Eliot:

1. Helen Gardner, *The Art of T.S. Eliot* (London : 'Faber & Faber, 1969). This is a very **useful** book on the poetic art of Eliot.
2. F.O. Matthiessen, *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot* (Oxford University Press). This is perhaps the most comprehensive study of Eliot's work during the years between the two world wars.
3. G. Williamson, *A Reader's Guide to T.S. Eliot* (New York, 1953). This book will be a useful addition to the material provided by IGNOU for understanding 'The Waste Land'.
4. Hugh **Kenner**, *The Invisible Poet T. S. Eliot* (London, Methuen, 1969). This book will be of use to those who want to make a special study of Eliot and his **poetry**.
5. **Manju Jain**, *A Critical Reading of the Selected Poems of T.S. Eliot* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991). This is a very useful book for a textual study of *The Waste Land* and some other poems of Eliot.
6. A.N Dwivedi, ed. *Studies in Eliot* (New Delhi; **Bahri** Publication, 1989).

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## 45.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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- 1 a. It was at **Harvard** University that Eliot first read some works of Baudelaire, the French poet. After reading Arthur **Symons'** book *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* he came to know about the contribution of the French poets of the nineteenth century.
- b. *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), *The Family Reunion* (1939), *The Cocktail Party* (1949), *The Confidential Clerk* (1953), and *The Elder Statesman* (1958).
- 2a. The various wastelands that one finds in 'The Waste Land' of Eliot are those of (i) religion, where there are rocks but no water; (ii) spirit, where all moral springs have dried up; and (iii) the reproductive instinct, where sex has become a means of physical gratification rather than a source of regeneration.
- b. 'The Waste Land' appeared for the first time in the opening number of *Criterion* (October, 1922), a literary journal edited by Eliot in London. The American and British published editions followed in 1922 and 1923, respectively.
- 3.a The unified pattern of *The Waste Land* becomes evident when we regard it as a single long poem of several movements (five in all) comparable, to that of a musical composition or a play of five acts.
- b. Please refer to Section 45.3.3 of this Unit.
- 4a. The central voice that we hear in 'The Waste Land' is that of Tiresias, the blind prophet. In his voice are combined the voices of the other figures, such as, the Hyacinth Girl, The Thames Daughters, Philomela, the woman at the pub, Madame **Sasostri**s (with her pack of Tarot cards), Ferdinand, Prince of Naples, and the sophisticated lady in 'A Game of Chess'. At the spiritual level, we hear the voices of Christ, St. Augustine and the Buddha. The literary voices are those of Chaucer, Dante, Spenser and Shakespeare.
- b. The 'unreal city' with its flowing crowds under a brown winter fog is a merging , together of Baudelaire's Paris with Eliot's London. In this city, men and women are ghostly figures without a vital social life.

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## UNIT 46 T.S. *ELIOT* : *THE WASTE LAND* (11)

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### Structure

- 46.0 Objectives
- 46.1 Introduction
- 46.2 The Waste Land : 1 . The Burial of the Dead
  - 46.2.1 Glossary
  - 46.2.2** Interpretation
  - 46.2.3** Critical Comments
- 46.3 II. A Game of Chess
  - 46.3.1** Glossary
  - 46.3.2** Interpretation
  - 46.3.3** Critical Comments
- 46.4 Summary of the Unit
- 46.5 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises

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### 46.0 OBJECTIVES

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After a careful study of this unit, you should be able to answer questions related to the text of *The Waste Land*, and also explain the meaning and significance of select passages of the poem with reference to the context. In short, this Unit will help you to understand the first two sections of the *The Waste Land*, and, in case occasion demands, you could explain it to others as well.

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### 46.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this Unit, our attempt is to explain to you the first two parts of *The Waste Land of T.S. Eliot* so that you are able to understand the complexities of its meaning. In fact, the poem does not have a single straight forward meaning but several layers of interpretation belonging to different historical, social, philosophical and most important of all literary contexts. All these divergent elements are simultaneously present in the text of the poem, and you have to grasp the same before venturing to make sense of what the poet is trying to say in this path-breaking work of the early twenties of the twentieth century. The deeply thought out and skilfully worked out message of *Eliot* is not true of only that period in European society but of all times and climes, since he is pointing his accusing finger at the general corruption of men and women everywhere in the modern world. Therefore, we have tried to make your task easy by fully explaining the lines together with their complex references and literary allusions. Hence, we provide you with a glossary and detailed interpretation explaining each of the five parts of *The Waste Land*. Under the *Critical Comments* we **try** to unravel the myths and metaphors, and pass judgement on the numerous symbolic devices employed by the poet for projecting his ideas to the successive generations of his readers. Therefore, it is important that you collaborate with us by studying this Unit most carefully with the text of the poem by your side all the time for constant reference. Also, when you complete the study of this Unit, try to attempt 'the explanation of some chosen passages with reference to the context, following the **pattern** of the examples provided by us in the interpretation of the text and model answers to the 'check **your** progress exercises'. Such attempts will prove useful to you at the time of the examination.

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### 46.2 THE WASTE LAND: 1. THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD

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It is very important at the very outset to grasp two **fundamental** concepts in order to understand T. S. Eliot's poems. Firstly, his **poetry** is a kind of continuous and complex stream of thought, a collection of memories in which what one has experienced in the past constantly **merges** with his experience of the present. Once we read a favourite poet, some of his memorable lines are bound to become an

essential part of our personal experience. Very often, we quote **him/her** to ourselves, and we experience a repeat of either one or a series of emotions in a poem or other kind of literary work. In exactly the same manner, Eliot quotes his favourite writers to himself in the poems, goes over their images, phrases and metaphors, like so many possessions in the crowded storehouse of his mind. It is our sincere hope, dear student, that we are making ourselves clear to you since our chief aim is to make **difficult** ideas and concepts clear to you in as many words as the scope of this Unit allows. Well, so far so good; let us now pass on to the next hurdle in our effort to understand of The Waste Land of T. S. Eliot.

The second important point is that one must grasp Eliot's obsession with the problem of time. He writes in Four Quartets,

Time present and time past  
Are both perhaps present in *time* future  
And time future contained in time past.

The essence of this thought is that if our past can determine our present, as most philosophers and historians seem to agree upon, then our present could equally **determine** our future. There is also the hope that memory could bring up feelings and incidents of long ago to render them real, so that they once again become a vital part of the present. Thus, when Eliot alludes to the Thames in The Waste Land, it remains the river that flows through London even now. But it is also the river on which the royalty and aristocracy of England went out in their boats centuries ago. The very name of the Thames evokes historical and personal memories, not only to those who live in London but also in far-off places, and who have never seen the Thames but read about it in English literature. Eliot's Thames is the same river that inspired Edmund Spenser (The English Poet of the sixteenth century who also wrote Epithalamion that you studied as part of this course in Block , Unit ), Line 183 in 'The Fire *Sermon*' (please check in the text of the poem), 'Sweet Thames, run softly till end my song', evokes the same line of Spenser in Prothalamion, another of his poems.

After these introductory remarks, let us now **turn** our attention to the text of The Waste Land, the first part of which is 'The Burial of the Dead!'

46.2.1 Glossary

|                     |                                                                                                          |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Lilacs              | plants with fragrant purple or white flowers                                                             |
| Tubers              | short thick rounded roots                                                                                |
| Starnbergersee      | lake near Munich in Germany                                                                              |
| Colonnade           | row of pillars                                                                                           |
| Hofgarten           | park in Munich                                                                                           |
| Cricket             | small brown insect resembling a grasshopper                                                              |
| Frisch ... du?      | The wind blows fresh to the homeland. My Irish girl, where are you lingering?                            |
| Hyacinth            | plant with fragrant bell-shaped flowers                                                                  |
| Oed'...Meer         | desolate and empty the sea                                                                               |
| Clairvoyante        | person with power to <b>visualise</b> events in the <b>future</b> , woman with prophesying <b>powers</b> |
| Phoenician          | resident of Phoenicia (old name of Lebanon on the Eastern Mediterranean coast)                           |
| Belladonna          | 'beautiful lady' in Italian                                                                              |
| Saint Mary Woolnoth | church in King William Street, London                                                                    |
| Mylae               | ancient city on the north coast of Sicily, Italy                                                         |
| Sprout              | leaves growing out of roots, <b>tubers</b> or beans                                                      |
| Lecteur             | reader in French                                                                                         |
| men semblable       | my fellow-man                                                                                            |
| mon frere           | my brother                                                                                               |

The title of this part of *The Waste Land* is derived from the service for the burial of the dead in the Church of England as given in the Book of Common Prayer. Let us caution you at the very outset that for a full understanding of this poem, you require some knowledge of the English Bible, which is not compulsory but still desirable.

**Lines 1-7 :** In these lines, Eliot subverts the traditional view of spring as a season of joy and merriment. He deliberately provides an ironic contrast to the glad opening of Geoffrey Chaucer's 'General Prologue' to *The Canterbury Tales* (which you have studied in Book, Unit of this course). To Eliot, April is cruel for being the time of Good Friday, when Christ was crucified on Calvary Hill on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Yet, he hints at the resurgence of life in the wasteland through the welcome image of flowers growing out of the barren earth. The April rain revives memory and desire equally in human beings and plants. Winter ironically keeps people warm since the vegetation continues to live in the warm underground while the surface is cold with snow. The image of a little life in dry roots is a reminder of the idea of death-in-life.

