

# ***Directorate of Distance Education***

**UNIVERSITY OF JAMMU  
JAMMU**



**Ist Semester**

**SESSION 2018 onwards**

**M.A. ENGLISH**

**Course No. ENG 111**

**Unit – I, II, III, IV, V, VI**

**Lesson Nos. 1-31**

**Course Coordinator :  
Dr. Anupama Vohra**

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**M.A. ENGLISH - I SEMESTER**

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**COURSE NO.- ENG 111**

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## Welcome

Dear Distance Learners,

Welcome to Directorate of Distance Education !

Now you are enrolled for PG English, a prestigious course, run by the Directorate. In Semester I you have four papers each of 6 credits. The detailed syllabus of each course is given in the respective study material. You are advised to read the prescribed texts in detail and consult the library for additional material. This course, that is ENG-111 comprises of six Units. Unit-I is Literary and Intellectual background of Drama upto Restoration age and Units II to VI have five plays. Those learners who have read literature at the undergraduate level have a fairly good idea about drama, prose, poetry, novel criticism, literary terms, genres etc. Those who come from non-literature background shall have to work hard to grasp the basics and cope with the detailed study of the prescribed texts in each course.

Kindly read *A New History of English Literature* written by Prof. B.S. Dahiya, Formerly Vice Chancellor, Kurushetra University, Kurushetra and published by Doaba House. It will give you a comprehensive overview of the history of English Literature. This shall help you not only in the preparation of semester end exam but also shall be beneficial for the preparation of NET/SET exams.

Do attend the PCP programmes though they are optional; the contact classes and counselling clarify many of your doubts, questions and queries. Do remember to submit the Internal Assessment Assignments (IAAs) in time because no late IAAs are accepted, and in case of non-submission of IAAs you are ineligible to sit in the term end exam.

Wish you good luck !

**Dr. Anupama Vohra**  
PG English Coordinator  
DDE

**DETAILED SYLLABUS OF M.A. ENGLISH**  
**SEMESTER - FIRST**

**Course No. : ENG 111**

**Duration of Examination : 3 hrs.**

**Title of the Course : Drama 1**

**Total Marks : 100**

**Credits : 5**

**(a) Semester Examination - 80**

**(b) Sessional Assessment - 20**

Detailed Syllabus for the examination to be held in Dec. 2018, 2019 & 2020.

**Objective :** The purpose of the course is to acquaint the students with the growth and development of English Drama from the Medieval to the Jacobean Period from the literary and historical perspectives. The course introduces the student to the different kinds of drama. They will study the form and literary problems associated with the prescribed plays.

**Unit-I**

Literary and Intellectual background of Drama upto the Restoration Period

**Unit-II**

Christopher Marlowe                      *Tamburlaine the Great (Part I)*

**Unit-III**

William Shakespeare                      *King Lear*

**Unit-IV**

Ben Jonson                                      *Volpone*

**Unit-V**

John Webster :                                      *The Duchess of Malfi*

**Unit-VI**

William Congreve :                                      *The Way of the World*

## MODE OF EXAMINATION

The paper will be divided into Sections A, B and C M.M.=80

### Section A Multiple Choice Questions

Q. No. A will be an objective type question covering the entire syllabus. Twelve objectives, two from each unit, with four options each will be set and the candidate will be required to write the correct option and not specify by putting a tick mark (✓). Any ten out of twelve are to be attempted. Each objective will be for one mark (10×1=10)

### Section B Short Answer Questions

Section B comprises short answer type questions covering the entire syllabus. Four questions will be set and the candidate will be required to attempt any two questions in about 80-100 words. Each answer will be evaluated for 5 marks. (5×2=10)

### Section C Long Answer Questions

Section C comprises long answer type questions from covering the entire syllabus. Six questions, one from each unit, will be set and the candidate will be required to attempt any five questions in about 300-350 words. Each answer will be evaluated for 12 marks.

(5×12=60)

### Suggested Reading :

1. Anne Barton : *Ben Jonson, Dramatist.*
2. D.H. Craig (ed.) : *Ben Jonson: The Critical Heritage 1599-1798.*
3. W. Shakespeare : *Othello, Hamlet, Troilus and Cressida and other plays.*
4. John Webster : *The White Devil.*
5. Fredson Bowers : *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy*
6. Una Mary Ellias Fermor : *The Jacobean Drama: An Interpretation*

7. Ralph J. Kaufmann (ed.) : *Elizabethan Drama : Modern Essays in Criticism*
8. Frank Laurence Lucas : *Seneca and the Elizabethan Tragedy.*
9. Irving Ribner : *Jacobean Tragedy: The quest of Moral Order*
10. F.P. Wilson : *Elizabethan and Jacobean.*
11. Ben Jonson : *Everyman in his Humour.*
12. Thomas Kyd : *The Spanish Tragedy.*
13. Andrew Cecil Bradley : *Shakespearean Tragedy*
14. G. Wilson Knight : *Wheel of Fire.*
15. Samuel Johnson : *Preface to Shakespeare.*
16. E. Welsford : *The Fool in Shakespeare.*
17. H. B. Charlton : *Shakespearean Comedy.*
18. John Palmer : *Comic Characters of Shakespeare.*
19. Frank Kermode : *Shakespeare: Final Plays.*
20. M.C. Bradbrook : *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy.*
21. Bonamy Dobree : *Restoration Comedy 1660-1720.*

<b>LIST OF CONTENTS</b>		<b>Page No.</b>
<b>Unit - I</b>	Literary and Intellectual background of Drama upto the Restoration Period Lesson (1-4) <i>Dr. Rakesh Lidiya</i> Lesson (5) <i>Dr. Sanjay Chawla</i>	6-96
<b>Unit - II</b>	Christopher Marlowe : <i>Tamburlaine : The Great</i> Lesson (6-10) <i>Dr. Kshamata Choudhary</i>	97-173
<b>Unit - III</b>	William Shakespeare : <i>King Lear</i> Lesson (11-16)	174-272
<b>Unit - IV</b>	Ben Jonson : <i>Volpone</i> Lesson (17-21)	273-324
<b>Unit - V</b>	John Webster : <i>The Duchess of Malfi</i> Lesson (22-26)	325-379
<b>Unit - VI</b>	William Congreve : <i>The Way of the World</i> Lesson (27-31)	380-428

**COURSE No.111**

**DRAMA-I**

**LESSON No. 1**

**M.A. ENGLISH**

**UNIT - I**

**LITERARY AND INTELLECTUAL  
BACKGROUND OF DRAMA UPTO THE RESTORATION PERIOD**

## **ENGLISH RENAISSANCE**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Objectives
- 1.3 The Historical Overview
- 1.4 The Elizabethan and Jacobean Ages
  - 1.4.1 Political Peace and Stability
  - 1.4.2 Social Development
  - 1.4.3 Religious Tolerance
  - 1.4.4 Sense and Feeling of Patriotism
  - 1.4.5 Discovery, Exploration and Expansion
  - 1.4.6 Influence of Foreign Fashions
  - 1.4.7 Contradictions and Set of Oppositions
- 1.5 Elizabethan Prose
  - 1.5.1 Prose in Early Renaissance
  - 1.5.2 The Essay
  - 1.5.3 Character Writers
  - 1.5.4 Religious Prose
  - 1.5.5 Prose Romances

## 1.6 Elizabethan Drama

### 1.6.1 The University Wits

### 1.6.2 Dramatic Activity of Shakespeare

### 1.6.3 Other Playwrights

## 1.7 Let Us Sum Up

## 1.8 Examination Oriented Questions

## 1.9 Suggested Reading

### **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

The focus of this lesson is on the Elizabethan and Jacobean Ages with special reference to Elizabethan prose and drama.

### **1.2 OBJECTIVES**

This unit will make the learners aware with the historical and socio-political knowledge of Elizabethan and Restoration Ages, features of the ages, literary tendencies, literary contributions to the different of genres like poetry, prose and drama. The important writers are introduced with their major works. With this background study the learners will be able to locate the particular works in the tradition of literature, and again they will study the prescribed texts in the historical background.

### **1.3 THE HISTORICAL OVERVIEW**

The literary decline after Chaucer's death was due in considerable measure to political reasons. The dispute about the throne, which culminated in the War of Roses, dissipated the energy and resources of the country and finally destroyed in large measure the noble families. The art and literature depended on their patronage. The accession of Henry VII in 1485 brought about a period of quiet and recovery. Henry VII established a strong monarchy and restored social and political order. He curtailed the powers and privileges of barons and patronized the new rich class. The country resumed its power among European nations, and began through them to feel the stimulus of the Renaissance. Caxton's press, which was established in

1476 in London, was the earliest forerunner of Renaissance in England. Rickett remarks: The Renaissance had come with Caxton. It began in London with the publication of English masterpieces that awakened a sense of their national life in the minds of the people. King Henry VIII, who acceded to the throne of England in 1509, began an era of significant and purposeful changes. He ruled in the spirit of modern statecraft. He encouraged trade and manufacturers, and increased the wealth of the country. He hastened the decline of feudalism by allowing men of low birth to high positions. Thus the court became the field for the display of individual ambition. Men of talent and learning found honourable place in his court. During his reign, England contributed her part to the spread of the new civilization and new learning. Education was popularized. Cardinal's College and Christ Church College at Oxford were founded. The Reign of Henry VIII also expedited the Reformation which had begun in England nearly two centuries before with Wycliffe. The spirit of emancipation of conscience from priestly control was strengthened by the example of German and Swiss reformers. In 1534, Henry VII enforced political separation from Rome on the occasion of the annulment of his first marriage. It provided an opportunity for radical theological reforms. Hugh Latimer was a powerful spokesman of the spirit of Reformation. His writings represent a development of popular English prose. The Reformation and various religious and political controversies gave rise to the writing of pamphlets, serious and satirical. The translation of the Bible by William Tyndale and Miles Coverdale is a significant development in English prose. During Henry's reign the court emerged as a great patron of learning, art and literature. The atmosphere of peace and calm which began to prevail after long turmoil and chaos paved the way for extraordinary development of literary activity. Edward VI ruled from 1547 to 1553. The reign of Queen Mary from 1553 to 1558 was marred by religious conflicts. She restored Roman Catholicism in England. Creative activity was arrested during her time but it was replenished with much greater vigour in the reign of Queen Elizabeth (1558 – 1603). The above historical overview is just an introduction to the socio-political and religious conditions leading to the golden period which is called the Age of Elizabeth. The English Renaissance covers a long span of time, which is divided for the sake of convenience into the following three periods: i)

The Beginning of Renaissance (1516 – 1558). ii) The Flowering of Renaissance (1558 – 1603). It is actually called the Age of Elizabeth. iii) The Decline of Renaissance (1603 – 1625). It is also termed as the Jacobean Age. Let's see these literary periods through different perspectives.

## **1.4 THE ELIZABETHAN AND JACOBAN AGES**

Both the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods in the history of English literature are also known as The Age of Shakespeare. This span of time is the golden age of literature. It extends from the accession of Elizabeth in 1558 to the death of James I in 1625. It was an era of peace, of economic prosperity, of stability, of liberty and of great explorations. It was an age of both contemplation and action. It was an era which was illustrious for the unprecedented development of art, literature and drama. John Milton calls England, during this age, as — a noble and puissant nation, rousing herself, like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks. Let's see the main characteristics of this age.

### **1.4.1 Political Peace and Stability**

Elizabeth brilliantly framed and followed the policy of balance and moderation both inside and outside the country. A working compromise was reached with Scotland. The rebellious northern barons were kept in check. She, therefore, could successfully establish peace in traditionally disturbed border areas. Under her able administration, the English national life rapidly and steadily progressed.

### **1.4.2 Social Development**

It was an age of great social contentment. The rapid rise of industrial towns gave employment to thousands. Increasing trade and commerce enriched England. The wealthy were taxed to support the poor. This created the atmosphere for literary activities.

### **1.4.3 Religious Tolerance**

It was an era of religious tolerance and peace. Upon her accession she found the whole nation divided against itself. The North was largely Catholic, and the

South was strongly Protestant. Scotland followed the Reformation intensely. Ireland followed its old traditional religion. It was Elizabeth who made the Anglican Church a reality. Anglicanism was a kind of compromise between Catholicism and Protestantism. Both the Protestants and the Catholics accepted the Church. All Englishmen were influenced by the Queen's policy of religious tolerance and were united in a magnificent national enthusiasm. The mind of man, now free from religious fears and persecutions, turned with a great creative impulse to other forms of activity. An atmosphere of all pervading religious peace gave great stimulus to literary activity.

#### **1.4.4 Sense and Feeling of Patriotism**

It was an age of patriotism. Queen Elizabeth loved England ardently and she made her court one of the most brilliant courts in Europe. The splendour of her court dazzled the eyes of the people. Her moderate policies did much to increase her popularity and prestige. Worship of the Virgin Queen became the order of the day. She was Spenser's Gloriana, Raleigh's Cynthia, and Shakespeare's — fair vestal throned by the West. Even the foreigners saw in her — a keen calculating intellect that baffled the ablest statesmen in Europe. Elizabeth inspired all her people with the unbounded patriotism which exults in Shakespeare and with the personal devotion which finds a voice in the *Faerie Queene*. Under her administration the English national life progressed faster not by slow historical and evolutionary process. English literature reached the highest point of literary development during her period.

#### **1.4.5 Discovery, Exploration and Expansion**

This is the most remarkable epoch for the expansion of both mental and geographical horizons. It was an age of great thought and great action. It was an age which appealed to the eye, the imagination and the intellect. New knowledge was pouring in from all directions. The great voyagers like Hawkins, Frobisher, Raleigh and Drake brought home both material and intellectual treasures from the East and the West. The spirit of adventure and exploration fired the imagination of writers. The spirit of action and adventure paved the way for the illustrious

development of dramatic literature. Drama progresses in an era of action and not of speculation. It has rightly been called the age of the discovery of the new world and of man.

#### **1.4.6 Influence of Foreign Fashions**

Italy, the home of Renaissance, fascinated the Elizabethans. All liked to visit Italy and stay there for some time. People were not only fond of Italian books and literature, but also of Italian manners and morals. Consequently the literature of England was immensely enriched by imitating Italian classics.

#### **1.4.7 Contradictions and Set of Oppositions**

It was an age of great diversity and contradictions. It was an age of light and darkness, of reason and of unreason, of wisdom and of foolishness, of hope and of despair. The barbarity and backwardness, the ignorance and superstition of the Middle Ages still persisted. Disorder, violence, bloodshed and tavern brawls still prevailed. Highway robberies, as mentioned in Henry IV, Part I, were very common. The barbarity of the age is seen in such brutal sports as bear baiting, cock and bull fighting, to which numerous references are found in the plays of Shakespeare. Despite the advancement of science and learning, people still believed in superstitions, ghosts, witches, fairies, charms and omens of all sorts. In spite of great refinement and learning it was an age of easy morals. People did not care for high principles of morality and justice. Bribery and intentional delays of justice were common evils. Material advancement was by fair means or foul, the main aim of men in high places. Hardly anyone of the public men of this age had a perfectly open heart and very few had quite clean hands. In spite of the ignorance and superstition, violence and brutality, easy morals and lax values, Elizabethan Age was an age in which men lived very much, thought intensely and wrote strongly.

### **1.5 ELIZABETHAN PROSE**

The Age of Elizabeth was also conspicuous for the remarkable development of prose, which was variously written with great stylistic and linguistic excellence. The following prose genres developed during this period:

### 1.5.1 Prose in Early Renaissance

The prose of early Renaissance consists largely of translations. The writers of this period were educationists and reformers rather than creative writers. The following major writers need to be considered in a nutshell: Sir Thomas More-- - He was one of the early humanists and the first prose writer of great literary significance. His famous work *Utopia* was written in Latin, but it was translated into English in 1551 by Ralph Robinson. It is the — true prologue of Renaissance. It shows the influence of Plato. *Utopia* has been called — the first monument of modern socialism. Thomas More extols democratic communism – people’s state, elected government, equal distribution of wealth and nine hours’ work a day. In it we find for the first time the foundation of civilized society, the three great words – Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. More advocates religious tolerance. In English literary history Thomas More is not remembered for his contribution to style but for the originality of his ideas. Roger Ascham--- He was a great educationist. His first work *The School of Shooting* was written in English. Commenting on the state of English language he writes: — Everything has been done excellently well in Greek and Latin, but in the English tongue so meanly that no man can do worse. But — I have written this English matter, in the English tongue for Englishmen. His second work, *The School Master* contains intellectual instructions for the young. Ascham’s prose style is conspicuous for economy and precision. He was the first writer who wrote — the English speech for the Englishmen. He is — the first English stylist. Sir Thomas Elyot and Sir John Cheke Elyot’s *The Governor* is a treatise on moral philosophy and education. His prose does not concern the common man but it is restrained and classical. Cheke was a teacher of Greek art at Cambridge. He wrote *The Heart of Sediton* which shows the influence of classicism and antiquity. To him both form and matter were equally important. His prose is vigorous, argumentative, eloquent and humorous.

### 1.5.2 The Essay

The Essay, which Montaigne began in France, was a very popular prose form during this Age. It has been variously defined. An essay is a short composition more or less incomplete. It is like lyric in poetry. It may be written on any subject

under the sun. The year 1597, when Bacon published his ten essays, marks the beginning of essay writing in English literature. Sir Francis Bacon— Bacon occupies a dominant place in English prose. He wrote varied type of prose. He is philosophical in *The Advancement of Learning*, historical in the *History of Henry VII*, and speculative in *New Atlantis*. Bacon occupies a permanent place in English prose due to his *Essays*, ten in number, which appeared in 1597. The second edition and the third edition raised the number to 38 and 58 respectively. They are on familiar subjects and they represent the meditations of trained and learned mind. They contain utilitarian wisdom and are written in lucid, clear and aphoristic style. Bacon began the vogue of essay writing in English. His essays introduced a new form of literature into English literature. He was the first English writer who employed a style that is conspicuous for lucidity, clarity, economy, precision, directness, masculinity and mathematical plainness. His images and figures of speech are simple and clearly illustrate the ideas that he wishes to communicate. Ben Jonson— Ben Jonson wrote aphoristic essays which are compiled in *The Timber of Discoveries* which was published posthumously about 1641. His essays are moral and critical. Jonson's style is noticeable for lucidity, terseness and strength. He treats a subject in a simple and plain manner. John Selden John Selden's *Table Talk* abounds in sharp, acid-natured aphorisms, exhibiting tough common sense and little imagination. As a practitioner of aphoristic essay he stands next to Bacon and Ben Jonson. He also wrote *The Titles of Honour* and *The History of Titles*.

### **1.5.3 Character Writers**

The seventeenth century witnessed the origin and development of another kind of essay, known as character writing. The character writers were influenced by Theophrastus, Seneca and dramatists. They are also highly indebted to Bacon who provided them with a pattern of style – concise, pointed and sententious. The following are the character writers:

- I. Thomas Dekkar wrote the *Bellman of London* and *A Strange Horse Race* which are noticeable for the portrayal of vivid character sketches. In character sketch the sentences are unusually short.

- II. Joseph Hall wrote the *Good Magistrate* and *Virtues and Vices*. He was endowed with the qualities required for character writing. Satire distinguishes his character sketches.
- III. Thomas Overbury's *Characters* is a collection of numerous well – portrayed characters. He usually packs the characters to some trade or occupation. The character takes colour from the occupation from which it draws its virtues and vices. His style is artificial and he subordinates substance to form, matter to manner.
- IV. Earle is superior to both Hall and Overbury as a character writer. His *Microcosmography* is his collection of well portrayed characters. It is written in a delightful and witty style. His style is easy, vigorous and fluent.
- V. George Herbert differs from all other character writers of his time. His famous work *A Priest in the Temple* or *A Country Parson* is not a collection of unconnected sketches, but a short treatise in thirty seven chapters. Each of the characters delineates a phase of parson's life – his knowledge, his praying, his preaching, his comforting etc. He aims at imparting reality to his character. His aim is to recommend religion by the portrayal of a charming and saintly life.
- VI. Thomas Fuller in his *Holy War* and *Profane State* does not follow the Theophrastian model. He belongs to a school of his own. What distinguishes Fuller is his boundless humanity which is visible in every page. He mixes his character sketches with interesting stories. He also imparts personal touch to his essays. His characters of virtues and vices are not merely fanciful exercises but they are real and concrete. His style is condensed and discursive.

#### **1.5.4 Religious Prose**

During this period religious controversy was in vogue. It gave rise to fine

English prose and it also contributed to the evolution of English prose style. The religious prose writers are as under: I. Sir John Tyndale is remembered for the translation of the *Bible* and the *Book of Common Prayer*. This translation formed the basis for *The Authorized Version of the Bible* (1611). It is written in traditional prose, purged form, ornateness and triviality. Its style is remarkable for simplicity, clarity, lucidity and directness because Tyndale's aim was to make the Bible readable even to peasants. II. Latimer's *Sermon on the Ploughers* and *others* were written in plain and straightforward English. Richard Hooker wrote *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* which is an outstanding contribution in the field of theology and prose style. Hooker's style is highly latinized but it is free from pedantry and vulgarity. It is logical and convincing, musical and cadenced, clear and vigorous.

### **1.5.5 Prose Romances**

The writing of prose romances is a remarkable development of this period. They anticipated novel which came into being during the eighteenth century. The prose romances of this period consisted of tales of adventure as well as of romance. They dealt with contemporary life and events of the past, with the life at the court and the life of the city. It was by turns humorous and didactic, realistic and fanciful. In short, it represented the first rough drafts of English novel. The prose romances of varied forms and shapes were written by many writers. I. George Gascoigne wrote the *Adventures of Master E.J.* which depicts a lively sketch of English country – house life. It has well-portrayed characters. II. John Lyly is the pioneer of the English novel, the first stylist in prose, and the most popular writer of the age. His famous work *Euphues* is incidentally — the first novel in English language. It deals with love and romance. It foretells the rise of the novel of manners. It moves away from the fanciful idealism of medieval romance and suggests an interest in contemporary life. *Euphues* is especially remarkable for its style, which is based on alliteration, play upon words, and antithesis. Lyly aimed at precision and emphasis by carefully balancing his words and phrases. III. Sir Philip Sidney wrote a prose romance *Arcadia* (1590) which represents the restless spirit of adventure of the age of chivalry. It is a dream world compounded of Sidney's knowledge of classicism and Christianity, medieval chivalry and Renaissance luxury. Its style is full of affectations and artificiality. It

is highly poetical. IV. As a writer of prose romances, Robert Greene is remembered for *Pandosto*, *Mamillia* and *Menaphone*. His romances are in moral tone and their style is imitative of Lyly. He has a sense of structural unity, restraint and verisimilitude. What distinguishes Greene is the skilful portraiture of women characters. Besides, these romances, Greene strikes a realistic note in *Mourning of Garment* and *Never Too Late*. V. Lodge's *Rosalynde* (1590) is a pastoral romance, written in imitation of the ornate style of *Eupheus*. It is considered to be the source of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. VI. Thomas Nashe is the first great realist who graphically depicted contemporary London life and its manners. His descriptions of respectable roguery are tinged with satire. Nash's memorable work is *The Unfortunate Traveller or The Life of Jack Wilton* (1594) which has the rare distinction of being the first picaresque or rogue novel. It combines both comedy and tragedy. It may also be called the first historical novel. His prose style is clear, lucid, simple and forceful. VII. Thomas Deloney was a realist, who in his works *Thomas of Reading*, *Jack of Newbury* and the *Gentle Craft*, realistically depict contemporary bourgeois life. His style is remarkable for simplicity, clarity, directness and spontaneity. His prose runs easily into spirited dialogue. VIII. Robert Burton was a humanist whose *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621) is a distinguished work of philosophical prose. His style changes with the subject. It is lucid, tense, precise and rhetorical.

## **1.6 ELIZABETHAN DRAMA**

The period marks the real beginning of drama. It is the golden age of English drama. The renewed study of classical drama shaped English drama in its formative years. Seneca influenced the development of English tragedy, and Plautus and Terence directed the formation of comedy. The classical drama gave English drama its five acts, its set scenes and many other features. Regular English tragedy, comedy and historical play were successfully written during this period. Nicholas Udall's *Ralph Roister Doister* (1553) is the first English comedy of the classical school, which is divided into acts and scenes. Gamar Gurton's *Needle* (1575), written by an unknown writer is another comedy in the classical style. The first complete tragedy of the Senecan type is *Gorboduc* (1562), which was written by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville. The example of *Gorboduc*

was followed by Thomas Hughes in *The Misfortunes of Arthus* (1588) and George Gascoigne's *Jocasta* (1566). All these tragedies were influenced by Seneca both in style and treatment of theme. Another dramatic genre, which emerged during this period, is tragic-comedy, which mixes lamentable tragedy with pleasant mirth. Some memorable plays of this type are Whetstone's *Right Excellent and Famous History*, Preston's *A Lamentable Tragedy*, Richard Edward's *Demons and Rithias* and R.B.'s *Apilus and Virginia*. Historical plays too were written during this period. Famous among the early historical plays are – *The Troublesome Reign of John, King of England* (1590), *Tragedy of Richard, the Third* (1590 – 94), *The Victories of Henry the Fifth* (1588) and *The Chroniete History of Lear* (1594).

### 1.6.1 The University Wits

Lyly, Peele, Greene, Lodge, Nashe, Kyd and Marlowe are known as the University Wits because they came either from Cambridge or from Oxford. They were romantic by nature and they represented the spirit of Renaissance. The great merit of the University Wits was that they came with their passion and poetry, and their academic training. They paved the way for the successive writers like Shakespeare to express his genius. The contribution of the University Wits to the development of drama needs to be highlighted: I. John Lyly: Lyly wrote eight comedies, of which the best are *Campaspe*, *Endymion*, *Gallathea*, *Midas* and *Love's Metamorphosis*. He wrote for the private theatres. His writing is replete with genuine romantic atmosphere, humour, fancy for romantic comedy, realism, classicism and romanticism. Lyly established prose as an expression of comedy. He deftly used prose to express light feelings of fun and laughter. He also used a suitable blank verse for the comedy. High comedy demands a nice sense of phrase, and Lyly is the first great phrase maker in English. He gave to English comedy a witty phraseology. He also made an important advance at successful comic portrayal. His characters are both types and individuals. Disguise as a devise was later popularized by Shakespeare in his plays especially in his comedies. The device of girl dressed as a boy is traced back to Lyly. The introduction of songs, symbolical of the mood owes its popularity to Lyly. II. George Peele: His work consists of *The Arraignement of Paris*, *The Battle of Alcazar*, *The Love of King David and Fair Bethsabe* and *The Old Wives'*

*Tales*. He has left behind a pastoral, a romantic tragedy, a chronicle history and a romantic satire. He juxtaposes romance and reality in his plays. As a humorist he influenced Shakespeare. In *The Old Wives' Tales* he for the first time introduced the note of satire in English drama. III. Robert Greene: Greene wrote *The Comical History of Alphonsus, King of Aragon and Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*. Greene was the first master of the art of plot construction in English drama. In his plays Greene has three distinct worlds mingled together – the world of magic, the world of aristocratic life, and the world of the country. There is peculiar romantic humour and rare combination of realism and idealism in his plays. He is the first to draw romantic heroines. His heroines Margaret and Dorothea anticipate Shakespeare's Rosalind and Celia. IV. Thomas Kyd: Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*, a Senecan tragedy, is an abiding contribution to the development of English tragedy. It is a well constructed play in which the dramatist has skillfully woven passion, pathos and fear until they reach a climax. Kyd succeeded in producing dialogue that is forceful and capable. He introduced the revenge motif into drama. He, thus, influenced Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. The device of play within play, which Shakespeare employed in *Hamlet*, is used for the first time in *The Spanish Tragedy*. He also introduced the hesitating type of hero, suffering from bouts of madness, feigned or real, in the character of Hieronimo, who anticipates the character of Hamlet. V. Christopher Marlowe: Marlowe's famous plays *Tamburlaine, the Great, Dr. Faustus, Edward II and The Jew of Malta* give him a place of pre-eminence among the University Wits. Swinburne calls him — the first great poet, the father of English tragedy and the creator of blank verse. He is, indeed, the protagonist of tragic drama in English and the forerunner of Shakespeare and his fellows. Marlowe provided big heroic subjects that appealed to human imagination. He for the first time imparted individuality and dignity to the tragic hero. He also presented the tragic conflict between the good and evil forces in *Dr. Faustus*. He is the first tragic dramatist who used the device of Nemesis in an artistic and psychological manner. Marlowe for the first time made blank verse a powerful vehicle for the expression of varied human emotions. His blank verse, which Ben Jonson calls, — Marlowe's Mighty Line is noticeable for its splendour of diction, picturesqueness, vigour and energy, variety in pace and its responsiveness to the

demands of varying emotions. Marlowe has been termed the father of English tragedy. He was in fact the first to feel that romantic drama was the sole form in harmony with the temperament of the nation. He created authentic romantic tragedy in English and paved the way for the full blossoming of Shakespeare's dramatic genius.

### **1.6.2 Dramatic Activity of Shakespeare**

William Shakespeare was not of an age but of all ages. He wrote 37 plays, which may be classified as tragedies, comedies, romances or tragic-comedies and historical plays. The period of Shakespeare's dramatic activity spans twenty four years (1588 – 1612) which is divided into the following four sub-periods: i) The First Period (1588 – 96): It is a period of early experimentation. During this period he wrote *Titus Andronicus*, *First Part of Henry VI*, *Love's Labour Lost*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Richard II* and *Richard III* and *King John*. His early poems *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Venus and Adonis* belong to this period. ii) The Second Period (1596 – 1600): Shakespeare wrote his great comedies and chronicled plays during this period. The works of this period are *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It*, *The Twelfth Night*, *Henry IV, Part I & II*, and *Henry V*. iii) The Third Period (1601 – 08): It is a period of great tragedies *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear* *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, and of somber and better comedies *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure For Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida*. iv) The Fourth Period (1608 – 1613) : Shakespeare's last period begins with *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus*, *Timon of Athens*, *Henry VIII* and *Pericles*. What distinguishes Shakespeare's last period is the reawakening of his first love romance in *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*. Shakespearean Comedy Shakespeare brought perfection to the writing of romantic comedy. His comedies are classified into the following three categories. i) The Early Comedies: They are *The Comedy of Errors*, *Love's Labour Lost* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. The plays show signs of immaturity. The plots are less original, the characters are less finished and the style is also vigorous. The humour lacks the wide human sympathy of his mature comedies. ii) The Mature Comedies: Shakespeare's comic genius finds

expression in *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *As You Like It*. These plays are full of love and romance, vigour and vitality, versatility of humour, humanity and well-portrayed characters. iii) The Somber Comedies: *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Measure for Measure* and *Troilus and Cressida* belong to the period of great tragedies. These comedies have a serious and somber time. Characteristics of Shakespearean Comedy: Shakespearean comedy is pre-eminently romantic. His predecessors – Lyly, Greene and Peele influenced his art of writing comedy. The main characteristics of Shakespearean comedy are given below: i) Romance and Realism: Shakespearean comedy is romantic. The classical unities of time, place and action are not observed in it.

The settings are all imaginative. The action takes place in some remote far off place, and not in familiar surroundings. According to Raleigh, Shakespearean comedy is a — rainbow world of love in idleness. What distinguishes Shakespearean comedy is the fine and artistic blend of romance and realism. All his comedies are related to real life. There are contemporary figures and contemporary fashions in *Love's Labour Lost*. Bottom and his companions exist with fairies; Sir Toly Belch and Sir Andrew are companions of Viola and Olivia. Shakespeare's characters are real. His dramatic personages are ordinary human beings and incidents are such as occurring in every day life. The romantic main plot and the realistic sub plot are harmoniously put together in *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Charlton writes: — Shakespearean comedies are not satiric; they are poetic. They are not conservative, they are creative. ii) Love: Shakespearean comedy is essentially a comedy of love, which ends with the ringing of the marriage bells. Wooing distinguishes it from classical comedy. The entire atmosphere is surcharged with love. Not only the hero and the heroine are in love but all are in love. The Shakespearean comedy ends not with the celebration of one marriage but with many marriages. Shakespeare has vividly exhibited carried manifestations of love in his comedies. In *As You Like It*, he has described the love at first sight between Orlando and Rosalind, thoughtful love between Celia and Oliver, pastoral love between Phebo and Silvius. The men and women who love truly have become superb representations of human nature. True love is spiritual. It is a union of minds and hearts. iii) Shakespeare's Heroines: Heroines in Shakespearean

comedy play leading roles and surpass their male counterparts. Ruskin's remark that — Shakespeare has only heroines and no heroes is certainly true to his comedies. Shakespeare's heroines Rosalind, Portia, Viola, Beatrice etc. are endowed with wit, common sense, human feelings and noble qualities of head and heart. They are wise, winning and charming. They have beautiful feelings, thoughts and emotions. They radiate joy, peace and spirit of harmony. Male characters in Shakespearean comedy only play a second fiddle. His heroines know how to fulfil their desires and resolve crisis. All heroines in Shakespearean comedy are guided by infinitive insight. iv) Disguise: The use of dramatic device of disguise is common to all the comedies of Shakespeare. In *The Merchant of Venice* Jessica disguises herself in — the lovely garnish of a boy, and Portia and Nerissa likewise don masculine attire. This device is also employed for instance, in *As You Like It* Rosalind and Celia become Ganymede and Aliena, and in *All's Well That Ends Well*. Helena passes off in bed as Diana. v) Humour: Humour is the soul of Shakespearean comedy. It arouses thoughtful laughter. It is full of humane and genial laughter. Shakespeare's wit lacks malice and his mockery has no bite. Brilliant wit mingles with kindly mirth and genial humour. Shakespeare's humour is many sided. He can arouse laughter from the mumblings of a drunkard and the intelligent repartees of leading women. The alert wit and bright good sense of Rosalind arouse exquisite pleasure. Her all pervasive spirit of mirth gains much from the presence of the Fool. Bottom and his companions, Feste, Sir Andrew, Sir Toby, Touchstone, Dogberry, Verges and Falstaff are Shakespeare's memorable fools, who not only create humour and laughter, but they also interlink the main and the subplots, and provide a running commentary on character and action. Falstaff is a superb comic character of Shakespeare. vi) Admixture of Tragic and Comic Elements: Shakespearean comedy differs from the classical comedy in the sense that in it the comic and the tragic elements are commingled. However, the tragic note does not dominate and the play ends on a note of joy. For example, *The Merchant of Venice* is pervaded by the tragic element from the signing of the bond to the end of the trial scene. Ultimately the play ends happily, as Antonio, whose life has been threatened by Shylock, feels happy at heart as his life has been saved. vii) Music and Song: Since music is the food of love. Shakespearean

comedy is abundantly full of song and music. *The Twelfth Night* opens with a note of music which strikes the keynote of the play. Several romantic songs are scattered all over *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It* and *Much Ado About Nothing*. viii) The Role of Fortune: — The course of true love never runs smooth. Lovers have to face the hostilities of parents, friends or relatives; and consequently, there are much tears and sighs, before the final union takes place. But all these difficulties and complications are unexpectedly removed by the benign power of Fortune. Shakespearean comedy radiates the spirit of humanity and a broad vision of life. It is large-hearted in the conception, sympathetic in its tone and humanitarian in its idealism. Shakespeare created his own hallmark on the comedies in English drama. Shakespearean Tragedy, Shakespearean comedy is romantic and not classical. It observes the fundamental requirements of tragedy expounded by Aristotle in *The Poetics*.

The main characteristics of Shakespearean tragedy are as follows: i) Tragic Hero: Shakespearean tragedy is pre-eminently the story of one person, the hero or the protagonist. It is, indeed, a tale of suffering and calamity resulting in the death of the hero. It is concerned always with persons of high degree, often with Kings or princes or with leaders in the state like Coriolanus, Brutus and Antony. Shakespeare's tragic heroes are not only great men, they also suffer greatly, their calamity and suffering are exceptional. The sufferings and calamities of an ordinary man are not worthy of note, as they affect his own life. The story of the prince like Hamlet, or the King like Lear, or the generals like Macbeth or Othello has a greatness and dignity of its own. His fate affects the fate of a whole nation or empire. When he falls from the height of earthly greatness to the dust, his fall produces a sense of contrast of the powerlessness of man. His fall creates cathartic effects on the audience. Shakespeare's tragic hero is endowed with noble qualities of head and heart. He is built on a grand scale. For instance, Macbeth has — vaulting ambition, Hamlet noble inaction, Othello credulity and rashness in action, and Lear the folly and incapacity to judge human character. Owing to this — fatal flaw the hero falls from a state of prosperity and greatness into adversity and unhappiness, and ultimately dies. ii) Tragic Waste: In Shakespearean tragedy we find the element of tragic waste. All exceptional qualities of the protagonist are

wasted. At the end of the tragedy, the Evil does not triumph. It is expelled but at the cost of much that is good and admirable. The fall of Macbeth does not only mean the death of evil in him, but also the waste of much that is essentially good and noble. In *Hamlet* and *King Lear* the good is also destroyed along with the evil. There is no tragedy in the expulsion of evil, the tragedy is that it involves the waste of good. iii) Fate and Character: The actions of the protagonist are of great importance as they lead to his death. What we do feel strongly as the tragedy advances to its close is that the calamities and catastrophe follow inevitably from the deeds of man, and that the main source of these deeds is character. But to call Shakespearean tragedy the story of human character is not the entire truth. Shakespeare's tragedies, as Nicoll points out are — tragedies of character and destiny. There is a tragic relationship between the hero and his environment. A. C. Bradley also points out that with Shakespeare — character is destiny is an exaggeration of a vital truth. Fate or destiny places the protagonist in just those circumstances and situations with which he is incapable of dealing. The flaw in the character of the protagonist proves fatal for him in the peculiar circumstances in which cruel *Destiny* has placed him. The essence of Shakespearean tragedy, therefore, is that Fate presents a problem which is difficult for the particular hero at a time when he is least fitted to tackle it. The tragic relationship between the hero and his surroundings is a significant factor in Shakespearean tragedy. So, both character and destiny are responsible for the hero's tragic end. iv) Abnormal Psychology: Some abnormal conditions of mind as insanity, somnambulism and hallucinations affect human deeds. Lear and Ophelia become victims of insanity. Lady Macbeth suffers from somnambulism and her husband Macbeth from hallucinations. v) The Supernatural Element: The supernatural agency plays a vital role in Shakespearean tragedy. It influences the thoughts and deeds of the hero. In the age of Shakespeare ghosts and witches were believed to be far more real than they are today. It is the supernatural agency that gives the sense of failure in Brutus, to the half formed thoughts of guilt in *Macbeth* and to suspicion in *Hamlet*. Supernatural agency has no power to influence events unless by influencing persons vi) Chance: In most of Shakespeare's tragedies chance or accident exerts an appreciable influence at some point in the action. For instance it may be called an accident, the pirate ship attacked Hamlet's ship, so that he was able to return forthwith to Denmark;

Desdemona drops her handkerchief at the most fatal of moments; Edgar arrives in the prison just too late to save Cordelia's life. vii) Conflict: Conflict is an important element in Shakespearean tragedy. According to Aristotle it is the soul of tragedy. This conflict may arise between two persons, e.g. the hero and the villain, or between two rival parties or groups in one of which the hero is the leading figure. This is called the external conflict. In *Macbeth*, the hero and the heroine are opposed to King Duncan. There is also an — inner conflict, an inward struggle, in the mind of the hero and, it is this inner conflict which is of far greater importance in the case of the Shakespearean tragedy. In it there is invariably such as inner conflict in the mind of one or more of the characters. In *Macbeth*, according to Bradley, we find that — treasonous ambition in Macbeth collides with loyalty and patriotism in Macduff and Malcolm: here is the outward conflict. But these powers and principles equally collide in the soul of Macbeth of himself; here is the inner. viii) Catharsis: Shakespearean tragedy is cathartic. It has the power of purging and thus easing us of some of the pain and suffering which is the lot of us all in the world. Compared to the exceptionally tragic life of the hero before our eyes, our own sufferings begin to appear to us little and insignificant. In a Shakespearean tragedy, the spectacle of the hero's sufferings is terrible and it arouses the emotions of pity and terror. It is truly cathartic, as it purges the audience of the emotions of self-pity and terror. ix) No Poetic Justice: Shakespearean tragedy is true to life. So, it excludes — poetic justice which is in flagrant and obvious contradiction of the facts of life. Although villainy is never ultimately triumphant in Shakespearean tragedy, there is yet an idea that the fortunes of the persons should correspond to their deserts and dooms. We feel that Lear ought to suffer for his folly and for his unjust treatment of Cordelia, but his sufferings are out of all proportion to his misdeeds. In Shakespearean tragedy we find that the doer must suffer. We also find that villainy never remains victorious and prosperous at the end. Nemesis overtakes Macbeth and all evil characters in Shakespearean tragedy. x) Moral Vision: Shakespearean tragedy is not depressing. It elevates, exalts and ennobles us. Shakespeare shows in his tragedies that man's destiny is always determined to a great extent by his own character. He is an architect of his own fate. It always reveals the dignity of man and of human endeavour over the power of evil, which is ultimately defeated. Shakespearean

tragedy ends with the restoration of the power of the good.

**Shakespeare's Historical Plays:** The historical plays were immensely popular in Elizabethan England. They reflected the spirit of the age. The people were intensely patriotic and were very proud of the achievements of their ancestors or the foreign fields. The newly awakened spirit of patriotism and nationalism enabled the people to take keen interest in the records of bygone struggle against foreign invasion and civil disunion. Shakespeare's historical plays span a period of 350 years of English history, from 1200 to 1550. His famous historical plays are *Henry VI, Parts I, II & III, Richard II, Richard III, King John, Henry IV, Parts I & II and Henry V*. Shakespeare's historical plays are suffused with the spirit of patriotism. They show his love for authority and discipline. He considers law and authority necessary for civilized life, he fears disorder for it leads to chaos. Shakespeare's last plays known as dramatic romances form a class apart. His last four plays – *Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale and The Tempest* are neither comedies nor tragedies. All of them end happily but all fetch happiness to shore out of shipwreck and suffering. These last plays have a lot in common. It is appropriate to call them dramatic romances or tragic comedies. They contain incidents which are undoubtedly tragic but they end happily.

### **1.6.3. Other Playwrights**

#### **I. Ben Jonson and the Comedy of Humours**

Ben Jonson was a classicist in Elizabethan England, which was romantic both in character and temper. Jonson was the first great neo-classic. Like Donne, he revolted against the artistic principles of his contemporaries, and he sought a measure for the uncontrolled, romantic exuberance of Elizabethan literature in the classical literature. In all branches of his writings, he is the conscious artist and reformer. To him the chief function of literature was to instruct and educate the audience and readers. All plays of Ben Jonson are neo-classic in spirit. They aim at reforming and instructing society and individuals. He is primarily a writer of the comedies of humour. His famous comedies are *The Case is Altered, Every Man in His Humour, Every Man Out of His Humour, Epicoene or The Silent Woman, The Alchemist, The Bartholomew Fair, The Devil is an Ass, The Light Heart,*

*Humour Reconciled and A Tale of A Tub*. Ben Jonson also wrote two tragedies *Sejanus* and *Cataline*. Jonson propounded the theory of the comedy of humours. To him the purpose of the comedy is corrective and cathartic. The corrective and moral tone necessitated the presence of satire in his comedies. The audience must laugh to some end and the play must deal with some folly and cure it by its ridiculous and comic presentation. To him a comedy was a — comical satire. He derived the idea of humours from medieval medical science. In the older physiology the four major humours corresponding with the four elements and possessing the qualities of moisture, dryness, heat and cold. These elements, in different combinations, formed in each body and declare his character. Variations in the relative strength of these humours showed the individual differences. The disturbance of the natural balance is dangerous and it results in different ailments of body. In order to restore the natural balance of the body many purgings, bleedings and other painful reductions were affected in medieval times. Ben Jonson used this term to include vices as well as follies, cruelty as well as jealousy. It was also used in the sense of mere caprice or trick of manner or peculiarity of chess. It also included vanity and affectation.

## **II. John Webster and the Revenge Tragedy**

Webster's two tragedies *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* have earned for him an outstanding place in British drama. In subtlety of thought and reality of tragic passion he is second to Shakespeare. Both his tragedies are based on the revenge motif. In them he emerges as a painstaking artist who had refined the material and motives of the earlier tragedies of blood and gloom. He had converted melodrama into tragedy. He imparted moral vision, psychological subtlety and emotional depth to the tragedy of revenge and horror.

## **III. Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher**

Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher combined to produce a great number of plays. Their typical comedies are *A King and No King*, *The Knight of Burning Pestle* and *The Scornful Lady*. They wrote two tragedies — *The Maid's Tragedy* and *Philaster*.

#### **IV. George Chapman**

George Chapman was a classicist like Jonson. His two comedies *All Fools' Day* and *Eastward Ho* are remarkable for Jonsonian humour. His historical plays dealing with nearly contemporary history are *The Blind Beggar of Alexandria*, *Charles, Duke of Byron* and *The Tragedy of Chabot*. V. Thomas Middleton: Thomas Middleton was one of the most original dramatists of his time. His light farcical comedies like *A Mad World My Masters* and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* are remarkable for vivacity. His other memorable plays are *Women Beware Women*, *Changeling* and *The Witch*. *The Spanish Gypsy* is a romantic comedy which reminds us of *As You Like It*.

#### **1.7 LET US SUM UP**

In this unit we have studied the importance of English Renaissance which exercised a great impact on the development of English literature. We have taken an outline of the socio-political milieu of the Elizabethan and Jacobean age including the literary features of these ages. Further we studied different kinds of poetry like love poetry, patriotic poetry, philosophic poetry and satirical poetry to name few. You have also been introduced with the important poets of the age. The unit continues with the peculiarities of the Elizabethan prose and its various forms: essay, character writing, religious writing and prose romances. This prose writing projected the novel writing in the later ages. The final part of the unit focuses on the dramatic art developed by the Elizabethan playwrights. It includes the University Wits and their contributions to drama, and as to how they pave the way for Shakespeare. The unit extensively studies the dramatic activities of William Shakespeare and characteristics of his different kinds of drama like comedy, tragedy and historical plays.

#### **1.8 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. What are the characteristics of Elizabethan Age?
2. How does poetry reflect the spirit of Age in Elizabethan England? Discuss.
3. Write an account of the evolution of English poetry during the Age of Shakespeare.

4. What roles do Wyatt and Surrey play in the development of English poetry? Describe.
5. Give an account of Songs and Lyrics in Elizabethan Poetry.
6. Write a note on Elizabethan sonnets and sonneteers.
8. Discuss briefly the development of Elizabethan prose.
11. Discuss the development of drama during the Elizabethan Age.
12. Discuss the characteristics of Shakespearean tragedy.
13. What are the main characteristics of Shakespearean comedy? Discuss.
14. Write a note on the contemporary playwrights of Shakespeare and their contribution to development of drama.
15. Write Short Notes on the following:
  - i. Character Writers in Elizabethan Period
  - ii. Prose Romances
  - iii. Love and Patriotic Poetry
  - iv. Elizabethan Poets.
  - v. Contemporary playwrights of Shakespeare
  - vi. University Wits.

### **1.9 SUGGESTED READING**

- Chambers, E. K. *The Elizabethan Stage*. 4 Volumes, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1923.
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<b>COURSE No.111</b>	<b>DRAMA-I</b>	<b>LESSON No. 2</b>
<b>M.A. ENGLISH</b>		<b>UNIT - I</b>
<b>LITERARY AND INTELLECTUAL</b>		
<b>BACKGROUND OF DRAMA UPTO THE RESTORATION PERIOD</b>		

## **THRESHOLD FOR SHAKESPEAREAN THEATRE**

### **STRUCTURE :**

- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Objectives
- 2.3 The Theatre and the Stagecrafts of the Elizabethan Era
- 2.4 The Elizabethan Theatre
- 2.5 The Shakespearean Theatre
- 2.6 Drama during the Reign of James I
- 2.7 About *Romeo and Juliet*
- 2.8 Short Summary of *Romeo and Juliet*
- 2.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.10 Examination Oriented Questions
- 2.11 Suggested Reading

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

This lesson introduces Elizabethan theatre with special reference to Shakespearean theatre.

## **2.2 OBJECTIVES**

This unit will help the learners to explore the background of the Shakespearean period. It is equally important to know the theatrical scenario of the Age, because without familiarity with it, one cannot grasp the Elizabethan Era completely. The unit also will relate the nutshell summary of the play.

## **2.3 THE THEATRE AND THE STAGE CRAFTS OF THE ELIZABETHAN ERA**

In England the influence of the Italian Renaissance was weaker, but the theatre of the Elizabethan Age was all the stronger for it. Apart from the rediscovery of classical culture, the 16th century in England was a time for developing a new sense of national identity, necessitated by the establishment of a national church. Furthermore, because the English were more suspicious of Rome and the Latin tradition, there was less imitation of classical dramatic forms and an almost complete disregard for the rules that bound the theatre in France and Italy. England built on its own foundations by adapting the strong native tradition of medieval religious drama to serve a more secular purpose. When some of the continental innovations were blended with this cruder indigenous strain, a rich synthesis was produced. Consequently, the theatre that emerged was resonant, varied, and in touch with all segments of society. It included the high seriousness of morality plays, the sweep of chronicle histories, the fantasy of romantic comedies, and the irreverent fun of the interludes. At the same time, the theatre had to contend with severe restrictions. The suppression of the festival of Corpus Christi in 1548 as a means of reinforcing the Protestant Church marked the rapid decline of morality plays and mystery cycles. Their forced descent into satirical propaganda mocking the Catholic faith polarized the audience and led to riots. By 1590, playwrights were prohibited from dramatizing religious issues and they had to resort and confine to history, mythology, allegory, or allusion in order to say anything about contemporary society. Violations and flouting these restrictions meant imprisonment. Nevertheless, playwrights managed to argue highly explosive political topics. In Shakespeare's histories, for instance, the subject of kingship is thoroughly examined in all its implications: both the rightful but incompetent sovereign and the usurping but strong monarch are

scrutinized. It was the most daring undertaking during the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603). The situation for actors was not helped by the hostile attitude of the City of London authorities. The authorities regarded theatre as an immoral pastime to be discouraged rather than tolerated. Professional companies, however, were invited to perform at court from the beginning of the 16th century and public performances took place wherever a suitable space could be found—in large rooms of inns, in halls, or in quiet innyards enclosed on all sides with a temporary platform stage. Around the stage, the audience could gather while others looked out from the windows above. But such makeshift conditions only retarded the development of the drama and kept it on an amateurish level.

## **2.4 THE ELIZABETHAN THEATRE**

These conditions were considerably improved during Elizabeth's reign by the legitimizing in 1574 of regular weekday performances and the building of the first playhouse in 1576 by James Burbage. The new theatre called simply the Theatre was erected in London immediately outside the City boundary. Other theatres followed, including The Curtain, The Rose, The Swan, and The Globe, where most of Shakespeare's plays were first staged. Just as the Spanish playhouse reproduced the features of the corrale it had grown out of, so the Elizabethan playhouse followed the pattern of the improvised innyard theatre. It was an enclosed circular structure containing two or three galleries with benches or stools and had an unroofed space in the middle where spectators could stand on three sides of the raised platform stage. Behind the stage was a wall with curtained doors and, above this was actors' and musicians' gallery. Large number of people could be accommodated, and the price was kept low at between one penny and sixpence. This type of stage allowed for fluid movement and considerable intimacy between actors and audience, while its lack of scenery placed the emphasis firmly on the actor interpreting the playwright's words. Such sheer simplicity presented a superb challenge for the writer: the quality of both language and acting had to be good enough to hold the attention of the spectators and make them use their imaginations. This challenge was quickly taken up by a generation of playwrights who could carry forward the established dramatic forms and test the possibilities of the new stage. Christopher Marlowe was the

major innovator who developed a vigorous style of tragedy that was refined by his contemporary. William Shakespeare began writing for the theatre about 1590. At this time, professional companies operated under the patronage of a member of the nobility. In Shakespeare's company, the Chamberlain's Men, the actors owned their playhouse, prompt books, costumes, and properties, and they shared in the profits. Other companies paid rent to the patron and received salaries from him. There were very few rehearsals for a new play, and because the texts were not immediately printed (to avoid pirating by rival companies) each actor was usually given only his own lines, with the relevant cues, in manuscript form. No women appeared on the Elizabethan stage. The female roles were taken either by boy actors or, in the case of older women, by adult male comedians. As in Italy, all the actors had to be able to sing and dance and often to make their own music. The great actors of the day were Richard Burbage, who worked in Shakespeare's company, and Edward Alleyn, who was mainly associated with Ben Jonson. In spite of the fact that theatres like the Globe played to a cross section of London's populace, audiences seem to have been attentive and well behaved. An alternative to the outdoor public playhouse was the private indoor theatre. The first of these was an abandoned monastery near St. Paul's Cathedral. It was converted in 1576 by Richard Farrant and renamed the Blackfriars Theatre. Others included The Cockpit, The Salisbury Court, and the Whitefriars. Initially these theatres were closer to the Spanish model, with the bare stage across one end, an inner stage at the back, benches in front for the audience, and galleries all around. Later, they made use of more elaborate scenery and featured the Italian-style proscenium arch. Because of the reduced size of the audience, higher prices had to be charged, which excluded all except the wealthier and learned segment of the public. This in turn affected the style of writing. These private theatres were mostly used by boy companies that presented a more refined and artificial type of drama. One of their chief dramatists was John Lyly, though Ben Jonson wrote many of his plays for them. Growing rivalry between the boy and adult companies, exacerbated by hostility from the increasingly powerful Puritan movement, resulted in James I imposing even tighter controls and exercising heavy censorship on the theatre when he came to the throne in 1603.

## 2.5 THE SHAKESPEAREAN THEATRE

Before Shakespeare's time and during his boyhood, troupes of actors performed wherever they could in halls, courts, courtyards, and any other open spaces available. However, in 1574, when Shakespeare was ten years old, the Common Council passed a law requiring plays and theatres in London to be licensed. In 1576, actor and future Lord Chamberlain's Man, James Burbage, built the first permanent theater, called "The Theatre", outside London city walls. After this many more theatres were established, including the Globe Theatre. Elizabethan theatres were generally built after the design of the original Theatre. Built of wood, these theatres comprised three tiers of seats in a circular shape, with a stage area on one side of the circle. The audience's seats and part of the stage were roofed, but much of the main stage and the area in front of the stage in the center of the circle were open to the elements. About 1,500 audience members could pay extra money to sit in the covered seating areas, while about 800 "groundlings" paid less money to stand in this open area before the stage. The stage itself was divided into three levels: a main stage area with doors at the rear and a curtained area in the back for "discovery scenes"; an upper, canopied area called "heaven" for balcony scenes; and an area under the stage called "hell," accessed by a trap door in the stage. There were dressing rooms located behind the stage, but no curtain in the front of the stage, which meant that scenes had to flow into each other, and "dead bodies" had to be dragged off. Performances took place during the day, using natural light from the open center of the theater. Since there could be no dramatic lighting and there was very little scenery or props, audiences relied on the actors' lines and stage directions to supply the time of day and year, the weather, location, and mood of the scenes. Shakespeare's plays masterfully supply this information. For example, in *Hamlet* the audience learns within the first twenty lines of dialogue where the scene takes place ("Have you had quiet guard?"), what time of day it is ("Tis now strook twelf"), what the weather is like ("Tis bitter cold"), and what mood the characters are in ("and I am sick at heart"). One important difference between plays written in Shakespeare's time and those written today is that Elizabethan plays were published after their performances, sometimes even after their authors'

deaths. Those plays were in many ways a record of what happened on stage during these performances rather than directions for what should happen. Actors were allowed to suggest changes to scenes and dialogue and had much more freedom with their parts than actors today. Shakespeare's plays are no exception. In *Hamlet*, for instance, much of the plot revolves around the fact that Hamlet writes his own scene to be added to a play in order to ensnare his murderous father. Shakespeare's plays were published in various forms and with a wide variety of accuracy during his time. The discrepancies between versions of his plays from one publication to the next make it difficult for editors to put together authoritative editions of his works. Plays could be published in large anthologies called Folios (the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays contains 36 plays) or smaller Quartos. Folios were so named because of the way their paper was folded in half to make chunks of two pages each which were sewn together to make a large volume. Quartos were smaller, cheaper books containing only one play. Their paper was folded twice, making four pages. In general, the First Folio is of better quality than the quartos. Therefore, plays that are printed in the First Folio are much easier for editors to compile. Although Shakespeare's language and classical references seem archaic to some modern readers, they were commonplace to his audiences. His viewers came from all classes, and his plays appealed to all kinds of sensibilities, from "highbrow" accounts of kings and queens of old to the "lowbrow" blunderings of clowns and servants. Even his most tragic plays include clown characters for comic relief and to comment on the events of the play. Audiences would have been familiar with his numerous references to classical mythology and literature, since these stories were staples of the Elizabethan knowledge base. While Shakespeare's plays appealed to all levels of society and included familiar story lines and themes. They also expanded his audiences' vocabularies. Many phrases and words that we use today, like "amazement," "in my mind's eye," and "the milk of human kindness" have been coined by Shakespeare. His plays contain a greater variety and number of words than almost any other work in the English language. This indicates that he was quick to innovate. He had a huge vocabulary, and was interested in using new phrases and words.

## **2.6 DRAMA DURING THE REIGN OF JAMES I**

Although the Italian influence gradually became stronger in the early part of the 17th century, the English theatre was by then established and confident enough to take over foreign ideas without losing any of its individuality. Jonson became increasingly preoccupied with the dramatic unities, while other writers of the Jacobean period such as John Webster, Thomas Middleton, and John Ford favoured a more definite separation of comedy and tragedy than had been the case in Elizabethan drama. They were given to sensationalism in their revenge plays, finding inspiration in the darker moods of Seneca and often setting them in Italy. Meanwhile, at court the pastoral was finding new popularity, partly because it provided opportunities for spectacular scenery, and with it came the revival of the masque. The masque is a sumptuous allegorical entertainment combining poetry, music, dance, scenery, and extravagant costumes. As court poet, Ben Jonson collaborated with the architect and designer Inigo Jones to produce some of the finest examples of the masque. Having spent a few years in Italy, Jones was greatly influenced by the Italian painted scenery and its use of machinery. On his return to England he did much to bring scenic design up to date and introduced many innovations. Members of the court had thorough training in dancing, fencing, singing, instrumental music, and courtly ceremonial. They were therefore well prepared to perform in the masques, even to take solo parts and to appear in the chorus. Masques became even more elaborate under Charles I. In 1634 Jonson, however, angrily withdrew his contribution when he saw that the visual elements were completely overtaking the dramatic content. When the Civil War broke out in 1642, the Puritans closed all the theatres and forbade dramatic performances of any kind. This created an almost complete break in the acting tradition for 18 years until the Restoration of Charles II. Thereafter the theatre flourished once again though on quite different lines.

## **2.7. ABOUT *ROMEO AND JULIET***

*Romeo and Juliet* was first published in quarto in 1597, and republished in a new edition only two years later. The second copy was used to create yet a third quarto in 1609, from which both the 1623 Quarto and First Folio are

derived. The first quarto is generally considered a bad quarto, or an illicit copy created from the recollections of several actors. The second quarto seems to be taken from Shakespeare's rough draft, and thus has some inconsistent speech and preserved lines which Shakespeare apparently meant to cross out. *Romeo and Juliet* derives its story from several sources available during the sixteenth century. Shakespeare's primary source for the play is Arthur Brooke's *Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* (1562), which is a long, dense poem. This poem in turn was based on a French prose version written by Pierre Boiastuau (1559), who had used an Italian version by Bandello written in 1554. Bandello's poem was further derived from Luigi da Porto's version in 1525 of a story by Masuccio Salernitano (1476). Shakespeare's plot remains true to the Brooke's version in most details, with theatrical license taken in some instances. For example, as he often does, Shakespeare telescopes the events in the poem which takes ninety days into only a few days. He also depicts Juliet as much younger thirteen rather than sixteen, thus presenting a young girl who is suddenly awakened to love. One of the most powerful aspects of *Romeo and Juliet* is the language. The characters curse, vow oaths, banish each other, and generally play with the language through overuse of action verbs. In addition, the play is saturated with the use of oxymorons, puns, paradoxes, and double entendres. Even the use of names is called into question, with Juliet asking what is in the name Romeo that denies her the right to love him. Shakespeare uses the poetic form of sonnet to open the first and second acts. The sonnet usually is defined as being written from a lover to his beloved. Thus, Shakespeare's "misuse" of the prose ties into the actual tension of the play. The sonnet struggles to cover up the disorder and chaos which is immediately apparent in the first act. When the first sonnet ends, the stage is overrun with quarrelling men. However, the sonnet is also used by Romeo and Juliet in their first love scene, again in an unusual manner. It is spoken by both characters rather than only one of them. This strange form of sonnet is, however, successful, and even ends with a kiss. It is worthwhile to note the rather strong shift in language used by both Romeo and Juliet once they fall in love. Whereas Romeo is hopelessly normal in his courtship before

meeting Juliet, afterwards his language becomes infinitely richer and stronger. He is changed so much that the Mercutio remarks, "Now art thou sociable". The play also deals with the issue of authoritarian law and order. Many of Shakespeare's plays have characters who represent the unalterable force of the law like the Duke in *The Comedy of Errors* and Prince Escalus in *Romeo and Juliet*. In this play, the law attempts to stop the civil disorder and banishes Romeo at the midpoint. However, as in *The Comedy of Errors*, the law again seems to be a side issue which cannot compete with the much stronger emotions of love and hate.

## **2.8. SHORT SUMMARY OF *ROMEO AND JULIET***

The play is set in Verona, Italy, where a feud has broken out between the families of the Montagues and the Capulets. The servants of both houses open the play with a brawling/ fighting scene. It eventually draws in the noblemen of the families and the city officials, including Prince Escalus. Romeo is lamenting the fact that he is love with a woman named Rosaline. Rosaline has vowed to remain chaste for the rest of her life. He and his friend Benvolio happen to stumble across a servant of the Capulet's in the street. The servant, Peter, is trying to read a list of names of people invited to a masked party at the Capulet house that evening. Romeo helps him read the list and receives an invitation to the party. Romeo arrives at the party in costume and falls in love with Juliet the minute he sees her. However, he is recognized by Tybalt, Juliet's cousin. Tybalt wants to kill him on the spot. Capulet intervenes and tells Tybalt that he will not disturb the party for any amount of money. Romeo manages to approach Juliet and tell her that he loves her. She and he share a sonnet and finish it with a kiss. Juliet's Nurse tells Romeo who Juliet really is. He is upset when he finds out he loves the daughter of Capulet. Juliet likewise finds out who Romeo is, and she laments the fact that she is in love with her enemy. Soon thereafter Romeo climbs the garden wall leading to Juliet's garden. Juliet emerges on her balcony and speaks her private thoughts out loud, imagining herself alone. She wishes Romeo could shed his name and marry her. At this, Romeo appears and tells her that he loves her. She warns him to be true in his love to her, and makes him swear by his own self that

he truly loves her. Juliet then is called inside, but manages to return twice to call Romeo back to her. They agree that Juliet will send her Nurse to meet him at nine o'clock the next day, at which point Romeo will set a place for them to be married. The Nurse carries out her duty, and tells Juliet to meet Romeo at the chapel where Friar Laurence lives and works. Juliet goes to find Romeo, and together they are married by the Friar. Benvolio and Mercutio, a good friend of the Montagues, are waiting on the street when Tybalt arrives. Tybalt demands to know where Romeo is so that he can challenge him to duel in order that he would avenge Romeo's sneaking into the party. Mercutio is eloquently vague, but Romeo happens to arrive in the middle of the verbal bantering. Tybalt challenges him but Romeo passively resists fighting, at which point Mercutio jumps in and draws his sword on Tybalt. Romeo tries to block the two men, but Tybalt cuts Mercutio and runs away, only to return after he hears that Mercutio has died. Romeo fights with Tybalt and kills him. When Prince Escalus arrives at the murder scene he chooses to banish Romeo from Verona forever. The Nurse goes to tell Juliet the sad news about what has happened to Tybalt and Romeo. Juliet is heart-broken, but soon recovers when she realizes that Romeo would have been killed if he had not fought Tybalt. She sends the Nurse to find Romeo and give him her ring. Romeo comes that night and sleeps with Juliet. The next morning he is forced to leave at dusk when Juliet's mother arrives. Romeo goes to Mantua where he waits for someone to send news about Juliet or about his banishment. During the night, Capulet decides that Juliet should marry a young man named Paris. He and Lady Capulet go to tell Juliet that she should marry Paris, but when she refuses to obey Capulet becomes infuriated and orders her to comply with his orders. He then leaves, and is soon followed by Lady Capulet and the Nurse, whom Juliet throws out of the room, saying, "ancient damnation". Juliet then goes to Friar Laurence, who gives her a potion or medicine that will make her seem dead for at least two days. She takes the potion and drinks it that night. The next morning, the day Juliet is supposed to marry Paris, her Nurse finds her "dead" in bed. The whole house decries her suicide, and Friar Laurence makes them hurry to put her into the family vault. Romeo's servant arrives in Mantua and tells his master that Juliet is dead and buried. Romeo hurries back

to Verona. Friar Laurence discovers too late from Friar John that his message to Romeo has failed to be delivered. He rushes to get to Juliet's grave before Romeo does. Romeo arrives at the Capulet vault and finds it guarded by Paris, who is there to mourn the loss of his betrothed. Paris challenges Romeo to a duel, and is quickly killed. Romeo then carries Paris into the grave and sets his body down. Seeing Juliet dead within the tomb, Romeo drinks some poison he has purchased and dies kissing her. Friar Laurence arrives just as Juliet wakes up within the bloody vault. He tries to get her to come out, but when she sees Romeo dead beside her, Juliet takes his dagger and kills herself with it. The rest of the town starts to arrive, including Capulet and Montague. Friar Laurence tells them the whole story. The two family patriarchs agree to become friends by erecting golden statues of the other's child.

## **2.9 LET US SUM UP**

The unit covers the background information about the Elizabethan theatres including the theatres during the reigns of James I. The condition of theatres before and after Shakespeare has been discussed. It also speaks of the stages, scripts, sources of the plays and the audience. In the next part of the unit, *Romeo and Juliet* has been introduced and the plot summary of the play is retold so as to lead you to the next aspect of the play in the succeeding unit of this module.

## **2.10 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. Give an account of Elizabethan and Jacobean theatres.
2. Relate the story of the play *Romeo and Juliet* in your own words.

## **2.10 SUGGESTED READING**

- Chambers, E. K. *The Elizabethan Stage*. 4 Volumes, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1923.
- Gurr, Andrew. *The Shakespearean Stage 1574–1642*. Third edition, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

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- Keenan, Siobhan. *Travelling Players in Shakespeare's England*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Dawson, Anthony B. (2002). "International Shakespeare". In Wells, Stanley; Stanton, Sarah. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 174–193.
- Keenan, Siobhan. *Acting Companies and Their Plays in Shakespeare's London* (London: Arden, 2014).

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**COURSE No.111**

**DRAMA-I**

**LESSON No. 3**

**M.A. ENGLISH**

**UNIT - I**

**LITERARY AND INTELLECTUAL  
BACKGROUND OF DRAMA UPTO THE RESTORATION PERIOD**

## **THEATRE IN THE MIDDLE AGES**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Objectives
- 3.3 Theatre in the Early Middle Ages
- 3.4 Theatre in the Middle and Late Medieval Period
- 3.5 European Theatre and Drama in the Middle Ages
- 3.6 Medieval Drama : An Introduction to Middle English Plays
- 3.7 Decline of Medieval Theatre
- 3.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.9 Examination Oriented Questions
- 3.10 Suggested Reading

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

After the fall of the Roman Empire, small nomadic bands traveled around performing wherever there was an audience. They consisted of storytellers, jesters, jugglers and many other performers. Later, festivals cropped up where entertainers would show their talents. However, the powerful Catholic Church made headway during the Middle Ages to stamp out such performances and convert the entertainers.

Despite its insistence that acting and traveling performances were sinful, the Church was actually instrumental in reviving theatre in the Middle Ages. In one type of church service, called *The Hours*, Bible stories were dramatized. Music often would be incorporated into the dramatizations. The very first written-down liturgical drama or play is known as the *Regularis Concordia* by Ethelwold, Bishop of Winchester. The majority of performances were held in monasteries at the beginning of the age. Religious drama was performed exclusively in churches until around 1200 when they were performed outside on occasion.

One of the most popular of the Bible stories that were dramatized was the story of Mary visiting Christ's tomb to discover Christ's resurrection. Jesus' crucifixion, however, was rarely dramatized. Other stories that were often dramatized were Daniel in the lion's den, Lazarus raised from the dead, and the conversion of St. Paul.

### **3.2 OBJECTIVES**

After reading this lesson, you will be able to explain the background of theatre in the early, middle and later period of the Middle Ages. You will also be able to explain the condition of drama in Europe during this age. You will get an idea of the medieval plays and the decline of this medieval theatre.

### **3.3 THEATRE IN THE EARLY MIDDLE AGES**

In the early Middle Ages, churches began to stage dramatized versions of important biblical events. The churches were faced with explaining a new religion to a majorly illiterate population, so these dramas visualized what would later be able to be read in the Bible. These productions also celebrated annual religious events. These productions evolved into liturgical dramas. The earliest known liturgical drama is the *Easter trope, Whom do you Seek*, which dates circa 925. Liturgical drama did not involve actors impersonating characters, but it did involve singing by two groups.

An important playwright in early Medieval times was Hrotsvit, a historian and aristocratic canoness from northern Germany in the 10th century. Hrotsvit wrote

six plays which she modeled after Terence's comedies. Though Terence's comedies show ordinary human subjects and situations involving marriage, sex and love, Hrotsvit put a moral and religious spin on Terence's plays in order to avoid criticism from the church.

She wrote a preface to her collection of plays which stated that her purpose for writing was to save Christians from the guilt that reading Classical Literature instilled in its readers. She is the first recorded female playwright. She is also wrote the first identified Western dramatic works of the post-classical era. Her works were first published in 1501 and had a large influence on religious drama of the sixteenth century.

Following Hrotsvit was another female playwright, Hildegard of Bingen. Hildegard's most famous work, *Ordo Virtutum*, is regarded as the first play set to music, or the first musical play. Her songs were collected into a symphony, *Symphonia armoniae celestium revelationum*, that was set to words from Hildegard's own hymns, sequences and responsories.

Secular Latin plays were an important aspect in the 12th century in England and in France. Other early Medieval performances included mimes, minstrels, storytellers and jugglers who traveled in search of employment. There is not much information available about specific performances of these entertainers.

### **3.4 THEATRE IN THE MIDDLE AND LATE MEDIEVAL PERIOD**

Liturgical dramas spread across Europe and Russia throughout the Middle Ages. Muslim-occupied Spain was the only area in which liturgical dramas were not present. However, though there is a large presence of surviving liturgical dramas, most churches only performed one or two per year. Some churches performed none at all.

An important milestone in the development of comedy was the *Feast of Fools*. The Feast of Fools was a festival in which the lower clergy were allowed to mock the higher clergy as well as church life. Comic plays and burlesque skits sometimes filtered into the events of the festival as well. True comedy did not

exist until drama and the liturgy were separated, but the Feast of Fools undoubtedly had an effect on the incorporation of comedy into religious plays.

Religious plays began production outside of the church during the 12th century. The process began by merging shorter liturgical dramas into longer plays which were then performed by laymen rather than clergy. The plays were then accessible to more people which now included the working class. These plays were usually staged outdoors.

Plays in the Middle Medieval Period led to the growth of towns and formation of guilds. This also led to important changes politically and economically, and more significant changes in the late Medieval Period.

Plays were produced in over 120 different towns in the British Isles during the Middle Ages. These plays, most often Mystery plays, were written in large numbers. Some examples include the York plays (48 plays), Chester Plays (24) and Wakefield Plays (32). A large number of plays also survive from Germany and France. Common elements in these plays include devils and clowns.

Actors in plays in the late Middle Ages were usually laymen from the town's local population. Plays at this time were staged on wheeled platforms which were used to move scenery. These stages were called pageant wagon stages, and were convenient for location changes. Playhouses were not a common occurrence. Contrary to popular belief, both sexes performed in plays in some European countries in the late Middle Ages. However, in England plays were performed by all-male casts.

Professional actors became more prevalent towards the end of the Middle Ages throughout Europe. Both Richard III and Henry VII kept small acting troupes. These actors performed plays in a nobleman's residence. Mummers' plays were also important events.

### **3.5 EUROPEAN THEATRE AND DRAMA IN THE MIDDLE AGES**

In the staging of liturgical drama there were many conventions used in the church. Small scenic structures called mansions were used to illustrate the

surroundings of a play. Small plays had only one mansion, longer plays had two or more. Costumes for liturgical drama were church clothing to which real or symbolic accessories were added. Most of the lines of the drama were chanted in Latin rather than spoken.

It was late in Middle Ages when religious plays were performed outside the churches. This seemingly small step opened the door for many other more significant changes in medieval drama. With the formation of guilds, the growth of towns, and a decline in feudalism, theatre had great opportunities to flower. Between the years 1200 to 1350 vernacular plays took over the number one spot previously taken by liturgical plays.

Many plays were performed outdoors during the spring and summer months. Cycle plays also became popular. The cycle plays were composed of many short plays or episodes and could or could not be religious. Cycle plays could take a few hours or 25 or more days to perform. The cycle plays varied but usually all dealt with religious figures, biblical writings of the church and sermons of the church. The plays had little sense of chronology, and most of their authors were anonymous.

Around the end of the 14th century the church was controlling less and less of the production of plays, but it always kept an eye on the contents of plays and their presentation. Sometimes towns would put on shows, but often individuals would arrange a production. The church always reserved the right to approve or disapprove a script before it became a production.

Directors emerged to handle the sometimes large number of actors, special effects, and money that would be put into productions. Sometimes a committee of overseers was put together to stage productions. These overseers would have duties such as directing the erection of the stage, constructing seating for the audience, casting and rehearsing the actors, working with actors on refining roles, assigning people to take up money at the door, and addressing the audience at the beginning and end of the play.

Actors and the number needed changed for each play. For instance, the cycle plays needed as many as 300 actors. Most actors were found in the local area where directors would hold auditions. Most of the time the actors were boys or

men, but in France women were occasionally allowed to act. Often an actor would have multiple roles in a show.

The morality play was a special play much like the cycle plays which centered around men's continuous struggle between good and evil. One of the most influential morality plays was *Romance of the Rose*. This play had characters such as Slander, Danger, and Fair Welcome. Another interesting morality play which was written in 1425 was the *Castle of Perseverance* which depicted mankind's progress from birth to death and showed the final judgment.

### **3.6 MEDIEVAL DRAMA : AN INTRODUCTION TO MIDDLE ENGLISH PLAYS**

#### **FOLK PLAYS**

In England the folk-plays, throughout the Middle Ages and in remote spots down almost to the present time, sometimes took the form of energetic dances (Morris dances, they came to be called, through confusion with Moorish performances of the same general nature).

Others of them, however, exhibited in the midst of much rough-and-tumble fighting and buffoonery, a slight thread of dramatic action. Their characters gradually came to be a conventional set, partly famous figures of popular tradition, such as St. George, Robin Hood, Maid Marian, and the Green Dragon.

Other offshoots of the folk-play were the 'mummings' and 'disguisings,' collective names for many forms of processions, shows, and other entertainments, such as, among the upper classes, that precursor of the Elizabethan Mask in which a group of persons in disguise, invited or uninvited, attended a formal dancing party. In the later part of the Middle Ages, also, there were the secular pageants, spectacular displays (rather different from those of the twentieth century) given on such occasions as when a king or other person of high rank made formal entry into a town. They consisted of an elaborate scenic background set up near the city gate or on the street, with figures from allegorical or traditional history who engaged in some pantomime or declamation, but with very little dramatic dialog, or none.

But all these forms, though they were not altogether without later influence, were very minor affairs, and the real drama of the Middle Ages grew up, without design and by the mere nature of things, from the regular services of the Church.

