Indira Gandhi National Open University
School of Humanities

MEG - 18
American Poetry

Block

5

MID TWENTIETH CENTURY

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BLOCK 5: MID TWENTIETH CENTURY

In this block we are going to discuss:

- The various trends and movements in mid- 20th Century American Poetry;
- A detailed analysis of Robert Lowell's 'For the Union Dead';
- Selected poems of Sylvia Plath;
- Selected poems of Anne sexton and Elizabeth Bishop;
- Wallace Stevens Anecdote of the Jar.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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UNIT 19: BACKGROUND

Structure

19.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- know about the background of Mid-twentieth century poetry in brief and the various schools of poetry.
- comprehend poetry of the period with reference to major poets and movements.
- understand the context and significance of the poetry of the period.
- locate the various modes of poetry such as new criticism, Harlem Renaissance, Confessional Poetry, Lyric poetry avant-garde poetry etc.
- comprehend trajectories of individual poets like T.S. Eliiot, Allen Tate, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton etc..

19.1 INTRODUCTION

World War II represents a watershed in American poetry as poets like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound have sought to prominence during World War I. A break from the modernist trends and continuity with post-war developments marks the 1950s poetic movement. Post-war poets take a definite shift in the direction of direct guises as three momentous movements in the poetry namely the academic formalist movement of New Criticism, a confessional mode of poetry with its intense personal approach, and beats and cross-cultural movements with its out of place emphasis, moving away from

academic rigidity. Whereas political, social and cultural conservatism rule supreme the previous era of American poetry, a predominant subversive mood characterized the poetry of post war era of 1950s which culminates in dealing with the larger progressive social developments in 1960s. the Unit will lead you in the right direction as to what major developments and findings of mid twentieth Century American Poetry.

The middle era presents itself with experimental mix up of themes with the rise of balck African-American poets like Tolson, Hayden and Brooks. In fact, Alan Tate a prominent American critic has right observed that Tolson is the first important black American poet who heralds a new saga in American poetry. They avidly followed the modernist trend represented by Eliot and Pound as against the cross cultural currents of Harlem Renaissance poets. Tolson's 1949 speech refers to the tenets of new poetry distinctly separated from Harlem Renaissance poets: "A new Negro Poetry for the new negro" is the credo now which revels in exploring explicitly about the black culture, history and folklore by acclimitisng techniques developed by Eliot and Pound. Allan Tate speaks highly about Tolson's experimental expertise who has "assimilated completely the full poetic language of his time … the language of Anglo-American poetic tradition." (138)

Tolson first came into prominence with the publication of the poem "Dark Symphony" which won a national award in The American Negro Exposition in 1939. Tolson's important contribution to American literature came with *Libretto for the Republic of Liberia*(1953) and *Harlem Gallery* and some collections followed before his death in 1966. David Perkins perceptive observation about the first poem that "metaphors, phrases in foreign languages, erudite puns, poeticisms, high rhetoric, motifs from black spirituals and blues, slang, and literary and historical allusions" (129) really helps the experimental mode of poetry in keeping with the demands of time. No wonder, Tolson is regarded as poet laureate of Liberia, a West African nation founded with the idea of establishing an African homeland for former slaves. *Harlem Gallery*, Tolson's epic, is critical and complex in portraying the African culture and its intrinsic nuances. Karl Shapiro's foreword proves the point more convincingly when he argues that the poem is "a narrative work so fantastically stylized that the mind balks at comparisons." (129). *Harlem Gallery, Book I: The Curator*, is divided into twenty-four sections corresponding to the letters of the Greek alphabet. The book examines the role of the black artist in America through the eyes of its narrator, a Harlem art curator of "afroirishjewish" origins. As Rita Dove suggests in her introduction to *Harlem Gallery and Other Poems*, the curator's gallery allows him the opportunity "to observe the shenanigans of the black bourgeoisie" and to examine "the position of blacks – and most specifically the black artist – in a white-dominated society." (129)

Robert Hayden sets out to write poetry under direct influence of modernism of T.S. Eliot. His famous poem "Middle Passage" is a miniature epic. The poem tells the story of Cinquez, the captive African prince who inspired and helped carry out the mutiny aboard the slave ship *Amistad*. Chronologically, the action of the poem begins with the exodus of African peoples from their villages and takes them across the Atlantic Ocean on slave ships. The first part of the poem is a description of the inhumane treatment of Africans

aboard various slave ships. The second part is the reminiscences of a retired slave-trader. And the climactic third part is a poetic recreation of the *Amistad* mutiny. The poem was much reworked over time, and was published in four different versions between 1941 and 1966. Stylistically, the poem owes a debt to Eliot's techniques of fragmentation, allusion, and the use of different voices in *The Waste Land*.

Gwendolyn Brooks published a first book of poems – *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945) – that provided a realistic portrayal of life in the black neighborhoods of Chicago. Using the long poem format as well as the shorter lyric, Brooks was consistent in presenting race as a public issue. *Annie Allen* (1949), a mock-epic in forty-three rhyming stanzas, was the first book of poems by an African American to win the Pulitzer Prize. Another long poem, "In the Mecca" (1968), depicts life in a Chicago slum building that was once an elegant apartment complex. In a short lyric like "We Real Cool" (1959), Brooks displays her gift for a formal compression that contributes to an ironic commentary on African American life.

19.2 THE BLACK ARTS MOVEMENT

Variously known as the Black Aesthetic, the New Black Consciousness, and the New Black Renaissance, the Black Arts movement refers to writings in the mid-1960s and continues up to the mid-1970s in all earnestness. Poetry like fiction drama and criticism reflects black racial revolution against white supremacy. Phrases like "Black Power," "Black Pride" and "Black is Beautiful" caries weightage - "a sense of political, social, and cultural freedom for African Americans, who had gained not only a heightened sense of their own oppression but a greater feeling of solidarity with other parts of the black world such as Africa and the Caribbean" (130)

Spirit of militancy and revolution ferver characterizes such a separatist movement; racial politics becomes the very basis upon which such kind of poetry is based. Politically, the Black Power Movement and its radical revolutionary trends become explicit. Stephen Henderson argues in the introduction to his 1972 anthology *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, the artists and writers of the Black Arts movement had "moved beyond the Harlem Renaissance" in their capacity to view their community" in the larger political and spiritual context of Blackness. (130) It is more like an art of visionary liberalism than a mere protest. Prominent among these Black Arts movement poets are Baraka, Audre Lorde, Nikki Giovanni, Don L. Lee (Haki Madhubuti), Etheridge Knight, David Henderson, June Jordan, Ishmael Reed, Michael S. Harper, Clarence Major, Sonia Sanchez, Jayne Cortez, and Lucille Clifton. Three notable aspects upon which black Arts Movement poetry get expression are theme, structure and the extent to which Blackness is represented in African-American poetry. Anderson observes succinctly that liberation is the key to Black American poetry, be it from slavery, segregation or a spurious sense of integration into mainstream white culture. The spatial, social and political insecurity are being addressed by using mythological, spiritual and focus on African folk music. Henderson believes that stylistic elements in contemporary black poetry find frequent references to both colloquial black speech and music, especially jazz and blues. More importantly, "the "saturation" of an African-American poem

involves the depth and the quality of its evocation of black experience" (131).

Baraka's poetry changed radically during the 1960s, as he turned froma more general sense of social alienation to a vision that was politically revolutionary and that expressed a profound solidarity with black culture. In his 1964 volume *The Dead Lecturer*, Baraka begins to describe more explicitly his sense of political and social alienation as a black man whose former status as a bohemian poet has been "undone bymy station . . . and the bad words of Newark" ("Political Poem"). But Baraka's real poetic revolution comes with the poem "Black Art" (1966). "Black Art" is Baraka's most famous poem and has been called the signature poem of the Black Arts movement, but it is one about which critics and readers are strongly divided. As Werner Sollors suggests, the poem is "striking for its venomous language and for its rhetorical violence." (131)The poem is a virtual barrage of language directed against white society in general, and more specific attacks are launched against Jews, white liberals, and bourgeois blacks:

We want live
words of the hip world live flesh &
coursing blood. Hearts Brains
Souls splintering fire. We want poems
like fists beating niggers out of Jocks
or dagger poems in the slimy bellies
of the owner-jews. Black poems to
smear on girdlemamma mulatto bitches
whose brains are red jelly stuck
between 'lizabeth taylor's toes. Stinking
Whores! We want "poems that kill."
Assassin poems, Poems that shoot
guns. Poems that wrestle cops into alleys
and take their weapons leaving them dead
with tongues pulled out and sent to Ireland. Knockoff
poems for dope selling wops or slick halfwhite
politicians Airplane poems, rrrrrrrrrrrrr
rrrrrrrrrrrr … tuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuhtuh

Baraka expressing his gall at the white race with some awkward use of language as he thinks that the existing language is inadequate to express his barrage of attack against the white society. He uses verbal guns, using "poems that kill" more than potent weapons available for the purpose. While the poem is certainly disturbing, especially in its anti-Semitic references, it is rhetorically powerful in its suggestion that poetry can reverse many of the injustices perpetrated on African Americans. Lines like "Poems that wrestle cops into alleys / and take their weapons leaving them dead / with tongues pulled out" express the desire for social and political revenge by reversing the power relationships usually operating in American society. The poem's

ending is more affirmative, calling for the "black poem" that can lead to a "Black World":

Let the world be a Black Poem

And Let All Black People Speak This Poem

Silently (133)

19.3 POETIC FORMALISM

Next important poetic movement that has taken American Poetry into reckoning is the poetic formalism of New Criticism. John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson and Robert Pen Warren are prominent poets of this movement. "Fugitive" is the level they have given to their group with an intension to write good poetry. Later they favour the label "Southern Agrarians" as they seem to have believed that Southern Agrarian Economy is the foundation of Northern Industrial Economy as the collection of poetry by twelve poets *I'll Take My Stand: the South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930) would suggest.

They have also contributed to the field of criticism immensely, influenced by English masters like T.S. Eliot, I.A. Richards, and William Empson. They preferred "close reading' of a poem instead of historical and philological details related to a particular poem. Ransom argued in a perceptive essay "Criticism, Inc" that literary criticism "must become more scientific … precise and systematic." (138). Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks published the most influential treatise on New criticism *Understanding Poetry* followed by its companion volumes *Understanding Fiction* and *Understanding Drama* to formulate the New Critical ideas that revolutionize class room teaching process. Ransom published two seminal books *The World's Body* (1938) and *The New Criticism* (1941) giving the movement its name and fame. Brook's *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947) and W. K. Wimsatt's *The Verbal Icon* (1954) contribute to poetry interpretation in a great way that continued up to 1960s. Terry Eagleton sums up the new critical ethos, how close reading becomes: "convenient pedagogical method of coping with a growing student population,". "Organic unity" of a poem basing upon analysis of images, symbols, words and figures of speech is the chief concern in such analysis. The poem is a self sufficient one and hence use of phrases like "Well wrought Urn" and "Verbal Icon" in order to delineate the critical emphasis on text. Ransom believes that the "the autonomy of the text is existing for its own sake". No critical practice can distract the attention of the reader from the text. "Intentionally Fallacy" (a work of art should be appreciated based on the intention of the author) and "Affective Fallacy" (a work of art should be judged according the emotional effects on the reader). The culmination comes with rejection of biographical, psychological, historical and social context. The use of poetic devices such as irony, paradox, and tension enables the poet to resolve dilemmas and bring unity in understanding the poem. Ransom argues that a poem has two elements– structure (its argument or logical discourse) and texture (its imagery, rhythm, sound, and diction)—which enables the reader to comprehend its meaning. The meaning of the poem sustained through

dramatic tension. Emphasis on close reading helps the reader resolve the complex interrelations and ambiguities within the poem.

19.4 JOHN CROW RANSOM

Born in 1888 in Rural Tennessee he graduated from Vanderbilt in1909, Ransom was a "precocious student". His exposure to classics at the Oxford and his term as an instructor in English department at Vanderbilt helped him publish his maiden collection of poetry *Poems about God* (1919). Soon two gripping books of poetry *Chills and Fever* (1924) and *Two Gentlemen in Bonds* (1927) followed to establish Ransom's credentials as a reputed poet. However, his teaching career and critical focus began to occupy his mind more than his poetic thrust in latter part of his life.

Form and expression are two key features of Ransom's poetry. He employs skillful prosody, metaphysical wit, and satirical contrast of formal literary language with the colloquial idiom as unique features of his poetry. "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter" (1924) is famous poem which deals with a sentimental issue of theme of death of young girl only to undermine it as the culmination point:

There was such speed in her little body,
And such lightness in her footfall,
It is no wonder her brown study
Astonishes us all.
Her wars were bruited in our high window,
We looked among orchard trees and beyond
Where she took arms against her shadow,
Or harried unto the pond.
The lazy geese, like a snow cloud
Dripping their snow on the green grass,
Tricking and stopping, sleepy and proud,
Who cried in goose, Alas,
For the tireless heart within the little
Lady with rod that made them rise
From their noon apple-dreams and scuttle
Goose-fashion under the skies!
But now go the bells, and we are ready,
In one house we are sternly stopped
To say we are vexed at her brown study.
Lying so primly propped

The poem, no doubt, commemorates the death of a young girl but in a unusual way. The gap between diction used and thematic thrust is certainly unusual. The title of the poem appears off beat. Name of the girl is missing. Use of words like "astonished" and "vexed" does not go with the theme of the poem as they express less of shock and more of surprise at upsetting all "human calculations".

19.5 ALLEN TATE

The second poet who commands respect is Allen Tate. He was a prominent protégé of Ransom whose remarkable expertise of French Symbolists and admiration for Eliot's *The Waste Land* became a point of rivalry between the teacher and disciple. Tate moved to New York where he published his first poetry volume *Mr. Pope and Other Poems* in 1928. His seminal poem "Ode to the Confederate Dead," published in1926, subscribes more to the new critical formalism than to catering to the demands of the form of an ode. Both the cultural past associated with the south and his own family history form the subject matter of the poem. Complex rhyming scheme in absence of regular stanza form is the characteristic feature of the poem.

Autumn is desolation in the plot
Of a thousand acres where these memories grow
From the inexhaustible bodies that are not
Dead, but feed the grass row after rich row.
Think of the autumns that have come and gone!
Ambitious November with the humors of the year,
With a particular zeal for every slab,
Staining the uncomfortable angels that rot
On the slabs, a wing chipped here, an arm there:
The brute curiosity of an angel's stare
Turns you, like them, to stone,
Transforms the heaving air
Till plunged to a heavier world below
You shift your sea-space blindly
Heaving, turning like the blind crab.

The man explicates autumn's changes as a "desolation"; he is deeply troubled by the "brute curiosity" of the angel's stare, perhaps because he can no longer participate in the "active faith" enjoyed by his ancestors. He goes through a series of metamorphoses that reflect the torpor of his psyche: he is turned into stone, descends into "sea-space," and is finally transformed into a "blind crab."

"Age of conformity" (Irving Howe) and the "tranquillized Fifties" (Robert Lowell) were very popular in the 1940s and 50s. Both these movements focused more on form and technique than content and theme. In fixed and rigid form of sonnet and rhymed quatrain the conservative social and political atmosphere is addressed. A host of poets with their significant poetry collections like John Ciardi's *Mid-Century American Poets* (1950), Rolfe Humphries's *New Poems by American Poets* (1953), W. H. Auden's *Criterion Book of Modern American Verse* (1956), and Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson's *New Poets of England and America* (1957) introduced a new generation of formal poets, including Wilbur, Merrill, Howard Nemerov, Anthony Hecht, John Hollander, Donald Justice, and William Meredith.

The typical poems produced by academic poets of the 1950s and 1960s reflect strongly the influence of the New Critics and of the more formal poets of the modernist generation, such as Frost, Yeats, and Stevens. They are formal, witty, and impersonal, seeking an elegance of phrasing and often a relaxed or insouciant tone. A good example of such polished writing is Richard Wilbur's poem "A Simile for Her Smile":

Your smiling, or the hope, the thought of it,
Makes in my mind such pause and abrupt ease
As when the highway bridge gates fall,
Balking the hasty traffic, which must sit
On each side massed and staring, while
Deliberately the drawbridge starts to rise:
Then horns are hushed, the oil smoke rarefies,
Above the idling motors one can tell
The packet's smooth approach, the slip,
Slip of the silken river past the sides,
The ringing of clear bells, the dip
And slow cascading of the paddle wheel.

Too much formalism has lost its sheen on contemporary audience. Hence a new kind of poetry catering to contemporary needs was very much on cards. Robert Lowell did just that. A kind of distaste with form and structure is the hallmark of this kind of poetry. Lowell's perceptive remarks explicate the fluid situation well: "The writing seems divorced from culture somehow. It's become too much something specialized that can't handle much experience. It's become a craft, purely a craft, and there must be some breakthrough back into life". (149). A sort of cultural crisis is being experienced by Lowell and Robert Creeley as they become critical of prevalent culture and the preceding one too. There is always a strong desire to put some "breakthrough back into life," as Lowell would contend. The prime motivating force of poetry being criticism of American culture and life as a whole.

Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959) is full of new insight and ferver with remarkable and illuminating poems like "Skunk Hour," "Waking in the Blue," "Memories of West Street and Lepke," "Man and Wife," "During Fever," and "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" marking a clear and dramatic departure from the established trend of poetry writing. Lowell's poetic prowess is already exhibited in his 1946 volume *Lord Weary's Castle* winning Pulitzer Prize and a host of other prestigious awards. The most popular poem of the volume "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket," is written in high rhetorical style, almost Miltonic in contention. The death of his cousin Warren Winslow at war due to shipwreck at the sea is certainly elegiac in tone. But what is striking is the use of grand literary mode:

Whenever winds are moving and their breath
Heaves at the roped-in bulwarks of this pier,
The terns and sea-gulls tremble at your death
In these home waters. Sailor, can you hear

The Pequod's sea wings, beating landward, fall
Headlong and break on our Atlantic wall.

Off 'Sconset, where the yawing S-boats splash
The bellbuoy, with ballooning spinnakers,
As the entangled, screeching mainsheet clears
the blocks: off Madaket, where lubbers lash
The heavy surf and throw their long lead squids
For blue-fish?

For the formalists form is more important than the content but ultimately it is the content that dominates poetic scene in America. What poets say has become more important than what forms they use. As the perceptive observation by C. Beach sums up the situation thus: "Over the course of the century, the strongest American poets have shown that poetic language emerges out of the poet's confrontation with the texture and meanings of individual words rather than as a result of the insertion of these words into prefabricated forms. If, as Robert Creeley put it, "form is never more than an extension of content," then the decisions poets make about what forms to write in are ultimately of less importance than the things they have to say" (153).

19.6 CONFESSIONAL POETRY

The dilemma of self revelation resorting to modernist and formalistic deliberations has come to haunt confessional poets time and again. Whether confessionalism is significant in American poetic movement or not is still a contentious issue. It is certainly a convenient critical label to describe self-indulgent post war poetry. Thomas Travisan's thought provoking observation pronounces vision of this new poetry in a persuasive way: Throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and well into the 1980s the confessional model remained influential with academic critics and literary historians across a wide spectrum, perhaps because it offered a humanly compelling and rather clear-cut way of evaluating poetry. Poems involving daring self-revelation could be assumed to be bold and sincere (154). Lowell experimented with colloquial, relaxed, and self revelatory style shifting away from the New Critical emphasis on form. The confessional movement represents a unique way of writing about culture that talks about American way of life from a personal standpoint. Autobiographical element, narrative structure and emotional content are the key to such a kind of exploration. The New critical tension and modernist rigidity give way to a more relaxed personal approach which explores American cultural nuances intrinsically. Psychological exploration is preferred over structural perfection giving vent personal thoughts, feelings, and emotional expressions. Lowell's label of "Tranquilized Fifties" to address motto of confessional poets as "the repression of grief [and] the plowing under of traumatic experience." Sacrificed the midcentury cultural norms.

