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# UNIT 1 GENESIS OF THEMES: PREPARATION FOR WRITING

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## 1.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

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This Unit seeks to explain the genesis of the creative impulse in a writer. By the end of this unit, you should have learnt to distinguish the features of a genuine creative **impulse** in order to give it a concrete form.

- It is distinguishable from a superficial emotion by its recurrent and empathic nature;
- it needs distancing from the event in terms of time and impersonality;
- it is concretised through an intermix of sharpened experience, observation and imagination;
- it may arise out of factual events or from submerged memories of the subconscious;
- it is wedded to motivation and not vice versa;
- it can be cultivated and developed into a short story or a poem.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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In Block 1 of the first course on **General Principles of Writing** we dealt with the fundamental norms of writing like the need for lucidity and directness, authenticity and credibility, as well as the nature and function of the authorial voice.

This opening Unit of Block 2 on 'Structure of Material' is concerned with the genesis of themes and the preparatory stages of writing.

The choice of themes for a possible short story or a **poem** is rarely deliberate; it is mostly spontaneous. That is, themes occur to you as you go about your daily work, and you begin to feel ~~that~~ it will be a good idea to put pen to paper and write on the theme that has come your way. But does each such impulse get transformed into a short **story/poem**? No. Quite often the impulse withers away, in spite of the brilliant promise it offered you at one point of time. And in quite a few cases, while you do start writing it out at the earliest opportunity, and with enthusiasm unbounded, you are compelled to leave it off mid-way. It's all the same whether you tear it up in disgust or treasure the aborted mess, hoping to do something about it at some future date. Then, again, there would be that odd one you complete somehow or other in a determined sweep and add to your tally, but you are never satisfied with the way it **has** turned out, and suffer the feeling that the theme that occurred to you was not particularly bright, and you should have better left it alone. These are **the** common occupational hazards that a writer has to put up with.

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## 1.2 ORIGINS OF THE CREATIVE IMPULSE

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So much for the **themes that** may **occur** to you. Their origins may elude you, rooted **as** they may be in **memories** submerged in your subconscious. You should honour these impulses and test them for possible viability. Now use the methods suggested later on in this Unit **before** you start writing.

It would indeed be tragic in terms of time-management, if so many themes should be born only to perish. Therefore, you should persevere in using words and phrases which approximate the original.

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## 1.3 GENUINENESS OF THE CREATIVE IMPULSE

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You should **make** sure **that** the **impulse** is genuine. **Assuming** that the **impulse** has troubled you on the emotional plane, as it often does, the question you should ask-of yourself is—charming and overwhelming as it may have been at the given moment, was it not rather a **transient** and hence a superficial emotion? Just as an auntie of the neighbourhood bursts into tears at the sight of a puppy in distress or a bride leaving her mother's home? Could it have happened that you were taken in by the setting or the atmosphere? In a certain romantic atmosphere of moon **and** faraway music and what have you, you found the dialogue of an old couple particularly cute, and you thought you could write a poem on the theme of 'Love in the Afternoon'. Or while passing through a slum **you** were moved by the sight of a young, **goodlooking** mother being harassed by a brood of unkempt and potbellied children, and you thought you could write a story on the theme of 'Roses in the Dust' etc. It may well be that you can write a **powerful** piece on either. But let the **confidence** **grow** in you over a period of **time**, **after** you have satisfied yourself that (i) such emotive reactions have been fairly recurrent with you in **similar** situations, and (ii) you can identify reasonably well with the old couple or the young mother in the hard core of their lives.

Distancing is necessary **for** creative effort. Conversely, do not trust the impulse for **immediate** action, if it is much too intense, being acutely personal. Here one remembers the famous phrase of Wordsworth, 'emotion **recollected** in tranquillity' **as** the base of poetry. Let the storm settle into a calm surface; it is only then that you can write on it effectively, Truman **Capote**, a contemporary fiction writer of repute, writes in a similar **vein**—'I have to exhaust the emotion before I feel clinical enough to analyse and project it. . . My own theory is that the writer should have dried his tears long long before setting out to evoke similar reactions in a reader'. What he means to say is that **insofar** as the emotional stimulus is concerned, a **certain** distancing is necessary for creative effort. To cite an example: you have lost a child. You are naturally **overwhelmed** with grief **and**, being a writer, you **wish** to **release** yourself in verse or **prose**. You may surely do so for therapeutic reasons, just as you could release yourself in a **flood** of tears. But the best results in terms of literary merit can be achieved **only** when you can look upon the event from a distance—thanksto the passage of time, among other things—and can call upon other parents to share those **intenser** moments with you. Your literary piece would then be both authentic in terms of **emotional** experience, and objective in terms of expressed **thought**, the ideal combination that any writer could devoutly wish for.

