
UNIT 1 QUESTIONING THE *CANON*, IDEOLOGY AND ASSUMPTIONS OF THE *CANON*

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1.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to explain the complex and fractured state of English studies particularly in the context of literary theory. This unit will introduce the conflicting ideas of what constitutes literary theory. We are first going to focus on the factors that construct the canon — a specific version of literature as the correct one. As against such mainstream thought processes we shall study the need to bring in alternative methodological strategies to understand literature. These are not merely tools that bring forth the meaning of literature. Instead they locate meaning within a definite socio-historical context. The process of questioning finally helps formulate a theoretical premise that constitutes a meaningful relation between literature and society at a specific moment in history. Let us begin by introducing the *Canon*.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

To begin with the debate on differing interpretations of the *canon* we must first discuss the present academic state of English Literature. In its present form it has come to embody a whole range of literary, social and cultural signifiers that determine important aspects of the world of the academic institutions and the one outside it. For the non-academic populace a degree in English Literature indicates a specialisation in English as a language. But people who are part of the literate minority understand it to mean a perfection of language skills as well as an exposure to a range of texts that are signifiers of literariness.

A student majoring in this language is subject to the interpretations of the course by the University. The course indicates the individual as a kind of literary elite who is somewhere at par with the products of the English Universities. This has implications for the social set-up as well. In the world outside the academic one the students of English Literature are regarded in some way as superior to the rest. These are the biases generated by the canonical readings of a course modeled on the ways of the West. One of the ways of attacking these established ideas is by re-formulating the course in English by adapting it to a specific context. Another way would be way to question the assumptions of the canon so that resistance can be made part of the process of studying literature in English. For the moment however, we will focus on the latter.

The study of English Literature is a study of the English language as understood in the context of England. What then is the application of a language in a context to which it did not belong at an earlier moment in history? While using English are we, the people of the Third World aware of the nuances of the nineteenth century imperial policies in which it originated? In India today, English is a second language only in name. It might not be the official language of India, but is definitely used in some way or the other in the different strata of our society. We are not trying to suggest the impossibility of the introduction and use of a new language in a context other than where it is the main language. Still, what we are doing is trying to make the Third World user (us) of this language conscious of the implications of language usage.

What do we mean by the term *canon* and how is it constructed? The term *canon* is a body of texts the understanding of which constitutes the literary range of a group studying English Literature. Texts that are part of this category are considered canonical and therefore constitute Literature. On the other hand texts outside the *canon* can be referred to as popular fiction or some other alternative genre. For example, works by Third World writers in English are not part of the *canon* and for them a separate title has to be framed. We are familiar with the debate on the identity formation of writers of the Third World. Should they be grouped as postcolonial literatures or Commonwealth literature? In all this the *canon* continues to occupy a place of its own and students studying a specialised course in English are subject to the canonicity of texts a pre-determined concept that regulates their response to a given text.

In studying the formation of the *canon* in our context we will first take a look at the way it was understood in the context of England. This is because our version of the *canon* is an offshoot of the one studied in the First World. The canonical texts of English Literature have been based on the ideas of **Macaulay**, **Arnold**, the **Newbolt Report**; and by the influence of eminent figures like **F R Leavis** and **T S Eliot**. A cross-section of nineteenth century English society shows the transformations in the structuring of its social set-up. Firstly, the economy of English society changed radically from a largely agrarian though emerging bourgeois society to a predominantly industrial one. Money came to more and more people and differentiated one class from the other — the privileged group formed the upper class, the emerging section that was slowly becoming powerful occupied the second position and at the end were the masses uprooted from the village and planted in the industry. The upper class also comprised the then redundant aristocracy.

Mind you, this is what nineteenth century England witnessed. Education and literature therefore rested in the hands of these few privileged people who had a limited perspective. But as the middle class acquired power, they also received exposure to education. So then we had the formation of two conflicting points of view- the powerful group wanted to dominate the field of education whereas the emergent middle class felt that the quality of literariness had to be passed on to more people. Both groups had vested interests. The former wanted to preserve its power whereas the latter wanted to attain it. Even though the middle class section wanted to make the system of education flexible, they had their own limitations. They wanted education for certain individuals only and did not allow it to filter down to the masses. The *canon* was therefore formed and re-structured to suit the interests of these two groups. This leads us inevitably to the question of culture.

1.2 MATTHEW ARNOLD AND F R LEAVIS AS MAKERS OF THE CANON

In this situation how did English Literature become synonymous with culture? One of the major reasons for this was the approach **Matthew Arnold** adopted. According to him in a scenario where the existence of God was increasingly subject to doubt

literature provided all the answers. **Arnold** noted that **Darwin's** theory of evolution fragmented the sensibility of people who had believed that their lives were regulated by the Christian idea of birth, suffering, death and a life after death. On the other hand, science emerged as a body of knowledge that could provide logical answers to the questions that people confronted in life. As a consequence, faith became an empty area without any basis. Thinkers like **Arnold** felt that literature could give some direction to the people of Victorian England in this regard. According to **Arnold** culture was recommended as an answer to the 'present difficulties' of society. The problem however remained that culture was accessible only to the privileged few. According to **Arnold**:

The highly-instructed few, and not the scantily-instructed many, will ever be the organ of the human race of knowledge and truth. Knowledge and truth in the full sense of the words, are not attainable by the great mass of the human race at all.

Arnold contributed to the formation of this literary *canon* by demarcating a specific section of society as possessing the capability to gain knowledge and truth. This gave the privileged group in possession of culture the mystical power of transmitting education to the masses in their own arbitrary way. Thus, even if literature could provide the answers to the problems of the nineteenth century society, it definitely classified education as the prerogative of only a few people. In this context let us raise the question — who are going to be the 'highly-instructed' few who will constitute the literary organ of the country? The obvious answer is that they are going to be people who have the economic power to purchase education. What about the economically deprived? **Arnold** does not go into this question seriously. What is however, certain is that the answer to the first question is the educated elite because of their notions of excellence, and privileges. This defines parameters of the *canon*, the formation of which is controlled by a privileged minority.

1.3 UNIVERSITIES, ENGLISH AND THE THIRD WORLD

Another factor that contributed to the formation and dissemination of canonical works was the **Newbolt Report** of 1921, *The Teaching of English in England*. The English establishment had prepared the Report with diligence. It set forth the aims and objectives of the course. It also clearly sets out to determine the cultural/ literary requirements of the colonial population. According to the report,

To every child in this country, there is one language with which he must necessarily be familiar and by that, and by that alone, he has the power of drawing directly from one of the great literatures of the world.

This report operated at two levels. It was aware, for instance, that in the wake of nationalistic fervor each nation and even community had become conscious of its own specific cultural indices. This had serious political implications in the context of the imperialistic strategies employed by England. The British tried to foreground English as a universal language against French, a language that enjoyed a privileged place in the world till the beginning of the twentieth century. Reports like the one by **Newbolt** made way for the dissemination of the English language in other countries particularly the colonies. It asserted that English as a language with global significance and English Literature as the 'great literature of the world'. Familiarity with the English language became a pre-requisite for becoming a part of the literary group. Therefore, a course in English acquired a literary value not available to other courses. **Arnold** came in handy to give shape to the *canon* by giving a special place to literature and the **Newbolt Report** elevated the English language to the level of a myth. After the formulation of this report English became entwined with signifiers

that indicated power. The teachers of this course regarded as missionaries by the report became people who had a significant role to perform in society. They would not only impart education but they would circulate belief in the myth of Englishness. A reading of English literature ensured a place within the larger *canon* in society — its power structure.

Another important factor that allowed for the perpetuation of the *canon* was the influence of eminent literary personalities such as **F R Leavis** and **T S Eliot** in the first half of the twentieth century. The ideas circulated by these people still have a determining influence on the minds of the students in English Universities as well as study centers outside England. Whereas **Leavis** belonged to the lower middle class, **Eliot** was part of the aristocratic circle that no longer enjoyed any power. **Leavis** tried to reformulate the *canon* so as to accommodate members of his class the sensitive middle class individuals, but he did not extend it to the masses. Thus, his view remained limited. The liberal humanist group behind the journal *Scrutiny* believed in the essential goodness of individuals- the idea that there were certain people all over the world who were good in nature.

This faith in individual goodness is a characteristic feature of such thinkers who try to privilege themselves as against the others. The ideas of the *Scrutiny* appealed to the minds of the people due to its liberal policy that allowed for an increase in the number of people who could be part of the literate group. This thinking suited the class ambitions of the bourgeois i.e., the class that wanted to figure in important positions in society. That is why **Leavisian** thinking holds the attention of the students in academic institutions even today. The vested interests of the middle class people also influenced significantly the object of the focus of English literature. This can be seen in the formation of one of the greatest canonical works by **Leavis**- *The Great Tradition*. A canonical work privileges certain texts as great literature and others as ordinary fiction that provides entertainment. That is why the **Leavisian canon** kept **Dickens** out of *The Great Tradition*. The same treatment was meted out to women authors like **Emily** and **Charlotte Bronte**. The attitude of **Leavis** coupled with his wide appeal to the student of Literature has contributed to the formation of the *canon* in our context. Another interesting feature that **Leavis** introduced into Literature was the association of literature with Criticism. Before him, the relation between the two had remained largely undefined. In this one must discuss the contribution of **T S Eliot** we shall do this in the next section of this unit.

1.4 CRITICISM, LITERATURE AND T S ELIOT

As pointed out earlier **T S Eliot** belonged to a class that was looking for ways and means to assert itself in the contemporary scenario. One of the ways in which it could manifest itself was by allying with the new intelligentsia as embodied in **Leavis** and others. **Eliot's** class aspirations become clear by an analysis of his ideas on criticism. His essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* is considered an important marker in the association between literature and criticism. In the context of literature he created space for himself by foregrounding criticism that focuses on the idea of 'Tradition'. According to him a study of literary criticism would be meaningless without bringing in the works of the past. In a way the idea was interesting as it looked for a cohesive view of literature. There can be no doubt that **T S Eliot** was able to accommodate the powerless aristocracy as an important figure in the literary field by invoking the idea of tradition. However, his idea of what constituted tradition was rather arbitrary. Further, the idea of including new works within this gamut was without a logical basis. In terms of literary devices, **Eliot's** early poetry suggested that meaning could not be located in society but in a vague and undefined time. The world had become in his view too complex and was beyond comprehension.

However, his later poetry pointed towards the Anglican Christian thinking suggesting that all complexities could be resolved within this specific religious frame. This was a process of subsumation that simplified all social contradictions and indicated a straight path of faith. The other problem with Eliot's thought was that he was considering only the minority in society the select few who had the capacity to 'objectively' consider a pattern in human existence. Where was the possibility of spreading this education to a larger group? This was of no concern to either Leavis or Eliot. They had both in their own ways contributed to the canon. Thus we can see that various social, literary and historical factors constructed the canon so assiduously reinterpreted and accepted by us. However, what was the significance of canonical formations of English studies in the other countries, particularly the Third World, under the imperial rule of the English? This we shall take up next.

1.5 THE CANON AND "US"

What were the implications of the study of English Literature for people outside the English context? This question is relevant particularly in view of the requirements of the Third World. As we know, the model of imperialism always projects the ruler as superior to the 'native'. Thus, English language performs a dual role. On the one hand a study of English language perpetuates the myth of Englishness because the native or 'other' can never perfect the language. And on the other it inspires the native to behave like the English. This is evident in Macaulay's views on education. The Indians would become, said Macaulay,

A class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and intellect...The languages of Western Europe civilized Russia. I cannot doubt that they will do for the Hindoo what they have done for the tartar.

The emphasis in Macaulay's *Minutes* on education is on the consolidation of the British Empire in India. The aim was two-fold: to replace Persian with English as the official language in India and to posit English conduct and approach as an answer to the social evils in India. This is reinforced by what Lord Bentinck said to Alexander Duff in an interview,

If there was one opinion on which he was more decided than another, it was the expediency of teaching English in all our higher Seminaries gradually substituting it throughout every department of government business, instead of the Persian which ought as soon as possible to be abolished.

The association of the English language with the imperial agenda is paradoxical. It functioned as a major point of connection between the 'English' and the Indian community. It made the Indians feel literate only if they gained proficiency in the language creating a 'babu' culture. At the same time it maintained a line of difference between the two groups privileging the English over the native. The language of the native was derogated and it was thought that the sooner it was abolished, the better it would be. Somehow or the other, the need was felt to evade native languages. Clearly, native languages could be subjugated by spreading a canonical interpretation amongst the Indian masses. The 'native' was subsumed within the myth of Englishness and believed that the emulation of Englishness could provide the Indians with a refinement they otherwise lacked. In terms of social groups this introduced the idea of the 'elite' - one who held some kind of mastery over the English language. Thus the English language was privileged over other languages of India.

The introduction of the English language in the Indian education system influenced its academic as well as social structures. The infiltration of this language into the administrative system and the category of the literary elite affected the thought

processes of the educated groups in the seats of learning. The Universities of the First World have controlled through influencing those of the Third World particularly in the context of imperialist domination. Even as we refer to the larger context of the Third World, the examples cited are from our immediate context- a specific space in Indian society. We are not suggesting that the Third World is a universal entity and the co-ordinates in the case of India would be applicable to Africa or Latin America. The idea is to pose questions valid in a specific problematic, so as to generate the possibility of resistance in other areas. At the end of the nineteenth century the establishment of the Oxford and Cambridge Universities signified the materialisation of a struggle that stressed the importance of education.

However this education had a specific purpose in mind. We have already discussed this in terms of the **Newbolt Report**. But how did the programme of education in England affect the Third World? The authorities framing the English courses in our Universities have faced pressure from institutions of England or America. Even before the outline of the English course is prepared for a University, the format to be followed already exists. Our language skills, writing skills and our understanding of literature have to conform to the standards that have been set by the Oxford or Cambridge Universities. There is a specific idea of English that is generated by these Universities and we are expected to follow them unquestioningly. It does not come as a surprise that students studying English Literature consider themselves closer to the English set-up and, therefore, more literate than the others. The courses in English have to be adapted and re-written taking into cognisance the aspects of literature in one's own context. That would be more worthwhile. It is interesting to note that as a resistance to this imperialist aftermath eminent teachers from our Universities show proficiency and awareness of, both English as well as Hindi, Urdu, and writings in other languages as well as their translations in English. Thus we can see the connection between the construction of the *canon* in the First World and its impact on the Third World. The *canon* is an entity that has far-reaching consequences and this is the reason why we need to formulate resistance to the *canon*. This takes us to the next point where we see the presence of certain biases behind what we call the *canon*.

1.5.1 Slants in Theory and the Canon

Before we formulate a theoretical position to resist the *canon*, let us first focus on the relationship between literature and criticism. Criticism is considered by some literary scholars as an allied branch of literature and by the others a well-integrated and necessary part of it. Our purpose is to see whether there are any canonical formations even in critical perspectives that claim to understand works of literature. This is essential. Critical theory has increasingly become an important area for the understanding of literature. However, is literature a body of thought that can be easily decoded by Criticism? We do not think this to be true. It is not as if the function of Criticism is to merely locate meaning in the form of definite answers to solve the riddle called literature. There are contradictions within both literature and criticism. The two must be considered in an objective materialistic way. The nature of contradictions is as much internal as it is external since both literature and criticism shape and are shaped by the actual surroundings in which they operate.

What is the thrust of the objective historicist point of view and how is it going to prove an appropriate 'slant' for us to discuss the aspects of literary theory? For us, literary theory recognises the transitions in English economy from an agrarian to a capitalist economy. It traces the development in society from an earlier period in history to the contemporary state of nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It recognises a relation between different social stages and its corresponding economic system. It analyses the development of new productive forces and works out their relation to other aspects of society. What we mean is that imperialism has been at the centre of *canon* formation in our context and needs as such to be comprehended in its multiple ways of functioning. The contradictions of which we talked about gets, further compounded under imperialism since it brings to bear on them its own weight of problems. What for instance is the relationship between the masses of western

'advanced' countries and those of the colonies? Normally, since both are exploited, they should have a commonality of interests. This, however, is not the case. In our context, the ordinary English citizen was prevented from relating to common Indian people by the fact of his position in the imperialistic structure. Therefore, we have to place this whole phenomenon in a new cultural- ideological framework and recognise its specific nature. Let us use somewhat simple terms to explain this phenomenon.

Today we have entered a new phase of capitalism in which different kinds of relations are formulated amongst the members of society. These are new manifestations of the earlier relations. We can see that in a given country with a market- oriented economy one section emerges richer than the others. In the global set-up then the developed country moves faster than the developing countries and the First World continues its control over the Third World. Today, the old system has remained even though the forms have changed and we have entered a new era of consumerism. We are puppets both at the hands of the indigenous markets and the multi-national corporations. In such a scenario should we dismiss the political- social nexus or should we deploy the ideas of economic suppression to counter the ever-emerging strategies of global capitalism? The literary *canon* tries to blur the boundaries of such ideological processes so that *status quo* prevails. This allows the proponents of the *canon* to work out their motives effectively. But we need to put a stop to these dominant modes of thinking. They are tempting and lucrative and it is easy to fall prey to them. We need to develop inter-related matrices to develop a cogent theory to counter canonical tendencies in literature. One such method is the alliance of materialist thought with Feminism.

As a theoretical enterprise feminism is also trying to work out methodological strategies to question canonical assumptions. The feminist groups have not restricted themselves to the text but are bringing it alive in the social context in the form of theatre, arts, and so on. But feminism cannot be worked out completely till equality is established at all levels in society and for this it has to function in co-operation with forces that aim to end exploitation. One of the most important ways of doing this is by beginning with an implementation of these theoretical concepts in the classroom. It is only with a meaningful interaction between the teacher and the student that these ideas can be extended beyond the room to the world outside. Therefore a questioning of the *canon* has to take place from a specific vantage point that is able to articulate meaningfully the voices of dissent. We need to sharpen literary minds so that the resistance offered against the established literary *canon* can be used to reformulate and define existing social tendencies.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this introductory unit we have tried to understand the various factors that have made for the easy perpetuation of the *canon*. Factors like the influence of **Arnold**, the **Newbolt Report** and others will be taken up in each of the units that follow. We have tried to recognise the pattern of relationship between literature and criticism and have discussed both the canonical renderings of this association and the possible alternative. These ideas point towards the need to question assumptions of the *canon*. We must articulate our voice from a specific point of view to challenge the basis of the *canon*. A view that stresses the influence of imperialism in our midst is one such point of reference that helps us undermine the influence of the *canon*. A critical perspective on the neo-colonial suppressions in our part of the world offers an appropriate paradigm to question the *canon* in a meaningful way.

