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## SYLLABUS

### 20TH CENTURY ENGLISH LITERATURE

MH-447

1. **W.B. Yeats:** "The Second Coming", "Sailing to Byzantium", "Easter 1916", "A Dialogue of self and soul", "The Tower", "Leda and the swan", "Among school Children".
2. **T.S. Eliot:** "The Waste Land".
3. **W.H. Auden:** "Musee Des Beaux Arts", "In Memory of W.B. Yeats", "Lay Your Sleeping Head my Love", "September 1, 1939", "Law like low", "As I walked out one evening".
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5. **Dylan Thomas:** "The Hand that Signed", "Light Breaks where no sun shines", "Poem on his Birthday", "Vision and Prayer", "Lament".

## 1

**W.B. YEATS****STRUCTURE**

- 1.0 Learning Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 The Second Coming
- 1.3 Sailing to Byzantium
- 1.4 Easter 1916
- 1.5 A Dialogue of Self and Soul
- 1.6 The Tower
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**1.0 LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

*After reading this unit, you will be able to:*

- describe the critical summary of the poem, "Sailing to Byzantium"
- discuss the religious aspects in the poem, "Easter 1916"
- examine the major themes of the poem, "The Tower"
- enumerate the summary of the poem, "Among School children"
- critically appreciate the poem, "Dialogue between the soul and self".

**1.1 INTRODUCTION**

William Butler Yeats, 13 June 1865 – 28 January 1939 was an Irish poet and playwright, and one of the foremost figures of 20th century literature.

## NOTES

A pillar of both the Irish and British literary establishments, in his later years Yeats served as an Irish Senator for two terms. He was a driving force behind the Irish Literary Revival and, along with Lady Gregory, Edward Martyn, and others, founded the Abbey Theatre, where he served as its chief during its early years. In 1923 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for what the Nobel Committee described as "inspired poetry, which in a highly artistic form gives expression to the spirit of a whole nation." He was the first Irishman so honoured. Yeats is generally considered one of the few writers who completed their greatest works after being awarded the Nobel Prize; such works include *The Tower* (1928) and *The Winding Stair and Other Poems* (1929).

Yeats was born and educated in Dublin but spent his childhood in County Sligo. He studied poetry in his youth and from an early age was fascinated by both Irish legends and the occult. Those topics feature in the first phase of his work, which lasted roughly until the turn of the 20th century. His earliest volume of verse was published in 1889 and those slow-paced and lyrical poems display debts to Edmund Spenser, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and the Pre-Raphaelite poets. From 1900, Yeats' poetry grew more physical and realistic. He largely renounced the transcendental beliefs of his youth, though he remained preoccupied with physical and spiritual masks, as well as with cyclical theories of life.

Yeats is generally considered one of the twentieth century's key English language poets. He was a Symbolist poet, in that he used allusive imagery and symbolic structures throughout his career. Yeats chose words and assembled them so that, in addition to a particular meaning, they suggest other abstract thoughts that may seem more significant and resonant. His use of symbols is usually something physical that is both itself and a suggestion of other, perhaps immaterial, timeless qualities.

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## 1.2 THE SECOND COMING

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### POEM

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

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

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**Synopsis**

The poem begins with the image of a falcon flying out of earshot its human master. In medieval times, people would use falcons or hawks to track down animals at ground level. In this image, however, the falcon has gotten itself lost by flying too far away, which we can read as a reference to the collapse of traditional social arrangements in Europe at the time Yeats was writing.

In the fourth line, the poem abruptly shifts into a description of "anarchy" and an orgy of violence in which "the ceremony of innocence is drowned." The speaker laments that only bad people seem to have any enthusiasm nowadays.

At line 9, the second stanza of the poem begins by setting up a new vision. The speaker takes the violence which has engulfed society as a sign that "the Second Coming is at hand." He imagines a sphinx in the desert, and we are meant to think that this mythical creature, rather than Christ, is what is coming to fulfill the prophecy from the Biblical Book of Revelation. In line 18, the vision ends as "darkness drops again," but the speaker remains troubled.

Finally, at the end of the poem, the speaker asks a rhetorical question which really amounts to a prophecy that the beast is on its way to Bethlehem, the birthplace of Christ, to be born into the world.

**Lines 1-2**

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

The falcon is described as "turning" in a "widening gyre" until it can no longer "hear the falconer," its human master.

A gyre is a spiral that expands outwardly as it goes up. Yeats uses the image of gyres frequently in his poems to describe the motion of history toward chaos and instability.

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In actual falconry, the bird is not supposed to keep flying in circles forever; it is eventually supposed to come back and land on the falconer's glove. (Interesting fact: falconers wear heavy gloves to keep the birds from scratching them with their claws.)

### Line 3

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

The "notion" that "things fall apart" could still apply to the falcon, but it's also vague enough to serve as a transition to the images of more general chaos that follow.

The second part of the line, a declaration that "the centre cannot hold," is full of political implications (like the collapse of centralized order into radicalism). This is the most famous line of the poem: the poem's "thesis," in a nutshell.

### Lines 4-6

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere. The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

These three lines describe a situation of violence and terror through phrases like "anarchy," "blood-dimmed tide," and "innocence [. . .] drowned." (By the way, "mere" doesn't mean "only" in this context; it means "total" or "pure.")

Overall, pretty scary stuff.

Also, with words like "tide," "loosed," and "drowned," the poem gives the sensation of water rushing around us. It's like Noah's flood all over again, except there's no orderly line of animals headed two-by-two into a boat.

What's Yeats referring to here? Is this a future prophecy, the poet's dream, or maybe a metaphor for Europe at war? There's really no way to be sure – Yeats doesn't seem to want us to know too much.

### Lines 7-8

The best lack all conviction, while the worst Are full of passionate intensity.

Who are "the best" and "the worst"?

One way of deciphering them is that Yeats is talking about "the good" and "the bad." But he doesn't use those words in the poem, and these lines are a clue as to why not.

For one thing, if "the best lack all conviction," can they really be that good? Believing in something enough to act on it is kind of what being good is all about.

On the other hand, "the worst" have all the "intensity" on their side, which is good for them, but definitely not for everyone else.

Think about that time you dropped your lunch in the cafeteria and all the people you hate laughed really hard, and all your friends were too

embarrassed to do anything about it. According to Yeats, Europe after the war is kind of like that. Things are so messed up that you can't tell the good and the bad apart.

W.B. Yeats

#### Lines 9-10

Surely some revelation is at hand; Surely the Second Coming is at hand. Notice how these two lines are almost exactly the same. This is where the speaker tells us what he thinks is going on, but the repetition means that he's maybe not so sure and is slowly trying to figure things out.

It's a revelation, he says, which is when the true meaning of something is revealed.

Not only that, but it's a revelation according to the most reputable source for these kinds of things: the Book of Revelation.

Apparently, all this violence and moral confusion means "the Second Coming is at hand." According to the Bible, that means Christ is going come back and set everything straight, right?

We'll see. For now, the poem is about to take another turn.

#### Lines 11-13

The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert

So maybe we're not saved.

The words "Second Coming" seem to have made the speaker think of something else, so that he repeats the phrase as an exclamation. It's like, "Eureka!" It makes him think of a "vast image out of Spiritus Mundi."

To know what this means, you have to know that Yeats was very interested in the occult and believed that people have a supernatural connection to one another. It's in the same ballpark as telepathy or a psychic connection, but not quite as kooky as those other things. It's more like we're all connected to a big database of communal memories going back all the way through human history, which we can get in contact with when we're feeling truly inspired.

Literally, Spiritus Mundi means "spirit of the world."

The speaker, through his sudden, revelatory connection to the world, is given access to a vision that takes him "somewhere in the sands of the desert."

#### Line 14

A shape with lion body and the head of a man,

Here, he is describing the sphinx, a mythical beast "with lion body and the head of a man."

You might have seen the picture of the ancient sphinx in Egypt: it's pretty famous. But Yeats isn't talking about that sphinx, per se. He's

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talking about the original, archetypal symbol of the sphinx that first inspired the Egyptians to build that big thing in the desert, and which is now inspiring him.

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### Lines 15-17

A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun, Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

In these lines he describes the sphinx's expression and what it is doing. By calling its gaze "pitiless," he doesn't mean "evil" or "mean-spirited." In fact, the sphinx really seems to have an inhuman expression that is as indifferent as nature itself. It is "blank," statuesque, and incapable of having empathy with other humans.

This might not tell us much, but now we know that the sphinx doesn't jibe at all with the way most people think of Christ. In other words, this "Second Coming" doesn't seem to have a lot in common with the descent of Christ from Heaven as described in the Book of Revelation.

Nor does it seem to be in any big hurry to get here, as it moves "its slow thighs."

But, strangely, this slowness only seems to add to the suspense and terror, like Michael Myers chasing Jamie Lee Curtis in the movie Halloween.

Even the birds are agitated, or "indignant," but it's not clear why. Their circling is similar to the gyres of the falcon from the beginning of the poem, but from what we know about desert birds, like vultures, when they fly in circles it's often because they think something will die soon.

### Lines 18-20

The darkness drops again; but now I know That twenty-centuries of stony sleep Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,

The vision from Spiritus Mundi ends as "darkness drops again," like a stage curtain, but it has left the speaker with a strong prophetic impression. He knows something that he didn't before, namely, that this strange sphinx is a symbol that will bear on the future.

Thinking outside the poem, it's safe to say that he is talking about Europe's future, and perhaps the world's in general.

What exactly does the speaker claim to "know"? "Twenty centuries" refers to roughly the amount of time that has passed since the "first coming" of Christ. But we have already seen that the Second Coming is not going to be anything like the first.

Although 2,000 years seems like a long time to us, Yeats compares it to a single night of an infant's sleep, which is suddenly "vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle."

The cradle reinforces the image that something has recently been "born," and its motion also serves as a metaphor for social upheaval.

It's interesting that the infant doesn't wake up because of the rocking. It instead begins to have nightmares, much like the recent nightmares afflicting European society, whose long history amounts to no more than the first stages of childhood. It's the terrible two's of an entire continent.

## NOTES

**Lines 21-22**

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last, Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

The object of Yeats's vision, which was formerly symbolized as a pitiless sphinx, is now described as a "rough beast" on its way to Bethlehem – the birthplace of Christ – "to be born."

The "slouching" of this beast is animalistic and similar to the slow gait of the sphinx in the desert. It sounds more than a little menacing.

Yeats is using the birth at Bethlehem as a metaphor of the passage of this malevolent beast from the spirit world – Spiritus Mundi – to the real, everyday world, where its effects will be visible to everyone.

By phrasing these lines as a question, Yeats tantalizes us with all the possibilities of what he might be describing. In the time since Yeats wrote the poem, the beast has been interpreted as a prediction of everything bad that the twentieth century has wrought, particularly the horrors of World War II: Hitler, fascism, and the atomic bomb.

It is the "nightmare" from which society would not be able to awake. Of course, Yeats would not have known about these specific things. However, he did seem to have a sense that things were still getting worse while most people around him thought things were getting better.

Some readers have thought that the birth at the end was an ironic vision of the Antichrist, an embodiment of evil as powerful as Christ was an embodiment of goodness.

Others believe that the beast, even though it is described as "rough," might not be evil, but merely a manifestation of the kind of harsh justice that society as a whole deserves. In other words, things have become so violent and decadent that God's only solution is to deploy his all-purpose cleanser.

**Summary**

The speaker describes a nightmarish scene: the falcon, turning in a widening "gyre" (spiral), cannot hear the falconer; "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold"; anarchy is loosed upon the world; "The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere/the ceremony of innocence is drowned." The best people, the speaker says, lack all conviction, but the worst "are full of passionate intensity."

Surely, the speaker asserts, the world is near a revelation; "Surely the Second Coming is at hand." No sooner does he think of "the Second Coming," then he is troubled by a vast image of the Spiritus Mundi, or the collective

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spirit of mankind: somewhere in the desert, a giant sphinx ("A shape with lion body and the head of a man, / A gaze as blank and pitiless as the sun") is moving, while the shadows of desert birds reel about it. The darkness drops again over the speaker's sight, but he knows that the sphinx's twenty centuries of "stony sleep" have been made a nightmare by the motions of "a rocking cradle." And what "rough beast," he wonders, "its hour come round at last, / Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"

### Form

"The Second Coming" is written in a very rough iambic pentameter, but the meter is so loose, and the exceptions so frequent, that it actually seems closer to free verse with frequent heavy stresses. The rhymes are likewise haphazard; apart from the two couplets with which the poem opens, there are only coincidental rhymes in the poem, such as "man" and "sun."

### Commentary

Because of its stunning, violent imagery and terrifying ritualistic language, "The Second Coming" is one of Yeats's most famous and most anthologized poems; it is also one of the most thematically obscure and difficult to understand. (It is safe to say that very few people who love this poem could paraphrase its meaning to satisfaction.) Structurally, the poem is quite simple—the first stanza describes the conditions present in the world (things falling apart, anarchy, *etc.*), and the second surmises from those conditions that a monstrous Second Coming is about to take place, not of the Jesus we first knew, but of a new messiah, a "rough beast," the slouching sphinx rousing itself in the desert and lumbering toward Bethlehem. This brief exposition, though intriguingly blasphemous, is not terribly complicated; but the question of what it should signify to a reader is another story entirely.

Yeats spent years crafting an elaborate, mystical theory of the universe that he described in his book *A Vision*. This theory issued in part from Yeats's lifelong fascination with the occult and mystical, and in part from the sense of responsibility. Yeats felt to order his experience within a structured belief system. The system is extremely complicated and not of any lasting importance—except for the effect that it had on his poetry, which is of extraordinary lasting importance. The theory of history Yeats articulated in *A Vision* centers on a diagram made of two conical spirals, one inside the other, so that the widest part of one of the spirals rings around the narrowest part of the other spiral, and *vice versa*. Yeats believed that this image (he called the spirals "gyres") captured the contrary motions inherent within the historical process, and he divided each gyre into specific regions that represented particular kinds of historical periods (and could also represent the psychological phases of an individual's development).

"The Second Coming" was intended by Yeats to describe the current historical moment (the poem appeared in 1921) in terms of these gyres. Yeats believed that the world was on the threshold of an apocalyptic revelation, as

history reached the end of the outer gyre (to speak roughly) and began moving along the inner gyre. In his definitive edition of Yeats's poems, Richard J. Finneran quotes Yeats's own notes:

The end of an age, which always receives the revelation of the character of the next age, is represented by the coming of one gyre to its place of greatest expansion and of the other to its place of greatest contraction... The revelation [that] approaches will... take its character from the contrary movement of the interior gyre...

In other words, the world's trajectory along the gyre of science, democracy, and heterogeneity is now coming apart, like the frantically widening flight-path of the falcon that has lost contact with the falconer; the next age will take its character not from the gyre of science, democracy, and speed, but from the contrary inner gyre—which, presumably, opposes mysticism, primal power, and slowness to the science and democracy of the outer gyre. The “rough beast” slouching toward Bethlehem is the symbol of this new age; the speaker's vision of the rising sphinx is his vision of the character of the new world.

This seems quite silly as philosophy or prophecy (particularly in light of the fact that it has not come true as yet). But as poetry, and understood more broadly than as a simple reiteration of the mystic theory of *A Vision*, “The Second Coming” is a magnificent statement about the contrary forces at work in history, and about the conflict between the modern world and the ancient world. The poem may not have the thematic relevance of Yeats's best work, and may not be a poem with which many people can personally identify; but the aesthetic experience of its passionate language is powerful enough to ensure its value and its importance in Yeats's work as a whole.

### Analysis

“The Second Coming” is easily one of the most famous and frequently quoted poems in all of Western literature. Several famous prose writers have used lines from W.B. Yeats's poems as titles to their books, and “The Second Coming” is no exception. For example, Chinua Achebe, an African writer, used part of the third line as the title of his novel, *Things Fall Apart*, and Woody Allen recently wrote a book called *Mere Anarchy*.

Yeats's poem was first published in 1920, a year after the end of World War I, “the Great War,” in which millions of European died. While many people at the time just wanted to get on with their lives, Yeats thought that European society had pretty much broken down, and the poem is a terrifying prediction of future violence. Unfortunately, the rise of Hitler and fascism in the 1930s proved him largely correct, and many find the poem disturbingly prophetic in light of the later wars of the twentieth century. However, we shouldn't somehow think that Yeats was a depressive based on this single work, his bleakest. Many of his other poems engage with more uplifting subjects, like love and Irish folklore. Nor should we think that Yeats was defeatist. After all, he was a very active figure in Irish politics throughout his life, which was

### NOTES

in the process of gaining its independence from England. By the time this poem was published, he had already been famous for many years, and he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923.

## NOTES

Check your progress

1. Write a note on the poem, "Second Coming".

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2. Write about the form of the poem, "Second Coming".

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### 1.3 SAILING TO BYZANTIUM

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#### POEM

##### I

That is no country for old men. The young  
In one another's arms, birds in the trees  
—Those dying generations— at their song,  
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,  
Fish, flesh, or fowl commend all summer long  
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.  
Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
Monuments of unaging intellect.

##### II

An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress,  
Nor is there singing school but studying  
Monuments of its own magnificence;  
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come  
To the holy city of Byzantium.

### III

W.B. Yeats

O sages standing in God's holy fire  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,  
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,  
And be the singing-masters of my soul.  
Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is; and gather me  
Into the artifice of eternity.

### IV

Once out of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

#### **Sailing to Byzantium—A Critical Summary**

“Sailing to Byzantium” is the first poem in a collection called *The Tower*, published in 1928. Perhaps it is the most famous single poem in this collection. Its main concern is aging, passing time and man's mortality. The poem shows how an old man solves the problem of age, death and regeneration. Yeats's comment on the poem will be of interest to the reader: “Now I am trying to write about the state of my soul, for it is right for an old man to make his soul, and some of my thoughts upon that subject known. I have put them into a poem called ‘Sailing to Byzantium’ .... Byzantium was the centre of European civilization and the source of its spiritual philosophy, so I symbolize the search for the spiritual life by a journey to the city.” The poem derives its beauty and strength from a carefully built system of oppositions.

#### **Sensual Life in Ireland**

##### **Stanza I**

The poet, now an old man, vehemently declares that Ireland is not a suitable place for old men because the country seems to belong to the young who adore sensual pleasure. He adds that he has decided to leave Ireland. In the following lines the poet presents a rich and vivid picture of Ireland and highlights how young people are given to the enjoyments of the passing day. It is a beautiful place with a bewitching landscape. The young men and women are in close embrace. The love-birds sitting on the tree top sing out of

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excitement as it is mating season for them. The young of all species – fish, flesh and fowl – adore sensual life. Engrossed in the joys of the senses the young people neglect the “monuments of unageing intellect.” In other words the youth “caught in the sensual music” of life do not care for immortal pleasure offered by the world of art, religion and philosophy. The young of all species are dying from the moment of their birth but they do not notice it. That is the greatest irony. The old man who can no longer participate in sensual delight justifies his spiritual journey to Byzantium in search of “monuments of unageing intellect.”

The highly imagistic first stanza is equally symbolic. While giving a description of the enchanting Irish landscape the poet talks about “the salmon-falls” and “the mackerel-crowed seas.” The salmon and the mackerel are two varieties of fish. They are symbols; and as symbols they represent power and beauty. They are suggestive of teeming life. To enjoy sensual life strength and beauty are essential and the young have them in abundance and indulge in unlimited procreation. The poet dismisses them as dying generations. “Those dying generations” remind the reader of Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale.” The dying generations are caught in the cycle of birth and life up in death. They ignore art that has in an appeal transcending time and death.

### **Journey to Byzantium**

#### **Stanza II**

The first two lines of the second stanza present the miserable predicament of the old man. The image of the insignificant old man gets intensified when he is compared to “a tattered coat upon a stick.” The old man will be considered a figure of fun and will be looked upon contemptuously by others unless he realises the magnificence of the soul. The soul of the aged must seek that which the youth neglects. The old man by his own efforts should understand the greatness of the soul as there is no school to make him realize the magnificence of the soul. Only by studying “monuments” – great works of art – he could realize the magnificence of the human soul. The weaker a man grows in body, the greater should be his joy in the works of art. So the old man says he has sailed the seas and has ultimately arrived at the holy city of Byzantium, the city of the unageing art, to achieve his goal.

“Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing/For every tatter in its mortal dress” is the most significant and at the same time an abstract idea presented in this stanza. The influence of William Blake (a Romantic poet and a mystic) on Yeats is clearly evident here. Blake said he had seen, in a vision, his dead brother’s soul ascending to heaven clapping its hands. Yeats taking a cue from this presents the bizarre image of the soul clapping its hands. But the idea conveyed is clear. As man grows old, the body decays and the soul matures. Hence the dissolution of the body should be a cause for happiness. After death the soul leaves the “tattered frame” and is in a state of ecstasy as it is freed from the prison of the body. So while ascending to heaven the disembodied soul sings loudly clapping its hands.

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Byzantium is a symbol. As a symbol it stands for the immortal world of art. It will be of interest to note that the historic Byzantium was the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire before the attack of the Turks in 1453. It was then known for its art treasures. It was a kind of capitol of art. It was remarkable for the skill of its craftsmen and the beauty of its buildings. Mosaic art and gold enamelling were done to perfection in the city. Byzantium is shown by the poet as the country of the old in contrast to Ireland, the country of the young. In Byzantium "spiritual life and creations of art merge into each other, the merger symbolising the very centre of the Unity of Being." Yeats also brings in the Platonic concept of oneness. All art of realizing the magnificence of the soul is to study the great works of art.

**Appeal to Artists of the Past****Stanza III**

The old poet could now visualize the great artists of the past standing like mosaic figures in the holy fire at the purgatory undergoing a process of purification. He begs "the sages standing in God's holy fire" to come out of the holy fire and spiral down to earth; and he implores them to teach his soul to sing. In other words he makes a fervent appeal to the souls of the past artists to retraverse the stages of their existence (by making spiral - like movement) and come down to earth and consumes his heart away as it is sick with passionate desires. The old man appeals to sages (souls of the great artists of the past) to purge his heart of all impurities and create a taste for eternal verities and values. He wants to become immortal like them and hence implores them to teach him the secrets of the soul and of art. The poet seeks inspiration from masters of the past to accomplish his present task of writing great poetry so as to become immortal like them.

Critics consider this stanza as the poem's climax. The expression "perne in a gyre" found in this stanza poses a problem to the reader in understanding the idea behind it. Yeats, being aware of this, has given a clue to understand this line. According to Yeats "perne" is another name for a spool or a bobbin or a cone-like structure on which the thread is wound. So, to perne is to move with a circular motion. "Gyre" means spiral. Yeats divided history into cycles of about 2000 years each. To represent this conception of time, Yeats uses the geo-metrical symbol of the gyre or cone. (For details read the section "Yeats and His System"). "Consume my heart away sick with desire" is a lyric cry. The reader is reminded of Shelley's influence. Shelley makes a lyric cry in his "Ode to the West Wind". Yeats was an admirer of Shelley.

**Desire to Become an Artefact****Stanza IV**

After death his disembodied soul would not choose any living creature because all living creatures are corruptible. Instead it would choose an incorruptible art object like a golden bird perched on a golden bough fashioned by the Grecian goldsmiths and dwell in it permanently. In other words, once

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the poet is released from the bondage of life he would seek no reincarnation in flesh as physical reincarnation is a state of corruption in which the soul has to remain enslaved by passion. But he would become a golden singing bird such as the one found in the emperor's palace at Byzantium and sing continuously of the past, the present and the future. Unlike an ordinary bird which sings only during "summer", this golden bird, a great work of art, will be singing of "what is past or passing or to come." The ageless golden bird is the artifact and it pours out the soul's music without any interruption to the mythical lords and ladies of Byzantium.

In the first stanza the poet talks about "sensual music." Sensual music which is transient degrades man. In the last stanza he refers to the "spiritual music." Everlasting spiritual music elevates the soul. There is an implicit contrast between the sensual music which commends "whatever is begotten, born and dies" and the eternal music of the golden bird which sings of "what is past or passing or to come." About the idea presented in the last stanza Yeats wrote: "I have read somewhere that in the Emperor's palace at Byzantium was a tree made of gold and silver and artificial birds that sang." The emperor refers to Theophilus who ruled over Byzantium from AD 829 to 842. The impact of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is discernible in this stanza. Some critics are of the opinion that there is nothing so dignified here as in "Ode on a Grecian Urn". The bird is an artificial toy built to amuse the bored emperor. These critics consider the last stanza as the poem's tame ending.

### Glossary

- Line 4 (i) the salmon falls: Precipitous falls in rivers over which the salmon, a kind of fish, leaps in going up river to breed.  
(ii) mackerel-crowded: full of mackerel, a kind of sea-fish marked on the back with dark stripes and much used for food.
- Line 7 caught in that sensual music: attracted by the beauty of a life devoted to the pleasure to the pleasure of the senses.
- Line 9 paltry: petty, worthless.
- Line 10 a tattered coat upon a stick: The shrunken flesh which barely covers the bones is thus effectively compared to a torn coat on a stick. Yeats must have had also in mind the famous comparison of bodies to dresses in the Bhagavad Gita (chapter II) with which he was familiar. Krishna says cast off worn-out bodies and assume new ones just as man clothes.
- Line 16 Byzantium: the city later known as Constantinople and the capital of the Roman Empire from 330 A.D. and also the Eastern Roman Empire from 395 A.D. till its capture by the Turks in 1453 A.D.
- Line 17 (i) perne: Probably in Irish word meaning whirl round as on a bobbin.  
(ii) gyre :a ring, a vortex.

## NOTES

(iii) perne in a gyre : The poet pictures the history and life as a contest between pairs of whirling cones placed opposite each other. As one civilisation decays, another rises up. As subjectivity decays, objectivity progresses. The saints are beyond the whirling gyres, having become "flame" reduced to the simplicity of artistic or spiritual perfection. But this is a state from which there is a return to the world. They are invited to return and help the poet.

Line 22 a dying animal: This refers to the ageing body.

Line 30 set upon bough: Wilson traces the golden tree to Gibbon, who mentions a project of a Byzantine Emperor who was envious of a tree made of gold and silver in the courtyard of the Caliph of Baghdad. The Emperor obtained "a golden tree, with leaves and petals, which sheltered a multitude of birds, warbling their notes". The poet must have related this to many mythological prototypes where the sun and moon hang as fruit and birds sing of regeneration.

Check your progress

3. Write a note on the poem, "Sailing to Byzantium".

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## 1.4 EASTER 1916

### POEM

I have met them at close of day  
 Coming with vivid faces  
 From counter or desk among grey  
 Eighteenth-century houses.  
 I have passed with a nod of the head  
 Or polite meaningless words,  
 Or have lingered awhile and said  
 Polite meaningless words,  
 And thought before I had done  
 Of a mocking tale or a gibe  
 To please a companion  
 Around the fire at the club,  
 Being certain that they and I  
 But lived where motley is worn:

NOTES

All changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.

That woman's days were spent  
In ignorant good-will,  
Her nights in argument  
Until her voice grew shrill.  
What voice more sweet than hers  
When, young and beautiful,  
She rode to harriers?  
This man had kept a school  
And rode our winged horse;  
This other his helper and friend  
Was coming into his force;  
He might have won fame in the end,  
So sensitive his nature seemed,  
So daring and sweet his thought.  
This other man I had dreamed  
A drunken, vainglorious lout.  
He had done most bitter wrong  
To some who are near my heart,  
Yet I number him in the song;  
He, too, has resigned his part  
In the casual comedy;  
He, too, has been changed in his turn,  
Transformed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.

Hearts with one purpose alone  
Through summer and winter seem  
Enchanted to a stone  
To trouble the living stream.  
The horse that comes from the road.  
The rider, the birds that range  
From cloud to tumbling cloud,  
Minute by minute they change;  
A shadow of cloud on the stream  
Changes minute by minute;  
A horse-hoof slides on the brim,

And a horse plashes within it;  
 The long-legged moor-hens dive,  
 And hens to moor-cocks call;  
 Minute by minute they live:  
 The stone's in the midst of all.

## NOTES

Too long a sacrifice  
 Can make a stone of the heart.  
 O when may it suffice?  
 That is Heaven's part, our part  
 To murmur name upon name,  
 As a mother names her child  
 When sleep at last has come  
 On limbs that had run wild.  
 What is it but nightfall?  
 No, no, not night but death;  
 Was it needless death after all?  
 For England may keep faith  
 For all that is done and said.  
 We know their dream; enough  
 To know they dreamed and are dead;  
 And what if excess of love  
 Bewildered them till they died?  
 I write it out in a verse -  
 MacDonagh and MacBride  
 And Connolly and Pearse  
 Now and in time to be,  
 Wherever green is worn,  
 Are changed, changed utterly:  
 A terrible beauty is born.

Easter, 1916 is a poem by W. B. Yeats describing the poet's torn emotions regarding the events of the Easter Rising staged in Ireland against British rule on Easter Monday, April 24, 1916. The uprising was unsuccessful, and most of the Irish republican leaders involved were executed for treason. The poem was written between May and September 1916.

#### Commentary and Interpretation

Although a committed nationalist, Yeats generally disapproved of violence as a means to securing Irish independence, and as a result had strained relations with some of the figures who eventually led the uprising.

## NOTES

The deaths of these revolutionary figures at the hands of the British however, was as much a shock to Yeats as it was to ordinary Irish people at the time who did not expect events to take a worse turn so soon. Yeats was working through his feelings about the revolutionary movement in this poem, and the insistent refrain about how “a terrible beauty is born” turned out to be rather prescient—as the brutal execution of the Easter Rising leaders by the British had the opposite intended effect, and led to a reinvigoration of the Irish Republican movement rather than its dissipation.

The initial social and ideological distance between Yeats and some of the revolutionary figures is portrayed in the poem when, in the first stanza, the poem’s narrator admits to having exchanged only “polite meaningless words” (6) with the revolutionaries prior to the uprising, sharing perhaps “a mocking tale or gibe” (10) but nothing more. However, this attitude changes with the refrain at the end of the stanza, when Yeats moves from a feeling of separation between the narrator and the revolutionaries, to a mood of distinct unity, by including all subjects of the poem in the last line with referent to the utter change that is happening when the revolutionary leaders were executed by the British: “All changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born.” (15–16) These last lines of the stanza have rhythmic similarities to the popular ballads of the era as well as syntactic echoes of William Blake.

In the second stanza, the narrator proceeds to describe in greater detail the key figures involved in the Easter uprising, alluding to them without actually listing names. The female revolutionary described at the opening of the stanza is Countess Markiewicz who was well-known to Yeats and a long-time friend. The man who “kept a school/And rode our winged horse” is a reference to Patrick Pearse, and the lines about Pearse’s “helper and friend” allude to Thomas MacDonagh. In Yeats’s description of the three, his torn feelings about the Easter uprising are most keenly communicated. He contrasted the “shrill” voice of Countess Markiewicz as a revolutionary, with his remembrance of her uncomparably “sweet” voice when she was a young woman; and he contrasted the haughty public personae of Pearse and MacDonagh against his impression of their “sensitive” nature, describing how “daring and sweet” their ideals were even though they had to resort to “force”.

This stanza also showed how Yeats was able to separate his own private feelings towards some of the revolutionary figures from the greater nationalist cause that the group was pursuing. Whilst Yeats had positive regard for the three Republican leaders mentioned above, he despised Major John MacBride, who as the estranged husband of Maud Gonne (who in turn had been the object of Yeats’s romantic feelings for a number of years) had abused both Gonne and their daughter during their marriage. In this poem, although MacBride is alluded to as a “vainglorious lout” (32) who had “done most bitter wrong” (33) to those close to the narrator’s heart; nevertheless, Yeats includes him in his eulogy as among those who have fallen for their republican ideals: “Yet I number him in the song;/He, too, has resigned his part/In the casual comedy/

## NOTES

He, too, has been changed in turn" (36–7). The phrase "the casual comedy" is full of sarcasm — it points to an unnecessary loss of life (a point he picks up again in a later stanza) as well as the senselessness of the killings. Yeats emphasises his repeated charge at the end of the stanza, that, as a result of the execution of the Easter Rising leaders, "A terrible beauty is born" (40).

The third stanza differs from the first two stanzas by abandoning the first-person narrative of "I" and moving to the natural realm of streams, clouds, and birds. The speaker elaborates on the theme of change ("Minute by minute they change (48) ... Changes minute by minute" (50)) and introduces the symbol of the stone, which opens and closes the stanza. Unlike the majority of images presented in this stanza, of clouds moving, seasons changing, horse-hoof sliding, which are characterized by their transience, the stone is a symbol of permanence. Yeats compares the fixedness of the revolutionaries' purpose to that of the stone, their hearts are said to be "enchanted to a stone" (43). The stone disturbs or "trouble[s]" "the living stream" (44), a metaphor for how the steadfastness of the revolutionaries' purpose contrasts sharply with the shifting transience of popular moods. The singularity of their purpose, leading to their ultimate deaths, cut through the complacency and indifference of everyday Irish society at the time.

The fourth and last stanza of the poem resumes the first person narrative of the first and second stanzas. The stanza returns to the image of the stony heart: "Too long a sacrifice/Can make a stone of the heart" (57–8), Yeats wrote, putting the determined struggle of Irish republicans in the Easter Rising in the context of the long, turbulent history of British colonialism in Ireland, as well as alluding to the immense psychological costs of the long struggle for independence. Indeed, the narrator cries, "O when may it suffice?", and answering his own question with the line, "That is heaven's part" (making an allusion to Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*— the parallel line occurs in Act I, scene V, regarding Gertrude's guilt: "Against thy mother aught: leave her to heaven"). In Yeats's schema, Heaven's role is to determine when the suffering will end and when the sacrifices are considered sufficient (59–60); whilst the role of the people left behind is to forever remember the names of those who had fallen in order to properly lay their wandering spirits to rest: "our part/To murmur name upon name,/as a mother names her child/ when sleep at last has come/On limbs that had run wild." (60–3).

In the second half of the last stanza, the narrator wonders aloud whether the sacrifices were indeed warranted: "Was it needless deaths after all?" (67), contemplating the possibility that the British might still allow the Home Rule Act 1914 to come into force without the uprising. However, Yeats made the point that what's done is done. All that is important is to remember the revolutionaries' dream and carry on: "We know their dream; enough/To know they dreamed and are dead." There is no point arguing over whether these revolutionaries should or shouldn't have acted so rashly for their cause as they did: "And what if excess of love/bewildered them till they died?" These are

some of the most poignant lines in the poem. The phrase "excess of love" (72) also recalls the character of Oisín in Yeats's long poem "The Wanderings of Oisín."

## NOTES

In the end, the narrator resigns to commemorating the names of those fallen revolutionary figures, viz. Thomas MacDonagh, John MacBride, James Connolly and Patrick Pearse, as eternal heroes of the Irish Republican movement (symbolised by the colour green), with Yeats adapting the final refrain to reflect the price these people paid to change the course of Irish history:

"I write it out in a verse -  
MacDonagh and MacBride  
And Connolly and Pearse  
Now and in time to be,  
Wherever green is worn,  
Are changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born."

The extent to which Yeats was willing to eulogize the members of the Easter Rising can be seen in his usage of "green" (78) to commemorate said members above, even though he generally abhors the use of the colour green as a political symbol (Yeats's abhorrence is such that he forbade green as the color of the binding of his books). In commemorating the names of the revolutionaries in eloquent lamentation in the final stanza, including even his love rival Major John MacBride, Yeats reconciled his personal private sentiments towards some of the individuals involved with the larger nationalist sentiments upheld and championed by the poem, even if there were revolutionaries whose strategies he didn't fully agree with. Yeats has an interesting perspective on the historical significance of his poem, adding to the tension of his recording. The revolutionaries "now and in time to be (77)... are changed, changed utterly" (79) — the knowledge of which shows Yeats's astute insight into the historical importance of his poetic memorial of these revolutionary figures.