### **TROPES, LITURGICAL PLAYS, AND MYSTERY PLAYS.**

We must try in the first place to realize clearly the conditions under which the church service, the mass, was conducted during all the medieval centuries. We should picture to ourselves congregations of persons for the most part grossly ignorant, of unquestioning though very superficial faith, and of emotions easily aroused to fever heat. Of the Latin words of the service they understood nothing; and of the Bible story they had only a very general impression. It was necessary, therefore, that the service should be given a strongly spectacular and emotional character, and to this end no effort was spared. The great cathedrals and churches were much the finest buildings of the time, spacious with lofty pillars and shadowy recesses, rich in sculptured stone and in painted windows that cast on the walls and pavements soft and glowing patterns of many colours and shifting forms. The service itself was in great part musical, the confident notes of the full choir joining with the resonant organ-tones; and after all the rest the richly robed priests and ministrants passed along the aisles in stately processions enveloped in fragrant clouds of incense. That the eye if not the ear of the spectator, also, might catch some definite knowledge, the priests as they read the Bible stories sometimes displayed painted rolls which vividly pictured the principal events of the day's lesson.

Still, however, a lack was strongly felt, and at last, accidentally and slowly, began the process of dramatizing the services. First, inevitably, to be so treated was the central incident of Christian faith, the story of Christ's resurrection. The earliest steps were very simple. First, during the ceremonies on Good Friday, the day when Christ was crucified, the cross which stood all the year above the altar, bearing the Savior's figure, was taken down and laid beneath the altar, a dramatic symbol of the Death and Burial; and two days later, on 'the third day' of the Bible phraseology, that is on Easter Sunday, as the story of the Resurrection was chanted by the choir, the cross was uncovered and replaced, amid the rejoicings of the

congregation. Next, and before the Norman Conquest, the Gospel dialog between the angel and the three Marys at the tomb of Christ came sometimes to be chanted by the choir in those responses which are called “tropes”:

*Whom seek ye in the sepulcher, O Christians?  
Jesus of Nazareth the crucified, O angel.  
He is not here; he has arisen as he said. Go,  
announce that he has risen from the sepulcher.’*

After this a little dramatic action was introduced almost as a matter of course. One priest dressed in white robes sat, to represent the angel, by one of the square-built tombs near the junction of nave and transept, and three others, personating the Marys, advanced slowly towards him while they chanted their portion of the same dialog. As the last momentous words of the angel died away a jubilant ‘Te Deum’ burst from, organ and choir, and every member of the congregation exulted, often with sobs, in the great triumph which brought salvation to every Christian soul.

Little by little, probably, as time passed, this Easter scene was further enlarged, in part by additions from the closing incidents of the Savior’s life. A similar treatment, too, was being given to the Christmas scene, still more humanly beautiful, of his birth in the manger, and occasionally the two scenes might be taken from their regular places in the service, combined, and presented at any season of the year. Other Biblical scenes, as well, came to be enacted, and, further, there were added stories from Christian tradition, such as that of Antichrist, and, on their particular days, the lives of Christian saints. Thus far these compositions are called Liturgical Plays, because they formed, in general, a part of the church service (liturgy). But as some of them were united into extended groups and as the interest of the congregation deepened, the churches began to seem too small and inconvenient, the excited audiences forgot the proper reverence, and the performances were transferred to the churchyard, and then, when the gravestones proved troublesome, to the market place, the village-green, or any convenient field. By this time the people had ceased to be patient with the unintelligible Latin, and it was replaced at first, perhaps, and in part, by French, but finally by English;

though probably verse was always retained as more appropriate than prose to the sacred subjects. Then, the religious spirit yielding inevitably in part to that of merrymaking, minstrels and mountebanks began to flock to the celebrations; and regular fairs, even, grew up about them. Gradually, too, the priests lost their hold even on the plays themselves; skilful actors from among the laymen began to take many of the parts; and at last in some towns the trade-guilds, or unions of the various handicrafts, which had secured control of the town governments, assumed entire charge.

These changes, very slowly creeping in, one by one, had come about in most places by the beginning of the fourteenth century. In 1311 a new impetus was given to the whole ceremony by the establishment of the late spring festival of Corpus Christi, a celebration of the doctrine of transubstantiation. On this occasion, or sometimes on some other festival, it became customary for the guilds to present an extended series of the plays, a series which together contained the essential substance of the Christian story, and therefore of the Christian faith. The Church generally still encouraged attendance, and not only did all the townspeople join wholeheartedly, but from all the country round the peasants flocked in. On one occasion the Pope promised the remission of a thousand days of purgatory to all persons who should be present at the Chester plays, and to this exemption the bishop of Chester added sixty days more.

The list of plays thus presented commonly included: The Fall of Lucifer; the Creation of the World and the Fall of Adam; Noah and the Flood; Abraham and Isaac and the promise of Christ's coming; a Procession of the Prophets, also foretelling Christ; the main events of the Gospel story, with some additions from Christian tradition; and the Day of Judgment. The longest cycle now known, that at York, contained, when fully developed, fifty plays, or perhaps even more. Generally each play was presented by a single guild (though sometimes two or three guilds or two or three plays might be combined), and sometimes, though not always, there was a special fitness in the assignment, as when the watermen gave the play of Noah's Ark or the bakers that of the Last Supper. In this connected form the plays are called the Mystery or Miracle Cycles. In many places, however,

detached plays, or groups of plays smaller than the full cycles, continued to be presented at one season or another.

Each cycle as a whole, it will be seen, has a natural epic unity, centering about the majestic theme of the spiritual history and the final judgment of all Mankind. But unity both of material and of atmosphere suffers not only from the diversity among the separate plays but also from the violent intrusion of the comedy and the farce which the coarse taste of the audience demanded. Sometimes, in the later period, altogether original and very realistic scenes from actual English life were added, like the very clever but very coarse parody on the Nativity play in the 'Towneley' cycle. More often comic treatment was given to the Bible scenes and characters themselves. Noah's wife, for example, came regularly to be presented as a shrew, who would not enter the ark until she had been beaten into submission; and Herod always appears as a blustering tyrant, whose fame still survives in a proverb of Shakespeare's coinage—'to out-Herod Herod.'

The manner of presentation of the cycles varied much in different towns. Sometimes the entire cycle was still given, like the detached plays, at a single spot, the market-place or some other central square; but often, to accommodate the great crowds, there were several 'stations' at convenient intervals. In the latter case each play might remain all day at a particular station and be continuously repeated as the crowd moved slowly by; but more often it was the, spectators who remained, and the plays, mounted on movable stages, the 'pageant'-wagons, were drawn in turn by the guild-apprentices from one station to another. When the audience was stationary, the common people stood in the square on all sides of the stage, while persons of higher rank or greater means were seated on temporary wooden scaffolds or looked down from the windows of the adjacent houses.

In the construction of the 'pageant' all the little that was possible was done to meet the needs of the presentation. Below the main floor, or stage, was the curtained dressing-room of the actors; and when the play required, on one side was attached 'Hell-Mouth,' a great and horrible human head, whence issued flames and fiendish cries, often the fiends themselves, and into which lost sinners were

violently hurled. On the stage the scenery was necessarily very simple. A small raised platform or pyramid might represent Heaven, where God the Father was seated, and from which as the action required the angels came down; a single tree might indicate the Garden of Eden; and a doorway an entire house. In partial compensation the costumes were often elaborate, with all the finery of the church wardrobe and much of those of the wealthy citizens. The expense accounts of the guilds, sometimes luckily preserved, furnish many picturesque and amusing items, such as these: 'Four pair of angels' wings, 2 shillings and 8 pence.' 'For mending of hell head, 6 pence.' 'Item, link for setting the world on fire.' Apparently women never acted; men and boys took the women's parts. All the plays of the cycle were commonly performed in a single day, beginning, at the first station, perhaps as early as five o'clock in the morning; but sometimes three days or even more were employed. To the guilds the giving of the plays was a very serious matter. Often each guild had a 'pageant-house' where it stored its 'properties,' and a pageant-master who trained the actors and imposed substantial fines on members remiss in cooperation.

We have said that the plays were always composed in verse. The stanza forms employed differ widely even within the same cycle, since the single plays were very diverse in both authorship and dates. The quality of the verse, generally mediocre at the outset, has often suffered much in transmission from generation to generation. In other respects also there are great contrasts; sometimes the feeling and power of a scene are admirable, revealing an author of real ability, sometimes there is only crude and wooden amateurishness. The medieval lack of historic sense gives to all the plays the setting of the authors' own times; Roman officers appear as feudal knights; and all the heathens (including the Jews) are Saracens, worshippers of 'Mahound' and 'Termagaunt'; while the good characters, however long they may really have lived before the Christian era, swear stoutly by St. John and St. Paul and the other medieval Christian divinities. The frank coarseness of the plays is often merely disgusting, and suggests how superficial, in most cases, was the medieval religious sense. With no thought of incongruity, too, these writers brought God the Father onto the stage in bodily form, and then, attempting in all sincerity

to show him reverence, gilded his face and put into his mouth long speeches of exceedingly tedious declamation. The whole emphasis, as generally in the religion of the times, was on the fear of hell rather than on the love of righteousness. Yet in spite of everything grotesque and inconsistent, the plays no doubt largely fulfilled their religious purpose and exercised on the whole an elevating influence. The humble submission of the boy Isaac to the will of God and of his earthly father, the yearning devotion of Mary the mother of Jesus, and the infinite love and pity of the tortured Christ himself, must have struck into even callous hearts for at least a little time some genuine consciousness of the beauty and power of the finer and higher life. A literary form which supplied much of the religious and artistic nourishment of half a continent for half a thousand years cannot be lightly regarded or dismissed.

### **THE MORALITY PLAYS**

The Mystery Plays seem to have reached their greatest popularity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In the dawning light of the Renaissance and the modern spirit they gradually waned, though in exceptional places and in special revivals they did not altogether cease to be given until the seventeenth century. On the Continent of Europe, indeed, they still survive, after a fashion, in a single somewhat modernized form, the celebrated Passion Play of Oberammergau. In England by the end of the fifteenth century they had been for the most part replaced by a kindred species which had long been growing up beside them, namely the Morality Plays.

The Morality Play probably arose in part from the desire of religious writers to teach the principles of Christian living in a more direct and compact fashion than was possible through the Bible stories of the Mysteries. In its strict form the Morality Play was a dramatized moral allegory. It was in part an offshoot from the Mysteries, in some of which there had appeared among the actors abstract allegorical figures, either good or bad, such as The Seven Deadly Sins, Contemplation, and Raise-Slander. In the Moralities the majority of the characters are of this sort—though not to the exclusion of supernatural persons such as God and the Devil—

and the hero is generally a type-figure standing for all Mankind. For the control of the hero the two definitely opposing groups of Virtues and Vices contend; the commonest type of Morality presents in brief glimpses the entire story of the hero's life, that is of the life of every man. It shows how he yields to temptation and lives for the most part in reckless sin, but at last in spite of all his flippancy and folly is saved by Perseverance and Repentance, pardoned through God's mercy, and assured of salvation.

As compared with the usual type of Mystery plays the Moralities had for the writers this advantage, that they allowed some independence in the invention of the story; and how powerful they might be made in the hands of a really gifted author has been finely demonstrated in our own time by the stage-revival of the best of them, 'Everyman' (which is probably a translation from a Dutch original). In most cases, however, the spirit of medieval allegory proved fatal, the genuinely abstract characters are mostly shadowy and unreal, and the speeches of the Virtues are extreme examples of intolerable sanctimonious declamation. Against this tendency, on the other hand, the persistent instinct for realism provided a partial antidote; the Vices are often very lifelike rascals, abstract only in name. In these cases the whole plays become vivid studies in contemporary low life, largely human and interesting except for their prolixity and the coarseness which they inherited from the Mysteries and multiplied on their own account. During the Reformation period, in the early sixteenth century, the character of the Moralities, more strictly so called, underwent something of a change, and they were—sometimes made the vehicle for religious argument, especially by Protestants.

### **THE INTERLUDES**

Early in the sixteenth century, the Morality in its turn was largely superseded by another sort of play called the Interlude. But just as in the case of the Mystery and the Morality, the Interlude developed out of the Morality, and the two cannot always be distinguished, some single plays being distinctly described by the authors as 'Moral Interludes.' In the Interludes the realism of the Moralities became still more pronounced, so that the typical Interlude is nothing more than a coarse farce,

with no pretense at religious or ethical meaning. The name Interlude denotes literally 'a play between,' but the meaning intended (between whom or what) is uncertain. The plays were given sometimes in the halls of nobles and gentlemen, either when banquets were in progress or on other festival occasions; sometimes before less select audiences in the town halls or on village greens. The actors were sometimes strolling companies of players, who might be minstrels 'or rustics, and were sometimes also retainers of the great nobles, allowed to practice their dramatic ability on tours about the country when they were not needed for their masters' entertainment. In the Interlude-Moralities and Interludes first appears The Vice, a rogue who sums up in himself all the Vices of the older Moralities and serves as the buffoon. One of his most popular exploits was to belabor the Devil about the stage with a wooden dagger, a habit which took a great hold on the popular imagination, as numerous references in later literature testify. Transformed by time, the Vice appears in the Elizabethan drama, and thereafter, as the clown.

### **THE LATER INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIEVAL DRAMA**

The various dramatic forms from the tenth century to the middle of the sixteenth at which we have thus hastily glanced—folk-plays, mummings and disguisings, secular pageants, Mystery plays, Moralities, and Interludes—have little but a historical importance. But besides demonstrating the persistence of the popular demand for drama, they exerted a permanent influence in that they formed certain stage traditions which were to modify or largely control the great drama of the Elizabethan period and to some extent of later times. Among these traditions were the disregard for unity, partly of action, but especially of time and place; the mingling of comedy with even the intense scenes of tragedy; the nearly complete lack of stage scenery, with a resultant willingness in the audience to make the largest possible imaginative assumptions; the presence of certain stock figures, such as the clown; and the presentation of women's parts by men and boys. The plays, therefore, must be reckoned with in dramatic history.

### **3.7 DECLINE OF MEDIEVAL THEATRE**

A change in interests among popular culture, a change in patronage to the

theater, and the establishment of playhouses signified the death of the theatre in the Middle Ages. The interest in religious plays was replaced by a renewed interest in Roman and Greek culture. Roman and Greek plays began to be performed, and plays that were written began to be influenced by Greek and Roman classics.

Changes in the theater were also caused by the support of nobility and monarchs. When the upper class began to support non-religious professional theater troupes, religious theater as a whole began to decline. The tastes of the nobility filtered down to the lower classes. The construction of permanent playhouses was also a contributing factor to the downfall of Medieval Theater.

Because players no longer had to rely on churches and inns for staging, more creative storytelling and staging options were now available. Productions now had a more professional quality and thus a wider audience appeal.

### **3.8 LET US SUM UP**

Theatre in the Middle ages covered a wide variety of genres and subject matter. Some of the most popular genres of plays in the Middle Ages include morality plays, farces, masques and drama. Medieval drama began with religious and moral themed plays. An early prominent Medieval playwright was Hrotsvit of Gardensheim of the 10th century. Some other famous examples of Medieval plays include the N-Town plays, the morality play, Everyman, Hildegard of Bingen's play set to music, OrdoVirtutum. The early Medieval period provides few surviving records of Medieval plays due to the low literacy rate of the general population. The clergy was also opposed to some types of performance. Drama began to thrive in the late medieval period, and more records of performances and plays exist from this time.

### **3.9 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. What do you understand by Middle Ages?
2. Discuss the European theatre during the medieval period.
3. What are the chief characteristics of the drama of this period?

4. What are folk, mystery and miracle plays?
5. What are Tropes, Liturgical and Morality plays?
6. What are interludes?
7. How did the medieval theatre decline?

### **3.10 SUGGESTED READING**

- Chambers, E. K. *The Elizabethan Stage*. 4 Volumes, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1923.
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**COURSE No.111  
M.A. ENGLISH**

**DRAMA-I**

**LESSON No. 4  
UNIT - I**

**LITERARY AND INTELLECTUAL  
BACKGROUND OF DRAMA UPTO THE JACOBAN AGE**

**RENAISSANCE DRAMA**

**STRUCTURE**

- 4.1 Introduction
  - 4.1.1 The Great Chain of Being
  - 4.1.2 Political Implications of the Chain of Being
  - 4.1.3 Humanism
  - 4.1.4 Imitation
  - 4.1.5 The Protestant Reformation
  - 4.1.6 Literary Ramifications
- 4.2 Objectives
- 4.3 The Elizabethan and Jacobean Ages
  - 4.3.1 Contradictions and Set of Oppositions
  - 4.3.2 Literary Tendencies
- 4.4 Offshoots of Renaissance Drama
- 4.5 Major Poets of this Age
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Examination Oriented Questions
- 4.8 Suggested Reading

## 4.1 INTRODUCTION

“Renaissance” literally means “rebirth.” It refers especially to the rebirth of learning that began in Italy in the fourteenth century, spread to the north, including England, by the sixteenth century, and ended in the north in the mid-seventeenth century. During this period, there was an enormous renewal of interest in and study of classical antiquity. Yet the Renaissance was more than a “rebirth.” It was also an age of new discoveries, both geographical (exploration of the New World) and intellectual. Both kinds of discovery resulted in changes of tremendous importance for Western civilization. In science, for example, Copernicus (1473-1543) attempted to prove that the sun rather than the earth was at the center of the planetary system, thus radically altering the cosmic world view that had dominated antiquity and the Middle Ages. In religion, Martin Luther (1483-1546) challenged and ultimately caused the division of one of the major institutions that had united Europe throughout the Middle Ages—the Church. In fact, Renaissance thinkers often thought of themselves as ushering in the modern age, as distinct from the ancient and medieval eras. Study of the Renaissance might well center on five interrelated issues. First, although Renaissance thinkers often tried to associate themselves with classical antiquity and to dissociate themselves from the Middle Ages, important continuities with their recent past, such as belief in the Great Chain of Being, were still much in evidence. Second, during this period, certain significant political changes were taking place. Third, some of the noblest ideals of the period were best expressed by the movement known as Humanism. Fourth, and connected to Humanist ideals, was the literary doctrine of “imitation,” important for its ideas about how literary works should be created. Finally, what later probably became an even more far-reaching influence, both on literary creation and on modern life in general, was the religious movement known as the Reformation. Renaissance thinkers strongly associated themselves with the values of classical antiquity, particularly as expressed in the newly rediscovered classics of literature, history, and moral philosophy. Conversely, they tended to dissociate themselves from works written in the Middle Ages, a historical period they looked upon rather negatively. According to them, the Middle Ages were set in the “middle” of two much more valuable historical periods, antiquity and their own. Nevertheless, as

modern scholars have noted, extremely important continuities with the previous age still existed.

#### **4.1.1 The Great Chain of Being**

Among the most important of the continuities with the Classical period was the concept of the Great Chain of Being. Its major premise was that every existing thing in the universe had its “place” in a divinely planned hierarchical order, which was pictured as a chain vertically extended. (“Hierarchical” refers to an order based on a series of higher and lower, strictly ranked gradations.) An object’s “place” depended on the relative proportion of “spirit” and “matter” it contained—the less “spirit” and the more “matter,” the lower down it stood. At the bottom, for example, stood various types of inanimate objects, such as metals, stones, and the four elements (earth, water, air, fire). Higher up were various members of the vegetative class, like trees and flowers. Then came animals; then humans; and then angels. At the very top was God. Then within each of these large groups, there were other hierarchies. For example, among metals, gold was the noblest and stood highest; lead had less “spirit” and more matter and so stood lower. (Alchemy was based on the belief that lead could be changed to gold through an infusion of “spirit.”) The various species of plants, animals, humans, and angels were similarly ranked from low to high within their respective segments. Finally, it was believed that between the segments themselves, there was continuity (shellfish were lowest among animals and shaded into the vegetative class, for example, because without locomotion, they almost resembled plants). Besides universal orderliness, there was universal interdependence. This was implicit in the doctrine of “correspondences,” which held that different segments of the chain reflected other segments. For example, Renaissance thinkers viewed a human being as a microcosm (literally, a “little world”) that reflected the structure of the world as a whole, the macrocosm; just as the world was composed of four “elements” (earth, water, air, fire), so too was the human body composed of four substances called “humours,” with characteristics corresponding to the four elements. (Illness occurred when there was an imbalance or “disorder” among the humours, that is, when they did not exist in proper proportion to each other.) “Correspondences” existed everywhere, on many levels. Thus the hierarchical organization of the mental faculties was also

thought of as reflecting the hierarchical order within the family, the state, and the forces of nature. When things were properly ordered, reason ruled the emotions, just as a king ruled his subjects, the parent ruled the child, and the sun governed the planets. But when disorder was present in one realm, it was correspondingly reflected in other realms. For example, in Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the simultaneous disorder in family relationships and in the state (child ruling parent, subject ruling king) is reflected in the disorder of Lear's mind (the loss of reason) as well as in the disorder of nature (the raging storm). Lear even equates his loss of reason to "a tempest in my mind." Though Renaissance writers seemed to be quite on the side of "order," the theme of "disorder" is much in evidence, suggesting that the age may have been experiencing some growing discomfort with traditional hierarchies. According to the chain of being concept, all existing things have their precise place and function in the universe, and to depart from one's proper place was to betray one's nature. Human beings, for example, were pictured as placed between the beasts and the angels. To act against human nature by not allowing reason to rule the emotions—was to descend to the level of the beasts. In the other direction, to attempt to go above one's proper place, as Eve did when she was tempted by Satan, was to court disaster. Yet Renaissance writers at times showed ambivalence towards such a rigidly organized universe. For example, the Italian philosopher Pico della Mirandola, in a work entitled *On the Dignity of Man*, exalted human beings as capable of rising to the level of the angels through philosophical contemplation. Also, some Renaissance writers were fascinated by the thought of going beyond boundaries set by the chain of being. A major example was the title character of Christopher Marlowe's play *Doctor Faustus*. Simultaneously displaying the grand spirit of human aspiration and the more questionable hunger for superhuman powers, Faustus seems in the play to be both exalted and punished. Marlowe's drama, in fact, has often been seen as the embodiment of Renaissance ambiguity in this regard, suggesting both its fear of and its fascination with pushing beyond human limitations.

#### **4.1.2 Political Implications of the Chain of Being**

The fear of "disorder" was not merely philosophical—it had significant political

ramifications. The proscription against trying to rise beyond one's place was of course useful to political rulers, for it helped to reinforce their authority. The implication was that civil rebellion caused the chain to be broken, and according to the doctrine of correspondences, this would have dire consequences in other realms. It was a sin against God, at least wherever rulers claimed to rule by "Divine Right." (And in England, the King was also the head of the Anglican Church.) In Shakespeare, it was suggested that the sin was of cosmic proportions: civil disorders were often accompanied by meteoric disturbances in the heavens. (Before Halley's theory about periodic orbits, comets, as well as meteors, were thought to be disorderly heavenly bodies.) The need for strong political rule was in fact very significant, for the Renaissance had brought an end for the most part to feudalism, the medieval form of political organization. The major political accomplishment of the Renaissance, perhaps, was the establishment of effective central government, not only in the north but in the south as well. Northern Europe saw the rise of national monarchies headed by kings, especially in England and France. Italy saw the rise of the territorial city-state often headed by wealthy oligarchic families. Not only did the chain of being concept provide a rationale for the authority of such rulers; it also suggested that there was ideal behaviour that was appropriate to their place in the order of things. It is no wonder then that much Renaissance literature is concerned with the ideals of kingship, with the character and behaviour of rulers, as in Machiavelli's *Prince* or Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Other ideals and values that were represented in the literature were even more significant. It was the intellectual movement known as Humanism that may have expressed most fully the values of the Renaissance and made a lasting contribution to our own culture.

#### **4.1.3 Humanism**

A common oversimplification of Humanism suggests that it gave renewed emphasis to life in this world instead of to the otherworldly, spiritual life associated with the Middle Ages. Oversimplified as it is, there is nevertheless truth to the idea that Renaissance Humanists placed great emphasis upon the dignity of man and upon the expanded possibilities of human life in this world. For the most part, it regarded human beings as social creatures who could create meaningful lives only

in association with other social beings. In the terms used in the Renaissance itself, Humanism represented a shift from the “contemplative life” to the “active life.” In the Middle Ages, great value had often been attached to the life of contemplation and religious devotion, away from the world (though this ideal applied to only a small number of people). In the Renaissance, the highest cultural values were usually associated with active involvement in public life, in moral, political, and military action, and in service to the state. Of course, the traditional religious values coexisted with the new secular values; in fact, some of the most important Humanists, like Erasmus, were Churchmen. Also, individual achievement, breadth of knowledge, and personal aspiration (as personified by Doctor Faustus) were valued. The concept of the “Renaissance Man” refers to an individual who, in addition to participating actively in the affairs of public life, possesses knowledge of and skill in many subject areas. (Such figures included Leonardo Da Vinci and John Milton, as well as Francis Bacon, who had declared, “I have taken all knowledge to be my province.”) Nevertheless, individual aspiration was not the major concern of Renaissance Humanists, who focused rather on teaching people how to participate in and rule a society (though only the nobility and some members of the middle class were included in this ideal). Overall, in consciously attempting to revive the thought and culture of classical antiquity, perhaps the most important value the Humanists extracted from their studies of classical literature, history, and moral philosophy was the social nature of humanity.

#### **4.1.4 Imitation**

Another concept derived from the classical past (though it was present in the Middle Ages too), was the literary doctrine of “imitation.” Of the two senses in which the term had traditionally been used, the theoretical emphasis of Renaissance literary critics was less on the “imitation” that meant “mirroring life” and more on the “imitation” that meant “following predecessors.” In contrast to our own emphasis on “originality,” the goal was not to create something entirely new. To a great extent, contemporary critics believed that the great literary works expressing definitive moral values had already been written in classical antiquity. Theoretically, then, it was the task of the writer to translate for present readers the moral vision of the past, and they were to do this by “imitating” great works, adapting them

to a Christian perspective and milieu. (Writers of the Middle Ages also practiced “imitation” in this sense, but did not have as many classical models to work from.) Of course Renaissance literary critics made it clear that such “imitation” was to be neither mechanical nor complete: writers were to capture the spirit of the originals, mastering the best models, learning from them, then using them for their own purposes. Nevertheless, despite the fact that there were a great many comments by critics about “imitation” in this sense, it was not the predominant practice of many of the greatest writers. For them, the faithful depiction of human behaviour—what Shakespeare called holding the mirror up to nature—was paramount, and therefore “imitation” in the mimetic sense was more often the common practice. The doctrine of “imitation” of ancient authors did have one very important effect: since it recommended not only the imitation of specific classical writers, but also the imitation of classical genres, there was a revival of significant literary forms. Among the most popular that were derived from antiquity were epic and satire. Even more important were the dramatic genres of comedy and tragedy. In fact, Europe at this time experienced a golden age of theater, led by great dramatists such as Shakespeare.

#### **4.1.5 The Protestant Reformation**

Finally, as it developed during the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation was a movement that had profound implications, not only for the modern world in general, but specifically for literary history. Just as Renaissance Humanists rejected medieval learning, the Reformation seemed to reject the medieval form of Christianity. (It should be noted, however, that both Catholics and Protestants were Humanists, though often with different emphases.) In the early sixteenth century, the German monk Martin Luther reacted against Church corruption, the sort depicted, for example, by Chaucer in the *Canterbury Tales*. Many Catholics like Erasmus wanted to reform the Church from within. However, Luther’s disagreements with Church policy ultimately led him to challenge some of the most fundamental doctrines of the Church, which in turn led him and his followers to break away from the Catholic Church in protest; hence they were known as Protestants. The Reformation had significant political ramifications, for it split Europe into Protestant and Catholic countries which often went to war with each

other during this period. Protestantism broke up the institution that had for so long unified all Europe under the Pope (though there were also national struggles with the Papacy that had little to do with Protestantism). Among the most important tenets of Protestantism was the rejection of the Pope as spiritual leader. A closely related Protestant doctrine was the rejection of the authority of the Church and its priests to mediate between human beings and God. Protestants believed that the Church as an institution could not grant salvation; only through a direct personal relationship with God—achieved by reading the *Bible*—could the believer be granted such. Many scholars argue that this emphasis on a personal, individual connection with God spawned the modern emphasis on individualism in those cultures affected by Protestantism. On the other hand, some Protestants also believed that after the Fall of Adam in Eden, human nature was totally corrupted as far as human spiritual capabilities were concerned. (Early Protestantism's emphasis on human depravity distinguishes it sharply from Renaissance Humanism.) Humans therefore are incapable of contributing to their salvation, for instance through good deeds; it could only be achieved through faith in God's grace. Overall, there is a good deal of ambivalence regarding many of the Protestant positions, and in fact the disagreement among the many Christian sects may be precisely what distinguishes Renaissance from Medieval religion.

#### **4.1.6 Literary Ramifications**

Among the literary ramifications of the Reformation, two stand out. First, the Protestant rejection of the authority of Church representatives resulted in placing that authority entirely on the *Bible*, at least in theory. Consequently, Protestants stressed the need for all believers to read the *Bible* for themselves. To help make that possible, they were active in translating the *Bible* into the vernacular languages so that all laymen could read it. This practice was opposed by the Catholic Church, which insisted on preserving the *Bible* in Latin. At the same time, Protestants also stressed the need to understand the *Bible* in its original languages (Hebrew and Greek) so that it could be properly translated. In their interest in such learning, particularly of ancient languages, Protestants were similar to Humanists. This emphasis on the *Bible* had a significant impact on literature because the *Bible* became a renewed source of literary inspiration, both in literary form and subject

matter; it also became a rich source of symbols. The other way the Reformation impacted on literature was perhaps more subtle, and the effects did not appear till much later in literary history. Certainly the emphasis on inner feeling found later in the Romantic Movement received at least some of its inspiration and reinforcement from the religious thrust of the Protestant Reformation. English Renaissance theatre, also known as early modern English theatre, or (commonly) as Elizabethan theatre, refers to the theatre of England between 1562 and 1642. This is the style of the plays of William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson. It is considered to be the most brilliant period in the history of English theatre. English Renaissance theatre encompasses the period between 1562 (performance at the Inner Temple during the Christmas season of 1561 of *Gorboduc*, the first English play using blank verse) and 1642 (ban on theatrical plays enacted by the English Parliament). The phrase Elizabethan theatre is used at times improperly (especially in languages other than English) to mean English Renaissance theatre, even though in a strict sense this only applies to 1603. Strictly speaking one distinguishes within English Renaissance theatre between Elizabethan theatre from 1562 to 1603, Jacobean theatre from 1603 to 1625 and Caroline theatre from 1625 to 1642. Along with the economics of the profession, the character of the drama changed toward the end of the period. Under Elizabeth, the drama was a unified expression as far as social class was concerned: the Court watched the same plays the commoners saw in the public playhouses. With the development of the private theatres, drama became more oriented toward the tastes and values of an upper-class audience. By the later part of the reign of Charles I, few new plays were being written for the public theatres, which sustained themselves on the accumulated works of the previous decades. Theatrical life was largely centered in London, but plays were performed by touring companies all over England. English companies even toured and performed English plays abroad, e.g. in Germany and in Denmark. The period starts before the establishment of the first permanent theatres. Two types of locations which were used for performing plays before the establishment of permanent theatres and continued to be used all through the period even after permanent theatres were established were the courtyards of inns and the Inns of Court such as the Inner Temple. The first permanent English theatre, the 'Red Lion' opened in 1567 but

it was a shortlived failure. The first successful theatres, such as The Theatre started operation in 1576. The establishment of large and profitable public theatres was an essential enabling factor in the success of English Renaissance drama. Once they were in operation, drama could become a fixed and permanent rather than a transitory phenomenon. Their construction was prompted when the Mayor and Corporation of London first banned plays in 1572 as a measure against the plague, and then formally expelled all players from the city in 1575. This prompted the construction of permanent playhouses outside the jurisdiction of London, in the liberties of Halliwell/Holywell in Shoreditch and later the Clink, and at Newington Butts near the established entertainment district of St. George's Fields in rural Surrey. The Theatre was constructed in Shoreditch in 1576 by James Burbage with his brother-in-law John Brayne (the owner of the unsuccessful Red Lion playhouse of 1567 and the Newington Butts playhouse was set up, probably by Jerome Savage, some time between 1575 and 1577. The Theatre was rapidly followed by the nearby Curtain Theatre (1577), the Rose (1587), the Swan (1595), the Globe (1599), the Fortune (1600), and the Red Bull (1604). Archaeological excavations on the foundations of the Rose and the Globe in the late twentieth century showed that all the London theatres had individual differences; yet their common function necessitated a similar general plan. The public theatres were three stories high, and built around an open space at the centre. Usually polygonal in plan to give an overall rounded effect (though the Red Bull and the first Fortune were square), the three levels of inward-facing galleries overlooked the open center, into which jutted the stage—essentially a platform surrounded on three sides by the audience, only the rear being restricted for the entrances and exits of the actors and seating for the musicians. The upper level behind the stage could be used as a balcony, as in *Romeo and Juliet* or *Antony and Cleopatra*, or as a position from which an actor could harangue a crowd, as in *Julius Caesar*. Usually built of timber, lath and plaster and with thatched roofs, the early theatres were vulnerable to fire, and were replaced (when necessary) with stronger structures. When the Globe burned down in June 1613, it was rebuilt with a tile roof; when the Fortune burned down in December 1621, it was rebuilt in brick (and apparently was no longer square). A different model was developed with the Blackfriars Theatre, which came into regular use on a long-term basis in 1599. The Blackfriars was small in comparison

to the earlier theatres and roofed rather than open to the sky; it resembled a modern theatre in ways that its predecessors did not. Other small enclosed theatres followed, notably the Whitefriars (1608) and the Cockpit (1617). With the building of the Salisbury Court Theatre in 1629 near the site of the defunct Whitefriars, the London audience had six theatres to choose from: three surviving large open-air “public” theatres, the Globe, the Fortune, and the Red Bull, and three smaller enclosed “private” theatres, the Blackfriars, the Cockpit, and the Salisbury Court. Audiences of the 1630s benefited from a half-century of vigorous dramaturgical development; the plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare and their contemporaries were still being performed on a regular basis (mostly at the public theatres), while the newest works of the newest playwrights were abundant as well (mainly at the private theatres). Around 1580, when both the Theatre and the Curtain were full on summer days, the total theatre capacity of London was about 5000 spectators. With the building of new theatre facilities and the formation of new companies, the capital’s total theatre capacity exceeded 10,000 after 1610. In 1580, the poorest citizens could purchase admittance to the Curtain or the Theatre for a penny; in 1640, their counterparts could gain admittance to the Globe, the Cockpit, or the Red Bull—for exactly the same price (Ticket prices at the private theatres were five or six times higher). The literary decline after Chaucer’s death was due in considerable measure to political reasons. The dispute about the throne, which culminated in the War of Roses, dissipated the energy and resources of the country and finally destroyed in large measure the noble families. The art and literature depended on their patronage. The accession of Henry VII in 1485 brought about a period of quiet and recovery. Henry VII established a strong monarchy and restored social and political order. He curtailed the powers and privileges of barons and patronized the new rich class. The country resumed its power among European nations, and began through them to feel the stimulus of the Renaissance. Caxton’s press, which was established in 1476 in London, was the earliest forerunner of Renaissance in England. Rickett remarks: The Renaissance had come with Caxton. It began in London with the publication of English masterpieces that awakened a sense of their national life in the minds of the people. King Henry VIII, who acceded to the throne of England in 1509, began an era of significant and purposeful

changes. He ruled in the spirit of modern statecraft. He encouraged trade and manufacturers, and increased the wealth of the country. He hastened the decline of feudalism by allowing men of low birth to high positions. Thus the court became the field for the display of individual ambition. Men of talent and learning found honourable place in his court. During his reign, England contributed her part to the spread of the new civilization and new learning. Education was popularized. Cardinal's College and Christ Church College at Oxford were founded. The Reign of Henry VIII also expedited the Reformation which had begun in England nearly two centuries before with Wycliffe. The spirit of emancipation of conscience from priestly control was strengthened by the example of German and Swiss reformers. In 1534 Henry VII enforced political separation from Rome on the occasion of the annulment of his first marriage. It provided an opportunity for radical theological reforms. Hugh Latimer was a powerful spokesman of the spirit of Reformation. His writings represent a development of popular English prose. The Reformation and various religious and political controversies gave rise to the writing of pamphlets, serious and satirical. The translation of the Bible by William Tyndale and Miles Coverdale is a significant development in English prose. During Henry's reign the court emerged as a great patron of learning, art and literature. The atmosphere of peace and calm which began to prevail after long turmoil and chaos paved the way for extraordinary development of literary activity. Edward VI ruled from 1547 to 1553. The reign of Queen Mary from 1553 to 1558 was marred by religious conflicts. She restored Roman Catholicism in England. Creative activity was arrested during her time but it was replenished with much greater vigour in the reign of Queen Elizabeth (1558 – 1603). The above historical overview is just an introduction to the socio-political and religious conditions leading to the golden period which is called the Age of Elizabeth. The English Renaissance covers a long span of time, which is divided for the sake of convenience into the following three periods: i) The Beginning of Renaissance (1516 – 1558). ii) The Flowering of Renaissance (1558 – 1603). It is actually called the Age of Elizabeth. iii) The Decline of Renaissance (1603 – 1625). It is also termed the Jacobean Age. Let's see these literary periods through different perspectives.

## **4.2 OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this lesson is to introduce the learner to the literary tendencies of the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages.

## **4.3 THE ELIZABETHAN AND JACOBAN AGES**

Both the Elizabethan and Jacobean Periods in the history of English literature are also known as The Age of Shakespeare. This span of time is the golden age of literature. It extends from the accession of Elizabeth in 1558 to the death of James I in 1625. It was an era of peace, of economic prosperity, of stability, of liberty and of great explorations. It was an age of both contemplation and action. It was an era which was illustrious for the unprecedented development of art, literature and drama. John Milton calls England, during this age, as — a noble and puissant nation, rousing herself, like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks. Let's see the main characteristics of this age. This is the most remarkable epoch for the expansion of both mental and geographical horizons. It was an age of great thought and great action. It is an age which appeals to the eye, the imagination and the intellect. New knowledge was pouring in from all directions. The great voyagers like Hawkins, Frobisher, Raleigh and Drake brought home both material and intellectual treasures from the East and the West. The spirit of adventure and exploration fired the imagination of writers. The spirit of action and adventure paved the way for the illustrious development of dramatic literature. Drama progresses in an era of action and not of speculation. It has rightly been called the age of the discovery of the new world and of man. Influence of foreign fashions: Italy, the home of Renaissance, fascinated the Elizabethans. All liked to visit Italy and stay there for some time. People were not only fond of Italian books and literature, but also of Italian manners and morals. Consequently the literature of England was immensely enriched by imitating Italian classics.

### **4.3.1 Contradictions and Set of Oppositions**

It was an age of great diversity and contradictions. It was an age of light and darkness, of reason and of unreason, of wisdom and of foolishness, of hope and

of despair. The barbarity and backwardness, the ignorance and superstition of the Middle Ages still persisted. Disorder, violence, bloodshed and tavern brawls still prevailed. Highway robberies, as mentioned in *Henry IV, Part I*, were very common. The barbarity of the age is seen in such brutal sports as bear baiting, cock and bull fighting, to which numerous references are found in the plays of Shakespeare. Despite the advancement of science and learning people still believed in superstitions, ghosts, witches, fairies, charms and omens of all sorts. In spite of great refinement and learning it was an age of easy morals. People did not care for high principles of morality and justice. Bribery and international delays of justice were common evils. Material advancement was by fair means or foul, the main aim of men in high places. Hardly anyone of the public men of this age had a perfectly open heart and very few had quite clean hands. In spite of the ignorance and superstition, violence and brutality, easy morals and lax values, Elizabethan Age was an age in which men lived very much, thought intensely and wrote strongly. Let's discuss the literary tendencies of the age.

#### **4.3.2 Literary Tendencies**

Both the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods in the history of English literature are also known as The Age of Shakespeare. This span of time is the golden age of literature. It extends from the accession of Elizabeth in 1558 to the death of James I in 1625. It was an era of peace, of economic prosperity, of stability, of liberty and of great explorations. It was an age of both contemplation and action. It was an era which was illustrious for the unprecedented development of art, literature and drama. John Milton calls England, during this age, as — a noble and puissant nation, rousing herself, like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks. Let's see the main characteristics of this age.

##### **4.3.2.1 Political Peace and Stability**

Elizabeth brilliantly framed and followed the policy of balance and moderation both inside and outside the country. A working compromise was reached with Scotland. The rebellious northern barons were kept in check. She, therefore, could successfully establish peace in traditionally disturbed border areas. Under her able administration the English national life rapidly and steadily progressed.

#### **4.3.2.2 Social Development**

It was an age of great social contentment. The rapid rise of industrial towns gave employment to thousands. Increasing trade and commerce enriched England. The wealthy were taxed to support the poor. This created the atmosphere for literary activities.

#### **4.3.2.3 Religious Tolerance**

It was an era of religious tolerance and peace. Upon her accession she found the whole nation divided against itself. The north was largely Catholic, and the South was strongly Protestant. Scotland followed the Reformation intensely. Ireland followed its old traditional religion. It was Elizabeth who made the Anglican Church a reality. Anglicanism was a kind of compromise between Catholicism and Protestantism. Both the Protestants and the Catholics accepted the Church. All Englishmen were influenced by the Queen's policy of religious tolerance and were united in a magnificent national enthusiasm. The mind of man, now free from religious fears and persecutions, turned with a great creative impulse to other forms of activity. An atmosphere of all pervading religious peace gave great stimulus to literary activity.

#### **4.3.2.4 Sense and Feeling of Patriotism**

It was an age of patriotism. Queen Elizabeth loved England ardently and she made her court one of the most brilliant courts in Europe. The splendour of her court dazzled the eyes of the people. Her moderate policies did much to increase her popularity and prestige. Worship of the Virgin Queen became the order of the day. She was Spenser's Gloriana, Raleigh's Cynthia, and Shakespeare's — fair vestal throned by the West. Even the foreigners saw in her — a keen calculating intellect that baffled the ablest statesmen in Europe. Elizabeth inspired all her people with the unbounded patriotism which exults in Shakespeare and with the personal devotion which finds a voice in the *Faery Queen*. Under her administration the English national life progressed faster not by slow historical and evolutionary process. English literature reached the very highest point of literary development during her period.

#### **4.3.2.5 Discovery, Exploration and Expansion**

This is the most remarkable epoch for the expansion of both mental and geographical horizons. It was an age of great thought and great action. It is an age which appeals to the eye, the imagination and the intellect. New knowledge was pouring in from all directions. The great voyagers like Hawkins, Frobisher, Raleigh and Drake brought home both material and intellectual treasures from the East and the West. The spirit of adventure and exploration fired the imagination of writers. The spirit of action and adventure paved the way for the illustrious development of dramatic literature. Drama progresses in an era of action and not of speculation. It has rightly been called the age of the discovery of the new world and of man. Influence of Foreign Fashions Italy, the home of Renaissance, fascinated the Elizabethans. All liked to visit Italy and stay there for some time. People were not only fond of Italian books and literature, but also of Italian manners and morals. Consequently the literature of England was immensely enriched by imitating Italian classics.

#### **CHIEF LITERARY TENDENCIES OF THE AGE**

##### **Foreign Influences**

England was under the full effect of the revival of learning. It was now not confined to the scholars alone at the universities and to the privileged ones at the court. The numerous translations of the celebrated ancient classics were now available for common people who could not read the original classics. Then it came under the all pervading influence of humanism, openness of mind, love of beauty and freedom. The knowledge of the world of antiquity exercised a great influence on the literature of this period. It was obtained through the recovery of the writings and works of art of the classical period. The idea presented in the literature of Athens and Rome that life was to be lived for its many sided development and fullest enjoyment, had a powerful influence on the literature of the period. The writers and artists cultivated the artistic forms used by classical poets, orators, sculptors and architects. In the year 1453, when the Turk Vandals invaded Constantinople, many Greek scholars, took shelter along with their manuscripts and libraries in Italy. Italy became the centre of classical literature

and culture. Italy, thus, became the teacher of Europe in philosophy, art and literature.

### **Influence of Reformation**

Both the Renaissance and the Reformation greatly influenced the literature of this age. Hudson says, — While the Renaissance aroused the intellect and the aesthetic faculties, the Reformation awakened the spiritual nature; the same printing press which diffused the knowledge of the classics, put the English Bible into the hands of the people; and a spread in the interest of religion was accompanied by a deepening of moral earnestness. All the great writers and dramatists of the Elizabethan Age were influenced by both the Renaissance and the Reformation.

### **Ardent Spirit of Adventure**

An ardent spirit of adventure characterized this age. The new discoveries and explorations beyond the seas by voyagers kindled human imagination and popular curiosity. The entire literature of this period, especially the plays of the University Wits and Shakespeare, are imbued with the spirit of adventure and imagination.

### **Abundance of Output**

It was an age rich in literary productions of all kinds. In Elizabethan Age treatises, pamphlets, essays, prose romances, sonnets, both Petrarchan and Shakespearean, Lyric, plays etc. were abundantly written. The output of literary productions was very wide. Several important foreign books were translated into English. By the end of Elizabeth's reign, many of the great books of modern times had been translated into English. Many translations were as popular as the original works. Many celebrated writers, including Shakespeare, derived the plots of their works from translations. Sir Thomas North translated Plutarch's *Lives* John Florio translated Montaigne's *Essais*. It was an era of peace and of general prosperity of the country. An intense patriotism became the outstanding characteristic of the age. It is the greatest and golden period of literature in English which developed all genres of literature.

## 4.4 OFFSHOOTS OF THE RENAISSANCE DRAMA

### ELIZABETHAN POETRY

One of the literary historians called Elizabethan age as a nest of singing birds about the composition of poetry in this period. There were many poets who contributed to develop this form of literature and it reached the peak of its development. The poets not only adopted and innovated the forms of poetry and wrote on the varied themes. The poetry of Elizabethan era mirrors the spirit of age. It reflects the spirit of conquest and self-glorification, humanism and vigorous imagination, emotional depth and passionate intensity. Sublimity was considered to be the essential quality of poetry. Spenser, Shakespeare and Marlowe had the immense power to exalt and sublimate the lovers of poetry. The poetry of his period is remarkable for the spirit of independence. The poets refused to follow set rules of poetic composition. Consequently, new poetic devices and new linguistic modes developed. All varieties of poetic forms like lyric, elegy, eclogue, ode, sonnet etc. were successfully attempted. Thematically, the following main divisions of poetry existed during this period:

#### Love Poetry

The love poetry is characterized by romance, imagination and youthful vigour, Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, Spenser's *Amoretti*, Daniel's *Delia*, Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and his sonnets are noticeable love poems of this period.

#### Patriotic Poetry

The ardent note of patriotism is the distinctive characteristic of Elizabethan poetry. Warner's *Abbicen's England*, Daniel's *Civil Wars of York and Lancaster*, Drayton's *The Barons War and The Ballad of Agincourt* are some memorable patriotic poems.

#### Philosophical Poetry

Elizabethan age was a period both of action and reflection. Action found its superb expression in contemporary drama. People thought inwardly. The tragedies

of Shakespeare represent this aspect of national life. Brooke's poems, *On Human Learning*, *On Wars*, *On Monarchy*, and *On Religion* have philosophical leanings.

### **Satirical Poetry**

It came into existence after the decline of the spirit of adventure and exploration, of youthful gaiety and imaginative vigour towards the end of Elizabeth's reign. Donne's *Satires* and Drummond's *Sonnets* are some fine examples of this type of poetry. In the reign of James I life's gaiety was lost. A harsh cynical realism succeeded. Poetry had grown self-conscious. Poetry had crept under the shadow of the approaching civil conflicts. The poetry of this age is original. The early classical and Italian influences were completely absorbed and the poetry of this period depicts the typical British character and temperament.

## **4.5 MAJOR POETS OF THIS AGE**

Wyatt and Surrey traveled widely in Italy. They brought to England the Italian and classic influence. They modeled their poetry on Italian pattern. They are the first harbingers of the Renaissance in English poetry. They are the first modern poets. The book that contains their poems is *Songs and Sonnets*, known as the Tottle's *Miscellany*. The brief introduction of the major poets of the age is necessary to be discussed along with their remarkable works.

### **I. Sir Thomas Wyatt.**

Wyatt brought to English poetry grace, harmony and nobility. He followed the Italian models and attempted a great variety of metrical experiment – songs, sonnets, madrigals and elegies. He was the first poet, who introduced sonnet, which was a favorite poetical form in England with Shakespeare, Milton, Spenser, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Arnold and many others. He first of all introduced personal or autobiographical note in English poetry. Wyatt's true ability as a poet is revealed not by the sonnets but by a number of lyrics and songs that he composed.

### **II. Earl of Surrey**

Surrey is a disciple of Wyatt rather than an independent poetical force. His sonnets are more effective than those of Wyatt. The former followed the Petrarchan

pattern of sonnet, whereas the latter modified it and made it typical English. The Petrarchan form is perhaps more impressive, the modified English form the more expressive. Shakespeare followed the English pattern of sonnet, introduced by Surrey. He was the first poet to use blank verse in his translation of *Aeneid*.

### **III. Thomas Sackville**

Sackville was a great humanist whose only contribution to England poetry is *The Induction*. He has a sureness of touch and a freedom from technical errors which make him superior to Wyatt and Surrey.

### **IV. Sir Philip Sidney**

Sidney was the most celebrated literary figure before Spenser and Shakespeare. As a man of letters he is remembered for *Arcadia* (a romance), *Apology For Poetry* (a collection of critical and literary principles) and *Astrophel and Stella* (a collection of sonnets). These 108 love sonnets are the first direct expressions of personal feelings and experience in English poetry. He analyses the sequence of his feelings with a vividness and minuteness. His sonnets owe much to Petrarch and Ronsard in tone and style.

### **V. Edmund Spenser**

Edmund Spenser is rightly called the poet's poet because all great poets of England have been indebted to him. C. Rickett remarks, — Spenser is at once the child of the Renaissance and the Reformation. On one side we may regard him with Milton as — the sage and serious Spenser, on the other he is the humanist, alive to the finger tips with the sensuous beauty of the Southern romance. Spenser's main poetical works are: *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1579), *two eclogues*, *March and December*. *Amoretti* (1595), a collection of eighty eight Petrarchan sonnets *Epithalamion* (1559), a magnificent ode written on the occasion of his marriage with Elizabeth Boyle *Prothalamion* (1596), an ode on marriage *Astrophel* (1596), an elegy on the death of Sir Philip Sidney *Four Hymns* (1576) written to glorify love and honour. His epic, *The Faerie Queen* (1589 – 90). Spenser's finest poetry is characterized by sensuousness and picturesqueness. He is a matchless painter in

words. His contribution to poetic style, diction and versification is memorable. He evolved a true poetic style which the succeeding generations of English poets used. The introduction of Spenserian stanza is Spenser's most remarkable contribution to poetry. He is great because of the extraordinary smoothness and melody, his verse and the richness of his language, a golden diction which he drew from every source – new words, old words, obsolete words. Renwick says — ‘Shakespeare himself might not have achieved so much, if Spenser had not lived and laboured.’ Dryden freely acknowledged that Spenser has been his master in English. Thompson referred to him as —my master Spenser. Wordsworth praises him as the embodiment of nobility, purity and sweetness. Byron, Shelley and Keats are his worthy followers. The Pre- Raphaelites were inspired by Spenser's word-painting and picturesque descriptions. Therefore he is aptly called Poet's poet.

#### **VI. Christopher Marlowe and George Chapman**

*The Hero and Leander* was left incomplete due to Marlowe's untimely death. It was completed by Chapman. This poem is remarkable for felicity of diction and flexibility of versification. The poets show great skill in effectively using words and images. Besides completing *Hero and Leander*, Chapman also translated *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and composed some sonnets.

#### **VII. William Shakespeare**

Shakespeare composed many beautiful sonnets and two long poems – *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. In the former the realistic passions are expressed through equally realistic pictures and episodes. It is remarkable for astonishing linguistic beauty. The latter is a contrast to the former. Having painted the attempts of an amorous woman, Shakespeare now proceeded to represent the rape of a chaste wife.

#### **VIII. Ben Jonson**

Ben Jonson was a pioneer in the field of poetry. His poetic work consists of short pieces, which appeared in three collections – *Epigrammes*, *The Forest* and *The Underwood*. He is a first-rate satirist in Elizabethan poetry. The spirit of satire

looms large in these three collections of his poetry. He presents vivid sarcastic portraits in ten or twenty lines. His moral satires were nobler in tone and more sincere in expression than of Hall or Marston. Ben Jonson was the first English poet to write Pindaric odes. His Ode to Himself is a fine example of this genre. His poetic style is lucid, clear and free from extravagances. He is also the forerunner of neo-classicism, which attained perfection in the works of Dryden and Pope. *To Celia*, *Echo's Song* and *A Song* are his memorable lyrics.

### **IX. John Donne**

As the pioneer of the Metaphysical Poetry, Donne stands unrivalled. His contribution to poetry will be discussed along with the metaphysical Poetry.

Apart from the above major poets, there are few poets whose names need to be mentioned. They are Joseph Hall, John Marston, George Wither, and William Browne because they contributed verse satire to the literature of Elizabethan period.

### **4.6 LET US SUM UP**

English Renaissance drama, or English Renaissance theatre, means the stage plays written and acted in the later 16th century and the first half of the 17th century, during the Renaissance period in England. This period in English history saw a great growth in drama as an art form and public entertainment. William Shakespeare, widely thought of as the greatest writer in English literature, is the most famous of many important playwrights, poets, and writers who worked in this era.

English Renaissance drama is sometimes called Elizabethan drama, since its most important developments started when Elizabeth I was queen of England from 1558 to 1603. But this name is not very accurate; the drama continued after Elizabeth's death, into the reigns of King James I (1603–1625) and his son King Charles I (1625–1649). Shakespeare, for example, started writing plays in the later years of Elizabeth's reign, but continued into the reign of James. When writing about plays from James's reign, scholars and critics sometimes use the term Jacobean drama; plays from Charles I's reign are called Caroline drama.

Playwrights worked in both the classic types of drama, tragedy and comedy.

They also began their own type of history play, mainly about earlier English kings and the events of their reigns. Richard Thayer, Roberts the third and Shakespeare's *Richard III* and Marlowe's *Edward II* are two examples of this type of English history play. Plays were often written in poetry; early plays were mainly in rhymed verse, though as time passed playwrights came to prefer unrhymed blank verse. Prose was also used in some plays, mostly for comedy.

English Renaissance drama grew and developed until 1642, when it suddenly stopped. In the early years of the English Civil War, the Puritans who were fighting King Charles gained control of London and the region around it. The Puritans were against play-acting; they thought it was sinful and immoral. On September 2, 1642, the Puritans forced the London theatres to close, and to stay closed for most of the time until 1660. Then the English Restoration brought a new king, Charles II, who let the theatres re-open. In the 18-year gap between 1642 and 1660, English society had changed a good deal, and a new style of drama rose up in the Restoration era; it is usually called Restoration drama or Restoration theatre.

#### **4.7 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. Discuss the background of Renaissance movement.
2. Discuss in detail the Elizabethan and Jacobean Ages of Literature.
3. What are the chief characteristics of Renaissance drama?
4. What are the products of Renaissance drama?
5. Discuss the major poets of the Age of Renaissance and their works.

#### **4.8 SUGGESTED READING**

- Chambers, E. K. *The Elizabethan Stage*. 4 Volumes, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1923.
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**COURSE No. 111**

**DRAMA-I**

**LESSON No. 5**

**M.A. ENGLISH**

**UNIT - I**

**LITERARY AND INTELLECTUAL  
BACKGROUND OF DRAMA UPTO THE JACOBAN AGE**

## **RESTORATION DRAMA**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Objectives
- 5.3 Historical Background
- 5.4 French Influence
- 5.5 Heroic Drama
- 5.6 Restoration Comedy
- 5.7 The National Reaction in Drama
- 5.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.9 Self-Assessment Questions
- 5.10 Examination Oriented Questions
- 5.11 Suggested Reading

### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

The period from 1660 to 1700 is known as the Restoration Period or the Age of Dryden. Dryden was the representative writer of this period. The restoration of King Charles II in 1660 marks the beginning of a new

era both in the life and the literature of England. The King was received with wild joy on his return from exile. The change of government from Commonwealth to Kingship corresponded to a change in the mood of the nation. In this period the Renaissance delight in this world and the unlimited possibilities of the exploration of the world, and the moral zeal and the earnestness of the Puritan period could no more fascinate the people of England. The historical events like the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, the religious controversy and the revolution of 1688 deeply influenced the social life and the literary movements of the age.

## **5.2 OBJECTIVES**

This lesson examines the re-establishment of theatre in England after a gap of eighteen years. It discusses the influences at work on the kinds of play shown and considers the changes that occurred from 1660 until 1689 when William and Mary took over the throne.

## **5.3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

From 1642 onward for eighteen years, the theatres of England remained nominally closed. There was of course evasion of the law; but whatever performances were offered had to be given in secrecy, before small companies in private houses, or in taverns located three or four miles out of town. No actor or spectator was safe, especially during the early days of the Puritan rule. Least of all was there any inspiration for dramatists. In 1660 the Stuart dynasty was restored to the throne of England. Charles II, the king, had been in France during the greater part of the Protectorate, together with many of the royalist party, all of whom were familiar with Paris and its fashions. Thus it was natural, upon the return of the court, that French influence should be felt, particularly in the theatre. In August, 1660, Charles issued patents for two companies of players, and performances immediately began. Certain writers, in the field before the Civil War, survived the period of theatrical eclipse, and now had their chance. Among these were Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant, who were quickly provided with fine playhouses.

#### 5.4 FRENCH INFLUENCE

The influence of France was not an accident. It had been prepared by the more frequent intercourse that had taken place between the two countries and the two courts since the fourth decade of the seventeenth century. France was the refuge by choice for those banished after the Civil War. The restored Stuart dynasty brought back of necessity with it the sense of the prestige of the French monarchy. The exiles of the Commonwealth period and with the courtiers of Charles II were many of the writers of his reign, imbibed in France the spirit of the nation's manners and literature. They felt the attraction of a great reign that had already begun and of a national flowering that was already in full bloom. The influence left its strong mark upon fashion and manners, the superficial sides of life. It even penetrated to modes of feeling and thinking. Besides, through the language as well as through the authority of precepts and aesthetic examples, it taught and encouraged certain habits and preferences of tastes.

Sir William Davenant (1606 –1668) had lived in France. To England he brought back many confused ideas and preferences, the product of which is a hybrid work, of still uncertain character. The first part of his *The Siege of Rhodes* is divided into 'entries', like the ballets of Benserade, which were the rage at the court of the young Louis XIV. It is written in rhymed verse, in a very free and variable measure. Its subject is 'heroic' and it recommends virtue 'under the forms of valor and conjugal love'. It can be regarded as the gem both of English opera and heroic tragedy. Through its material figuration the play caused a sensation. Moreover an English actress played one of the leading parts. This daring and unprecedented step became a common feature of the Restoration theatre. With Davenant and *The Siege of Rhodes* there opened a phase in the history of English drama characterized by the ascendancy of the French model; and this phase was to last for a whole century.

Translations of classical tragedy in France had already revealed Thomas Corneille to English readers. Soon the tragic comedies of Corneille, the heroic tragedies of Scudery or Quinault, the comedies of Moliere and the purely French

art of Racine were all eagerly welcomed and imitated. The French influence is seen in the coarseness and indecency of the Restoration Comedy of Manners. The combined influence of French and classical models of tragedy is seen in the heroic tragedy. The French influence is responsible for the growth and popularity of opera.

## 5.5 HEROIC DRAMA

The heroic drama evolved through several works of the middle to later 1660s; John Dryden's *The Indian Emperour* (1665) and Roger Boyle's *The Black Prince* (1667) were key developments. The term "heroic drama" was invented by Dryden for his play, *The Conquest of Granada* (1670). For the *Preface* to the printed version of the play, Dryden argued that the drama was a specie of *epic poetry* for the stage just as the epic was to other poetry, so the heroic drama was to other plays. Consequently, Dryden derived a series of rules for this type of play.

First, the play should be composed in heroic verse (closed couplets in iambic pentameter). Second, the play must focus on a subject that pertains to national foundations, mythological events, or important and grand matters. Third, the hero of the heroic drama must be powerful, decisive, and, like Achilles, dominating even when wrong. *The Conquest of Granada* followed all of these rules.

Dryden's *The Conquest of Granada* is often considered one of the better heroic tragedies, but his highest achievement is his adaptation (which he called *All for Love*, 1678) of Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra* to the heroic formula. Other heroic dramatists were Nathaniel Lee (*The Rival Queens*) and Thomas Otway, whose *Venice Preserved* is a fine tragedy that transcends the usual limitations of the form. We also owe indirectly to heroic tragedy two very amusing parodies of the type: the Duke of Buckingham's *The Rehearsal* and Henry Fielding's *The Tragedy of Tragedies, or the Life and Death of Tom Thumb the Great*. Restoration plays by Sir William Davenant, Thomas Otway, Nathaniel Lee, John Crowne, Elkanah Settle, and John Banks, and later works by Nicholas Rowe and Joseph Addison, have been included in tighter or looser definitions of

heroic drama.

Today, drama is divided up into numerous subgenres; Dryden, however, worked from Classical critics. There was little dramatic critical theory for him to appeal to, and the new rules brought over from France (particularly those of Corneille and Boileau) did not match English theatrical history or practice. The emphasis on unities and on maintaining only classically prescribed dramatic forms also came from Thomas Rymer, who condemned the heterogeneity of the stage. Aristotle had only spoken of satire, epic, and tragedy, and Horace also wrote only of comedy, tragedy and satire, and so Dryden was seeking to square actual theatrical practice with an ancient framework for literature. He was attempting his own neo-classicism. The First Folio of Shakespeare had divided Shakespeare's plays into "history," "tragedy," and "comedy," but these terms were stretched. Dryden, therefore, implicitly recognizes that drama had moved into the territory of other types of poetry, but he strives to restrain that freedom by reforming the stage to a true and epic subject matter.

George Villiers, second Duke of Buckingham and others satirized heroic drama in *The Rehearsal*. The satire was successful enough that heroic drama largely disappeared afterward. Buckingham attacked the stupidity of blustering, military heroes, as well as the apparent self-importance of attempting a dramatic entertainment about the serious subjects of military and national history.

Buckingham's criticism of Dryden in *The Rehearsal* is partly Dryden's bombastic verse but, more pointedly, Dryden's *personal* interest in creating a "pure" drama. The character of Bayes is ludicrous more for his hubris in damning actual plays in favour of imagined ones than he is for being a poetaster.

## **5.6 RESTORATION COMEDY**

Comedy of Manners is used as a synonym of Restoration comedy. Restoration comedy is notorious for its sexual explicitness, a quality

encouraged by Charles II personally and by the rakish aristocratic ethos of his court. The socially diverse audiences included aristocrats, their servants and hangers-on, and a substantial middle-class segment. These playgoers were attracted to the comedies by up-to-the-minute topical writing, by crowded and bustling plots, by the introduction of the first professional actresses, and by the rise of the first celebrity actors. This period saw the first professional female playwright, Aphra Behn.

The drama of the 1660s and 1670s was vitalized by the personal interest of Charles II, and the comic playwrights rose to the demand for new plays. They stole freely from the contemporary French and Spanish stage, from English Jacobean and Caroline plays, and even from Greek and Roman classical comedies, and combined the looted plotlines in adventurous ways. Resulting differences of tone in a single play were appreciated rather than frowned on, as the audience prized “variety” within as well as between plays.

The unsentimental or “hard” comedies of John Dryden, William Wycherley, and George Etherege reflected the atmosphere at Court, and celebrated with frankness an aristocratic macho lifestyle of unremitting sexual intrigue and conquest. The Earl of Rochester, real-life Restoration rake, courtier and poet, is flatteringly portrayed in Etherege’s *The Man of Mode* (1676) as a riotous, witty, intellectual, and sexually irresistible aristocrat, a template for posterity’s idea of the glamorous Restoration rake (actually never a very common character in Restoration comedy). Wycherley’s *The Plain Dealer* (1676), a variation on the theme of Molière’s *Le Misanthrope*, was highly regarded for its uncompromising satire and earned Wycherley the appellation “Plain Dealer” Wycherley or “Manly” Wycherley, after the play’s main character Manly. The single play that does most to support the charge of obscenity leveled then and now at Restoration comedy is probably Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* (1675).

By 1682 when the London stage had become a monopoly, both the number and the variety of new plays being written dropped sharply. There was a swing away from comedy to serious political drama, reflecting preoccupations and divisions following on the *Popish Plot* (1678) and the *Exclusion*

*Crisis* (1682). The few comedies produced also tended to be political in focus, the Whig dramatist Thomas Shadwell sparring with the Tories, John Dryden and Aphra Behn.

During the second wave of Restoration comedy in the 1690s, the “softer” comedies of William Congreve and John Vanbrugh reflected mutating cultural perceptions and great social change. The playwrights of the 1690s set out to appeal to more socially mixed audiences with a strong middle-class element, and to female spectators, for instance by moving the war between the sexes from the arena of intrigue into that of marriage. The focus in comedy is less on young lovers outwitting the older generation, more on marital relations after the wedding bells.

In Congreve’s *Love for Love* (1695) and *The Way of the World* (1700), the “wit duels” between lovers typical of 1670s comedy are underplayed. The give-and-take set pieces of couples still testing their attraction for each other have mutated into witty prenuptial debates on the eve of marriage, as in the famous “Proviso” scene in *The Way of the World* (1700). Vanbrugh’s *The Provoked Wife* (1697) follows in the footsteps of Southerner’s *Wives’ Excuse*, with a lighter touch and more humanly recognizable characters.

The tolerance for Restoration comedy even in its modified form was running out at the end of the seventeenth century, as public opinion turned to respectability and seriousness even faster than the playwrights did. Interconnected causes for this shift in taste were demographic change, the Glorious Revolution of 1688, William’s and Mary’s dislike of the theatre, and the lawsuits brought against playwrights by the Society for the Reformation of Manners (founded in 1692). When Jeremy Collier attacked Congreve and Vanbrugh in 1698, he was confirming a shift in audience taste that had already taken place. At the much-anticipated all-star première in 1700 of *The Way of the World*, Congreve’s first comedy for five years, the audience showed only moderate enthusiasm for that subtle and almost melancholy work. The comedy of sex and wit was about to be replaced by the drama of obvious sentiment and exemplary morality.

## 5.7 THE NATIONAL REACTION IN DRAMA

Between 1675 and 1680 there was a marked awakening of the national spirit revealing itself in English literature. The reaction against the excess of worldly corruption, political opposition to the government of Charles II, the Protestant unrest, the Popish plot, the shame of the subjection of English monarchy to France, the fear inspired by the ambition of Louis XIV and the dominating influence of French art and fashions- all contribute to the secret movement towards the repossession and reassertion of the national self. This reaction is clearly visible in the drama and more especially in the work of Dryden.

John Wilson was one of those foremost playwrights that preserved the untouched older traditions of English comedy. His *The Cheats* (1662) is a prose comedy frankly following the manner of Jonson. Besides some excellent comedies, Wilson is the author of a tragedy, *Andronicus Comnenius*, of admirable conduct and vigour, and written in blank verse of a freedom compacted with firmness that recalls the better work of the previous age. Save for a very short passage, it is written in blank verse of fine quality.

The return to blank verse is the sign of the decisive evolution in the dramatic career of Dryden. He treats a subject upon which Shakespeare had placed his mark and through the very force of his personality extracts from it a tragedy- *All for Love*. The Preface he wrote for his adaptation of *Troilus and Cressida* shows throughout a just, strong, and yet qualified appreciation of all the greatness of Shakespeare. Dryden wishes to remain faithful to the classical doctrine derived from Aristotle and establishes a deliberate reconciliation with the technique of the Elizabethan Romanticists. He claims that the mind of the English requires the mixture of comedy and tragedy.

A writer who on two occasions surpassed Dryden, Thomas Otway (1651-1685), was an unsuccessful actor who turned to writing plays. His *Don Carlos* (1675), written in rhymed couplets, won for him his first success. When Dryden abandoned rhyme, the world of playwrights changed with him; and Otway's second important play, *The Orphan* (1680), was in blank verse. The situation, turning upon the love of two brothers for Monimia, the orphan ward of their

father, is one which Ford might have created. In working it out, Otway is relentless; he has evolved from it one of the cruellest of English tragedies. In his power of deepening the horror by a lighter, simpler touch, pitiful as a strain of music, he reminds us again of the later Elizabethans, especially of Webster. Even more successful than *The Orphan* was *Venice Preserved* (1682), in which, as in *The Orphan*, Otway caught something of the greatness of handling characteristic of an earlier time. His plays have the genuine passion which Dryden lacked, and they are not marred by the distortions of human life and character that abound both in Dryden and in the Jacobean dramatists.

At no other time did a monarch take such a particularly personal interest in the theatre as Charles II. It was not until he was succeeded by James II in 1685, that the core of the royal influence began to change, particularly in a less blatant display of sexuality. Quarrels and financial problems meant the two companies had to amalgamate in 1682 and few new plays were shown. Moreover, James II was more concerned with religious and political matters for the short time he was on the throne and the resultant upheavals in the country contributed to a lean time for the theatres. William and Mary had little interest in the theatre and rarely attended. The audience changed from a majority of influential sycophantic courtiers and their hangers-on to a more commercially based mixture of London merchants and craftsmen, a Protestant bourgeoisie with a more genteel and sentimental taste in drama. Farquhar's (1677-1707) plays with middle class characters set in the provinces satisfied their expectations better. Whereas Congreve (1670-1729) although much admired today, was not successful at the time and eventually gave up writing plays. The audience were no longer interested in the witty language and sexual affairs of the nobility and this kind of comedy disappeared until the end of the 1770s when Sheridan wrote comedies exposing the manners of his society. In addition Congreve and Vanbrugh (1664-1726) were particularly targeted by Jeremy Collier (1650-1726) in his pamphlet *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (pub. 1698) which reviled the stage as irreligious and obscene. Vanbrugh responded by building his own theatre for the presentation of opera.

## 5.8 LET US SUM UP

Nothing in the Restoration drama matches the comedy. The ‘heroic drama’ of that age is remembered only in the text books of literature. In this strange form the motives of love and honour were exaggerated to incredible lengths, and the characters were given grandiose and ranting speeches, which they declaimed in regular heroic couplets. The one notable thing about the heroic drama is that Dryden devoted his great talents to it. However, the heroic drama was too bizarre a fashion to live long. Dryden’s contribution to the ‘heroic drama’ was among the least of his achievements. It may be recalled that apart from ‘heroic drama’ he also wrote comedies. They were not his most spontaneous productions but in them are embedded some of his most delightful lyrics. In *Marriage a la Mode* (1672) he sums up with grace the whole atmosphere of Restoration comedy:

*Why should a foolish Marriage Vow,  
Which long ago was made,  
Oblige us to each other now,  
When Passion is decay’d.  
We lov’d, and we lov’d, as long as we could:  
‘Till our love was lov’d out in us both:  
But, our Marriage is death when the Pleasure is fled:  
‘Twas Pleasure first made it an Oath.*

## 5.9 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Why is the Restoration period called Restoration?
  - (a) It begins in 1660, the year in which the monarchy was restored to the English throne.
  - (b) It marks the restoration and reopening of English theatres and the restoration of the Church of England as the established church.

- (c) Colonies lost to Spain and France were restored to England.  
(d) Both (a) and (b) Ans. (d)
2. Which of the following types of plays is not meant for acting?  
(a) A Romance  
(b) A Chronicle play  
(c) A Closet play  
(d) A Masque Ans. (c)
3. Dryden has written a play on a Mughal Emperor. Name the Emperor.  
(a) Shahjahan  
(b) Aurangzeb  
(c) Bahadur Shah  
(d) Akbar Ans. (b)
4. The theatres were reopened in 1660. When were they closed last?  
(a) 1616  
(b) 1642  
(c) 1650  
(d) 1652 Ans. (b)
5. Restoration period lasted from —— to ——.  
(a) 1629-1700  
(b) 1650-1700  
(c) 1700-1740  
(d) 1660-1700 Ans. (d)

### 5.10 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

1. Trace the development of the heroic tragedy in the Restoration period with reference to Dryden's work *All For Love*.

Ans. The genre of the heroic tragedy developed during the Restoration years.

It featured lyric and emphatic dialogues, idealized characters, exotic contexts and dramatic plots. As the most respected playwright of the Restoration, Dryden was the master of the genre. His play *All For Love* or *The World Well Lost* (1677) is the story of Anthony and Cleopatra and represents a turning point in the author's heroic tragedies. Here, Dryden abandons his habit of writing in rhymed couplets in favour of blank verse. He also compresses the action so that he observes all the unities of classical theatre (time, place, action). The play presents the dilemma of love against the demands of politics and society. In the opposition between Rome and Egypt critics have also read juxtaposition between the virtuous England and the corrupted (and largely Catholic) Europe.

Anthony is a heroic character in his larger-than-life stature and passions, but Dryden challenges an entirely positive reading of his hero as he points out Anthony's limitations as a statesman.

2. Why were the themes of Restoration comedies immoral or indecent?

Ans. If running water is blocked for long time, when it is loosened, the current of water flows with double energy. The puritan government prohibited all kinds of fine arts for over 20 years. The doors of the theatres were closed for so long. With the restoration, all barriers were removed. With the collapse of the puritan government there sprung up activities that had been so long suppressed that they flew to violent excess. In the comedy, immoral and indecent scenes were introduced just for entertaining purpose. The public mind of the time was immoral, and the authors wrote to please them, not to create any artistic work.

Moreover, King Charles II, when he was restored to the throne, openly supported the theatre and practiced a licentious character himself - having sexual adventures with many of his mistresses, he fathered many bastards.

When a King displayed such behavior himself, it was natural for the population to indulge in sexual intrigues and libertinism. These social follies were reflected in Restoration theatre.

3. What was the social and moral condition of the Restoration period?

Ans. After the Restoration, Parliament re-established the Anglican Church as England's official church and Charles II openly declared himself as a Catholic. Parliament also passed many laws against the Puritans. Their worship was restricted, and their political rights were limited. During the Restoration period, extreme reaction set in against the strict morality of the Puritans. The court of Charles II became known for immorality and loose living. People were valued not for their wisdom or integrity, but for their cleverness and wit.

4. Which genre of literature emerged during the Restoration period with dominant traits of realism, social analysis and satire?

Ans. No doubt, comic drama was the signature genre for the period in English history that began with the restoration of the monarchy when Charles II returned from exile in France. Theatre was a social occasion for several social levels, and the king's nobles welcomed the opportunity to comically criticize and parody the human foibles of their "lessers." The playwrights took advantage of the new permissiveness, coupled with a rejuvenated financial reward. Today, their texts serve as the ideal literature to capture the flavour of the times. William Wycherley, William Congreve, George Etherege, and their colleagues have left behind a diary of the Restoration romance with social comic criticism.

5. What are the characteristics of restoration drama?

Ans. Technically and historically, while the Restoration began on Charles II's return to the English throne in 1660, the "characteristics" of Restoration drama began to appear in the Carolinian dramas before the Interregnum—the "comedy of manners" and "heroic tragedies" pointed toward a changing public sensibility. Two other changes should be noted: increased attention to the commercial, rather than artistic, aspect of making theatre, and the popularization of earlier Elizabethan texts—*King Lear*, for example, was given a happy ending. Specifically, however, physically,

Restoration theatre showed these social changes: theatrical events moved indoors, into horse-shoe shaped theatres with a raked stage, allowing for inclusion of more social classes (servants, for example, were sent to reserve seats for their higher-class employees, but then stayed in the balconies to watch the play); the acting profession allowed female actors (one example of the exiled king's French influence brought to England). So the theatre experience underwent major changes. With them came dramatic changes—sentiment, farcical treatment of lower-class figures—country bumpkins, aging rakes, the overly thrifty, etc.— all foreshadowed in late Jacobean and Carolinian drama. Certain subgenres became popular—comedy of manners, in which fops and dandies presided over a heavily structured world of superficial lovers and intrigues—sentimental dramas, in which maudlin scenes tugged at the audience's heart in superficial ways—heroic tragedies, in which quasi-historic figures came to bad ends in exaggerated ways; the real voice of the age, however, was comedy—the “insider” ridiculing the “outsider.” The secularization and social broadening of the Restoration audience, and drama's catering commercially to this new mix, brought a scathing condemnation from Colley Cibber in *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* (1698), which ironically now serves scholars as a crisp source of the characteristics of the age. The verse forms and dialogue of Restoration drama also reflected the French theatre's influence, as did the increased permissiveness and bawdiness of the coarser plots.