**Lines 8-11 :** This is a reference to a shower of rain that perhaps drenched the poet and his group of tourists while boating on a lake near Munich in August, 1911. When the sunlight returned, they went into a public park where they had some coffee.

**Lines 12-18:** The details of this passage are perhaps taken from *My Past* (1913), an autobiographical work by Countess Marrie Larisch, a relation of the Austrian Empress Elizabeth. Valerie Eliot (the poet's second wife) writes that Eliot met the Countess somewhere, and that his description of the sledding episode comes from a conversation he had with her. This passage evokes a picture of the decadence (or corruption) of contemporary European aristocracy. The only place where Marrie feels free is in the mountains. Just to impress Eliot, she informs him that the Archduke is her cousin, she is an intellectual since she reads at night, and also she goes to the warmer south of Europe (France, Spain and Italy) in winter when it is very cold in Austria.

**Lines 19-24:** Here Eliot uses images from a passage in the Bible, Book of Job, viii, 11-13, 16-17, where there is mention of roots wrapped about a heap of stones. 'Son of man', is the Jewish prophet, Ezekiel, who is sent on a mission to preach God's word to the unbelieving people of Israel. The preacher reminds people of the vanity of life, and stresses the importance of remembering God in their youth before the desolation of old age sets in. It is, again, a reference to the Bible, Ecclesiastes xii, 5. The dry stone that gives no sound of water is a recurring image of death-in-life in *The Waste Land*.

**Lines 25-30:** These lines are virtual repetition of a passage in an early poem of Eliot, 'The Death of Saint Narcissus', which he probably wrote in 1915. The various biblical echoes in these lines are of (a) Isaiah ii, 10 (b) Isaiah xxxii, 2; (c) 1 Corinthians x, 3-5. Christ is described as a Spiritual Rock in the Bible, and those who did not believe in him were overthrown in the desert. The shadow of the rock provides no solace in *The Waste Land*, but reminds us of mortality (certain death). The last line in this passage is a reminder of the fear of death, of which dust is a symbol as the body inside the grave turns into dust after death. This passage supplements the previously expressed idea that the European society is decayed and disintegrated. The voice of the biblical prophet is only one of the many, in Eliot's poem, that comment on the barrenness of the wasteland.

**Lines 31-42:** In Greek mythology, a youth named Hyacinth was killed in an accident and a flower grew out of his blood. The flowers in this passage evoke feelings of sadness, sympathy and desire. The lines record the recollection of a passionately intense moment of romantic life. There is sad memory of the remembered joy with a

feeling of irreversible loss. To express his view **forcefully**, Eliot quotes from *Tristan and Isolde*, an opera of the German poet, Wagner: Thereby, he suggests not only the desolate state in his own poem but also a correspondence between the situation in the opera and that in *The Waste Land*. Eliot's use of the quotation heightens the general effect of desolation in the poem.

**Lines 43 - 59 :** Here, Eliot satirizes the dabbling in matters spiritual by the society ladies of his time. Ironically, he ridicules the practice of fortune - telling through the Tarot pack of cards, which were the first playing cards made in Italy in the early fourteenth century. It should be noted about Madame Sosostris, the society clairvoyante, that she has no knowledge of any spiritual matters. Hence, she cannot find in the pack the 'Hanged Man', whom Eliot associates with the hooded figure of Christ (refer to **II.362-3** in part V of *The Waste Land*). She herself does not fully understand what she sees. The Phoenician Sailor was a kind of fertility god, whose image was every year thrown into the sea as a symbol of the death of summer. As per tradition, he was later reclaimed, and his resurrection meant the return of new life in spring. In section IV, he figures as Phlebas, representing not resurrection but mortality of mankind. Actually, there is a drowned sailor's picture in the Tarot pack of cards. The line, 'Those are pearls that were his eyes' is a quotation from Ariel's song in *The Tempest* of Shakespeare.

'Belladonna, the Lady of the Rocks' is the image of a beautiful and seductive woman who could be a source of threat to the narrator (of *The Waste Land*). She reminds us of the vampire-like figure of Mona Lisa as described by Walter Pater (the Victorian Critics) in his essay on Leonardo da Vinci (the Italian painter) in the collection entitled the *Renaissance*. The man with three staves (or sticks), a figure in the Tarot pack, is associated by Eliot with the Fisher King. The wheel (of fortune) another card, reflects the cyclic reversal of fortune in life. The one-eyed, merchant is the fool in the pack, and also linked with Mr. Eugenides, the merchant from *Symrna* (section **III**, pp.209-14). But there is no blank card in the Tarot pack; this is a deliberate mystification introduced here by the poet. 'The Hanged Man' could be an allusion to Christ on the cross. Mrs. Equitone is obviously a client of Madame Sosostris. the name carries on ironic connotation.

**Lines 60-76 :** Eliot himself, in his notes to the poem, refers to a poem about Paris by the French poet, Baudelaire. It is about a **swarming** city full of dreams. In colder climes like that of London, Paris, New York, Moscow, and Srinagar in Kashmir, the winter fog is thick in the sub-zero temperatures of December and January. The people on their way to work pass on surrounded by the thick brown fog. Eliot visualizes such a scene of people flowing over London Bridge. The exhalation of sighs from the crowd of passing humanity, recalling a similar passage in Dante's *Inferno* is an image of the tragedy of modern world. The crowd, reminiscent of the damned souls in Hell, is of the workers on their way to the city district of London, the financial nerve centre of that metropolis, of which King William Street is a part. Saint Mary Woolnoth is a church in that very street. In the 1920s, nine o'clock in the morning was the usual starting time for the workers in the city.

'Stetson, just a name, does not refer to anyone in particular.' he could be any senior bank clerk in a bowler hat. The reference to the battle at Mylae (an ancient city on the coast of Sicily) in 260 BC is a comment on the continuity of the past and present: the old battle and the first world war in Eliot's own time. The 'corpse' could be a forgotten memory or the self buried in the surrounding life. The familiar idea of the dog being a friend to men is juxtaposed with the menacing image of the dog in the Old Testament (Psalms xxii, 16-20). At the end of this passage, Eliot refers to the prefatory poem of Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* (Flowers of Evil). The quotation is from 'Au Lecteur' (To the Reader): 'O hypocrite reader, my follow-man, my brother!' Eliot, by reference to Baudelaire, compels the reader to confront the **vice** of boredom or spiritual emptiness in order to realize how he himself is situated. After going through *The Waste Land*, the reader shares with the poet a state of deep spiritual

46.2.3 Critical Comments

Here are a few additional critical comments to explain certain allusions in this part of *The Waste Land*.

**Lines 6- 7:** The image of 'feeding/A little life' is derived from 'To Our Ladies of Death,' a poem by the English poet James Thomson (1834-82). Through this allusion, Eliot suggests the dried up state of human consciousness which is reduced to a death-in-life situation.

**Line 12:** this comment by **Marrie** is quoted as a criticism of her conformity with the German idea of racial superiority in which Adolf Hitler believed.

**Lines 31 -34:** Eliot's note refers to *Tristan and Isolde* an opera by Richard Wagner (1 813 - 83), the German poet. The quotation is a comment on the episode in the hyacinth garden.

**Line 35:** The hyacinths are a symbol of the resurrected god of fertility rites.

**Line 42:** this quotation is **from** the last act of *Tristan and Isolde*. Eliot perhaps quotes **from** the original German in order to evoke the music of the opera.

**Line 46 :** **Eliot** explains in his notes that he did not know the exact structure of the Tarot pack of cards, **from** which he departs to suit his own convenience.

**Line 49 :** Belladonna , apart from being a powerful drug, is also the name of the three fates in classified muthology.

**Line 64:** **In** his note, Eliot refers to **Dante's** Inferno, IV, 25-27.

**Line 70:** The Battle of **Mylac** was fought between the armies of Rome and **Carthage** in 260 BC. It provides a link **between** the past and present in there context of the First world war.

**Line 74 :** Eliot's note refers to the dirge (song of mourning) sung by Cornelia for her **son** in John Webster's *The While **Devil***.

Check Your Progegss 1

- (a) What are the **difficulties** that a student faces in trying to understand *The Waste Land*?

(b) Write a critical interpretation of 11. 1-7 of The Burial of the Dead.

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Explain with reference to the context 11.60 - 65.

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46.3 II. A GAME OF CHESS

The title of this part of *The Waste Land* is taken from a play called *A Game of Chess* by the English dramatist, Thomas Middleton(1580 - 1627). That drama is a political allegory about the conflict between England and Spain, which extended over a prolonged period in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In the actual game of chess in Middleton's play, the white pieces represent the English, while the black pieces are the Spaniards because of their comparatively dark complexion. In *Women Beware women*, another play by Middleton, a young woman is being seduced in the background of the stage even as a game of chess is in progress in the foreground. By choosing the title of this part of his poem, Eliot is suggesting that the relationships of men and women, as shown here, are like the moves and counter-moves in a subtle game of chess, both parties trying to overcome each other.