1.7 QUESTIONS

1. Write in brief the factors that have led to canon-formation.
2. What is the effect of the canon on the Third World?

3. What were the implications of Macaulay's ideas on Education for India?
4. Do you see any relation between canon formation and economic systems in a given society?

1.8 GLOSSARY

Agrarian Economy:

Economic structure that is land-oriented

Babus:

As the Britishers left India; the Indians who continued in the administrative set-up fostered the remnants of colonial superiority and considered themselves 'babus', people better than the others.

Methodological Strategies:

Literary techniques that are not merely objective tools. In fact, they are based on a specific method related to a definite point of view.

Parameters:

Boundaries that define the field of operation of a particular idea.

Myth:

It is a system that posits its cultural ideas as naturally superior. It employs the arts, culture and other literary factors for the process of naturalisation.

UNIT 2 *THE RISE OF ENGLISH* AND ISSUES CONCERNING THE 'CANON'

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The *Canon* in Relation to the Literature of the Eighteenth Century
 - 2.2.1 Imagination and Literature: The Nineteenth Century
- 2.3 Romanticism and the *Canon*
- 2.4 God or Evolution
- 2.5 Literature and Society
- 2.6 Whither Women?
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Questions
- 2.9 Glossary

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this unit is to make us understand theoretically the formation of the *canon* in the context of certain specific developments in society that in turn take place in the course of history. Conditions in history are the outcome of the change in economic structures from one social system to another, from the era of agrarian power relations, for instance, in our context to industrialism and imperialism. A consideration of these will then help us to answer the larger questions: What is the relationship between literature and society? Does the *canon* take into consideration the different classes in a given society? Where is the Indian student positioned with respect to the *canon*? Let us now look at **Terry Eagleton**'s essay *The Rise of English*.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In **Terry Eagleton**'s essay titled *The Rise Of English* the term 'English' is discussed in theoretical terms. However, certain questions arise. Does it mean the rise of the English civilisation, the beginnings of English Studies or the English as a power to reckon with? **Eagleton**'s analysis takes into account the changing and ever evolving relations between the development of the English society in the last couple of centuries as an imperio-industrial power and the study of English. It is within these relations and the conflicting forces reflected therein that the familiar term '*canon*' and its implications are located. But what is the *canon*? The *canon* is not simply an aesthetic idea. It is a category that has a complex relationship with society and its powerful zones. The nature of this complexity is what we are going to. To explain further, '*canon*' is a term used initially in the context of the church. It implied a dogma decreed by the church council. *Canon* also referred to a set of books that were considered as holy by the authorities of the church. In the present age *canon* has started to signify the rules by which a certain set of books can be considered authoritative. The *canonicity* of the *canon* has become a yardstick to slot literary works as mainstream or otherwise.

2.2 THE *CANON* IN RELATION TO THE LITERATURE OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Eagleton discusses the *canon* with respect to the literature of the eighteenth century onwards to the criticism of the early twentieth century. At the beginning of the essay

he makes an important distinction between literature of the Enlightenment and what we consider to be 'creative' or 'imaginative' literature of the succeeding era. The literary developments of the eighteenth century did not take place in isolation. They were related as **Eagleton** points out, to the emergence of a new class in this period—the middle class group of traders and merchants that forms itself as the developed capitalists later in the nineteenth century. In the eighteenth century it comprised people who had started acquiring money from sources other than 'land'. Land had hitherto determined social relations but now the old medieval land-centred order had been challenged. The guild system of the seventeenth century in which people traded with one another developed into the idea of trade some time later. These transactions allowed people to relate power with a new co-ordinate, money. This replaced powerful groups like the aristocrats and the landlords the people who were slowly becoming socially strong owing to acquisition of money. The people of the waning dominant order of the past were compelled to acknowledge the presence of this 'cluster' as the latter were now able to wield importance. To suit the needs of this upcoming class, literature changed its emphasis by foregrounding another latent genre—the periodical essay for example. As **Eagleton** says:

With the need to incorporate the increasingly powerful but spiritually rather raw middle classes into unity with the ruling aristocracy, to diffuse polite social manners, habits of 'correct' taste and common cultural standards, literature gained a new importance. (15).

This category was designed to refine the emerging class so that they could fit in with and integrated into the upper echelons of society. The body of literature that had so far focused on poetry as a genre was now to acknowledge the presence of a new literary form whose aim was "to temper wit with morality and to enliven morality with wit." According to **Eagleton** this originated to suit the needs of a new class that lacked the code of social etiquettes laid down by the dominant forces of the previous period. The coffee house became the place where an intermingling of different clusters of people became possible. Our attention is drawn to the fact that the coffee house led to the formation of what we understand as 'opinion'. A sensibility owing allegiance to ideas and opinions was not possible in the feudal set-up where expression was a prerogative of those who were in possession of land. The coffee house culture made possible a different kind of interaction that threatened the interests of the aristocrats. The new group, suggests **Eagleton**, tried to reformulate the term 'aristocracy' to make space for itself. The system of values also had to be redefined so that the interests of this category could be kept in mind. We are told that it is because of this reason that the middle class started talking about relativity of morality and ideas of liberty, as their spirit of dynamism and change. This shows how in **Eagleton's** words:

Literature did more than 'embody' certain social values: it was a vital instrument for their deeper entrenchment and wider dissemination. Literature interacts with social forces and creates another set of values altering the existing system.

What was meant to be a 'correction' of taste for this new group formed the foundation of an emerging power. In his book, *The Function of Criticism*, **Eagleton** has explained this phenomenon in the following manner:

In the early eighteenth century, then, the bourgeois principle of abstract free and equal exchange is elevated from the market-place to the sphere of discourse, to mystify and idealize real bourgeois social relations. The petty proprietors of a commodity known as 'opinion' assemble together for its regulated interchange, at once miming in purer, non-dominative form the exchanges of bourgeois economy, and contributing to the political apparatus which sustains it.

It is in this connection between what we understand as the exchange of 'opinion' at the coffee houses and the change in economic structures that the role of literature and

formation of the *canon* should be located. The free exchange taking place in the market place has its bearing on the formation of opinionated thought in society. Let us look the relationship between the *Canon* and the literature of the nineteenth century in the next section.

2.2.1 Imagination and Literature: The Nineteenth Century

Eagleton has pointed out in this essay that in our context there is a tendency to associate literature with the 'creative' faculty. This definition of literature was a result of the far-reaching transitions in the nineteenth century. The industrial revolution and its impact on the society led to a reformulation of the existing thought categories. The association of literature with creative thought arose out of a specific requirement in society. It is not as if literature has to be altered to suit the world outside. Still, we must understand that there is a relationship between works of literature and the society of the time when they were composed and our aim is to understand it. We have to ask as to how this definition of literature came into being: Did this have any connection with the changing face of the middle classes? It is a 'narrowing' of the meaning of literature to certain categories of thought that occupies Eagleton's concern in the next part of the essay, as he points out:

But by the time of the Romantic period....to write about what did not exist was somehow more soul-stirring and valuable than to pen an account of Birmingham. (16).

These evolved and became also different in the period that followed. The nineteenth century is the period in which ideas of Empire, industrialism, economic growth in the form of capitalism and literature intersect at various points. These connections manifest themselves in literary activity in the form of new ideas. One of these formations is the term 'imagination'. The faculty of imagination as a term came into being as a reaction of some groups against the barrenness created by increased industrialisation and reduction of relationships to economic coordinates of capital. These groups comprised the ascendant bourgeoisie whose expectations were belied by new historical developments. In the world of nineteenth century England, the people were regulated by a different structure of economy where the controlling factor was money and not land.

The nature of the co-ordinates being discussed in the context of the nineteenth century might share some similarities with the eighteenth century but at the same time the differences have not been ignored. One cannot ignore the contradictions of the historical process. In the eighteenth century the imperial policies of the English coupled with the regulation of the Enclosure system compelled people to move away from a land - based society. In this period therefore, we have the formation of different ideas that are at their experimental stage. It is only in the nineteenth century that these ideas harden into rules that form a different kind of society. Parallel to this are the people who exist as clusters in the eighteenth century, but it is only in the next century that this new group is able to crystallise itself into a new class that would alter the system radically. In the face of an emerging capitalism coupled with the utilitarian ideology, the people started desiring more in the form of products made available by the 'boon' called industrialisation. Human relations, earlier regulated by a feudal-patriarchal set up were now looked at differently. The vantage point had changed. Social relations were now defined in terms of market relations. For example, earlier groups of people would 'create' a product and then sell it as part of the guild system. In this case even in small-scale workshops the organiser would be in direct contact with the people working with him. However, the industrial set up generated another relation that between the owner and the worker. In this the owner no longer had any contact with the worker who was reduced to a name on the salary statement. As Eagleton points out:

In England a crassly philistine Utilitarianism is rapidly becoming the dominant ideology of the middle class, fetishizing fact, reducing human relations to market exchanges and dismissing art as unprofitable ornamentation. (17).

Thus changes in the market place had a direct impact on the way society had been structured. Historically this was a very significant period as it witnessed the revolutionary fervour of the masses. In France and other places in Europe one saw the emergence of ideas of 'liberty, fraternity and equality'. In the words of **Wordsworths**, "Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive". It is in such a scenario that the literary group we understand as the Romantics gave birth to the idea of 'imagination'. According to **Eagleton**, this concept became a means of creating a space free from the invasion of economic ideas. It was a zone that tried to resist the onslaught of a system that was lucrative and therefore quite overpowering in nature. The Romantics, according to **Eagleton**, were not divorced from reality but were firmly rooted in it. Imagination was thus, not merely an aesthetic experience but as in the case of **Shelley**, it became a way of positing another system. To consider the idea of Imagination merely as 'escapism' would be a reductive interpretation, one that would ignore the relation of the Romantics with society. In fact the Romantics tried to redefine the *canon* in their own way. This group was thoroughly disgusted with the 'materialistic' approach of the proponents of the industrial set-up. This compelled the romantics to look for a new aspect of society through which they could in turn define themselves. Reason was therefore substituted by imagination and this provided succour to the otherwise barren situation in which the Romantics were placed.

2.3 ROMANTICISM AND THE CANON

How do we respond to and evaluate the *canon* of creativity as a field that offered scope to escape? The accepted position in mainstream English criticism is that **Romanticism** posited the individual against society and dreams against reality. Nothing could be farther from the truth. **Eagleton** helps us to understand that **English Romanticism** was caused by concrete historical circumstances that demanded a rejection of the prevailing and the newly emerging trends. The sheer sterility of their socio-political environment made it imperative for these people to locate other areas of expression. Imagination provided them with the possibility of materialising ideas of non-alienated labour, equality for the masses and transcendence in a depressing social situation. This is the reason why **Eagleton** sees the literature of this period as an 'alternative ideology' and imagination as a 'political force'. In fact poets like **Shelly** saw complete harmony between their poetic ideals and their socio-political leanings. It is another matter that, some of them were unable to continue their grip on reality. After transcending the real world by moving into the imaginative faculty, some of the Romantics were unable to crystallise their thought in any concrete way. But others were unable to understand with clarity the nuances of being part of this or that class. It can be argued that the Romanticists equated the suffering exploited masses with the capitalists because of which, they could not see the potentiality of protest within the existing society. They ignored the difference in their social set-up where the latter were the owners of property unlike the former who were only the workers. These together as human beings constituted the bourgeois social environment. This restriction of the forces of the imaginative powers to the individuals of a specific group prevented the materialisation of potential forces of the imagination into any meaningful alternative structure in society.

This manifested, according to **Eagleton**, in a kind of idealism in literature in newer forms such as 'symbol' and 'aestheticism'. The *canon* was formed in the context of these new concepts. **Baudelaire** and others considered the poet to be a seer who could 'see' through the existing order to one beyond it. Concrete images are looked at as symbols considered a 'unitary' entity having artistic sanctity, one that could not be

violated. The symbol would then help get a grasp on the ideal world. This meant that there was to be insularity in art that could not be penetrated and that it was to have a privileged status that made it available to only the chosen ones. Any possibility of the symbol to be interpreted in a specific context was also ruled out. Art became an aesthetic experience which was to be 'felt' but in an isolated way. This singularised the multifarious social possibilities into a static thought allowing for little or practically no change in society.

Art was to have no connection with existing social forces. It was to be content formulating its own rules and regulations. We have a re-formulation of the *canon* — the aesthetic *canon* of imagination, sensibility and experience that would privilege certain groups and leave the others out. What importance did this assign to the literary artist and the reader of their works? As far as the writer was concerned the focus was supposed to rest on art for its own sake. As a result the literary worker was reduced to being an artist rooted out of context in the realm of an abstract universal space. The artist was compelled to believe in the illusion that his works have no relation to society except that of projecting beauty. **Eagleton** thus shows how *canons* in literature are formed; how a clever slant is provided to literature because of which injustice is done to a major part of creative endeavour.

2.4 GOD OR EVOLUTION

Eagleton's analysis of literature and social forces in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century establishes the ideological aspects of literature, which lead him to conclude in the following words, "Literature, in the meaning of the word we have inherited, is an ideology", (19). In the mid-nineteenth century, however there were two important factors that redirected the attention of the literary artist from imagination to what they would call the reality of life. One was the failure of the revolution of 1848 and the other was the dissolution of the dominant forces of religion. The revolutions of 1789 and 1848 fought to establish equality but there was a distinct difference in the social nature of these two movements. In the case of the former, the middle classes or the bourgeoisie is together with the working classes shouted slogans of liberty, equality and fraternity. However, as the bourgeoisie gained political ascendancy they started working in favour of the ruling class. The masses were betrayed. The revolution of 1848 saw the working classes get together to oppose the existing system but they were effectively curbed by what **Eagleton** calls a 'police state'.

From here **Eagleton** comes to the role of religion in this scenario and the aftermath of its disintegration. We ought to remember that **Eagleton** sees religion as an agency playing a role, — something unheard of in the preceding periods. According to **Eagleton**, the failure of the revolution of 1848 led to widespread dissatisfaction amongst the working classes and at the same time it made visible the distortions of educated middle class which had by now allied its ideas with the value system of the existing powerful group. Prior to this period religion, according to **Eagleton**, had performed the function of social cement. Religion played an instrumental role in projecting a narrow system of values and morality as one that is beneficial for the masses. The category we understand as religion was developed and adapted to provide an illusion to the common people. Strategies of 'mystification' and 'idealisation' allowed the perpetuation of the dubious ideas of the ruling class whose underlying agenda was to further its own interests and acquire more power. In the name of God this class would wield power and yet convince the people that it was for their good. This made society into a capitalist patriarchy headed by God in 'heaven' and the powerful bourgeoisie on earth. Religion became an effective 'social cement' in society. Its methods of binding people together ignored the socio-economic status of the different classes — and ruthlessly absorbed the 'others' into the ideology of the middle class. The virtues of self-sacrifice and meekness that it preached were meant

for learning by the people lower down on the social ladder so that they could be exploited effectively. Thus the *canon* can be seen as evolving in a specific context.

In the mid-nineteenth century when far-reaching changes shook the face of English society, **Darwin's** theory of evolution displaced God from its seat and instead put the theory of evolution in its place. It was asserted that Man was no longer made in the image of God but had descended from the apes. He even had a generic name- *Homo sapiens*. The *Adam* who had categorised and named different species had now been put into a slot. **Copernicus'** ideas of the solar system, **Harvey's** discovery of the circulation of blood in the body and **Newton's** laws of gravity became some of the dominant ideas of this period. This led to a major questioning of the privileged place hitherto accorded to religion. According to this view, society no longer had a controlling force. It was now directionless. People started looking for zones where could assert themselves and maintain structures of power. Literature seemed to be a possible alternative.

Eagleton explains the phenomenon thus,

Literature has become a whole alternative ideology, and the 'imagination' itself as with Blake and Shelley becomes a political force". (17)

The question that disturbed people was whether literary works had any importance in the wake of scientific theories. In his essay titled *Literature and Science* **Matthew Arnold** formulates this question to expand the dimensions of literature. He says,

I am going to ask whether the present movement for ousting letters from their old predominance in education, and for transferring the predominance in education to the natural sciences, whether this brisk and flourishing movement ought to prevail, and whether it is likely that it will prevail?

The importance given to scientific works disturbed people like **Arnold** who had postulated that the only possibility for the people was through literature. The term that he suggested was 'culture'. This was for him, "a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world." The society needed a unifying force to substitute religion and literature seemed to provide the answer. English is now rendered a 'subject' that would represent this conflict. The study of English was entwined with the formulation of a structure of morality.

In this context the next question that comes to one's mind constituting the members of this literary group? **Arnold** in his essay, *Culture and Anarchy* divides the society into three different groups. The first group comprised the people who possessed the power of money and these he called the 'barbarians'. The next was the ascendant middle class who was trying to scale the social ladder. These people he called the 'philistines'. Finally, he clubbed the exploited masses into a single category, the 'populace'. For **Arnold** the solution lies not with the 'barbarians' but the 'philistines' who need to be reformed for this programme. According to **Arnold** a relocation of faith is possible only in this class or else the society is going to be endangered by anarchic forces. These ideas crystallised into the ideology of Liberal humanism that was to provide the right methods of changing this class.

The liberal humanists believed in the goodness of people. Theoretically they included the privileged and the deprived in this paradigm. However they did not evolve any socio-political programme to change the existing situation. Further, this schema did not take into cognisance the difficult conditions of the large body of people we know as the working class. **Arnold** also does not include the working class in his visionary plan since he regards them as people devoid of imagination. Even when the liberal humanists voice their opinion on exploitation, they are considered by **Arnold** to be the 'Hyde-Park rough,' those who do not understand things completely. One can

therefore say that liberal humanism is a way of blurring class boundaries and seeing human beings as divested of their social background. In the next section we shall examine the impact of all these social upheavals and changes on literature.

2.5 LITERATURE AND SOCIETY

What was the impact of all these changes on literature? Literature started projecting a simple plurality of perspective that was only superficial. The underlying agenda was to universalise interests of the bourgeoisie. The masses were made to believe that their point of view held equal importance to that of the ones in power. But this was only a false sense of well being as the power equation between different classes in society was ignored and *status quo* was maintained. What was finally socially significant was the 'version' of the ones in power — the bourgeoisie. Finally, such 'pluralistic' views would be reconciled in one stream of thought — that of the masters.