Interestingly, the date of the Easter Rising can be seen in the structure of the poem also: there are 16 lines (for 1916) in the first and third stanzas, 24 lines (for April 24, the date the Rising began) in the second and fourth stanzas, and four stanzas in total (which refers to April, the fourth month of the year).

### Summary

The poem begins by paying tribute to the Irish people for leaving behind their previously mundane, trivial lives to dedicate themselves to the fight for independence. In lines which become a refrain, Yeats proclaims, "All changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born."

## NOTES

The second stanza singles out individual martyrs, killed or imprisoned for their activities, among them his childhood friend Countess Markiewicz and Major John MacBride, the husband of Maud Gonne, the woman Yeats had loved long and unrequited. Although he had considered MacBride merely "a drunken, vainglorious lout," Yeats acknowledges that he too has been ennobled by his heroism.

Stanza 3 notes paradoxically that these martyrs are all changed in that they have become unchanging: their hearts, united by one purpose, have become unchanging as stone, in disturbing contrast to the living stream of ordinary human life. In a characteristic shift of mood, Yeats uses the stone metaphor to warn of the danger of fanaticism: "Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart."

The final stanza raises but quickly abandons essentially unanswerable questions about the duration and value of the Irish struggle and the trustworthiness of England's promise of independence. Instead Yeats confines himself to the more modest task of paying tribute to the fallen patriots by naming them with the tenderness of a mother naming her child. While acknowledging the awful finality of death, Yeats proclaims the meaningfulness of their enterprise, in which they doffed the "motley" of their former clownish days to don green in a life both terrible and beautiful in its purpose.

With rare compression, Yeats not only succeeds in expressing his ambivalence about patriotism in general and about the Irish cause in particular, but he also allows the reader to follow sympathetically the shifts of thought and feeling in the troubled mind of a poet who is both critical and compassionate.

**Check your progress****4. Write about the setting of the poem, "Easter 1916".**


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## **1.5 A DIALOGUE OF SELF AND SOUL**

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**POEM****I**

*My Soul*, I summon to the winding ancient stair;  
 Set all your mind upon the steep ascent,  
 Upon the broken, crumbling battlement,  
 Upon the breathless starlit air,

NOTES

"Upon the star that marks the hidden pole;  
Fix every wandering thought upon  
That quarter where all thought is done:  
Who can distinguish darkness from the soul

*My Self.* The consecrated blade upon my knees  
Is Sato's ancient blade, still as it was,  
Still razor-keen, still like a looking-glass  
Unspotted by the centuries;  
That flowering, silken, old embroidery, torn  
From some court-lady's dress and round  
The wooden scabbard bound and wound  
Can, tattered, still protect, faded adorn

*My Soul.* Why should the imagination of a man  
Long past his prime remember things that are  
Emblematical of love and war?  
Think of ancestral night that can,  
If but imagination scorn the earth  
And intellect is wandering  
To this and that and t'other thing,  
Deliver from the crime of death and birth.

*My self.* Montashigi, third of his family, fashioned it  
Five hundred years ago, about it lie  
Flowers from I know not what embroidery —  
Heart's purple — and all these I set  
For emblems of the day against the tower  
Emblematical of the night,  
And claim as by a soldier's right  
A charter to commit the crime once more.

*My Soul.* Such fullness in that quarter overflows  
And falls into the basin of the mind  
That man is stricken deaf and dumb and blind,  
For intellect no longer knows  
I, *Is* from the I, *Ought*, or I *knower* from the I *Known* —  
That is to say, ascends to Heaven;  
Only the dead can be forgiven;  
But when I think of that my tongue's a stone.

*My Self.* A living man is blind and drinks his drop.  
 What matter if the ditches are impure?  
 What matter if I live it all once more?  
 Endure that toil of growing up;  
 The ignominy of boyhood; the distress  
 Of boyhood changing into man;  
 The unfinished man and his pain  
 Brought face to face with his own clumsiness;  
 The finished man among his enemies? —  
 How in the name of Heaven can he escape  
 That defiling and disfigured shape  
 The mirror of malicious eyes  
 Casts upon his eyes until at last  
 He thinks that shape must be his shape?  
 And what's the good of an escape  
 If honour find him in the wintry blast?  
 I am content to live it all again  
 And yet again, if it be life to pitch  
 Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch,  
 A blind man battering blind men;  
 Or into that most fecund ditch of all,  
 The folly that man does  
 Or must suffer, if he woos  
 A proud woman not kindred of his soul.  
 I am content to follow to its source  
 Every event in action or in thought;  
 Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!  
 When such as I cast out remorse  
 So great a sweetness flows into the breast  
 We must laugh and we must sing,  
 We are blest by everything,  
 Everything we look upon is blest.

## NOTES

**Summary**

In the first stanza the Soul calls the reader to the tower of learning where "the star," the most distant part of our universe, "marks the hidden pole." The soul seems to be talking about the contemplation of eternity. On the other hand, the poem itself seems to imply that the soul's goal is so vague as to be virtually unknowable. "Thought," as represented by the tower, cannot distinguish

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"darkness from the soul." In a later poem Yeats says the tower is "half dead at the top." If we see the tower as an individual, as a source of knowledge, this would seem to imply that there is no more original thought there. If, on the other hand, we see the tower as a phallic symbol, it has become impotent.

In the second stanza, self says it holds an ancient Japanese blade wrapped in a piece of embroidered silk. As pointed out in the next stanza, these seem to be symbols of war and love. The sword can stand for the blood that has been spilled, while the dress seems to have been given to the samurai out of love. The sword also seems to represent self-discovery, "a looking glass," where man discovers his penchant for violence. The silken embroidery represents art, one thing many romanticists felt transcended time.

Soul argues that these are foolish symbols, and that if imagination would just "scorn the earth" (perhaps, instead, contemplate how many angels can dance on the head of a pin or meditate on its navel) and intellect would quit wandering from topic to topic, then together they could deliver us from the "crime of death and birth," suggesting a Buddhist-like escape from the cycle of eternal rebirth.

In the fourth stanza, Self sets purple flowers the color of the heart and the sword, with its implied blood, against the darkness that the tower represents. Passion, in and of itself, Yeats seems to suggest can make life meaningful. We shouldn't try to avoid life and death; we should live it passionately.

Soul finally argues that when intellect and imagination are focused on philosophy that intellect no longer knows Is from Ought or Knower from Known and that is like ascending to Heaven. It's obvious that Yeats is a Romantic and believes in the power of intuition, not rational arguments. Part II of the poem is spoken entirely by the Self. Luckily, it needs little explanation. It is a celebration of life itself, though a rather strange celebration, no doubt, by some people's standards. No matter how miserable our life has been, the narrators argues, if we follow it to its source, measure the lot, and forgive ourselves for our mistakes, we will transcend those mistakes and become "blest."

Part of the power of the poem comes from our realization that, we, too, have suffered most of these indignities. Who hasn't felt the awkwardness of childhood, or the fears of becoming a man or woman, and fear of enemies who would have our job? How can we escape the hurtful image that malicious acquaintances project onto us at different times of life? The power of the poem, of course, also comes from the power of the description, not the mere intellectual argument. Lines like ... if it be life to pitch/Into the frog-spawn of a blind man's ditch,/A blind man battering blind men" are the kinds of lines that can stay with you for years. Equally amazing is how these lines can be transformed into the optimistic lines that the poem ends with: "We must laugh and we must sing,/We are blest by everything,/Everything we look upon is

blest." Yeats must have been blessed by the blarney stone to compose lines this magnificent.

W.B. Yeats

### Analysis

Self-imagery in the Poetry of W. B. Yeats The first aim of W. B. Yeats's self-characterizations is to dramatize his personality a self-referential with direct, passionate speech. His strategies differ according to the subject, theme, and occasion, but his self-referential poems show how autobiography (with linked images and allusions) informs the carefully arranged mythology of his personal utterance. To achieve this passionate personal utterance, Yeats adopts a poetic mask to present a credible, unsentimental, discursive tone. Without the mask as a distancing device, Yeats's self-characterizations could easily degenerate into mere self-expression. The artifice of an extroverted persona (his anti-self) allows him an emotional buffer between personal passion and self-pity. One way he gets his points across without hand wringing is to exploit a grammatical demarcation. In "Adam's Curse," for example, Yeats objectifies the toil and pain of creating poetry and beauty by using the plural pronouns "we" and "us." Even the "I" that closes the last stanza in the historical present sounds more statemental than subjective. To realize how drastically the mode of self-characterization determines the poem's tone (and thus its emotive message) one could change the voice to the first person: "A line will take me hours" or "My stitching and unstitching." Yeats's strategy for using himself in this poem or that calls for dramatizing rather than sympathizing. Such self-characterizations highlight an attitude or theme without spotlighting the speaker as a wholly self-referential "I and only I." Yeats characterizes himself in "Adam's Curse" as lover and poet discussing with Maude Gonne and another woman elevated notions of rigor and style in poetry, beauty, and love. In one of the Yeats-Gonne variations, love diminishes over time like the pastel, hollowed moon. More significantly, "Adam's Curse" marks a turning point in Yeats's style of self-projection from the pastoral manifesto of "The Happy Shepherd" and symbol-brocaded "The Wanderings of Oisín" to a conversational tone and modernized form. Yeats carries several arrows in his rhetorical quiver. In "The Cold Heaven" the crossed-love theme surfaces within a sudden epiphany of a cosmic over-arching, an incident of dreaming-back after death (an occult notion elaborated in *A Vision*), and a closing question. The strategy of "A Prayer for My Daughter," on the other hand, takes advantage of the conventions of address inherent in an apostrophe. "The Tower" tumbles through an acceptable testamentary discursiveness, and "Dialogue of Self and Soul" uses the strategy of an interior debate to introduce a Nietzschean dithyramb of tragic joy and cyclic recurrence.

If "Adam's Curse" represents a change in Yeats's style, "Dialogue of Self and Soul" represents a change in his attitude. He dramatizes his own internal conflicts as opposites and reconciles them with a Dionysian credo. Self-mastery replaces lamentation. Sato's blade, an unspotted soul-symbol, replaces pastel weariness, remorse, and longing. Heaven is no longer cold. Ecstatic recurrence

### NOTES

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replaces unforgiving punishment; reality replaces romantic dreaminess and dislocated desire. Instead of a battered kettle in "The Tower" the body becomes the sheaf of the timeless sword-as-soul. "Dialogue of Self and Soul" also exemplifies one of Yeats's favorite modes of self-characterization—summoning memories to maintain a coherent context for his self-characterizations, and thereby dramatizing his evolving outlook. Friends and associates serve as supporting actors; concrete items in his daily life—restored tower, Sato's blade, the wind off the coast—become emblems or props in complex meditative poems. Over time, his self-characterization becomes something of a self-institutionalization—he carries his own frame of public reference. Yeats's poems enumerates old themes well before he writes "The Circus Animals' Desertion." The specimen poems here, especially "The Tower" and "Dialogue of Self and Soul," enumerate themes found in poems only; the wayward circus animals emblemize themes found in his narrative and dramatic writings. In "A Prayer for My Daughter" Yeats dramatizes public and internal opposites to show his way with of thinking and feeling. From his convulsive experience with Maude Gonne's violent politics he draws the antitheses of those aristocratic qualities he invokes for his daughter—beauty, custom, ceremony, innocence, kindness, emotional balance, and domestic rootedness—symbolized by the centered, sheltering, spreading laurel tree. Cf. the chestnut tree in "Among School Children." His self-characterization, based on the old dictum that the style is the man, includes a compulsive interweaving of images and symbols as a recurrent, personalized code. The prayer that his daughter avoid social turmoil and political hatred illustrates the role of accumulated self-characterization as one of the apparent objections of his poetry. In this sense, his poems cannot be isolated without a contextual loss. Precedents from old books in "Adam's Curse" become the precedents from Yeats's own previous books of poetry. Thus, it is insufficient to read "A Prayer for My Daughter" without the context and carry-over connotations from Yeats's anguishing Maude Gonne poems, nasty public controversies, feminine militancy, and Dublin's political paltriness. Similarly, the virtues he envisions for his daughter incorporate his self-dramatizations in a dozen poems idealizing the aristocratic environs of the Gregorys' Coole Park. The central point is that Yeats's self-characterizations are not supplements to the poems but increments to his ideal of the unity of self.

**Check your progress**

5. Comment on the first stanza of the poem, "Dialogue of self and soul".

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## 1.6 THE TOWER

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W.B. Yeats

### Sailing to Byzantium

#### I

THAT is no country for old men. The young  
In one another's arms, birds in the trees  
—Those dying generations—at their song,  
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,  
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long  
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.  
Caught in that sensual music all neglect  
Monuments of unageing intellect.  
An aged man is but a paltry thing,  
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless  
Soul clap its hands and sing, and louder sing  
For every tatter in its mortal dress,  
Nor is there singing school but studying  
Monuments of its own magnificence;  
And therefore I have sailed the seas and come  
To the holy city of Byzantium.  
O sages standing in God's holy fire  
As in the gold mosaic of a wall,  
Come from the holy fire, perne in a gyre,  
And be the singing-masters of my soul.  
Consume my heart away; sick with desire  
And fastened to a dying animal  
It knows not what it is; and gather me  
Into the artifice of eternity.  
Once out Of nature I shall never take  
My bodily form from any natural thing,  
But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make  
Of hammered gold and gold enamelling  
To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;  
Or set upon a golden bough to sing  
To lords and ladies of Byzantium  
Of what is past, or passing, or to come.

### NOTES

II

NOTES

WHAT shall I do with this absurdity —  
O heart, O troubled heart — this caricature,  
Decrepit age that has been tied to me  
As to a dog's tail?  
Never had I more  
Excited, passionate, fantastical  
Imagination, nor an ear and eye  
That more expected the impossible —  
No, not in boyhood when with rod and fly,  
Or the humbler worm, I climbed Ben Bulben's back  
And had the livelong summer day to spend.  
It seems that I must bid the Muse go pack,  
Choose Plato and Plotinus for a friend  
Until imagination, ear and eye,  
Can be content with argument and deal  
In abstract things; or be derided by  
A sort of battered kettle at the heel.  
I pace upon the battlements and stare  
On the foundations of a house, or where  
Tree, like a sooty finger, starts from the earth;  
And send imagination forth  
Under the day's declining beam, and call  
Images and memories  
From ruin or from ancient trees,  
For I would ask a question of them all.  
Beyond that ridge lived Mrs. French, and once  
When every silver candlestick or sconce  
Lit up the dark mahogany and the wine.  
A serving-man, that could divine  
That most respected lady's every wish,  
Ran and with the garden shears  
Clipped an insolent farmer's ears  
And brought them in a little covered dish.  
Some few remembered still when I was young  
A peasant girl commended by a Song,  
Who'd lived somewhere upon that rocky place,  
And praised the colour of her face,  
And had the greater joy in praising her,

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Remembering that, if walked she there,  
Farmers jostled at the fair  
So great a glory did the song confer.  
And certain men, being maddened by those rhymes,  
Or else by toasting her a score of times,  
Rose from the table and declared it right  
To test their fancy by their sight;  
But they mistook the brightness of the moon  
For the prosaic light of day—  
Music had driven their wits astray—  
And one was drowned in the great bog of Cloone.  
Strange, but the man who made the song was blind;  
Yet, now I have considered it, I find  
That nothing strange; the tragedy began  
With Homer that was a blind man,  
And Helen has all living hearts betrayed.  
O may the moon and sunlight seem  
One inextricable beam,  
For if I triumph I must make men mad.  
And I myself created Hanrahan  
And drove him drunk or sober through the dawn  
From somewhere in the neighbouring cottages.  
Caught by an old man's juggleries  
He stumbled, tumbled, fumbled to and fro  
And had but broken knees for hire  
And horrible splendour of desire;  
I thought it all out twenty years ago:  
Good fellows shuffled cards in an old bawn;  
And when that ancient ruffian's turn was on  
He so bewitched the cards under his thumb  
That all but the one card became  
A pack of hounds and not a pack of cards,  
And that he changed into a hare.  
Hanrahan rose in frenzy there  
And followed up those baying creatures towards —  
O towards I have forgotten what — enough!  
I must recall a man that neither love  
Nor music nor an enemy's clipped ear  
Could, he was so harried, cheer;

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A figure that has' grown so fabulous  
There's not a neighbour left to say  
When he finished his dog's day:  
An ancient bankrupt master of this house.  
Before that ruin came, for centuries,  
Rough men-at-arms, cross-gartered to the knees  
Or shod in iron, climbed the narrow stairs,  
And certain men-at-arms there were  
Whose images, in the Great Memory stored,  
Come with loud cry and panting breast  
To break upon a sleeper's rest  
While their great wooden dice beat on the board.  
As I would question all, come all who can;  
Come old, necessitous, half-mounted man;  
And bring beauty's blind rambling celebrant;  
The red man the juggler sent  
Through God-forsaken meadows; Mrs. French,  
Gifted with so fine an ear;  
The man drowned in a bog's mire,  
When mocking Muses chose the country wench.  
Did all old men and women, rich and poor,  
Who trod upon these rocks or passed this door,  
Whether in public or in secret rage  
As I do now against old age?  
But I have found an answer in those eyes  
That are impatient to be gone;  
Go therefore; but leave Hanrahan,  
For I need all his mighty memories.  
Old lecher with a love on every wind,  
Bring up out of that deep considering mind  
All that you have discovered in the grave,  
For it is certain that you have  
Reckoned up every unforeknown, unseeing  
plunge, lured by a softening eye,  
Or by a touch or a sigh,  
Into the labyrinth of another's being;  
Does the imagination dwell the most  
Upon a woman won or woman lost?  
If on the lost, admit you turned aside

From a great labyrinth out of pride,  
Cowardice, some silly over-subtle thought  
Or anything called conscience once;  
And that if memory recur, the sun's  
Under eclipse and the day blotted out.

### III

It is time that I wrote my will;  
I choose upstanding men  
That climb the streams until  
The fountain leap, and at dawn  
Drop their cast at the side  
Of dripping stone; I declare  
They shall inherit my pride,  
The pride of people that were  
Bound neither to Cause nor to State.  
Neither to slaves that were spat on,  
Nor to the tyrants that spat,  
The people of Burke and of Grattan  
That gave, though free to refuse —  
pride, like that of the morn,  
When the headlong light is loose,  
Or that of the fabulous horn,  
Or that of the sudden shower  
When all streams are dry,  
Or that of the hour  
When the swan must fix his eye  
Upon a fading gleam,  
Float out upon a long  
Last reach of glittering stream  
And there sing his last song.  
And I declare my faith:  
I mock plotinus' thought  
And cry in plato's teeth,  
Death and life were not  
Till man made up the whole,  
Made lock, stock and barrel  
Out of his bitter soul,  
Aye, sun and moon and star; all,

### NOTES

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And further add to that  
That, being dead, we rise,  
Dream and so create  
Translunar paradise.  
I have prepared my peace  
With learned Italian things  
And the proud stones of Greece,  
Poet's imaginings  
And memories of love,  
Memories of the words of women,  
All those things whereof  
Man makes a superhuman,  
Mirror-resembling dream.  
As at the loophole there  
The daws chatter and scream,  
And drop twigs layer upon layer.  
When they have mounted up,  
The mother bird will rest  
On their hollow top,  
And so warm her wild nest.  
I leave both faith and pride  
To young upstanding men  
Climbing the mountain-side,  
That under bursting dawn  
They may drop a fly;  
Being of that metal made  
Till it was broken by  
This sedentary trade.  
Now shall I make my soul,  
Compelling it to study  
In a learned school  
Till the wreck of body,  
Slow decay of blood,  
Testy delirium  
Or dull decrepitude,  
Or what worse evil come —  
The death of friends, or death  
Of every brilliant eye  
That made a catch in the breath —

Seem but the clouds of the sky  
When the horizon fades;  
Or a bird's sleepy cry  
Among the deepening shades.

W.B. Yeats

## NOTES

### Summary

The speaker describes the absurdity of the contrast between his old body and his young spirit. He feels more passionate and inspired than ever - even more so than when he was a boy and went fishing in the mountains of Western Ireland. Nevertheless, he feels he must say goodbye to poetry and choose reason instead: it is more becoming to his age. He walks to and fro atop a castle and looks out over the countryside. He sees where the wealthy Mrs. French once lived. Her servant, who knew her wishes well, once cut off the ears of a rude farmer and brought them to her on a covered dish.

When the speaker was young, some men spoke of a legendary peasant girl, who was the most beautiful in the area. One drunk man talked of her often, and in the middle of a drinking session got up to seek her out. He mistook the moon for her lovely face, and drowned in a lake. The man who told the speaker these songs was blind, like Homer.

The girl may well be mistaken for the sun or moon, because, says the speaker, she has betrayed all living men. The speaker himself created Hanrahan twenty years ago. The character was destined to stumble through villages, lamed. When it was the speaker's turn at cards, he shuffled the pack into a pack of hounds, which then turned into a hare. Hanrahan followed these creatures.

The speaker interrupts his own story, crying "enough!" He must remember a man so distraught that neither love nor music nor clipped ears could make him feel better. This man is a ruined master of the house. Before the house went to ruin, servants dressed for war came to the house. The speaker questioned them all, wondering whether they raged against age as he now does. They give no satisfactory answer. The speaker is happy to be left with Hanrahan. He calls up Hanrahan, from the knowledgeable dead, to tell him whether one thinks more often of a woman won or lost. A woman, once lost, is an irretrievable mistake.

The speaker draws up his will, leaving men who fish tirelessly his pride. His pride is not political, or tied up with slaves or tyrants, but that of Grattan and Burke. His pride is as refreshing as an unexpected shower, as poignant as a swansong. He mocks Plato and Plotinus. He is prepared to die with a combination of ancient poetry and of the love of women, both of which make man a superhuman. He leaves his faith and pride to these young fishermen. He will now prepare his body and his mind for death, or, worse, the death of those whom he has loved.

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**Analysis**

In one of the most complicated poems of his career, Yeats tries to come to terms with his age and with the changes his country is undergoing. "The Tower" is presented in a fragmented style, a proto-modernist device that shows Yeats' move away from romantic Irish mythology toward a sparser approach. This change was partially affected by his friendship with Ezra Pound, who encouraged Yeats to seek out alternatives to the flowery language that characterized his earlier collections.

The ideal of manhood and youth is introduced in the first stanza through the representation of the speaker: a young man. This image is pastoral, with the young man fishing in the fertile streams of Ireland. The iconic mountain of Ben Bulbin tells the reader that this is western Ireland, where Yeats used to have his vacation during summers away from London. The speaker's turn to Plato and reason seems forced. Put together with the narrative element of cutting off the farmer's ears, the implication is that the speaker's decision is unnatural and made in a top-down fashion. The poet can impose rules on himself, just as the rich can on the poor.

The lovely peasant girl, whom the speaker also refers to as Helen (as in Helen of Troy), is undoubtedly Maude Gonne. Gonne, a revolutionary who was the great love of Yeats' life, did not return his love. She appears often in Yeats' poetry, often symbolized by or associated with a moon: something lovely, feminine, untouchable, and capable of causing madness. The peasant who drowns in pursuit of her is proof of her power.

The speaker breaks away from the narrative of the girl to present a new character who meets a similarly grim fate. This is yet another modernist device. The speaker breaks down the illusion that the poem is or could be truthful, and displays his ability to create characters at will. Hanrahan is an intertextual character, appearing in other Yeats works. He is an Irish peasant everyman, suffering the afflictions of lameness (whether physical or moral) and alcoholism that were rampant in early 20th-century Ireland. Hanrahan shows a flash of glory, however, in the transfiguration of cards into a pack of hounds. This is an allusion to Cuchulain's (a famous hero of Irish mythology) hounds, which were part of his army. These are quickly turned into a hare, an object of English-style hunting, so the peasant's empowerment is all too brief.

The hare symbol transitions into a description of a great house. In Ireland, a large ruined or empty house always refers to the Protestant Ascendancy: English families that lived in Ireland and formed ruling elite. Most of these manors were destroyed by the IRA during the Anglo-Irish War of 1919–1921. In "The Tower," ghosts of warlike men haunt the house, and it is these ghosts, as well as other people who were old in the speaker's childhood, that he queries about age. They do not wish to answer, so he dismisses their memory, saying he needs only Hanrahan to answer. The poem finishes with the question of Maude Gonne again. Even a reader who does not know the

biographical details can read in the title of the poem that Yeats is in mourning over a lost woman. The phallic image is as lonely as can be.

W.B. Yeats

## Major Themes

### Magic

Magic is the primary spiritual form in this collection, replacing religion as a place to turn in a time of distress. Yeats was brought up in a Protestant family, but turned to theosophy when he became an intellectual. Theosophy, a set of beliefs that declares that all religions hold some measure of truth, tends toward the fantastical in practice. Yeats attended séances and exercised what he called "automatic writing": writing funneled through a poet. These magical trappings are evident in many poems in *The Tower*, including the speaker's ability to call on the "sages" in "Sailing to Byzantium" or the ghosts in "All Souls' Night."

Magic provides one possible solution to the crisis that the poet puzzles over throughout this collection: aging. As he points out in "The Fool by the Roadside," only a fool thinks that life can be made to go from the end point to the beginning, instead of the other way around. But the poet casts himself as this fool, and it seems to be his earnest wish to reverse the life cycle. When he is attended upon by the sages in "Sailing to Byzantium," a reversal, a rebirth, does seem possible. The poet will be reborn through healing fire, like the phoenix.

### Fishing

The activity of fishing appears throughout this collection as a metaphor for youth, life, and health. Yeats uses it to counteract the images of aging. The most common variation on the image of "tattered rags on a stick," is the inverse of fishing. Instead of controlling the rod, a symbol of virility, the aged man is himself trapped, no longer the fisher but the fished.

Fishing holds not only a symbolic but also a historical significance for Yeats, who used to fish during his childhood in the hills of County Sligo. The fish leaping in the water is a common trope for fertility, and Yeats' special mention of salmon leaping upstream is biologically correct (there are many salmon in Irish rivers) and also a possible comment on the Irishman's stubborn and heroic nature. In "The Tower," Yeats leaves the fishermen his pride in his "will." Although he is no longer one of the young, he seems to identify with and admire them.

### Destruction

In keeping with the collection's more general theme of death, Yeats supplements the images of decay with those of active destruction. In addition to nature and time playing an active part in the destruction of the human body, other humans may also choose to destroy one another. In many poems, the speaker seems afraid of the former and horrified by the later.

## NOTES

## NOTES

Part of the horror of destruction is an intrinsic belief in the goodness of beauty and the human body. In "Nineteen Hundred Nineteen," Yeats describes the destruction of an ancient statue and the mob's complete disregard for its beauty or historical significance. Of course the more salient destruction that the IRA and the Black and Tans (they, too, in many senses could be considered a mob) carried out was killings. In mourning the destruction of a beautiful statue, the poet creates a symbol for the slain human and affirms its beauty and significance. Images of destruction, whether they be killings as in "Meditations in a Time of Civil War" or less direct references, appear most frequently in the more political poems in this collection.

### **The Moon**

The moon appears so often in this collection that its significance must be weighed. It is the counter symbol to the destruction that plagues much of the rest of the collection; it is the female force. But although it is a peaceful symbol, the moon also has an edge of danger.

Yeats often compares the moon to a beautiful woman, or draws parallels with Maude Gonne, the woman who refused to love him back. Yeats plays on the word "lunacy" to support the ancient myth that madness and the moon were tied together. This, together with the moon's feminine associations, implies that women, too may drive men mad. This is in keeping with the theme of unrequited lust.

### **Unrequited Lust**

Many poets write of unrequited love, but Yeats, in this collection, confronts unrequited lust. Part of the experience of aging seems to be the loss of physical attractiveness. In "A Man Young and Old," the speaker mourns, "My arms are like the twisted thorns/ And yet there beauty lay." The speaker has been in and out of love, but desire for young women still remains. This is part of the contradiction of a young spirit trapped in an old man's body.

Yeats uses the word "lecher" to describe a person in this situation; it is clear that although he mentions this sort of lust in many of the poems he is aware of the moral aspect of the unequal lust. In "Owen Aherne and his dancers" it seems there is a possibility a young girl might "mistake her childish gratitude for love," but the speaker resolves to "let her choose a young man and all for his wild sake." His strongly expressed desire, not fully but half returned, makes this ending seem generous and self-denying. This resolution does not, however, prevent this sort of desire from reoccurring in other poems.

### **Immortality and Classicism**

A poet so preoccupied with the issue of aging is naturally also preoccupied by the issue of immortality. Critics have explained the shift away from Irish and toward Classical mythology, once again, with Yeats' friendship with Pound and his interest in the modernist literary movement. Putting this aside, however, Irish mythology is much more vague about immortality than

Greek or Latin: in which the gods, and some of their favored mortals, live forever. This may explain the hopeful color that references to Juno and Athena add to some of these poems, and the explicitly classical-themed "Oedipus at Colonus."

### Danger

Danger is ever-present in this collection, whether it be through age, brokenheartedness, or violence. Much of Yeats' description of danger has to do with a heightened time scheme: all men age, but the speaker in "Youth and Age" seems worried about imminent death. All men die, but the speaker in "Meditations in a Time of Civil War" is likely to face sudden death at the hands of intruders.

Danger, characterized by a heightened urgency, creates uncertainty, and that is a dominant mood in *The Tower*. Continuity is represented in this collection by art, especially sculpture, which is a stand-in for culture more generally. Once this is destroyed by the mob, there is no telling what or whom the mob will destroy next. This mood is not confined to Yeats alone, but is visible in much of the literature written directly after WWI.

### NOTES

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## 1.7 LEDA AND THE SWAN

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### POEM

A SUDDEN blow: the great wings beating still  
 Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed  
 By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,  
 He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.  
 How can those terrified vague fingers push  
 The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?  
 And how can body, laid in that white rush,  
 But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?  
 A shudder in the loins engenders there  
 The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
 And Agamemnon dead.  
 Being so caught up,  
 So mastered by the brute blood of the air,  
 Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
 Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

### Summary

The speaker retells a story from Greek mythology, the rape of the girl Leda by the god Zeus, who had assumed the form of a swan. Leda felt a sudden blow, with the "great wings" of the swan still beating above her. Her thighs

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were caressed by “the dark webs,” and the nape of her neck was caught in his bill; he held “her helpless breast upon his breast.” How, the speaker asks, could Leda’s “terrified vague fingers” push the feathered glory of the swan from between her thighs? And how could her body help but feel “the strange heart beating where it lies”? A shudder in the loins engenders “The broken wall, the burning roof and tower, and Agamemnon dead.” The speaker wonders whether Leda, caught up by the swan and “mastered by the brute blood of the air,” assumed his knowledge as well as his power “Before the indifferent beak could let her drop.”

### Form

“Leda and the Swan” is a sonnet, a traditional fourteen-line poem in iambic pentameter. The structure of this sonnet is Petrarchan with a clear separation between the first eight lines (the “octave”) and the final six (the “sestet”), the dividing line being the moment of ejaculation—the “shudder in the loins.” The rhyme scheme of the sonnet is ABAB CDCD EFGEFG.

### Commentary

Like “The Second Coming,” “Leda and the Swan” describes a moment that represented a change of era in Yeats’s historical model of gyres, which he offers in *A Vision*, his mystical theory of the universe. But where “The Second Coming” represents (in Yeats’s conception) the end of modern history, “Leda and the Swan” represents something like its beginning; as Yeats understands it, the “history” of Leda is that, raped by the god Zeus in the form of a swan, she laid eggs, which hatched into Clytemnestra and Helen and the war-gods Castor and Polydeuces—and thereby brought about the Trojan War (“The broken wall, the burning roof and tower, / And Agamemnon dead”). The details of the story of the Trojan War are quite elaborate: briefly, the Greek Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, was kidnapped by the Trojans, so the Greeks besieged the city of Troy; after the war, Clytemnestra, the wife of the Greek leader Agamemnon, had her husband murdered. Here, however, it is important to know only the war’s lasting impact: it brought about the end of the ancient mythological era and the birth of modern history.

Also like “The Second Coming,” “Leda and the Swan” is valuable more for its powerful and evocative language—which manages to imagine vividly such a bizarre phenomenon as a girl’s rape by a massive swan—than for its place in Yeats’s occult history of the world. As an aesthetic experience, the sonnet is remarkable; Yeats combines words indicating powerful action (sudden blow, beating, staggering, beating, shudder, mastered, burning, mastered) with adjectives and descriptive words that indicate Leda’s weakness and helplessness (caressed, helpless, terrified, vague, loosening), thus increasing the sensory impact of the poem.

### Analysis

This is the most famous poem in the collection, and its most intense and immediate in terms of imagery. The myth of Leda and the Swan is a familiar

## NOTES

one from Classical mythology. Zeus fell in love with a mortal, Leda the Trojan queen, and raped her while taking on the form of a swan to protect his identity. She became pregnant with Helen of Troy. That Helen was part goddess helps to explain how her beauty brought about the destruction of two civilizations. Despite its ABAB rhyme scheme, the poem maintains a breathlessness that is partially due to enjambment, a poetic technique that Yeats uses liberally in this collection.

The impregnation in this poem has many layers. There is the physical impregnation of the girl with a daughter, but also the sense that her womb holds the blueprint for the entire Trojan War. Therefore even the rape takes on a sort of inevitability, similar to the events that the still unborn Helen will cause.

Check your progress

6. Write a note on the form of the poem, "Leda and the Swan".

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## 1.8 AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN

### POEM

#### I

I WALK through the long schoolroom questioning;  
 A kind old nun in a white hood replies;  
 The children learn to cipher and to sing,  
 To study reading-books and histories,  
 To cut and sew, be neat in everything  
 In the best modern way — the children's eyes  
 In momentary wonder stare upon  
 A sixty-year-old smiling public man.

#### II

I dream of a Ledaean body, bent  
 Above a sinking fire, a tale that she  
 Told of a harsh reproof, or trivial event  
 That changed some childish day to tragedy —  
 Told, and it seemed that our two natures blent  
 Into a sphere from youthful sympathy,  
 Or else, to alter Plato's parable,  
 Into the yolk and white of the one shell.

NOTES

III

And thinking of that fit of grief or rage  
I look upon one child or t'other there  
And wonder if she stood so at that age —  
For even daughters of the swan can share  
Something of every paddler's heritage —  
And had that colour upon cheek or hair,  
And thereupon my heart is driven wild:  
She stands before me as a living child.

IV

Her present image floats into the mind —  
Did Quattrocento finger fashion it  
Hollow of cheek as though it drank the wind  
And took a mess of shadows for its meat?  
And I though never of Ledaean kind  
Had pretty plumage once — enough of that,  
Better to smile on all that smile, and show  
There is a comfortable kind of old scarecrow.

V

What youthful mother, a shape upon her lap  
Honey of generation had betrayed,  
And that must sleep, shriek, struggle to escape  
As recollection or the drug decide,  
Would think her Son, did she but see that shape  
With sixty or more winters on its head,  
A compensation for the pang of his birth,  
Or the uncertainty of his setting forth?

VI

Plato thought nature but a spume that plays  
Upon a ghostly paradigm of things;  
Solider Aristotle played the taws  
Upon the bottom of a king of kings;  
World-famous golden-thighed Pythagoras  
Fingered upon a fiddle-stick or strings

What a star sang and careless Muses heard:  
Old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird.

W.B. Yeats

## VII

Both nuns and mothers worship images,  
But thos the candles light are not as those  
That animate a mother's reveries,  
But keep a marble or a bronze repose.  
And yet they too break hearts — O presences  
That passion, piety or affection knows,  
And that all heavenly glory symbolise —  
O self-born mockers of man's enterprise;

## NOTES

## VIII

Labour is blossoming or dancing where  
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul.  
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,  
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.  
O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?  
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

### Summary

The speaker paces around a classroom, looking at the schoolchildren. The nun says that what they learn in school is to read and to sing. They learn about history, sewing, and how to be neat "in a modern way." The children stare at the speaker, an old politician.

