

Block**4****Poetry**

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Block 4 “Poetry” is devoted to a discussion of the work of some of the most significant poetic voices of early twentieth century Britain. These poets adopted a new poetic language and style to express their responses to the general sense of rootlessness and monotony that seemed to afflict modern existence.

Unit 13: W.B. Yeats, “The Second Coming”: introduces the poetic world of W. B. Yeats, focusing on the poem “The Second Coming.” The symbolism of the poem and its Biblical and historical contexts are explained in detail.

Unit 14: T.S. Eliot: “The Journey of the Magi”: briefly discusses the key role played by T. S. Eliot in creating a new sensibility in British poetry, and critically analyses the poem “The Journey of the Magi”.

Unit 15: W. H. Auden: “The Unknown Citizen” introduces Auden as a major War Poet of the early twentieth century, and offers a critical reading of his poem “The Unknown Citizen”.

Unit 16: Stephen Spender: “I think continually of those who were truly great”, focuses on the poetry of Stephen Spender and critically interprets the poem “I think continually of those who were truly great”.

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UNIT 13 W. B. YEATS: “THE SECOND COMING”

Structure

- 13.0 Aims and Objectives
- 13.1 Introduction to W. B. Yeats
- 13.2 Famous lines from Yeats
- 13.3 The poem *The Second Coming*
- 13.4 Critical summary of the poem
- 13.5 The Historical and the Biblical context
- 13.6 Analysis of the poem
- 13.7 Symbolism in the poem
- 13.8 Summing up
- 13.9 Unit end questions
- 13.10 Glossary
- 13.11 References
- 13.12 Further Reading

13.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit devoted to Yeats’s poem “The Second Coming” you would have learnt about:

- The life and writings of William Butler Yeats, one of the most prominent poets of the 20th century
- His works and contribution to Modernism
- His poem, *The Second Coming*
- Analysis of the poem
- Its historical and Biblical references
- Yeats’s use of symbols in this poem and their significance.

13.1 INTRODUCTION TO W. B. YEATS



Source: [www. Wikipedia.com](http://www.Wikipedia.com)

Born in 1865 in Ireland, William Butler Yeats was one of the greatest English language poets, a towering figure in 20th century English Literature. Like T. S. Eliot, he was also a dramatist and a

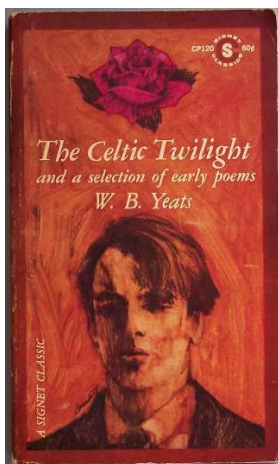
writer of prose. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1923 “for his always inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation.”¹

Born in 1865, he began writing at the early age of seventeen, and his first published poem *The Isle of Statutes* revealed the influences of Shelley and Spenser on him. The poets who influenced Yeats were diverse and include the English Romantic poets - Wordsworth, Blake, and Keats, and the French Symbolists, such as Stephen Mallarme and Arthur Rimbaud. He was also influenced by Irish mythology and folklore as is seen in his formative work, *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other poems*, published in 1869. Yeats was an Irish patriot who desired Ireland's political independence from England and many of his works are in praise of Irish culture and heritage.

In 1889, he met the Irish nationalist, Maud Gonne who was the great love of his life. It was mainly her influence that made him get involved in Irish politics and propelled him to join the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Though Maud Gonne never consented to marry him, she was the Muse who inspired him to write many poems and plays for her. He was passionate about Irish cultural identity and Irish heritage which was in line with Maud Gonne's fervent struggle for political independence for her nation. Among the most famous poems of Yeats are *The Stolen Child*, *The Second Coming*, *The Lake Isle of Innisfree*, *Sailing to Byzantium* and *Among School Children* alongside his powerful poems that document political unrest such as *September 1913* and *Easter 1916*.

Activity: Read some of the poems he wrote in the 1890s and identify the works that reflect Yeats' love for Ireland and its cultural heritage.

Yeats with his friend and patron, Lady Gregory founded the Irish Literary Theatre to revive Celtic dramatic literature. He was a cultural revolutionary and wrote 26 plays. Yeats joined hands with another outstanding Irish playwright John Middleton Synge and established the famous Abbey Theatre, one of the leading cultural institutions of Ireland. The motto of the Abbey theatre was to ‘bring upon stage the deeper emotions of Ireland’. In his manifesto to the Abbey Theatre group, Yeats declared, "We hope to find in Ireland an uncorrupted & imaginative audience trained to listen by its passion for oratory ... & that freedom to experiment which is not found in the theatres of England, & without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed." ². Yeats was thus a pillar of the Irish literary establishment. The Abbey theatre he founded continues to play a vital role in launching new, young Irish writers and playwrights



Source: www.flicker.com

13.2 FAMOUS LINES OF W.B. YEATS

Yeats truly celebrated status can be best seen in some of the famous lines he wrote:

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.”

“There are no strangers here; only friends you haven’t met.”

“Happiness is neither virtue nor pleasure, neither this thing nor that but simply growth. We are happy when we are growing.”

“People who lean on logic and philosophy and rational exposition end by starving the best part of the mind.”

Such lines stand testimony to the romantic and humane aspects of Yeats’s mind.

Activity: Read other poems by Yeats, and identify some of his most memorable lines. Yeats is remarkable for writing on multifarious subjects that include nationalism, mythology, culture, heritage, romantic love of life and beauty, Christianity etc.

Check your progress 1:

Write a note on Yeats’s involvement in the Irish literary movement of the early twentieth century.

13.3 THE POEM: *THE SECOND COMING*

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

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

13.4 CRITICAL SUMMARY OF THE POEM

The above poem was written in 1919 and published in both *The Nation* and *The Dial* in November 1920 and later in Yeats's collection *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921). Yeats wrote the poem to coincide with the end of World War I (1914-18) that had caused suffering and death, torture, hunger and disillusionment to millions of people. The First World War had let loose anarchy in the world. During the War, bombs were dropped, and many thousands of innocent people were killed which made people think that the time had come for the end of the world. The War proved catastrophic, almost signalling the end of the world and people began to wait for relief from the cruel happenings. This parallels the waiting of those who had earlier, witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus and had waited for his promised second coming, that is, the second coming of Jesus to earth, as revealed in the Book of Revelation (the last Book of the New Testament). In the New Testament, it is stated that the second coming would happen at the end of a catastrophic war and that the Saviour would arrive and take all devout people to a joyous life in heaven. The apocalyptic prediction of the collapse of civilization as revealed in the Book of Revelation seemed truly prophetic in the context of the deadly world War

The New Testament made many Christians long for Jesus's return to the world a second time as their Saviour. The concept of time span is revealed by the title with the three words, '*The Second Coming*'. Just as Christ's earlier arrival in the world was for saving men and women from their sins and punishments, in the same way the poet feels the second coming of Jesus will be to save mankind from total annihilation as evidenced in the First World War.

The poem is difficult to understand with its shocking imagery and obscurity. Once the images are well explained, it is easy to apprehend the theme of the poem. Simply stated it is a lament for the death of the old world and an expression of hope and expectation of a possible rebirth of a new one. The poem draws upon the Biblical symbolism of the apocalypse and the second coming of Christ to make the point. The poem is deeply pessimistic for the "Second Coming," since it is only an event that people desire; where people think there will be light, given the reality of the catastrophic war, only darkness remains.

"Yeats believed that history is cyclical, and his poem 'The Second Coming'—a two-stanza poem in blank verse—with its imagery of swirling chaos and terror, prophesies the cataclysmic end of an era. Critics associated the poem with various contemporary calamities, such as the Easter rising of 1916, the Russian Revolution of 1917, the rise of fascism, and the political decay of eastern Europe."³

13.5 THE HISTORICAL AND THE BIBLICAL CONTEXTS

This is an elaboration of the previous section (13.3) that provided you with a brief summary of the poem. Yeats' genius is seen in his fusion of the historical and the Biblical contexts in the poem.

1. This poem is based on *The Book of Revelation*. The title of the poem, *The Second Coming* is a phrase out of *the Book of Revelation*. *The Book of Revelation* – also variedly called *the Apocalypse of John*, *Revelation to John* or *Revelation from Jesus Christ* is the final book of the New Testament, and consequently is also the final book of the Christian Bible.

The Bible is of two parts- *the Old Testament* and *the New Testament*. *The Book of Revelation*, the final book of the New Testament is the only apocalyptic book in the New Testament canon. The word Apocalypse means ‘unveiling’ or ‘revelation’. Thus, it occupies a central place in Christian eschatology . We have evidence of the second coming of Jesus in the Gospels (Matthew 24–25; Mark 13; Luke 21:5–26; John 14:25–29), in *the Book of Revelation*, and in other biblical and traditional sources.

“**Second Coming**, also called **Second Advent** or **Parousia**, in Christianity, is the future return of Christ in glory, when it is understood that he will set up his kingdom, judge his enemies, and reward the faithful, living and dead.”⁴ John in his Gospel says that he received new revelation concerning the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. In Revelation 1:18, the figure whom John sees, identifies himself as ‘the First and the Last,’ who ‘was dead, and behold I am alive forever and ever’, a reference to the Resurrection of Jesus. In the first ten verses the emphasis is on what he heard in special announcements in preparation for the return of Christ. In verses 11-21, however, the stress falls on what John sees concerning the actual return of the Lord. The return of the Lord brings to a close the Tribulation and the wrath of God.