From here on, literature is further reduced to what **Eagleton** calls a 'solitary' activity that is going to prevent any political action. Therefore, the English subject becomes a category defined by the bourgeois in a way that allows for no change that can be implemented in the interest of the 'populace'. Like religion, literature operates on the emotional sensibility of the people to function as its substitute to facilitate the 'cementing' process. As the subversive potential of literature is curbed, it becomes, according to **Eagleton**, the enemy of 'ideological dogma'. A set-up that created the industrial proletariat tried to relieve itself of its social guilt by educating the workers at a primary level. They used literature to target such people to subsume them within the ideology of capitalism and exploitation. In a system that tried to universalise all differences, any kind of socio-political commitment was considered to be an aberration. Did this mean that the problems of the masses within England and those of the people outside were ignored? No, in fact that was not the case, it was much worse. Their social situation was converted into a fetishist image for the others to feast upon. The idea is that there was no need for the people to think about class differences, they were only supposed to gaze upon them as objects. In this respect, **Eagleton** has also been able to bring in the context of the colonised subject in other countries and its figuration in the literature of England. According to him, people who desired to 'know' about the other places could read the novels of people such as **Kipling** or **Conrad**. Readers were to get a holistic view of society by indulging in themselves in such literature to believe that there was only goodness all around and no exploitation. In literature, the problems of the masses in England and the colonised outside are reduced to a concept of art that plucks the problem out of its context and raises it to be gazed at. In short the reading masses are expected to subsume social differences within notions of goodness and morality. Bourgeois society derives its sense of power by converting social relations into mechanical ones and by regarding them as acts of fetish that are not to be changed. Where are the women located in this problematic of power? As we look at the links between literature and society, we also need to be conscious of specific vantage points. In a world regulated by a capitalist patriarchy the women are much worse as they do not exist either in reality or literature except in terms of their bodies. At the end of this section let us take a brief look at the way women have figured in relation to our understanding the *canon*.

2.6 WHITHER WOMEN?

In this discussion of the connections between the area of literature and that of society we need to ask a very important question — How and where are the women located in such a situation? The woman is a category that is never actively present in such analyses. Instead it is projected, as a passive category understood by implication only. In the eighteenth century the forces of trade, colonisation and industrialisation

separated men and women in terms of polarities. It is not as if patriarchy was not present in the feudal system, but in that system one saw the men and women work together. In the emerging system of things the men in terms of their mobility defined the women, as they had to venture into new areas to conquer and trade. This made men feel powerful and in turn they started looking at women as inferior.

But where does literature figure in all this? Actually, the question needs to be iterated from the other end — where do women figure in works of literature? The co-ordinates of economy and imperialism not only influenced the literary leanings but also focussed on male-centred zones. They were the protagonists of works that relegated women to silent spaces and male writers and patriarchal sensibilities. Women figured as objects that were to reinforce structures of morality. This was meant to teach the women in real life the burden of goodness that they were to shoulder. It is only with the emergence of the novel genre that women began to write in a major way even if with male pseudonyms. Even then they were fed with codes of behaviour and were expected to conform to superficialities. The women of the working classes were completely ignored in literature and appeared if at all in a remote corner. Further, the *canon* projected the colonised subject as a unified static entity incapable of any motion. What is the relation of the *canon* to such marginalised subjects? Here we are not trying to answer this question. What we are trying to suggest is that for a complete understanding of the *canon* we need to study its relation with 'us', the marginalised subjects.

2.7 LET US SUM UP

We have been able to establish the tenuous connections between changes that have taken place in the course of history and the transitions in literature. But how can we establish these points of intersection within literature? Can there be a body of literature that would help us build on these ideas so that they enhance our understanding of both literature and society and help us disrupt authoritative ideas of the *canon*? Let us see how the academia has been trying to grapple with works of literature and in the process evolve certain methodological strategies.

2.8 QUESTIONS

1. What are the forces that led to the formation of the canon?
2. What does the term 'Imagination' signify?
3. Where are the women positioned with respect to the canon?
4. What do you think are the links between imperialism and canon formation?

2.9 GLOSSARY

Aesthetics:	A theory that there is an intrinsic value to art based on its inherent beauty and not for its social significance.
Guild:	A group of people who would specialise in the production of a specific object and would trade with other guilds.
Industrialism:	A nineteenth century phenomenon that replaced the system of manual labour with machinery, introduced the railway engine and demarcated the city from the village.

Imperialism:

The process by which one powerful country controls the land, and culture of another country and also bureaucratically- militarily runs its politics.

*The Rise of English
and Issues Concerning
the Canon*

Periodical essay:

In the eighteenth century, the essay formed a part of journals like the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*. These essays were meant to educate the emergent middle class groups.

UNIT 3 POSSIBILITIES OF NEW AGREEMENTS

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Leavis and *Scrutiny*
- 3.3 Locating the *Wasteland*
- 3.4 Value- Aesthetic or Utilitarian?
- 3.5 Context and the *Canon*
- 3.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.7 Questions
- 3.8 Glossary

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In the previous unit we have studied the formation of the *canon*. We have seen the way in which certain texts can be termed as canonical and how they regulate the direction that English studies are supposed to tow. In the present unit we shall further acquaint you with **Eagleton**'s critical arguments so that we can study new methodological strategies evolved in English Studies in the first half of the twentieth century. The question that concerns us is whether these methods have any logic — social, linguistic, aesthetic or other and whether they can be applied in a predetermined sort of way to a text. We are also going to see how these strategies consider certain texts as canonical and others outside the *canon*.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

F R Leavis belonged to a social stratum that did not hold direct sway over the dominant discourses of the time. He was the son of a musical instruments dealer what **Eagleton** refers 'to as the 'offspring of the provincial petty-bourgeoisie'. The petty bourgeoisie is a class that constantly keeps moving between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. However, its interests are usually allied with the ones in power and not with those of the working classes. For the first time in England, the people of this group were getting the opportunity of University education. In fact **Eagleton** explains this phenomenon in these words:

In the early 1920' it was desperately unclear why English was worth studying at all; by the early 1930' it had become a question of why it was worth wasting your time on anything else, (27).

In the next section we shall try and see the uses to which this group put this new step.

3.2 LEAVIS AND SCRUTINY

The ideas of this group materialised into the critical journal, *Scrutiny* launched by the Leavises- **F R Leavis** and his wife **Q D Leavis**. Here, one needs to ask if the class-consciousness of these people was able to evolve any 'mutations' in the field of Criticism. **Eagleton** believes that the ideas that germinated in *Scrutiny* had such a

major impact that even today the students have not been able to free themselves of its influence. This is where our work in understanding the nuances of Leavisian thinking becomes important so that we can question the working of the *canon* effectively. We must focus on the reasons for the wide appeal of its ideas even as it had its origins in a 'different' i.e., middle class segment of society.

Scrutiny was the product of a class that saw itself as struggling against the ideas of the dominant group, one that comprised upper-middle class people. This was the segment that exercised a determining ideological influence on the economic and educational spheres. However, the people who contributed to the formation of this journal belonged to the lower middle class. They were reacting against the designs of a specific educated faction that played into the hands of the capitalist world. This is the reason that in its early phase this journal focussed on important social and political issues. As **Eagleton** says, Leavis in his early years saw the need to address social and political questions: he even at one point guardedly entertained a form of economic communism", (29).

However, **Leavis** does not consider equality as seriously as was claimed. This is interesting and we have to be fully alert to see the subtle workings of Leavisianism. The Leavises looked at literature as a 'moral and cultural' crusade. **Leavis**, too in the tradition of **Arnold**, stresses the importance accorded to literature as the only factor that could provide society with a direction.

Leavis in his essay titled *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* attacks the restriction of cultures in the hands of a privileged few. He reveals how culture has become part of a minority. To describe this phenomenon he uses the term high-brow. As he discusses the nuances of the term 'high-brow' he says,

High-brow is an ominous addition to the English language...culture has always been in minority keeping. But the minority now is made conscious, not merely of an uncongenial but of a hostile environment...the minority is being cut-off from the powers that rule the world as never before.

To counter the term 'high-brow' and to salvage the position of the minority **Leavis** advocates the importance of a rigorous analysis of a particular work. Instead of wasting attention on other influences, *Scrutiny* narrowed the attention of the reader on the 'words on the page.' The importance given to words brought forth the importance of language in theoretical studies. As a result 'English' literature came to be understood in the context of the language. Methodologies to analyse a text now focussed on the quality of words used and their texture. The quality of language according to **Eagleton**, signified the 'social index' of a particular society. The concept of evaluating literary works arose giving birth to an associated body of thought- Literary Criticism. *Scrutiny's* critique of capitalist system established literary criticism and managed to get for it mass appeal. However, even as it emanated from the minority segment of society it stressed spiritualism and a moral centrality inherent in a study of literature. As a result certain texts were exonerated as they had the potential of providing the moral and spiritual yardstick to society. The map of English Literature was finally ready in its new form. The ruling ideology was liberal humanism. Before we discuss the implications of this line of thinking let us analyse an extract from *Scrutiny*: In one of the essays titled *Literature and Society* that appeared in this journal, **Leavis** writes about his reasons for not taking the stance of **Marxist** thought. He says

A literature, that is, must be thought of as essentially something more than an accumulation of separate works: it has an organic form, or constitutes an organic order, in relation to which the individual writer has his significance and his being...it stresses, not economic and material determinants, but intellectual and spiritual, so implying a different conception from the Marxist of the relation between the present of the society and the past, and a different conception of society.

A little later he states his belief in the potential of the individual and not the social. He says, "Without the individual talent there is no creation...the truth that it is only in individuals that society lives."

This extract makes clear the contradictions in *Scrutiny* and the thought categories underlying this journal. Let us first take a look at the term 'organic form'. It implies a composite structure that is neatly defined and has an aesthetic logic of its own, one that cannot be violated. The co-ordinates that determine this organic form are spiritual and intellectual. These also happen to be the points of reference for liberal humanism. However, the terms intellectualism and spiritualism do not have any material grounding. Theoretical categories are, therefore, reduced to an arbitrary process that considers certain groups as possessing these traits and others without them. The 'organic' nature of literature can only fulfil the needs of the few who have brought about this change in the idea of literature. Organicity assumes a certain harmony that is not there in the existing socio-economic set-up. The organic form then becomes a way of evading class-differences and those of language under the blanket cover of English. The individual who has a certain relation with this form belongs to a specific segment of society and the form in turn privileges this class. But where does this leave the others who cannot think of interacting actively with this order.

The Leavisian argument is equipped not to answer this but only to ignore this issue. There is a tendency in this thinking that does not look into the needs of a class that constitute the masses and instead looks for inspiration to the literary whims of the minority or the 'elite'. Therefore, even as **Leavis** attacks highbrow culture, he creates another category — the elite. According to **Eagleton**:

The Scrutiny case was inescapably elitist: it betrayed a profound ignorance and distrust of the capacities of those not fortunate enough to have read English at Downing College, (30).

The second point is that Leavisian thinking stresses certain intellectual and spiritual determinants. But what is the relationship of these to the working classes that have been reduced to automatons in a machine? What kind of spiritualism is possible for the people whose identity has been subsumed into the giant industrial machinery? When the economic needs of the masses are not fulfilled, and they are alienated from their labour, how can they be expected to cultivate an intellectual sensibility? One can see that **Leavis** attacks the capitalist structure at one level and obviates it at another. It is clear that his attack on the upper classes is from the position of the petty-bourgeois intellectual who also maintains its distance from the lower classes. The *Scrutiny* lacked the potential to shift its vantage point from that of the petty bourgeois to those of the working class.

Eagleton's grasp of the *canon* formation is firm. He reflects it by analysing the relationship between creativity and individuality. How can there be any notion of 'organic' creativity in a world that is not aware of the needs of the groups it has rendered weak? Creativity should be looked at as a socially realisable process, not as an individual characteristic or only certain people will monopolise this quality. Further, what is the role that literature has to play under such circumstances? Should it harp on ideas like 'organic form' and 'liberal humanism' or should it reflect dialectically the problems of the masses and work out a solution within certain socio-historic parameters? The answers to these questions are complex and can only be located in the very process of "questioning the *canon*".

In fact **Leavis'** insecurities are quite clear in his work, *The Great Tradition*. This critical work canonises **Jane Austen**, **George Eliot**, **Henry James**, and **Joseph Conrad**. He focuses on the last three for some 'special reasons'. He leaves out **Dickens** and women authors like **Charlotte Bronte** from this great tradition. According to **Leavis**,

It is tempting to retort that there is only one Bronte. Actually Charlotte, though claiming no part in the great line of English fiction has a permanent interest of a minor kind...The genius, of course, was Emily.

The author of texts like *Villette*, *Romola* has been reduced to a minority. It is to resist such strategies of canonisation that academia like the Delhi University have changed the syllabus to include texts like, *Jane Eyre*. On the other hand even as Emily Bronte has been labelled a genius for her magnum opus *Wuthering Heights* the work is called 'a kind of sport'. For Dickens Leavis says that,

Dickens was a great genius and is permanently among the classics is certain. But the genius was that of a great entertainer, and he had for the most part no profounder responsibility as a creative artist than his description suggests.

Even as Leavis traces Dickens' influence in Conrad, James, and the others, he relegates him to the level of a mere 'entertainer'. The seriousness of the Dickensian vision has been ignored by Leavis. Or may be the profundity, maturity and grim depiction of the evils of the industrial world threatens him. This insecurity is also visible in his attitude towards the French writer, Flaubert. In fact half-way through the book one has to ask if he is establishing a tradition or trying to overcome the threat writers like Flaubert or Balzac pose before him? He uses the comments of James and George Eliot to talk of a masterpiece like *Madame Bovary* as an instance of pre-occupation with 'form'. To extend the argument further, he praises the interest in life related to art. For Flaubert he says, "Far from having anything of Flaubert's disdain or boredom, they are all distinguished by a vital capacity for experience." He seems to have completely missed out on Flaubert's hatred for bourgeois society and its pretensions and has reduced it to boredom. What are these if not strategies of canonisation that privilege certain texts and eliminate the others from the sphere of reading? The kind of space that is accorded to *Emma Bovary* can only be regarded as immorality in the Leavisian context. Such flexibility is not present even in his analysis of Eliot's *Middlemarch* even as he does her the favor of including her in *The Great Tradition*.

3.3 LOCATING THE WASTE LAND

Thus we can see the way Leavis redirects the *canon* by suggesting methods that focus on the text in isolation. We can say, therefore, with some certainty that *The Great Tradition* is nothing but *canon* in its new form. In fact Leavis constitutes the *canon* in relation to critical theory. One can now see the connections between the two. Where Leavis was able to formulate certain aspects of critical theory, T S Eliot redefined the *canon* from the perspective of 'tradition'. We go from here to discuss T S Eliot's sense of tradition and the way it was related to his specific social sensibility. The idea is not to deliberately impose social and material co-ordinates on a text but to study the possible connections they share. According to Eagleton, "Culturally displaced and spiritually disinherited, Eliot arrived in England...and began to carry out a wholesale salvage and demolition job on its literary traditions", (33). T S Eliot belongs to the aristocratic social set-up- a class that no longer enjoyed the divine associations of power. What is meant is that earlier when this group was part of the feudal order, its members were placed closest to God. Their word was law for the lower classes. With the rise of the middle class, and restructuring society on the basis of money their privileged status was challenged. They were compelled to accommodate the emergent middle class or they would perish.

T S Eliot also belonged to this disintegrating aristocratic order. He experienced a fragmentation of sensibility and saw this as manifested in society as a universal concept. This is what most of us do we normally generalise on the basis of our

limited class experience and project it as an all –acceptable truth. He tried to resolve this schism by representing it in literature and suggesting the answer in the powers of tradition. This idea was to function as a coordinate from which to judge works of literature to evolve a new concept of the *canon*. The mainstream literature in its existing form has been modified, but on what grounds? The question remains to be asked- what is the nature of the tradition that he is trying to invoke? In his essay, *Tradition and the Individual Talent* he says,

Tradition....involves in the first place a historical sense....and the historical sense involves a perception not only of the pastness of the past but its presence....poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality but an escape from personality.

According to **Eagleton**, tradition for **T S Eliot** is an over-arching framework against which works of literature have to fashion themselves. The co-ordinates for judging a text have again been fixed- the vantage point is that of the redundant aristocracy trying to re-establish its power equation in society. The past has to be invoked and filtered through the likes of **T S Eliot**. The historical sense has to be understood only in the way the past manifests itself in the present. **Eagleton** points out that in this way in **T S Eliot**, the historical process is reduced to a simple linear category. As discussed earlier, in the case of **Leavis** the idea of organic form is another manifestation of liberal humanism. **T S Eliot** seems to be attacking the individualism of the middle class tradition of liberal humanism. The implied movement away from the selfish interests is no doubt to be acknowledged, but where does it head? Where **Leavis** introduces aesthetic categories, **Eliot** modifies it with tradition. He completely ignores the differing nuances of tradition and reconstructs the *canon* again sorting out different texts including the Metaphysical poets and eliminating **Milton**.

The *canon* as it existed had ignored the school of Metaphysical poets. However, these poets of the seventeenth century were fore-grounded by **T S Eliot**. Thus, we see an effort here to change the *canon*. According to Eliot, the seventeenth century poets displayed a "unity of sensibility, an easy fusion of thought and feeling." The later periods that witnessed the revolutions experienced what he calls "a dissociation of sensibility." For **T S Eliot** this dissociation was no longer connected with experience and this fragmentation was best visible in **Milton** in whose hands no such unity was possible. What we need to ask is whether the tradition of the working classes is the same as that of the bourgeois: Whose tradition is the focus - the exploiter or the exploited? The two cannot be equated. But, **T S Eliot** subsumes all contradictions in the fold of the degenerate aristocracy. According to **Eagleton**, "After his conversion to Christianity in the mid-1920' he advocated a large rural society run by a few great families and a small elite of theological intellectuals much like himself", (34).

This is what tradition is supposed to mean. It is supposed to mutate the *canon* on the terms of a group that is eager to concretize its position in society. Religion is to function as a tool that will further the interests of these people. **Eliot's** conversion to the Anglican Christian group moves the reader and writer to involve itself with the tradition of Christianity. Two things are quite clear- firstly, even as **Eliot** captures the decadence in English society in 'form' in his early poetry, in his later poems he suggests transcendence towards a religious order. This seems to further fortify his idea of Tradition. In this context where do we locate the representation of people who have been thrown out of the arbitrary impersonal order of tradition or the Christian order? It implies that the society can rejuvenate itself only by reliving the past. In relation to class politics this means that the society needs to be re-structured as in the past. In the context of the present then we again have a privileged few that believe in tradition and Anglicanism. Actually, this was not merely a redefinition of the *canon* at the time but a new definition of the 'elite'.