He dreams of a Leda-like body bent over a fire in a domestic scene. She is telling a story of how a small interaction with a child turned its day to tragedy. Together, over the story, they share a great deal. Looking at the children, he wonders what she was like at their age. He sees her as a child and is mad with love.

Her current, gaunt image comes to mind. She once was pretty, but she is now comfortable and old. Did the speaker's mother, when carrying him, know that seeing this woman would be enough compensation for her child's birth? Plato thought nature to be imperfect; Aristotle contemplated the nature of things, as did Pythagoras...but these are all merely subjects for students to study.

Nuns and mothers adore images, but the mothers' images are their children. The speaker questions life's very location, wondering what part of a

tree is the essence of the tree, what part of a dancer is a dancer, and which is the dance itself.

### Analysis

## NOTES

The subject matter of schoolchildren contrasts greatly with that of the earlier historical poems in this collection. Here is evidence of civil society, of progress, and of modernity - none of which were possible during the Anglo-Irish War or the Civil War. From this, and from the implication that the speaker is a senator (as Yeats was after 1924), one may deduce that this is a later poem, written from the standpoint of a more peaceful Ireland.

The children are poignant for the speaker because they are associated both with an obvious type of innocence and with the woman whom the speaker loves. By comparing her child self and her current incarnation, it is sharply evident to the speaker how she has aged. The imagined conversation between the two, in which she seems to be a schoolteacher rather than a revolutionary, is wishful thinking on his part. Yeats' musings on whether it was destined that he should fall in love with this woman is related to "Leda and the Swan" in that it presupposes a series of events that must come to pass. The final stanza is a philosophical riddle concerning whether man acts or is acted upon, and serves as a connection to Yeats' uncertainty as to whether he loves or was destined to love.

### Themes, Motifs and Symbols of W.B. Yeats

#### Themes

#### The Relationship between Art and Politics

Yeats believed that art and politics were intrinsically linked and used his writing to express his attitudes toward Irish politics, as well as to educate his readers about Irish cultural history. From an early age, Yeats felt a deep connection to Ireland and his national identity, and he thought that British rule negatively impacted Irish politics and social life. His early compilation of folklore sought to teach a literary history that had been suppressed by British rule, and his early poems were odes to the beauty and mystery of the Irish countryside. This work frequently integrated references to myths and mythic figures, including Oisín and Cúchulainn. As Yeats became more involved in Irish politics—through his relationships with the Irish National Theatre, the Irish Literary Society, the Irish Republican Brotherhood, and Maud Gonne—his poems increasingly resembled political manifestos. Yeats wrote numerous poems about Ireland's involvement in World War I ("An Irish Airman Foresees His Death" [1919], "A Meditation in Time of War" [1921]), Irish nationalists and political activists ("On a Political Prisoner" [1921], "In Memory of Eva Gore Booth and Con Markiewicz" [1933]), and the Easter Rebellion ("Easter 1916" [1916]). Yeats believed that art could serve a political function: poems could both critique and comment on political events, as well as educate and inform a population.

## The Impact of Fate and the Divine on History

Yeats's devotion to mysticism led to the development of a unique spiritual and philosophical system that emphasized the role of fate and historical determinism, or the belief that events have been preordained. Yeats had rejected Christianity early in his life, but his lifelong study of mythology, Theosophy, spiritualism, philosophy, and the occult demonstrate his profound interest in the divine and how it interacts with humanity. Over the course of his life, he created a complex system of spirituality, using the image of interlocking gyres (similar to spiral cones) to map out the development and reincarnation of the soul. Yeats believed that history was determined by fate and that fate revealed its plan in moments when the human and divine interact. A tone of historically determined inevitability permeates his poems, particularly in descriptions of situations of human and divine interaction. The divine takes on many forms in Yeats's poetry, sometimes literally ("Leda and the Swan" [1923]), sometimes abstractly ("The Second Coming" [1919]). In other poems, the divine is only gestured to (as in the sense of the divine in the Byzantine mosaics in "Sailing to Byzantium" [1926]). No matter what shape it takes, the divine signals the role of fate in determining the course of history.

## NOTES

### The Transition from Romanticism to Modernism

Yeats started his long literary career as a romantic poet and gradually evolved into a modernist poet. When he began publishing poetry in the 1880s, his poems had a lyrical, romantic style, and they focused on love, longing and loss, and Irish myths. His early writing follows the conventions of romantic verse, utilizing familiar rhyme schemes, metric patterns, and poetic structures. Although it is lighter than his later writings, his early poetry is still sophisticated and accomplished. Several factors contributed to his poetic evolution: his interest in mysticism and the occult led him to explore spiritually and philosophically complex subjects. Yeats's frustrated romantic relationship with Maud Gonne caused the starry-eyed romantic idealism of his early work to become more knowing and cynical. Additionally, his concern with Irish subjects evolved as he became more closely connected to nationalist political causes. As a result, Yeats shifted his focus from myth and folklore to contemporary politics, often linking the two to make potent statements that reflected political agitation and turbulence in Ireland and abroad. Finally, and most significantly, Yeats's connection with the changing face of literary culture in the early twentieth century led him to pick up some of the styles and conventions of the modernist poets. The modernists experimented with verse forms, aggressively engaged with contemporary politics, challenged poetic conventions and the literary tradition at large, and rejected the notion that poetry should simply be lyrical and beautiful. These influences caused his poetry to become darker, edgier, and more concise. Although he never abandoned the verse forms that provided the sounds and rhythms of his earlier poetry, there is still a noticeable shift in style and tone over the course of his career.

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### **Motifs**

#### **Irish Nationalism and Politics**

Throughout his literary career, Yeats incorporated distinctly Irish themes and issues into his work. He used his writing as a tool to comment on Irish politics and the home rule movement and to educate and inform people about Irish history and culture. Yeats also used the backdrop of the Irish countryside to retell stories and legends from Irish folklore. As he became increasingly involved in nationalist politics, his poems took on a patriotic tone. Yeats addressed Irish politics in a variety of ways: sometimes his statements are explicit political commentary, as in "An Irish Airman Foresees His Death," in which he addresses the hypocrisy of the British use of Irish soldiers in World War I. Such poems as "Easter 1916" and "In Memory of Eva Gore Booth and Con Markiewicz" address individuals and events connected to Irish nationalist politics, while "The Second Coming" and "Leda and the Swan" subtly include the idea of Irish nationalism. In these poems, a sense of cultural crisis and conflict seeps through, even though the poems are not explicitly about Ireland. By using images of chaos, disorder, and war, Yeats engaged in an understated commentary on the political situations in Ireland and abroad. Yeats's active participation in Irish politics informed his poetry, and he used his work to further comment on the nationalist issues of his day.

#### **Mysticism and the Occult**

Yeats had a deep fascination with mysticism and the occult, and his poetry is infused with a sense of the otherworldly, the spiritual, and the unknown. His interest in the occult began with his study of Theosophy as a young man and expanded and developed through his participation in the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a mystical secret society. Mysticism figures prominently in Yeats's discussion of the reincarnation of the soul, as well as in his philosophical model of the conical gyres used to explain the journey of the soul, the passage of time, and the guiding hand of fate. Mysticism and the occult occur again and again in Yeats's poetry, most explicitly in "The Second Coming" but also in poems such as "Sailing to Byzantium" and "The Magi" (1916). The rejection of Christian principles in favor of a more supernatural approach to spirituality creates a unique flavor in Yeats's poetry that impacts his discussion of history, politics, and love.

#### **Irish Myth and Folklore**

Yeats's participation in the Irish political system had origins in his interest in Irish myth and folklore. Irish myth and folklore had been suppressed by church doctrine and British control of the school system. Yeats used his poetry as a tool for re-educating the Irish population about their heritage and as a strategy for developing Irish nationalism. He retold entire folktales in **epic** poems and plays, such as *The Wanderings of Oisín* (1889) and *The Death of Cúchulainn* (1939), and used fragments of stories in shorter poems, such as "The Stolen Child" (1886), which retells a parable of fairies

luring a child away from his home, and "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea" (1925), which recounts part of an epic where the Irish folk hero Cuchulain battles his long-lost son by at the edge of the sea. Other poems deal with subjects, images, and themes culled from folklore. In "Who Goes with Fergus?" (1893) Yeats imagines a meeting with the exiled wandering king of Irish legend, while "The Song of Wandering Aengus" (1899) captures the experiences of the lovelorn god Aengus as he searches for the beautiful maiden seen in his dreams. Most important, Yeats infused his poetry with a rich sense of Irish culture. Even poems that do not deal explicitly with subjects from myth retain powerful tinges of indigenous Irish culture. Yeats often borrowed word selection, verse form, and patterns of **imagery** directly from traditional Irish myth and folklore.

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### Symbols

#### The Gyre

The gyre, a circular or conical shape, appears frequently in Yeats's poems and was developed as part of the philosophical system outlined in his book *A Vision*. At first, Yeats used the phases of the moon to articulate his belief that history was structured in terms of ages, but he later settled upon the gyre as a more useful model. He chose the image of interlocking gyres—visually represented as two intersecting conical spirals—to symbolize his philosophical belief that all things could be described in terms of cycles and patterns. The soul (or the civilization, the age, and so on) would move from the smallest point of the spiral to the largest before moving along to the other gyre. Although this is a difficult concept to grasp abstractly, the image makes sense when applied to the waxing and waning of a particular historical age or the evolution of a human life from youth to adulthood to old age. The symbol of the interlocking gyres reveals Yeats's belief in fate and historical determinism as well as his spiritual attitudes toward the development of the soul, since creatures and events must evolve according to the conical shape. With the image of the gyre, Yeats created a shorthand reference in his poetry that stood for his entire philosophy of history and spirituality.

#### The Swan

Swans are a common symbol in poetry, often used to depict idealized nature. Yeats employs this convention in "The Wild Swans at Coole" (1919), in which the regal birds represent an unchanging, flawless ideal. In "Leda and the Swan," Yeats rewrites the Greek myth of Zeus and Leda to comment on fate and historical inevitability: Zeus disguises himself as a swan to rape the unsuspecting Leda. In this poem, the bird is fearsome and destructive, and it possesses a divine power that violates Leda and initiates the dire consequences of war and devastation depicted in the final lines. Even though Yeats clearly states that the swan is the god Zeus, he also emphasizes the physicality of the swan: the beating wings, the dark webbed feet, the long neck and beak. Through this description of its physical characteristics, the swan becomes a

violent divine force. By rendering a well-known poetic symbol as violent and terrifying rather than idealized and beautiful, Yeats manipulates poetic conventions, an act of literary modernism, and adds to the power of the poem.

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### The Great Beast

Yeats employs the figure of a great beast—a horrific, violent animal—to embody difficult abstract concepts. The great beast as a symbol comes from Christian iconography, in which it represents evil and darkness. In “The Second Coming,” the great beast emerges from the Spiritus Mundi, or soul of the universe, to function as the primary image of destruction in the poem. Yeats describes the onset of apocalyptic events in which the “blood-dimmed tide is loosed” and the “ceremony of innocence is drowned” as the world enters a new age and falls apart as a result of the widening of the historical gyres. The speaker predicts the arrival of the Second Coming, and this prediction summons a “vast image” of a frightening monster pulled from the collective consciousness of the world. Yeats modifies the well-known image of the sphinx to embody the poem’s vision of the climactic coming. By rendering the terrifying prospect of disruption and change into an easily imagined horrifying monster, Yeats makes an abstract fear become tangible and real. The great beast slouches toward Bethlehem to be born, where it will evolve into a second Christ (or anti-Christ) figure for the dark new age. In this way, Yeats uses distinct, concrete imagery to symbolize complex ideas about the state of the modern world.

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## SUMMARY

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- Yeats’ early poetry drew heavily on Irish myth and folklore, his later work was engaged with more contemporary issues, and his style underwent a dramatic transformation. His work can be divided into three general periods. The early poems are lushly pre-Raphaelite in tone, self-consciously ornate, and, at times, according to unsympathetic critics, stilted. Yeats began by writing epic poems such as *The Isle of Statues* and *The Wanderings of Oisín*. After *Oisín*, he never attempted another long poem. His other early poems are lyrics on the themes of love or mystical and esoteric subjects. Yeats’ middle period saw him abandon the pre-Raphaelite character of his early work and attempt to turn himself into a Landor-style social ironist.
- Critics who admire his middle work might characterize it as supple and muscular in its rhythms and sometimes harshly modernist, while others find these poems barren and weak in imaginative power. Yeats’ later work found new imaginative inspiration in the mystical system he began to work out for himself under the influence of spiritualism. In many ways, this poetry is a return to the vision of his earlier work. The opposition between the worldly-minded man of the sword and the spiritually-minded man of God, the theme of *The Wanderings of Oisín*, is reproduced in *A Dialogue between Self and Soul*.

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## KEY WORDS

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**1. Revelation**

In religion and theology, revelation is the revealing or disclosing, through active or passive communication with a supernatural or a divine entity.

**2. Anarchy**

Anarchy may refer to any of several political states, and has been variously defined by sources.

**3. Easter**

Easter is the central feast in the Christian liturgical year.

**4. Treason**

Treason is the crime that covers some of the more serious acts of betrayal of one's sovereign or nation.

**5. Byzantium**

Byzantium was an ancient Greek city, founded by Greek colonists from Megara in 667 BC and named after their king Byzas.

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## ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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1. "The Second Coming" is easily one of the most famous and frequently quoted poems in all of Western literature. Several famous prose writers have used lines from W.B. Yeats's poems as titles to their books, and "The Second Coming" is no exception.
2. "The Second Coming" is written in a very rough iambic pentameter, but the meter is so loose, and the exceptions so frequent, that it actually seems closer to free verse with frequent heavy stresses. The rhymes are likewise haphazard; apart from the two couplets with which the poem opens, there are only coincidental rhymes in the poem, such as "man" and "sun."
3. "Sailing to Byzantium" is the first poem in a collection called *The Tower*, published in 1928. Perhaps it is the most famous single poem in this collection. Its main concern is aging, passing time and man's mortality. The poem shows how an old man solves the problem of age, death and regeneration.
4. The poem begins by paying tribute to the Irish people for leaving behind their previously mundane, trivial lives to dedicate themselves to the fight for independence. In lines which become a refrain, Yeats proclaims, "All changed, changed utterly: A terrible beauty is born."
5. In the first stanza the Soul calls the reader to the tower of learning where "the star," the most distant part of our universe, "marks the hidden pole." The soul seems to be talking about the contemplation of eternity. On the other hand, the poem itself seems to imply that the soul's goal is so vague as to be virtually unknowable. "Thought," as represented by the tower, cannot distinguish "darkness from the soul."
6. "Leda and the Swan" is a sonnet, a traditional fourteen-line poem in iambic pentameter. The structure of this sonnet is Petrarchan with a clear separation between the first eight lines (the "octave") and the final six (the "sestet"), the

dividing line being the moment of ejaculation—the “shudder in the loins.” The rhyme scheme of the sonnet is ABAB CDCD EFGEFG.

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### REVIEW QUESTIONS

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1. Write down the critical analysis of the poem, “Second coming”.
2. Describe the critical summary of the poem, “Sailing to Byzantium”.
3. Discuss the religious aspects in the poem, “Easter 1916”.
4. Examine the major themes of the poem, “The Tower”.
5. Write an essay on the superstitious aspects of W.B.Yeats.
6. Enumerate the summary of the poem, “Among School children”.
7. Critically appreciate the poem, “Dialogue between the soul and self”.

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### FURTHER READINGS

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- The Collected poems of W.B.Yeats
- Collected Poems
- A Commentary on the collected poems of W.B.Yeats
- W.B.Yeats: a critical introduction
- William Butler Yeats
- William Blake & Yeats
- Alexander Norman Jeffares
- Stan Smith.

## 2

**T.S. ELIOT****STRUCTURE**

- 2.0 Learning Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The Waste Land
  - *Summary*
  - *Key Words*
  - *Answers to Check Your Progress*
  - *Review Questions*
  - *Further Readings*

**2.0 LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

*After reading this unit, you will be able to:*

- describe the structure and style of T.S. Eliot's Poems
- explain the parts of the poem, "The Waste Land"
- discuss the theme of the poem, "The Waste Land".

**2.1 INTRODUCTION**

Thomas Stearns Eliot (September 26, 1888 – January 4, 1965) was an American-born English poet, playwright, and literary critic, arguably the most important English-language poet of the 20th century. The poem that made his name, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*—started in 1910 and published in Chicago in 1915—is regarded as a masterpiece of the modernist movement. He followed this with what have become some of the best-known poems in the English language, including *Gerontion* (1920), *The Waste Land* (1922), *The Hollow Men* (1925), *Ash Wednesday* (1930), and *Four Quartets* (1945). He is also known for his seven plays, particularly *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935). He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948.

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Born in St. Louis, Missouri, Eliot went east for college and was educated at Harvard. After graduation, he studied philosophy at the Sorbonne for a year, then won a scholarship to Oxford in 1914. An expatriate, he became a British citizen at the age of 39. "My poetry has obviously more in common with my distinguished contemporaries in America than with anything written in my generation in England," he said of his nationality and its role in his work. "It wouldn't be what it is, and I imagine it wouldn't be so good ... if I'd been born in England, and it wouldn't be what it is if I'd stayed in America. It's a combination of things. But in its sources, in its emotional springs, it comes from America." Eliot renounced his citizenship to the United States and said: "My mind may be American but my heart is British".

For a poet of his stature, Eliot produced a relatively small amount of poetry and he was aware of this early in his career. He wrote to J. H. Woods, one of his former Harvard professors, "My reputation in London is built upon one small volume of verse, and is kept up by printing two or three more poems in a year. The only thing that matters is that these should be perfect in their kind, so that each should be an event."

Typically, Eliot first published his poems individually in periodicals or in small books or pamphlets, and then collected them in books. His first collection was *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917). In 1920, he published more poems in *Ara Vos Prec* (London) and *Poems: 1920* (New York). These had the same poems (in a different order) except that "Ode" in the British edition was replaced with "Hysteria" in the American edition. In 1925, he collected *The Waste Land* and the poems in *Prufrock* and *Poems* into one volume and added *The Hollow Men* to form *Poems: 1909-1925*. From then on, he updated this work as *Collected Poems*. Exceptions are *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939), a collection of light verse; *Poems Written in Early Youth*, posthumously published in 1967 and consisting mainly of poems published 1907-1910 in *The Harvard Advocate*, and *Inventions of the March Hare: Poems 1909-1917*, material Eliot never intended to have published, which appeared posthumously in 1997.

### **The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock**

In 1915 Ezra Pound, overseas editor of *Poetry* magazine, recommended to Harriet Monroe, the magazine's founder, that she publish "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock". Although the character Prufrock seems to be middle-aged, Eliot wrote most of the poem when he was only 22. Its now-famous opening lines, comparing the evening sky to "a patient etherised upon a table," were considered shocking and offensive, especially at a time when Georgian Poetry was hailed for its derivations of the 19th century Romantic Poets. The poem follows the conscious experience of a man, Prufrock (relayed in the "stream of consciousness" form characteristic of the Modernists), lamenting his physical and intellectual inertia, the lost opportunities in his life and lack of spiritual progress, with the recurrent theme of carnal love unattained. Critical opinion is divided as to whether the narrator leaves his residence

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during the course of the narration. The locations described can be interpreted either as actual physical experiences, mental recollections, or as symbolic images from the sub-conscious mind, as, for example, in the refrain "In the room the women come and go." The poem's structure was heavily influenced by Eliot's extensive reading of Dante Alighieri, in the Italian, and refers to a number of literary works, including Hamlet and those of the French Symbolists.

Its reception in London can be gauged from an unsigned review in *The Times Literary Supplement* on June 21, 1917: "The fact that these things occurred to the mind of Mr Eliot is surely of the very smallest importance to anyone, even to himself. They certainly have no relation to poetry..."

### The Waste Land

In October 1922 Eliot published *The Waste Land* in *The Criterion*. Eliot's dedication to *il miglior fabbro* ("the better craftsman") refers to Ezra Pound's significant hand in editing and reshaping the poem from a longer Eliot manuscript to the shortened version that appears in publication. It was composed during a period of personal difficulty for Eliot—his marriage was failing, and both he and Vivienne were suffering from nervous disorders. The poem is often read as a representation of the disillusionment of the post-war generation. That year Eliot lived in Lausanne, Switzerland to take a treatment and to convalesce from a break-down. There he wrote the final section, "What the Thunder Said," which contains frequent references to mountains. Before the poem's publication as a book in December 1922, Eliot distanced himself from its vision of despair. On November 15, 1922, he wrote to Richard Aldington, saying, "As for *The Waste Land*, that is a thing of the past so far as I am concerned and I am now feeling toward a new form and style." The poem is known for its obscure nature—its slippage between satire and prophecy; its abrupt changes of speaker, location, and time. Despite this, it has become a touchstone of modern literature, a poetic counterpart to a novel published in the same year, James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Among its best-known phrases are "April is the cruellest month", "I will show you fear in a handful of dust"; and "Shantih shantih shantih," the Sanskrit mantra that ends the poem.

### The Hollow Men

*The Hollow Men* appeared in 1925. For the critic Edmund Wilson, it marked "the nadir of the phase of despair and desolation given such effective expression in *The Waste Land*." It is Eliot's major poem of the late twenties. Similar to other work, its themes are overlapping and fragmentary: post-war Europe under the Treaty of Versailles (which Eliot despised); the difficulty of hope and religious conversion; and Eliot's failed marriage.

Allen Tate perceived a shift in Eliot's method, writing that, "The mythologies disappear altogether in *The Hollow Men*." This is a striking claim for a poem as indebted to Dante as anything else in Eliot's early work, to say

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little of the modern English mythology—the “Old Guy Fawkes” of the Gunpowder Plot—or the colonial and agrarian mythos of Joseph Conrad and James George Frazer, which, at least for reasons of textual history, echo in *The Waste Land*. The “continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” that is so characteristic of his mythical method remained in fine form. *The Hollow Men* contains some of Eliot’s most famous lines, notably its conclusion:

This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but a whimper.

### Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday is the first long poem written by Eliot after his 1927 conversion to Anglicanism. Published in 1930, it deals with the struggle that ensues when one who has lacked faith acquires it. Sometimes referred to as Eliot’s “conversion poem,” it is richly but ambiguously allusive, and deals with the aspiration to move from spiritual barrenness to hope for human salvation. The style is different from the poetry that predates his conversion. Ash Wednesday and the poems that followed had a more casual, melodic, and contemplative method.

Many critics were particularly enthusiastic about it. Edwin Muir maintained that it is one of the most moving poems Eliot wrote, and perhaps the “most perfect,” though it was not well-received by everyone. The poem’s groundwork of orthodox Christianity discomfited many of the more secular literati.

### Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats

In 1930, Eliot published a book of light verse, *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* (“Old Possum” was Ezra Pound’s nickname for him). This first edition had an illustration of the author on the cover. In 1954, the composer Alan Rawsthorne set six of the poems for speaker and orchestra, in a work entitled *Practical Cats*. After Eliot’s death, the book was adapted as the basis of the musical, *Cats*, by Andrew Lloyd Webber, first produced in London’s West End in 1981 and opening on Broadway the following year.

### Four Quartets

Eliot regarded *Four Quartets* as his masterpiece, and it is the work that led to his being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. It consists of four long poems, each first published separately: *Burnt Norton* (1936), *East Coker* (1940), *The Dry Salvages* (1941) and *Little Gidding* (1942). Each has five sections. Although they resist easy characterisation, each begins with a rumination on the geographical location of its title, and each meditates on the nature of time in some important respect—theological, historical, physical—and its relation to the human condition. Each poem is associated with one of the four classical elements: air, earth, water, and fire.

Burnt Norton asks what it means to consider things that might have been. We see the shell of an abandoned house, and Eliot toys with the idea that all these merely possible realities are present together, invisible to us. All the possible ways people might walk across a courtyard add up to a vast dance we can't see; children who aren't there are hiding in the bushes.

Footfalls echo in the memory  
Down the passage which we did not take  
Towards the door we never opened  
Into the rose-garden.

East Coker continues the examination of time and meaning, focusing in a famous passage on the nature of language and poetry. Out of darkness, Eliot offers a solution: "I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope".

The Dry Salvages treats the element of water, via images of river and sea. It strives to contain opposites: "... the past and future/Are conquered, and reconciled".

Little Gidding (the element of fire) is the most anthologized of the Quartets. Eliot's experiences as an air raid warden in The Blitz power the poem, and he imagines meeting Dante during the German bombing. The beginning of the Quartets ("Houses .../Are removed, destroyed") had become a violent everyday experience; this creates an animation, where for the first time he talks of Love as the driving force behind all experience. From this background, the Quartets end with an affirmation of Julian of Norwich: "all shall be well and/All manner of thing shall be well".

The Four Quartets cannot be understood without reference to Christian thought, traditions, and history. Eliot draws upon the theology, art, symbolism and language of such figures as Dante, and mystics St. John of the Cross and Julian of Norwich. The "deeper communion" sought in East Coker, the "hints and whispers of children, the sickness that must grow worse in order to find healing," and the exploration which inevitably leads us home all point to the pilgrim's path along the road of sanctification.

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## 2.2 THE WASTE LAND

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The Waste Land is a 434-line Modernist poem by T. S. Eliot published in 1922. It has been called "one of the most important poems of the 20th century." Despite the poem's obscurity—its shifts between satire and prophecy, its abrupt and unannounced changes of speaker, location and time, its elegiac but intimidating summoning up of a vast and dissonant range of cultures and literatures—the poem has become a familiar touchstone of modern literature. Among its famous phrases are "April is the cruellest month" (its first line); "I will show you fear in a handful of dust"; and (its last line) the mantra in the Sanskrit language "Shantih shantih shantih."

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### Style

The style of the work in part grows out of Eliot's interest in exploring the possibilities of dramatic monologue. This interest dates back at least as far as *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Of course, "The Waste Land" is not a single monologue like "Prufrock." Instead, it is made up of a wild variety of voices (sometimes in monologue, dialogue, or with more than two characters speaking).

The style of the poem overall is marked by the hundreds of allusions and quotations from other texts (classic and obscure; "high-brow" and "low-brow") that Eliot peppered throughout the poem. In addition to the many "high-brow" references and/or quotes from poets like Baudelaire, Shakespeare, Ovid, and Homer, Eliot also included a couple of references to "low-brow" genres. A good example of this is Eliot's quote from the Tin Pan Alley song "The Shakespearian Rag" by Ziegfeld Follies composers Dave Stamper and Gene Buck. There were also a number of low-brow references in the opening section of Eliot's original manuscript (when the poem was entitled "He Do The Policeman in Different Voices"), but they were removed from the final draft after Eliot cut this original opening section.

"The Waste Land" is notable for its seemingly disjointed structure, indicative of the Modernist style of Joyce's *Ulysses* (which Eliot cited as an influence and which he read the same year that he was writing "The Waste Land"). In the Modernist style, Eliot jumps from one voice or image to another without clearly delineating these shifts for the reader. He also includes phrases from multiple foreign languages (both Cyrillic and latinate), indicative of Pound's influence.

### Structure

The poem is preceded by a Latin and Greek epigraph from *The Satyricon* of Petronius. In English, it reads: "I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl of Cumae hanging in a jar, and when the boys said to her, Sibyl, what do you want? she replied I want to die."

Following the epigraph is a dedication (added in a 1925 republication) that reads "For Ezra Pound: il miglior fabbro" Here Eliot is both quoting line 117 of Canto XXVI of Dante's *Purgatorio*, the second cantica of *The Divine Comedy*, where Dante defines the troubadour Arnaut Daniel as "the best smith of the mother tongue" and also Pound's title of chapter 2 of his *The Spirit of Romance* (1910) where he translated the phrase as "the better craftsman." This dedication was originally written in ink by Eliot in the 1922 Boni & Liveright paperback edition of the poem presented to Pound; it was subsequently included in future editions.

The five parts of *The Waste Land* are entitled:

1. The Burial of the Dead
2. A Game of Chess
3. The Fire Sermon

## 4. Death by Water

## 5. What the Thunder Said.

The text of the poem is followed by several pages of notes, purporting to explain his metaphors, references, and allusions. Some of these notes are helpful in interpreting the poem, but some are arguably even more puzzling, and many of the most opaque passages are left unannotated. The notes were added after Eliot's publisher requested something longer to justify printing *The Waste Land* in a separate book.

There is some question as to whether Eliot originally intended *The Waste Land* to be a collection of individual poems (additional poems were supplied to Pound for his comments on including them) or to be considered one poem with five sections.

The structure of the poem is also meant to loosely follow the vegetation myth and Holy Grail folklore surrounding the Fisher King story as outlined by Jessie Weston in her book *From Ritual to Romance* (1920). Weston's book was so central to the structure of the poem that it was the first text that Eliot cited in his "Notes on the Waste Land."

### Summary

Eliot opens the poem with a perfect motto, which adequately captures the prevailing mood of loss and depravity in the modern world. The epigraph presents an image of literally suspended life and Cleanth Brooks rightly argues that it signifies a "death – in – life", from which death proper would be an escape. Incidentally, it ought to be noted that Eliot draws contradistinctions and comparisons between living death and death proper.

The protagonist of the poem is Tiresias with wrinkled female ducks. He is aged but paradoxically is of all ages. His bisexuality endows him with a greater vision and understanding of all matters of life and death and the hereafter of all men and women, individually and collectively. He is the single vice and the many vices that one hears in the poem. He is the active speaker and hearer, and also the passive listener and ironic observer – though a blind prophet – of the wasted and wasting conditions of the waste land. In fact, it is he who sees the substance of the poem as Eliot himself asserts in his notes that trailed this monumental composition. In turn, all the characters in the poem, including the Fisher King and the poet merge and melt in one. He is literally the cosmos for he contains the multitudes. And he is eminently fitted to be the visionary surveying the desolating conditions of the wasteland.

Tiresias, the omniscient protagonist, is blind and his blindness is symbolic of the inability of the Waste Landers to see the wasteness. The Waste Landers are morally depraved and spiritually dead and they are not prepared for any striving. Therefore, they resent Spring, which is a painful disturbance to their unloving state. Unlike Chaucer, they consider April as "the cruellest month breeding Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/memory and desire, stirring/dull roots with spring rain". In their unloving dead state, the painful

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memories and the unrealizable desires are the only momentary flowerings of intuitive life that keeps them warm and helps them maintain a little life. Conversely, they prefer winter for it is in consonance with their dead state. Derek Traversi argues: "covered in forgetful snow" maintaining "a little life" in the form of desiccated roots – "dried season has preserved a faint underground stirring, a suggestion of vitality, which may or may not be the prelude to revival. It may be that this is only of life which the dwellers in the waste land desire, or can contemplate."

The prevailing sense of uneasiness is notably extended and is sustained throughout the first section entitled "THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD". The title aptly signifies that the Waste Landers prefer their unliving state – buried lives – to death proper, which ensures a higher rise to god and better living in the hereafter. Sun and rain and spring are the agents of new life and they are painful disturbances to the Waste Landers who have buried themselves deep in their secular and material lives. And April with religious connotation of being the season fit for undertaking holy pilgrimages is lost sight of by the Waste Landers who are materialistically preoccupied.

Marie is the typical globetrotter of the wasteland leading a directionless, pointless and soulless life. She is homeless and rootless as the Waste Landers are. In consonance with her life of no significance her speech drifts from point to point becoming touchingly inconsequential. Her conversation – presented in scraps – with her cousin, the Archduke, and her childhood reminiscence remembered against a spring background of alternation sun and rain are recalled by Tiresias, the omniscient protagonist. Marie's childhood of innocence and purity and involving a certain amount of "risk" painfully contrasts with her adulthood and by extension with the desolate and desolating conditions of the wasteland. The life of the Waste Landers is one of retreating into a safe meaningless routine, as though such a life is going to help them shun death proper. The poem reads: "In the mountains, there you feel free I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter." Derek Traversi says that Marie's reminiscences "are reflections of an ambivalent state." The empty sophistication of cosmopolitan idlers is suggested by the reference to going South in the winter. The rootless cosmopolitan tourists are not part of the rhythm of the life cycle.

The poem shifts – shifting references constitute a characteristic feather of the poem – from the personal reminiscence of Marie, as remembered by the protagonist to the severe and denunciatory words of the Old Testament prophets, particularly Ezekiel, set in a bleak and somber tone. With the dead tree providing no shelter, with the cricket promising no relief, with the dry stone without sound of water, "son of man" – mankind – suffers as the persecuted Israelites did in their days of exodus to the Promised Land. The "son of man" in the WASTELAND experiences in mind a heap of broken images because of his having moved away from the sea of faith.

The words of the Old Testament prophets recall the doom of the Israelites and hint a similar fate to the Waste Landers if they do not give up

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their "broken images. The words of the prophets also hold out the hope that the Waste Landers can look forward to their spiritual rejuvenation if they move to the shelter of the red rock. This conceptual though it is argued through the roots clutching and sprouting and branching – like the branching arms of the Mother Church instituted by the Messiah – in the spring and rain and growing green. The picture is reminiscent of Christ, who used the phrase, "Son of Man" to identify himself with successive generations of mankind with the roots beginning to clutch and grow into branches holds out the hope to the Waste Landers that they can gain the vital impulse to lead a spiritual life even in the adverse conditions and unfavorable environment of "stony rubbish" in the wasteland. Derek Traversi analyses the lines adequately: "The prevailing impression is still one of monotony, death, desolation, absence of the life-giving water; and yet there is an indication, tenuous even ambiguous, indeed, of change. The "voice" afflicted by its sense of perceiving nothing real beyond the heap of broken images, fragmentary impressions, indicates for red rock in the desert. And the only grim alternative to the unloving dead Waste Landers is to fear death in a handful of dust. They should not delude themselves feeling that if they are materially safe they can shun death. And Derek Traversi states: "In the fear of death, which seems to be the most powerful emotion open to those who dwell in the wasteland there may be the beginning of more positive awareness of what it means to be human, alive."

Love is no more a pure passion working its way up intuitively. It is dragged in the mire in the wasteland. It is reduced to mere animalism and bestial sexuality. In the name of love, deceptions and violations are perpetuated. Pure love, which expects no returns, which is altogether governed by the sense of "otherness", is not practiced in the wasteland.

The Hyacinth girl episode, which is preceded and followed by libretto from Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, highlights primarily the rejuvenation motif. It also points out that love can be intense as well as deceptive. The deceiving quality and the intense nature of love are signified by the silence of the lover. The first fragment from Wagner's opera is hopeful and forward looking in tone. The second fragment is in consonance with the wasteland condition, and leaves one with the impression of love resulting in desolation and emptiness. Both fragments from Wagner's opera prove that love in its highest moments of meaning and intensity, resembles death. The poet drives home the truth that Waste Land love cannot escape from getting reduced to nothingness. And it is only lust that prevails and lust as divorced from any redeeming qualities of love. Madame Sosostris', reference to the tarot pack, like the Hyacinth girl episode, underscores the rejuvenation motif. The hanged god Frazer is associated with the sacrificial deities of the fertility rites to highlight the rejuvenation motif. And the hanged man by shifting its reference stands strikingly for the fulfillment that can be richly experienced in Christ. Eugenides, the Symrna merchant, symbolizes the one eyed, with his one eye on material gains only. His other eye is blind symbolizing that he is blind to the lasting gains that can be gained through spirituality.

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Madame Sosostris, the false prophetess, is paradoxically true in assessing the real mental point stating "fear death by water". She only feels about death proper. The Waste Lander's endeavors are to avoid and shun death for he feels that death proper is an end and is a cruel depriver of life. With this end in view he seeks to shun death by making himself materially strong. He simply fails to realize that death "imaginatively" transforms and leads one to better state in the hereafter. The words of Sosostris "fear death by water" when contrasted with the words from "The Tempest", "those are pearls that were his eyes Look!" highlight the double concept of death as tragically meaningless and conceivably redeeming. Madame Sosostris is sinister and comical and is the contemporary exponent of a false religion. She symbolizes the falsehood that is rampant in the wasteland.