The credo of confessional poetry is summed up by Diana Brooks thus "the pressures on the family as an institution regulating middle-class life". Specific personal issues like "divorce, sexual infidelity, childhood neglect, and the

mental disorders that follow from deep emotional wounds received in early life" (155) come to the fore to get expression in poetry. Confessional poetry derives strength from trouble-ridden experience of the poets concerned. The biographical content of the confessional poets is equally important while exploring their poetry. Cases of suicide are common among poets like Plath, Berryman, Anne Sexton, and Delmore Schwartz, and Jarrell attempted suicide. Resort to alcohol, emotional breakdown and divorce are frequent among poets like Lowell, Bishop, and Berryman, Jarrell, and W. D. Snodgrass, Plath, and Sexton. Personal problems are highlighted through the medium of poetry. With Lowell the confessional poetry as a movement is said to have been marked its beginning from late 1950s to mid1960s. Lowell's *Life Studies*, W. D. Snodgrass's *Heart's Needle*, Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*, Anne Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* and *All My Pretty Ones*, and John Berryman's *77 Dream Songs* are seminal confessional poetry collections that had a profound impact upon the American readers. Poems dealing with relationships, sex, marriage, and domestic life become the new normals of American culture and society. Family relationships and subjects such as divorce, adolescent anorexia, and childhood abuse have got the focus of the poets of confessional mode Old's collection *The Father* concentrates on childhood feelings of personal loss at the sad demise of her father.

Robert Lowell:–

Lowell's "Sunk Hour" is considered as a trend setter for confessional poetry. Featuring in *Life Studies*, it is considered as "the anchor poem of the sequence."

Beach's perceptive argument comes handy here: "the poem is in fact highly crafted. It is composed in eight six-line stanzas with a variable meter and rhyme scheme; the first four stanzas address the decay of the town, and the second four deal with his personal ordeal, the "dark night of the soul" from which he is saved by the appearance of a family of skunks" (156).

At the beginning the poem takes to task the town and its inhabitants; the eccentric heir apparent is being seen flirting with "Queen Victoria's century" than the present American trend. She is totally averse to the changes being effected by the modern world. The second stanza focuses on the personal agony of the poet where the general "illness" of the "season" turns out to be his personal inadequacy as he declares candidly "my mind's not right":

One dark night,
my Tudor Ford climbed the hill's skull;
I watched for love-cars. Lights turned down,
they lay together, hull to hull,
where the graveyard shelves on the town.
My mind's not right.
A car radio bleats,
"Love, O careless Love …" I hear
my ill-spirit sob in each blood cell,
as if my hand were at its throat . . .

I myself am hell;

nobody's here –

The poet persona has been confused over the development of events. His personal status is being transformed to "hill's skull". The "town's illness" of the first stanza is being intensified here. Charles Altieri sums up the symbolic significance of the skunks:

By returning to the prereflective natural order … Lowell makes the skunk embody the determination and self-concern of all living beings and beyond that, as mother, a willingness to face danger in order to accept the responsibility of her role … Now one sees both a parody of the Eucharist and, on another level, a genuine moment of communion, for, as the skunk swills from the garbage pail, Lowell finds precisely the image of endurance and survival he had sought in vain in the rest of the volume . . . As the skunk makes her way beneath the "chalk-dry church spire" reminding the reader of the dead vertical world, she embodies whatever possibilities Lowell can find for restoring a context of value within secular and biological necessity (Beach 158).

The move of unorthodox ways has given Lowell much needed edge to deal with demands of new kind of poetry where the poet tries to display his or her psychological turmoil to the outside world.

19.7 SYLVIA PLATH

This private agony is more clearly exhibited in Sylvia Plath before she committed suicide in1963**.** "Lady Lazarus," written in the fall of 1962, begins with a comparison between the poem's speaker and the Jews tortured and killed in World War II:

A sort of walking miracle, my skin

Bright as a Nazi lampshade,

My right foot

A paperweight,

My face a featureless, fine

Jew linen.

Plath selects violent images to go beyond limits of poetic conventions as the hallmark of her poetry. Her direct treatment of historical imagery in poems like "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" to cater to the demands of confessional poems is significant. Even if she is not a Jew, she uses the holocaust as a fundamental metaphor for her own personal troubles. The structure of a poem also serves the purpose for Plath to express wry humour:

There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge

For the hearing of my heart –

It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge

For a word or a touch

Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.

Repetition of words like "Charge" brings out the poet's intension to take everything around her to task. She also uses the *terrza rima* form of Italian mode in poems like "Ariel" and "Fever 103". In "Lady Lazarus", the reader's job is caught out when "peanut-crunching crowd" participates in the voyeuristic act Plath's self revelation. The reader is drawn into the poem by this conceit, invited to watch, listen, and even touch the woman, who is herself reduced to a set of mechanized body parts: her heart, for example, is like a wind-up toy that "really goes." The sound of the words here – especially the repetition of the harsh "ar" sound in "charge," "scars," "heart," and "large" – adds to the brutally ironic tone of the passage. This disturbing effect is intensified by the relatively short lines and the use of meters more typical of light verse (for example, the rocking anapests of "For a piece of my hair or my clothes") (Beach 161).

Contemplation of suicide and the process of suicide have been parodied throughout the poem. Self parody is mixed up with a sense of pride in herself which the poetic persona revels in different roles of stripper, sideshow freak, or vaudeville comedian. The poet is flirting with suicide and her personal achievement is significant here:

Dying

Is an art, like everything else.

I do it exceptionally well,

I do it so it feels like hell.

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I've a call.

Plath proves her potential as poet in manipulating voice, image, form, and rhythm in the poem. She draws attention of the reader towards her, a mode of self identification, by contemplating suicide. She presents her own ambitious agenda of becoming famous by exploring subtle and complex issue of suicide:

You poke and stir.

Flesh, bone, there is nothing there –

A cake of soap,

A wedding ring,

A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer

Beware,

Beware.

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air.

She is making amends for the torture she has undergone at the hands of her male counterparts including her husband Ted Hughes. Doctors, Nazis,

and even God himself are not spared from her list of assailants. She also nurtures hope of liberating herself from a male dominated world.

19.7.1 Anne Sexton

Sexton's "The Truth the Dead Know," from *All My Pretty Ones* (1962), is considered as a meditative lyric as well as her personal confession on matters of her own contemplation. More specifically, it can be treated as an exploration of possibilities of death as a universal healer. The primary thrust in the poem is giving death a philosophical dimension far above the ordinary parlance related to death. The sad demise of both her parents in quick succession gives the occasion for the poet to brood over the poetic possibilities of such a commemorative setback:

Gone, I say and walk from church,
refusing the stiff procession to the grave,
letting the dead ride alone in the hearse.
It is June. I am tired of being brave.
We drive to the Cape. I cultivate
myself where the sun gutters from the sky,
where the sea swings in like an iron gate
and we touch. In another country people die.
My darling, the wind falls in like stones
from the white hearted water and when we touch
we enter touch entirely. No one's alone.
Men kill for this, or for as much.
And what of the dead? They lie without shoes
in their stone boats. They are more like stone
than the sea would be if it stopped. They refuse
to be blessed, throat, eye and knucklebone.

The close knit structure of the poem with a b a b rhyme pattern imposes a sort of order on the poetic persona from which there seems no immediate respite. Yet the simple word "gone " is suggestive enough to express her personal inability to have any control over the natural order. The word has many connotations; her parents death has taken toll on her mind and she is mentally gone now. The fact that she returns from the church in a mood of bereavement also exhausts her spiritually. Sexton refuses "the stiff procession to the grave" and instead drives to Cape Cod. The change place and landscape is process of self recovery for the poet from utter depression. New possibilities are being provided with the change of place and landscape.

One does not find any traditional association of elegy as redemption; the poet uses a deliberative technique of "refusal". The persona refuses to participate in funeral procession, she asserts that the parents "refuse / to be blessed" in the process of death. Unlike the traditional nature which is an embodiment of perfection and everything beautiful, Sexaton deals with nature as an apathetic and even threatening agent in keeping with the somber mood of the poem exhibited through a series of striking images, the sun "gutters from the sky," the sea "swings in like an iron gate," and the

wind "falls in like stones." The limited option between the persona and her dead parents is significant here; her emotional turbulence due the demise of her parents and the cathartic effect of emotions forms the climatic crux. The final truth of life death gets all its due in the poemwhich is beyond human comprehension.

19.7.2 John Berryman

Like Robert Lowell, Berryman too wrote poetry under the shadow of new poetic formalism and is the last recognized poet of "the mid generation" with highly individualistic style of poetic representation. His important poetic breakthrough came only in the mid 1960s with publication of *The Dream Songs*. He published an important poem *Homage to Mistress Bradstreet* (1953) in the form an interior monologue modeled upon the voice of first recognized American poet Anne Bradstreet. Beach's perceptive observation about Berryman's dream songs is significant here: "In *The Dream Songs*, Berryman turned to Whitman's "Song of Myself" for inspiration. Though the Dream Songs are formally and stylistically very different from Whitman's work, they resemble Whitman's poem in that they strive for the same combination of the personal and the epic. Like "Song of Myself," whose hero is the poet himself, *The Dream Songs* feature a central protagonist who is given the name of Henry but who is modeled quite closely on Berryman's own life, thoughts, and emotions" (164).

Beach's analysis of Berryman's typical structure and syntax is also unique and suits to the need of the present context: "The form of the poems is distinctive: three stanzas of six lines sporadically rhymed and with varied line lengths. Within this form, Berryman uses syntax and diction in highly idiosyncratic, jarring, and often very powerful ways: his goal, he claimed, was to "make the reader's nerves jump." Clearly the poems are not meant to be sung, but their designation as "songs" is only partly ironic: it alludes to the title of Whitman's poem and to the whole tradition of English lyric verse, on which the poems trope in various ways" (165).

"Dream Song 14" exhibits Berryman's poetic skills superbly.

Life, friends, is boring. We must not say so.
After all, the sky flashes, the great sea yearns,
we ourselves flash and yearn,
and moreover my mother told me as a boy
(repeatingly) "Ever to confess you're bored
means you have no
Inner Resources." I conclude now that I have no
inner resources, because I am heavy bored.
Peoples bore me,
literature bores me, especially great literature,
Henry bores me, with his plights & gripes
as bad as achilles,
who loves people and valiant art, which bores me.

And the tranquil hills, & gin, look like a drag
and somehow a dog
has taken itself & its tail considerably away
into mountain or sea or sky, leaving
behind: me, wag.

Berryman's Dream Songs follows the pattern of a mock heroic epic where Henry fights for a wrong cause "late in a long war" against a sea of odds who are onto wiping his identity out of contention. The mention of Greek hero Achilles seems to be the only saving grace of the poem but the mention of the great hero's name in lower case only serves the satiric purposes of the poet in the mock heroic convention. Heroic assertions are being dismantled by the ironic repetitions.

19.7.3 Elizabeth Bishop

She is a confessional poet with a difference, despite her affinities with her peers like Lowell and Sexton. Her reticent and withdrawn mood makes all the difference. She is a significant poet of transitional mode who puts the conventions of confessional paradigm to limitus test. Her poems certainly confirm to norms and conditions of confessional poetryas it explores "a type of narrative and lyric verse … which deals … with the facts and intimate mental and physical experience of the poet's own life" (167).

Some of Bishop's intensely personal poems can hardly be called "confessional." The poems in her final volume, *Geography* III (1979), pose greater degree of difficulty of reading her work in confirmation with confessionalism. "In the Waiting Room" is a narrative poem in which a seven-year-old girl (believed to be some version of Bishop herself) records her plight in a dentist's office and reading a magazine (*National Geographic*) while her aunt is being treated by the dentist. Her identification with the pictures in the magazine – of African women's breasts and her aunt's acute pain coming out dental treatment have been empathetic for the reader as the realization that everything that happens inside the dentist clinic relates to her in a horrific way:

Suddenly, from inside,
came an *oh!* of pain
– Aunt Consuelo's voice –
not very loud or long,
I wasn't at all surprised;
even then I knew she was
a foolish, timid woman.
I might have been embarrassed,
but wasn't. What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was *me*:
my voice, in my mouth.

Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I – we – we falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover
of the *National Geographic*,
February, 1918.

Her personal pain assumes the universal significance and the interplay between personal and larger canvas of appeal is achieved in the final moments of the poem where self revelation turns out be the cry of humanity as a whole:

I said to myself: three days
and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space.
But I felt: you are an *I*,
you are an *Elizabeth*,
you are one of *them*

The child narrator's adult concerns become significant here and the interplay between first person and second person narrative only intensifies the move from a personal to universal plain where humanity becomes the subject. The seven year old girl comes to terms with reality associated with race, gender, and ethnicity and confronts these larger realities with her painful self realization.

Elizabeth's poems reveal her personal vulnerability as a human being as well as her refusal to fall into the lure of such a trap where women get little space to assert their identity. In a sense she is the transitional poet who mediates between what the confessional poets represented in personal revelation and rekindling a hope of relating that painful reality to larger issues concerning life. Hers is strategy of continuation with and break from the confessional mode of self revelation which is not confined to the inner realization of the poet but there is always an attempt to reach out of the personal limitation to have access to issues concerning humanity.

19.8 LYRIC POETRY

Lyric poetry emerged as a panacea for a society undergoing radical changes in the last of twentieth century. Obsession with the self , ideas in the external world, and the radical experiments brought about by Freudian and Jungian psychology, impact of surrealism n art and literature and the influence of South American poets like Pablo Neruda have all gone into the making of the lyric poetry ,occult and mystical elements also contributed their share. experimentation mode has certainly led to a sort of symbolic, metaphysical and introspective poetry.

Eliot's Four Quarts remains the most influential text on meditative poetry. Theodore Roethke's "North American Sequence" is based on *Four Quarts*, he seems to be repudiating the meditative mode, though. Considered as a poem of both time and place, Eliot's poem has four sections, "Burnt Norton," dealing with the rose garden of an English country house; the second quartet, "East Coker," set in the village in Somerset from which Eliot's ancestor Andrew Eliot traveled to the New World in the seventeenth century in search of religious freedom; the third section, "The Dry Salvages," focuses on both the Mississippi River of Eliot's Missouri childhood and the rocky coastline of New England; and the last quartet, "Little Gidding," takes place in an English village founded as a seventeenth century Anglican religious community. The poem has significant beginning fitting in Eliot's agenda well:

Time present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time future,

And time future contained in time past …

Besides, Roethke, Robert Bly and James Wright representing the "Deep Image" movement wrote meditative poetry in 1960s and 70s. These poets use visual images for comprehension of higher consciousness as a sort of sudden revelation or moment of epiphany. Other notable poets of the period are Gary Snyder and Galway Kinnell who mediate between the meditative and more surrealistic mode in poetry.

19.9 POSTMODERN, AVANT-GARDE POETRY

American poetry took a significant turn in late 1950s and 60s as the poetry of the period was divided between dominant lyric tradition represented by poets like James Merrill, Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke and the experimental avant-garde tradition represented by *The New American Poetry* (1960) edited by Douglas Allen. They parted with the academic accomplishment of New Critics and emphasized experimentation in the avant-garde mode best illustrated by the Beat Generation of poets like Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso , Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Philip Lamantia.

19.10 SUMMING UP

In this unit we have seen how Mid Twentieth century poetry is replete with

- various schools of poetry and their rich repertory.
- the impact of World War I and II in poetry, the black movement and Harlem Renaissance, Confessional poetry of Plath and Sexton.
- each movement has its own share of contribution to the development of poetry.
- Eliot's iconic influence on the poets of the period.
- the experimental, meditative, avant-garde and postmodern nuances present in the poetry of the period.

19.11 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. The impact of war has been profound in the poetry of the period. Discuss.

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2. The period has been rich in every aspect—theme, technique and emotional appeal. Do you agree? Give your reasons.

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3. Discuss the contributions of Eliot to American poetry.

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4. What do you mean by Harlem Renaissance? Why is it so-called?

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5. Write a note on Confessional poetry with reference to Sylvia Plath's Poetry.

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6. What are the salient features of 'poetic formalism'. Elaborate your answer.

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7. What is lyric poetry? What is the impact of Eliot's *Four Quartets?*

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8. Write a note on postmodern avant-garde American poetry with reference to the poets you have studied.

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UNIT 20: ROBERT LOWELL'S *"FOR THE UNION DEAD"*

Structure

20.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- know about the works of Robert Lowell
- comprehend *For The Union Dead* as distinctly different from his other works
- understand human tragedy in the context of this text
- locate social forces as determining the discourse of the human life, hence the pragmatics of individual emotions pitted against or getting shaped by dominant social mores
- comprehend a picture of a life without heroic idealism and intrusion of technology.

20.1 INTRODUCTION

20.1.1 The Writer's Bio-brief

On March 1, 1917, Robert Lowell was born into one of Boston's oldest and most prominent families. He attended Harvard College for two years. After that he studied at Kenyon College, where he studied poetry under John Crowe Ransom and received an undergraduate degree in 1940. He took graduate courses at Louisiana State University where he studied with Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks. His books like, *Land of Unlikeness* (Harcourt, Brace and Company), was published in1944. His second book *Lord Weary's Castle* (Harcourt, Brace Company, 1946),won a Pulitzer Prize in 1947. Both his books were influenced by his conversion from Episcopalianism to Catholicism and reconnoitred the dark side of America's Puritan legacy. Under the influence of Allen Tate and the New Critics, he wrote austerely formal poetry that sketched praise for its remarkably commanding handling

of meter and rhyme. Lowell was politically involved—he became a diligent protester during the Second World War and was imprisoned as a result, and actively protested against the war in Vietnam. On the other hand his personal life was full of marital and psychological turmoil. He suffered from severe episodes of manic depression, for which he was repeatedly hospitalized.

He suffered from frequent psychological bouts. This had a deepening influence in his poetic career and in the mid-1950 under the influence of younger poets as W. D. Snodgrass and Allen Ginsberg, Lowell began to write more directly from personal experience, and loosened his observance to traditional meter and form. The result was a watershed collection, *Life Studies* (Faber and Faber, 1959), which incessantly altered the landscape of modern poetry, like Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Many critics consider Lowell to be the most important poet in English of the second half of the twentieth century. He continued to develop his work with sometimes uneven results, until his sudden death on September 12, 1977. Robert Lowell served as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 1962 until his death.

20.1.2 Summary of *For The Union Death*

The dramatic opening begins as a private meditation on his childhood memory of the Boston Aquarium. 'For the Union Dead' commemorates the sacrifice of Colonel Robert Shaw, a Union officer killed while leading a regiment of black troops during the Civil War. The poet shifts between the historic past and present, and deeply laments the erosion of heroic idealism in contemporary America with the technological intrusion.

The poem envisages the legacy of the Civil War, embodied in a memorial to Colonel Robert Shaw, a white soldier who died while commanding an all-black regiment. Colonel Shaw was a twenty-one year old son of a well-to-do white man, but had entirely sacrificed himself for the unity of the nation. He symbolized union idealism. One hundred years after his death, Lowell contrasts Shaw's heroism with contemporary forms of self-interest and greed in this poem. The title suggests that the Union army, now symbolizing national unity/patriotism, has been dead for the people of America of 1963. The poem is a critique of modern culture in general.

The epigraph (letters carved under the statue, written in Latin) of the poem is the inscription on the memorial to Colonel Shaw and the 54th Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment that he commanded. Lowell revised the inscription for the poem in English it means, "He leaves everything else to serve the republic". The original inscription is: "Relinquunt Omnia ServareRem Publicam" (or "They relinquish/ sacrifice everything to serve the Republic"). Lowell thus introduces the theme of noble self sacrifice in the poem

The poet begins by graphing the Boston memorial from a distance; as he looks at the surrounding, he feels that the place looks like a "Sahara of snow now" - symbolically a place bereft of feelings. The South Boston Aquarium (a big aquarium was also placed before the statue for decorating it) has been so unkempt that it has wrecked and there are no more fish in it. The weathercock upon the building has lost its scales so that it no longer shows any direction. This is a scathing criticism of the symbolic of the lack of direction in the "progress" of the material American civilization.

In the second stanza, the poet recalls his visit of the aquarium. As he was a child, he rubbed his nose on the glass wall of the aquarium and wished that he could break the bubbles that rose from the mouth of the fishes. The bubbles, symbolize many things including the American dream, values that modern people regard too unreal to be pursued, the heroism of the past. This image of rising bubbles presents the fish as entombed and subservient. The kingdom of fish is literally heading "dark downwards" as they swim down and away from the aquarium light. To put it differently, this image suggests a sense that the modern American kingdom is getting worse, murkier, and less moral. "For the Union Dead" addresses the manner of American society as it degenerates from the idealism of the nineteenth century to the desperate loss of it in the mid twentieth century. The very image of the decrepit landscape and the fragmented language underlines this sense of collapse of values. Everything is derelict, broken and bare, both literally and symbolically.