46.3.1 Glossary

|                     |                                                                        |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| burnished           | : polished                                                             |
| fruited vines       | : grape-vines bearing clusters of grape fruit                          |
| Cupidon             | : baby Cupid, the pagon god of love                                    |
| Candelabra          | : large stands for candles or lamps with branches                      |
| vials               | : small bottles                                                        |
| Unstoppered         | : without caps, corks or stoppers                                      |
| synthetic           | : chemically prepared as against something made of natural ingredients |
| Unguent             | : ointment or lubricant                                                |
| laqueria            | : a panelled ceiling                                                   |
| coffered            | : decorated with ornamental panels                                     |
| dolphin             | : large sea mamal with a beak like snout                               |
| gave upon ... scene | : opened towards a forest scene                                        |
| forced              | : violated, seduced                                                    |
| 'Jug Jug'           | : the bird-song of the nightingale                                     |
| stumps              | : remnants, reminders of old times                                     |
| told                | : retold in the form of carvings                                       |

|                   |                                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| shuffled          | : moved noisily                                                                                                                                           |
| rat's alley       | : narrow passage infested by rats                                                                                                                         |
| Shakespearian Rag | : This is a reference to an American regatime hit song of 1912. Rag was a style of Jazz dance music very popular at the beginning of the First World War. |
| demobbed          | : demobilised or retired from the army                                                                                                                    |
| gammon            | : salted or smoked piece of meat from the bottom of a pig                                                                                                 |
| beauty            | : charm, pleasure                                                                                                                                         |
| Goonight          | : slang expression for good night.                                                                                                                        |

### 46.3.2 Interpretation

**Lines 77-96:** The first twenty lines of this part of *The Waste Land* recall the literary tradition of the Renaissance period in Europe dealing with the subject of fatal romantic passion. The artificial language and diction as well as the style of these lines satirize the mode of expression of that tradition. Eliot's note refers to the famous passage in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act 11, se ii, where Enobarbus (a minor character) gives a description of the ceremonial boat of Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt, and her first meeting with Mark Antony, the Roman commander. Here Eliot's style is an ironic **parody**(mock imitation) of what Enobarbus says in Shakespeare's play. The description of the woman at the dressing table reminds one of Belinda at her toilet in The *Rape of the Lock*, a mock-heroic poem by Alexander Pope (1688-1744). The panelled ceiling of the room invokes the banquet scene in the Latin epic, the *Aeneid* (Book I,1.726) of Virgil, the Roman poet. The banquet was given by Dido, Queen of Carthage (an ancient state on the northern coastal area of Africa), in honour of youthful and handsome Aeneas, a Roman hero in exile. Later when faithlessly deserted by Aeneas, her lover, Dido destroyed herself by burning on a funeral **pyre** while the Roman returned to his own land to continue his exploits. All these literary allusions are built into the text of Eliot's poem in this part of *The Waste Land*. If one does not know these allusions it is difficult for the reader or student to understand what the poet is trying to convey. Hence, we have made a special effort to explain such classical and other references for the benefit of our distance education students.

**Lines 97-110 :** Eliot's note refers to the scene encountered by Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, iv, 140, when the fallen angel, in his journey across planets, reaches the Garden of Eden, where Adam and Eve, the first human beings created by God, lived their life together in absolute bliss and peace. Next, Eliot recalls a tragic event in the Latin poem, *Metamorphoses*, vi, by Ovid (43 BC-AD 18), another Roman poet, who touchingly describes the rape of young Philomela by King Tereus of Thrace (in ancient Italy), the husband of her sister, Procne. Later, she was meta morphosed (physically transformed ) into a singing ninghtingale by the gods who took pity on her sad condition. The peculiar expression 'Jug Jug' is both the bird's song as well as a rude joking reference to the act of sexual union, the purity of the one being contrasted by Eliot with the vulgarity of the other interpretation. Through Philomel, the poet projects the entemal image of woman as victim in a male-dominated world. But as the scene unfolds, the society lady at the dressing table is revealed to be an exploiting seductress rather than an innocent victim, the sound of foot-steps on the stairs are of her approaching lover who now joins her. The one sided conversation that follows exposes the shallow values and priorities of such men and women caught up in the social whirl of modem times.

**Lines 111 -126 :** The woman of this satiric episode is in a nervous mood, and would like to be entertained through a bit of light- hearted and frivolous conversation. But her man is not drawn into the amusing dialogue since he is in a pensive (thoughtful) mood. He is thinking of the fragility of life in the slum and what follows after death. 'Nothing again nothing' of 1.120 is an echo of several literary sources :

- (a) Webster's *The White Devil*, V, 223-7;
- (b) Lear's warning to Cordelia (his daughter) in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, I, i, 'Nothing will come of nothing'; and
- (c) Ophelia's answer to Hamlet's query \_\_\_\_ 'I think nothing my lord', Hamlet, III, ii.

The man in Eliot's scene is still thinking of death, as is indicated by the repetition of a line **from** *The Tempest* of Shakespeare. (Please refer to 1.48 of *The Waste Land*). His continued silence draws an ironic remark from the woman. (see 1. 126 of the text: 'Are you alive, or not ? Is there nothing in your head?')

*Lines 127 - 138* : The poet's allusion is to a popular American song of 1912, when Eliot was twenty-four years old:

The Shakespearian Rag  
Most intelligent, very elegant,  
That old classical drag,  
Has the proper stuff  
The line 'Lay on Macduff.

The last phrase, 'Lay on Macduff', comes **from** *Macbeth*, one of the four major tragedies of Shakespeare, in which he explores the psychology of an exalted man and his wife who are driven to murder and, consequently, their own destruction through over-riding ambition.

The last utterance of Hamlet in Shakespeare's celebrated play is 'O, O, O, O', the repetition of it here mocks the woman's taunt to her lover. (Again, please see 1.126). **Her** abnormally nervous speech and indecisive **behaviour** recall Queen Dido's despair at Carthage when Aeneas finally deserts her. In a similar fashion, sleep had disappeared from the woman's 'lidless eyes' as she waited for the arrival of her lover on the appointed time. Eliot's artistic juxtaposition of the sublime (Dido's tragic story) with the ridiculous (the lowly placed London woman's plight) highlights the devaluation of human values in the early twentieth century.

*Lines 139 - 172* : This comparatively long passage is the second scene **in** 'A Game of Chess'. The critics often pick this episode to illustrate (the American) Eliot's ignorance of the contemporary life and speech of the working class men and women in (the very British) London. He once frankly admitted that this episode involving a **sexual** encounter between Lil and Albert owes its origin to a story told him by his housemaid. Incidentally, everyone in India knows how talkative and informative on **the** neighbourhood scandals a housemaid could be. The language and diction **m** this scene are deliberately stylized as in a musical comedy. Eliot contrasts a meaningless and sterile sexual encounter between a lower middle-class woman and her man with **the** unchecked fertility of a woman in a pub (one of London's numerous popular public bar cum - restaurants). Both relationships, as cleverly presented in the two episodes, are a negation of the number of children that are likely to be born out of the union of a love marriage. The poet is here mainly involved with the basic problem of sexual **morality**, he is not concerned with the distinctions of class in society.

Dear students, in order to understand the second scene in the second part of *The Waste Land*, you have to image a situation in a public bar of the postwar London where the two women are having an intimate conversation about their immediate status and family circumstances. Lil is worried about the return after war of Albert, her soldier husband, while her unnamed friend wants her to take better care of herself before she welcomes back the man of the house. The experienced **friend** goes to the extent of advising Lil to order a new set of teeth (dentures) so as to look more attractive **to** her husband who has already paid her to fix the dentures. The soldiers

all over the world, when they return home from war, look forward to having a 'good time' with their wives or girl friends, and that includes plenty of sex. If the women do not provide that kind of relaxing entertainment, the men will naturally look for it somewhere else. As Lil looks accusingly at her wise and experienced friend, the latter advises her to take good care of Albert for her own sake. After all, why should Lil look old at just thirty one. Perhaps it is due to the pills she took to bring off an abortion having already aborted five times. She knows the pills have had a bad effect on her in spite of the assurances of the chemist from whom she bought the medicine. The friend is at a loss to understand why Lil married if she did not want children. When Albert finally returns home on a Sunday, Lil invites her friend to dinner to celebrate on the occasion, and she serves special dishes made out of pork (pig's meat). As the pub closes for the day, the women bid farewell to each other, all others present wishing a good night to everybody else. There is a touch of sadness of parting that colours the farewell at the pub.

### 46.3.3 Critical Comments

**Line 92** : Eliot's use of the word 'laquearia' is meant to recall the dinner that Dido hosted in honour of Aeneas.

**Lines 124-5** : Here, the allusion is to the story of Paolo Lines 124-5 : Here, the allusion is to the story of Paolo and Francesca who, having subjected reason to lust, are in the second circle of Dante's *Inferno*. Dido and Cleopatra too are found in this very part of Hell.

**Line 137**: Eliot's note refers to the game of chess in Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, II, ii.

**Line 141** : This is the call of the barman at the closing time in a British pub. The line is repeated throughout the rest of the scene as a refrain. It provides an echo of the idea expressed by Andrew Marvell in 'To His Coy Mistress', II. 185-6:  
But at my back I always hear  
Time's winged chariot hurrying near.

**Line 172** . These are the last words uttered by Ophelia in Shakespeare's Hamlet, IV, before she drowns herself, driven mad by the double shock of rejection by Hamlet and her father's death.

### Check Your Progress 2

- (a) Write a brief note on the significance of the first twenty lines (77-96) of 'A game of Chess.'

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- (b) Explain with reference to the context 11.97 - 102.

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(c) Briefly comment on the scene .at the pub, it, 138 -72.