6. Why do you think that comedy and satire became so important during the Restoration period? What does this suggest about the perspective of the writers of this era?
7. The most important plays produced during the Restoration period were comedies of manners. How does the theatre of this period compare to and/or contrast with Elizabethan theatre and the age of Shakespeare?
8. Why do you think that the literature of the period—and particularly the theatre—placed such an emphasis on sex and sexual innuendo?
9. John Dryden is considered to be the most important figure in Restoration

literature. Why do you think he was so influential?

10. While it's clear when this period in English literature begins (in 1660 with the restoration of monarchy in England), it's not so clear when it ends. Some critics draw the line at 1700, others later. How do we decide when Restoration literature "ends"?

#### **5.11 SUGGESTED READING**

- Hume, Robert D. (1976). *The Development of English Drama in the Late Seventeenth Century*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hughes, Derek (1996). *English Drama, 1660–1700*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

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**COURSE No.111**

**DRAMA-I**

**LESSON No. 6**

**M.A. ENGLISH CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE**

**UNIT - II**

**(TAMBURLAINE : THE GREAT)**

## **CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE'S EARLY LIFE : INFLUENCES AND EXPERIENCES**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Objectives
- 6.3 Life of Christopher Marlowe
- 6.4 Marlowe's works
- 6.5 His Formative Years
- 6.6 Literary Influences
- 6.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.8 Self-Assesment Questions with Answers
- 6.9 Examination Oriented Questions
- 6.10 Suggested Reading

### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) is one of the most suggestive figures of the English Renaissance, and the greatest of Shakespeare's predecessors. The glory of the Elizabethan drama dates from his *Tamburlaine* (1587), wherein the whole restless temper of the age finds expression:

*Nature, that framed us of four elements  
Warring within our breasts for regiment,  
Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds:  
Our souls--whose faculties can comprehend,  
The wondrous architecture of the world,  
And measure every wandering planet's course,  
Still climbing after knowledge infinite,  
And always moving as the restless spheres--  
Will us to wear ourselves and never rest.*

*Tamburlaine*, Pt. I, II, vii.

## **6.2 OBJECTIVES**

In this lesson we shall study in detail the early life of Christopher Marlowe and experiences which influenced him and his writings. We shall also glance through the formative and literary influences on him.

## **6.3 LIFE OF CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE**

Marlowe was born in Canterbury, only a few months before Shakespeare.

He was the son of a poor shoemaker, but through the kindness of a patron was educated at the town grammar school and then at Cambridge. When he came to London (c.1584), his soul was surging with the ideals of the Renaissance, which later found expression in Faustus, the scholar longing for unlimited knowledge and for power to grasp the universe. Unfortunately, Marlowe had also the unbridled passions which mark the early, or Pagan Renaissance, as Taine calls it, and the conceit of a young man just entering the realms of knowledge. He became an actor and lived in a low-tavern atmosphere of excess and wretchedness. In 1587, when he was twenty-three years old, he produced *Tamburlaine*, which brought him instant recognition. Thereafter, notwithstanding his wretched life, he holds steadily to a high literary purpose. Though all his plays abound in violence, no doubt reflecting many of the violent scenes in which he lived, he develops his "mighty line" and depicts great scenes in magnificent bursts of poetry, such as the stage

had never heard before. In five years, while Shakespeare was serving his apprenticeship, Marlowe produced all his great work. Then he was stabbed in a drunken brawl and died wretchedly, as he had lived. The Epilogue of Faustus is written across his tombstone:

*Cut is the branch that might have grown full straight,  
And burned is Apollo's laurel bough  
That sometime grew within this learned man.*

#### **6.4 MARLOWE'S WORKS**

Marlowe is famous for four dramas, now known as the Marlowesque or one-man type of tragedy, each revolving about one central personality who is consumed by the lust of power. The first of these is *'Tamburlaine'*, the story of Timur, the Tartar. Timur begins as a shepherd chief, who first rebels and then triumphs over the Persian king. Intoxicated by his success, Timur, rushes like a tempest over the whole of East. Seated on his chariot drawn by captive kings, with a caged emperor before him, he boasts of his power which overrides all things. Then, afflicted with disease, he raves against the gods and would overthrow them as he has overthrown earthly rulers. *Tamburlaine* is an epic rather than a drama; but one can understand its instant success with a people only half-civilized, fond of military glory, and the instant adoption of its "mighty line" as the instrument of all dramatic expression. *Dr. Faustus*, the second play, is one of the best of Marlowe's works. The story is that of a scholar who longs for infinite knowledge, and who turns from Theology, Philosophy, Medicine, and Law, the four sciences of the time, to the study of magic, much as a child might turn from jewels to tinsel and coloured paper. In order to learn magic he sells himself to the devil, on condition that he shall have twenty-four years of absolute power and knowledge. The play is the story of those twenty-four years. Like *Tamburlaine*, it is lacking in dramatic construction, but has an unusual number of passages of rare poetic beauty. Milton's Satan suggests strongly that the author of *'Paradise Lost'* had access to *Faustus* and used it, as he may also have used *Tamburlaine*, for the magnificent panorama displayed by Satan in *'Paradise Regained'*. For instance, more than fifty years before Milton's

hero says, "Which way I turn is hell, myself am hell," Marlowe had written:

Faustus : How comes it then that thou art out of hell?

Mephistophles : Why this is hell, nor am I out of it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed

In one self-place; for where we are is hell,

And where hell is there must we ever be.

Marlowe's third play is *'The Jew of Malta'*, a study of the lust for wealth, which centres about Barabas, a terrible old money lender, strongly suggestive of Shylock in *'The Merchant of Venice'*. The first part of the play is well constructed, showing a decided advance, but the last part is an accumulation of melodramatic horrors. Barabas is checked in his murderous career by falling into a boiling caldron which he had prepared for another, and dies blaspheming, his only regret being that he has not done more evil in his life.

Marlowe's last play is *'Edward II'*, a tragic study of a king's weakness and misery. In point of style and dramatic construction, it is by far the best of Marlowe's plays, and is a worthy predecessor of Shakespeare's historical drama. Marlowe is the only dramatist of the time who is ever compared with Shakespeare. When we remember that he died at twenty-nine, probably before Shakespeare had produced a single great play, we must wonder what he might have done had he outlived his wretched youth and become a man. Here and there his work is remarkable for its splendid imagination, for the stateliness of its verse, and for its rare bits of poetic beauty; but in dramatic instinct, in wide knowledge of human life, in humour, in delineation of woman's character, in the delicate fancy which presents an Ariel as perfectly as a Macbeth, in a word, in all that makes a dramatic genius, Shakespeare stands alone. Marlowe simply prepared the way for the master who was to follow.

## 6.5 HIS FORMATIVE YEARS

Marlowe was born in 1564 (the same year as Shakespeare as generally

referred), the son of a shoemaker at Canterbury. Taking his master's degree after seven years at Cambridge, in 1587, he followed the other 'University Wits' to London. There, probably the same year and the next, he astonished the public with the two parts of '*Tamburlaine the Great*,' a dramatization of the stupendous career of the bloodthirsty Mongol fourteenth-century conqueror. Various influences—psychological, social, economic and political—work as forces upon the child-artist who imbibes in him all that later becomes the source-material for his artistic creations. He is the creative medium through which his age and society find expression. It is, therefore, necessary to examine, analyse and record the early influences which went a long way to the making of Marlowe as an artist. Though the major influences, the literary, the philosophical and the artistic, are dealt with a little later, the early influences are significant in their own way.

Christopher Marlowe, the man, was shaped by environment, the social forces of his times, just as any or all artists have been shaped through ages. His childhood, his family background, his early education and the social milieu of the age were the forces which infused fire and spirit in the young child who was later to make significant changes in the world of thought and art. His psychology like that of any great artist was planted ready-made in him. He identified himself with the currents of thought and movements which though glorious were in their early phases received with shock by the conservative. Though much has been written on Marlowe's childhood and early life, only a few significant facts stand out as authentic records. There is no doubt that the boy was endowed by nature with a precocious nature, sharp mind and keen eye. His humble birth could prove no hurdle in the way of his ambitious and independent pursuits. The absence of any elder brother and sister in the family must have made the boy confident and self-reliant. Thus his psychology was of a lone genius in a world of commonality in which he was to rise by the force of his will and the power of his mind.

As in the case of Shakespeare, so in the case of Marlowe we have very

few biographical details. He was the son of John Marlowe, who was a shoemaker in Canterbury. About his father, Wright says, -‘John Marlowe, the shoemaker is best described in the words of Dr. Urry as a ‘busy, active, pugnacious fellow’ clearly very fond of the lime-light, prone to go to law at the slightest excuse, ready to perform public office and probably rather neglectful of his business’’. The boy Marlowe must have imbibed some of the traits of his own father. Consciously or unconsciously, at least, he did have the fondness of coming into the lime-light, especially when he had the intellectual resources of a genius. His unusual faculties, it is natural, would not let him find satisfaction in following the trade of his father. Moreover, his unusual qualities must have outshone all others in the family and in his father’s trade. Wright records, “His son Christopher ...must have been a strikingly beautiful bright-eyed boy, intelligent beyond the usual, who might readily have attracted the attention of a patron amongst his father’s wealthier clients. A likely benefactor has been suggested in the person of Sir Roger Manwood, who might have put in good word to further the lad to the scholarship which he was awarded to the King’s school’’. He got this scholarship when he was about fifteen years old. We do not have much knowledge as to how the boy equipped himself with knowledge that enabled him to get the scholarship.

By attending some local school in Canterbury, he had acquired the basic knowledge of letters, but his restless mind had also rummaged through the books and literary works in quest of more and more knowledge. This can be offered as a plausible explanation of his competence to qualify for the scholarship, notwithstanding the recommendation of the benefactor Sir Roger Manwood. Moreover, the knowledge of classical literature brought by the Renaissance was gaining popularity by the English translations of classical works, which printed by Caxton, were reaching all corners of England. Canterbury, in particular, had imbibed the influence Renaissance in its earliest phase on account of its situation, its unbroken relationship with the church, its history and also its links with other centers of trade in England and in Europe. As an important place of pilgrimage, it attracted men of all views, professions, trades, ranks and classes.

About his mother we know even less. His mother's tastes reveal that John Marlowe was a flourishing business man and the boy had seen many beautiful things in his house. Boas says, "Catherine Marlowe lingers solicitously over the bestowal of her gold and silver rings, her greatest silver spoons, her taffeta cushions and the rest, it is fanciful to conjecture that Christopher may, in part, have inherited from his mother his eye for 'seld-seen precious stones' for the dazzling blaze and colours of the world. It is permissible to catch at oven such a sight due to the sudden flowering from a prosperous, well-ordered tradesman stock of a revolutionary poetic genius-as inexplicable sport of nature as the emergence in a later age of a Shelley or a Swinburne from an equally conventional though far higher, social environment". Marlowe, there is no doubt might have this and some other sources of his passion for gold, silver, diamond, pearls, rubies and jewels which the reader so often finds scattered in his works. This passion of the best links him at once with the Elizabethan passion for wealth and splendour. As a boy, his psychology was rooted in the life around him to provide him with first hand knowledge. Besides this, we find in his works an elaborate system of imagery of objects such as stars and heavenly bodies which give us a peep into the splendour of the poet's imagination. The consciousness of his intellectual powers combined with his father's fearless spirit, must have made the boy ambitious, with a desire to achieve fame and come into the limelight. "So Christopher Marlowe grew up in a family dominated by females, with a rather fearless father, no doubt that was important dominated his psychological makeup".

The Elizabethans had a passion for fashions, glossy dresses with diamonds stitched or studded, ribbons and gold-laces, brilliantly inlaid scabbards, hilts and poniards. Women had cultivated unusual interest in delicate but costly works of art and handicraft such as, tapestries, hoods, trailing gowns and skirts and jewellery. They took pride in possessing rare pieces of cutlery and other articles of antiquity. All these and many other trends which had branched out in the Elizabethan age may have made the boy look for higher standards, particularly when he found them enlivened by his powerful imagination and

recreated by his poetic talent. Beauty both of sight and sound environed Marlowe in his most impressionable years”.

Not only the art, but also the architecture of the age with its roots in the past and its glories in the future was likewise making rapid progress. The old and mossy castles and fortress presented a striking contrast with the towering pinnacles of cathedrals and churches. The present seemed to be pregnant with all that would be a fitting expression of the Renaissance urge for glory greater and more impressive than the past had to boast of.

Marlowe was only nine when he had the occasion to witness the arrival of Queen Elizabeth and the royal pageant in all its splendour. It must have been an occasion of imposing significance to the child. “The Queen made it her policy to allow herself to be seen by her subjects and it may be assured that kid had his first glimpse at this tender age of the fabulous Virgin Queen whom he was later to serve as a political agent”. It can be reasonably deduced that the sight of royalty with its splendour would have taken whole of the young boy’s imagination, which later helped him to conceive of royal glory in his portraiture of *Tamburlaine*.

Christopher Marlowe joined the King’s School when he was just two months short of fifteen. He spent just two years at the King’s School. But on a boy of his exceptional gifts and interests, in the formative period between fifteen and seventeen, they must have had a highly important influence. “The curriculum of the school, as has been seen was fashioned according to the Renaissance pedagogic ideals, and its chief aim was to train the scholars to speak and write Latin fluently. The foundation of his familiarity with Latin literature and with the mythology of Greece and Rome must have been laid at the King’s School in 1579-80. A favourite Renaissance method of teaching boys to speak Latin intelligently was training them to act in classical or neo-classical plays But whether or not there was acting by the king’s scholars in 1579-80, it must have counted for something in Christopher’s development that his school had a tradition of theatrical production which was favoured by the authorities of the Cathedral”. Marlowe in these two years found his

potential dramatic talent awakened, his fecund mind touched by his pilgrimage through the classical world of Greece and Rome and his heart fascinated by the wealth of beauty and splendour in the world of art. Marlowe had begun his journey at the King's School, from the world of wonders, he had moved into the world of art and literature made more complex and interesting by the classical creed of the age.

From the rich and colourful world of Canterbury, he found himself in the rich fields of classical literature. He would have been astounded at the beauty and grace of the classics. It is reasonable to suppose that his creative imagination awakened at school, by the study of classical poetry, and by witnessing or participating in the performance of plays, which were popular at school. We have a detailed account of the curriculum which gives us understanding of the development of his mind at this stage. "According to the statutes of 1541 governing the curriculum, by the time a boy reached Fourth Form (and Marlowe would have gone into this straight way at least or probably to a higher grade) he would have been required to know his Latin syntax thoroughly, and there he would be practiced in poetic tales, the familiar letters of the learned men, and other literature of that sort. In the Fifth Form Latin oratory and classical rules of verse-making were taught, and here Christopher would have made a beginning in 'translating the chaste poets and the best historian'. In the sixth and highest form, he would cope with Erasmus and learn to vary speech in every mood in Latin...as implied by its name and evidenced by the curriculum one of the main functions of the grammar and speech with Greek as second language. To encourage fluency in this, the favoured teaching method of the Renaissance was the performance of these plays in these languages...it may be assumed that early contact with the drama proved a formative influence in the life of Marlowe who was destined to create an entirely new dramatic form for the English stage and call into being a dramatic literature unsurpassed in the history of the world".

In fact, Marlowe was fortunate to be initiated into the dramatic world by his time and place. The Elizabethan Age, as we know, had inherited the

tradition of dramatic performance from native sources. The Mysteries, Miracles and Moralities were popular in every town of England and these were patronised by the guilds. Rowse tells us that city like Canterbury with numerous guilds would have provided means for the “regular performances of Miracle plays, Moralities and musings. There is much more of this element in *Dr. Faustus* than in any of the plays of Shakespeare”. The young dramatist was thus being nursed and nourished in the Renaissance tradition and in the tradition of exploration into the new-found land of human experience, aspiration and achievement.

There was also another side to this glory and splendour of the Elizabethan Age. It was an age, which reveled in punishing its victims. On the one hand, it presented the procession of glorious adventures and statesmen, on the other hand it provided the spectacle of men who had dissented with authority or the Church going to the gallows. Political murders were neither unknown nor infrequent. “There were three public gibbets in Canterbury. The third was put up, evidently to meet a pressing need in 1576. Otherwise, while these were still tenanted, men were hanged on the city walls from the condemned cells in an upper room of West-gate. This seems to have impressed Marlowe as a boy, for in *Tamburlaine*. The Governor of Babylon is hung up in Chains on the city walls and shot to death”. Again, “Under 1540 the city account books, itemize the sums paid out to the various people engaged in the hanging, and perboiling of Fraiar Stone... It may be that Marlowe was drawing upon this event in the annals of Canterbury when he made Barabas fall into a boiling cauldron in the last scene of the *Jew of Malta*”.

Thus we see that Marlowe had been collecting material in his psychological reservoir so laboriously that he had simply to turn towards it whenever he wanted source material for his plays. So far as the various scenes of atrocity and cruelty are concerned, he “did not have to go very far afield for the more atrocious incidents in his plays, and conversely, the Elizabethan appetite for horrors was fully catered for by the dramatists... For Marlowe, scenes of

cruelty seem to have been a source of exhilaration. His friend Thomas Nash was also very representative of the age in this combination of lyrical sensibility and sadism, for it would be hard to parallel the gusto with which he, describes the death by torture of Cutwolfe in "*The Unfortunate Traveller*". Marlowe's life in his early youth was thus rich in personal experience. Even the rise of puritanism had a different effect on him, for instead of making him devout, it made him react against it. At school, he got more entrenched in the confirmation of experience of his boyhood days.

Thus, upto the age of fifteen, Marlowe's mind had been formed by the colourful yet cruel life of the Renaissance England. He had become familiar with classical stories, he had seen the pageants of Queen Elizabeth, he had felt the wonder and the beauty of the Gothic cathedral of Canterbury, he had known something of the wickedness of human nature by the innumerable fables and stories of ancient and contemporary life which he had read and heard. He had seen plays acted both in and outside school, and had heard the exaggerated declamations of Elizabethan actors.

Thus he was able to gather the rich harvest of the Elizabethan Age even before he crossed the portals of the Cambridge University.

## **6.6 LITERARY INFLUENCES**

To be initiated into the literary world, a young artist has to pass through his environmental set up. Cross-currents of literary forces play upon him and give him a direction which leads him to his peculiar literary achievements. Every age has its characteristic literary trends which influence a growing youth. He is nursed upon a certain well-defined tradition which in some sense influences the contemporary literary activity of the nation. Literary influences begin with the boy's entry into the academic circles or the literary field, particularly if he happens to be extra-intelligent and ambitious. Consciously or unconsciously, he identifies himself with a certain thought, an idea, a movement or a passion chiefly represented in the literary works available to him. Marlowe's own case exemplifies this statement when we probe deeply

into the literary scene of his times, the literary activities in the immediate past and the revolutionary thought unravelling the problems and mysteries of life and nature, was fast sweeping England under the impact of the Renaissance. A new angle and a new colour was imparted to the vision of life, literature, human affairs, religion, ethics and politics. Men of very rare potentialities, though in minority, were at work to lead the majority into an altogether novel world of human experience. Marlowe was at that time a student in Cambridge, one of the greatest centres of learning in England. He, by Nature, being unusual in his acceptance, or rejection of knowledge imparted indiscriminately, found himself attracted most to what was being dug out from the so far unexplored areas of investigation in almost every field. "And Cambridge offered a more variegated, a more disturbed and a more exciting scene."

Marlowe was a typical Elizabethan Englishman in the making. He had around him the world of the grown-up Elizabethan Englishmen with their eyes at everything appearing in the intellectual firmament of Europe. Will and Ariel Durant observe, "All in all, the Elizabethan Englishman was a scion of the Renaissance.... The dominant man of the age was a charge of energy released from old dogmas and inhibitions and not yet bound to new; boundless in ambition, longing to develop his capacities, unshackled in humour, sensitive to literature if it breathed life, given to violence of action and speech, but struggling, amid his bombast, vices and cruelties to be a gentleman. His ideal hovered between the amiable courtesies of Castiglione's "Courties" and the ruthless immoralism of Machiavelli's 'Prince'. He admired Sidney, but he aspired to be Drake."

Such models of daring men were before and around him. He was imbibing ideas both from life and literature just as he was developing in himself the qualities of 'the scion' of the Renaissance. Moreover, we have to remember that it was the age of both creative and the critical effort. The creative led them to the creation of the new models and the critical procured source material from outside the range of ordinary in thought and art. It was thus

the national glow of life and thought which made a fitting place for literary and intellectual development of Marlowe.

One of the major sources of the English literary revival was the attempt of English scholars to translate classical works into English. The influence of these translations upon Elizabethan literature was immense. These translations “gave plots to Marlowe, Shakespeare, Webster, Massinger and Ford, and Italian locale to many Elizabethan plays. Italy, which had rejected the Reformation, had gone beyond it to break down the old theology, even the Christian ethics, while Elizabethan religion debated Catholicism and protestantism, Elizabethan literature ignoring that conflict, returned to the spirit and verve of the Renaissance.” This was happening at the intellectual centres of England—Oxford and Cambridge. Marlowe was imbibing these influences to the marrow of his bones. He was reading Divinity, apparently in preparation for a life in holy orders at Canterbury. But Marlowe was made of different stuff. His sceptical mind would not let him accept anything without sifting it through the filter of his reason. This scepticism soon led him to atheism. This last loosely defined term comprised any kind of questioning of the accepted religious dogmas. Such an atmosphere proved congenial to the young Marlowe’s mind. At Cambridge he found opportunity to study in the small library of Archbishop Parker, where he avidly read Machiavelli, Erasmus, and the Latin Bible. He also read Aristotle and Ramus. But apart from the serious religious and philosophical works, he was particularly interested in Virgil and Ovid, who, alongwith other writers, revealed to him the glories of the antique world. He was already turning away from ‘Divinity, although he was morally bound to it by the terms of the scholarship. His natural urge lay in the free manifestation of his will. He broke the agreement and instead of taking to clerical life and going back to Canterbury, he went to London and became a play-wright. Thus, he followed the opportunistic doctrine of Machiavelli. Wright observes, ‘Machiavellian policy was something Christopher was well able to expound. Arch-Bishop Parker scholars consisting of Greek and Latin Bibles, Erasmus’s New Testament (Latin version in two volumes),

a Latin Bible concordance, classical lexicons and ‘thesauri’ and a history of Cambridge. If Marlowe resorted to this little library, it was but to sharpen his critical faculty and he was soon weaned on to other literature, browsing particularly happily among the Latin classical authors, Virgil and Ovid claiming him as disciple. Aristotle and Ramus he also read. The controversy over these two was the pivot of much Cambridge disputation. Echoes of this are found in Marlowe’s works. As at Canterbury, so now at Cambridge his genius was to receive to some extent, the stamp of his environment and be enriched by it.”

In fact, the Cambridge atmosphere of classical learning had endowed Marlowe with an artistic mind and was largely responsible for shaping him into a dramatic artist. The picture of Greek and Roman drama lay vivid before his eyes. Boas says, “Without denying that Marlowe during his six years residence at Cambridge may have acquired the elements of Greek, there can be no doubt that to him as to nearly all English humanists of his time, except a select group of scholars and divines, revelation of the antique world came through the literature of Rome. And to Marlowe the pre-eminent source of this revelation was Ovid—not only in the ‘Amores of which his translation may even have dated from his Cambridge days, but even such storehouses of myth and legend as the ‘*Metamorphosis*’, the ‘Fasti’, and the ‘Heroide’s only second was the attraction for him of Virgil to whom his debt extends well beyond the confines of Dido, Queen of Carthage. Indeed, for him the corpus of Latin literature would include the medieval and neo-classic analysts and biographers who furnished him with materials for *Tamburlaine*.”

Marlowe absorbed what he had read, but he did not attempt a slavish imitation of classical models. He was to transform everything that entered his mind into something altogether different, novel and beautiful. His study of classics coupled with his company with dare-devil thinkers and free-lancers at Cambridge made him a symbol of free thought. He became a blasphemous atheist. Will Durant observes, “His study of the classics unsettled his theology and his acquaintance with Machiavelli’s ideas gave his skepticism a cynical turn. Moving

to London after receiving his M.A. (1517), he shared a room with Thomas Kyd, and found the free-thinking circle of Raleigh and Harriot. Richard Barnes, a Government agent, reported to the Queen (June 3, 1593), that Marlowe had declared that ‘the first beginning of religion was only to keep men in awe. That Christ was a bastard...’ “He would be delighted to find Bruno calling Christ a carpenter and treating Greek and Christian legends, in the spaccio, on the same level, or to read in Ramus’s *De Religions* that Moses was an Egyptian braggart and the Christians dunces and scoundrels there are direct traces of Bruno’s and Machiavelli’s influence in his plays.”

Marlowe stayed at Cambridge for six and a half years. During this period, apart from absorbing classical knowledge he started his own creative work. Like most scholars he tried his hand at translation, besides composing poetry. “While he should have been studying Divinity, he was writing poetry.” He translated Ovid’s *Amores* and *Heroides*, and Lucan’s *Pharsalia*. “In translating this first book, Marlowe appears for once to look at the centre of the Elizabethan world picture without eccentricity of judgment or tone. The emphasis in social and political, rather than personal...In Marlowe’s Lucan, the vision of a world in confusion provokes some of the most deeply-felt writing.... In all this, the matter is of central and common Elizabethan interest, but the voice is distinctly and forcefully Marlowe’s.”

The translation of Ovid was important in the sense that it enabled him to gain mastery in writing rhymed couplets which makes his ‘*Hero and Leander*’ a classic Elizabethan poem. The translation of Lucan in blank verse gave him mastery in a form which he was to introduce and establish as the vehicle of poetic dream. He translated the first look of Lucan’s *Pharsalia* into blank verse; Since he was translating into blank verse...this gave him a tough apprenticeship in the art of blank verse. Here, in this stiff apprenticeship, is the origin of Marlowe’s mighty line. Lucan helped Marlowe in another way. He found a strange kinship between his imagination and that of Lucan. Lucan “Let his eye range over the three continents, to the farthest limits where the legions had trod, and he poured forth a wealth of geo-graphical and ethnographical detail which was not lost on the author of

*Tamburlaine*. His gaze, too, at times swept the heavens, and here again he touched an answering chord in the Cambridge student of cosmology.”

This ‘temperamental kinship’ with Lucan, Ovid and other ancient masters, and a wilful and diligent apprenticeship gave Marlowe a necessary further vision into the world where lay his polestar, ‘the Renaissance tradition.’ But it brought him into conflict with the authorities at Cambridge. His bold translations were dangerous in a society governed by morals and manners expounded by archbishops. He did translate but, “it was hardly the sort of poetry the authorities would approve. They did not. Marlowe’s translations of Ovid’s elegies or ‘Amores’ achieved the distinction of being publicly burnt by the order of the Archbishop Canterbury and the Bishop of London, and Marlowe’s translations from Ovid and Lucan are the work of an immature genius, but they are important for the influence exerted on his creative mind in his formative period. With Ovid and Lucan, Marlowe went to school.”

Marlowe’s experiments in poetic composition helped him when he started writing plays. The Elizabethan Age was rich in dramatic production, and Marlowe was attracted towards it. Cambridge curriculum encouraged the writings of original dramatic essays. Such an atmosphere at Cambridge perhaps goaded Marlowe to deviate from the Senecan tradition. He must have done a good deal of thinking before he wrote his first play, *Tamburlaine*. Evan probably persuaded him to discard the classical form of dramatic poetry and inspired him to write plays that were different in construction from Senecan plays. He had before him very few literary models. Upto that time England had not produced many dramatic works of high quality; there were the Miracle and Morality plays heavily overburdened with didactic intent, there was the first attempt at tragedy, *Gorboduc* written in 1562, and there was Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy*, an imitation of Seneca’s Revenge tragedies. Marlowe’s contemporaries like Nashe and Greene were also writing plays. Professor Wright thinks that he collaborated with Nashe in writing the first draft of his first play. “Casting around for a subject for his first real drama. He may have collaborated in a first draft with Thomas Nashe of St. John’s College, who from 1582 onwards, was at the University contemporaneously

with Marlowe. Another dramatist with whom Kyd might have first struck acquaintance in Cambridge was Robert Greene.” Boas says, Marlowe is more likely to have been influenced by the plays of Lyly dealing with classical subjects and acted by the children of the Chapel and of Paul. The name of Lyly has been so long associated with that of Marlowe as the first heir of his invention. Yet a close examination suggests that Marlowe’s Cambridge studies and translations of Latin poetry may well have led him to the choice of the Scythian conqueror for his first play.”

## **6.7 LET US SUM UP**

Thus, Marlowe grew up in an atmosphere of drama both at school and at Cambridge for as the records show the Elizabethan men and women were in spirit more akin to drama and dramatic poetry than to any other form of literature-to attain than to contemplation. Wright says, “Early contact with the drama proved a formative influence in the life of Marlowe, who was destined to create an entirely new dramatic form for the English stage and call into being a dramatic literature unsurpassed in the history of the world.” Marlowe had a very close association with the important University Wits, a privilege which Shakespeare did not have. In their company, he discussed and disputed what might have formed the source material, the thematic fabric and the philosophical nucleus of his great plays. The literary environmental conditions were thus like the furnace in which Marlowe the youngman was being shaped into an artist: a poet he was born and a dramatist he became. The stage was set for the great creator, who had instinctively been turning for authority to the Renaissance, to populate the Elizabethan stage with the Renaissance heroes of unusual aspirations, extraordinary dimensions and actions that would shock the Elizabethan out of orthodoxy into admiration.

## **6.8 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS**

1. How old was Marlowe when he produced *Tamburlaine*?

Ans. He produced *Tamburlaine* in 1587 when he was only 23 years old.

2. What was the cause of his early death?

Ans. He was stabbed in a drunken brawl and died wretchedly in 1593 at the age of 29.

3. What is Marlowesque drama?

Ans. It is one-man type of tragedy that revolves around one central personality consumed by the lust for power.

4. Name the four major dramas written by Marlowe.

Ans. The major dramas' are:

(i) *Tamburlaine*

(ii) *Dr. Faustus*

(iii) *Edward II*

(iv) *The Jew of Malta*

5. How was Marlowe initiated into the dramatic world?

Ans. The mysteries, miracles and moralities were popular in every town of England and they were patronized by the guilds.

6. What did his skeptical mind lead him to?

Ans. It led him to atheism.

## **6.9 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. Write the themes of the four major plays of Marlowe in brief.

2. What do you know about the early age of Marlowe ?

3. How was Marlowe initiated into the dramatic world ?

4. Marlowe was a typical Elizabethan English man in the making. Discuss.

5. Discuss Marlowe as a symbol of free thought.

## 6.10 SUGGESTED READING

- Bevington, David. *From Mankind to Marlowe: Growth of Structure in Elizabethan Drama*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965.
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## **THE FIVE PLAYS OF MARLOWE**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 7.1. Introduction
- 7.2 Objectives
- 7.3 The Spirit on Renaissance
- 7.4 ‘Tamburlaine’
- 7.5 Doctor Faustus
- 7.6 The Jew of Malta
- 7.7 Edward II
- 7.8 The Massacre at Paris
- 7.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 7.10 Self-Assesment Questions with answers
- 7.11 Examination Oriented Questions
- 7.12 Suggested Reading

### **7.1 INTRODUCTION**

Christopher Marlowe in writing his plays gave a new direction to drama. Marlowe’s heroes represent the romantic dreams of Elizabethan England more than the characters of any other contemporary dramatist except Shakespeare. There

are two reasons for it: firstly, he had absorbed like Shakespeare the manifold and colourful life of the age deeply, and secondly, his heroes are more subjective than Shakespeare's heroes. This is due to the fact that they are poetically conceived, and their romantic glamour provides the mirror for the romantic heroic conception of the age.

Marlowe's plays are closely associated with his tragic vision in the context of the Renaissance England—her glory, her inordinate ambition of a world Empire, her fabulous wealth and her efforts to cross the boundaries of traditional ethics to gain political supremacy. "Marlowe was the epitome of the Renaissance man, who aspires to grasp all knowledge and all experience within the compass of his brief, and all too hazardous life. He has been aptly described, 'the morning star' of the great literary effulgence that took place in the Renaissance England of Queen Elizabeth's reign and at his end, like a shooting star, he fell."

## **7.2 OBJECTIVES**

In this lesson we shall have an overview of the five prominent dramas of Christopher Marlowe. Also to appreciate Marlowe's dramatic creations, it is essential to appreciate the age in which he lived and wrote. It was an age of an inborn urge in the Renaissance hero to struggle.

## **7.3 THE SPIRIT ON RENAISSANCE**

The five plays of Marlowe reveal the spirit of Renaissance England. Whatever the places of scenes in the play, whatever people taken up as characters, and whatever the problems chosen for dramatic representation, they are closely associated with the times of Marlowe's England. Right from *Tamburlaine* to *Massacre at Paris* the plays mirror the Renaissance sentiment, character and life. Tamburlaine's urge for wealth and power springs from the national feeling of the Englishmen of the sixteenth century England. His military adventures, his urge for conquest and his war-craft reflect the British desire for the conquest of the world. The Englishmen in the sixteenth century thought their England to be a very small place and their own position in the world politically and economically inadequate

and sent daring Englishmen abroad in search of new lands of promising wealth. Symbolically Tamburlaine's stature as he rose from a mere shepherd to be the monarch of Asia, represents the parallel of the British isle expanding and subjugating numerous rich but weak nations in Asia, Africa and many other islands.

The personality and political prowess of Queen Elizabeth was gradually raising England from a small island into the center of the world affairs. To the sixteenth century Englishmen, the ever-widening horizon of their success inspired them for more expansion of imperialistic forces. This was due to the personality, prowess and glamour of Queen Elizabeth. She was "a person of exceptional intelligence and studious, and of inquisitive temperament, she was educated in the rigorous manner of the Renaissance by the finest scholars of the time." Her influence over her age is visible in almost all fields in the 16th century. She admired heroism and rewarded many a brave adventurous young man. She refused to be orthodox in religion. Her love of wealth, splendour, luxury and beauty made her an admirable person of emulation to her subjects.

The Queen provided a model of heroism to a man like Marlowe, because to her age her wisdom and statesmanship were more important than her feminine qualities. Many of her traits are traceable in the persons of Dr. Faustus, Tamburlaine and Mortimer. Dr. Faustus also was a 'person of exceptional intelligence and studious and of inquisitive nature'. His love of power and knowledge and a sense of adventure make him a truly Renaissance figure. Tamburlaine and Mortimer are also figures of exceptional courage and cunning. They delight in bloodshed and violence because they think that the way to the crown and power lies through bloodshed. Their activities such as wars, strategies, bloodshed reflect their love for glory, grandeur, wealth and beauty for which they shed blood. Thus in many ways they are the children of the Renaissance England.

#### **7.4 'TAMBURLAINE'**

There is a lot of information about the 16th century warfare and warcraft in Tamburlaine that helped him to gain victories. Kocher says, "So much of technical

information enters into *Tamburlaine*, specially that all of the action and much of the characterization of the play leap into full significance only against a background of the 16th century warfare and military usage... Marlowe's greater interest, however, is in the heavy cavalry arm, to which Tamburlaine and his sons as leaders of the army, properly belong: 'Well done, my boy, Thou shalt have shield and lance, Armour of proof horse, helm, and curtle axe'. This was the ponderous steel equipment and these were the shock tactics of the western armored horseman even so late as Marlowe's days. We find a good deal of realism in this play. It is not a matter of mere reproduction of technical information collected from catalogues: Marlowe creates a realistic picture of warfare and warcraft of the 16th century England. "Especially in *Tamburlaine*, by repeated hints, touches and more elaborate reference to armies and tactics distributed everywhere through the action, he keeps us always cognizant of these things and offers to our imagination three-dimensional scenes busy with the movements and sounds of war." *Tamburlaine*, as a whole reflects the Englishman's aspiration and desire for material progress. They wanted to see the crowns of the Asian and African kings tumbling before the British Crown. The Crown imagery in *Tamburlaine* thus symbolizes the Elizabethan sentiment of political supremacy in the world.

The defeated Cosroe calls Tamburlaine "bloody and insatiate Tamburlaine". "Not so", replies the aggressive hero, and he proceeds to defend himself by the examples of the gods and of Nature: "The thrust.../Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds" (I, *Tamb.*II, vii, 12-20). Awesome and charismatic, Tamburlaine still looks to continuity and at his death leaves the reins of government to his surviving sons, establishing himself as the model for their political conduct."

## 7.5 DOCTOR FAUSTUS

*Doctor Faustus* reflects Renaissance England on more levels than does *Tamburlaine*. This play shows on the stage the luxury and the ease which were available to the affluent Elizabethans. Records show how fabulous sums of money were spent on parties, dinners and pageants in the Elizabethan age. Lords and ladies lived in the most luxuriant ways and comforts. Money was spent on purchas-

ing fashionable garments, jewellery, diamonds, tapestry and fashionable dresses. Dr. Faustus's action of exchanging knowledge for power shows the Englishman's devotion to professions, arts and trades which would bring them immeasurable wealth. The material trends of the people and their sad indifference to religion under the impact of the Renaissance is also reflected in this play. Under the influence of Machiavelli they had begun to think freely and would not be blind followers of religion. Voyages and journeys were on the increase. Faustus's journey epitomizes these journeys and voyages. The play would be out of place in any other age of England before or after the sixteenth century. His martyrdom in the name of knowledge and science fits in only in the framework of the intellectual age of the Renaissance in England. "Dr. Faustus has all the divine discontent, the unwearied and unsatisfied striving after knowledge that marked the age in which Marlowe wrote. An age of exploration, its adventurers were not only the merchants and seamen who sailed round the world but also the scientists, astronomers who surveyed the heaven with their optic glass and those scholars who travelled in the realms of gold to bring back tales of a mighty race of gods and heroes in ancient Greece and Rome." Harry Levin says that the first soliloquy of Dr. Faustus is "no mere reckoning of accounts but an inventory of the Renaissance mind." Today both Tamburlaine and Faustus would come under scathing criticism for being evil to some extent. But in the context of Renaissance England, they would be the darlings of the age because their overreaching ambitions reflect the spirit, the tenor and the milieu of the sixteenth century England. Moreover, as Dr. Tillyard observes: "The greatness of the Elizabethan age was that it contained so much of the new without bursting the noble form of the old order. It is here that the Queen herself comes in. Somehow the Tudors had inserted themselves into the constitution of the medieval universe. They were part of the pattern and they made themselves indispensable. If they were to be preserved, it had to be as part of this pattern." This fact is supported by the picture of Dr. Faustus and his world. His tragedy clearly shows that though he revolted against the Christian tenets, against Christ and Heaven, he could not repudiate reality. His conflict between the new and the old forms of order illustrates the conflicting pattern of the Elizabethan

mind. His decision to court the Devil lands him into Hell. While he is being dragged to Hell, his repentance and cries for help uphold his belief in the old order. Doctor Faustus, a well-respected German scholar, grows dissatisfied with the limits of traditional forms of knowledge—logic, medicine, law, and religion—and decides that he wants to learn to practice magic. His friends Valdes and Cornelius instruct him in the black arts, and he begins his new career as a magician by summoning up Mephistophilis, a devil. Despite Mephistophilis's warnings about the horrors of hell, Faustus tells the devil to return to his master, Lucifer, with an offer of Faustus's soul in exchange for twenty-four years of service from Mephistophilis. Meanwhile, Wagner, Faustus's servant, has picked up some magical ability and uses it to press a clown named Robin into his service.

Mephistophilis returns to Faustus with word that Lucifer has accepted Faustus's offer. Faustus experiences some misgivings and wonders if he should repent and save his soul; in the end, though, he agrees to the deal, signing it with his blood. As soon as he does so, the words "Homo fuge," Latin for "O man, fly," appear branded on his arm. Faustus again has second thoughts, but Mephistophilis bestows rich gifts on him and gives him a book of spells to learn. Later, Mephistophilis answers all of his questions about the nature of the world, refusing to answer only when Faustus asks him who made the universe. This refusal prompts yet another bout of misgivings in Faustus, but Mephistophilis and Lucifer bring in personifications of the Seven Deadly Sins to prance about in front of Faustus, and he is impressed enough to quiet his doubts.

Armed with his new powers and attended by Mephistophilis, Faustus begins to travel. He goes to the pope's court in Rome, makes himself invisible, and plays a series of tricks. He disrupts the pope's banquet by stealing food and boxing the pope's ears. Following this incident, he travels through the courts of Europe, with his fame spreading as he goes. Eventually, he is invited to the court of the German emperor, Charles V (the enemy of the pope), who asks Faustus to allow him to see Alexander the Great, the famed fourth-century B.C. Macedonian king and conqueror. Faustus conjures up an image of Alexander, and Charles is suitably

impressed. A knight scoffs at Faustus's powers, and Faustus chastises him by making antlers sprout from his head. Furious, the knight vows revenge.

Meanwhile, Robin, Wagner's clown, has picked up some magic on his own, and with his fellow stablehand, Rafe, he undergoes a number of comic misadventures. At one point, he manages to summon Mephistophilis, who threatens to turn Robin and Rafe into animals (or perhaps even does transform them; the text isn't clear) to punish them for their foolishness.

Faustus then goes on with his travels, playing a trick on a horse-courser along the way. Faustus sells him a horse that turns into a heap of straw when ridden into a river. Eventually, Faustus is invited to the court of the Duke of Vanholt, where he performs various feats. The horse-courser shows up there, along with Robin, a man named Dick (Rafe in the A text), and various others who have fallen victim to Faustus's trickery. But Faustus casts spells on them and sends them on their way, to the amusement of the duke and duchess.

As the twenty-four years of his deal with Lucifer come to a close, Faustus begins to dread his impending death. He has Mephistophilis call up Helen of Troy, the famous beauty from the ancient world, and uses her presence to impress a group of scholars. An old man urges Faustus to repent, but Faustus drives him away. Faustus summons Helen again and exclaims rapturously about her beauty. But time is growing short. Faustus tells the scholars about his pact, and they are horror-stricken and resolve to pray for him. On the final night before the expiration of the twenty-four years, Faustus is overcome by fear and remorse. He begs for mercy, but it is too late. At midnight, a host of devils appears and carries his soul off to hell. In the morning, the scholars find Faustus's limbs and decide to hold a funeral for him.

## **7.6 THE JEW OF MALTA**

*The Jew of Malta*, however, repugnant to the Christians is also the product of the Renaissance mind. He is the mercantile prince and the Machiavellian merchant. He has trade contacts in almost all the important cities of the world. His Malta is

no other country than the sixteenth century England, for at that time, England had commercial contacts with many countries in the world. *The Jew of Malta* engages directly with the social environment in which it was reared in its treatment of the new world of international mercantilism. There is a passage in the play that supports this view : “Warehouses stuffed with spices and with drugs at Alexandria merchandise unsold : But yesterday two ships went from this town, / their voyage will be worth ten thousand crown : / in Florence, Venus, Antwerp, London, Sevilla/ Frankfort, Leubeck, Moscow, and where not.” This reflects the milieu into which Barabas initiates us, i.e. into the cosmopolitan commercial world. Historical records show that the state of commerce in England and the fabulous wealth pouring into the purses of England tallies with the state of affairs in Malta. The play thus reflects the contemporary situation of England. “There is the concrete particularity of a real world in the opening scene...and at the same moment that he is expanding his most opulent verse on the varnishing of the higher cupidity—‘bags of fiery opals, sapphires, amethysts/Jacinth, hard topaz, grass-green emeralds...’” The play also reflects the economic and political power of England for Barabas struggles not only for wealth but also for political power by ransoming the town to the Turks. The play certainly reflects the state of Commerce, the hunger for power, cupidity for wealth and the English cunning by which the sixteenth century rulers and commoners were trying to begin with trade contacts and end with political possession of the lands they rowed in and established their colonies in. Machiavelli entered subtly into the English politics of the time. The play reflects dramatically the techniques of power used in constructing the British Empire by emancipating the political mind from the traditional bonds of morality. ‘Everything is fair in politics’, had become the policy of the sixteenth century Britishers which is amply pictured in the character of the Jew.

The play opens with a Prologue narrated by Machevill, a caricature of the author Machiavelli. This character explains that he is presenting the “tragedy of a Jew” who has become rich by following Machiavelli’s teachings.

Act I opens with a Jewish merchant, called Barabas, waiting for news about the

return of his ships from the east. He discovers that they have safely docked in Malta, before three Jews arrive to inform him that they must go to the senate-house to meet the governor. Once there, Barabas discovers that along with every other Jew on the island he must forfeit half of his estate to help the government pay tribute to the Turks. When the Barabas protests at this unfair treatment, the governor Ferneze confiscates all of Barabas's wealth and decides to turn Barabas's house into a convent. Barabas vows revenge but first attempts to recover some of the treasures he has hidden in his mansion. His daughter, Abigail, pretends to convert to Christianity in order to enter the convent. She smuggles out her father's gold at night.

Ferneze meets with Del Bosco, the Spanish Vice-Admiral, who wishes to sell Turkish slaves in the market place. Del Bosco convinces Ferneze to break his alliance with the Turks in return for Spanish protection. While viewing the slaves, Barabas meets up with Ferneze's, Lodowick. This man has heard of Abigail's great beauty from his friend (and Abigail's lover) Mathias. Barabas realizes that he can use Lodowick to exact revenge on Ferneze, and so he dupes the young man into thinking Abigail will marry him. While doing this, the merchant buys a slave called Ithamore who hates Christians as much as his new master does. Mathias sees Barabas talking to Lodowick and demands to know whether they are discussing Abigail. Barabas lies to Mathias, and so Barabas deludes both young men into thinking that Abigail has been promised to them. At home, Barabas orders his reluctant daughter to get betrothed to Lodowick. At the end of the second Act, the two young men vow revenge on each other for attempting to woo Abigail behind one another's backs. Barabas seizes on this opportunity and gets Ithamore to deliver a forged letter to Mathias, supposedly from Lodowick, challenging him to a duel.

Act III introduces the prostitute Bellamira and her pimp Pilia-Borza, who decide that they will steal some of Barabas's gold since business has been slack. Ithamore enters and instantly falls in love with Bellamira. Mathias and Lodowick kill each other in the duel orchestrated by Barabas and are found by Ferneze and

Katherine, Mathias's mother. The bereaved parents vow revenge on the perpetrator of their sons' murders. Abigail finds Ithamore laughing, and Ithamore tells her of Barabas's role in the young men's deaths. Grief-stricken, Abigail persuades a Dominican friar Jacomo to let her enter the convent, even though she lied once before about converting. When Barabas finds out what Abigail has done, he is enraged, and he decides to poison some rice and send it to the nuns. He instructs Ithamore to deliver the food. In the next scene, Ferneze meets a Turkish emissary, and Ferneze explains that he will not pay the required tribute. The Turk leaves, stating that his leader Calymath will attack the island.

Jacomo and another friar Bernardine despair at the deaths of all the nuns, who have been poisoned by Barabas. Abigail enters, close to death, and confesses her father's role in Mathias's and Lodowick's deaths to Jacomo. She knows that the priest cannot make this knowledge public because it was revealed to him in confession.

Act IV shows Barabas and Ithamore delighting in the nuns' deaths. Bernardine and Jacomo enter with the intention of confronting Barabas. Barabas realizes that Abigail has confessed his crimes to Jacomo. In order to distract the two priests from their task, Barabas pretends that he wants to convert to Christianity and give all his money to whichever monastery he joins. Jacomo and Bernardine start fighting in order to get the Jew to join their own religious houses. Barabas hatches a plan and tricks Bernardine into coming home with him. Ithamore then strangles Bernardine, and Barabas frames Jacomo for the crime. The action switches to Bellamira and her pimp, who find Ithamore and persuade him to bribe Barabas. The slave confesses his master's crimes to Bellamira, who decides to report them to the governor after Barabas has given her his money. Barabas is maddened by the slave's treachery and turns up at Bellamira's home disguised as a French lute player. Barabas then poisons all three conspirators with the use of a poisoned flower.

The action moves quickly in the final act. Bellamira and Pilia-Borza confess Barabas's crimes to Ferneze, and the murderer is sent for along with Ithamore.

Shortly after, Bellamira, Pilia-Borza and Ithamore die. Barabas fakes his own death and escapes to find Calymath. Barabas tells the Turkish leader how best to storm the town. Following this event and the capture of Malta by the Turkish forces, Barabas is made governor, and Calymath prepares to leave. However, fearing for his own life and the security of his office, Barabas sends for Ferneze. Barabas tells him that he will free Malta from Turkish rule and kill Calymath in exchange for a large amount of money. Ferneze agrees and Barabas invites Calymath to a feast at his home. However, when Calymath arrives, Ferneze prevents Barabas from killing him. Ferneze and Calymath watch as Barabas dies in a cauldron that Barabas had prepared for Calymath. Ferneze tells the Turkish leader that he will be a prisoner in Malta until the Ottoman Emperor agrees to free the island.

## 7.7 EDWARD II

*Edward II* and *Massacre at Paris* mirror some other aspects of the Renaissance England—other than mere economic and political aspects. *Edward II* reflects the weakness of flesh in the form of Gaveston and the king and an ambition to power and a sense of order and harmony in the state as embodied in Mortimer. Gaveston entices the king with the pleasures of the senses and promises ‘pleasing wits/ Musicians.../Sweet speeches, comedies and pleasing shows/ ..men, like satyrs grazing On the Lawns, (I, 1, 52-58/). The king is so fascinated by this promise that he neglects his Queen Isabella. This accounts for the weakness of the rich gentry and royalty in the Elizabethan Age. Vital matters of the state were neglected and sensual pleasures were sought in the pagan standards of beauty, but Mortimer reflects the stronger aspect and the tougher attitude of the Renaissance England. His character, his ambition and his action mirror the young aspiring lords of England gathering round Queen Elizabeth in the 16th century. He resembles Lord Essex and Gloucester in many ways. Mortimer loved the Queen. But in spite of his own ambition for power, he was devoted to the State ruled by the weak king. His fortitude at the time of his death is the fortitude of many young lords like Essex who was ordered to be executed by Queen Elizabeth. “Elizabeth signed his (Essex’s) death warrant. Essex was only thirty four at the time of his execution.

The glamour went out of the court when Essex died.” King Edward II recalls his *favourite*, Pierce de Gaveston, from exile; Gaveston joyfully returns to England. While hurrying to Westminster to rejoin his monarch, he comes upon the king talking to his courtiers. Secretively, he hides from the royal assemblage and overhears the noblemen discussing his repatriation.

They discuss how Edward, an immature and weak-minded yet stubborn man, nourished for Gaveston an unwholesome and unyielding love, in spite of the fact that Edward’s father originally banished the man. The noblemen of England, sworn to uphold the decree of exile, hate the royal favourite. Most passionate in his fury is young Mortimer. Others are not far behind Mortimer in their antipathy, and they threaten the king with revolt if Gaveston remains in England. None but the king’s brother Edmund will harbour Gaveston. The fiery discussion ends; the nobles stalk off in haughty displeasure.

Gaveston, still in hiding, rejoices in his knowledge of the king’s love, for Edward reveals his pettiness by his unconcern for the welfare of his kingdom as weighed against his desire to clasp Gaveston to his bosom once more. When Gaveston reveals his presence, Edward ecstatically rewards him with a series of titles and honours, the scope of which causes even Edmund to comment wryly that Edward outdid himself. Gaveston claims with a smirk that all he desires is to be near his monarch. To add salt to the kingdom’s wounds, Edward sentences the Bishop of Coventry, the instigator of Gaveston’s exile, to die in the Tower of London.

This action, coupled with the titles and estates lavishly bestowed upon Gaveston, so incenses the rebellious nobility that under the leadership of the two Mortimers, Warwick, and Lancaster, they plot to kill Gaveston. The Archbishop of Canterbury, protesting the damage inflicted upon the Church by the king’s folly, allies himself with the plot. Queen Isabella, who professes to love her lord dearly, complains to the noblemen that since Gaveston’s return Edward snubs her beyond endurance. She agrees that Gaveston must be done away with, but she cautions the angry noblemen not to injure Edward.

When the rebellious nobility seize Gaveston, Edward, yielding to the archbishop's threat to enforce his papal powers against the king, can do nothing but stand by and allow his beloved friend to be carried off. A bitter exchange of words between the king and his lords is tempered by the gentle sentiments of Gaveston as he bids Edward farewell. Driven by childish anger, perhaps incensed by an intuitive knowledge, Gaveston attacks the queen and accuses her of a clandestine association with the younger Mortimer, a charge that she denies. Sensing his advantage, Edward seizes upon the accusation as a wedge to undermine his enemies, and he compels the queen to use her influence to save Gaveston. The queen, because of her love for Edward and her hopes for a reconciliation, resolves to mend the rift by abetting her husband.

## **7.8 THE MASSACRE AT PARIS**

*The Massacre at Paris* deals chiefly with the religious intolerance that was the Renaissance bane of 16th century England. There was a bloody tug of war, between the Roman Catholics who derived their strength from the Pope of Rome and the Protestants who relied on their sovereign and the new awakening brought about by Luther and Erasmus. It is a very realistic picture of the religious war going on in England at various levels. The genius of Guise exploited religion in his own favour and interpreted it to his own convenience as the powerful religious men in England were doing to the annoyance of the Crown. Nor are the melodramatic ways of poisoning and killing less representative Elizabethan methods learnt in Italy and practiced in England. One of the most dominant similarities between the lives reflected in *The Massacre at Paris* and the sixteenth century Renaissance England is the struggle for power by fair or foul means and the art of destroying the enemies. The incident of Mary Stuart's beheading by the order of Queen Elizabeth who was her rival is a striking example of the struggle for power and religious fanaticism of the age. *The Massacre at Paris* is without doubt the play of Marlowe's that has received least attention historically both from a staging and a critical perspective, and justifiably so. It is only extant in what is believed to be both an abridged and 'reported' text, a single undated Octavo version, published by Edward White almost certainly some time between 1594 and 1606. The result

is a play text approximately half the length of *Edward II*, *The Jew of Malta*, and each part of *Tamburlaine*, mostly comprised of fast moving and bloody action, but lacking for the most part much depth of characterisation or good quality verse.

There is however much of historical interest here. The play is virtually unique in addressing contemporary European history, and indeed a sensitive political situation on England's own doorstep. The St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, instigated by the French royal rulers and Catholic nobles (including the Duke of Guise) saw the systematic murder and execution of thousands of protestant Huguenots in the French capital in August 1572. Many of the Huguenot leadership were in Paris for the wedding of their leader, Henry of Navarre, to the French King's sister Margaret. With the notable exceptions of Navarre and the Prince of Condé, virtually all the Huguenot nobles present were exterminated along with a large number of ordinary protestants living in Paris, including scholars, preachers, clergymen, and all manner of ordinary men, women and children. It was a horrific act of mass murder that shocked the world, especially neighbouring protestant countries such as England and the Netherlands. The terror was more acute due to a good number of Englishmen in Paris who witnessed the butchery first hand, including the Queen's Ambassador Sir Francis Walsingham, and Sir Philip Sidney.

The massacre occupies the first half of the play, before Marlowe brings the story of the French Wars of Religion up to date through the reign of Henry III. Indeed the climax of this play, most likely written in 1592, covers some very recent history indeed: the murder of the Duke of Guise and his brother the Cardinal of Guise in December 1588, and the subsequent murder in turn of Henry III by a Dominican friar, Jacques Clément, in August 1589. This latest cycle of religious and political assassinations left Henry of Navarre as King Henry IV of France, although it would take another four years and the new King's conversion to Catholicism before he could be crowned.

## **7.9 LET US SUM UP**

The man of the Renaissance England had acquired a special and particular love for beauty in all its forms. It was seen in the general way of living, dress, furniture, buildings, glittering coaches, gilded chariots and attitude towards beautiful women.

Tamburlaine's ecstatic joy expressed on seeing Zenocrate and Faustus's poetic and passionate outbursts on seeing Helen reflect the passionate love of the Renaissance man for physical beauty. In literature, we have numerous ballads and sonnets written on the beauty of women by Spenser, Sidney and Shakespeare. Love of splendour and grandeur is mirrored in these plays exactly as it was displayed by the people in the reign of Elizabeth The Queen in her golden chariot visited the Lords and her subjects in public ; her dazzling and grand pageant is reflected in Tamburlaine's numerous journeys and marches to the battle front. Besides this, the demonstration of military power and the subjugation of various rebellions by Elizabeth are reflected in *Tamburlaine*- All the plays of Marlowe are the windows that open into the 16th century Renaissance England and reveal in full the life, the living, the sentiments, actions and thoughts of the contemporary English society. "The whole story of Renaissance humanism is told in four Elizabethan tragedies : the two parts of *Tamburlaine The Great*, *Dr. Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta* and *Edward II*. "To claim so much for Marlowe's play is not, I think, to fabricate a Renaissance Summer from one swallow".

#### **7.10 SELF- ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS**

1. What are the essential features of Renaissance man?

Ans. He aspires to grasp all knowledge and all experience within the compass of his brief but hazardous life.

2. What does crown imagery in *Tamburlaine* symbolize?

Ans. It symbolises the Elizabethan sentiment of political supremacy in the world.

3. What does Malta in *Jew of Malta* signify?

Ans. It signifies the sixteenth century England.

4. What is the theme of Massacre at Paris?

Ans. It deals with the religious intolerance of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Renaissance England.

## 7.11 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

1. Comment on the realism of the play *Tamburlaine*.
2. What are the interests of English men reflected in *Doctor Faustus*?
3. Comment on the social environment reflected in *The Jew of Malta*.
4. Write a note on the themes of *Edward II* and *The Massacre at Paris*.
5. How do the plays of Marlowe reveal the spirit of Renaissance England?

## 7.12 SUGGESTED READING

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**TAMBURLAINE THE GREAT : PLOT SUMMARY****STRUCTURE**

- 8.1. Introduction
- 8.2 Objectives
- 8.3 Detailed Summary of the Part I
- 8.4 Critical analysis of Plot of Part I
- 8.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 8.6 Self-Assesment Questions with Answers
- 8.7 Examination Oriented Questions
- 8.8 Suggested Reading

**8.1 INTRODUCTION**

This epic play, written during the Elizabethan period, tells the epic story of an ambitious would-be emperor and his rise to earthly greatness. His ascent to power is contrasted by his descent into a delusional arrogance and his resistance to what he himself describes as the "feminine" weakness of deep emotion. Themes of loyalty and of the relationship between fathers and sons are developed through a series of military conquests interspersed with brief interludes of tenderness and personal intimacy.

## **8.2 OBJECTIVES**

In this lesson we shall give you detailed summary of the play. Subsequently the critical comments on the plot will help you look at the text with a critical eye.

## **8.3 DETAILED SUMMARY OF THE PART I**

A brief prologue introduces the action of Part 1, the chronicle of how Tamburlaine conquers the world. It suggests that the audience, or the reader, is intended to view what happens as a tragedy, and to judge Tamburlaine's actions accordingly. Act 1 then opens with the king of Persia, Mycetes, complaining to his brother Cosroe of a band of outlaws led by a "Scythian" shepherd named Tamburlaine. Scythians would technically have lived north and northeast of the Black Sea, but Marlowe uses the term interchangeably with "Tartar," which signifies the area of East Asia controlled by Mongol tribes. Cosroe criticizes his brother for being a weak and foolish king, and Mycetes instructs his chief captain Theridamas to kill Tamburlaine and his band before they enter Persia. Then, two Persian lords inform Cosroe of widespread unrest and offer him the crown, which Cosroe accepts.

Tamburlaine encourages Zenocrate, a recently captured princess of Egypt, to not fear him, saying she needs him to guarantee safe passage through his lands. When he asks whether she is betrothed to anyone, she tells him she is. He then tells her that he intends to have her for his wife, to conquer Africa and Asia, and to make her an empress. To illustrate his seriousness, he takes off the clothing of a shepherd that he wears and puts on battle armour as his generals speak flatteringly to him; Zenocrate tells him the gods will not allow him to fulfill his ambitions. Tamburlaine responds by saying Zenocrate is more beautiful and more valuable to him than all the treasure she travels with. One of Tamburlaine's generals, Techelles, comments with surprise that Tamburlaine seems to be in love. Tamburlaine says women must be flattered. In the opening scene the conversation between Cosroe and his generals reveal that Cosroe knows Theridimas has allied himself with Tamburlaine, who is described in great and flattering detail by Menaphon. Cosroe says that Tamburlaine is a potentially powerful ally,

and resolves to join with him to seize control of the Persian throne from Mycetes, adding that someone with Tamburlaine's ambition and drive will be a powerful servant. Later Mycetes discovered that Cosroe, Tamburlaine, and Theridimas have joined forces. He vows to defeat them, and Meander urges him to promise great reward to those who kill them. A spy comes with news that the army of the traitors is much larger than that of Mycetes. Meander suggests that the size of Tamburlaine's army will make him careless, and then addresses the soldiers, promising them gold and riches if they succeed.

Mycetes appears, carrying his crown. He speaks in soliloquy about how frightening war is, how kings always make good targets in a war, and how he thinks it is a good idea to hide his crown so no-one can take it from him. Tamburlaine appears and confronts him. Mycetes tries to use his authority as king to order him away, but Tamburlaine stays and discovers the crown. Mycetes demands that he give it back and Tamburlaine does, saying it is only a loan. He then goes out, and Mycetes marvels that Tamburlaine "the thief" did not simply steal it.

One can see conversation between Tamburlaine and Cosroe, in the presence of Theridimas, Meander, Techelles and other generals, reveals that Mycetes has been defeated, that Cosroe is now emperor, and that Tamburlaine is now regent (deputy king) of Persia. Cosroe makes Meander his chief advisor, proclaims that messengers are to be sent to all the other regents in the empire that their overlord has changed, and announces his intention to subdue the remains of Mycetes' army. After he leaves, Tamburlaine tells Theridimas and his generals that he intends to get control of Persia for himself, along with control of Cosroe's other lands for his generals. He sends Techelles after Cosroe to give him fair warning that he (Tamburlaine) is taking control. Cosroe angrily vows to destroy Tamburlaine. Meander and his other generals speak of what an ambitious monster Tamburlaine is. Bajazeth announces to three of his regents that Tamburlaine is challenging his rule of the Turkish Empire. After commenting that his army is invincible and that his attention will not be distracted from his siege of Constantinople in Greece, Bajazeth sends a basso (messenger) to Tamburlaine with the command that he should not advance into Africa or Greece, and with the offer to negotiate for

peace. The Basso leaves on his mission. After he is gone, Bajazeth's regents speak flatteringly to him, and he speaks determinedly about how he will conquer the Greeks once and for all.

In Act 3, Scene 1 the stage is set for Tamburlaine's next conquest. It is interesting to note how all the rulers he conquers, including Bajazeth and Cosroe, come across as over-confident and arrogant in much the same manner as does Tamburlaine. The core...

In Act 3, Scene 2 Zenocrate's loyal servant Agydas asks why she is so troubled, saying that her kidnapping and rape at the hands of Tamburlaine ought to have been "digested" (made peace with) a long time ago. Zenocrate agrees that her first feelings of disgust have indeed been digested because of the attention and courtesy he has paid to her since, but admits that there is something else troubling her, and comments on how much she now loves Tamburlaine.

Tamburlaine and Techelles appear, without being noticed, and overhear as Agydas reminds Zenocrate that Tamburlaine is keeping her from seeing her father and from being granted the rightful honours of a queen. He urges her to hope for rescue from her father the Soldan (Sultan) of Egypt. Zenocrate tells him to speak of Tamburlaine more appropriately, but Agydas suggests that Tamburlaine is incapable of love because he had not shown true valour.

In Act 3, Scene 3 Tamburlaine, in the company of Theridimas, Techelles, Zenocrate and other attendants, greets the Basso mockingly, telling his regents that the crowns of Bajazeth's regents will be theirs when they win. Theridimas and Techelles both vow that victory will be theirs and Tamburlaine speaks encouragingly to them, calling himself "the Scourge and Wrath of God" and vowing to completely subdue Bajazeth, his armies and his empire.

Bajazeth enters, calling himself the greatest ruler in Africa and accompanied by his regents, by his wife Zabina, and by a guard of honour. He and Tamburlaine challenge each other, each swearing that the other will be soundly defeated. Bajazeth comments that Tamburlaine's regents will be harnessed to his wife's chariot and made to pull her, while the regents of each leader speak negatively

about the other regents. He also brags about how Zabina has given him his heir and her life.

In Act 4 Scene 1 - The Soldan, accompanied by several lords and a Messenger, cries out with anger about Zenocrate being kept as a concubine by Tamburlaine, and about how Tamburlaine is advancing into Egyptian territory. The Messenger describes the army in detail, and the Soldan says no army of any size would frighten him. One of his lords reminds him that the speed of Tamburlaine's assault has caught him unready, but the Soldan tells him the way Tamburlaine is treating Zenocrate has made him (the Soldan) angry enough to brave anything. The Messenger pleads with the Soldan to understand how vicious and bloodthirsty Tamburlaine is, but the Soldan comments that Tamburlaine is an ignorant peasant and will be defeated in revenge for the way he treated Zenocrate.

In Scene 2 we read Tamburlaine orders that Bajazeth, kept in a cage like an animal, be brought out. He wants Bajazeth to suffer.

In Act 4 Scene 3 - The Soldan attempts to convince the King of Arabia to join his battle with Tamburlaine, likening their efforts to those of several mythic warriors. The King of Arabia reminds him of what happened to Bajazeth, but the Soldan tells him that he has vowed to free both Bajazeth and Zenocrate at any cost. The King comments that he longs to fight Tamburlaine and agrees to join his army with that of the Soldan. After hearing the details of the size of the combined forces, the King of Arabia speaks confidently about their chances for victory. The Soldan orders that the combined forces defend Damascus and humiliate Tamburlaine.

In Scene 4 - As he welcomes his guests to a banquet, Tamburlaine's words indicate that the Soldan has not surrendered and that a bloody battle is imminent. After enduring more curses from both he leaves the place for more action to think about.

In Act 5, Scene 1 - The Governor of Damascus notes the city is under siege from Tamburlaine, imagines him to be remorseless, and expresses the hope that the Four Virgins he is planning to send to him will awaken mercy in him. The

First Virgin tells the Governor that if he had taken greater care in planning their safety, their mission would not be nearly the death warrant that it seems. The Governor urges her to think of the potential good their actions will provide to the city and to forgive him, then bids them farewell and goes out.

In Scene 2 - In continuous action, Tamburlaine, Theridimas, Techelles and other regents join the Virgins. Tamburlaine says the Governor should have asked for mercy before the attack when he had the chance. The First Virgin speaks flatteringly to him and beseeches him to have pity on them.

Here is the end of Tamburlaine Part I

#### **8.4 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF PLOT OF PART I**

When you read Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*—and you must have wondered why he was so highly regarded. You should understand that this play in particular was the Titanic of its time and that Marlowe probably inspired Shakespeare, especially with *Henry VI*, Parts One and Two. But by *Henry VI, Part Three*, young Will had surpassed young Kit in drawing characters and creating metaphors, and soon Shakespeare was heading to his own sphere of imagery, characterization, and nuanced language and portrayals. Within a couple of years of his death, Marlowe's plays, and this play in particular, were outdated.

In the hands of professional Shakespeareans—or professional Marloweans, for that matter, as was the case in this lusciously-costumed production—*Tamburlaine the Great* not only shows us the foundation upon which the great Shakespeare launched his own campaign, it also proves to be particularly timely for 2011. Yes, this play is bombastic in its speeches and characters, from the titular Scythian shepherd who conquers the Eastern World to the lieutenants who dote on him, from the succession of kings he subdues to their women. Yes, these characters are as dimensionally drawn as those of a graphic novel. Yes, the verse is rigidly formal. It is mighty verse. Nobody talks that way, not now and probably not then.

Yet, that mighty verse also reveals subtle insights into power politics, and the characters, if not multidimensional individually, taken as an overall palette

portray shades of human nature that dictate the known world's fate. One of Tamburlaine's followers, Theridamas, determines early in their conquests that "A god is not so glorious as a king: I think the pleasure they enjoy in heaven, cannot compare with kingly joys in earth." Yet, "though I praise it, I can live without it."

In Theridamas' defection, however, is the foundation for what I see in *Tamburlaine the Great* as a great study in leadership, absolutely applicable to our current nation's political and military landscape. It is a study in that ever ubiquitous but elusive "it" (what Kent calls "authority" in *King Lear*), who has "it" and who doesn't. More importantly, the play delves into how "it" cannot be easily replaced by other, tangible qualities. Theridamas switches his allegiance from Mycetes after meeting Tamburlaine and seeing in him not just strength and intelligence but bearing. "His looks do menace heaven and dare the gods; his fiery eyes are fix'd upon the earth, as if he now devis'd some stratagem, or meant to pierce Avernus' darksome vaults to pull the triple-headed dog from hell." Theridamas also sees the quality of Tamburlaine's leadership in the quality of his followers, Usumcasane and Techelles: "What strong enchantments tice my yielding soul to these resolved, noble Scythians!"

The kings Tamburlaine defeats each depict leaders with a single but fatal flaw. Mycetes considers his rule as his privilege but abrogates his responsibilities at every turn. His brother Cosroe usurps Mycetes and arrogantly deems the crown his right by virtue of his superior intelligence. Emperor Bajazeth and his empress, Zabina, display the arrogance of long-held power: They base their fates on the assumption that their obvious might is all that matters. Finally, Soldan of Egypt rules in a state of willful ignorance, preparing for a reality that simple is not so.

Tamburlaine sees rule as his destiny, something he was born to accomplish, and he sets out in manner, in training, and in personal fortitude to achieve it. He is ruthless in his conquests, but he proves true to his followers (something not entirely true of the other kings), and while they talk of the spoils of war, it is their achieving an end that seems to drive them most.

In Tamburlaine's early incarnation, he had a gentle face and an honest smile, even when he was issuing stern threats. He inspired admiration in the captured daughter of Soldan, Zenocrate, who ultimately becomes Tamburlaine's wife.

In the siege of Damascus, Tamburlaine went through three phases wherein he showed his transformation from simple to evil incarnation. Tamburlaine spoke his resolve in an even voice, but his piercing eyes communicated his soul, and it was merciless. Perhaps Marlowe's intent of keeping the captured Bajazeth on stage in a cage behind Tamburlaine for the play's latter portions was to suggest that the conquering general's fate had turned toward that of the conquered emperor, where leadership gets caged in by arrogant pride.

Thornton was all wrath and power as the reigning Bajazeth and all despair and power as the caged Bajazeth. Never once did he let go of his arrogance. For him, he must be emperor; nothing less was worth living for. But Marlowe has him kill himself in the most gruesome way: "He brains himself against the cage".

The final scene—Tamburlaine had defeated Soldan, killed Zenocrate's original betrothed, the King of Arabia, but saved Soldan for his wife's sake, then has his three lieutenant kings crown her empress—played out around the brained bodies of Bajazeth and Zabina. Even in death, Thornton and Glenzer dominated the stage, and the play *Tamburlaine the Great* had become the Tragedy of Bajazeth.

## 8.5 LET US SUM UP

For several other reasons *'Tamburlaine'* is of high importance. It gives repeated and splendid expression to the passionate haunting Renaissance zest for the beautiful. It is rich with extravagant sensuous descriptions, notable among those which abound gorgeously in all Elizabethan poetry. Tamburlaine himself as Marlowe presents him is a titanic, almost superhuman, figure who by sheer courage and pitiless unbending will raises himself from shepherd to general and then emperor of countless people, and sweeps like a whirlwind over the stage of the world, carrying everywhere overwhelming slaughter and desolation. His speeches are outbursts of incredible arrogance, equally powerful and bombastic. Indeed his blasphemous boasts of superiority to the gods seem almost justified by his apparently irresistible success.

## 8.6 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

1. Why does Meander plan to throw gold on the field when Cosroe joins with Tamburlaine to overthrow his brother?

Ans. He does this in order to distract soldiers whom he considers to be greedy thieves.

2. What is the outcome of Tamburlaine's attack on Egypt?

Ans. The King of Arabia dies and Tamburlaine wins the battle. He spares Soldan's life and gives him more territories than before. Tamburlaine crowns Zenocrates queen of Persia.

## 8.7 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

1. Comment on the erratic behaviour of Mycetes with reasons to support your answer.
2. Discuss Callapine's words showing his determination to live up to the standard and example of his father.
3. Throw light on the transformation of Tamburlaine from gentle heart to arrogant king with examples to support your answer.

## 8.8 SUGGESTED READING

Leech, Clifford, ed. (1964) *Marlowe : A collection of critical essays*. New Jersey: Price-Hall. Levin, Harry (1953) *The Overreacher: a Study of Christopher Marlowe*. London: Faber.

Simkin, Steve (2000) *A preface to Marlowe*. Harlowe: Pearson Editions.

Tibawi, A. L. (1964) *English-speaking orientalists: a critique of their approach to Islam and Arab nationalism*. London: Luzac.

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**TAMBURLAINE THE GREAT : THE NEW HUMAN****STRUCTURE**

- 9.1 Introduction
- 9.2 Objectives
- 9.3 Characters
- 9.4 Story
- 9.5 Critical Overview Part-I
- 9.6 The Milieu
- 9.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 9.8 Self-Assessment Questions with Answers
- 9.9 Examination Oriented Questions
- 9.10 Suggested Reading

**9.1 INTRODUCTION**

Tamburlaine, with his cruelty, his ambition, his tremendous capacity for violence, and his intense passion for his wife, represented a new and shocking type of hero for late sixteenth-century audiences. He was the equivalent of what audiences today might consider a Romantic hero—a passionate male obsessed with war who defies convention and whose fervency goes far beyond what is even conceivable for most people. Audiences were not even necessarily intended

to understand Tamburlaine, such was his shock value and his capacity to break through the very fabric of society with his ceaseless conquests and unquenchable thirst for power.

Because Tamburlaine was a new type of hero, conquering the traditions of restraint and mercy with his passion, eloquence, and power, he challenged the traditional morality system that pervaded London theaters in the early Elizabethan period. Unlike the conventional plays that preceded *Tamburlaine the Great*, Marlowe's work does not consist of a simplistic didactic, or morally instructive, lesson emphasizing that humans must adhere to a strict and traditional moral code. Instead, the play attacks the philosophical problem of humanity's relationship to the universe and provides an example of a new and extreme worldview that seems to ignore traditional morality. It is Tamburlaine's conviction that he is as powerful as a god, and he refuses to see himself as an impotent human in a massive, oppressive universe. He believes that he can control the world and is tremendously optimistic about the possibilities of human achievement.

Marlowe does not straightforwardly advocate this worldview; Tamburlaine's relationship with the audience is complex, and he often inspires repugnance and alienation. However, Tamburlaine is not simply an anti-hero whose worldview the audience finds persuasive solely because he is a devilish figure of temptation. Tamburlaine is likely an exhilarating figure.

## **9.2 OBJECTIVES**

This lesson introduces the characters in 'Tamburlaine' and a critical view of the plot of the tragedy besides its significance in creating a stock of themes and in demonstrating the potential of blank verse in drama.