Eliot's *The Waste Land* analyses the meaninglessness of modern life, its sterile and barren nature. The structures in society have lost all meaning and do not make any sense. The individual is pushed into a social situation that only inhibits his development. Human relations have broken down and communication between two people is no longer possible. According to T S Eliot, this is reflected in language that does not make sense any longer. Language can only be understood in terms of what T S Eliot calls an objective co-relative. However, the nature of the desolation he reflects in his early poetry is that of the middle class male- where is the female and where are the working classes? Further the problems of the middle class man are to be resolved only through a mythological structure- a radical socio-political change is not possible. In fact the *canon* and its proponents can never allow a change in the system, as that would threaten their position of power. But we have to keep the possibility alive by questioning the *canon*. Next we consider the *canon* in terms of its class nature.

3.4 VALUE - AESTHETIC OR UTILITARIAN?

It is clear that in the *Scrutiny* or Eliot's idea of Tradition there is a pattern inherent in these ideological structures. These ideas are crystallised in literature in the form of literary theories like **Practical Criticism** that deployed methods like *Close Reading*. This strategy stressed on the need to focus on the reading of the text. We would be discussing this aspect in detail in the context of **Hillis Miller's** essay in the sixth unit of this block. The idea was that literature had to be looked at from the point of view of the literary work alone. The 'greatness' of literature rested in the poem and not the context that produced it. Literature has been narrowed to the idea of an aesthetic ideal and has been completely rooted out of history and thrust into tradition. As **Eagleton** says, "It inescapably suggests an attention to this rather than to something else: to the 'words on the page' rather than to the contexts which produce and surround them". These ideas were further incorporated in the American **New Criticism**. Coming back to **I A Richards**, he too devises a system of understanding the relationship between the writer, reader and the literary work. The 'emotive' aspects of poetry are stressed. Let us look at an extract from *The Principles of Literary Criticism*-

What is the value of the arts, why are they worth the devotion of the keenest hours of the best minds, and what is their place in the human endeavors? is left almost untouched, although without some clear view it would seem that even the most judicious critic must often lose his sense of position...Thus arises the phantom problem of the aesthetic mode or aesthetic state, a legacy from the days of abstract investigation into the Good, the Beautiful and the True.

He considers it a serious problem of aesthetics that it ignores the question of value of the literary work. According to **Richards** the literary experience should be understood in two parts- the critical and the technical. The former describes the 'value of the experience', the latter the object. However, **Richards** never clearly explains what he means by the 'value' of a work. It is to be related in some way to the 'human endeavors'. Where he attacks the aesthetic mode and its categories of 'good', 'beautiful', and 'true' he bases the question of value on some abstract concept. **Eagleton** points out that, "Society is in crisis, **Richard** argues, because historical change, and scientific discovery in particular, has outstripped and devalued the traditional mythologies by which men and women have lived". (39).

Even as **Richards** resists Utilitarian thinking he uses the term, value which is straight out of their discourse. What does he mean when he talks about the value of a specific work? Is he reducing the text to a category that would be useful if not economically, at least morally? He seems to be attacking a particular form of aestheticism but in the

process is only extending its scope further. In this context the equation between the poet, the reader and the poem is:

What concerns criticism is not the avowed or unavowed motives of the artist...but the fact that his procedure does, in the majority of instances, make the communicative efficacy of work correspond with his own satisfaction and sense of its rightness.

According to **Richards** there is to be a correspondence "between the poet's impulses and possible impulses in his reader." **Richard's** theory of value and the way the author and reader are positioned within it makes sure that all possibilities of change located in literature are ruled out and reduced to a linear equation. The reader is only an extension of the poet, and he is expected not to show any responses. The only reaction is one in which he is able to absorb the mind of the poet. How can any change be effected after such a static relationship between the different coordinates in the process of reading?

In this system of **New Critical** reading the reader is in a subservient position to the poet whose ideological inclinations he is supposed to embody. This system further imposes on the wide reading populace the value systems of a group of people who decide them arbitrarily. The readers then cannot assert themselves as a cohesive social force. Coherence and integration are the key words. This means that history is rendered free of its 'contradictions' and is linearised into the faculties of the 'elite' in different forms. All contradictions are resolved within the 'poem' that is supposed to provide the answers. As **Eagleton** says, "Poetry is an 'emotive' rather than 'referential language', a kind of 'pseudo-statement' which appears to describe the world but in fact simply organises our feelings about it in satisfying ways...he offers poetry as a means of exquisitely reconciling the anarchy of modern existence", (39).

The poem then, as **Eagleton** points out, became a holistic entity that signified that there was a single answer to the different social questions. Also, this answer could be located in the poem. The poem emblematised the belief that people like **Richards** could make decisions in the interests of the masses. The poem thus was 'dematerialised'. However, this was not a concrete social answer. To maintain a connection between literature and reality, **Richards** and the others assumed that such a resolution was possible in reality.

We can see a further shaping of the new *canon* in the later **New Critics** who modified the ideas of **Richards**. They did not believe in the supremacy of the author or reader's dependence on him. Instead, they believed that the poem was to be an object in itself and that it had nothing to do with either the reader or writer. The text was 'rematerialised'. The bourgeois has a strange way of reducing all possible relations in society to objects of fetish. In **Eagleton's** opinion, the poem's isolation from its context also reduces it to an entity that has to be looked at from a distance. The nature of this fetishist object is one in which various tensions are integrated in form. This is indeed a long shot from the idea of social reflection and relevance earlier. This produced a 'technocracy' of method and style. Even as it decried liberal humanism the **New Critics** appealed to the liberal's sensibility as it allowed him to interpret the cohesive force as that of middle class humanity. According to **Eagleton**, "Like *Scrutiny*, in other words, New Criticism was the ideology of an uprooted, defensive intelligentsia who reinvented in literature what they could not locate in reality".

Thus, Empson appears to be an exception to the New Critics as he provides some vitality to the reader. Unlike the New Critical theory that is convinced about a definite resolution to the contradictions within the poem and society, Empson laid emphasis on the potentiality of ambiguities meaning thereby that it is the reader who brings in a range of social contexts and locates contradictions in their context.

Empson is able to evolve an active equation between the poem, the writer and the reader. But he too locates the answers to various clashes within the 'pastoral'. He seems conscious of the disparity between the 'elite' and the common level of readership. He believes that they can be resolved within the pastoral. Usually, there is an underlying assumption that all is well in the pastoral but **Empson** picks this genre not for its organicity but its varied nature and contradictions. However, this as **Eagleton** points out is only an 'imaginary solution'. If the tensions are located socially the answers too need to be located in the same manner. This is a good example of questioning the *canon* by **Eagleton**. Where are we expected to locate ourselves in terms of the equation between the writer, the work of art and the reader? How important is the context? Is there a necessary relation between a work of art and the society? We could use two significant terms that would help us answer these questions briefly. One is the 'point of view' and the other is 'slant'.

Literature needs to be seen as an independent phenomenon following certain laws and showing the social reality through it in a slanted way so that an effort by the reader to reach its objective truth through the slant could be successful. The slant in this case signifies the point of view of the author who always positions herself/himself according to class preference. Extending this one can say that the authorial slant forms one possible connection between itself and his/her immediate social problematic. In each work is implicit the reader and this brings in another context. The two might cohere or dissociate or oppose. But for us the importance of slant lies in a questioning of the existing system to think about the possibility of an 'other' alternative which would rule out oppression and its various forms. We are more interested in a potentially relevant dialogue in society where the reader who might belong to a different social stratum can also voice dissent. This is the bedrock of our efforts to question the *canon*.

3.5 CONTEXT AND THE *CANON*

The next question we need to ask is: where are we the people of the Third World located in all this? Firstly, we need to be aware of the reasons why we are studying works of the previously established *canon*. As **Eagleton** has pointed out the answer lies in the policy of English imperialism. The colonial policies of the English have tried to perpetuate through the *canon* the English language and a specific moral structure that might not be applicable to our context. We are located in terms of the *canon* either nowhere or if at all then probably in some remote aspect of the canonised text. What is to be stressed is that we have to enter into a meaningful dialogue with the proponents of the *canon* through a process of questioning. It is a matter of visibility and we need to assert ourselves to evolve a vision that would help rule out forces of power and oppression. We have to keep our slant not only in relation to the *canon* but within the third world. The slant of the working classes and that of the women in differing social constructs has to be kept in mind.

3.6 LET US SUM UP

We can sum up by saying that there is a definite relationship between literature and society. This has to be understood in a way that others believing in equality, freedom and togetherness can replace the forces in society that have created the haves and have-nots. We also have to keep in mind that in society there are different constructs and each will have its own slant. They have to be adequately grasped and evaluated.

3.7 QUESTIONS

1. What do you think is the relationship between literature and social forces?
2. Do you agree with **Eagleton** that students are still under the influence of **Leavisian** thinking? If so how do you think we can resist this?

3.8 GLOSSARY

Dematerialised:	Not matter-based but shadow-like. A writer or critic may do this consciously.
Liberal Humanism:	A belief that there is a good world that exists somewhere and can be located not socially but individually. It is non-interventionist in nature.
Patriarchy:	A system that privileges the King over the subject, family over the individual, father over son, man over woman.
Utilitarianism:	The nineteenth century belief in the greatest good for the greatest number that also gave birth to the idea of free trade.

UNIT 4 **EXPLODING ENGLISH: CRITICISM, THEORY, AND CULTURE**

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Newbolt and Arnold
- 4.3 Leavis or Lewis- Which Way Are We Going?
- 4.4 Exploding English and Englishness
- 4.5 English Theorists and Theory
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Questions
- 4.8 Glossary

4.0 **OBJECTIVES**

In the previous unit we discussed ideas of literary theory as put forth by **Eagleton**. Having discussed canonical formations we are now going to take a look into the institutionalisation of these mainstream ideological agendas of the dominant western groups in our world. Our focus is going to be on how canonical ideas are realised in the form of specific propensities of the University programmes.

4.1 **INTRODUCTION**

Bergonzi traces different canonical forms from the **Newbolt Report** of 1921 onwards. He studies how the report's aims influenced the ideas of University education. We are then able to note the difference in attitudes taken up by the leading faculty of the Universities in the process of defining the *canon*. But let us first take a look at what we have been given to understand by the term 'English', which constitutes a *canon* in itself particularly for 'us' Third World readers.

4.2 **NEWBOLT AND ARNOLD**

Bergonzi at the beginning of his argument states that, "English was and remains a 'synthetic' subject, comprising several elements". 'Synthetic' subject implies that there is an act of construction involved in the process of what English signifies and what we understand to be English. The two need not mean the same thing. In the context of our discussion such a distinction can help us understand that the *canon* is not a mythical entity but one that is created in specific socio-historical and literary circumstances. Such constructions allows for a free interaction between those who define the *canon* and those who critically interpret and displace it. **Bergonzi** fixes four different reference points for defining the term English. He says,

It can refer to (i) a nation, (ii) a language, (iii) a literature, and (iv) as an academic subject.

In the first instance it can be looked at as a word that determines certain geographical boundaries- United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. Therefore, the use of the term English brings to mind a specific place whose interests it reflects. In England the development of ideas of nationalism transformed the geographical enterprise into a

cultural one making it stand as distinct from the minority areas. In this sense English is restricted to the system of a particular area. As a language, however, it functioned as a signifier for a much larger area. It aimed at global operation and coupled with the rise in power of America it made room for its greater receptivity.

Let us now look at the difference in the two usages of the term English. In the first case English represents the Englishness of a group of people that makes them superior to the others. Thus Englishness becomes a mark of distinction for its people. In the second case, some flexibility is allowed but for a specific reason. As a language English made way for the expansion of imperial interests of first England and later America. Language became a way of becoming part of the myth we know as English. In other words, to be an extended part of the Englishness of the English community one was fortunate to get access to the language English. So where 'English' constructed a myth for a nation and included only a restricted group of people, as a language it had global appeal. As we have seen, the two factors were inter-related.

Where, then, can English literature be located? According to **Bergonzi** the third application of 'English' is situated between these strategies of restriction privileging the English people and strategies of extension that carry it beyond a given geographical boundary to which it belongs. **Bergonzi** sees this as an act of 'imperialistic appropriation'. Yet at the same time **Bergonzi** sees the liberating aspects of it as he says, "But if so, it is one that the objects have found convenient." He defines English literature as, "*The literature in English of the various peoples of British Isles*". However, the shift of this language from the Isles to other areas has led to a bursting forth of the concept of English literature making it an 'unstable' concept. This brings us to the implications of English as an academic discipline. This means that we are now going to focus on the institutionalisation of English studies. **Bergonzi** attributes the institutionalised development of English studies to the 'nationalistic, the religious, the ethical, the aesthetic and the rhetorical.' He sees the crystallisation of vernacular literature as an academic discipline as related to 'cultural nationalism'. **Bergonzi** sees the basis of this in **Henry Newbolt's** 1921 report, *The Teaching of English in England*.

As has already been discussed in **Unit Two**, this report was the consequence of the patriotic fervour of World War I. The report had a two-fold purpose. Firstly, the report took national sentiment as its basis and displaced the privileged classics from their coveted position in the literary scenario. **Matthew Arnold's** faith in poetry as providing a direction to the society helped the propagation of English studies in the twentieth century. The report looked at the teachers as missionaries with a purpose- the spread of English values. We can understand this clearly when we see the effect of these ideas on the literary and social scenario of the Indian colony. In India, the missionary zeal converted the Indians to Christianity and provided 'education' to these people. In short the report performed both functions- preserving the Englishness of a nation and spreading its values to its colonies as part of the larger imperialist programme. The teacher was supposed to instill in the reader the desire to study literature. Here when we use the term 'literature' we mean English literature. By extension this meant love for the values of its nation as represented in literature. The second job of the imperialists, was to teach the students the techniques for improving their reading and writing skills. The imperial supremacy of English was going to be replaced by the one in academics. We were being prepared for a power equation of a different kind. As **Bergonzi** says,

They are to be missionaries as well as ambassadors, and will need propaganda work, organization and the building up of a staff of assistant missionaries.

The report precedes the canonisation of literature in America. It asks the English to tow the line of the French who have been able to evolve a sense of cultural unity.

This becomes a little problematic and a useful futuristic paradigm at that, as it seems that different kinds of literatures are going to be products of their respective well-defined nation. This means that the system of one nation is going to clash with that of another and each one is going to fight for supremacy in the global scenario. Literature would be structured in the context of a power frame privileging the literature of the developed countries as against the developing ones.

Bergonzi then explains the relationship between religion, imagination and literature. He points out that even as the **Newbolt** report uses words from the religious frame of reference it does not equate religion with imaginative literature. However, particularly people like **Arnold** and **I A Richards**, considered the two as synonymous. The literary journal of the time *Scrutiny* was able to capture the contradictions of the age, and the points of intersection between religion, imagination and literature. In the previous unit we have discussed how **Leavis** belonged to the lower stratum of society and in his writings expressed dissent but in a limited way. Poetry was to be the cross-section between religion and imagination. **Bergonzi** sees such connections as a product of Romanticism and the rise of the aesthetic function of literature. He explains that in the case of the classics literature performed a role that was essentially mimetic by which he means that it, represented certain moral values that were to be imitated by the people. Literature was expected to perform an ethical function and the relation between literature and imagination was direct. According to **Bergonzi**, after the emergence of Romantic thought the role accorded to literature was religious in nature. One of the chief reasons for this change was the degenerate effect of the Industrial revolution noted earlier. The **Newbolt** report was in **Bergonzi**'s opinion based on this 'Romantic-religious model'.

According to **Bergonzi** the aesthetic was a reaction to the empiricist and moral dicta of the eighteenth century. As he explains this is evident from **Schillers** letters that asserted that, the reaction indicated release "from all that might be called constraint, alike in the physical and moral sphere." But the aesthetic had to be defined and came to mean harmony of form. As **Bergonzi** says, "The literary text is a work of art, an aesthetic monad, a verbal icon or well-wrought urn for contemplation rather than instruction or impulsion to action". In the nineteenth century even as the imagination provided space for political rebellion it remain allied to aesthetic interests. **Bergonzi** finally describes the use of rhetoric to understand 'English'.

This for him is a technique that focuses on the verbal and structural elements of the text. Therefore, the use of rhetoric to understand English would mean an understanding of its linguistic elements or other structures of the text to make the process of teaching possible. Rhetoric has existed from the time of the classics and in fact was used as part of oral literature. This materialised into the work of **I A Richards**, *Practical Criticism*. This can be extended to written, visual and other modes. These are the different foundational categories in English that together help us understand the Englishness of the poem in particular. But the questions that can be asked is that do these categories not exist in relation to literature in other languages? The answer would be in the affirmative, but the specific moment in history at which the **Newbolt** report came up not only helped define 'English' but constructed the myth of English literature which we still carry within us due to the imperial aftermath.

4.3 LEAVIS OR LEWIS – WHICH WAY ARE WE GOING?

In this section we are going to study the relationship between the two most prestigious Universities – **Oxford** and **Cambridge** vis-a-vie their role in English Studies. What were the different formations that the academic discipline of English Literature assumed in the two Universities? Where do we stand in relation to these

attitudes and which is the line of thinking that has influenced us greatly? This section would help us understand the formation of the *canon* in institutionalised forms and a few possible ways of resisting the same.

The concept of University education was a consequence of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The two major Universities that were able to establish themselves in the twentieth century were **Oxford** and **Cambridge**. In the context of English literature the two academic areas projected two different kinds of attitude to English studies. And in their respective ways they have contributed to the understanding of what academics could mean to the University going student. The Oxford honours course was established in a different way than before in the last decade of the nineteenth century. The **Oxford University** based its study in English literature under a strictly ordered programme. The idealism of poets like **Arnold** and the maker of the **Newbolt** report was lacking in this programme, as this was not to be their aim. The University introduced eminent positions such as the Merton Professorship of English Literature. **Sir Walter Raleigh** was appointed to this chair in 1904. In spite of the acknowledgement he received from the University, it is interesting to note, his reasons for taking up this profession were a far cry from the missionary enterprise of the **Newbolt** report.