20.2 EPIGRAPH

RelinquuntOmniaServare Rem Publicam."

- Translation from Latin: "They gave up all to serve the republic."
- This is an epigraph. It is a short quotation at the beginning of the poem intended to introduce the poem.
- Here, Lowell very ingeniously takes the Latin phrase that is engraved in the actual Civil War memorial to introduce a poem on the very subject, a dedication for the Union soldiers that died in the Civil War.
- Briefly, the Union soldiers were from the north, and wanted, among other things, for all of the states (northern and southern) to remain part of the Republic. The Confederates, the opposition from the south, wanted to break away from the Republic.
- The Union supported President Lincoln's decision to abolish slavery, the Confederates did not.

20.3 CRITICAL COMMENTARY

The historical context of this poem rests on Colonel Robert Shaw, who was recruited in 1863 by Governor John Andrew to lead one of the first troops of all–African American men in the Civil War. This group became the 54thMassachusetts Infantry. Shaw grew passionate about the equality of his soldiers, and he even led a boycott against unequal pay when he learned that his African American soldiers were paid less than their white counterparts. The 54th infantry paraded through Boston before going to South Carolina, where Shaw was killed near Charleston.

In the first stanza, the reader is surprised. Expecting to read about the "Union Dead," it is a perplexing to read initially about the South Boston Aquarium instead. Lowell prepares his readers. The contrast between the ideals Shaw fought for and the world Lowell sees is totally opposite. Lowell uses alliteration twice in the second line ("Sahara . . . snow" and "broken . . . boarded") to further accentuate the unforgiving and cold environment of this modern Boston. He ends that stanza with fish tanks that have dried up.

Just as the tanks have lost the purpose for which they were created, Boston may have lost its way in the calling issued by Colonel Shaw to create a more united world.

In the second stanza, Lowell reflects on memories from his childhood, when he watched fish and reptiles in the aquarium, and he connects this through enjambment to the next stanza, in which construction is encroaching the Boston sky. The narrator begins at the ruins of the South Boston Aquarium, evoking past memories, then shifts to near-present, a day 'last March.' Lowell draws attention of his readers to a fenced excavation for an underground parking garage within paved parking areas in central Boston. The construction supports the frame the 'tingling' Statehouse in steel girders, while tremor from the work badly shakes the Shaw Memorial, reinforced only by a wooden 'plank.' In a way this is a critique of the modern technology.

The narrator reflects on the Memorial, which commemorates Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and the Union's first black regiment, the Massachusetts 54th. The figures in the sculpture seem to 'breathe' life, issuing a vivid, personal, and disturbing reminder of death and sacrifice. Lowell reminds us that over half the regiment was killed in the first two months of battle. The Memorial hits home in a primeval way that contrasts sharply with its counterparts in 'small-town . . . greens' throughout New England, that seem 'sparse' and sleepy by comparison. The poem reminds and informs the reader that Colonel Shaw, the white commander, was buried in a mass grave, 'a ditch,' along with his black soldiers. This was all that Shaw's father wanted. There are no more recent war memorials in Boston Common. One notices that the closest thing being a photograph celebrating an American-made safe that 'survived' Hiroshima intact. There are no statues to commemorate the Hiroshima attack.

The poem concludes in a unique way, the content opens up in ways that challenge the reader and complicate interpretation. The drained faces of 'Negro school children', reconnects with Colonel Shaw through images of balloons and bubbles, anticipating an impending rupture. In the final stanza, the poem refers to the closed aquarium once more, implying that the fish that once fascinated the narrator have now been replaced by the 'giant finned cars' that appear 'everywhere', leaving the reader to consider the various implications.

20.4 ANALYSIS

Let us now go through a very detailed analysis of the poem :

In the first few lines of the poem:

- The poet establishes place (the South Boston Aquarium) and at least a general sense of the present (he writes in present tense, and an aquarium is more or less a modern-day invention, not part of the Civil War era).
- Lowell not only introduces an unexpected subject, but also places the readers in an unexpected period of time.

In a Sahara of snow now.

Its broken windows are boarded.

- It is winter. The Aquarium is totally shut down, and presumably has been for a while.
- In these first two lines, Lowell creates a picture of desolation using these two opposing places: South Boston and the Sahara.

The bronze weather vane cod has lost half its scales.

The airy tanks are dry.

- Lowell is setting up a pattern here, just like he did in the previous line, of describing things in the opposite way of what we would expectSahara, makes one think of extreme heat, but in the scene he describes it is snowing. The fish should be underwater, but instead it is blowing in the wind. These unusual descriptions help to create vivid images.

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass,

- The speaker uses the flash back technique and recalls a time when he used to press his face to the glass of the tanks at the aquarium.
- "Like a snail" is a simile and it describes his nose up against the glass.

My hand tingled to burst the bubbles drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish.

- The speaker is still remembering the excitement of being at the aquarium. He was so entranced that he wanted to reach in a pop the bubbles coming from the mouths of the fish.
- To describe the fish as "cowed" and "compliant" is to suggest that they have been forced or intimidated into this position—which is, in a way, true.

My hand draws back. I often sigh still for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom of the fish and reptile.

- The poet draws us out of the reverie into the present day. The speaker admits that even now he daydreams of the past when he would visit the aquarium.
- The description of the marine life as a "dark downward and vegetating kingdom" adds a mysticism.

I pressed against the new barbed and galvanized fence on the Boston Common. Behind their cage yellow dinosaur steamshovels were grunting

- Through the fence the narrator watches construction happening. He uses a metaphor,he describes the steamshovels as yellow dinosaurs, trapped behind a cage. Lowell uses poetic deviceslike personification, which is giving inanimate objects (like the construction machinery) characteristics of a—person (the "grunting,").

As they cropped up tons of mush and grass to gouge their underworld garage.

- There are huge machines digging up the earth to make way for an underground parking garage.
- Lowell uses "underworld" rather than the word "underground".

Parking spaces luxuriate like civic sandpiles in the heart of Boston.

- These soon-to-be parking spaces are now full of piles of sand, chilling in the middle of Boston.

A girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin coloured girders braces the tingling Statehouse,

- The poet compares a woman's undergarments (girdle) to the girders (supporting beams). He states that the girders are orange right away. Further he describes them as Puritan-pumpkin coloured. Puritan refers to a specific religious population in Boston.

Shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel Shaw and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry

- The shaking refers to the machinery that is used in the construction
- Colonel Shaw was in charge of the 54th all-black infantry in the Civil War.
- The "Negro" 54th infantry was the first of its kind in the Civil War; they joined the war in 1863.
- In modern parlance the word "negro" sounds obsolete and even offensive, but during this time it was used to describe Africans and African Americans and was not considered derogatory.

On St. Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief, propped by a plank splintagainst the garage's earthquake.

- Augustus Saint-Gaudens was an Irish-American sculptor who made the Civil War statue that Lowell is writing of.
- It seems this memorial is shaking because it is rammed up against thesenseless construction that is going on, and only a propped up plank is thereto safeguard it from the construction.
- Words like "shaking" "tingling" "earthquake" has been used to describe the scene

Two months after marching through Boston, half the regiment was dead;

- There is a time shift. Lowell goes back to describing the Civil War and discusses the fate of the 54th infantry.
- So, after marching south for two months, the regiment had lost half its members.The soldiers sacrificed their lives. They give up all, including their lives, for the Republic.

At the dedication, William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe.

- There is again a shift in time. Lowell skips past the end of the Civil War to the dedication of the memorial.
- The dedication Lowell is talking about here is the unveiling of the memorial.
- William James, a philosopher from Boston, gave the inaugural speech during the unveiling of the statue.
- The speaker could almost hear the bronze soldiers breathe. The inner meaning is this: that they looked very real, and/or that he was so

moved by their courage, and the sacrifice was so fresh in his mind, that the statues seemed almost real to him.

Their monument sticks like a fishbone in the city's throat.

- A fishbone in the throat feels like a sharp knife.
- By "city's throat" Lowell might also be thinking of the city's anatomy, he is focussing on its centre.

Its Colonel is as lean as a compass-needle.

- In this simile, Lowell compares the Colonel to the compass needle, actually the statue is lean and possibly sharp-looking
- *He has an angry wrenlike vigilance, a greyhound's gentle tautness;*
- In these two lines Lowell describes the Colonel using two different animals: a wren (type of bird), and a greyhound (a dog).
- The Colonel seems taut (like a bow), but in a gentle way.

He seems to wince at pleasure, and suffocate for privacy.

- Lowell is personifying the statue, or giving human feelings to it.
- "Wince at pleasure" is a strange phrase. The vigilant colonel is so used to bracing himself for danger, that he fails to anticipate that good things might come in his way.
- "Suffocate for privacy" is equally strange. Lowell describes the statue as a mere object (using "Its"), and compares it to animals ("wren like" and "greyhound"). There is a kind of evolution in the statue's description which brings it slowly more to life.

He is out of bounds now. He rejoices in man's lovely, peculiar power to choose life and die—

- "He is out of bounds now" .Colonel Shaw is dead, he is also out of the bounds of life.
- This "choice" to "choose life and die" refers to the philosopher William James, who wrote about free will. Lowell also refers to the soldiers' choice to fight bravely until death.
- Col. Shaw, chose to live his life a certain way (leading his African American troops into battle) and, now that he is no more he is put to oblivion by the mercenary attitude of the people of Boston.

When he leads his black soldiers to death, he cannot bend his back.

- By the time the 54th infantry fights its last battle, the Colonel is so fatigued from fighting that he cannot bend his back.
- These lines show how hard these soldiers fought. They were utterly exhausted and worn-out, but they chose to enter the battle in spite of all of that. Shaw, too continued.

On a thousand small town New England greens, the old white churches hold their air of sparse, sincere rebellion; frayed flags

- Revolt means resistance to authority. It is probably related to the instituting attitude of New England, breaking away from the rule of monarchy.

- The "frayed flags" at the end of line are a mention of the American flags, they are symbolic for they refer to the Union. Lowell reminds his readers of how the union fought for the Republic, for all states aspire to be one nation.
- "Sparse" means thinly spread or dispersed.
- The frayed flags has a similar effect on the spirit of rebellion and patriotism. It is coming apart. Colonel Shaw and his infantry's statue in the heart of Bostonis being shaken violently by construction, and is protected by a single, flimsy plank. The old flags are frayed. The present generation attaches very little importance to the sacrifice of Colonel Shaw and his infantry.

Quilt the graveyards of the Grand Army of the Republic.

- The American flags are disseminated like quilt squares all over the graveyards of the Union soldiers in New England.
- Quilts are quintessential American.
- This picture of patriotism and commemoration for those that died for the Republic illustrates the amount of respect the New Englanders had for the Union soldiers of the Civil War.

The stone statues of the abstract Union Soldier grow slimmer and younger each year—

- Lowell describes Colonel Shaw as an "abstract Union Soldier." The meaning of abstract isexisting in thought or idea, but not in physical presence.

Wasp-waisted, they doze over muskets and muse through their sideburns…

- "Wasp-waisted" means skinny. These skinny little soldiers doze over their weapons, and think ("muse") through their sideburns. Instead of the speaker looking at the statue of these soldiers and thinking of their physical strength, he pictures them right now as sort of weary philosophers.
- Colonel Shaw's fatheropposed the idea of constructing a monument honouring his achievement in the Civil War.
- He preferred a simple grave for his son and not an ornate monument.

Where his son's body was thrown and lost with his "niggers."

- When he died at the battle of Fort Wagner, Colonel Shaw was buried in a ditch with the dead black infantrymen.
- "Niggers" is in quotations because it is not used as offensive language of Lowell, or of the speaker, but they refer to the Confederate soldiers who killed them and threw them in a ditch.

The ditch is nearer.

- The ditch probably refers to the construction in the middle of Boston, and also mentions the underworld.

There are no statues for the last war here; on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph shows Hiroshima boiling

- Lowell shifts in time. He now takes the readers to the present times. The United States dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan in WWII, one of the most devastating moments in US military history.
- There are no statues commemorating the heroes of this war. There is only a picture of Hiroshima which brings us to the reality. Lowell uses the word "commercial" to describe the picture, meaning that it is intended to attract customers, make money.

Over a Mosler Safe, the "Rock of Ages" that survived the blast. Space is nearer.

- The advertisement is for a brand of safe (Moser) whose motto is, "rock of ages," meaning it can survive anything, even the blast of Hiroshima—which, in the name of commerce, is truly tasteless: they're using an image of human devastation to sell their safes.
- "Space is nearer" echoes the previous line, "The ditch is nearer."
- In this case, the phrase could mean a couple of things: 1. Advances in technology (evidenced by the bomb, the safe, and although not mentioned, the recent successful human exploration into space. 2. It might carry a deeper, more figurative meaning: that space (as in nothingness) is nearer, because we are destroying our history by failing to commemorate it or simply forgetting it, *and* we are destroying our potential future by tearing up our cities with reckless abandon to make way for new technology. Things are looking bleak.

When I crouch to my television set, the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons.

- The narrator is describing the African American school children he sees on his television set.
- He describes the faces as "drained." The narrator refers to the members of 54th black regiment sacrificing themselves for the Republic—their faces might be drained from decades of sacrifice and struggle. African Americans continued the struggle for human rights long after slavery was eradicated and long after the Civil War. Perhaps Lowell is trying to determine how slow-going and problematic progress has been for African Americans in this country.
- The speaker contrasts the negative word, "drained" with a happier "balloons." He means to say that even though the faces are drained, they are still rising. The line ends on a hypothetically positive note.

Colonel Shaw

Is riding on his bubble,

- A reference to the bubble from the beginning of the poem when the narrator wants to pop the bubbles blowing from the mouth of the fish in the aquarium.
- This bubble also reminds us of the previous line with the balloons.
- This is a fantasy-like image, Colonel Shaw is now dead, and even if he was alive it would be pretty tough to ride a bubble.

He waits for the blessed break.

- The imagery is wonderful. Colonel Shaw is riding on an imaginary (or figurative) bubble, waiting for it to break.
- The bubble could stand for the cause or the struggle (a united country with united countrymen, regardless of colour, creed and race) that he and his regiment fought for.
- The break could also mean the relief. Lowell reminds his readers that the Civil Rights struggle is still going on during the time this poem was written, maybe the speaker imagines Shaw is waiting for the final resolution..

The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere, giant finned cars nose forward like fish;

- Lowell travels back to the beginning mentioning the long-gone aquarium. This also helps the readers to connect themselves to the present day.
- The aquariumhave been replaced by a world much less appealing to the narrator.The cars are creeping around like fish. The innocence, the empathy have been replaced by a grim reality.
- The space-age is drawing nearer. Lowell surprises his readers with an unfamiliar, strange-looking future, filled with "giant finned cars."

A savage servility slides by on grease.

- The narrator reminds us of the valiant infantrymen who fought with savage ferocity for their country and for their own civil liberties. They were servile, however, because they still did not have nearly any of the civil rights in comparison with their white compatriots.
- Lowell laments the fact that little progress has been made in terms of civil rights and equality.
- These final two lines arecritical in tone they are not a reference to the soldiers directly, but Lowell is critical of the fact that, even though the Civil War is over, there hasnot been enough change or progress. This poem charts how little progress had been made between the time when the Union soldiers died and the time the poem was being written. Lowell includes the other aspects of the poem—the aquarium, the construction in Boston—to paint a larger picture for the reader. The fish were trapped, en*slaved* in a way. That's the way this awful world works, Lowell is saying, and—despite decades of history—it hasnot really changed.

20.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE

The title of the poem points to the fact that it is a commemorative poem, dedicated to the dead Union soldiers. However as we go through the poem we find it to be a misnomer. For this dedication is not in tune with the typical memorial route of straight-up praising the brave and heroic veterans. It speaks about the past, about aquariums, outer space, and Boston that does not seem directly related to the title. The poet juxtaposes the past with the present, speaks of the childhood memories and brings the reader face to face with the present day Boston, its culture, people and values and tradition.

The Civil War has been put into oblivion. The present generation in Boston nurtures no sentiments about the war heroes, about Colonel Shaw, about the sacrifices they made. Present day Boston is more concerned with the construction and concretization and advancement of technology. There is little time to pay homage to the Union dead.

20.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS : POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Long Questions

1. Why does Lowell write a commemorative poem for something that happened almost a century ago?
2. If the poem is about Union soldiers, why is the poet bringing in the past memories about the aquarium?
3. Describe the present Boston, according to the speaker? How do you think the speaker feels about the place? Discuss.
4. What is the overall tone of the poem?
5. Is the poem a typical dedication which speaks of commemorating Shaw and his soldiers? Why or why not?
6. Do you think this poem addresses the Civil Rights movement? If so, how?

Short Questions:

1. What happened to the South Boston Aquarium?
2. What does Lowell mean when he refers to the fish as "cowed"?
3. Fill in the blank. "Their monument sticks like a _____ / in the city's throat."
4. In the second-to-last stanza, what is Colonel Shaw riding on?
5. In the final stanza, what does Lowell compare the cars to?
6. What is the purpose of all the digging?
7. Colonel Shaw was the leader of what group?
8. What artist created the Civil War statue?
9. What other war (besides the Civil War) makes a cameo appearance?

20.7 SUMMING UP

This poem charts how little progress had been made between the time when the Union soldiers died and the time the poem was being written. Lowell includes the other aspects in the poem—the aquarium, the construction in Boston—to paint a larger picture for the reader. The fish were trapped, enslaved in a way. That is the way this awful world works, Lowell is saying, and—despite decades of history—it has not really changed. Lowell also draws our attention to the technological advancement which has taken a toll on the humane side of humanity. Human beings today are bereft of sentiments, empathy and sacrifice!

20.8 SELECT READING LIST:

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Perloff, Marjorie G. "Realism and the Confessional Mode of Robert Lowell." Contemporary Literature 11, 4 (Autumn, 1970), pp. 470-487 [free at jstor].

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UNIT 21: SYLVIA PLATH'S *"ARIEL", "DADDY" AND "LADY LAZARUS"*

Structure

21.0 OBJECTIVES

Having been acquainted with the background of mid-twentieth century American poetry, and considered an influential poem by an important poet, namely Robert Lowell's 'For the Union Dead' you will now be introduced to the feminist, confessional and Modernist genres of American poetry.

In this Unit we shall take a look at Sylvia Plath's poems 'Ariel', 'Daddy', and 'Lady Lazarus'. As mature learners of an advanced course of literature you will be expected to understand the social, cultural and political contexts in which the poet composed her poetry and the biographical factors and aesthetic beliefs which may have influenced her creative output.

You will also be expected to use relevant tools of critical analysis whereby you can arrive at a fresh and rewarding appreciation of the poems in this Unit.

21.1 THE LIFE AND WORK OF SYLVIA PLATH

Sylvia Plath was born on October 27, 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts to immigrant parents with Austrian descent on her mother's side, and a German one on the father's. After Plath's brother Warren was born in 1935 the family moved from Jamaica Plain to Winthrop where her mother Aurelia had grown up, and where her maternal grandparents lived. Though the debate is on as to how far biographical factors may be considered in a poet's artistic evolution it is a fact that Plath's childhood years in Point Shirley, the Winthrop home of her grandparents find interesting mentions in her work.

The death of Plath's father Otto Plath on November 5, 1940, (a few days after her eighth birthday) of diabetes related complications proved to be a harrowing and traumatic experience for the young Sylvia who returned repeatedly in her work to this devastating event. Plath graduated from

Bradford Senior High school in 1950 and thereafter attended Smith College where she excelled academically being awarded the position of a guest editor in Mademoiselle magazine which caused her to spend a month in New York City. Frustrated early in this stint Plath used some of the events of this summer in her novel *The Bell Jar*.