In the unreal city of the wasteland, which is synonymous with hell, the modern materialists lead godless and valueless lives. The spirits of Dante's limbo were dead. But they were spiritually alive. In the modern inferno of the wasteland the hollow men are physically alive but spiritually dead. The reference to Baudelaire in the content, underscores the fact that the wasteland is filled to its capacity with spiritually dead unloving non men. The protagonist undertakes an emotional journey through the unreal city and he witnesses contemporary scene of desolation, emptiness, pains and tears and despair. This state of cultural waste and spiritual aridity is correlated with the catastrophic havoc caused by the Punic Wars at Mylae or the First World War, for the experience and consequence of war remain the same. The protagonist meets crowds of non - men - so many living dead moving like specters in their routine hats exhaling sighs short and frequent, and fixing their eyes before their feet. Their fixation concerns only themselves and none other. They never take into cognizance Christ's concern for others and the basic concept of Christianity to "love thy neighbor as thyself."

The protagonist on meeting Stetson asks him to keep the dog away from the corpse" of Frazer's corn god buried as a part of the vegetation rites. The "corpse" is not to be dug out by man or beast for; the Waste Landers are not for any spiritual revival. If the "corpse" signifies material progress then, they do not want the dog to disturb before the seeds embedded in the "corpse" sprout, thereby ensuring material prosperity. The quotation from Baudelaire proves all the Waste Landers to be hypocrites. And "sprout" has the sexual connotation of oversized sexlessness.

The poem courses from abstractions to concretions. And it moves from the general aspects to particular conditions. The motto for this second section of the poem is derived from Middleton's play *Women Beware Women*. And the motto "The game of chess" highlights the fact that love in the Waste Landers no more intuitive, pure and innocent. But love in the wasteland waters down to the practising of dehumanized sex or indulging in sex violations and deceptions and sex prudery. Furthermore, the motto symbolizes the life of the Waste Landers, which is empty, abstract, traditional, and full of competitive intrigue.

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The sophistication of a rich woman with her hair spreading out in fierce symbolizes the oversexed sexlessness in the wasteland. Her chair is like aburnished throne reminding one of Enobarbus' description of the grandeur and opulence of Antony's Cleopatra. The golden Cupidon, the fruited vine and the carved dolphin are magnified with the synthetic perfumes that permeate the air. These are mere withered stumps of time spelling out no significance to the sophisticated rich women. Beneath the surface or rich sensual variety there lie artificiality and sterile pointlessness.

The waste Landers live in a rat's alley where the dead lose their bones. This pointedly drives home the truth that the Waste Landers are obsessed with the thought of death as a cruel depriver of life and that physical death as a reliever of hallucinatory pains and anxieties, with which they suffer, and that death leads one to a better state in the hereafter. They fail to read the significance in Ferdinand's words which implies, though imaginatively, the transformation that death works. In fact, the Waste Landers hear nothing, see nothing, and remember nothing. And they have reached by their unloving nature, a stage of pointless, and empty and unreal existence. And in their living of no significance, they pass through a despairing routine with hot water at ten and, if it rains, a closed car at four.

If the sophisticated rich woman is constitutionally unable to experience the pure passion of love, so is the proletariat specimen Lil. The conversation of the working class women in the London Pub is focused on their desire to have sex without procreation. The interest that the demobilized Albert has for Lil depends on her outward beauty and not on her inward worth. The sophisticated rich and the proletariat poor commonly experience love in all its vacuity and as such it tends to point out the general malaise that afflicts the Waste Landers. It is reflection on the all round putrescence. There is the hurrying into sex, on the one hand and on the other the involvement of everyone is sexual perversion. Love and sex, therefore, have lost their proper function: they are no more the true sources of life and vitality in the wasteland. Cleanth Brooks, one of the perceptive critics of modern times, reads the significance of "the change off Philomel" passage which is repeatedly introduced, with the ape neck Sweeney, representing all that is vulgar, likened to the barbarous King Tereus: "Needless to say, lust defeats its own ends."

The portrayal of the change of Philomel by the barbarous king is a fitting commentary on the scene, which it ornaments. The wasteland of the legend came in this way; the modern waste land has also come in this way." It is high time - HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME - the Waste Landers took efforts to gain spiritual rejuvenation. Ophelia's good nights hint at something that borders on insanity, which is wasteland condition. To the Waste Landers, who suffer from spiritual inadequacies, the Fire Sermon of the Buddha is out of context, though the Buddha's preaching's are in consonance with the image of Christ's Sermon on the Mount in significance and intensity. The Buddha's sermon advocates that lust and baser passions be burned in fire. But Tiresias'

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survey of the wasteland leaves him with the image of men being consumed by the fire of lust. It is the of flesh and the Waste Landers experience its corrupting influences. The Thames of the golden age of Queen Elizabeth glorified by Spenser in Prothalamion, running sweetly in pure state of love is replaced by the Thames of the Waste Land that bears testimony to the summer nights and picnics gone through by the contemporaneous with a kind of hopeless disdain. The rubbish left behind by the picnickers' reveal the pointless measures resorted to by the Waste Landers In fact, they achieve nothing, and nothing is there to sustain them. Constantly is heard in the background, the significant words of Marvell, "Times winged chariot hurrying near". The line of Marvell when studied in conjunction, with the rattle of the bones and the wind under the door makes a pointed reference to the Waste Landers obsession with the thought of death as an end. And therefore, in their effort to shun death they do not realize that it is a futile exercise. Furthermore, this thought of death proper is an argument put forth by the Waste Landers to make the most of life.

The three Thames daughters typing the good time girls of the wasteland. They in a way resemble the ideal nymphs of the Greek mythology. They are in fact, the damaged priestesses of the permissive society. The loitering heirs for occasional pick up these girls. The damaged priestesses learn to be conscious of the emptiness that prevails in the wasteland. They learn to connect nothing with anything and their parents expect nothing. Thus, everything is reduced to a state of nullity in the wasteland.

The dehumanization that was corroding, crept into the sex act, and it is strikingly in the parody of sex indulged in, by the young man Carbuncular with the typist. She mechanically reacts to sex and displays no emotion. She allows his exploring hands on her encountering no defense. It is because her vanity leaves her frigidly indifferent. After the dehumanized sex act is over, he gropes his way out and it is typical of the groping of the Waste Landers. The typist is happy that the mechanical sex act is over. And this dehumanized sex takes to the heart of unreality that makes everything in the wasteland. Sex prudery and sex exhibition mark modern society. These are revealed by the callous way she brushed her hair after the act is over and how she litters her 'divan' with stockings, slippers, camisoles and 'stays'.

The sound of horns does not bring Diana to Actaeon but takes the ape neck Sweeney – he symbolizes all that is vulgar and ugly in the Wasteland – to Mrs. Porter's daughter, who washes her feet in soda water to keep herself fair and attractive. She is conscious of her physical beauty and not her inward worth. Eugenides, that one eyed merchant, invites the protagonist for a homosexual bout at the Metropole. This is again symptomatic of the sexual perversion that is a pervading wasteland condition. The third climactic section concludes with the words of Sait Augustine "O, Lord Thou pluckest" point to the redeeming idea of prayer that is open to Waste Landers. The motto "Death by Water", which Madame Sosostric wants the Waste Landers to be

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wary of and fear, indicates the obsession of the Waste Landers, who are obsessed with the thought of death as an end and therefore endeavour ever to shun it. But water like fire is symbolic of purification. Real significance is to read in the death by water Phlebas, the Phoenician sailor which makes the pat life of the dead person gain, adding significance and life in the hereafter a greater meaning. As such death is more intense than the miraculous birth and this is what the Christian sacrament of Baptism testifies. The bones of Phoebes are picked are picked up in whispers by the sea and the bones are purified and made free of the contamination of flesh. In fine, water is a purifier as fire is. Derek Traversi argues: "The contemplation of death by water points, in its own way, to the same possible indicated in transformation of the Fire of lust into the purgatorial Fire of lust; into the purgatorial flame of Christian and Buddhist tradition."

The fifth section is capped by a fitting motto signifying the worth of the three tests as laid down by Prajapathi for his sons. If the Waste Landers adhere to three religious principles then they can redeem themselves from their desolate and desolating condition. All they have to do is to control themselves, to be compassionate and to be charitable to others in thought, word and deed.

The mental and emotional journey of Tiresias synchronizes with the journey of the Grail quester, who encounters hardships, with the greatest hardship of finding a rock and a 'pool' beside it with no water, but only the sound of water as heard in the "drip drop drip drop drop dorp dorp" of the cry of the hermit - thrush. All these tend to prove that the Waste Landers still suffer from mirages and hallucinatory tensions.

Tiresias reminisces over the incidents surrounding the passion of Christ. And the Messiah is the Arch victim of suffering and this victimization persists in the Waste Landers through the Philomels. "He who was living is now dead/we who were living are dying/with little patience." It is for the Waste Landers to face the death proper without histrionics and self - regarding excitement. It is everyman's fate to court death as the deliverer who conducts one into the hereafter, where a great rise and one into the hereafter, where a great rise and a chance of gaining oneness with God are possible.

The Waste Landers is poised between reality and hallucination. His is the state somewhere between that of the Apostles and the Antarctic explorers. Derek Traversi analyses the point adequately "The experience of the Apostles was, in terms of the Gospel narrative, a reality, a proof of resurrection; that of the explorers is, quite simply, an illusion. Those who live in the desert, the wasteland, is somewhere between the two." The reference to the barbarian hordes swarming over endless plains indicates the post - War chaos in Europe. The modern world is crumbling with the "palling towards" of "Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/Vienna London." All the cities of the wasteland are in danger of disintegration. And the thought of the city as a place of safety and security, where men can live with others in a reasonable and spiritual way,

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is becoming a mirage, a mere illusion. The journey of Tiresias and the Quester ends in emptiness with "decayed hole" facing them, it is so to say that the Waste Lander, as the first step towards his redemption, must take cognizance of the absence of all belief and content that has swayed him thus far. The cry of the cock, which has the power to drive away the forces of evil, is the signal for the Thunder – God – to speak and for the rain to fall and rejuvenate the Waste Landers' spiritually. The triple commands of the Thunder – God – to one are to give, to sympathize and to control. They are not like the empty words of a madman. They spell out the righteous paths to be followed to attain salvation; and whoever follows them will gain peace that passeth understating. Thus Eliot's "The Waste Land" helps the reader to become conscious of the spiritual aridity and perceive the total loss and depravity of modern life. The poem holds out the hope that the Waste Lander can regain spirituality and vitality of life by seeking the shelter of the red rock – the religion of God.

Glossary

**1. THE BURIAL OF THE DEAD:** "The order for the Dead" is the complete title of the burial service in the Church of England, as derived from The Book of Common Prayer. In a related context, the burial of the dead is also intended to convey the burial of the fertility gods as explained by Miss Jessie Weston and Sir James Frazer. These myths are related to vegetation cults and harvest festivals, and the cycle of fertility and decay, spring and winter, in nature. In Egypt, the cycles of fertility and decay were personified as gods, such as Osiris etc. who were buried or drowned in the sea and again, reclaimed in spring. The concept of "The Burial of the Dead" is also deriving for the Grail legends, particularly the event of the buried corpse. The question is asked whether the buried corpse begun to sprout, whether there is any hope that the vegetation God may arise and fertility to the wasteland.

Line 1 April is the cruelest months: April, the harbinger of spring, is also connected with the great event of Christ's resurrection, Easter.

Line 2 Lilacs out of the dead land: Lilac flowers are symbols of spring, renewal in nature and fertility. Eliot reverses the implication of this.

Line 66 King William Street : A street in London where Eliot walked daily to reach his office.

Line 67 Saint Mary Woolnoth: A famous Anglican Church with beautiful interior decorations designed by Sir Christopher Wren. It is located on the corner of King William Street and Lombard street in London. The clock referred to helped Eliot and many other

office-goers. (at 9 a.m) in their office schedules.

Line 69 Stetson:

An obvious reference to Ezra Pound who was nicknamed "Buffalo Bill". Pound was known for his very impressive hat.

Line 70 Mylae:

If refers to the Battle of Mylae (260 B.C) which was part of the Punic War fought on the issue of trade between the Romans and the Carthaginians.

## 2. A GAME OF CHESS:

The title is taken from a play 'A GAME OF CHESS' (1624) by Thomas Middleton (1580-1627), which is a satire on an uneasy marriage forced by political necessity. In another play of Middleton, 'WOMEN BEWARE WOMEN' (1621) is shown, an actual game of Livia. She is the Duke's accomplice and plays with the mother. Meanwhile, the Duke is seducing Bianca, which is another kind of game. The woman at the dressing table reminds one of Belinda in Alexander Pope's THE RAPE OF THE LOCK (1714) and the resemblance is not superficial, but has deeper implications. The ornate quality of Belinda's dressing table and the society lady's drawing room is quite impressive.

Line 77 The chair she sat,  
in like a burnished throne:

This is based on Enababus' description of Cleopatra in Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra as the beautiful queen is sailing in d decorated barge on the river Cygnus in Asia Minor. She meets Antony (Act III, SC ii). Eliot's language is full of ironic distortions of Enobarbus' speech.

Line 80 Cupidon:

The golden image of Cupid, the god of love.

Line 82 Candelabra:

large, branched candlestick.

Line 93 Coffered:

adorned with sunken, low, panels.

Line 98 Sylvan scene:

Eliot has referred the reader to Milton's Paradise Lost. Book IV, 140: describing Satan's response to his first sight of the Garden of Eden.

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Line 115 rat's alley:

a meaningful image of spiritual darkness and modern man's sense of loss.

Line 128 The Shakespearian Rag:

A very popular jazz song in the years of the First World War (1914-18). It was an American hit song of 1912, it was partly an adoption of Kenneth Ball's song, "O you Beautiful Doll".

Line 139 demobbed:

discharge from the army. It is a slang expression, an abbreviation for demobilized.

Line 166 gammon

ham or bacon.

**THE FIRE SERMON:**

The subtitle is based on Lord Buddha's great sermon to his disciples against the fires of anger. Lust and malice, the six temptations, that consume men. It also evokes the sentiments of St. Augustine about unholy passions as well as the injunction of St. Paul against unholy alliance.

Line 173 the river's tent is broken:

The visual image is projected of the shelter provided by leafy branches of trees over-hanging the river. However, the loss is deeper because tent also means a tabernacle over a holy place in the Old Testament. The river is associated with the tent as an image of power and security (See: Isaiah 33:1-20).

Line 189 while I was fishing in the dull canal:

The Fisher King of mythology. To fish is to seek eternity and salvation.

Line 206 Tereu:

Tereu is the Latin vocative form of Tereus, the king who raped Philomela, see also John Lyly's *Alexander and Campaspe* (1956) in which the words jug, jug, jug, occur.

Line 209 Smyrna:

Modern Izmir, in the western part of Turkey a great centre of trade.

Line 212 demotic:

Vulgar, abominable.

Line 214 Metropole:

A fashionable luxury hotel Brighton, a seaside resort on the South Coast, sixty miles from London. The proposal made by Eugenides to protagonist for a "week-end at Brighton" has homosexual implications.

Line 234 As silk hat on a  
Bradford millionaire:

Line 264 Magnus martyr:

Line 276 Isle of Dogs:

Line 281 stern:

Line 300 Margate sands:

### **DEATH BY WATER:**

Line 320 O you turn the wheel:

### **WHAT THE THUNDER SAID:**

Bradford is a great centre of wool manufacture in Yorkshire and an abode of many millionaires in that trade. Rapid fortunes were made here in World War I.

The beautiful church designed by Sir Christopher Wren which is built in Lower Thames Street.

The river bank opposite Greenwich.

Hind part of ship.

A seaside resort in Kent on the Thames estuary. Eliot began composing "The Waste Land" here in 1921 while he was recovering from an acute illness.

It is a reference to the practice at Alexandria narrated by Jessie Weston of throwing into the sea an effigy of a pagan fertility god such as Adonis as a symbol of the death of 'nature's power'. The head was retrieved and worshipped as a symbol of the resurrected God. The Christian sacrament of Baptism could also be cited as another significant tradition in this context. This section is a close adaptation of the last seven lines of French poem written by Eliot *Dans le Restaurant* (1916-17).

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight drowned, forgot the cry of gulls and the swell of the connish seas, and the profit and the loss and the cargo of tin. An undersea current carried him far, took him back through the ages of his past. It is terrible for a man once so handsome and tall.

The wheel of fortune as engraved on the Tarot pack of cards which is turned by a figure holding a sword and a crown, perhaps the mysterious nature of man's fate is suggested in this picture. It suggests, in the Hindu scripture the "terrible wheel of rebirth and death."

Eliot writes that the source of this subtitle is the Indian legend of the thunder derived from the sacred book

*T.S. Eliot*

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Lines 322-328:

Lines 326-328 reverberation:

Line 339 Carious:

Line 353 Cicada:

Line 395 Ganga:

the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad. Eliot also says that in the first part (lines 322-94) three themes are explored. First, the story told in the Bible (St. Luke 24: 13-31) of the two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus, a village near Jerusalem) on the day of Christ's resurrection. He joins them, but they don't know him until the evening meal when he blesses them. The disciples, meanwhile speak about the arrest, trial and the crucifixion of the Lord. Eliot's second theme is the final state of the Grail quest and the journey to Chapel Perilous of the knight. This theme is interwoven with the theme of the Emmaus journey. Eliot's third theme is modern - the decay of Eastern Europe in the twentieth century.

These lines evoke the course of great events from the betrayal and arrest of Jesus Christ, the agony and prayer in garden of Gethsemane to the moment of crucifixion. Also they are indirectly evocative of the death of the Fisher King. John reports (18:3) the arrest of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane: "Judas then received a band of men and officers from the chief priests and Pharisees, cometh thither with lanterns and torches and weapons.

At the death of Christ the whole earth shook. See Mathew 27:51, "the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent.

decayed

an insect

The original sacred Sanskrit word for River Ganges. Ganga is the great river of India, which rises in the Himalayas, 14,000ft, above sea level. It is first called the Bhagirathi, taking the name of Ganges after the Alakanada joins it. It

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flows southeastwards to Allahabad, where it receives the Jumuna, then turns east past Varanasi and Patna. South of its confluence with Brahamapurta the vast delta begins. It enters the sea by several mounts, one being the Hooghly, on which Calcutta stands. The Ganges is 1,560 sq.m. It is subject to floods, which cover an immense area. To the Hindus the Ganges is a scared river, and they come in thousands to bathe in her waters.

Line 397 Himavant:

The original Sanskrit name for the high mountain in the Himalayan ranges.

Line 400 DA:

This is the voice of Thunder. The parable embodying the divine message of thunder is found in the Brihadaranyaka Upanished V,i.

Line 411 Dayadhavam:

sympathize

Line 416 broken Coriolanus:

The hero of Shakeshpeare's play, Coriolanus. He was broken because pride and selfishness brought about his death, to the shouting of the mob. He scorned the mob, yet he was broken by his won pride.

Line 418 Damayata:

Be controlled.

Line 433 Shanthi:

Sanskrit word, Eliot tells us that it refers to the Supreme Pease – "Peace that passeth understanding". Shanthi is the word, which severs as the formal ending to the Upanishads. In this context one may recall the words of Paul to the early Christians: "And the Peace of God which passeth all understanding, shall keep you hearts and minds through Christ Jesus". (Philippians 4:5) Tiresias is a seer who warns the crumbing world that it can be saved and regenerated only by going back to the Supreme Wisdom contained in the message of the Thunder: Give, Sympathize, and Control.

## Analysis of the poem Waste Land

### The Waste Land Section I: "The Burial of the Dead"

#### Summary

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The first section of *The Waste Land* takes its title from a line in the Anglican burial service. It is made up of four vignettes, each seemingly from the perspective of a different speaker. The first is an autobiographical snippet from the childhood of an aristocratic woman, in which she recalls sledding and claims that she is German, not Russian (this would be important if the woman is meant to be a member of the recently defeated Austrian imperial family). The woman mixes a meditation on the seasons with remarks on the barren state of her current existence ("I read, much of the night, and go south in the winter"). The second section is a prophetic, apocalyptic invitation to journey into a desert waste, where the speaker will show the reader "something different from either/Your shadow at morning striding behind you/Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;/[He] will show you fear in a handful of dust" (Evelyn Waugh took the title for one of his best-known novels from these lines). The almost threatening prophetic tone is mixed with childhood reminiscences about a "hyacinth girl" and a nihilistic epiphany the speaker has after an encounter with her. These recollections are filtered through quotations from Wagner's operatic version of *Tristan und Isolde*, an Arthurian tale of adultery and loss. The third episode in this section describes an imaginative tarot reading, in which some of the cards Eliot includes in the reading are not part of an actual tarot deck. The final episode of the section is the most surreal. The speaker walks through a London populated by ghosts of the dead. He confronts a figure with whom he once fought in a battle that seems to conflate the clashes of World War I with the Punic Wars between Rome and Carthage (both futile and excessively destructive wars). The speaker asks the ghostly figure, Stetson, about the fate of a corpse planted in his garden. The episode concludes with a famous line from the preface to Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* (an important collection of Symbolist poetry), accusing the reader of sharing in the poet's sins.

#### Form

Like "Prufrock," this section of *The Waste Land* can be seen as a modified dramatic monologue. The four speakers in this section are frantic in their need to speak, to find an audience, but they find themselves surrounded by dead people and thwarted by outside circumstances, like wars. Because the sections are so short and the situations so confusing, the effect is not one of an overwhelming impression of a single character; instead, the reader is left with the feeling of being trapped in a crowd, unable to find a familiar face.

Also like "Prufrock," *The Waste Land* employs only partial rhyme schemes and short bursts of structure. These are meant to reference—but also rework—the literary past, achieving simultaneously a stabilizing and a defamiliarizing effect. The world of *The Waste Land* has some parallels to an earlier time, but it cannot be approached in the same way. The inclusion of

fragments in languages other than English further complicates matters. The reader is not expected to be able to translate these immediately; rather, they are reminders of the cosmopolitan nature of twentieth-century Europe and of mankind's fate after the Tower of Babel: We will never be able to perfectly comprehend one another.

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**Commentary**

Not only is *The Waste Land* Eliot's greatest work, but it may be—along with Joyce's *Ulysses*—the greatest work of all modernist literature. Most of the poem was written in 1921, and it first appeared in print in 1922. As the poem's dedication indicates, Eliot received a great deal of guidance from Ezra Pound, who encouraged him to cut large sections of the planned work and to break up the rhyme scheme. Recent scholarship suggests that Eliot's wife, Vivien, also had a significant role in the poem's final form. A long work divided into five sections, *The Waste Land* takes on the degraded mess that Eliot considered modern culture to constitute, particularly after the first World War had ravaged Europe. A sign of the pessimism with which Eliot approaches his subject is the poem's epigraph, taken from the *Satyricon*, in which the Sibyl (a woman with prophetic powers who ages but never dies) looks at the future and proclaims that she only wants to die. The Sibyl's predicament mirrors what Eliot sees as his own: He lives in a culture that has decayed and withered but will not expire, and he is forced to live with reminders of its former glory. Thus, the underlying plot of *The Waste Land*, inasmuch as it can be said to have one, revolves around Eliot's reading of two extraordinarily influential contemporary cultural/anthropological texts, Jessie Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* and Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Both of these works focus on the persistence of ancient fertility rituals in modern thought and religion; of particular interest to both authors is the story of the Fisher King, who has been wounded in the genitals and whose lack of potency is the cause of his country becoming a desiccated "waste land." Heal the Fisher King, the legend says, and the land will regain its fertility. According to Weston and Frazer, healing the Fisher King has been the subject of mythic tales from ancient Egypt to Arthurian England. Eliot picks up on the figure of the Fisher King legend's wasteland as an appropriate description of the state of modern society. The important difference, of course, is that in Eliot's world there is no way to heal the Fisher King; perhaps there is no Fisher King at all. The legend's imperfect integration into a modern meditation highlights the lack of a unifying narrative (like religion or mythology) in the modern world.

Eliot's poem, like the anthropological texts that inspired it, draws on a vast range of sources. Eliot provided copious footnotes with the publication of *The Waste Land* in book form; these are an excellent source for tracking down the origins of a reference. Many of the references are from the Bible: at the time of the poem's writing Eliot was just beginning to develop an interest in Christianity that would reach its apex in the *Four Quartets*. The overall range of allusions in *The Waste Land*, though, suggests no overarching paradigm

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but rather a grab bag of broken fragments that must somehow be pieced together to form a coherent whole. While Eliot employs a deliberately difficult style and seems often to find the most obscure reference possible, he means to do more than just frustrate his reader and display his own intelligence: He intends to provide a mimetic account of life in the confusing world of the twentieth century.

The *Waste Land* opens with a reference to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. In this case, though, April is not the happy month of pilgrimages and storytelling. It is instead the time when the land should be regenerating after a long winter. Regeneration, though, is painful, for it brings back reminders of a more fertile and happier past. In the modern world, winter, the time of forgetfulness and numbness, is indeed preferable. Marie's childhood recollections are also painful: the simple world of cousins, sledding, and coffee in the park has been replaced by a complex set of emotional and political consequences resulting from the war. The topic of memory, particularly when it involves remembering the dead, is of critical importance in *The Waste Land*. Memory creates a confrontation of the past with the present, a juxtaposition that points out just how badly things have decayed. Marie reads for most of the night: ostracized by politics, she is unable to do much else. To read is also to remember a better past, which could produce a coherent literary culture.

The second episode contains a troubled religious proposition. The speaker describes a true wasteland of "stony rubbish"; in it, he says, man can recognize only "[a] heap of broken images." Yet the scene seems to offer salvation: shade and a vision of something new and different. The vision consists only of nothingness—a handful of dust—which is so profound as to be frightening; yet truth also resides here: No longer a religious phenomenon achieved through Christ, truth is represented by a mere void. The speaker remembers a female figure from his past, with whom he has apparently had some sort of romantic involvement. In contrast to the present setting in the desert, his memories are lush, full of water and blooming flowers. The vibrancy of the earlier scene, though, leads the speaker to a revelation of the nothingness he now offers to show the reader. Again memory serves to contrast the past with the present, but here it also serves to explode the idea of coherence in either place. In the episode from the past, the "nothingness" is more clearly a sexual failure, a moment of impotence. Despite the overall fecundity and joy of the moment, no reconciliation, and, therefore, no action, is possible. This in turn leads directly to the desert waste of the present. In the final line of the episode attention turns from the desert to the sea. Here, the sea is not a locus for the fear of nothingness, and neither is it the locus for a philosophical interpretation of nothingness; rather, it is the site of true, essential nothingness itself. The line comes from a section of *Tristan und Isolde* where Tristan waits for Isolde to come heal him. She is supposedly coming by ship but fails to arrive. The ocean is truly empty, devoid of the possibility of healing or revelation.

The third episode explores Eliot's fascination with transformation. The tarot reader Madame Sosostris conducts the most outrageous form of "reading"

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possible, transforming a series of vague symbols into predictions, many of which will come true in succeeding sections of the poem. Eliot transforms the traditional tarot pack to serve his purposes. The drowned sailor makes reference to the ultimate work of magic and transformation in English literature, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* ("Those are pearls that were his eyes" is a quote from one of Ariel's songs). Transformation in *The Tempest*, though, is the result of the highest art of humankind. Here, transformation is associated with fraud, vulgarity, and cheap mysticism. That Madame Sosostriis will prove to be right in her predictions of death and transformation is a direct commentary on the failed religious mysticism and prophecy of the preceding desert section.

The final episode of the first section allows Eliot finally to establish the true wasteland of the poem, the modern city. Eliot's London references Baudelaire's Paris ("Unreal City"), Dickens's London ("the brown fog of a winter dawn") and Dante's hell ("the flowing crowd of the dead"). The city is desolate and depopulated, inhabited only by ghosts from the past. Stetson, the apparition the speaker recognizes, is a fallen war comrade. The speaker pesters him with a series of ghoulish questions about a corpse buried in his garden: again, with the garden, we return to the theme of regeneration and fertility. This encounter can be read as a quest for a meaning behind the tremendous slaughter of the first World War; however, it can also be read as an exercise in ultimate futility: as we see in Stetson's failure to respond to the speaker's inquiries, the dead offer few answers. The great respective weights of history, tradition, and the poet's dead predecessors combine to create an oppressive burden.

### The Waste Land Section II: "The Game of Chess"

#### Summary

This section takes its title from two plays by the early 17th-century playwright Thomas Middleton, in one of which the moves in a game of chess denote stages in a seduction. This section focuses on two opposing scenes, one of high society and one of the lower classes. The first half of the section portrays a wealthy, highly groomed woman surrounded by exquisite furnishings. As she waits for a lover, her neurotic thoughts become frantic, meaningless cries. Her day culminates with plans for an excursion and a game of chess. The second part of this section shifts to a London barroom, where two women discuss a third woman. Between the bartender's repeated calls of "HURRY UP PLEASE IT'S TIME" (the bar is closing for the night) one of the women recounts a conversation with their friend Lil, whose husband has just been discharged from the army. She has chided Lil over her failure to get herself some false teeth, telling her that her husband will seek out the company of other women if she doesn't improve her appearance. Lil claims that the cause of her ravaged looks is the medication she took to induce an abortion; having nearly died giving birth to her fifth child, she had refused to have another, but her husband "won't leave [her] alone." The women leave the bar to a chorus of "good night(s)" reminiscent of Ophelia's farewell speech in *Hamlet*.

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### Form

The first part of the section is largely in unrhymed iambic pentameter lines, or blank verse. As the section proceeds, the lines become increasingly irregular in length and meter, giving the feeling of disintegration, of things falling apart. As the woman of the first half begins to give voice to her paranoid thoughts, things do fall apart, at least formally: We read lines of dialogue, then a snippet from a nonsense song. The last four lines of the first half rhyme, although they are irregular in meter, suggesting at least a partial return to stability.

The second half of the section is a dialogue interrupted by the barman's refrain. Rather than following an organized structure of rhyme and meter, this section constitutes a loose series of phrases connected by "I said(s)" and "she said(s)." This is perhaps the most poetically experimental section of the entire poem. Eliot is writing in a lower-class vernacular here that resists poetic treatment. This section refutes the prevalent claim that iambic pentameter mirrors normal English speech patterns: Line length and stresses are consistently irregular. Yet the section sounds like poetry: the repeated use of "I said" and the grounding provided by the barman's chorus allow the woman's speech to flow elegantly, despite her rough phrasing and the coarse content of her story.

### Commentary

The two women of this section of the poem represent the two sides of modern sexuality: while one side of this sexuality is a dry, barren interchange inseparable from neurosis and self-destruction, the other side of this sexuality is a rampant fecundity associated with a lack of culture and rapid aging. The first woman is associated by allusion with Cleopatra, Dido, and even Keats's Lamia, by virtue of the lushness of language surrounding her (although Eliot would never have acknowledged Keats as an influence). She is a frustrated, overly emotional but not terribly intellectual figure, oddly sinister, surrounded by "strange synthetic perfumes" and smoking candles. She can be seen as a counterpart to the title character of Eliot's earlier "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," with whom she shares both a physical setting and a profound sense of isolation. Her association with Dido and Cleopatra, two women who committed suicide out of frustrated love, suggests her fundamental irrationality. Unlike the two queens of myth, however, this woman will never become a cultural touchstone. Her despair is pathetic, rather than moving, as she demands that her lover stay with her and tell her his thoughts. The lover, who seems to be associated with the narrator of this part of the poem, can think only of drowning (again, in a reference to *The Tempest*) and rats among dead men's bones. The woman is explicitly compared to Philomela, a character out of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* who is raped by her brother-in-law the king, who then cuts her tongue out to keep her quiet. She manages to tell her sister, who helps her avenge herself by murdering the king's son and feeding him to the king. The sisters are then changed into birds, Philomela into a

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nightingale. This comparison suggests something essentially disappointing about the woman, that she is unable to communicate her interior self to the world. The woman and her surroundings, although aesthetically pleasing, are ultimately sterile and meaningless, as suggested by the nonsense song that she sings (which manages to debase even Shakespeare).

The second scene in this section further diminishes the possibility that sex can bring regeneration—either cultural or personal. This section is remarkably free of the cultural allusions that dominate the rest of the poem; instead, it relies on vernacular speech to make its point. Notice that Eliot is using a British vernacular: By this point he had moved to England permanently and had become a confirmed Anglophile. Although Eliot is able to produce startlingly beautiful poetry from the rough speech of the women in the bar, he nevertheless presents their conversation as further reason for pessimism. Their friend Lil has done everything the right way—married, supported her soldier husband, borne children—yet she is being punished by her body. Interestingly, this section ends with a line echoing Ophelia's suicide speech in *Hamlet*; this links Lil to the woman in the first section of the poem, who has also been compared to famous female suicides. The comparison between the two is not meant to suggest equality between them or to propose that the first woman's exaggerated sense of high culture is in any way equivalent to the second woman's lack of it; rather, Eliot means to suggest that neither woman's form of sexuality is regenerative.

### The Waste Land Section III: "The Fire Sermon"

#### Summary

The title of this, the longest section of *The Waste Land*, is taken from a sermon given by Buddha in which he encourages his followers to give up earthly passion (symbolized by fire) and seek freedom from earthly things. A turn away from the earthly does indeed take place in this section, as a series of increasingly debased sexual encounters concludes with a river-song and a religious incantation. The section opens with a desolate riverside scene: Rats and garbage surround the speaker, who is fishing and "musing on the king my brother's wreck." The river-song begins in this section, with the refrain from Spenser's *Prothalamion*: "Sweet Thames, run softly till I end my song." A snippet from a vulgar soldier's ballad follows, then a reference back to Philomela (see the previous section). The speaker is then propositioned by Mr. Eugenides, the one-eyed merchant of Madame Sosostris's tarot pack. Eugenides invites the speaker to go with him to a hotel known as a meeting place for homosexual trysts.

The speaker then proclaims himself to be Tiresias, a figure from classical mythology who has both male and female features ("Old man with wrinkled female breasts") and is blind but can "see" into the future. Tiresias/the speaker observes a young typist, at home for tea, who awaits her lover, a dull and slightly arrogant clerk. The woman allows the clerk to have his way with her, and he leaves victorious. Tiresias, who has "suffered all," watches the whole

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thing. After her lover's departure, the typist thinks only that she's glad the encounter is done and over.

A brief interlude begins the river-song in earnest. First, a fisherman's bar is described, then a beautiful church interior, then the Thames itself. These are among the few moments of tranquility in the poem, and they seem to represent some sort of simpler alternative. The Thames-daughters, borrowed from Spenser's poem, chime in with a nonsense chorus ("Weialala leia/Wallala leialala"). The scene shifts again, to Queen Elizabeth I in an amorous encounter with the Earl of Leicester. The queen seems unmoved by her lover's declarations, and she thinks only of her "people humble people who expect/Nothing." The section then comes to an abrupt end with a few lines from St. Augustine's Confessions and a vague reference to the Buddha's Fire Sermon ("burning").