46.4 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we acquaint you with two fundamental points that a student needs to grasp beforehand for trying to understand Eliot's poems. The first is that his poetry is a kind of continuous stream of thought as well as a collection of his memories of the past events and works read by him. He quotes his favourite authors to himself in the poems that he writes, and this increases the complexity of his writings. Secondly, Eliot has an obsession with the problems of time, and he tends to let past, present and future times overlap each other. After this preamble (introductory remarks), we give you the glossary and detailed interpretation of the first part of *The Waste Land*, 'The Burial of the Dead', followed by additional critical comments to explain some of the allusions and reference, that we could not include in the interpretation. Then, you have the detailed explanation of 'A Game of Chess', the second part of the poem, on exactly the same pattern as attempted before. In 'Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises', we do an illustrative explanation with reference to the context of a model passage, the exact pattern of which you should follow in your own attempt at the exercises. This particular exercise is aimed to examine your close **knowledge** of the text of Eliot's poem, *The Waste Land*.

46.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

- 1. (a) See section 46.2 of the Unit.  
(b) See section 46.2.2 of the Unit.  
(c) This passage is taken from 'The Burial of the Dead', the first part of *The Waste Land* written by T. S. Eliot. The little of this section of the **poem** is derived from the service for the burial of the dead in the Church of England. The central theme of this part is **barrenness**, sterility, death and **decay**. Immediately before the passage under discussion, we have a scene involving Madame **Sosostris**, the famous prophecying woman, who uses the Tarot pack of cards to predict the future of her customers.

Here, Eliot evokes the image of the 'unreal-city' which **could** be London, Paris or any other northern snow bound city in winter. The people, on their way to work, **are** surrounded by the thick brown fog

of the early morning. The poet visualizes a crowd of people passing over London Bridge, and all of them are saddened by thoughts of death. Each man looks fixedly in **front.** the people exhale their sighs, short and irregular, in thick clouds of vapour as happens in sub-zero temperatures. The flowing crowd reminds Eliot of the passage in Dante's *Inferno*, where the poet describes the movement of the damned souls in Hell.

- (a) The first twenty lines (77-96) of 'A Game of Chess' deal with the subject of fatal romantic passion, which was a literary tradition of the Renaissance in Europe. Eliot deliberately imitates the style of that tradition. As an example, he recalls the famous first meeting of Mark **Antony** with **Cleopatra** as described by Enobarbus in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. The poet also remembers Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock* of Alexander Pope, and Dido Queen of Carthage in Virgil's *Aeneid*.
- (b) See section 46.3.2 of the Unit.
- (c) See the last paragraph of section 46.3.2.

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## UNIT 47 T.S. ELIOT : *THE WASTE LAND* (III)

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### Structure

- 47.0 Objectives
- 47.1 Introduction
- 47.2 III. 'The Fire Sermon'
  - 47.2.1 Glossary
  - 47.2.2 Interpretation
  - 47.2.3 Critical Comments
- 47.3 IV. 'Death by Water'
  - 47.3.1 Glossary
  - 47.3.2 Interpretation and Critical Comments
- 47.4 V. 'What the Thunder said'
  - 47.4.1 Glossary
  - 47.4.2 Interpretation
  - 47.4.3 Critical Comments
- 47.5 Conclusion
- 47.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 47.7 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises.

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### 47.0 OBJECTIVES

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In the previous Unit, you studied the first two part of *The Waste Land*, each of which we explained to you with the help of a glossary, detailed interpretation and additional critical comments. Ideally, you ought to read that Unit along with the text of the first two parts more than once to get the best instruction out of it. In the present Unit, we follow the same pattern in teaching you the last three parts of *The Waste Land*, i.e. III. 'The Fire Sermon', IV. 'Death by Water', V. 'What the Thunder said'. After a careful reading of this Unit, you should be able to answer textual questions on these three parts of the poem. You should also be able to relate each part to the other two, and again the three included here to the two explained in Unit 2. That would give you a complete understanding of *The Waste Land* as a unified work of literary art.

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### 47.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this Unit, we explain the meaning and poetic significance of the last three parts of *The Waste Land*. All the complexities have been smoothed out for you, the numerous symbols and metaphors are unravelled, and the multiple literary allusions have been explained in detail with reference to the contexts from which the poet has drawn those to add to the deeper and wide-ranging meaning of his poem. We follow the earlier model of putting the whole thing across to you with the help of glossaries, interpretations, and critical comments, wherever necessary. Towards the end, we provide a conclusion of our extended discussion of Eliot's poem spread over three Units. There follows the usual summing up of the present Unit as well as the answers and hints to Check Your Progress Exercises. That brings to its logical end our effort of introducing and teaching you the text of *The Waste Land* of T.S. Eliot.

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### 47.2 III THE FIRE SERMON

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The title of the third part of *The Waste Land* is taken from the Fire Sermon preached by Gautam Buddha (563BC-483BC) to convince his followers, the Buddhists, of the negative and evil influence on the human mind of the fires of lust, passion, infatuation and hatred. Though Buddhism as a religious faith started in India, but through the efforts of King Ashoka, the Maurya ruler of the third century BC, it spread across South Asia in Sri Lanka, Burma, Malayasia, Tibet, Thailand, China and

Indonesia. The Buddha's message is still remembered, respected and followed in these countries.

#### 47.2.1 Glossary

|                        |   |                                                                                                                                      |
|------------------------|---|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| nymphs                 | : | literally pastoral goddesses, but here taken in the sense of pretty young girls loved and entertained by the sons of City directors. |
| testimony              | : | evidence, proof                                                                                                                      |
| City                   |   | the commercial centre of London                                                                                                      |
| Leman                  |   | the French name for Lake Geneva in Switzerland                                                                                       |
| chuckle                | : | wide-mouthed laughing gesture                                                                                                        |
| slimy                  |   | covered with wet mud                                                                                                                 |
| Musing                 | : | thinking of                                                                                                                          |
| garret                 | : | poor men's attic (top storey of a house)                                                                                             |
| Rattled                |   | disturbed                                                                                                                            |
| <i>Et O... cupole!</i> | : | 'And, O those children's voices singing in the dome!'                                                                                |
| <i>Tereu</i>           |   | the Latin vocative form of Tereus                                                                                                    |
| <b>Smyrna</b>          | : | modern Izmir in Western Turkey                                                                                                       |
| currants               | : | dried grapes used in cookery                                                                                                         |
| <b>C. I. F.</b>        |   | 'Cost, insurance and freight'                                                                                                        |
| <b>domotic</b> French  | : | the French of common popular speech                                                                                                  |
| Metropole              | : | the fashionable hotel at Brighton, a sea resort on south coast of England                                                            |
| violet hour            | : | time of sunset, when the violet <b>colour</b> is prominent on the <b>western</b> horizon                                             |
| throbbing              | : | with idling engine as at a red-light crossing                                                                                        |
| perilously             | : | dangerously                                                                                                                          |
| combinations           | : | undergarments covering body and legs                                                                                                 |
| Stockings              | : | close-fitting long socks that cover feet and legs.                                                                                   |
| camisole               | : | <del>women's</del> cotton undergarment                                                                                               |
| stays                  | : | not to be <b>confused</b> with the third person present tense of the verb 'stay'; it means 'support for waist or corset'             |
| wrinkled dugs          | : | shrunken teats or nipples                                                                                                            |
| carbuncular            | : | red or inflamed                                                                                                                      |

|                               |                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>assurance</b>              | self-confidence                                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Bradford</b>               | an industrial town in North England                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>propitious</b>             | lucky, fortunate                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>caresses</b>               | tender loving touches                                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>unreproved</b> :           | unoffended                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Tiresias</b>               | the blind prophet of Thebes in Greece in the days of King Oedipus, about whom Sophocles, the Greek poet of the fifty century BC has written three tragedies known as the 'Theban Trilogy' |
| <b>gropes</b>                 | feels around in the dark                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>strand</b>                 | street leading towards the city part of London                                                                                                                                            |
| <b>whining</b>                | sad music                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>mandoline</b>              | stringed musical instrument                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Magnus Martyr</b> :        | the church of <b>Magnus</b> the <b>Martyr</b> built by Christopher Wren, a great British architect.                                                                                       |
| <b>Ionian</b>                 | ancient Greek style of architecture                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>barges</b>                 | large flat-bottomed boats                                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>leeward</b>                | the side away from the wind                                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>spar</b>                   | the strong central pole of a large sailing boat or ship                                                                                                                                   |
| <b>Greenwich reach:</b>       | the south bank of the Thames at Greenwich                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Weillia ... leialala</b> : | the lament of the Rhine maidens in an opera by the German poet, Wagner                                                                                                                    |
| <b>stern</b> .                | the <b>rearside</b> of a boat or ship                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>.brisk swell</b> ¸         | fast-moving waves                                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>peal</b>                   | ringing of bells                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Highbury</b>               | residential suburb in the north of London                                                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Richmond and Kew</b>       | two riverside districts on the Thames                                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Moorgate</b>               | poor area in the City of London                                                                                                                                                           |
| <b>Margate sands</b> :        | seaside resort in Kent on the Thames                                                                                                                                                      |
| <b>Carthage</b>               | 'close to Algeria in North Africa                                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>pluckest</b>               | takes out (of fire)                                                                                                                                                                       |

Lines **173-86**: This opening passage of the third part of *The Waste Land* provides some visual images of the River Thames in autumn. The leafy branches of the trees on the river bank provide a tent-like shelter in summer. But, at the present time, the leaves that resemble hands with fingers have fallen down on the wet earth, and there is no shelter. The cold wind blows across the land without the noisy flutter of the leaves. The pretty young girls are gone away. Line 176, 'Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song', recalls the refrain of Edmund Spenser's 'Prothalamion.' There is no evidence of the picnics and parties held on the river bank on the summer nights—none of the debris (left overs) that people generally leave behind on such occasions. The sons of the directors of the companies situated in the City part of London, the boy friends of the 'gone away' girls too have departed **from** the scene. They have not left their addresses by which they could be traced.