The first medically recorded suicide attempt by Plath was in August 1953 from which she recovered through treatment and therapy, returned to college, submitted her thesis, and graduated from Smith with the highest honours. Plath proceeded to Newnham College in Cambridge University, England on a Fulbright scholarship where she continued to write poetry. Plath first met Ted Hughes in February 1956 at a party in Cambridge. Already struck by his poetry she was drawn to the poet and the man, and the two of them began spending much time together and were married on June 16, 1956 within months of their first meeting.

The couple moved to the United States where Plath taught for a while at Smith giving up her job to work as a receptionist and taking creative writing seminars given by Robert Lowell in the evening. During this period she came into contact with Anne Sexton and other writers who encouraged her to write from experience as also to express herself as a woman. In search of new experiences the couple travelled across Canada and the United States staying for a while at the Yaddo artists' colony at Saratoga Springs before moving back to the United Kingdom in 1959, and taking up residence in London.

The year 1960 heralded births for the Plaths, first that of their daughter Frieda, and then of Sylvia's first poetry collection *The Colossus*. In August 1961 Plath completed her novel *The Bell Jar*, and soon after the family moved to North Tawton in Devon. In January 1962 the couple's son Nicholas was born. In September 1962 the couple separated after Plath discovered in July that Hughes was having an affair with Assia Wevill, their friend and tenant. Plath returned with her children to a rented flat in London in December 1962 in the throes of a creative flood which had begun in October and continued till the end of her life. In this extraordinary period of literary creativity Plath came to write the majority of the poems on which her fame primarily rests today, and twenty-six of which are published in her posthumous collection *Ariel*.

In the bitterly cold winter of 1962-63 Plath probably went through one of the bleakest periods in her personal life suffering emotional rejection and critical indifference coupled with the rigours of caring single-handedly for her two infants. On February 11, 1963 Plath was found dead of carbon monoxide poisoning with her head in the gas oven at her home.

Activity 1:

Do you have any observations on Plath's diaries and letters?

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Activity 2

Do you know of any film that was made on Sylvia Plath? What was her daughter's reaction to the film?

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21.2 MID-TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

In the United States, the middle decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of several strains of poetry. Wallace Stevens was a leading figure who had an influence on several poets. There were the poets such as Karl Shapiro, Randall Jarrell, and James Dickey who had seen active service in World War II and wrote from their personal experiences. The so-called Confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton under the influence of John Berryman and Robert Lowell explored and expressed their experiences in a carefully crafted style. By contrast the Beat poets such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Amiri Baraka and Lawrence Ferlinghetti among others spearheaded a revolution for artistic freedom of expression, expressing a deep impatience with traditional beliefs and institutions, experimenting with form, and opting to use a raw style of composition.

The Black Mountain poets operating from Black Mountain College introduced certain innovations. Some of these poets such as Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, Ed Dorn, Paul Blacburn and others under the leadership of Charles Olson propagated a poetic form based on the line which in turn was based on breath thereby emphasizing a poetics which merges life, utterance and thought. Olson further advocated the adherence to a style of writing that depended for its effect on a lateral and linear continuity of thought and ideas.

The poetry belonging to the San Francisco Renaissance was led by Kenneth Rexroth and Madeline Gleason. The Small Press poets surfaced in the San Francisco Bay area publishing the work of new poets in low-budget periodicals in a bid to infuse new blood into the worn traditions. Then there were the Los Angeles poets such as Leland Kickman, Harry Northup, Michael C. Ford, Kate Braverman among others. They were mostly lyric poets drawing on their own experiences.

While the West Coast had its movements the East Coast, never to lag behind had the New York School of poets. Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, Ted Berrigan and others under the leadership of John Ashbery were some of the main figures of this group who strove to express the experience of everyday life in a spontaneous and commonly used language abstaining from an elaborate or artificial style. Often seen as a reaction to Confessionalist poetry the work of this group of poets drew inspiration from Surrealism and the avant-garde art movements.

21.3 ARIEL: THEMATIC INTERPRETATIONS

'Ariel', the title poem of the collection which made Plath famous is an ambiguous poem. The name or word Ariel has several meanings as you will soon discover. Ariel is the airy spirit freed by Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Ariel is also the sacred flame mentioned in two Books of the Old Testament, namely *Leviticus* and *Isaiah*. Ariel is sometimes regarded as a symbolic name for Jerusalem, and in Hebrew it means 'lion of God'. On a biographical level Ariel was the name of the horse on which Plath used to go riding.

The first six tercets (three-line stanzas) combine to give the physical impression of riding. In the first tercet Ariel has just completed the task of creating the tempest, and there is the proverbial lull before the storm. "Stasis in darkness" suggests that the sea is still calm, and it is the darkest hour. The two near-spondees, 'stasis' and 'darkness' in the first line, rhyming and arranged around the insignificant 'in' create a line which could scarcely have less forward movement in metrical terms. The headlong movement of the bolting horse fuses concrete objects to an abstract blur of "distances".

The second stanza introduces Ariel who is shown as woman, lioness and horse all in one. Christian and pagan associations mingle in the image of the lion. The lion is the symbol of St. Mark. In alchemy the red lion is associated with the philosopher's fire, the original substance of sulphur; and the green lion is associated with vitriol which stands for the union of low and high. In pagan mythology the goddesses Cybele, Artemis and Fortuna were shown to have a lioness by their side.

Between the second and third stanzas Ariel is shown to metamorphose from lion to horse. The lioness speeding across the sky lands on earth and becomes Ariel, the horse, with "the brown arc of the neck" that gallops over the splitting and vanishing furrows. "How one we grow" in the second stanza is a cryptic reference to the several meanings of Ariel, the three identities of woman, lioness and horse converging in the act of metamorphosis through motion.

While the image of "the brown arc" quite literally refers to the stretched neck of the horse in motion it also stands for the fragmentation of Plath's era and own experiences powerfully evoking the disjunctions of Modernist sensibility and art. The image of the flying horse recalls Poseidon-Neptune, the god of horses, and also Cybele, the horse-headed goddess with a lioness by her side.

The imagery of darkness predominates in the fourth and fifth stanzas through the references to "nigger-eye berries", "dark hooks", "black mouthfuls", and "shadows" relating the poet's personal state with literary and Biblical echoes which reinforce the same. The image of the "berries" recalls Caliban's bitter comment to Prospero in Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, "You used to give me water with berries" thereby invoking the prevalence of social hierarchies across ages, and the power equations engendered thereof.

The imagery of briars, brambles, thistles and thorns evoked through the images of "hooks" and "berries" is symbolic of the Passion of Christ when Jesus during his prolonged agony before the crucifixion was made to wear

a crown of thorns. The phrase "black sweet blood mouthfuls" refers to the blackberries that Ariel is forced to taste as she plunges past the bramble of the blackberry bushes.

The personal note is clearly struck in the sixth stanza through the use of the personal pronoun "me". The sense of fragmentation, motion and possibly disintegration to which Plath was subjected at the time is conjured up through the anatomical references to "thighs, hair; /Flakes from my heels" as she is "hauled through air".

This is connected to the image of Godiva in the seventh stanza, the English heroine famous in legend who, to secure a promise from her husband to reduce taxation in Coventry, rode naked through the town on a white horse. The adjective "white" may refer to the colour of the horse, Plath's own colour and complexion or Godiva's moral courage. The lines "Godiva, I unpeel/Dead hands, dead stringencies" may refer to the peeling off of clothes which symbolizes a quest for the truth or essence of things, a notion which recurs in Plath's poetry.

"And now I/ Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas" in the eighth stanza suggests a movement from Aphrodite to Eve. The child's cry melting in the wall mentioned in the ninth stanza is a reference to the cry of Jesus at the wall of Jerusalem. It could also refer to Plath's own children's cries at the time of her suicide. The "arrow" and the "dew" mentioned in the ninth and the tenth stanzas respectively though found here to be in apparent apposition do not, in fact, reinforce each other. The arrow kills while the dew is killed. The female speaker here identifies with the horse, a symbol of masculine sexual potency which, as the arrow becomes a phallic image that drives into the eye, a circle associated with female sexuality. Thus, it may be understood that the speaker is both subject and object, horse and rider, the driving arrow and the passive cauldron.

The constantly changing self of the speaker now undergoes a deconstruction of her personae as she "unpeels" and becomes pure motion. Anne Stevenson says in this regard, "The speaker, increasingly ethereal, unpeels like the speaker in *Fever 103* as woman-horse becomes woman-arrow-dew, destroying herself in her unremitting drive towards resurrection"[1]. It may be suggested, at this point that Plath's Ariel finds her final transformation in dew. The dew "from the still-vexed Bermuda" (in *The Tempest*) which was believed to have magical properties being an alchemical union of the elements is here ascribed with a motion not normally associated with it. The "foam", "wheat", "glitter of seas" have through evaporation become the arrow as Ariel, dew-like and suicidal flies into the rising sun, that red eye, "the cauldron of morning". Since the "red eye" is also the sun god Apollo who inspired the Muses Ariel's flight into it may suggest creative regeneration and through it a resurrection of the self.

21.4 'ARIEL': STRUCTURE AND STYLE

Plath turned the three-line stanza of the villanelle* into a highly flexible medium. Observes Brita Lindberg Seyersted, "this verse form reappeared in poems composed in the last year of her life in a superbly liberated yet

controlled form" [2] as is borne out by 'Fever 103', 'Ariel', 'Lady Lazarus', 'Mary's Song' and a few other poems.

In 'Ariel' the opposing ideas of motion and stasis are expressed through the vocabulary and rhythm. The manipulation of vowels in words like 'substanceless', "distances", "lioness', "mouthfuls", "unpeel", and "suicidal" which prolong the act of articulation imparts an element of stasis while verbs such as "splits", "passes", "hauls" and "flies" create an effect of speed. The internal rhymes as in "Stasis in darkness"; the half rhymes as in "mouthfuls" and "else"; and the rhyme scheme interlocking successive stanzas create an overall auditory impression of continuity and complexity.

The play on the rhyming words "eye" and "I" is centred on speed in the first half of the poem. "The brown arc/Of the neck I cannot catch'/Nigger-eye berries…" In the second half the rapidly metamorphosing "I", rhyming with "cry" and "eye" achieves annihilation and resurrection through the ultimate image of the red eye, "the cauldron of morning" into which the speaker flies.

- The villanelle is a nineteen line stanza consisting of five tercets followed by a quatrain.

21.5 LADY LAZARUS: THEMATIC INTERPRETATIONS

'Lady Lazarus', written in the same thirtieth birthday month that Plath wrote 'Ariel' and 'Daddy', contained in her posthumous collection *Ariel,* and generally regarded as one of her 'Holocaust' poems along with 'Daddy' and 'Mary's Song', is an anthology piece which disturbs, shocks, lulls, teases and provokes the reader into reactions which as you will soon realize are both passionately and cleverly manipulated by the poet/speaker.

Beginning with a bald, matter-of-fact statement "I have done it again" the speaker draws attention to her suicide attempts, once in every decade, the first which was an 'accident', the second from which she was 'rescued', and the third one being the present instance which occasioned the poem. In the next three tercets she develops the theme of Nazi persecution and atrocities perpetrated on the Jews during World War II.

As Plath's father was of German descent and her mother possibly part Jew the racial polarization in the family was sought to be addressed through the Nazi imagery. Also, the victim-aggressor syndrome implicit in the larger historical and political ideology and practice of Nazism, and in her own perceived relationship with her father Otta Plath gains a particular focus in these stanzas. The references to "lampshades", "paperweights" and "linen" comment on the sadistic medical experiments carried out by Nazi doctors on Jews as also the Nazi's use of the bodies of Jews to make lampshades and other artifacts in one of the most grotesque violations of human rights in all history.

The napkin when peeled in the fourth stanza will reveal to her enemies, (in this case her rescuers) her nose, eyes and full set of teeth, along with her "sour breath" which will proclaim her failed suicide bid. As she revives from the suicide bid her ghoulish appearance too will change, the flesh growing on her again, and turning her once again into a smiling thirty year

old woman. The line "And like the cat I have nine times to die" emphasizes the failed suicide bids and the speaker's return to life from near-death.

When the speaker interjects, "What a trash/To annihilate each decade" her tone is full of self-deprecating irony. "The peanut-crunching crowd" in stanza eight is the archetypal public who "shoves' and jostles to get a better view of a spectacle, in this case the person rescued from a suicide bid. The imagery of unwrapping her "hand and foot" is linked to the notion of peeling mentioned earlier in the poem, and also in other poems such as 'Ariel'. "The big strip tease" refers not only to the lurid curiosity of the onlookers who voyeuristically view the rescued person's body, mind and past but try to peer into her very essence, as it were, disrobing the outer layers which had hidden her till then.

The hands, knees, skin and bones mentioned in stanza eleven bring a depersonalized touch to the account even as together they are used to account for the totality and consistency of the person: "Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman". In stanzas twelve, thirteen and fourteen, you will find that the speaker recounts the first two suicide attempts, one in each decade. The first time, at age ten was an "accident'; the second one a more deliberate and determined one: "To last it out and not come back at all".

The fossilization that attends the process of pearls forming from oysters is suggested in stanza fourteen interestingly undercutting the whole idea through the introduction of "worms" that had had to be peeled off like pearls thereby maintaining that the precious change in self envisaged by dying was not achieved. Christina Britzolakis observes: "The metaphor of the seashell converts the female body into a hardened, dead and inorganic object, but at the same time nostalgically recalls the maternal fecundity of the sea".[3] She further relates how the refrain 'Those are pearls that were his eyes' in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land,* is "associated with the drowned Phoenician sailor, implicit victim of witch-like, neurotic, or soul-destroying female figures, such as Madame Sosostris and Cleopatra".[4]

"Dying Is an art, like everything else, I do it exceptionally well".

The well-known fifteenth stanza extends the attitude of self-parody and hyperbole. The intense and private act of taking one's own life is contrasted with the discovery of the saved suicide in "the theatrical comeback in broad day/To the same place, the same face, the same brute/Amused shout/'A miracle!' Speaking exaggeratedly about herself: that she's a "walking miracle", that she has "nine times to die" and that "dying is an art" that she does" exceptionally well" is actually an ironic device used by her to camouflage her insecurities..

The voyeuristic peering and the sense of a theatrical spectacle are effortlessly merged into the imagery of the remains of Holocaust victims, and eventually with the relics of saints: "scars', "beating of my heart", a "word", "touch", a "bit of blood", and "a piece of my hair or my clothes", for which those interested will have to pay a "charge', sometimes, "a very large charge". As observed by Arthur Oberg, "Sylvia Plath borrowed from a sideshow or vaudeville world the respect for virtuosity which the performer must acquire, for which the audience pays and never stops paying".[5]

Jon Rosenblatt explains that the Lady's identity is defined through four basic image sequences. At the beginning she is identified with fabric or material, "lampshade, linen, napkin"; in the middle she is associated with parts of the human body, namely, knees, skin, bones, and hair; then she is objectified as "gold, ash, a cake of soap" till finally she is resurrected as a red haired demon. [6] Each of these states, as Rosenblatt points out is connected to an observer figure through direct address. The first state is addressed to an unnamed "enemy"; the second to the "gentlemen and ladies"; the third to "Herr Doktor" and the fourth to Herr God and Herr Lucifer. Unable to reconcile the warring selves within her Lady Lazarus is in danger of disintegrating into her multiple constituent elements or personalities. For the peanut crunching crowd the speaker is a strip tease; for the medical analysts she is a wonder and her unexpected preservation from death is amazing; for the religious devotees she is a miracle whose hair, tooth and clothes are prized as relics while for Herr Doktor she is a Jew whose body is to be burned.

Lady Lazarus' repeated attempts to commit suicide are, in a sense, efforts at rebirth. The second time she "rocked shut/ As a seashell/ And they had to call and call". The third time she emerged from her "cave" like the Biblical Lazarus from his cave-like tomb. The enemy is linked to a German male authority figure, perhaps a scholar like her father Otto Plath (Herr Doktor). The personal and historical imaginations merging in the reference to Herr Doktor become cosmic in its scope through the allusions to Herr God and Herr Lucifer. The speaker is thus Plath the victim, forced to suffer the loss of her father at a tender age; she is also (by extension) the Jewish target of Nazi persecution; the ordinary human being subjected to God, the great authority figure whose justice is often questioned and of course to Satan the undisputed perpetrator of all types of oppression. In speaking out against Herr Doktor, Herr God and Herr Lucifer the speaker articulates her anger at patriarchy which has a stranglehold on all spheres of life and activity according to her.

The "opus', the "valuable" and the "pure gold baby" mentioned in the twenty-third stanza stand for the concrete outcome sought by Nazi bigots and other authority figures who subject others to torture. The "pure gold baby" which "melts to a shriek" as she turns and burns recalls the Holocaust victims consigned to gas ovens during the height of Nazi terror and oppression, a victim figure with whom Plath identifies consistently in the poem.

Even as the macabre images of retrieving valuables from Jewish corpses gather force in the lines: "You poke and stir/Flesh, bone, there is nothing there" but for a wedding ring or a gold filling the dramatic rebirth achieved by the speaker is enacted.

"Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air".

Burnt to ash by Herr Doktor Lady Lazarus rises, Phoenix-like and also like the Biblical Lazarus. However, she returns not in corporeal form but as pure spirit. The figure of Lady Lazarus with her striking hair at the end of the poem

echoes Coleridge's description of the possessed poet in 'Kubla Khan': 'And all should cry Beware! Beware! His flashing eyes, his floating hair!' While the poet in 'Kubla Khan' is in the throes of artistic creation the speaker in Plath's poem achieves a dramatic rebirth and return in both physical and artistic terms. The ending, however, has been generally criticized for what has been seen as exhibitionism and a false bravado as the speaker has not been able to transcend the patriarchal limitations that continue to keep her constrained.

Activity:

Which other poems by Plath deal with the notion of 'undressing' as explored by her in 'Lady Lazarus'?

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21.6 DADDY: THEMATIC INTERPRETATIONS

The poem 'Daddy', considered by Jacqueline Rose to enjoy a "founding status in the mythology of Sylvia Plath",[7] is, like the other two poems in your Unit, extremely well-known.

The poem represents the speaker's attempts to do away with or purge her mind of the image of the father that she has imaginatively constructed. The first twelve stanzas of the poem reveal an obsession on her part with what in psychoanalytic terms is called the 'imago' (in this case) of her father. An imago which is often a combination of actual experiences and archetypal memory here appears as a childhood perception which had persisted into adulthood.

The poem begins with references to the all encompassing and constricting influence of her father on Plath, and her rejection of it. Through the image of the "black shoe" which she inhabited for thirty years, barely daring to breathe or sneeze the speaker expresses her sense of perceived vulnerability, victimization and claustrophobic oppression. In the second stanza she confesses the patricide: "Daddy, I have had to kill you/You died before I had time" thereby expressing the impossibility of killing someone who was already dead, and suggesting that it was the constructed imago of the father that she had had to do away with, and further (perhaps inadvertently) revealing that it was because he died that she had to paradoxically "kill" him.

Plath's sense of hurt and betrayal at her father's untimely death has been well documented by both her and commentators. In a BBC interview Plath, explaining the origin of the poem 'Daddy', says, "The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other--she has to act out the awful little allegory once before she is free of it."[8] This comment by the poet helps us to understand the driving force behind the poem by placing it in perspective.

Daddy, symbol of a universal patriarchal oppressor is diffused throughout the world, with "one gray toe/Big as a Frisco seal" and a "head in the freakish Atlantic". His omnipotence is scattered across the elements. He is "marble-

heavy" and is called "bag full of God", the obvious connotation hinging on Plath's perception of her father as a stone-cold, patriarchal, larger than life statue. The reference to the "gray toe", symbol of the father's physical decay as well as his perceived moral decadence, recalls the fact that Otto Plath's fatal illness had stemmed from a sore that he had developed on his toe requiring his hospitalization.