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## 1.4 THE CREATIVE IMPULSE AS DISTINCT FROM POLITICAL AND SOCIAL MOTIVATION

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**Do** not **misjudge** the **stirrings** of an **abiding** motivation for a creative impulse. Suppose you are strongly motivated, by **temperament** and conviction, to expose the evils of social justice. Undoubtedly such motivation would govern your outlook on the **human** condition, and you would **smell** injustice in a situation, which to **some** others may be no more than a curiosity in terms of **interpersonal conflict**. **There** is

**nothing inherently** wrong in **such colouration** that is bound to creep into the works of a motivated writer (the motivation covered could well be cultural, philosophical or any other). But what is important is that the genesis should indeed be a creative impulse to start with, which could later be wedded to the motivation, and not vice versa. As a writer you should consider the impulse **as** creative only when you react to a **situation** primarily **because** it is interesting from the human angle, and only additionally because of its social implications.

**The** late Bhagabati Panigrahi, a noted writer who was also one of the founders of the Communist Party in **Orissa**, wrote a story named '**Shikar**' which has acquired considerable fame and **has** also been turned into a competent movie entitled 'Mrigaya' by **Mrinal Sen**. Here the theme, obviously, is of social injustice—the oppression of poor **tribals** by the moneyed henchmen of an alien administration. But one imagines that **Bhagabati Panigrahi** must have been impelled to write the story when he came across, through his observation-cum-imagination, a character such **as Ghinua**, a simple tribal who could never understand till his death, by hanging, the strange logic that he did not deserve an award more than any average hunter, for having chopped off the head of a well-known oppressor and presented it to the local **Commissioner**. It is the **bizarre** simplicity of truth embodied in the personality of the character that lends particular charm to the story and not the well-known fact of social injustice in the colonial times.

And so, look for the seeds of an illuminating circumstance in human terms—absurd, funny, or tragic as the case may be—in the impulse you have had to write a **certain** story or poem; you could consider later whether it would also serve your cherished motivation.

A story with a motivation written into it should indeed be richer, for it gives an extra dimension to the story. But let it not appear that the characters have been directed to 'prove' the truth of the motivation; for that may be self-defeating. On the other hand, give them the importance of being human and the freedom that goes with it—freedom to love, weep, howl, fight and act in all sorts of funny and foolish ways, in situations that may be called socially evil, and you will see how your motivation shines through the intensely human **narrative**.

For example, let us compare two stories that you may gain access to without much difficulty. One is Anton **Chekhov's** 'In Exile'—the story of the young Tartar and the old Simeon, nicknamed Wiseacre, thrown together in exile in Siberia **as ferrymen**, along with some others. The young man clings pitifully to the illusion that life **can** yet be lived, and so he feels miserable thinking of his young wife and family left at home, whereas the old man, who has seen it all, makes himself believe that he is happy, and **repeats—'God grant everyone such a life!**' The cruel irony of the human situation in **extremis** caused by the socio-political system comes **through** in the interaction between these two characters, both foolishly human and vulnerable, with others inciting them, as it were, from the sidelines. See how understated, yet devastating, the concluding lines are:

All of them lay down. The wind blew the door open. Snow drifted into the hut. No one could bring **himself** to get up and shut the door; it was cold, but they put up with it.

'And I am happy,' muttered Simeon as he fell asleep, 'God grant everyone such a life!'

You surely are the devil's own. Even the devil needn't bother to **take you.**'

Sounds like the barking of a dog came from outside.

Why is that? Who is there?

**'It's the Tartar crying.'**

'Oh! he is an odd one.'

'He'll get used to it!' said Simeon, and soon fell asleep. Soon the others slept too, and the door was left open,



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## 1.5 PREPARATION FOR WRITING

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Finally, do your homework. After you have made sure that your impulse is **genuine**, if not overwhelmingly **charged** with a personal emotion, and not '**created**' by a social or other motivation, the **task** before you is to convert the impulse into **the hardcore** genesis of a theme. In essence, what you have to do is to concretise **the impulse you** have had into flesh and blood and living tissue, so that it may **acquire a body**. This is the last stage before you put pen to paper, and it constitutes what may be termed as preparation for writing.