Line **182** is an echo of the psalmist's lament, when he recalls the longing of the Jews for their homeland during their exile in biblical Babylonia: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion (Isreal)! The biblical associations of the line evoke the poet's feelings of despair and alienation from contemporary life of the early twentieth century. Lines 185-6 are an ironic variation on the theme of 'To His Coy Mistress' by Andrew Marvell, the seventeenth century English metaphysical poet:

But at my back I always hear  
Time's winged chariot hurrying near.

This sad image of death is the very opposite of Spenser's lyricism. Eliot suggests death as a human skeleton with the naked jaws spread to their extreme limits in a gesture of omnious laughter.

Lines **187-202** This second passage presents a contrasting picture of the River Thames. The persona or speaker of these lines ironically identifies himself with the Fisher King of the **legend**. The image of the slimy rat dragging itself through the bushes on the bank is an ugly picture providing a contrast to the earlier bright images of the **river**. The persona identifies himself with Prince Ferdinand of Naples in *The Tempest* of Shakespeare, mourning the reported death by drowning of his father. This obsession with the naked realism of the images connected with death are opposed to the renewal of life in the fertility myths. There follows an echo of a line in **Marvell's** 'To His Coy Mistress'. Sweeney is Eliot's **recurring** image of the natural, sensual man, and also figures in poems like 'Sweeney Erect', 'Sweeney among the Nightingales', and 'Sweeney Agonistes.'

In his notes, Eliot says that lines 199-201 are taken from a ballad which someone wrote to him **from** Sydney, Australia. Mrs. Porter was a legendary brothel-keeper in Cairo, Egypt, in some versions of the ballad, which was popular among the Australian soldiers during the First World War. The soda water is not the aerated drink but the bicarbonate of soda solution. The next line is in French, from Paul Verlaine's (1844-96) '**Parsifal**', and it means 'And, O those children's voices singing in the dome.' The quotation evokes an ironic awareness that such aspiration perhaps exists only in art and literature.

**Lines 203-6**

The first two lines consist of sounds made by birds like sparrows and nightingales. And, then there is repetition of a phrase that, obviously, refers to the rape of Philomela by her sister's husband, King Tereus. Hence the single word "Tereu" which concludes this passage.

**Lines 207-14**

The 'Unreal City' could be any city in Europe, America or Asia. It is a ghost city-hence unreal-where the passing crowd and life in general are hidden under the fog of a winter noon. Eugenides, the merchant from western Turkey, is ironically associated with the Fool in the Tarot cards. Eliot once admitted that, while working in a bank in the City, he was invited by an unshaven man from Smyrna with currants in his pockets. Also, in any business transaction, the documents of ownership and transport would be handed over to the purchaser in exchange for a bank draft payable at night.

**Lines 215-27**

At the time of sunset, when the western sky bears a violet colour, the clerks of the banks and offices in the City stand up and stretch their backs as a gesture of realization (after a whole day spent working at the desk). Their bodies are like taxi-engines idling at the side of the road, waiting for a customer. At that very hour, Tiresias (the blind prophet of ancient Greece), who lives between the two fives of a male and female, and whose breasts are shrunk in old age, has a vision of what life brings to each man and woman as reward of their daily labour.

That is the time when the sailor comes home from the sea. The typist returns home from office at tea-time, clears the dishes from the dining table and makes preparations for the dinner. Her undergarments, touched by the last rays of the sun, are hanging dangerously out of the windows. On the divan, which serves as her bed at night, are spread all the various items of her clothes of daily use.

**Lines 228-48**

Tiresias foresees the scene that follows and make a prophecy for the future. Like the London typist, he too waits for the visitor expected by her. Finally, the young man with a disfigured face, arrives at the typist's flat. He is no hero, only an ordinary house-agent's clerk, but his self-assurance is as high as that of a rich industrialist from Bradford in North England. The clerk imagines that the typist must have finished her dinner, and must be feeling tired and bored. Hence, she would be in a receptive mood to love-making. He tried his best to arouse her passion by caressing her, but she remains unresponsive. Finally being himself sexually aroused, he assaults her without any resistance from her. He is so egotistical and selfish that he does not expect a response from her, and regards her indifference as a welcome to his advances. Tiresias, the eternal witness of Thebes in ancient Greece, has undergone the suffering and pain of the typist centuries ago, in anticipation of the events to come. He has given company to the lowest among the dead, and he watches ineffectually while the clerk gives a parting kiss to the typist before finding his way down by the darkly lit stairs.

**Lines 249-56**

The typist has hardly noticed the departure of her lover. She looks at her reflection in the mirror, and feels relieved that the pre-arranged sexual encounter is over. The narrator quotes a line from Olivia's song in Oliver Goldsmith's novel, *The Vicar of Wakefield* (of the eighteenth century) to suggest a contrast between the typist's situation and the seduction of Olivia in that novel. The typist moves

around in her room absent-mindedly smooth down her ruffled hair, and puts a record on the gramophone as if nothing has happened. This episode of the typist and the clerk, like the one in the pub before it, is a deliberate theatrical device by Eliot to achieve a satiric effect.

**Lines 257-65** Here, the poet begins with a quotation from Ferdinand's reflection on the music that distracts him away from through of his father's supposed death by drowning in *The Tempest*, I.ii 192. The music is an ironic reference to the typist gramophone record while recalling Ariel's song in Shakespeare's play. The narrator of *The Waste Land* takes us along the strand and Queen Victoria Street in the City district of London, where is heard the sad music of a mandoline near a public bar in Lower Thames Street. He also remembers the clattering sound of utensils and talk of the fishermen who usually relax there at noon. Nearby, the walls of the Church of St. Magnus the Martyr display the white and gold columns of the Greek (Ionian) style of its architecture.

**Lines 266-78** In his notes to the poem, Eliot says that the song of the three Thames daughters starts here. From line 292 to line 306, they speak one by one. His Thames daughters merge with the nymphs of the opening section of this part of *The Waste Land* and present an ironic variation of Spenser's Daughters of the Flood in Prothalamion and the German poet Wagner's Rhine daughters in the opera, *The Twilight of the Gods*, III. i. The Thames daughters complain that the surface of the river is covered with oil and tar; the flat-bottomed freight-carrying boats have to shift position between the high and low tides of the sea, the widespread red sails change direction with the tide while hanging by the central poles of the barges that push floating logs of wood down the river towards Greenwich and the Isle of Dogs. The two lines that conclude this passage are the lament of the Rhine maidens of Wagner.

**Lines 279-91** In his note to the first line of this passage, Eliot refers to the history of England, vii, 349 by J.A. Froude, where there is an allusion to the love-affair between Queen Elizabeth I (of the late sixteenth century) and her minister, Earl of Leicester. They were once together on a boating excursion on the Thames where the Spanish Ambassador was also present. The passage that follows recalls Enobarbus's description of Cleopatra's barge in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (see interpretation of line 77 in Unit of this Block). The rear - side of the boat was painted in red and gold. The quick-flowing waves struck against both shores of the river. The southwesterly winds carried the sound of the ringing bells down stream where the white stone towers of the Tower of London could be seen. There follows a repetition of the lament of the Rhine maidens of Wagner.

**Lines 292-311** What follows in this passage is the song of the three Thames daughters. The first speaks of the boring trams and dusty trees of Highbury in North London. The riverside districts of Richmond and Kew do not please her either. Floating down near Richmond she raises her knees, lying on her back on the floor of a narrow boat. This action is obviously, meant for the convenience of the lover accompanying her in the boat. The second girl says that she had her encounter in the poor quarter (area) of Moorgate. At that time, her heart was virtually under her feet because of the sexual excitement she experienced. After the encounter, her lover feels sorry and cries out of remorse. He promises to behave properly in future, a remark

on which she makes no comment. Being practical-minded, she **knowns** there is no reason for her to resent the physical **union** that she and her lover enjoyed together. The third Thames daughter declares on **Margate** Sands, a seaside resort on the Thames in Kent, that she finds it difficult to connect different things together. She ponders over the broken fingernails of her dirty hands (which is a hint of her low working class origin in society).

The reference to Carthage is taken **from** the Confessions (iii, 1) of **St. Augustine**, who was born in Algeria and went to Carthage at the age of sixteen. In the passage under reference, he writes of the sensual temptations of his youth. The word 'burning' repeated four times indicates not only sexual passion, but also the burning of **Sodom** and Gomorrah as recounted in the Old Testament. Eliot points out in his note, that the coming together of the Buddha and **St. Augustine**, the two representatives of East and West, in their opinion of lustful physical passion in love, is the culmination of this part of **The Waste Land**. Both the religious leaders refer to sensual temptation as a burning fire. While the Buddha advocates a rejection of the pleasures of the senses leading to freedom from passion and rebirth, **St. Augustine** trusts to the grace of God for the ultimate salvation of man in Christian terms.

