
UNIT 1 SITUATIONS

Structure

- 1.0 Aims and Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Choice of a situation
 - 1.2.1 Grouping of experience : Happy or unhappy
 - 1.2.2 Other possible classifications
- 1.3 Direct experience very important
 - 1.3.1 Transformation of ready-made situations in the classics
 - 1.3.2 Be realistic about your power and potential
- 1.4 The daily newspaper can offer situations for story writing
- 1.5 To begin with, one might find short stories (or one-act plays) easier to handle
- 1.6 Felt experience may not appear equally intense when put down in writing
 - 1.6.1 The validity of the author's feeling will be judged by the impersonal reader
 - 1.6.2 The language you-use will often choose your situation
- 1.7 Summing up
- 1.8 Activities : aids to answers
- 1.9 Glossary

1.0 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Situations play an important role in the dramatisation of ideas, as without a situation there is nothing to dramatise. In this lesson, an attempt has been made to bring out the various implications of the term. You will learn that:

- there are certain social and cultural restraints put **upon** the author in the choice of situations, although any situation can make a good story;
- any experience can provide a situation; the experience can be **happy** or unhappy;
- there are other ways of classifying experience : by age, by social contexts, by personality types, formal or informal occasions, solemn or **merry** occasions, religious and secular considerations;
- there are experiences which are understood at once, and there are those which require interpretation;
- in all these, direct involvement is important—second-hand accounts are not suitable for creative **writing**; although great classics of the past can, however, be **made** use of in **total** for situations and stories, yet the authors put themselves into them, making the experience real;
- a new writer **should** know what he can and cannot do, so it is best to begin modestly;
- the language one chooses often decides what sort of situation the writer can write on; **and**
- the busy writer ought to make a list of possible situations and keep it handy.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

A situation is to a story what flour is to bread. It is not only the substance of the 'stories' of short stories and novels but also the stuff of poetry. One of the earliest poetic outbursts came out of the situation of the sage Valmiki accidentally **seeing** a hunter kill a bird, letting his spouse suffer the pangs of separation. Epics of all languages have a **situation** of grave importance as their subject matter, and each epic contains a **multiplicity** of situations.

1.2 CHOICE OF A SITUATION

In the centuries of creative writing in all parts of the world, almost all experiences possible to man have been written about. Although formal writing, until about five hundred years ago, was mostly about larger-than-lifemen and women, gods and goddesses, alongside there was also creative writing **dealing** with the ordinary and the lowly. As a matter of fact, though the main characters of the epics and classics of ancient times were **gifted** or specially blessed heroes and heroines, all the works had accounts of numberless **men** and women who were very close to ordinary life, almost like any of us today. Languages and cultures of great sophistication laid down special rules for creating characters, and these prescriptions continued to be followed for a fairly long time, and acted as a restraint upon a free choice of situations. That apart, the **culture** of a land imposes its own restraints on matters of speech and writing. Either **consciously** or unconsciously, every Indian observes certain taboos, and these **eliminate** a few more situations from creative writing. But in spite of these restraints, life in **India** has an **abundant** variety of situations for an aspiring writer.

1.2.1 Grouping of experience : Happy or unhappy

Any experience or memory can serve as a situation for creative writing. Broadly speaking, experiences can be grouped under two heads : happy or unhappy. In creative writing, it **so happens** that some writers have a special leaning towards the one or the **other**. There can be no value judgement on this selection because a story, or a novel, or a poem, that springs from an unhappy situation need not necessarily be a **sorrowful, depressing** experience. On the other hand, it can take the reader directly to the heart of the human condition and **give** him a glimpse of truth. Happy situations convey a feeling of **optimism** and well-being, and they are an invaluable asset to human imagination and fantasy. Happy situations are, in a sense, the more difficult of the two to handle in a literary work of depth.

1.2.2 Other possible classifications

Situations can also be classified differently : childhood, adolescence, youth, middle age, old age, senility; school, **university**, place of work; relationship with other men, other women; informal groups and formal groups; weddings, other celebrations, deaths and funerals; society as **an** amorphous mass or particular representatives of the society; religion, in general, a particular god or deity or a saint or a holy place, personal religious experience **which** may range from ecstasy to acute feelings of remorse or guilt; politics of the land with all the ramifications—social, institutional and personal; law court, court buildings, judges, clerks of the judiciary, lawyers, witnesses, court cases, plaintiff, defendant, accused, sentence, prison, different forms of **punishment**, execution; existential situations, and situations **provoking righteous** indignation.