Raleigh said, "I am a teacher by accident. I had not enough money for the Bar, or anything else, after graduating- second class". There is recognition of basic economic needs in his words and not the desire to conform to the role of the teacher of those days. **Raleigh's** successor, **George Gordon** also attacked the ideas of the report. He said, "I observe, and not only in this report, the growth of a religious jargon about literature and literary genius, and I observe it with regret as an affront to life". The pioneers of the Oxford style of education kept the study of literature away from any association with religious terminology. The Arnoldian belief that poetry could save society was not the belief of these people who believed in an organised programme. **Bergonzi** also reveals that the study of English Literature was definitely not part of the mainstream initially.

In **Cambridge University** the study of English was part of the Modern Languages Tripos till mid twentieth century. It was only later that it was institutionalised and privileged in the form of King Edward VII Chair of English Literature in 1912. **Sir Arthur Quiller Couch** was the first to be appointed to this eminent position. According to **Bergonzi** the Golden Age of this University began with critical works such as *Principles of Literary Criticism*, *Science and Poetry*, and *Practical Criticism* by **I A Richards**, *Seven Types of Ambiguities* by **William Empson** and works by **F R Leavis** and **Q D Leavis**. Unlike the well-defined course in English Literature at Oxford, the course at Cambridge was more flexible and was titled Literature, Life and Thought." As the name of the course suggests greater width and freedom was allowed. One of the reasons for this was that the pioneers of this University were not only from the field of English Literature alone but came from other areas of knowledge. As **Bergonzi** reveals **Forbes**, **Richards** and **Tillyard** were from History, Philosophy and the Classics. We are also told how **T S Eliot**, was able to influence the direction of the University course in English even as he was not part of the faculty. In the previous unit we have already discussed the reasons why **Eliot's** way of thinking came to hold wide appeal. His attitude to the contemporary modernist situation captured the decadence of his times. In fact as **Bergonzi** mentions **T S Eliot's** series of lectures titled *The Sacred Wood* was considered to be like a 'hymn-book' for the students. However, gradually, the increase in the number of students, lack of a central directive control and the loss of its early members like **Forbes** and **Richards** became instrumental in the exercise becoming focussed on literature.

This brings us to the discussion of one of the most eminent personalities of the Cambridge University- **F R Leavis**. According to **Bergonzi**, "**Leavis** himself was something of a double man, both historic and mythic". Can you relate this to what you have read of **Leavis** in the previous unit? **Bergonzi** gives biographical details to

explain the historical context of **Leavis**. We know, for instance, that **Leavis** did not receive any recognition from the faculty despite his competence. It was only in 1959 that he was appointed Reader in the University. **Leavis** continued his struggle at Cambridge unlike **L C Knights** who taught in the provincial universities. **Leavis'** acceptability outside the University created that 'mythic' side to his personality we know so much about. This contradiction in his person has continued **Leavis's** appeal even today. In fact the Universities continue to show evidences of the Leavisian line of thinking till date. **Bergonzi** then discusses **Leavis's** ideas as understood from his journal, *Scrutiny*.

In an analysis of **Terry Eagleton's** essay we have tried to familiarise ourselves with the implications of some important concepts used and propagated by the journal. Coming from the lower rungs of the society **Leavis** was able to cause some interventions in the canonical attitudes created by thinkers like **Quiller - Couch**. As **Bergonzi** says, "Many diverse elements intersect in **Leavis**: Romanticism, the English Puritan tradition, Victorian cultural criticism, modernism and several strands of twentieth century anti-positivist and anti-scientific ideology".

Bergonzi notes that unlike **C S Lewis** who did not posit the Arnoldian faith in poetry, **Leavis** saw the survival of society and its system only through poetry. What could be the reason behind such a faith? This faith in English Literature according to **Bergonzi**, fitted well into the University programme of "Literature, Life and Thought." The connections between literature and religion existed but neither could subsume academic activity within its separate ideology. The two ideas need to be looked at together comprising aspects of both literature and religion. On one side, we can also ask: what is the idea of morality that exists in this intersection? What we mean to ask is that in the light of what we have studied, can literature be looked at as ethical or moral? **Bergonzi's** guess is that for **Leavis** it was a question of 'moral choice' unlike the idea of ethical valuation.

According to him these ideas exist even today even as the points of reference are no longer Christian but are Marxist or Feminist. The *Scrutiny* was defined by a sense of moral urgency necessary to save civilisation and for **Lewis** unlike **Leavis**, this was possible through criticism. We have already discussed the formation of the literary canon in this unit. However, here we can see the birth of a new kind of canon formation that has far more serious consequences. The *Scrutiny* created an idea of 'Englishness', and strengthened it as a myth. At the same time, this was an idea alien to the American context. What we can ask is: how was the Third World affected by the spread of this mythical aspect of the idea of Englishness? The effect was contradictory as we were spurred to study this imposed and alien culture. On the one hand we received exposure to new ideas, yet paradoxically we were also taught that we could never learn them completely in the imperialist set-up. Further, we were saddled with an idea of Englishness that became a standard yardstick for measuring literary as well as cultural standards.

Whereas Cambridge produced **Leavis** and his myth of 'Englishness' one encountered a different attitude to English Literature and the idea of Englishness at Oxford University. This should be clear to you by now. Oxford English formed a polarity to the ideas of the **Newbolt Report**. The report had also posited faith in English Literature for saving the degenerate, industrialised England. However, an eminent scholar of the Oxford University, **C S Lewis** was against any such moral and cultural valuations of literature. **Bergonzi** traces points of commonality between the lives of **Leavis** and **Lewis** in the context of the Oxford-Cambridge rivalry. Still, there remained an important point of difference.

Lewis was open to discussions and debates about his ideological premises. **Leavis** resented the same. The reasons are obvious — **Leavis** believed in the existence of certain fixed moral choices in literature and its functioning. **Lewis** attacked such truth valuations. For **Lewis**, Literature was not to provide a kind of alternative to religion. In fact, it had to be kept away from such connections. In his work, *An Experiment in Criticism* the possibility that literature must provide answers to questions about life or be seen as a saviour of culture and civilisation was rejected. In short, the idealism of

the **Newbolt Report** had also been sidelined. The University was to be looked at as a centre for learning and not education, which was different from the former. This eliminated the missionary enterprise also which, was a part of the Leavisian way of thinking. In literature the poem had to be looked at for its own sake and not to provide a moral statement. Even though as **Bergonzi** points out, **Lewis** did believe in ethical valuations, his rejection of any moral attachment to literature can be seen as a point of intervention.

One of the ways in which the difference in thinking of the two scholars is evident is in their response to the ideas of fantasy and realism. **Leavis** and the *Scrutiny* group privileged realism over fantasy as the latter was equated with daydreaming. **Lewis** on the other hand did not understand these terms in such a simplistic manner. One of the reasons why **Lewis** is able to evolve a more holistic view of things is because he is able to resist value judgements with respect to literary concepts. According to **Lewis** realism exists at two levels — "realism of content and realism of presentation." Fantasy also exists at different levels of 'delusion of reality', as consolation' and as normal 'Castle-Building'. According to **Bergonzi**, "This third entity leads to fiction, motivating both the production and the reception of it".

What he means is that the last factor in the realm of fantasy influences the formative processes of the text as well as its reception. This is interesting as unlike most other critics he considers the idea of the 'production' of the text and the ways in which a reader can possibly respond to it. This is the reason why **Bergonzi** thinks that **Lewis'** ideas can be considered as part of what we call Reader-response criticism — one that is able to see that there can be a relationship between the reader and the text. This was different from New Critical theory that considered a poem only with respect to the author and later the text by itself or Russian Formalism that focussed on the literary aspects of the text. These were the '*fabula*' and the '*Syuzhet*'. The '*fabula*,' says **Bergonzi**, was the story that focussed on the events in a linear way whereas the '*Syuzhet*' focussed on the methodology of the narrative. **Lewis** sees the reader as important and the different positions and perspectives that he can take up in the process of reading. **Lewis** proposes literary and non-literary readings of the text. The former is attentive in nature whereas the latter is more technical like the reading of newspapers and office reports. If we extend this argument further, then we have an interesting situation where literature can actually be used to understand, resist and maybe change the social situation not passively but in an active manner. **Lewis** argues for distinct categories of books that are not to be looked at in terms of value judgements of the kind made by **Leavis**. This idea of literary reading allows for greater space and mobility but as **Bergonzi** explains **Lewis** does not provide us with an actual theoretical program to formulate the intentionality of approaching the text.

To make **Lewis'** theory function in a productive way the readers' vantage point has to be kept in mind. Further, a complete negation of what **Bergonzi** calls the 'intrinsic elements of the text' makes his theory 'elite and egalitarian'. It becomes elite as a kind of literary readings set certain standards that are fulfilled only by a limited set of people. Further the literariness of a text becomes a quotient of the readers' response irrespective of whether or not it has that aspect. This brings us to dangers of enforced readings imposed on a text. However, in the context of our present discussion we have to look at **Lewis'** arguments as forming a dialectic of criticism with Leavisian thinking and not merely as a counter-attack on **Leavis'** idea of criticism. **Bergonzi** obviously shows greater sympathy and closeness towards **C S Lewis**. Let us see how **Bergonzi** compares the two attitudes and sorts out the question of moral in literature.

4.4 EXPLODING ENGLISH AND ENGLISHNESS

The two Universities — **Oxford** and **Cambridge** projected two different kinds of English and distinct ideas of what Englishness could signify. English Literature continued to be a distinct program of each University till the 1950s. However the

appointment in 1954 of C S Lewis to the chair at Cambridge had a symbolic significance. It presented a kind of synthesis of the two distinct responses to English within what **Bergonzi** terms a 'parliamentary system' that could accommodate both points of view. This brings us to another related point for discussion — what would be the link between literatures written in English but with no plea for Englishness with the larger audience? The decline in the imperialist powers of the English and the simultaneous development of national identity in other countries problematised the relation between English and Englishness. Would literature focussing on the American context project Englishness? This is an interesting issue.

Like a capitalist economy that always turns against itself, the English language was fragmenting from within. The language could now function against itself and the idea of Englishness. The myth had been de-mythified. The reason was that due to strategies of colonisation the English language had also become the language of other nations. As a result people were able to articulate their dissent against their situation as the colonised as people who were at the receiving end of imperialism. The **Newbolt Report** became in this context not only anachronistic but also redundant in the then contemporary situation. As **Bergonzi** says the relation between English, Englishness and the report, could be thus defined, "That union was still assumed in the anachronistic pieties of the **Newbolt Report**, but it was potentially called into question by the existence of a substantial body of literature that was written in English but made no claim to English identity". **Matthew Arnold** had pre-figured the situation and expressed his unease when he said, "Are we going to have a primer of Canadian literature too, and a primer of Australian? We are all contributories to one great Literature- English Literature". **Arnold** wanted English to occupy globally the same position as the Latin language. This would have helped the English people enjoy a privileged place in the world. As **Bergonzi** says, we are not going to have primers but 'histories of Canadian and Australian literature, and, indeed, of Scottish literature too'. Therefore, we do have an English language but one that has now started making meaningful interventions in the *canon*. Earlier we had a mainstream English Literature that looked into the interests of the English and considered the others as outsiders. The development of American literature and works from other countries in the English language substituted English Literature with Literature in English. As **Bergonzi** says,

Taken together, the spatial and temporal expansion amounts to an explosion...the pioneers had no conception of the problems brought by exploding the canon.

Bergonzi is also careful to point out that even as imperialism has withered and nationalism has continued, it in no way means that literature has to be looked at only in terms of cultural nationalism. Writers like **Conrad** and **Nabokov** choose to write in English and not in the language they had learnt. According to **Bergonzi** it is writers like **Sylvia Plath** belonging to both national and global literature create interventions and attack institutionalised culture. At the same time we must also be wary of statements made by writers about contexts they are familiar with in a superficial way. For example, the Trinidadian writer and Nobel Prize winner **V S Naipaul**'s writings about India offer a similar paradigm.

We also have to keep in mind **Ngugi Wa Thiongo**'s stand on writing in *Gikuyu*. His stance raises a significant issue- can the English language with its set of cultural signifiers express the interest of not just the literary elite but of the masses? It is to extend his writings to the masses that he first writes in *Gikuyu*. **Ngugi** feels that his works can always be translated in English. This seems to be a fair alternative as **Ngugi** is also able to contribute to literature in English. At a larger level, we must keep in mind that a conscious effort at exploding the signifiers associated with English language has to be made whether in translation or otherwise. **Bergonzi** finally asks as to how one could deal with so many different contexts and literatures. The answer for him lies in the idea of 'specialisation' as only this can allow for a better understanding of a specific context.

This has to be a collective exercise so that different inputs would allow for a better understanding of the concepts globally. This might never be realised completely but we would always be moving in the right direction. Also in the context of the Third World, we have to keep in mind the implications of the **Newbolt Report** and the myth of Englishness. We have to look for significant points of entry to disrupt *canonical* concepts. One of the ways could be using the language to explode the *canon*. This prepares us to have a sharp critical look at the practice of Englishness under imperialism. This has reference to the site on which such a practise evolves itself: the academic world.

4.5 ENGLISH THEORISTS AND THEORY

In this section we shall study the changing attitude to theory in the academia of the English Universities. **Bergonzi** narrows his attention to the 'English' faculty and the origin of literary theory in England. He explains how the English have kept away from the terrain of theory as they consider themselves to be empiricists. However, from 1970 onwards the influence of the French theorists and translations (available from the American Universities) made this rigid faculty more receptive to theoretical inputs. Theoretical challenges are to be seen as a breakdown of the insular 'synthesis' fabricated in the English University. **Bergonzi** discusses the vast array of critics in the English literary scenario such as **Jonanthan Culler's** *Structuralist Poetics*, **David Lodge's** *The Modes of Modern Writing*, **Catherine Belsey's** *Critical Practice*, **Terence Hawkes's** *Structuralism and Semiotics* and others like **Veronica Forrest-Thomson** and **Tony Bennett**. **Bergonzi** looks at these different theorists as part of what he calls a 'rainbow coalition'. He quotes **Belsey's** *Critical Practice* where she says, "Only by closing the doors of the English Department against theoretical challenges from outside can we continue to ignore the "Copernican" revolution which is currently taking place and which is radically undermining traditional ways of perceiving both the world and the text".

The point that **Bergonzi** is trying to make is that the British intellectuals have probably understood the nuances of theory but not its application. **Bergonzi** says that there is a use of rhetorical devices in **Belsey's** *Critical Practice* that distances literary theory from what he calls the 'human agency' and relegates important social concerns outside the parameters of theory. The relationship between literary theory, literature, and socio-historical structures has been erased. How can such theoretical concepts that focus on rhetoric alone take into cognisance the change in the implications of the signifier and signified with a change in context? What can be the connection between these theoretical concepts and those developed elsewhere say in the African or Latin American context? **Bergonzi** extends this argument to a study of **Hawkes's** *Structuralism and Semiotics*.

According to **Bergonzi**, **Hawkes's** idea of **New Critics** is quite similar to the earlier **New Critics**. Both focus on the text while ignoring the difference in 'contextual forms of life and conceptual foundation'. Another problem area with the English theorists, according to **Bergonzi**, is their unmindful pasting of the French theorists onto their context. The application is direct and ignores that the ideas have originated in response to a specific structure and cannot be implanted just anywhere. Methodological devices like wit, irony etc., are also not easily translatable. They can only be adapted to a specific context. The fact that the text is available in translation to the British theorists also causes a lot of contextual problems as mentioned in **Heath's** appendix to **Barthes's** *Image-Music-Text*.

As **Bergonzi** says,

This raises the large question of the role of translation in the transmission of French ideas to English readers...other translations from modern French theorists are, one hears very inadequate.

Bergonzi acknowledges the present state of disorder of theory but sees it as symptomatic and not as a failure. At the end of the 'rainbow coalition' he discusses the point of view of the Marxists. **Bergonzi** appreciates early Marxism but sees problems in its contemporary state. In fact he says, "Globally, Marxism has run out of steam, persisting merely as sentiment and tradition...to employ Marxism against Thatcherism is to employ an obsolete weapon". He further adds, "It is not easy to engage in discussion with someone who regards other opinions as no more than symptomatic of the way a bourgeois intellectual thinks under late capitalism". For **Bergonzi** the traditional Marxist looks at the world-view from a perspective that can provide all the answers. At the other end is the new attitude that looks at the ideology operating within a text.

Let us analyse these charges systematically. **Bergonzi** considers Marxism as an ideology that is now dated. However in this one can sense the presumptuous response of a First world Theorist. How can he assume, for instance, that this body of thought is not valid 'globally'. As a theorist of the First World he is subsuming the ideas of the Third world within his privileged context. Can an ideology active a few years back become obsolete without any tangible reason now? Does it mean that for **Bergonzi** the context is no longer valid in the existing scheme of things? Isn't **Bergonzi** succumbing to the pressure of bourgeois intellectualism by referring to the Marxist ideology as a 'dogmatic assurance'? If the Marxist thought held sway in the early phase of capitalism it cannot degenerate in the present since capitalism has shown no signs of resurgence. In fact it will emerge in more active modified forms in this new era of capitalism.

For **Bergonzi** the solution lies in **Bakhtin's** carnivalesque. **Bergonzi** suggests **Bakhtin's** dialogic criticism as providing some interesting insights into the methodology of reading. The dialogic stresses a plurality of voices as against the 'monologic' that focuses on a single institutionalised voice. **Bergonzi** does not suggest how institutionalisation of the bourgeois kind can be fought without an alternative collective effort. However, unlike the deconstructionists this plurality is not meant to defy any notion of meaning. The theory of deconstruction negates meaning and the possibility of any concrete relation between literature and society. But, **Bakhtin's** carnivalesque dislodges meaning from the hands of the privileged group. The dialogic mode helps make 'inter-subjective communication' possible.

Bergonzi has pointed towards the limitations of the British theorists who either get lost in the play between the signifier and signified or apply the French theorists unthinkingly to their own ideas. He has also pointed out some limitations of Marxist thought while privileging the early writings of **Marx**. He finally suggests dialogic communication as a probable solution. But this communication has to take place within a specific socio-historical milieu or else it will remain restricted in meaning.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have traced the beginnings of institutionalised English from the **Newbolt Report** onwards and seen how it combined literature with ideas from religious discourse. The Oxford-Cambridge rivalry influenced the study of English Literature in its own ways. Finally, we have seen how the *canon* turns against itself and makes space for subversion making the ideas of the report seem old and obsolete. Such techniques and methodologies help demystify the myth of Englishness to evolve a more humane outlook towards not only the elite but also the masses that would then also be part of literary discourse. The final section discusses the limitations of the

English theorists and suggests communication in the dialogic mode to resolve the existing disorder in the state of literary theory. However, even as **Bergónzi** realizes the limitations of the First World theorists his biases are also evident. He still possesses the complacency of the literary elite that is content to see only a certain section of society transformed. The situation of the majority has obviously been ignored.