### 47.2.3 Critical Comments

#### Line 173

This line provides a link with the last line of the second part of **The Waste Land**, and thereby helps to sustain the continuity of the poem. The images that one finds in this line recall Ophelia's death by drowning in Shakespeare's **Hamlet**, and that is already alluded to in the final passage of part II. 'A Game of Chess', passage from the German book, in which the author writes of the drunken spiritual frenzy of Eastern Europe, where the saint and the seer listen to the people's song with tears in their eyes. That work by Hesse is a commentary on how **The Brothers Karamozov** of the Russian novelist Dostoevsky (1821-81) provides a prophetic vision of the collapse of Europe that actually came about during the First World War. Hesse spent those years in neutral Switzerland, and wrote denunciations of militarism and nationalism. He regards the maintenance of civilization as a conflict between man's rationality and his repressed wild instincts, which he seems emerging as the decay of European culture. Eliot shares the vision of Hesse whom he visited in May 1922. Line 367 recalls Christ's words to the women who lamented him as he was led away to be crucified: 'Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not for me, but for yourselves and your children. (New Testament, Luke xx iii, 27-8). The word 'horde' came into the European languages **from** the steppes of Central Asia. It means a mass of creatures on the move, on the attack, a blind menace, more animal than human. That is how the 'hooded' Mongols came down on horses in their thousands **from** their Central Asian camps to invade and spread their empire across South Asia and China, led **by** fierce commanders like Chinggis Khan and Halaku Khan. They symbolise the primitive invading forces, **underwhose** relentless onslaught the European cultures, like those of the Jews and Christians (Jerusalem), the Greeks (Athens), the Pharaohs and the Arabs (Alexandria), the East Europeans (Vienna), and the British (London) fall as of little consequence. The various cities of Europe, Asia and Africa, mentioned in this passage, are examples of the 'Unreal City' of Eliot's wasteland. The decay of Europe is seen within the perspective of the rise and fall of civilizations throughout

history. Eliot's vision of the unreal cities might be intended as a contrast to the ideal city of Plato as described by him in his *Republic*.

**Line 377-84** The fantastic and unreal imagery of these lines was partly inspired by a painting of Hieronymus Bosch, the **fifteenth** century Dutch artist. In the panel entitled 'Hell', Bosch has painted night, **marish** visions of Hell with a bat-like semi-human figure crawling head-first down a rock wall. This passage in the poem recreates the strange and unreal world of Bosh's symbolic picture of hell.

**Lines 176** This is the refrain of 'Prothalamion', a much appreciated lyrical poem by Edmund Spenser of the late sixteenth century. While celebrating a double marriage at which he was present, Spenser expresses his appreciation of the River **Thames** and the city of London through which it flows before going down into the sea. Hence the refrain, which appeals to the river to flow softly till the poet ends his song. By repeating the line here, Eliot too celebrates London and the tames.

**Lines 197-8** In his notes, Eliot refers to the Parliament *of Bees*, a play by John Day (1574-1640?) quoting :

When of the sudden, listening, you shall hear,  
A noise of horns and hunting, which shall bring  
**Actaeon** to Diana in the spring,  
Where all shall see her naked skin...

In Greek **mythology**, **Actaeon** was a hunter who surprised Diana, the goddess of chastity, when she was bathing in a river. As punishment, the goddess turned him into a stag, and he was tom to pieces by his own dogs.

**Line 209** **Smyrna** was in the news, and was of topical (current) interest when *The Waste Land* was being written. In May, 1919, **Smyrna** was accupied by the Greek army, but was recaptured by the Turks in 1422.

**Lines 243-6** In these three lines, Eliot refers to the bisexuality of Tiresias and to his role in two masterpieces of Greek poetry, Oedipus **Rex** (a play) of Sophocles and the *Odyssey* (an eipc) of Homer. In both the classics, he is shown to be a blind visionary with prophecyng powers. But, then, he is also linked with the Roman Sibyls, women who could predict the future events.

### Check Your Progress 1

(a) Write a short note on the relevance of Eliot's repetition of Edmund Spenser's line, 'Sweet Thames run softly till I end my song.'

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(b) What do you know about Eliot's 'Unreal City'?

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47.3 IV DEATH BY WATER

'Death by Water' is a revised version of the last seven lines of a French poem, 'Dans le Restaurant', that Eliot wrote in May-June, 1981. This part of *The Waste Land* refers to the various associated connections of water with mortality and the theme of death by drowning. It has links with the drowned god of the fertility cults, the shipwreck in *The Tempest* of Shakespeare, and with the death of Ophelia in *Hamlet*. In ancient Egypt, the yearly ritual of the god's head being thrown into the Nile was an enactment of the death and resurrection of the god. The Bengali Hindus follow the same ritual on the tenth day of the Durga Puja Festival in October when they immerse decorated images of the goddess in the Hoogly, the sea, or the nearest river. In Maharashtra, the same practice is observed on Ganesh Chaturthi (the fourth day of the bright fortnight in September) when the images of the Elephant God after ritual puja are taken out to the sea or the nearest watering place accompanied by a procession of devotees singing and dancing all the way to the chosen spot. In Eliot's poem, the emphasis is on death, and not on the hope of rebirth into a new life. Perhaps there is also an allusion to the Christian sacrament of baptism, at which the holy water becomes an agent of death of the old self and rebirth of the spirit.

47.3.1 Glossary

- Gulls large sea-birds that haunt the sea coasts.
- Whirlpool : current of water moving in a circle
- Gentile : non-Jewish person such as a Christian
- Wheel the steering wheel of a ship
- Windward : the side of the ship from which the wind blows.

47.3.2 Interpretation and Critical Comments

**Lines 312-21** Phlebas the Phoenician is connected with several other figures in *The Waste Land*, such as : (a) 'the drowned Phoenician Sailor' of Line 47 in part I, (b) the 'one-eyed merchant', who is the Fool in the Tarot cards of Line 52, and (c) Mr. Eugenides, the Smyrna merchant of line 209 in part III. Since he is already dead, there is no question of remembering the cry of the sea gulls, the movement of the deep sea, and any matters concerning profit and loss, which were his everyday business while he was alive.

An undersea current gently disturbs the bones of Phlebas. His bones rise and fall suggesting the different stages of his youth and old age while he was living. Lines 315-16 recall Alonso's words in *The Tempest*, where he thinks that his son, Ferdinand, is perhaps dead. The narrator of the poem next addresses the pilot (of a hypothetical ship) who turns the wheel that controls the direction of the ship. The pilot is asked to ponder over the fate of Phlebas who was once handsome and tall like the former. The phrase, 'Gentile or Jew', is an

evocation to all mankind, of non-Jewish or Jewish origins. 'The wheel' could also be taken as the wheel of fortune in the Tarot pack. The last line in this passage has a link with Philebus, a dialogue of Plato (Greek philosopher of 5th century BC). There Socrates, the Greek philosopher and teacher of Plato, refers to 'People who think themselves taller and more handsome and physically finer.... than they really are'. In saying so, **Socrates** is actually commenting on self-deception.

## Check Your Progress 2

- (a) What is the significance of the title, 'Death by Water'?

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- (b) What does Phlebas the Phoenician Sailor represent in the overall context of *The Waste Land*?

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## 47.4 V. WHAT THE THUNDER SAID

Eliot thought that the fifth and last part of *The Waste Land*, entitled 'What the Thunder said', was not only the best part, but the only part that justified the whole [poem]. In the first section of part V, three themes are introduced: the journey to **Emmaus** (a village near Jerusalem), the approach to the Chapel Perilous, the present decay of Eastern Europe. The story of the journey to **Emmaus** occurs in the New Testament, Luke XXIV, 13-31. Two disciples of Jesus Christ were travelling on the road to the village **after** his crucifixion and discussing the events of the past few days. Christ, just risen from the grave, joins them and explains to them how his death and resurrection were in full accord with the divine plan. The disciples do not recognise Christ until he blesses their evening meal, and then he disappears from the scene. The approach to the Chapel Perilous is the final stage of the quest for the Holy **Graill** (the cup used by Christ at his last supper with his disciples). The decay of Eastern Europe is a reference to the Red (communist) Revolution of Russia under the Czars in **November**, 1917, with the refugees fleeing to West Europe. None of these themes is resolved in '**What** the Thunder said', the three journeys merge here but remain inconclusive.

### 47.4.1 Glossary

|                |                                                |
|----------------|------------------------------------------------|
| frosty         | cold in the winter frost.                      |
| reverberation  | Resounding echo                                |
| carious        | decayed with cavities                          |
| serile thunder | only the sound of thunder but no fruitful rain |

|                      |                                                                                                                                               |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>snarl</b>         | threatening noise like that made by an aggressive animal                                                                                      |
| <b>mud cracked</b>   | mud-houses with cracks on the surface due to dry heat                                                                                         |
| <b>cicada</b>        | chirping insect resembling a grasshopper                                                                                                      |
| <b>hermit thrush</b> | a song-bird that frequents lonely places                                                                                                      |
| <b>Gliding</b>       | moving along noiselessly                                                                                                                      |
| <b>mantle</b>        | cloak                                                                                                                                         |
| <b>lamentation</b>   | expression of grief                                                                                                                           |
| <b>hordes</b>        | crowds                                                                                                                                        |
| <b>Ringed</b>        | surrounded                                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Jerusalem</b>     | city in Palestine (modern Israel) where the tomb of Christ is situated. It is a place equally sacred to the Jews, Christians and Mohammedans. |
| <b>Athens</b>        | capital city of Greece, centre of ancient Greek culture                                                                                       |
| <b>Alexandria</b>    | port city of Egypt founded by Alexander the Great of Macedonia (in ancient Greece)                                                            |
| <b>Vienna</b>        | capital of Austria, centre of art and music                                                                                                   |
| <b>reminiscent</b>   | that which reminds us of something                                                                                                            |
| <b>cisterns</b>      | tanks for storing water                                                                                                                       |
| <b>tumbled</b>       | irregular, overthrown                                                                                                                         |
| <b>chapel</b>        | place other than a Church used for Christian worship                                                                                          |
| <b>roof tree</b>     | the main beam supporting the ridge of the roof                                                                                                |
| <b>Coco rico</b>     | cock's crowing signal at dawn                                                                                                                 |
| <b>Himavant</b>      | Sanskrit name for the Himalaya mountain                                                                                                       |
| <b>humped</b>        | hung over                                                                                                                                     |
| <b>Datta</b>         | Sanskrit for 'to give' or 'given'                                                                                                             |
| <b>prudence</b>      | worldly wisdom                                                                                                                                |
| <b>retract</b>       | reverse, withdraw                                                                                                                             |
| <b>obituaries</b>    | notices of death                                                                                                                              |
| <b>solicitor</b>     | lawyer who advises clients                                                                                                                    |
| <b>Dayadhvam</b>     | to be compassionate                                                                                                                           |
| <b>aethereal</b>     | airy, baseless                                                                                                                                |

|                    |                                                                                          |
|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Cariolanus</b>  | the Roman general in Shakespeare's play of the same                                      |
| <b>Damyata</b>     | self-control                                                                             |
| <b>arid</b>        | dry, parched                                                                             |
| <b>Poi..affina</b> | '-be mindful in due time of my pain.' Quoted from Dante's <i>Purgatorio</i> xxvi, 145-8. |