### Form

This section of *The Waste Land* is notable for its inclusion of popular poetic forms, particularly musical ones. The more plot-driven sections are in Eliot's usual assortment of various line lengths, rhymed at random. "The Fire Sermon," however, also includes bits of many musical pieces, including Spenser's wedding song (which becomes the song of the Thames-daughters), a soldier's ballad, a nightingale's chirps, a song from Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, and a mandolin tune (which has no words but is echoed in "a clatter and a chatter from within"). The use of such "low" forms cuts both ways here: In one sense, it provides a critical commentary on the episodes described, the cheap sexual encounters shaped by popular culture (the gramophone, the men's hotel). But Eliot also uses these bits and pieces to create high art, and some of the fragments he uses (the lines from Spenser in particular) are themselves taken from more exalted forms. In the case of the Prothalamion, in fact, Eliot is placing himself within a tradition stretching back to ancient Greece (classically, "prothalamion" is a generic term for a poem-like song written for a wedding). Again this provides an ironic contrast to the debased goings-on but also provides another form of connection and commentary. Another such reference, generating both ironic distance and proximate parallels, is the inclusion of Elizabeth I: The liaison between Elizabeth and Leicester is traditionally romanticized, and, thus, the reference seems to clash with the otherwise sordid nature of this section. However, Eliot depicts Elizabeth—and Spenser, for that matter—as a mere fragment, stripped of noble connotations and made to represent just one more piece of cultural rubbish. Again, this is not meant to be a democratizing move but a nihilistic one: Romance is dead.

### Commentary

The opening two stanzas of this section describe the ultimate "Waste Land" as Eliot sees it. The wasteland is cold, dry, and barren, covered in garbage. Unlike the desert, which at least burns with heat, this place is static, save for a few scurrying rats. Even the river, normally a symbol of renewal,

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has been reduced to a "dull canal." The ugliness stands in implicit contrast to the "Sweet Thames" of Spenser's time. The most significant image in these lines, though, is the rat. Like the crabs in *Prufrock*, rats are scavengers, taking what they can from the refuse of higher-order creatures. The rat could be said to provide a model for Eliot's poetic process: Like the rat, Eliot takes what he can from earlier, grander generations and uses the bits and pieces to sustain (poetic) life. Somehow this is preferable to the more coherent but vulgar existence of the contemporary world, here represented by the sound of horns and motors in the distance, intimating a sexual liaison.

The actual sexual encounters that take place in this section of the poem are infinitely unfruitful. Eugenides proposes a homosexual tryst, which by its very nature thwarts fertility. The impossibility of regeneration by such means is symbolized by the currants in his pocket—the desiccated, deadened version of what were once plump, fertile fruits. The typist and her lover are equally barren in their way, even though reproduction is at least theoretically possible for the two. Living in so impoverished a manner that she does not even own a bed, the typist is certainly not interested in a family. Elizabeth and Leicester are perhaps the most interesting of the three couples, however. For political reasons, Elizabeth was required to represent herself as constantly available for marriage (to royalty from countries with whom England may have wanted an alliance); out of this need came the myth of the "Virgin Queen." This can be read as the opposite of the Fisher King legend: To protect the vitality of the land, Elizabeth had to compromise her own sexuality; whereas in the Fisher King story, the renewal of the land comes with the renewal of the Fisher King's sexual potency. Her tryst with Leicester, therefore, is a consummation that is simultaneously denied, an event that never happened. The twisted logic underlying Elizabeth's public sexuality, or lack thereof, mirrors and distorts the Fisher King plot and further questions the possibility for renewal, especially through sexuality, in the modern world.

Tiresias, thus, becomes an important model for modern existence. Neither man nor woman, and blind yet able to see with ultimate clarity, he is an individual who does not hope or act. He has, like *Prufrock*, "seen it all," but, unlike *Prufrock*, he sees no possibility for action. Whereas *Prufrock* is paralyzed by his neuroses, Tiresias is held motionless by ennui and pragmatism. He is not quite able to escape earthly things, though, for he is forced to sit and watch the sordid deeds of mortals; like the Sibyl in the poem's epigraph, he would like to die but cannot. The brief interlude following the typist's tryst may offer an alternative to escape, by describing a warm, everyday scene of work and companionship; however, the interlude is brief, and Eliot once again tosses us into a world of sex and strife. Tiresias disappears, to be replaced by St. Augustine at the end of the section. Eliot claims in his footnote to have deliberately conflated Augustine and the Buddha, as the representatives of Eastern and Western asceticism. Both seem, in the lines Eliot quotes, to be unable to transcend the world on their own: Augustine must call on God to "pluck [him] out," while Buddha can only repeat the word

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“burning,” unable to break free of its monotonous fascination. The poem’s next section, which will relate the story of a death without resurrection, exposes the absurdity of these two figures’ faith in external higher powers. That this section ends with only the single word “burning,” isolated on the page, reveals the futility of all of man’s struggles.

### **The Waste Land Section IV: “Death by Water”**

#### **Summary**

The shortest section of the poem, “Death by Water” describes a man, Phlebas the Phoenician, who has died, apparently by drowning. In death he has forgotten his worldly cares as the creatures of the sea have picked his body apart. The narrator asks his reader to consider Phlebas and recall his or her own mortality.

#### **Form**

While this section appears on the page as a ten-line stanza, in reading, it compresses into eight: four pairs of rhyming couplets. Both visually and audibly, this is one of the most formally organized sections of the poem. It is meant to recall other highly organized forms that often have philosophical or religious import, like aphorisms and parables. The alliteration and the deliberately archaic language (“o you,” “a fortnight dead”) also contribute to the serious, didactic feel of this section.

#### **Commentary**

The major point of this short section is to rebut ideas of renewal and regeneration. Phlebas just dies; that’s it. Like Stetson’s corpse in the first section, Phlebas’s body yields nothing more than products of decay. However, the section’s meaning is far from flat; indeed, its ironic layering is twofold. First, this section fulfills one of the prophecies of Madame Sosostris in the poem’s first section: “Fear death by water,” she says, after pulling the card of the Drowned Sailor. Second, this section, in its language and form, mimics other literary forms (parables, biblical stories, etc.) that are normally rich in meaning. These two features suggest that something of great significance lies here. In reality, though, the only lesson that Phlebas offers is that the physical reality of death and decay triumphs over all. Phlebas is not resurrected or transfigured. Eliot further emphasizes Phlebas’s dried-up antiquity and irrelevance by placing this section in the distant past (by making Phlebas a Phoenician).

### **The Waste Land Section V: “What the Thunder Said”**

#### **Summary**

The final section of *The Waste Land* is dramatic in both its imagery and its events. The first half of the section builds to an apocalyptic climax, as suffering people become “hooded hordes swarming” and the “unreal” cities of Jerusalem, Athens, Alexandria, Vienna, and London are destroyed, rebuilt, and destroyed again. A decaying chapel is described, which suggests the chapel

in the legend of the Holy Grail. Atop the chapel, a cock crows, and the rains come, relieving the drought and bringing life back to the land. Curiously, no heroic figure has appeared to claim the Grail; the renewal has come seemingly at random, gratuitously.

The scene then shifts to the Ganges, half a world away from Europe, where thunder rumbles. Eliot draws on the traditional interpretation of "what the thunder says," as taken from the Upanishads (Hindu fables). According to these fables, the thunder "gives," "sympathizes," and "controls" through its "speech"; Eliot launches into a meditation on each of these aspects of the thunder's power. The meditations seem to bring about some sort of reconciliation, as a Fisher King-type figure is shown sitting on the shore preparing to put his lands in order, a sign of his imminent death or at least abdication. The poem ends with a series of disparate fragments from a children's song, from Dante, and from Elizabethan drama, leading up to a final chant of "Shantih shantih shantih"—the traditional ending to an Upanishad. Eliot, in his notes to the poem, translates this chant as "the peace which passeth understanding," the expression of ultimate resignation.

### Form

Just as the third section of the poem explores popular forms, such as music, the final section of *The Waste Land* moves away from more typical poetic forms to experiment with structures normally associated with religion and philosophy. The proposition and meditation structure of the last part of this section looks forward to the more philosophically oriented *Four Quartets*, Eliot's last major work. The reasoned, structured nature of the final stanzas comes as a relief after the obsessively repetitive language and alliteration ("If there were water/And no rock/If there were rock/And also water...") of the apocalyptic opening. The reader's relief at the shift in style mirrors the physical relief brought by the rain midway through the section. Both formally and thematically, then, this final chapter follows a pattern of obsession and resignation. Its patterning reflects the speaker's offer at the end to "fit you," to transform experience into poetry ("fit" is an archaic term for sections of a poem or play; here, "fit" is used as a verb, meaning "to render into a fit," to make into poetry).

### Commentary

The initial imagery associated with the apocalypse at this section's opening is taken from the crucifixion of Christ. Significantly, though, Christ is not resurrected here: we are told, "He who was living is now dead." The rest of the first part, while making reference to contemporary events in Eastern Europe and other more traditional apocalypse narratives, continues to draw on Biblical imagery and symbolism associated with the quest for the Holy Grail. The repetitive language and harsh imagery of this section suggest that the end is perhaps near, that not only will there be no renewal but that there will be no survival either. Cities are destroyed, rebuilt, and destroyed,

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mirroring the cyclical downfall of cultures: Jerusalem, Greece, Egypt, and Austria—among the major empires of the past two millennia—all see their capitals fall. There is something nevertheless insubstantial about this looming disaster: it seems “unreal,” as the ghost-filled London did earlier in the poem. It is as if such a profound end would be inappropriate for such a pathetic civilization. Rather, we expect the end to be accompanied by a sense of boredom and surrender.

Release comes not from any heroic act but from the random call of a farmyard bird. The symbolism surrounding the Grail myth is still extant but it is empty, devoid of people. No one comes to the ruined chapel, yet it exists regardless of who visits it. This is a horribly sad situation: The symbols that have previously held profound meaning still exist, yet they are unused and unusable. A flash of light—a quick glimpse of truth and vitality, perhaps—releases the rain and lets the poem end.

The meditations upon the Upanishads give Eliot a chance to test the potential of the modern world. Asking, “What have we given?” he finds that the only time people give is in the sexual act and that this gift is ultimately evanescent and destructive: He associates it with spider webs and solicitors reading wills. Just as the poem’s speaker fails to find signs of giving, so too does he search in vain for acts of sympathy—the second characteristic of “what the thunder says”: He recalls individuals so caught up in his or her own fate—each thinking only of the key to his or her own prison—as to be oblivious to anything but “ethereal rumors” of others. The third idea expressed in the thunder’s speech—that of control—holds the most potential, although it implies a series of domineering relationships and surrenders of the self that, ultimately, are never realized.

Finally Eliot turns to the Fisher King himself, still on the shore fishing. The possibility of regeneration for the “arid plain” of society has been long ago discarded. Instead, the king will do his best to put in order what remains of his kingdom, and he will then surrender, although he still fails to understand the true significance of the coming void (as implied by the phrase “peace which passeth understanding”). The burst of allusions at the end can be read as either a final attempt at coherence or as a final dissolution into a world of fragments and rubbish. The king offers some consolation: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins,” he says, suggesting that it will be possible to continue on despite the failed redemption. It will still be possible for him, and for Eliot, to “fit you,” to create art in the face of madness. It is important that the last words of the poem are in a non-Western language: Although the meaning of the words themselves communicates resignation (“peace which passeth understanding”), they invoke an alternative set of paradigms to those of the Western world; they offer a glimpse into a culture and a value system new to us—and, thus, offer some hope for an alternative to our own dead world.

**Check your progress**

*T.S. Eliot*

**1. Write short note on the poem, "The Waste Land".**

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**2. Write about the style of the poem.**

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**3. Name the five parts of the poem.**

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**4. Write down the structure of the poem.**

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**5. What is the form of the poem, "The Waste Land"?**

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**6. Who is the protagonist of the poem, "The Waste Land"?**

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**SUMMARY**

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- In October 1922 Eliot published *The Waste Land* in *The Criterion*. Eliot's dedication to *il miglior fabbro* ("the better craftsman") refers to Ezra Pound's significant hand in editing and reshaping the poem from a longer Eliot manuscript to the shortened version that appears in publication. It was composed during a period of personal difficulty for Eliot—his marriage was failing, and both he and Vivienne were suffering from nervous disorders. The poem is often read as a representation of the disillusionment of the post-war generation. That year Eliot lived in Lausanne, Switzerland to take a treatment and to convalesce from a break-down. There he wrote the final section, "What the Thunder Said," which contains frequent references to mountains. Before the poem's publication as a book in December 1922, Eliot distanced himself from its vision of despair. On November 15, 1922, he wrote to Richard Aldington, saying, "As for *The Waste*

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Land, that is a thing of the past so far as I am concerned and I am now feeling toward a new form and style." The poem is known for its obscure nature—its slippage between satire and prophecy; its abrupt changes of speaker, location, and time. Despite this, it has become a touchstone of modern literature, a poetic counterpart to a novel published in the same year, James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Among its best-known phrases are "April is the cruellest month", "I will show you fear in a handful of dust"; and "Shantih shantih shantih," the Sanskrit mantra that ends the poem.

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## KEY WORDS

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### 1. Omniscient

Omniscience is the capacity to know everything infinitely, or at least everything that can be known about a character including thoughts, feelings, life and the universe, etc.

### 2. Mythology

The term mythology can refer to either the study of myths, or to a body of myths.

### 3. Reminiscence

Reminiscence is a technical term, coined by Ballard in 1913, denoting improvement in the performance of a partially learned act that occurs while the subject is resting, that is, not performing the act in question.

### 4. Hallucination

A hallucination, in the broadest sense of the word, is a perception in the absence of a stimulus.

### 5. Apocalypse

An Apocalypse is a disclosure of something hidden from the majority of mankind in an era dominated by falsehood and misconception, i.e. the veil to be lifted.

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## ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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1. The Waste Land is a 434-line Modernist poem by T. S. Eliot published in 1922. It has been called "one of the most important poems of the 20th century." Despite the poem's obscurity—its shifts between satire and prophecy, its abrupt and unannounced changes of speaker, location and time, its elegiac but intimidating summoning up of a vast and dissonant range of cultures and literatures—the poem has become a familiar touchstone of modern literature.
2. The style of the work in part grows out of Eliot's interest in exploring the possibilities of dramatic monologue. This interest dates back at least as far as *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Of course, "The Waste Land" is not a single monologue like "Prufrock." Instead, it is made up of a wild variety of voices.
3. The poem is preceded by a Latin and Greek epigraph from *The Satyricon* of Petronius. In English, it reads: "I saw with my own eyes the Sibyl of Cumae hanging in a jar, and when the boys said to her, Sibyl, what do you want? she replied I want to die." Following the epigraph is a dedication (added in a 1925

republication) that reads "For Ezra Pound: il miglior fabbro" Here Eliot is both quoting line 117 of Canto XXVI of Dante's *Purgatorio*, the second cantica of *The Divine Comedy*, where Dante defines the troubadour Arnaut Daniel as "the best smith of the mother tongue" and also Pound's title of chapter 2 of his *The Spirit of Romance* (1910) where he translated the phrase as "the better craftsman."

4. The five parts of *The Waste Land* are entitled:
  - The Burial of the Dead
  - A Game of Chess
  - The Fire Sermon
  - Death by Water
  - What the Thunder Said?
5. Just as the third section of the poem explores popular forms, such as music, the final section of *The Waste Land* moves away from more typical poetic forms to experiment with structures normally associated with religion and philosophy. The proposition and meditation structure of the last part of this section looks forward to the more philosophically oriented *Four Quartets*, Eliot's last major work. The reasoned, structured nature of the final stanzas comes as a relief after the obsessively repetitive language and alliteration ("If there were water/ And no rock/If there were rock/And also water...") of the apocalyptic opening.
6. The protagonist of the poem is Tiresias with wrinkled female ducks. He is aged but paradoxically is of all ages. His bisexuality endows him with a greater vision and understanding of all matters of life and death and the hereafter of all men and women, individually and collectively. He is the single vice and the many vices that one hears in the poem.

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## REVIEW QUESTIONS

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1. Do you think Eliot's picture of people in a pub shows contempt for ordinary humanity?
2. "Death by water" has been described as a lyrical interlude, a poem of serenity and a negative acceptance of death. What is your view?
3. Discuss the religious imagery in the poem.
4. The poem ends with a heap of broken images: How successful is this?
5. Write down the detailed summary of the poem; "The Waste Land".

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## FURTHER READINGS

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- |                                       |                  |
|---------------------------------------|------------------|
| • The Waste Land                      | - T.S.Eliot      |
| • T.S.Eliot's, "The Waste Land"       | - Harold Bloom   |
| • T.S.Eliot: The Waste Land           | - Helen Williams |
| • T.S. Eliot the modernist in history | - Ronald Bush.   |

## NOTES

**W.H. AUDEN**

**STRUCTURE**

- 3.0 Learning Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Musee Des Beaux Arts
- 3.3 In Memory of W.B. Yeats
- 3.4 Lay Your Sleeping Head My Love
- 3.5 September 1, 1939
- 3.6 Law Like Love
- 3.7 As I Walked Out One Evening
  - Summary
  - Key Words
  - Answers to Check Your Progress
  - Review Questions
  - Further Readings

**3.0 LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

*After reading this unit, you will be able to:*

- describe the summary of "Musee des beaux arts"
- discuss the themes of the poem, "In memory of W.B. Yeats"
- examine the critical analysis of "Lay your sleeping head my love"
- write down the summary of "September 1, 1939" and "As I walked out one evening".

**3.1 INTRODUCTION**

Wystan Hugh Auden 21 February 1907 – 29 September 1973, who published as W. H. Auden, was an Anglo-American poet, born in England, later an American citizen, regarded by many as one of the greatest writers of the

20th century. His work is noted for its stylistic and technical achievements, its engagement with moral and political issues, and its variety of tone, form and content. The central themes of his poetry are love, politics and citizenship, religion and morals, and the relationship between unique human beings and the anonymous, impersonal world of nature.

Auden grew up in Birmingham in a professional middle class family and read English literature at Christ Church, Oxford. His early poems, written in the late 1920s and early 1930s, alternated between telegraphic modern styles and fluent traditional ones, were written in an intense and dramatic tone, and established his reputation as a left-wing political poet and prophet. He became uncomfortable in this role in the later 1930s, and abandoned it after he moved to the United States in 1939, where he became an American citizen in 1946. His poems in the 1940s explored religious and ethical themes in a less dramatic manner than his earlier works, but still combined traditional forms and styles with new forms devised by Auden himself. In the 1950s and 1960s many of his poems focused on the ways in which words revealed and concealed emotions, and he took a particular interest in writing opera librettos, a form ideally suited to direct expression of strong feelings.

He was also a prolific writer of prose essays and reviews on literary, political, psychological and religious subjects, and he worked at various times on documentary films, poetic plays and other forms of performance. Throughout his career he was both controversial and influential. After his death, some of his poems, notably "Funeral Blues" ("Stop all the clocks") and "September 1, 1939", became widely known through films, broadcasts and popular media.

## NOTES

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### 3.2 MUSEE DES BEAUX ARTS

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#### POEM

About suffering they were never wrong,  
 The Old Masters: how well they understood  
 Its human position; how it takes place  
 While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully  
 along;  
 How when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting  
 For the miraculous birth, there always must be  
 Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating  
 On a pond at the edge of the wood:  
 They never forgot  
 That even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course  
 Anyhow in a corner, some untidy spot

## NOTES

Where the dogs go on with their doggy life and the torturer's horse  
Scratches its innocent behind on a tree.

In Brueghel's Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away  
Quite leisurely from the disaster; the ploughman may  
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,  
But for him it was not an important failure; the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

### Commentary

Auden's poem seems to divide people into two categories, based on what the speaker's viewing in the paintings he's seeing.

One category is composed of those who, for whatever reason, are indifferent to the sufferings of others, or just don't realize at all that anything's going on.

The other category seems to be composed of the "aged," "martyrs," and Icarus.

Now if we take the "aged" to be people like Simeon, and "martyrs" to be, well, "martyrs," then the connection between those two groups is obvious, but it leaves out Icarus.

Ovid thought Icarus was just being a boy when he flew too close to the sun and fell to his death. Other authorities, I'm sure, are more concerned with Icarus' potential or actual hubris. Brueghel's own painting features a ploughman plowing as its most prominent feature.

The ploughman plows, the ship sails, only the shepherd stares at the sky, away from where Icarus fell, and the painting seems to scream "Look at Icarus; his ambition and hubris earned him death and smallness. Whereas these other people, who know their roles in life, and who work hard at their given station, well, they persist, at the least." (Brueghel's capacity to be ironic shouldn't be ignored just because he illustrated Dutch proverbs much of the time.)

And Icarus and the martyrs and the aged do have something in common: they stand for something, and have some sort of ambition, some sort of hope, and that's what creates the suffering they go through. If they didn't want anything, or didn't care for anything in particular, they'd suffer less, certainly.

But who wants to suffer at all? We can always be the speaker, and just move on to the next painting, quite casually, as if we've learned nothing at all: For we, like the ship, have "somewhere to get to" and we can therefore "sail calmly on," too.

W.H. Auden is a master of form. We could think of him as a chameleon: just when we're ready to pin him as a formal poet, one who's careful to respect

traditional rhyme and meter, he breaks out something like "Musée des Beaux Arts," which has no rhyme or metrical pattern to speak of. What it does have, though, is simple, precise language. Nothing to get too upset about. Nothing to twist the tongue or boggle the mind. Nice, neat, simple language. What makes it so amazing is that he's able to craft a masterpiece with the mildest of tools.

W.H. Auden

## NOTES

### Check your progress

1. What are the two categories of people based on the Auden's poems?

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2. Write about the form of the poem, "Musée des Beaux Arts".

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## 3.3 IN MEMORY OF W.B. YEATS

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### POEM

#### I

He disappeared in the dead of winter:  
The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted,  
The snow disfigured the public statues;  
The mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day.  
What instruments we have agree  
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

Far from his illness  
The wolves ran on through the evergreen forests,  
The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays;  
By mourning tongues  
The death of the poet was kept from his poems.

But for him it was his last afternoon as himself,  
An afternoon of nurses and rumours;  
The provinces of his body revolted,  
The squares of his mind were empty,

NOTES

Silence invaded the suburbs,  
The current of his feeling failed; he became his admirers.

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities  
And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections,  
To find his happiness in another kind of wood  
And be punished under a foreign code of conscience.  
The words of a dead man  
Are modified in the guts of the living.

But in the importance and noise of to-morrow  
When the brokers are roaring like beasts on the floor of the Bourse,  
And the poor have the sufferings to which they are fairly accustomed,  
And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom,  
A few thousand will think of this day  
As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual.  
What instruments we have agree  
The day of his death was a dark cold day.

II

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:  
The parish of rich women, physical decay,  
Yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.  
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,  
For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives  
In the valley of its making where executives  
Would never want to tamper, flows on south  
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,  
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,  
A way of happening, a mouth.

III

Earth, receive an honoured guest:  
William Yeats is laid to rest.  
Let the Irish vessel lie  
Emptied of its poetry.  
[Auden later deleted the next three stanzas.]

Time that is intolerant  
Of the brave and the innocent,  
And indifferent in a week  
To a beautiful physique,

Worships language and forgives  
Everyone by whom it lives;  
Pardons cowardice, conceit,  
Lays its honours at their feet.

Time that with this strange excuse  
Pardoned Kipling and his views,  
And will pardon Paul Claudel,  
Pardons him for writing well.

In the nightmare of the dark  
All the dogs of Europe bark,  
And the living nations wait,  
Each sequestered in its hate;

Intellectual disgrace  
Stares from every human face,  
And the seas of pity lie  
Locked and frozen in each eye.

Follow, poet, follow right  
To the bottom of the night,  
With your unconstraining voice  
Still persuade us to rejoice.

With the farming of a verse  
Make a vineyard of the curse,  
Sing of human unsuccess  
In a rapture of distress.

In the deserts of the heart  
Let the healing fountains start,  
In the prison of his days  
Teach the free man how to praise.

NOTES

NOTES

Summary

In his poem, "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," Auden defines the reader of poetry as the poet's successor, exhorting his readers to think and to act. Poets die, as every man dies, but poetry does not die, and neither does mankind. The title suggests that this poem is an elegy for a certain man; after the title, though, it mentions Yeats' name once, and only a few other details suggest this is Yeats that Auden is mourning. The first section of the poem denigrates the body of the poet; the second section, the efficiency of poetry itself. Likewise, the poem as a whole does not seek to praise a particular poet or a specific author's poetry. This poem is not exclusively focused on Yeats, but inquires into poetry in general, poses Auden's own ideas of poetry against Yeats'.

Auden both admired and despised Yeats for different aspects of his poetry. This ambivalence is visible in his admiration of Yeats' poignancy and instantaneous effect, and in his contempt for Yeats' delusions. The former, combined with the Auden's solution to the latter, comprises the theme of the role of the poet in this poem. Auden contemporaneously wrote a short prose companion piece, "The Public vs. The Late William Butler Yeats," in which he expresses some of his thoughts on Yeats—esteem from the defense and anti-fairytale sentiment from the prosecution. Auden concludes not with a condemnation or pardon for Yeats, but with putting the jury on trial, for seeking to judge the poet. The case lies not with the poet, but with his readers.

Poetry (and consequently the poet) is only as effective as its listeners make it. If the listener reads the poetry but does not digest it, then the poet has written his poetry in vain. As Auden calls the attentive reader of "Musée des Beaux Arts" to be mindful of suffering, he demands a certain sensitivity and active thought from readers in general. In "The Unknown Citizen," Auden denounces the thoughtless individual who was born, breeds, and breathes his last on the bandwagon. This citizen is everything his leaders want him to be: a mindless lamb herded along with the flock, never questioning or "interfering" with their plans (27). Auden never explicitly disparages this citizen, but the irony is apparent—the poem is an entreaty to think, not to act like this citizen. Auden never takes the role of authority; he never presumes to preach exactly how man should live. Rather, he presents his poetry as "parables," to make the reader think about his way of life ("Psychology and Art To-day" 342).

Two contextual themes that concerned Auden at the time he wrote "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" provide a useful background to its reading. First, Critic John Hildebilde lists fourteen biographical poems written 1936-41, most of them eulogies, which demonstrate Auden's preoccupation with death (Hildebilde 1). Secondly, there is Auden's disappointment with the effectiveness of the individual, inspired by his involvement in the war, his travels, and fruitless efforts to halt the germination of the Second World War. This disenchantment with poetry and concern with death converge on the role of the poet and the best response from his listeners. The poem is a metrical

gallery, beginning in free verse, moving to syllabic, and culminating in flawless trochaic tetrameter. Although there is a hint of the dirgeful dactylic, *e.g.*

“The | dáy of his | déath was a | dárk cóld dáy” (6), the first part is free verse in order to downplay the death of the poet. As a classicist, Auden did not much care for free verse, but he knew its effects, and used it when fitting. Here, the variation and haphazard line lengths invoke a sense of chaos and disorder. Likewise informally, the speaker is not an obsequious funeral orator but he is blunt and accepting of death, focusing not on what the dead man was, but where he is going. Similarly to “Musée des Beaux Arts,” Auden uses long lines to draw the focus away from the poet, as the world does, running on apathetically, as in “The brooks were frozen, the airports almost deserted” and “The peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays” (2, 9). Contrastingly, the lines addressing the physicality of the poet seem curt and abrupt, such as “Far from his illness” (7) and the repeated “The day of his death was a dark cold day” (6, 31).

This section is split into five five-to-six line stanzas (excluding the final two-line repetition), progressing from the absolute unimportance of the poet to his inheritors—his vicarious mode of immortality. Auden begins with an image of desolation, disparate from the death of the poet, from which the poet has disappeared. The world of unperturbed nature and unfeeling machinery has no regard for this death of just another man. But a glimmer of hope remains: this man “disappeared,” rather than dying or passing away (1); he has departed from the physical world, but he has not been extinguished.

The second stanza reinforces this sense, and explains where the departed has disappeared:

“By mourning tongues/The death of the poet was kept from his poems” (10–11). Here Auden reveals the dichotomy between the poet and his poetry, and the one’s persistence even after its seemingly inseparable maker has died. Here, Auden introduces his real subject, the mourners, and sets them forth as the poet’s salvation; or, more precisely, his eternal abode.

Next, Auden takes one last look at the man’s life, and the moment of his death. Each line rings with sympathetic finality, reinforcing the finality of the body’s death. A catalog of seven mostly equivalent phrases describes the desolation of the dying man, likening him to a city, which, bereft of its people, dies. The saving conclusion is again the dead man’s transference into his listeners, not just “mourners” now, but “admirers” (10, 18).

In the fourth stanza, we see the disembodied poet propagated into life in other cities not himself and given to new readers. Two metaphors worth noting are these: the dead man is left “To find his happiness in another kind of wood,” that is, to live anew on paper. The second is a strange linking of the “words of the dead man” to the Eucharist (22). The Eucharist is broken and administered to the people and consumed, just as the poet’s words are “scattered,” read, and “modified in the guts of the living” listeners (18, 23).

## NOTES

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The Eucharist is a sign of Christ's sacrifice for his people, which feeds its partakers spiritually, and is likewise "modified" from bread into bodily sustenance. The words of the poet provide intellectual sustenance for his readers. The dead man is not only incorporated into his readers' reactions to his poetry, but he is subjected to their "punishment," that is, their individual interpretations, though incorrect in Yeats' conception (21). Even after death, the poet is not static, but made dynamic by his interpreters and each one's "foreign code of conscience" (21).

Auden concludes this first section with great hope for what the poet's readers do with the poetry. He sets a scene of thoughtlessness and delusion, where "brokers" have become "beasts," the "poor" content themselves with "suffering," and man lives in a fantasy of "freedom" (25-7). Into this wintry, inhumane environment, Auden introduces the few thousand readers in whom the poet lives on. These remember the day of Yeats' death "As one thinks of a day when one did something slightly unusual" (29). Action is required on their part: the word is "did," not heard of (29).

The second part of the poem is syllabic, which is a very unimposing meter, here mostly regular, with an odd variation in the last half. Auden confronts Yeats in the second person, and rebuffs Yeats by describing where poetry comes from and what it does not do. This part, like the first, references Yeats personally, but soon diverges into a general interrogation of poetry. Yeats wrote poetry to cure his country, but his country remains sick. Auden claims "poetry makes nothing happen"; instead, it is merely a "way of happening, a mouth" (36, 41). This subtle distinction illumines the delicate opposition between Yeats and Auden. Yeats considered poetry to be a tool, whereas Auden proclaims it is nothing in itself, but only in how its readers respond to it. Yeats' fault was that he expected too much, and the wrong things, out of poetry.

Auden clarifies that poetry is not a force in itself, but is only as effective as a parable. The parable is what "survived" all of Yeats' physicality and delusion. The problem that Yeats sought to fix, the "madness" of Ireland, still exists (35). Despite his misdirected effort, Yeats' poetry endures, indebted to his readers' "foreign code of conscience" that keeps the poetry alive and pertinent (21). In his essay "Writing," Auden claims the purpose of poetry is, "by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate"—a much more humble goal than Yeats' attempt to heal his country of all its ills (27). Likewise, in "The Poet in the City," Auden claims that the political poet can achieve nothing more than to enlighten the "management" of the plight of the "managed" (88).

As Auden moves away from Yeats, he varies the line-length, creating a metrical cool of "Would never want to tamper, flows on south," by surrounding it with longer thirteen syllable lines (26). Shortening this line to ten syllables emphasizes the distance of poetry, which arises in "ranches of isolation," from the unreflective bustle of the "executive" (37, 39). The valley, to Auden, was a place of true civilization. In "Atlantis," the paradise of the title lies in a valley. This, Auden's Eden, is not a bustling city, but a pastoral town.

## NOTES

Meshing with the Yeats-as-city metaphor from the first section, the poet's mind is likened to a valley. Percy Bysshe Shelly claimed that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world. Auden contradicts this with his definition of poetry, which has nothing to do with "executives", nor they with it (37). After this rejection of poetry's material effect, the meter returns to the original twelve-syllable length, then descends finally into Auden's short concluding definition of poetry as "A way of happening, a mouth" (41). The caesura before "a mouth" is strong enough that those two final words read almost as another line—a split that further subdues and quiets the ending into a sigh.

The third section is comprised of six stanzas of truncated trochaic tetrameter that beg to be juxtaposed with Yeats' autobiographical elegy, "Under Ben Bulbin", which is metrically similar, though intriguingly more erratic. Yeats, in his epitaph, laments his own death, fearing for the future of Irish poetry, calling for new poets to arise and replace him when he is gone. Auden uses "In Memory of W. B. Yeats", to set forth his contrasting idea: that the worth of poetry is not in its author, but in its readers. Auden does not satirize Yeats' meter with his own stringent tetrameter, but molds it to fit his own texture and meaning. Yeats' diction befits his relaxed meter, but Auden uses a strict pattern to respond to Yeats' overreaching efforts and to institute a different order.

The speaker here assumes a more serious demeanor. With gravity, he finally names the man whose death he elegizes: "Earth, receive an honored guest/William Yeats is laid to rest" (42-3). But this is no more befitting a funeral oration than the previous sections; Yeats is demoted to the importance of a "vessel"; now emptied, he is finished (44). Through these solemn elegiac couplets, Auden departs from the poet to the fearful landscape of Europe, and then returns to the poet to implore him for words of hope in the midst of distress.

The first stanza initially seems disconnected the following stanzas, partly because Auden deleted the three stanzas that originally followed from the final version of the poem. That he deleted these is not incredibly surprising; they make the same kind of universal claims that induced him to remove the entire "September 1, 1939" from his collected works. The claims that "Time ... worships language" and "Pardoned Kipling and his views" have traces of his pre-American ambition (Norton 1473-4). They are wonderful, powerful lines, but Auden eventually recanted such far-reaching claims. Throughout the late '30's and early '40's, Auden became more and more humble in his assumptions and meek in his predictions, excising much of his previous poetry that was too closely involved with the war. This judgment of Claudel and Kipling and demand for time's clemency must have seemed too hopeful in retrospect, so Auden deleted them.

Even with these three stanzas included, the second stanza seems a jolting non sequitur. Auden uses this, however, to place the poet in the center of the

## NOTES

pain and turmoil of war. By jumping from poet to war, Auden sets forth the conflict: how can a poet rejoice in the face of war, while Europe lives in fear, hate and pitilessness? He does not command the poet to stop the war; rather, he calls the poet to "persuade us to rejoice" and to teach us "how to praise," despite the fallen world all around. He implores the poet to descend into the "night" and, from there, to cultivate a "fountain" of "praise" (55, 63-5).

This is, first, a request to make the best of things—to sing even of sin. Nine years later a similar theme appears in his syllabic masterpiece, "In Praise of Limestone," in which Auden likens the response of limestone to water to the faults and glories of man. Auden praises the way limestone displays the effect water has on it; how it often lets the water emerge from its tunnels to the air, running, "at times/Arm in arm, but never, thank God, in step" (22-23). Similarly, in "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," he calls the poet to "Make a vineyard of the curse"—to create something beautiful and productive out of the ugliness and fear of original sin (59).

Simultaneously, Auden includes the reader in his exhortation; the audience of the third section is the reader as well as the poet. It is an exhortation—every sentence but those in the second and third stanzas are grammatically imperative. When the poet "persuades us to rejoice," we ought to rejoice (57). When, "in rapture," he sings of the "unsuccess" of man, we ought to sing along (60-1). And when the poet teaches us to praise, despite the "prison" of man's temporality and soon-to-be war-torn environment, we ought to praise (64-5).

This persistence and fearlessness appears more singularly in "Leap Before You Look," where Auden admits that there are pitfalls and threats that might scare us into passivity. Yet man must not live in hedonistic ignorance. Auden concludes the poem with the exhortation, "Our dream of safety has to disappear" (24). We must make the leap, which is not so much a leap of faith, as a leap of hope.

Within the sixty-five lines of "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," Auden discusses the role of the poet, poetry, temporality, war, and delusion. More enduringly, however, he entreats the reader to regard poetry and act upon it. We ought not be the "unknown citizen," never questioning our choices. Instead, we should think, and we should rejoice in the face of fear. The death of a poet should neither grieve us nor dash our hopes; instead, it should incite action, for it has become our, the readers', duty to continue the work of the poet.

### Check your progress

#### 3. Who is the poet's successor according to Auden's poem?

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4. Write about the two sections of the poem.