The key literary influence running through this poem from start to finish is the biblical *Book of Revelation* (and *the Bible* more generally). In *the Book of Revelation*, Jesus is predicted to return to the Earth (in what's called "The Second Coming") and usher in a new era of peace, joy, and union with God. This poem is a kind of subversion of that story, seeing a bizarre beast in place of the expected saviour.

Historical Context

Since the date of composition of Yeats’ poem is 1919, i.e., a year after the end of World War I, the historical period is clear and significant even though Yeats does not make any explicit reference to it. The fallout of the war was the death of nearly 20 million people while another 20 million were wounded..

The first few lines of the poem (starting from the 3rd line) sum up the disjointed time after the war.

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

These lines detail the devastation caused by the War and the last two lines in particular is almost a foretelling of the second World War, almost prophesying the coming of “the worst” like Adolf Hitler , ‘full of passionate intensity’. Though Yeats is no prophet or foreseer, his words anticipate the deadly fascist violence that Hitler unleashed two decades later leading to World War II (1939-45). Yeats juxtaposes the historical context of the First World War that he is presently concerned with with an end-of-the-world scenario, which transforms the work partly to a work of eschatology—that is, writing about the apocalypse. The Biblical revelation had foretold the futuristic happening of a degenerate world, speedily coming to an end. Thus the poem has both a historical context woven around the Biblical narrative of the birth and crucifixion of Jesus and his resurrection that holds the promise of his possible second coming to save mankind.

Check your progress 2:

Explain the biblical and historical contexts of this poem.

13.6 ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

While the first stanza describes the catastrophic state of the people, the second stanza is explicit about the Biblical reference:

*Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming!*

But the main idea in "The Second Coming" can be elusive, especially because the poem ends with a complicated question that takes up the last five lines of the poem.

*The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

Before we take up the analysis of these last five lines, it is pertinent to focus on Yeats's use of the word 'gyre' which appears in the opening line: '*Turning and turning in the widening gyre*'. The word 'gyre' is used in oceanography and climatology. It means a vast circular system made up of ocean currents that spirals about a central point. The world *gyre* simply means spiral that widens on going up or down. Here the falcon (refer to the next line) is seen spinning round and round. As the falcon gyrates, it cannot hear the falconer. The 'Falcon' symbolizes the hawk which is the symbol of logic. Thus the falcon represents man's intellect while the falconer stands for his strong feelings about the way the world has turned anarchic (with no controlling rules or principles to give order). The image of Falcon and Falconer continues throughout the poem. Here in the poem it can also stand for the interacting and conflicting eras. According to the poet "things fall apart and the centre cannot hold", where the centre refers to the falconer and the things refer to the Falcon.

The word 'gyre' is also significant in its reference to the cyclical nature of history. Yeats believed in the theory that history consists of cycles that lasts two thousand years and then repeats itself. Yeats suggests that at the end of the 20th century the current cycle will end and the next one will be ushered in. The current cycle of 2000 years thus includes 1919 when the poem was written. This cycle had begun long time back when Jesus was born. You must remember that a *new era* started with the *birth of Christ*. Yeats says that he and his generation are living in a chaotic time. The world had gone through a terrible War, which was widespread throughout Europe and had caused the death of millions of innocent people.

Yeats, looking back on the present times as characterised by chaos, feels that the world has regressed to the point where "the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity." Anarchy and confusion are prevailing all over the world post- War, which had degenerated into a bloodbath of innocent killings. The virtue-rewards and the sin-punishment

syndrome had taken a reverse turn whereby good people do not get justice while those full of passionate intensity enjoy the best of times. The first stanza presents a world devastated by war, inhumanity and violence and sets the tone for the second and concluding stanza that presages a new era with the second coming of Jesus. These conditions have been prophesied in *the Bible* and the poet prepares us for the next stage which according to him is not a sanguine expectation; he is sceptical about it providing relief and ushering in a new era of peace and harmony.

The poet starts the second stanza with a reference to *the Book of Revelation* and **repeats the idea of second coming in the next two lines**. Soon the poet sees a big image of *Spiritus Mundi*. This phrase means the spirit or the outlook or the social and cultural values characteristic of an era of human history. Though it was supposed to provide relief, the poet is troubled by visualizing it. Why?

This is because Yeats pictures the spirit to be like a beast, a man-lion where the head of a man is conjoined to the body of a lion. In this avatar, it shows itself to be without compassion or empathy for humans. The brutality of war had dried human feelings to such an extent that human beings are no longer capable of reacting to the sorrow and misery of fellow beings all round. Yeats's lines remind one of the twin poems *The Lamb* and *the Tiger* where the poet contrasts God's creation of a fearsome tiger with that of a gentle lamb. The speaker is in awe of the fearsome qualities of the tiger, and rhetorically wonders whether the same creator could have also made the lamb earlier. Jesus in his first descent into the world was like a gentle lamb. But the second coming may be like that of a tiger. This is how Yeats describes the coming of an apocalypse to ravage the world, no longer like a gentle lamb, but as a ferocious tiger.

"The twenty centuries of stony sleep" relates to the barbaric age prior to the advent of Christianity. But after the arrival of Jesus, the earlier 2000 years of barbarism had ended. As the world was moving towards the end of the 20th century once again barbarism had erupted. Now as the Christian Era is about to end, it is moving **"towards Bethlehem to be born"**. Bethlehem is the city of Jesus' birth. The beast is slouching towards Bethlehem. Slouching means to trudge; or, to move lazily. It is not a gentle Jesus, but a malevolent beast from the spirit world – *Spiritus Mundi* – that will now take birth at Bethlehem.

The sight of *Spiritus Mundi* vanishes and **"the darkness drops again"**. The ending of the poem suggests the wait for the promised relief that Christ will be born when the world goes through such a cataclysmic upheaval. But this time, Yeats fears it is not going to be the gentle, kind, peace loving Jesus to save mankind who will be born, but a rough beast to punish the sinners and the wicked. It seems as though Yeats fears punishment and not pardon at the end of the 2000 year cycle. "Thinking of the next 2000-year cycle, which he calls "the Second Coming," Yeats is filled with pessimism and dread. He imagines a "rough beast" rising from the sands in the desert and wonders what it is, but from the description and the questions, it is clear that he anticipates that nothing good can come in the next cycle. If the current cycle, as bad as it is, was kicked off by "a rocking cradle," a harmless event, then how much worse will be the next cycle, which is being heralded by this ominous beast? The main idea, then, seems to be pessimism about the current age and even more pessimism about the future"⁵.

13.7 SYMBOLISM IN THE POEM

From a detailed analysis given above, it is easy to identify the symbols used by Yeats in the poem. It begins with the title "The Second Coming", a phrase from *the Book of Revelation* to signify the coming of Jesus a second time. Yeats use of the 'gyre' is related to his belief in the 2000 year cycle

the world goes through. The world in 1919, the year of the poem's creation, is slowly moving towards 2000, symbolic of the end of 2000 years after the death of Jesus. Christian values taught by Jesus of love and peace, service, thankfulness, compassion, forgiveness, and empathy have all been forgotten as evidenced in the just concluded World War. Yeats anticipates a new cycle to begin. But he does not hold any hope of God sending his Son, but more likely a man-lion to destroy wickedness. "A page of history is about to flip; one epoch is about to give birth to another"⁶.

13.8 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we discussed the poetry of W. B. Yeats, an outstanding Modernist poet of the early twentieth century. We also read his poem "The Second Coming", and discussed the historical and biblical contexts of the poem. The symbolism of the poem was also discussed against the background of Yeats's concept of cyclical history.

13.9 Unit end questions

- (1) How does the title relate to the poem?
- (2) Discuss the symbolism in this poem with reference to Yeats's cyclical theory of history.
- (3) Explain the pessimistic overtone of the poem
- (4) Is the poem relevant to our times? Explain.

13.10 GLOSSARY

Celtic: today, the term generally refers to the languages and respective cultures of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Cornwall, the Isle of Man, and Brittany, also known as the Celtic nations
Saviour: ((in Christianity) God or Jesus Christ as the redeemer of sin and saver of souls.

Annihilation: extinction, destruction

Obscurity: a thing that is unclear or difficult to understand

Apprehend: Understand, perceive

Apocalypse: the complete final destruction of the world, as described in the biblical book of Revelation

cataclysmic: causing sudden and violent upheaval

Easter rising of 1916: The Rising was launched by Irish republicans against British rule in Ireland with the aim of establishing an independent Irish Republic while the United Kingdom was fighting the First World War.

Russian Revolution of 1917: Russian Revolution took place in 1917 when the peasants and working class people of Russia revolted against the government of Tsar Nicholas II. The new communist government created the country, the Soviet Union.

fascism: a form of far-right, authoritarian ultra-nationalism characterized by dictatorial power, forcible suppression of opposition, and strong regimentation of society and of the economy, which came to prominence in early 20th-century Europe.

The Old Testament: the first part of the Christian Bible, comprising thirty-nine books and corresponding approximately to the Hebrew Bible. Most of these books were written in Hebrew, some in Aramaic, between about 1200 and 100 BC. They comprise the chief texts of the law, history, prophecy, and wisdom literature of the ancient people of Israel.

The New Testament: the second part of the Christian Bible, written originally in Greek and recording the life and teachings of Christ and his earliest followers. It includes the four Gospels -

of Matthew, John, Mark and Luke, the Acts of the Apostles, twenty-one Epistles by St Paul and others, and the book of Revelation.

canon: the list of works considered to be permanently established as being of the highest quality.