**Quando ... Chelidon:** 'When shall I become as the swallow?'

**Le Prince ... abolie** 'The Prince Aquitaine of the ruined tower

**shore** propped or supported with wooden pillars

**lle** I shall

**Hieronymo** character in the Spanish *Tragedy* of Thomas Kyd (1557-95)

**Shantih** Sanskrit for 'peace'

#### 47.4.2 Interpretation

**Lines 322-30** This passage recalls the chain of events from the betrayal (by Judas Iscariot, an early disciple) and arrest of Jesus Christ, after the night of agony and prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, up to the time of his crucifixion. Judas along with a group of soldiers and men from the Jewish priests, came to the garden with lanterns, torches and weapons. Christ was arrested and taken to the palace of the High Priest, where he was openly questioned before being taken to the Hall of Judgement, where **Pilate** the Roman governor of Palestine was awaiting him. On the day of Christ's crucifixion, there was a terrible earthquake. His death meant a kind of universal death for all. 'Patience' of line 30 is the key-word in this passage since it signifies the suffering of the living humanity after Christ was no more. It also denotes the agony of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind.

**Lines 331-58** Eliot thought these twenty-eight lines of the water-dripping song to be the only good lines in *The Waste Land*, and hence immortal compared to the transitoriness of the rest of the poem. He believed that the less realistic literature was, the **more** visual it must be. In order to be seen, dreams must be real, or at least seem to be so. In this passage, clear visual images, and sounds that artistically convey the sense of the words, create hypnotizing recitative rhythms to achieve an unusual effect. The evocative suggestion is one of an arid and waterless rocky region, a virtual wasteland or desert, where there is no hope of regeneration and life. This God-forsaken land would be transformed if only there were some water somewhere. The repetition of certain key-words like 'rock' and, 'water' only heighten the general atmosphere of dryness and sterility.

There is no water in this land, only rocks and a winding sandy road which goes up among the dry and bare mountains. If only there were water, the travellers on the road would gladly stop to drink. But, for want of that, they can neither stop to rest nor think of **what** to do. The heat of the sand underfoot dries their sweat. The rock is **like** the cavity-filled mouth of the mountain that does not spit (or yield) any water. This is no place to rest and refresh oneself. The dry mountains are not silent but echoing with the sound of **rainless**

thunder. There is not even the solace of solitude, since the ominous faces of the dwellers of this wasteland glare at the pedestrian travellers from the doors of cracked mud-houses. So what the narrator of the poem repeatedly asks for is only some water without rock, and, if that were not possible, let it be rock with a little water. He desperately craves for a spring, a pool among the rocks. What he asks for is the sound of water only, not that of the dry grass or the cicada. Above all sounds, he cares for the sound of water flowing over a rock, surrounded by the pine trees and the song of the hermit-thrush. But, unfortunately, his eager ears do not hear the 'drip drop drip drop' sound of water.

**Lines 359-65** Here we have a change of scene. We have to imagine ourselves watching the **progress** of the two followers of Christ on the road to **Emmaus** near Jerusalem. One asks the other about the shadowy presence of a third person, dressed in a hooded brown cloak, silently walking by their side. He is not sure if it is a man or woman, but who could it be! Obviously, the cloaked figure is that of Christ risen from the grave.

**Line 366-76** Eliot, in his notes, refers to the 1920 text of *Blick ins Chaos* ('A Glimpse into Chaos') by the German writer, Herman Hesse (1872-1962). He quotes a 'Shanthi' is the formal ending to an Upnishad. Eliot's use of the Sanskrit word implies that he had to look beyond the European tradition to find a word of adequate depth and resonance.

#### 47.4.3 Critical Comments

**Line 326** Francis Bacon (1561-1626), The first English essayist, begins his essay 'Of Truth' with this line: ' "What is truth"? Asked jesting **Pilate**, and would not stay for an answer " ". When interrogated by **Pilate**, Christ is reported to have told him that whatever he preached was only truth. **Pilate** made the remarks quoted above, and ceremoniously washed his hands of the whole affair. He walked out of the Hall of Judgement after handing Christ over to the Jewish High priest, **who** condemned him to death by **crucifixion** under the Jewish law. Incidentally, *Jesting Pilate* is the title of a book by Aldous Huxley, a popular British writer of the twentieth Century.

**Line 353** The cicadas **frequent** the willow groves of **Kashmir**, where their shrill high-pitched noise in chorus could be heard throughout the day in summer and autumn. They are also found in other Asian countries like Japan.

**Lines 366-70** (a) Herman Hesse is also the author of a novel called *Siddartha*, based on the Indian theme of how and when Buddhism as a faith started in India. A picture was made in English on this novel with Shashi Kapoor and Simi Grewal in the lead roles. (b) Nasir-ud-Din Babar was a Muslim descendent of the Mongols of Central Asia. He established the rule of the **Mughal** dynasty in **Delhi**, which lasted for nearly 250 years. Kublai Khan of **S.T. Coleridge's** poem 'Kubla Khan', was a Mongol King in a part of China, which is now known as Mangolia.

**Line 395** Eliot uses the Sanskrit name for the river, commonly known in India, but not the anglicized term 'the Ganges'.

played upon with a bow like the strings of a violin? The tolling bells are the church bells of London and of the 'failling towers' of other capital cities of the countries of three continents surrounding the Mediterranean sea on three sides. There is also a reference to Browning's poem, 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came.' In his Clarke Lectures of 1926, Eliot praises this poem for achieving the stet of a double world, whereby the character's words and deeds seem to belong to another plane of reality, from which he is in exile. The background of 'What the Thunder said' resembles the dream-like world of Browning's poem, the narrative of which too is in the form of a quest. In the Old Testament, the empty cistern and wells signified the loss of faith and the worship of false gods.

**Lines 385-394** Suddenly, we are confronted with a scene that is a contrast to the earlier desert-like desolation. There is an empty place of worship, without doors and windows. The wind comes and goes through it as it likes. But in this deserted small gap in the mountains, the grass is singing over a graveyard in the faint moonlight. The dry bones of the graves can cause no harm. A cock stands on the roof tree of the chapel, crowing, 'Co co rico co co rico' in the flash of lightning. Soon after a damp gust of wind brings welcome rain. The cock is connected with the betrayal of Christ. After his arrest by the soldiers of Pilate, the Roman governor of Palestine, one of his first disciples, Peter, thrice denies that he knows him. The cock crows after the third denial. Peter then remembers what his master had previously said to him, 'Before the cock crow, thou shalt deny me thrice.' (Matthew xxvi, 69-75). The crowing of the cock in Eliot's poem marks the moment of Peter's recognition of his betrayal of Christ. The cock, however, is a bird of good omen since it announces the morning, when the evil sprits, and ghosts, that walk the earth by night, are dispersed. Eliot's reproduction of the cock's crowing is the French equivalent of the English 'cock-a-doodle-do', What follows this passage is an echo of the message of the *Bhagvad Gita* and the Hindu *Upnishads*.

**Lines 395-409** The poet suddenly has thoughts of the River Ganga (Ganges) and its land, India. In the heat of the summer, while the river was almost dry and the lifeless leaves of the trees on the banks awaited the rain, the dark clouds gathered over the Himalayas, and the forests waited in silence, At that time, the thunder in terms of the message of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* V, 2. The threefold offspring of Brahama, the Creator in Hindu mythology, i.e., men, gods and demons, approach him after finishing their formal education. To each group, he says only one syllable, 'DA', and they interpret it according to their separate ways of thinking. The men interpret it as *datta*, which means 'to give'. The demons interpret it as *dayadhvam*, which means 'to be compassionate'. The gods interpret it as *damyata*, which means 'to control oneself'. When the three groups express what they understand by 'DA', Brahma responds with Om, which signifies that they have understood him. The thunder in heaven repeats that very message. DA, DA, DA, i.e., give to the needy, be compassionate, exercise self-control. One should practise this very three-fold advice, and that is how Dr. S. Radhakrishnan interprets the fable in the *Principal Upanishads* (London Allen and Unwin, 21953, pp. 289-90). The fable concludes by asking men to practise all the

three commands for **there** are no gods or demons other than men. Eliot adopts this very interpretation, and lends to it his own meaning.