W.H. Auden

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### 3.4 LAY YOUR SLEEPING HEAD MY LOVE

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#### POEM

Lay your sleeping head, my love,  
Human on my faithless arm;  
Time and fevers burn away  
Individual beauty from  
Thoughtful children, and the grave  
Proves the child ephemerel:  
But in my arms till break of day  
Let the living creature lie,  
Mortal, guilty, but to me  
The entirely beautiful.

Soul and body have no bounds:  
To lovers as they lie upon  
Her tolerant enchanted slope  
In their ordinary swoon,  
Grave the vision Venus sends  
Of supernatural sympathy,  
Universal love and hope;  
While an abstract insight wakes  
Among the glaciers and the rocks  
The hermit's sensual ecstasy.

Certainty, fidelity  
On the stroke of midnight pass  
Like vibrations of a bell,  
And fashionable madmen raise  
Their pedantic boring cry:  
Every farthing of the cost,  
All the dreadful cards foretell,  
Shall be paid, but not from this night

Not a whisper, not a thought,  
Not a kiss nor look be lost.

## NOTES

Beauty, midnight, vision dies:  
Let the winds of dawn that blow  
Softly round your dreaming head  
Such a day of sweetness show  
Eye and knocking heart may bless.  
Find the mortal world enough;  
Nights of dryness see you fed  
By the involuntary powers,  
Nights of insult let you pass  
Watched by every human love.

Auden's interest in his Roman Catholic faith – to which he increasingly turned for comfort and the solution to the world's ills in his mature years — makes itself felt in the pantheistic and almost mystical belief in "Universal love and hope" in the second stanza: one remembers the concluding stanzas of Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' in the context.

The dramatic situation in the poem is left shadowy, though: only at the very end of the poem do we dimly guess that the speaker might have been loving and talking to a prostitute all this while. Auden's mature acceptance of the humanity of human love is evident in the 2nd stanza, where he equates love—the act of love-making, when accompanied by spiritual kinship and union—to a "hermit's ecstasy": lovers of English poetry are bound to be reminded of Donne's 'Cannonization' here.

One tends to argue with him, however, over the idea that the sort of heightened physical and spiritual union the stanza talks about could be achieved with someone the speaker does not have a deep relationship with. Maybe, the speaker does not meet with a casual acquaintance, after all. There seems to be an element of vagueness about the nature of the relationship he shares with the owner of the "sleeping head", however unfaithful. Perhaps the lady in question was once in a deeper bond with the speaker and the two have met again after a separation, during which the lady had to suffer "nights of insult" (nights of loveless love-making').

The third stanza evinces an eagerness on the part of the speaker to enjoy whatever the fleeting present has to offer before it dies away unobserved "like vibrations of a bell". This has nothing, however, in common with, say, an Andrew Marvell's hedonistic 'carpe diem' in 'To His Coy Mistress'. Auden's anxiety seems to be more about the affections than about orgasms. Here is a world-weary, disillusioned soul come to rest in the quiet comforts of shared tenderness and companionship, even if this can never be anything more than a one-night fling. (Here again one gets the nagging feeling that the speaker and the woman in the poem had a deeper bond at a point of time beyond the

temporal ambit of the poem: the poet could have helped our imaginations a little more by ampler suggestions.) The reference to the "dreaded cards" is obscure: are they business cards which stridently claim the dues payable to the world by the speaker and his companion for stealing a night of tenderness and passion between them?

The poem closes with a prayer by the speaker for his short-term companion and lover: one is reminded here of the closing lines of Coleridge's 'Dejection: an Ode', where the earlier poet prays for the cheerfulness and lasting bliss of his beloved Sarah Hutchinson. The prayer in Auden's poem is more deeply suffused with the tints of a worldly-wise maturity, though. And it's a prayer almost paternal in its tender solicitousness: note the affectionate and apprehensive references to the woman's "dreaming head" and "knocking heart"! The eagerness of the speaker for her heart to find "the mortal world enough" seems to betray the struggle he had himself had in order to accept the less than satisfying rewards of this mortal earth. Has he succeeded fully in that struggle yet? Or does he, like Matthew Arnold, still find himself torn between "Infinite passion and the pain/Of finite hearts that yearn"? We are left to wonder.

Check your progress

5. Describe the end of the poem.

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### 3.5 SEPTEMBER 1, 1939

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#### POEM

I sit in one of the dives  
 On Fifty-second Street  
 Uncertain and afraid  
 As the clever hopes expire  
 Of a low dishonest decade;  
 Waves of anger and fear  
 Circulate over the bright  
 And darkened lands of the earth,  
 Obsessing our private lives;  
 The unmentionable odour of death  
 Offends the September night.

NOTES

Accurate scholarship can  
Unearth the whole offence  
From Luther until now  
That has driven a culture mad,  
Find what occurred at Linz,  
Find what huge imago made  
A psychopathic god:  
I and the public know  
What all schoolchildren learn,  
Those to whom evil is done  
Do evil in return.

Exiled Thucydides knew  
All that a speech can say  
About Democracy,  
And what dictators do,  
The elderly rubbish they talk  
To an apathetic grave;  
Analysed all in his book,  
The enlightenment driven away,  
The habit-forming pain,  
Mismanagement and grief:  
We must suffer them all again.

Into this neutral air  
Where blind skyscrapers use  
Their full height to proclaim  
The strength of Collective Man,  
Each language pours its vain  
Competitive excuse:  
But who can live for long  
In an euphoric dream;  
Out of the mirror they stare,  
Imperialism's face  
And the international wrong.

Faces along the bar  
Cling to their average day:  
The lights must never go out,  
The music must always play,

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All the conventions conspire  
To make this fort assume  
The furniture of home;  
Lest we should see where we are,  
Lost in a haunted wood,  
Children afraid of the night  
Who have never been happy or good.

The windiest militant trash  
Important Persons shout  
Is not so crude as our wish:  
What mad Nijinsky wrote  
About Diaghilev  
Is true of the normal heart;  
For the error bred in the bone  
Of each woman and each man  
Craves what it cannot have,  
Not universal love  
But to be loved alone.

From the conservative dark  
Into the ethical life  
The dense commuters come,  
Repeating their morning vow;  
"I *will* be true to the wife,  
I'll concentrate more on my work,"

And helpless governors wake  
To resume their compulsory game:  
Who can release them now,  
Who can reach the deaf,  
Who can speak for the dumb?

Defenceless under the night  
Our world in stupor lies;  
Yet, dotted everywhere,  
Ironic points of light  
Flash out wherever the Just  
Exchange their messages:

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May I, composed like them  
Of Eros and of dust,  
Beleaguered by the same  
Negation and despair,  
Show an affirming flame.

“Auden was the first poet writing in English who felt at home in the twentieth century. He welcomed into his poetry all the disordered conditions of his time, all its variety of language and event. In this, as in almost everything else, he differed from his modernist predecessors such as Yeats, Lawrence, Eliot or Pound, who turned away from a flawed present to some lost illusory Eden where life was unified, hierarchy secure, and the grand style a natural extension of the vernacular. All of this Auden rejected. His continuing subject was the task of the present moment: erotic and political tasks in his early poems, ethical and religious ones later. When Auden looked back into history, it was to seek the causes of his present condition that he may act better and more effectively in the future. The past his poems envisioned was never a southern classical domain of unreflective elegance, as it was for the modernists, but a past that had always been ruined, a northern industrial landscape marred by the same violence that marred his own.”

“Auden was never altogether happy in his role as poetic prophet to the English left, and he was often most divided when he appeared most committed. As early as 1936 he sensed that if he were ever to escape the temptations to fame and to the power to shape opinion that led him to accept this role, he would have to leave England.”

“When he arrived in America to stay, early in 1939, he set to work on what was virtually a new career, recapitulating his earlier one in a drastically different manner. He began to explore once again the same thematic and formal territory he had covered in his English years, but with a maturer vision, and no longer distracted by the claims of a public.”... “The shift from private to public concerns that occurred in Auden’s work in the early thirties occurred again in the mid-forties, although now he was without ambition for social influence and lived in a country where poets traditionally had none. His departure from England proved not to have been a rejection of all public roles, as he thought at the time, but a rejection of the wrong ones. He now became an interpreter of his society, not its scourge and prophet.”

The invasion of Poland by the German-Nazi forces commenced upon September 1, 1939 yet it is not the hallmark of W.H. Auden’s intention in his poem “September 1, 1939.” No, this work is far more than a description or criticism of the German-Nazi decision to invade an innocent country; this work, these words, this plea comes from the heart of a man who is living in a society filled with an oppressive nature towards those they deem less human or unfitting to society. Despite such risk of oppression Auden went ahead and published this gorgeous piece of poetry in 1940 with conscious thought to mask his true intentions because unbeknownst to his public Wystan Hugh Auden

was "homosexual" (Miller 1). By use of allusion, symbolism, and straight out diction Auden suggests truly mind-expanding concepts and a criticism of something rather unexpected.

"September 1, 1939" is split into nine, eleven lined, stanzas with no set rhyme scheme or exact meter. For the most part shifts occur randomly although one can group them to certain degrees though it would be best, in one's opinion, to absorb the allusion-based meanings individually for yes they are ever-so deep. The first two stanzas seem to make reference to the German invasion of Poland; the third and fourth stanzas takes a shot at democratically industrialized man; stanzas five and six touch on the concept of sin; surprisingly the seventh, eighth and ninth stanzas bring out the strongest messages which are rather hopeful if not optimistic. Occasionally one meets a rhyme but they are inconsistent in one's eyes and not truly compelling if one suggested they pushed the overall meaning of the work.

In the first two stanzas one finds the speaker in "one of the dives on Fifty-second Street" where he is both "Uncertain and afraid" (1-2). At first glance one could conclude that Auden or the speaker is merely in a small club, but with thought towards his sexual orientation it may in fact suggest that he is avoiding a crowded area where he would normally be uncomfortable (Miller). In the second stanza there is a strong reference to Germany by means of Luther (an anti-Semitic) being that which has pushed the German society to their status quo (14-15). After such Auden then makes a reference to Linz and a psychopathic god in lines 16 and 18 which seems to make an allusion to Hitler due to the fact that Hitler was born in Linz and could easily be thought of as a sort of psychopathic god (Shipon). Auden then tosses in the phrase "Those to whom evil is done do evil in return" (21-22) which makes one possibly consider that this may be an allusion, though not directly, to the Treaty of Versailles which in 20/20 hindsight clearly sets those who made the treaty as doers of evil.

In stanzas three and four one is shown a more anti-American concept. Auden first makes a reference in line 23 to Thucydides who was one of the first people to suggest that history should always be recorded for what it is and not for the glory of the country that records it; because of such a statement, Thucydides was exiled from his home. Towards America this may reference things such as the old propaganda movies our military used to show which were filled with lies and stereotypes to make us think in a more pro-American way. Stanza four then takes focus upon the boasts of "The strength of Collective Man" (37). Effectually Auden starts to write this idea that the buildings we make show our greatness as a "vain competitive excuse" (38-39) which when considered is justifiably true. To make clear his meaning Auden adds "Out of the mirror they stare, imperialism's face and the international wrong" (42-44). These lines suggest a great deal much of which pushes a thought that perhaps America is imperialistic as opposed to democratic and all good. Maybe some of our policies bring about an international wrong;

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although one should note that this is not applied to the wars of today but to a pre-U.S. involvement with WWII.

Stanzas five and six bring about evoking thoughts. Five suggests that the average person never wants to escape their norm; instead everything must always be same. If things changed those people would finally see what's going on around them. They would be "lost in a haunted wood, children afraid of the night who have never been happy or good" (53-55) which symbolizes that they are stuck in a bad or unjust place where they've never really been right or happy. The sixth stanza takes a shot at the unimportant things important people shout. There is then an allusion to Nijinsky, a dance student to Diaghilev, who was driven insane by his teacher's pressure (Miller). Auden then makes a reference to natural sin in line 62 and follows it by the concept that the sinful heart wants "not universal love but to be loved alone" which deeply suggests it that people are exceedingly selfish.

The last three stanzas set each other up to deliver the message Auden intends to plainly give. Stanza seven focuses upon the concept of not being able to reach the average person for they are deaf and dumb to the message. Specifically Auden sets up the deaf-dumb bit in lines 75-77 with a keen literary device known as a parallel which adds a more dramatic push by means of repetition. In stanza eight Auden goes on to suggest that the speaker is one person set to tell the truth about authority and its corruption. Auden even dares to say that "there is no such thing as the state" (84) and that people are controlled by human necessity. More importantly this stanza ends with a beautiful phrase: "We must love one another or die" (88). The final stanza encapsulates a real sense of hope. It stands that though our world does not always understand or right there is still hope. Hope can be found in those who believe in goodness. Auden then alludes that he is composed "of Eros and of dust" in line 96 which suggests that he is made of love, for Eros is the god of love, and dust which references the creation of man according to scripture. Though Auden feels the same "negation and despair" (98) as others, he still hopes to stand true to his good ideals.

Overall the poem makes a slight comparison between the fascist Nazi oppression and our own U.S. oppression. The Nazis persecuted the Jews; the U.S. persecuted homosexuals. In his own time period Auden could never allow his audience to know that he was indeed a homosexual for the repercussions would not be gentle (Miller). Americans did not approve of homosexuals in this time period and if one looks closely at the text one sees that Auden is wishing people could understand or just see that their way is not necessarily the right way. By Auden's use of allusions, symbols, and phrases one sees his real message: the world is forever condemned if people cannot learn to accept and love others for their differences.

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## 3.6 LAW LIKE LOVE

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W.H. Auden

### POEM

Law, say the gardeners, is the sun,  
Law is the one  
All gardeners obey  
To-morrow, yesterday, to-day.

Law is the wisdom of the old,  
The impotent grandfathers feebly scold;  
The grandchildren put out a treble tongue,  
Law is the senses of the young.

Law, says the priest with a priestly look,  
Expounding to an unpriestly people,  
Law is the words in my priestly book,  
Law is my pulpit and my steeple.

Law, says the judge as he looks down his nose,  
Speaking clearly and most severely,  
Law is as I've told you before,  
Law is as you know I suppose,  
Law is but let me explain it once more,  
Law is The Law.

Yet law-abiding scholars write:  
Law is neither wrong nor right,  
Law is only crimes  
Punished by places and by times,  
Law is the clothes men wear  
Anytime, anywhere,  
Law is Good morning and Good night.

Others say, Law is our Fate;  
Others say, Law is our State;  
Others say, others say  
Law is no more,  
Law has gone away.

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And always the loud angry crowd,  
Very angry and very loud,  
Law is We,  
And always the soft idiot softly Me.

If we, dear, know we know no more  
Than they about the Law,  
If I no more than you  
Know what we should and should not do  
Except that all agree  
Gladly or miserably  
That the Law is  
And that all know this  
If therefore thinking it absurd  
To identify Law with some other word,  
Unlike so many men  
I cannot say Law is again,

No more than they can we suppress  
The universal wish to guess  
Or slip out of our own position  
Into an unconcerned condition.  
Although I can at least confine  
Your vanity and mine  
To stating timidly  
A timid similarity,  
We shall boast anyway:  
Like love I say.

Like love we don't know where or why,  
Like love we can't compel or fly,  
Like love we often weep,  
Like love we seldom keep.

**Summary**

Out of many Auden poems this one comes to its "timid similarity" right at the very end, so that having chuckled through the poem once you are almost compelled to go back to the beginning and read it through again, this time replacing Law with Love and realising how truly brilliant the comparison is?

Second, that it's a poem that cries to be read aloud - even reading it in one's head every stanza has it's own 'voice' creating an incredible impression

of movement as one jumps breathlessly from one person's view—point to another's.

W.H. Auden

And finally, for a gem of a last line - one that both makes you laugh and makes you want to cry with a terrible longing for our lost loves. In a poem that is otherwise fairly cheerful it introduces a note of honest grief that lifts the poem above the merely clever.

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### 3.7 AS I WALKED OUT ONE EVENING

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#### POEM

As I walked out one evening,  
Walking down Bristol Street,  
The crowds upon the pavement  
Were fields of harvest wheat.

And down by the brimming river  
I heard a lover sing  
Under an arch of the railway:  
'Love has no ending.

'I'll love you, dear, I'll love you  
Till China and Africa meet,  
And the river jumps over the mountain  
And the salmon sing in the street,

'I'll love you till the ocean  
Is folded and hung up to dry  
And the seven stars go squawking  
Like geese about the sky.

'The years shall run like rabbits,  
For in my arms I hold  
The Flower of the Ages,  
And the first love of the world.'

But all the clocks in the city  
Began to whirr and chime:  
'O let not Time deceive you,  
You cannot conquer Time.

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'In the burrows of the Nightmare  
Where Justice naked is,  
Time watches from the shadow  
And coughs when you would kiss.

'In headaches and in worry  
Vaguely life leaks away,  
And Time will have his fancy  
To-morrow or to-day.

'Into many a green valley  
Drifts the appalling snow;  
Time breaks the threaded dances  
And the diver's brilliant bow.

'O plunge your hands in water,  
Plunge them in up to the wrist;  
Stare, stare in the basin  
And wonder what you've missed.

'The glacier knocks in the cupboard,  
The desert sighs in the bed,  
And the crack in the tea-cup opens  
A lane to the land of the dead.

'Where the beggars raffle the banknotes  
And the Giant is enchanting to Jack,  
And the Lily-white Boy is a Roarer,  
And Jill goes down on her back.

'O look, look in the mirror?  
O look in your distress:  
Life remains a blessing  
Although you cannot bless.

'O stand, stand at the window  
As the tears scald and start;  
You shall love your crooked neighbour  
With your crooked heart.'

It was late, late in the evening,  
 The lovers they were gone;  
 The clocks had ceased their chiming,  
 And the deep river ran on.

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**Summary**

This poem is essentially about how 'Time' will eventually 'conquer' us all and the naive lover introduced in stanza 2 is warned by a personified Time that the promises she/he makes are essentially empty, although she/he doesn't yet realise this. (The lover is more likely to be a male speaking to a female since he refers to her as 'The Flower of the Ages').

In the first stanza, the narrator sets the scene: an evening walk down a busy city street where the pavement is so full of people they resemble a wheat field ready to be harvested. He leaves behind the crowds and comes across the lover singing to his beloved down by the river, tucked away beneath a railway arch.

The lover's song promises unending love and devotion as the lover says his love will last until impossible things occur such as the ocean drying up and the stars 'squawking like geese'. His description of his beloved as the 'first love of the world' alludes to the belief of young lovers that they are the only people to experience love.

At this point, 'all the clocks in the city' begin to chime the hour and the sound of their chimes serves as the warning offered in the stanzas which follow. The words attributed to the 'clocks' could be the words of a personified Time or could be what the chimes mean to the narrator when he hears them. If the latter, this lends extra bitterness to the tone, and is my preferred reading of the poem.

Where the lovers dream of a future together, Time offers a 'Nightmare' world, lurking in the shadows and interrupting moments of intimacy: 'coughs when you would kiss.' The life they hope to share together, enjoying 'years [that will] run like rabbits' will instead 'leak away' full of 'headaches' and 'worry'. Time is also described as a destructive force in stanza nine, one capable of taking you by surprise just as the unexpected snow.

In stanzas ten and eleven, Auden introduces familiar, domestic images such as the 'basin', 'cupboard', 'bed' and cracked 'tea-cup' and juxtaposes these with extreme features of the natural and eventually supernatural world. The homely features could be symbols of domestic drudgery – perhaps Auden is alluding to married life? The plunging of the hands in the basin could be seen as being something as simple as dishwashing where the washer-upper thinks of all the things they've missed out on. Notice the sighing desert in the bed – symbolic of barrenness, oppressiveness but a deep longing.

In the 'land of the dead', Auden turns to the childish world of nursery rhymes and fairy tales but subverts them. The beggars of rhymes such as 'Tinker, tailor' and 'Hark, hark the dogs do bark' are wealthy enough to be able to 'raffle the banknotes' and the terrifying giant in the 'Jack and the

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beanstalk' story charms rather than threatens. The 'Lily-white boy' of 'Green grow the rushes oh' and 'Jill' of 'Jack and Jill' also make an appearance but not quite as innocently as their original counterparts since Auden uses the slang term for a homosexual and Jill's position seems sexually suggestive.

The antepenultimate and penultimate stanzas hold a bitter-sweet message: whilst the lover is distressed and in tears they are reassured that life is still a 'blessing' and there is still love, albeit 'crooked'.

At the end of the poem, the lovers leave and the clocks stop chiming and all we are left with is the river, still running deep – symbolic perhaps of nature's endurance and certainty and echoing the use of nature by the lover to prove his love will not end.

Auden's poem offers a realist's viewpoint on love – all-consuming and exciting in the initial moments but marred by the realities of life and the passage of time. The lovers leave in blissful ignorance of the warning offered by the chiming of the clocks and perhaps this is something we should be grateful for since if we knew what life had in store for us we might not see the point.

### Lines 1-4

This first stanza establishes a setting and a pace for the walk we are about to begin with the speaker. Auden introduces the time of day ("one evening") and specific location ("Bristol Street"), which we might guess is in the city of Bristol, just west of London, England. Bristol Street is crowded this time of day, and the people moving together reminds the speaker of "fields of harvest wheat." As we walk down the crowded street with the speaker we begin to feel the pace of his stride echoed in the rhythm of each line.

Notice too that Auden describes the wheat in terms of time, or when it is to be harvested. Fall, the harvest season, is often used in art as a metaphor for old age because it is the last stage of the life cycle, with the plants past bloom and fruit and cold winter coming. Here the speaker sees the crowd and thinks of the fields in the fall, the golden wheat, and our journey to our "winter" years.

### Lines 5-8

After passing through the crowd, the speaker arrives at a "brimming river" where he hears two lovers talking under "an arch of the railway." The poem becomes a dialogue which will extend for the rest of the stanzas, and here the scenery seems to reflect the mood of the lovers: the water in the river rises on its banks, the arch they stand under resembles a huge door to a cathedral or the gates of heaven. The two perhaps believe their love will keep them together forever, since "Love has no ending."

### Lines 9-16

The speaker eavesdrops on the lovers, and for the next several lines listens to their promises of eternal devotion. Their words seem almost absurd, like when they place their love on a geologic time scale. They conclude that

their love will survive as long as it would take for China and Africa to slide together in continental drift, or for a river to find its course over a mountain. The "seven stars" in line 15 are probably the constellation Pleiades, known in mythology to be the seven sisters.

#### Lines 17-19

In these lines the lover makes perhaps the most grandiose claim; he asserts that the years will pass as fast as "rabbits" because he holds the "flower of the ages" in his hand, as if their love were so apart from time he could pluck all of history like a flower and offer it to her. Perhaps like many lovers, they are convinced their love is "the first love of the world." This image is the last of several which imply that love can conquer time and keep the two together for eternity. But these lines also mark the end of the lover's dialogue, which is cut short by the tolling of the city bells.

#### Lines: 20-24

Just as the lovers reach their most exaggerated claims of devotion, "all the clocks in the city/began to whirr and chime." The speaker imagines in the tolling bells another voice, perhaps responding to the youthful promises of the lovers. Line 22 begins a dialogue which will extend for the next eight stanzas; Auden gives the clocks human voices in a poetic device called "allegory." Using allegory, a poet treats more abstract concepts like "time" and "justice" as if they were characters in a play, their names capitalized appropriately. In this way the clocks are able to speak for Time, warning the lovers "O let not Time deceive you,/You cannot conquer Time." No matter how much they may love each other, it is not going to save them from their own mortality.

#### Lines 25-32

The description of Time in these lines is compared to something that hides in the "burrows of the nightmare," watching the lovers from the shadows and waiting for them to kiss just so it can interrupt with a cough. Whereas the dialogue of the lovers is filled with statements of eternal hope, the clocks quickly remind the two that Time is always there, lurking, clearing its throat like an impatient conductor waiting for the last few passengers to get aboard the dark train. We are not going to live forever, Time reminds us, because the day we are born is the first day counting down to our death, because "In headaches and in worry/Vaguely life leaks away." Time's "fancy" in line 31 may be death itself, which could arrive at any moment, even "tomorrow or today." This horrible, raw truth may be the naked Justice mentioned a few lines previous, the mortal rules we must all follow.

#### Lines 33-40

Echoing the image of "harvest wheat" at the beginning of the poem, this stanza returns to the cycle of the seasons, the green valley of youth giving way to winter and its "appalling" snow that covers the ground. "Appalling" means "terrible," but also literally means "to make pale." The snow makes the

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hills white, "white" like the color of an old man's hair or the pale faces of the sick and dying. The clocks seem to scold the arrogance of the lovers, telling them that not only is it impossible to conquer time, but rather Time itself "breaks the threaded dances/and the diver's brilliant bow."

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### SUMMARY

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- Auden began writing poems at thirteen, mostly in the styles of 19th-century romantic poets, especially Wordsworth, and later poets with rural interests, especially Thomas Hardy. At eighteen he discovered T. S. Eliot and adopted an extreme version of Eliot's style. He found his own voice at twenty, when he wrote the first poem later included in his collected work, "From the very first coming down." This and other poems of the late 1920s tended to be in a clipped, elusive style that alluded to, but did not directly state, their themes of loneliness and loss. Twenty of these poems appeared in his first book *Poems* (1928), a pamphlet hand-printed by Stephen Spender.
- In 1928 he wrote his first dramatic work, *Paid on Both Sides*, subtitled "A Charade," which combined style and content from the Icelandic sagas with jokes from English school life. This mixture of tragedy and farce, with a dream play-within-the-play, introduced the mixed styles and content of much of his later work. This drama and thirty short poems appeared in his first published book *Poems* (1930, 2nd edition with seven poems replaced, 1933); the poems in the book were mostly lyrical and gnomic mediations on hoped-for or unconsummated love and on themes of personal, social, and seasonal renewal; among these poems were "It was Easter as I walked," "Doom is dark," "Sir, no man's enemy," and "This lunar beauty."
- A recurrent theme in these early poems is the effect of "family ghosts", Auden's term for the powerful, unseen psychological effects of preceding generations on any individual life (and the title of a poem). A parallel theme, present throughout his work, is the contrast between biological evolution (unchosen and involuntary) and the psychological evolution of cultures and individuals (voluntary and deliberate even in its subconscious aspects).

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### KEY WORDS

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#### 1. Opera

Opera is an art form in which singers and musicians perform a dramatic work combining text (called a libretto) and musical score.

#### 2. Tetrameter

In poetry, a tetrameter is a line of four metrical feet.

#### 3. Chameleon

Chameleons (family Chamaeleonidae) are a distinctive and highly specialized clade of lizards.

#### 4. Pamphlet

A pamphlet is an unbound booklet (that is, without a hard cover or binding).

## 5. Elegy

W.H. Auden

An elegy is a mournful, melancholic or plaintive poem, especially a funeral song or a lament for the dead.

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### ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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### NOTES

1. Auden's poem seems to divide people into two categories, based on what the speaker's viewing in the paintings he's seeing. One category is composed of those who, for whatever reason, are indifferent to the sufferings of others, or just don't realize at all that anything's going on. The other category seems to be composed of the "aged," "martyrs," and Icarus.
2. The poem, "Musée des Beaux Arts," has no rhyme or metrical pattern to speak of. What it does have, though, is simple, precise language. There is nothing to get too upset about and nothing to twist the tongue or boggle the mind. Nice, neat, simple language.
3. Auden defines the reader of poetry as the poet's successor, exhorting his readers to think and to act. Poets die, as every man dies, but poetry does not die, and neither does mankind. The title suggests that this poem is an elegy for a certain man; after the title, though, it mentions Yeats' name once, and only a few other details suggest this is Yeats that Auden is mourning.
4. The first section of the poem denigrates the body of the poet; the second section, the efficiency of poetry itself.
5. The poem closes with a prayer by the speaker for his short-term companion and lover: one is reminded here of the closing lines of Coleridge's 'Dejection: an Ode', where the earlier poet prays for the cheerfulness and lasting bliss of his beloved Sarah Hutchinson. The prayer in Auden's poem is more deeply suffused with the tints of a worldly-wise maturity, though.

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### REVIEW QUESTIONS

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1. Describe the summary of "Musée des beaux arts".
2. Discuss the themes of the poem, "In memory of W.B. Yeats".
3. Examine the critical analysis of "Lay your sleeping head my love".
4. Write down the summary of "September 1, 1939" and "As I walked out one evening".
5. Critically appreciate the poem, "Law like Love".

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### FURTHER READINGS

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- Poems - W.H. Auden
- Collected Poems - W.H. Auden
- W.H. Auden: Poems - Wystan Hugh Auden
- The poetry of W.H. Auden - Paul Hendon
- W.H. Auden - John Haffenden.

## PHILIP LARKIN

### STRUCTURE

- 4.0 Learning Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Wants
- 4.3 Church Going
- 4.4 Deceptions
- 4.5 High Window
- 4.6 Next Please
- 4.7 Ambulance
  - *Summary*
  - *Key Words*
  - *Answers to Check Your Progress*
  - *Review Questions*
  - *Further Readings*

### 4.0 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

*After reading this unit, you will be able to:*

- describe the analysis of the poem, "Wants"
- discuss the summary of the poem, "Church going"
- examine the critical analysis of the poem, "Deceptions"
- enumerate the summary of the poem, "High window"
- explain the poetic analysis of the poems, "Next please" and "Ambulance".

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Philip Arthur Larkin, (9 August 1922 – 2 December 1985) is widely regarded as one of the great English poets of the latter half of the twentieth

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century. His first book of poetry, *The North Ship*, was published in 1945, followed by two novels, *Jill* (1946) and *A Girl in Winter* (1947), but he came to prominence in 1955 with the publication of his second collection of poems, *The Less Deceived*, followed by *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974). He contributed to *The Daily Telegraph* as its jazz critic from 1961 to 1971, articles gathered together in *All What Jazz: A Record Diary 1961–71* (1985) and he edited the *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* (1973). He was the recipient of many honours, including the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry. He was offered, but declined, the position of poet laureate in 1984, following the death of John Betjeman.

After graduating from Oxford in 1943 with a first in English language and literature, Larkin became a librarian. It was during the thirty years he served as university librarian at the Brynmor Jones Library at the University of Hull that he produced the greater part of his published work. His poems are marked by what Andrew Motion calls a very English, gum accuracy about emotions, places, and relationships, and what Donald Davie described as lowered sights and diminished expectations. Eric Homberger called him "the saddest heart in the post-war supermarket"—Larkin himself said that deprivation for him was what daffodils were for Wordsworth. Influenced by W. H. Auden, W. B. Yeats, and Thomas Hardy, his poems are highly-structured but flexible verse forms. They were described by Jean Hartley, the ex-wife of Larkin's publisher George Hartley (The Marvell Press), as a "piquant mixture of lyricism and discontent," though anthologist Keith Tuma writes that there is more to Larkin's work than its reputation for dour pessimism suggests.

Larkin's public persona was that of the no-nonsense, solitary Englishman who disliked fame and had no patience for the trappings of the public literary life. The posthumous publication by Anthony Thwaite in 1992 of his letters triggered controversy about his personal life and reactionary political views, described by John Banville as hair-raising, but also in places hilarious. Lisa Jardine called him a "casual, habitual racist, and an easy misogynist," though the academic John Osborne argued in 2008 that "the worst that anyone has discovered about Larkin are some crass letters and a taste for porn softer than what passes for mainstream entertainment". Despite the controversy, Larkin was chosen in a 2003 Poetry Book Society survey, almost two decades after his death, as Britain's best-loved poet of the previous 50 years, and in 2008 *The Times* named him Britain's greatest post-war writer.

In 2010, 25 years after his death, Larkin's adopted home city, Kingston upon Hull commemorated him with the Larkin 25 Festival which culminated in the unveiling of a statue of Larkin by Martin Jennings on the 25th anniversary of his death, 2 December 2010.

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## 4.2 WANTS

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### NOTES

### POEM

Beyond all this, the wish to be alone:  
However the sky grows dark with invitation-cards  
However we follow the printed directions of sex  
However the family is photographed under the flagstaff—  
Beyond all this, the wish to be alone.

Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs:  
Despite the artful tensions of the calendar,  
The life insurance, the tabled fertility rites,  
The costly aversion of the eyes from death—  
Beneath it all, desire of oblivion runs.

### Analysis

Freud always assumed that one of the chief aims of psychoanalytic theory is to replace repressions with sublimations. However, this is not a panacea as i) not all libido can be displaced ii) only a minority of people are capable of creative sublimation iii) sublimations by virtue of their intrinsic nature are not capable of complete satisfaction. And we reach to the crux: 'the desexualisation intrinsic to all sublimation ... involves a necessary component of dying to life of the body, and therefore cannot ever satisfy the life instinct'. Thus, what Philip Larkin so insistently portrays, is the reaction of his id to the stress it suffers through sublimation. There could be no better example of the 'narcissistic enjoyment' that is derived from the expression of the death instinct and its concomitant desexualisation than the poem *Wants*.

The illusion of omnipotence, which is the only jouissance in the psychological state that gave rise to this poem, lies in the ability of the poet to openly negate life and bravely embrace death. This illusion is further enhanced by indirectly invoking death as something that should better be come to grips with rather than repressed (The costly aversion of the eyes from death). The weariness and the futility of trying to escape are brought out by the use of unrhymed lines and repeated syntax suggesting lassitude ('however...', 'however..'). Also, each stanza is enclosed between bare statements reinforcing the inevitability of any redeeming action. There is a mechanical, biologicistic, view of sex ('printed directions of sex' and 'tabled fertility rites') which divests it from any romantic overtones. Human rituals as seen as a subterfuge for the truth which nobody wants to face. The attitude to all received pieties is iconoclastic. Hope, which has been treated in the poem, *Next Please*, does not exist at all in this poem, it has been already dispensed with

as a liar that can only protract one's sorrows; the only reward is the black ship of death. It is from that point that, *Wants*, begins.

*Philip Larkin*

In fact, we can draw a parallel here between loneliness and death. Each of these concepts serves as the topic sentence to each stanza. Psychoanalysis has shown us that loneliness is, in a psychological reality, one of the most powerful ways that death can intimate itself to us, and that fear of death is nothing but the expression of the terror of loneliness. In absolute love, one fears not death, one has surpassed death. The romantics especially have grasped this concept that reached one of its many climaxes, for example, in Wagnerian music drama. Wagner's, *Tristan and Isolde*, has become synonymous with the concept of *Liebested* the amalgamation of the two German words for love and death.

## NOTES

But where, *Wants*, ends, *Aubade*, begins. It is probably the last poem written by Philip Larkin about death. In it there are many cliches, but it is still remarkable for the adroit and original way in which the bare cliched ideas are combined. The themes already mentioned that relate to the attitude towards death recur; but this time in a synectic, cumulative way. *Aubade* stands for the song before morning of lovers who must part at first light. Larkin's version becomes a meditation in the early hours of one who fears separation from what he most loves (?) - life itself. Once again, the primordial archetype of Love and Death is evoked. Once again fear of death is alternated with the negation of the will-to-live. Once again one falls in love with what one must part with.