Eschatology: in the history of religion, the term eschatology refers to conceptions of the last things: immortality of the soul, rebirth, resurrection, migration of the soul, and the end of time. This concept also has secular parallels as for example, in the turning points in one's life and in one's understanding of death.

Second Advent: the prophesied return of Christ to earth at the Last Judgment. The Last Judgement is the day when God judges everyone and decides whether they will go to Heaven or Hell.

Parousia: another term for the 'Second Coming'.

Resurrection: in Christian belief the rising of Christ again to life from the dead

Tribulation: grievous trouble; severe trial or suffering

bizarre: very strange or unusual

oceanography: the branch of science that deals with the physical and biological properties and phenomena of the sea.

climatology: the scientific study of climate

Gyrate: cause to move or whirl rapidly in a circle or a spiral

Anarchic: with no controlling rules or principles to give order

Presage: be a sign or warning of (an imminent event, typically an unwelcome one)

Sanguine: optimistic, positive, hopeful

Sceptical: not easily convinced; having doubts or reservations

13.11 REFERENCES

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13.12 FURTHER READING

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UNIT 14 “JOURNEY OF THE MAGI” BY T. S. ELIOT

Structure

- 14.0 Aims and Objectives
- 14.1 Introduction
- 14.2 A Brief analysis of Eliot’s works
- 14.3 The poem: “Journey of the Magi”
- 14.4 Biblical background of the poem
- 14.5 Interpretation
- 14.6 Symbolism in the poem
- 14.7 Summing Up
- 14.8 Unit end questions and answers
- 14.9 Glossary
- 14.10 References:
- 14.11 Further Reading

14.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This Unit introduces you to T. S. Eliot, leader of the Modernist movement in poetry in England. After a study of this unit which includes the prescribed poem, *Journey of the Magi*, you will get to know

- *the biblical account of the birth of Jesus
- * the journey of the Magi to Bethlehem to witness the birth of Jesus
- * the metaphorical meaning of the journey which is essentially a spiritual journey
- *the significance of Jesus’ birth and death and
- *the spiritual transformation that comes with the understanding that life is a journey that all humans have to go through.

14.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 2 of the earlier Block, you have read about modern poetry, where we mentioned some of the leading English poets of the first three decades of the 20th century. Thomas Stearns Eliot who was one of them, was born in September 1888 in the USA and settled later in England where he died in 1965. His writings can be distinctly divided into two phases - the early phase that reflects an undercurrent of despair, disenchantment and disillusionment with the period after World War I (1914-18) and the later phase when he wrote poems after his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism. that had a pronounced theological bent. The year he wrote this poem *Journey of the Magi* was 1927 which was an important year for Eliot. It was in 1927 that Eliot got his British citizenship and converted to Anglo-Catholicism, to which he was committed for life. Worshipping in church became a crucial part of his routine and this directly influenced the composition of the poem *Journey of the Magi*.

14.2 A brief analysis of the writings of T. S. Eliot

Eliot was a versatile writer. His oeuvre spanned all literary genres. He was a poet, playwright, essayist and literary critic. He was a leader of the Modernist movement, as is notably reflected in his early poems like *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, *The Waste Land* and the later poem *The Four Quartets* which led to his recognition as the greatest living English poet and man of letters. He was awarded both the Order of Merit and the Nobel Prize for literature. Both through his poetry and critical essays, he broke new ground in versification, diction and style. There was an undercurrent of hope in his early poems despite the despair and disillusionment of the War years as he referred to the ancient philosophical and religious texts that included the Hindu texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads* along with

the writings of ancient Greek philosophers like Heraclitus and Socrates, Parmenides and Pythagoras, not to leave out the English philosopher, F. R. Bradley. He wrote: 'these fragments I have shored against my ruins'.¹ His early reading of 17th century English writers like John Donne and John Webster and the 19th century French Symbolist LaForgue helped him to find his own style. Eliot said: "LaForgue was the first to teach me how to speak, to teach me the poetic possibilities of my own idiom of speech."² *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* was the first poem that introduced a new poetic diction in English poetry. Just as Wordsworth and Coleridge brought to poetry the language of ordinary men, Eliot and his contemporary Ezra Pound created new diction using the contemporary speech that was 'neither pedantic nor vulgar'.

His early poems marked a new turn in the history of English poetry. In them, Eliot articulated distinctly modern themes using contemporary diction that were a marked departure from those of 19th century poetry. The most influential poems of Eliot during this period were *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, *Gerontion* and *The Waste Land* (1922). While the origins of *The Waste Land* are in part personal, the voices projected are universal. In *The Waste Land* he diagnosed the malaise discomfort, illness, or of his generation and indeed of Western civilization in the 20th century.

Let us have a brief summing up of these three influential poems to illustrate Eliot's themes. *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is a poem written in 1910 and published in 1915. It is considered to be a typical representative poem of modernism and contributed to the literary movement of the early 20th century by focusing on themes of "alienation, isolation, and the diminishing power of the traditional sources of authority."³

Gerontion by T. S. Eliot is a poem about an old man reflecting on his youthful years and the world that was undergoing rapid changes. "Written in 1920, it shows a view of the nineteenth century and World War I as man experienced them, and it is sombre in his yearning for the kind of deeper meaning that others found during that time"⁴ The main themes of *The Waste Land* are: "Eliot's portrait of women, or the female characters as presented in the poem and the metaphor of the title and the emptiness and sterility of the modern world"⁵

After his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, from 1930 onwards the second phase of his writing begins. In 1930 he published his next major poem, *Ash-Wednesday*. This was followed by his masterly poem *The Four Quartets* consisting of. *Burnt Norton* (1941), *East Coker* (1940), *The Dry Salvages* (1941), and *Little Gidding* (1942). *The Four Quartets* is one of the greatest and mature poetic achievements of Eliot and read alongside his early poems like *The Wasteland* and *The Hollow Men*, we recognize the change and progression in Eliot's state of mind - from despair to a fleeting glimmer of wishful hope in the early poems to an affirmation of redemption through God's grace.

Eliot was almost as renowned a literary critic as he was a poet. From 1916 through 1921 he contributed approximately one hundred reviews and articles to various periodicals. Eliot contributed significantly to the emergence of New Criticism, one of the most influential schools of literary study in the 20th century. Eliot's literary criticism was followed by his religious and social criticism. In *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), he writes as a Christian poet trying to make sense of the world between the two World Wars. These writings reflect his misgivings about Western culture prevailing in the 1930s and they complement his poetry, plays, and literary journalism. Eliot is also an important figure in 20th century drama. He was inclined from the first toward the theatre - his early poems are essentially dramatic, and many of his early essays and reviews are on drama or dramatists.

Eliot's first play, *Sweeney Agonistes* was published in 1932 and performed in 1933. In the 1930s he wrote an ecclesiastical pageant, *The Rock* (performed and published in 1934), and two full-blown plays, *Murder in the Cathedral* (performed and published in 1935) and *The Family Reunion* (performed and published in 1939); and in the late 1940s and the 1950s he devoted himself almost exclusively to plays, of which *The Cocktail Party* (performed in 1949, published in 1950) has been the most popular. His most significant contribution to English theatre was the revitalization of poetic drama in terms that would be consistent with the modern age. He experimented with language which was

close to contemporary speech, but also essentially poetic and thus capable of expressing spiritual, emotional, and intellectual experiences.

14.3 JOURNEY OF THE MAGI

*A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.” 5
And the camels galled, sore-footed, refractory,
Lying down in the melting snow.
There were times we regretted
The summer palaces on slopes, the terraces,
And the silken girls bringing sherbet. 10
Then the camel men cursing and grumbling
And running away, and wanting their liquor and women,
And the night-fires going out, and the lack of shelters,
And the cities hostile and the towns unfriendly
And the villages dirty and charging high prices: 15
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly. 20
Then at dawn we came down to a temperate valley,
Wet, below the snow line, smelling of vegetation;
With a running stream and a water-mill beating the darkness,
And three trees on the low sky,
And an old white horse galloped away in the meadow. 25
Then we came to a tavern with vine-leaves over the lintel,
Six hands at an open door dicing for pieces of silver,
And feet kicking the empty wine-skins.
But there was no information, and so we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon 30
Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.
All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for 35
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms, 40
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death. 43*

14.4 BIBLICAL BACKGROUND TO THE POEM

The stories about the early life of Jesus Christ by different writers are found in four books called the Gospels, a term which means good news. They are the Gospels of Matthew, of John, of Mark and of Luke. Together they form the New Testament which tells us though not in great detail, about his birth but

mostly about his later life that comprises his teachings, the miracles he performed, his death by crucifixion and his Resurrection (rising from death).

This poem, *Journey of the Magi*, is based on the Gospel of St. Matthew. Jesus was born in Bethlehem and the poem describes the journey undertaken by three wise men who travel to witness the birth of Jesus Christ. The word Magi is a plural form of Magus representing the three wise kings of the eastern world. The three Magi travelled to Bethlehem so as to witness the birth of Jesus Christ. The journey is arduous as it takes place in the cold wintry month of December. Jesus' birth heralds the dawn of a new world. Jesus dies on the Cross and his disciples founded the new religion Christianity based on the teachings of Jesus.