The search for the father's identity in the fourth stanza yields no definite result both the name of the Polish town in the German tongue, and the town itself having been erased, the one by the inflections of a foreign accent, and the other "scraped flat by the roller/Of wars, wars, wars". The name of the purported town (in the Polish corridor of a German town) was so common as to merit no distinctiveness whatsoever and remained lost in the jumble of history, geography and political ideology. So the speaker, continuing in the vein of direct address says, "So I never could tell where you/Put your foot, your root" having been unsuccessful in her attempts to trace her ancestry. As Rosenblatt puts it once the initial effect of the poem wears off one discovers what he calls the "ironic disclaimers associated with dramatic monologue".[9]

The child's diffidence and fright before a dominating father come out in the lines: "I never could talk to you/The tongue stuck in my jaw". The imagery of obstruction moves swiftly from a child's containing jaw to the realities of warfare, a "barbed wire snare". The persona reiterates her inability to speak, "Ich, ich, ich, ich,/ I could hardly speak" referring to the overpowering influence of a larger than life figure who reduced the child, and later the woman to a hesitant, uncertain and stuttering creature causing her to relate herself to the Jewish victims of Nazi torture, and by extension, the father to the Nazi oppressor.

The personal image of the dominating father gathers momentum as it is extended to the entire German race: "I thought every German was you". Jacqueline Rose explains it thus: "Looking for her father, failing to find him anywhere, the speaker finds him everywhere instead".[10] The German language, perceived by its native speakers as an index of Teutonic cultural superiority is dismissed by the speaker as "obscene", an instrument to differentiate the Jews from the ethnically "pure" Germans it is seen as an "engine" chuffing off Jews to the dreaded and notorious concentration camps in Dachau, Auschwitz and Belsen. The speaker identifies herself with these Jewish victims of the Holocaust for she says, not only was she chuffed off like a Jew, "I began to talk like a Jew/ I think I well may be a Jew".

In this regard a word on the Holocaust may be in order. As Nazi forces captured many countries of Europe during World War II (1939 – 1945) millions of Jews were rounded up and sent to the concentration camps where they were killed outright or were imprisoned where many succumbed to disease and starvation. By the end of the war an estimated number of almost six million Jewish men, women and children were slaughtered by the Nazis.

The scenic beauty and the celebrated beer of Vienna, for all their transparency are "not very pure or true" the speaker contends. The last three lines of the eighth stanza have invited a great deal of criticism for the flippant attribution of the Jewish predicament at the hands of the Nazis to "weird luck". Thus, the speaker's identification with Jewish victimhood has been perceived to

lack the sincerity and depth of feeling that would have validated it. The poet/ persona seems to be appropriating the horrors of a holocaust with which she has no personal link or experience.

In the ninth stanza the individual girl in terror of her father merges with the victimized Jew through a series of Nazi images – “”Luftwaffe”; “neat moustache” and “Aryan eye, bright blue”, the denominators of an aggressive racial pride (associated with Germans of the time), all compactly held together within the first and last lines of the stanza: “I have always been scared of you” and “Panzer-man, panzer-man, O you”. “Panzer-man” refers to the German soldiers who fought like armoured tanks in World War II. The Nazi references spill over onto the tenth stanza in the images of the “swastika”, the “Fascist”, “the boot in the face”, and the triple repetition of the word “brute”.

The unredeemed blackness of the swastika stands for the moral blackness of the Nazi atrocities, the devil-like father called the “black man” who had bit her “pretty red heart in two”. The third and fourth lines of the tenth stanza: “Every woman adores a Fascist/ The boot in the face” pose a problem, specially for feminists for their generalization of women’s love of, and capitulation to male power and sexual violence.

The image of “daddy” standing at the blackboard in the eleventh stanza, with a cleft in his chin instead of the proverbial one in his foot but “no less the devil for that, no not/Any less the black man” who had broken her heart uses direct as well as indirect allusions to the colour black, mainly to signify evil. According to Jon Rosenblatt “Daddy keeps returning in the poem in different guises: statue, shoe, Nazi, teacher, devil, and vampire”.[11]

The relation between Plath’s father’s death when she was barely ten and her suicide attempt at age twenty are clearly stated in the twelfth stanza when she says, “At twenty I tried to die/ And get back, back, back to you”. So deep was her longing for her father that she had reasoned that “even the bones would do”. She rues the fact in the next stanza that she was saved from that suicide attempt. She was “pulled out of the sack” and put together with glue. “And then I knew what to do” seems to be a kind of turning point in the emotional life of the speaker as she realizes that she would have to resolve her love-hate relationship with her father, and all its attendant pain and problems, not by joining him in death but by exorcizing him from her mind and memory through killing the carefully constructed image of him that she had developed in her mind over the years.

The speaker says, “I made a model of you/A man in black with a Meinkampf look/And a love of the rack and the screw/And I said I do, I do”. The word Meinkampf (literally translated as *My Struggle*) as you probably know is the name of the autobiographical manifesto written by Adolf Hitler in which he expresses his political beliefs and his plans for the future of Germany. The ironic play on the word “model” could suggest the ideal that the speaker’s father had once been to her, a standard, template or prototype of its kind to her. Or the word “model” could conversely mean the epitome of the Nazi torturer. Or it could imply an effigy, a physical image of the person one wished to harm or kill.

Most likely, however, the model is the "constructed surrogate" of her father, the man "with the Meinkampf" look whom she married. The man who "loved the rack and the screw" (notorious instruments of physical torture) and who, according to Susan Gubar, vampire-like, drained her of her blood, depleting her of vitality, creativity, (and) the desire to live. [12]

Even as she made a model of her father/husband she herself had been re-crafted, as it were, when she was "stuck… together with glue". When she echoes the words of the Christian marriage service "I do, I do" it is only to declare, "So daddy, I'm finally through" in an ironical twist of their original associations. It is no longer 'marriage' or union with her dead father that she seeks but divorce from him through exorcism and erasure of his memory.

The father becomes a scapegoat, ritually dismembered into body parts such as foot, toe, head, moustache, blue eye, cleft chin, bones, heart, and resurrected in a bewildering variety of guises: black shoe, 'ghastly statue with one gray toe', 'panzer-man', teacher, devil, black man, Teutonic vampire, and, finally, Freudian father of the primal horde murdered by his sons.[13] This fragmentation ironically reinforces the speaker's own dismemberment as she had to be "stuck together with glue".

Interestingly, the reference in these lines is not only to the speaker's father but also to her husband from whom she had separated and whose betrayal she wanted to efface, along with the emotional torture that he had inflicted on her through his love affair with another woman. When she avers, "The black telephone's off at the root" she probably means that the device of communication has been cut off at source, and none of the voices that she had been so close to can "worm through" to her as she is 'dead' to them. She cuts herself off from family, community and society in an expression of total rejection of the modern world.

In the second last stanza of the poem the speaker has clearly conflated (combined into a composite whole) the father with the husband. "If I've killed one I've killed two/The vampire who said he was you". She goes on to say that the vampire drank her blood for seven years, a length of time that was precisely the period that Plath had known Hughes. The poem ends with the description of a killing of the composite persona of the father/husband who had become identified by then with the traditional male oppressor. The last stanza assumes the tone of a black magic ritual in a rural setting where villagers dance and stamp on the effigy of 'Daddy' who is being told to "lie back now" as there's "a stake in his fat, black heart". The savagery is tempered with a dark humour as the act of "stamping" suggests a childish tantrum.

Plath deftly uses the shoe and foot imagery twisting it for interesting moods, meanings and variations. Initially she imagines herself to be a foot in the black shoe of her father; then the father becomes a "gray toe", and within a few lines there is a reference to his "foot" and his "roots". Soon the roles are reversed and she is the one with "the boot in the face". Then in stanza eleven she finds the cleft in his chin instead of in his foot. The poem ends with an image of the villagers stamping on the father in an orgy of rejection, violence and vengeance. [14]

George Steiner, commenting on the poem sums it up well. He says, it "achieves the classic act of generalization, translating a private, obviously intolerable hurt into a code of plain statement, of instantaneously public images which concern us all".[15]It is by rejecting the constructed image of the father/husband/Nazi/oppressor that the speaker could perhaps get over her own deeply-felt and long-held sense of rejection.

Activity:

What kind of a voice, do you think emerges from the last stanza of the poem 'Daddy'?

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21.7 STRUCTURE AND STYLE OF 'LADY LAZARUS' AND 'DADDY'

As the two poems 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy' are generally regarded as companion pieces their structure and style are being considered within a single section to allow for easier comprehension through comparison, contrast and reference. The vocabulary and rhythms used in both the poems, as you will probably agree enforce a conversational tone touched by a colloquial idiom. Arthur Oberg contends that 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy' are poems which have been written "at the edge of sensibility and of imagistic technique" and that both employ "an imagery of severe disintegration and dislocation".[16] In 'Lady Lazarus' the speaker has been dismembered and reduced to hand, foot, skin and bone recalling the "Nazi lampshade" of her skin and the paperweight made from her foot. Personal fragmentation is linked to the historical dismemberment of the Jews during the Holocaust through these images.

The imagery of peeling off or stripping, found in several poems by Plath as you must have gathered by now is integral to both the poems under consideration here. The imagery of "peeling off" has its opposite in 're-construction' in 'Daddy' where the speaker refers to her being stuck together with glue, ("psychic reintegration" according to Roger Platizky) or her crafting of a model for her father.[17]

The repetition of words and phrases is in keeping with the oral or colloquial tone, adds emphasis, creates an incantatory (chant-like) quality of language which compensates for the plain style, and heightens the rhetorical intensity of the monologues. The repetition in 'Lady Lazarus' of "I do it so it feels like…" in the fifteenth stanza, and "It's easy enough to do it" in the very next one makes of her suicide attempts a casual endeavour, as it were, carrying the reader along the current of her convictions, while actually intensifying the horror of the same. The repetition of the adjective "same" in the seventeenth stanza - in "the same place, the same face, the same brute/Amused shout" underscores her return to monotony, the very tedium that she had been seeking to escape.

The insistent use of the word "charge" in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth stanzas directs attention to the performative aspect of the speaker's suicide attempts when at the moment of rescue she feels herself to be a strip tease artist, freak show or even a saint whose relics command a high price. Incidentally, the word "charge" carries sexual connotations, too as in the excitement generated in the viewers who get to see the naked self of the speaker. The vituperative unleashing of "so" in "So, so, Herr Dokter/./So, Herr Enemy" comes across as a self-righteous vindication of the speaker's conclusion that she is Herr Doktor's "opus", "valuable" and "pure gold baby".

The repetition of the phrase "I am" in the twenty-second stanza ironically recalls Jehovah's use of the same in the Old Testament and Jesus' echoing of it in the New Testament as the speaker applies it not to an ontological* understanding of divinity as found in the Bible but to her essential objectification in the eyes of her oppressor. The final repetition in the poem, "Beware/Beware", with its racy demonstrativeness, rings with the sense of a childish threat and empty boast of her witch-like, Lazarus-like and phoenix-like rebirth when she will consume "men like air".

- Philosophical theory of the nature of being or existing.

The nursery rhyme rhythms of "You do not do, you do not do" in 'Daddy' recalls the witches' incantations in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* "I'll do, I'll do and I'll do" even as they remind one of Eliot's hypnotic repetition, "How do you do, how do you do" in Sweeney Agonistes". These repetitive word patterns ironically underscore and undercut the line "I do, I do, I do" from the Anglican marriage service, and draw attention to the poet's marriage to Hughes, the man with whom she had exchanged wedding vows, and to whom she had said "I do".

Paul Breslin observes that in 'Daddy', the "obsessive repetition, not only of certain words but of the rhyme-sound *oo*, evokes the doggerel of playground chants or, more to the point, the stubborn reiterations of a temper tantrum".[18] It is interesting to note that the majority of lines in the poem end with the oo sound. "As the Mother Goose rhymes on "you," "*du,"* "Jew," "glue," "screw," "gobbledygoo," "shoe" accumulate, the poem goose steps toward the concluding "I'm finally through" that proclaims a victory over the spectral afterlife of the fascist, but only at the cost of the daughter's own life", maintains Gubar[19]. The vocabulary of childhood recuperated through the use of words and expressions such as "gobbledygoo", "achoo" and "my little red heart" takes one back to the infant self of the speaker capturing the reality of a long past time.

The triple repetition of the word "brute" in stanza ten and of "back" in stanza twelve drives home the wild urgency of the speaker's mental state as she expresses her obsession with the savage domination of the father-figure to whom she ironically wants to go "back". The repetitions found in childhood speech and rhymes become fused with an adult urgency that, not wishing to be constrained by the logic and pattern of conventional language, regresses to the "inarticulacy" of the nursery jingle. Since it was the father who had "bit her pretty red heart in two" she had to avenge the violation by

driving a stake through his "fat black heart" seeking to settle scores through, as far as possible, an exact revenge.

The close connection between language and identity, and the politics thereof is discussed very competently by Jacqueline Rose. "The dispersal of identity in language follows the lines of a division or confusion between nations and tongues. In fact language in this part of the poem moves in two directions at once. It appears in the form of translation and as a series of repetitions and overlappings —'Ich', 'Ach', 'Achoo'—which dissolve the pronoun back into infantile patterns of sound".[20] She further observes, "how the rhyming pattern of the poem sends us back to the first line. 'You do not do, you do not do', and allows us to read it as both English and German: 'You du not du', 'You you not you' — 'you' as 'not you' because 'you' do not exist inside a space where linguistic address would be possible".[21]

Both the poems are touched by caricature, hyperbole, and parody. There are elements of caricature in the presentation of the strip tease artist in 'Lady Lazarus', and in those of the Nazi torturer in 'Daddy'. Hyperbole or exaggeration surfaces at the end of the poem 'Daddy' in the speaker's dramatic over-reaction to the father-figure, while parody operates at all levels in the two poems, directed both at others and the self.

21.8 SUMMING UP

Three important and well-known poems by Sylvia Plath have been discussed in this Unit. While all three were written around the same time 'Ariel' is different in theme from the other two. It deals with the changing selves of the speaker as she achieves an artistic and psychic regeneration. 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy', on the other hand belong to what is known as Plath's Holocaust poems expressing her identification of personal pain with, and through the historical framework of Nazi torture of Jews during the Second World War.

The poet reaches out to a wide variety of sources and experiences through numerous images and references which are biblical, mythical, and historical in an attempt to locate her own situation and emotions in a larger context. It is to be hoped that the objectives outlined at the outset have been achieved, and you have obtained a fairly clear understanding of Sylvia Plath and her poetry, specially the poems in your syllabus.

You will, of course, need to supplement the basic understanding thus achieved by reading up some more of Plath's poems, and some of the critical material suggested in the following sections.

21.9 SUGGESTED READING

Alexander, Paul. (1991). *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath*. New York, NY: Da Capo Press

Butscher, Edward. (2003). *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*. Tucson, Ariz: Schaffner Press.

Wagner-Martin, Linda (Ed). (1988). *Sylvia Plath (Critical Heritage)*. London: Routledge

You may also look up the works cited under the 'References' section on the internet for further and in-depth online materials on the subject.

References

1. Stevenson, Anne, Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath, 1989
2. Lindberg-Seyersted, Brita, Sylvia Plath: Studies in her Poetry and her Personality, Oslo, Novus Press, 2002.
3. Britzolakis, Christina, *Sylvia Plath and Theatre of Mourning*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999.
4. Ibid.
5. Oberg, Arthur, *Modern American Lyric: Lowell, Berryman, Creeley,- and Plath*, Rutgers University Press, 1978
6. Rosenblatt, Jon, *Sylvia Plath: the Poetry of Initiation*, University of North Carolina Press, 1979
7. Rose, Jacqueline, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath,* Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1992.
8. 'Poets in Partnership, Rare 1961 BBC Interview with Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes.
9. Rosenblatt, Jon.
10. Rose, Jacqueline.
11. Rosenblatt, Jon.
12. Gubar, Susan, "Prosopopoeia and Holocaust Poetry in English: Sylvia Plath and her Contemporaries", Yale Journal of Criticism, 2001
13. Britzolakis, Christina
14. Dickie, Margaret, *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, University of Illinois Press, 1979
15. Steiner, George, "Dying is an Art", The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium, ed., Charles Newman, 1970
16. Oberg, Arthur
17. *Platizky, Roger, The Explicator* 55.2 (Winter 1997)
18. Breslin, Paul, *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry since the Fifties*, Chicago University Press, 1987
19. Gubar, Susan
20. Rose, Jacqueline.
21. Ibid.

Possible answers for the 'Activity' section.

21.1.i Sylvia Plath's letters, selected and edited by her mother Aurelia Plath were published in 1975 under the title *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*. Plath had kept a diary from the age of 11 till her death. Her adult diaries starting from her first year in Smith College in 1950 were published in 1982 as *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. This volume was edited by Frances McCullough with Ted Hughes as the Consulting Editor. In the same year Smith College acquired Plath's remaining papers and journals. Hughes

sealed two of her journals till 2013, the fiftieth anniversary of Plath's death. Wishing to bring out a fuller version of Plath's diaries Hughes initiated work on them, passing on the project to his two children by Sylvia who, in turn passed it on to Karen V. Kukil who finished editing it in December 1999, and it was published by Anchor Books in 2000.

21.1.ii A film called *Sylvia* was made in 2003 on the poet's life. Plath was portrayed by Gwyneth Paltrow in the film.

Plath's daughter Frieda Hughes was annoyed and upset with the film as she felt that it was an intrusion of privacy holding up her parents' lives for public scrutiny.

She even published a poem on the issue in Tatler.

"Now they want to make a film
On anybody lacking the ability
To imagine the body, head in oven,
Orphaning children

[…] they think
I should give them my mother's words
To fill the mouth of their monster,
Their Sylvia Suicide Doll."

21.5 In 'Lady Lazarus' Plath presents the speaker as a woman who engages in "The big strip tease" uncovering herself for the gratification of "the peanut-crunching crowd". The poem 'Purdah' along with your text 'Lady Lazarus' present disrobing as a gesture of power and assertion, a notion that Plath had already addressed in 'A Birthday Present'. In the poem 'Ariel', too, as you have noticed there is a reference to "peeling off" suggesting an uncovering of the inner self.

Critics have felt that through the metaphor of the "strip tease" the so-called power of the act of display has been played down as it is a gesture of seduction reducing the speaker to a performer and an object of the male 'gaze'. However, it is possible that the female speaker wants to shame her male viewers and voyeurs into an acknowledgement of their exploitation of her, and womankind in general, and exert her power through this enforced admission.

21.6 The reference to a childish temper tantrum, already referred to in the concerned Unit, is expressed through the construction of a voice. This voice has been described by Robert von Hallberg as "nasty, proud, murderous", and the second and fourth lines of the stanza recover, according to him, "the meanness of an angry child". Yet, despite the apparent vengeance and mockery in the denunciation of the father-figure there may be found in the speaker's voice what Anne Stevenson describes as "a sobbing and impassioned undersong". She goes on to observe that the voice is "finally that of a revengeful, bitterly hurt child storming against a beloved parent".

UNIT 22: ANNE SEXTON'S *"AFTER AUSCHWITZ"* AND ELIZABTH BISHOP'S *"A SUMMER'S DREAM"*

Structure

22.0 OBJECTIVES

After your study of three well-known poems by Sylvia Plath in the previous Unit you will be introduced to two other women poets – Elizabeth Bishop and Anne Sexton. While Bishop was about twenty years earlier Sexton was a contemporary of Plath, and the names of all three poets are taken together.

You will understand why Plath and Sexton are generally regarded as confessional poets by noting how they used the elements of their personal life in their poetry. You will also discover how historical events and ideologies such as World War II and Nazism influenced the work of these two poets causing them to locate their personal losses and pains in the example and imagery of the Holocaust.

You may examine their shared response to common developments and the guidance of literary figures such as Robert Lowell, and study the representative poems chosen from their literary output for the characteristics that they embody.

22.1 INTRODUCTION

In Unit IV we are going to take a look at two poems, the first one being 'A Summer's Dream' by Elizabeth Bishop and the other being 'After Auschwitz' by Anne Sexton. The idea is that you should be introduced to the poetry of major American poets who shared similarities in their life circumstances and poetry, and yet were dissimilar in several important respects, as for instance, in their attitude to their work.

Both poets had connections with Boston since infancy, won awards for their work, and were acclaimed in their lifetime. However, while Sexton was a confessional poet who had little inhibitions about using her experiences for

her work Bishop was reluctant to use autobiographical material in her poetry, though she did at times use the same but with considerable reservations.

While Bishop frequently negotiated her path to creativity through alcoholism Sexton was prey to mental illness which affected her relationships with her close relatives, including her daughters. Volumes brought out after the deaths of both poets triggered off undesirable reactions in the public domain. The posthumous publication of *Edgar Allen Poe and the Jukebox* which included many unpublished materials could not have added to Bishop's stature as these were inferior in quality, and revealed facets of her which she would surely not liked to have exposed to readers.