### Check your progress

1. Why the poem "*Wants*", considered as the example of 'narcissistic enjoyment'?

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## 4.3 CHURCH GOING

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### POEM

Once I am sure there's nothing going on  
I step inside, letting the door thud shut.  
Another church: matting, seats, and stone,  
And little books; sprawlings of flowers, cut  
For Sunday, brownish now; some brass and stuff  
Up at the holy end; the small neat organ;  
And a tense, musty, unignorable silence,  
Brewed God knows how long. Hatless, I take off

NOTES

My cycle-clips in awkward reverence,  
Move forward, run my hand around the font.  
From where I stand, the roof looks almost new-  
Cleaned or restored? Someone would know: I don't.  
Mounting the lectern, I peruse a few  
Hectoring large-scale verses, and pronounce  
"Here endeth" much more loudly than I'd meant.  
The echoes snigger briefly. Back at the door  
I sign the book, donate an Irish sixpence,  
Reflect the place was not worth stopping for. Yet stop I did: in fact I  
often do,  
And always end much at a loss like this,  
Wondering what to look for; wondering, too,  
When churches fall completely out of use  
What we shall turn them into, if we shall keep  
A few cathedrals chronically on show,  
Their parchment, plate, and pyx in locked cases,  
And let the rest rent-free to rain and sheep.  
Shall we avoid them as unlucky places? Or, after dark, will dubious  
women come  
To make their children touch a particular stone;  
Pick simples for a cancer; or on some  
Advised night see walking a dead one?  
Power of some sort or other will go on  
In games, in riddles, seemingly at random;  
But superstition, like belief, must die,  
And what remains when disbelief has gone?  
Grass, weedy pavement, brambles, buttress, sky, A shape less recog-  
nizable each week,  
A purpose more obscure. I wonder who  
Will be the last, the very last, to seek  
This place for what it was; one of the crew  
That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?  
Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,  
Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff  
Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?  
Or will he be my representative, Bored, uninformed, knowing the  
ghostly silt  
Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground  
Through suburb scrub because it held unpilt

So long and equably what since is found  
Only in separation—marriage, and birth,  
And death, and thoughts of these—for whom was built  
This special shell? For, though I've no idea  
What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,  
It pleases me to stand in silence here; A serious house on serious earth  
it is,  
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,  
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.  
And that much never can be obsolete,  
Since someone will forever be surprising  
A hunger in himself to be more serious,  
And gravitating with it to this ground,  
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,  
If only that so many dead lie round.

## NOTES

### Summary

The seven stanzas of this poem remarkably channel the reader through phases of reflection and an interior monologue. In the first person, lyrical, assertion, the poet makes the reader deliberate along side his moving into and out of a church. And at last a wholistic appraisal of the significance of church as a house on Earth emerges:

The poet is sure that there is nothing going on inside the church. He steps inside. The door is shut. The church looks different though there are matting seats and stone and little books and flowers cut for Sunday, and other ciboria vessels holy to perform worship at the holy end and a neat organ, the church no longer frequented in good numbers observe silence. The silence to the poet seems unignorable. The poet partly agnostic removes his cycle clips in awkward reverence.

Then he feels the font. The roof is fairly new. He goes to the lectern, reads a few 'hectoring verses' and tells 'here endeth'. Then he signs the book, donates an Irish six pence, a charity and thinks that the place is not worth stopping for yet, on seen churches falling out of use. Mostly they are haunts for rain and sheep rent free. Why human endeavour should keeps them as archaeological curios. Many cathedrals are tourist's views these days. Is it because humanity thinks these places not lucky?

Many churches out of use are secret places for dubious women to go on with their affairs, or they bring in children to touch a stone and embrace faith, or they pick some herbs grown in the yard to cure diseases. Some say some see the dead spirits walking. The poet says that superstition like belief must die. What if is the perennial question. Even if people were to lose all faith or all disbelief, what remains, as church is but a dilapidated structure, with grass overgrows weedy pavement, brambles, buttress and sky.

## NOTES

Week after week the church is on the wane. The purpose for which it is there becomes more obscure. The poet wonders who could possibly be the last one to go to church for solace for other purposes. Some archaeologist analyzing ruins may go; some that went to collect the antique things may go; some devoted men to celebrate Christmas with due service may, with faith in the priestly authority and rites of enactment for some epiphany.

The poet wonders that the church is a type of special shell signifying the great moments of human life like marriage, birth and death. The ministerial services offered by the church can hardly be ignored. Though one is often bored or wanting in knowledge of the spirit dispersed over centuries like silt of groundless faith there is to be felt an encrustation of significance. The poet sincerely has little idea of the 'accounted frowsty barns' worth. Yet he confesses it really please him to stand there and remain silent.

In the last stanza, Larkin denouncing all disbelief comes out asserting that church is a serious house on serious earth. There are some motive compulsions of human life that definitely repeat. The honouring these compulsions by its benediction do not let them go obsolete. Moreover for the believer, (there is always a believer) this place is holy and he is drawn to it instinctively; for he gathers wisdom here and the spirits of the departed are there around in the reckoning.

The poem begins agnostically and ends catholically. The point is clear. Church as an institution may undergo vicissitudes. But as a place of faith shall continue ever for the basic compulsions of humans meet there, its symbolic deserted look is that of an agnostic soul, which on embracing faith would recognize its worth. The poet stopped not without an instinct in him and really feels the church as a serious house on serious earth. The word 'serious' means ever-during. That way, one need not be disheartened at what appears as deserted and neglected. One can by simple reflection can lift up his hearts. A structure like the church would be the place for such a reflection.

### Analysis

Philip Larkin's *Church Going* describes the idle curiosity of the poet/speaker for a church he comes across while out for a bike ride. It consists of 7 stanzas, each 9 lines in length. The meter is a relaxed iambic pentameter. The rhyme scheme is ababcbdb with numerous slant rhymes appearing in lines 5-9. The language is typical of Larkin - ordinary, conversational, almost slangy.

The speaker wants to be sure there is nothing in the way of a church service going on. He appears more interested in the building than in the movement that brought it about. He demonstrates awkward reverence removing his hat and cuff clips. Apparently he has stopped at a number of churches. He describes this one as "Another church" and makes note of "matting, seats, and stone,/And little books, sprawlings of flowers cut/ For Sunday, brownish now." He seems uninterested in the denomination of the church.

In stanza 2 he moves forward, rubbing a hand over the baptismal font, speculating on the condition of the roof, climbs the lectern and says, "Here

endeth" more loudly than he had intended to. Returning to the entrance, he signs the guest book and contributes a foreign coin to the collection box, thinking the place was not worth stopping for.

In stanza 3 he questions his curious habit of stopping at churches. Once they have become totally useless, will officials keep open some cathedrals and leave the smaller churches to rain and sheep? Will cathedrals become tourist traps and these smaller churches become attractions for ruin seekers, antique hounds, and mothers perpetuating superstitions and seeking simples (medicinal plants) to cure cancer?

It becomes clear that the title has more than one meaning. Churches were built for the once large numbers of believers who attended every Sunday, but those numbers are rapidly reducing themselves. Marriages are gradually shifting to legal events performed by lay people if indeed people don't merely choose to live together without ceremony. The same situation is replacing the elaborate requiems and funerals of earlier ages. As time goes on, the Church is playing a role of less importance in society, politics, and world events. Finally there are people like the poet/speaker - curious but not trained in history or architecture - who are church goers but are unencumbered by religion.

The Church may be said to be going fast. Still Larkin's speaker (who speaks for Larkin) cannot totally reject the human religious movement that dominated history until the twentieth century. 'A serious house on serious earth it is.' And think of all the many dead who lie round.

**Check your progress**

**2. What happens when the poet enters the church?**

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**3. Write about the structure of the poem.**

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## **4.4 DECEPTIONS**

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### **POEM**

'Of course I was drugged, and so heavily I did not regain consciousness until the next morning. I was horrified to discover that I had been ruined, and for some days I was inconsolable, and cried like a child to be killed or sent back to my aunt.'

-Mayhew, London Labour and the London Poor

## **NOTES**

NOTES

Even so distant, I can taste the grief,  
Bitter and sharp with stalks, he made you gulp.  
The sun's occasional print, the brisk brief  
Worry of wheels along the street outside  
Where bridal London bows the other way,  
And light, unanswerable and tall and wide,  
Forbids the scar to heal, and drives  
Shame out of hiding. All the unhurried day,  
Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives.

Slums, years, have buried you. I would not dare  
Console you if I could. What can be said,  
Except that suffering is exact, but where  
Desire takes charge, readings will grow erratic?  
For you would hardly care  
That you were less deceived, out on that bed,  
Than he was, stumbling up the breathless stair  
To burst into fulfillment's desolate attic.

**Analysis**

Concentrating on a single poem, 'Deceptions' shows how critical theory can 'open up' Larkin's writing to a variety of illuminating, if not always reconcilable, viewpoints. In this poem the poet recognizes that the reality of experience he has been pursuing is simply not there: just as the woman's existence has been obliterated, so the effort to capture a reality beyond language is doomed to failure.

As the imaginary debate on 'Deceptions' makes clear, the issue of sexual politics in Larkin's poetry is difficult to ignore, especially when it appears in such a painfully explicit and starkly confrontational way. Much of Larkin's poetry is concerned explicitly with sexual desire and sexual disillusionment, yet remarkably few critics have seriously addressed these concerns.

In the case of 'Deceptions', for instance, Janice Rossen finds the speaker's attitude 'detached almost to the point of sadism'. Like Clark, though, she finds something redeeming in Larkin's sexual attitudes his poems convey, but often satirises such views and shows that 'women ought to be treated less as objects and more as people in their own right'.

**Check your progress**

**4. How does the poem, "Deceptions" clear the issue of sexual politics?**

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**4.5 HIGH WINDOW**


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**POEM**

When I see a couple of kids  
 And guess he's fucking her and she's  
 Taking pills or wearing a diaphragm,  
 I know this is paradise

Everyone old has dreamed of all their lives—  
 Bonds and gestures pushed to one side  
 Like an outdated combine harvester,  
 And everyone young going down the long slide

To happiness, endlessly. I wonder if  
 Anyone looked at me, forty years back,  
 And thought, That'll be the life;  
 No God any more, or sweating in the dark

About hell and that, or having to hide  
 What you think of the priest. He  
 And his lot will all go down the long slide  
 Like free bloody birds. And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:  
 The sun-comprehending glass,  
 And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows  
 Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.

**Summary**

"High Windows" consists of five quatrains; it has a variable metrical pattern and an irregular but discernible rhyme scheme (basically *abab*). Like many of Philip Larkin's poems, "High Windows" is written in the first person with no attempt to separate himself from the speaker. "I write poems," Larkin has said, "to preserve things I have seen/thought/felt (if I may so indicate a composite and complex experience) both for myself and others."

"High Windows" closes by looking up to wordless, endless, and radiant nothingness. Of course, the poem is about the end of religion (the windows seem to be those of a church) and the agnostic's fear of death. But, like other poems from this period, it is also about the relation of the poet and his language to the social and to the private, and about the relation of one

**NOTES**

## NOTES

generation and its pleasures to the next and theirs. Radiant high windows and high diction on the one hand, fucking and four-letter words on the other. And while these pleasures may at first seem rivalrous or opposed, they turn out to mean, and reveal, the same thing: disrupted and disrupting negativity, resistance to meaning and relation, and-most of all-the common unavailability, for the poet, of two contrasting kinds of consolation and joy.

Other people, "High Windows" says, especially young ones, seem to me to have wonderful, satisfying, earthly, social, and sensual rewards, though of course it probably doesn't often seem that way to them, and those joys will never be available to me: and, second, the rewards that art can offer me, the rewards we really built and suited for, are even at their best characterized by deferral, remoteness, vacancy. With Larkin, the rewards that art or "thought" can offer the reader or writer who is old or distant or lonely enough to need them always begin in privacy and end in privation. The invisible, endless, wordless "Elsewhere" in those windows is a final figure for two kinds of emptiness or regret-we might call them social and private, or young and old, or bodily and linguistic, or even life and art-for which the shaky a metricality and confrontational diction of the first stanzas, the fucked-up lines about fucking, comprise a first figure.

We say to ourselves "That'll be the life" far more than we say "This is the life." And what this indicates (a feeling of deferral, the hope that we might have the right experience later, the sense that someone else might be having it now but we haven't or can't) applies to our desires for artistic enlightenment as well as to those for sensual satisfaction. This common experience of the unattainability of whatever we want, or think we want, is one of Larkin's great subjects. It is also the subject of Andrew Swarbrick's *Out of Reach*, by far the best critical book solely about Larkin. Swarbrick argues that even "the most triumphant of Larkin's poems are about failure and ultimately prefer silence to words." The "failures" and "silences" of "High Windows" are then twofold: one is sexual and social, the other is private and abstract. Larkin can't think about the one without the other. Some deep groove in his head connects an inability to reach or speak to the young with a sense of sexual unfulfillment, and associates both with an almost deconstructive despair at the failure of words (and of art) to mean or cohere. This complex of ideas, which animates "High Windows," runs back through his writing like an underground river, from "Love Again" to "Dockery and Son" to the jazz criticism, two sentences of which could almost serve as an epigraph for "High Windows":

In a humanist society, art assumes great importance, and to lose touch with it is parallel to losing one's faith in a religious age. Or, in this particular case, since jazz is the music of the young, it was like losing one's potency.

Larkin's confrontational "fucks," like his gestures to elsewhere and nothing, respond to this loss, to this sense of failure, which is both spiritual (and private) and social (and sexual). "The peculiar triumph of Larkin's lyricism," as Swarbrick says (quoting Bakhtin), "is to incorporate 'other people's words.'"

## NOTES

Talking about the kids in their language, ventriloquizing while showing his distance, the Larkin of these late poems is like the lonely boy John Kemp who spends about a third of Larkin's undergraduate novel, *Jill*, writing the fictional diary of its heroine. Historicizing his own feelings of outsiderhood in "High Windows," realizing that the same relations have applied whenever the old, resentful, lonely, and goatish (like Larkin) have looked at the young, Larkin turns to "arrogant eternity," solitude, Art, and realizes that their consolations, too, "never worked for me," as he put it in "Love Again." One kind of distance just replaces another. In the end, saying "fuck" and "bloody" turns out to be more like contemplating the depth of the ocean, the height of the air, or the uncomprehending sunlight than anyone but Larkin would have guessed.

### Analysis

'High Windows' is a very widely known and discussed poem. Larkin will therefore not discuss it in any depth; only try to assemble critical comments on its connection to religion or Christianity. These comments fall into two main categories, those who consider the poem totally irreligious and having nothing to do with Christianity, and those who, in contrast, claim that the poem is really about Christianity.

"Sweating in the dark/About/What you think of the priest," to my mind, these lines do not mean that religion as such has disappeared but that is no longer necessary to be Christian. In light of the last stanza it means exactly the opposite, i.e. that there is some kind of a religion somewhere, what has changed is that now it does not lie in the rules but only in personal decisions or, to use Larkin's words, the "endlessness".

Endlessness is an important notion in the poem, it can be found two times: once in the middle of the poem and then at the very end, (which position is actually very central in a poem). The two instances are related, the first refers to something that follows while the other to something preceding it, the first to the young, the second to the old. That can either mean the deceased in Heaven or the deceased as "nothing", gone without a trace. These opposites make endlessness a property that describes life as something continuous, even if there are changes "endlessly". Continuousness does not mean constancy but ongoing change. An important interpretation of this endlessness would be freedom, since this is what Larkin seems to strive for, even though it is impossible to reach it. In other words, freedom is only an illusion because it is relative, as Swarbrick suggests, the generation before Larkin's had the freedom of belief, while the one after Larkin's had the freedom of sex.

There are different interpretations about the meaning of the last stanza. Booth, who refuses to treat Larkin as a poet who has anything to do with Christianity, says that the title refers to the poet's own windows, and the image of blue air is only a description of reality without any transcendental meaning. Racz, for example, claims that the endless blue air does have an underlying meaning, that of eternal clarity. Watson calls interprets this notion as "beyond the known and limited lies the unknown and unlimited" i.e. the universal God.

## NOTES

Lerner ignores the meaning of the "high windows", still he calls the vision "open-ended" i.e. that the last image of the poem opens unto nothing therefore it ends with "a glimpse of absence and emptiness". Walcott called the last lines tender, prayer like, sacred and translucent with other poems as 'Water' or 'Coming'.

The whole poem flows towards one main image, namely that although every generation becomes more and more independent, there still are some things within us that we cannot get rid of. Endlessness is one of these main images, and an endless blue sky is truly a Christian image. This is again an image that Larkin cannot get rid of exactly because of his origins. This does not mean that he might be Christian but that his life is immersed in Christianity, and that is why he uses these images even when he tries to pretend that he already got rid of them.

In this respect, the high windows can refer to a church, although this is not the meaning a Christian would uphold. This church is only the image of his most prominent theme, the symbol of an age that has already declined. Still it is in the very "blood" of every member of European culture.

Nevertheless, we also accept Booth's point of view that these windows are Larkin's own, since that is a biographical fact. However, this does not mean that the high windows of a room cannot take on the image of church windows. The voice of the poem elevates Larkin's study into a sacred environment, a church, in the poet's mind, just as Christians find God in prayer as they immerse into their inner temples.

A further reason why Christianity could be important in the poem is that its basic situation has to do with expiration. The upcoming generation has taken on new roles in life, just as Larkin had done when he was young. That does not mean that the next generation would have it better, which projects that coming generations will always have their own innovations, and all human beings will always face their own passing while observing a new generation. 'Passing' is a fundamental issue that Christianity tries to deal with. To put it very profanely, they say that dead souls go to heaven, up above is the endless blue sky. The image of the sky, therefore, is simply an imagery derived from the "kids" of the first stanza.

Still, there are images that either questions the validity of these new laws of life, or they refer to the poet's envy of the young. The main image is the slide that refers to a downward direction, that is a direction towards Hell, or in a more common imagery, something bad, as in such words as "lower class", "downfall", etc. "Going down the long slide/To happiness" is therefore ambiguous, either meaning "exhilaration or panic" quite like saying that common and ugly things are the source of happiness.

We have to see that two different shapes come out of the poem. One is a circle that represents the circularity of the poem (the cyclic quality of the generations was also suggested by Lerner 31). Sliding downwards to the upper regions means that every downward movement ends up in an upward movement and therefore the whole movement is circular. Also, the two

occurrences of endless, first associated with the bottom then going to the top, makes endlessness a whole, a circle. Also the diverse imagery "He / And his lot will all go down the long slide / Like free bloody birds" raises the image of circling birds (drawing a parabola) from their upward slide (as eagles swoop upon their prey).

The other geometrical forms that come out of the poem are two lines. Every generation has some novelties they could make of their own. Larkin's generation could dispose of Christianity as a compulsory religion, while the following generation could have a freer sexual life. That does not mean that Larkin's generation was more restricted, only that it was different. The whole image is a linear one. It is also important to point out that it is not a "downward line" but a constant, therefore horizontal one.

The thought of up and down has another important role. Even if it is pointed out that to be a part of a later generation does not mean automatically to be "better" or "worse" in any way, still we have the visual image of the earlier generations "above" the later ones. Both Larkin and the generation before him imagined that the younger generations were in a slide. Larkin was not "sweating in the dark/About hell", which might mean that he was closer to Hell than those who did. However, when he is older, he looks down on the young from his high windows. At the same time, the elder generations who have died are above him in Heaven. This image presents another line, a vertical one. Obviously, these two lines, especially with a circle at the point where they intersect, make up a cross. It may be too farfetched to say that this was Larkin's intent, however.

The numerous images suggest that the poem uses symbolistic techniques, as Motion claimed. The most interesting image in this poem is the "sun-comprehending glass" that can be associated with Shelley's "Dome of many-colour'd glass" in 'Adonais'. Since 'Adonais' was written on the occasion of Keats's death, it is on the boundary between life and death, and it can be considered as a religious poem, even though Shelley himself was not a religious poet.

Bringing this line from 'Adonais' into context ("The One remains, the many change and pass/Heaven's light forever shines, Earth's shadows fly/ Life, like a dome of many-colour'd glass/Stains the white radiance of Eternity/ Until Death tramples it to fragments."), we can see that the "many-colour'd glass" refers to eternity as "The sun-comprehending glass" does to endlessness in 'High Windows'. This is, therefore, another evidence of the religious interpretation of the poem's ending.

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## 4.6 NEXT PLEASE

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### POEM

Always too eager for the future, we  
Pick up bad habits of expectancy.

## NOTES

NOTES

Something is always approaching; every day  
Till then we say,

Watching from a bluff the tiny, clear  
Sparkling armada of promises draw near.  
How slow they are! And how much time they waste,  
Refusing to make haste!

Yet still they leave us holding wretched stalks  
Of disappointment, for, though nothing balks  
Each big approach, leaning with brasswork prinked,  
Each rope distinct,

Flagged, and the figurehead wit golden tits  
Arching our way, it never anchors; it's  
No sooner present than it turns to past.  
Right to the last

We think each one will heave to and unload  
All good into our lives, all we are owed/  
For waiting so devoutly and so long.  
But we are wrong:

Only one ship is seeking us, a black-  
Sailed unfamiliar, towing at her back  
A huge and birdless silence. In her wake  
No waters breed or break.

**Summary**

Philip Larkin's "Next, Please" is made up of six four-line stanzas. The first three lines of each (with several exceptions) are in iambic pentameter, while the last line of each is noticeably shorter (either four or six syllables). The rhyme scheme of each of the stanzas is *aabb*. The poem examines the common desire many people have to focus their attention on the future instead of living in the present. Many spend their entire lives waiting for the good things the future will supposedly bring to those who faithfully wait for them.

What do we make of the title of this piece? "Next Please"? Sounds like a shop or doctor's waiting room and the references to death in the last stanza hint at the answer. This is Death calling! The Grim Reaper is calling this title out loud to us all.

## NOTES

The premise of this piece is that we focus our attention on the future instead of living in the here and now. Notice the inclusive use of "we" and "our" throughout the poem. Larkin suggests we spend our entire lives waiting for the rewards the future will apparently endow to those who patiently wait for them. The irony is, of course, that from our vantage point think we are looking at our well deserved rewards in life when in fact we are only seeing The Grim Reaper's vessel getting closer.

The rhyme scheme is *aabb* and the first three lines of each are mostly in iambic pentameter, while the last line of each is much shorter and is either four or six syllables in length. Note the tone in the first stanza. Lexis such as "eager" and "expectancy" have rather positive connotations, yet there is a tension when we see the phrase "bad habits".

The second stanza is rather cinematic in nature. This technique is rather typical of much of Larkin's work. He often provides us with vivid mental images. We are taken to a cliff by the seaside. From here we see an approaching metaphorical "armada of promises". It brings to mind the phrase that "one day our ship will come in."

He uses a three-part list to premodify this image; it is "tiny, clear" and "Sparkling". This "armada" is laden with alluring "promises" and seems a very attractive proposition to the onlooker.

However, we have a hint of caution when we note the time-reference lexis in the second half of this stanza: "slow", "time" and "haste". He seems to be suggesting that much of life is spent waiting for rewards rather than having them.

The third stanza shows us Larkin's pivot word "Yet". He will often set up a scene then interject a "yet" or "but" or "however" to turn the conversation round.

The naval semantic field is extended with lexis like "balk", "brasswork" and "rope". Note the poet's effective use of postmodification too, here: brasswork is "prinked" and ropes are "distinct", but the first line has given us a very clear negative land-based metaphor in the lines:

"holding wretched stalks  
Of disappointment"

We have been tantalised but are destined to be let down. Such is Larkin's pessimistic view of life. The agony of lost opportunity is further extended in the fourth stanza. It starts with alliteration of the repeating "f" sounds and if we had originally thought the "promises" on board had been material wealth, now; the highly sexual figurehead metaphor suggests our love life is equally doomed to failure.

The naval lexis is obvious in the penultimate stanza. Apparently, the ships will dock and deliver their alluring cargo; however in the last line we are met with another of Larkin's pivot words are we are told categorically that: "we are wrong". We will not get this delivery, whether material or sexual. It has all been in vain.

## NOTES

Is Larkin chastising us for being fooled for so long? That depends on how you read it and that depends too on your philosophy of life.

Do you view your glass half empty or half full? Are you naturally pessimistic or optimistic? That will determine your approach to Larkin's verse; he might confirm your worst fears or challenge you to fight your corner and suggest life is NOT full of disappointment. For most readers of this poem, our supposed rewards are depicted as a line of approaching ships that will unload their precious cargoes into our lives.

In this nihilistic poem, Larkin describes vividly the void and nothingness that comes after death. Interestingly, one student summed the poem up as being not about hopelessness but hopefulness. He was delighted to see how we "consider that happiness is just around the corner despite its repeated failure to appear." How do you react to this personal response to the piece? Do you agree? Or disagree?

The clear references to death are startling in the final section. If the first five verses have been about life, then this final stanza is about death. It is the only thing that we can be certain of in life.

He seizes the naval image of a ship and sets out a morbid message. The sails are "black". The connotations are clear. The ship itself is eerily called an "unfamiliar" and astern; we witness a "huge and birdless silence". This is a very emotive line. The simple and moving alliterative last line rams home the point with "w" and "b" to pound out the beat. We have a nihilistic, cheerless end to life. No celebration; it is just silent and motionless.

The extensive use of a naval semantic field produces a vivid, graphic and moving view of life and death.

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## 4.7 AMBULANCE

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### POEM

Closed like confessionals, they thread  
Loud noons of cities, giving back  
None of the glances they absorb.  
Light glossy grey, arms on a plaque,  
They come to rest at any kerb:  
All streets in time are visited.

Then children strewn on steps or road,  
Or women coming from the shops  
Past smells of different dinners, see  
A wild white face that overtops  
Red stretcher-blankets momentarily  
As it is carried in and stowed,

NOTES

And sense the solving emptiness  
That lies just under all we do,  
And for a second get it whole,  
So permanent and blank and true.  
The fastened doors recede. Poor soul,  
They whisper at their own distress;

For borne away in deadened air  
May go the sudden shut of loss  
Round something nearly at an end,  
And what cohered in it across  
The years, the unique random blend  
Of families and fashions, there

At last begin to loosen. Far  
From the exchange of love to lie  
Unreachable insided a room  
The traffic parts to let go by  
Brings closer what is left to come,  
And dulls to distance all we are.

A meditation on the closeness of death, its randomness and its inevitability. These three ideas are captured for Larkin in the action of ambulances in the city. Today young people might see ambulances as a sign of hope, a positive intervention sustaining life rather than heralding death. When the poem was written in the fifties, to be carried away in an ambulance was a sign of worse to come.

Stanza 1

The ambulances symbolise death. They are closed and inscrutable "giving back none of the glances they absorb"; like a corpse. They are private, secretive, and silent like confessionals. They cause agitation in people who glance nervously at them hoping that their time has not come. The randomness of death is suggested by

"They come to rest at any kerb"

Its inevitability is expressed in,

"all streets in time are visited"

Stanza 2

Note Larkin's superb eye for significant detail as he points out the contrast between the zest and energy of living "children strewn on roads" "women....past smells of different dinners..." and the horror of its opposite "A wild white face.." as the patient is carried away from the flow of normality to

be "stowed" like some dead thing in the ambulance. The red of the blankets, the white of the face are colours of distress.

### Stanza 3

## NOTES

A reflective stanza after the vivid details of the first two. The poet is moved to think that death is our common fate that has the power to render life meaningless. All our busy concerns, all our cooking, our play is just a way of filling time until death takes us a way to empty nothingness; "And sense the solving emptiness "That lies just under all we do". This thought which we put out of our minds comes to us without any softening theology "And for a second (we) get it whole so permanent and blank and true" As the ambulance pulls away, Larkin suggests that peoples' expression of sympathy at the patient's plight is also an expression of our common vulnerability to sickness and death.

### Stanza 4 and 5

Now Larkin thinks of the dying patient and the sadness in her heart as she experiences

"the sudden shut of loss

Round something nearly at an end."

He sympathises with her fear. He reflects on the loss that death will bring; how it will destroy this unique person

"the unique random blend of families and fashions..."

and "loosens" her from her family and identity - all that really matters to us as people.

The tremendous isolation of being in an ambulance as she faces death

"Far from the exchange of love to lie

Unreachable inside a room "(i.e. the ambulance)

brings out Larkin's deep sympathy for the victim. This sympathy is for a real person. But as with most poems by Larkin, he is able to take a particular experience, a particular circumstance and find a general truth in it. Here, the suffering of the victim become the model for all life lived, all death experienced. The model is bleak, however. Living according to this model is just the rush towards death, "brings closer what is left to come" and the effect of this realisation is to make life seem a lonely and bleak experience robbed of its joyful immediacy its pleasant physicality, "And dulls to distance all we are." We are left isolated by the experience, distanced from ourselves.

Closed like confessionals, ambulances weave through the city. One of them might come to rest anywhere. When that happens, the onlookers momentarily see "a wild white face that overtops/Red stretcher blankets" as the patient is taken into the ambulance.

Suddenly, just for a moment, they "sense the solving emptiness/that lies just under all we do." The onlookers whisper in distress. But the ambulance moves on, the traffic parts to let it by, and "dulls to distance all we are." [30 lines]

Larkin captures the mystique of ambulances that appear from somewhere outside of our experience to take one of us away. A person who an hour ago was living through an ordinary day has, without warning, become a "wild white face that overtops/Red stretcher blankets." It can happen to you. It can happen to me. Ultimately, it will happen to all of us.

## NOTES

### Poetry analysis

Larkin was one of the great English poets, his poem entitled 'Ambulance' was written in 1961.

### Stanza One

The opening words of the first stanza describe the ambulance as a "closed confessional," if you think about those two words then nothing could be more true.

A person in pain or distress is so very vulnerable and at that point in their life they may freely give away information that they would have normally held close to their chest. Personal information is always exchanged between a patient and the ambulance crew.

The ambulance is referred to as the glossy light grey vehicle with the county badge painted onto the side of it. As the ambulance makes its way through the busy city with its siren shrieking many people on the streets will turn to look and to wonder where it is going. From this we can deduce that the patient lives on the outskirts of a busy city and the fact that he is a number rather than a name because city life often tends to be rather impersonal.

Larkin is perfectly correct when he states that the ambulance is immune to the onlookers, the driver of the vehicle is only concerned with reaching his destination.

Larkin points out that the ambulance could be called anywhere, any place or any time, not one of us can know when or of we will find ourselves in a similar situation.

These are the opening lines of the poem and by the time you have read them you will know that the verse is not upbeat or optimistic. The air is hanging with impending doom and gloom.

### Stanza Two

The emergency clearly happens around lunchtime, maybe Larkin decided this poem should be set during the school holidays because he refers to the children playing on the the streets.

The reference to the children playing on the streets instantly makes you realise that this poem was written a few decades ago, streets are no longer a safe place for children to play.

The patient is clearly very distressed, Larkin describes his face as "wild and white face."

But life goes on as the frightened and bewildered patient is put onto the stretcher and covered with the blood red blanket.

## NOTES

One of the residents of the street may well be in dire distress but the saucepans still remain on top of the stove and that instantly reminds me of the wartime years when women would refuse to go into the air-raid shelters because their meals would burn.

Up until now we have no idea whether the patient is male, female, young or elderly. Larkin is keeping us in the dark.

### Stanza Three

In this stanza there is an air of total despair.

Larkin says, "And sense the solving emptiness that lies just under all we do."

It seems that Larkin is implying that life is futile, he may even be thinking that death is preferential to life.

And for a second get it whole, so permanent and blank and true.

Death is the final chapter, it is permanent.

Larkin makes sure that we know that the neighbours are upset by the scene and as the patient is finally stowed away inside of the glossy grey ambulance then and only then do they feel able to sympathise with the whole situation. It seems that the neighbours watch on but none of them want to get involved.

We must take it that the patient travels to the hospital on his/her own, there is never any mention of anyone else.

### Stanza Four

The next couple of lines give us great insight into how serious the situation is, Larkin speaks of the "deadened air," "the sudden shut of loss" and "something nearly at an end."

So from these words we can glean that the patient is making his final journey.

Only at that point do you see the word "family" appear but Larkin seems to be referring to previous life when there was some cohesion. Life is slowly drifting away and the tone of the verse has all but come to a halt.

### Stanza Five

There is great sorrow in the next few lines and that sorrow is so tangible that it could lead you to think that Larkin was wondering about his own death.

"Death is imminent, the patient lays alone and has no one to share his final moments with."

As the siren wails and the ambulance nears the hospital entrance the traffic senses the emergency and hastily pulls over to let the racing vehicle past.

The penultimate line is "Brings closer what is life to come."

Does this mean that Larkin believed in the afterlife? For me those few words inject a sense of hope but in the final line "And dulls to distance all we are," my hopes are dashed against the rocks.

"Ambulances" by Philip Larkin is a very astute observation of life.

## Check your progress

Philip Larkin

### 5. What does the word "ambulance" symbolizes?

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NOTES

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## SUMMARY

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- Larkin's poetry has been characterized as combining "an ordinary, colloquial style", "clarity", a "quiet, reflective tone", "ironic understatement" and a "direct" engagement with "commonplace experiences", while Jean Hartley summed his style up as a "piquant mixture of lyricism and discontent".
- Larkin's earliest work showed the influence of Eliot, Auden and Yeats, and the development of his mature poetic identity in the early 1950s coincided with the growing influence on him of Thomas Hardy. The "mature" Larkin style, first evident in *The Less Deceived*, is "that of the detached, sometimes lugubrious, sometimes tender observer", who, in Hartley's phrase, looks at "ordinary people doing ordinary things". Larkin's mature poetic persona is notable for its "plainness and scepticism". Other recurrent features of his mature work are sudden openings and "highly-structured but flexible verse forms".
- In 1972 Larkin wrote the oft-quoted "Going, Going", a poem which expresses a romantic fatalism in its view of England that was typical of his later years. In it he prophesies a complete destruction of the countryside, and expresses an idealised sense of national togetherness and identity: "And that will be England gone ... it will linger on in galleries; but all that remains for us will be concrete and tyres". The poem ends with the blunt statement, "I just think it will happen, soon."
- Larkin's style is bound up with his recurring themes and subjects, which include death and fatalism, as in his final major poem "Aubade". Poet Andrew Motion observes of Larkin's poems that "their rage or contempt is always checked by the ... energy of their language and the satisfactions of their articulate formal control", and contrasts two aspects of his poetic personality—on the one hand an enthusiasm for "symbolist moments" and "freely imaginative narratives", and on the other a "remorseless factuality" and "crudity of language". Motion defines this as a "life-enhancing struggle between opposites", and concludes that his poetry is typically "ambivalent": "His three mature collections have developed attitudes and styles of ... imaginative daring: in their prolonged debates with despair, they testify to wide sympathies, contain passages of frequently transcendent beauty, and demonstrate a poetic inclusiveness which is of immense consequence for his literary heirs."

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## KEY WORDS

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### 1. Philip Larkin

Philip Arthur Larkin is widely regarded as one of the great English poets of the latter half of the twentieth century.

## NOTES

### 2. Narcissism

Narcissism is the personality trait of egotism, vanity, conceit, or simple selfishness.

### 3. Modernism

Modernism, in its broadest definition, is modern thought, character, or practice.

### 4. Symbolist Poetry

Symbolist poetry, a movement in poetry that emphasized disconnected descriptions of thoughts and feelings.

### 5. Colloquialism

A colloquialism is a phrase that is common in everyday, unconstrained conversation, rather than in formal speech, academic writing, or paralinguistics.

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## ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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1. Philip Larkin so insistently portrays, is the reaction of his id to the stress it suffers through sublimation. There could be no better example of the 'narcissistic enjoyment' that is derived from the expression of the death instinct and its concomitant desexualisation than the poem *Wants*.
2. The poet is sure that there is nothing going on inside the church. He steps inside. The door is shut. The church looks different though there are matting seats and stone and little books and flowers cut for Sunday, and other ciboria vessels holy to perform worship at the holy end and a neat organ, the church no longer frequented in good numbers observe silence. The silence to the poet seems unignorable. The poet partly agnostic removes his cycle clips in awkward reverence.
3. Philip Larkin's *Church Going* describes the idle curiosity of the poet/speaker for a church he comes across while out for a bike ride. It consists of 7 stanzas, each 9 lines in length. The meter is a relaxed iambic pentameter. The rhyme scheme is ababcbdgb with numerous slant rhymes appearing in lines 5 – 9. The language is typical of Larkin - ordinary, conversational, almost slangy.
4. The Poem, 'Deceptions' makes clear, the issue of sexual politics in Larkin's poetry is difficult to ignore, especially when it appears in such a painfully explicit and starkly confrontational way. Much of Larkin's poetry is concerned explicitly with sexual desire and sexual disillusionment, yet remarkably few critics have seriously addressed these concerns.
5. The ambulances symbolise death. They are closed and inscrutable "giving back none of the glances they absorb"; like a corpse. They are private, secretive, and silent like confessionals. They cause agitation in people who glance nervously at them hoping that their time has not come.