Situations can also be divided **into** two broad groups—human-interest situations, and those needing interpretations.

1.3 DIRECT EXPERIENCE VERY IMPORTANT

As already stated, in the first instance, any situation is good enough for creative elaboration. But it is best to **choose** only those which have directly affected the author to some extent. It is **only** then that the necessary involvement to activate the creative process **can** be **generated**. A single situation can be the seed for a whole work of creative imagination. It is also possible to take up a chain of interrelated or **interconnected** situations and **weave** them into a creative work. The important **thing** is that the main situation chosen must have, in some substantial manner, affected the writer. Only then will his **writing** acquire the ring of **authenticity**.

1.3.1 Transformation of ready-made situations in the classics

Whether we examine the work of Valmiki or Shakespeare, the great masters took up stories which were already popular or had been recorded in some form or other. They took up an ordinary story and transformed it into a work of art by treating the subject with their vision. Ancient epics contain a large number of situations and deal with a variety of relationships and human feelings. They are ambitious works by exceptionally gifted and skilled men. It is **unfortunate** that we know so little of the time the epics write about, even more unfortunate that we know so little about the authors, their apprenticeship, and the experiences that shaped their art. Yet, although they might have taken up ready-made situation, they transformed such stories with their personalities—behind which lay a lifetime of intense living, feeling and **thinking**.

1.3.2 Be realistic about your power and potential

In creative writing, it is good to be ambitious, but one should also be realistic about one's own capability, potential and limitations. There are numerous accounts of how the writers of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries wrote their masterpieces. A main characteristic of the writing of this century is that the first creations of a writer have generally drawn heavily from actual experiences. The first novel or the first stories are about himself, which is not bad in itself. The writer then has greater control over his or her **material**; he or she has plenty to choose from; the degree of authenticity is always higher. Childhood experiences offer a bountiful treasure to any aspiring writer. Whether the childhood was a happy one or not is a matter of subjective judgement, but in any case the person has quite a few significant things of his or her childhood to talk about, discuss, **reorder** in his or her imagination, and present in an interesting, creative work.

1.4 THE DAILY NEWSPAPER CAN OFFER SITUATIONS FOR STORY WRITING

But, for some reasons, a person may not like to write about himself or herself. This decision **has** to be respected and for such a person, nothing comes in more handy than the daily newspaper. Dostoevsky created his masterpieces from bits and scraps of newspapers he preserved. A paragraph of a theft, or a murder, was enough to stimulate the creation of a masterpiece for all times.

There is **now** a fairly well-documented account of how Tolstoy came to write Resurrection. It was actually second-hand information, and there was a lapse of several years between the time the great writer heard of an incident at the court, and the time he actually sat down to write it out as a novel. Here again, it wasn't just the incident that prompted the writer to write the novel. There was a certain urgency about his having to earn money for a particular cause. So he decided to write a **novel**. A novel about what? At this point his conversation with a **friend**, years ago, about the incident came in useful.

1.5 TO BEGIN WITH, ONE MIGHT FIND SHORT STORIES (OR ONE-ACT PLAYS) EASIER TO HANDLE

A novel is also a fairly ambitious effort, and can be a frustrating experience for one without **sufficient** training and discipline in writing. A work of short **fiction** or a one-act play is preferable as a first effort. Once the situation is chosen, one will be well-advised to dwell on it in one's mind for a while, before actually beginning to turn it into a story or a play.

those who intend to write in only one language, this may not be obvious, but even they would be unconsciously guided by the language they choose. In a **country** like India, with subtle caste and class differences, language is a strong **determining** factor in the choice of situations to write about. The easy way out is to **employ** a formal, **highflown** language, be it Tamil or Hindi or **Marathi**, and then the **situations** choose themselves: they belong to the past, the days of kings and queens and **courtiers**. It should be remembered though, that historical situations can be quite **challenging**. In fact, if the writer is perceptive enough, any situation can offer a fair challenge.