In the case of Sexton, Diane Middlebrook published a biography of the poet in which she used material from the controversial tapes of the latter's therapy sessions with Dr. Orne. These tapes revealed information about Sexton's occasionally violent relationship with her husband, and her abuse of her children. While Sexton's daughter Linda Gray had given permission to the biographer several other members of her family, along with sections of critics and readers condemned the book on the grounds of intrusion of privacy, and betrayal of trust.

The poem 'A Summer's Dream' by Bishop typically explores the fuzziness of experience leaving it to the reader to decide whether the situation described is real or a dream. 'After Auschwitz' by Sexton, too, is a representative poem in that the personal, the historical and the artistic are entwined in a manner of much of the poet's work.

22.2 THE LIFE AND WORKS OF ELIZABETH BISHOP

Elizabeth Bishop was born on February, 8, 1911 in Worcester, Massachusetts. A poet, short story writer and translator of considerable repute Bishop had been Poet Laureate of the United States from 1949 to 1950. She had won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1956, the National Book Award in Poetry in 1970 and the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1976.

Having lost her father at the tender age of eight months and her mother to mental illness at the age of eight Bishop had been practically orphaned since her infancy, and had been brought up by her maternal grandparents on a farm in Nova Scotia. Later however, her paternal family gained her custody and shifted her to Worcester, Massachusetts where despite the affluent life style the child felt lost and lonely. Bishop's paternal grandparents sensing her unhappiness arranged for her to live with her maternal aunt Maud Boomer Shepherdson in 1918. It was Maud who introduced young Elizabeth to the works of the Victorian poets and possibly inculcated a love of literature in her from an early age. However, despite her close relationship with some of her maternal relatives Bishop rarely felt at home in family settings. This is clear from her admission, "But my relationship with my relatives – I was always a sort of a guest, and I think I've always felt like that".[1]

Because of her tendency to fall ill as a child Bishop could receive an erratic formal schooling shifting between schools and finally boarding with the Walnut Hill School for a course in music. She entered Vassar College

in the autumn of 1929 intending to train as a composer but switched to English, publishing her pieces in the college magazine. Bishop had the rare opportunity of being with college mates who later became well known poets and literary figures. Mary McCarthy was a year senior to her, Eleanor Clark was in her class and Muriel Rukeyser was in the freshman year. * Bishop graduated from Vassar College in 1934.

Basing herself in New York Bishop travelled extensively in France, Spain, Ireland, Italy and North Africa. She lived in France for several years in the mid 1930s. Having settled in Key West, Florida in 1938 Bishop devoted herself to the writing of poetry, and many of the poems that she wrote during this period were collected in her first volume *North and South* which was published in 1946 and won the Houghton Mifflin Prize for poetry. In 1944 Bishop left Key West and from 1949-50 she lived in Washington DC where she was the Consultant in Poetry for the Library of Congress. In 1951 after having received a travelling fellowship she set off to circumnavigate South America by boat. Arriving in Santos, Brazil where she had planned to stay for two weeks she ended up spending fifteen years because of certain medical complications.

A violent allergic reaction to "the fruit of the cashew" caused Bishop to be hospitalized. She was nursed back to health by the Brazilian architect Lota de Macedo Soares, and opted to spend the next decade and a half in Brazil in the company of her friend and companion Soares. Her second collection – *North and South/A Cold Spring* published in 1955 received the Pulitzer Prize. The volume *Questions of Travel* was published after a considerable gap in 1965 and bore traces of her Brazil experience as well as her memories of other locations such as Nova Scotia. During her stay in Brazil Bishop was drawn to the languages, literatures and cultures of South America. She was influenced by the Mexican poet Octavio Paz as well as by Brazilian poets such as Joao Cabral de Melo Neto and Carlos Drummond de Andrade, and even translated their work into English.

After Soares' suicide in 1967 (an incident which had a deep and lasting impact on her) Bishop moved back to the United States where she divided her time between New York, San Francisco and Massachusetts. The volume *The Ballad of the Burglar of Babylon* was published in 1968. She took up a teaching position in Harvard University in 1970 and received in the same year the National Book Award in Poetry for her collection, *The Complete Poems*. Bishop's steadily mounting reputation was enhanced by the publication of *Geography III* and also by her winning the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1976. *The Complete Poems, 1927 – 1979* was posthumously published in 1983, and *Edgar Allen Poe & the Juke-box* in 2006.

There were several strong literary influences on Bishop. Marianne Moore to whom she had been introduced in Vassar took a keen interest in her work and helped publish some of her early poems in *Trial Balances*. Robert Lowell was another mentor and friend with whom Bishop had a lifelong association. After his death she wrote "…our friendship often kept alive through years of separation only by letters, remained constant and affectionate, and I shall always be deeply grateful for it". [2]

Bishop who had described herself several times as "shy" was famously reticent about her personal life, and published sparingly. Refusing to be

slotted as a 'lesbian poet' or a 'woman poet' Bishop wanted her work to be assessed for its intrinsic literary merit. For the most part detached and objective, Bishop's poetry is detailed and employs distant points of view. She drew on her own experiences but sparingly, and used them with a view to artistic integrity and never superfluously.

From 1971 onwards Bishop became close to Alice Methfessel who was later her literary executor as well. Bishop died of a cerebral aneurysm on October 6, 1979.

* Mary McCarthy (1912-1989) was a novelist, critic and memoirist.

Eleanor Clark (1913 – 1996) was an award-winning American novelist who had also authored a couple of works of non-fiction.

Muriel Rukeyser (1913 – 1980) was an American poet and novelist who along with Bishop, McCarthy and Clark had attended Vassar College.

22.3 "A SUMMER'S DREAM": THEMATIC INTERPRETATIONS

Bishop's poem *A Summer's Dream* is, on the literal level, about a boarding house in which the speaker apparently lodged, and by extension, the town and its inhabitants. Located by a dilapidated harbor to which few ships could come it had a neglected look about it. Details about the sparse population enhance the general impression of decay and backwardness that permeates the scene.

The first stanza tells of "the sagging wharf" to which few ships came, and about the people who inhabited the town. The details about the population spill over into the second stanza and we learn that there were "two giants, an idiot, a dwarf, /a gentle storekeeper" and a "kind landlady". We are able to glean further information about the inhabitants through descriptions of some of their activities or occupations. We learn that the storekeeper "was asleep behind his counter" while the dwarf was the seamstress of the landlady.

The third stanza describes the activity of the "idiot" who could be beguiled to pick blackberries only to throw them away as the "shrunken seamstress" looked on smilingly. The use of the word "beguiled" in this regard is interesting. It suggests a reward which a child is given to keep him away from mischief, and to spend his time in harmless pursuits. The dressmaker who supervises him may perhaps be understood as the three sisters of Fate in classical Greek mythology, namely Clotho, the spinner of the thread of life, Lachesis, the measurer of that thread and Atropos who snips the thread. Significantly the seamstress makes clothes for the landlady and supervises the 'idiot".

From the fourth to the eighth stanzas we get to learn several details about the house, gathering, for instance, that it was situated by the sea, and that it bore a melancholy aspect "streaked/as though it had been crying". Countering this suggestion of sorrow are the references to the front windows crowded with geraniums, and the floors which "glittered" with linoleums suggesting colour, shine, domestic beauty, comfort and life. The glistening wallpaper in the sixth stanza further extends the notion of gleam against that of gloom.

The sixth and seventh stanzas deal with activities as distinct from descriptions. The speaker refers to how she/he lay every night listening for the call of the horned owl, and to the grumble of the landlady's son (one of the giants) as he climbed the stairs of the boarding house while carrying out his study of grammar. Opposites inform the eighth stanza. The son was "morose" while the landlady was "cheerful". The bedroom was "cold" while the feather bed was "close'.

The last stanza of the poem, a favourite with readers and commentators alike, betrays the notion that the entire experience as described in the preceding eight stanzas is probably a dream, and what is more, a dream which is continuing as they were "still dreaming audibly". Interestingly the speaker was awakened by "the somnambulist brook/nearing the sea" which is very much a part of the dream landscape, expressing the ambiguities of the ending of Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* – "Was it a vision, or a waking dream?/ Fled is that music: - / /Do I wake or sleep?"

While the last line of the poem suggests an awakening it is also true that with the continuation of the dream the speaker had probably entered a zone of both dream and consciousness, of sleep and awakening. Such a state of liminality (a portal or threshold having elements of the scenario on both sides) recurs in Bishop's poetry, one of the most famous examples being her poem 'The Waiting Room' which explores the internal/external duality in its various aspects.

The last line captures the confusion of a person who has suddenly woken up from sleep, and the dream she had been rapt in is still fresh in her mind so that she is effectively located between illusion and reality. The poem explores the notion that sometimes dreams make sense and at others they do not.

Generally speaking, the poem presents a town which is a world in itself bearing inhabitants whose physical, mental and emotional attributes have been emphasized. There were two "giants", a "dwarf", an "idiot", a "gentle" storekeeper and a "kind" landlady who comprised the population of the town. You will notice that the physical ("giants" and "dwarf"), mental "(idiot") and emotional ("gentle" and "kind") attributes of the inhabitants have been spelt out.

The boarding house functions as a universal symbol of shelter; the store as a trading centre where goods are bought and sold; the dressmaker as a seamstress discharges the primary function of clothing people; and the "idiot" may well be the symbol of the child in all his simplicity who can be "beguiled" with the activity of picking blackberries, a pastoral pastime full of the promise of innocence.

Suggestions of sleep, as you may well have noticed, are present in the poem from the beginning. As early as the first stanza one gets a hint of the town being a sleepy backwater through the reference to the fact that the wharf was "sagging" and that "few ships could come to it". The second stanza promotes this notion by completing the list of the inhabitants of the town which was astonishingly limited. Further, there is a reference to the storekeeper "asleep behind his counter" suggesting a general air of somnolence, and also the

social and economic backwardness that characterized the town and its inhabitants.

This strain is picked up and reinforced in the last stanza through the words "awakened", "somnambulist" and "dreaming". Yet, despite these hints one is perhaps not prepared for the discovery at the end of the poem that the entire experience described thus far is a dream. As noted by Elizabeth Spires, Bishop's "poetry was an endlessly delightful blending of the plainspoken and the fanciful…as in the ending to 'A Summer's Dream'."[3]

Activity:

Pick out the domestic images in Bishop's 'A Summer's Dream'.

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22.4 "A SUMMER'S DREAM": STRUCTURE AND STYLE

A poem consisting of nine four-lined stanzas having a rhyme scheme of abca it has varied metres, and rhymes which are loose in places. Examples of loose rhymes are found in the second stanza where "storekeeper" is made to rhyme with "dressmaker' and in the fifth stanza where "geraniums" are paired with "linoleums".

The poet uses personification to paint a picture of the wharf, town and boarding house. The wharf is described as "sagging" suggesting age and a decrepit condition; the house itself "streaked" with all its associations of a tear-stained aspect; the front windows "crowded" with geraniums; and a "somnambulist brook" which sleepwalks down to the sea are all personifications of some aspect or the other of the human condition.

Such an anthropomorphic imagery vitalizes the inanimate objects described through their human suggestions, and makes up for the lack of a vibrant human presence in the poem. The attributes of the people mentioned in the poem have been effectively suggested through the adjectives applied to the wharf, house and brook.

Several figures of speech have been used in the poem. The poet compares the colour of the boarding house to a mackerel that is blue through the use of a simile. Alliterations occur as in the line: "The shrunken seamstress smiled" with the repetition of the consonant's'.

Images with visual and auditory associations are found throughout the poem. The blue colour and streaked aspect of the boarding house, the geraniums, the glittering linoleums, the wallpaper glistening in the flame of the "horned lamp" appeal to the eye while the implied cry of the "horned owl", the giant's 'grumbling "on the stairs, and the sound presumably made by the "somnambulist brook" connect to our auditory sense.

Practising careful craftsmanship, Bishop was particular in her choice of diction, idiom and syntax. Leithauser praises Bishop maintaining that she

"was a poet of startling originality and pitch-perfect cadence"[4]. However, Bishop set high standards for herself and felt that she had never really achieved in her creative and artistic life what she had truly wanted to. She maintains, "I've never written the things I'd like to write that I've admired all my life. Maybe one never does".[5]

22.5 THE LIFE AND WORKS OF ANNE SEXTON

Anne Sexton was born on November 9, 1928 in Newton, Massachusetts to Mary Gray Staples and Ralph Churchill Harvey. She had two older sisters, Elizabeth and Blanche. Sexton spent most of her childhood in Boston enrolling at Rogers Hall Boarding School in Lowell, Massachusetts. After graduation she enrolled in Garland Junior College for a year. Sexton later studied with Robert Lowell in Boston University sharing academic space with several distinguished poets of the day. On August 16, 1948 she married Alfred Muller Sexton II with whom she had two daughters, Linda Gray and Joyce Ladd.

Sexton was plagued by severe mental illness for much of her life first falling prey to it in 1954 after the birth of her first daughter. She had to be admitted to a neuro-psychiatric hospital. She recovered but suffered a second bout in 1955. During this time she began to be treated by Dr. Martin Orne who, it has been alleged, used questionable psychotherapeutic practices to address her problems. Sexton's poems about her mental problems were collected in her first book, '*To Bedlam and Part Way Back'* in 1960.

Sexton came under the literary influence of John Holmes who led the first poetry workshop that she attended. She contributed poems to *The New Yorker*, *Harper's Magazine*, and *The Saturday Review*. She was encouraged in her career by the poet W.D. Snodgrass some of whose poems proved to be inspirational for her. In an interview with Patricia Marx Sexton described Snodgrass' influence thus: "If anything influenced me it was W.D. Snodgrass' 'Heart's Needle'…It so changed me, and undoubtedly it must have influenced my poetry. At the same time everyone said, "You can't write this way. It's too personal; it's confessional; you can't write this, Anne,' and everyone was discouraging me. But then I saw Snodgrass doing what I was doing, and it kind of gave me permission".

Having located a mentor figure in Snodgrass Sexton gave a free rein to her need to write openly about subjects not traditionally expressed in literature at the time. Maxine Cumin says that Sexton "wrote openly about menstruation, abortion, masturbation, incest, adultery and drug addiction at a time when the proprieties embraced none of these as proper topics for poetry."[6] This has probably earned Sexton the label of the 'confessional' poet who delved deep into her psyche and expressed her inmost thoughts and emotions.

Sexton published *The Starry Night* in 1961, *All My Pretty Ones* in 1962 and *Live or Die* in 1966 for which she won the Pulitzer Prize in 1967. She brought out *Love Poems* in 1969 and the play *Mercy Street* the same year. The volume *Transformations* in 1971 has strong feminist overtones. She published *The Book of Folly* in 1972, *O Ye Tongues* in 1973 and *The Death Notebooks* in 1974. *The Awful Rowing Toward God* was her eighth and final

collection of poems which was published posthumously in 1975. *45 Mercy Street* was published in 1976, and *Words for Dr. Y: Uncollected Poems with Three Stories* in 1978.

Sexton's lifelong relationship with Maxine Kumin was characterized by friendship as well as literary collaboration between the two. The two of them wrote four children's books together even as they remained unflinching critics of each others' works. It was a close friendship between two creative women who needed each other as critical sounding boards and for emotional support.

Though generally perceived as a confessional poet Sexton's work gradually moved beyond the personal into a wider realm. Her volume *Transformations*, for instance, imaginatively retells *Grimm's Fairy Tales* nudging her towards a kind of inter-textuality that enables her to distance her voice through an allegorical framework. It makes for a dramatization of the self that necessarily lessens the direct expression (and intrusion?) of the personal identity of the poet in her work. In one of her early and best-known poems 'Her Kind' the poet draws on her own experience as a woman but this perception is mediated through the language of folk-lore and fairytale thereby distancing the immediacy of the personal account.

In fact, in addition to a few early voices such as that of Beverly Fields recent scholars such as Gillian White have argued that Sexton's poetry is not as autobiographical as it is made out to be. They point out Sexton's intelligent use of voice, point of view and audience reception to create a poetry that transcends the merely subjective. Possibly Sexton's artistry as Erica Jong maintains has been overlooked in the light of her overwhelming candour in discussing so-called forbidden themes.

Sexton had received numerous honours including the Frost Fellowship, the Radcliffe Institute Fellowship, the American Academy of Arts and Letters traveling fellowship, the Guggenheim Fellowship among others, along with honorary degrees and professorships at Colgate and Boston universities.

Sexton died on October 4, 1974 at Weston, Massachusetts committing suicide through asphyxiation by carbon monoxide poisoning at the age of 45. The theme of death that had haunted her last two books of poetry, namely *The Death Notebooks* and *The Awful Rowing Toward God* found a culminating expression in the poet's life through this act of self-destruction.

Activity:

i) Can you think of a few tributes paid to Sexton by musicians?

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22.6 "AFTER AUSCHWITZ": THEMATIC INTERPRETATIONS

'After Auschwitz' was written by Anne Sexton in 1973 and included in the volume *The Awful Rowing Toward God.* Though generally regarded as a

response to the atrocities carried out by the Nazis in Auschwitz and other notorious concentration camps during the sway of Adolf Hitler the poem 'After Auschwitz' may be also understood, in general, as a bitter comment on the dehumanization wrought in man. At a personal level it may have been occasioned by the family problems that Sexton was experiencing at the time as also her battle against depression.

Auschwitz was one of the largest concentration and extermination camps operated by the Nazis during the Second World War. The camp was located in southern Poland near the town of Oswiecim (which the Germans called Auschwitz) on the Wisla River about fifty kilometers southwest of Krakow. The name 'Auschwitz' has become synonymous with mass extermination or genocide in the aftermath of its role in the killing of millions of Jews during the Holocaust.

The first line with its single word "anger" followed by the qualifying simile in the second one, "black as a hook" comes to rest in the third line with "overtakes me". Anger as an emotion and reaction, as you very well know, is negative. However, since in this case it is anger expressed at a historical failure of humanity it acquires an edge of justification for it is difficult to respond with positive feelings to genocides.

The speaker first describes her emotions and then the cause which prompted it. The consumption of human babies at breakfast by Nazis is an immediate cause, or let us say, a flashpoint in the general sense of horrified umbrage experienced by the speaker over the Nazi atrocities. We may read in this larger historical condemnation the poet's personal sense of failure, frustration and pain at the kind of relationship that she shared with her daughters, specially the older one, Linda Gray which definitely suggest an abnormal preying upon the vulnerable child.

The image of the hook, quite naturally suggests entrapment which was, as is universally known a condition experienced by the Jews during the Holocaust. For a wider understanding of the term Holocaust you may refer to Unit III of Block V where with regard to Sylvia Plath's poem *Daddy* there is a discussion on the term. The adjective "black" suggests the grimness, despair and darkness of the Jewish predicament in the mentioned age as also the total hold of the anger that had the speaker in its clasp.

The next five lines which constitute the rest of the stanza provide, in a most casual way, the gruesome details of a horrible practice which was allegedly carried out by the Nazis. We learn that every morning at 8 am precisely every Nazi took a baby and had it for breakfast after sautéing it. The mention of an exact time, namely 8 am suggests the discipline with which the Nazi machinery operated reducing all human actions and responses to a mechanical drill. This attitude of a mindless discipline was extended to the discharge of their mind-numbing acts of cruelty as well.

To be taken metaphorically this description satirizes the intense brutality of the Nazis who slaughtered human beings like cattle or chickens. This is a double-edged image of bestiality suggesting how the Jewish victims were seen as beasts by their Nazi persecutors even as they themselves were dehumanized by this attitude. Also, it suggests the cannibalization when man preys on man and eats his own kind in the manner of the lesser species.

The second stanza consisting of just two lines personifies death as a disinterested onlooker who looks on while picking at the dirt under his fingernails. Death, looking on, is always present, and is so common as to be indistinguishable from the mass of human beings. During the Second World War one was surrounded by death, not least of it caused by Nazi genocides of the Jews.