4.7 QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by the term English?
2. What is the relation between English Literature and Englishness?
3. What is the difference between the position taken by Leavis and Lewis with respect to English Literature?
4. What do you understand by the phrase 'exploding the *canon*'?

4.8 GLOSSARY

Carnavalesque:	A celebration, pageant, spectacle meant to generate a spirit of happiness
Ethics:	A rational insight into a theory of standards of right or wrong as also a belief that different groups have different concepts of good or bad
Exploding:	A bursting forth from within
Nationalism:	The belief that people sharing similar language religion or culture within a given geographical area constitute a nation. It is indicated that their actions are determined by the nation and are to be in its best interests.
Russian Formalism:	A literary theory developed in Russia in the 1920s. They focused on the way in which the literary text achieved their effects, one of the ways being - defamiliarisation.

UNIT 5 THE CRISIS IN ENGLISH STUDIES

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Literature As A Category
- 5.3 Criticism and Theory
- 5.4 *Canon* and Criticism
- 5.5 Marxism and Theory
- 5.6 How to Critique Widdowson?
- 5.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.8 Questions
- 5.9 Glossary

5.0 OBJECTIVES

In the previous unit we discussed the institutionalisation of the English language in mainstream Universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. We also focussed on the formulation of the myth of Englishness. In this unit we shall also look into the parameters that define literature as a category. We shall also look at how these boundaries are framed and whether they allow a degree of flexibility or not?

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Through the course of our discussion in this unit we will examine **Widdowson's** idea of the relation between literature and criticism. According to him there exists a 'reciprocal relationship' between the two entities. We will also discuss **Marxist** theory and its assumed isolation by **Widdowson** from the implementation of theoretical strategies in academic institutions.

5.2 LITERATURE AS A CATEGORY

Widdowson's essay, "*The Crisis in English Studies*" is an introduction to the book *Re-Reading English* that he has edited himself. As the title suggests this book offers a reinterpretation of English studies. Our purpose here would be to see how far this re-look at English resists *canonical* formations. Is **Widdowson** really offering another radical perspective for the study of English or is the new theoretical premise another manifestation of the already established *canon*? Such an analysis would then help us question the assumptions of both the *canon* and the strategies of reinterpretation adopted by today's academics. **Widdowson** identifies a 'crisis' in the field of English studies.

The term 'crisis' signifies the recognition of certain ruptures within theoretical studies pertaining to English literature. For **Widdowson** this theoretical upheaval is not based on a conflict between different critical approaches towards literature. The crisis in English studies according to him is a reflection on the breakdown of the insular category of English literature. As a result the index of identity formation of English is undergoing a change today. In the context of this argument we are going to study the direction in which English studies is headed. As **Widdowson** says

It is a question, posed from within, as to what English is, where it has got to, whether it has a future, whether it should have a future as a discrete discipline...the business of making ones own academic discipline itself the object of scrutiny of deconstructing and/or reconstructing it has not been commonly undertaken.

According to **Widdowson**, to challenge the assumptions of the *canon* it is important to dismantle literature as a closed entity. Our focus therefore should be on the simultaneous formation of and resistance to the category English. At the same time we have to study the techniques employed for this process of "deconstructing and/or reconstructing" to see whether they evolve a new attitude towards English. **Widdowson** studies the relationship between the implications of the myth of 'Englishness' and the changing 'social and political needs' at a specific moment in history. This means that he recognizes a connection between literature and society where social transformations have some bearing on the literary set-up. **Widdowson** has contextualised this crisis in terms of the debate that was raging in the University of Cambridge in 1981. According to him, the journal *The Guardian* stresses the need for a politically conscious 'English syllabus'. However, this same journal quotes **Professor Ricks'** remark on the need for upholding the '*canon*'. This establishes the polarities towards the literary problematic— on the one hand is the view that looks at English as a category rigid in form and on the other hand is a perspective that takes into consideration socio-historic formations and their association with literature. A desire to maintain the *canon* is a marker of the threat posed to the dominant position of the canonical version of literature.

It should be clear to us that, the research and teaching faculty that supports canonical texts does so to maintain their superiority and to shun alternative readings of literature. Otherwise, how is research possible without an understanding of and experimentation with different theoretical stances? How can a faculty, favouring *status quo* bring about any change in the social set-up? This shows the connections between the Universities and the courses offered, as, the, outlines of the syllabus are determined by them. The Course in English Literature has to be formulated in a way that it brings about changes in the very structure of the literary frame. One of the ways of doing this according to **Widdowson** is by attacking value-based criticism.

Widdowson introduces us to the debate of the 'value' of literature. What does one mean by the 'value' of literature? He says,

In recent years in Britain there has been a growing debate among radical critics about the value of 'Literature'"; about the principles by which we evaluate different literary productions; and indeed, the category 'Literature' itself.

The debate on whether or not literature is a value-laden construct can be attributed to an increased interest in inter-disciplinary activities with departments such as sociology or history. A shift in positioning based on the focus of a specific subject has introduced the possibility of other interpretations to the category, literature. Value implies the privileging of certain texts as important and others as part of genres regarded as 'low brow' such as popular culture. What is the basis of these demarcations that make certain texts part of the *canon* whilst sidelining the rest? According to **Widdowson** canonical interpretations are value-based. They look for a definite moral or ethical meaning in the text. Such an interpretation allows for the perpetuation of power structures in society. According to **Widdowson** a single critical premise will not offer the appropriate answer that can be located only when we question the 'received tradition' of literary works.

A discussion of the value of literature throws us back in time to the period of the pre-*New Critical Theorists* like **I A Richards** who asserted the need for value-based literature. As discussed in Unit III, the allocation of value to literature implicates the

Utilitarian model of the nineteenth century. In the contemporary situation we continue to look for 'value' in literature that will reinforce the moral codes in society. The value of literature implies that there is an intrinsic core to English that can be revealed in some way. This mystery can be understood through the tools of critical theory. It also reflects on the puzzles of human life that are difficult to understand and are best left in this incomprehensible state. According to **Widdowson** these associations stem from a bourgeois mode of thinking that project such thought processes as universally applicable. The interests of one particular class subsume within itself the contradictions of the other groups. This activity goes on in a subtle manner. We look at this phenomenon in the following section.

5.3 CRITICISM AND THEORY

Widdowson formulates the relation between literature and criticism in the form of a reciprocal equation. According to him literature has its own specific ideological space and criticism is usually understood as separate from it. Criticism is supposed to provide the methodological devices for understanding aspects of literature in their variety and particularity. The question that **Widdowson** raises is – Does literature constitute criticism or is it in turn determined by critical theory? As **Widdowson** says,

'Literature' is, in effect, being recognized as the construct of a criticism which, while assuming and proclaiming its 'descriptiveness', its 'disinterestedness', its ideological innocence, has so constituted literature as to reproduce and naturalize bourgeois ideology as 'literary value'.

If as according to **Widdowson** criticism claims to be 'descriptive' and 'disinterested' it means that its devices describe the literary aspects of a text in an objective manner. In this sense criticism only extends the domain of literature making it more approachable. **Widdowson** explains the reciprocal relation in that criticism constitutes literature and literary value. According to him, the field of operation of critical theory is not ideologically innocent and employs certain devices for understanding a text. The category, 'literature' is formulated by the continual deployment of methodological strategies that slot certain texts as part of literature. According to **Widdowson** this is how criticism determines literature and brings about the formation of the *canon*. The implications of this are diverse. **Widdowson** notes that criticism by 'selecting' and 'evaluating' works of literature creates the idea of literary value – one that presents the interests of a specific group in society. These practices are bourgeois in nature and structure the *canon* in a way that makes these strategies seem natural. In fact, according to **Widdowson**, these values reflect the interests of the bourgeois group that believes in liberal individualism – the belief of a group of people who like to propagate a view of literature in consonance with the profit-making motive of a capitalist system.

You must be wondering what connection can possibly exist between literature and the economic system. We must understand that society has levels of power points that form an integrated structure. These power nodules influence literature even as it tries to resist them. However without an understanding of the connections between literature, society and power a fully formed resistance is not possible. In this context the powerful groups exercises control over the literary elite. This latter group continues to maintain its elitism by allying with the dominant groups even as it pretends to attack mainstream ideas. The bourgeois class regulates the ideological processes of the literary elite making literature reflect their interests. Critical theories, suggests **Widdowson**, are many and classify literature in their own various ways. However, our target is those methods that construct the *canon* in terms of value-laden statements. We have to caution the reader/writer against the deployment of such critical theories.

Widdowson argues that the bourgeois aspects of criticism have become an integral part of the British education system due to the simultaneous occurrence of certain socio-literary factors. In the previous chapters we have studied the reasons for the institutionalisation of English studies and the belief in the myth of Englishness. **Widdowson** also points towards **Arnold's** conception of literature as an alternative to the religious ideology that had regulated the lives of the people in the past. This led to the emergence of the idea of culture – a substitute to religion that could save mankind. In terms of changes in economic structures this was the period when capitalism was establishing itself in Britain. This meant that the Utilitarian philosophy of the 'greatest good for the greatest number' had become the rule for life in the nineteenth century. However, for **Widdowson** even as these factors, they should not be overestimated.

Widdowson points towards two more significant factors in the establishment of the *canon* – one is the development of professional criticism and the other the introduction of English into the academic curriculum of the Universities. It is a conglomeration of these factors that defined the *canon*. This took place in terms of what has been explained as a 'reciprocal relationship'. As a result, English was established as a privileged literary and cultural signifier and English studies became synonymous with the area of criticism. In **Widdowson's** words:

The reciprocal relationship between the construction of Literature by modern criticism, and the establishment of that 'English' as criticism in higher education is a nexus of great importance in the sustaining of liberal ideology.

What **Widdowson** means in this quotation is that the constitution of English studies as criticism had serious consequences in the formation of a networking between the study of English and the field of Criticism. Here we would like to caution the reader. In saying that literature is constituted by criticism, **Widdowson** seems to be privileging the latter over the former. However, the two need to be seen in a dialectical relation where both literature and criticism contribute to the formation of each which in theory can be called a significant problematic. If, English is, constituted by its reciprocal relation to Criticism then, we have a specific kind of English that is projected as the index of literariness. We also have a set of rules as part of Critical theory that go on to project the *canon* of English literature. What we mean is that criticism provides the yardstick to determine English in its *canon* form. This makes the rules of conventional or bourgeois critical theory acceptable as English. This as **Widdowson** explains is part of the liberal policy of the dominant group that favours English studies by a particular group over the others.

The liberal radicals fight for the individual's rights of freedom. However, in this case there is no scope for the society to move in a collective manner. The space of one individual is bound to clash with that of another one. So are we not moving towards an anarchic world in which each individual is going to fight for his own specific interests? How can equality and harmony in society be visualised in such a case? What is the effect of this on the students specialising in English literature in the Universities? The *canon* has an active impact on the thinking power of the students whose minds are fed with fixed notions. They are manoeuvred into accepting the ideology of the literary elite. Research and study in literature is reduced to 'listening' to lectures framed by the people who have contributed to the *canon*. This prevents the students of English from making any valuable contribution to research or alternative areas in literature as we too often see.

According to **Widdowson** the spread of canonical tendencies in literature breeds two major assumptions. Firstly, the authorities that encourage canonical formations believe that there is an essential body of knowledge known as literature. This brings back the idea that literature has an inherent value of its own allowing space only for minor changes in the cultural field that surrounds it. The boundaries of the functional field of literature have been determined and all that exists outside it is non-literary.

Literature becomes text-centred and is not affected by changes in the social and historical formations. Secondly, another assumption that is circulated is that criticism is a holistic entity – a body of work that is undifferentiated in nature. As **Widdowson** says:

The other assumption is...criticism exists as a largely undifferentiated corpus of scholarship- undoubtedly representing many different individual 'views' of literary texts, but innocent of other ulterior design or motive.

Mainstream methods advocate the existence of a 'universal and immanent' category 'literature' that has a specific literary value. Value-based Criticism ignores the different perspectives or critical theories within criticism. As **Widdowson** points out, criticism in the present state expresses the individual's perception of a text but without a specific point of view. Looking at the text from a specific point of reference would mean a definite ideological stance. However, canonical forms that look at both literature and criticism as singular in nature negate interpretations that do not have moral overtones. In the absence of 'ideological determinants' literature and criticism remain free-floating and meaningless. Canonical readings of literature and criticism rule out the possibility of a reinterpretation of literature. This means that literature cannot be used to understand the contradictions in society and changes in its base or different superstructures. Literature cannot function to formulate a cohesive and meaningful ideology and would be left within the bourgeois frame of society. It is therefore necessary, according to **Widdowson**, to question strategies that naturalise literature and criticism so that these concepts can be understood in terms of a dialectical form.

Widdowson expresses his unease with the fact that this debate on the value of literature has still not acquired momentum. According to him in the Universities of the First World resistance to the *canon* is still sporadic. As a result departments that are into theoretical research have still not been able to counter the *canon* effectively. The reason is that even progressive academic departments ignore the context of their research and focus on value-laden critical methods. **Widdowson** explains that the reasons for the perpetuation of *canon* studies, is a lack of proof to explain the disaster towards which we are heading. However, **Widdowson** is being too empiricist in demanding a proof to substantiate his argument. The catastrophe has already hit us even if we fail to realise its impact. We are now in the new phase of capitalism – one where even literature has become a commodity to be consumed. Colonialism has manifested itself in the form of neo-colonialism. Signs of literary and social degeneration are evident everywhere around us. It is surprising that **Widdowson** has written off the history-centred Marxist approach from any realisation of freedom in such a scenario.

5.4 CANON AND CRITICISM

Let us now take a look at the response of canonical works towards cogent critical theories. Important theoretical concepts like Marxism and Feminism have called to question the assumptions of the *canon*. However, the proponents of the *canon* consider ideas of history and theory merely a distraction. As **Widdowson** points out, "That this is so is confirmed by the reiteration, in the Cambridge English debate, of the centrality of the 'canon' and the need ultimately to dispense with the distractions of history and theory in order to return to the unproblematic reality of the 'literary works themselves'". **Widdowson** cites the example of **Marjorie Boulton's** book, *The Anatomy of Literary Studies* that has not really moved beyond the writings of a **Matthew Arnold** and the **Newbolt Report** of 1921. This supports our argument about the effect of the *canon* on students of the succeeding period. If the myth of English and Criticism is going to be circulated and not resisted then only works like **Boulton's** are going to be written and circulated. The *canon* looks at literature as a

well-defined body that formulates the rules for human behaviour. It lays down what **Widdowson** refers to as the 'universals' of life.

In this context another example of canonical blunders is the ignorance on the part of *canon* constructors of the association of **Joyce** and **Paul de Man** with the Nazis. This does not disturb those who construct the *canon* as they regard this as an aberration and learn lessons from it as also to make the academic world sufficiently conscious of the role those two may have played in the literary and cultural world. Literature is supposed to exercise a civilising influence on society. This is the claim constantly made. Those who adhere to this are considered as part of the *canon* and those who resist it are marginalised. This generates a structure of bourgeois morality that looks at literature in a biased way. What would happen if we extend this argument further to our own context in the Third World? The answer is clear. The *canon* of English studies generates universal human values. It is a rigid frame that cannot be questioned and altered. In this way the powerful sections of the developed countries set standards for the developing ones of the Third World. The languages put forth in the *canon* have a determining influence on the study of what then becomes the vernacular. The structures of power in our context are re-modelled on those of the powerful groups in the First World Academic Centres. Even the level of humanity and social awareness is to be determined by the privileged section of the First world. It is not a surprise that we take great pride in flaunting our acquired 'Englishness' without understanding its nuances in terms of our own cultural signifiers. **Widdowson** makes us partly aware of this and we should extend his argument further. Help in this regard is supposed to come in a major way from the Marxist Approach to literature.

5.5 MARXISM AND THEORY

Widdowson points towards the consequent need for questioning received traditions if one has to develop an active understanding of literature and literary theory. He says, "It is therefore imperative, if literature remains a massively consumed product in society, and if the study of it widely persists, that a criticism be mobilised which can positively engage with them". What does **Widdowson** consider as a sound theoretical premise for questioning the *canon*? He begins by saying that the last decade has created the space for the advent of a process of questioning. However, we can mention that the 1970s failed to make way for progressive ideas. What actually happened was that the 1970s definitely produced new manifestations of a conventional mode of thinking. What are these modified forms? Further to what extent is **Widdowson** complicit with these ideas even as he claims to resist them? According to him, "Such a criticism is predicated on empirical practice, on the study of 'texts', and is heavily reinforced by the publishing industry, both in its large investment in Literary Criticism— even, increasingly and significantly, versions of Marxist criticism— and in its publication of 'Libraries' of 'classic texts' and 'student editions'".

Conventional criticism for **Widdowson** is associated thus with the empirical practice of reading the text. This is particularly true in the case of theorists like **de Man** and **Derrida** who foreground the text and its nuances and ignore the context to which it is related. This is then another version of New Criticism that in an early phase of theory drew the readers' attention to the 'words on the page'. Theorists in the present day continue to focus on the text, only the coordinates have changed, they have become more 'de-centred' and archaic. It is true that the publishing industry has made available a large number of texts and has brought about a boom in the different branches of literature and social sciences. However, it is strange that **Widdowson** equates versions of Marxism with 'classic' texts and 'student editions'. Wherein does the connection lie? He is trying to suggest that the relationship of Marxism with society is the same as that between society and the classic texts. Against the

supposedly dated ideas of Marxism **Widdowson** privileges theory at a 'high level of abstraction' which has somehow lost its appeal. Even though **Widdowson** critiqued conventional criticism as the product of a bourgeois and capitalist ideology, he looks at theory as an abstract concept hidden somewhere in the pages of the text. He states clearly that he does not want to identify himself with what he calls 'crude new empiricism'. This new form of empiricism appears to be the relationship between theory and the formative influences in which it originates. The potentiality of theory energising literature to play a social role is largely lost on **Widdowson**.