His birth and death constitute a paradox as his birth marks the death of the earlier pagan world order and his death marks the birth of a new era, the Christian era. Thus death refers to both the death of Christ and the death of the old religious order, including the magical power of the Magi and birth refers to the birth of Jesus and the birth of Christianity. The Magi visiting Bethlehem to witness the birth of Jesus end the poem with an anticipation of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, signalling a new Christian era. The journey of the Magi thus becomes a renewal of hope after despair, where birth and death alternate. In spiritual terms the birth of a child is seen as the Birth of Jesus and his death signals the birth of a new world order. The journey thus represents a spiritual journey that witnesses a drastic change in the world: the death of the old pagan order and the beginning of a new world order of Christianity.

The poem focuses on the epiphany of Matthew. The name 'Epiphany' comes from the Greek 'epiphaneia', meaning "appearance" or "manifestation," and refers to the manifestation of Jesus Christ to the world. The theme of the poem is the effect of spiritual/ cultural events on individual identity and society; it deals with birth, death and regeneration or renewal. Eliot echoes the views of Shelley who wrote "When Winter comes, can Spring be far behind"? The binary happenings on earth are seen in the alternation of winter and spring, scorching summer and freezing winter not to leave out day and night, morning and evening, full moon and new moon, light and darkness, sunrise and sunset. Birth and death are of the same binary quality. The physical journey of the Magi gets transformed into his spiritual journey when he gets a deeper understanding of life as a binary alternation between birth and death, exemplified by Jesus's birth and death and the dawn of Christianity.

14.5 INTERPRETATION

The opening lines with a graphic description of the harsh wintry weather are taken by Eliot from a sermon given by the Anglican Bishop Lancelot Andrewes in 1622. The Bishop's sermon was as given under: "A cold coming they had of it at this time of the year, just the worst time of the year to take a journey, and specially a long journey. The ways deep, the weather sharp, the days short, the sun farthest off, in solstitio brumali, 'the very dead of winter'".

The poem is a dramatic monologue, a poem written in the form of a speech by an individual character. This means there is no dialogue coming from another speaker. It captures in a single scene the essence of what the speaker wants to express and the speech also provides a psychological insight into the character of the speaker. The poem is addressed to a silent listener. There are three specific characteristics of the Dramatic Monologue:

- A character speaks in an uninterrupted flow
- The audience may be either present or absent
- The speaker reveals something about his or her character or situation through the monologue

Activity: Read the poetry of Robert Browning who wrote some of the notable dramatic monologues in English Literature. Identify in his *My Last Duchess* the characteristics of a dramatic monologue. Read Tennyson's *Ulysses* and try to see how Ulysses reveals his character that has an affinity with Victorian conflict between art for art's sake and art for the reformation of mankind.

In the *Journey of the Magi*, the speaker is one of the Magi. The singular form of Magi is Magus. Who are the Magi? In the Bible, the Magi represent three men who were called three Kings or three wise men. They followed a star to witness the great event of Jesus's birth, and give baby Jesus presents. What were the gifts they had taken? Gold, a symbol of earthly kingship, frankincense, a symbol of godliness; and myrrh, a symbol of death. Thus the gifts were given in recognition of Jesus's importance within the Christian story. Jesus was known as the King of the Jews or the Judaeans (hence gold is offered); he was also the Son of God (hence frankincense as a symbol of godliness is offered) and Jesus was crucified by a fanatic mob who refused to acknowledge him as the Son of God (hence, myrrh, as the symbol of death is one of the gifts brought by the Magi). According to the Bible, crucifixion is important for Christians who believe that God sacrificed Jesus, his only Son, to atone for the sins of humanity.

The Poem is in three stanzas:

- the journey to the birthplace and the doubt.
- the arrival, the prefiguring and satisfaction.
- the reflection and acknowledgement of a new faith.

Stanza 1

Lines 1-5: It is the month of December, a time of freezing cold. It was hardly a time for travel.

Lines 6-7: Even the camels that carried them were in pain and refused to move and lay down in the melting snow.

Lines 8- 12: The three Magi longed for the days in their luxurious palaces. The camel drivers also ran away wanting various comforts.

Lines 13-20: Added to the inclement and the frosty weather, there were no places of shelter to take temporary refuge from rain and storm. Cities were hostile and the villages they came across were filthy. It was a difficult journey. They thought it better to travel through night, sleeping when they could, than go and stay in lodgings which were expensive. They heard voices telling them to stop being foolish and turn back.

Stanza 2

Lines 21-31: Then one morning after the arduous journey, the Magi arrived at a pleasant valley full of vegetation. There was a stream and a water mill, and three trees on the horizon and a white horse in a nearby meadow. As they stopped at a tavern with vines above the door, they met people fully drunk and asking for money. No one gave them any useful information, so they continued along their way. That evening, they finally got to Bethlehem.

Lines 32-43: All that had been narrated had happened long time back - a clear reference to the pre-Christian days, to the days written about in the Old Testament that included the birth of Jesus.

The Christian Bible has two sections, the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is the original Hebrew Bible, the sacred scriptures of the Jewish faith, written at different times between about 1200 and 165 BC. The New Testament books were written by Christians in the first century AD. Jesus who was hailed as the son of God was put on the cross and crucified by the Jews. Christianity, founded on the teachings of Jesus was the new religion marking the Christian era.

The Magus, the speaker asserts that if they had to undertake such a journey again, they would do it again as their visit to Bethlehem to witness a glorious event was more than satisfactory. But the visit provokes a question - did they undertake the journey for birth or death? They witnessed the birth of Jesus. But Jesus' birth, his death and the birth of Christianity are far beyond our inane and puerile notions of birth and death. Jesus' whose birth marked the birth of the Son of God, and the death of their pagan religion. When they returned to their kingdoms, they felt their old pagan world was alien to them and all their idols were false. Jesus' death begins yet another birth – the birth of a new dawn, a new religion. The speaker

concludes that he would be happy to encounter another death by undertaking another journey to witness such a glorious birth.

Check your progress 1

1. Why does Eliot use capital B for Birth and capital D for Death in lines 36 and 39 respectively?
2. Why does the speaker say "I shall be glad of another death"?

14.6 SYMBOLISM IN THE POEM

What is symbolism? Symbols are used as literary devices to represent ideas or qualities. It is an artistic and poetic movement or style using symbolic images and indirect suggestion to express mystical ideas, emotions, and states of mind. It originated in late 19th-century France and Belgium. In the 20th century, it was used by English and American writers as a literary device that used symbols, be they words, people, marks, locations, or abstract ideas to represent something beyond the literal meaning.

Let us start from the first word, "journey". The Journey of the Magi to Bethlehem is undertaken, to witness a glorious event. It turns out to be a spiritual journey. The Journey through the harsh wintry weather is difficult and creates doubt as to the worth and wisdom of undertaking such a journey. The months were the dreadful months of winter. If you know the life history of Jesus, you will discover that he was born in the last week of December (25th) and he was crucified in April, the spring season. Eliot had written in another poem "April is the cruellest month". The symbolic shift from birth to death is seen in the shift from winter to spring.

'Sherbet' (a sweet drink) is a symbol for sensuous pleasure, and by extension 'Pagan' pleasure which is hedonism or motivated by desire for sensual pleasures. Coming to the symbol of the River, we should note that water is a symbol of Jesus. In the Gospel of John, Jesus calls himself 'the Living Water'. Here it is symbolic of the Grace offered by Jesus. With Water as the symbol, the references are to the running stream, vegetation and water mill - suggestive of fertility, birth and light.. The stream powers a water mill "beating the darkness". In a watermill, the energy to spin the rotor is supplied by moving water, and it can generate energy to power lights. The allusion is to Jesus's claim in the Gospel of John to be the Light of the World.

The symbol of the "three trees low on the sky" has been interpreted variously by scholars to symbolize the crucifixion of Christ with the two thieves on the other two crosses to either side of him. It can also represent the Trinity –God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. According to the Gospel of Luke, Jesus was crucified with two thieves in an attempt to degrade him as a thief and a rebel. One of the two thieves was called the Penitent Thief, also known as the Good Thief, Wise Thief, Grateful Thief or the Thief on the Cross. He requests Jesus to "remember him" when Jesus arrives at his kingdom. The other, known as the impenitent thief, challenges Jesus to save himself and save both of them by asking Jesus to prove that he is the Son of God.

The symbol of the 'White Horse' refers to someone who announces the coming of Jesus. Vine leaves are symbolic of Christ as the "True Vine". The True Vine is a parable given by Jesus himself where he describes his disciples as branches of himself, who is the "true vine". As Jesus spoke of Himself by saying, "I am the true vine," he was trying to make people understand the value of being connected to Him by faith. A deep and growing relationship with Him will result in peace in all circumstances, hope in trials, strength in adversity, and joy.

The lintel represents the threshold of conversion. 'Dicing' is another symbol in the poem. The men gambling is a reference to Judas's betrayal of Jesus for 30 pieces of silver (Matthew 26:14-16) and to the dicing of Roman soldiers for Christ's clothing after he was killed. The reference to the 'Wine-skins' is an

allusion to Jesus's parable of the "new wine" (Matthew 9:17). Christianity will be the new religion to fill new wine-skins. The kicking of the empty old wine-skins represents the change of the old dispensation to the new.

Check your progress 2

How does Eliot use symbols in this poem? Explain their significance.

14.7 SUMMING UP

This is a poem with a Christian theme with several references to the Old and the New Testaments. After a study of this Unit you would have learnt that the journey in the poem, is a spiritual journey that speaks of Jesus's Birth and Death. "Death" refers to Jesus's sacrifice for the sins of the people, the death of the Pagan order and the birth of a new religion, Christianity. Jesus's Birth and Death are seen not as negative aspects of the narrative, but as positive signs of a renewal of a new order- an affirmation of the reality of existence where birth and death alternate. The theme of the poem is thus the process of renewal, that helps in the journey of the human spirit through history.