The third stanza returns to the theme of the inherent evil in man. The first line of the stanza, "Man is evil" is a declaration emphasized by the speaker's need to articulate the sentiment aloud. The next image of man being a flower that should be burnt has Biblical echoes on the transience of man's earthly life. It also carries topical connotations of the wish of many of the Jewish victims who apparently had opted to have been cremated after being burnt in the gas chambers. In the last image of the stanza where man is shown to be "a bird full of mud" Sexton balances opposing ideas through suggestions of the weightlessness and freedom of a bird's aerial flight and the weight and earthiness of mud implying thereby that a man belongs to both the elements of air and earth.

The fourth stanza repeats the line "And death looks on with a casual eye" its indifference heightened by the grossness of its action, "and scratches his anus". The evil thus consists not only in the action of persecuting the Jewish victims but also in the inaction of the onlookers or bystanders who look on without the slightest desire to intervene or help. Through their inaction they may be held guilty of the fate of the victims referred to in the poem, and thus may be seen as unwitting agents of death or simply put, as murderers.

In the fifth stanza man is described as having "small pink toes' and "miraculous fingers" testifying to the perfection of his body which nothing short of a miracle could have created. There is the constant reminder in the poem that man has the potential for good but is corrupted despite this promise. He is a "flower" which is burnt; a "bird" who is filled with mud; he is *not* a "temple" but an "outhouse". The first four lines of the fifth stanza suggest the care with which a human being is created by God and nurtured by man (the pink toes and miraculous fingers suggesting babyhood, and the marvel of God's creations) and the marginalization to which he is subjected/ or chooses to adopt when he is either thrown out of society and obliterated from the mainstream of life, or becomes an onlooker in the struggle between life and death.

The image of the "outhouse' corroborates this outsider status of man whatever his plight or role in the scheme of things. The observation that man despite the purity of his infancy and the miraculous perfection of his physical being is "not a temple" ironically underscores the degeneration that has affected him. The human body in most religious traditions is considered to be a dwelling place for the divine being. In the Bible, for instance, this idea is found to recur, one of the famous articulations being, "Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in ye?" From being the repository or "temple" of God, and therefore, the centre of all life, the human being is consigned to the outskirts being merely an "outhouse".

The last five lines of the fifth stanza express a complete disillusionment with man proclaiming him as being inadequate for all the activities that one

associates with the human condition. The line "let man never again raise his teacup" expresses the speaker's lack of faith in man's attempt to lead a socialized and civilized life wherein he can enjoy fellowship with his fellow human beings. The next line "Let man never again write a book" betrays the speaker's belief that man has forfeited the right to all academic and cultural attainments, and to the self-improvement brought about through education. "Let man never again put on his shoe" expresses a similar hopelessness about man's ability to dress as a human being, to walk upright or to embark on the journey of life. The last of the commandments, "Let man never again raise his eyes,/on a soft July night" seems to be the most despairing of the injunctions. Man is here being forbidden to raise his eyes heavenwards towards God as he is not deserving of divine forgiveness after what happened during the Holocaust.

Activity:

i) Mention the Nazi atrocity described by the poet.

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ii) What echoes of Nazi behavior do you find in Plath's poem 'Daddy'?

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iii) Would you agree with the charge of trivialization of the Holocaust brought against both poets?

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Give reasons for your viewpoint.

22.7 'AFTER AUSCHWITZ': STRUCTURE AND STYLE

Regarded as a dramatic monologue 'After Auschwitz' conforms to most of the features of the form. It begins dramatically expressing the agitation of the speaker over a vexing issue. It captures the tonalities of the speaking voice venting, in this case the anger of the speaker. The idiom is colloquial and racy. Though no specific listener may be identified it is clear that the outburst is addressed to someone – possibly to human society in general. It may equally be addressed to the self stemming from the speaker's perception of her unwitting but inevitable complicity in the genocides mentioned in the poem.

'After Auschwitz' is a poem of six stanzas of uneven length, most of the stanzas comprising lines of irregular length. There are single-word lines, and lines containing just two or three words along with longer ones. The chopped rhythm testifies to the emotional distress of the speaker. The tone is direct and forceful having a conversational ring as in most dramatic monologues.

Most of the lines have a declarative air about them. The speaker is stating some bald truths about the atrocities carried out against humankind by human beings. The style is thus in keeping with the theme of the poem. The forthright quality also has to do with the pain experienced by the speaker which probably cannot be better expressed in any other way.

Repetition has been used to good effect. The line "I say aloud" has been used four times while a variation of the same, "I say those things aloud" has been used once. The five 'nevers' in the second last line of the poem emphasize the hopelessness experienced by the speaker, her complete lack of belief in her fellow human beings.

Several figures of speech have been used in the poem. The comparison of anger to a hook is a simile that is used in the first stanza while personification occurs in the second and fourth stanzas where death has been visualized as a casual bystander involved in gross and repulsive actions. The use of anaphora where successive lines begin with the same word or group of words is seen in the third and fifth stanzas. In the second stanza the words "Man is…" occur repeatedly while in the fifth one "Let man never again…" occur in four successive lines building up a powerful effect of censure through the repetition of words at the beginning of lines.

Thus it is seen that 'After Auschwitz' is a poem in which theme and style are more or less harmoniously blended. Accents of the speaking voice, a bold diction, images of everyday reality to express an unnaturally horrific act, and an irregular rhythm together create a poem of shocking vividness that succeeds in jolting the reader into a heightened awareness of the reality eing described.

Activity:

Point out the domestic images in Sexton's poem 'After Auschwitz'.

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22.8 SUMMING UP

While 'A Summer's Dream' by Bishop is symbolic and suggestive, created out of delicate touches evoking a lost, lonely and faraway landscape and town 'After Auschwitz' by Sexton pertains to a particular time, place and scenario, namely the Nazi brutalities carried out against the Jews during the Second World War in Europe.

You have been encouraged to study the poems in their contexts – the influence of the Second World War, the social and intellectual liberation of

women (along with the maladjustments that this often wrought), the new directions in poetry in America at the time, the Vietnam War, travel with its attendant negotiation of other cultures, and other social, cultural and political factors.

It is to be hoped that you have been able to understand the meaning of the poems through the discussions on backgrounds, themes, structure and style that have been duly provided. The 'Activities' or practical exercises have been designed to increase your involvement in the subject under study so that you may get drawn into an animated and interactive learning process where you are not merely at the receiving end but are actually and actively engaged in the give and take of the teaching-learning method.

22.9 SUGGESTED READING

Colburn, Steven E., *Anne Sexton,* University of Michigan Press, 1988.

George, Diana Hume, *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton*, University of Illinois Press, 1987.

McClatchy, J.D., editor, *Anne Sexton: The Artist and Her Critics*, Indiana University Press, 1978.

Middlewood, Diane Wood, *Anne Sexton: A Biography*, Houghton, 1991.

Phillips, Robert, *The Confessional Poets*, Southern Illinois University Press, 1973.

Ostriker, Alicia (1983). *Writing like a woman*. University of Michigan Press.

References:

1. The Paris Review, Elizabeth Bishop, The Art of Poetry, No. 27 Interviewed by Elizabeth Spires
2. Bishop, Elizabeth. *Poems, Prose, and Letters*. New York: Library of America, 2008. 733.
3. The Paris Review, Elizabeth Bishop, The Art of Poetry
4. The Poet as Survivor, Brad Leithauser, The Wall Street Journal, updated April 26, 2008, Reviewing Elizabeth Bishop: Ed., Robert Giroux and Lloyd Schwartz, The Library of America
5. Leithauser, The Wall Street Journal.
6. Colburn, Steven E., *Anne Sexton,* University of Michigan Press, 1988.

Possible Answers for Activities

22.3 The domestic images in Bishop's poem 'A Summer's Dream' are the geranium decorated front windows of the house, the shining linoleum covering the floors, the wallpaper, the stairs within the house and the feather bed.

22.5 i) The musician Peter Gabriel dedicated his song 'Mercy Street' from his 1986 album to Anne Sexton. Morissey, the former lead singer of 'The Smiths' described Sexton as "a personal touchstone". Sexton's book *Transformations* was used as the libretto for the 1973 opera of the same name by the American composer Conrad Susa.

22.6 i) The Nazi atrocity described in 'After Auschwitz' is the consumption of Jewish babies by the mentioned group for breakfast. This gruesome exaggeration has been used by Sexton to express her extreme disgust at and revulsion for the genocides and other acts of cruelty carried out by the Nazis, and also to shock the reader into an awareness of the unnaturally horrific nature of the same.

This shocking exaggeration helps to highlight the inhuman cruelty practiced by the Nazis on their Jewish victims treating them like cattle or poultry. In a keen irony their bestiality is suggested through their perception of others as animals.

2.6. ii) In Sylvia Plath's poem 'Daddy' the speaker identifies her father, and later her husband with the Nazi oppressor. The "pure" German language was seen by the speaker as a racial marker which helped the Nazis differentiate between the ethnic Germans and the Jews enabling them to deport the latter to the dreaded concentration camps in Dachau, Auschwitz and Belsen. A reference to "Panzer-man" in the same poem brings forth images of the German soldiers who fought like armoured tanks in World War II. The poem further provides the image of a man with "the Meinkampf look" who had a love of the "rack and the screw", an obvious allusion to Hitler and his Nazi ideology. More Nazi echoes surface in the images of the "Luftwaffe", "neat moustache", "swastika", "Aryan eye, bright blue", the "Fascist", "the boot in the face", and the triple repetition of the word "brute".

22.6 iii) The charge of trivialization brought against both poets regarding their use of the Holocaust for poetic purposes may be valid to some extent. As both had not been personally touched by the unparalleled tragedy, and had no first-hand knowledge of the same it has been felt in some quarters that their personal involvement with it lacks the sincerity and solemnity that it merits. The last three lines of the eighth stanza of 'Daddy', particularly have invited a great deal of criticism for the flippant attribution of the Jewish predicament at the hands of the Nazis to "weird luck".

22.7 The domestic images in 'After Auschwitz' are the frying pan in the first stanza, the teacup and the shoe in the fifth one.

UNIT 23: WALLACE STEVENS
ANECDOTE OF THE JAR

Structure

23.0 OBJECTIVES

Wallace Stevens is an important American Modernist poet, in the first half of the twentieth century his influence on contemporary and subsequent poets is considerable. Hence an acquaintance with his work is necessary for students opting for a specialized knowledge of American literature.

This Unit is expected to help students understand some of the foundational factors of modern American poetry preparing them thereby for their onward negotiation of later poets.

A reading of Stevens' poem 'Anecdote of the Jar' will introduce students to his poetry providing them insights into his vision and style perhaps encouraging them to read up more on him.

23.1 INTRODUCTION

Having considered important or representative poems by Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and Elizabeth Bishop in the previous units of this Block, a reading of Wallace Stevens' poetry will prove to be particularly instructive as it is likely to shed valuable light on the making of poetic canons in America, Stevens' place in the tradition, and his contribution to as well as departure from it. Most of all, this poem is likely to improve your understanding of Stevens' idea of the role of the creative imagination and its synthesis with the perceived world in creating the final outcome of the poem.

The question of aesthetics which so preoccupied Stevens and which earned for him a respected place in the literary history of his country is a driving force in his poetry surfacing in poem after poem in the quest for "a supreme fiction". This so-called "supreme fiction" according to Stevens is to be found in change, the essence of which is pleasure.

The struggle to define the aesthetics of poetic composition is a measure of Stevens' Modernism as is his incorporation or application of techniques from painting exemplified in his use of the Cubist perspective in some of his poems. The oneness experienced by the poet with the materials of the outer world as he draws the latter unto himself and creates of it a new order reflects the Modernist writer's empathy with the objective world, as he re-constitutes it into a new whole.

Stevens was preoccupied, as is evident from his poems and essays with the search for "a supreme fiction" which would be an alternative and answer to the divine in an increasingly irreligious world. In his book *Opus Posthumous* Stevens writes, "After one has abandoned a belief in God, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption". From this comment it is clear that he valued poetry as the spiritual mainstay of human life in the modern world.

23.2 THE LIFE AND WORKS OF WALLACE STEVENS

Wallace Stevens was born on October 2, 1879 in Reading, Pennsylvania. He attended Harvard University from 1897 to 1900 but did not graduate earning his degree instead from New York Law School in 1903 going on to be admitted to the New York bar in 1904. That same year he met a young woman by the name of Elsie Katchel whom he married in 1909. He made a very successful career out of insurance law working for various law and insurance firms in New York before joining the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company and settling down in Hartford where he remained for the rest of his life.

In 1915 Stevens wrote two of his well-known poems, namely 'Peter Quince at the Clavier' and 'Sunday Morning'. In 1916 he published his acclaimed play *Three Travelers Watch a Sunrise* following it up with another play, *Carlos among the Candles* the next year. His comic poem 'Le Monode de mon Oncle' appeared in 1918.

Stevens brought out his first volume of poetry, *Harmonium* in 1923 which included his earlier poems along with some longer ones such as 'Comedian as the Letter C'. A couple of other noteworthy poems in this collection are "The Emperor of Icecream" and "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird". This volume at once proclaimed to the world Stevens' peculiar talents, not least among them his interesting turn of phrase, quaint sense of humour and his ability to locate the profound or the philosophical in the banal.

In the decade following the publication of *Harmonium* Stevens wrote little preoccupied as he was with the parenting of his daughter Holly. It was in 1933 that he published his second collection of poetry, namely *Ideas of Order*. The poems in this volume are, on the whole, bleaker though a few with their energetic exploration of fundamental moral and aesthetic questions redeems the collection somewhat from its pessimistic enquiries into aging, declining and dying.

'The Idea of Order in Key West', conceivably one of the most important poems in Stevens' entire canon examines how the creative artist as maker imposes order on the context and materials of his art. The following lines

are particularly illuminating: "She was the single artificer of the world/In which she sang/ And when she sang, the sea, /Whatever self it had, became the self/ That was her song, for she was the maker." The fusion of artist and art, and the organizing power of the former described in these lines are climactically enunciated through the observers who "Knew that there never was a world for her/ Except the one she sang and, singing, made".

This notion of the poet as the maker of his artistic world is explored in poem after poem building up a distinct theory of aesthetics and encouraging us to understand Stevens' poetry as a self-reflexive genre which compulsively examines the process of its own creation. This idea will be discussed in greater detail in Section 5.3 iv.

Between 1922 and 1940 Stevens made several trips to Key West, Florida enraptured by the beauty of the land, sea and sky that he found there. The influence of Key West may be traced in some of the poems in his first two collections of poetry. His skirmishes with legendary American poets and writers such as Robert Frost and Ernest Hemingway in Key West, too, have been recorded, and they provide interesting glimpses into the human traits of these larger than life figures whose personal flaws and frailties are often ignored in deference to their talent.

The publication of Stevens' book *Owl's Clover* in 1936 failed to strike a sympathetic chord in readers and critics. It was the volume *The Man with the Blue Guitar, and Other Poems* in 1937 written at age fifty-eight which expressed the resolution of many of Stevens' artistic anxieties. Most of his volumes thereafter are devoted to a delineation of the nature of poetry which he basically understood to be an outcome of the fusion of the perceiving imagination and the observed world.

Consequently Stevens' next collection of poetry, *Parts of a World* in 1942 has several poems which are self-referential insofar as they are reflections on their own creation, evolution and composition. You will find that poems such as 'Prelude to Objects'; 'Add this to Rhetoric' and 'Of Modern Poetry' all deal, in varying degrees, with the aesthetic process of literary creation. Some of the other important poems in this collection are 'The Poems of Our Climate' and 'Examination of the Hero in a Time of War'.

Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction first published in 1942, and subsequently included in the 1947 collection *Transport to Summer* comprises a prologue, three sections and a coda. In keeping with Stevens' preoccupation with philosophical and aesthetic notions it is a query of, as well as a commentary on the nature of poetry. It tries to be what it describes thus becoming a meta-poem illustrating the very points that it seeks to define. The poem proceeds from a premise explored in his earlier poetry that art through its commingling with nature achieves immortality; that change revitalizes life and that art creates a world that is complete in itself. Some of the other noteworthy poems in *Transport to Summer* are 'The Pure Good of Theory'; 'Description without Place' and 'The House was Quiet and the World was Calm'.

In 1950 Stevens published his last new collection of poetry *The Auroras of Autumn* which extends the theme of his previous collection refining his ideas on the role of the imagination in the creative process. It includes 'The

Auroras of Autumn'; 'The Ultimate Poem is Abstract' and 'Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight'. The poem 'An Ordinary Evening in New Haven', one of his most important works is an ambitious, though ambiguous poem in this volume which reiterates Stevens' idea that the perfect fusion of imagination and reality creates the 'supreme fiction' of poetry. The lines "This endlessly elaborating poem/Displays the theory of poetry/As the life of poetry", sum up the theory and practice of poetry as understood by him, and present it as a source of endless life.

Around this time Stevens published a volume *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* which, as a prose counterpart to his poetry expresses his ideas on the aesthetics of form. The essays 'The Figure of the Poet as Virile Youth', 'Effects of Analogy' and 'The Realm of Resemblance' for instance, take up the familiar theme of the power of the imagination to transform reality into a higher form. In the essay 'Imagination as Value' Stevens writes, "The truth seems to be that we live in concepts of the imagination before the reason has established them". What he probably means here is that imagination antedates reason in the human mind being a primordial element of the psyche, and unconsciously forms the values before they are consciously formulated, articulated and accepted by the reason.

In 1951 Stevens was awarded the National Book Award for *The Auroras of Autumn* and in 1955 the Pulitzer Prize and another National Book Award for his publication of *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. This last volume put together nearly all his published poems except for the ones in *Owl's Clover* besides carrying an additional section entitled 'The Rock'. This section contained some of his subtlest and most thought provoking poems, such as 'The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain'; 'A Quiet Normal Life'; 'Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour'; 'The Rock' and 'Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself'.

In May 1955 Stevens was diagnosed with stomach cancer. He was operated on, and by June he had recovered sufficiently to attend functions in Hartford and Yale Universities where he was conferred honorary doctorates. However, his condition deteriorated in July and he was readmitted to hospital. On August 1 Stevens lapsed into a coma and passed away on August 2, and was buried in Hartford's Cedar Hill Cemetery.

ACTIVITY: Compare the themes of the poems 'The Idea of Order in Key West' and 'The Man with the Blue Guitar'.

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23.3 ANECDOTE OF THE JAR: THEMATIC INTERPRETATIONS

'Anecdote of the Jar' by Wallace Stevens written in 1918 when he was in the town of Elizabethton in Tennessee is one of his most anthologized

poems even as it is one of his most difficult ones. The speaker describes his placing of a jar on a hill in Tennessee, and how first, it caused the wilderness to surround the hill, and then to give up its wild aspect concluding with the observation that though "gray and bare" the jar dominated the landscape and the fauna of the region. The jar, as you must have guessed already is a symbol of, and objective correlative for the vessel of the creative imagination which orders and organizes its surroundings, or the larger world into a new composition of reality.

The obvious and immediate allusion is to Keats' *Ode on a Grecian* Urn which explores the connections and contrasts between life and art, the urn being a symbol of artistic perfection. The shape of the jar has been specified as "round" but there are no references to its size (except for the use of the word "tall" in the second stanza) or the material from which it is made. It could be a vase or urn which makes it decorative in addition to being useful whereas the term "jar" has associations that are more utilitarian than aesthetic. Yet, there seems to be little doubt that the jar, its placement and its domination of all the external elements surrounding it have, at some level or the other, a symbolic connection with the creation or fashioning of art, be it the crafting of a poem, a piece of sculpture or any other form of artistic expression.

The poem is held by some critics to be an ironic critique of the Romantic belief in the fusion of the human consciousness and nature as a basis for art. The conflict in the poem between the jar as masculine organizer and nature as fecund mother is not resolved at any stage, and critics are, by and large, divided over which is more important than the other.

23.3.1 Brief Theoretical Analyses of 'Anecdote of the Jar'

Since Stevens was considered to be an important American **Modernist** poet it is necessary to say a few words about the Modernist elements in his poetry. As many of us know Modernism was an artistic movement in the first few decades of the twentieth century which encouraged, among other things, the intermingling of the arts. Literature, during the sway of this movement, for instance, was influenced by other art forms such as painting, photography and the cinema, not to mention other forms of artistic expression. The influence of Picasso's Cubism (the representation of an object from different planes, angles and perspectives to capture its multi-dimensional reality) is reflected in Stevens' poem 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird'. The lines in the mentioned poem which particularly illustrate this are the following: "When the blackbird flew out of sight/It marked the edge/Of one of many circles".