These ideas become clear in **Widdowson**'s discussion of Marxist criticism, theory and literature. He recognizes Marxist thought as a sustained theoretical critique that focussed on the lacunae in the hegemonic state of dominant forces. It attacked the belief system of the bourgeois class that tried to regulate the economic and literary structure of society. However, according to **Widdowson** this has had an adverse effect on the problematic of theory. According to him this has led to a synonymy between Marxist criticism and critical theory. He says, "But the result has been in effect, that Marxist criticism now means critical theory". Contrary to what **Widdowson** thinks it is not as if Marxism has hindered the development of other theoretical points of view. In the past decades we have seen the consolidation of feminism as a sound theoretical premise. Has Marxist thought inhibited the expansion of feminist thought process or has it in some way contributed to it? Let us pose another question to answer this one. Can we think about equal status for women in a class-based society? The answer is that Marxism and feminism form the strongest allies that can together try to initiate a new social order.

However, **Widdowson** has written off Marxist thought as of no consequence for literature since he believes that Marxism has vacated the field of critical theory. According to him, "It becomes 'something else', a 'different' autonomous self-generating intellectual field, tending to leave the empirical field of study clear for the continuing operations of literary critical practice". **Widdowson** is suggesting that the active applicability of Marxist thought is not possible anymore and that Marxism exists only as a passive category that can have no meaning for the society in which it is formed. How can a theoretical enterprise based on the existing living conditions of society not be active or relevant? This is the problem of the First World theorists who are quick to eliminate Marxism from their context without realising that the Marxist outlook is closely aligned with working masses. We have already analysed a similar problem in the case of **Bergonzi** who has relegated Marxism as an 'obsolete weapon' in the context of Thatcherite politics. Theorists like **Bergonzi** and **Widdowson** have 'naturalised' the idea of context in the process of resisting it. Also they discuss the validity of Marxism if at all with respect to their own world as if no other exists. They ignore the Third World where Marxism is seen as a powerful force to counter strategies of bourgeois thinking. One may apprehend that the next target of the First World thinkers is going to be feminism so that any possibility of change is ruled out. This is a fine example of wishing away common masses and women – the capitalist structure under which the former operate and patriarchy under which women get oppressed.

5.6 HOW TO CRITIQUE WIDDOWSON?

Widdowson studies the relationship between Marxism and the 'untransformed education system'. Just as he considers context as a singular construct, he also regards the education system only in terms of its canonical versions. The education system is one of the most active and vital institutions trying to wriggle out of the oppressive bond of the bourgeois class. And this has become possible only due to the active application of Marxist and Feminist methodology. But **Widdowson** assumes that the faculty of the English academic institutions regard with 'disdain' the ideology of the left. Assuming gradually becomes acceptance. He states the reason for this by referring to Marxists critical practice in these terms... "The wild young

persons of the Left striking despairingly at the immanent phenomena of Literature and Criticism, when we can all see that the texts are solidly there...to be understood and when understood to be valued". **Widdowson** regards the thinking of the Left as nothing more than a periodical fervour of youth. He considers all the thinkers of this theoretical enterprise as 'wild young persons' who express their academic frustration by ignoring the text. He overlooks the fact that the ideology of the Left never attempts to eliminate the text, literature or criticism. It only provides radical methodological devices to understand it. Underlining the socio-ideological role it may play in its environment. Marxism sees a vital connection between literature and society. One is surprised thus to know that **Widdowson's** position has changed at the end of his essay.

Whereas he had initially decried the association of value with Literature as bourgeois, he now reinforces it as an essential category. Literature has an inherent core that the students can understand. This limits students' attitudes towards Literature and Criticism in a way that the larger cultural environment is left alone. They are conditioned into looking for essential meaning within a text instead of looking for a meaningful relation between literature and society. Isn't **Widdowson's** understanding of the category 'student' somewhat narrow? Another charge that **Widdowson** levies against Marxist theory is that, "It allows little or no operational space to those who are not primarily theoreticians, but who wish to occupy the new spaces created by the theoretical work, and who are still teaching Literature in schools, colleges, polytechnics and universities". That it appears **Widdowson** is trying to extend the study of literature to more and more people. But, for him, to educate the masses is another level of equality that Marxism strives for in society. If we examine closely, we shall find that its' thinking is in no way restricted to the literary elite. In fact Marxist thought speaks in a way that is easily understood by the youngest members of the educated community – both teachers and students. **Widdowson** is unable to see this. **Bergonzi** in his discussion of critical practice of one of the Marxists says that, "It regards the great literature and art of the past as a common human inheritance, which should be wrested from the exploiting classes and made available to the whole of humanity". However, he goes on to twist in a manner that the Marxist criticism ceases to be meaningful in the context of actual, concrete literary works. There are close parallels between **Bergonzi** and **Widdowson's** thinking. Both attack Marxism for being a 'dying culture'. They do not see a re-structuring of society in Marxist terms. But where **Widdowson** attacks Marxism for limiting the operational space of theory, **Bergonzi** charges it for the utopian idea of spreading education to the masses.

These are some of the idiosyncrasies of the First World theorists. **Widdowson** discusses the conflicting forces at different levels of power in the academic institutions such as students' interpretation of literature, conflicts within theory and difficult theoretical concepts that make literary theory inaccessible to the student. The teachers and the students are then compelled to take to 'establishment criticism' or what he terms 'progressive criticism'. **Widdowson** does not comment on the use of the former. However, in the case of cultural studies, a part of progressive criticism, he feels that there is only a problematisation of the social forces but no solution. This, according to **Widdowson** leads to an 'intellectual schizophrenia' where the index of intellectual activity remains passive. The teachers and the students indulge in futile mental activity that has no application to the real world. **Widdowson** does not have a logical basis for the claims he is making. Even if one follows this argument it points towards the necessity of formulating a theory that would take into cognisance the literary and social needs of the masses. However, **Widdowson** sees Marxism as the germ of this entire problem. This reflects the unease of such theorists as **Widdowson** with a radical theoretical construct.

He believes that Marxism has hindered the progress of other theoretical enterprises. But what these other categories are he does not specify. He hints at the body of empirical thought that would enable the academia to arrive at interesting conclusions. He says,

What it does imply is the need for critical work to be produced which challenges the assumptions and practices of conventional criticism, not in the form of theory, but as a detailed rebuttal of them in practice and as a substantive replacement for them which teachers at all levels may draw on and refer to in their classes and courses.

Widdowson is formulating a connection between the University, its members – both teachers and students and the field of theory. This forms a closed triangle that does not take into consideration the co-ordinates in the space outside. He stresses the need for an empirical understanding of the forces in society. Despite his tirade against value-based criticism, **Widdowson's** ideological agenda seems to privilege it, as he believes that criticism must address itself to the value of the literature being studied. He also believes that criticism must take into account the aim of criticism, the object or literary work being criticised and the 'conditions' in which this is taking place. He calls this materialist criticism. **Widdowson** is picking up ideas from Marxism but the limitations of his argument prevent him from declaring it in theory. This is because **Widdowson** is trying to work towards the benefit of only a specific group of teachers and students whose job is to appreciate concrete texts. He shies away from the idea of a complete social movement as visible in literature. Literature and Criticism have to be understood in terms of a theoretical construct without which their application would be sporadic and casual.

5.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have examined the implications of studying literature as an essential category. **Widdowson** is seen as underlining the relationship between literature and criticism. According to him, criticism is not merely a tool to understand works of literature. It constitutes literature in the process of evaluating it. **Widdowson** enlists the problems associated with Marxist thinking and considers Marxism as a theory that has 'vacated' the domain of literary theory. However, there are problems with his argument. For one he sees Criticism as determining literature whereas the two need to be seen in a dialectical relation with each other and with society. Secondly, he identifies the cause of weakness in literary theory in Marxist thought. In this unit we have also seen a few inconsistencies the First World Theorists suffer from.

5.8 QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by Literature as an essential category?
2. What is the relationship between criticism and literature?
3. Do you think that Marxism has become outdated in literary criticism? Give reasons to support your answer.

5.9 GLOSSARY

Identity formation:	To look at a construct in a specific way so as to determine its boundaries.
Value:	The essential meaning of a word or text. It is supposed to be inherent in the text.
Naturalise:	To subsume differences within universal assumptions. To make ideas easy and convenient,
Neo-colonialism:	A phase in which the powerful countries over the globe exercise control over the developing ones through culture and literature.

UNIT 6 **BASE, TEXT AND CONTEXT: ON THE TRIUMPH OF THEORY, THE RESISTANCE TO READING, AND THE QUESTION OF THE MATERIAL BASE**

Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 American and the Grain
- 6.3 Occulted Being, Radiant Gist, Cratylism and the Materiality of the Base
- 6.4 Resistance and Theory
- 6.5 Triumph of Theory?
- 6.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.7 Questions
- 6.8 Glossary

6.0 **OBJECTIVES**

In the previous unit we have discussed the implications of the direction taken by English studies, and the necessity of questioning the *canon*. In the present unit we shall see how dominant strategies in literature operate and how they can be understood and countered effectively. This unit should take you to the point where you feel equipped to free yourself from the established First World centered *canon*. In this unit, we shall take a close look at **J Hillis Miller's** Presidential Address of 1986 to ascertain areas where a new *canon* is being evolved for our use. We shall see what we can make of it.

6.1 **INTRODUCTION**

In the wake of new perspectives and ideas like pluralism we have become conscious of certain 'vantage points' in literary theory. These different perspectives need to be articulated within a specific critical frame. What is the methodology required for understanding differing positions? For **Hillis Miller** one such method is reading. What does reading imply? Where does 'theory' stand in relation to the process of reading? The answer lies in understanding aspects of literary theory and the 'resistance' that it meets with to form certain connections between reading, theory and resistance. Our analyses have to take into consideration not only what we think but also the multiple impulses and their interactions.

6.2 **AMERICA AND THE GRAIN**

At the beginning of the address, mentioned above, **Miller** is careful to point out the specific socio-historical context – the West in the year 1986. This implicates an audience, one that belongs to a definite period in history. The immediate spectator is the educated New Yorker who is an active witness to this discussion. At another level it also involves the group of people who elsewhere in the world are the target readers of the MLA and are in some way concerned with the literary scenario. Today, the time period is different from that of the Address. The year is 2004 and we are discussing issues raised by **Miller** after a period of almost two decades. During this

period what progress has been made in the field of literary theory not only in the West but also in our context? In **Miller's** essay the context is relevant and in this he does not leave anyone out except those who are not actively involved. The issues he is raising are meant for the interests of the literary community- those who want to probe the socially relevant thought processes. Further, America as the focal centre of his speech has significant implications for us. It allows us to position ourselves with respect to the mainstream and to compare the respective literary scenarios. It helps us to evaluate our attitudes with respect to what we understand as literary theory. We also have to keep in mind **Millers'** own biases, if any. What we mean is that we have to see how **Miller** uses the idea of context. Is he trying to manipulate the audience by subsuming plurality within an underlying agenda not easily visible to the reader?

Miller begins by discussing a section of **William Carlos Williams's** novel titled *In the American Grain*. The novel appeared in the year 1925. He focuses on a specific section of the novel- 'The Destruction of Tenochtitlan'. **Miller** explains how **Williams** sees two different responses to the America that was not subject to the social, cultural and economic onslaught of the outsider. Of the two responses, one is that of Rasles, a Jesuit missionary and the other is of Cortez and the New England Puritans. A collision with the outsiders establishes differing equations for the 'Indian' group already living there. In the case of the Jesuit missionary, Rasles, we have the classic case of hybridity. In the wake of changes that affect the indigenous attitudes, Rasles is able to reconcile the value system of the settlers and missionaries with those of the Indian. According to William's, Rasles is able to understand the meaning of being an 'Indian' as he is able to evolve a syncretic view that leads to the formation of a new hybrid culture. In this case the unique characteristics of the community 'flower' under the influence of the missionary who shapes them in their own way. This is an example of a positive fusion of two worlds and ways of life.

On the other hand is the attitude of Cortez who is insensitive to the needs of the people already staying in America. There is no point of connection established between the two groups. Cortez, who represents another cultural system, imposes its dicta onto the indigenous groups left to grapple with an alien culture. The Indians were forced into accepting a new religion and a new value system to reformulate their society on the terms laid down by the others. This implicated a hierarchical order in which the invaders held control and the domestic groups were ousted from power. As **Miller** points out these are the 'bad guys' in American history. The 'Indian' can be released only by the method of operation of Rasles. According to **Miller**, Williams defines proper culture as one that is able to preserve the essence of a specific social system- "to create, to hybridize, to crosspollinize." How is the attitude of Rasles different from that of Cortez? As students of theory we should be able to respond to this question. In both the cases it is the outsider who is in a position of power. In one case the indigenous group on which new ideas are enacted is compelled to accept a re-definition of its own system and in the other it enjoys a few liberties. Williams seems to be complying with a version of culture that takes into account not the indigenous requirements but those of the outsider. He is equating creativity with hybridity, but we must ask whose creativity is really going to bloom in the hybrid context.

Millers concern in this example is mainly with the process of naming. The colonised comes into being only in a hybrid culture through the process of 'proper naming' that is considered as a performative act. Performativity is a term used in the context of speech acts. A performative utterance is one that does what it says it does. By extension it is not, however, strictly necessary that the words name or describe the act. The essential features are that the words are used to perform an act. Miller does not seem to be aware of this subversive dimension of naming. Performativity can also be made to function as a subversive act as in the case of a specific theoretical premise. However, his concern is with the performative act of naming that brings the hidden aspects or the 'radiant gist' of the indigenous culture to life. He terms this indigeneity the 'American grain'. One can't help but wonder as to why **Miller** chooses this example and what is its significance in the context of literary theory? What is the

relationship between the cultural system we now understand as 'America' and the 'grain'? The question is significant. It indicates the coming into being of a system where one of provides basis for launching the idea of base and its materiality, something that literary theory in our world is concerned with. Let us now proceed further into this discussion.

6.3 OCCULTED BEING, RADIANT GIST, CRATYLISM AND THE MATERIALITY OF THE BASE

Miller uses concepts from linguistic theory for application to the example from **Williams** novel *In the American Grain* for a discussion of the materiality of the base. **Miller** explains how the term 'radiant gist' functions in the same way as the Heideggerian idea of the 'occulted being' divested of its critical rigour. **Martin Heidegger** was a German philosopher of the early twentieth century. In his book *Being and Time* he explored the idea of 'being'. He called this existence *Dasein* that would be manifest in our actual existence and experience. **Heidegger** considered *Dasein* not as a static entity, but one that comes into formation in different situations. This allows for a certain space of enactment to the idea of existence that however is regulated by the factor of mortality. This is **Heidegger's** idea of 'Being'. 'Occult' indicates allowing a certain kind of mysticism that accompanies the idea of *Dasein*. Therefore even as the Being has a specific context **Miller** looks at it not as a social entity but more as a mystical one. **Miller** in the essay under discussion considers **Williams's** idea of the radiant gist to be like the Heideggerian occulted being. In fact according to **Miller**, **Williams** is not able to retain the critical rigour that accompanies **Heidegger's** philosophical idea. The question that **Miller** is raising is

What can one say, here and now, today, about this opposition between two kinds of culture and about the resulting narrative of American history to which it leads? In the case of America the gap between the American culture as understood by Cortez and the indigenous American grain exemplifies the process of forgetting the 'Being'. American history can therefore be understood as a continual movement away from the grain.

It is difficult to distinguish whether **Miller** is attacking the basis of American history or the idea of history. This is best represented in technological developments of America in the context of which the lack of relation between the America as we see it and the American grain is more poignantly felt.

Miller then introduces another term from the field of linguistics to explain the lack of a concrete and meaningful relation between two entities such as the American grain and the new culture introduced therein – the idea of Cratylism. He asks, "Is **Williams's** radiant gist no more than a strange version of a now exploded Cratylism, the stubborn belief that the phenomenality of words somehow naturally corresponds to the essence of things? What **Miller** is suggesting is that Cratylism assumes a direct correspondence between words and the essence of things. Similarly, there is the inherent assumption of a direct relationship between the alien culture and the grain, even as it does not exist. However, the relationship between the cultural system and the indigenous group or grain is not merely one of direct correspondence. Instead, it has to do with the performative powers of the outsider who names or renames the ground and allows it to come into being. As **Paul de Man** says, "To the extent that Cratylism assumes a convergence of the phenomenal aspects of language, as sound, with its signifying function as referent, it is an aesthetically oriented conception. In the case of **Williams** also there is an aesthetically oriented conception behind the logic of the text". This is because in the present context performativity is not used to question the notion of identity but to determine the 'name' of one of the groups. It provides space only to the group performing this task. In *Paradise Lost* Adam's

naming of the differing species made his position dynamic and powerful, the species named remained within the stasis of the term conferred on them. It seems that in Williams's vision the ground exists outside language waiting to be named not by the native but by the outsider. There is also the interesting suggestion that the community had no name prior to the one given by the alien.

Miller extends this idea to focus on the nature of a probable relationship between the grain and the culture that exists 'on' it. We are not to concern ourselves with the nature of the radiant gist or the grain but on the possible nexus between the ground and the culture that towers over it. **Miller** points towards the necessity of a relationship with the base. **Miller** says, "All meanings have a material base— cultural meanings as well as meanings embodied in written or printed texts". **Miller** emphasizes the importance of the materiality of the base. In the context of America he is trying to evolve a relationship between the material base and the superstructure. According to **Miller** the example from *In the American Grain* suggests two possible connections between the material base and the cultural meaning. Like the two different responses of Cortez and Rasles, culture either emanates from the ground or it is imposed on the grain. Cortez' reaction towards the grain signifies how the base has been completely ignored. We can now arrive at an idea of what literary theory could mean and at the same time how it can be applied to the context of American history to attack its mainstream notions. According to **Miller**, when meaning emanates from the base there is a kind of 'magical correspondence' between the material base and the superstructure. But in the context of a performative speech act, does the meaning come into being by the name given by the base in which case the material base would determine the super structure? Further, does the superstructure in any way 'name' the base even as it is determined by it? Also, then would such an equation be desirable in the context of American history? These questions have to be kept in mind in understanding the base-superstructure equation.

The second possibility with respect to the situation in the novel, says **Miller**, is that the superstructure has no relation with the base and remains 'free-floating' as in the case of Cortez. This somehow means that culture becomes a term whose growth has no relation with the base. Thus, where the material has no connection with the cultural aspects, the latter becomes a static entity that will have no concrete foundation. It could then be pasted anywhere without being affected by the change in materiality of the situation. Thereafter change in the superstructure takes place arbitrarily making the system rigid and oppressive. This not only distorts the base-superstructure equation but empties culture of its meaning. For **Miller**, in terms of a social structure this phenomenon can be understood in the context of America. In this case the relationship between the base and superstructure can only be understood as an empty meaningless space that maintains the two entities as separate. This has also been the phantom haunting writers like **Hawthorne, James** and **Melville** who have tried very hard to fill the gaps to constitute some kind of a meaningful relation with the base. You would have noticed that **Miller** has already laid the foundation of a super structure that is fluid, rigid and independent at the same time. How does it relate to literary theory? This we shall discuss in the next part.