Journey of the Magi specifically focuses on the Epiphany (Matthew 2. 1-12), despite the lack of named references to this event. The speaker is deeply affected by the Birth and Death of Jesus, that changed their lives forever.

14.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1. What is the central theme of the Poem *Journey of the Magi*?
2. The poem, *Journey of the Magi* is a Christian poem. Discuss.
3. Write a note on Eliot's contribution to Modernism.

14.9 GLOSSARY

Anglo-Catholicism: movement that emphasizes the Catholic rather than the Protestant heritage of the Anglican Communion. It sought to renew Catholic thought and practice in the Church of England

Pronounced: noticeable, distinct

Theological: study of the nature of God and theological belief

Versatile: able to adapt or be adapted to many different functions or activities.

Oeuvre: body of work

Pedantic: excessively concerned with minor details or rules

Malaise: a general feeling of discomfort, illness, or unease

Revitalization: reactivation, renewal, giving new life and vitality

Paradox: a person or thing that combines contradictory features or qualities.

Paganism: a term first used in the fourth century by early Christians for people in the Roman Empire who practised polytheism or ethnic religions other than Judaism

Frankincense: a fragrant gum resin from trees of a genus found in Somalia and southern coastal Arabia that is an important incense resin which was used in religious rites, perfumery, and embalming

Myrrh: an embalming oil

Inane: lacking sense or meaning; silly.

Puerile: childishly silly, immature

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UNIT 15 W. H. AUDEN: *THE UNKNOWN CITIZEN*

Structure

- 15.0 Aims and Objectives
- 15.1 Introduction to British War Poetry of the 20th century
- 15.2 Auden: his life and works
- 15.3 The Poem: *The Unknown Citizen*
- 15.4 Analysis
- 15.5 Auden, the modernist poet
- 15.6 Summing up
- 15.7 Unit end questions
- 15.8 Glossary
- 15.9 References
- 15.10 Further Reading

15.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This Unit aims at giving you an understanding of:

- War poetry in 20th century English literature
- Themes and analysis of the poem *The Unknown Citizen* and
- Auden's place in Modern poetry

15.1 Introduction to War Poetry in English Literature of the 20th Century

Auden wrote poetry during the War years and is regarded as one of the outstanding War poets of his time. In Block 1, Unit 3, on *Modern Poetry*, we had referred to War Poetry.

*"We have War poets belonging to the First World War period whose central theme was 'anti-War'. War poetry captures themes that carry across generations. It also seeks to create new language, which later generations use as a framework for understanding war history. Notable among them were W. H. Auden, Wilfred Owen, Isaac Rosenberg, Siegfried Sassoon, Herbert Read, Robert Graves to name a few."*¹

What is war poetry? It is a literary genre which originated during the First World War, when hundreds of both soldiers and civilians who had experienced the brutality and vengeful fury of the War started to write poetry to express their emotions - tragic, bitter and at times ironic on the basis of their real experience.

War poetry is not just a World War phenomenon of the 20th century. It had been written from the very early times of the Greeks but what is new is the establishment of War poetry as a literary genre. The 20th century witnessed many wars - the Spanish Civil war (1936-39), the First World War and the Second World War (1914-18 and 1939-45), the Cambodian War (1968-75) besides the intermittent wars in Eastern Europe. Soldiers and civilians with their respective experiences of active and distant involvement in the war and belonging to different nationalities contributed to War poetry which became some of the defining texts of twentieth century Europe.

We describe World War II as a Global War as many countries were involved in it. World War II took place between 1939 and 1945. It was between Germany, Italy and Japan (known as the Axis Powers) on one hand and the Allies comprising the U.S., France, Britain and the U.S.S.R., on the other side. As mentioned above, this period also witnessed the Spanish war and other Eastern

European wars. So almost every poet who wrote on this theme, expressed his own experience of War.

War poetry should not be misread as ‘anti-war’ alone. It is “about the very large questions of life: identity, innocence, guilt, loyalty, courage, compassion, humanity, duty, desire, death. Its response to these questions, and its relation of immediate personal experience to moments of national and international crisis, give war poetry an extra-literary importance.”² The significance of war poetry lies in its ability to rouse both historical consciousness and political consciousness as it speaks for the individual and for the nation.

Check your progress 1

1. What is War poetry? What were the causes that contributed to the rise of the genre?



Source: www.grograph.org.uk

15.2 AUDEN: HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Auden was born in England in 1907 and later migrated to the United States in 1939. Hence it is best to describe him as an Anglo-American poet. He came from an educated professional family, with his father being a medical officer and his mother a nurse. The family was devoutly Anglo-Catholic.

In the pantheon of great poets of the 20th century, Auden cannot be compared with T. S. Eliot or W.B. Yeats who wrote masterpieces such as *The Wasteland*, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, *Sailing to Byzantium* or *The Second Coming*. But Auden enjoys the status of a modernist poet along with “Stephen Spender, Cecil Lewis and others — a generation of English poets from the 1930s, who found themselves engulfed in the soaring menace of Second World War (WWII), the rise of fascism and economic crisis in the West”.³ Auden and his Oxford contemporary poet Stephen Spender introduced new themes that have become a part of Modernist poetry of the 20th century. The next Unit in this block will be on Stephen Spender. One of the best introductions to Auden’s poetry is from his own short poem, *Epitaph on a Tyrant*:

*Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after,
And the poetry he invented was easy to understand;
He knew human folly like the back of his hand,
And was greatly interested in armies and fleets;*

*When he laughed, respectable senators burst with laughter,
And when he cried the little children died in the streets.*

These lines highlight his invention of new themes, his insistence on perfection, his simple and elegant style, shorn of pedantry and numerous classical and biblical references that we associate with the poems of Eliot and Yeats. W.H. Auden was a poet of general ideas, which were mostly political in nature. He was interested in matters concerning war and had empathy for the suffering of ordinary masses. This could be because of his interest in Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud.

Activity: Identify the words and the lines from the above poem that fits with the salient features of Auden's poetry.

15.3 THE POEM: *THE UNKNOWN CITIZEN*

To JS/07 M 378

*This Marble Monument
Is Erected by the State)*

*He was found by the Bureau of Statistics to be
One against whom there was no official complaint,
And all the reports on his conduct agree
That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint,
For in everything he did he served the Greater Community.
Except for the War till the day he retired
He worked in a factory and never got fired,
But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc.
Yet he wasn't a scab or odd in his views,
For his Union reports that he paid his dues,
(Our report on his Union shows it was sound)
And our Social Psychology workers found
That he was popular with his mates and liked a drink.
The Press are convinced that he bought a paper every day
And that his reactions to advertisements were normal in every way.
Policies taken out in his name prove that he was fully insured,
And his Health-card shows he was once in hospital but left it cured.
Both Producers Research and High-Grade Living declare
He was fully sensible to the advantages of the Instalment Plan
And had everything necessary to the Modern Man,
A phonograph, a radio, a car and a frigidaire.
Our researchers into Public Opinion are content
That he held the proper opinions for the time of year;
When there was peace, he was for peace: when there was war, he went.
He was married and added five children to the population,
Which our Eugenist says was the right number for a parent of his generation.
And our teachers report that he never interfered with their education.
Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:
Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.*

15.4 ANALYSIS

The poem in 32 lines is simple, direct and uncomplicated. It is easily comprehensible as the theme relates to our times where the discordance between the State and the people is a quotidian experience. The poem is in the form of a satirical elegy, where two literary genres - 'elegy' and 'satire' are fused. What is an elegy and what is a satire?

An elegy is a song or poem expressing sorrow or lamentation especially for one who is dead. A satire is a literary form in which human or individual vices, follies and shortcomings are criticized by means of ridicule, derision, burlesque, irony, parody, caricature, or other methods, though at times with an intent not so much to mock but to inspire social reform. In a satirical elegy, the elegy is used to make it perform a task directly opposed to its intended purpose. In *The Unknown Citizen*, W.H. Auden, laments the loss of man's individuality by making him conform to the rules laid down by the government/society to ensure its smooth running. The Unknown Citizen never deviates from those norms and therefore Government has no complaints to make against him - holding him as a model of disciplined citizen, but in reality, a man's life is so much more than mere compliance to set rules. Such life negates all exercise of human powers, emotions, desires and wants.

Who is the speaker? From the language and content of the poem it is possible to surmise the speaker to be a spokesman of the government, a bureaucrat who addresses the elegy to an individual referring to him not by his name but by alphabets and numbers - JS/07 M378. This form of address by the heard but unseen voice of the speaker sets the tone of the poem. It is impersonal, officious, lacking in sensitivity and empathy. The speaker represents the faceless, indifferent and ruthless bureaucrat of the State or the Government who exerts his authority on the nameless citizens masquerading as a concerned, caring, and benevolent power. The individual (JS/07M378) is denuded of his individuality in such a way that he can only be recognized by the various government agencies that keep track of his life to make sure that he is a pliant and willing subject, totally subservient and obedient to the powers above him.

The nameless and faceless individual is shown as a model citizen who is willing to abnegate his individuality to conform to the ideals set out by the State /government to hold on to its authoritarian power. This, in essence is the everlasting conflict between the people and the Government. When the latter establishes a totalitarian regime, the gap between the masses and the Superpower structures widens. Influenced by Marxian ideology, Auden in his works highlights contemporary issues overlaid by totalitarian governments. He looks at the voiceless and faceless citizen as a cog in the wheel of the State machinery who does everything that is expected of any obedient citizen and therefore is rightly addressed as the Unknown Citizen.