## **9.3 CHARACTERS**

### ***Tamburlaine***

Tamburlaine (TAM-bur-layn), the magniloquent Scythian shepherd who, becoming the ruler of vast lands in Africa and the Middle East, calls himself "the

Scourge of God.” Absolutely ruthless, he kills the defenseless women and children in conquered cities and stabs his own son when he finds him gambling during an important battle. He is pre-eminently theatrical, delighting in triumphal pageants and in such spectacular effects as changing the colour of his tents from white to red to black while he waits outside a city for its surrender or its challenge. This dramatic instinct inspires the imprisonment of Emperor Bajazeth in a cage and the harnessing of four defeated rulers to Tamburlaine’s chariot. Invulnerable to injury from men, Tamburlaine wages a strong battle against death and meets it in characteristic theatrical fashion when he has himself carried by his servants and friends to the head of his army.

The prologue introduces him in lines that were to become famous: “Threatening the world with high astounding terms,/ And scourging kingdoms with his conquering sword.” Tamburlaine’s power comes from his limitless self-concept, not from his birth, which was that of a humble shepherd. In Marlowe’s world, a person’s worth is measured by his or her actions. Thus Tamburlaine declares, “I am a lord, for so my deeds shall prove—/ And yet a shepherd by my parentage.” His thoughts, he says, are coequal with the clouds, and his aspiration is immortality such as the gods enjoy. Indeed, he claims to gain his authority to terrorize the world from Jove himself, whose scourge he is.

As for the traditional enemies of the aspirant—Death and Fortune—the plays contain frequent references to Tamburlaine’s mastery over them, as in the passage in Part I, act 1, where he claims that he has bound the Fates in iron chains and turns Fortune’s wheel with his own hand. He appears to have assumed the role of Fate in condemning the virgins of Damascus to death for their failure to surrender before he symbolically decked his tents in black: His Customs, he says, are “as peremptory/ As wrathful planets, death, or destiny.”

Such assertions are hubristic in the extreme and, in a Christian context, would merit a downfall such as Faustus’s. Tamburlaine, however, moves freely in a non-Christian setting. His death, when it comes, occurs through illness. He is never punished for his past exploits; rather, he is lionized by all save his enemies. “Nature,” he says, “. . . doth teach us...”

Tamburlaine, flushed with many conquests, almost at the zenith of his career in conquering the world he knew, besieges Damascus. This is the city of Zenocrate, the princess Tamburlaine loves. She asks that her father, its ruler, be dealt with kindly, but Tamburlaine refuses, though to refuse causes him sadness, so that he agrees not to put Zenocrate's father to death when the city falls. The ruler of Damascus sends four beautiful young virgins to Tamburlaine, hoping they can persuade him to accept the city's surrender without slaughter and destruction. The great conqueror, melancholy and dressed all in black, receives the four virgins, but he remains unmoved by their appeal; he has them taken out to be killed by a group of charging horsemen and their bodies hung up in sight of the defenders of the city. Even while giving his heartless orders, however, Tamburlaine thinks of his love for Zenocrate and how her pleas for her father, the Sultan of Egypt, cause him emotion:

**Tamburlaine**

. . .

*What is beauty saith my sufferings then  
If all the pens that ever poets held,  
Had fed the feelings of their master's thoughts,  
And every sweetnes that suspir'd their hearts,  
Their minds, and muses on admired themes:  
If all the heavenly Quintessence they still  
From their immortall flowers of Poesy,  
Wherein, as in a mirror we perceive  
The highest reaches of a human wit.  
If these had made one Poems' period  
And all combin'd in Beauty's worthiness,  
Yet should ther hover in their restless heads,  
One thought, one grace, one woonder, at the least,  
Which into words no virtue can digest.*

By the force of his personality, he inspired his army to fanatical efforts that conquered kingdoms and empires. While still only a shepherd leader, Tamburlaine

stops the caravan of lovely Zenocrate, on her way to marry the Sultan. While wooing her by talking of his life and his ambitions, he receives word that a thousand Persian cavalymen are riding to attack him. He discusses the situation with followers and officers:

**Tamburlaine**

*A thousand horsemen!—We five hundred foot!—  
An odds too great for us to stand against.  
But are they rich?—And is their armor good?*

**Soldier**

*Their pluméd helms are wrought with beaten gold,  
Their swords enamelled, and about their necks  
Hang massy chains of gold, down to the waist,  
In every part exceeding brave and rich.*

**Tamburlaine**

*Then shall we fight courageously with them?  
Or look you I should play the orator?*

**Techelles**

*No; cowards and faint-hearted runaways  
Look for orations when the foe is near:  
Our swords shall play the orators for us.*

**Usumcasane**

*Come! Let us meet them at the mountain top,  
And with a sudden and a hot alarm,*

Drive all their horses headlong down the hill.

Tamburlaine, a former scythian shepherd, defeats force after force to become ruler of the East, styling himself Emperor of Asia, and keeping kings and queens as slaves, laughing at their curses. Bajazeth, former ruler of the Turks, Tamburlaine keeps in a cage, letting him out to serve as a footstool upon which to mount

the throne. Zenocrate, daughter of the Sultan of Egypt, held as a prisoner by Tamburlaine, comes to love her captor, as he deeply loves her. One day at a banquet Tamburlaine causes three crowns to be brought in for display. He looks to his three lieutenants—Theridamas, Techelles, and Usumcasane—bidding them finger the crowns, but they are hesitant, lest they seem too ambitious and arouse Tamburlaine's distrust. However, Tamburlaine makes Theridamas the King of Argier, Techelles the King of Fez, and Usumcasane the King of Morocco. Having crowned his loyal followers, Tamburlaine speaks in praise of them:

### **Tamburlaine**

*Kings of Argier, Morocco, and of Fez,  
You that have marched with happy Tamburlaine,  
As far from the frozen place of heaven,  
Unto the watry morning's ruddy bower,  
And thence by land unto the Torrid Zone,  
Deserve these titles I endow you with  
By valour and magnanimity.  
Your births shall be no blemish to your fame,  
For virtue is the fount whence honor springs,  
And they are worthy she investeth kings.*

### **Zenocrate**

Zenocrate (zeh-NO-kruh-tee), his wife and the daughter of the Sultan of Egypt. Although she is enraged when Tamburlaine captures her, she is quickly enthralled by his grand ambition and proudly wears her crown. She attempts on occasion to assuage her husband's cruelty by pleading for the life of her father and urging tolerance for the weakness of their son, Calyphas.

### **Bajazeth**

Bajazeth (BA-ja-zehth), the proud emperor of the Turks. Defeated by Tamburlaine in spite of his confidence in his own power, he is drawn about in a cage, like a beast, until he submits to his despair and dashes his brains out against the bars of his cage. The emperor of Turkey in part 1, until Tamburlaine

conquers his armies and makes him a slave, Bajazeth is a proud Islamic leader who ultimately beats his brains out on his cage rather than be subject to more humiliation and starvation. Bajazeth swears before his last battle to remove Tamburlaine's testicles and force him to draw his wife's chariot. While captive, Bajazeth frequently curses Tamburlaine, highlighting his most barbarous moments.

### **Zabina**

Zabina (za-BI-na) is the arrogant wife of Bajazeth. When Bajazeth is overpowered and made captive, she too suffered the captivity as servant of Tamburlaine.

### **Agydas**

Agydas is the Median, or Iranian, lord traveling to Egypt with Zenocrate when Tamburlaine captures them. Tamburlaine overhears Agydas advising Zenocrate to resist the "vile and barbarous" Tamburlaine's advances. Agydas stabs himself to avoid torture.

### **Almeda**

Almeda is Callapine's jailer, whom Callapine convinces to release him by promising Almeda a kingdom in Turkey. Callapine does in fact give him a kingdom before battling with Tamburlaine, although Almeda will never rule it because Tamburlaine wins the battle.

### **Anippe**

Anippe is Zenocrate's maid, whose right it is to treat the Turkish Empress Zabina as a servant after Tamburlaine subdues the Turkish armies.

### **Bassoos**

Now spelled "Bashaws" or "Pashas," a bassoe was the title given to Turkish officials. In the play, bassoos are servants of Bajazeth.

### **Callapine**

Bajazeth's son and heir to the Turkish Empire, Callapine has dedicated his

life to avenging his father's cruel treatment and to destroying Tamburlaine. Callapine is a cunning leader who manages to win over his jailer and escape from Tamburlaine's prison. Callapine also escapes from the battle that he loses to Tamburlaine, returning to attack Tamburlaine's army at the end of the play. Although Callapine is no match for Tamburlaine, he does manage to stay alive and unconquered throughout the play, completely committed to, as he puts it, "conquering the tyrant of the world." The implication is that he will return to haunt Amyras after Tamburlaine dies.

#### **Captain of Balsera**

Olympia's husband, the captain refuses to yield his hold to Techelles and Theridamas, and he is killed in the subsequent invasion.

#### **Cosroe**

Brother to the Mycetes, king of Persia, Cosroe usurps his brother's title with Tamburlaine's help. Cosroe worries about the state of the empire under his brother's ineffectual rule, and he determines at the bequest of several Persian lords to take the crown and rule more wisely. Although Cosroe is not as weak as his brother, he is naive enough to leave Tamburlaine and his companions with all of their soldiers after they win the battle for the Persian crown, and Tamburlaine quickly challenges him to battle and triumphs.

#### **Frederick**

A peer of Hungary, Frederick persuades Sigismund to break his vow of peace with Orcanes.

#### **Gazellus**

The viceroy, or ruler with the mandate of a king, of the Turkish territory of Byron, Gazellus is an ally and advisor to Orcanes.

#### **Governor of Babylon**

Stubborn and unyielding, the governor of Babylon refuses to allow Tamburlaine inside his city. When he is conquered and under threat of death, however, he

attempts to bribe Tamburlaine by telling him where a stockpile of gold is hidden. Tamburlaine has him hanged nevertheless.

#### **Governor of Damascus**

The governor of Damascus fears that Tamburlaine will slaughter everyone in his city, but his attempt to plead for mercy, sending four virgins to Tamburlaine's camp, fails.

#### **King of Arabia**

The king of Arabia, also known as Alcidamus, is betrothed to Zenocrate before she is captured by Tamburlaine. Zenocrate prays for his life to be spared but Alcidamus is killed during Tamburlaine's battle with the soldan of Egypt, and, as he dies, Alcidamus declares his love for Zenocrate.

#### **King of Jerusalem**

The king of Jerusalem is an ally of Callapine's, and after defeating him Tamburlaine forces him to pull his chariot.

#### **King of Soria**

The king of "Soria," or Syria, is one of Callapine's subsidiary kings. After conquering him, Tamburlaine forces him to pull his chariot until he loses strength, at which point Tamburlaine has him hanged.

#### **King of Trebizon**

Like Soria, the king of Trebizon is an ally of Callapine's who is forced to pull Tamburlaine's chariot after he is conquered. The king of Trebizon is hanged when he becomes too tired to pull the chariot.

#### **Meander**

The Persian lord closest to Mycetes, Meander councils the king on defending himself from the uprising, but he changes his allegiance to Cosroe after the battle.

#### **Menaphon**

Menaphon is the Persian lord closest to Cosroe. He is key in the conspiracy

to overthrow Mycetes.

### **Mycetes**

Mycetes is the king of Persia from the opening of part 1 until Tamburlaine and Cosroe overthrow him. He is a weak king whose speech is characterized by repeated sounds and clichés. Although he complains that his brother abuses him, he does nothing about it. When Tamburlaine discovers Mycetes attempting to hide his crown on the battlefield, an absurd attempt to ensure that no one will steal it, Tamburlaine lets the king keep it until he wins the battle. Mycetes, King of Persia, finds his kingdom menaced by the forces of Tamburlaine, a former Scythian shepherd. Anxious to rid his crown and his lands of this threat, Mycetes sends Theridamas at the head of a thousand richly armed cavalymen to subdue Tamburlaine and his few hundred foot soldiers. But Theridamas, impressed by Tamburlaine at a parley, decides to join forces with him. Mycetes' brother, Cosroe, meanwhile, plots to become king, disdaining Mycetes as a weak monarch. He joins forces with Tamburlaine, expecting to use Tamburlaine to defeat Mycetes and thus win the crown of Persia. During the ensuing battle Mycetes leaves the field to hide his crown. He is found alone by Tamburlaine, who tells Mycetes he may keep the crown till Tamburlaine can pull it publicly from his head. Mycetes makes his comment about war just before meeting Tamburlaine:

### **Mycetes**

*Accurst be he that first invented war,  
They knew not, ah, they knew not simple men,  
How those were hit by pelting Cannon shot,  
Stand staggering like a quivering Aspen leaf,  
Fearing the force of Boreas boisterous blasts.  
In what a lamentable case were I,  
If Nature had not given me wisdoms lore?  
For Kings are clouts that every man shoots at,  
Our Crown the pin that thousands seek to cleave.  
Therefore in pollicy I think it good  
To hide it close: a goodly Strategem,*

*And far from any man that is a fool.  
So shall I not be knowen, or if I be,  
They cannot take my crown from me.  
Here will I hide it in this simple hole.*

### **Olympia**

Wife to the Captain of Balsera, Olympia is a resigned but shrewd woman who watches her husband die, stabs her son, and then attempts to burn herself on their funeral pyre before Theridamas prevents her. Then, rather than submit to Theridamas's romantic advances, she tricks him into stabbing her in the neck.

### **Orcanes**

The king of Natolia, or Anatolia, a region slightly larger than the Anatolia of present-day Turkey, Orcanes is a fierce enemy to Tamburlaine. He has more vocal power than most of Tamburlaine's other enemies, and he is a somewhat more complex figure as well, actually paying tribute to Christ because he believes that Christ was responsible for his victory over the king of Hungary, who broke his Christian vow of peace with Orcanes. After Tamburlaine enslaves him, Orcanes curses Tamburlaine with insights such as, "Thou showest the difference 'twixt ourselves and thee / In this thy barbarous damned tyranny."

### **Perdicas**

Perdicas is Calyphas's idle companion, with whom Calyphas is playing cards before his father stabs him. ...

## **9.4 STORY**

The story of the poor shepherd who becomes the conqueror of kings must have been attractive to Christopher Marlowe, son of a carpenter. In two parts, the play depicts Tamburlaine's rise from humble beginnings to his death, not in battle but from disease.

Marlowe's Tamburlaine yearns for conquest, not because he has any plan for progress or improvement but simply to glorify himself. That the 16th century

could have seen such a man as heroic tells us much about that time. The play gave its audience a political model just as the first English empire was being formed.

This part of the play's appeal was the spectacle it presented: A famous scene brings Tamburlaine on stage in his chariot drawn by vanquished kings. More important than the story, however, is the way that Marlowe tells it. This was the first English play to use blank verse, a ten-syllable line with the rhythmic alternation of weakly and strongly accented syllables. Some critics have called the language of the play bombastic, yet it created a sensation among playgoers and writers. Marlowe himself was to do better in later works, and the great dramatists who succeeded him found blank verse a suitable form for their histories and tragedies.

## 9.5 CRITICAL OVERVIEW PART - I

Among most successful plays of the Elizabethan era, *Tamburlaine the Great* captivated audiences with its eloquent rhetoric and powerful verse. Although it remained popular as a piece of literature, was not frequently performed in later periods and was infrequently performed in the early 2000s in comparison with Marlowe's other works. The grandiose wars and conquests of the play may not translate well to the modern stage, but the work is now, and has been for centuries, a prominent subject for stylistic and thematic literary criticism.

Marlowe's reputation suffered because of the numerous scandals surrounding his private life, including the circumstances of his death. Claims that he was an immoral atheist and blasphemer initially affected the critical evaluation of his plays. The dramatist's critical reception recovered, however, and *Tamburlaine the Great* became one of the principle subjects for critics interested in the development of blank verse and the style of Renaissance drama. Most critics consider it extremely important, if not the most important work, in developing the style that came to a height around the turn of the sixteenth century.

Regarding the principle thematic meaning of the work, two analytical views eventually emerged to explain Tamburlaine's ambivalent character.

On the surface, *Tamburlaine the Great* is a play about war and conquest, that is concerned with ambition, domination, and power in the public sphere, while private conflicts and domestic life are neither glorious nor important. Actions in the play take on epic proportions, and Tamburlaine places his life on the scale of the gods, whom he frequently challenges and to whom he often compares himself. Although Marlowe is concerned with ambition, power, and violence, his principle interest is in the origin of these themes in Tamburlaine's internal psychology. In fact, Tamburlaine is actually much less interested in conquest and political rule than he is in winning over his idealized wife, extending his sense of self to the next generation, and satisfying his egotistical desires to feel majestic and triumphant.

One of the most important pieces of evidence that *Tamburlaine the Great* is a psychological drama lies in its treatment of Tamburlaine's relationship with Zenocrate. Zenocrate is entirely Marlowe's own addition to the narrative; she does not appear in any historical documents about Tamburlaine the conqueror and there is no evidence that Tamburlaine fell passionately in love with anyone. The historical Tamburlaine had a number of wives and concubines, including the warlord Amir Husayn's sister, whom he married to fortify their alliance, and also a former wife of Husayn, after Tamerlane had him killed. Unlike these women, Zenocrate does not help forward Tamburlaine's practical political goals in the play; if anything, she does him harm since she arouses the attempted vengeance of the king of Arabia and her father, the soldan of Egypt.

In fact, Tamburlaine seems almost to adjust his political ambitions, conquering Zenocrate's people, her betrothed husband, and her father, in order to win his wife entirely and become the king of their relationship. Of course, Tamburlaine states that he will not alter his military aims for his wife, and he does not accommodate her request for mercy on her people, but he does spare the soldan's life and give him back more than his former territory. This is an action suitable not for a warrior with purely political and military ambitions, but for a son-in-law who wishes to be the magnanimous ruler of his marriage. Tamburlaine views his domestic life as a battle to be won, and his wife a treasure to be pillaged,

by conquering her territory and subduing the other males who lay claim to her.

A study of driving ambition, *Tamburlaine the Great* is also notable for the dignity and beauty of Christopher Marlowe's lines. The poetry of the play is all the more remarkable for being among the first written in English blank verse. Marlowe wrote with so much original invention, that for a time many scholars believed him the author of some plays now attributed to William Shakespeare. It is safe to say that Marlowe is the best of the pre-Shakespearean playwrights.

Marlowe's turbulent life ended tragically, and perhaps characteristically, in a bar room brawl with a man named Ingram Frizer. Even though he was only twenty-nine when he died, Marlowe managed to set a precedent for the development of English drama by leaving behind a model of Senecan dramatic form. His first production, *Tamburlaine the Great*, more a dramatic masque than a play, was a milestone of early Elizabethan drama. Certainly Shakespeare must have been influenced, especially in *Julius Caesar* (pr. c. 1599-1600, pb. 1623), by the conjunction of "Nature," "Fortune," and "stars" in the construction of Tamburlaine's character. Above all, Marlowe made blank verse the accepted mode of Elizabethan theatrical expression, both to reflect delicate grace and to pronounce such mighty lines as, "Even as when windy exhalations/ Fighting for passage, tilt within the earth." The character Tamburlaine is shown capable of a certain tenderness because of Marlowe's poetic versatility. As the hero says to Zenocrate, "With milk-white harts upon an ivory sled/ Thou shalt be drawn amidst the frozen pools,/ And scale the icy mountains' lofty tops,/ Which with thy beauty will be soon resolv'd."

Basing his drama on the history of Timur the Lame (1336-1406), a Mongol conqueror and descendant of Genghis Khan, Marlowe constructed his first Herculean hero as a bloodthirsty personification of the Renaissance spirit of boldness, defiance, and determination who tests the limitations of human ability. Invulnerable to all attacks but that of death, Tamburlaine moves toward his goals undaunted by considerations of destiny or accidental circumstances. He is the master of his own destiny simply because he decides to be and finds no one strong enough to deny him his ambitions. He says to Theridamas, "Forsake thy king, and do but

join with me/ And we will triumph over all the world:/ I hold the Fates bound fast in iron chains,/ And with my hand turn Fortune's wheel about." Here is the hubris of classical Athenian tragedy, but with a difference: Tamburlaine is not struck down because of it; instead, he succeeds in everything he has time to undertake.

## **9.6 THE MILIEU**

### **Asia**

Asia. Largest continent on Earth, stretching from the Black Sea in the west to the China Sea in the east, and from the Arctic Circle in the north to the Indian Ocean in the south. *Tamburlaine the Great* dramatizes the rise and fall of the historical conqueror Timur, who reclaimed much of Asia from the Mongols in the late fourteenth century. The location of some of the world's most powerful dynasties, Asia represents the ultimate achievement for Tamburlaine, who is driven to conquer the world.

### **Royal courts**

Marlowe sets most of the action in *Tamburlaine the Great* in the imperial court of Persia, and in the courts of the king of Arabia, the king of Jerusalem, the governor of Damascus, the king of Hungary, and the governor of Babylon, among others. The courts are the scenes of political duplicity, at which characters boast about their strength and plot the overthrow of their enemies. They are also places where the specter of Tamburlaine continually gains substance, as his military conquests bring him closer to controlling all of Asia. Throughout the play, Marlowe uses court settings to reveal the human and political dimensions of his characters. He does not stage the many battle scenes in the play. Rather, he emphasizes the forces that shape his character's decisions and the consequences of those decisions.

### **Elizabethan England**

When Queen Elizabeth I succeeded to the throne of England in 1558, the nation was poorer and less powerful than the continental powers France and Spain. England had been torn by internal religious strife between Protestants

and Catholics, and was quite unstable. Elizabeth, an adept and shrewd monarch who surrounded herself with pragmatic advisors, presided over a period of increasing power and prosperity, making peace with France in 1560, defeating the Spanish Armada in 1588, and garnering relative peace with Catholics and Puritans. England was not without its problems, however. England enjoyed a sometimes precarious political stability. Elizabeth narrowly survived a number of assassination attempts that would have resulted in a fierce battle of succession since, despite pressure from Parliament, she never married or produced an heir. In this environment of relative tolerance and stability, the flourishing of the arts in continental Europe spread to England all over the world.

### **Tamburlaine's camps**

As he moves through Asia, conquering Persia, Damascus, Turkey, and North Africa, Tamburlaine is generally depicted throughout the play in his camps near the sites of his many military victories. Marlowe portrays Tamburlaine's valor as a soldier and his vicious cruelty as a tyrant, not on battlefields, but rather in the personal settings of his military camps. There, Tamburlaine gives way to the mitigating influence of Zenocrate, the daughter of the Sultan of Egypt, with whom he is in love.

## **9.7 LET US SUM UP**

The introduction to the characters of the play, a critical overview of the story, and the Milieu, have given you a fairly good idea of this important work in the history of English drama. Tamburlaine is all ravenous appetite — man reduced to his most basic hunger to possess and control. As this Scythian shepherd-turned-soldier-turned-all-usurping-monarch growls, roars and sings Marlowe's verse, iambic pentameter becomes the meter of unsleeping ambition. As Tamburlaine sees it, he's just doing what comes naturally. "Nature, that framed us of four elements," he says, "Warring within our breasts for regiment/ Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds." It's just that nobody can match Tamburlaine's bloody single-mindedness.

## 9.8 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS

1. How is Tamburlaine an equivalent of the modern day Romantic Hero?

Ans. He was a passionate male obsessed with war who defies convention.

2. Who was bent upon destroying Tamburlaine?

Ans. Callapine, the son of Bajazeth and heir to Turkish Empire.

3. Why did Tamburlaine yearn for conquests?

Ans. He simply wanted to glorify himself.

4. What is the historical source of the play?

Ans. The play is based on the history of Timur the Lame (1336-1406), a Mongol conqueror and descendent of Genghis Khan.

## 9.9 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

1. How did Tamburlaine a new type of hero for the sixteenth century audience?

2. Comment on the internal psychology of Tamburlaine.

3. What is the theme in *Tamburlaine the Great* by Christopher Marlowe?

4. What is the setting of *Tamburlaine the Great* by Christopher Marlowe?

5. Who is the protagonist in *Tamburlaine the Great* by Christopher Marlowe?

## 9.10 SUGGESTED READING

Wolff, T. A., ed. (1964) *Christopher Marlowe: Tamburlaine the Great*, parts I & II. London: Methuen.

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**TAMBURLAINE : THE SWEET FRUITION OF AN  
EARTHLY CROWN**

**STRUCTURE**

- 10.1. Introduction
- 10.2 Objectives
- 10.3 Tamburlaine- A Man of Strong Will
- 10.4 Marlowe's Rebellious Attitude in *Tamburlaine*
- 10.5 Tamburlaine : A Dream of World Annexation
- 10.6 Tamburlaine : Heroic Stature of a Common Man
- 10.7 Tamburlaine : A Practical Man Desiring Glory
- 10.8 Tamburlaine : A Machiavellian Hero
- 10.9 Ethics of Tamburlaine
- 10.10 Imagery
  - 10.10.1 Sun and Star Images
  - 10.10.2 Crown and Gold Images
  - 10.10.3 War Images
  - 10.10.4 Biblical and Mythological Images
- 10.11 Let Us Sum Up

10.12 Self-Assessment Questions with Answers

10.13 Examination Oriented Questions

10.14 Suggested Reading

## **10.1 INTRODUCTION**

The most significant influence responsible for creation of a proper atmosphere for the Elizabethan tragic drama was the Renaissance. The Renaissance made man reason, verify and explore life. Troubled by the restless urge for freedom, man revolted against the chains of tradition which bound his mind. Life became an experiment, an exploration and discovery for such man. So man and his potentialities became the chief theme of the Elizabethan writers. Thomas Marc Parrot and R. B Ball observe that Elizabethan playwrights made “unconscious and instinctive efforts to bring the action up to date and thus impose a sense of truth upon the audience”. Man with all the human attributes as protagonist bore the tragic responsibility in the Elizabethan drama. In this drama, man began to be seen as solely responsible for this action, who in spite of the mental conflict, was trying to liberate himself from the limits of fate. Tamburlaine, Macbeth, Faustus, Hamlet, all seem free to act or not to act. And yet they act in such a way as to march to a sure doom.

Marlowe, the chief exponent of the Renaissance spirit in drama made man and his potentialities the chief theme of his plays. It is for this reason that his plays became studies in Renaissance heroism. His heroes are men of a very strong and unflinching will. Harry Levin observes, “All of Marlowe’s plays are dominated by the animus of such individuals, and by the resultant conflicts between the energies of the protagonist and the circumstances into which he hurls himself.”

## **10.2 OBJECTIVES**

In this lesson we shall study in detail the character of ‘Tamburlaine’, a man of Renaissance. We shall also consider the comments of various critics on the chain of thought of this unusual character.

### 10.3 TAMBURLAINE – A MAN OF STRONG WILL

Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* is a tragic play in which the hero's will to be an 'absolute king' is so active that it transcends the governance of all laws. It is supported by internal evidence that "Tamburlaine's ambition has no definite object ; it exists in and for itself". The text makes it clear that Tamburlaine's will has set before it a goal to be attained at all costs, however, unattainable it might seem. J.C. Maxwell says, "Tamburlaine *if* not idealized at least gains from us right away the admiration due to a man who knows what he wants and the road to it." His will is bent on removing all obstacles—moral, religious, political and social laws and even the decree of fate—whatever the price. He goes to the extent of replacing 'godhead' with 'self' the grace of God with strength and 'religion' with the sword, a man bent on conquests. James Rowe regards Tamburlaine "as the study of a character whose aspiring egotism and absolute belief in himself are so overwhelming that his cruelty becomes the expression of something awesomely superior to the lower order of humanity in which must be act." He is soul-hydropic with a kind of thirst that would need the subjugation of the whole world and even the 'triple world' to satisfy his desire. Richard Sewall observes that it was Marlowe who "set his hero's mind completely free to range forbidden realms, and no voice save Tamburlaine's gives comparable expression to the outward Renaissance thrust." Tamburlaine represents the spirit of the Renaissance. He makes it glow with his radiance and vibrate it with his thundering voice and what may seem monstrous in him is an essential part of the wondrous. His imagination is enlivened by his love for absolute power. So he mounts himself on the steeds of ambition which run and fly swifter than 'Pegasus' with his will steel against all odds and obstructions. All those who bow before his will, are his friends and those who do not, are his enemies. It is for them that he decides to prove to be the scourge of God. He wins Theridamas, the Persian general, with his looks and the flavour of his speech. "I hold the fates bound fast in iron chains, and with my hand turn fortunes' wheel about" (1, 2, 173-74). Tamburlaine has set before him a dream of power over the entire world. The desire to translate this dream into reality is his only goal. It grips his central being: his will becomes active. The example of Jove scaling the heaven

is a reality for Tamburlaine and he wills to emulate that example : “Jove, sometimes masked in a shepherd’s weed/And by those steps that he hath scal’d the heaven/May we become immortal like the gods” (1, 2, 198-200).

Tamburlaine’s love for absolute power is indeed the expression of an unusual mind, and it is this unusualness that makes Tamburlaine a heroic figure. True to himself, to his word and deed, before the second Act begins, Tamburlaine, by the power of his eloquence has succeeded in winning Theridmas, his followers, while he wins over Zenocrate and her attendants by his noble bearing and his treatment of her. Now, if Tamburlaine is the symbol of power, Theridmas is certainly the symbol of virtue and Zenocrate the symbol of beauty. Symbolically speaking both Virtue and Beauty yield to power, of which Tamburlaine is the embodiment. Menaphon describes Tamburlaine to Cosroe: ‘Of Stature tall and straightly fashioned like his desire, lift upward and divine that guides his steps and actions to the throne.’ (II, I, 7-17). He appears to be the king of men for in him—” Nature doth strive with fortune and his stars” (II, 1, 33). His ‘will’ envisages a conflict with fortune, and conflict is the soul of tragedy. It is “in conflict that the hero gains ‘size’ and that tragic stature that is spuriously attached to the high born in our minds the tragic effect stems from the hero’s struggle against the conventions, persons and institutions ranged against him”. This ‘size’ and ‘stature’ is necessary for his personality. The greater the conflict, the greater is the hero who struggles against his challenger. Tamburlaine the unusual man in arms, begins his conflict with the cosmic forces, the fate, the kings and the political powers. It is a deliberate act on his part and in that he differs from the conventional heroes on whom the tragic situation is imposed. Tamburlaine creates the situation with his will to power, and struggles hard to emerge victorious. He embodied in himself the power and energy that clashes against the commands of fate, the canons of convention, the bonds of rules, no matter whether they are man-made or God-made. This excessive love for power at the cost of all other values of life is also one aspect of the Renaissance concept of power derived from Machiavelli. Tamburlaine attaches no importance to the idea of sin or crime.

#### 10.4 MARLOWE'S REBELLIOUS ATTITUDE IN TAMBURLAINE

Tamburlaine also shows his unusualness in his love for the crown. In his leap to the stars, he is guided by his will to power and will-generated power that can overlook all pitfalls. "But the crown was a more imposing symbol in Tudor times than it is today, and to Tamburlaine, it is the symbol of absolute power, the reward of aspiration, the climb after knowledge. Aspiration and knowledge are no use without power and the crown represents it, the greatest a man can obtain. Within Tamburlaine's philosophy the crown is the essential symbol the means to all desirable ends." It is in this crown 'the means to all desirable ends' which is the object of ultimate happiness to Tamburlaine, a dominant Renaissance trait. Aristotle may be horrified to accept Tamburlaine as a tragic hero in a Greek play, because for Aristotle moral goodness is the only means to the end of happiness. But Tamburlaine, has his domain outside the Greek territory of Aristotle's authority: he is a man of the Renaissance with his eye on power, of which the crown is the visible symbol. Tatania Woolf rightly observes, "the crown is the pinnacle of Tamburlaine's aspirations; it is hidden by Mycetes ; snatched away from Cosroe; guarded by Zenocrate, eaten in triumph in the form of sweet meats : it is the symbol of power." Tamburlaine has a conception of God, which is different from that of Christianity. His God is not merciful and good; his concept of God is based upon the power God can hold over the universe. His morality springs from such a concept, and it is by virtue of this attribute of God that he assumes the role of the Scourge of God on earth. It is because of this concept that he embarks upon the glorious enterprise of unending conquests. Meander thinks that some supernatural power is guiding Tamburlaine. He says to Cosroe : "Some powers divine, or else infernal/ mixed/their angry seeds at his conception;/For he was never sprung of human race since with the spirit of his fearful pride/He dares so doubtlessly resolve of rule/and by profession be ambitious" (II,6, 9-14). Such ambition is no doubt condemnable according to the ordinary canons of morality. But Tamburlaine, convinced of his being born to prove his greatness, imagines himself to be like the gods in Greek mythology. He emulates the gods. "The thirst of reign and sweetness of a crown,/that caused the eldest son of heavenly Ops/To thrust his doting father from his chair,/And place

himself in the imperial heaven, Mov'd me to manage arms against the state"/What better precedent than mighty Jove:" ;11, 7, 12-17). He further justifies his aspiring mind: "Nature, that framed us of four elements .../Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds:/our souls /still climbing after knowledge infinite/wills us to wear ourselves, and never rest" (11, 7, 12-26). Behind his will, there is no sanction of traditional morality or conventional religion. There is only the sanction of his own morality and ethics. This is Marlowe's own rebellious attitude, expressing itself through the character of Tamburlaine.

### **10.5 TAMBURLAINE : A DREAM OF WORLD ANNEXATION**

In fact, Tamburlaine has created for himself a dream—the dream of domination over the world. For the fulfilment of this dream of unlimited power, he rejects all considerations of the means. He believes like his creator and Machiavelli that 'ends justify means'. In this respect, he is the antithesis of Christ, both in his means and his ends. For Christ, God is the all-merciful father; for Tamburlaine God is omnipotent. A Christian hero sacrifices his life for God. He leaves everything to God. T. S. Eliot's Beckett does not even allow the doors of the cathedral to be closed though the priests tell him that the knights are coming to murder him. But Tamburlaine is made of a different stuff. He takes delight in the fantastic idea that by killing men and conquering their territories, he is fulfilling the will of God. He considers his desire for power and his heroism as obtaining their sanction from God. "We may suspect that the motives are often highly complex. Both the heroic and anti-social qualities, may well be associated in the fantasy-world in which he lives, the power which he desires so intensely, and the excesses of deed and word by which he seeks perpetually to reassure himself as to his own stature—Tamburlaine and Mr. Eliot's Beckett of Canterbury' are at opposite poles in their disinterestedness " Beckett is a Christian hero and Tamburlaine is an anti-religious hero. Tamburlaine is possessed of the idea that his path is right and therefore, he accepts, in his own way, the challenge of the forces ranged against him— political forces in the form of status which he wins and does not inherit, religious and ethical forces which commend him to abstain from bloodshed and conquests. But Tamburlaine propelled by his will, makes his choice to defy all that stands in his

way of the fulfilment of his dream. Whereas Beckett would yield to the will of the knights, Tamburlaine would fight with them to test their power and be victorious. *Tamburlaine*, observes Eugene M. Waith, “is not so much the instrument as the embodiment of a divine purpose. His serene confidence that his will is seconded by destiny gives him the magnificence of the hero who transcends the merely human.”

#### **10.6 TAMBURLAINE : HEROIC STATURE OF A COMMON MAN**

In classical as well as in Shakespearean tragedy, the hero is a man of high status. He possesses this status by birth. He does not acquire it. Tragedy presents the scene of the downfall of such a man. But Marlowe’s hero is a common shepherd, who by his own sword rises to heights of fame and glory. He believes in war, because he thinks that men deserve to be conquered by war. Arthur Miller says, “The common man may have heroic stature.. and that the tragic effect stems from the hero’s struggle against the conventions, persons and institutions ranged against him.” Tamburlaine begins as a common man and struggles against the forces, which, whatever they may be to the human society, he thinks, are ranged against him. Tamburlaine begins as a shepherd, a mere thief, ‘that sturdy Scythian thief’, whose aspiration is mocked at by the King of Persia and his courtiers. Zenocrate calls him ‘shepherd’ and a ‘mean man’. Magnetes refers to ‘his highness’ letter to command aid and assistance ; but Tamburlaine silences him with his assertion : “But now you see these letters and commands/Are countermanded by a greater man” (1, 2, 21-22). At this place he asserts his greatness over the conventionally accepted greatness of kings and other men of authority, for “with Tamburlaine.....to want is to attempt, and not to attempt is weakness.” His will is leavened with the desire of being great and powerful. He tells Zenocrate “I am a lord, for so my deeds shall prove/And yet a shepherd by my parentage.” (1. 2, 34-35).

Tamburlaine has the prowess, courage and dimensions needed to make a king of him and yet he is considered to be a mere ‘shepherd’, ‘a mean man’. Tamburlaine, like a Renaissance man, holds the operating values in his world to be repressive, tyrannical and inhuman, and again, like the Renaissance man, he treads over them

to free his mind. To prove his worth and his justness of aspiration to power, he sets out to conquer king after king; torture man after man, and burn city after city. It is true that he is not the prophet of God; but he claims to represent the divine, though horrifying aspect of God; he wants to be the scourge of God. Miss Bodkin's remarks on prophets can also be applied to Tamburlaine, the anti-prophet, She writes, "It is especially at times when barriers of personal repression are removed and image of 'cosmic' character are arising freely, that the fantasy figure may appear of some great prophet who tends to assure control over the personality." Tamburlaine makes himself free from the barriers of personal repression, it is then that images of cosmic character as anti-prophet and ruler of the triple-world appear. Tamburlaine proves himself to be the king of kings from the materialistic point of view. Being a common man, he has achieved the height of worldly glory. It is natural for him to have no respect for born kings who are too weak to defend their countries. This explains his attitude of utter scorn for those who cannot achieve what he achieved. E. M. Waith says, "The hero's goal is to be attained by an innate power which has nothing to do with the accidents of birth." Thus the Renaissance concept of heroism not depending on birth finds its embodiment in the person of Tamburlaine.

### **10.7 TAMBURLAINE : A PRACTICAL MAN DESIRING GLORY**

Tamburlaine's career of victory through bloodshed and cruelty might shock our civilized sensibility, but war, past or present, always implies such cruelty. Tamburlaine, a practical man desiring glory, and following the path of war and bloodshed for this purpose realizes that barbarous cruelty is an integral part of the policy of war and of counteracting the forces of mutiny and revolt as a threat to his power. It is Bajezeth who first threatens Tamburlaine. "He shall be made a chaste and lust less Eunuch;/and shall draw the chariot of my emperors" (III,3, 78-80). Tamburlaine succeeds in the battle and puts Bajezeth in the cage and later when he defeats other kings he yokes them to his own chariot. Bajezeth swears by Mohammed and Alcoran, but Tamburlaine substitutes these two with his sword, "by my sword that conquered Persia." He places his faith in strength, energy and power of which the sword is the symbol. From mythology, he chooses Jove who

bent his powers against his own father ; from history he chooses Julius Caesar as his model : “My camp is like a Julius Caesar’s host/That never fought but had the victory”(III,3, 52-52). He dismisses the request of Zabina, wife of Bajezeth, about ransoming her husband, because the defeated kings to him are the symbol of his victory and strength; a living history of his exploits; the pageant of what inspires horror and fear in others. His success turns his mind towards the unconquered, the undiscovered and the unexplored. So, if he believes in any ethics, it is the ethics of war, of honour and dishonour in war. For him, the whole cosmic reality lies imaged in the scene of war in which he wills to succeed and thereby to become a cosmic figure of heroism. When Zenocrate requests him to have pity on Egypt for her sake he replies, “Nor for the world Zenocrate, if I have sworn.” (IV, 2, 25). Tamburlaine’s refusal is based on the absolute primacy of his will and faith in honour. His religion is none but the religion of war. At a banquet, Tamburlaine is all in scarlet like the priest of war God and orders: “Now hang our blood colours by Damascus/ reflexing hues of blood upon their heads /Full bowls of wine unto the god of war” (IV, 4, 1-6). These are his rituals of war to please the deity and he cares for nothing else. He says, “Zeno-crate, were Egypt Jove’s own land./Yet would I with my sword make Jove to stoop” (IV, 4, 7D-76). “The siege of the city is used to present the core of the problem of virtues—Heroica.” Power expands his ego and he assumes that he is the fountain of virtue :`For virtue is the fountain whence honour springs” (IV, 4,131). Virtue for Tamburlaine is not the religious virtue, the moral or the ethical virtue, but that quality which brings victory, power and energy. One is really shocked by *Tamburlaine’s* ruthless killing of innocent persons. For instance his order to kill the virgins and his execution of his own son are extremely pathetic scenes in the play. But it is very important to remember that it is power in its harsher, cruder and even terrible aspect that Tamburlaine would accept as the attribute of God. The image of ‘the scourge of God’ is a kind of refrain in the play that punctuates the explosive thought in the mind of Tamburlaine. He orders the murder of the virgins without a grain of remorse and declares ‘Death’ to be his servant. He is established in the belief of his godhead : “And know that my customs are as preptory/As wrathful planets, death; or destiny” (V, 2, 64-65). The godhead has its own doctrine : “That virtue solely is the sum of

glory/And fashions men with true nobility” (V, 2, 126-27). Douglas Cole observes, “Tamburlaine’s god is the image of himself—valiant, proud, ambitious— while Tamburlaine son is the obverse of that image and must be despatched as an insult to the father who aspires to the power of Jove.”

### **10.8 TAMBURLAINE : A MACHIAVELLIAN HERO**

Tamburlaine may be considered a Machiavellian hero in many respects. He certainly makes war as his instrument of power, but he does not stoop to underhand methods to gain success. “Marlowe makes the most acute examination of the Machiavellian system that Elizabethan literature can show, but his interest in it derives from its value as a working hypothesis and his imaginative reconstruction of Machiavellian characters and their impact on society, are at least partially designed as tests.”

Unlike Shakespeare, Tamburlaine does not look upon war as an evil. Marlowe’s Tamburlaine is in this sense absolutely different from Richard III, Cassius or Claudius. Shakespeare’s heroes commit horrible deeds, but they possess their creator’s moral outlook. They can be judged by moral standards, because they are aware of these standards. Tamburlaine does not possess any such moral sense, hence, it would not be proper to judge him from standards of which he has no knowledge. He believes in war as the noblest means for the attainment of human ambitions on earth, and looks down upon peace as an unmanly and cowardly quality. Steane observes, “... in *Tamburlaine*, evil has become dramatically good. Tamburlaine’s concept of peace as decadent is never challenged, whereas, the whole force of Shakespeare’s histories is to make us see war as an evil...” Wilson comments, “Shakespeare’s Richard III, in an opening soliloquy tells us : ‘I am determined to prove a villain’, the equally ambitious and equally villainous Selimus Soldan of Trebizond boasts in his opening speech that he is an unscrupulous atheist and does so in elaborate rhyme royals. The audience is never left in doubt. They are prepared from the outset for the inevitable downfall at the end. But in *Tamburlaine*, there is no such preparation and such downfall.”

Tamburlaine is not an evil-minded schemer, an expert in villainous designs.

Even in his warcraft, he is not sly as a fox, but is a valiant warrior who would fight an open war, rather than resort to a concealed combat. His exploits command admiration. He certainly believes that 'ends justify means', but his means are the means of a military genius, a priest of the war-god and a devotee of power. He does not study sin; does not calculate crimes; he approaches his problem with the tone and temper of a Renaissance hero for whom solution of his problem is the only reality. Tamburlaine chooses the art of war to solve his problem of ruling the world which is exactly in keeping with the precepts of Machievelli. Machievelli writes: "A prince ought to have no other aim or thought, nor select anything else for his study than war and its rule and discipline for this is the sole art that belongs to him who rules" and it is of such force that it not only upholds those who are born princes, but it often enables men to rise from a private station to that rank." This statement is directly applicable to Tamburlaine who rose from a private station to the rank of an emperor through the cultivation of the art of war, and the study of war-craft.

## **10.9 ETHICS OF TAMBURLAINE**

He has divorced ethics from politics. But he has divorced only the conventional ethics; his concept of politics and his policy of war are strong enough to create their own ethics based on reality rather than idealism. He takes himself to be the centre of the universe around which all should resolve in submission: "The god of war resigns his room: O..me/ meaning to make me general of the world;/Jove...locks pale and wan/fatal sisters sweat/ And grisly death by running to and fro/To do their ceaseless homage to my sword/Emperors and kings lie breathless at my feet/ / His honour, that consists in shedding blood" (V, 2, 388415). His conquering mind throws a challenge to the whole world. M.C. Bradbrook says, "At first Jove is his protector; later he is a rival, even a worsted rival. The constant imagery of battle against the gods in the relative unimportance of Tamburlaine's actual battles keep this before the mind and prevent his desire 'Life upward and divine' from seeming to be fixed on 'the sweet fruition of an earthly crown.'"

Tamburlaine also possessed love for beauty and the gentle graces of life. He did not touch Zenocrate before they were married, and at a later stage, he spared the life of Zenocrate's father out of love for her. He was thus not an inhuman barbarian. He was capable of being won over by beauty and love. Zenocrate played an important part in keeping him within the bounds of normal humanity.

Wilson observes, "It is Zenocrate, the symbol of beauty and compassion who turns Tamburlaine into a lover when he might have been merely conqueror; it is Zenocrate who sets up a conflict between honour and love in a mind otherwise, undivided and single; it is Zenocrate who speaks or who inspires some of the lyrical passages which contrast so markedly with the ruthless clangour of much of the heroic verse; it is Zenocrate who exacts from this all-conquering conqueror an admission of defeat." It was this passion for beauty transformed into love that made a poetic speech float over the bloody fields of war. "What is beauty, saith my suffering, the/..... /one thought, one grace, one wonder, at the last/'which into words no virtue can digest" (V, 2, 97-110). If Tamburlaine ever relented in his relentless pursuits it was in the name of love and beauty.

## **10.10 IMAGERY**

When we examine the imagery of Tamburlaine we find that it is derived mostly from stars, meteors, spheres, the sun, lightning, clouds, globes, worlds, angels and tall trees. He makes an extensive use of star images, astronomical images and the images of crown, kingship, royalty and biblical and mythological imagery mostly associated with conquests and usurpation of the throne.

### **10.10.1 SUN AND STAR IMAGES**

The images of sun and star signify his great love for glory, splendour and dignified and affluent position. It seems he associates the crown and royal powers with the stars and the sun. He says, "and with our sun-bright armour, as we march,/ we'll chase the stars from heaven and dim their eyes/That stand or muse at our admired arms" III, 3, 22-24). Here Tamburlaine considers himself to be the sun and all other kings as mere stars. In another image he says : "And means to be a terror to the world/Measuring the limits of his empery/By east and west, as

Phoebus doth his course” (I, 2, 38-40). In yet another image, he clearly calls himself the sun : “For I, the chiefest lamp of all the earth,/First rising in the east with mild aspect,/But fixed now in the meridian line,” (IV 2 36-38). In fact, the sun and star imagery is dominant. But in these images, clouds usually represent height and the power that obscures and darkens the dome of stars. Lightning images are associated with swiftness and the power of fight : “These are the wings shall make it fly as swift/As doth the lightning or the breath of heaven/ And kill as sure as it swiftly flies” (II, 3 57.5). It also signifies energy. The images of lightning are numerous.

#### **10.10.2 CROWN AND GOLD IMAGES**

Tamburlaine’s insatiable love for wealth, and power is also seen in the images of crown, gold and pearls. In the first Act itself he refers to the wealth of gold and pearls : “shall common soldiers drink in quaffing bowls,/Ay, liquid gold, when we have conquered him,/Mingled with coral or with orient pearl” (I, 6, 95-97?). Zenocrate is compared to pearl or precious stone, ‘the only paragon of Tamburlaine’. Thus, gold, pearls and diamonds fascinate his imagination as powerfully as the crown, the symbol of kingship and power.

#### **10.10.3 WAR IMAGES**

Images of war are extensively used in *Tamburlaine*. It seems he looked upon the world chiefly as a battlefield and the conquest of the world is his main ambition. He takes pride in being a soldier : “Now look I like a soldier and this wound/As great a grace and majesty to me/ As if a chair of gold-enamelled, enchased with diamonds, sapphires, rubies,/ And fairest pearl of wealthy India ‘(III, 2, 117-21). This image makes it clear that he would be a soldier and a warrior because through war he would win his way to the throne studded with diamonds and rubies. His animal imagery is chiefly derived from beasts of prey or very strong animals like lions, bulls and horses.

#### **10.10.4 BIBLICAL AND MYTHOLOGICAL IMAGES**

Marlowe’s biblical and mythological imagery becomes highly significant when

he finds these images chiefly associated with the conquests and seizure of power. One of the most recurring is that of Jove, the god of gods and he imagines himself to be created in the image of Jove : “That Jove shall send his winged messenger/  
To bid me sheath my sword and leave the field” (I, 6, 39-30). And again : “No.  
nor I myself,/the wrathful messenger of mighty Jove,/That with his sword hath  
quailed all earthly kings” (V, 1, 91-93). He compares himself to Saturn’s royal sun,  
mounted his shining chariot gilt with fire/And draxn with princely eagles to the  
path” (IV, 3, 125-27). Often he refers to the god of war as his chief model. In one  
image he says, “Yepetty kings of Turkey, I am come/As Hector did into the  
Grecian camp,/To over dare the pride of Grecia” (III, 5, (4-66). In another image  
he compares his camp to Julius Caesar’s host: “My camp is like to Julius Caesar’s  
host,/ that never fought but had the victory”(III, 3, 152-53).

#### **10.11 LET US SUM UP**

Tamburlaine’s vocabulary contains words drawn from the field of war, statesmanship, virtue, honour, beauty, love and poetry. Words signifying killings, cruelty and callousness spring from his mind when he is roused to anger or whenever something goes wrong with his schemes and plans. On the whole they leave on the audience an impression of awe mixed with admiration, oratory and eloquence. His speech is most eloquent when his mind turns to the heroic in man and beauty in Zenocrate. The, Renaissance thrust is thus felt, strongly and surely, in the character of Tamburlaine.

#### **10.12 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS WITH ANSWERS**

1. What was the main characteristic of man as a protagonist in Elizabethan drama?

Ans. Man with all the human attributes as protagonist bore the tragic responsibility in the Elizabethan drama. In spite of mental conflict he tries to liberate himself from the limits of fate.

2. Tamburlaine is soul Hydropic. Explain.

Ans. He has a kind of thirst that wants to subjugate the whole world and even the triple world to satisfy his desire.

3. What makes Tamburlaine different from the conventional tragic heroes?

Ans. He deliberately begins his conflict with the cosmic forces, kings and the political powers. This makes him different from the conventional tragic heroes.

4. What dream has Tamburlaine created for himself? How will he fulfill it?

Ans. He has created for himself the dream of domination over the world. He believes in the Machiavellian doctrine of 'ends justify means' to fulfill his dream.

5. How is Renaissance hero different from Shakespearean heroes?

Ans. Shakespearean tragic heroes are men of status by birth but the Renaissance concept of heroism does not depend on birth.

6. Which are extremely pathetic scenes in the play?

Ans. Tamburlaine's order to kill the virgins and the execution of his son are extremely pathetic.

### **10.13 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. Examine Tamburlaine as a Renaissance character.
2. Tamburlaine is not an Aristotelian tragic hero. Discuss.
3. Compare and contrast Tamburlaine with Shakespearean tragic heroes.
4. Examine Tamburlaine as a Machiavellian hero.
5. Tamburlaine's ethics is based on reality rather than idealism. Discuss
6. Comment on the imagery of 'Tamburlaine'.

### **10.14 SUGGESTED READING**

Thornton Burnett, Mark. "Tamburlaine the Great Parts One and Two." *The Cambridge companion to Christopher Marlowe*. Ed. Patrick Gerard Cheney. New York: Cambridge UP, 2004

Waith, Eugene M. (1964) "Tamburlaine". *In Marlowe: a collection of critical essays*. Clifford Leech, ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

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**COURSE No.111**

**DRAMA-I**

**LESSON No. 11**

**M.A. ENGLISH**

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**

**UNIT - III**

**(KING LEAR)**

## **KING LEAR**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 11.1 Introduction
- 11.2 Objectives
- 11.3 The story in brief
- 11.4 Elements of the Plot
- 11.5 The Exposition
- 11.6 The Complication
- 11.7 The Climax, Crisis or Turning Point
- 11.8 The Resolution
- 11.9 Plot Construction
  - 11.9.1 Improbabilities in King Lear : Bradley's View
  - 11.9.2 Problem of Double Plot in King Lear
  - 11.9.3 Defence of Sub-Plot
- 11.10 Examination Oriented Questions
- 11.11 Let Us Sum Up
- 11.12 Suggested Reading

## 11.1 INTRODUCTION

*King Lear* is one of those tragic plays which are regarded as Shakespeare's greatest works, the other three being, *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*. A.C., Bradley writes that *King Lear* seems to him Shakespeare's greatest achievement. When he calls it the greatest Shakespearean play, he is not regarding it simply as a drama, but is grouping it with works like *Prometheus Vincit* and the *Divine Comedy* and even with the greatest symphonies of Beethoven and the statues in the Medici Chapel. Dr. Johnson opines about the play : "The tragedy of Lear is deservedly celebrated among the dramas of Shakespeare. There is perhaps no play which keeps the attention so strongly fixed : which so much agitates our passions and interests our curiosity." Another critic calls this play "the mightiest, the vastest, the most stirring, the most intense dramatic poem that has ever been written."

The year in which Shakespeare wrote *King Lear* seems to have been 1605. It is the time when Shakespeare as a man, philosopher and dramatic artist had matured, *King Lear* thus, belongs to the full maturity of Shakespeare's poetic and dramatic powers. Nowhere has he explored more fully the depths of evil than in this play.

## 11.2 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this lesson is to acquaint you with the story of King Lear, one of the famous tragedies written by William Shakespeare.

## 11.3 THE STORY IN BRIEF

The story contained in the play is simple. Lear, King of Britain, intends dividing his kingdom among his three daughters, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia, but because Cordelia is unable to make a public profession of her love for him, he disinherits her and banishes Kent for protesting. The King of France marries the dowryless Cordelia, and Lear divides the kingdom between Goneril and Regan and their husbands, Albany and Cornwall, though he himself retains the title of the King. These two elder daughters refuse to

have their father in their houses with his retinue of a hundred knights, and Lear, broken by their hard hearts and ingratitude goes out into the storm where he loses his reason. There he meets the apparently mad Edgar, the son of Gloucester, who has been banished by him owing to the machinations of his illegitimate son Edmund. The disguised Kent and Gloucester assist Lear, and Gloucester is blinded by Cornwall for doing so. Edgar then guides his father towards Dover, where Cordelia has landed with French troops in aid of her father, and Kent does the same for Lear. There is a reconciliation between Lear and Cordelia, but in the battle they are defeated and captured. Cordelia is hanged by order of Edmund. Goneril poisons Regan for love of Edmund, and when he is killed in combat with his brother Edgar, she stabs herself. Edgar tells how his father died when he revealed himself to him. Lear then comes in with Cordelia dead in his arms and dies, imagining that after all she lives. Like Gloucester, his flawed heart bursts "twixt two extremes of passion, joy and grief." In the end Albany is left to govern the kingdom.

#### **11.4 ELEMENTS OF THE PLOT**

Shakespeare was gifted with the miraculous and the most significant art of weaving together details and incidents, which were scattered and disjointed in the works of his contemporaries. Before dealing with other important aspects of this great tragedy, I would like you to know something about the plot construction of *King Lear*. In *King Lear*, as in every great drama, five stages may be noted in the plot development : (1) the exposition or introduction; (2) the complication, rising action or growth; (3) the climax, crisis, or turning points ; (4) The resolution falling action, or consequence; and (5) the denouement, catastrophe, or conclusion. However, it should always be remembered that these five stages are not isolated in watertight compartments. Though each of these stages is clearly differentiated, they overlap each other.

#### **11.5 THE EXPOSITION**

In *King Lear*, the exposition is in the closest conjunction with the complication or rising action. In lines 1-28 all the leading characters, except Edgar and the Fool, are introduced ; the two plots and their interaction are

prepared for and the keynote of both Gloucester's character and Lear's struck. The old King's announcement of his "darker purpose" brings the action of the Lear plot. "Darker" suggests the atmosphere of the drama. The unconvincing, ridiculous and far-fetched love test, the division of the Kingdom, the disinheritance of Cordelia, and the banishment of Kent, determine the issue of the whole action. In Act-I Scene ii, the action of the Gloucester plot begins with Edmund's soliloquy, in which, like Richard III he is determined to prove a villain and his persuasion of Gloucester by a forged letter that Edgar wishes to conspire with him a plot to kill their father and share his property. Edgar is introduced, and his open mindedness results in his playing into the hands of his arch-enemy. In Act-I Scene iii and iv, Goneril's assumption of authority and her attitude to her father are revealed in her conversation with Oswald, who presents an effective contrast to Kent. Kent in disguise, enters Lear's service, and Lear pathetically begins to realize the position in which he has placed himself. In his answer to the Knight, (iv) 64-68, is given a glimpse of his nobler nature. With the entry of the Fool, the keynote of whose character is struck in line 69-70, the exposition is complete.

#### **11.6. THE COMPLICATION**

**Act-I Scene iv 187-338 :** The role played by the Fool in evolving the plot deserves considerable attention. His poignant wit which unmasks the real Goneril and compels her outbursts of passion, sets in motion the machinery that brings about the final overthrow of Lear's mind and the concluding scenes of devilry and death. In Act-I scene iv, the Fool is preparing Lear for the way he will be treated by Regan, his sallies touch the old man to the quick. Lear begins to feel remorseful for his treatment of Cordelia and the tragic note is struck, in all its terror, in the cry to be saved from madness. The very jests with which the Fool strives to avert his master's madness cooperate to augment it, fixing his mind on that which is the cause of his irritation.

**In Act-2 Scene i :** The Gloucester plot is developed by Edmund's success in turning his father against Edgar. When Edmund brings Regan and Cornwall to Gloucester's Castle, the way is prepared for the union of the

two plots. The chief link between the Lear plot and the Gloucester's plot is Edmund's association with Regan and Goneril. Things get further complicated in Act-2 Scene i, while Regan solicits Gloucester's support and Cornwall invites Edmund's services. Oswald and Kent fight and Kent is put in stocks, where, before he sleeps, he intimates that he is in communication with Cordelia. Lear's anguish reaches its height when Regan shows herself to be crueller than even Goneril, and with the words "I shall go mad" he rushes out into a night of wild storm.

The plot gets further complicated in Act-III Scene I when Kent informs a friend that France, of which Cordelia is now the queen, has planned an invasion of Britain. The tide begins to turn against Regan and Goneril. In Act-III Scene II, we find Lear, the Fool and Kent in the storm. Here, as in *Julius Caesar*, the storm is the dramatic background of human passions. The old man appeals to the heavens and the heavens prove as deaf to his call as either Goneril or Regan. Amid the "dreadful pudder" of the elements his "wits begin to turn."

**In Act-III Scene iii**, the Gloucester plot is interwoven with the Lear plot. Gloucester tells Edmund that he intends, to aid Lear, and in his confidence, he plays unwittingly into the hands of his enemies. The result is that he is suspected of being friendly to France, and the relations between Edmund, Cornwall, and Regan are strengthened.

#### **11.7. THE CLIMAX, CRISIS, OR TURNING POINT**

**In Act-III Scene iv**, the Lear plot and the Gloucester plot are interwoven as one. Here, to use Aristotle's famous statement, all the elements of interest in main plot and sub-plot are tightened into a compact knot of general entanglement. Edgar is the victim of the Gloucester plot, and his disguise as a Bedlam beggar is the climax to the tragedy of his own sufferings. Contact with the feigned madness of Edgar completes the overthrow of Lear's mind, and while the storm continues to rumble, the old king begins to tear off his clothes. Gloucester, seeking to save Lear, reaches the hovel and from his words to Kent, Edgar learns how his father had been deceived, and his anger

against him is turned to pity. The beginning of the resolution in a drama is usually in the closest union with the climax. From the meeting of the mad Edgar with the mad Lear, there springs at once the final stroke of the mystery; why Gloucester suffers due to the son he has favoured (the attempt to save Lear being betrayed by Edmund, who becomes thereby the cause of the vengeance which puts out his father's eyes) and the beginning of the forgiving love he is to experience from the son he has wronged.

### **11.8. THE RESOLUTION**

**In Act III, Scene v** : Edmund's intrigue is successful. He betrays his father to Cornwall, who makes him the Earl of Gloucester. The development of the action up to this point in the drama has been masterly. With the resolution or falling action, there is a slackening of the emotional tension until the scenes immediately, before the denouement. All through the resolution, Edmund and Edgar are prominent in working out the causes and conditions which are to bring about the catastrophe. In Act-III Scene vi, Lear, in his madness arraigns Regan and Goneril in an imaginary trial with Edgar and the Fool as judges. In the next scenes, Gloucester betrayed by Edmund is brought before Cornwall and Regan. He is "pinioned like a thief", and Regan hears from his lips the first condemnation of her atrocious cruelty to her father. Strung by his reproaches, Cornwall gives orders for his eyes to be put out. In his agony, Gloucester calls upon Edmund to avenge him, and he learns from Regan that it is Edmund only who has brought him to this pass. Cornwall receives a death blow from a servant's sword.

**Act-IV Scene i** brings before us wronged Edgar lovingly tending his blind father on the way to Dover, and his tender regard is like that of Cordelia for Lear. From now on the place of Gloucester, who has acted as a link between the two plots is taken by Edmund whose story becomes one with that of Regan and Goneril. In the next scene, Edmund's intrigue entangles him in a relationship which will be the nemesis to punish him. The adulterous love of Goneril for Edmund is resented by Albany. In Scene iii, by way of a conversation between Kent and a Gentleman, is revealed the solicitude with which Cordelia had learnt of the treatment to which her father had been subjected.

**In Act IV Scene iv**, with drum and colours and attended by soldiers, indicating her rank as queen and the military preparations in progress, Cordelia re-enters upon the scene. In conversation with a doctor, she gives a wonderful word picture of Lear who "mad as the vex'd sea," has wandered away crowned with wild flowers. The plot thickens further in the next scene where Goneril and the widowed Regan are rivals for the affection of Edmund. Regan tries to induce Oswald to betray his mistress, but in vain.

**Act-IV Scene vi** is a long scene crowded with action. Edgar persuades his father that, though he threw himself over Dover cliff, he has been miraculously preserved. Lear in his insane wandering encounters Gloucester led by Edgar, and the two helpless old sufferers talk, until Lear is found by the attendants sent in search of him. Gloucester is then attacked by Oswald, who hopes to win high reward by killing him, but Edgar interposes, and Oswald is killed. On his body, Edgar finds a letter from Goneril to Edmund proposing that he will kill Albany and marry her. He then plans to inform the Duke.

In all his great tragedies with the notable exception of *Othello*, when the forces of the resolution or falling action are gathering toward the denouement, Shakespeare introduces a scene which appeals to an emotion different from any of those excited elsewhere in the play. "As a rule this new emotion is pathetic, and the pathos is not terrible or lacerating, but, even if painful, is accompanied by the scenes of beauty and by overflow of admiration or affection, which came with an inexpressible sweetness after the tensions, of the crisis and the first counterstroke. The most famous instance of this effect is the scene, where Lear wakes from sleep and finds Cordelia bending over him." A.C. Bradley calls it "the most tear-compelling passage in Literature."

**Act-V Scene I** brings us very close to the falling action leading to denouement. Interest in the preparations by Edmund and Albany for the impending battle with the French army is subordinated to the interest in the bitter division between Regan and Goneril because of Edmund. Edgar, disguised, brings Goneril's treacherous letter to Albany, and arranges that, if Cordelia loses, he should call for a champion to challenge Edgar. In the next scene

between military alarms, Edgar takes farewell of Gloucester. Lear and Cordelia are taken prisoners. The insignificance of this battle as compared with the corresponding battles in *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* is due partly to the dramatic necessity for concentrating attention on the main interest of the plot and partly to the fact that while the play calls for sympathy with Lear and Cordelia, Elizabethan patriotism demanded that the British forces win and in these circumstances the meagre the description, the better.

The action of the denouement is swift and marvellously concentrated. The results of all the varied actions are gathered up in 326 lines, where every word tells. All the leading characters of the opening scene gather to receive the reward of their deeds. It is the sudden reaping of a terrible sowing. Albany demands the release of Cordelia and Lear, and Edmund refuses to give them up. The quarrel that ensues shows to what an insane length had gone the indecent rivalry of Regan and Goneril over Edmund. Regan, poisoned by her sister meets a horrible death. Albany taunts his wife with the incriminating letter, charges Edmund with treason, and calls for the champion. Edgar defeats Edmund, Goneril stabs herself to death, and while Edgar hastens to save the prisoners, Lear enters the scene with murdered Cordelia in his arms, and gives way to wild burst of grief over her death. The wheel has come full circle. The "darker purpose" of the opening scene has brought about holocaust. Mortals are punished for their mistakes as well as for their crimes, and the innocents are overwhelmed in the disasters brought by fools and knaves.

## 11.9 PLOT CONSTRUCTION

This is how the action of *King Lear* starts, gathers momentum and then falls. We have seen that *King Lear* contains a very large number of principal and minor characters. Apart from the character, the plot contains one sub-plot also. Critics are divided in their opinion about the plot construction of this play. Some consider *King Lear* as a perfect masterpiece of dramatic art, whereas others find improbabilities in the plot or find fault with the sub plot dealing with the Gloucester story.

Let me start with those critics who are full of praise for this play and consider it the most valuable dramatic treasure of the world. Shelley, in his

*Defence of Poetry*, comparing it with the masterpieces of Aeschylus, opines that it is "the most perfect specimen of the dramatic art existing in the world". William Hazlitt in his *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* refers to *King Lear* thus; "It is then the best of all Shakespeare's plays for it is the one in which he has was most in earnest". Professor Edward Dowden thinks that *King Lear* is indeed the greatest single achievement in poetry of the Teutonic or northern genius.

*King Lear* has been justly termed as the most Elizabethan and the most Gothic of Shakespeare's plays. In the multiplicity of plots, in the extravagance of action, in the unprecedented mixing of moods, the play abundantly ministered to the tastes of Elizabethan theatre goes. The remarks of Victor Hugo in this connection are particularly illuminating. "There are some formidable cathedral towers, which are in very huge shape. They have their spirals, their staircases, their cellars, their arial cells, their sounding chambers, their bells and their spires, and all their vastness in order to support at their summit an angel spreading its golden wings such is *King Lear*."

Wherein does the greatness of the plot construction lie? Coleridge highly admires the atmosphere of the storm. To quote Coleridge, "What is Lear ? It is storm and tempest, the thunder at first rumbling in the far horizon, then gathering around us and at last bursting in fury over our head succeeded by a breaking of the clouds for a while a last flash of lightning, the closing in of night and the single hope of darkness".

When we read A.C. Bradley he says, "When I regard it (*King Lear*) strictly as a drama, it appears to me, though in certain part overwhelming, decidedly inferior as a whole to *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*". The first of these defects, according to Bradley, is that *King Lear* is too huge for the stage. It is as a whole, imperfectly dramatic and there is something in its very essence, which is at war with the senses and demands a purely imaginative realisation. It so, therefore, Shakespeare's greatest work but not as Hazlitt says the best of his plays.

### 11.9.1 Improbabilities in King Lear : Bradley's View :

A.C. Bradley argues that in *King Lear* "Shakespeare was less concerned than usual with dramatic fitness; improbabilities, inconsistencies sayings and doings are some of its prominent shortcomings.

According to him, some of the important improbabilities in *King Lear* are as follows :

- i) No reason is given why Edgar who, lives in the same house with Edmund, should write a letter to him instead of speaking, and this is a letter absolutely damning to his character. Gloucester was very foolish, but surely not so foolish as to let go unnoticed this improbability. Secondly, how could he be unacquainted with his son's handwriting?
- (ii) Does it sound probable that Edgar should be persuaded without the slightest demur to avoid his father instead of confronting him and asking him the cause of his anger ?
- (iii) Is it not extraordinary that after Gloucester's attempted suicide, Edger should first talk to him in the language of a gentleman, then to Oswald, in his presence, in broad peasant dialect, then again to Gloucester in gentle language and yet that Gloucester should not manifest the least surprise?
- (iv) Only a fortnight seems to have elapsed between the first scene and the breach with Goneril and yet, already, there are rumours not only of war between Goneril and Regan but of the coming of a French army and this, Kent says, is perhaps connected with harshness of both the sisters to their father, although Regan has apparently had no opportunity of showing any harshness till the day before.
- (v) In the quarrel with Goneril, Lear speaks of his having to dismiss fifty of his followers at a clap, yet she has neither mentioned

any number nor had any opportunity of mentioning it off the stage.

- (vi) Lear and Goneril, intending to hurry to Regan both send off messengers to bring back an answer. But it does not appear either how the messengers could return or what answer could be required, as their superiors are following them with the greatest speed.
- (vii) Why does Edgar not reveal himself to his blind father, as he truly says he ought to have done ?
- (viii) Why does Kent so carefully preserve his incognito till the last scene ? He says he does it for an important purpose, but we have to guess the purpose.

### **11.9.2 Problem of Double Plot in *King Lear***

According to Bradley, the double plot in *King Lear* has certain strictly dramatic advantages. The secondary plot fills out a story which, by itself would have been somewhat thin, and the sub plot simply repeats the theme of the main story. He argues, "This repetition does not simply double the pain with which the tragedy is witnessed, it startles and terrifies by suggesting that the folly of Lear and the ingratitude of his daughters are no accidents of merely individual aberrations, but that in that dark and cold world some fateful malignant influence is abroad, turning the hearts of the fathers against their children and of the children against their fathers, smiting the earth with a curse, so that brother gives the brother to death and the father the son, blinding the eyes, maddening the brain, freezing the springs, numbing all powers except the nerves of anguish and the dull lust of life."

In *King Lear*, we thus come to the most complex of the plays which we have studied and one which presents a number of special problems. The reader becomes aware immediately of the complexity of the plot, and besides this there is, as various interpretations of the individual scenes have suggested, a considerable complexity of patterns of meaning. The student's problem is

to see how the manifold materials' of this drama-words, single events and experiences, and two fully developed plots merge in a unified tragedy of very powerful effect.

Our first problem is to see how the elements of a very full and variegated plot work together so that the final effect is not one of diffuseness and lack of focus. At simplest level, of course, the diverse ingredients are held together by the close inter-relationship of the various characters in terms of plot : (i) Gloucester, who appears at first only as one of the men at Lear's court, becomes an associate of the usurpers and then a devoted helper of the King and then a victim of the usurpers: thus his own actions become almost a part of the main plot. (ii) The tracing of Edgar's fate is brought close to the main plot by Edgar's association with Lear, his aiding Gloucester, and of course, his important contributions to the working out of the plot in Act V Scene iii. (iii) Edmund's plotting against Edgar and Gloucester, which might easily become a separate line of action, is woven closely into the main pattern by the two sisters falling in love with Edmund. (iv) The public and private are bound together, at the plot's level, by the fact that the working out of the private emotion and the resolution of the private conflicts-between parents and children; between rival lovers also determine the state of affairs in the Kingdom.

The real difficulty of course, is the fusion of the two plots into one artistic unity. But the dramatist has been successful in so fusing the two separate streams of action as to produce a real unity of movement and effect, a union so vital, so complete, so indissoluble as, in this sense, to make the play what Shelley called it, "the most perfect specimen of dramatic poetry existing in the world". In the fusion of the two stories, *King Lear*, of course was to stand in antithesis to the Earl of Gloucester, and the relations between Lear and his daughters were to be paired off with relations between Gloucester and his sons. But in coupling the two stories; so as to make them run together, Shakespeare made one contrast of deep dramatic significance. The story of Lear was so presented as to bring the virtuous character of Cordelia into the highest predominance of effect, but the story of Gloucester was so turned as to give that predominance to the vicious character of Edmund.

Thus, in the construction of the double drama, it is the conflict between the good influence of Cordelia and the evil influence of Edmund that creates tragic situation and leads to the sublime horrors of the catastrophe. If Regan for example, had been as heroine paired off with Edmund as hero or if Edgar the good son had been paired off with Cordelia, the good daughter, the movement of the drama would have been enfeebled, and the enfeeble pathos of the tragedy have been lost. It is therefore, in the organic contrast between the characters of Cordelia and Edmund that the double tragedy of Lear and Gloucester reached its highest effect.

As the story of Lear hinges upon the character and conduct of Cordelia, so the story of Gloucester hinges upon the character and conduct of Edmund. And thus, in artistic composition, over the sublime beauty of Cordelia's virtues there stands the stunning depravity of Edmund.

### **11.9.3 Defence of Sub-plot :**

There are critics who defend the sub plot. Schlegel forcefully speaks in favour of the sub plot in this play. He is surprised that the incorporation of the two plots should be censured as destructive of the unity of action. In his opinion, the two stories have been dovetailed into each other with great ingenuity and skill. Moreover, according to him in the sub plot it is the very combination of the two stories which constitutes "the sublime beauty" of the play. The two stories compare and contrast by presenting two unheard, examples of filial ingratitude. Thus, in Schelegel's opinion, the dramatic impact of the play is greatly increased by the Gloucester story.

One more critic has defended the role of the sub plot in enhancing the dramatic impact of the play. Lear and Gloucester are two different types of men. Lear imposes on the world his own erroneous conclusions about children and court. He invites tragedy by three errors of understanding; errors with regard to the nature of kingship, the nature of love, and the nature of language. Gloucester, on the other hand, accepts rather than imposes. Thus, Lear and Gloucester are, in terms of construction not duplicate but complements. This, says one critic, "is one key to the unity of the play". The

completeness of the play, its cosmic inclusiveness is imparted by the double focus presentation of tragic error of understanding. W.R. Elton expresses the same view in a different manner. He argues, “Although the double action is thus held to be fatally defective and to be filling which is ‘simply’ repetitive, some critics have excused it on the grounds that it universalises ingratitude and intensifies the tragic effect.”

The critics, who believe that the principle structural weakness of *King Lear* lies in the double plot, argue that because of the sub plot the number of essential characters in this play become unmanageably large and their action and movement greatly, complicated. According to them the events, particularly towards the end of the play, become so thick that the readers' attention is repeatedly transferred from one centre of interest to another. The reader thus feels intellectually confused and emotionally fatigued. They also say that the improbabilities and inconsistencies are found more in the sub plot or the secondary plot.

From the above discussion, it becomes clear that it is far more difficult to retrace, in memory, the steps of the action in *King Lear* than in *Hamlet*, *Othello* or *Macbeth*. It appears that while Shakespeare was writing *King Lear*, he was more concerned with the dramatic effect of the great scenes and was exceptionally careless about probability, clarity or consistency in small matters.

#### **11.10. EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. Discuss the plot of the play.
2. Whether the double plot of the play weakens or strengthens the dramatic effect of the play. Discuss.
3. Discuss the plot construction of *King Lear*.

#### **11.11. LET US SUM UP**

This lesson discusses the story of *King Lear* from the perspective of exposition, complication, climax falling action and conclusion.

### 11.11. SUGGESTED READING

Maguire, L.E. (1996) *Shakespearean Suspect Texts: The 'Bad' Quartos and Their Contexts*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Schoenbaum, S. (1977) *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*. Oxford University Press, Oxford

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**COURSE No.111**

**DRAMA-I**

**LESSON No. 12**

**M.A. ENGLISH**

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE  
(KING LEAR)**

**UNIT - III**

## **KING LEAR**

### **IMPORTANT SCENES IN *KING LEAR***

#### **STRUCTURE**

- 12.1 Introduction
- 12.2 Objectives
- 12.3 The Beginning in a Drama
- 12.4 Opening Scene of *King Lear*
- 12.5 A Critic's View
- 12.6 Opinion of Critics
- 12.7 Disarmament : A Criticism
- 12.8 Storm Scene
- 12.9 Stage Presentation of *King Lear*.
- 12.10 The rise of storm to its greatest pitch
- 12.11 The Reconciliation scene
- 12.12 Rebirth of Lear
- 12.13 Cordelia's Selfless love for Lear
- 12.14 Let Us Sum Up
- 12.15 Examination Oriented Questions
- 12.16 Suggested Reading

## 12.1 INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare was seriously concerned with a few important scenes **and their dramatic effects**. The first scene, which is considered dramatically significant is the **opening scene**. It is sometimes considered as the basis of the main plot, but you should remember that this is not something unique to *King Lear* only. In almost all the plays of Shakespeare the opening scene sets the story in motion.