1.7 SUMMING UP

Any human experience is a situation; a writer must choose his and find the right language to tell the story. The chosen situation can be examined either in isolation or placed in the context of a number of associated situations. Situations which move vary from person to person, and a writer is best advised to choose that situation which has moved **him** deeply. Having chosen the situation, he should mentally dwell upon it. Having a fairly clear picture of the situation, the writer should choose his language carefully so that he can speak to his reader effectively. The writer should know what sort of a reader the story is addressing.

- A list of situations might help a busy writer.
- Situations can be **classified** in a number of ways, and a writer **who** expects to do a substantial quantity of writing will be better advised to list the situations that occur to him or come floating into his memory. A skilful combination of situations can be achieved if the writer has a choice of situations.
- The writer's treatment of the situation will give it literary value. Situations by themselves do not make literature. If it were so, any issue of a daily newspaper should be a literary piece. What the writer makes out of the situation is most important. This depends on how well and how deeply he has reflected upon the various aspects of life, not only of his own but of others. Much of such reflection could be the stuff out of his imagination, not from **first-hand** experience, but all the same, arising from reflections on contemporary world issues.
- How does a writer **offer** his perspective of life? Here again it **must** be **said** that there is no general rule, for it is not breadth of knowledge that **would ensure** the right values or perspective. There have been instances of persons who were confined to small geographic regions, sometimes just their homes and nothing else. But still they turned out literary works of great maturity and **wisdom**. A writer should, however, **try** to take advantage of all the available resources our age can offer. If we can't take advantage of **all** this, it is a sad waste. A situation gains in **complexity** when looked at from a wider perspective.

Activity 2

Given below is a passage from 'The Submerged Valley' (*The Submerged Valley and other stories*, by Manoj Das, **Batstone** Books, Wiltshire, UK). Utilising the knowledge you have gained from this Unit, answer the following questions.

- Identify some words, phrases or sentences which suggest that, though the account is in the first person, it is not a 'personal' experience of the **narrator**.
- Write a similar passage, creating a highly emotional atmosphere. (150 words)

Last but not the least, there was an insane woman who **lived** on the hill behind the temple. She had for her pets a mad dog and a mad cat. Whatever be the standard applied to **measure** the states of **mind** of the woman and her dog, it was intriguing how our people had become so sure of the lunacy of the cat. But before I was of age, all the three had died.

The woman had left behind a son, crazy and no less arrogant. He chose a house one **day** and planted himself in its courtyard, **refusing** to budge until fed to his content. His incoherent speech and enigmatic hints added a pinch of weirdness to his personality. And that was to his profit.

(Check for hints. 1.8)

1.8 ACTIVITIES : AIDS TO ANSWERS

Activity 1

- i) See glossary, Block 1.
- ii) These situations are in the world around him and within himself. (Complete the answer from the text.)
- iii) Situations can be **classified** according to their nature:
 - a) either happy or unhappy;
 - b) age, or temperament, of the protagonist (child, adolescent, old man, man or woman, aggressive or mild, practical or dreamy, etc.)
 - c) They can be of human interest, or they can lend themselves to analytical treatment.

Activity 2

Hints:

- i) The cliché, 'Last **but** not the least', reduces the horror of insanity to a common place **occurrence**.
"And that was to **his** profit." The writer gives the impression that the crazy man is putting on an act to bluff people into giving him food. From the account we gather that he is **genuinely** insane.
- ii) Use a more informal style, with simple words, to describe his feelings and emotions.

1.9 GLOSSARY

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

Classics: A literary **work** of acknowledged excellence (comparable to the works of great **Greek** and Latin **writers**), that transcends the limitations of time and space.

Epic: One of the most ancient forms of poetry. It is a long narrative which extols the heroic deeds of a deity or a culture hero.

The conventions of the epic-form are derived **from** the stylistic and **linguistic** patterns used by **Homer** in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. These conventions generate a sense of awe and **grandeur** which surround the epic hero and his deeds.

Existential: The act of commitment through choice to a philosophy or course of action which enables a man to **pull himself** out of his amorphous past to 'live' or 'exist'. These choices are accompanied by anguish and a sense of despair. The energy generated by this upheaval enables a man to give meaning to his universe.

Situation: See glossary, Block 1, Unit 3.