*Except for the War till the day he retired
He worked in a factory and never got fired,
But satisfied his employers, Fudge Motors Inc.
Yet he wasn't a scab or odd in his views,
For his Union reports that he paid his dues*

How does the speaker describe him?
*One against whom there was no official complaint,
And all the reports on his conduct agree
That, in the modern sense of an old-fashioned word, he was a saint.*

The faceless citizen does not suffer from any social tension and psychological abnormality. He follows all the norms that the society has laid down - is friendly, enjoys a drink in company, is a regular reader of a newspaper which invariably reflects the State's views and accepting it

without critical questioning, pays his insurance policies and follows investment plans and follows whatever the State decides, in times of Peace and War. He is one among the multitudes of people to live a fault-less life as the State desires.

But the two end lines reveal the mechanical, dour, stagnant life where he remains emotionally sterilized and paralyzed, transposed almost into a robot.

Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:

Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.

The Unknown Citizen has submerged his thinking mind and feeling heart to the norms that society and the state have decreed as those of an ideal citizen. His intellect and his emotions have been dwarfed by the macro-power of the State. The poem ends on the cryptic note that had he been unhappy, had he rebelled against his slavery to the State, we would have heard a different story far from the elegy spoken in praise of the unknown citizen for not leading an 'exemplary' life as the State had deemed.

The Unknown Citizen describes the average citizen (*the aam admi*) –the common man who leads a life deemed utopian by the State and which, in reality is a dystopian life as he abdicates his thinking and feeling faculties to remain impassive and phlegmatic as required by the State. The standardization prescribed by the state saps human desire for freedom to think, feel, express, act and live without ticking the right boxes. That is why Auden reasons that for the modern man living in the war-torn 20th century, freedom and happiness are absurdities. All that matters is to be a conformist and remain a conformist. The State will erect a monument to one who did the right things as desired by the State. This monument is at the beginning of the poem dedicated to an unknown citizen, a faceless, emotionless, mindless man.

Check your progress 2

1. What is a Satire and what is an Elegy?
2. Why does Auden fuse the two to write a satirical elegy?
3. Analyse the last two lines of the poem:

Was he free? Was he happy? The question is absurd:

Had anything been wrong, we should certainly have heard.

15.5 AUDEN THE MODERNIST POET

Form and content in Auden's poetry reveal the qualities of Modernism. It is not that all aspects of Modernism are present in his poems. But some of the salient characteristics can be seen in his poems that give him the status of a Modernist poet. Auden's poetry has the following themes:

1. The idea that Love is fleeting
2. Theme of horror in modern life
3. Theme of death
4. Theme of bureaucracy and totalitarianism; - the last three (2-4) can be subsumed under a single theme – the theme of suffering.

While Auden's poems deal with death and totalitarianism, he is also known for his love poems. For discussion let us look at one poem, though to appreciate Auden's poetry and his contribution to modern poetry, it is advisable to read a few more of his love poems, such as "As I Walked Out One Evening" and "O Tell Me the Truth About Love," that show how love is beautiful and inspiring and how it is equally ephemeral like life itself as both are affected by the vicissitudes of time. In many of his love poems we find an undercurrent of sorrow. Love is sweet, but it exists

alongside suffering and death that reveal an irrefutable finality when life ceases to exist. In *Funeral Blues*, he writes:

*Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.*

The poem is in four stanzas and each one of them present a study in grief. The poem resonates with the readers as it speaks about the cruel finality of death, though it does not stop the world from moving on. If a most loved person ceases to exist, all the shared experiences with him/her also come to an end. But Auden is disturbed to see how one has to endure a tragic crisis in the midst of others who go about their mundane routines.

But when a celebrated person like Yeats died in 1939, the year that saw the beginning of World War II, the whole world seemed to be consonant with the sad event and mourned his death. Yeats even after his death continues to live through his poems. Yeats is almost like an avant-garde poet who could foresee the horrors of war and which came true during the Second World War. In the elegy for Yeats, he asserts his belief that poetry can still lift the human spirit and “persuade us to rejoice” and “teach the free man how to praise.” Auden affirms the power of art and culture to transcend death. The enduring quality of art is in contrast to the transitoriness or the impermanence of life. A poet like Yeats never dies as he continues to be alive in his poems that affirm the basic dignity of the individual soul:

*With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;
In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.*

While love and life do not enjoy permanence and life’s beautiful moments are temporary and fleeting, the poignant loss experienced in *Funeral Blues* underscoring humanity’s most cynical impulses is in a paradoxical way countered by the sustainable quality of Poetry. Auden’s poetry is meaningful and relevant not only during the period he wrote, but to all times. Life is temporary; art is eternal.

All other themes listed above are seen in Auden’s poetry expressing the horrors and fears of living in the 20th century, during and after the two World Wars. The World Wars were the result of the rise of totalitarianism and fascism in Europe when dictators in Europe suppressed their people’s freedoms, led their countries into war, and resorted to barbaric acts of mass slaughter. Auden’s poems mirror the horrors of life in a world where humanity was dead. In a few of his poems he wonders what the role of poetry can be in the face of such nightmares, and why he should honour the death of one man when so many were being killed on the battlefield, on the streets, and in gas chambers. Writing about Freud, he asks, “of whom shall we speak” when “there are so many we shall have to mourn.”

Auden's poetry is about the horrors of the modern world and that itself vouches for his Modernism. He speaks of authoritarians and their mad quest for domination not only in their nations, but all over the world. Hitler's madness and cruelty witnessed in his acts of genocide, his manipulation of the masses on the pretext of racial superiority, his ruthless dominance over the bureaucracy to do his bidding, General Franco's brutality in Spain to put down the left leaning Popular Front government of the Second Spanish Republic and the resulting mental, physical, psychological and spiritual scars of the heinous wars that bludgeon the human spirit, form the background to Auden's poetry. Through all this, one can discern Auden's optimism that such an expose' may free the human spirit from the shackles of dictators and authoritarians. Auden does not shy away from the theme of death. The State and its bureaucracy can do everything to destroy the human spirit, but Auden's belief in the value of poetry as well as in the enduring human spirit rejuvenates the eternal optimism dormant in the human heart.

What are some of the characteristics of modern poetry we see in Auden's poem?

1. Modern poetry is written in simple language, the language of every day speech
2. Modern poetry is highly intellectual; it is written from the mind of the poet and it addresses the mind of the reader, like the poems of T. S. Eliot.
3. Modern poetry is pessimistic as a result of the miserable condition of people in many parts of the world, but there is always an infusion of hope at the end.
4. Modern poetry is suggestive; the poem may suggest different meanings to different readers.
5. Modern poetry is cosmopolitan. It appeals to readers everywhere and at every time because it deals with the problems of humanity.
6. Interest in politics and the political problems of the age and the problems of the average man and the lower classes.
7. Experimentation is one of the important characteristic features of modern poetry. Poets try to break new grounds, i. e. to find new forms, new language and new methods of expression.
8. Irregularity of form. Modern poetry is mostly written without metre and rhyme scheme, in free verse and prose (the prose poem). The most peculiar quality of the modern poetry is the poet's tendency to experiment with different kinds of metre and versification. Auden is modern in this respect also. He has experimented with free verse, blank verse, the ballad metre etc.
10. Modern poetry addresses the modern man of sensibility who lives a state of spiritual and intellectual scepticism. Individualism is a key element in Modernist literature where the individual is given more focus than society. Auden, like Eliot before him is a sensitive poet who writes of the world in which he lives, and reflects many of the characteristics of that world. Auden has come to be one of the most outstanding poets of our time. In conclusion, we find Auden concerned with war, its cruelty and the aftermath of wars that result in social, political and economic upheavals. He argues that most of the ills of the contemporary society are a consequence of the inhumanity embedded in Wars. Modern age is marked by violence and war. That had always been from the very early times to modern ages. Auden is a social poet, a war poet and a Modern poet.

“In a nutshell, *The Unknown Citizen* fits easily into the trends of modern literature and highlights the problems that people face. The citizen remains unknown even though he serves the community because we are not shown who he really is as an individual which elucidates that individuality is reduced and diminished for the sake of worldly business. The poet says that statistics cannot sum up an individual and physical facts are inadequate to evaluate human happiness. Therefore, the poem reflects Auden's insight of the concept of control versus freedom which brings to light the dangers of losing the sense of individuality.”⁴

15.6 SUMMING UP

A study of this Unit would help you in understanding

- *War poetry written in the 20th century by English poets
- * Auden's satirical elegy *The Unknown Citizen*
- * An analysis that highlights the blending of the two genres – satire and elegy
- * The themes in Auden's poetry
- *Auden as a Modernist poet.

15.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the relevance of Auden's poetry to our times
2. What is the significance of the title *The Unknown Citizen*?
3. Write a note on Auden as a Modernist poet.

15.8 GLOSSARY

Intermittent: Occurring at irregular intervals

Anglo-Catholic: Anglo-Catholicism, movement that emphasizes the Catholic rather than the Protestant, which sought to renew Catholic thought and practice in the Church of England

Shorn of: removed from

Pedantry: Excessive concern with minor or trivial details

Discordance: Lack of agreement or consistency

Quotidian: occurring daily

Derision: contemptuous ridicule or mockery

Burlesque: an absurd or comically exaggerated imitation of something

Irony: the expression of one's meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite

Parody: a humorously exaggerated imitation of a style or a writer

Caricature: exaggeration by means of often ludicrous distortion of parts or characteristics of a person

Officious: assertive of authority in a domineering and intrusive way

Masquerading: pretending

Denuded: stripped off

Abnegate: renounce or reject

Macro-power: Great or excessive power

Cryptic: having or seeming to have a hidden or ambiguous meaning

Utopian: modelled on or aiming for a state in which everything is perfect; idealistic

Dystopian: modelled on or aiming for a state in which there is great suffering or injustice

Impassive: not feeling or showing emotion

Phlegmatic: having an unemotional and stolidly calm disposition

Absurdities: the quality or state of being ridiculous or wildly unreasonable.