## 12.2 OBJECTIVES

The lesson is about the important scenes in the drama all the important scenes have been included along with their importance in the drama.

## 12.3 THE BEGINNING IN A DRAMA

The beginning of a play is more important than the beginning of a novel. With only about two hours at his disposal the dramatist has not a moment to lose. He must at the outset explain the existing situation with whatever antecedent action is necessary to our understanding of the plot, introduce his characters, get his story under way, and arrest the immediate attention of the audience. In times gone by, a dramatist could drag into his play subordinate characters, the servants or guests of the family, who would discuss the principal characters and explain the situation to the audience.

## 12.4 OPENING SCENE OF *KING LEAR*

*Hamlet* has a masterly opening scene with the bitter cold night, the shivering sentries ready to start at the slightest sound, the dark shadow of the castle, and the sense of impending, supernatural, disaster. The first scene of *Macbeth*, if well acted, holds the imagination of the audience spellbound and at the same time strikes the key note of the play. *Othello* opens on a dark night in a deserted street with two men plotting in the shadows, thus giving at once an atmosphere of treachery. *Romeo and Juliet* opens with the sudden violence of a street brawl between the Capulets and the Montagues a significant suggestion of a drama of quick passions.

The opening scene of *King Lear* is simply the court ceremony in which the formal transfer of the kingdom is to be made. Lear is already handing over to his daughters, the carefully drawn maps which mark the boundaries of the provinces, when he suddenly pauses, and with the yearning of age and authority for testimonies of devotion, calls upon his daughters for declaration of affection, the easiest of returns for the substantial gifts, he is giving them. Goneril and Regan pour forth in glib eloquence. Then, Lear turns to Cordelia thinking delightedly of the special prize he has marked out for the pet of his old age. He asks her :

*“What can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters?”*

But Cordelia has been revolted by the fulsome flattery of the sisters whose hypocrisy she knows so well. She, therefore, bluntly refuses to be drawn into any declaration of affection at all. Cordelia might well have found some other method of separating herself from her false sisters, without thus flouting her father, before his whole court in a moment of tenderness of herself or if carried away by the indignation of the moment, a sign of submission would have won her a pardon. But Cordelia, sweet and strong, as her character is in great things, has inherited a touch of her father's temper, and the moment's sullenness is protracted into obstinacy. Cordelia thus, commits an offence of manner, but Lear's passion vents itself in a sentence proper only to a moral crime.

## **12.5 A CRITIC'S VIEW**

Nicoll says something radically different about the opening scene. Whatever eulogies have been cast upon the exposition of Lear the fact is that this first scene is a failure. It is easily the most uninteresting long scene of drama and must strike any actor as an almost impossible scene to play satisfactorily. In endeavouring to secure his effect, Shakespeare, for once, seems to have overreached himself. (Shakespeare might not have been able to weave a tragedy out of the material presented to him there, but he at least provided his main characters with normal, appreciable motives.) To find an explanation for Lear's decision and demeanour in this first scene we need to know the subsequent development of the plot.

The king's dotting old age is evident from the fact that he must have public protestations of filial love from his daughters before he passes on his power and authority to them. His hasty impatience about Cordelia's in sincerity, which makes her reticent, first finds expression in a simple "nothing" and then bursts forth unexpectedly in a language which is as vehement as it is unnatural. We are very naturally led to suspect that something terrible is sure to follow and are kept in suspense till the effects gradually unfold themselves in the subsequent scenes and acts beginning with the third scene of the first act. The dramatic element of the first scene of the first act becomes all the more forceful when we bear in mind that the king had actually already divided the kingdom into three equal parts for his three daughters ("Give the map there. Know that we have divided in three our Kingdom") and anticipates that each of them will be equally profused in her profession of love. But Cordelia's simplicity and truthfulness wound the vanity of the fond father and, as a result, the audience is treated to a masterly dramatic-cum-psychological stroke.

#### **12.6 OPINIONS OF CRITICS IN FAVOUR OF FIRST SCENE**

The following points will reflect that the scene is not strange :—

The situation is strange, like so many of the stories on which romantic dramas are based, Shakespeare has done much to soften the improbability of the original legend. "The oft repeated judgement that the first scene of *King Lear* is absurdly improbable, and that no sane man would think of dividing his kingdom among his daughters in proportion to the strength of their verbal protestations, of love, is much too harsh and is based upon a strange misunderstanding." This scene acts effectively, and to imagination the story is not at all incredible. "It is merely strange, like so many of the stories on which our romantic dramas are based. Shakespeare, besides, has done a good deal to soften the improbability of the legend ; and he has done much more than the casual reader perceives. The very first words of the drama, as Coleridge pointed out, tell us that the division of the kingdom is already settled in all its details, so that only the public announcement of it remains" : says A.C. Bradley.

Improbable as the conduct of Lear is in the first scene, it was an old story rooted in popular faith a thing taken for granted already, and consequently without any of the effects of the improbability. Even in the first scene we get an idea of the era or historic time to which the play refers. *King Lear* represents as an era of uncultivated simplicity and the primitive nature of early society. In *Macbeth*, we have the mystic and imaginative side of the Celtic temperament described. But in *King Lear*, the other aspect of Celtic nature namely, wild and wayward passion is reflected. In the atmosphere of primitive society, it is easily conceivable that such apparently improbable incidents as the partition of the kingdom might well take place. The opening scene strikes the keynote of Lear's character, namely, fickleness and fundamental error it leads to, out of which the tragedy of the drama arises. It also reveals Gloucester's utter disregard of all moral obligations, and want of steadiness and principles as the two attributes of life in court and at home.

According to Dr. Johnson, there is something of obscurity or inaccuracy in this 'preparatory scene.' The dialogue between Kent and Gloucester shows that the King has already divided his kingdom. "And yet when he enters he examines his daughters, to discover in what proportion he should divide it. Perhaps Kent, and Gloucester only were privy to his design, which he still kept in his own hands, to be changed or performed as subsequent reasons should determine him".

### **12.7 DISARMAMENT : A CRITICISM**

Marvellous indeed is the skill with which Shakespeare turns an old nursery tale with all its improbability to a fine dramatic purpose. He is an old hand at this sort of thing. Recall the cunning with which he transforms in *The Merchant of Venice*, the story of the pound of flesh, and makes the Trial Scene look like a real trial, though no court known to history can show the like of such a trial and such an award as Portia's. But Shakespeare's art can disarm criticism and does so here. The division of the kingdom is the artist's make-believe; and bids us forget the accidental elements and fix our attention on what is universal.

Shakespeare's opening scene are often a kind of postulate, which the spectator or the reader is asked to grant. At this juncture, improbability is of no account; the intelligent reader will accept the situation as a gift and will become alert and critical only when the next step is taken, and he is asked to concede the truth of the argument that has given these persons in these situations such and such events will follow. It must be granted that an old King divides his realm among his three daughters, exacting from each of them a profession of ardent affection. The play opens with this postulate. Before appealing to the sympathies and judgement of his audience, Shakespeare in the opening scene acquaints them with the situation.

If this be so, it makes some kinds of criticism idle. Why, it is often asked, did not Cordelia humour her father a little ? She was so stubborn and rude, where tact and sympathetic understanding might, without any violation of truth, have saved the situation. It is easy to answer this question by enlarging on the character of Cordelia and on that touch of obstinacy which is often found in very pure and unselfish natures. But this is really beside the mark, and those, who spend so much thought on Cordelia, are apt to forget Shakespeare. If Cordelia had been perfectly tender and tactful, there would have been no play. The situation would have been saved, and the dramatist, who was in attendance to celebrate the sequel of the situation, might have packed up his pipes and gone home. This is not to say that the character of Cordelia is drawn carelessly or inconsistently. But it is a character invented for the situation, so that argument from the character to the plot is to invert the true order of things in the artist's mind. To go further and discuss Cordelia's childhood, as a serious question of criticism, is to lose all hold on the real dramatic problem, and to fall back among the idle people, who ask to be deceived and are deceived.

## **12.8 STORM SCENE :**

Another important scene in the play is the storm scene. S.T. Coleridge once explained in awe at the imaginative power of Shakespeare which could fuse such diversity into the unity of the heath storm, "Where the deep anguish of a father spreads the feeling of ingratitude and cruelty over the

very elements of heaven.” Granville Barker’s magnificent *Preface to King Lear* observes the fusion of the man and the storm, a process by which Lear transcends the weakness of a wretched old man to become a titanic, apocalyptic figure endowed with all the fury, power, and awesome grandeur of the storm. Edith Sitwell has added another illumination to the scene by designating Lear as Time who is more than old age and who becomes a fifth element like the other four, viz. earth, air, fire and water.

The metaphor of cosmic chaos seems a particularly fitting way to represent imaginatively the unnatural character of ingratitude. Renaissance moral philosophy and courtesy literature contain many references to the enormous evil of this vice; the dominant note, however, seems to be that of un-natural, monstrous villainy which severs the bonds among kinsfolk, friends and members of civil society. Most of these ideas made their appearance in Renaissance ethical literature as restatements, translations, or comments upon classical ideas from Greek and Latin authors. Ingratitude was an enemy of human concord and deserving therefore, of the strongest reapproach. We consider that the Renaissance horror of the vice contains also overtones from the traditional concept of feudal loyalty, in which gratitude had originally been the quality sealing the relationship of lord and vassal and hence the fundamental bond of feudal society.

The aptness of cosmic chaos in the Empedoclean sense to symbolize the effect of ingratitude can perhaps be seen again as the play draws to a close. In the cosmology of Empedocles, the universe passes through a series of cycles in which first Love and then, Strife predominates. Although strife destroys the world, a new cosmos is born as love returns. The reappearance of Cordelia, even for a short time, the victory of Albany and the reinstatement of Edgar perhaps announce the return of love, and create the “restoration of tranquillity” which is integral to the tragic effect. Lear and Gloucester have perished in the upheaval, but also has the evil which destroyed them.

## **12.9 STAGE PRESENTATION OF KING LEAR**

One of the reasons that led Charles Lamb to say that *King Lear*

cannot be acted was that no stage would be capable, no stage machinery adequate to bring out the full effect of the storm scene. When Bradley remarked that *King Lear* was too huge for the stage, he had this storm scene, among others, in view. According to Bradley, “the dramatic centre of the whole tragedy” is the storm scene. The play, presented on the stage, does poor justice to the play as it is visualized in our imagination. As Bradley remarks, the temptation of Othello and the scene of Duncan’s murder in *Macbeth* may lose upon the stage, but they do not lose their essence and gain as well as lose. But the storm Scenes in *King Lear* gain nothing and their very essence is destroyed. The theatrical storm, not to drown the dialogue, must be silent whenever a human being wishes to speak-thus defeating the very purpose of the storm, which seeks to produce effect through sound.

As Lamb puts it, to see *King Lear* acted, is to see an old man tottering about the stage with a walking stick, turned out of doors by his daughters in a rainy stormy night. The contemptible machinery by which the storm is mimicked is absolutely inadequate to bring out the horrors of the real elements. The explosions of Lear’s passion are terrible as volcano, they are storms turning up and disclosing to the bottom that sea-which is the mind of Lear. The storm is symbolic of the storm that rages within the mind of Lear. The burst of rain and thunder, and the storm within Lear’s breast are not two things, but manifestations of one thing. The storm outside is a projection of the storm within Lear’s mind. In the groans of roaring wind and rain, we see and hear the groans of a tormented soul. The storm scenes further show that nature herself is convulsed by the same horrible passions, and that Nature, the common mother of all created beings, turns savagely on her own children to complete the ruin they have wrought on themselves.

#### **12.10 THE RISE OF STORM TO ITS GREATEST PITCH**

The first speech in the second scene is Lear’s (III, ii, 1-9). It is crowning speech of the first part of the play, in a sense the Keynote. Only a few lines later, Lear says, “My wits begin to turn.” His speeches in scene ii show the last traces of his already vanishing sanity, and in scene iv he is “far gone.” His prayer in scene iv :

*Take physic, pomp;  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,  
And show the heavens more just.*

This is the first step in the regenerative process, showing as it does sympathy towards man and an incipient willingness to admit an error. But it is also the last sane utterance, if not indeed an expression of a mind already deranged.

In the first nine lines of the scene, the storm and the style rise to their greatest pitch. It is in fact only through the rise in the style that the audience comes to feel the full extent of the storm. In these lines, Shakespeare reaches the point for which he has been preparing in the preceding two scenes. The report which the gentleman makes in scene i first announces the condition of the King, as he was with himself and the elements. This is followed by a digression of thirty five lines during which the conversation shifts to the fortunes of Cordelia and the activities of the British Dukes, Kent recalls the storm hastily before his exit and immediately in the person of the King it breaks in full fury :

*Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! Blow!  
You cataracts and hurricanes, spout  
Till you have drenched our steeples, drown'd the cocks!  
Singe my white head! and thou all shaking thunder  
Smite flat the thick rotundity o'th'world,  
Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once,  
That make ingrateful man!*

### **Inner crisis of Lear's mind**

This scene may be regarded as the crisis of the play. The meeting with Edgar brings on in Lear, the first positive symptoms of insanity: and through the incoherence of Lear's thoughts we see the profound change that

has come over his character. His sorrows rouse in him a great compassion for the sufferings of the poor. He can conceive of only one cause for any man's affliction-namely, the unkindness of his daughter "What have his daughters brought him to this pass?" Which makes Hazlitt exclaim "What a bewildered amazement, what a wrench of the imagination, that cannot be brought to conceive of any other cause of misery than that which has bowed it down, and absorb all other sorrows in its own."

The scene illuminates another aspect too, of Lear's mind. It has come to puzzle itself with the essential and fundamental nature of man "Unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art." And Lear thinks he has found the philosopher who could enlighten him about ultimate causes of thunder, about the composition of Regan's heart, and the cause in nature that makes such hard hearts. The madness of Lear serves the same purpose to Shakespeare that dreams do to psycho-analyst-the purpose of interpreting a man's deepest instincts, impulses and obsession. But Shakespeare uses it also for a higher purpose to show character development.

### **Connection between Storm and Lear's madness**

The storm sets in, just at the psychological moment, to convert Lear's mental strain into actual madness. The storm and the madness are thus connected. A sentence from Dr. Bucknill's *The Mad Folk of Shakespeare* throws light on this point : "Insanity arising from mental and moral causes often continues in a certain state of imperfect development ..... " a state of exaggerated and perverted emotion accompanied by violent and irregular conduct, but unconnected with intellectual aberration until some physical shock is incurred, bodily illness, or accident or exposure to physical suffering, and then the imperfect mental disease is converted into perfect lunacy. We cannot doubt that Shakespeare contemplated this exposure and physical suffering as the cause of the first crisis in Lear's malady.

The storm in *King Lear*, as in *Julius Casear*, is recognised as the dramatic background to the tempest of human emotions. It is the signal that we have entered upon the mysterious centrepiece of the play in which the

gathering passions of the whole drama are to be allowed to vent themselves without check or bound. It is no ordinary storm. It is a night of bleak winds sorely ruffling of cataracts and hurricanes. No words can tell the imaginative greatness of the scene on the bleak and lonely moor and in Lear's bleak and lonely heart. To conceive it as it is conceived was a splendid imagination.

#### **12.11 THE RECONCILIATION SCENE :**

This is one of the greatest scenes not only of the play but of all the plays of Shakespeare. So far as its relations to the action of the drama is concerned, it is less important than the fourth scene of the First Act where, Lear meets a changed Goneril or the fourth scene of the second act where, he meets a changed Regan. But it ranks with these scenes in dramatic power. *King Lear* does not contain any other scene as affecting and pathetic as this one in which Cordelia's care for her old father is revealed and which gradually passing through Lear's restoration to reason, brings us to the climax where he recognises her, kneeling in front of her and admits his foolish fondness.

The scene opens in the French camp. Lear is sleeping in bed with music playing to help him sleep soundly. Cordelia, Kent and the Doctor are standing round his bed. Cordelia thanks Kent for his goodness and asks him to give up his shabby disguise; but Kent refuses on the ground that the proper time for it has not yet come. Cordelia laments piteously and lovingly because her old father has been so ungenerously treated by her sisters. Lear gradually wakes up and at first cannot recognise Cordelia. But when he does, he kneels and is almost about to ask her forgiveness. Though stopped by Cordelia at that time, he does ask her to forgive him when he is led away by her. Towards the end of the scene we learn from a conversation between Kent and the Gentleman that Edmund is leading the British army and that a decisive battle is going to be fought on that very day.

#### **12.12 REBIRTH OF LEAR**

The old Lear died in the storm. The new Lear is born in the scene, in which he is reunited with Cordelia. His madness sparked the end of the wilful, egotistical monarch. He is fully resurrected as a human being. We can tell from

his protest that the awakening into life is a painful happening. After the reconciliation, Lear makes only two more appearances. In the scene, in which he is being led off to prison he has apparently overcome the desire for vengeance: he has left behind him all those attributes of kingship which had prevented him from attaining his full stature as a man. He has even passed beyond his own pride. At the beginning of the play, he is incapable of disinterested love, for he uses the love of others to minister to his own egotism. His prolonged agony and his utter loss of everything frees his heart from the bondage of the selfhood. He unlearns hatred and learns love and humility. He loses the world and gains his soul.

In this state, when his eyes light on Cordelia, she seems to him a blessed spirit of Heaven : “Thou art a soul in bliss.” He is still in a state between dream and wakefulness; but it tells us much about his thoughts for months. How must they have hovered round Cordelia, as round an angelic spirit of love ? But to Cordelia, to be spoken of as ‘a spirit’ or ‘a soul in bliss’ is a sign of lingering delirium. How can it be otherwise ? In the following lines, Shakespeare lights up the hidden recesses of Lear’s mind as well as Cordelia’s character.

*You do me wrong to take me out o’ the grave  
Thou art a soul in bliss; but I am bound  
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears  
Do scald like molten lead.*

### **12.13 CORDELIA’S SELFLESS LOVE FOR LEAR**

While Lear doubts the sanity of his vision, Cordelia who has been anxiously waiting for the recognition, cries in joy and love and thankfulness : “So I am,” Space forbids us to dwell on the full psychological content of these words. Hazlitt, however, comes near the mark when he says : “The words ‘so I am’ of Cordelia gush from her heart like a torrent of tears; relieving it of a weight of love and of supposed ingratitude which had pressed upon it for years.” When we think we have reached the climax of Shakespeare’s power in the scene, the great wizard has another master stroke up his sleeve in Cordelia’s “No cause, no

cause”. It is negatively stated, yet it expresses more than any eloquent protestation could, Cordelia’s grief for what Lear has suffered from her sister.

As an exercise of creative imagination this scene bears, in every line and phrase, the stamp of genius that plunges the depths of man’s nobler nature. Spontaneity, simplicity and profundity mark its great moments. No mood befits our deepest yearning for another’s recovery from illness or for his happiness as the mood of prayer. Hence, Shakespeare could not have begun better than with Cordelia’s ‘O kind god’. There is the same sureness of touch, selective power and naturalness in the way in which Cordelia expresses her sense of shock at children who could be brazenly cruel to an old, revered father.

#### **12.14 LET US SUM UP**

Each Act and each Scene in King Lear is important as each scene gives space and time to reveal the inner thoughts and feelings of characters. Spontaneity, simplicity and profundity mark great moments.

#### **12.15 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. What are the important scenes in *King Lear*?
2. What is the importance of Storm Scene?
3. Discuss the regeneration of Lear.

#### **12.16 SUGGESTED READING**

King Lear.cliffnotes.com

“Complete scene by Scene Outline.” [kinglear.org/scene-outlines](http://kinglear.org/scene-outlines).

Shakespeare, William. King Lear. Harvard Colleges. 1608 Library

Edwards, P. (1986) *Shakespeare: A Writer’s Progress*. Oxford University Press, Oxford

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**COURSE No.111**

**DRAMA-I**

**LESSON No. 13**

**M.A. ENGLISH**

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**

**UNIT - III**

**(KING LEAR)**

## **AN ANALYSIS**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 13.1 Introduction to Lear as a Protagonist
- 13.2 Objectives
- 13.3 Language of Passion
- 13.4 Lear as Noble King
- 13.5 Tragic Flaw in Lear
- 13.6 Negative Traits in Lear's Character
- 13.7 Role of Circumstance
- 13.8 Theme of Madness in Shakespeare
- 13.9 King Lear as Scientific study of Mental Disease
- 13.10 Lear : "More Sinned Against than Sinning"
- 13.11 The Redemption of Lear
- 13.12 The Significance of Cordelia in the Play
- 13.13 Let Us Sum Up
- 13.14 Examination Oriented Questions
- 13.15 Suggested Reading

### 13.1 INTRODUCTION TO LEAR AS A PROTAGONIST

It is high time now for me to give you a critical insight into the character of the protagonist or the central figure in *King Lear*. Here, you will find answers to such questions as character is destiny in Shakespeare's plays and Lear is more sinned against than sinning.

In all his tragedies, Shakespeare has created grand memorable figures. King Lear is an impressive and dominating figure. He is aged, and he speaks of himself 'as about to crawl toward death' (Act. I., Sc. I.). Yet, in Act I Scene iv, we find him coming back from hunting, a strenuous pursuit, and calling with hearty appetite for dinner. There is no fatigue here. In the centre of the play he is grievously afflicted by exposure to the fury of the tempest: yet he survives it and after his ordeal, he has the strength, near the very end, to kill Cordelia's hangman. His physical stamina is indeed extraordinary and any producer who thought of presenting him as (in Lamb's phrase) 'an old man tottering about the stage with a walking-stick', would be inappropriate. And Lear's aspect is indeed royal. The disguised Kent is assuredly using no flattery when he speaks of Lear as having 'authority' in his countenance that is, in his bearing. Lear, we see in Act I Sc. i, is a monarch of great age, of powerful physique, of compelling personality. But at the same time he is a foolish man.

With all his outbursts of passion, and even in his savage invective against his daughters-an invective surely unequalled in all literature for its terrible violence, Lear is never undignified. Note, for instance, his kingly astonishment, when Goneril first dares to criticise his followers :

*"Are you our daughter" ?*

and again :

*"Doth any here know me ? This is not Lear".*

or again his almost inarticulate rage, when Gloucester makes excuses for the fiery quality of the Duke.

*Vengeance, plague, death, confusion, Fiery*

*What quality ? Why, Gloucester, Gloucester*

*I'd speak with the Duke of Cornwall and his wife.*

The tone being always to the last, that of a man used to command, and to be obeyed. Even in his madness we catch glimpses of this heroic spirit shining through his incoherence, notably in the final passage, when he is recognised by Gloucester.

### **13.2 OBJECTIVES**

The lesson introduces the learners to *King Lear* as protagonist, and as a king. The tragic flaw in him is enumerated on. Role of circumstance in the madness of Lear is included. Lear's suffering, redemption have been included for the proper appreciation of the character in drama.

### **13.3 LANGUAGE OF PASSION**

In a Shakespearean tragedy, the lot of the tragic hero seems to be that he discovers through suffering, the secret wealth of his imagination. The greater the man and the greater his suffering, the greater is the secret wealth of his imagination. The note of grandeur begins to be heard in Lear's speech to Goneril. 'I am ashamed that thou hast power to shake *my* manhood thus; and it is heightened, as by degrees, his wits unsettle. His intelligence, which in the opening scenes has been blinded, now sees all the 'injustice of the world'' and the indecency of man and womankind, now awakens, and is actually at its strongest however jaundiced when he is on the verge of madness and beyond. His passion, and personally his hallucination break into apostrophe. He conjures the elements, the gods, the poor naked wretches, the 'rascal beadle,' and the joint stool that he mistakes for Goneril. Language, in this brainstorm, is churned up from the depths; the rhythm follows every change of mood, marking the greater or less coherence of Lear's musings, as it slips from wonderfully modulated, but normal verse into broken lines and hence downward into prose. When he recovers calm, and awakens a different kind of pity, no longer mixed with terror, his speech is simple and the verse runs evenly.

### 13.4 LEAR AS A NOBLE KING

All Shakespeare's kings are surrounded by a certain halo of prestige. Shakespeare's fervent royalism is seen in his preference for reverence for superiors. His Lear has a greater endowment of this kind of majesty than any other figure in his plays. For this reason, the blows of Fate that inflict such cruel wounds on his pride are infinitely more painful to him than acts of ingratitude and baseness would be to an ordinary mind. But the more his pride is wounded, the more clearly does it show its unconquerable nature; it will perish only with the life of the king himself. Even in his madness this pride remains unshaken. He arises more majestic where others would be in danger of lapsing into ridicule. Thus, we may indeed, say of Lear, keeping the Shakespearean conception of highness in view, that he is "every inch a king." This characteristic phrase, again, is uttered by the king with reference to himself. "Ay, every inch a king" (iv, vi, 110). The significance of the words is not greatly affected by the fact that they are spoken in a state of madness. His exalted attitude is very strongly emphasized throughout the play. The man who says of himself that he is 'every inch a king' radiates 'greatness'.

As was inevitable for such a man as Lear, who is not accustomed to look before he leaped, is only gradually brought, by his own sufferings and his ill-treatment at the hands of Goneril and Regan, whom he had not wronged, to feel some remorse for the wrong he did to Cordelia. Perhaps, we see the first symptoms of his altered attitude of mind in Act I, Scene II, where he cries out to the elements. "Here I stand your slave, a poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man." This is the note he strikes when Cordelia's forgiving tenderness brings his short comings home to him, towards the end of the play he implores :

*Pray do not mock me,*

*I am a very foolish fond old man,*

*Fourscore and upwards; not an hour more or less  
And to deal plainly,*

*I fear I am not in my perfect mind.*

### **13.5 HAMARTIA OR TRAGIC FLAW IN LEAR**

In Shakespeare's plays, a tragic hero has some fatal weakness (Hamartia) in him. He makes some fatal mistake, which brings about his tragic fall. It is true with Hamlet, Othello and Macbeth. But Lear differs from the other tragic heroes of Shakespeare, in that he seems to be a sufferer, hardly at all an agent. Whereas, the other tragic heroes of Shakespeare are active agents of their own doom, Lear is mostly a passive sufferer. As Bradley puts it, Lear's sufferings are so cruel and our indignation against those, who inflicted, those sufferings on him is so intense that we are inclined to forget and even forgive his act of folly and the wrong he did to Cordelia and Kent. Lear inspires in us not only pity, but also much admiration and affection. His frankness and generosity, his heroic efforts to be patient, his shame and repentance, the ecstasy of his re-union with Cordelia, melt our hearts. The following are the main traits of his character which led to the fall of Lear.

#### **Hypersensitive**

Uncontrollable excitability is a negative trait in Lear's personality. This is evident throughout the play. Words fail to express the full force of the volcanic outbursts of love and hatred that take sovereign possession of the proud, sensitive, passion ridden mind.

#### **Lack of Judgement**

Lack of judgement is another great limitation of this great king. This is a natural consequence of unbridled passion and is exemplified in Lear's blindness towards the true worth of Cordelia and Kent as well as in his failure to detect the crisis in the Kingdom was a single act of poor judgement, since internal strife would certainly result from the setting up of three rival kings in one kingdom.

#### **His love for dignity**

Lear has great love of retinue and homage. He bitterly resents the falling off in deference in the two sisters and in Oswald, especially in the

diminution and final cutting of his retinue. Thus, his first complaint to Regan against Goneril is, “She hath abated me of half my train” and Regan is commended as not likely to expose him to such bitter indignity. When Regan further reduces his train, he detests her. Goneril seems to offer better conditions with respect to his train, he quickly has a reversal in her favour, unmindful of his previous protestation to “abjure all roofs.”

Cordelia shows how much alive she is to this conspicuous weakness when she carefully addresses him in almost fulsome language. Kent, when disguised, by the same device secures his desired position as servant, by remarking, certainly not by accident, that the king had that in countenance, viz. authority, which he (Kent) would fain call master. And lastly, the king does not forget even in his moments of complete delusion, that he is “every inch a king.”

Lear’s imperviousness is very obvious. At the very commencement of the play, one sees what manner of man Lear is. The bare idea of a public abdication and a public assessment of his daughter’s affection for him, sounds like the silly whim of a man accustomed to bend others to his rule. His words to Cordelia on her plain avowal of her feelings fully reveal it.

*“How, how, Cordelia ? mend your speech a little. Lest it may mar your fortunes”*

Lear is a man of towering passions. His passionate hatred is well displayed in his speech to his daughter Cordelia, when in an outburst of fury he declares that she shall have nothing from him. The same trait is characteristic of him throughout the play.

*The barbarous Scythian,*

*Or he that makes his generation messes*

*To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom*

*Be as well neighbour’d, pitied and relieved,*

*As thou my sometime daughter.*

When the Earl of Kent, his faithful counsellor, attempts to defend Cordelia, Lear in anger, banishes him from his Kingdom :

*If on the tenth day following  
Thy banish'd trunk be found in our dominions,  
The moment is thy death, Away! By Jupiter,  
This shall not be revok'd.*

and when angry at his daughter Goneril, the same wrath is vented forth upon her :

*Blasts and forge upon thee!  
The untented woundings of a father's curse pierce every sense about thee;*

Lear's division of the kingdom among his daughters, and the manner of the division, the mock trial of the affections of his daughters, are the first acts of his approaching madness, and he is unable to distinguish between the flattery of his elder daughters, Goneril and Regan, and the genuine expressions of his younger daughter Cordelia.

At times, his affection towards his three daughters is most marked. When the King of France learns of the banishment of Cordelia, he presses his suit more eagerly, although urged by her father :

*To avert your liking a more worthier way  
Than on a wretch whom nature is ashamed  
Almost to acknowledge hers.*

but King of France in reply reminds him of his former affection for his daughter :

*This is most strange,  
That she, that even but now as your best object,  
The argument of your praise, balm of your age,*

*Most best, most dearest. Should in this trice of time  
Commit a thing so monstrous, to dismantle  
So many folds of favour.*

When Cordelia is taken captive with her father he again shows his passionate affection for her :

*Come, let's away to prison :*

*We two alone will sing like birds in the cage : When thou dost ask  
me blessing, I'll kneel down,*

*And ask of thee forgiveness : so we'll live, as gilded butterflies,*

### **Craving for flattery**

Lear's inordinate craving for flattery is responsible for all his suffering and misery. He is fond of pomp, homage and outward attention from his servants, and shows great respect to his daughters Goneril and Regan on account of allowing him to live alternately with them, attended by a few hundred knights. For their supposed love, he divides between them the share of kingdom previously intended for his daughter Cordelia. For himself he decides;

*By monthly course,*

*With reservation of a hundred knights*

*By you to be sustain'd shall our abode*

*Make with you by due turn.*

When Goneril tired of her father's company, deprives him of his attendants, he bitterly resents the falling off in her regard for him. He first complains to Regan of the conduct of Goneril :

*This not in thee*

*To grudge my pleasures, to cut off my train.*

but later, when Regan makes a further reduction of his attendants than Goneril did, he says :

*What ! must I come to you*

*With five and twenty? Regan, said you so ?*

His youngest daughter Cordelia sees plainly her father's weakness for pomp, as is shown in the careful manner in which she addresses him, "How does my royal lord ? How fares your majesty ?"

### **13.6 NEGATIVE TRAITS IN THE CHARACTER OF LEAR**

Lear's speech to his daughter Goneril brings out four distinct traits in his character; irritation and sadness, which are followed by an outburst of rage and hate, and finally an effort to be patient with her. Determined to retain the title status and prerogatives of a king, he nevertheless, wishes to relinquish the actual task of ruling. He decided to divide his kingdom amongst his three daughters, who with their husbands will govern their respective regions under his titular authority. In the first scene of the play, he ostensibly holds an auction : the best portion of the kingdom will go to that daughter who by her words indicates that she loves her father best. But he has already made his division. Before the play has begun he has decided to give Goneril and Regan exactly equal portion of the realm, and to give Cordelia a portion richer than these.

If Lear has made his decision already, why should he ask his daughters to speak of their love for him before he formally presents them with their portions ? It might be suggested that he wants to corroborate in his own mind, or publicly to display as sound, his previous judgement as to their degrees of affection for him. But this will hardly do. For when the first daughter has spoken, Lear gives her portion before hearing the second; and when the second has spoken, he gives her portion before hearing the third. His real reason for making his daughters speak of their love is just that he likes to hear himself praised on a ceremonial occasion. He knew that Goneril would flatter him, that Regan would flatter him, and he enjoys their flattery. He was confident that

Cordelia-his particular favourite would excel them both. His own words give him away.

‘Now, our joy’, he says.

*What can you say to draw*

*A third more opulent than your sisters ? Speak.*

The matter is already decided. Lear leans back to enjoy the culmination of the performance he has staged. But the words do not come and he immediately casts her off. And to his fault of vanity is added the fault of rashness. When his pride receives an affront, he reacts intemperately. He lacks self control. Passion usurps the place of reason. And this is not merely the result of old age but of vanity also.

It may be wondered why, since Lear is of such an autocratic disposition, he should have taken it into his head to abdicate at all in favour of his daughters. Possibly we may see in this act of his-and, it must be remembered he had always been eccentric, -a sudden fancy that a resolution must be acted upon. And what is more, his daughters must repay him by their public protestations of affection. Goneril, and Regan, with their insincere and extravagant expressions of love are well enough, but the king waits for something more from his darling daughter Cordelia. One can picture his annoyance when he is met by her somewhat cool answer.

*I love your majesty,*

*According to my bond, nor more nor less.*

It is then that Lear’s uncontrollable wrath bursts out, the wrath that is to be followed by such disastrous consequences, both to himself and to others. Just as Lear’s abdication is the basis of all the actual incidents of the play, this outburst of ungovernable rage is the beginning of his moral downfall, culminating in his madness and all the miseries it entails.

### **13.7 ROLE OF CIRCUMSTANCE**

Circumstances also contribute to the tragedy in many significant

ways. There are various examples which illustrate this point. (i) When Lear is driven out to the heath by the cruelty of his daughters, a violent storm breaks out. But for this storm at this juncture, the king would not have suffered so' much physically or lost his wits. (ii) The presence of Edgar disguised as Tom bedlam in the cottage is a significant coincidence that stimulates and hastens the madness of Lear. (iii) Just when the King goes to sleep and there is a good chance of the king recovering his wits as the result of refreshing sleep, Gloucester comes with the news of a plot against Lear's life and the need to take Lear to Dover. So the King's sleep is broken and his disorder has no opportunity to recover balance. This is an unfortunate coincidence in the play that aggravates Lear's tragedy. (iv) Cordelia's army is defeated and Cordelia and Lear are taken prisoner : otherwise the play would have ended happily for Lear. Defeat in battle may be ascribed to the accidents of war but why is it that the reprieve of Cordelia comes too late to prevent her hanging ? Albany wants to set Cordelia free and restore Lear to his throne. Edmund also repents and wants to save Cordelia; but his confession comes too late to save Cordelia. The hanging of Cordelia is a tragic incident which gives us the impression that the mysterious forces of fate, are working against Lear and Cordelia. When Cordelia is hanged, Lear naturally dies broken-hearted. So, we find that circumstances also contribute largely to the tragedy of Lear.

It is, therefore, wrong to say that character is destiny as far as Lear's fortunes are considered; both character and circumstances or fate are jointly responsible for his tragedy. But the primary responsibility rests with his own character.

### **13.8 THEME OF MADNESS IN SHAKESPEARE**

Shakespeare has many portraits of madness, real, and assumed. Titus Andronicus is driven mad by his sufferings; Hamlet is unbalanced as he feigns madness, and Ophelia is driven mad by grief; Constance is driven distracted by her loss of Arthur; Lady Macbeth commits suicide because of an unsound mind; and in *The Tempest*, the three men of sin are maddened by the workings of conscience, so that their brains are as useless as a

tumour. It says much for Shakespeare's powers of observation, or for his intuitive understanding of the human mind that his depiction of madness, though based on sixteenth-century theory, has satisfied medical opinion of later ages, J.C. Bucknill in his remarks on the medical knowledge of Shakespeare and H. Somerille in *Madness in Shakespearean Tragedy* illustrate the fact that our increasing knowledge of madness during the past century has served only to justify Shakespeare's intuitions.

The groundlings of the Elizabethan theatre loved to see mad characters on the stage. It was part of the mob's love of sensationalism. Shakespeare never, disdained to exploit the tastes of the audience if he could raise it to a high dramatic purpose. He had always, watched the phenomena of insanity in some of its forms, and possessed a deeper understanding of them than any of his contemporaries. He loved to take some of his characters, for instance Hamlet, Othello and Lady Macbeth to the border of insanity, and it is the borderland that fascinates the student of psychology even more than the land itself. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare shows both the outer shadow and the inner darkness dotted with spots, and sometimes with pools of light. As a study in insanity Lear is his prize specimen. But as a dramatic method, it can become a medium for revealing the abysses and recesses of the human mind. When the controls of reason are absent, things lonely and things dark in the underworld of personality become, significant. The insanity of Lear makes the workings of his unconscious and subconscious self luminous in diverse ways. It is a radiograph of his mind, enabling us to see firstly, the thoughts and impulses of Lear in years gone by; secondly, his obsessions during the days of mental strain that brought on the collapse; thirdly, the expansion of his human sympathies and the awakening of the moral greatness that had lain dormant within him; fourthly, his remorse; and lastly, the growth and change of the inner man, Lear. Insanity itself is shown as changing and as a process with phases.

### **13.9 'KING LEAR' AS A SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF MENTAL DISEASE**

It is significant that experts in mental diseases consult and quote

*King Lear* as though it were the history of an actual case of insanity. Essays and treatises on the subject are numerous. That Shakespeare should have entered so perfectly into the consciousness of insanity as thus to project, not a mere likeness of the thing, but the very thing itself, is one of the mysteries of his genius. The methods used for the recovery of the old king anticipate those employed as the result of modern scientific study and experience. Dr Brigham remarks, “Although nearly two centuries and a half have passed since, Shakespeare wrote this, we have very little to add to his method of treating the insane as thus, pointed out to produce sleep, to quiet the mind by medical and moral treatment, to avoid all unkindness, and when the patients begin to convalesce, to guard, as he directs, against everything likely to disturb their minds and cause a relapse. It is now considered the best and nearly the only essential treatment.”

### **13.10 LEAR : “MORE SINNED AGAINST THAN SINNING”**

Coleridge states : “All his faults increase our pity for him. We refuse to know them otherwise than as means of his sufferings and aggravations of his daughters’ ingratitude.” Lamb also endorses Coleridge’s view. In fact, Lear is a tragic character whose sufferings emanate from the flaws which are inherent in his character. We see that these serious defects of Lear’s character are, revealed in the opening scene of the drama. His want of understanding of his daughter’s nature; his absurd desire to hear their declarations of love for him, his unnatural outburst of rage against his dear daughter Cordelia and loyal Kent reveal his basic mental and moral weakness. His reckless and cruel discarding of Cordelia and banishing of Kent supplement his rash folly in giving away his kingdom to his daughters. His tragic sufferings follow, inevitably, from his rash actions. Lear has “sinned”, and has to reap “superflux” of sufferings and the intensity of his sufferings is more than his faults or “sins”. Sympathy is certainly evoked by Shakespeare’s representation of his character and his suffering.

Granted that he has done injustice to Cordelia, why should Goneril and Regan ill-treat him ? He has given them the whole kingdom reserving

to himself the symbols of sovereignty and the attendance of a hundred followers. Even if, he has some defects of temper, he deserves gratitude and affection on their part in his triple capacity of king, father and old man. It is to be noted that Goneril instructs her servants to practise a deliberate neglect towards Lear and his followers. If Lear strikes Oswald and Kent trips him, it is because the fellow is rude in behaviour. Consider how rude Oswald's answer that Lear is his lady's father. Nor should we forget that Goneril and Regan are wicked hypocrites who only want excuses to reduce the king to lonely and helpless existence. They play with him as a cat does with a mouse, progressively reduce his brain, and with triumphant malice ask why he needs any servant at all. The aged king kneels before Regan, begging for raiment, food and shelter, but she brushes this aside as the unsightly trick of his dotage, and asks him to go back to Goneril. Whatever be his faults, Lear does not deserve to be humiliated like this. Ultimately the king rushes out into the wild stormy heath, and Goneril and Regan close the doors of the castle, to protect themselves from the raging storm. What monstrous ingratitude and pitiless cruelty! Surely Lear does not deserve this from his own daughters.

But though Lear suffers grievously and unjustly, his sufferings have one compensatory relieving feature. Sufferings purge his soul, expand and elevate his mind and heart, and give him lofty spiritual vision. The Lear at the end of the play is a redeemed Lear. And though his sufferings are monstrously out of proportion to his offences, we do not feel crushed at the spectacle of his tragedy.

### **13.11 THE REDEMPTION OF LEAR**

It is because of the purgatorial effect of suffering on Lear's mind that the play is called the Redemption of King Lear. Suffering forces him to realize his own humanity and awakens the philanthropic disposition which was the attitude the stoics cultivated towards their fellow men. Lear expresses his conversion to this ethical position in the following famous lines :

*Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your loop's and window'd raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these ? O, I have taken  
Too little care of this! Take physic pomp;  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them  
And show the heavens more just.*

A.C. Bradley says that these lines mark the redemption of Lear. But they report only his first hesitant step in that direction, for the old man's moment of humility is fleeting; it has no immediate effect upon his conduct or upon his madness.

The real redemption of Lear comes when he awakens from the delusions of his frenzied mind to discover Cordelia and her unselfish enduring love. The mere sight of her kills "the great rage" in him the unsocial emotional turmoil from which all his sins and sufferings have sprung. Now he is calmly receptive to the healing power of Christian love. For he has now arrived to utter indifference to external events, that complete freedom from emotion, the disease of the intellect, which produces true stoic content. On the contrary, Lear finds his peace in an active emotion, in all absorbing love which at last renders him independent of circumstances. Even shut within the narrow walls of a prison, he can now find utter peace and happiness if only Cordelia and her love be with him there :

*Come, let's away to prison;  
We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage;*

.....  
*And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
At gilded butterflies*

.....  
*And take upon's the mystery of things,  
As if we were God's spies; and we'll wear out,  
In a wall'll prison, packs and scets of great ones  
That ebb and flow by the moon*

.....  
*Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia,  
The gods themselves throw incense,*

### **13.12 SIGNIFICANCE OF CORDELIA IN PLAY**

This speech shows that Lear's ideals have come full circle. In the first scene of the play, he showed himself so exclusively devoted to the external shows of his position that he has come to value even love only in so far as it augmented his earthly glory. But his passage through purgatory has made him realize that beside love all the baser uses of this world seem utterly unprofitable. Even the packs and sects (conspiracies and factions) of great ones, to which he used to pay all his allegiance, seem wholly insignificant. If Lear's reunion with Cordelia brings about his salvation, one may well ask why Shakespeare snatches her so suddenly from him. And why does he put Lear to death so soon ? The answers to the two questions are closely related. It is not what the earthly creature Cordelia is, but what she represents that is important for the meaning of the play. It is her spirit, not her bodily presence, that redeems her father. And like the third friend in the sermons, she is hanged, as Christ was crucified, so that mankind might be saved.

Since this is a sublime morality play, its action prepares Lear not for a life of stoic tranquility on this earth, but for the heavenly joy of a redeemed soul. The meaning of Cordelia's execution comes to Lear slowly and painfully. At first he is filled with despair at losing her.

*Thou' is come no more,*

*Never, never, never, never, never!*

But, suddenly he makes the blessed discovery that Cordelia is not dead after all, that the breath of life still trembles on her lips :

*Do you see this ? Look on her, look her lips,*

*Look there; look there!*

In the joy of this discovery, the old man's heart breaks in a spasm of ecstasy. For only to earthbound intelligence is Lear pathetically deceived in thinking poor Cordelia alive. Those familiar with the pattern of the morality play realized that Lear has discovered in her unselfish God-like love and the one companion who is willing to go with him through Death up to the throne of the Everlasting Judge. This knowledge enables Lear to meet Death in a state of rapture.

It was Bradley who suggested that the play might be called "The Redemption of King Lear", Schucking, however, argues that it is not "really consistent with Shakespeare's philosophy to see in this sequence of events and ascent of the character to a higher plane; a process of purification and perfection." Lear in his madness "does little more than follow the beaten track of the melancholy type." His attacks on society, however profound they may seem are the result of his mental derangement; and at the end of the play he is not purified by suffering, but rather "a nature completely transformed, whose extraordinary vital forces are extinguished or about to be extinguished." Schucking concludes, therefore that it shows a complete misunderstanding of the play "to regard Lear as greater at the close than at the beginning." It is true, of course, that some of Lear's most impressive critical views of society are expressed in his madness; that he becomes progressively more feeble; and that in the last scene there are signs of his approaching dissolution; yet the three moments in the play crucial to Bradley's theory of Lear's development-his recognition of error, his compassion for the poor, and his kneeling to Cordelia occur either before or after his madness. His resemblance to the

melancholic type is superficial, though other dramatists had criticized society through the mouth of a malcontent as Shakespeare did through the mouth of a madman. Schucking seems to be, only partially, aware of the paradox that Lear when ostensibly sane cannot distinguish between Cordelia and her wicked sisters: he acquires wisdom by going mad, and his wildest speeches are a mixture of matter and impertinency “reason in madness”.

For these reasons, it is impossible to accept the view that Lear at the end of the play is only an enfeebled Lear. Actually his character undergoes a process of regeneration and ennoblement. Like gold in fire, his character becomes purified through suffering.

### **13.13 LET US SUM UP**

The story of King Lear revolves around the character King Lear, his mistakes, weaknessess and the process of his regeneration and ennoblement. Cordelia, however, innocent has to pay for others’ sins by giving up her life. The storm in the play is metaphor of Lear’s madness.

### **13.14 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. Discuss Lear as protagonist of the play.
2. Highlight the tragic flaw in Lear.
3. Write a note on the role of Cordelia.

### **13.15 SUGGESTED READING**

Sher, Antony, year of the Mad King : The Lear Diaries. Nick Hern Books, Limited, 2018.

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Taylor, G. “The Canon and Chronology of Shakespeare’s Plays.” In S. Wells and G. Taylor.

Wells, S., Taylor, G., Jowett, J., Montgomery, W. eds. (1987) William Shakespeare: *A Textual Companion*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

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**COURSE No.111**

**DRAMA-I**

**LESSON No. 14**

**M.A. ENGLISH**

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE  
(KING LEAR)**

**UNIT - III**

**AN ANALYSIS OF  
MAIN CHARACTERS IN LEAR**

**STRUCTURE**

- 14.1 Introduction
- 14.2 Objectives
- 14.3 Cordelia
  - 14.3.1 A dutiful and truthful daughter
  - 14.3.2 Her honest nature
- 14.4 Critics
- 14.5 Categories of Fool
- 14.6 Role of Fool in Elizabethan Drama
  - 14.6.1 Fool in King Lear
  - 14.6.2 Role of Fool in the Drama
- 14.7 Edgar
  - 14.7.1 Edgar's assumed madness
- 14.8 Kent
- 14.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 14.10 Examination Oriented Questions
- 14.11 Suggested Reading

## 14.1 INTRODUCTION

Cordelia, Kent, Edgar and the Fool form a remarkable group of characters in *King Lear*. They represent abundance of extreme good, selfless devotion and unconquerable love. We approve these characters, admire them, love them; but we feel no mystery. We do not ask in bewilderment, “Is there any cause in nature that makes these kind of hearts.” First of all, I would like to discuss the character of Cordelia. According to A.C. Bradley, “the character of Cordelia is not a masterpiece of invention or subtlety like that of Cleopatra; yet in its own way it is a wonderful creation. Cordelia appears in only four of the twenty-six scenes of *King Lear*, she speaks-it is hard to believe it-scarcely more than a hundred lines; and yet no character in Shakespeare is more absolutely individual or more ineffaceably stamped on the memory of his readers.”

## 14.2 OBJECTIVES

The lesson gives the detailed interpretation of the main characters of the drama, *King Lear*. The role of the characters and their importance acquaints the learner with the writer as the creator of characters.

## 14.3 CORDELIA

All students of Shakespeare have agreed in enthroning Cordelia high, if not, highest amongst lovable and loving ladies. She is, by no means, expressive in her affection, indeed she is rather lacking in demonstration, but not unpardonably so, when, as in the first act, a public display of her affection is demanded, and that for a mercenary reason. When, however, her father is restored to her after his barbarous experiences at the hands of her sisters, we find a lovely touching demonstration of love without alloy.

Although the character of Cordelia is painted with but few touches, it is none-the-less distinct in its characteristics of perfect womanhood. All the critics have expressed their hesitation in even speaking of “the heavenly beauty”, (as Schlegel puts it) of Cordelia’s character. She presents a strong contrast to the general ‘savagery of the age’ as evidenced in all the other

characters, with the single exception of Edgar.

This exceptional trait of Cordelia's character comes out most strongly, as is suitable and fitting, in her dealings with her stricken father, whose restoration she strives hard to accomplish. She will not allow that she has any cause whatever by reason of the hard fate meted out to her, for abating her affection towards him one jot. When Lear says :

*"I know you do not love me; for your sisters*

*Have, as I do remember, done me wrong,*

*You have some cause, they have not."*

*Cordelia's reply is brief as it is emphatic,*

*"No cause, no cause," She prays :*

*Restoration, hang*

*Thy medicine on my lips, and let his kiss*

*Repair those violent harms that my two sisters*

*Have in thy reverence made !*

#### **14.3.1 A dutiful and truthful daughter**

Lear is "Your Highness," "My Royal Lord." "Your Majesty" to his daughter, who knows that this accustomed homage, will solace the battered old heart. Even towards her sisters she bears no malice, although her quiet condemnation of them is even more effective than all the passionate denunciation of Lear. In Cordelia, we have the personification of duty and truth.

*Since what I well intend*

*I'll do it before I speak,*

Cordelia is her own simple description of her cardinal rule of conduct. There is to be no excess of promise over performance, but rather the reverse, hence, another reason why she could not make loud protestations of what

her filial affection would prompt her to do. She recognises that wifely affection would have to be allowed for as well as love for her father. She neither has not desires “that glib and oily art” to which her sisters owed their advancement.

She sees through the hollow affection of her sisters as through the mercenary love of Burgundy. She recognises the hollowness of the prosperity that comes from hypocrisy and is glad not to have “such a tongue.”

*Though not to have it*

*Hath lost me in your liking.*

A boisterous woman is not pleasant to contemplate, and when Lear tells us that

*Her voice was ever soft,*

*Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman,*

One feels that nothing could have been better in keeping with her quiet, earnest and undemonstrative nature. Again, what could be more truly scathing than her condemnation of Burgundy :

*Peace be with Burgundy :*

*Since that respects of fortune are his love,*

*I shall not be his wife*

In conclusion, the self-control and decision of Cordelia’s character stands out in sharp contrast with that of the uncontrollable and vacillating king.

If one tries to sum up her character in one word, the word “restraint” seems most appropriate. This note is evident at the very beginning of the play, such an ordeal as the public declaration of her love to her father was most offensive to one of Cordelia’s temperament. She seems to have been one of those to whom any violent expression of feeling is repellent; this trait is shown not merely by her disappointing answer (Act. I, Sc. i), “Nothing my Lord,” to her father’s eager question; but towards the close of the play

(Act. IV, Sc, iii), when the messenger is recounting her reception of Kent's news about her father's plight. It is the reserve and reticence of all true deeper natures that we see typified in Cordelia.

#### **14.3.2 Her honest nature :**

Cordelia's honesty is remarkable. She is truth-loving even to a fault. Many commentators have gone so far as to remark that her cool and the matter of fact attitude in meeting her father's demand for a protestation of love with blunt truth was merely obstinacy; and it is possible she may have inherited, or imbibed from her surroundings, some of the obstinacy of her father. Yet it is more to the point to regard her attitude as, the natural revulsion from the hypocrisy of her sisters. Notice the following examples of this trait.

(i) Her satirical comments spoken aside (Act. I. Sc. i), while her sisters are making their hollow protestations :

*What shall Cordelia do ? Love and be silent" and  
And yet not so; since I am sure my-love's  
More richer than my tongue.*

These remarks are a running commentary on her sisters' extravagance and show her own appreciation of it all at its true worth.

Also (II) her clear reading of a half hearted suitor, Burgundy (Act I. Sc. I) :

*"Peace be with Burgundy :  
Since that respects of fortune are his love  
I shall not be his wife".*

Again, notice the gentle humour of her farewell to her sisters in Act, I. Sc. I. Or again her quiet

*Ye jewels of our father, with wash'd eyes Cordelia leaves you....*

..... *Use well our father;*

*To your professed bosoms I commit him;*

and again her quiet expression of bitterness in Act V. Sc. iii

*We are not the first*

*Who with best meaning have incur'd the worst,*

*For thee, oppressed king, am I cast down;*

*Myself could else out frown false fortune's frown,*

*Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters.*

#### **14.4 CRITICS**

Mrs. Jameson in *Shakespeare's Heroines* particularly notes the beautiful simplicity and tenderness of Cordelia in Act IV Sc. vii, where she meets the father who had disinherited her. We feel that her tender humouring of him might have restored his mind, especially as the doctor tell us "the great rage" has passed, had she not met before his very eyes the violent death, which shatters his reason again and strikes him down also.

Cordelia can be most fittingly compared with the Antigone of Sophocles. In both, we see the same devotion to a blind and aged father and with these are unmerited sufferings which provoke our pity; but whereas in Antigone we see a masculine energy, proud to fight her own battles and fully able to withstand Creon; Cordelia suggests rather to us the gentle feminine type of quiet suffering. About Cordelia's behaviour, when receiving from Kent an account of her sister's conduct towards their father, Mrs. Jameson remarks : The, subdued pathos and simplicity of Cordelia's character, her quiet but intense feeling, the misery and humiliation at the same time sustained with such a deep intuitive knowledge of the innermost working of the human heart, that there is nothing that can be compared to it in any other writer." Finally, Mrs. Jameson compares Cordelia, with *Antigone*, daughter of Oedipus. "As poetical conceptions, the two characters rest on

the same basis : they are both pure abstractions of truth, piety and natural affection; and in both love, as a passion, is kept entirely out of sight. The filial piety of Antigone is the most affecting part of the tragedy of *Oedipus Coloneus*. Her sisterly affection and her heroic self-devotion to a religious duty, form the plot of the tragedy called by her name.”

#### 14.5 CATEGORIES OF FOOLS

Of the various types of Fools, the domestic fool, often called a clown, is generally a born idiot, silly by nature but still cunning. The clown is generally a country booby or a witty rustic. He is generally a servant who takes liberties with his master. Then we have the female Fools. The City and Corporation Fools are another variety of the tavern Fool who amuses customers. Ben Jonson introduces such Fools in his plays. Then we have the ancient Fool of Mysteries or Moralities, technically called The Vice. He generally takes delight in having a dig at the Devil on the stage and his delight is to tease and torment the fiend to his heart's content. The Vice disappears from the drama towards the end of the sixteenth century. Other varieties are the Dumb show Fool at Fairs and Inns, the Dancing Fools, the Merry Andrews and others.

The theatrical fool or clown came down from the morality plays and was beloved of the groundlings. His antics, his songs, his dances, his jests delighted them and did something to make the drama, what the vulgar, poor or rich, like it to be, a variety entertainment. Even if he confined himself to what was set down for him, he often disturbed the dramatic unity of the peace. Shakespeare makes *Hamlet* object to it in emphatic terms. The more learned critics and poets went further and would have abolished the fool altogether. His part declines as the drama advances, diminishing markedly at the end of the sixteenth century. Johnson and Massinger exclude him. Shakespeare used him-as he used all other popular elements of the drama; but he abstained from introducing him into the Roman plays and there is no fool in the last of the pure tragedies *Macbeth*.

## 14.6 FOOL IN ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

Before one attempts to make up his mind as to the character of the fool one should consider just what an Elizabethan fool was and what privileges his position implied. The fools were household servants whose purpose was to create fun for their masters. In order to give them free rein, they were considered immune from punishment under ordinary circumstances, and at liberty to speak their minds freely without fear of consequences. Hence, Lear's threat to have the fool whipped is equivalent to saying that the king has almost forgotten what is due to a Fool. And it will be noted throughout that the Fool makes remarks, without the least hesitation, that no one else would have dared to make in the presence of the tempestuous king. Enid Welsford rightly argues that like "others of his profession, he is very ready to profer his cox comb to his betters but in doing so he does not merely raise a laugh or score a point, he sets a proble, WHAT AM I? What is madness? he seems to ask. "The world being what it is, do I necessarily insult a man investing him with motely."

According to A.C. Bradley, "Fool is one of Shakespeare's triumph in King Lear. It has been ingeniously suggested that the fool represents, in embodied form, the conscience of Lear. If this be so, one wonders at the fact that Lear's conscience has no effect upon him. Perhaps what is really meant is that the fool represents what would have been Lear's conscience, if he had one. This would, perhaps, explain the fact that he speaks only to Lear and that there is no more of him when Lear has lost his mind.

There may be another explanation of the function of the fool. Recall the tempestuous character of the king. We are always looking for an explosion greater than the one before. Now the fool throughout is saying things that would cause such an outbreak of temper had they been said by anyone else in the play. It is only because they originate from the fool that Lear is able to control himself. Yet we are constantly wondering how long the king will be able to exercise a slender self-control which hangs by such a trifling thread. The great moment comes on the heath. And after this, there being no further need of the fool, he does not appear again.

### 14.6.1 Fool in 'King Lear'

It takes a wise man to make a Fool. Paradoxical as it may seem, it is nevertheless, true. At first, the Fool was attached to the court with a licence to indulge in gibes at his own master. A Fool is safe because nobody would think of retaliating, for if you give it to the Fool he gives back to you very badly and rudely. To make a Fool, one should have more than ordinary observation, judgement and wisdom. Viola in *The Twelfth Night*, fulfils all the conditions of the Court Fool, while Jacques in *As You Like It*, glorifies the office of a Fool. Rough jesters usually are not gentlemen, but we have several instances of gentlemen-jesters also. Some times he is a 'simpleton' that lends point to his jests. Each Court has its Fool who is preacher and admonisher of kings.

The Fool is one of the most important characters in *King Lear*. It has been often said, upon our estimate of the part he plays, depends to a large extent, on our estimate of the play as a whole. As Kent very truly says of him (Act I Sc. iv) "This is not altogether fool my Lord." Regan expresses something like this towards the end of the play when she remarks, "Jesters do oft prove prophets." There is great sage counsel running through all his fooling; and he exhibits the most touching loyalty and affection for his master. Notice his buoyant chatter-an endeavour to cheer the King in his misery throughout the terrible storm scene. Doubtless, in the introduction of the Fool, one must recognize a good deal more comic relief or contrast to the tragedy of Lear's position.

On the heath, there is a strange assemblage of the Fool and the king and a strange effect arising from their union and position. It seems hardly possible that Lear's character around be properly developed without him. Indeed, he serves as a common gauge and exponent of all the characters about him, the mirror in which their finest and deepest lineaments are reflected. Though a privileged person, with the largest opportunity of seeing and the largest liberty of speaking, he everywhere turns his privileges into charities, making the immunities of the clown subservient to the noblest sympathies of

the man. He moves in vital intercourse with the character and passion of the drama. He makes his folly the vehicle of truths which Lear will bear in no other shape, while his affectionate tenderness sanctifies all his nonsense.

How better can the Fool be described than as the soul of pathos in a sort of comic masquerade? One in whom fun and frolic are sublimed and idealized into tragic beauty.

#### **14.6.2 Role of Fool in the Drama**

Undoubtedly, our estimate of this drama as a whole depends very much on the view we take of the Fool; that is, on how we interpret his part or in what sense we understand it. Superficially considered, his presence and action can hardly seem other than a blemish in the work, and a hindrance to its proper interest. Accordingly, he has been greatly misunderstood, indeed totally misconstrued, by many of Shakespeare's critics. And it must be confessed that the true meaning of his part is somewhat difficult to seize; in fact is not to be seized at all, unless one gets just the right point of view. He has no suffering of his own to move us, yet, rightly seen, he does move us, and deeply too. But the process of his interest is very peculiar and recondite. The real key to his character lies in that while his heart is slowly breaking, he never speaks, nor even appears so much as to think, of his own suffering. He seems indeed quite unconscious of it. His anguish is purely the anguish of sympathy, sympathy as deep and intense as to induce absolute forgetfulness with the words. "And I'll go to bed at noon" which means simply that the poor fellow is dying, and this, too, purely of other's sorrows, which he feels more keenly than they do themselves. She, who was the light of his eyes is gone, dowered with her father's curse and stranger with his oath. Kent and Edgar have vanished from his recognition, he knows not the victims of that wrong and crime; the wicked seem to be having all things their own way, the elements have joined their persecution to the cruelties of men; there is not pity in the heavens, no help from the earth: he sees nothing but a "world's convention of agonies" before him, and his straining of mind

‘to play assuagement upon other’s woes’ has fairly breached the citadel of his life. But the deepest grief of all has now overtaken him: his old master’s wits are shattered. To prevent this he has been toiling his forces to the utmost, and now that it has come in spite of him, he no longer has anything to live for. To the last, he masks his passion in a characteristic disguise, and he breathes out of his life in a play of thought.

As the Fool represents truth in the guise of humour, he cannot be brought forward until the rupture with the moral law has taken place; the disguised truth waits; the king has not for two days seen the Fool. In his grief for Cordelia’s banishment, the Fool has almost forgotten his part, and this affords us a pledge that, under the guise of humour, the deepest earnestness is concealed. Only in slight allusions does he touch the fault of the king, for roughly to waken up the injury done were the office not of love but of scorn. Hence, the Fool makes the folly of the king the target of his humour; the harmless words he throws out conceal a deep and penetrating significance. For example, immediately after Goneril’s first rude speech to her father, the Fool breaks out with the apparently random words, ‘Out went the candle and we were left darking’ highlighting the folly Lear committed in banishing Cordelia. Gradually such words grow fewer. From now onwards, he indulges in some harmless, jesting remark to cheer the suffering of his master and to lighten the burden of his own grief. The whole depth and power of his sorrow he crowds into a little song, for he has become thus rich in songs since the king, as he says, has made his daughters his mothers. In a similar way, he expresses his impregnable devotion to the king in those deeply significant verses in which he promises not to desert the king in the storm, and the particular theme of which is that the wise are fools before God, but the fools in the eye of the world are justified by a higher power.

The Fool has his place in the tragedy only so long as the king is able to perceive the truth veiled by the Fool’s humour. There is no longer room or need for him after the king becomes crazed. This crisis is the end of the fool. He vanishes, goes to bed at mid-day, when his beloved master is hopelessly lost.

The Fool in Lear fulfills two functions corresponding with his two fold character : he emphasises the tragedy of the events and relieves it. He emphasises the tragedy because in his character as Jester (and it is his main character) he exposes, with something more than the freedom of speech usually accorded to his class, the folly of his master's action and its consequences. His aim seems to be to induce Lear to "resume" his power; hence, he harps continually on the folly of what Lear has done and expresses the regret to what his master is ashamed to give vent. For at first, Lear tries to hide the truth from himself; but the fool, acting as the King's "Conscience," forces the truth on his notice. All through the earlier part of the piece, pursuing this futile aim of urging the king to attempt to undo his work, the Fool puts into words what Lear himself is thinking, and those about him are thinking though afraid to say. Thus, he keeps the tragedy of the King's position vividly present and does this under the guise of a fantastic levity-which relieves the tension. From the close of the Second Act, the note of his sallies changes. Lear's cause is irredeemably lost, his mind is tottering; and now the Fool seeks to divert his master, "to out-just his heart struck injuries." And in his jesting there is less of bitterness and cleverness, less of pungent allusion to the king's mistake and of satirical worldly wisdom masquerading as "folly." But Lear's "injuries" are beyond the Fool's power to alleviate, and he ceases to be necessary to the scheme of the play. No words of his are wanted to emphasise its self-evident tragedy. The King's madness is emphatic enough; nothing can relieve its sheer horror. So, the Fool drops out of the action.

One can sum up the discussion by quoting A.C. Bradley's words when he writes, "*But the fool is one of Shakespeare's triumphs in King Lear. Imagine the tragedy without him and you hardly know it. To remove him would spoil its harmony, as the harmony of a picture would be spoiled if one of the colours was extracted. One can almost imagine that Shakespeare, going home from an evening at the Mermaid where he had listened to Jonson fulminating against fools in general and perhaps criticising the clown in Twelfth Night in particular, had said to himself; "Come my*

*friends, I will show you once for all that the mischief is in you, and not in the fool or the audience. I will have a fool in the most tragic of my tragedies. He shall not play a little part. He shall keep from first to last the company in which you most object to see him, the company of a king instead of amusing the king's idle hours, he shall stand by him in the very whirlwind of passion. Before I have done you shall confess, between laughters and tears that he is of the very essence of life, that you have known him all your days though you never recognised him till now, and that you would as soon go without Hamlet as miss him."*

#### **14.7 EDGAR**

Edgar is another important character who is important in the dramatic construction of King Lear. The scheme of the play makes Edgar the counterpart of Cordelia. He is the son of Earl of Gloucester. Being an upright and honourable man he fails to see evil in others, and readily falls into the trap laid by Edmund who seeks to deprive him of his rights, and so succeed his father. He is described by Edmund as

*a brother noble,*

*Whose nature is so far from doing harms*

*That he suspects none;*

He seems to accept readily Edmund's feigned story of his father's ill-will towards him, and is even persuaded by Edmund to flee from home, thus, giving ground for suspicion, instead of first ascertaining from his father the cause of any ill-will. In this condition, he first meets the mad King Lear, and afterwards his father, Gloucester. Like Cordelia, he does not allow any feeling of hatred to predominate against those who have wronged him, but tenderly cares ones for his father. When after the blinding of Gloucester they meet on the heath, he endeavours to give comfort to him in his physical and mental anguish. When Gloucester contemplates suicide, it is Edgar who saves him from it. Even after all his troubles which he briefly, though eloquently, relates he behaves charitably

towards Edmund. Even when his business is exposed following the well-known words, he half apologises for him.

*The gods are just and of our pleasant vices*

*Make instruments to plague us.*

Edgar's much-to-be admired conduct stands out in bold relief to the treachery of Edmund, his half-brother. If the best grace and happiness of life consist, as this play makes us feel that they do, in forgetting of self and a living for others, Kent and Edgar are those of Shakespeare's men whom one should most wish to resemble. Strikingly similar in virtues and situation, these two persons are, notwithstanding, widely different in character. Brothers in magnanimity and in misfortune; equally invincible in fidelity, the one to his king and other to his father, both are driven to disguise themselves, and in their disguise both serve where they stand condemned. Kent, despite his generosity to control himself is always quick, fiery and impetuous. Edgar, controlling himself even because of his generosity, is always calm, collected, and deliberate. For, if Edgar be the more judicious and prudent, Kent is the more unselfish of the two; the former disguises himself for his own safety, and then turning his disguise into an opportunity of service; the latter disguising himself merely in order to serve, and than perilling his life in the same cause whereby the other seeks to preserve it.

According to A.C. Bradley, "There is in Edgar, with much else that is fine, something of buoyancy of spirit which charms us in Imogene. Nothing can subdue in him the feeling that life is sweet and must be cherished. At his worst, misconstrued, condemned, exiled, under sentence of death, the lowest and most dejected thing of fortune, he keeps his head erect. The inextinguishable spirit of youth and delight is in him ; he embraces the unsubstantial air which has blown him to the worst for him 'the worst returns to laughter. 'Bear free and patient thoughts,' he says to his father. His own thoughts are more than patient, they are free, even joyous, in spite of the tender sympathies which strive in vain to overwhelm him." This ability to feel sympathy with

those in distress is a noble quality, sometimes found in souls like Edgar's—naturally buoyant and also religious. It may even be characteristic of him that, when Lear is sinking down in death, he tries to rouse him and bring back to life 'Look up, my lord' he cries.

As stated earlier, the scheme of the play makes Edgar the counterpart of Cordelia, and he is worthy of this position; what higher praise could be given to him? There is something very touching in the tenderness with which his strong nature deals with his father's weakness. He is generous in his peculiar relation to Edmund and the latter's taunt (II.I.67) is the very last that Edgar would use. His only practical mistakes are that, like Gloucester, he accepts too implicitly Edmund's story and afterwards takes to flight instead of seeking some explanation from his father. But he has no special reason to distrust Edmund, of whom he can know but little, and his own nature "is so far from doing harms." that he instinctively trusts others, unsuspecting, underserved confidence in others is the natural error of such men. After his flight, Edgar manifests a nerve and versatility which carry him through many great difficulties and enable him as Gervinus says, to play many parts successfully. There is about him a "royal nobleness" of bearing and character of which, none can be insensible. Had he too fallen a victim at the last it would have been exceedingly hard to dispute the alleged pessimism of *King Lear*.

Just as Cordelia is the beautiful ideal of the heroine, so is Edgar the very type of the hero. The modern fictionist would have expressed this by marrying these two kindred spirits by way of a happy denouement. Himself upright, honourable, and affectionate, he thinks evil of no man. Like Cordelia, he does not permit the smart of underserved hatred to poison his mind against his father, whom he tenderly cares for when after the blinding of Gloucester, they meet on the heath. Even after all his woes, which are related so eloquently, and yet so tersely, he is ready to exchange charity and Edmund, for whom indeed he half apologises in the oft-quoted words.

*The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices*

*Make instruments to plague us:*

*The dark and vicious place where thee he got*

*Cost him his eyes.*

Edgar's admirable conduct throughout the play shows, only the villainy of Edmund in a more heinous light.

In Edgar, we have a character in, some respects, as grand as that of Kent, though perhaps hardly as unselfish and lovable. At the outset, indeed, we are scarcely prepared for the nobility of character which event after event bring out. It strikes us as strange that he should be so ready to accept Edmund's story of his father's ill-will towards him and should not at once have sought that father's presence to ascertain the possible grounds of his distrust. Described by Edmund as one :

*"Whose nature is so-far from doing harm*

*That he suspects none."*

He not only by his advice avoids a father by whom he must know himself to be loved and to have deserved to be loved, but is shortly afterwards persuaded to take a step, in itself as suspicious as that of fleeing from home instead of facing inquiry. Possibly, aware of his father's credulity, he believes it to be impossible to establish his innocence in the teeth of such a plot against him as that at which Edmund has hinted.

#### **14.7.1 Edgar's assumed madness :**

Edgar pretends to be a mad man, a poor Tom O'Bedlam, hiding himself in a hovel on the heath. He pretends to be followed by a foul friend with jaw-breaking names. Lear is persecuted by his two daughters and rightly he suffers from a persecution mania. But Edgar's persecution mania is pretended.

Edgar plays a role of a mad man rather badly and none but the wilfully blind could be deceived by it. As a mad man, he should talk incoherently without any sense. But Edgar's talk is coherent and logical and only sometimes when he goes far, he breaks the coherence mechanically, and utters some deliberate nonsense like : Tom's cold O' do de, do de, do de, etc.

Lear projects his own feelings into Edgar's case and remarks that he, too, must have been betrayed by his ungrateful daughters to whom he must have given away his all. Lear looks upon Edgar as a philosopher, who teaches him what a poor, bare, forked animal is unaccommodated man. Edgar continues his assumed madness even when he meets his blinded father and saves from intended suicide. It is, however, curious that he talks in various dialects and tones without exciting anybody's suspicion. Edgar casts off his madness to meet his bastard brother in a duel to settle his account with him at last and Edmund dies at the hands of Edgar.

The delineation of Edgar's assumed madness is not as well done by Shakespeare as Lear's is. But besides serving a dramatic purpose in the under-plot, Edgar's assumed madness served as a contrast to Lear's real madness even as Hamlet's feigned madness served as a contrast to the real madness of Ophelia.

Edgar's philosophy co-exists with his faith in the gods of his race. His philosophy has taught him to endure and to endure in a manly way, the 'Strange mutations' of the world ("To be weak is miserable, doing or suffering,...."). He therefore, in his deep sympathy and affection, saves his wretched father from killing himself in despair and by a show-as it were as supernatural intervention and grace-converts him to his own manly creed which calls upon to "Bear free and patient thoughts." He blames Gloucester for getting into "ill thoughts," and tells him :

*"Men must endure*

*Their going hence, even as their coming hither*

*Ripeness is all"*

These words of Edgar recall Hamlet's own philosophy "readiness is all." Besides this philosophy, Edgar has his faith also in the gods of his society. He thus, tells Gloucester about the divine grace that has saved him from death :

*“therefore, thou happy father,*

*Think that the dearest gods, who make them honours*

*Of men’s impossibilities, have preserved thee”.*

Edgar’s clear faith converts his old father to a belief in the “ever gentle gods”. We see Edgar’s deep faith in his accusation of Edmund, just before their combat.

*... Thou art a traitor*

*False to thy gods, thy brother, and thy father....*

*And in the fall and death of Edmund, Edgar sees the justice of the gods.*

K. Deighton rightly says that Lear’s suffering calls out the most adorable and lovable aspect of Edgar’s personality and his deepest sympathies, though it is beyond his power in any way to remedy them. With his father it is different. Roused out of himself and the sorrows which had seemed almost too great to be borne, he sees before him a task prescribed by love, and calling for the exercise of all the patience, tenderness, and tact that he can command. As we watch him in his endeavour to solace the mental no less than the physical anguish of the father whose distrust of himself has been so grievous, as we have proof of the courage with which he defends him and the skill whereby he wins him from the determination of suicide to a calm acceptance of the will of the gods, as we listen to his relation of the peaceful close of life which his ministrations have made possible, witness his noble distance of his treacherous brother and the still more noble forgiveness which he grants to his fallen foe, we feel that Edgar is no unworthy ‘yoke-fellow in arms’ with Kent in the fierce struggle against evil wherein their fate has involved them.’

To conclude the discussion about Edgar, I quote from A.C. Bradley. He writes, “of these four characters (Cordelia, Kent, Fool, and Edgar), Edgar excites the least enthusiasm, but he is the one whose development is the most marked. His behaviour in early part of the play, granted that it is not too improbable, is so foolish as to provoke one. But he learns by experience, and becomes the

capable person in the story, without losing any of his purity and nobility of mind. With his religiousness, on the other side, is connected his cheerful and confident endurance, and his practical helpfulness and resource. He never thinks of despairing; in the worst circumstances he is sure there is something to be done, to make things better. And he is sure of this, not only from temperament, but from faith in 'the clearest gods.' He is the man on whom we are to rely at the end for the recovery and welfare of the state : "We do rely on him."

#### 14.8 KENT

Kent is the most striking and most noble character in *King Lear*. His devotion to his master, from whom he has received such harsh treatment, is unwavering, untiring, and utterly regardless of the dangers he may bring upon himself. For such devotion, we are prepared from almost the first words he speaks. None but a brave man would have ventured as he did to come "between the dragon and his wrath," none but a resolute one to persist in opposition to despotic will and power. His championship of Cordelia makes it manifest to us that when determining to follow the fortunes of the unhappy king he will do so with no halting step, that whatever sacrifices may be demanded of him, he will gladly pay. As the troubles around him increase, his great qualities stand out all the more strongly. He displays not only a rare fidelity, but large resource, wisdom, and foresight. His equanimity under the insults put upon him by Regan is unruffled; amid the sufferings which he shares with his master his cheerfulness abates no with while the tender care with which he watches over Lear is what we perhaps might not have expected from one so blunt of speech and impetuous of manner.

*O thou good Kent, how shall I live and work  
To match thy goodness? My life will be too short  
And every measure fail me,*

are Cordelia's words of no exaggerated acknowledgement and are uttered by one who justly says of herself.