Hence, the poet asks, 'What **have** we given?' Sometimes, like Peter, with a palpitating heart, we surrender to a momentary weakness, which the wisdom of experience cannot reverse. Our acts of giving might not be recorded in the obituaries, memorials or wills the **seals** of which shall be broken by the lawyers **after** our death. But, by those very acts of charity have we lived, and shall be remembered by the posterity.

**Lines 410-22** Eliot says that in this world we are like prisoners in a locked cell. The key in the lock turned only once, and that is when we are truly compassionate towards the underprivileged. To remember the key is a confirmation of our worldly imprisoned state. Perhaps only at nightfall do we remember our true state like Coriolanus, the Shakespearean hero who was a prisoner of his own conscience, and eventually perished for his own past misdeeds of **arrogance** and want of compassion. As for *damyata*, Eliot **translates** the word as 'control' when the more accurate rendering would be 'restrain' or 'control yourselves'. However, the emphasis in this third command of the thunder is on self-control or self-restraint. The image that the poet evokes in support of the Upanishadic idea is that of a boat, **well-**equipped with sail **and/or**, and which responds to the hand of the helmsman who controls its movement. When the mind is like a calm sea, the heart of an individual (like the boat) would easily respond to the guiding hand of the captain (call him god if you so like).

**Lines 423-33** In his notes, Eliot refers to the chapter on the Fisher King in Jessie **Weston's** *From Ritual to Romance*. The ruler of the wasteland is sitting upon the shore, fishing, with the desert behind him, and is pondering over the question if he should set his lands in order. The **falling** of the London Bridge, a historical monument of the capital of the British Empire, is a startling event that foreshadows not only the decline of Europe but also the winding up of the Empire.

Procne, the wife of King Tereus, was transformed into a swallow, and Philomela, her sister raped by Tereus, into a nightingale. In his notes, Eliot refers to Philomela as mentioned in part II (lines 99 - 103) and part III (lines 203 - 6) of *The Waste Land*. There is also an echo of **Tennyson's** poem ('O Swallow, Swallow, if I could follow...') to evoke a yearning for release and **transformation**, together with a realization of its impossibility. 'The Prince of Aquitaine, of the ruined tower' is a line **from** the sonnet 'El Desdichado' (The Disinherited) by Gerard de **Nerval** (1808-55). The medieval concept of courtly love, which deeply influenced later European lyrical poetry, **first** appeared in the minstrel poetry of France. Physical passion is neutralized in the cult of courtly love. The 'ruined tower' is linked with **the** earlier images of falling towers, and again signifies the disintegration of civilization and of the self. **One** of the cards in the Tarot pack is the tower struck by lightning.

In his note to line 431, Eliot refers to *The Spanish Tragedy* of **Thomas Kyd** (1557 - 95), subtitled 'Hieronymo is Mad Again'. Hieronymo, mad with grief over the murder of his son, plans the destruction of the murderers. His answer to the suggestion of writing a play is double-edged, meaning that he will write something suitable for the occasion, and that he will punish the murderers **fittingly**. Hieronymo's play is composed of fragments of poetry in unknown

languages. In the guise of **Hieronymo**, the poet seems to threaten the reader.

- Line 416** Perhaps the memory of 'a broken **Coriolanus**' is a reminder to such people as are self-dependent and lacking in human sympathy.
- Line 426** This is the refrain of a nursery rhyme. The line is connected with the apocalyptic vision (relating to the Revelation of St. John in the New Testament part of the Bible) of falling towers (refer Lines 373-5). That vision is of the future or events to come before the **final** destruction of the human race at the time of the Last Judgement of mankind by God.
- Line 429** Aquitaine was a region in the south of France, where the **ministrel** poets, writing in **their** French dialect, flourished from the late eleventh to the thirteenth centuries.

### Check Your Progress - 3

- (a) Explain the meaning and significance of the following lines with reference to the context:

There is always another one walking beside you Gliding **wrapt** in a brown mantle hooded I do not know whether a man or a woman - But who is that on the other side of you?

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- (b) What is the relevance and meaning of the Sanskrit words, i.e. , *Datta*, *Dayadhvam*, *Damyata* ?

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## 47.5 CONCLUSION TO THE WASTE LAND

The ending of *The Waste Land* of T.S. Eliot is marked by a sense of uncertainty. It has been suggested that the last line, which is a **triple** repetition of the Sanskrit word 'Shantih', invokes 'the peace of God, which passeth all understanding.' To Eliot it means a moment of exhaustion after the hard endeavour of writing the poem. It also expresses a longing for peace, appeasement, absolution, and something close to total destruction which in itself is indescribable. Professor Balanchandra Rajan (In 'The

Dialect of the Tribe' in A.D. Moody, ed. *The Waste Land in Different Voices*; London : Edwin Arnold, 1974, p. 14) says that the final benediction of Eliot may be read 'as reflecting the peace of enlightenment, or as indicating no more than exhausted subsidence[or falling ] into a consolatory formula, a termination rather than an ending.' If it is not Eliot's greatest poem, *The Waste Land* is certainly his most influential work. The generation of English poets that grew in the years immediately after the First World War absorbed the poem so that it became a part of their mental set up. The depth and violence of the contrasts of themes, the sense that the poet wrestling with the problem within and outside his mind is stronger here than in Eliot's later poetry. Even in his commonly acknowledged great work, *The Four Quartets*, one does not feel that philosophy and everyday life have been brought so together as in *The Waste Land*.

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## 47.6 LET US SUM UP

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As in the previous Unit in this Block, here too we have systematically done our job of explaining to you the text of the remaining three parts of *The Waste Land* of T.S. Eliot: III. 'The Fire Sermon', IV. 'Death by Water', and V. 'What the Thunder said'. After a brief introduction to each part, we provide for you a useful glossary so that you do not have to depend too much on a dictionary of the English language. Next, we give you the detailed interpretation and analysis of each part. This is so exhaustive that you would not have to look for a critical work or help-book for a thorough understanding of the text of the poem. Almost all the literary, mythical and biblical allusions have been explained, as far as possible within the scope of this Unit, to make it easy for you to unravel the many layers of meaning that Eliot's complex and multi-dimensional poem possesses. In case, we have missed some indirect references into the interpretation, we provide additional information on each part of the poem under a separate subsection called 'Critical Comments' That should help you in tackling explanations with reference to the context and other textual questions on the poem in the examination . We round off our painstaking effort with a 'Conclusion' that hints at the significance of studying this epoch-making poem of T.S. Eliot as a representative work of modern English literature, which is an important part of your post-graduate syllabus at IGNOU. As usual, the critical interpretation of each part of the poem is followed by 'Check Your Progress' exercises, the hints and answers to which are provided at the end of the Unit.

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## 47.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress 1

- (a) This line is a deliberate repetition of the refrain from 'Prothalamion', a lyrical poem by Edmund Spenser, the late sixteenth century English poet of the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. That poem is about a double marriage celebration of the aristocracy in London at which Spenser was an honoured guest. While he writes imaginatively of the two weddings, he also lovingly describes the towers of the city of London and the boat procession of the two bride-grooms on the River Thames. Hence the refrain, 'Sweet Thames run softly till I end my song.' Eliot's repetition of this line expresses his own admiration of the beauty and grandeur of the river that flows through London, one of the great historical and metropolitan cities of Europe.
- (b) Please refer to 47.2.1 'Interpretation', lines 207-14.

### Check Your Progress 2

- (a) Please refer to 47.3.
- (b) Please refer to 47.3.2 'Interpretation and Critical Comments', lines 312-21.

- (a) These four lines have been taken from 'What the Thunder said', the fifth and last part of *The Waste Land* of T.S. Eliot, who regards this as the best part of that widely influential poem in the history of English literature. According to him the last part justifies the whole poem. The lines under reference relate to the journey to Emmaus (a village near Jerusalem in ancient Palestine) undertaken by two disciples of Jesus Christ soon after his crucifixion.

Though there are only two of them walking together, one notices the shadowy presence of a third figure by the side of his companion. Hence he asks him about the identity of the additional person. The third figure moves along softly, entirely covered by a hooded brown cloak, which makes it difficult to say whether it is a man or woman. The doubt in his mind makes the disciple repeat his question regarding the third, shadowy, figure moving on the road along with them.

This passage hints at the resurrection of Christ, who joins these two disciples on their journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus even before the other disciples come to know about Christ's rising from the grave for the good of mankind.

- (b) *Datta* means 'give in charity' to the needy and the poor. It is an appeal to the charitable instincts of an individual. *Dayadhvam* means 'be compassionate' to the people in misery and helplessness. It is an appeal to the emotions of pity and compassion in a person. *Damyata* means 'contract yourself in the world full of temptations. It is an appeal that exhorts one to exercise self-control in order to live at peace with others.

#### Additions to 1.5 ANNOTATED READING LIST

##### I. Works of T.S. Eliot:

1. 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'; an interesting early poem from *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969). Here Eliot writes with a touch of irony about the fashionable London society of the time he came over from America to settle down in England. In this poem, one finds him experimenting with the language and form of the English verse, the improved version of which is found in *The Waste Land* and the culmination in *Four Quartets*. Some of the favourite images of Eliot, such as that of London under a brown fog, appear for the first time in 'The Love Song'.
2. Essays on 'Hamlet' and 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1928; repeated 1976). In the essay on 'Hamlet', Eliot puts forward his theory of the 'objective correlative', by which he means a set of images and patterns that tend to recur in the work of a writer, thereby achieving a unity of structure in that work. The other essay is known for its theory of how a writer works within an accepted tradition and yet maintains his individuality as a literary artist.