Vicissitudes: a change of circumstances or fortune, typically one that is unwelcome or unpleasant.

Avant-garde: new and experimental ideas and methods in art, music and literature

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UNIT 16 STEPHEN SPENDER: “I THINK CONTINUALLY OF THOSE WHO WERE TRULY GREAT”

Structure

- 16.0 Aims and Objectives
- 16.1 Introduction to Stephen Spender
- 16.2 The works of Stephen Spender
- 16.3 The Poem *The Truly Great*
- 16.4 Analysis of the poem
- 16.5 Spender, An Assessment
- 16.6 Summing Up
- 16.7 Glossary
- 16.8 Questions and Answers
- 16.9 References
- 16.10 Further Reading

16.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

This Unit is the last unit in this Block that deals with four of the major English poets of the 20th century. At the end of the study of this Unit, you will come to know about

- * Stephen Spender, who is regarded as one of the Oxford Poets
- * His works that reflect the history of that period
- * The major influences on Stephen Spender's works
- * An analysis of the poem *The Truly Great*
- * Stephen Spender, an assesment

16.1 INTRODUCTION TO STEPHEN SPENDER (1909-1995)

Stephen Spender was born in 1909 and came into prominence as an outstanding poet of his times. He was one of the celebrated poets of the group called Oxford Poets in the 1930s. W.H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Cecil Day Lewis and Louis MacNeice are known as the Oxford poets. These poets are called “the four Musketeers of the Oxford Movement”. These poets were Oxford graduates. They were given the nickname “MacSpaunday”, that was made up of the four poets: Louis MacNeice (“Mac”) Stephen Spender (“Sp”) W. H. Auden (“au-n”) Cecil Day-Lewis (“day”). Auden was the leader of this group. This group was also called the Auden Group or the Thirties Poets, representing a new, more experimental literary style. This group was concerned with tumultuous issues of the day both political and social such as the Great Depression, the Spanish Civil War, the rise of Fascism, and World War II. The Auden group existed for nearly ten years from 1930–1939, comprising writers, musicians, and painters who were members belonging to what T. S. Eliot described as a ‘definitely post-war generation’. They shared a left-of-centre political ideology. After the World War ended, Spender focused on prose writing that included literary criticism and autobiographical writing and fiction.

Stephen Spender had the good fortune to inherit the artistic and educated lineage of his parents, with his father being a political journalist and his mother, a poet and a painter. Hence his interest in art and literature helped him in his critical and original work.

Activity: Read some of the poems of the Auden group or Oxford poets and state their social themes.

16.2 THE WORKS OF STEPHEN SPENDER

Stephen Spender brought out his first volume of poetry, *Nine Experiments: Being Poems Written at the Age of Eighteen* in 1928. His second volume *Poems* was published in 1933 which included several of the poems he wrote between 1928 and 1930.

The 1930s marked a period between the two deadly World Wars. The first World War was between 1914 and 1918, the second between 1939 and 1945. The two Wars devastated Europe and brought about a change in people's perspective on the meaning of life, their faith in God almost bordering on *atheism and nihilism*, the collapse of all values that had hitherto been regarded as hallowed and inviolable. The established world order had crumbled and idealists like Spender turned to Communism as an alternative to Fascism. Europe was reorganized, and a new world was born. The European nations that had fought in the Great War emerged economically and socially crippled. Economic depression prevailed in Europe for much of the inter-war period. "The political atmosphere of the inter-war years was sharply divided between those who thought the extreme left could solve Europe's problems, and those who desired leadership from the extreme right. This situation kept the governments of Britain, France, and Eastern Europe in constant turmoil, swinging wildly between one extreme and the next. Extreme viewpoints won in the form of totalitarian states in Europe during the inter-war years, and communism took hold in the Soviet Union, while fascism controlled Germany, Italy and Spain"¹.

Spender went to Spain during the Spanish civil war to fight the Fascist forces under General Franco, though he personally did not participate in the fighting. Instead he wielded his pen to write Poems for Spain. From his early days Spender was concerned with social and political issues and gained celebrity status as a poet. His poem *Vienna* of 1934 details Fascist suppression of the Socialists' revolt in Austria. Poems in *The Still Centre* are about his experience in Spain and hints at his growing disenchantment with communism. These poems also reveal his rejection of the heroic idea of war. Those of you who have read *Arms and the Man* by Bernard Shaw, which premiered in 1894 can understand how writers and thinkers of the 20th century were concerned with the futility of wars and criticized romantic ideals of heroism and sentimental love. Spender's later publication of essays under the title *The God that Failed* further reflects his disillusionment with leading Communist intellectuals like Arthur Koestler, Andre Gide and Richard Wright. But during this period- i.e., during the Second World War, besides editing an anti communist periodical *Encounter*, he turned to poetry writing and published two volumes of poems.

Activity: Read Bernard Shaw's play *Arms and the Man* along with Auden's poem *The Unknown Citizen* and Spender's *The Truly Great*.

But in his post-war life, his focus was more on prose that included literary criticism and fiction and also drama. His literary criticism in his first prose work was on authors like Henry James, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and D. H. Lawrence. His prose fiction includes a book of short stories, *The Burning Cactus* (1936), almost Lawrentian in tone in expressing suppressed

emotion, and a full-length novel, *The Backward Son* (1940), an autobiographical account of English boarding school life, which he disliked. He also wrote a five-act, verse drama, *Trial of a Judge* against Fascism.

Spender's critical output comprises *The Destructive Element* and its sequel, *The Creative Element*. *The Destructive Element* is a study of modern writers aimed to "alert one that human nature and values are precarious, not immutable, and that the forces of destruction facing them are enormous".²

Activity: If you want to know more about Modern writers, read Spender's two volumes - *The Destructive Element* and *The Creative Element*.

The Creative Element is about the vision, despair and orthodoxy among some modern writers. In *The Struggle of the Modern* Spender defines literary modernism as an endeavor to reconcile the past and the present, and heal the divide between art and life. "He also produced several volumes of autobiography, journals, and collected letters, most notably the 1951 memoir *World within World*, a valuable document of literary and cultural history that re-creates the social and political atmosphere of the 1930s. This book exemplifies the commitment to honesty and candor of an author who claimed that all of his art is essentially autobiographical."³

Check your progress 1

Who were the major influences on Spender's poetry?

16.3 THE POEM, *THE TRULY GREAT*

BY STEPHEN SPENDER

I think continually of those who were truly great.
Who, from the womb, remembered the soul's history
Through corridors of light, where the hours are suns,
Endless and singing. Whose lovely ambition
Was that their lips, still touched with fire,
Should tell of the Spirit, clothed from head to foot in song.
And who hoarded from the Spring branches
The desires falling across their bodies like blossoms.

What is precious, is never to forget
The essential delight of the blood drawn from ageless springs
Breaking through rocks in worlds before our earth.
Never to deny its pleasure in the morning simple light
Nor its grave evening demand for love.
Never to allow gradually the traffic to smother
With noise and fog, the flowering of the spirit.

Near the snow, near the sun, in the highest fields,
See how these names are fêted by the waving grass
And by the streamers of white cloud
And whispers of wind in the listening sky.
The names of those who in their lives fought for life,
Who wore at their hearts the fire's centre.

Born of the sun, they travelled a short while toward the sun
And left the vivid air signed with their honour.

16.4 ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

The first line of the poem, “*I think continually of those who were Truly Great*”, gives us the clue that the poet is talking about the truly great personalities from the past and how continually thinking about them suggests that the past is always connected to the present and therefore all those truly great individuals are connected to us across time. As the poem progresses, we realize how they have close correspondence with perennial Nature which, in turn, confers eternity on them. Time cannot erase their memory. Like Nature that is eternally present in sunshine, spring blossoms, snowy mountains and lush green meadows, these truly great heroes are omnipresent and make us identify the connection between Nature and grandeur of Man and their perennity.

By stressing on the word ‘continually’, the poet says Nature is always present and so are the stellar individuals who are ever present at all times and in all places. In Hindi, we have a term *Rinanubandhan* (ऋणानुबन्धन) which means an invisible chord that ties you together to your past life. Without going into the religious and astrological dimensions, it can be said of Spender’s poem that it is about human bonding with the past through historical, ecological, and spiritual connections.

Spender does not name or identify the truly greats of the past. Simply they are heroes, nameless and faceless and they are recalled in the present on account of their heroic deeds that have left lasting footprints on the sands of time and place all over the world. Some critics point out the absence of any heroic action of the present. But Spender pays his tributes solely for the past heroes who had contributed to and shaped the world that we live in today. He is not interested in criticizing the present for lack of heroism. The poem is one of grateful acknowledgement of their grand contributions that have made a difference to the world, making our heritage better than what they had inherited.

“This poem, broadly, is an attempt to describe what makes a person “truly” great. The poem was written in the 1930’s during wartime, this no doubt influenced the poet. However, soldiers are not the only people he is referring to. He is essentially referring to anyone who selflessly fights for what they believe in.^{4/} The “Truly Great” can be poets, soldiers, selfless and passionate artists. What defines them is their actions, deeds, words, artistic and aesthetic creations that inspire generations that come after them. They have made a difference to the world and hence our thoughts in grateful acknowledgement of what they have bequeathed to the present generation.