### 1.5.1 Marshalling of relevant facts concerning locale, atmosphere and characters

If you have a story in mind, you should take particular care to marshal the facts—authentic and recognisable details of the locale, the atmosphere, the historical or social background if that be relevant, as also of the **character(s)** you have decided to summon for your purpose. Focus on the concrete facts of perception which would make the reader alive to the 'reality' of the story, even though you would be **mixing** them up cleverly with loads of imaginative fiction.

Take, for example, R.K. **Narayan's** Malgudi. There is indeed no such town in India or elsewhere. But we seem to find our own small town (for those of us who are familiar with one, in present living or nostalgic memory) talking to us in numerous ripples of events, **peopled**, as it is, not merely by recognisable men and women and children, but by temples, hospitals, markets, goats, donkeys, **and what** have you. The writer has brought them close to us, no less by the care he has taken to study and **organise** the authentic factual details for his story, than by the other charms of his story-telling genius.

The importance of fact-finding is less, but only relatively so, in a poem. Subjectivity **has** no doubt **been, traditionally**, a distinctive feature in poetry. Nevertheless, thanks to the value placed on realism in modern literary thought, poems are considered to be richer and hence more acceptable, if they are seen to be in response to concrete scenes and situations of life in our times, as a reader would **recognise them—e.g.** the tourist and the beggar-woman following him gazing together at a **Mithuna sculpture** in the temple-walls of Konarak, the body of a child floating down the river in the **aftermath** of a bloody riot, the poor fish in the marketplace staring in awe and wonder, as it were, at the **amplitude** of the rich housewife closing in on 'him' for the bargain . . . **etc.** Won't the poem be more picturesque and powerful if you **could convey** authentic details of the **Konarak sculpture, a river** bank that was indeed **witness to a** bloody riot in recent memory, or the sights and sounds of a typical fish-market? And then what about longer poems rooted in history of **mythology? Can you** trust your creative impulse to yield a worthwhile poem unless you arm yourself sufficiently with factual **details** of the locale, atmosphere and **character(s)** relevant (or supposedly relevant, in a mythological piece) to the situation you **have** in mind?

### 1.5.2 Combining experience, observation and imagination

The emphasis, as above, on 'homework' is derived from the compulsion, in literary parlance, of the circumstance, that while a creative impulse is derived from (a) experience, (b) observation, and (c) imagination, the three ingredients **are hardly** ever matched in ideal proportions in the mental equipage of a writer. Hence the need to deepen the experience, sharpen the observations and avoid overdoing the imagination, by taking upon oneself, for the time being, the role of a researcher, and thus provide the genesis of a theme, that will hold, for a story or a **poem**.

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## 1.6 ADDITIONAL CRITERIA FOR SELECTION OF THEMES

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**While the** guidelines indicated above would apply to the genesis of creative effort in **general**, it will be advisable to apply **some** separate and additional criteria in **the case** of short stories and **poems**.

### 1.6.1 Themes for short stories

A theme may pass the tests referred to above and you may have **made** the necessary preparations, but it is still possible that it does not lend itself to the format of a short story, though it could **be** excellent material for a piece of journalistic feature-writing. So before starting to **work** on the theme (a) you should satisfy yourself that it is susceptible of **being converted** into a **story**, i.e. a tale that **begins** with a promise, can normally sustain a **conflict** or complication on its way, and ends with a certain revelation; and (b) you **should** be fairly confident that it will say, or appear to say, something 'new' **about the** human condition, howsoever limited the framework of your experience or observation may be.

Thus, for example, the antics of the **bandarwallah (monkeyman)**, sporting a flowing white beard and **indulging** in toothless chatter, who seeks to entertain the children of the **neighbourhood** with the performance of his monkey, much less **interesting** than his own, may have prompted you to write something on the funny, yet sad situation. Apparently, it would make for a delightfully moving feature-article. But could it also be brought within the **format** of a short story? Yes,—if you could, through your further observation and imagination, weave the outlines of a tale around the fascinating character. Possibly you could connect the mirth of his toothless **grin** to the ebullience of his youth, and his pathetic dedication to the trade, hardly popular in a city, of playing the **monkey**, to a fierce sense of independence that seeks to defy the fates which have been chasing the sunlights out of his life **one** by one. So what seems pitiful and ridiculous **too**, **could** well be an essay in bravery. Or could it be his way of taking it out on his family, a cranky old man pitted against his practical third generation? Whatever it is, you have to connect it with a tale, the brief story of his life or one outside it and so 'reveal' the essence of his character at the end. See if your theme can yield **such** a tale. And having assured yourself that you can make it, on with your story, and best of luck.