*what I will intend  
"I'll do it before I speak."*

And when all his sacrifice of love is fruitless, when he for whom it has so

cheerfully been made is unable to profit by it, or even to recognize to whom he owes such loyal tendance, but passes away, his mind still clouded with its sad disease and his heart broken by the last awful blow of Cordelia's death, for Kent there is no further tie to earth, no other hope but that of following his master elsewhere as here. To Albany's entreaty that he will share with Edgar the government of the realm his answer is,

*"I have a journey, sir, shortly to go;  
My master calls me, I must not say no.*

#### **14.9 LET US SUM UP**

It is generally acknowledged that the role played by Cordelia in *King Lear* is a symbolic one. She is a symbol of good amidst the evil characters within the play. Cordelia reply does not initiate the tragedy, Lear's misguided question does that. When Cordelia, Lear's only well-intentioned daughter, is banished from the kingdom, Fool immediately assumes her role on Lear's protector. The fool is the king's advocate, honest and loyal and through his use of irony sarcasm and humour he is able to point out Lear's faults. Edgar is the chorus of the play and can also be seen as a positive commentator and a philosopher. He has faith in the triumph of goodness over evil and he is able to see beyond mere luck to some higher grand design.

#### **14.10 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

- Q1 Draw a character sketch of Cordelia.
- Q2 What is the importance of assumed madness of Edgar.
- Q3 Discuss the character sketch of Kent.

#### **14.11 SUGGESTED READING**

Muir, Kenneth, and Stanley Wells. *Aspects of King Lear*. Cambridge UP, 1982

Ram Bilas Sharma. *Essays on Shakespearean Tragedy*. Anamika Publishers, New Delhi, 1998.

Wolfgang Clemen. *The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery*, Mathew and Co. Ltd. London 1977.

Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*.

**COURSE No. 111**

**DRAMA-I**

**LESSON No. 15**

**M.A. ENGLISH**

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE  
(KING LEAR)**

**UNIT - III**

**AN ANALYSIS  
'KING LEAR' AS A TRAGEDY**

**STRUCTURE**

- 15.1 Introduction
- 15.2 Objectives
- 15.3 *King Lear* is more tragic than other tragedies
- 15.4 Universal appeal of the Play
- 15.5 Effect of Suffering on Lear
- 15.6 *Lear & Othello* as Tragedies
- 15.7 Comic Elements in the Play
- 15.8 Role of Cordelia
- 15.9 Popular Superstition in the Play
- 15.10 Christian World View
- 15.11 Let Us Sum Up
- 15.12 Examination Oriented Questions
- 15.13 Suggested Reading

**15.1 INTRODUCTION**

*King Lear* is sometimes referred to as the most pessimistic of the

four tragedies written by Shakespeare. Commenting upon the pessimistic atmosphere of the play Caroline Spurgeon comments. “We are conscious all through of the atmosphere of buffeting strife, and moments of bodily tension to the point of agony”. Granville Barker says, “the main truth about life, to Shakespeare that wrote *King Lear*, is its capricious cruelty.”

*King Lear* is, by common consent, our greatest poet’s greatest creation. It follows, therefore that the world of which Shakespeare delivered himself in this stupendous drama, though admittedly the most painful of all his tragedies, should have a better right to be called in Sidney’s sense, ‘golden’ than any other we can name, whether among his own works or in the whole galaxy of poems that glorify English literature. It is only another way of putting what Hazlitt said when he observed of *King Lear* that “it is the best of Shakespeare’s plays, since it is the one in which he is most in earnest,” and is “fairly caught in the web of his own imagination.”

Caroline Spurgeon gives a vivid description of the prevailing atmosphere of “very Night heresays” in *King Lear*. The picture that is constantly kept before us is that of “a human body in anguished movement, tugged, wretched, beaten, pierced, stung, scourged, dislocated, flayed, gashed, scalded, tortured, and finally broken on the rack. Lear, in his agonized remorse, pictures himself as a man wrenched and tortured by an ‘engine,’ beating “at the gate (his head) that let his folly in”, Goneril has power to shake his manhood; he complains that she has struck him with her tongue, his heart will break into a hundred thousand flaws. Albany wonders how far Goneril’s eyes may pierce, Gloucester’s flawed heart is cracked and finally it bursts.”

#### **Pagan and barbaric atmosphere in the play :**

It indicates that the play is concerned with a primitive age. In fact, it is saturated with the barbaric and pagan atmosphere. The incidents that form the framework of the play can happen in royal families only in barbarian times. To quote Gervinus : “We know from the authenticated history of the Burgundian and Merovingian houses, that such times and such men did exist,

that family horrors, as we read them in Lear, have abounded for centuries, even among Christian races. The poet places us in the very centre of such an age and brings actively before us a whole race endowed with that barbaric strength of passion, in which almost without exception, the resistance of reason and conscience to the emotions of passion is powerless or dead.”

The pervading pagan atmosphere; the radiant goodness of the few, the volcanic passions of others, the teeming references of nature and animal life, the frequent references to physical torture and mental agony, the terrific storm on the heath, and brutal monstrosities of character that render the human landscape of King Lear, as dark and gloomy as the convulsions in nature, make it one of the most elemental and primeval of Shakespeare’s tragedies. John Holloway categorically states that King Lear, a play set (unlike Macbeth) in the legendry prehistory of Britain, depicts a world which is what follows from having the quality of legend, and the primeval as subject. In conformity with the ‘splendidly barbaric and temper of the play King Lear’s is a church-less and a priest-less world. Its political organisation is a simple scheme of monarchy wherein the King’s authority is uncontrolled and unlimited in its absoluteness. A robed man of justice may appear sporadically, but he is a mere appendage of the regal household and an interpreter of the royal will. The impression that the atmosphere here is in a pronounced manner, pagan, is substantiated when Lear swears by Apollo, by Jupiter, by the sacred radiance of the sun, by

*The mysteries of hecate and the night.*

*By all the operation of the orbs*

*From whom we exist and cease to be*

He prays to his ‘dear goddess’ Nature to strike Goneril’s womb with sterility. So too, does Edmund, ironically enough he dedicates himself to her services, expecting to draw from her the evil energies he needs for the furtherance of his career. In her most prayerful mood, Cordelia invokes the “Kind gods” to cure the great breach in her father’s ‘abused nature’. Edgar,

reflecting upon the woes brought on his father by Edmund, attributes the working of nemesis to the gods;

*The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices*

*Make instruments to plague us.*

To Lear as well as the Duke of Albany, they are the fountains of justice: while to Gloucester, in his agony, they are the wanton and reckless inflictors of cruelty on helpless human beings. He says,

*As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods:*

*They kill us for their sport.*

These stars, gods, nature, the sun and the sacred orbs, Hecate and her mysteries govern the lives and fortunes of the characters in *King Lear*.

With the help of a large number of hints in the play, Shakespeare creates the impression that mankind has reeled back to the beast. The air reeks with savage animal nature. When Edgar describes himself as “false of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand; hog in sloth fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey,” it is man himself that Shakespeare is thinking of. “The fitchew nor the soiled horse goes to ‘t with a more riotous appetite”, is Lear’s view of man’s sensuality. “Goneril is a kite; her ingratitude has a serpent’s tooth : she has struck her father most serpent-like upon the very heart, her visage is wolfish. She has tied sharp toothed unkindness like a vulture on her father’s breast, for her husband she is a gilded serpent : to Gloucester her cruelty seems to have the fangs of a bear. She and Regan are dog-hearted : They are tigers, not daughters : each is an adder to the other : the flesh of each is covered with the fell of a beast”. Bradley has summed up the cruelty of the times very lucidly. To quote him, “As we read, the souls of all the beast in turn seem to us to have entered the bodies of these mortals; horrible in their venom savagery, lust, deceitfulness, sloth, cruelty, filthiness; blindness; and man, ‘consider him well’, is even what they are.”

So far, Shakespeare had spared us crude physical horrors, Lear has suffered beyond endurance for the wrong done to Cordelia, but Nature has mercifully taken away his sanity. To Gloucester, no such mercy is shown. Cornwall and Regan have sent Edmund away with Goneril, and they wait impatiently for their victim. When he comes they turn on him and abuse him. They bind him to a chair and then put out his eyes. On the stage, the physical horror of this scene is and should be unendurable, for if play is to be acted it must neither be mitigated nor softened or the stark pity and terror of the tragedy, is lessened. Nevertheless, some immediate vengeance is at hand when one of the servants unable to endure the cruelty of his master tries to save Gloucester, and in the fight Cornwall is fatally wounded. So Gloucester, like his master, is turned out of doors to smell his way to Dover. He, too has been justly but brutally punished, first for the original sin which began with Edmund and secondly for the nasty injustice of his treatment of Edgar.

## **15.2 OBJECTIVES**

The lesson acquaints the learner with the important traits of *King Lear* as tragedy. The characters of Lear and Cordelia are discussed in this context. The social background is also included so as to ensure that the popular superstition of the play becomes intelligible.

## **15.3 LEAR MORE TRAGIC THAN OTHER TRAGEDIES**

*King Lear*, is more terrible than *Macbeth*, more piteous than *Othello*, more profound than *Hamlet*, but less human than any of them. And it is too sublime for terror; too profound for pity, and almost too vast for thought. It is bewildering in its intensity and its breath: the mind refuses to grasp it as a whole. It can never be as popular on the stage as the other great tragedies are. *Hamlet* is a part in which no great actor has failed; but no one can act Lear, for Lear is more than a man. Everything is fused in this drama: folly and wisdom, madness and sanity, pity and rage, are one.

A few small points may also be noted. Regan and Goneril with their

barbaric energy and ruthless passions are the vivid pictures before our eyes. Is the scene, in which Gloucester's eyes are torn out, good art? Would the hanging of Cordelia be less intelligible without it? Some shrink from the blinding and some from the wholesale slaughter at the end. It may at least be pointed out that it would have been utterly unlike Shakespeare to leave Regan and Goneril triumphant. It is significant that, unlike Hamlet and Macbeth, the play does not end with any note of triumph or of hope. On the horizon of Shakespeare's tragic fatalism we see no such twilight of atonement, such pledge of reconciliation as this. Requital, redemption, amends, equity, explanation, pity and mercy, are words without a meaning here.

**Key note of the Play :**

*As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;*

*They kill us for their sport.*

The words just cited are not casual or episodic; they strike the keynote of the whole play; the keystone of the whole arch of thought.

The playwright of *King Lear*, adhering to the letter of his text, left Cordelia happy with her father at the end of the drama. We shall never know who moved Shakespeare to drop that pall of darkness upon the mystery of inscrutable woe at the very moment when there dawned a brighter day for Lear on being united to his blameless daughter. For once, it would appear, he chose to sound the deepest depths of the world's suffering, a depth deeper than of Aeschylean or Sophoclean tragedy, deeper than the tragedy of *Othello*, a story of black despairing depth of voiceless and inexplicable agony.

There is no drama in the whole range of modern literature, perhaps of ancient as well, which can equal *King Lear*, in the tragic imagination which has clothed with chaotic darkness and godless sorrow, not only Lear and the characters that make its mighty train, but also the whole of humanity,

even the gods themselves. The eternal justice whom we trust lives beyond and above our sorrow and our crime; which the Greek drama permits us to feel as holding in its hands of far off pope-is-not to be *King Lear*. The gods have not only forgotten man; the gods seem dead. The stars alone – the destroying planets-rule supreme.

The principal characters here are not those who act, but those who suffer. We have a fall from the highest elevation into the deepest abyss of misery, where humanity is stripped of all external and internal advantages and given up a prey to naked helplessness. Threefold dignity of a king, an old man and a father is dishonoured by the cruel ingratitude of his unnatural daughters. The old Lear, who, out of a foolish tenderness, has given away everything, is driven out to the world as a wandering beggar; the childish imbecility to which he was fast advancing changes into the wildest insanity; and when he is saved, from the disgraceful destitution to which he was abandoned, it is too late. The kind consolations of filial care and attention and true friendship are now lost on him; his bodily and mental powers are destroyed beyond all hope of recovery; and all that now remains to him of life is the capability of loving and suffering, beyond measure. What a picture we have in the meeting of Edgar and Lear in a wretched hovel. The meeting of the exiled and disguised Edgar with the blind Gloucester is equally heartrending; nothing can be more moving than to see the rejected son become the father's guide, and the good angel, who under the disguise of insanity, by an ingenious and pious fraud saves him from the horror and despair of suicide.

Everything is woeful in this woeful world. The whole scene is like the remembrance of some wild prescribing scene from real life. The charge of pessimism in *King Lear*, is substantiated by the way in which Shakespeare might have saved both Cordelia and the aged King, her father, if he had so chosen. In support of this contention, they point out the sudden and unprepared way in which the catastrophe is made to take place. Some go even to the extent of imagining that if Shakespeare had written this play later on, in what Professor Dowden would call, the fourth and the final period of dramatic composition, he would have ended the play happily. Though this is not the

place to discuss elaborately whether Shakespeare could not have ended this play happily, it can be stated unhesitatingly, that the death of Cordelia and Lear do not leave us crushed, rebellious or hopeless.

#### **15.4 UNIVERSAL APPEAL OF THE PLAY**

*King Lear* may be regarded as more universal in its scope than either *Othello* or *Macbeth*. For the king, there is no murderer, nor is he the victim of an almost incredible malice and extreme credulity, but rather a hero of inherent largeness of soul, who partly by his own errors of judgement, suffers exceptional calamity. Because the suffering of Lear is not unconnected with his character, it is tragic and not melodramatic, but because it is out of proportion to his fault. It raises the whole problem of evil. The perennial appeal of tragedy, to the human mind, lies in its presentation in the artistic form of the eternal question of evil and suffering. Is there justice in the world, or in the heavens ? It is mainly because questions like this crop up persistently before us in *Lear* than the other tragedies that the drama may be spoken of as more universal. *Lear* goes further than in the other tragedies of Shakespeare in answering the problem by insisting on the value of endurance, and by showing us the hero purged through suffering. If *King Lear*, is a tragic reading of life, it is not a cynical one for it goes as far as tragedy can go, without ceasing to be tragedy. But apart from the hint which some may find (with Bradley) of something beyond death, all sensitive readers are left with the feeling that it is quality and not quantity of life that matters.

#### **Religious appeal of the Play :**

Thus, *King Lear*, though not a religious work is compatible with religion. 'For all those who cannot go beyond the moral interpretation of life to the religious interpretation, it might easily be held that Shakespeare is the most precious of thinkers'. And nowhere in Shakespeare are 'integrity, loyalty, patience, love, forgiveness humility' more powerfully presented than in *King Lear*. *King Lear* bears it out even to the edge of doom' is true of Cordelia, Kent, and Edgar. But a dramatist is neither a preacher nor a moralist; and

what we can draw from the play of Shakespeare's judgement of value are important to us just because he is a supreme poet. He is a supreme dramatist because he surpasses his fellows in the insight and sympathy with which he can present a vast variety of characters of every age and condition of life, a range which makes the work of Elizabethans like Marlowe, Johnson, Webster, or Ford look narrow and stilted.

Lear's journey towards enlightenment begins before the storm. But it is not until his sufferings have reached a climax in the storm, when he is driven insane, that we feel really confident that he is ultimately going to reach the spiritual goal. At the start, Lear was literally speaking, sane; but his folly was great enough to be spoken by Kent as 'madness'. But when he goes completely mad in the storm he is certainly on the way to true wisdom; he can speak 'reason in madness'. It is an amazing moment when Lear, in his madness, expresses his lately acquired awareness of the humanity common to himself and to the lowest of the low. Hailing poor Tom as the thing itself he continues; "unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings. Come, unbutton here."

We are touched by the gentle courtesy of his words. This is a tone of which he was incapable at the start. Now 'undo this button' echoes the 'Come, unbutton here' which he shouted out in the storm at the later point and enables us to compare and contrast. When he cries 'Come unbutton here': Lear has attained knowledge of truth. But he is frenzied and is moreover dramatizing himself. When he says 'Pray you. Undo this button. Thank you, sir', he has the knowledge of the same truth but he is quiet and humble. Thus, Shakespeare subtly suggests that Lear learns wisdom, comes to full spiritual regeneration not in madness but through madness. The lesson he learns in the storm have their full effect only when he regains his sanity towards the end. Thus, the end of the play does not make us pessimistic.

According to Dowden, Shakespeare opposes the presence and the influence of evil not by any transcendental denial of evil, but by the presence

of human virtue, fidelity, and self-sacrificial love. "As we draw near to the awful close of *King Lear* or of *Othello* and feel the fibres of our being almost torn as under, the comfort that comes to us when quiet falls on the desolate scene is the comfort, of the sure knowledge that Shakespeare is with us; that was he who saw these things felt them as we do, and found in the splendours of courage and love a remedy for despair says Raleigh. Edmund and Cornwall, Goneril and Regan can exist in any age in the world's history.

### **15.5 EFFECT OF SUFFERING ON LEAR**

A.C. Bradley is of the opinion that there is nothing more noble and beautiful in literature than Shakespeare's exposition of the effect of suffering in reviving the greatness and eliciting the sweetness of Lear's nature. The occasional recurrence, during his madness, of autocratic impatience or of desire for revenge serves only to heighten this effect, and the moments when his insanity becomes merely infinitely piteous do not weaken it. The old King, who in pleading with his daughters, feels so intensely his own humiliation and their horrible ingratitude, and who yet at fourscore and upward, constrains himself to practise a self-control and patience so many years disused; who out of old affection for Fool, and in repentance for his injustice to the Fool's beloved mistress, tolerates, incessant and cutting reminders of this own folly and wrong; in whom the rage of "the storm awakes a power and a poetic grandeur surpassing even that of Othello's anguish; who comes in his affliction to think of others first, and to seek, in tender solicitude for his poor boy, the shelter he scorns for his own head; who learns to feel and to pray for the miserable and houseless poor, to discern the falseness of flattery and the brutality of authority, and to pierce below the difference of rank and to the common humanity beneath; whose sight is so purged by scalding tears that it sees at last how power and place and things in the world are vanity except love; who tastes in his last hours the extremes both of love's rapture and of its agony, but could never, if he lived on or lived again, care a jot for aught

beside there is no figure, surely, in the world of poetry at once so grand, so pathetic and so beautiful as his . Well, but Lear owes the whole of this to these sufferings which made us doubt whether life were not simply evil, and man like the flies which wanton boys torture for their sport. Should we not be at least as near the truth, if we called this poem *The Redemption of King Lear*, and declared that the business of “the gods” with him was neither to torment him, not to teach him a “noble anger” but to lead him to attain through apparently hopeless failure the very end and aim of life ? One can believe that Shakespeare had been tempted at times to feel misanthropy and despair, but is quite impossible that he could have been mastered by such feelings at the time when he produced this conception.”

*King Lear* is often at the apex of Shakespeare's achievement, and by many judges at the head of the dramatic literature of the world. The story was as old as Geoffrey of Monmouth, the medieval chronicler, and like so many of the themes which Shakespeare handled, had already been made the subject of a play, a crude effort by some nameless playwright during the experimental stage of Elizabethan drama. Here, as was his constant custom, Shakespeare followed the main lines of the story given to him and incorporated into his grand edifice every bit of usable material from the building of his predecessor. Here, too, as always in Shakespeare, if we pierce to the core of his meaning, the real tragedy is a spiritual one. Lear is an imperious self-government by long indulgence of his passionate whims. At the opening of the play, we see him craving to find a refuge from himself by surrendering all his wealth and power in exchange for absolute love. The heart of the old King demands love; love is the element upon which it subsists and age, instead of abating this hunger, has made craving more imperious. He demands love not only in the spirit but in the letter, and throws away his youngest daughter, Cordelia, far from him with cruel briskness when she refuses to use the terms of extravagant hyperbole to describe her affection for him. This brisk and hasty spirit of the King precipitates upon his old head the enmity of his remaining daughters,

Goneril and Regan. Before he has recovered from the shock of Cordelia's defection, this awful pair of daughters lays bare, little by little, their monstrous soul to their father's gaze. As in *Othello*, the result of the revelation is to unhinge the sufferer from the order of nature. As is in sympathy with the chaos in Lear's soul, the elements break loose; and in the pauses of the blast we hear the noise of violent crimes, curses, heart-broken jesting, the chatter of idiocy, and the wandering tongue of madness. The sentimentalist phrase, "poetic justice", has no meaning for Shakespeare. The ruin wrought in the old King's heart and brain is irreparable, and the tornado which whirls him to his doom carries with it the just and the unjust. The little golden pause of peace when Lear and Cordelia are united, is followed by the intolerably piercing scene in which he bears her dead body out of the prison, muttering that they have hanged his "poor fool". The consequences of rash action, heartlessly taken advantage of, were never followed to a grimmer end.

#### **15.6 KING LEAR AND OTHELLO AS TRAGEDIES**

*King Lear*, which Swinburne called, "the most elemental and primeval" of Shakespeare's plays, is in sharp contrast to the concentrated domestic tragedy of *Othello*. The main story goes far back into ancient British mythology; Lear himself as originally the old Celtic sea-god, and the folk tale of the king and his three daughters was attached to this character by Geoffrey of Monmouth in the twelfth century. The story, as Geoffrey told it, was repeated several times in English literature before Shakespeare (by Holinshed and Spenser among others), and there was an older play on the subject which Shakespeare used as one of his sources; With the main story Shakespeare combined the tale of Gloucester and his two sons-the substance of which he found in Sidney's *Arcadia*, to achieve an extraordinary double plotted tragedy where the main action is echoed and commented on, as it were, by the sub plot. Instinctively recognizing the mythological and folk elements in the original story, Shakespeare fills his play with archetypal images and ideas which combine and reverberate to produce a large cosmic

view of man's fate at the same time as the individual tragedies of Lear and his daughters; and Gloucester and his sons are played out. *King Lear* is thus, the largest in conception and implication of all Shakespearean tragedies; it is a poetic drama heightened to a grand symbolic level without losing that uncanny insight into ordinary human psychology that continues to astonish us in Shakespeare. The play is thus, a happy hunting ground for those who are interested in discovering the symbolic pattern of imagery in Shakespeare, for in his handling of images of nature, of sex, of astronomy, of order, in the paradoxical counter pointing of symbols of light and dark, of sight and blindness, of knowledge and ignorance, of good and evil, Shakespeare brings his highest poetic and dramatic powers to bear. It is an immense play, immense in power and meaning in the weight of tragic knowledge which it conveys. Both, poetically and dramatically, it goes as far as poetic can go.

*King Lear*, is in depth, less individual than is *Othello*. Although it starts with the family and the innermost circle of human relations, it reaches out through the state and through nature itself to the ultimate and unchangeable in man's life. Lear is one that hath even but slenderly known himself and is therefore, at the opposite pole from Hamlet. If a man will not enter into the solution of his problem, nature can be counted on to solve it for him. Nature is seen here as power of generation, regeneration and cohesion. Left alone, it is chaos; subdued and shaped by God's law and man's law, it is order, civilization, justice, and mercy. When Lear gives over the sovereignty of his kingdom, he commits an act against nature and the law of God. His behaviour as a father is equally subversive, and throughout the play he reaps the consequences of the violation of natural fundamentals. The stresses and strains of the external world finally destroy Lear's sanity itself. The moment can be marked exactly. When Lear in the storm before the hovel on the heath, has seen the wild spectacle of disorder reinforced suggestively by the terror of his own suffering and the suffering of the fool and the ravages of Tom o 'Bedlam', he goes crazy himself in a burst of lucid reasoning. *King Lear*

thus, pictures in the tragedy of a king who is also kingship, and of a father who is also fatherhood, the return to chaos in a kingdom and family-the ruin of the centres and, therefore, of the whole body politics. This is the ultimate idea of calamity in the ethics of the Renaissance. The play is notable also for its perfect handling of the plots. In universality, *King Lear*; rivals Hamlet, although two plays occupy different fields-*Hamlet*, represents the innermost life of all men; *Lear* portrays man in his social relations leading to the cosmic problems. In *Lear*, too huge, too vague, too fearful for the stage, though Shakespeare's greatest imaginative creation, we have the spectacle of aged fathers tortured in mind and body by unnatural children; and the storm that rages through the play seems to shake the very universe to its foundations.

#### **15.7 COMIC ELEMENTS IN THE PLAY**

There is present, in this play, besides the sublime, the beauty of the comic also. Of the great tragedies *King Lear*, alone contains a Fool to whom an important part in the action is assigned. His main function, dramatically, is to emphasize the folly, as contrasted with the majesty, of his royal master. This Fool is by common consent one of the most beautiful characters that Shakespeare ever created. As soon as he enters upon the scene, an immediate alteration takes place in our imaginative attitude towards the chief sufferer and to the world of which he is at once the centre and the symbol the change is thus proverbially described as the single step from the sublime to the ridiculous. The storm, for instance, for which 'man's nature could not carry the affliction and fear, is instantly stripped of its dreadfulness and becomes mere 'rain-water out of door'. The titanic figure of the aged king in his agony, contending, as it were, on equal terms with the "oak cleaving thunderbolts", dwindles absurdly to our 'good uncle' whom he advises to ask his daughters' blessing". But this does not mean that with the entrance of the Fool, the world of *King Lear* has ceased to be beautiful. It merely signifies that the beauty of the sublime has opened out into the beauty of its opposite. But forms of beauty have

their source in the same power. When contemplating the sublimity of suffering, we felt that this power lay in the nature of suffering itself, and when awe struck by the seeming paradox, we now through the agency of the Fool realize with a shock of surprise-note, of course, by reflection, but intuitively that in feelings so, we were the victims of an illusion.

If, on the other hand, in the act of experiencing the world of *King Lear*, there are moments, when by means hard to analyse we are suddenly made aware of being confronted with suffering made divinely beautiful, because felt to be in itself a victory over evil, won by a love that sticks to the entire point, 'nor bends with the remover to remove,' than we must suppose that Shakespeare (who was in fact a Christian, though he was here imagining a purely pagan world) was unconsciously inspired by a story taken from Greek, but from Christian mythology and explains the golden effect of the play relating it to some such myth as the Harrowing of Hell, which was of course, familiar enough to the dramatist.

### **15.8 ROLE OF CORDELIA**

Divine love, symbolized by Cordelia enters a kingdom already divided against itself, which is Christian definition of hell. And, though we normally rightly think of love as a harmonizing power-it is indeed, ultimately the only one there is. However, Shakespeare here reminds us that, when it descends into hell, enters there first as a disorganizing force, it must make the confusion yet confounded before it can restore all things to order, as in the end it certainly will. That is, in fact, Cordelia's function in the 'brazen' world of *King Lear*. As symbol of love, she must be regarded as an alien power in hell, a power which can never be at home there, its very presence bringing ruin to such a realm. Nevertheless, it is by her suffering and death for other's sake (she like her prototype, was hunged) that she not only rescues her chosen ones from the dominion of evil, but also redeems nature from the general course, just as, were she to return from hell to the world she has saved, live again thereby to reap, in due course, the full fruits of her victory, her resurrection would redeem all sorrows that even man has felt. If Bradley

be right, it is not the change, but the certainty that she does indeed so love which causes even Lear's hitherto indomitable heart to break, and the great sufferer dies at last, not of sorrow, but in an ecstasy of joy.”

The horrors that have gone by, seem to fade into insignificance as the white haired king totters into the midst of the petrified onlookers, with his daughter dead in his arms, and the long drawn monotone of lamentations of his lips. There is a momentary thrill of hope as he bends down to catch a fancied murmur of that still small voice, but it is hushed for ever, and the silence on the loved one's lips, more potent than all the thunders of heaven, cracks the heart of Lear. As his gazing eyes 'take their last look of the form in his arms, the whole riddle of life and death is compressed into the anguished cry.

*No, no, no life*

*Why should a dog a horse, a rat, have life,*

*And thou no breath at all ? Thou, ' it come no more,*

*Never never, never, never, never*

No, this most representative of Shakespeare's tragedies is not born of pessimism that despairs of all things human nor of the facile optimism that thinks everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds, it is, as Kreysing has called it 'the tragedy of the categorical imperative'. It boldly recognises that in the sphere neither of outward circumstances virtue is not always triumphant nor vice cast down amidst the clash of the iron forces of the universe, love and purity are often crushed.

*Screams will not curb their pride*

*The just man not entomb.*

*Nor lightning go aside*

*To give his virtue room;*

Nor is that wind less rough which blows a good Mans' barge.

And may we not venture to interpret Lear's own words as a prophetic salutation, and to think of Cordelia as a soul in bliss.

Another fascinating aspect of the play relates to the relationship between mankind and the power or powers which govern the universe ?

### **15.9 POPULAR SUPERSTITIONS IN THE PLAY**

We hear much in the play about astrology. That man's fate lies not in his own keeping but under the control of the stars was, of course, a commonly held medieval view. It is part of an old established tradition which, as we see in Act I scene ii, Gloucester accepts, Edmund, the 'new man' rejects it. Professor Bradley speaks of Shakespeare's attitude. While he would have hesitated to deny that the stars could affect men's lives, there is nothing to suggest that he had no such faith in their influence as to deny the freedom of the will. Free will is the essence of tragedy, which cannot exist under determinism, and astrology is only a crude form of determinism. As an explanation of the tragic mystery, the inadequacy of Kent's belief: "It is the stars, The stars above us, govern our conditions" is discernible even in the play in which it occurs. Gloucester too, in a memorable passage, says; "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; They kill us for their sport."

But can we convincingly argue that this is the philosophy that Shakespeare wants us to take away from the theatre when the performance is over. There are some who think it is. Professor G.B. Harrison speaks of Shakespeare transmitting' an old tale in which evil is punished and good restored' into a tremendous and pessimistic drama, of which Gloucester's words (quoted above) form the most fitting motto'. But do they do so ?

All the evil characters are dead before the end, and we cannot but relate this to the exercise of divine justice. When Albany is told of how a servant has killed Cornwall, he exclaims:

*This judgement of the heavens, that makes us tremble,*

*Touches us not with pity,  
and This shows you are above,  
You justicers, that these our nether crimes  
So speedily can venge!*

There is no ground for pessimism here. The sufferings of Lear and Gloucester are terrible to behold. But before we are tempted on this score to speak of pessimistic tragedy, we should do well to remember two things. First: their sufferings are to some extent, though certainly not entirely, brought about through their own errors, so that the conception of divine justice is valid here also :

*The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices  
Make instruments to plague us.*

It is true that here the 'just' dealings of the gods make us more uneasy than does their treatment of villains. If admittedly it was 'the dark and vicious place' where Gloucester begot Edmund that 'cost him his eyes' there is much more to be sad. Gloucester has to suffer beyond his deserts, as has Lear-a common enough phenomenon amongst humanity: we sow the wind and reap the whirlwind. But, if tempted by the appalling sufferings of Lear and Gloucester to regard this as a 'pessimistic' drama, we must bear in mind a second point. The gods are merciful. If, after all their agony, Lear and Gloucester died uneducated, unregenerate, then we should indeed have to speak of pessimism. But both, as they die, are wise, and redeemed. Nothing is here for tears-unless we weep for the salutary outcome. We must do so; and the conclusion of the play has indeed a sober colouring. How apt are the words of Albany in the last scene when he offers to reign the life of the old majesty and declares :

*All friends shall taste  
The wages of their virtue, and all foes*

*The cup of their deservings.*

Yet the unassailable fact remains that the gods, in benignity, permit Lear and Gloucester to die in a state of spiritual health. Their sufferings are redemptive. There is no ultimate ground for pessimism here. But of the death of Cordelia? It troubles us all, as it troubled Dr. Johnson who, in a well-known passage, declared. "It was many years ago, so shocked by Cordelia's death, that I knew not whether I ever endured to read again the last scenes of the play till I undertook to revise them as an editor."

The gods allow the totally innocent Cordelia; to be done to death. Does not this at least, it may be asked, spell a final pessimism, even if nothing else does?

#### **15.10 CHRISTIAN WORLD VIEW**

*King Lear* is a Christian play about a pagan world. The author's viewpoint is Christian. Now the Christian outlook is, of course, the reverse of pessimistic. To the Christian, God is, paradoxically at once just, merciful, and in his dealings bewildering. Almost every day the Christian has to take account of happenings which seem to mean that God at least acquiesces in the incomprehensible destruction of the pure and the good. The temptation is strong to cry out, why does God allow this kind of thing or is there a God at all? But the true Christian, if agonized by such things, is nevertheless unable to let them over-turn his faith. God overthrows the absolutely evil-he destroys the Cornwalls, the Gonerils, the Regans: He is a just God who chastens those who err "but who can be regenerated"-the Lears, the Gloucesters-and in mercy he redeems them: he is just and merciful. But again, God moves in mysterious ways-he deals strangely with the Cordelias of this world. His methods are inscrutable. Shakespeare presents the whole picture-the mysterious as well as that which is plain. This, however, can mean 'pessimistic' drama only to those who cannot agree that the play is Christian.

Of the four people in *King Lear* who react to adversity within the traditional sense, two show Christian patience and two defective patience.

The group is meticulously balanced: Cordelia is the perfection of Christian patience. Her father is an instance of extreme falling off first into rage and then into madness. Gloucester and Edgar occupy a middle region between these two limits. The son is steadily patient. The father wavers on the edge of grace and despair and is only saved in the end by the ministrations of his son. Cordelia stands in the light of a clear Christian doctrine. The discussion of her conduct in the first scene is a good example. Almost everyone has strained to detect in her a trace of her father's pride. Cordelia, when she says nothing, is the sheep before the shearers that must be dumb. She is quite simply the truly patient woman and daughter, yet she has that patience which does not exclude passion—the passion of grief and the passion of compassion. Throughout the play Cordelia is the model of perfect patience and the charity it connotes.

As is already noted, *King Lear*, is a gruesome tragedy as the picture of cruelty in nature is pervading through and through. The end of the play may be studied keeping in view the handicaps of the human beings. Evil is not permanently triumphant. Thus, the play presents the revelation of righteous omnipotence. "It may be frankly stated at once that *King Lear* does not contain a revelation of righteous omnipotence or heavenly harmony or even a promise of the reconciliation of mystery and justice." But if we consider the real course of the play and the ultimate powerlessness and end of evil, we may conclude that the world has been given over totally to darkness. The ultimate impression that is left on our minds, as we rise from the study of the play, is that evil triumphs for a while in this world, that it is a working principle of death and isolation, that it tries to destroy its opposite that is, good but ends up in destroying itself. It looks as if the world is full of evil and that evil is potent everywhere and that goodness is rare and though good seems not to avail outwardly, it has an ultimate victory in this world as certainly as evil in spirit of its apparent victory, is ultimately vanquished. The lessons that we learn from the play are: (i) that the victory of evil is at best temporary; (ii) that the defeat of good is not after all the worst thing

that can happen in this world where there are much worse things than this.

The poet's conception of virtue and goodness, as worked out in this drama is thoroughly of the Christian type-steeped indeed in the efficacy of the Christian ideal. The old Roman conception of human goodness, extol courage, patriotism, honesty, and justice whereas the proper constituents of the Christian ideal are besides these, and higher than these: mercy, philanthropy, self-sacrifice, forgiveness of injuries and love of enemies. It is in this sense that Shakespeare gives us the best expressions of the Christian ideals that are to be met within the poetry and art.

### **15.11 LET US SUM UP**

*King Lear* is a brutal play, filled with human cruelty and follies, seemingly meaningless. The play's succession of terrible events raises in obvious question for the characters namely, whether there is any possibility of justice in the world, or whether the world is fundamentally indifferent or even hostile to human kind.

### **15.12 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

- Q1 Discuss *King Lear* as a Tragedy.
- Q2 What is the Christian value taught by the play?
- Q3 What role superstition play in the drama?

### **15.13 SUGGESTED READING**

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**COURSE No.111**

**DRAMA-I**

**LESSON No. 16**

**M.A. ENGLISH**

**WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE  
(KING LEAR)**

**UNIT - III**

**AN ANALYSIS  
KING LEAR IS AN INDICTMENT OF PROSPERITY**

**STRUCTURE**

- 16.1 Introduction
- 16.2 Objectives
- 16.3 Ending of the Play
- 16.4 Poetic Justice
- 16.5 Moral Order in the Play
- 16.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 16.7 Examination Oriented Questions
- 16.8 Suggested Reading

**16.1 INTRODUCTION**

This lesson introduces the concept of poetic justice in context of *King Lear* and the moral order in the play.

**16.2 OBJECTIVES**

The lesson throws light on the ending of the play. The play has been analysed from the view of poetic justice being metted out to the characters in the play.

### 16.3 ENDING OF THE PLAY

The ending of the *King Lear*, is another issue on which the critical opinion is divided. There are two distinct schools of thought regarding the end of the play. There are some critics who are in favour of the happy ending of the play. The second school of thought is in favour of the inevitability of the tragedy in *King Lear*. It is true that the tragedy of *King Lear* is very painful and horrible. That is the way, the theory of the happy ending of this play has remained very popular for a certain period of the English drama. Now let us take these schools of thought one by one and come to the conclusion about the end of the *King Lear*.

From the theatrical revival at the Restoration down to the end of the last century many of Shakespeare's plays were acted in adaptations that is, in versions (one should say perversions) which introduced new, and omitted the original, character and incidents exactly as the adapter thought would suit the taste of the public. *King Lear* was no exception. It was adapted by a minor dramatist Nahum Tate in 1680, and his perversion of Lear was "the only acting copy" down in 1838, when Macready restored Shakespeare's tragedy to the stage. All the great actors of the period (1690-1838) Betterton, Garrick, Kemble, Edmund Kean-appeared in Tate's Lear. The two great features of this daring composition are that Edgar is made from the outset the lover of Cordelia. The character of "France" being dropped altogether and the piece "ends happily" with Lear's restoration to his Kingdom and the union of the lovers. Now the impertinence of this sentimental element of love-making needs no comment, but some sympathy is possible with Tate's desire of making the tragedy conclude in a success to the innocent distressed persons. One can scarcely resist a superficial wish that the tragedy did end differently; but it could not; catastrophe was inevitable.

Dr. Bradley is of the opinion that the play can be given a happy ending. But he has also stressed that if the play is a tragic poetic drama, it is bound to be completed with the death of King Lear and Cordelia. The ways in which the deaths of Cordelia and Lear are brought about are

anything but fair dismissals from the stage of life. The double calamity is singularly unprepared for. When Bradley speaks of the possibilities of a happy ending for the play he is not arguing that the aged and wearied monarch should once more be burdened with the responsibilities of Government. He is not recommending that the gilt robe and sceptre should be handed over to him. Bradley would like to see fulfilled the expressed wish of Lear himself : "We two alone will sing like birds; when thou dost ask me blessing I will kneel down and ask of thee forgiveness". So, it was not impossible for Shakespeare to have given King Lear peace and happiness at Cordelia's fireside.

Charles Lamb has pooh-poohed the plea of restoration of Lear to kingdom and prosperity. To quote him: "Tate has put his hook into the nostrils of his Leviathan, for Garrick and his followers, the showmen of the scene, to draw the mighty beast about more easily, 'A happy ending', as if the living martyrdom that Lear had gone through- the flaying of his feeling alive, did not make a fair dismissal from the stage, of life the only decorous thing for him. If he is to live and be happy after, if he could sustain his world's burden after, why all this padding and preparation-why torment us with all this unnecessary sympathy ? As if the childish pleasure of getting his gilt robes and sceptre again could tempt him to act over again his misused station, as if at his years, and with his experiences anything was left but to die." He further says, "We must refer briefly to the improvement, which this drama has suffered at the hands of one Nahum Tate: an improvement inflected for purpose as would seem, of dwarfing and dementing the play down to the capacity of some theatrical showmen. A part of Tate's work lay in rectifying the catastrophe, so as to have Lear and Cordelia come off triumphant thus, rewarding their virtue with worldly success. The cutting out of the precious Fool, and the turning of Cordelia into a love sick hypocrite who feigns indifference to her father, in order to cheat him, and thus make him abandon her to a forbidden match with Edgar, completes this execrable piece of profanation. Tate improved *King Lear* set a thinker at work to improve Niagara".

"To live after the fight of this angle (Cordelia), to be the father orphaned of his only beloved child, to be the burdened heart that knows no more joy, from time to stretch hands into obscurity and try to re-clasp a being who was there; to feel himself forgotten in that departure; to have lost all reason for being here below; to be hence-forth a man who goes to and returns from a sepulchre-not received, there not admitted-this would indeed be a gloomy destiny for Lear if he were preserved alive. Thou hast done well, poet: to have killed this old man."

We have already discussed the redemption of King Lear. We again recollect those ideas. In our minds, the sacrifices of Lear and Cordelia are joint sacrifices, sacrifices upon which the gods could throw incense. We cannot dissociate Lear from Cordelia and think of the one surviving the other. Lear's fate, therefore involves the fate of all those who come within his orbit. If Lear's death is inevitable, Cordelia's extinction is a necessary sequence. "It may appear as if at certain times men have not felt the entire inevitability of Lear's story". The eighteenth century provided an alternative ending to it, and left Lear living in the comfort of reconciliation with Cordelia, just as the earliest tellers of the tale, Geoffrey and others had done. The current sentiment of its' human kindness had run to sentimentality and its complacent rationalism had demanded poetic justice. But Lear is not to be tucked back into the pettiness of domesticity, nor to the memory of life's whips and scorns :

*Vex not his ghost; O. let him pass he hates him*

*That would upon the rack of tough world stretch him out longer.*

It is more likely that the happy ending which Tate gave to the play was not merely meant to provide comfort for Lear : it was probably a device to save Cordelia. Even Dr. Johnson, a representative wonderful and least praised of the inventions in the last scene' is that of the dying Edmund. He has been treacherous to nearly every person in the play. His first treachery, indirectly, the cause of his ruin, is still in act, the killing of Cordelia and the king are the exemplary. He has been stricken down. "*The wheel has come full circle*" he has learnt too late :

*The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices*

*Make instruments to plague us.*

While studying and analysing any great tragedy one should always remember that the greatest and the most subtle quality of the tragic poet goes beyond the immediate presentation of scene and persons. It is the power to suggest something illimitable, to place life against the background of eternity and to make the reader feel the presence of problems which he cannot solve. "We remain confronted with the inexplicable fact or the no less inexplicable appearance of a world struggling for perfection, but bringing to birth, together with glorious good, an evil which it is able to overcome only by self-torture and self-waste. This fact or appearance is tragedy". That this vision of the incomprehensible may lead to a pessimistic philosophy of life is true; but it has not done so. A Shakespearean tragedy is never, like some miscalled tragedies, depressing. No one ever closes the book with the feeling that man is a poor, mean creature. 'No weakness, no contempt'. Tragedy shows man's weakness as well as his strength. It is man's challenge to fate. It is man's struggle with destiny. Tragedy involves resistance to fate, reaction against calamity. Cordelia is a pathetic figure, Lear is a tragic character. The tragic hero may not be good, but he is always great. He may be wretched and he may be awful but he is not small. He retains our sympathy to the end. And with this greatness of the tragic hero is connected the centre of the tragic impression. This central feeling is the feeling of waste. With Shakespeare at any rate, the pity and fear which are stirred by the tragic story seem to unite with, and even merge in a profound sense of sadness and mystery, which is due to this impression of waste. There is no tragedy in the expulsion of evil; the tragedy is that it involves the waste of good.

#### **16.4 POETIC JUSTICE**

Closely related to this discussion about the controversial ending of the play is the problem of poetic justice. Poetic justice, in simple words means a mathematical distribution of reward and punishment. Shakespeare's conception of tragedy involves recognition of the blindness of chance that

cannot be squared with any theory of poetic justice or theological view of the rewards due to virtue. But it also involves recognition of the moral law that results in the punishment of its violators. The villains never escape as they do in comedy. The wages of sin are always death though the reward of virtue is not happiness. Mark Cordelia's words to Lear :

*We are not the first,*

*Who with best meaning, have incurr'd the worst.*

Characters good and bad are involved in general destruction: there is no question in these plays of, systematized poetic justice. The punishment is often underserved or at least disproportionate, to the error or offence. The German critics who seek to rationalize and explain tragedy only explain away tragedy. An element of mystery is inseparable from tragedy in the general conception of it. The idea of tragedy is always associated with something wrong in the world, an inexplicable failure in the general justice of things. A tragedy in which everything can be explained and justified is no tragedy at all. The vastness of evil in the world, its malignant influence is a part of the contemporary thought. The doctrines of total depravity and of moral responsibility go side by side under medieval drama. In the depiction of the waste of effort, the expense of spirit, the crippling of greatness by weakness, the ineffectuality of virtue, Shakespeare gave a far more comprehensive and a far more penetrating representation of the tragic fact than world had yet known, but without professing any solution of its mysteries. His characters are the characters of his own imagination and he stands godlike, apart. He dogmatizes not at all concerning the forces above and beyond us. Even when he employs the supernatural for artistic and tragic effect his attitude is rationalistic. The good and noble in his tragedies exist for themselves not for any outside god or heavenly power. These tragedies of passion are no fiction. You would think while reading them that you stood before the unclosed awful Book of Fate, while the whirlwind of the most impassioned life was howling through the leaves and tossing them fiercely to and fro. These terrible leaves of the Book of Fate, which we name *Macbeth*, *Lear*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus* are all concerned with

the breaches of the law wrought by passion-the rending of the bonds of loyalty, of wedlock, of filial duty, of love of country and love of humanity. They exhibit evil in its incubation, and in its temporary triumph, passion in its complexity of motion, its occult movements, its outbreak and violent fluctuations. But the effect left on the spirit of the reader or spectator of this play is not one of disorder.

The Laws of human life are not shaken; the pillars of the divine order stand sure. Even though Cordelia lies strangled upon the lap of Lear, we do not despair.

*Upon such sacrifice, my Cordelia*

*The Gods themselves throw incense.*

Before winding up the discussion, I would like to say something about the moral lesson conveyed through the tragedy of *King Lear*. The subject of Lear is self-denial, and it is only by being wilfully blind that one can fail to understand what Shakespeare is saying.

Lear renounces his throne but expects everyone to continue treating him as a King. He does not see that if he surrenders power, other people will take advantage of his weakness: also that those who flatter him the most grossly, i.e. Regan and Goneril, are exactly the ones who will turn against him. The moment he finds that he can no longer make people obey him as he did before, he falls into a rage which Tolstoy describes as “strange and un-natural; but which in fact is perfectly in character”. In his madness and despair, he passes through two moods which again are natural enough in his circumstances, though in one of them it is probable that he ‘is being used partly as a mouthpiece for Shakespeare’s own opinions. One is the mood of disgust in which Lear repents as it were, for having been a king and grasps for the first time the rottenness of formal justice and vulgar morality. The other is a mood of impatient fury in which he wrecks imaginary revenges upon those who have wronged him. To have thousand serpents with red burning spits come hissing in upon them.’”

Only at the end does he realize, as a sane man, that power, revenge, and victory are not worthwhile :

*No, no. no. no! Come, Let's away to prison:  
We two alone will sing like birds i' the cage;  
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down,  
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,  
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,  
Who loses and who wins; who's in, who's out;  
And take upon's the mystery of things,  
As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out,  
In a wall'd prison, packs and sect of great ones,  
That ebb and flow by the moon.*

But by the time he makes this discovery it is too late, for his death and Cordelia's are already decided. That is the story and allowing for some clumsiness in the telling, it is a very good story. What exactly is the moral of Lear ? Evidently there are two morals, one explicit, the other implied in the story.

Shakespeare starts by assuming that to make yourself powerless is to invite an attack. This does not mean that everyone will turn against you (Kent and the Fool stand by Lear from first to last), but in all probability someone will. If you throw away your weapons, some less scrupulous person will pick them up. If you turn the other cheek, you will get a harder blow

on it than you got on the first one. This does not always happen, but it is to be expected and you ought not to complain if it does happen. The second blow is, so to speak part of the act of turning the other cheek. First of all, therefore, there is the vulgar, common-sense moral drawn by the Fool : Don't relinquish power, don't give away your lands'. But there is also another moral. Shakespeare never utters it in so many words and it does not very much matter whether he was fully aware of it. It is contained in the story, which, after all, he made up, or altered to suit his purpose. It is, give away lands if you want to, but don't try to gain happiness out of it. If you live for others, you must live for others, and do not make it a roundabout way of getting an advantage for yourself.

#### **16.5 MORAL ORDER IN THE PLAY**

Shakespeare was not a philosopher; his tragedies however, reveal the various problems of good and evil in this world. In *King Lear*, there are two important dictums which are uttered by Gloucester and Edgar. Let us, take them one by one.

Edgar is of the opinion that the world is governed by strict moral laws and those who do evil will have to suffer. Our pleasant vices are sources of suffering and punishment to us, says Edgar. Gloucester was the evil-doer because he gave birth to an illegitimate son, Edmund. Thus, he suffered because of this misdeed. We later on come to know that he was blinded and ruined by the illegitimate son. Similarly, Lear also suffered because he did not behave properly with his daughter, Cordelia. Lear trusted the flattery of Goneril and Regan, and later on, they become the instruments of his suffering, and persecution. Again, both Goneril and Regan indulge in guilty love for Edmund and this love itself becomes the instrument of their ruin and death. Because of their mutual jealousy and rivalry in love, Goneril poisons Regan and later stabs herself. Further, Edmund meets with just punishment from Edgar whom he had deceived and injured; at the supreme moment of his success in war and love. Edmund is defeated and killed by Edgar, the previous victim of his treachery. So, there are

many elements in the play to support Edgar's view that the gods are just and that they punish us for our sins.

However, these sufferings are never proportionate for example, Edgar, Cordelia and King Lear suffer more than what they do in performance of their duties. So we can not accept the view that there is strict justice in the world. The gods are certainly on the side of morality: they do punish evil; but in the conflict between evil and good the destruction of evil is accompanied by the partial waste of good. This is one of the painful facts in the mortal world of tragedy. The gods cannot prevent unjust suffering: but their blessings are always with those who stand for virtue :

*Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia.*

*The gods themselves throw incense*

*Then we come to the lines uttered by Gloucester.*

*The gods are just and of our pleasant vices*

*Make instruments to plague us."*

and

*"As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods;*

*They kill us their sport".*

Gloucester is of the opinion that the gods are unjust and cruel. They take delight in inflicting pains upon mortals. He further adds that the human world is not governed by the laws of justice. He has trusted his son Edmund, and the same son proves treacherous to him and causes his undoing. Moreover, Gloucester is blinded for his virtuous efforts to help the aged and helpless Lear who is the victim of his daughter's cruelty. Gloucester finds the wicked prospering and the virtuous suffering. So he feels disillusioned and thinks that the gods are unjust and malicious and that they inflict suffering upon mortals in sheer sports and cruelty.

In fact, the gods who govern the human world of Lear are neither cruel nor malicious, they are on the whole on the side of virtue. The wicked suffer and are ultimately destroyed, but in the course of the conflict between good and evil, the virtuous also suffer. There is justice in the play though not poetic justice. Though the virtuous, sometimes suffer badly, a noble life is its own reward, and upon such sacrifices as that of Cordelia, the gods themselves throw incense. The gods are clearly on the side of virtue.

#### **16.6 LET US SUM UP**

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare's emphasis is upon the process of human regeneration, the self knowledge, penance, and expiation for sin upon which he had touched only lightly in the final scene of *Othello*. He affirms that Lear's four score years of pride and self-deception were merely the prelude to life and not true life at all. The suffering of Lear and Gloucester is presented with all the immediate intensity of which Shakespeare is capable in order to emphasize that the process of regeneration is a purgatorial one. If Shakespeare is to assert the power of man to overcome evil, the force of evil must be shown in their most uncompromising terms. *King Lear* is a triumph of dramatic construction which in its total effect, like *Hamlet* and *Othello*, affirms justice in the world, which it sees as a harmonious system ruled by a benevolent God.

In *King Lear*, the characters perform symbolic functions. The primary focus is upon Lear, and to a lesser extent upon Gloucester. They stand together for humanity at large. The other characters serve secondary supporting functions, each symbolic of some force of good or evil action upon humanity. The theatre of the action is not only the single world of man, but also its corresponding planes in the scheme of creation: the family, the state, and the physical universe. The universality of these is reinforced by the vagueness of the place setting, the audience is watching not only Lear's little kingdom, but the great world itself.

### 16.7 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

1. Do you agree with the observation that *King Lear* is more sinned against than sinning? If not, give reasons.
2. In Shakespearean tragedy Character is destiny. Do you think it is true in case of *King Lear*?
3. Enumerate the advantages and disadvantages of the double plot in *King Lear*.
4. Do you find the atmosphere of *King Lear* extraordinarily pessimistic?
5. Compare and contrast the characters of Kent and Gloucester.
6. What do you understand by poetic justice? Does the principle of poetic justice operate in a Shakespearean tragedy? Substantiate your answer from *King Lear*.

### 16.8. SUGGESTED READING

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**COURSE No.111**

**DRAMA-I**

**LESSON No. 17**

**M.A. ENGLISH**

**BEN JONSON  
(VOLPONE)**

**UNIT - IV**

## **BEN JONSON AND HIS WORK**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 17.1 Introduction
- 17.2 Objectives
- 17.3 Jonson As a Poet
- 17.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 17.5 Examination Oriented Questions
- 17.6 Suggested Reading

### **17.1 INTRODUCTION**

Ben Jonson was born in 1572, only eight years after the birth of Shakespeare. He died in 1637, after twenty one years of Shakespeare's death. He entered the English theatres in London like a scourge. In fact, for quite sometime, he was regarded as an affliction, so powerful was his influence. The first play with which his name is generally associated is a lost comedy, named *The Isle of Dogs* (1597). He is believed to have collaborated with Thomas Nashe in writing this comedy. Its satire was so strong that it at once incensed the authorities, who immediately ordered the closure of all playhouses. It also led to the arrest of Ben Jonson along with two of the actors in the Marshalsea. His imprisonment lasted from July till October 1597. To begin with, Ben Jonson was both actor and dramatist. He disposed of his works among different

theatre companies in London as best as he could. *The Isle of Dogs*, was not produced at Henslowe's theatre. But Henslowe being a friend of Ben Jonson paid the playwright as loan, four pounds towards the cost of imprisonment. He also advanced on the following December 3 a sum of twenty shillings on the plot of a play Jonson was to finish by Christmas. But when Jonson failed to complete his assignment, Chapman was paid a year later for work on a tragedy of "Benjamin's plot."

Ben Jonson had written by 1598 *The Case is Altered* for the Chapel children. It is a comedy comparable with Chapman's *All Fools*, although it is more romantic in tone and less expertly worked out. He chooses Plautus, the Italian dramatist, for model, and develops the classic themes into a comedy of contemporary times. To this very period perhaps also belongs the original form of *A Tale of a Tub*, which exists only in the revised version that Jonson had made long after its composition. His fame began with his very first play, *Every Man in His Humour*, which was acted by the Chamberlain's company. As reported by Rowe in 1709, it is believed that Shakespeare's personal intervention had induced the company to accept this play. It is also known for sure now that Shakespeare himself acted a part in it when it was staged in September 1598. The play certainly became one of the great successes of its time. As the text of the play existed at that time, it was quite superficially another Italian comedy. The plot was set in Florence and concerned with the classic devices of the duel of wits between father and son and the stratagems of an intriguing slave. But behind this stereotype story lay a keen criticism of contemporary English society, which came into focus more sharply when Jonson revised the play's text for his Folio edition of 1616, the year of Shakespeare's death. Jonson's revision of the play included giving the characters English names and introducing a vast apparatus of pungent allusions of London.

Jonson's famous comedy thus became, essentially, the arrangement of an erabent on acquiring fashionable prestige at small cost. Jonson lashes this absurd quest for gentlemanliness in a variety of ways by attributing to each character some dominant trait of the time. Calling this dominant trait a "humour", Jonson made popular his theory of humours, as each character showed his or her ludicrous

tendency in the comedy of contemporary life. For instance, the country cousin, Stephen, thinks he can rate as a gentleman by studying a book about hawking. Similarly, the city youth, Mathew, seeks the same end by pretending to be a poet. Another comic character in the play is Bobadill who wins temporary respect by boasting about his fencing. Although a coward, he earns respect by the elegance with which he swears and takes tobacco. The most intelligent of all the crowd of youngmen are, of course, Mr. Knowell and Mr. Wellbred, who make an evocation of exploiting the fools they meet for the gratification of their own vanity. Being sick of the insincerities of time, the public welcomed Jonson's satirical comedy with delight and satisfaction. The comedy pleased people so much that Samuel Rowlands, the most lively commentator of that time, soon urged all the poets of his day to follow Jonson's lead :

*Good honest poets, let me crave a boon:  
That you would write, I do not care how soon,  
Against the bastard humours hourly bred  
In every mad-brain'd, wit-worn, giddy head.  
At such gross follies do not sit and wink;  
Belabour these same gulls with pen and ink.*

Jonson's *Every Man Out of His Humour* was written as a sequel to his first success. It was acted at the Globe the very next year (1599). Jonson is said to have become so proud of it that he rushed it into print in 1600. He also signed a dedication to the gentlemen of the Inns of Court, the arbiters of elegance of the day. An explanation of this play has been that it was an effort to use the stage (of the theatre) as a vehicle or means for the type of caustic satire which the censors of the press were prohibiting. The play certainly belonged to the tradition or the literary movement which produced the satires of Hall and Marston. One can safely say that Jonson was so much satisfied with the success of his new technique introduced in *Every Man in His Humour* that in the second play, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, he almost ran it to death. In this second play,

one does not find anything like a dramatic plot. The play consists of only dramatic episodes and acute psychological observations in generalized form. The characters still carry Italian names, but they are not shown living in Italy. They are shown inhabitants of the "Fortunate Island," which in the obvious language of satire meant England. In this comedy, ten or twelve social misfits are shown to exhibit their egotistic follies, which continue through four Acts of the play. The fifth Act moves rather swiftly, each of these misfits is kicked "out of his humour" by the very logic of the play's events. Their being kicked "out of humour" means they regain a more normal state of mind. They no longer remain eccentrics. Jonson prefaced the play's printed text by a clever list of "the characters of the persons," in which each is neatly impaled, like the insects of an entomologist's collection: there's also an inordinately heavy mass of running commentary. Jonson uses four persons to emphasize the author's views or show the wisdom of his method.

We do not have any record of what Shakespeare thought of Jonson's second comedy, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, but one thing seems clear that his theatre company did not find it rewarding. It was only after many years of Jonson's first play's production that Shakespeare did another play of the younger dramatist. Jonson's next play, *Cynthia's Revels* (1600), was sold to the boys of the Queen's Chapel. It is said to be slighter piece, comparatively, but even more aggressive than his earlier comedies. Its real significance lies in its being in many respects a forecaster of Jonson's development as a dramatist. This comedy ends in an authentic masque, and includes Jonson's loveliest song that he had as yet written: "Queen and huntress, chaste and fair." In the elaborately satiric definitions of courtier types it goes beyond *Every Man Out of His Humour* and prepares for the "characters" of *Overbury* and *Earle*. It is the last tribute to the aged Queen who, as in *Lyly*, is pictured in *Cynthia*. But through the stately grace of the allegory tramps the burly figure of the author, originally called Criticus. In the 1616 text of the play, however, the author is magnified into Crites, the Judge. As the play represents, he is the man who is always right. He becomes recipient of the Queen's ecstatic praise for his poetry and wisdom. At the end he writes himself *Cynthia's* warrant to purge society, along with his chosen companion,

Arete, on Virtue :

*Dear Arete and Crites, to you two*

*We give the charge: impose what pains you please;*

*Th' incurable cut off, the rest reform.*

Such bumptiousness was intolerable, Jonson was angrily laughed at. Even his admirer, Marston, gibed at him in his revised anti-war play *Histriomastix* (1601), in Jack Drum's Entertainment, and elsewhere. Jonson retaliated to this gibe by writing his satirical play, *Poetaster* (1601). The play begins with Envy hopefully rising "to dawn the author." But she is trodden underfoot by the mailed prologue of the piece. It may not be one of Jonson's greatest plays, but is certainly one of the most amusing. The scene is Rome in the reign of King Augustus, in the first century A.D. The chief characters are the greatest poets of the age, their patrons, and their enemies. Jonson arrogates to himself the character of Horace and belauds him plentifully. Marston, made poetaster in the play, called Crispinus, is excoriated.

Since Dekker also figured in Jonson's play as a minor poetaster, he immediately retorted and wrote a satire on Jonson, entitled *Satiromastix, or the Untrussing of the Humorous Poet*. This provided a mine of information on Jonson not otherwise available to today's reader. All that his contemporary knew about him in 1601 seems to have been put into Dekker's play. Jonson's slowness in composition, his self-esteem, his career as bricklayer, his career as barnstorming actor, his poverty and psychopancy to the great, his killing of a player and escape from Tyburn by his "neck-verse," his "parboiled face," and his habit of epigramming his friends are all set down with the precision of a master realist. The two play houses that staged Dekker's satirical comedy must have been well filled. As a result, a printed text of *Satiromastix* was immediately in demand. Knowing his own weaknesses too well, Jonson withheld his retort. In a dignified "apologetical dialogue" to *Poetaster* he withdrew from the stage war and devoted himself to classic tragedy. Jonson rescued himself by *Sejanus* (1603), a historical play of ponderous ethics and meticulous scholarship. It has the kind of greatness

that Chapman's later tragedies have. Chapman and Marston both wrote commendatory verses for the first quarto in 1605. In fact, Chapman perhaps had a part in composing the stage version. Shakespeare's company staged it, as it later did Jonson's other Roman tragedy of *Catiline's Conspiracy* (1611). Shakespeare himself, although on the verge of retirement as actor, performed a part in *Sejanus*. The war of the theatres was quite over.

Jonson's training as a comic realist served him well in *Sejanus*, which gives an impressive real view of imperial Rome and develops the great figures as enlarged and darkened humour characters. It is an important play, but most important for what it led to. It led to *Volpone, the Fox* (1606), which is considered the most magnificent of his comedies. This rather dreadful comedy was staged by Shakespeare's company, which had now become the King's. The comedy is supposed to take place in modern Venice. Its treatment of the theme of greed came, however, from Jonson's study of the enormities of ancient Rome. The character symbolism peculiar to humour comedy is intensified in this play by an imitation of the beast-fable. This method showed how human types could be caricatured by representing them as animals. The chief villain in the play is called Fox. His agent is called the Fly (*Mosca*). His dupes are the birds of prey, such as crow, vulture, and raven. The technical perfection of the play is a little spoiled, but the human appeal a good deal increased, by the addition of three English types. These are Peregrine (the falcon), Sir Pol (the talkative parrot), and the latter's extraordinarily British and modern wife.

Critics over the ages have acclaimed *Volpone*, the finest of Jonson's, plays. Dryden, of course, gave the palm to Jonson's next play, *The Silent Woman* (1609), which verges upon farce, just as *Volpone* verges upon tragedy. These plays are so wonderfully articulated and so amazingly life-like that either of the two would assure Jonson's place as the greatest satiric dramatist in English literature. But both of these plays are said to have been surpassed by his third crowning play, *The Alchemist* (1610). In respect of tone, this comedy of Jonson strikes an exact center between the other two. This decidedly is much more economical than any other play of Jonson. It has been said that in *The Alchemist*

every word and jesture counts in the final effect. One can see in this play a perfect fusion of classical method and English scene. It could go no further. The location is not only London; it is the fashionable Blackfriars quarter where Jonson himself lived. It is from here that he had signed the dedication of *Volpone*. Everything in the play occurs either inside the house of Lovewit or before the door of that house. The time is during the plague of 1610, which was raging as Jonson wrote. The play's time is not longer than the actual time the actors are on the stage. A single spring moves all the characters, which is their desire to get something for nothing. Of the twelve dramatis personae, three are knaves, seven others are dupes, representing five classes of people one would expect to see at Black-friars. These classes are the young professional law clerk, the luxury merchant dealing in tobacco and other country wares, the pleasure-loving Knight, the two Puritan preachers, and the wealthy young man up from the country with his sister. The rest of the play's characters, Surly and Lovewit, are neither quite knave nor quite dupe, but potentially both, as the play's action reveals. Such is said to be Jonson's picture of his neighbours, which is represented in the play without romance and quite without poetic justice, but also without bitterness. The picture in this play, of the social scene presented, does, of course, lack the harshness of *Volpone*, and enforces its moral with a more cleansing laughter.

The perfect precision of *The Alchemist*, could not be repeated, for sure, without its becoming stale. No wonder that Jonson's later comedies are inferior to his earlier three great ones. His comic art was a very jealous mistress. He was more and more distracted from it by his famous masques, which from 1610 onward demanded an increasing amount of his attention. However, two very important plays were produced even during this period, namely *Bartholomew Fair* in 1614 and *The Staple of News* in 1626. The former is, in fact, the complement of *The Alchemist*. It presents a picture of the other side of London. In this side the lower classes congregate at Smithfield during the famous August fair. It presents a large canvas and many more characters. But Jonson finds even in this side of London much the same people and the same vices. The characterization as well as satiric

brilliance are as masterly as ever in Jonson. The only thing one finds inferior here is the not so neat structure of the play.

The scenes of *The Staple of News* that ridicule the impostures of the new business of journalism are equally effective. As Swinburne said, "No man can know anything worth knowing of Ben Jonson who has not studied and digested the text of *Every Man in His Humour*, *The Fox*, *The Alchemist*, and *The Staple of News*; but any man who has may be said to know him well." Jonson also wrote *The Devil is an Ass* (1616) and *The New Inn* (1629), but both are on a lower plane. They do not match his earlier plays. They do, however, have more romantic charm than anything Jonson had written in drama since *The Case is Altered*. As Jonson grew older and sadder, and his classic certitude relaxed, he became in some ways more Elizabethan. He gave best expression to this side of himself in the beautiful fragment of pastoral drama which he left uncompleted, *The Sad Shepherd*.

## 17.2 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this lesson is to

- (a) study the biographical sketch of Ben Jonson and about his works.
- (b) discuss Jonson as a poet

## 17.3 JONSON AS A POET

Drummond, a contemporary of Ben Jonson, records, "In his merry humour he was wont to name himself The Poet." No doubt, Jonson was not the greatest of Elizabethan, or even of Jacobean, poets, and he knew it. He himself deemed John Donne, a contemporary, the first poet in the world in some things. His appreciation of his senior Shakespeare is the most just and generous that we have from any writer of the age. But even those who began abominating Jonson's bravado did come to understand that as a poet he was the norm and centre for the measurement of his fellow poets. He is considered so normal as a poet that, apart from the outstanding lyrics and plays, we do not easily recognize his

greatness. But the greatness is decidedly there in almost every poem he composed. The average poetic line of Jonson, read, reread, memorized, and lived with, will assay higher and wear better than the more striking lines of easier poets. For him, poetry was, in Arnold's words, a criticism of life. Criticism, in his case, could be no easy thing for author or for reader :

*For though the Poet's matter Nature be,  
His art doth give the fashion; and that he,  
Who casts to write a living line, must sweat,  
..... And strike the second heat  
Upon the Muses' anvil.*

The reader of Jonson's *Epigrams*, *Forest*, and *Underwood* may at first be repelled by the products of this sweating Titan. He hammered his verses into their hard and shining felicity. But let him try the quality of the metal and workmanship, he will find most other men's poetry to seem rather paltry in comparison to his. Even when Jonson chose to write flattery to the fashionables of the court, he wrote with his whole thinking mind and with proud assertion of the dignity of thought. Note, for instance, his verses to the Countess of Rutland :

*Beauty, I know, is good, and blood is more;  
Riches thought most: but, Madame, think what store  
The world hath seen which all these had in trust,  
And now lie lost in their forgotten dust.  
It is the Muse alone can raise to heaven,  
And at her strong arm's end hold up, and even,  
The souls she loves.*

There is an Augustan urbanity in many of Jonson's smaller poems which none of his contemporaries could equal. For instance, in his verse letters to Donne and Drayton, the tone and diction both speak of this polished urbanity. He did have sting, no doubt, but he employed it less in poetry than he did in his plays.

Jonson did not regard himself as a love poet. He says that he did attempt love poetry, but the god of love fled him:

*and again*

*Into my rimes could ne'er be got*

*By any art. Then wonder not*

*That, since, my numbers are so cold,*

*When Love is fled and I grow old.*

And yet one of the finest love songs in the English language has come from his pen. No one, once read, has been able to forget the fascinating "Drink to me only with thine eyes!" Out of materials no less diverse than his learning he fabricated songs which are as purely Elizabethan and as living today as anything the age produced. One of the earliest is the stately hymn to Queen Elizabeth in *Cynthia's Revels* (1600), which is perhaps most classically perfect lyric in English: "Queen and huntress, chaste and fair." Into the climactic scene of *Volpone*, he introduced one of his marvelous adaptations of Catullus :

*Come, my Celia, let us prove,*

*While we can the sports of love;*

*Time will not be ours for ever.*

*Suns that set may rise again;*

*But if once we lose this light,*

*'Tis with us perpetual night.*

Jonson became the pattern of the Restoration singers. He has been rightly described the real father of the Augustan age. But his influence was broader than that, for he was also a master in his odes of an intricate and enchanting music which later appears only in the nineteenth century. One can see a "source" for Wordsworth's immortality ode in Jonson's "Ode to Cary and Morison" :

*It is not growing like a tree  
In bulk doth make man better be,  
Or standing long an oak, three hundred year,  
To fall a log at last, dry, bald, and sere.  
A lily of a day  
Is fairer far in May :  
Although it fall and die that night,  
It was the plant and flower of light.  
In small proportions we just beauties see,  
And in short measures life may perfect be.*

We may sum up by repeating that though Jonson was the greatest poet of his age, under the impact of his colossal mind and art critics have, in every succeeding age, found this hard to believe.

#### **17.4 LET US SUM UP**

Ben Jonson was an English Renaissance dramatist, poet and actor. A contemporary of William Shakespeare, he is best known for his satirical plays, particularly *Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomen Fair* and his lyrical poems.

### **17.5 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. Discuss Ben Jonson as a poet.
2. Analyze the poetic technique used by Ben Jonson in his poems.
3. Write a brief biographical sketch of Ben Jonson.

### **17.6 SUGGESTED READING**

Riggs, David. *Ben Jonson : A Life*. Harvard University Press, 1989.

Johnston, George B., and George Burke Johnston. *Poems of Ben Jonson*. Harvard University Press, 1955.

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**COURSE No.111**

**DRAMA-I**

**LESSON No. 18**

**M.A. ENGLISH**

**BEN JONSON  
(VOLPONE)**

**UNIT - IV**

## **JONSON'S COMEDY OF HUMOURS**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 18.1 Introduction
- 18.2 Objectives
- 18.3 Jonson's Comedy of Humours
- 18.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 18.5 Examination Oriented Questions
- 18.6 Suggested Reading

### **18.1 INTRODUCTION**

The term "humour", in the case of Ben Jonson, has a special meaning; it is not to be mistaken with the ordinary meaning of the word suggesting comic or funny or laughing matter - person or event. To get at the particular meaning Jonson imparted to the word we need to go into its history, as to how it came down to the period of Jonson and acquired the meaning it did in his comedy. This special brand that Ben Jonson evolved for himself came to be known as the "comedy of humours". But before we go into various aspects of the Jonsonian comedy, let us first get clarity about the term humour as it came down to Jonson who gave it the special connotation which has come to stick to it.

The term 'humour' is originally derived from the Latin word *humor*, which in Latin means moisture or humid. The term was used in the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance period, in the tradition of Hippocratic pathology and

physiology, to denote the four humours of the body. These four humours of the body depended on the four fluids, namely blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. The admixture or commingling of these fluids determined a person's disposition, his/her temperament, character, mind, and morality. The humours in turn released spirits or vapours which affected a person's brain, and hence his/her behaviour. According to the predominant humour, a man would be sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, or melancholic. Robert Burton, in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), gives an excellent account of the qualities of these humours. Vestigially, the theory of humours survives in such expressions as "ill-humoured", "good-humoured", "black with rage", "in a black mood", "yellow with jealousy", "green with envy", "yellow-rivered", "red with remorse", and so forth. No wonder that we still use "sanguine" or "melancholy" to describe certain temperaments.

The theory of humours had a considerable influence on writers when it came to the creation of characters. Dramatists devised characters based on the theory of the imbalances that occurred between the bodily fluids. In the Elizabethan age, it was Ben Jonson who picked up this theory and made it the basis of his characterization. He created characters for his plays who were dominated each by a particular mood, inclination, or peculiarity. He deliberately named his first successful comedy as *Every Man in His Humour*, and explained in its preface or prologue the theory and its use in the making of his play's characters. He also wrote another comedy using the same theory and named it *Every Man Out of His Humour*. Thus, Ben Jonson became the most notable instance of a dramatist who based his comedy on the theory of humours. And it was for this very reason that his comedy came to be called the "Comedy of Humours". It may not be just a coincidence that in this very period writers were also addressing themselves to the depiction of "characters" in character sketches, and analyzing character and temperament.

It was only later in the eighteenth century that humour came to be associated with laughter, and came to be used in contradiction to wit. Any character, for any reason, deviating from the normal human behaviour, causing laughter, came to be known as a humorous or funny character. Thus, it lost its special meaning

of a dominant trait or characteristic of one's personality. When a dramatist like Jonson created characters in terms of his theory of humours, he made his characters what E. M. Forster has called flat, not round. If one is dominated by any one trait, decidedly he/she automatically becomes comic. Of course, not always though. There are certain character traits which can make a character tragic or pathetic also. Ben Jonson created all kinds of characters, giving them the benefit of a humour for each, which made them comic, pathetic, or tragic. In the wide range of Jonson's social canvas, there is a large variety of male and female characters who display their humours in different situations.

## **18.2 OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this lesson is to introduce the learner to Johnson's concept of comedy of humours.

## **18.3 JONSON'S COMEDY OF HUMOURS**

Theory and criticism play an important part in the growth of Jonson's dramatic art. The naturalistic portraiture came as inevitably to him as it did to Middleton. But the tenacity of Jonson's principles combines his theory and practice together in his comedy. The dominance of a clear intellect also prevented the severance and conflict of elements that we find in the works of some of his contemporaries, such as Marston. Jonson's evident conscious purpose sets his realism at once apart from that of the unselfconscious comedy of Middleton. He seldom enters the domain of imaginative tragedy or of romance in which the conflict of thought finds its inevitable expression. He never condescends to mingle with his proposed art the popular theatrical attractions of sensation and sentiment. There is, of course, one disadvantage also of this purposiveness: His most representative comedy of humours also becomes limited. It has a sharp focus on an immediate area of experience, but that also makes it narrow. Similarly, the characters show their humours clearly, but they also become less complex, and even less real or life-like.

No doubt, Jonson's attempt in his comedies is to treat his material objectively or scientifically. He certainly endeavours to present moral and psychological truth

more and more nearly in terms of actuality. He tries, for sure, to eliminate more and more thoroughly the element of the subjective. But the very fact that his expressed purpose is to punish those that deviate from the standard moral norms he has approved as socially desirable compels him to reduce those characters into types of one or another social or moral failing. Thus, his attempt ultimately is not only to show how any individual humour, if allowed to determine a person's life, can lead one into ludicrous as well as tragic situations, but also to stretch that humour to the limit of a social or moral folly. Hence, the interests of Jonson, the satirist, and those of Jonson, the humourist, would not harmonize with each other. For every humour is not necessarily an evil, or even a folly, nor every folly or evil necessarily a humour.

And yet the great artist as Ben Jonson was, he overcomes many of the problems that his varied interests create for him as dramatist. He succeeds in creating convincing characters, who would certainly demand the comic allowance of being not exactly the persons we encounter in real life, but who would not demand the romantic licence of being altogether the creatures of the twilight world. He is able to blend, as far as, is possible for a dramatist, satire and comedy, humour and representation, into an integrated picture of contemporary life. No doubt, his characters become types of various humours, but they retain at the same time their strong resemblance to personages from real life. His subtle art of drama lies in structuring humour to the point of human folly and relating human folly to the predominant humour of the individual personage. Thus, individual and typical, psychological and social, ethical and moral, all blend into a convincing human figure. Although the theory of humours was first put into practice in Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*, it remains a principle of his characterization in all of his subsequent plays. His *Volpone, or The Fox*, considered his most subtle play, is no exception to this rule. The characters that we encounter in this comedy conform to Jonson's theory of humours. They behave as logically in terms of their respective humours as the theory would demand to be logical and convincing. One great thing about Jonson as dramatist is that when it comes to delineating his characters, good as well as bad, young as well as old, he is not dominated by any sentiment of sympathy or antipathy. He is one of those

rare dramatists who remain detached from their creations. Just as a scientist has the clinical attitude to his patient, diagnosing, dissecting, and curing by cutting the diseased tissue, so does Jonson treat his characters, diagnosing them in terms of their troubling humours, cutting those humours with the knife of his satire, and cure them by cutting out the affected parts of their moral conduct.