The “truly great” are remembered for their ceaseless toil from the womb to the tomb - from birth to death. Like the sun that shines all through day and night, as it orbits from East to West, and back from West to East, these great celebrity heroes shone all through their living hours. Spender equates hours with suns, as all their hours are resplendent like the shining sun and like the sun, these great personalities also lived active hours. The poet says to the reader that these truly great people dwelt in a constant light where the hours are likened to the suns. “The sun is the main source of energy on earth. It is brilliant and a source of great inspiration, therefore Spender could

be saying that their every hour was a source of great inspiration and full of achievement. Spender goes on to state that these great people had their aspirations, and their aspirations could be seen by the words that they spoke to the people".⁵ Their visionary ideas to transform the world are compared to blooming blossoms that lend colour and beauty to Nature. Sun, light, fire and blossoms are loaded with symbolism and they relate to eternity and energy, inspiration and achievement.

The poem is replete with symbols as we move into the second stanza. But the symbols cannot be treated as having one-to one correspondence that is easy of comprehension. At times, one wonders if Spender's long-drawn similies are a trifle laboured and stretched! What is to be noted is they once again reflect the connection between the work of Nature and the work done by the truly great heroes of the past. The idea is to show that however hard the task is, there is always an essential happiness in doing hard work and achieving the fruits of one's toil. Just as there is satisfaction and joy in drawing the blood from springs, these individuals conducted all their great acts and hard work with true happiness.

Madeline Wells explains: "Here, the "blood" of the "truly great" is of divine origin. It is "drawn from ageless springs," meaning God himself has infused his divine essence into the bloodstreams of the "truly great." So, "ageless springs" are a metaphor describing God or Providence, whose power is ageless and eternal. This "ageless spring" is formidable enough to break through "rocks in worlds before our earth." Essentially, the narrator may be intimating that the "truly great" have charted new territory in areas beyond the average citizen's comprehension. Because of this, we should remember them with deep gratitude and strive to emulate their wisdom and nobility of spirit."⁵

The exaggerated symbol of breaking through the rocks is an index of the timelessness of their hard work. They were not distracted by words of discouragement from reaching for their goals and ambitions. Spender attributes their single minded pursuit of realizing their passion to transform the world to the vision and will they possessed what he terms as 'the Spirit'. He continues the thread from the second stanza that these heroic works will never be forgotten, 'what is precious is never to forget', and this justifies why he thinks continually of them. The snow of the mountaintops, the waving grass-filled meadows, the clouds, and the winds all whisper the names of these great people. In this stanza, Spender reveals that these heroes may not be poets but rather war heroes who lost their lives fighting for their country - 'fought for life'.

Spender describes these truly great people as those 'who remembered the soul's history from the womb'. 'Soul's history' implies history of humankind from the beginning of time By forever remembering what humankind had gone through from the beginning of time, it allowed these individuals to be passionate about making a change and therefore they become so great.

Stephen Spender was always in contact with artists, litterateurs and cultural aesthetes and he shared with them their taste and sensitivity for art and aesthetics. He was concerned with art beyond borders, collaboration between artists and writers; solidarity against their censorship; and the moral responsibility of the creative individual in times of social crisis. This poem is very likely a summation of Spender's love for art, his deep engagement with social issues and his belief in the responsibility of artists to play a significant role in shaping society and the world.

Check your progress 2

- (1) Explain the title of the poem *I think continually of those who are truly great*.
- (2) What is the theme of the poem? How does Spender integrate the past and the present?
- (3) Explain the symbolism in this poem.
- (4) List the images in the poem and discuss how it sums up Spender's love for art, his deep engagement with social issues and his belief in the responsibility of artists to play a significant role in shaping society and the world

16.5 STEPHEN SPENDER, AN ASSESSMENT

Stephen Spender may be assessed as follows:

- * A writer of social protest
- * Celebrated for his literary and critical writings as a poet, novelist, literary critic and prose writer.
- * Was deeply concerned with economic and political fall-out as a result of the First World War such as labour unrest, unemployment, the rise of Fascist-Nazi totalitarianism.
- * His sympathy for the sufferings of common people made him write in a direct, simple style that made his poetic communication easy to follow.
- * His ideal was democratic socialism, "No man shall hunger: Man shall spend equally (from 'Not Palaces, An Era's Crown').
- * In his poems, he used modern imagery from industry and warfare.
- * He was honest and open-minded in his writings. To begin with he was drawn towards Communism as a counter to Fascist dictatorship of Hitler and Franco and this was reflected in all his works. Later when he became disillusioned with leftist ideology under the totalitarian regime of Soviet Russia, his writings became critical of the celebrated Communist ideologues like Koestler and Gide. His poems stand testimony to his self-critical and honest personality.
- * He was a humanist and compassionate to the core, as reflected in—*Ruins and Visions* (1942), *Poems of Dedication* (1947), *The Edge of Being* (1949), *Collected Poems* (1955), *Selected Poems* (1965), *The Generous Days* (1971), and *Dolphins* (1994)
- * This tribute by Gerald Nicosia sums up the high standard of craftsmanship, that Spender and the Oxford poets had achieved. "[these poets] turned away from the esotericism of T.S. Eliot, insisting that the writer stay in touch with the urgent political issues of the day and that he speak in a voice whose clarity can be understood by all."⁶
- * Spender's poetry reveals three major influences that make him both a modernist and Romantic poet. His idealism, his use of powerful imagery and graceful ability to express his emotions remind us of the Romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley. He is like Rainer Maria Rilke, a modernist poet, who tried to express his traumatic experience of war horrors and despite the disillusionment with war and its inhumanity, his poems affirmed life. Similarly, D.H. Lawrence had a strong influence on him as his poems give expression to suppressed emotions. The third and the most powerful influence was that of his fellow Oxford poets. In particular mention has to be made of Auden and Christopher Isherwood who shaped his views on the poet's role in commenting on society.
- * All the modern poets of the Oxford Group were engaged with the issues of the day. And they tried to reconcile the artistic muse and the urge to confront fascism. 'The struggle to connect outer and inner reality is, in fact, Spender's overarching theme.'⁷

* The two poets Auden and Spender present the seamy side of urban-industrial landscape and reflect both the social and political concerns of their times.

*Spender breaks free of formal poetic conventions and wrote free verse. “The sound of his poems is distinctive, although he uses few seductive aural techniques, such as alliteration, assonance, full or near rhyme, or regular rhythms. The imagery, though painterly, often lacks concreteness. One weakness of his poetry is a tendency toward rhetorical abstraction.”⁸

*A lot of autobiographical elements are included in Spender's poetry. “Its obsessive theme is an introspective search for a valid, sustaining faith, a coherent approach to uniting the self with the world, the personal with the political.”

Honours came to him in recognition of his literary achievements and humane personality. Sir Stephen Harold Spender was honoured as an English poet, novelist and essayist who concentrated on themes of social injustice and class struggles in his work. He was appointed the seventeenth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the United States Library of Congress in 1965. Spender was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) at the 1962 Queen's Birthday Honours, and knighted in the 1983 Queen's Birthday Honours.

16.6 SUMMING UP

At the end of your study of this unit you would have learnt about

- * The Oxford Poets
- * Stephen Spender and his works
- * The major influences on his poetry
- * An assessment of his works
- * The poem “I think continually of those who were Truly Great”
- * A critical analysis of the poem and
- * Significance of the symbols used by the poet

16.7 GLOSSARY

Great Depression: worldwide economic downturn that began in 1929 and lasted until about 1939. Although it originated in the United States, the Great Depression caused drastic declines in output, severe unemployment, and acute deflation in almost every country of the world.

Spanish Civil War: War between the leftists, known as the Republicans (formed by the Spanish government together with unions, communists, anarchists, workers, and peasants) and the Nationalists - the rebel part of the army, the bourgeoisie, the landlords, and, generally, the upper classes.

Fascism: a form of far-right, authoritarian ultranationalism characterized by dictatorial power, forcible suppression of opposition, and strong regimentation of society and of the economy, which came to prominence in early 20th century Europe.

Atheism: The literal definition of “atheist” is “a person who does not believe in the existence of a God or any gods.

Nihilism: the rejection of all religious and moral principles, in the belief that life is meaningless.

Totalitarian: relates to a system of government that is centralized and dictatorial and requires complete subservience to the State.

Perennial: lasting or existing for a long or apparently infinite time

Perennity: the state or quality of being perennial

Omnipresent: present everywhere at all times

Ecological: of or relating to the science of ecology or the patterns of relationships between living things and their environment

Orbit: An orbit is a regular, repeating path that an object in space takes around another one

Seamy: Sordid and disreputable

Seductive: tempting and attractive; enticing

Aural: relative to the ear, sense of hearing

Alliteration: the occurrence of the same letter or sound at the beginning of adjacent or closely connected words.

Assonance: resemblance of sound in words or syllables.

Painterly: artistic, appropriate to a painter

Rhetorical abstraction: refers to language that describes concepts rather than concrete images (ideas and qualities rather than observable or specific things, people, or places)

16.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- (1) Write a critical analysis of the poem *The Truly Great*.
- (2) Critically assess Spender's literary output.
- (3) Explain from your reading of the poem *The Truly Great*, Spender's tendency towards rhetorical abstraction. Give examples from the poem.

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