6.4 RESISTANCE AND THEORY

Miller discusses changes in literary studies and elucidates the factors that are going to affect the present as well as the future of literary studies. The rapidly moving demographic transitions involve change in the size of population, geographical factors, emigration, immigration, the relation between population and natural resources and an array of other related ideas. According to **Miller** an increase in emigrations has created cosmopolitan zones that are no longer regulated by any one specific group. The group ideology is that of money and there are multi-lingual and multi-racial groups. In the metropolitan pockets the culture is determined not by the

index of literariness but by the development of a new body – the mass media and electronic media. The media has brought the different zones closer creating global concepts. Universities are now collaborating on grounds of knowledge - exchange, research, and finance. This has made available a large number of texts and information, particularly to the under-privileged zones. Such collaborative efforts have foregrounded points of view or 'slants' that had earlier been ignored. This has made possible the coming up of new bodies of literature such as women studies or gender studies. These changes have revolutionized the way we look at the world, notions of history, formation of culture, and so on. The otherwise ignored areas of the world like the Third world, the African context have been able to articulate a voice that had been kept latent by the dominant influence of the *canon*. The *canon* has been broken into different *canons* and this has made us aware of the way in which power points are located in society today.

In the next part of his essay, **Miller** extends his ideas to the context of the 1986 listeners and readers. Literary theory, according to him, has now changed its course. Therefore language-based studies are no longer the focus of the attention of theorists. What occupies them is studies in history, formation of society and so on. Literature and society based theories have made the intellectual community conscious of its duty of spreading this awareness in the world. Even as **Miller** considers this transition sudden and abrupt, he correctly points out that it stems from 'our' own sense of responsibility. This seems to be a reason to rejoice. However, **Miller** raises an objection. He is critical of this shift in the field of theory, as according to him this has become an excuse to avoid reading the text. There is a tendency to look in the text for ideas pre-conditioned by the specific co-ordinates or vantage points one has in mind. **Miller** believes that theory's co-relation with the text is not there. As a result of which the base or the materiality of the text has once again been ignored. Meaning has no materiality and it continues to remain 'free-floating'. However, it seems that **Miller** is assuming that theories that lay emphasis on the context fix pre-determined coordinates and do not read the 'text'. His agenda seems to be to privilege linguistics over a theoretical stance that takes into cognisance specific historical formations and their implications.

At this stage, **Miller** introduces another concept used by **Paul de Man** in his essay, *The Resistance to Theory*. This essay was initially written at the request of the Modern Language Association for the Volume *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*. This will help us understand the two terms 'theory' and 'resistance'. According to **Miller** theory is the displacement in literary studies from a focus on the meaning of a text to a focus on the way meaning is conveyed. For **Miller**, meaning has to be understood through a specific methodology and literary theory provides us with the technique of conveying it as we locate it in a text. As **Miller** says, "Theory is the use of language to talk about language". At one level language is a way of conveying certain modes of meaning. But what we are interested in is not the essence delivered but the method of operation, of the modes employed. It is evident that for **Miller**, theoretical concepts have been restricted within the problematic of the text and cannot go beyond it to include the context. Another way in which **Miller** defines theory is 'through the idea of referentiality. What is referentiality? It is a term used to define phrases of forms in a specific manner unlike the attributive aspects that are used in a more generalised way. In the case of a referential utterance there is an assertion to indicate something particular. It forms an equation that establishes a relation between the referring expression and that to which it refers. According to **de Man** linguistic terminology designates reference prior to designating the referent. The referential function of language, "considers reference as a function of language and not necessarily as intuition." Therefore firstly, theory focuses not on the referred object but on the equation established. It raises the problems of formulating such connections. This **Miller** calls the problem of referentiality. In this context the referential equation is not to be looked at as a direct relation between the two ends – the reader and the society but of how such connections can be formulated. 'Intuition' has no relation to a material base and can

be considered part of a larger aesthetic idea. By ruling out intuition the aesthetic problematic that hitherto determined meaning has been displaced from its privileged position and replaced by a conscious "function of language". Let us see how resistance can be defined.

According to **Wlad Godzich**:

Resistance is a property of the referent, we would say today, which allows this referent to become the object of knowledge of the subject that we are. Without this resistance, we would never be able to ascertain whether the phenomenal or sensible is really "out there" and whether we have any knowledge of such an "out there".

Resistance is therefore a property of the referent that makes it functional. Now we need to ask where and how is this resistance located? According to **de Man** this resistance is inherent in theory itself. He says,

The real debate of literary theory is not with its polemical opponents but rather with its own methodological assumptions and possibilities...the resistance to theory is a resistance to the use of language about language. It is therefore a resistance to language itself or to the possibility that language contains factors and functions that cannot be reduced to intuition.

Miller uses **de Man**'s term 'resistance' in discussing the polemical opponents of literary theory. These for **Miller** are the right and left wing groups. This is surprising as for some reason **Miller** has equated two distinct if not mutually antagonistic ideological frames of reference and subsumed them within the idea of resistance. For **Miller** the opposing factions of both the right and left believe that in the absence of any phenomenal approach, linguistic theory has made the terrain of literary theory "sterile". What is the nature of this sterility? Is it actually there or is it a deliberate attempt at disarming the theorists? Further, the use of the term sterile to describe the deficiencies in theory is deliberate. According to **Miller** this displaces power completely into the hands of the two groups. Sterility implies impotence and the idea is that theory is incapable of generating any cogent meaning whereas the other groups are fertile and their methodological assumptions carry the potential of producing comprehensive meaning. As **Miller** deals with the charges, he points out that theory is attacked by the left group for being elite, apolitical and reactionary. The left attacks the theorists for focusing too much on the concerns of language. The left assumes that this has no connection with the superstructure and its formations and that there is an increased stress on words and language and this can only lead to sterility. According to **Miller** the left-wing critics seem to forget that words too can be looked at within a specific context. But is **Miller** invoking the context of 'words' or are they restricted to the text alone?

According to **Miller**, the group to the right believes that a concern with language and theory diverts the attention of the reader from the given value system to areas that have no concern with what is actually the dominant mode. The right wing group wants the world to be regulated by a fixed system whose rules are determined by them and can only be changed at their ideological whims. The explosive powers of language that can be used to subvert the system threaten their existence. Based on aesthetic assumptions the right group indulges in a series of value-based clichés. According to **Miller**, for the 'dispassionate spectator', one who manages to strike a balance in a scenario of utter confusion, it becomes difficult to understand the difference in ideological predilections of the two groups.

One wonders in this connection whether **Miller** has really been able to distinguish between the thought categories of the left and the right. **Miller** believes that both the right and left groups impose certain pre-conceived systems on to the text whereas the theorists allow it to emerge out of the text itself. According to **Miller** these factions have not even tried to understand the methodology of literary theory. **Miller** notes

with concern the present criticism's non-adherence to the text. He defends **de Man** or **Derrida** who he feels have not divorced themselves from history, politics or humanities. Instead, they are looking for proper methods of 'reading', which would definitely involve concerns of history. As we see, there are two problems with respect to **Miller's** argument. Firstly, **Miller** has clubbed the ideological concepts of the left with those of the right without even understanding their differences. Secondly, the idea of resistance has been reduced to that between the finished text and the reader. By 'finished' text what we mean is the text, as it exists in the final printed stage on the pages of the book. The position of the reader is an outcome of an understanding of tools of linguistic theory. The text is considered at the final stage where it is available for the process of reading. But what would **Miller** say about the text in its formative stages and its production? There one would definitely have to take into consideration the 'material base' and "conditions of production, technology, distribution and consumption of 'cultural products'." The context also has to be 'read'. However, **Miller** has entirely ignored this important dimension.

Miller sees a connection between language teaching and the bureaucratic set-up. The State apparatuses encourage inter-disciplinary activities to further their own interests— the development of diplomatic relations. However, these activities are not supposed to perform a subversive role. Instead, they are expected to circulate the 'value systems' of the powerful groups— affirming the supremacy of the First world over the Third world, by circulating the myth that English' is the supreme language which makes global comprehensiveness possible. Sadly, this leads to the projection of English literature as the *canon* and people like us are compelled to judge our literatures in the context of their *canon*. This impedes the formation of literatures free of the dominant discourses. Translation studies are promoted but it is translation into English that is considered relevant. How many times do we hear of people reading the translation of **Shakespeare** into lets say Hindi in our case? Consequently America has become the seat of power, technological and economic. This systematic analysis of the idea of context and of power structures in society culminates in the present form of America as a super-power. **Miller** attacks the American set-up that has no connection with the base. **Miller** relates such strategies to the lack of any relation between the superstructure and the material base. This allows it to be transmitted anywhere and allows it to be projected as the ideal option for other material bases. This is good as far as it goes. **Miller** seems to be taking the wind out of the sails of those who criticize America's academic or cultural imperialism. This is an example of cosy criticism of a trend that is strongly entrenched and does not face a real threat. Therefore, what we need to be cautious of is that this attack on the First world should not function as a medium that makes space for a resistance to the left or other progressive thought categories.

6.5 TRIUMPH OF THEORY ?

Miller focuses on **de Mans** argument— that resistance to theory is actually a resistance to reading whose culminating point is the triumph of theory. The triumph of theory, for **Miller**, is not a consequence of change in literary fashion. Neither is it something that is derived straight out of the material base. It is, as **Miller** says, a response to 'complex motivations and forces' in the process of 'concrete' teaching. He considers resistance as an active element embedded in theory itself. To affirm his claim he cites the example of the mid-west MLA meet in Chicago that presented papers that were purely theoretical whatever their critical stance. The other important case in point according to **Miller** is that of feminist literary studies. The women's movement is not a universal category. It is conscious of the differing constructs of women situated in different social set-ups all over the world. As pointed out earlier this has unsettled the supremacy enjoyed by the white male — oriented *canon* formations. **Miller** relegates to a lower level the stance of earlier schools of thought

that focus purely on biography, mechanical historical research and editing. According to **Miller** groups that foreground these methods do so in a simplistic manner. However, the triumph of theory has been made possible as it incorporates these methods within a larger theoretical approach. For **Miller**, The triumph of theory is the resistance to reading, a resistance so successful as to be an erasure or forgetting the material base in question.

In fact, according to **Miller**, the greatest ambiguity is that people who denounce theory use strategies and methods that are themselves theoretical. The compelling powers of theory, the impossibility of avoiding it and the resistance within it constitutes the greatest triumph of theory. **Paul de Man** and **Miller** reveal that theory is not a historically and socially translatable entity. It is a 'human and linguistic universal'. Once again, **Miller** has undermined the importance of the context and its relation to theoretical concepts. It is misinterpretations like these that allow an unfiltered transmission of First world ideas into the Third World.

For **Miller**, the forces that we have just discussed shape concrete teaching. Does this imply that students have to be coerced into understanding the words in the text? According to **Miller**, The notion of the material – far from being a base, root, the ground of reality, something unambiguously opposed to the impalpability's of language play or theoretical abstraction – is itself an extremely problematical concept. Therefore, even though **Miller** tried to explain the significance of the 'grain', he has at this point relegated it to a minor position. He privileges the text with words, the text and its paper over such contextual formations. The dialectic we have in front of us is that between the words and the page and not that between the base and superstructure. To understand this idea clearly let us take a look into the idea of 'base' and 'superstructure' as **Marx** understood it. In explaining the base **Marx** says,

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production, which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which raises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social political and intellectual life processes in general.

Whereas for **Marx**, the base is a complex and dynamic category, for **Miller** it is a simple 'material' entity outside of and away from the realm of meaning. For **Miller**, the 'material base' is nothing but the matter that is captured in the texts on theory. It is like the relation between an example and the concept it exemplifies. Even though **Miller** has charged the left wing theorists with not reading the text, he himself ignores the context despite his defense of **Derrida** in this essay. In **Bergonzi's** *Exploding English* we have already discussed the problems of ignoring the 'human agency'. The materiality of the base has to take into consideration the relations between the owners of the means of production and the workers. In short, the relations constituted by the means of production form what we understand as the base. The structures that are built over it i.e. structures of thought, sentiment, intellectual modes form the superstructure. As **Marx** says,

Upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiment illusions, modes of thought and views of life. The entire class creates and forms them out of its material foundations and out of the corresponding social relations.

What then is the relationship between the base and the superstructure? It cannot be understood in terms of direct or inverse relations. There is something else that constitutes the two, the dialectical mode. How does one arrive at the dialectical mode? From the two extracts discussed above one might feel inclined to think that since consciousness is derived from the materiality of a society, the base determines

the superstructure. However, that is not the case. Just as the base plays a meaningful role in the formation of the superstructure, similarly the latter asserts what is called a reciprocal influence on the former. One must take note that the ideas that puts premium on individual initiatives pertain to a capitalist set-up. In **Miller's** argument therefore the words hold the centre or should we say the text and not the context holds relevance for the reader. **Miller** explains his ideas in the form of an allegorical example of how the Orange County Performing Arts Center was built on what had earlier been a bean field and before that a semi-desert. The people who lived over there originally were called the 'Gabrielinos' - a name given to them by the Spanish mission. At one level, the allegory shows how the bean field and the Centre for performing arts is built artificially and does not take into account the requirement of the ground and the people staying there. At another level, it shows how the existing community has been given a name - Gabrielinos. The identity of the existing group is wiped out and they are brought into 'being' by the name conferred on them.

Miller also attacks the use of the material base with the help of Western metaphysics. According to **Miller**, western ideas with their stress on logocentrism or the idea of presence use the material base as a fixed and strictly defined entity. They are unable to see the contradictions within the base. Therefore, the action taken in the name of the base is only apparently performative. However, the claims it makes are constative in nature. Constatives state facts, performatives do not; constatives make true or false claims whereas performatives don't. What **Miller** seems to be saying is that in Western metaphysics, there is a tendency to apparently base ideas on performatives but the meaning is a constative, a static base projected as dynamic?

Miller advocates the necessity of the process of recovery- to revive what has been erased. This process is possible only in the act of reading. However he sees this as paradoxical. In the simple act of reading, as one focuses on the text the materiality gets evaded as "we do not see the paper for the words." In this sense reading is a process that makes the particular of the 'paper' in question into an abstraction. Reading is, therefore, always a theoretical task. The triumph of theory is then a resistance to reading as this inevitably performs an erasure. In fact the writer believes that we have to indulge in the act of retrieving what has been lost, as only that will maintain the archive. To allow a free interplay of opinions it is imperative that we focus on literary theory by directing attention to the text. The theoretical aspects of reading rest on paradoxes that can be understood in terms of rhetorical statements. For **Miller**, the answer lies in 'deconstruction' studies. **Miller** defines deconstruction as the current name for the multiple and heterogeneous strategies of overturning and displacement that will liberate your own enterprise from what disables it. Such a theoretical premise performs the subversive task of overturning only words on a page.

Miller tackles the charges levelled on the deconstructionists from the lobbies of the left and the right that are subsumed under the same ideological cover. The right wing group attacks strategies of deconstruction on aesthetic grounds saying that it distorts the 'organic form' of literature. What is this organicity and what is the use of focussing on this and not on anything else? The right front suggests **Miller**, believes that a crisis has come up in the literary scenario, because of techniques that violate the sanctity of the body of literature. **Miller** considers the mass media as allied with such factions to project the wrong message. In understanding the claims of the left he feels that a commitment to history and society should be attached with strategies of deconstruction for a problematisation of the base. In case they do not do so their ideas can always be manipulated by other groups who will then project this concern in a manner that would be detrimental to the ideological structure of the group. The basis of **Miller's** argument is that left wing critics emphasise the context alone and do not allow a 'free play' of words on the page. However, this is only a distortion of the. Against this, **Miller** privileges the American Universities who allow such free interaction. Even as **Miller** attacks certain ideas of the American theorists he feels that the mark of the American Universities is a healthy exchange of impulses that can be channelled properly. He says, "The University can only live in an atmosphere of

open debate, maintaining that freedom of speech, thought and writing which is one of America's most precious heritages". According to **Miller** groups that focus on ideas of culture, and history actually ignore the nuances of the base. For **Miller** a connection with the base is possible only through the simple act of reading the text. The idea is to recover the performative powers of the text that allow the base to come into being.

One can see problems with **Miller's** approach to literary theory as pointed out earlier. He seems to be implying that theory is non-historical and linguistic in nature. The thought processes of the right and left groups (considered the same by **Miller**) dilute the effect of theory by focussing on the context thus rendering it futile. Further according to **Miller** theory can be understood only through a working of words in a text and the interplay of words through linguistic structures. The text therefore, has been placed at the center of literary discourse. This means that the text regulates the context and social phenomenon can be understood only as it is crystallised in the text. **Miller** does not focus on how a given text would be received by a group of people. Finally, how would **Miller** understand the formation of history? What would be the text's relation to the makers of history? These questions are beyond the purview of **Miller's** narrow argument as his concern is the text as a finished product and not it's making. The *canon* has been reformulated and is constituted by the materiality of the referent as understood through words. This restriction of literary theory to specific areas of linguistic theory indicates the present phase of imperialist thought in which literature ceases to be an expression of ordinary people's heroic aspirations and dreams.

6.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have before us **Miller's** attack on the theoretical attitudes of the West. At the same time he privileges what he considers the plurality of the American Universities. **Miller** groups the aesthetic ideas of the right with the historical and socially inclined theories of the left only to undermine the latter. For him, the base can only be understood through a working of words in the text. The slippery nature of the base, the individual's responses to the text and the rejection of the context reflect **Miller's** notion of independent reading, and the meaning of literary theory is substituted with the dictates of linguistic theory.

6.8 QUESTIONS

1. Is there any relation between text and context? Which of the two would you emphasise and why? Give reasons.
2. What do you understand by the terms 'base' and 'superstructure'? Are they relevant in today's state of literary theory?
3. What kind of a *canon* does **Miller's** argument suggest? Or is it an attack of all *canons*? Discuss.

6.9 GLOSSARY

Indigenous:	domestic, refers to the colonial masses of a country and carries the bias of the master race
Trope:	a non-literal use of words at once suggestive of a pattern or figure
Logos:	the idea of presence, it indicates meaning and essence.

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