The chief character of *Volpone*, is Volpone, the fox. He is given to plots and intrigues. That, in fact, is his humour. He is a trickster who delights in disguises and intrigues. He can trick his victims into giving him their most prized possessions. There is a sort of comic sense in the simplicity and single-mindedness of Volpone's character. His insatiable desire to trick people is characteristic of the fool. Although Volpone is a nobleman, he shares the same human nature as the lowly fools in his household. The only difference is that while the lowly fools are naturally deformed, Volpone is the cause of his own deformation. The play's plot shows his fall from a Venetian nobleman to the position of a fool. He starts out playing the fool and ends up by becoming one. He conforms to Mosca's description of people : "Almost all the wise world is little else, but parasites or sub-parasites."

The next important character in *Volpone*, is Mosca. The word here means the gadfly, who is a parasite. He is Volpone's servant. He is only one step higher in the social scale than the three deformed fools of Volpone's household. These three fools are the dwarf, the hermaphrodite, and the eunuch. Mosca is socially deformed, or fellow of no birth or blood. Having no scope for advancement in the Venetian world, Mosca lives by his wits. He does not suffer from the folly of greed. He takes whatever he needs from the treasures of others, but he takes no more than his daily needs. In a way, his humour is to feed on others, not getting moved by any temptation. Thus, he is free from the normal ambitions of human nature. This gives him an advantage of judging others who are vulnerable to all sorts of follies. He mocks at the follies of other people. When an opportunity arises for making gains in the absence of his master, Mosca is discovered to be vulnerable to the folly of greed. Ironically, it is the very folly for which he has been making fun of other people. Now, he himself is found equally vulnerable to that folly. Hence, he,

too, proves that "almost all the wise world is little else, in nature, but parasites or sub-parasites."

Another interesting character in this zoo-like spectacle of Jonson's satirical comedy is Voltore, who is a vulture. Vulture is one of the three birds of prey that circle around the fox, greedy and full of expectation. As a lawyer by profession, Voltore has a weakness for wills. That becomes his humour - to greed for gains through false wills. He uses his legal expertise to advocate injustice in order to take possession of Volpone's riches. Mosca cleverly fools this gull by using the advocate's own tactics. He tells Volpone the biggest lie and documents it with elements of well known facts. Thus, Voltore is tricked by his own folly. He believes that with his quick agility he can make the wide world believe that a lie is the truth. He fails to observe that as a part of the wide world he himself can also be cozened.

Another equally interesting character in *Volpone*, is that of Corbaccio, who represents the carrion crow. An old and decrepit, deaf and round of back, he is rather avaricious. Avarice, so to say, is the humour of Corbaccio. Partially deformed by old age, this fool completes his transformation from nobleman to parasite by being tricked into disinheriting his son. The spiritual condition of this gentleman is embodied by his physical condition. He expects to outlive Volpone and inherit his wealth. His comic flaw, so to say, is not physical but spiritual blindness. Jonson increases the interest of his comedy by turning his portrait gallery into a zoo of beasts. The strategy of using a beast fable format for exposing the animal-like beastly qualities of human beings works very well in the plot of Jonson's play. The humour of each comes out more clearly through the analogy of the beast. Each of the beasts used in the play is known for one or another dominant trait, which easily gets identified with one or another humour of the human species.

Corvino is another character in *Volpone* that attracts our attention at once. He represents the raven, which is one of the three greedy trio, the other two being vulture and crow. This peacock is proud of his beauty. This bird of prey is an exceedingly jealous husband who guards his wife with great care. Corvino's humour, so clearly brought out through the animal analogy of the peacock, is,

obviously, jealousy. Interestingly, his greed persuades him to demand that Volpone cuckold him. When at last he discovers the folly of his ways, he is too proud to reveal his foolish vanity. The paramount quality common to these three characters, represented by three different birds of prey, is their desire to possess wealth.

Closely associated with the comedy centering on the fortunes of Volpone are also the characters of Celia and Bonario. Celia is that ripe beauty, Corvino's wife, who is used as an effective device of plot. It is Volpone's desire that delivers her at his doorstep. Her presence there gives Bonario a chance to save her. Bonario is the good fellow of the play. He is a romantic and a sentimentalist. Celia and Bonario are foolish as well as innocent. They look at life in Venice through the eyes of the lovers of melodramatic fiction. Their humour is to see life not as in itself it really is, but to see it as the books of romance have painted it. They are, in other words, not directed by their own experience of life, but by the descriptions of life given in romance fiction. Hence, they seriously misunderstand and misjudge whatever they encounter, people or places. If the gulls seem inhuman in their humour of total greed, Bonario and Celia seem equally inhuman in their humour of innocence. Their folly is not so much vicious as silly. But it remains a folly all the same.

A few more interesting characters in the motley crowd of *Volpone, or the Fox* are Sir Politic and Lady Would-Be and Peregrine. Sir Politic, his wife Lady Would-Be and Peregrine are native English characters now travelling through Italy. Although tourists, they are trying to become Italians in their life style. In their attempt to follow the old saying, "Do in Rome as the Romans do," they run into all kinds of funny situations. They turn out to be hilariously inept in the art of imitation, never quite succeeding in acquiring the manners of the Italian gentry. They find themselves parroting the ways of the master plotters without ever knowing what they are actually doing. So, their humour in terms of Jonsonian theory of comedy is mimicry, which is largely mindless, but also indirectly self-flattering. The fact that they fail to imitate the manners of the evil Italians that they are too good to become the stuff the Italians are made of. Peregrine serves

as confidant of Sir Politic. He uses the English Knight for merriment, but never quite becomes involved in the main action of the satirical comedy.

The last set of characters included in the comic plot of *Volpone* consists of Nano, Androgyno, and Castrone. These three are regular, professional fools. They are naturally deformed persons. They are meant to serve as entertainers in the household of Volpone. Jonson uses them just as Shakespeare used the Fool in *King Lear* or Touchstone in *As You Like It*. Their function in *Volpone*, similar to the function of the fools in Shakespeare, is to remind us of the other side of human nature that people of high strata generally become unmindful of. They are there to show the difference there is between the high and the low in a society based on the power and privilege of capital and estate. Those who enjoy that power become totally unaware of what life really is for those who are deprived of all the privileges attached to capital and estate. These Fools are set apart also by their deformity. Although they are born with their deformities, having no hand in what they look like, they are treated in society as odd presences meant for the ridicule of the privileged.

Mosca is born without noble blood, but he is normal in every other way. Volpone, Voltore, Corbaccio, and Corvino are all normal and of noble blood. Nonetheless, these normal people acquire spiritual deformity through their inhuman or excessive greed and the foolish actions they indulge in. While the dwarf, hermaphrodite, and Eunuch are not responsible for their follies because they are born to behave that way, Mosca, Volpone, and the three birds of prey are fully responsible for their follies because their acts of folly are the result of their conscious and deliberate choice. Perhaps Mosca rightly defines the play's theme when he speaks these satirical lines, "Almost all the wise world is little else, in nature, but parasites or sub-parasites." Here, it is important for us to understand the difference between Volpone and Mosca; that is, between a gentleman and a parasite. In the European societies highly based on the class distinctions, the roles and functions of each class had got defined through long traditions and conventions of those societies. We can find recorded descriptions of parasites as a class attached to the great houses of the privileged lords and ladies, counts and countesses, dukes and duchesses, etc. These parasites were people without property. They would depend for their subsistence entirely on the estate of their masters. The masters would

have them as a part of their establishment, an army of servants and hangers-on, whose roles and functions were well defined. The parasites were supposed to serve as butts of ridicule, of gross and vulgar jokes, accepting even abuse, by their wealthy masters, as a part of their duty. Some of them would be physically and mentally deformed and retarded. Since they were no better than beggars, having nothing to fall back on, they were destined to accept a life full of insults and indignities. It is an indication of decadence and degeneration, of dehumanization that the callousness of the rich and the cringiness of the poor were taken as natural on both sides. The status of the parasites was no better than the animal pets of the rich. They did get free food and lodging, but they paid by accepting indignities as their earnings. These figures were common in the classical Greek and Roman comedies, and continued as a tradition later in the Elizabethan and Jacobean comedies. Jonson focuses our attention on the inhumanity involved in the traditional practice of the parasite in the society of his time.

#### **18.4 LET US SUM UP**

Comedy of Humours is a dramatic genre most clearly associated with the English playwright Ben Jonson from the late 16th century. Comedy of humours focuses on a character or range of characters, each of whom exhibits two or more overriding traits or ‘humours’ that dominates their personality, desires and conduct. The characters in *Volpone* are stereotypes. All of the characters are imbalanced as well, so their ‘humors’ are out of balance and they thus act in comical ways. Thus, *Volpone* is a comedy of humours.

#### **18.5 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. Discuss Ben Jonson as a Jacobean dramatist.
2. Examine *Volpone* as comedy of humours.
3. Evaluate Volpone as a chief character in the play *Volpone*.

#### **18.6 SUGGESTED READING**

Jonson, Ben. *Volpone* Ed. Robert N. Watson. Blooms.bury, 2014.

Jonson, Ben. *Volpone or the Fox*. Ed David Cook Methuen, 1967.

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**COURSE No.111**

**DRAMA-I**

**LESSON No. 19**

**M.A. ENGLISH**

**BEN JONSON  
VOLPONE**

**UNIT - IV**

## **PLOT AND STRUCTURE**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 19.1 Introduction
- 19.2 Objectives
- 19.3 Plot and Structure
- 19.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 19.5 Examination Oriented Questions
- 19.6 Suggested Reading

### **19.1 INTRODUCTION**

The plot of *Volpone* consists of the Epistle, the Argument and the Prologue, and Five Acts. In the Epistle that precedes the play, Jonson dedicates *Volpone* to Oxford University and Cambridge University calling them “most equal Sisters” (line 12). In the Argument, Jonson summarizes the main conflict of the play in the form of an acrostic poem. The Prologue expresses Jonson’s hope that the play will be both entertaining and enlightening.

### **19.2 OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this lesson is to introduce the learner to the plot and structure of the play *Volpone*.

### **19.3 PLOT AND STRUCTURE**

Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, or *The Fox*, is set in the Italy of the Renaissance period. The characters take their names from birds and animals. The plot actually grew

out of a beast fable popular in the oral tradition of the Elizabethan period. *Volpone* or *Volpe* in Italian is meant a fox. In the same manner of the animal fable, *Mosca* is the word for the parasite among flies called the gadfly. *Mosca* is a part of the household of the nobleman *Volpone*. He is a parasite subsisting on the estate of the rich *Volpone*. Being himself a person of no means, *Mosca* is a professional parasite. He is a type who was conventionally a part of the household of the renaissance gentleman. The natural idiots or deformed fools, such as the dwarf, eunuch, and fool, were meant to entertain the rich. In a way, their wages were to receive free meals, but they had to return it by being the butts of vulgar jokes and abuses for their rich masters. Some of these, like *Mosca*, were obsequious but clever fools. The others were natural fools. While people like *Mosca* chose to play the fools, others were born fools having no mind to behave otherwise.

*Volpone's* genius lies in his ability to fleece the greedy rich, the covetous wealthy, without resort to trade, venture, or product, which were the usual occupations or means and methods of economic advancement. In his practices, so wonderful they are, no poor, or ignorant person is harmed. In fact, several parasites are maintained in husbanding the gold. *Volpone* is a gentleman of Venice, which is one of the prominent cities in Italy. He is discovered at home, singing in praise of his wealth, the "sacred treasure in this blessed room." His servant *Mosca* impishly joins the song of his master in praise of gold. *Volpone* cherishes the manner in which the treasure of gold reaches him.

Not fortunate to have a heir to his riches, *Volpone* automatically attracts the greedy and wealthy to his house. They bring with them plates, coins, and jewels in the fond hope that *Volpone's* imminent death would return their gifts tenfold. This competition in giving gifts to *Volpone* is whetted by him when he cleverly feigns serious illness. While savouring the success of his ruse, *Volpone* summons his eunuch, dwarf, and fool to celebrate his present victory with an interlude, a brief and comic play like sequence. It is important to remember that although *Volpone* is a gentleman, and not a parasite, his practices are not gentlemanly but those of a parasite. He is making his living, and collecting his riches by, using improper practices, which the regular parasites do. This indicates that the dramatist has designed his role as comic, not serious.

In the absence of any relative, near or distant, to claim Volpone's property after his death, he has to name someone from the circle of people known to him as the beneficiary of his wealth. This position of Volpone attracts a large number of competitors. They try to win the favour of the ailing old man by bringing handsome gifts to him. Mosca, Volpone's servant, a parasite, finds it a god-sent opportunity to exploit the greedy would-be heirs of Volpone. He is clever and crafty who can play such games quite successfully. He encourages three major gulls. One of these, who is first to arrive, is Voltore, the vulture. He is an advocate by profession and a gull by avocation. Volpone hurries to change into his costume of a decaying carcass. Meanwhile, the other gull, one Signor Corbaccio (carrion crow) arrives. Mosca takes Voltore's gifts and hurries him out to entertain the newcomer. He befools him in the same manner. Soon comes the third gull, Corvino (the raven), who receives the same treatment from Mosca. The cunning and crafty Mosca sends out one after due fleecing and lets in the next, and thus befools all the three gulls successfully. He assures each one of having the best chances of becoming heir of Volpone's fortunes, and sends each satisfied, without permitting them to see each other. Here lies the craft of the parasite.

We must note here the use by Jonson of the subtle device of hyperbole as an instrument of comedy. Since Mosca has to manage the comic stage at the house of Volpone, it is he who is allowed the benefit of this device. Hyperbole is conventionally the rhetorical device of exaggeration. Since it is used to achieve a certain effect, it should not be taken literally at its face value. In usual practice, hyperbole is used as an ornament to plain speech. Here in Jonson's comedy, it is more functional than decorative; it is an essential part of the dramatic fun. Thus, Mosca's use of hyperbole has special ironic thrust. He exaggerates, for example, Volpone's condition of ill health, but does not do the same in the case of Corbaccio. Jonson's use of hyperbole as a device of rhetoric in *Volpone*, enriches the meaning of the dramatic situation. The hyperbolic intensity of the play's rhetoric increases as the plot complications become more and more involved. Its use is again especially ironic and effective in revealing Mosca's character. Although he plays the servant to all, he is affectionate or loyal to none. It is a business dealing with him. He clothes his moves in fun only to sting his trapped victims.

Among the gulls being befooled by Mosca the most interesting of all, is Mr. Corvino, a rich merchant. He is also the husband of Celia, a beautiful lady of Venice. Mosca announces that his master's hearing is gone. He even declares that his master has only bastard children, those three deformed fools. Encouraged to join the game, Corvino pledges Mosca a share of his inheritance in exchange for his help. Mosca suggests that part of it is his gallant wife's. This makes Corvino to make a quick exit. Now comes another knock on the door. This brings in Lady Would-Be, the wife of the English Knight Sir Politic Would-Be. Volpone tells Mosca to get rid of her, wondering how the "bold English... dare let loose their wives to all encounters." Mosca comments that given the face she is blessed with she cannot but be virtuous. He even makes a hymn to the beauty of Corvino's wife. Volpone resolves to see the lady who is so much praised by Mosca. So, a disguise is needed to deceive the jealous Corvino, who guards his wife with ten spies.

Disguised as mountebank, Volpone finds entry into Corvino's house. Celia's husband rushes from his house, screaming and beating on disguised Volpone, demanding that Volpone leave his house at once. After the crowd disperses in confusion, Volpone and Mosca stagger down to the front of the stage in great distress. Volpone has been wounded by "angry Cupid, bolting from Celia's eyes." He must see her or die a wretched death. Although now the meeting seems almost impossible, Mosca undertakes to turn the trick. The action again shifts in Corvino's house. The raven is furious with Celia for flirting with the disguised Volpone. His rage is stopped by a sudden knock at the door, on which he hustles Celia out of the room with dire consequences. A servant announces the arrival of Signior Mosca. Corvino turns from wrath to smiles hoping to hear the news of Volpone's death. But Mosca dashes his hopes to the ground, telling him that Volpone has instead recovered. The juice that cured him was produced by Voltore and Corbaccio. Now, he says some young woman is needed at once to fully effect the recovery. Mosca rejects Corvino's proposal that a courtesan could be procured for the purpose. He subtly suggests the services of Celia, Corvino's wife.

The third Act opens with the traditional Elizabethan theatrical convention of the soliloquy. Mosca is discovered in the street, soliloquizing on the nature,

number, and the kinds of parasitic fools. As an important device, soliloquy enabled the Elizabethan playwright to comment upon the action of the play as well as to reveal the inner thoughts and feelings of the speaker. In the present case, Jonson employs it as a quiet interlude before the plot begins to hurdle out of the characters' control to a final comic conclusion. Up to this point, as Mosca's attitude suggests, the villains are the complete masters of events. Things are just about to get out of their hands.

Mosca's musings are interrupted by old Corbaccio's son, Bonario (good fellow). Mosca feigns self-pity to overcome the youngman's reluctance for a dialogue with him. After winning over Bonario's sympathy Mosca warns him that his father wants to disinherit him. Bonario begins to suspect him of some trickery. Mosca offers to bring Bonario to witness the deed so that he can prove himself to be honest. The young man follows him with his heart weeping blood in anguish. Meanwhile, to pass time, Volpone watches an interlude by his household fools. A knock then interrupts the playing. That brings the English lady. Lady Would-Be is there to torment Volpone. As he puts it, "The storm comes towards me." She elaborates upon horrors, making Volpone tremble and sweat. She talks out the old man. Only Mosca's appearance saves him from the Lady's torture.

Mosca tells a lie that he saw Sir Politic, the Lady's husband, "rowing upon the water in a gondola, with the most cunning courtesan of Venice." He thus succeeds in sending her away, depriving her, at the same time, the gift she had brought for Volpone. Mosca now enters with Bonario in tow and places him in hiding as a knock is heard at the door. Both await the entrance of Corbaccio, with Bonario in close hiding and Mosca as the welcoming servant. The newcomer, however, turns out to be Corvino, not Corbaccio. Celia stands shrinking by her side. Putting Bonario out of the way, Mosca opens the drapes on Volpone's bed, showing Volpone waiting for Celia. Corvino asks his wife Celia to obey him and go to Volpone's bed. She says she cannot respect the marriage vow to obey him above her honour. Corvino defines honour as "a mere term invented to awe fools." She declares her husband's tactic as sin. Volpone orders Mosca to bring the lamb (Celia) forward for slaughter. He introduces the couple in most cuckolding terms. Celia withdraws, requesting death, but Corvino drags her forward. Mosca

persuades Corvino to leave his wife alone with Volpone. She is left alone to lament being "placed beneath the basest circumstance, and modesty an exile made for money."

Suddenly, the fox leaps from his feigned sickbed and begins to chase. The aging lecher tries to seduce the lady with a song. She remains adamant. He recounts the larges he will give her for obliging him :

*...we will eat such a meal...*

*The heads of parrots, tongues of nightingales,*

*The brains of peacocks and ostriches,*

*Shall be our food....*

Celia takes her innocence as her wealth, and stands steadfast. She asks him if he had a conscience. His reply is, "Tis the beggar's virtue." He finally asks her to yield, or he will force her. At a critical time, Bonario jumps out of his hiding and rescues the lady in danger of losing her honour. Now the old rascal cries, "I am unmasked, unspirited, undone, betrayed to beggary, to infamy." Feigning a wretched state, Mosca enters and offers to let Volpone cut his throat. Before Volpone has time to take Mosca seriously, Mosca proposes a double suicide. Their lamentations are interrupted by a knock at the door. Mosca feels the branding iron of the felon burning into his forehead. Volpone takes to his bed; for the first time his suffering is not entirely feigned. The door opens on Corbaccio.

Mosca invents another lie, and tells Corbaccio that his son, Bonario, by accident has come to know of his purpose. Thereupon he came here with an open sword and wounded Volpone. Hearing how his son had come to kill him, he declares that his son would be disinherited. At this point, Voltore enters the stage unnoticed. But Mosca suddenly discovers his presence. Accused by Voltore of his double loyalty, Mosca at once thinks of a new trick - to call Bonario hear the deed of his disinheritance so that he killed his father. This way, Mosca thinks, he will be able to remove Corbaccio from the way. Meanwhile, Bonario seizes the lady, wounds her, and makes her swear that Volpone raped her. That pretext would accuse Corbaccio, defame Volpone, and ruin Voltore's hopes. Corbaccio,

who has been counting Volpone's treasure, is hustled out the door by Voltore. They must find Corvino to tell him the news. Volpone and Mosca have nothing left to do but pray for the success of their latest dodge.

With Act IV, comes the subplot involving Sir Politic Would-Be, Lady Would-Be, and Peregrine. Sir Politic instructs his young companion, a fellow Englishman, about the Italian manners, saying that Englishmen never change their habits when they travel abroad. When they are engaged in inspecting the diary notes of Sir Politic, Lady Would-Be comes. She has on her mind Mosca's lie that her husband was rowing in a gondola with an Italian courtesan. She thinks the young Englishman is that lady disguised as boy. She calls him a prostitute, a female devil in a male exterior. Before the encounter reaches the boiling point, Mosca arrives on the scene. Lady Would-Be declares her injury to Mosca and calls Peregrine naughty names. Mosca explains her mistake, and she changes her attitude to the young man. After a blithe apology, she exits on Mosca's arm, leaving Peregrine bewildered. He swears to take a comic revenge on Sir Politic.

Then follows the court case, where with Celia and Bonario on one side, and the rest on the side of Mosca, accusations and counter-accusations follow. Witnesses are produced by both sides, the case is argued by the two sides, finally the innocents losing it. The innocents were foolish enough to think that Venetian courts dispensed justice when they merely administered the law. Jonson is obviously satirizing the courts and their quibble about words, ignoring the truth. Volpone confesses to Mosca that cozening the court in such a grand manner was worth "more than if I had enjoyed the wench." After attaining the success in the trial, Volpone now develops a new plot. Mosca is to put on an expensive gown, take up pen and ink, and begin taking an inventory of Volpone's hoard. If anyone should ask after Volpone's body, the fools are to say it was corrupted. Volpone will "get up behind the curtain, on a stool," and watch the circus unfold. Suddenly, as usual, someone knocks at the door. It is the vulture. Voltore is happy to see Mosca taking inventory, but he becomes suspicious of his new garb. Old Corbaccio also comes on the scene. Then follows the third gull, Corcino. Also appears unexpectedly Lady Would-Be. As all get together, they see Volpone's will, and discover "Mosca the heir." The gulls are stunned and show violent reactions.

Each of the greedy characters wanting to become Volpone's heir is told off by Mosca, using one trick or another. When all have been successfully evaded, Volpone comes out of his hiding place and showers praise on his parasite for his brilliance as a trickster. If he could only disguise himself and follow the gulls, he could further enjoy his triumph. Mosca readily agrees to fit his master in a rare disguise. It is an outfit of a police officer. Mosca tells Volpone to look for curses. Volpone replies, "The fox fares ever best when he is curst."

Simultaneously, proceeds the sub-plot further. Peregrine, disguised and accompanied by three merchants, enters Sir Politic's house. His design is merely to frighten, not to harm, Sir Politic. Peregrine, now disguised as merchant, tells that Peregrine was a Venetian spy who reported Sir Politic's plot "to sell the state of Venice to the Turk." Sir Politic becomes distraught. He explains how his "plot" was drawn from playbooks and only put into his notebook. Merchant Peregrine offers to smuggle Sir Politic aboard a boat to escape capture. The three merchants, as planned, now burst upon the scene. Sir Politic, turned into a turtle as disguise, is walked upon by the merchants for joke. Later, he pulls off his disguise and laughs at him. After the merchants depart, Sir Politic looks for his lady, and is told that she, too, is in need of a physic. He determines to shun this place and clime forever.

The scene now reverts to the main plot again. Volpone and Mosca enter, disguised, each congratulating the other on his appearance. When Volpone leaves for a moment to gather news from the court, Mosca soliloquizes, "My fox is out of his hole, and ere he shall re-enter, I'll make him languish in his borrowed case." Unless Volpone came to terms is meanwhile, Mosca dismisses the fools and servants for the day and resolves to "bury him or gain by him.... To cozen him of all were but a cheat well placed." Corbaccio and Corvino, meanwhile, are discovered in a Venetian street. They are talking about the court sentence to be pronounced on Bonario and Celia. Volpone approaches the two gentlemen in his police disguise. He congratulates them on "the sudden good dropped down upon you from old Volpone." Their old indignation returns, and they begin to beat Volpone. Both gulls leave in a huff, but Voltore comes on to take their place. He is grumbling about Mosca's knavery. When Volpone begins to supplicate for some of the rents from a tenement house owned by the deceased Volpone,

Voltore vents his spleen on the head of Volpone. With a parting insult, Volpone runs for the next corner. Now, Volpone encounters Corbaccio and Corvino. He tells them that Mosca has a cozening nose. He expresses surprise that such a witty group could be fooled by a parasite. After a parting remark about the valour of cuckolds, Volpone gleefully escapes the gulls' reach.

Just before their arrival at the Senate chamber, Volpone and Voltore meet once more. Volpone tells the vulture that he must be the heir. It is not within the wit of man, he says, to cozen so great a lawyer. Volpone is hounded into the courtroom by the seething gulls. The whole cast is now assembled at the Senate to play out the game. Voltore changes his argument, accuses Mosca of the whole mischief, and pleads for mercy for the innocent Bonario and Celia. The court is shocked at the news of Volpone's demise. But Volpone is discovered wandering in the street in a fearful state. At that moment, the three fools of his household come upon the disguised Volpone. He is shocked to learn that Mosca has dismissed them. He asks them to find Mosca and send him to the court. This brings us to the last scene of the play, where all tricks are exposed, and the tricksters are trapped. After everybody stands exposed in the court, the court sentences them all with due punishment. Because Mosca is without a noble blood, his sentence is to be perpetual prisoner in the galleys of Venice. Volpone's substance is given to the hospital for incurables, and he is to be put in chains till he be "sick and lame indeed." Voltore is banished. Corbaccio's estate is given to his son, and he is sent to a monastery. Corvino will be rowed about Venice with a cap of ass's ears instead of horns. Celia is given her dowry and returned to her father.

Jonson's writing in the classical tradition thus, structures his play observing the unity of action, unity of place, and unity of time. The only thing that seems a surprise is the subplot in the play. It does not very well blend with the main plot. It only adds something to the satire on English society. But satire does not remain within the structure of the play. But for this subplot, the play's action is wholly unified. Another thing that undercuts the power of comedy in the play, its unified impact, is the too complicated nature of the action. It consists of intrigue upon intrigue, involving the audience in a sort of puzzle which it is hard

to keep track of. Every scene is rescued by a sudden knock, which furthers the action. But these surprise appearances undercut the realistic fabric of the plot. Also undercuts its otherwise powerful impact the justice distributed at the end. The poetic justice meted out to the plotters and tricksters is too neat to square up with the spirit of realism intended to inform the play's plot structure. These shortcomings notwithstanding, *Volpone* remains one of the powerful comedies of its age.

#### **19.4 LET US SUM UP**

*Volpone* has five acts. *Volpone* takes place in seventeenth-century, over the course of one day. *Volpone*, a venation nobleman, has no relative to make his heir; he must name someone his beneficiary. While Corvino threatens his wife Celia with closer incarceration. *Volpone* sings to Mosca of Celia's beauty and his desire. Mosca hatches a plot to secure Celia for his master.

#### **19.5 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. Discuss in detail the structure of *Volpone*.
2. How story develops in the play *Volpone*?
3. Evaluate the plot of *Volpone*.

#### **19.6 SUGGESTED READING**

*Volpone* : Plot Overview. Sparknotes.com

Knowlton, E.C; "The Plots of Ben Jonson". Jstor.com

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2913432>.

[www.gradesaver.com](http://www.gradesaver.com)

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**COURSE No.111**

**DRAMA-I**

**LESSON No. 20**

**M.A. ENGLISH**

**BEN JONSON**

**UNIT - IV**

**VOLPONE**

## **VOLPONE AS MORAL SATIRE**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 20.1 Introduction
- 20.2 Objectives
- 20.3 Volpone as moral Satire
- 20.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 20.5 Examination Oriented Questions
- 20.6 Suggested Reading

### **20.1 INTRODUCTION**

Reading through Ben Jonson's prose in his *Discoveries*, *the Dedications*, and the *Letters*, one becomes aware of the strong moral basis of his writings. His drama, too, has the same moral basis as we find in his prose. The following passage from *Timber: or Discoveries; Made upon Men and Matter* sums up that moral basis which informs his entire work, drama, poetry, prose alike :

*A man should study other things, not to covet, not to feare, not to repent him: To make his Base such, as no Tempest shall shake him: to be secure of all opinion; and pleasing to himself, even for that, wherein he displeaseth others. For the worst opinion gotten for doing well, should delight us: would'st not thou be just, but for fame; thou ought'st to be it with infamy: Hee that would have his vertue published, is not the servant of vertue, but glory.*

While in his dramatic works, we find Jonson a realist by principle, in his prose works we find direct statements stating his beliefs as well as the principles themselves from which were derived his criticisms of contemporary society and literature as well as the attitude to his material which sets him apart from his contemporaries. Ben Jonson had a deliberate schooling in objectivity. He persistently subjected his imagination to the evidence of the actual. These mental habits of Jonson constitute the counterpart in the domain of art that thorough principling which permeates his art. In the growth of his dramatic art, his theory and criticism both played an important part. Jonson is greatly separated from his contemporaries in that he seldom enters the twilight region of romance. His art is sharply purposed, which is not afflicted by the popular practices of the Elizabethan stage.

## **20.2 OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this lesson is to make the learners able to examine *Volpone* as moral satire.

## **20.3 VOLPONE AS MORAL SATIRE**

Jonson's province as dramatist is the contemporary society, its social and moral follies. He closely concentrates in his own province upon the reality around him. He always strives for more and more precision in detail, which make his comedy highly specialized. As a dramatist, he accepts certain terms of reference, always limiting the background of his plays against which the comedy is to take place. Thus, his plays are marked by a self-contained universe made up of just those elements that are freed from all further implications. Compared to Shakespeare's late comedies and Middleton's latest tragic-comedies, Jonson's social satire even at its severest, one far more earnest in tone. But the scope of his most representative comedy is rather limited, in comparison with theirs, to a narrow, sharp focusing on an immediate area of experience. His treatment of his material is, however more scientific than theirs, much more selective than theirs. The endeavour of his comedy is to present moral and psychological truth more and more nearly in terms of actuality. It attempts to eliminate more and more thoroughly the element of the subjective.

Since, Ben Jonson was a satirist and a moralist first and dramatist later, he

did never dramatize himself, and it was with some difficulty that he dramatized anything else. Had it not been for his age, which predominantly expressed itself in drama, Ben Jonson would have written his satires in more direct poetic and prose forms like Pope and Swift. Those forms would have suited his specific purpose of moral satire much better than did the dramatic. There is for sure, a deeply inherent non-dramatic principle in him. This principle helps formulate a proper approach to the study of his moral satire. Giving precedence to dramatic form and its conventions and practices would, in fact, do injustice to Jonson's art as a moral satirist. It is important, therefore, that his comedies are studied as moral satires in dramatic form rather than as dramas with satirical or moral tinge. The difference made out here may seem superficial, but it makes an important difference in the understanding of his art.

While making a study of Jonson's art, it is very important that a choice is made of the approach to be adopted for making that study. The reason for this necessity is that the scope of his art is too wide to be included in one continuous movement of the mind. Another reason for this necessity is that his conscious and determined reference to principle introduces inconsistencies and conflicts which are not there in the works of his contemporaries. We may explore his work, perhaps justly assessing the parts. We may also subject our imagination to each word we encounter in entire work in all variety of pattern and purpose. Looking at the spectrum of his work we come across the poet of the festive comedies, such as *Every Man in His Humour* and *Epicone*, or *the Silent Woman*. We then come across the poet of the jovial and virile observation of *Bartholomew Fair*, *The New Inn*, *The Staple of News*, *The Magnetic Lady*. And then we see that the poet of these two categories is not quite the same person as the humour theorist of *Every Man Out of His Humour*, of the sharper prologues and inductions. Nor is he the poet of the Donne - like and unexpected love songs. Nor is any of these the man in whom a *saeva indignation*, disciplined by that same subjection of fact to the true *virtue ordinate*, made of the satirist at one and at the same time a Roman like Juvenal and an Italian like Machiavelli.

And yet all these men are one man. We see him informing, by his spirit, all this variety of work. Poet, scholar, or satirist, it is the same Jonson, the

discipliner of all that "sufflaminanda erant". He is the same critic of life and letters, driven perhaps into too great severity, both as critic and as poet, in his contempt for sensation and sentiment. He is the same rough talker with the touch of swagger, the man of infinite humility to his God and equal haughtiness to man. And when all this has been said not even half of Jonson has been described.

Ben Jonson's *Volpone, or The Fox*, is considered his most successful play, a masterpiece of moral satire, a sublimely simple and homogeneous work. It captures the mood of purposed evil. The compact flawlessness of the first four Acts is only equaled or surpassed in Jonson's age by his own two succeeding comedies. Moreover, there stirs in this play something that we hardly come across in Jonson's other works: The promise continually upon the verge of fulfilment, of that passionate obsession in the author with the figure of his own creating that is familiar to us in nearly all of his contemporaries, and is utterly akin to Jonson's detached moralists art. Ever and again about the figure of Volpone there moves, indefinable and unseizable, this sense of an imagination kindling, not to critical denunciation, but to oblivion of critical positions, to identifying of itself with the passion and the power of its own creation. To Ben Jonson, it is entirely impossible to allow this kind of passion, since Volpone was originally begotten of his moral satire. But also equally impossible for Jonson is to impoverish him, to strip away a certain magnificence of daring. This daring is Volpone's high insolence with which, unaware, he himself has fallen in love. When the moment comes, in the fifth act, to reverse and unmask Volpone, when he should have been driven into ignominious terms, we are suddenly made to realize what hold this magnificent insolence has laid upon the writer's imagination. Like Shakespeare's Falstaff in *Henry IV*, when the moment arrives for Volpone's dropping, he almost wrecks the play.

Mosca, Volpone's tricky servant, and perhaps Jonson himself, realizes rather too late, as does Shakespeare in *Henry IV*, that Volpone is no slave-minded craven whom he is blackmailing. Instead, the person is an aristocrat whose high spirit he has failed to gauge. With just one last terrific gesture, utterly unbecoming a comedy, in fact precipitating it into tragedy, Volpone pulls down disaster upon himself and his opponent alike: "I limmed this night-piece and it was my best."

Thus, *Volpone*, the pride of Lodovico, himself dictates his last free gesture. And he withdraws, no way disabled in mind or spirit, a Venetian magnifico still. Never again did perhaps Jonson come so near feeling for a character of his own creation an admiration like the one, he gave to the two great contemporaries whom he revered. One can safely say that the closing scenes of *Volpone* are his comment on the Jacobean ideal of an aristocrat, his characteristic variant of the theme "I am Duchess of Malfi still."

It may sound paradoxical, even perverse, but it is true that from the very opening lines of *Volpone*'s slow-moving monologue, we are haunted by the splendour of the play, a splendour which is symbolized superficially by the gold and massive plate of the legacy-hunters. But this splendour finds its antitype in the depths below depths of evil into which the characters coldly and resolutely plunge. Cruel and ruthless as these characters are, they are intended by the dramatist to appear repulsive and contemptible. But the very solidity of the atmosphere of evil lends a greatness to their tenacity and their resolution. Ben Jonson penetrates, by the supreme power of his imagination, behind the melodramatic semblances with which tradition had invested the Machiavellian plotter. He expresses the cold concentration, the flawless courage of these evil characters, which was major quantity of the portrait Machiavelli drew. It is no surprise that *Volpone* rivals for posterity even *The Alchemist*. And to many critics, it seems the supreme reach of Ben Jonson's poetic power in moral satire. Here is an example of the power of that poetic satire presented in dramatic form :

*Good morning to the day; and, next, my gold;*

*Open the shrine, that I may see my saint.*

*Haile the worlds soule, and mine. More glad then is*

*The teeming earthe to see the lang'd-for sunne*

*Peep through the hornes of the celestial ram,*

*Am I to view the splendour, darkening his:*

*That, lying here, amongst my other hoords,*

*Shew'st like a flame, by night; or like the day  
Strook out of chaos, when all darkness fled  
Unto the centre, O, thou sonne of SOL,  
(But brighter then thy father) let me kisse,  
With adoration, thee, and every relique  
Of sacred treasure, in this blessed roome.  
Well did wise Poets, by thy glorious name,  
Title that age, which they would have the best;  
Thou being the best of things: and far transcending  
All stile of joy, in children, parents, friends,  
Or any other waking dreame on earth.*

*... Dear Saint,*

*Riches, the dumb god, that giv'st all men tongues :  
That canst do nought, and yet mak'st men doe all things;  
The price of soules; even hell, with thee to boot,  
Is made worth heaven! Thou art vertue, fame,  
Honour, and all things else! Who can get thee,  
He shall be noble, valiant, honest, wise.*

In *Volpone*, as well as in *The Alchemist*, and other great comedies of Jonson, he has noticed and analysed whatever his contemporaries depicted from the life of Jacobean London. In fact, quite often he has done it a little sooner than they did. His picture of contemporary life is so full, of thoughts, habits and discoveries of his age, that comparison immediately suggests itself with two of his contemporaries who rival him in breadth. These contemporaries are Middleton and Shakespeare. Like Middleton, Jonson comprehends in his picture most of the

forms of life to be found in the London of Jacobean age. He distinguishes people's habits and processes. He reflects their background, their daily life, their eccentricities and the peculiarities of their gestures and speech. But Jonson does it all with this difference, that where Middleton only records, he records and criticizes or satirises simultaneously. Like Shakespeare, Jonson gathers up in his plays the findings of all contemporary exploration. But Jonson does it with this difference that, where Shakespeare transmutes all into an eternal and a universal expression, Jonson analyses all into a no less permanent, but far from universal, critical record. The material of Jonson's plays must remain, in the last event, a critical record of his times, unkindled as it is by passion. So far as the form and the structural technique are concerned, critics have recognised in Jonson a supreme and self-constituted artist. The spirit that animates the people whose movements make that form, remains, except for the singular case of *Volpone*, critical and highly undramatic.

When all is said, however, no one can fail to recognize that it is the conscious critical purpose of Ben Jonson as dramatist which constitutes a point of distinction between him and his contemporaries. All the dramatists of the age, including the greatest of all, Shakespeare, were artists by instinct, theatre-men by profession, and moralists, if at all, by fits and starts. As and when they outgrew the moralist, and they did quite often, their work was that of artists conforming naturally to the popular and professional demands upon their art. It is for this reason that their plays reflect clearly not only their own preoccupations but also the mood and temper of their age. In the case of Ben Jonson alone, it was the moral satirist rather than the professional dramatist, who always came first. This priority may be just by a short length, but it is always and unmistakably there. Not that Jonson was not a considerable artist; he decidedly was. But his peculiarity remained in the fact that his ethical principles predominated all the aspects of his art. These principles not only controlled the subject-matter of his art but, transmuted into aesthetic theories, controlled also its form.

We do not require the evidence of Jonson's poems and his masks to indicate how much of his considerable artistic instinct was suppressed and disciplined into other forms by his conscious moral and satiric purposes. We do not require this

extra evidence because there is enough evidence of rebellion that was nearly successful in the transformation of his mood in *Volpone*. Some critics think that Jonson perhaps crippled himself as an artist by the moral imposition on his dramatic art. As an evidence to it they speak of his divided mind. At the same time, they concede, that his deeply divided mind is at least half concealed by the unified surface of purpose that is presented to us by his artistic compositions. Nevertheless, it is further argued, that it is this very fundamental division which is responsible for the reader's inability to conceive of his work as a whole. Whatever be at last the effect upon his ultimate achievement, one thing is decidedly certain that the severity of his aesthetic standard, coming as early in the Jacobean age as it did, was of an immense value in giving a standard of subject-matter, thought and structure to serious critical comedy.

Ben Jonson's contemporaries may have in the beginning disapproved of his theories. They may not have approved of his high-handed imposition of classical norms. But the effect of his practice came out indubitable. It does not mean that there was any considerable imitation of his comedy. In the case of his technique, the question of imitation would not even arise, for that would have been unprofitable in any case. But the strength and severity of his hard-knit drama had been demonstrated from the appearance of his very first comedy. Dramatists like Middleton, who were born with the natural instinct for easy, graceful plotting and were unencumbered by purposes ethical or aesthetic, evolved their own technique very much more readily than was Jonson able to do. But it has been considered arguable that, without the experience of Jonson's tougher texture, the *Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, and the grimmer comedy of Middleton would have been much less serious stuff, much less close-knit, and much less ironical.

Jonson's greatness as satiric poet is, therefore, incompletely reflected in his dramatic compositions. His is a greatness of character, not only, nor principally, of imagination, and much less of dramatic artistry. Like many people, he unconsciously characterized himself when he wrote of the man to whom his reference most naturally turned. What he said of Bacon can, in fact, be repeated of himself, albiet with some modifications :

*I have, and do reverence him for the greatnesse, that was only proper to himself, in that he seem'd to me ever, by his work one of the greatest men, and most worthy of admiration, that had been in many Ages. In his adversity I ever prayed, that God would give him strength: for Greatness he could not want. Neither could I condole in a word, or syllable for him; as knowing no Accident could do harm to vertue; but rather help to make it manifest.*

The peculiar virtue attributed here to Bacon was shared by Jonson himself. Jonson's most savage comedy *Volpone*, shows his virtue as a moral satirist. Despite its Italian title and majority of characters, it does not seek to reduce men to beasts or mere concepts. Its virtuous characters, Celia and Bonario, who respectively represent Heavenly and Good, may act like ciphers and may mouth moral platitudes, but they do leave us wondering how else uprightness might express itself in such a singularly naughty world. The Venice of *Volpone* is anything but serene. Its merchants are unscrupulous and self-seeking, its husbands mercenary and violent, its lawyers mendacious and corrupt, and visitors to it mistake its dissimulation for sophistication.

Jonson, who was much given to declarations and manifestos of literary intent, insisted that comedy had been considered by the Greeks to be equal in dignity to tragedy. Comic dramatists, he added, were held to be moral instructors "no less than the Tragicks ." His complaint was that the modern (of his time) theatre-goers had consistently failed to grasp the point that "the moving of laughter" was not essential to comedy, whereas "equity, truth, perspicuity, and candour" were. His prologue to the second version ( that is with characters of English names ) of *Every Man in His Humour*, equally represents an attempt to define the qualities of his own dramas in the face of debased popular taste. He claims to hate the kind of play that makes "a child now sawdled, to proceed Man, and then shoot up, in one beard and weed, / past three score years", and that which "with three rusty swords" re-enacts "York and Lancaster's long jars". His plays will have no apologetic choruses, no scenic effects, and no ominous noises off. They will rather employ

*... deeds and language, such as men do use,  
And persons, such as comedy would choose,  
When she would show an image of the times,  
And sport with human follies not with crimes.  
Except we make them such, by loving still  
Our popular errors, when we know they're ill.  
I mean such errors as you'll all confess,  
By laughing at them, they deserve no less...*

This clearly announces the advent of a theatrical new age, an age which will dispose of artifice and substitute plain words, one which will subvert rather than confront, one which will allow that drama can represent a shared and deficient humanity rather than elevate and isolate the tragic hero.

As indicated at the earliest in his "English" version of *Every Man in His Humour*, drama, for Jonson, was more than simply sport with human folly. It was, to him, a precise study of the kind of whimsical excess which disturb the steady and reasoned development of human affairs. Excess also determines the nature of Jonson's most subtle, various and energetic comedies, *Volpone*, *Epicene or The Silent Woman*, and *The Alchemist*. In the world of *Volpone*, gold is said to overturn the metaphors of pagan legend and Christian Scripture alike. It usurps splendours of nature and the joys of love, and even renders hell "with thee to boot" worth heaven. At last, the Venetian justice prevails. The moral satire overtly controls the play's structure. The interest remains sharply focused on the nature of follies, their respective debasing effects, and their appropriate punishments.

#### **20.4 LET US SUM UP**

*Volpone*, disguised as a didactic comedy, is actually an intelligent and cynical satire that compels the audience to rethink their moral expectations. It is a play that takes on the form of a comical satire as well as a mortality play. It also

adapts the features of a fable, and in that it strives to teach a moral.

### **20.5 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. Discuss *Volpone* as a moral fable.
2. Evaluate *Volpone* as a comical satire.
3. Examine *Volpone* as a cynical satire.

### **20.6 SUGGESTED READING**

Karim, Sajjadul. "Ben Jonson's *Volpone* : An Unconventional and Innovative Jacobean Comedy." *IIUC Studies* 8 : (2011), and 27.38.

Bay, Lynn. Ben Jonson's "*Volpone*" - Satire?" Seminar Paper. Google Books 2009. [http: 11 books.google.co.in./books' isbn : 3656759065](http://11books.google.co.in/books?isbn:3656759065)

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**COURSE No.111**

**DRAMA-I**

**LESSON No. 21**

**M.A. ENGLISH**

**BEN JONSON  
VOLPONE**

**UNIT - IV**

## **JONSON'S STYLE AND TECHNIQUE**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 21.1 Introduction
- 21.2 Objectives
- 21.3 Jonson's Style and Technique
- 21.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 21.5 Examination Oriented Questions
- 21.6 Suggested Reading

### **21.1 INTRODUCTION**

Ben Jonson's style and technique as a dramatist has been a subject of continuous debate among critics. Although most of his contemporaries are conveniently defined, in terms of their dramatic style and technique, as Elizabethan or Jacobean, he remains a difficult proposition when it comes to putting a classified critical jacket on him. Just as he was in his body, so did he emerge in his work, too huge to wear any classified jacket. Being the most learned among his contemporaries, he did not, without giving a long thought, take to the conventions and practices popular in the theatre of his times. His reputation as a learned poet and dramatist had come up quite early. In the same century in which Jonson wrote, we find John Dryden, the leading dramatist of the later seventeenth century called the Restoration period, making the following comments: "As for Jonson, ...I think him the most learned

and judicious writer which any theatre ever had.... He was deeply conversant in the Ancients, both Greek and Latin and he borrowed boldly from them.... If I would compare him with Shakespeare, I must acknowledge him the more correct poet, but Shakespeare the greater wit. Shakespeare was the Homer, or father of our dramatic poets; Jonson was the Virgil, the pattern of elaborate writing; I admire him, but I love Shakespeare." With his vast vision and plasticity of technique, Shakespeare adopted the popular dramatic tradition of his time. He produced a poetic drama which was not indebted to any classical source for its correctness. In his hands, drama developed, out of the pressure of its own vitality, its own kind of form and unity. Shakespeare's style and technique in his plays are characteristically English. There is nothing foreign about them. The same cannot, however, he said about the style and technique of Jonson's plays.

## **21.2 OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this lesson is to introduce the learners with dramatic style and technique of Ben Jonson with special reference to *Volpone*.

## **21.3 JONSON'S STYLE AND TECHNIQUE**

Known for his vast learning and wide interest in classical literature of ancient Greece and Italy, Jonson approached his dramatic art from quite a different point of view. With him, the theory of drama came first, its practice later. He knew in advance what the function of comedy was, and what sort of humour was proper to it. He knew the rules of dramatic structure and he understood what the principle of decorum meant. He knew how the principle of three unities was essential for a dramatic plot. He knew all there was to know about the ancient classical theory of drama and its practice by the great masters. Similarly, when he wrote plays based on Roman history, he knew what Roman sources to consult and which phases of Roman life to refer to. Thus, he was, unlike Shakespeare, imitative, pedantic, and supremely self-confident in his learned art. Jonson is the one great example in English of the Renaissance humanist, in the narrowest sense of that term, who turned poet and dramatist.

If Ben Jonson were only an imitator of the classical dramatic style and technique, he would have been remembered more as a literary curiosity than as

a great literary figure. But he was also a rugged Englishman with a sardonic taste for the varied and colourful London life of his day. He also had a boisterous and even a cruel sense of humour which manifested itself in his best comedies with a bizarre brilliance. He showed enormous vitality and impressive originality even when he followed most closely the classical models or applied rules derived from classical theory or practice. In addition to all this, Jonson also had the quality which is not often associated with those already mentioned. He had, that is, a delicate artfulness in the handling of such elements of style as word and image. This ability enabled him to produce, as part of his dramatic style, as well as of non-dramatic poetry, such well - remembered examples of perfect verbal patterning as "Drink to me only with thine eyes," "Slow, slow fresh fount," and "Queen and huntress, chaste and fair."

Thus, the contrast between Jonson and Shakespeare is not a simple one, between the Renaissance humanist obsessed by classical rule and precedent and the "natural genius" inventing his own style of writing with the help of a popular tradition. Jonson's sardonic view of human nature owed nothing to his classical sources. Similarly, his lyrical gift, even though it was partly stimulated by classical epigram and the Greek Anthology, reflected an important aspect of his not altogether classical personality. In the latter part of his career, Jonson was the leader of an important literary group and, in fact, something of a literary dictator. He was actually the first significant example of the species in English literature. Although time has established the superiority of Shakespeare over Jonson in the art of drama, it was not so clear to the critics and playgoers of the Elizabethan age. Jonson had a claim on literary men that Shakespeare did not have. He had the ability or arrogance to bully critics into admiration by the force of his literary claims and the supreme self-confidence in pressing them. It took long time in England to develop a critical theory adequate enough to cope with the richness and subtlety of Shakespeare's dramatic style. In the case of Jonson, there was no such difficulty. His dramatic style could be proved good by the available critical apparatus derived from the classical sources.

In his *An Essay of Dramatic Poesy* (1688), Dryden provided a model analysis of a Jonson play, *Epicoene* or *The Silent Woman*. "I will take the pattern of a perfect

play form Ben Jonson, who was a careful and learned observer of the dramatic laws." It was not possible to analyse a Shakespeare play in this fashion, because he drew upon the images of nature "not laboriously, but luckily." In Dryden's view, "he needed not the spectacles of books to read nature; he looked inwards, and found her there." Jonson was thus, more respected in the seventeenth century because his dramatic style was based on those very principles that provided the norm for critical analysis.

Jonson's very first successful play, *Every Man in His Humour*, gives a fairly good idea of his dramatic style and technique. It is a comedy of intrigue which owes much to the Roman comedy. But it is also highly original so far as its tone and manner are concerned. His intention to present a satiric picture of his age is quite clear. His style marked by cool irony comes handy for making an exposure of the contemporary human follies and foibles. As he declares, his dramatic style was that of a realist. In his Prologue to the play, he attacks both the themes and the conventions of contemporary drama. He holds his own style superior to the popular dramatic style of his contemporaries, including Shakespeare. As he insists, he would not "serve the ill customs of his age." The following excerpt from the Prologue clearly explains the style and technique Jonson devised for his satirical comedy modeled on the classical precedent of the Graeco-Roman tradition:

*To make a child, now swaddled, to proceed  
Man, and then shoot up, in one beard, and weed,  
Past threescore years: or, with three rusty swords,  
Fight over York and Lancaster's long jars,  
And in the tiring house bring wounds to scars.  
He rather prays, you will be pleased to see  
One such today as other plays should be,  
Where neither chorus wafts you o'er the seas,  
Nor creaking throne comes down, the boys to please,*

*Nor nimble squib is seen, to make afeard.  
The gentlewomen, nor rolled bullet heard  
To say, it thunders, nor tempestuous drum  
Rumbles, to tell you when the storm doth come;  
But deeds and languages such as men do use,  
And persons such as comedy would choose  
When she would show an image of the times  
And sport with human follies, not with crimes.*

This amply elucidates Jonson's realistic dramatic style, which uses the language, people actually speak, which depicts people and places from familiar everyday life, and which dwells on common human follies rather than uncommon events that occur on unknown islands. Decidedly, this is the language of a conscious reformer of the theatre. In his view, his style of dramatic writing is both artistically better and morally superior compared to what was being produced on the popular stage in his time. In technique also, he was to be a more correct dramatist, more contemporary in theme, and more improving in effect.

The function of comedy, in the classical style of Ben Jonson, was to reprove human foibles by holding them up to ridicule. He adapted the old explanation of human character by the four humours to develop "comedy of humours," a comedy, that is, in which each character is seen to be dominated, even obsessed, by on particular quirk. The effectiveness of Jonson's dramatic style lies in its component of satire. It is through the power of satire that he intended to improve the moral health of contemporary England. His zeal for moral improvement was so strong that he did not mind being brutal and ruthless in his satire on social shams. As he himself declared,

*... I will scourge those apes  
And to these courteous eyes oppose a mirror,  
As large as is the stage whereon we act,*

*Where they shall see the time's deformity*

*Anatomized in every nerve and sinew*

*With constant courage, and contempt of fear.*

Jonson never realized that his theory of humours was at cross purposes with his dramatic philosophy of realism. A character made to represent a humour is bound to be a caricature. It can never be presented as a fully realized human being. It will remain as a fop, a blusterer, a jealous husband, and anxious father, an uncouth country cousin aping city manners, a hypocritical Puritan, or some other type. A type meant to represent a humour is seldom an individual character, a specific human being. He is too general to be a particular. Such characters are, for sure, not life-like. They will serve the purpose of underlining a social or moral oddity in human character or creating comedy. They will also serve the purpose of satire, lending themselves easily to the satirist's ironic treatment. They would serve all these purposes, but they would never become the real people we come across and converse with. An element of the puppet will always be there in such a characterization. Thus, in Jonson's style, comedy becomes satire, character becomes oddity, evil becomes culpable folly.

There is humour enough in Jonson's comedy. He presents his obsessed characters with wit, very much a component of his style. There is also in this style liveliness of comic extravagance, even cleverly manipulated absurdity. At times, comedy in the hands of Jonson degenerates into farce - low comedy. It is however, splendid farce, which deals with ridiculous situations merely, but with ridiculous situations as they arise from ridiculous elements in human nature. In some respects, this aspect of Jonson's style is Dickensian. But the big difference is that when Dickens laughs, the overtones are humanitarian. On the other hand, Jonson's laughter is sterner. Behind his laughter there always is felt his own enormous self-confidence, which at times rises to arrogance.

Although for a time distracted from his standardized style of satirical comedy, involved as he had become in the war of theatres going on in his time, Jonson soon returned to his favourite type of work and wrote *Volpone*, or *The Fox*. His distraction into controversial writing had confined his satirical talent. Now it came

into play once again. His didactic style, demanding moral enforcement by striking at the opposite of each moral represented by one or another character of humour, took charge again. One direct consequence of Jonson's commitment to moral satire was to undermine the role of incident in his comedy. Instead, there emerged in his kind of satirical comedy greater reliance on dialogue. Whatever action there is in his comedy, it is in the nature of intrigue often leading to farcical scenes, such as Volpone's tricking of Celia into submission. Volpone does not succeed, for in Jonson no trick is allowed to reach a quick conclusion, there always is a surprise knock at the door. Thus, characters come and go to thwart an intrigue or to initiate a new one. And the characters are exposed of their respective follies as much through dialogue as through their intrigues. Since, the entire force of his comedy depends on the encounters among characters, dialogue has to carry the entire burden of the comedy.

Jonson's merit as a dramatist, therefore, does not rest with the invention of incident, or landscape, but with the power of dialogue. He makes it powerful by making use of rhetorical devices. He remains among his contemporaries a master of dramatic rhetoric. Rhetoric meant much more to the Elizabethans than it means to us today. Jonson employed poetic dialogue to create irony, the power of which is directly proportionate to its rhetorical elaboration. In *Volpone*, for example, what is said is not so much important as the manner of saying it. When Mosca uses formal and elevated language to praise the unworthy, the effect of this rhetorical embellishment is ironic. Also, Mosca's agility in employing ambiguities for persuasion is a highly developed rhetorical skill. In short, Jonson's style enriches the meaning of the dramatic situation. Viewed alone, the speeches of Volpone are stripped of their power. Only in relation to the action of the play can the audience hope to realize their literary value.

Jonson's satire is not limited to hitting at moral failings alone; it also hits at literary failings as well. Along with the devices of irony and ambiguity, therefore, the stylistic device of allusion, even in the form of parody, remains a powerful weapon of Jonsonian comedy. Parodying or burlesquing goes on side by side with ridiculing and exposing. Very early in *Volpone*, for instance, the interlude performed by the household fools of Volpone, namely the eunuch, dwarf and

fool, is a parody of the king of comic relief injected between the Acts of a morality play. Jonson devises his dialogue as an imitation of the false pace of such verse, at the same time demonstrating his own command of the past literature. He takes the opportunity to show his contempt also for the policies of the Puritans by arguing for the Pythagorean rule over that of reformed religion. At the end of the show, the fools suggest that it is best to suffer neither rule. As Mosca's song indicates, the fool's condition is the best:

*Fools they are the only nation*

*Worth men's envy or admiration,*

.....

*E'en his face begeth laughter,*

*And he speaks truth free from slaughter.*

Since, the Fool lives outside the social order, he can speak the truth because he is not held responsible for what he says. Mosca has deliberately chosen for himself the status of a fool.

Ben Jonson being a man of classical learning as well as an accomplished man of the theatre, he deliberately satirizes here the poor professional players of the traveling morality drama. It gives him a chance to show his theatrical superiority. Here is a highbrow dramatist ridiculing the pedestrian practices of his age. His larding of the dialogue of the present interlude with Greek names serves to show his familiarity with the classics. Thus, allusion becomes a powerful weapon of the privileged. He uses it to browbeat his rival practitioners.

Jonson's theatrical or dramatic technique is highly dependent on costumes and animal names, both of which contribute to the success of his comedy. For instance, the leading character in the play is named Volpone, which in Italian means a fox. Other characters in the play are also named after birds or animals. In the tradition of the beast fable, the name Voltore characterizes the gull (vulture) as a bird of prey. The vulture hovers outside the room of the fox in the play waiting for his victim to die. Thus, Jonson builds an atmosphere of the play through the very names of his characters. He introduces us to his two leading

characters and sets up the circumstances of their mischievous ruse. At the same time, he is able to mock players, Puritans, and the people in general who throng the house of Volpone to be gulled. Here, the successful theatrical technique of Jonson also requires elaborate use of costumes. For example, *Volpone* dresses in an elaborate invalid's costume in preparation for Voltore's entrance. All such byplays in *Volpone* are always made possible by the use of costumes. The names from the beast fables are also meant to induct the sting of satire, which for its success require us to visualize the scenes from the fables.

Use of mimicry in performance and of hyperbole in poetic dialogue are also powerful devices of Jonson's technique and style of his comedy. For instance, Corbaccio, as the name suggests, is an old crow ready to die, living only on carrion. He is not as fearsome a bird of prey as the vulture. So Mosca, the gadfly, is bolder in his presence. This is made evident by two pieces of visual "business". In mimic fashion, Mosca illustrates Volpone's death throes on Corbaccio's face. Again, Mosca employs Corbaccio's hearing defect to mock his infirmity. The actor's facial expression and vocal tone belie the meaning of his rhetoric.

Hyperbole is another device of rhetoric which Jonson makes full use of for achieving dramatic effects. He does not make the usual ornamental use of the device. He makes it highly functional in his dramatic technique. Mosca is the master of hyperbole in the play. His use of the device has special ironic power. For instance, he exaggerates Volpone's condition of ill health, but not Corbaccio's present state of health. The device enriches the meaning and effect of the dramatic situation. The hyperbolic intensity of the play's rhetorical style increases as the plot complications become more involved. Another instance of irony and satire working through mimicry and parody is Volpone's sales talk in Act II. The dialogue in blank verse at the occasion changes to epigram during the mountebank's pitch. Volpone's sales talk is purposeful and pragmatic. Mosca's presence during Volpone's oratory is important. Though he has not a line, it is he who has engineered the scene and performance and knows which is Celia's window. He is the device who focuses Volpone's and our attention on her presence in the window. Here, Jonson's rhetoric for Scoto has all the enchantment associated with carnival barkers. The irony of the hyperbolic language is in the dramatic situation. Thus, Volpone and Mosca

both have to perform so many roles within the play, and all are made successful by Jonson's power of style and technique.

### **21.3 LET US SUM UP**

Ben Jonson was an early modern playwright whose popularity rivaled that of Shakespeare or Marlowe. Jonson's comic style remains constant and easily recognisable throughout his plays. Whether it is *Every Man in His Humour* or *Volpone* or *The Fox* or *The Alchemist*. *Volpone* is most like the characteristic 'City Comedies' of Jacobean London in the Vigorous fluency of its language. According to Swinebure, "There is in *volpone* a touch of something like inagination, a savour of something like romance, which gives a higher tone to the style and a deeper interest to the action [than in *The Alchemist*]. The style of Ben Jonson is high. The entire play is written in blank verse.

### **21.4 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. Discuss the significance of Sir Politic-Peregrine sub-plot.
2. What is the significance of animal names in *Volpone*?
3. Discuss Jonson's style and its role in creating comedy.
4. Discuss *Volpone* as a moral satire.
5. Examine the role of small costumes in *Volpone*.

### **21.5 SUGGESTED READING**

1. L. C. Knights, *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson* (1937)
2. E. W. Talbert, *New Light on Ben Jonson's Workmanship* (1943)
3. H. W. Baun, *The Satire and The Didactic in Ben Jonson's Comedies* (1947)
4. A. H. Sackton, *Rhetoric as a Dramatic Language in Ben Jonson* (1948).
5. J. J. Enck, *Jonson and The Comic Truth* (1957)

**COURSE No.111**  
**M.A. ENGLISH**

**DRAMA-I**  
**JOHN WEBSTER**  
**(THE DUCHESS OF MALFI)**

**LESSON No. 22**  
**UNIT - V**

## **WEBSTER AND HIS TIMES**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 22.1 Introduction
- 22.2 Objectives
- 22.3 His Life
- 22.4 The Great Tragedies
- 22.5 His View of Life
- 22.6 Webster's Times
- 22.7 Revenge Theme
- 22.8 Satirical Temper
- 22.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 22.10 Examination Oriented Questions
- 22.11 Suggested Reading

### **22.1 INTRODUCTION**

John Webster holds a unique position among the Jacobean dramatists. The age called Jacobean followed the Age of Elizabeth, which ended in 1603. From the death of Elizabeth to 1625, the period in history of English literature is called the Jacobean Period. Unlike many Jacobean dramatists, Webster was

not a traditionalist, such as Dekker and Heywood were. Surely, he cannot be grouped with them without some blurring of his uniqueness. At the same time, he cannot be classed with the more typical Jacobean. We cannot do that because, unlike the typical Jacobean, he was neither a satirist, nor a defeatist, nor an escapist. It will not be an exaggeration to insist that the tone of his greatest tragedies allies him more closely with Shakespeare and Marlowe than with any of his more immediate contemporaries.

## 22.2 OBJECTIVES

The lesson is supposed to make the learner familiar with the biography, the tragedies, the view of life, social background and the themes of John Webster. His satirical temper has also been discussed in detail.

## 22.3 HIS LIFE

The record of Webster's life is almost non-existent. The bibliography of his works also is, exceptionally obscure and fragmentary. Two facts, however, do indicate his status as dramatist. One of these is, as indicated in his prefaces, that Ben Jonson had a serene confidence in the merit of his work. The other is that the publishers gave his name on title pages an emphasis equal to that of Shakespeare. Also, several of his contemporaries paid him high tributes. One outstanding example of these tributes is, the set of complimentary verses which Middleton, Rowley and Ford wrote for *The Duchess of Malfi*. These are great tributes by any standard, a great achievement for any dramatist.

John Webster was born in London in 1580. His father was a coach-maker and a freeman of the Merchant Taylors Company. He is first mentioned in Henslowe's Diary in 1601 as an author of several plays, none of which seems to have survived. One of them, *Lady Jane* (viz., Grey), can probably be traced in *Sir Thomas Wyatt*, printed in 1607 as by Dekker and Webster. It is a loose chronical play, in casual verse and prose, and is quite close to the first part of Heywood's *If You Know Not Me*, which it likewise resembles in being preserved in a very faulty text. In 1604, Webster wrote for Shakespeare's company the famous induction to Marston's

*Malcontent*, which, even though very brief, gives a valuable view of what went on during a performance at the Globe. About the same time he collaborated with Dekker again in two city comedies for the Children of Paul's, *Westward Ho!* and *Northward Ho!* The former received notable admiration from Ben Jonson in the prologue to the oppositely-named *Eastward Ho!*: "For that was good, and better cannot be." Both these pieces are lively and well-plotted. Both are written in prose. Also, both deal with the amorous amusements of London wives. It is naturally very difficult to trace in them the later Webster. At the same time, they do not seem to be predominantly Dekker's work. They are quite devoid of the caustic satire which was the fashion of the day. And though the language and situations are pungent enough, the citizens' wives are a good deal better than their reputations.

The loss of Webster's play *Guise* is something to be deplored. Evidently, he thought well of this play. The very fact that he chose to bracket it with *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* in the dedication of his *Devil's Law-Case* shows how well he thought of it. It seems most likely that this play was founded on Marlowe's *Massacre of Paris*. That would probably emphasize the Marlowian strain in Webster's work. But in the absence of *Guise* his reputation rests now almost wholly upon his two well-known tragedies just mentioned. We must note that these two tragedies are very different from all other tragedies of the Jacobean period.

#### **22.4 THE GREAT TRAGEDIES**

One of these famous tragedies of Webster is *The White Devil*. It was acted by the Queen's company of Heywood in 1612, and was printed the same year. It concerns the rather recent case of Vittoria Accoramboni, Duchess of Bracciano, who lived from 1557 to 1585. By following the available accounts of her brief and stormy life he could have produced a much more plausible tragedy than the one he wrote. But Webster as dramatist is never plausible. Whenever he deviates from his sources, he usually does so in order to emphasize the brutal irrationality of life. And by so doing he increases his constructional difficulties. In Webster's play, Vittoria is

neither white nor a devil. Her complicity in her husband's murder, though morally certain, is not avowed. In the great scene of Act III, in which she is arraigned before Cardinal Monticelso and the embarrassed ambassadors, Webster allows her all the honours of the conflict. It is a scene which perhaps John Fletcher may be thought to have done well to copy a year or two later, when he wrote Katharine of Aragon's defence of herself before Cardinal Wolsey and Campeius.

Vittoria has a brother whose name is Flamineo. He is one of the most bloodcurdlingly real villains in English drama. She also has a mother whose name is Cornelia. She is one of the most pathetic creations of the play. She is a kind of ancient Ophelia of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Webster works with terror and pity, undiluted, and in copious outpourings. He employs ghosts and horrid dumb-shows after the manner of the early Senecans. He also has in his play many of the grisliest stage deaths in drama. Isabella dies by kissing a poisoned picture of her husband. Camillo's neck is broken by his companions while vaulting. Brachiano is killed by a poisoned helmet. The pain drives him mad. Marcello is, without warning, run through the body by his brother in their mother's presence. Vittoria, Zanche, and Flamineo are all stabbed after a scene in which Flamineo has most horribly pretended to be shot with pistols. The deaths pile up so lawlessly that one is tempted to retort upon the author the last question in the play :

*By what authority have you committed  
This massacre?*

But between these many and horrid deaths are some small and moving voices that protest and indicate the pity of it. For instance, the boy Giovanni's talk with his uncle in Act III, Scene-ii and Cornelia's mad song in Act V, scene-i :

*Call for the robin redbreast and the wren,  
Since ov'r shady groves they hover,  
And with leaves and flowers do cover  
The friendless bodies of unburied men.*

The brutality of Webster's villains notwithstanding, his poetry in this play, as well as in *The Duchess of Malfi*, is as powerful as that of Marlowe and Shakespeare.

The more famous of the two great tragedies of Webster has been *The Duchess of Malfi*. It was acted by Shakespeare's Company by about 1613. It was revised a little later. It is considered better than *The White Devil* because, even though it has as much terror, it has more pity, and so gives Webster's view of life in better balance. Its plot is derived from William Painter's *Palace of Pleasure*, which was a storehouse of plots for the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, including Shakespeare. Painter's book made available in English the tales and fables of Italian and French writers, such as Boccaccio and Bandello. Webster's story of the Duchess came from Bandello. Based on very early sixteenth century history Webster made it as absurd as possible. The Duchess, contracting a marriage of love with her honest and knightly master of the household, must keep it a secret from her two brothers. They place a super-spy in her palace, whose name is Bosola, to inform them of just such matters. An average detective would do Bosola's business in a day. But in this play the obvious is never discernible. Years pass, while Bosola pries and plots, children are born and even grow to maturity in the way Sidney deplored, before the wicked brothers discover the reality of their sister's marriage with the steward.

The fourth Act of *The Duchess of Malfi*, is wholly devoted to the Duchess's death. It may well be considered the greatest death scene in Elizabethan literature. The fifth Act, which presents six deaths more, should be an anticlimax. But it is kept aloft by Webster's mastery of the macabre. It is Webster's poetry which again salvages his play. All absurdities of the play get overlooked under the powerful sweep of his poetry. A large number of memorable aphorisms flow from the mouth of the villain himself. When outwitted by his employers, he utters some grand truths of life. Added to the beauty of Webster's poetry is his creation of the character of the Duchess. She remains in the play the most memorable figure. Her nobility makes her a towering figure in the play. Her case also raises in our time the question of gender justice. We shall have occasion to discuss all

these issues in the subsequent lessons.

Meanwhile, resuming the subject of Webster's career as a dramatist, it almost carries us back to the work of Thomas Kyd, one of the University Wits who wrote plays before Shakespeare in the age of Elizabeth. Of course, the strange art of Webster is far more intelligent than that of Kyd. His style is curiously unrhythmic, except in the songs which crash in, like the trumpets of doom, upon the cacophonies of mundane speech. His dialogue is often patched with sayings from Sidney, Montaigne, or Donne. He is said to have stored these sayings in his notebooks. Webster quite often introduces formal "characters" such as he was writing for the overbury collection.

## 22.5 HIS VIEW OF LIFE

Webster's view of life is said to be Elizabethan rather than Jacobean. The sharp distinction he maintains between good and bad and the straightforwardness with which he faces death and horror bring him closer to Elizabethans than his own Jacobean contemporaries. He is considered one of the most romantic of dramatists. In his view, life is like a labyrinth. His Duchess says near the beginning of the play, "Wish me good speed"

*For I am going into a wilderness,  
Where I shall find nor path nor friendly clue  
To be my guide.*

In Webster's world, the only constant is death. He leads his characters relentlessly upto this constant. And he dismisses them under the glare of death's great illumination. He seldom makes theological assertions. But a reading of his plays is a kind of religious experience. If any affinity must be sought among the Stuart writers, it will be found in such mystic poets as George Herbert, and Henry Vaughan. Like them, Webster, too, seems to be constantly whispering :

*Dear, beauteous death, the jewel of the just,  
Shining nowhere but in the dark,*

*What mysteries do lie beyond thy dust,*

*Could man outlook that mark.*

These lines from Vaughan's "They are all gone into the world of light" express the kind of view Webster seems to hold of Death. None of the Jacobean dramatists seem to hold the same view of death. It is Webster's colleagues among the Metaphysicals who seem much closer to him in this matter of Death.

No one however, is more like Webster than Shakespeare in the latter's darkest moods. Shakespeare's play that most resembles Webster's two great tragedies is *King Lear*. Lear says something very much like "I am Duchess of Malfi still", and Gloucester parallels Bosola's cosmic despair,

*We are merely the stars' tennis-balls, struck an bandied*

*Which way please them.*

And Webster's most famous line

*Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle; she died young,*

may have had its cue in *King Lear*, Act V, Scene iii, line 242. Perhaps only Shakespeare can bedew his horror with such appeals to simple pity as the Duchess's

*I pray thee, look thou giv'st my little boy*

*Some syrup for his cold, and let the girl*

*Say her prayers ere she sleep.*

King Lear's gloom, Gloucester's cosmic pessimism, Cordelia's barbaric death, Edmund's villainy, all find very close parallel in the greatest tragedy of Webster. It is for this reason, this comparison with the greatest of dramatists, which makes Webster taller than all other Jacobean writers.

Webster's two later plays, *The Devil's Law-Case* (1623) and *A Cure for a Cuckold* (printed 1661) — the latter in unfortunate collaboration with Rowley - do not seem to have much merit. They do not deserve much attention, not because they are altogether inferior, but because Webster seems to attempt here

tragicomedy and finds that form perhaps too light for his heavy hand. The central character of *The Devil's Law-Case*, Romelio, the wealthy merchant of Naples, who in one scene disguised as a Jew, is a not unworthy imitation of Marlowe's Barbas (*The Merchant of Venice*). His mother and sister belong to Webster's greatest women. The long court scene (Act IV, scene ii), which occupies a fifth of the play, is comparable with the one in *The White Devil*. Some of Webster's most characteristic lines come from this play, as well as one of his greatest songs :

*Courts adieu, and all delights,  
All bewitching appetites!  
Sweetest breath and clearest eye,  
Like perfumes, go out and die.*

Thus, very much like Shakespeare, Webster's tragic vision and powerful verse stand out in his plays. Although minor in terms of his total output, his two great tragedies alone make him next only to Shakespeare and Marlowe. He surpasses all other writers of tragedy, Jacobean as well as Elizabethan.

## **22.6 WEBSTER'S TIMES**

It is interesting to note that the best description of the Jacobean plays is prophetically given in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. In the closing moments of the play, Horatio looks back on the trail of intrigue and violence which had reached its tragic climax in the death of Hamlet, the prince of Denmark. Horatio utters the following words, which are addressed to both the people assembled on the stage as well as to the audience sitting beyond the stage :

*... So shall you hear  
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,  
Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,  
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,*

*And, in this upshot, purposes mistook*

*Fall'n on the inventors' heads.*

These lines sum up more than the action of Shakespeare's play. They give us a fairly accurate idea of a whole set of plays we call by the name of "Revenge Tragedy", or more widely called "the tragedy of blood," or the "Jacobean tragedy". These tragedies of the Jacobean period follow immediately after *Hamlet*, which had been acted in or around 1601.

## **22.7 REVENGE THEME**

The dramatists' preoccupation with the revenge theme during the Jacobean period is actually a reflection of a general interest in the social and ethical implications of revenge, which is a feature of the age. In his essay "Turner and the Tragedy of Revenge," L.G. Salinger cogently summarizes the nature of this interest :

*The theme of revenge (the 'wild justice' of Bacon's essay) was popular in Elizabethan tragedy because it touched important questions of the day; the social problem of personal honour and the survival of feudal lawlessness; the political problem of tyranny and resistance; and the supreme question of providence, with its provocative contrasts between human vengeance and divine.*

As a matter of fact, the age lived in a tension between two conflicting attitudes centred on the notion of revenge. On the one hand, the law of the land was equivocal in condemning private revenge as an attempt by man to usurp the prerogative of God. Its political equivalent was the attempt by powerful individuals (like Henry IV) to assume the powers of the sovereign. "Vengeance is mine; I will reply, saith the Lord." Thus, the law of the land and the moralists of the time both were united in affirming this viewpoint. By and large, the general mass of people adopted it as a sacred belief. On the other hand, the older tradition of private revenge was still alive. It had come down from the more turbulent times when the power of the state to punish crime was neither codified in law nor always effective. When it comes down to Webster's times, it had become by then linked with certain extreme notions of

personal honour which tended to make the revenger appear in a sympathetic light. The most striking justification of revenge, and perhaps the most important, was the situation of blood-revenge for murder. Murder was considered the crime of crimes by the Elizabethans. It was viewed as a violation of God's commandment. There was even a current though wholly erroneous idea that a son could not inherit from his murdered father unless and until he avenged his father's murder.