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## REVIEW QUESTIONS

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1. Describe the analysis of the poem, "Wants".
2. Discuss the summary of the poem, "Church going".

3. Examine the critical analysis of the poem, "Deceptions".
4. Enumerate the summary of the poem, "High window".
5. Explain the poetic analysis of the poems, "Next please" and "Ambulance".

*Philip Larkin*

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### **FURTHER READINGS**

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- Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life - Andrew Motion
- Collected Poems - Philip Larkin
- Philip Larkin: the poems - Nicolas Marsh
- Philip Larkin - Stephen Regan.

**NOTES**

## DYLAN THOMAS

### STRUCTURE

- 5.0 Learning Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 The Hand that Signed the Paper
- 5.3 Light Breaks Where no Sun Shines
- 5.4 Poem on his Birthday
- 5.5 Vision and Prayer
- 5.6 Lament
  - *Summary*
  - *Key Words*
  - *Answers to Check Your Progress*
  - *Review Questions*
  - *Further Readings*

### 5.0 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

*After reading this unit, you will be able to:*

- describe the analysis of the poem, "The Hand that signed the paper"
- discuss the summary of the poem, "Light breaks where no sun shines"
- examine the critical analysis of the poem, "Poem on his Birthday"
- enumerate the summary of the poem, "Vision and Prayer"
- explain the poetic analysis of the poem, "Lament".

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

Dylan Thomas is a Welsh poet, short-story writer, and playwright, renowned for the unique brilliance of his verbal imagery and for his celebration of natural beauty.

## NOTES

Thomas spent his childhood in southwestern Wales. His father taught English at the Swansea grammar school, which in due course the boy attended. Because Dylan's mother was a farmer's daughter, he had a country home he could go to when on holiday. His poem "Fern Hill" (1946) describes its joys.

Although he edited the school magazine, contributing poetry and prose to it, Thomas did badly at school since he was always intellectually lazy with regard to any subject that did not directly concern him. His practical knowledge of English poetry was enormous, however. He had begun writing poems at a very early age, and scholars have shown that the bulk of his poetic output was completed, at least in embryonic form, by the time he moved to London at the age of 21. At age 16 he left school to work as a reporter on the South Wales Evening Post.

Thomas's first book, *18 Poems*, appeared in 1934, and it announced a strikingly new and individual, if not always comprehensible, voice in English poetry. His original style was further developed in *Twenty-Five Poems* (1936) and *The Map of Love* (1939). Thomas's work, in its overtly emotional impact, its insistence on the importance of sound and rhythm, its primitivism, and the tensions between its biblical echoes and its sexual imagery, owed more to his Welsh background than to the prevailing taste in English literature for grim social commentary. Therein lay its originality. The poetry written up to 1939 is concerned with introspective, obsessive, sexual, and religious currents of feeling; and Thomas seems to be arguing rhetorically with himself on the subjects of sex and death, sin and redemption, the natural processes, creation and decay. The writing shows prodigious energy, but the final effect is sometimes obscure or diffuse.

Thomas basically made London his home for some 10 years from about 1936. In 1937 he married the Irishwoman Caitlin Macnamara, with whom he had two sons and a daughter. He had become famous in literary circles, was sociable, and was very poor, with a wife and growing family to support. His attempts to make money with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and as a film scriptwriter were not sufficiently remunerative. He wrote film scripts during World War II, having been excused from military service owing to a lung condition. Unfortunately, he was totally lacking in any sort of business acumen. He fell badly behind with his income tax returns, and what money he managed to make was snatched from him, at source, by the British Exchequer. He took to drinking more heavily and to borrowing from richer friends. Still, he continued to work, though in his maturity the composition of his poems became an ever-slower and more painstaking business.

The poems collected in *Deaths and Entrances* (1946) show a greater lucidity and confirm Thomas as a religious poet. This book reveals an advance in sympathy and understanding due, in part, to the impact of World War II and to the deepening harmony between the poet and his Welsh environment, for he writes generally in a mood of reconciliation and acceptance. He often adopts a bardic tone and is a true romantic in claiming a high, almost priestlike

## NOTES

function for the poet. He also makes extensive use of Christian myth and symbolism and often sounds a note of formal ritual and incantation in his poems. The re-creation of childhood experience produces a visionary, mystical poetry in which the landscapes of youth and infancy assume the holiness of the first Eden ("Poem in October," "Fern Hill"); for Thomas, childhood, with its intimations of immortality, is a state of innocence and grace. But the rhapsodic lilt and music of the later verse derives from a complex technical discipline, so that Thomas' absorption in his craft produces verbal harmonies that are unique in English poetry.

Meanwhile the London or London-based atmosphere became increasingly dangerous and uncongenial both to Thomas and to his wife. As early as 1946 he was talking of emigrating to the United States, and in 1947 he had what would seem to be a nervous breakdown but refused psychiatric assistance. He moved to Oxford, where he was given a cottage by the distinguished historian A.J.P. Taylor. His trips to London, however, principally in connection with his BBC work, were grueling, exhausting, and increasingly alcoholic. In 1949 Taylor's wife financed the purchase of a cottage, the Boat House, Laugharne, and Thomas returned to Wales. In the following year his first American tour was arranged, and for a while it seemed as if a happy compromise had been arranged between American money and Welsh tranquillity.

The prose that Thomas wrote is linked with his development as a poet, and his first stories, included in *The Map of Love* and *A Prospect of the Sea* (1955), are a by-product of the early poetry. But in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* (1940), the half-mythical Welsh landscapes of the early stories have been replaced by realistically and humorously observed scenes. A poet's growing consciousness of himself, of the real seriousness hidden behind his mask of comedy, and of the world around him is presented with that characteristic blend of humour and pathos which is later given such lively expression in his "play for voices," *Under Milk Wood* (1954). This play, which evokes the lives of the inhabitants of a small Welsh town, shows Thomas' full powers as an artist in comedy; it is richly imaginative in language, dramatic in characterization, and fertile in comic invention.

*Under Milk Wood* was presented at the Poetry Center in New York City in 1953, and its final version was broadcast by the BBC in 1954. In 1952 Thomas published his *Collected Poems*, which exhibited the deeper insight and superb craftsmanship of a major 20th-century English poet. The volume was an immediate success on both sides of the Atlantic. But, because of the insistence of the Inland Revenue, his monetary difficulties persisted. He coped with his exhausting American tours by indulging in reckless drinking bouts. There were far too many people who seem to have derived pleasure from making the famous poet drunk. His personal despair mounted, his marriage was in peril, and at last, while in New York City and far from his Welsh home, he took such an overdose of hard liquor that he died.

## 5.2 THE HAND THAT SIGNED THE PAPER

### POEM

The hand that signed the paper felled a city;  
 Five sovereign fingers taxed the breath,  
 Doubled the globe of dead and halved a country;  
 These five kings did a king to death.

The mighty hand leads to a sloping shoulder,  
 The finger joints are cramped with chalk;  
 A goose's quill has put an end to murder  
 That put an end to talk.

The hand that signed the treaty bred a fever,  
 And famine grew, and locusts came;  
 Great is the hand that holds dominion over  
 Man by a scribbled name.

The five kings count the dead but do not soften  
 The crusted wound nor stroke the brow;  
 A hand rules pity as a hand rules heaven;  
 Hands have no tears to flow.

### Summary

Dylan Thomas's "The Hand That Signed the Paper" consists of four quatrains that deride the cruel impersonality and wholesale destructiveness of modern politics and warfare. It is a universal war protest poem that expresses profound contempt for political leaders as a whole. They exhibit an absence of true feeling for their fellow human beings in their self-interested and pitiless handling of international conflicts and disputes.

This poem is about how government turns a cold shoulder to the feelings on man and has no real sympathy for the majority of its people. It goes on to talk about how a government leader counts the dead and wounded, yet sheds no tears nor has pity. The five kings (symbolizing a hand - synecdoche) are thought to be at ease while ordering troops into battle, partially because they are not sending themselves nor close loved ones into the dangers and therefore have little sympathy for the dead.

The use of power in the midst of war in a civilized society is at the heart of "The Hand that Signed the Paper," an intriguing classic poem from the prolific Welsh writer Dylan Thomas.

### NOTES

## NOTES

Made up of only four stanzas where there are four verses in each one, The Hand gave few hints that with the finiteness of the poem's construction, the poet aimed not to romanticize the message. By repeating words, Thomas succeeded in subtly conveying his message.

The consequences of great power when given to man are easily evoked by the poem based on the first few words.

Thomas uses the hand as a recurring motif ("A hand," "The hand," "The mighty hand," "Five sovereign fingers," "Hands"), and curiously, not the collective parts of the body as the doer of action.

This left me wondering that without the heart and mind, or any other part of the body, how can man face and cope with the conflict between his impulses. By living with the rules or by gratifying one's desires?

Since the "hand" symbolizes desire for power and how to further increase it, the results are evil. The consequences then include war, search for dominion, influence, and supremacy. And in Thomas' poem, the hand hears no one, but himself alone. For the poet, humans are mere watchers, a robot, stripped off with any trace of human spirit or humanity.

Nevertheless, the poem is not interested in providing answers. But in order to do good, one need to use his hands also, which the poem refuses to acknowledge. But again, everyone have a choice: whether to respond to the call of man's first instinct or next, one must be ready to face the consequences of it.

### Analysis

In a linguistic analysis of the poem, we can identify the use of certain cataphoric, anaphoric and homophoric items. For instance, the use of "the" in stanza 1 (the hand, the paper, the breath and the globe) is cataphoric, while the subsequent uses of "the" are defining, so they are anaphoric. Examples are: The mighty hand or The five kings.

The use of "the" in the dead in line 1 of stanza 4 is homophoric and anaphoric since the phrase the dead could be said to get an universal application. Also we have in the poem the use of participant relations where parts of the body and certain elements are made to act as if on their own volition. For instance, in the title of the work, The hand that signed the paper, the poet presents the hand as if acting independently of its owner whose brain must have given the signal before the actual signing was done. Also, we have fingers taxed the breath, A hand that rules pity, a hand that rules heaven, etc.

On the other hand, there is a preponderance of the nominal group in the poem, and most of these nominal groups are inanimate: The hand that signed the paper, The globe of dead (stanza 1, line 3), a scribbled name (stanza 3, line 4), etc.

Synonymy is another lexical device used in the poem: did a king to death (stanza 2, line 4) and murder (stanza 2, line 3) can be said to be identical

meaning. Also, paper and treaty can be said to be synonymous. The use of fingers and hand is an instance of hyponymy. The implication of this is that the poet uses them as elements of foregrounding to lay emphasis on the actual message of the poem.

The rhyme is unique for the whole poem: ABAB. The vocabulary used by Thomas is not very complicated, but there are some words difficult to understand even for English students, as goose (line 7), locusts (line 10) or scribbled (line 12).

As I have said before, this text of Thomas is full of words with double meaning that make this poem an excellent portrait of what happens when the (hand of a) man has got the power to initiate and to end a war with a simple sign in an insignificant piece of paper. This is shown in a masterly way in lines 7 and 8: A goose's quill has put end to murder/That put an end to talk.

Thomas does not use the term death, even it would be a more appropriate word for a poem which talks about war and its consequences, but he uses murder to emphasize the dramatic effect of death, the only way of not finding death in a natural way. This two lines are, in my opinion, the most brilliant ones in the whole poem.

In the line 2, Five sovereign fingers taxed the breath, Thomas shows the fingers of the hand as kings, as powerful figures; we can see this again later, two lines further down. The expression taxed the breath is very good to explain how difficult it is to survive in a war, because signing that paper means killing a lot of innocent people.

The second stanza begins with a reference to God, to divine power: The mighty hand leads to a sloping shoulder: God is Almighty, that hand can be so mighty as God.

In lines 9 and 10 (The hand that signed the treaty bred a fever,/And famine grew, and locusts came:). It makes reference to plagues that people who are physically and psychologically injured in a war have to endure.

Great is the hand that holds dominion over/Man by a scribbled name. Here the writer criticizes the power of bureaucracy. Is it possible that a man, for having signed a piece of paper, had in his hands the destiny of millions of men, women and children?

The last stanza is a return to terms explained before: Thomas comes back to show the fingers of the hand as individual kings, as powerful men (The five kings), and also comes back to compare the hand of the man with God's hand: A hand rules pity as a hand rules heaven.

"Essentially, this poem, written when Dylan Thomas was just 21 years of age, depicts and explores his perception of power, and the enormity of it. This idea of power was particularly appropriate when this was written, during the after math of war. Thus, it is no surprise that Thomas, being a highly opinionated figure at the time, ensured that his voice was heard through his poetry. The poem challenges that we place too much emphasis on a leader and hence, this results in one person controlling a decision concerning many. In

## NOTES

NOTES

essence, "The hand that signed the paper" shows that power is such an influential device and that it can be used in many ways, for good or for bad. However, particularly to the poem, it portrays the consequences when power is used in an evil way, depicting an immense amount of pain and suffering caused by a decision of a person in a position of great power."

**Check your progress**

1. Write short note on the poem, "The Hand that signed the paper".

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2. Write down the linguistic analysis of the poem.

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### **5.3 LIGHT BREAKS WHERE NO SUN SHINES**

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**POEM**

Light breaks where no sun shines;  
Where no sea runs, the waters of the heart  
Push in their tides;  
And, broken ghosts with glowworms in their heads,  
The things of light  
File through the flesh where no flesh decks the bones.

A candle in the thighs  
Warms youth and seed and burns the seeds of age;  
Where no seed stirs,  
The fruit of man unwrinkles in the stars,  
Bright as a fig;  
Where no wax is, the candle shows its hairs.

Dawn breaks behind the eyes;  
From poles of skull and toe the windy blood  
Slides like a sea;  
Nor fenced, nor staked, the gushers of the sky  
Spout to the rod-

Divining in a smile the oil of tears.

*Dylan Thomas*

Night in the sockets rounds,  
Like some pitch moon, the limit of the globes;  
Day lights the bone;  
Where no cold is, the skinning gales unpin  
The winter's robes;  
The film of spring is hanging from the lids.

## NOTES

Light breaks on secret lots,  
On tips of thought where thoughts smell in the rain;  
When logics die,  
The secret of the soil grows through the eye,  
And blood jumps in the sun;  
Above the waste allotments the dawn halts.

### Summary

The message of this poem is both simple and profound. What it is saying with each of its images is that there is hope in all that we call futile; that there is light in darkness and life even in death itself. Its unshaking optimism in the face of mortality is akin in spirit and meaning to 'And Death Shall Have No Dominion' and 'Do Not Go Gentle unto That Good Night'. One can't help being moved by the deftly articulated signs of this strong sentiment of courage, of the sheer stubbornness of life that runs throughout Thomas's oeuvre.

The poem seems to portray an individual's first experience of phallic gratification which leads him to a kind of fulfilment. Yet this fulfilment is only partial because it is accompanied by a sense of loss of chastity and purity of the body and the mind. Therefore the act of sexual intercourse is a kind of enlightenment to him, it is like light breaking upon darkness or ignorance or even innocence, thus illuminating it. The loss in the process of illumination is the loss of purity of the body, the idea which is ingrained into the consciousness of the individual.

This extraordinary poem likens the body to the world, with blood for oceans and tears gushing like oil-wells. The eye sockets are black moons; light comes, not from the sun, but from body parts - the glowworm in the head, the candle in the thighs. 'Bright as a fig' - ripe figs are a dull purple, neither bright nor shiny.

Dylan Thomas offers a wide magnitude of poetry, ranging from poems that are filled with exuberant, elaborate, florid words to poems that offer obscure, mysterious insights into metaphor and imagery. We are bombarded with lots of emotion and dropped into an overwhelming world of Dylan Thomas's language to describe his peculiar thoughts of life from his retrospect.

## NOTES

Thomas uses this device of exuberance to bring his poetry to life, forcing the reader to delve into the depths of his writing, with its connotations of religion and sexual overtones. Thomas's use of the life cycle and the virtues of life mainly show the affluence of exuberance in his poems. This exuberance is conveyed to us by literature, which is impressively powerful and extremely emotionally charged. "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines" is a particular poem which fits the 'exuberant' label. Thomas chooses to shock you by divulging his sickening thoughts about the birth, life and death process. He strays purposely away from the romantic side of the life cycle, by using words that have

File through flesh, where no flesh decks the bones."

The sequence to end, the being is dead and buried in what seems to be an open grave, whilst nature tries to keep the existence alive with glow worms and the dawn light, the being cannot survive symbolising the end of the era.

After studying Dylan Thomas's Selected Poems, I have decided that the statement "His poems are exuberant, often florid and occasionally obscure". Personally I think this is an entirely unfair statement, that doesn't give Thomas's work any justice at all. The word exuberant should be more suitably replaced with enthusiastic. Thomas has an overwhelming thirst for his subject; he is truly enthusiastic about what he is writing about. Through his exuberant phrases he avidly invites reader to view his subject from his viewpoint. Florid also isn't a suitable word to describe Thomas's poetry. Floridness denotes flowery, ornate language, although Thomas's does effectively "dress" language, his wording is not flowery. However, his poetry is extremely obscure in both senses of vagueness and obscurity. By using exuberance and obscurity Dylan Thomas offers a vast insight into a world of literature which has no rules or boundaries, he dares to delve into a deeper meaning of the universe.

"Is my Destroyer" "Turns mine to wax" "Hauls my shroud sail",

The poet carries on with this theme of life evolving from something that is meant to be dead. The poem doesn't offer any immediate message or moral to learn. This makes the poem very ambiguous there doesn't seem to be any definite relevance to the poem or at least the poem on its own. When you look at when the poem was written we see that it was during Thomas's 'life cycle period' of writing. From this we realise that the poem is in actual fact apart of a larger picture. The poem is involved in one large life cycle evaluation adjoining several poems to describe this cycle, like verses in a song. The cycle starts with "This bread I break" symbolising the beginning, the start of a new day or era. "When once the twilight locks" chronicles the birth of a life in the cycle. "The force that through the green fuse", describes the corruption that we have inflicted on nature and lastly "Light breaks where no sun shines" the last of the poems in the larger scale cycle. This poem brings!

Dylan Thomas's poems mostly have a theme that is exuberant and lively, though his poems possess these qualities some can be a little indistinct in their meanings, and obscure. "Light breaks where no sun shines" offers an obscure outlook into Dylan Thomas's gruesome world of the life cycle. Though

mentioned earlier as being exuberant I think this poem is an illustrious example of poetry, which possesses the ability to be both qualities. In the poem we can see both sides of Thomas's reckoning with Exuberant and obscure, we can see the obscure side of the poem by analysing the text in more detail. By close analysis the poet appears to be talking about the dead, relating back to the "no sun shines" part of the title. We discover that Thomas is telling a tale of an awakening. An awakening from beyond the grave, from beyond the realms of normality and what we understand to be natural life. The poem talks about the arousing of a life an entity within a skeleton. The glowworms beco!

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Check your progress

3. What is the message of the poem, "Light breaks where no Sun Shines"?

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4. Why does Thomas used the device of exuberance in his poem?

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**5.4 POEM ON HIS BIRTHDAY**

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POEM

In the mustardseed sun,  
By full tilt river and switchback sea  
Where the cormorants scud,  
In his house on stilts high among beaks  
And palavers of birds  
This sandgrain day in the bent bay's grave  
He celebrates and spurns  
His driftwood thirty-fifth wind turned age;  
Heron's spire and spear.

Under and round him go  
Flounders, gulls, on their cold, dying trails,  
Doing what they are told,  
Curlews aloud in the congered waves  
Work at their ways to death,

NOTES

And the rhymer in the long tongued room,  
Who tolls his birthday bell,  
Toils towards the ambush of his wounds;  
Herons, steeple stemmed, bless:

In the thistledown fall,  
He sings towards anguish; finches fly  
In the claw tracks of hawks  
On a seizing sky; small fishes glide  
Through wynds and shells of drowned  
Ship towns to pastures of otters. He  
In his slant, racking house  
And the hewn coils of his trade perceives  
Herons walk in their shroud,

The livelong river's robe  
Of minnows wreathing around their prayer;  
And far at sea he knows,  
Who slaves to his crouched, eternal end  
Under a serpent cloud,  
Dolphins dive in their turnturtle dust,  
The rippled seals streak down  
To kill and their own tide daubing blood  
Slides good in the sleek mouth.

In a cavernous, swung  
Wave's silence, wept white angelus knells.  
Thirty-five bells sing struck  
On skull and scar where his loves lie wrecked,  
Steered by the falling stars.  
And to-morrow weeps in a blind cage  
Terror will rage apart  
Before chains break to a hammer flame  
And love unbolts the dark

And freely he goes lost  
In the unknown, famous light of great  
And fabulous, dear God.  
Dark is a way and light is a place,

Heaven that never was  
Nor will be ever is always true,  
And, in that brambled void,  
Plenty as blackberries in the woods  
The dead grow for His joy.

There he might wander bare  
With the spirits of the horseshoe bay  
Or the stars' seashore dead,  
Marrow of eagles, the roots of whales  
And wishbones of wild geese,  
With blessed, unborn God and His Ghost,  
And every soul His priest,  
Gulled and chanter in young Heaven's fold  
Be at cloud quaking peace,

But dark is a long way.  
He, on the earth of the night, alone  
With all the living, prays,  
Who knows the rocketing wind will blow  
The bones out of the hills,  
And the scythed boulders bleed, and the last  
Rage shattered waters kick  
Masts and fishes to the still quick starts,  
Faithlessly unto Him

Who is the light of old  
And air shaped Heaven where souls grow wild  
As horses in the foam:  
Oh, let me midlife mourn by the shrined  
And druid herons' vows  
The voyage to ruin I must run,  
Dawn ships clouted aground,  
Yet, though I cry with tumbledown tongue,  
Count my blessings aloud:

Four elements and five  
Senses, and man a spirit in love  
Tangling through this spun slime

NOTES

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To his nimbus bell cool kingdom come  
And the lost, moonshine domes,  
And the sea that hides his secret selves  
Deep in its black, base bones,  
Lulling of spheres in the seashell flesh,  
And this last blessing most,

That the closer I move  
To death, one man through his sundered hulks,  
The louder the sun blooms  
And the tusked, ramshackling sea exults;  
And every wave of the way  
And gale I tackle, the whole world then,  
With more triumphant faith  
That ever was since the world was said,  
Spins its morning of praise,

I hear the bouncing hills  
Grow larked and greener at berry brown  
Fall and the dew larks sing  
Taller this thunderclap spring, and how  
More spanned with angles ride  
The mansouled fiery islands! Oh,  
Holier than their eyes,  
And my shining men no more alone  
As I sail out to die.

**Summary**

"Poem on His Birthday" is composed of twelve stanzas of nine lines each. It was written to mark Dylan Thomas's thirty-fifth birthday, and is the fourth and last of Thomas's birthday poems. In the first four stanzas, the poet looks out at the real and imagined scene from his house overlooking the bay on his thirty-fifth birthday. As he gazes at the river and sea illumined by an October sun, he "celebrates" but also "spurns" his birthday, likening the passage of his life to "driftwood."

This is Dylan Thomas's greatest poem. So much of his writing is bombast, the emotion in language not justified by meaning, but not here. This is a perfect balance between faith and unbelief. "Heaven than never was always true" because it is a fantasy that appeals to desire or because it is real in eternity and not temporal, "never was nor ever will be". God is at the top of the food chain here: "plenty as blackberries is the wood the dead grow for

his joy". I have to admit, I've had this poem memorized for over 30 years. Never anthologized, it is one of the underappreciated poems in modern literature. Worth rereading many times.

Dylan Thomas

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## 5.5 VISION AND PRAYER

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### POEM

Who  
Are you  
Who is born  
In the next room  
So loud to my own  
That I can hear the womb  
Opening and the dark run  
Over the ghost and the dropped son  
Behind the wall thin as a wren's bone?  
In the birth bloody room unknown  
To the burn and turn of time  
And the heart print of man  
Bows no baptism  
But dark alone  
Blessing on  
The wild  
Child.

### Summary

"Dylan Thomas' poem 'Vision and Prayer' was first published in 1945, and consists of twelve 'shaped' stanzas, each of the first six of which progresses from an initial line of a single syllable, by the addition of a syllable per line, to a [maximum] line of nine syllables, and then subtractively returns to a single syllabic line. The second group of six [stanzas] reverses the process, by progressing from an initial line of nine syllables to a center line of a single syllable, and then returning to the nine-syllable line."

The most compelling evidence that Thomas might have known bardic theology is the uniqueness of his Christ. It is impossible to believe either that as the sperm in "Before I Knocked" he is merely a sexual symbol or that as the brilliantly hymned figure of "Vision and Prayer" he is a mere stage mask lending drama to the poet's ego. It is in this poem, a lyric masterpiece, that Thomas' religious attitude towards the figure of incarnate Christ is most fully realized.

## NOTES

At the beginning of the world of "Vision and Prayer" there is a "first death", "The woundward flight of the ancient/Young from the canyons of oblivion!". After this one experience of ultimate nihilism there is, as in "A refusal to Mourn", "no other" final dying for the human soul, even though each man must return over and over to "the round/Zion of the water bead". For this, much more than for the reasons given by the pantheist, "death shall have no dominion". Every aspect of Thomas' peculiarly Welsh Christ is on fire in "Vision and Prayer": the poet is lost "In/The spin/Of the sun," caught "In the caldron/Of his/Kiss," and blinded by the "High noon/Of his wound." Although Thomas, like Peter, prays for the "known dark" where the "country of death is the heart's size", he and his works are caught up an apotheosis of "crimson/Sun."

"Vision and Prayer" concludes with what seems a triumph of the Welsh solar divinity, roaring and blinding "at the prayer's end". Just as in "Vision and Prayer" Thomas here would have man bounded by the "known dark" country of the personality, only to realize that incarnation and sexual initiation are analogous stages in historical and personal development. Here, as in Yeats' "Crazy Jane talks to the Bishop" the created earth proclaims the fact that "Nothing can be sole or whole/That has not been rent."

Thomas' desire (which he also expressed through the young hero of "One Warm Saturday") is impossible, for "out of the beaked, web dark and the pouncing boughs/Be you sure that the Thief will seek a way sly and sure." The transcendent deity will find a way for his incarnation no matter what barriers are put up, a shattering entry which Thomas mourns here, as in "Vision and Prayer", as an inexorable part of human existence. The world of fable and fantasy is terrible for both its destruction and its wonder, for even as he warns the girl he himself bursts out with irrepressible joy at the marriage of spirit and matter.

As in "Vision and Prayer" divinity incorporates itself into the "thisness" or "inscape" of created things, in spite of the poet's desire for the less complex comforts of a world that is the "heart's size".

"Vision and Prayer" is written from a passionate conviction of the existence of a saviour in whom he does not want to believe. Personal confrontation with the deity might have engendered Thomas' always personal approach to Christ, but if indeed he experienced a religious crisis, it was soon mingled with the other strands of a unique theology.

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## 5.6 LAMENT

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When I was a windy boy and a bit  
And the black spit of the chapel fold,  
(Sighed the old ram rod, dying of women),  
I tiptoed shy in the gooseberry wood,  
The rude owl cried like a tell-tale tit,

I skipped in a blush as the big girls rolled  
Nine-pin down on donkey's common,  
And on seesaw sunday nights I wooed  
Whoever I would with my wicked eyes,  
The whole of the moon I could love and leave  
All the green leaved little weddings' wives  
In the coal black bush and let them grieve.

When I was a gusty man and a half  
And the black beast of the beetles' pews  
(Sighed the old ram rod, dying of bitches),  
Not a boy and a bit in the wick-  
Dipping moon and drunk as a new dropped calf,  
I whistled all night in the twisted flues,  
Midwives grew in the midnight ditches,  
And the sizzling sheets of the town cried, Quick!-  
Whenever I dove in a breast high shoal,  
Wherever I ramped in the clover quilts,  
Whatsoever I did in the coal-  
Black night, I left my quivering prints.

When I was a man you could call a man  
And the black cross of the holy house,  
(Sighed the old ram rod, dying of welcome),  
Brandy and ripe in my bright, bass prime,  
No spring tailed tom in the red hot town  
With every simmering woman his mouse  
But a hillocky bull in the swelter  
Of summer come in his great good time  
To the sultry, biding hērds, I said,  
Oh, time enough when the blood runs cold,  
And I lie down but to sleep in bed,  
For my sulking, skulking, coal black soul!

When I was half the man I was  
And serve me right as the preachers warn,  
(Sighed the old ram rod, dying of downfall),  
No flailing calf or cat in a flame  
Or hickory bull in milky grass

NOTES

## NOTES

But a black sheep with a crumpled horn,  
At last the soul from its foul mouse hole  
Slunk pouting out when the limp time came;  
And I gave my soul a blind, slashed eye,  
Gristle and rind; and a roarers' life,  
And I shoved it into the coal black sky  
To find a woman's soul for a wife.

Now I am a man no more no more  
And a black reward for a roaring life,  
(Sighed the old ram rod, dying of strangers),  
Tidy and cursed in my dove cooed room  
I lie down thin and hear the good bells jaw—  
For, oh, my soul found a sunday wife  
In the coal black sky and she bore angels!  
Harpies around me out of her womb!  
Chastity prays for me, piety sings,  
Innocence sweetens my last black breath,  
Modesty hides my thighs in her wings,  
And all the deadly virtues plague my death!

### Analysis

This type of poem is an ODE it starts out being something specific and develops into something more profound. The poem's themes are of romantic poetry, it contains themes of emotion, nature, self-expression and passion and hostility to establishments like the church of England on line 26' and the black cross of the holy house'. Line 2' and the black beast of the Beatties pews'

Individual and emotional feelings matter more than reason and moral rules, line 18' whistled all night in the twisted flues'-he went on a spree, nights of passion, where and whenever he could.

Line 19 'midwives grew in the midnight ditches' he got women pregnant and backstreet abortions had to be carried out in secret. Line 20' and the sizzling beds of the town cried, QUICK' he does not decipher between married and unmarried women, everyone is a conquest 'sizzling beds' refers to the heat and passion of sexual activity. 'QUICK!' -Wives hear their husbands arriving home, the opening and closing of gates and front doors they tell him to go. Line 28 'brandy and ripe in my bright bass prime'-sexually at his peak. Line 31 'but a hillocky bull in the swelter'-metaphor he is a sexual predator he thinks he has greater stamina in himself than any younger lads. The lines are used in a list form giving the poem an accumulative effect helping build the images the writer wants the reader to think as well as aid the structure and give cohesion to the poem.

In every stanza his life stages are explained by his actions. Stanza 1 he was a young lad going through puberty. Stanza 2 Dylan refers to himself as a gusty young man, revealing his boastfulness of his sexual conquests, he reveals a change in attitude to women line 16 'not a boy and a bit in the wink dipping moon-wink dipping is metaphor for having sex with someone.

**NOTES**

There is a rhyme pattern in stanza 1 and 2 lines four lines apart are Para-rhyming line 13'half' with line 17 'calf'. Line 14 'pews' with line 18'flues'.line 15'bitches' with line 19'ditches'. line 16 with line 20.

Stanza 3. He enters midlife, when he is at his sexual peak, line 26 he refers to himself as a 'blackcross of the holy house' he was anti church. In line 35 & 36 'for my sulking, skulking, coal black soul' he shares his thoughts and regrets.

Stanza 4. There is a definite change of tone line 37'when i was a half of the man i was' line 38 'and serve me right as the preachers worn' he means the people at church were right line 39'sighed the old ramrod, dying of downfall' he is no longer able to maintain a permanent erection.

He goes on to describe himself as line 42 'black sheep with crumpled horn crumpled horn being metaphor for limp penis, Dylan had put all his beliefs in the workings of his penis but now that has given way. His belief is gone. However he goes on to get married. The last stanza he feels trapped line 51' the old ramrod dying of strangers' metaphor for all the women he meets in his life as a family man he has to rethink his attitude to promiscuity. line 53 & 54'i lie down thin and hear the good bells jaw—for oh my soul found a Sunday wife-metaphor for he has married a church going woman. Line 55'she bore angels'-he became a father. Line 56 'harpies around me out of her womb!' this translates from metaphor-he describes his children as cherub like winged angels. Good imagery is used here. A complete transformation has taken place; RELIGION now plays a major role in Dylan's life, though he still bears guilt from days bygone.

**Check your progress**

5. What type of poem the "Lament" is?

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**SUMMARY**

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Thomas' verbal style played against strict verse forms, such as in the villanelle do not go gentle into that good night. His images were carefully ordered in a patterned sequence, and his major theme was the unity of all life, the continuing process of life and death and new life that linked the generations. Thomas saw biology as a magical transformation producing unity out of diversity, and in his poetry he sought a poetic ritual to celebrate this unity. He saw men and women locked in cycles of growth, love, procreation, new growth, death, and new life again. Therefore, each image engenders

its opposite. Thomas derived his closely woven, sometimes self-contradictory images from the Bible, Welsh folklore and preaching, and Freud.

## NOTES

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### KEY WORDS

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#### 1. BBC

British Broadcasting Corporation

#### 2. Ode

Ode is a type of lyrical verse.

#### 3. Tranquility

Tranquility is the quality or state of being tranquil; calmness; serenity.

#### 4. Spirituality

Spirituality can refer to an ultimate or an alleged immaterial reality; an inner path enabling a person to discover the essence of their being.

#### 5. Mythology

The term mythology can refer to either the study of myths, or to a body of myths.

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### ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

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1. Dylan Thomas's "The Hand That Signed the Paper" consists of four quatrains that deride the cruel impersonality and wholesale destructiveness of modern politics and warfare. It is a universal war protest poem that expresses profound contempt for political leaders as a whole. They exhibit an absence of true feeling for their fellow human beings in their self-interested and pitiless handling of international conflicts and disputes.
2. In a linguistic analysis of the poem, we can identify the use of certain cataphoric, anaphoric and homophoric items. For instance, the use of "the" in stanza 1 (the hand, the paper, the breath and the globe) is cataphoric, while the subsequent uses of "the" are defining, so they are anaphoric. Examples are: The mighty hand or The five kings.
3. The message of this poem is both simple and profound. What it is saying with each of its images is that there is hope in all that we call futile; that there is light in darkness and life even in death itself. Its unshaking optimism in the face of mortality is akin in spirit and meaning to 'And Death Shall Have No Dominion' and 'Do Not Go Gentle unto That Good Night'.
4. Thomas uses this device of exuberance to bring his poetry to life, forcing the reader to delve into the depths of his writing, with its connotations of religion and sexual overtones. Thomas's use of the life cycle and the virtues of life mainly show the affluence of exuberance in his poems. This exuberance is conveyed to us by literature, which is impressively powerful and extremely emotionally charged. "Light Breaks Where No Sun Shines" is a particular poem which fits the 'exuberant' label.

5. This type of poem is an ODE it starts out being something specific and develops into something more profound. The poems themes are of romantic poetry, it contains themes of emotion, nature, self-expression and passion and hostility to establishments like the church of England on line 26' and the black cross of the holy house'.

*Dylan Thomas*

## NOTES

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### REVIEW QUESTIONS

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1. Describe the analysis of the poem, "The Hand that signed the paper".
2. Discuss the summary of the poem, "Light breaks where no sun shines".
3. Examine the critical analysis of the poem, "Poem on his Birthday".
4. Enumerate the summary of the poem, "Vision and Prayer".
5. Explain the poetic analysis of the poem, "Lament".

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### FURTHER READINGS

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- The Poems of Dylan Thomas - Dylan Thomas
- The Poems - Dylan Thomas
- Dylan Thomas: the biography - Paul Ferris
- Dylan Thomas: an original language - Barbara Nathan Hardy.