Stevens was an art connoisseur who collected artworks from across the world. His poetry was influenced by the paintings of Paul Klee and Paul Cezanne. Stevens liked the mysterious quality of Klee's work along with his whimsical, sometimes humorous portrayals of reality. In Cezanne he admired the reduction or shrinkage of the world into a few gigantic objects, and the alterations of scale and perspective that this necessarily wrought. The notions of scale and perspective, intrinsic to painting are explored in 'Anecdote of the Jar' where the placement of the jar determines the perspective through which the surrounding countryside is viewed. In fact, it

alters both scale and perspective by prompting the wilderness to rearrange itself in response to its call and action.

The verbal economy practised by Stevens, along with the multi-layered symbolism in his works are aspects of Modernist style as found on both sides of the Atlantic. 'Anecdote of the Jar' is a good example of a Modernist poem taken up as it is with the aesthetics of poetic creativity, and reflecting in its composition the cryptic, symbolic and densely-layered quality associated with the genre.

American Modernist literature is frequently self-reflexive, that is, concerned with its own origin and nature. 'Anecdote of the Jar' is in this tradition as it is taken up with the synthesis of the poetic imagination with the outer world to create or fashion the poem. .

Read from a **New Critical** perspective, the poem is about aesthetic process or about the making of poetry, the jar being a symbol of the poetic imagination and the wilderness that of objective reality which is reordered by the former to become a new whole, namely the finished artistic product which in this case is the poem. It is possible to locate the meaning of the poem solely in and through the text without resorting to biographical or historical references, thus affirming its suitability to be interpreted through the New Critical method.

The minimalism and colloquialism evident in the poem suggest its anticipation of **New Historicist Criticism**, one of the main tenets of which is that every act of critique or opposition involves the use of the very tools or methodologies which it seeks to expose. Hence, the almost palpable lack of reliance on words, phrases and other literary stock-in-trade that are the typical tools of the poet. Also, the belief that no discourse can capture the truth of life intrinsic to this theory is seen in the almost casual tone of the poem, the desire of the poet to keep the structure and style simple as no amount of sophistication (in keeping with this theory) will enable it to access the unattainable truths that all art seeks to capture.

A **Structuralist** reading will take note of the larger canon of meta-poetry, or poems which describe or enact their own making/creation to which this particular poem is linked deriving its meaning from its relationship to the larger structure to which it owes allegiance. In fact, 'Anecdote of the Jar' is linked, even more intimately, within this larger pattern to the sub-structure of Stevens' own poems with this theme which incidentally constitute a considerable body of his work.

Construed from a **Post-Structuralist** point of view the poem expresses linguistic dislocations and breaks specially as seen in the last two lines of the second and third stanzas. From a description of the physical properties of the jar – "round" and "tall" we suddenly learn that it was "of a port in air" making a syntactical transition that is far from smooth. The last two lines of the poem: "It did not give of bird or bush/Like nothing else in Tennessee" register a similar jump in terms of meaning as well as language, leaving the poem open to different interpretations, and making it eligible for Post-Structuralist readings.

A **Feminist** reading will question the notion of male dominance over a natural landscape traditionally seen as feminine. The very symbol of the jar

may be problematized according to this view as it is both a phallic image and a vessel or receptacle in the feminine sense. Thus, even as it establishes its sway over surrounding nature in its pivotal role as male organizer and shaper the jar serves, accommodates and neatens up the "slovenly" landscape in a demonstration of the so-called womanly faculties.*

*Jacqueline V. Brogan has interesting observations in this respect. You may look up her essay "Introducing Stevens: Or, the Sheerly Playful and the Display of Theory" in *Teaching Wallace Stevens*, ed., John Serio and B. Leggett, University of Tennessee Press, 1994.

ACTIVITY: Find out four more points about literary Modernism.

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22.3.2 Setting of the Poem

We wonder why of all the states in the United States the poet chooses Tennessee for the placement of the jar, and by extension the setting of his poem. Tennessee is a state in the south-eastern part of America, and in its social, political and cultural ethos it is very much a part of the **American South**. At this point a few observations on the 'American South' may be in order. The South was, and to some extent is predominantly agrarian in contrast to the North which was more urbanized and industrialized. Climactically warmer than the cold North it was home to the African-Americans who constituted the slave labour in the cotton, coffee and tobacco plantations and who, in the course of time contributed some of their distinctive qualities to the culture of the place. For instance, Tennessee is associated with several forms of American popular music including rock and roll, blues and country, and Memphis, one of its main cities is associated with the birth of musical genres such as the blues, traditionally identified with African-Americans.

The topography of the state as mentioned in the poem is dominated by hills and forests. The eastern edge of Tennessee is characterized by the Appalachian Trail and the Blue Ridge Mountains. Clingman's Dome in the Blue Ridge area is the highest point in the state. The Blue Ridge area is sparsely populated being largely covered by the Cherokee National Forest, the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and several federal wilderness areas and state parks. Hence, it is easy to see why Stevens concentrates on these aspects of the state's natural landscape. It is possible that he has this area in mind when he refers to the hill and wilderness. Specially as he is dwelling on the aesthetic process, and the agency of the imagination in it a reference to the highest point in the state may well bring home the sublimity of the poetic intelligence which orders and elevates the reality around it, and also takes it over, as it were, informing its every particle.

ACTIVITY: Name three of the main cities of Tennessee, and mention two well-known characteristics of each.

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22.3.3 Stanza-wise Discussion

The use of the word "anecdote" in the title is interesting. An anecdote is usually a brief and light story which is tangentially referred to in the course of narration. As you well know it is not the main story but a related episode or event which throws light on the main theme. According to Pat Righetelo this "is an anecdote which leads nowhere, which fends off chatty familiarity, and in which there is no significant joining that transcends its constitutive elements". [1]

In the first stanza we learn of the power of the jar to call forth the wilderness which may have been unevenly spread out to respond to its placement and "surround" it. The word "surround" suggests a circular pattern which would be a replication or extension of the "round" shape of the jar. It also expresses a convergence which points to the jar's ability to force compliance from the external world prompting it to obey its dictates. The movement of the wilderness toward the jar describes how the scattered elements of nature formed a pattern coming closer to the source of their inspiration and motivation. You may also, in this regard, take note of the word "made" which not only denotes a certain compulsion exercised by the jar on the forests but also suggests the creative impetus of the former as it went about reorganizing the "slovenly" wilderness.

The speaker appears in the first line of the poem disappearing thereafter becoming a distant observer whose presence can barely be felt. Stevens believed, as has been discussed in the previous section that poetry "is the supreme fiction" which fuses the creative imagination with objective reality. While the jar through its roundness is made to symbolize symmetry the countryside surrounding its immediate location has been described as "slovenly". Thus it is suggested that art, through its order aspires to perfection of thought and form while nature, in its unchecked growth appears to be unkempt, and far from the harmony of the former.

If the wilderness' response in the first stanza has been described as "surround" in the second stanza the word used is "rose". The word suggests the motion of the wilderness as it reared itself up to equal the height of the hill. Not only did it rise but it lay "sprawled around" thereby reinforcing the idea conveyed by the word "surround". If we analyze these words or expressions closely we shall realize that they suggest two specific types of movement. If "rose" indicates a vertical ascension the expression "sprawled around" describes a lateral grouping. Most significant, however, is the information at this point that the wilderness was no longer wild. "The wilderness rose up to it/And sprawled around, no longer wild". The wilderness ceases to be a wilderness if it is no longer wild.

What the poet has in mind is probably that the wilderness having organized itself around the jar, having risen to match its elevated position, and generally submitted to its discipline has lost its own distinguishing characteristics to become an intrinsic part of the jar, and all that it stands for. In a literal sense the reflection of the natural landscape on the sides of the glass jar (if we presume it to be made of transparent glass) will give the illusion of it having entered the jar. Further, the close grouping of external nature as reflected on the curved sides and surface of the jar infuses it with an air of order that is

not there in the real thing. As we know reflections on a curved or convex surface are normally distorted. Hence, in this case the distortions, by nature illusory, and not true to the original ironically impart an orderliness not to be found in the prototype.

The second stanza reiterates the shape of the jar as being "round', and being solidly planted on the "ground", that is, the surface of the hill where it stood "tall" being a "port" or a station in the air. The jar's situation in air suggests its abstract quality being far removed in terms of height from the base of the surrounding landscape.

The first line of the third and final stanza, "It took dominion everywhere" seems to be one of the most important lines in a poem in which every line is of the utmost value. Emerson's comments on nature in his essay "Nature' may help us in our understanding of this cryptic line in the poem. He says, "There is property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet". Just as the jar in Stevens' poem has dominion over the surrounding countryside the poet's eye, in Emerson's essay has sway over the entire range of what he can see. And like the jar it can order or "integrate" the landscape, and thereby claim or reclaim its wholeness.

In the same essay Emerson further says, "Standing on the bare ground- my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, - all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me…" Righetalo understands this as all the space that the eye can acquire, and attributes it to what he calls "the colonizing consciousness".[2] While the hunger for land is subtly suggested in this line it is actually another type of dominion or colonization that is probably meant, namely, the aesthetic control wielded by the artist over the materials and context of his art.

In addition to the various meanings that we gather from the use of the word "dominion" we learn that at the time of the poem's composition in America there was a specific type of a fruit jar which was called the 'Dominion Wide Mouth Special'[3]. The critic Roy Harvey Pearce mentions that though manufactured in Canada the jar was widely distributed in the United States. It is possible that Stevens has this particular type of domestic container in mind which adds a practical nuance to the meanings of the word "dominion" discussed here.

The second line of the last stanza, "The jar was gray and bare" comes as a surprise in the light of its pre-eminence as we would have expected it to have been described in more positive terms as a synthesizing intelligence which imparts shape and form to the prevailing disorder beyond its self. However, if we consider the fact that the colour gray is neutral in shade, and can therefore complement other hues, just as the bareness of the jar may accommodate elements from the surrounding world, the adjectives seem justified. The word "bare" relates to emptiness, a concept not out of place in reference to a jar which after all is a vessel, receptacle or container. It could also mean undecorated or stark as in devoid of embellishments.

The last two lines, grammatically weak, and obscure in meaning may be understood to mean that the jar, in its overpowering presence, did not yield

to any aspect of the flora and fauna of the place maintaining its supremacy "like nothing else in Tennessee". According to Joseph Carroll the jar "does not itself move or change; it merely sheds influence. The source of its power is the perfection of its empty form".[4]

While the image of the bird through its associations of flight carries notions of height and abstraction the word "bush" is strongly reminiscent of primeval and untamed vegetation. In terms of meaning it seems to be a natural continuation of the first line of the stanza: "It took dominion everywhere" not yielding to any aspect of the Tennessee wilderness. The last line puts the jar in a league of its own as everything else in Tennessee pales into insignificance beside it.

ACTIVITY: What are some of the typical associations of a 'jar'? What does the 'jar' represent in the poem?

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23.3.4 Similarity of theme with other poems by Stevens

The idea at the heart of the poem 'Anecdote of the Jar' is a favourite one with Stevens recurring in his poetry through various images and metaphors. The following lines in the poem 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' are instructive in this regard: "They said, 'You have a blue guitar,/You do not play things as they are'/The man replied, 'Things as they are/Are changed upon the blue guitar'". The "blue guitar" as an equivalent or extension of Shelley's "Aeolian harp" is, like the jar in 'Anecdote of the Jar', a symbol of the creative imagination which controls and orders the world that it sees around itself. The wilderness, attuning itself to the jar, ceases to be wild in the manner of things which are changed on the 'blue guitar'.

A similar idea, as has been discussed in an earlier section, is explored in 'The Idea of Order at Key West'. A girl singing of the ocean transfuses the medley of the latter into a melody of her own. "But it was she and not the sea we heard./For she was the maker of the song she sang". In this case the girl who sings of the sea is an equivalent of the jar and the blue guitar achieving a synthesis of the song and the singer.

In 'Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself' the subjective imagination and the objective reality are shown to fuse at the moment of perception. "That scrawny cry – it was/ A chorister whose c preceded the choir./It was part of the colossal sun/Surrounded by its choral rings/Still far away. It was like/A new knowledge of reality". "That scrawny cry", a part of the primeval energy represented here by the sun is the universal *om* of Vedic philosophy, the Word in the Bible, the original utterance which lies at the heart of all creation.

In his poem "Of Modern Poetry" Stevens says, "The actor is/ A metaphysician in the dark, twanging/An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives/ Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly/Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,/Beyond which it has no will to rise". Like

the girl singing of the sea in 'The Idea of Order in Key West' the "actor" in this poem "twangs" his instrument, not unlike the man with the blue guitar, and hits notes, that like "the scrawny cry" in 'Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself' are "sudden rightnesses" or the ultimate art (at once indistinguishable from the original expression) wrought by the perfect fusion of the artist and his art.

23.4 STRUCTURE AND STYLE

'Anecdote of the Jar' has been composed mostly in iambic tetrameter that is four-beat lines with each beat having an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one. A few lines do not strictly follow this pattern. Lines 3 and 12, for instance, deviate a little from the predominant metrical scheme. It is not clear why the poet does this. A reason that has been suggested is that he wants to draw attention to the co-existence of aesthetic order and natural disorder through his juxtaposition of metrical schemes.

While the poem does not rhyme in the traditional sense the use of rhyming words such as 'round', 'surround' and 'ground' and 'air', 'bare' and 'everywhere' set up an interplay of sound effects. The first set of rhymes, you will notice, has to do with shapes, spaces and solidity whereas the second one focuses more on the intangible, the absent and the diffuse. The repetition of certain words, syllables and sounds not only imparts emphasis but creates a web of auditory effects that lingers in the mind.

The three verbs in the first stanza, namely, "placed", "made" and "surround" are each in relation to a different subject. The jar was placed by the speaker; the jar made the wilderness enclose it; and the wilderness surrounded the jar. In the second stanza both the verbs "rose" and "sprawled" have to do with the wilderness, the one describing a vertical movement and the other a lateral one. In contrast the two verbs in the third stanza "took" and "give" have to do with the jar, shedding light on the proprietorial attitude of the jar as it took dominion of the wilderness, and neither yielded to, nor let go of any element of the natural surroundings.

An analysis of the nouns shows that most of the things mentioned in the poem such as "hill", "bird" and "bush" have to do with the wilderness, and the wilderness itself is a part of Tennessee. The nouns "hill" and "Tennessee" have been mentioned twice. The noun "port" as in station suggests a location, and that situation, we are told is high up in the air. The word "air" suggests the intangibility that is an aspect of art while the abstract noun "dominion" which is a long word of Latin origin expresses the all pervading action of the creative imagination.

Of the adjectives in the poem, namely "round", "slovenly", "wild", "tall", "gray" and "bare" four pertain to the jar while the remaining two describe the wilderness. The symmetry of the jar has been emphasized through the repetition of the adjective "round"; it's lofty position through "tall"; its colour through "gray" and its contents as well as its general aspect through "bare". The two adjectives pertaining to nature, namely "slovenly" and "wild" are somewhat in opposition here as the latter having been preceded by "no longer" describes a nature that is in the process of change, and hence different from "slovenly".

Helen Vendler maintains that the comparison with Keats highlights the predicament of the American poet who is not a confident possessor of the Western cultural tradition in the way that the English Romantic poet was[5]. This observation is based, in part, on the poet's mingling of expressions borrowed from Europe as in "of a port in air" and ordinary American English as in "give of".

Like most of Stevens' poems 'Anecdote of the Jar', too, is written in language that is, for the most part simple but expresses deeply philosophical ideas. Vivid expressions such as "scrawny cry" and "sudden rightnesses" found in some of his other poems are noticeably absent here. However, evident here, as in his other poems are the "noble accents" and "lucid, inescapable rhythms" that he refers to in 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird'.

23.5 SUMMING UP

By way of summing up we may observe that 'Anecdote of the Jar' is an important poem in Stevens' canon. It is to be hoped that, after going through the Unit you have been able to understand exactly why it is considered to be an interesting and influential poem. Having been introduced to the poet you were acquainted with the biographical facts of his life and also with his major works.

After familiarizing you with the context of the specific poem in your syllabus you were encouraged to analyze the content. In this section a stanza-wise discussion was undertaken for the sake of a thorough textual grounding which I hope has been achieved. A number of critical approaches were briefly discussed to introduce you to some of the theoretical tools which may be applied to the poem in order to better understand it. Plenty of cross references were provided to help you understand the main theme of the poem, and the drift of ideas which underlies Stevens' poetry.

Finally, a discussion on the structure and style of the poem was provided with the intention to round off your understanding of 'Anecdote of the Jar'. A formal assessment supplementing thematic readings has been provided to enable you to approach the text from two of the main traditional viewpoints thus making for a balanced appraisal which may, in its turn, inspire you to read up more on the poet in question.

23.6 SUGGESTED READING

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Pack, Robert, *Wallace Stevens: An Approach to his Poetry and Thought*, Rutgers University Press, 1958.

Tindall, William York, *Wallace Stevens*, University of Minnesota Press, 1961.

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Vendler, Helen H. *Wallace Stevens*, Harvard University Press, 1986.

References:

1. Righelato, Pat, "Wallace Stevens" in American Poetry: the Modernist Ideal, ed., Clive Bloom and Brian Docherty, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1995
2. Ibid.
3. Roy Harvey Pearce, "'Anecdote of the Jar'": An Iconological Note," *The Wallace Stevens Journal* 1:2 (Summer 1977), 65.
4. Carroll, Joseph, *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism*, Louisiana, 1987.
5. Vendler, Helen, *Words Chosen Out of Desire*, University of Tennessee Press, 1984.

Possible Answers for Activities

23.2 Both the poems 'The Idea of Order at Key West' and 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' deal with the theme of the relationship between the artist and his art.

The girl in 'The Idea of Order' transforms the sound of the sea into a fresh creation, the music of her poetry or song. Similarly the musician in 'The Man with the Blue Guitar' changes the reality around him into a new expression of what he feels or understands to be the truth.

Both poems express Stevens' strongly-held theme that the creative imagination of the poet interacts with the natural, palpable world to produce or create a whole new order of reality, namely the world attained in and through art.

23.3.1 You have already been acquainted with some features of literary Modernism. Four more points related to the said movement are:

1. The allusive technique described by T.S. Eliot as "the mythical method". The theme, developed through discontinuity, discordance and fragmentation coheres by means of a sub-structure of myth, history or inter-textuality which holds it together.
2. The sequencing or placement of words under the influence of Ezra Pound and the Imagists who believed in the 'mot juste' or using the right word in the right place. Also, the ordering of words under the influence of the French Symbolist poets to draw out the musical qualities of language for the maximum auditory (sound) effect.
3. The influence of the new discipline of psychology caused poets and writers to probe the sub-conscious and the unconscious in an interiorization of action that accounts, to some extent for the inward-looking (or solipsistic) nature of the art produced at the time.

4. Modernist literature often conveys fragmentation through abrupt shifts in perspective, voice and tone.

23.3.2

1. Memphis.

   It is in the southwest part of Tennessee along the Mississippi River.

   It is popularly known as 'Home of the Blues' and 'The Birthplace of Rock and Roll' as famous musicians such as B.B. King, W.C. Handy and Elvis Presley made their homes there.

2. Nashville

   It is the second largest city in Tennessee in terms of land area and population.

   It is an important centre for country music.

3. Knoxville

   It is the third-largest city in Tennessee with a comparatively sparse population and good employment opportunities.

   It is located between the Great Smoky Mountains and the Cumberland Plateau.

23.1.3

Some of the typical associations of a jar are:

It is a vessel or container usually made of glass or ceramic and used for storing edibles such as biscuits, cookies and pickles.

It can be a measuring jar mainly for use in the kitchen.

It can also be a vase for flowers or an urn for bearing ashes.

It can also have technical use as a laboratory vessel.

In the poem 'Anecdote of the Jar' it represents the creative imagination which directs, orders and reorganizes nature and other external elements to produce, through the interaction of mind and matter a different order of reality symbolized by the work of art.