This example refers to a **so-called 'character-story'**. But there are many other ways of telling a story, derived **from** the twin prerequisites referred to above, and there are several other **cognate** considerations that go into the writing of a story. These are matters that would be **dealt** with in detail when the speciality of a short story as a distinct literary form is covered (Course 3).

### 1.6.2. Themes for poetry

**While** the writer's **statement** in a **short story** comes through by traversing a certain distance, **the** statement in a poem has to grip the reader's thought and imagination in an instant. This being so, **it** is of utmost importance before writing a poem on a well-chosen theme that **you** should be committed totally, right at the beginning, to what you are going to say and how. That is, to the basic thought-content and the tone (fearful, angry, excited, reflective or whatever) that you wish to adopt. The words will come later. **You** may have to chop and hew them any number of times. But your sights must be pretty **clear** at the outset, on the '**what** and **how**' of your poem-to-be, which would determine the overall nature of the impact you wish to create in the mind of the **reader**.

Let us take for example **the** theme of being lost in the woods on an evening when the darkness is setting in—a traditional yet **fascinating** theme which has a fable-like charm about it that has enticed poets through the ages, from the immortal Dante in his 'The Divine Comedy' to the modern poet of today, anxious to seize upon an image which would be rich in **possibilities** in terms of the various **kinds** of response that it tends to evoke. **There** is a **fatal charm** about such themes, and they can tie you up in knots, if you are not careful enough to start with.

In a poem the **thought-content** and the tone **often tend** to **coalesce**; **the** verbal, **seeking** to **express** a thought, would merge into the non-verbal, i.e. the pervasive mystical **experience** of the poem which can only be expressed symbolically. In its totality it may be, as most modern poems are, a complex **phenomenon** in awareness **that** you **wish** to share with the reader. Even **so**, it is necessary for your **poetic** craft that **you should** commit yourself to the quintessence of your statement in the mould of an overall emotion, before you **begin**. **Using**



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## 1.8. ACTIVITIES: AIDS TO ANSWERS

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### Activity 1

- i) An emotional **reaction** to a scene or incident, however **strong**, is a passing phase, unless it **continues** to recur in similar situations and disturbs you deeply. A genuine creative **impulse** is distinguishable by a persistent emotional turmoil as well as a **capacity** for identification with the object.
- ii) Distancing is necessary to get away from excessive personal involvement, in order to control **the** overflow of emotion. Creativity needs a measure of calm and detachment.
- iii) Every creative **impulse** has a deeper and more pervasive human perspective than motivation **which** constitutes a strong sense of purpose in a writer. In any great writing, **motivation** does not dominate the creative impulse but only subserves it.

### Activity 2

- i) The three factors **involved** in creativity are experience, observation and imagination. **Unfortunately**, imagination alone is **often-commissioned** to substitute for experience and observation. This invariably leads to shallow writing.
- ii) **Hints**  
Write about **something** that really happened to you. If that is not possible, then recall a similar incident that affected you deeply. Precise details would indicate close observation.  
  
Imagination could **help** you to alter your account from a mere report to a fictional **narrative—change** of locale, names, descriptions of people and so on.
- iii) **Hints**  
A writer's creative **impulse** enables him to raise a mere local event to the level of a universal experience.

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## 1.9 GLOSSARY

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You will find in the **glossary** a short list of the literary terms used in this Unit.

**Atmosphere** is the mood and feeling of a story. It is **created** by the writer through the use of imagery and symbols and communicates itself directly to the reader.

**Conflict**: In a literary work this term refers to **the tension** in a situation between characters who are in opposition to each other.

**Fable**: A fable is a short fictional tale, in prose or verse, in which animals often act out human roles. It is designed to make a point quickly, clearly and sharply.

**Irony** involves the perception of a difference between words and their meanings, between actions and their results, or between appearance and reality.

**Mythology** is the study of tales and legends of a particular **culture**. Myths offer explanations for the supernatural origins of man and his universe, and centre around a culture hero.