It is because the theme of revenge struck a responsive chord in society at large that the dramatists of this period, beginning with Kyd, were so strongly drawn to the tragedies of Seneca. In Seneca, we can trace most, though not all, the features which distinguish the Jacobean "tragedy of blood." The Seneca's tragedies, such as *Clytemnestra* and *Medea*, the crimes are described with horrifying realism. Also, there are detailed accounts of physical torture. Of course, Seneca's plays were meant to be recited, not staged. The theme of blood revenge for murder is also emphasized. Other features include characters who unwittingly become accomplices to the act of revenge, or are tricked into becoming accessories. The ghosts of the dead clamouring intermittently for revenge is also an aspect of the Senecan tragedy. Machiavellianism was also a strong influence from Italy on the tragedy of the Jacobean period. In the tragedies of the period, one of the protagonists, often but not always the avenger, is recognizably Machiavellian figure. In many of the plays, we can see the avenger moving between the two extremes of sympathetic hero ; and Machiavellian villain. Since Marlowe put Machieval on the stage in the prologue to *The Jew of Malta*, the Machiavellian figure had been the embodiment of conscious and intricately contrived villainy, usually delighting in its own virtuosity.

## **22.8 SATIRICAL TEMPER**

The fact that these revenge tragedies invariably have Italian plots clearly shows the Senecan and Machiavellian influence on the Jacobean period more than on the Elizabethan. In these later tragedies, the Machiavellian villain is also in most cases a railer against society or 'malcontent'. One very important aspect of Jacobean tragedy is that it combines with tragedy satire as an equal partner. Thus, these tragedies strongly link together the theme of revenge and an attack on the corruption of society. Normally, we tend to think of satire as part of comedy. But an intimate

connection between tragedy and the satirical temper is one of the aspects which distinguish the drama of the Jacobean period. The reasons for this temper of the period were plenty. One of these was the political uncertainty surrounding the succession in the last years of the Elizabethan period. This led to instability and disillusion on the early years of King James' reign. Also responsible for this temper was the Renaissance emphasis on the richness of sensual experience colliding with the 'Machiavellian' cynicism with regard to all human experience. Still another factor responsible for the satirical temper of the age was the revival of a medieval notion that the world was running down and civilization was on the brink of dissolution.

A summary account of the main characteristics of the Jacobean tragic satire as a distinct form of art is given by Alvin Kernan. In his view, its setting is densely crowded with people and things, so that the satire is usually found against an urban background. Its personages are grotesque caricatures, distorted by the imperfections which they embody. There is also some hint of an ideal standard by which they embody. There is also some hint of an ideal standard by which the perverted activities of these characters are to be judged. This implied standard is, of course, remote or impotent. There is, on the contrary, an obsessive concentration on the purely animal aspects of human existence, such as eating, drinking, defecation, and copulation. The satirical hero has his public personality as blunt, truthful, simple, forced into utterance by the wickedness and hypocrisy of the world about him. It also traces him to adopt violent expression as the only effective protest. Thus, it brings into play the darker 'private' aspect of his character. All this leads him to a kind of sadistic relish in scourging humanity. Hence, the brutal satirical tragedies or tragical-satires of Webster and the other Jacobean dramatists.

## **22.9 LET US SUM UP**

John Webster was an English dramatist whose *The White Devil* (performed in 1612) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (performed in 1614) are generally regarded as the paramount seventeenth century English tragedies apart from those of Shakespeare. His preface to *Monuments of Honor*, his Lord Mayor's Show for 1642, says he was born a freeman of the Merchant Taylor's Company. He was probably a coachmaker, and possibly he was an actor. *The White Devil*, like *Macbeth*, is a tragedy of action and *The Duchess of Malfi*, like *King Lear*, is a tragedy of suffering.

## **22.10 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

- Q1. Discuss the themes of Webster's Tragedies.
- Q2. Discuss the biography of Webster.
- Q3. Satire constitutes the main part of Webster's writings. Discuss

## **22.11 SUGGESTED READING**

John Webster : English Dramatist. Britannica.com, n.d.  
*<https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Webster-English-dramatist>*.

Berry, Ralph. *The Art of John Webster*. Routledge, 1972

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## **WEBSTER'S TRAGIC VISION**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 23.1 Introduction
- 23.2 Objectives
- 23.3 Webster's Tragic Vision
- 23.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 23.5 Examination Oriented Questions
- 23.6 Suggested Reading

### **23.1 INTRODUCTION**

John Webster, the author of *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*, two great tragedies of the Jacobean period, is known for his distinct tragic vision of the world, just as Sophocles is, or Marlowe is. As David Cecil has described, this vision depicts the world "a fallen place in which suffering outweighs happiness and all activities are tainted with sin; where evil is the controlling force, and good - just because it is good - is inevitably quietest; hoping, at least and with luck, to slip through the tempest of existence, unnoticed." At the same time, Webster's world is not utterly devoid of morality. There is a feeling imparted to the reader, while reading his tragedies, that his world is also a place where the moral law cannot be thwarted for ever. We see in these tragedies that finally the evil destroys itself, just as it does in Shakespeare, and justice is vindicated :

*Let guilty men remember their black deeds,*

*Do lean on crutches, made of slender reeds.*

This final couplet of *The White Devil* sums it up. It states the moral truth which the entire preceding action of the play has been designed to illustrate. The message of the play, conveyed clearly by the couplet, comes home to the reader unmistakably. The last lines of *The Duchess of Malfi*, however, propound a different truth :

*Integrity of life is fame's best friend,*

*Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end.*

Heaven is shown to be just here for all the apparent horror of man's life. In the end, it is virtue which is glorified. But it gets glorified in heaven, not on earth. The two closings are, of course, complementary; they make two parts of a complete statement.

## **23.2 OBJECTIVES**

The lesson introduces the learner to the tragic vision of John Webster with reference to his main dramatic works.

## **23.3 WEBSTER'S TRAGIC VISION**

This tentatively formulated world view of Webster, as summed up in the ending lines of his two great tragedies, can be illustrated by the events and characters of these two plays. Without any doubt, the key figure in these plays is the villain, who is invariably a deliberate and intriguing sinner. Webster is believed to be a man of ideas, always interested in the intellectual side of his characters. The focus of his interest in his tragedies seems to be : what happens to a man who directs his life, consciously and calculatedly, in defiance of the Divine Law? In this respect, Webster comes closer to Marlowe than to Shakespeare. He studies this question in different form in each of his tragedies. In *The White Devil*, his deliberate sinner is Flamineo. He is the typical Machiavellian figure, an Italian adventurer. To an English Protestant audience, he is ruthless, cynical, consciously anti-moral. His

sole business of life is only to advance his own interests, his own fortunes. And he sees the best chance of doing this, by making use of the adulterous passion which the Duke Brachiano has conceived for his beautiful sister. So he sets himself on the pursuit of his plan. He plots to bring them together. In the course of this pursuit, he is led to commit one crime after another, each worse than the last.

To begin with, Flameneo instigates adultery between Duke Brachiano and his sister. The next step he takes is to arrange the murder of Brachiano's wife and his sister Vittoria's husband. His crimes create horror and provoke the wrath of Marcello, his own virtuous brother. In retaliation, the devil gets enraged and kills his own brother. As a result of this event, his mother, Cornelia, goes mad with grief. Flameneo is thus, solely responsible for the murder of his brother and the madness of his mother. Upto this point the villain's schemes are quite successful. But henceforth, the Divine justice can be felt in operation. It starts bringing punishment on the sinners. Brachiano is murdered in revenge for his wife's death. It looks as if a similar punishment will also soon follow for Vittoria and Flameneo. Flameneo seems to realize this. He is now full of gloom fearing an unhappy future. There begins a decline in his fortunes. And with the decline comes profound melancholy. He begins to have superstitious premonitions of misfortune. He shudders at the ultimate fate of his soul. Brachiano's ghost appears before him :

*What a mockery hath death made thee? (cries flamineo)*

*Thou look'st sad.*

*In what place art thou? In yon starry gallery?*

*Or in the cursed dungeon? No? not speak?*

*Pray, sir, resolve me, what religion's best*

*For a man to die in? or is it in your knowledge*

*To answer me how long I have to live?*

Flameneo desperately tries to put his fears aside. He tries to concentrate on

devising some scheme to save himself from his enemies. In his attempt to discover whether his sister would stand by him, he concocts a fantastic hoax. This involves her in a consent to kill herself with him in a suicide pact. But soon it comes out that she cannot be trusted. For she is ready to kill him but not herself. Thus, Flamineo discovers to his dismay that the evil-doer has no friends, even among his fellow criminals, be they the members of his own family, his own blood relations.

When Flamineo is in an act of contemplation, thinking what right has he to expect loyalty, when his own actions are founded on a considered repudiation of all but self-centred motives? At this point of time, the avengers arrive to kill him. His state of mind in the last moments of his life is revealed by his speeches. He does not come out repentant. By this time, after committing so many heinous crimes, he become a damned soul. As such, he becomes incapable of repentance. Until the last, he speaks with defiant mocking courage. But it actually conceals an absolute despair. Although he is no longer capable of appreciating the value of good, he can still realize that evil-doing is also not of much avail. Like Shakespeare's Macbeth, who is also a case of damned soul, he has come to think that life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Like Macbeth he falls back on a thorough nihilism :

*I do not look*

*Who went before, nor who shall follow me;*

*No, at myself I will begin and end ....*

*This busy trade of life appears most vain,*

*Since rest breeds, rest, where all seek pain by pain.*

Similar is the dominance of the villain, in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. Here, the development takes place in a different direction. Although as dominant as the villain in the earlier play, Bosola is not wholly given to the devil. He is, like Flamineo, an intellectual villain, but he also has a strain of good in him, which the other does not have. At long last, it is this very strain which leads him to

repentance, not to damnation. From the first, there are explanations offered for his amoral attitude. It is attributed to his harsh circumstance. As such, it becomes, if not excusable, less outrageous. Also, the fact that the author decides to provide reasons for someone's misconduct shows that the author wants the reader to have a little softer approach to the character who apparently seems villainous. Bosola is a middle-aged soldier of fortune. He is embittered by poverty, ingratitude, and bad luck. All these factors combine to mentally prepare him to yield to any temptation that comes his way. Why is he scrupulous in a wholly unscrupulous world? This vulnerable state of mind in Bosola is found to be a fertile ground for exploitation by Ferdinand and Cardinal. They take advantage of his desperate mood and make him their spy in their plots against their sister, the Duchess. Under their pressure, he proceeds like Flamineo, from crime to crime. He is planted as a spy on the Duchess. Ironically, she trusts him as faithful servant. But he soon betrays her secret. Later, when her brothers begin to wreak vengeance on her, he first becomes her torturer, and then her murderer. But he is made never to show any liking for what he does under the command of his masters. As his task becomes more odious, he recoils more and more, and receives the orders of his masters with a kind a bitter detachment. In fact, he goes to the extent of praising the Duchess for her courage, and that, too, to her brothers who want her to be eliminated. He talks to her with a strange melancholy irony, even while he is engineering her torments. Finally, when he stands with the Duke Ferdinand by her dead body, he finds himself unable any longer to shut his ears to the clamour of his conscience. The spectacle of the dead Duchess, his victim, brings home to him the full horror of what he has done :

*I stand like one*

*That long hath ta'en a sweet and golden dream :*

*I am angry with myself now that I wake ....*

*I would not change my peace of conscience*

*For all the wealth of Europe.*

Once his conscience takes the better of him, as it does in the last section of the play, he tries to make amends for his sins. He seeks out Antonio, the Duchess's husband, to tell him the truth, and offer him assistance in bringing justice on her brothers. But he meets with only partial success in this attempt. The brothers are killed, no doubt, but so is Antonio. And, by a wonderful stroke of dramatic irony, Antonio falls by Bosola's hand. In the darkness, he mistakes Antonio for the Cardinal, and kills him. Webster seems to suggest here that the moral law is inexorable. Man cannot undo the evil he has committed. God can punish us, he seems to convey, by making our efforts the unwitting cause of further evil. Webster's view here seems to be very clear, that people commit crimes, not from rational motives, but because they are corrupted by that original sin with which all mortal flesh is tainted, because they succumb to the promptings of that devil which is always whispering in human ears suggestions to obey his diabolical will. The people of Webster's time could believe in Ferdinand, Iago, and Goneril, and the rest of them without having to be told exactly why they were wicked. Everyone has the disposition, they knew as well as we do, to be wicked if one chooses to give in to it.

Webster's horrors — his ghosts and torturers - also are not, as with his lesser contemporaries, mere stage devices to awaken a pleasing sensation of fear. They are symbolic incarnations of that spiritual terror and diabolical delight in suffering which are, to him, central figures of the human drama. Duke Ferdinand and the Cardinal are creatures of hell. The prison in which they throw the Duchess, made hideous by the clamour of lunatics and the ghostly images of murdered children, exhibit to us, in visible form, the hell on earth. It is in the nature of such people as the Duke and the Cardinal to create such hells. Even the seemingly irrelevant scenes in Webster of pageantry, having nothing much to do with the plot, make a significant contribution to his picture of human life. He exposes to us in such scenes the hollowness of the superficial splendour of these worldly dignities, such as Duke and Cardinal.

Webster chooses not to write in realistic conventions. This allows him full play of the imagination. It enables him to make sermons into works of art. If

treated in terms of realism, the stories of *The White Devil* and *The Duchess of Malfi* would be, to the reader or audience, merely painful and repulsive. But here in the hands of Webster they become attractive. They are alight with dark gleaming splendour! Every episode and every thought of these plays comes to be irradiated by the unearthly leaping flame of Webster's creative imagination. His vision emblazens them with the colours of heaven and hell. For example, in real life people do not instigate murders by relating weird dreams. But here in Webster, an ugly episode of lust and treachery and assassination is turned into something terribly sinister. A magnificence of sinister world is created through strange precise images, which set the fancy mysteriously and sublimely astir.

No doubt, Webster beautifies his horrific scenes, he does not soften them. As an Elizabethan or Jacobean, he does not shrink from the grotesque and the horrible. On the contrary, the poet's imagination being fantastic and full-blooded, always craves for such stuff and feeds on it. Vittoria's dream, for example, conceals her evil suggestion behind an imaginative splendour. It also reveals much more clearly, than would have been done by a realistic treatment, the true nature of the act she is promoting. The spiritual wickedness of the act, its relation to the supernatural forces of sin and death, of which it is an offspring, come across to us in clearer terms. Lesser ugly than a realistic version of the same incident, Webster's is also far more penetrating. Thus, Webster emerges, in these two great tragedies of his, a true tragic poet. His greatness lies in transmuting even the most dreadful and baffling acts of human experience, in all their unmitigated horror, into things of glory. He is able to do it by the depth and grandeur of his vision. Obviously, he is the rarest sort of poet, and among the greatest.

It can be seen in his plays that Webster's vision of life is characterized by disintegration. Like other dramatists of his age, it is true, he inherited the Elizabethan world picture, but in his work we see that world-picture falling in ruins. His characters belong to a world of violent crime and violent change, of sin, blood and repentance. And yet it is a world loyal to a theological scheme. The moral standards do not stand dissolved or destroyed altogether. On the contrary, it can afford to indulge itself just because those standards were so powerful. But this

Elizabethan world is falling apart in the Jacobean period. Webster's tragedies are the best evidence of this decline. What seems to kindle the dramatist's imagination in these plays is, not any philosophy of life, but certain aspects of hell or chaos. We must not forget that Webster is depicting the world of evil, a world in which evil preponderates, and which works out its own destruction. As such, it could not have been presented as comprehended wholly or even largely by a single character. By its very nature it is incomprehensible. And yet its existence at various times in history is undoubted. The Jacobean period, for sure, is one such period of history.

In the case of Webster, as well as the other dramatists of this period, the tragedy of blood was an attempt to deal with a world of evil, the existence of which was borne in upon them in late Elizabethan, early Jacobean times. Most of them attempted to show this world from outside — by its effects on a comparatively virtuous person, not a member of itself. Such a person goes mad or destroyed. The world of evil survives him. From outside, it looks perfectly comprehensible. There is no reason why it should not go on. In Webster, however, certainly in his two great tragedies, the evil world is presented from within. Seen from within, the world of evil seems all confusion. It sounds a pointless activity. In the mind of the audience or the reader alone the notion of order is awakened. He vehemently desires to see it transferred to the stage. So his attention is held until the close of the play. With the arrival of a new ruler in *The White Devil*, for example, a new generation, the whole evil world is destroyed.

One of the misunderstandings about Webster's vision that has been common among critics comes out in their interpretations of *The Duchess of Malfi*, especially its ending. It actually illustrates how little the dramatist has been properly understood even by his admirers. Since, the play's title places the Duchess in prominence, she has been considered as the play's key figure. This led to the critical accusation of the play's creator of inappropriately continuing the play even after the death of the Duchess. But we should not overlook the fact that even though she is the heroine of the play being the chief object of our sympathies, she is not the one who provides for the play's action the chief motive. Also, it is not in relation to her

action that the theme of the play is to be found. This theme of his tragedy, as is always the case in Webster, is the act of sin and its consequences. And until these consequences are pursued to their final conclusion, the play's intention cannot become plain. Moreover, the central figure, as far as that action is concerned, is the man who murders her. It is the man who has elected, against the promptings of his better self, to be the devil's agent in the drama.

Here, one can draw a parallel between Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. In Shakespeare's play also, named after Caesar, our sympathies are drawn by Caesar, but he is murdered much before the play's ending. But the play's action continues because the chief interest of the play comes to center on Brutus, who has committed a sin and has to go through its consequences. Ending the play with the death of Caesar would have left the questions raised by his death unanswered. The same is the case here with regard to Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. The play continues even after the death of the Duchess because the man, Bosola, who commits the murder of the Duchess, has to reach the logical conclusion of having committed a sin. His behaviour after the murder, his suffering, and his view of life, as it comes upon him in the final pages of the play, are an essential part of the play's scheme of ideas. Without these scenes, after the death of the Duchess, the dramatist's world view, his tragic vision, would have remained unfolded to us.

#### **23.4 LET US SUM UP**

Webster, therefore, was not so wrong about himself as might at first sight be supposed. Since, he is not a flamboyant sensationalist, an unthinking maker of eloquent melodramas, he should not be accused of such a lapse. As a matter of fact, he is a stern moralist whose tragedies are carefully designed to enforce the philosophy of human conduct in which he believes. To incarnate his spiritual drama with the full intensity which it demands Webster must perforce use symbols. The battle of heaven and hell cannot be effectively conveyed through the mundane medium of realism. His interpretation of this world could come only through the medium of symbolism. The wild and bloody conventions of his time provided a

suitable vehicle for communicating his hell-haunted vision of the world. Undoubtedly, Webster has been successful in both of his great tragedies to make an effective use of the conventions of his day to give shape to his dark vision of the world, which is not without the silver lining of his moral tinge. After all, the evil does destroy itself, even though it does destroy in the process the good also. Thus, his tragic vision, even though a little darker than Shakespeare's, is not without the lightning presence behind the dark clouds of the heavenly judgement.

### **23.5 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

Q1 Discuss the tragic vision of John Webster.

Q2 Discuss John Webster as a dramatist.

### **23.6 SUGGESTED READING**

Smith, Michael Anthony. *The Tragic Vision of John Webster*. Trinity University College, 1973.

Gziel, Hassan Mohamed Mousa. *The Transformation of the Tragic vision in Jacobean Drama : John Webster; John Ford and Thomas Middelton*. University of Bimingham, 1991.

Moore, Don D Ed. *John Webster : The Critical Heritage*. Routledge, 1981.

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**COURSE No. 111**  
**M.A. ENGLISH**

**DRAMA-I**  
**JOHN WEBSTER**  
**(THE DUCHESS OF MALFI)**

**LESSON No. 24**  
**UNIT - V**

## **WEBSTER'S TRAGIC SATIRE**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 24.1 Introduction
- 24.2 Objectives
- 24.3 Webster's Satire and Tragedy
- 24.4 Moral Purpose of Satire
- 24.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 24.6 Examination Oriented Questions
- 24.7 Suggested Reading

### **24.1 INTRODUCTION**

One of the contributions of Webster as dramatist has been his making satire a natural ally of tragedy. In the Elizabethan comedy, including Shakespeare's satire was of course, an essential component. But in the Elizabethan tragedy, it did not find any substantial presence. In fact, in the strict observance of the principle of decorum, satire could not be combined with tragedy, for the two belonged to different classes – while tragedy belonged to the high literature, satire belonged to the middle. Comedy also belonged to the middle class. Hence, satire and comedy could be combined, but not satire and tragedy. But with Webster and his contemporaries, tragedy was no longer as lofty as it was with the Elizabethans. In this later age of English drama,

the villain had come to occupy the centre stage in tragedy. The loftiness was gone. Also gone was the lofty status of the hero. He was no longer a superman. Nor had Gods any longer a presence in the dark world of the Jacobean tragedy. So, for Webster and his contemporaries, satire was essential in tragedy because their subject was the world of evil and corruption.

As Webster darkens the world of his tragedy, life appears to become in increasing agony. What had been an aberration, even deviation or digression to the earlier dramatists becomes to Webster the norm. In his dramatic world, each evil is a symbol of death, each abuse a step toward it. In the end, what his satire reveals of the true nature of life is fused with the outcome of his tragic story. The ultimate tragedy in Webster's world is, not the death of any individual, but the presence of evil and its power to decay and drag all mankind to death. The function of satire, as Webster understood it, is to reveal man's common mortality and his involvement in evil. The tragic story is of those persons who show courage to defy such revelation. In their defiance of evil and its designs, these persons prove that there is a glory for mankind. It is in the struggle and assertion of the tragic characters that the brilliance of Webster's tragedy lies.

## **24.2 OBJECTIVES**

The lesson intends to acquaint the learner with the tragic satire of John Webster. It also teaches about the moral purpose of the tragic satire.

## **24.3 WEBSTER'S SATIRE AND TRAGEDY**

We must also realize that it is in the fusion of satire and tragedy that Webster shows his strength as dramatist. The greatness of his tragedy is precisely because of his success in making this fusion look so natural. Had this fusion been forced or incomplete, the effect of his tragedies would have been destroyed. Had there been a lack of reality or proper heightening, had there been a failure to integrate the satiric comment, the accusation could have been justly made that these spectacles were merely sensational shows

to please the vulgar. As things stand, however relating the dramatic works to their own times, considering them in the light of the conventions that produced them, these accusations would be found rather exaggerated. In the case of Webster, they lose credibility altogether, the wholeness of his world being so powerful. His world is so integrated through the tragic action that it assumes the character of a profound comment on life. Second only to Shakespeare, he seems to have found what Yeats called "Emotion of Multitude." As Yeats put it, "*Indeed all the great Masters have understood that there cannot be great art without the little limited life of the fable,... and the rich, far-wandering, many-imaged life of the half-seen world beyond it.*"

As Coleridge very well understood, Shakespeare looked into the wellsprings of his characters' inner being to its very source in common humanity. And from this common root, comes what Yeats calls the "emotion of multitude." An audience or reader may not immediately understand that emotion consciously, but it seldom fails to respond to that emotion. Webster, of course, forgoes significant inner revelation, and traces the outer patterns of men struggling with one another. He tends to de-emphasize the individual aspects of his fable, and instead relate the fable's action to the doings of men everywhere. It is when the light of satire shines across the plane of tragic action and throws that action into relief that the dark shadows of the protagonists fall across the face of life itself. And it is by so doing that he achieves the "emotion of multitude." And it is owing to this achievement that his great tragedies, *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil*, speak as eloquently today as in the past.

The appeal of these plays, like that of any other literature, has been uneven through different periods of history. The sentimental cast of the eighteenth century or the over-idealism of the Romantic movement would not go to them without a certain prejudice of mind. But an age like ours, where the sentimentality and morality are not the ruling passions, these works come through to us more quickly and with greater force. And yet,

the world of these tragedies is not as valueless as it seemed to some of these earlier periods of history. In the life of every individual, more so in the case of a sensitive writer, there comes a time when denial of value has to cease. One must find or convince oneself that it can be found, something in the world which is not subject to rot and human bestiality. One can see this happening in the case of Webster. Perhaps his last play, *Guise*, which he mentions in the preface to *The White Devil*, might have told us more about what happened to him in his search for ethical values. But as things stand today, it can be surmised that the fire, which sprung forth from his despair and forced him to set forth on the stage all that he saw in the world, seemed to have died suddenly. His two great tragedies alone have the emotional sweep, the full "emotion of multitude." Compared to these, his later tragedy grows conventional, his comedy increasingly foolish. The plays after 1614 are few, and none of them achieves the tragic heights. Then, he seems to have stopped writing altogether.

Why he stopped writing is, of course, not as clear as it becomes from the last plays of Shakespeare. Nor need we indulge in any idle speculation on the issue. We only need to concentrate on the best that Webster left behind, and trace the moral pattern embodied in that best. Without any reservation, his two great tragedies have always been acknowledged as the best that he has left behind for the posterity. Undoubtedly, while his despair flamed, he presented life as he saw it. His despair did, of course, distort the truth of what he saw. His view of life sounds highly coloured. But it remains profound all the same. He seems to have looked into darkness steadily and as a whole. His characters carve out their course against a black panorama, and in the end are lost in darkness. Only a few, before the tumult of terror breaks, can muster courage to assert the essential dignity of the human species. And precisely this, as it is in any degree the picture of a world we must recognize, is, despite all its horror, the stuff of great tragedy.

We may not get as ecstatic in praise of Webster's handling of horror in these great tragedies as does A. C. Swinburne, but we cannot fail to

agree to his perception. In his view, the exclusive art of Webster's genius and his work is his command of terror. To quote Swinburne, "Except in Aeschylus, in Dante, and in Shakespeare, I at least know not where to seek for passages which in sheer force of tragic and noble horror... may be set against the subtlest, the deepest, the sublimest passages of Webster." Moving on in his ecstatic adulation of Webster, Swinburne raises him even higher than Marlowe and Shakespeare. "Neither Marlowe nor Shakespeare," he emphatically asserts, "had so fine, so accurate, so infallible a sense of the delicate line of demarcation which divides the impressive and the terrible from the horrible and the loathsome." This sense of discrimination comes, no doubt, from a keen sense of what is human and what is inhuman. And it is this very sense that makes one a satirist. Placing the individual tragedy in the larger social context and undercut the social practices that smack of corruption is the task of a satirist. And it is precisely in this task that Webster excels all his contemporaries.

Thus, we must acknowledge the fact that a satirist is essentially a moralist. After all, it is one's moral sense only which reflects on and reacts to whatever is less than what he expects of a decent human being. And it requires an art of high order to combine the satirical purpose with the purpose of tragedy. For on the face of it the two sound rather antithetical. But they are not really as far removed from each other as they seem. For, after all, whoever senses a tragedy also senses not merely the individual but also the social factors responsible for that individual tragedy, but it is only a great artist who can successfully blend the two, and so blend them each would enhance the effect or impact of the other. And Webster, to repeat, is one of these great dramatists who have achieved this height in art. As the immeasurable superiority of Aeschylus to his successors lies in his quality of instinctive righteousness, so is it shared by Webster who, too, comes much above his contemporaries in his moral nobility. We say moral nobility because it is this which makes him feel with great intensity the horror and terror of evil in human nature.

Here, one is once again drawn to Swinburne's sober observations on the lasting qualities of Webster's dramatic art. As he says in all seriousness, *"In all the vast and voluminous records of critical error there can be discovered no falsehood more foolish or more flagrant than the vulgar tradition which represents this high-souled and gentle-hearted poet as one morbidly fascinated by a fantastic attraction towards the 'violent delights' of horror and the nervous or sensational excitement of criminal detail: nor can there be conceived a more perverse or futile misapprehension than that which represents John Webster as one whose instinct led him by some obscure propensity to darken the darkness of southern crime or vice by an infusion of northern seriousness of introspective cynicism and reflective intensity in wrongdoing, into the easy levity and infantine simplicity of spontaneous wickedness which distinguished the moral and social corruption of renascent Italy... The great is not incomparable power displayed in Webster's delineation of such criminals as Flamineo and Bosola... is a sign rather of his noble English loathing for the traditions associated with such names as Caesar, Medici and Borgia, Catiline and Iscariot and Napoleon, than of any sympathetic interest in such incarnations of historic crime. Flamineo, especially, the ardent pimp, the enthusiastic pandar, who prostitutes his sister and assassinates his brother with such earnest and single-hearted devotion to his own straightforward self-interest, has in him a sublime fervour and rascality."*

#### **24.4 MORAL PURPOSE OF SATIRE**

As to the moral purpose of Webster's satire, there has been an ongoing controversy, some claiming moral purpose, others denying it. In the absence of critical certainty or unanimity on the subject, it has proved critically agreeable to talk of him as an old fashioned moralist, as a social dramatist, or a man halting between his inherited and his individual values. Where an artist's purposes are uncertain, it is always possible to proceed towards an understanding of his art by another track. We can do that by attempting a more accurate definition of his individual style. In the case of a dramatist, it will mean a study of his use

of language and his dramatic technique. In other words, we can make a study of the kind of dramatic experience he communicates in his plays.

We can take up for a specimen the case of *The White Devil*. Here, as is generally recognized, the structure is rather loose and rambling. It had been called a sort of gothic aggregation rather than a steady exploration of and development towards a single communication. Another view has been that the play is a revenge tragedy. But it has been pointed out that the play has three, not one, revengers. It has also been considered, in its width and range, a history play. It has also been called a tragedy of passion, or of great deeds overthrown. Here, again, the objection raised is that there is no single disaster. A few critics have also called it a satirical drama. But here again the objection has been that there are, not one, but three satirical commentators. Considering all these views, one wonders whether these are mere critical opinions, or considered understandings and appreciations of the art of Webster's play. Opinions are meant to be different. But there always is an area of art where opinions may not come into play; that is, if opinions are not expressed just to get ourselves included among those who also said something about the play. Otherwise, the area of art is its own organism where the interrelationship of different parts and the various functions of different devices can be objectively examined, understood, and appreciated on the basis of the end result of the relationships and functions.

As has been gathered from the various critical opinions on the play, *The White Devil* gets large acceptance both as tragedy and satire. The only objection raised in both cases is that instead of single-minded, concentrated treatment of either tragedy or satire, there is greater emphasis on variety or multiplicity of viewpoints on satire as well as tragedy. There are three revengers rather than one; and there are three satirical commentators rather than one. It will do well to remember here that neither Webster's Elizabethan predecessors nor he himself followed the classical dictum of three unities. Their strength as dramatists lies in the variety of life they provide within a single structure, and the multiplicity of viewpoints they offer on a single

subject. The case of Shakespeare's double plots, which at one time was a structural flaw, has long since been settled as a virtue of his vision. The doubling or multiplying a situation, it has been agreed, help universalize an experience, and provide to the reader the advantage of double or multiple perspective.

We know how in the case of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the revenge theme is handled at three different levels by having within a single plot three revengers of varying consciousness. While Fortinbras, seeking revenge upon Hamlet for his father's death by Hamlet's father, is a soldier with straight morality of blood for blood, Hamlet himself, seeking revenge on Claudius for his father's murder, faces all kinds of complexities created by his mother being an accomplice in the act. Hamlet speaks of puritanical ideas of sin, of penitence and penance, of incest and adultery, of heaven and hell, etc. The third revenger, Laertes, seeking revenge on Hamlet for his father's death by Hamlet, reacts neither like the soldier Fortinbras nor like the philosopher Hamlet, but falls an easy prey to Claudius' intrigues, finding himself face to face with Hamlet in a sword battle over the grave of his sister, Ophelia. Well, the number of revengers here is no less than those in *The White Devil*. No doubt, Monticelso is at first ready to "stake a brother's life" for the sake of revenge, but later, he says "It's damnable." Also, Francisco is a revenger who works mostly through other men and escapes scot-free at the end. Lodovico, another revenger, is the one who satisfies his own pride while working for Francisco, and finally loses his life. Another revenger, Giovanni, stands for justice in revenge.

Now, taking all these shades of revenge attitudes represented by different revengers only proves, as it does in the case of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, that in the view of the dramatist, there is no blind law of blood for blood. As Hamlet himself puts it, "there is nothing good or bad, only thinking makes it so." The point that Hamlet seems to make here is that action alone cannot be called good or bad by itself. With what thinking, to what purpose or end, an action has been taken by a person would determine the moral

status of that action. Here, in both these plays, there are revengers with very different intents and purposes, and all of them cannot be considered to occupy the same moral status. This aspect of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama has to be understood in the light of the new learning of the Renaissance. The unified, even closed, society of the Medieval ages no longer existed, and the individual has come to experience the fruit of free thinking, or least to have available to him ideas alternative to the medieval on every subject and situation one had to face in life. The dramatist, Shakespeare or Webster, is only being true to his age, and by so doing dramatizes to us the greater awareness of life and more developed consciousness on the part of his protagonist than was available to the medieval man. If anything, multiplicity of revengers makes for the writer's complexity of consciousness and maturity of vision.

It is the same view we have to take of there being more than one commentator in the satire of *The White Devil*. This has been attributed to the multiplicity of sources Webster had available to him for the story of Vittoria. J.R. Brown, for instance, comments: "Notice that, when we begin to analyse the nature of Webster's dramatic style, his heterogeneous debts to other dramatists begin to make sense; at least they all seem to serve a consistent technical purpose. Such multiplicity is not found in any of the contemporary accounts of Vittoria which may have been Webster's sources; it was he who introduced the death of Marcello and the madness of Cornelia in the last Act, who developed Flamineo's role, brought Francisco to Padua to act as commentator, gave Loctovico a personal motive for revenge, and added to the importance of Giovonnia at the close."

#### **24.5 LET US SUM UP**

This only proves that Webster made all these changes with a purpose, and that obviously was to present a world picture which could be viewed from the eyes of three commentators, giving a prism-view of life, rich and complex, not simplified by either the convention of revenge or the tradition

of satire. He combines both and combines them with all the complexity of vision available to him at the time. And for communicating this complexity, he created a unique dramatic style, in which his use of language, the pulse of his prose and verse, his imagery, the continual choric comment, ironic, comic, and straightforward, the sensational happenings and sudden changes in action and sentiment, all seem entirely appropriate to his purpose. The multiplicity and looseness of his dramatic structure give a width and complexity of presentation to his works next only to Shakespeare's.

#### **24.6 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

- Q1 John Webster is a tragic satirist. Discuss.
- Q2 John Webster is satirist with a purpose. Discuss.
- Q3 Discuss the moral vision of John Webster.

#### **24.7 SUGGESTED READING**

- Bogard, Travis. *The Tragic Satire of John Webster*. Rusell & Rusell, 1965.
- Murray, Peter B. *A Study of John Webster Mouton*, 1969.
- Peason, Jacqueline. *Tragedy and tragicomedy in the plays of John Webster*. Manchester UP, 1980.

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**COURSE No.111**  
**M.A. ENGLISH**

**DRAMA-I**  
**JOHN WEBSTER**  
**(THE DUCHESS OF MALFI)**

**LESSON No. 25**  
**UNIT - V**

## **PLOT AND STRUCTURE**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 25.1 Introduction
- 25.2 Objectives
- 25.3 Structure of the Play
- 25.4 Plot Construction
- 25.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 25.6 Examination Oriented Questions
- 25.7 Suggested Reading

### **25.1 INTRODUCTION**

Writing about the Elizabethan drama, T. S. Eliot observed, “The art of the Elizabethans is an impure art.... The aim of the Elizabethans was to attain complete realism without surrendering any of the advantages which as artists they observed in unrealistic conventions.” John Webster being closer to this art shares most of its aspects in both *The Duchess of Malfi* as well as *The White Devil*. One can, in Eliot’s sense, call both of Webster’s great tragedies examples of “an impure art.” In his *The Duchess of Malfi*, Webster plays over the whole gamut between firm convention and complete realism. From the conventional dumb-show to the would-be realistic pathos of “I pray thee, look thou giv’st my little boy/some syrup for

his cold...,” or from the horror-show of “*the artificial figures of Antonio, and his children, appearing as if they were dead*” to the realization of a character’s psychological state, in such lines as Ferdinand’s much-quoted “Cover up her face: mine eyes dazzle: she died young,” or Antonio’s “I have no use/To put my life to” many critics have seen a confusion, in Webster’s play, between convention and realism, leading to a failure of his dramatic technique. Their contention is that this mixing leads to, so to say, to the lack of structure in *The Duchess of Malfi*, as well as in *The White Devil*.

## **25.2 OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this lesson is to make the learner familiar with the plot and the structure of the drama *The Duchess of Malfi* by John Webster.

## **25.3 STRUCTURE OF THE PLAY**

It has been very common with critics to say that when Webster uses conventional dramatic material, such as the various devices of the Revenge play, he does it only for show value, for dramatic effect. He never uses them, in the critical opinion, for furthering the dramatic action, or for the meaning of the play. On the contrary, Webster’s dramatic meaning would appear to consist in his poetry, such as Bosola’s “...didst thou ever see a lark in a cage?” The meaning of the play comes through in his poetry irrespective of the dramatic devices employed. It is also one of the critical favourites to say that it is only when Webster’s poetry fails to do the trick that he falls back on showmanship. This showmanship includes all the apparatus of dead hands, wax images, dancing madmen, and dirge-singing tomb-makers in *The Duchess of Malfi*. Even if we agree that the other contemporaries of Webster made better observance of conventions than he did, it is not necessary that his mixing of conventions and realism would always be a disadvantage to him as a dramatist. A successful dramatist may fuse, rather than confuse, the two contrary elements. He may put them together to his dramatic advantage. For sure, Shakespeare did so; and so did, undoubtedly, John Webster. By successfully amalgamating convention and realism, both Webster and

Shakespeare created something structurally new and vital, enriching the existing forms thereby. This “something” is much more elusive than a rigid form or any of its ingredients.

One of the problems for the critics of *The Duchess of Malfi* has been the death scene of the Duchess. It has been condemned by some as a structural oddity, praised by others as a complex character-analysis. Most critics would grant that the scene is a penetrating piece of character analysis, but very few would appreciate its structural appropriateness. The inner development of her character is revealed, no doubt, through language where juxtaposition of sublime and lowly suggests the tremendous tension in her mind :

*The heaven over my head seems made of molten brass,*

*The earth of flaming sulphur, yet I am not mad:*

*As the tann'd galley-slave is with his oar*

We are made to follow, through such language, the inner development of the Duchess towards the acceptance of her fate, till she humbly kneels to welcome death. In the middle of such a moving human experience, Webster introduces a pack of howling madmen, who sing and dance and make antic speeches. As these figures leave the stage, it is followed by another apparatus, of “dirge-singing tomb-makers,” etc.

Here, all kinds of critical questions have been raised about the structural propriety of such a show material. How are we to reconcile such opposed elements? The commonly critical answer has been that it is just another instance of Webster’s constant letting us down, his constant sacrifice of the unity of plot and structure, in order to achieve dramatic effects. Seen in the over-all scheme of the play, the madmen’s masque is, for sure, part of a larger structural unit – a more extensive masque. Within the scene of the Duchess’s death, this larger masque is being developed on a framework of realistic dramatic representation. The framework itself bears an analogous relationship to the masque structure. The

action of the scene can be grasped only by seeing both, the basic framework and the masque structure, and the progressive interaction of the two. And it is this structural counterpointing of convention and realism, this concentrated purity of art, so to say, which imparts to the scene its peculiar nature.

Webster's introduction of masque in his tragedy was nothing new at the time he wrote *The Duchess of Malfi*. It had become by then a long-established tradition. Right from Thomas Kyd down to Tourner, masque had been traditionally used to commit revering murder or otherwise resolve the plot. The essence of the masque, throughout its tradition, was "the arrival of certain persons vizored and disguised, to dance a dance or present an offering." Although the structure of the early Tudor masque had become overlaid with literature and with show, the masques inserted in Jacobean plays stayed close to the simpler structure of the Elizabethan masque. It is the servant who is made by Webster the presenter of the masque in *The Duchess of Malfi*. He delivers a speech introducing each of the eight madmen masquers. This has been called a product of Webster's grim comico-satirical strain. In terms of realistic plot, it also looks out of place here. But not so, however, if seen in the tradition to which it belongs.

If we look into the history of the masque, it is found that from 1608 onwards practically every court-masque was preceded by an antimasque, often danced by "antics." Webster is obviously working here in an antimasque tradition which came to have many uses in the drama that followed Webster. After the servant's presentation of the madmen masquers, the masquers themselves appear. Then one of them sings a song to what the stage directions describe as "a dismal kind of music." Here is that so-called song :

*O let us howl, some heavy note,  
Some deadly dogged howl,  
Sounding as from the threat'ning throat  
Of beasts, and fatal fowl!*

The song is immediately followed by various madmen speaking for themselves, in a series of disjointed speeches. These speeches verbally link the episode with main themes of *The Duchess of Malfi*. By now it must become clear that the episode is not a structural oddity as considered by certain critics. It is not a Bedlam-broke-loose. Seen in the overall structure of the play, this scene at the very centre of the plot, is highly functional. It is significantly related to the events represented on the stage. One can see that there is a nucleus of folk tradition in the masque, which has a direct bearing on the action of the play. Hence, it is justified for being a part of the play's plot.

Traditionally, after the masquers had danced "their own measure," they would "take out" members of the audience to dance. This peculiar feature of involving the audience in the proceedings distinguished the masque as an art form from the drama. In *The Duchess of Malfi*, the Duchess is now "taken out". It is at this point, directly upon the madmen's "own measure," that Bosola, masqued "*like an old man*", enters the stage. His "invitation," or summons, to the Duchess is as conclusive as could be: "I am come to make thy tomb." The Duchess until now has been a rather passive spectator like the audience. But now, with an abrupt change, she takes part in what is happening. Bosola's disguise is like that of the traditional masque image of Time. Also, his appearance, while again focusing our attention on the Duchess, turns the mock wedding-masque into what reminds us of a Dance of Death. Bosola's speech at the moment, "thou art a Iroch of worm-seed, at best, but a salvatory of green mummy..." is from the view-point of plot rather extravagant. But from the viewpoint of the play's thematic design, it is fed with meaning by the masque structure around it, quite as much as is the grave-digger's speech in *Hamlet*.

Thus, Act IV, entirely devoted to the death of the Duchess, gives an insight into Webster's "impure art." The scene II of the act, with its masque of madmen, neither fits into a realistic scheme of cause and effect, or psychological motivation, nor does it consistently embody convention. It balances between those two alternatives. No doubt, it is a precarious balance, which Webster loses elsewhere.

But here in this scene, he holds the tension between the two and draws strength from both. It can be rightly remarked here that Webster's art is most "impure" at the centers of meaning of his plays, and that his peculiar skill lay in his ability to utilize the very impurity of his art. When we finally try to grasp how Webster holds the balance between convention and realism, we come to realize that he achieves it by poetic means. For instance, the masque is related to the realistic dramatic representation of what happens, within the scene where it appears, in the manner of a poetic analogy. In other words, the Duchess's marriage, leading to her murder, is like a marriage-masque turned into a masque of Death. Conventional masque elements have helped to give Webster a structure on which to build up the most powerful irony. The irony is, in fact, there in the very analogy between the represented situation and the masque. The irony culminates when the two parts of the analogy become interchangeable: the Duchess becomes "involved" in the masque, and her fate becomes one with the progress of the masque. Also, as in the case of any effective metaphor, the implications reach beyond the immediate situation. In Bosola's worm-seed speech, it is not only the Duchess but – in the manner of the *Death Macabre* – all flesh and all things are involved. What Webster seems to suggest can be grasped here only through the technique he uses in the scene.

Another episode that has been severely criticized for its improbability in the play's structure occurs in Act II, scene iii. Here, Antonio hides in jest from the Duchess and is then replaced by Ferdinand, with daggers in his words and hands. Ferdinand never sees Antonio, though he talks to him through the arras. Antonio only emerges when Ferdinand has disappeared. The critics have pointed out here the physical improbability of the scene. But G. K. Hunter is the one to whom the scene "conveys brilliantly the pattern that Webster is aiming at: the sense of human passions yearning for fulfilment, but never able to reach resolution, because never able to come into full face contact with one another, and speak out directly." Throughout Webster's tragedies we encounter a world where the individual is powerless to realize the integrity of his desires. There are no shared persuasions or presuppositions among characters. It is a shattered and self-divided world.

Direct communications seem rather difficult to come by. The point made comes to us through the sum of the obliquities. What we have, in place of a community of shared values, is a complex of divided characters, each involved in others, and none able to separate from the entanglement.

Webster's vision imposes on his pattern a deviousness of action as well as an abrogation of the free-will of his characters. As a result, the plays' action becomes too atomized by competing individualism to reach any conclusion. Also, the individuals are too isolated from each other ever to make a community of common values and purposes. But this should not be understood to mean that in his dramatic world the ultimate meaning of life is denied. On the contrary, his evil is always self-defeating. Also, there is always a retributive Justice in Heaven, which is time and again emphasized through commentary in the play :

*Other sins only speak; murder shrieks out:*

*The element of water moistens the earth,*

*But blood flies upwards, and bedews the heavens.*

However, even though Webster affirms the existence and supremacy of the stars or the Heaven, he also shows that any attempt to steer by them leads inevitably to the disaster of worldly hopes. As Ferdinand says,

*... some*

*hold opinion, all things are written there.*

*To which Bosola replies,*

*Yes, if we could find spectacles to read them.*

Thus, the intense gnomonic activity in *The Duchess of Malfi*, is not irrelevant to its action. Actually, the play's action is organized on the principles that are derived from gnomonic understanding. Webster is excessively concerned with certain patterns of action which exhibit man lost and isolated, or in a state of servile subjection.

However, these patterns become important only if the author can convey some sense of the values they exclude, the sense of loss in the world of power, the tension between Virtue and Fortune. He seems to carry to its logical extreme the concern with “what men were, and are.” His assumption, for sure, is that it is only in action that men truly reveal themselves. Conversely, his belief seems to be that contemplation or pure knowledge may be beautiful, but it is ineffective. This assumption, in fact, belonged to the Renaissance humanists, from whom it was handed down to the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists. The line of tragic drama from Marston to Webster explores the assumption in terrifying detail, facing, as it does, the Italianate or modern world of success-at-all-costs with scorn and horror. Thus, the play’s structure is so designed as to clearly communicate Webster’s vision of this world full of scorn and horror. The entire apparatus of theatrical conventions he uses, the characters he creates for dramatizing his vision of the world, the incidents that he uses to bring out the hidden fires in human nature, are all geared towards a common end, which is to illustrate that vision.

#### **25.4 PLOT CONSTRUCTION**

No doubt, Webster does not construct his plays, in some ways, as Shakespeare did. But that also does not mean that his constructions are not as good as those of Shakespeare. It is generally believed that Webster created for himself in *The Duchess of Malfi*, structural problems by trying to do more than one thing at a time. The more commonly identified problems are the play’s ironic repetition and deliberate fragmentation. To these critics, while the play’s first four Acts constitute a tragic plot, the fifth act confronts tragedy with satire, tragic-comedy, and a distorted view of the tragic absolutes. This method, seemingly unconventional, has been viewed rather unkindly by critics. Some have called it “broken-backed,” others an “anti-climax,” rather fatal to the unity of the play. The final Act seems to be deliberately separated from the rest by a change in language and by an increasing load of the comic and tragicomic substance. It also shows a change in focus on certain characters. We are made or placed increasingly distanced from the characters. As a result, it becomes less and less easy to accept what they tell us. It

requires an extra effort on our part now to see the intents behind their words. Their purposes and professions become far removed from each other. Deviousness and deception become more common in these characters. Those characters who until the end of the fourth Act stood delegates to the audience have either disappeared from the scene altogether or stand apart with the earlier relation shattered. For example, in the earlier Acts Antonio guided our judgements, but has now all of a sudden shrunk in status after the death of the Duchess. Bosola has now taken over his clear-sighted grasp of character and Delio his stubborn integrity. Only his less attractive characteristics remain, such as his sub-conscious wish for disaster, his helpless indecision, poor judgement, and desire for safety. Like Ferdinand and the Cardinal, he, too, is destroyed by the death of the Duchess.

The play's last Act contains a large number of parodies and incomplete versions of tragedy. The deliberate fictional versions have now replaced the genuine tragedy of the Duchess. For instance, the cardinal's baseless story of the ominous haunting of the family by woman killed by her own kinsmen for her riches is the nearest he can get to understanding tragedy. This fabrication is, for sure, a parody of the story of the Duchess. We are at once reminded of Ferdinand who had said that he hoped to gain "infinite mass of treasure by her death." This manipulator and manufacturer of fiction is given an appropriate death. He becomes a victim of his own fabulous designs. His death becomes an appropriate comment on his own life and exact inversion of the tragic process. Thus, suffering gets surrounded by comedy, knowledge only leads to despair, and the cardinal is reduced to "a little point, a kind of nothing."

The cardinal's death constitutes a clear anti-tragedy in which the solemn tragic moment of Duchess's death disintegrates. The death of Ferdinand is made to follow the same pattern. It is also surrounded by fiction and force instead of the genuine pity and horror of tragedy. His madness is another anti-thesis of tragic awareness. He can only look backwards. And the cardinal only welcomes oblivion. These two deaths provide the antithetical versions to the tragedy of Duchess's death.

The tragedy of Duchess, ending in her death in the fourth Act, is followed by a number of distorted versions of it, changing more and more the tragic spirit

into the comic and satirical. For instance, Cariola resists and lies, Julia refuses to evaluate her own life, Cardinal and Ferdinand invert and parody the achievement of tragic awareness and affirmation. The death of Antonio also acquires an anti-tragic tinge. He is killed casually and accidentally, just as Polonius is killed in *Hamlet*, while hiding behind curtain. Thus, all these tiny centers help reverse the spirit of Duchess's tragedy. Finally, the action reaches far away from tragedy in the death of Bosola. The villain's definition of himself as a justified avenger is also undercut by the brutally simple summing up of his character by Malateste: "Thou wretched thing of blood." His death, like so many more after the death of the Duchess, provides an ironic inversion of tragedy with ambiguous knowledge and affirmation of life. Even Delio's last lines turn out to be an ironic undercut. He attempts to redefine greatness which, he says, lies not in birth or power but in moral excellence. As he insists, men are truly great when they are lords of truth. Only integrity of life, which is complete moral life, leads to immortal fame. Obviously, the Duchess, like the heroine of a tragic comedy, is assured of an immortality because of her essential nobility, her innate goodness.

The play's last lines, which apparently seem to offer a "reaffirmation," turn out to be ambiguous and complex, and so the play's vision of the future. Antonio's son is destined to become Duke "in his mother's right." This makes us believe that political and moral orders would get restored in this rightful act. The real heir, however, turns out to be the Duchess's son by her first marriage, whose horoscope's prediction is that he would have a short life and meet with violent death. Thus, even the play's final restoration of order becomes profoundly ironic. The tragedy of the Duchess is posed at the summit of a descending scale. The play returns from the height to the confusions, ironies, and uncertainties of our real life.

But, as was asserted, earlier, the last act looks anti-climactic only if we proceed with the set assumption that the play is a conventional tragedy. But if we keep an open mind, study its structure step by step, relate each part to the whole, then we shall see that all its aspects – tragedy as well as satire, comic scenes as well as serious – fall into a pattern and form a definite design. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, with its grave-digger's scene and those between Hamlet and Polonius, is the best example before us of how tragedy and satire can be combined, and both to the advantage of tragedy. These comic and satirical elements only enrich the

tragic design as well as the tragic vision. Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, makes use of these and more such elements and gains by their presence rather than lose its basic tragic effect. Webster's tragedy fully conforms to the conventions of his times. The trouble arises only when we try to apply the norms of classical Roman or Greek tragedy to the play, which it was never meant to be.

### **25.5 LET US SUM UP**

*The Duchess of Malfi* consists of five acts. *The Duchess of Malfi* originally published as *The Tragedy of the Dutchesse of Malfy* is a macbre, tragic play written by the English dramatist John Webster in 1612-13. The play is set in the court of Malfi, Italy, from 1504 to 1510. The recently widowed Duchess falls in love with Antonio, a lovely steward. Her brothers, Ferdinand and Cardinal, forbid her remarrying seeking to defend their inheritance. Suspicious of her, they hire Basala to spy on her. She elopes with Antonio and bears him three children. The Duchess takes Basola into her confidence, unaware that he is Ferdinand's spy, which leads to her tragic death. The play is still popular in the contemporary period evident by the fact its current performance by the Royal Shakespeare Company in the Swan Theatre in Stranford-upon-Avon.

### **25.6 EXAMINATION OREINTED QUESTIONS**

Q1 Discuss the structure of the play *The Duchess of Malfi*.

Q2 Evaluate on the plot of the play *The Duchess of Malfi*.

### **25.7 SUGGESTED READING**

"The Duchess of Malfi Synopsis." Royal Shakespeare Company. <https://www.rsc.org.uk/the-duchess-of-mafi/plot>.

Luckyj, C. "Plot and Subplot in the Duchess of Malfi." Jstor.com. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/450466>.

Webster, John. *The Duchess of Malfi* Dover Publications, Inc., 1623

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## **REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 26.1 Introduction
- 26.2 Objectives
- 26.3 Representation of Women
- 26.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 26.5 Examination Oriented Questions
- 26.6 Suggested Reading

### **26.1 INTRODUCTION**

The representation of women in Elizabethan comedy and Jacobean tragedy has been a matter of great interest among critics. It is generally agreed that women in the drama of this period are represented as strong, self-willed, intelligent, and mostly noble. They are shown doing well in different roles, including that of a lawyer or an administrator. Their love is ennobling, their charms are humanizing, their wit and intelligence are incomparable. At the same time, it will be wrong to presume that women in the seventeenth century actually enjoyed the freedom and privilege that are accorded in the drama of the period, or that the society of the time accepted women to possess all the virtues they are credited with in these plays. The non-literary sources available to us today tell us an altogether a different story. These sources give no evidence of women having been emancipated at that time. In fact, what surprises the reader of the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama is this striking difference between the actual and the represented status of women in

the society of the time. Where do these ideas about women come from when their position in the society of the period was not so glorious as represented in the dramatic literature?

## **26.2 OBJECTIVES**

The lesson shows how John Webster has presented women characters in his dramas, especially in *The Duchess of Malfi*.

## **26.3 REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN**

First of all, let us look into the leading female characters available to us in the Jacobean drama. The women who immediately occur to us in this connection are the Duchess of Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, Vittoria of *The White Devil*, and Beatrice-Joanna of Middleton's *The Changeling*. These women clearly share the common attributes of passion, sensuality, courage, intelligence, cunning, and ambition. These qualities of character make these females so attractive and admirable that for centuries they have been accepted as a part of consistent and believable female heroic persona. We have leading female characters in Shakespeare's comedies, but we do not have a single leading female character in his tragedies. We have tragic heroines in the Greek drama, but not in the Elizabethan. It is remarkable that in the Jacobean period Webster should choose to have woman as the leading character in both of his great tragedies. As has been rightly acknowledged, it can be said that one of John Webster's most original contributions to English tragedy consisted in his examination of the characteristics which combine to produce a convincing tragic heroine.

When we come to consider the fact that this heroic woman is done to death by her own brothers, we cannot help asking, "What did this woman do to merit death?" Perhaps, the answer is, that the tragedy which successfully presents a sympathetic tragic heroine must also be concerned with the question, "Can this woman be trusted?" Of course, it is not a matter of one woman being able to trust another. It is, in point of fact, a matter of whether one man or many men can trust one particular woman. Also, what is important to understand here is the nature of this question. 'Can this woman be trusted?' is, as a matter of fact, a peculiarly

patriarchal question to ask. In Webster's major tragedies this point is emphasized by the strange situation of his heroines. Both, the Duchess and Vittoria move in exclusively masculine worlds. Also, both appear to be cut off from contact with other women. Then, both are virtually isolated from the friendship or companionship of women of their own rank.

Critics have pointed out that the Jacobean dramatists, especially Webster, show great insight into female character, even female psychology. They maintain that the female portrayals are convincing. To this, the feminists have reacted insisting that the characters look convincing to the male critics because they are drawn from a distinctly male viewpoint. How men conceive of women? What do they think of women? If the female characters square up with their views, they are called convincing. Even a female critic, Una-Ellis-Fermor, endorses this view. Praising Middleton, for instance, she says: "Middleton's capacity for tragedy is inseparable from his other supreme gift, his discernment of the minds of women; in this no dramatist of the period except Shakespeare is his equal at once for variety and for penetration." The feminists of today would not accept the old-timer woman critic, who writes just as men wrote – criticism on accepted critical ethos, including ideas of malehood and femininity. They find that the qualities being praised of the women characters in the Jacobean plays are actually morally dubious. Some of these qualities are: cunning, duplicity, sexual rapaciousness, changeableness.

Let us examine the case of the Duchess in Webster's play, our immediate concern here. The first time we see the Duchess in the play, she is shown in an atmosphere fraught with explicitly offensive sexual innuendo. Here, she is involved in this offensive affair, which is made to control our assessment of her character for the rest of the play's time. Here is the scene of her appearance :

FERDINAND. *You are a widow :*

*You know already what man is, and therefore*

*Let not youth, high promotion, eloquence –*

CARDINAL. *No, nor anything without the addition, honour,*

*Sway your high blood.*

FERDINAND. *Marry! They are most luxurious*

*Will wed twice.*

DUCHESS. *Will you hear me?*

*I'll never marry :-*

CARDINAL. *So most widows say!*

*But commonly that motion lasts no longer*

*Than the turning of an hour-glass—the funeral sermon*

*And it, end both together.*

The sexual innuendo comes to a climax a couple of speeches later. The Duchess reveals the accuracy of her brothers' prediction. She confirms their dark travesty of female lasciviousness and doubleness simultaneously. Note the following conversation which reveals it all :

FERDINAND. *You are my sister –*

*This was my father's poniard: do you see!*

*I'd be loth to see 'trusty, 'cause 't was his :-*

*A visor and a mask are whispering-rooms*

*That were ne'er built for goodness: for ye well :-*

*And women like that part which, like the lamprey*

*Hath ne'er a bone in't.*

DUCHESS. *Fie sir!*

FERDINAND. *Nay,*

*I mean the tongue: variety of courtship...*

*What cannot a neat knave with a smooth tale*

*Make a woman believe? Farewell lusty widow. [Exit]*

DUCHESS. *Shall this move me? If all my royal kindered*

*Lay in my way unto this marriage,*

*I'd make them my low footsteps.*

Antonio's picture of the Duchess, painted after his infatuation, of stereotype female virtue cannot stand its ground before this encounter here. The impact of this conversation is far more powerful than what the infatuated lover, and that too a servant of the Duchess, has to say in flattery of her.

What Ferdinand fears, the Duchess declares: she is committed to her lust/love for Antonio. Her "luxuriousness" (or lust) drives her into secret marriage with Antonio. She flouts the wishes of her brother, just as Gertude belies the wishes of her son in *Hamlet*. Hamlet's mother too, marries Claudius, which act on her part he keeps condemning as bestial. Considered lower in her sexual drive than even "a beast that wants discourse of reason," the Duchess of Malifi steps out of the path of "duty" and marries for lust. Once the Duchess has taken this step, she remains heroically committed to it irrespective of the consequences that she knows, would follow. Of course, her resoluteness gets gradually commuted into the splendour of a resigned passive acceptance of her inevitable downfall :

FERDINAND. *How doth our sister duchess bear herself*

*In her imprisonment?*

BOSOLA. *Nobly; I'll describe her:*

*She's sad, as one long us'd to 't; and she seems*

*Rather to welcome the end of misery*

*Than shun it; - a behaviour so noble*

*As gives a majesty to adversity;*

*You may discern the shape of loveliness*

*More perfect in her tears, than in her smiles.*

The female tragic protagonist shows “majesty” in her most reassuring and admirable form when associated with patient suffering. We know how Griselda, the Virgin Mary, Hecuba, all prostrate with grief. Here, what has been called a “convincing” representation of the developing psychology of the female protagonist is obviously the transformation of lascivious waywardness into emblematic chaste resignation.

The typical Jacobean attitude towards women was to consider them unreliable. “Frailty thy name is woman,” which the Prince of Denmark pronounces in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was universal with the 17<sup>th</sup> century male members of English society. Donne’s “Go and catch a falling star” stresses the same stereotype image of the woman. Such statements about women, so common in the poetry and drama of the age, were always meant to remind the audience of the female sensuality. This image of the woman as a deceiving creature when it comes to lust or sensuality perhaps was derived from the Biblical story of the Fall. Since, the first woman failed to resist the sensual temptation, all women thereafter inherited the basic female trait. This religious sanction came handy to the male members for subjugating the female members to their stronger partners. Even Desdemona’s marriage for love is given the same colouring :

*Look to her Moor if thou hast eyes to see;*

*She has deceiv’d her father, and thee.*

Such accusations against women were meant to make them feel “guilty” of their willful acts of love and marriage. Unless the act is sanctioned by the male authority – father, brother, husband – it remains an immoral act, and hence, liable to punishment.

In the eyes of Jacobean audience, these women had to be severely punished

for their inordinate sensuality so that others of the race do not make the mistake. What Webster thought of the Duchess's story and what he expected from the audience of his age in reacting to her story can be gauged from the source he relied upon for the plot of his play. The acknowledged source of Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* was William Painter's *The Palace of Pleasure* (1566/67). This book, consisting of lively tales translated from Boccaccio and other Italian writers, was a source, in fact, for all of the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, including Shakespeare. The twenty-third "novel" in this book is entitled, "The Duchess of Main, the infortunate marriage of a gentleman, called Antonio Bologna with the Duchess of Malfi, and the pitiful death of them both." The moral message of this novella is unequivocal from the very opening paragraph of the tale, which runs thus:

*Wherefore it behoveth the Noble, and such as have charge of common wealth, to live an honest life, and bear their port upright, that none have cause to take ill example upon discourse of their deeds and naughtie life. And above all, that modesty ought to be kept by women, as their race. Noble birth, authoritie and name, maketh them more famous, even so their vertue, honestie, chastity, and continencie more praiseworthy. And behovefull it is, that like as they wishe to be honoured above all other, so their life do make them worthy of the honour, without disgracing their name by deede or woorde, or blemishing that brightnesse which may commend the same. I greatly feare that all the Princely factes, the exploits and conquests done by the Babylonian queen Semyramis, never was recommended with such praise, as hir vice had shame in records by those which left remembrance of ancient acts. Thus I say, because a woman being as it were the image of sweetness, curtesie and shame-fastnesse, so soone as she steppeth out of the right tracte, and leaveth the smel of hir duetie and modestie, besides the denigration of her honor thrusteth hir self into infinite troubles and causeth the ruine of such which should be honored and praised, if women's allurements solicited them not to follie.*

Here is characterized the image of woman created by the age, which, if violated in any manner, would invite punishment from the authority that be. The

woman is made here an emblem of passive and dutiful behaviour, of sweetness, courtesy and shame. Any act violating this code will cause a woman's fall from the pedestal. An entire glorious military career is blotted out when queen Semyramis seduces her son.

In the dramatic text of Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, too, active sexuality on the part of the Duchess is considered a breach of conduct carved out for the woman by the ethos of the age. In the moment of disobeying her brothers and remarrying, she asserts her sexual independence. But her act of marrying, and that too her inferior in social hierarchy, makes the widow a double sinner in the eyes of her brothers and the society of the time. This metamorphoses her from an ideal mirror of virtue into lascivious whore, for she has preferred "lust" to "duty". The Duchess as a woman is made to stand out against all the social odds. She has shown courage in defying a social code, which debar her from marrying again if her first husband is lost, which debar her from marrying a person of her choice, if that person is from a lower class than her own. When she chooses to defy these social codes, she has decided to become a rebel. And as a rebel, she is to be punished so that others dare not question the social code. She takes the punishment, and she takes it bravely. She refuses to relent, she remains steadfast. She maintains her dignity as an individual and sacrifices for her freedom. She is, thus, ahead of her time. She is a martyr for the cause of female freedom and dignity.

For fuller appreciation of the social position of woman in the seventeenth century, in the context of which the story of the Duchess is to be viewed, we need to look into some of the relevant records of the social order in that age. In the history of England, sixteenth century can be considered a period of some of the major changes of far-reaching effects. One such change was with regard to the law of inheritance. However, the practice of inheritance was not the same as the law of inheritance. What existed in the law was not accepted in practice. Hence, there were circumventings of law to avoid smaller divisions of land holdings, also to favour sons as against daughters. Incidentally, in our own country we have the law of equal rights to property of daughters, but how many daughters in actual practice

get their due? Historians reveal that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, great landowners found themselves under threat from wealthy status-seeking burghers. As a result, they preferred to tinker with the legislation so that their dwindling estates were not divided any further. The issue is said to have come down to a head on conflict between the nobleman's estate and the increasingly powerful mercantile class's cash. At the heart of every "tinkering" with the law could be found a woman in every meticulously drawn up will of the nobility and gentry of the period.

Even before the demographic accident had produced an alarming shortfall in male heirs, female kin had come to be seen as destructive of estate conservation. A daughter had to be provided with dowry, and a part of this dowry, in the case of noble families, would be in the form of land. As soon as a woman produced an heir to her husband's line, that land would become part of the alien line's permanent holding. However, in the absence of an heir, the land would revert to her own family, either upon her death, or upon that of her husband. In the absence of any sons at all, the estate would be divided among daughters, as it is done by Lear in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Also, in the event of a nobleman's death before his wife, one-third of all his lands went to the widow for her use during her lifetime. This imposed a considerable burden on the heir, and might, if she remarried, result once again in the division of estate. One wonders whether the regular confusion of "dowry" and "dower" (entirely distinct in law) in popular parlance stemmed from the threat to the continuity of male inheritance.

The female heirs occupied prominent position in all the complex tactical manoeuvres surrounding inheritance. This prominence was in striking contrast to their enforced submissiveness elsewhere in the Jacobean social system. This contrast, in a way, sounds ironic. It was never the intention of lawyers and landowners preoccupied with patrilinear succession to involve their women as other than means to a patriarchal end. But it also remains true that the female nobles and gentry do obtrude during this period in their capacity as carriers of inheritance. We must also be clear about the fact that the law about female inheritance did not give them any real power. They are only technically strong. Their strength can be said

to be limited to causing patriarchal anxiety. As a matter of fact, they remain in thrall. Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, makes the point clear. Here, the handsomely dowried Isabella bewails her lack of personal choice of a marriage partner whilst at the same time affirming her importance in the inheritance stakes:

ISABELLA.     *Oh the heat breakings*  
*Of miserable maids, where love's enforced!*  
*The best condition is but bad enough :*  
*When women have their choices, commonly*  
*They do but buy their thraldoms, and bring great portions*  
*To men to keep 'em in subjection –*  
*As if a fearful prisoner should bribe*  
*The keeper to be good to him, yet lies in still,*  
*And glad of a good usage, a good look sometimes.*  
*By'r lady, no misery surmounts a woman's:*  
*Men buy their slaves but women buy their masters.*

Yet in Middleton's play, it is the female characters who, even while protesting their hopelessness in relation to men, wheel-and-deal their way through adultery, murder and incest. The alliance of heart is preferred to an arranged marriage. The female drive towards independent choice leads to sexual license. Thus, the shift from passivity to bravura activity is accompanied by a marked moral decline.

With comparable bravado, the Duchess of Malfi clearly identifies her elevated fiscal position with her actual entitlement to act exactly as she chooses. In both the cases, of Isabella and the Duchess, we are made witness to the acting out of a taboo. The Duchess is shown acting out her remarriage and its consequences as if her power as royal heir, dowager of the Dukedom of Amalfi, carrier of a substantial dowry in movable goods, gave her the real strength. Her presumption

is, however, proved wrong. The patriarchy's relation to her behaviour is made more than clear in the play. She loses her princely immunity through forfeiture of her dower. From now onward she is no longer, despite her protests to the contrary ("I am the Duchess of Malfi still"), the Duchess of Malfi. She is reduced to the safe composite stereotype of penitent whore. Virgin majestic in grief, serving mother, and patient and true turtle dove mourning her one love. The Duchess may act out on the stage her power of inheritance, in real life it was no power for the individual woman. In real life the verdict had been decided upon in advance. William Painter, whose *The Palace of Pleasure*, was the source book for the plot of Webster's play, had laid it down as under :

Behold here (O ye foolish lovers) a Glasse of your lightnesse, and ye women, the course of your fonde behavior... Shall I be of opinion that a household servaunt ought to sollicite, nay rather suborne the daughter of his Lord without punishment, or that a vile and abject person dare to mount upon a Princes bed? No, no, pollicie requireth order in all, and eche wight ought to be matched according to their qualitie, without making pastime of it to cover our follies, and know not of what force love and destiny be, except the same be resisted. A goodly thing it is to love, but where reason loseth his place, love is without his effect, and the sequele rage and madness.

Thus, in *The Duchess of Malfi*, the spectre of real female power implicit in the structure of inheritance is ritually exercised. Headstrong, emancipated female love is chastened into figurative submission. The message for the reader is more than clear. In the first place, she is not shown to be the representative woman of her age. Both by her birth as well as by her deed she is an exceptional woman. Also, her daring act of remarriage, of marrying a person of her choice, and of marrying a person lower in status than her own, is made an example of a woman led astray by her lust, and therefore rightly done to death. The dramatist may impart some grandeur to her person, may lend her dignity of a tragic hero. But she still remains a tragic figure because she has committed an error which must cost her dearly her fortune as well as her life. Her torturers are, no doubt, made to appear cruel and inhuman. But she too, is not shown doing the right thing in what

she did. Her act is still made to appear a wrong one. Hence, the gender bias of the age is prominently displayed in the story of the Duchess.

#### **26.4 LET US SUM UP**

The Duchess of Malfi is an unusual centre figure for a seventeenth century tragedy not only because she is a woman, but also because, as a woman, she combines virtue with powerful sexual desire. *The Duchess of Malfi* raises questions about the nature and gendering of political authority. The figure of the Duchess combines the roles of tragic protagonist and tragic victim, and occupies a dramatic centrality that is conventionally only accorded to male characters, such as Shakespeare's great tragic heroes : King Lear, Othello and Macbeth.

#### **26.5 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. Write a note on the chief characteristics of Jacobean tragedy.
2. Discuss Webster as a tragic satirist.
3. Examine *The Duchess of Malfi* in terms of its plot.
4. Write a note on the character of the Duchess.
5. Discuss Bosola as a Machiavellian villain.

#### **26.6 SUGGESTED READING**

M. C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy*, 1935.

Una Ellis-Fermor, *The Jacobean Drama: An Interpretation*, 1936.

Callaghan, Dympna. "The Duchess of Malfi and Renaissance Women." British Library, 31 March 2017. <https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/the-duchess-of-malfi-and-renaissance-women>.

Jankowski, Theodora A. *Women in Power in the Early Modern Drama*. University of Illinois Press, 1992.

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**COURSE No. 111**

**DRAMA-I**

**LESSON No. 27**

**M.A. ENGLISH**

**THE WAY OF THE WORLD**

**UNIT - VI**

**WILLIAM CONGREVE (1670–1729)**

## **THE WRITER AND HIS WORK**

### **STRUCTURE**

- 27.1 Introduction
- 27.2 Objectives
- 27.3 The Writer and his work
- 27.4 Congreve's Plots
- 27.5 His Characters
- 27.6 Congreve's Wit
- 27.7 Congreve's strength and weakness
- 27.8 Let Us SumUp
- 27.9 Examination Oriented Questions
- 27.10 Suggested Reading

### **27.1 INTRODUCTION**

The unit will introduce the learner to Congreve as a dramatist.

### **27.2 OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this lesson is to acquaint the learner with the life and works of William Congreve.

### 27.3 THE WRITER AND HIS WORK

William Congreve was born at Bardsey, Yorkshire, in 1670. His childhood, however, was spent in Ireland, not in England where he was born. It was his father's military service that had taken the family to Ireland. There in Ireland, he studied at Kilkenny School, where Jonathan Swift was also a student. Then Congreve joined Trinity College in Dublin. Later he went to London to do Law, where he joined the Middle Temple in 1691. However, since he had little interest in the profession of Law, he did not take up the practice. Instead he began his career as gentleman author. He soon wrote four comedies and one tragedy. The first two of his comedies were staged at the Drury Lane theatre in London. The other two comedies and the tragedy were staged by the Betterton's Company in the new theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields. His plays were attacked by Jeremy Collier, to which Congreve replied. But when *The Way of the World* (1700) received a cool reception, he virtually wrote nothing for the theatre thereafter.

Congreve held many government sinecures and lived politely with many friends and practically no enemies. In his later life he spent most of the time with Henrietta, Duchess of Marlborough, to whom he bequeathed the bulk of his estate, apparently with a private understanding that the Duchess was in turn to bequeath it, as she did, to their daughter. They had not married, but lived together and had this daughter. Their daughter's name was Lady Mary Godolphin. Some of the important works of Congreve include *The Old Bachelor* (1693), *The Double Dealer* (1693), *Love for Love* (1695), *The Mourning Bride* (1697), *The Way of the World* (1700). He was deeply shocked by the critical attack of Collier. To his mind, the attack was highly unjust.

Congreve always thought of himself as a reformer of the stage. He was regarded so by others also as is evident from the fact that he (along with Vanbrugh) was chosen to direct the new theatre in Haymarket, which was opened in 1705 and was supposedly devoted to theatrical uplift. Another testimony to his merit as dramatist is that Dryden and Southerne praised him quite early in his career.

Besides, his work was highly lauded by Addison and Swift, and many others. Congreve's reform was largely concerned with the technique of drama. The main areas of his interest included wit, structure and dialogue in the dramatic form. Maybe because he felt discouraged by the lack of sufficient response to his reformist zeal, he abandoned writing for the stage at the early age of thirty. His prefaces to his plays, as well as Swift's epistle to him, indicated that Congreve felt superior to his audiences. After abandoning theatre, Congreve chose to become an elegant minor poet, a gouty man about town, and the gallant of a wealthy duchess. If there was something of the snob in Congreve, he was still an amiable snob. He was decidedly one of the best liked of literary men during a period of nearly forty years (1692-1729), in which very few wits were generally beloved.

Undoubtedly, Congreve was a formalist and a technician, a man of artistic rather than moral conscience. He learned a good deal from his predecessors, such as Etherege, Wycherley, Shadwell, and Moliere. His characters were decidedly more subtle than those of Etherege. If we compare Congreve's gentlemen, Vainlove and Mirabell, with the celebrated Dorimant, the superiority of the former becomes clear. His lovers do not love a quarrel with a cast mistress. They do not condescend to berate their servants. They are also not vain of their inconstancy in love—though they are inconstant. Congreve is also free from Wycherley's vehemence, and yet the actions of his plays, especially of the *Double Dealer*, are far from being inherently comic. "Tis but the way of the world" might have been said of any of his sophisticated characters in any of his plays. The way of the world, evidently, is not a pretty way. With the superficialities of the world, however, the comic writer may safely and amusingly play. "There are," Congreve recognized, like a true neo-classicist, "Crimes too daring and too horrid for Comedy. But the Vices most frequent, and which are the common Practice of the looser sort of Lovers, are the subject Matter of Comedy." So among the affections and follies of men, Congreve as dramatist works, leaving more serious matters to be corrected by the courts, ecclesiastical or civil. "Unmasking," wrote his friend Swift, almost at the same moment when Congreve was defending his plays against Collier, "I think, has never been allowed fair usage, either in the world or the playhouse." But the unmasking of follies

remained Congreve's forte.

#### 27.4 CONGREVE'S PLOTS

Congreve's highest achievements in drama are not seen in his plots, although he observes the three unities more regularly than any other dramatist of his age. For instance, his very first play, *The Old Bachelor* (1693), observes the unity of action quite superbly. Its plot involves a series of intrigues on different social planes. The play was an enormous success; it assured the reputation of the young dramatist. Later, in the same year (1693), however, Congreve's second play failed rather miserably. The failure of *The Double Dealer* is hardly accountable. So far as the plot of this play is concerned, it is far more unified than the first. There are, no doubt, thrilling incidents, but no divergent intrigues as in the first play. The darkness of the villainy makes the play hardly more than tragicomic, and possibly this fact explains its cool reception. Congreve's third play, *Love for Love* (1695), remained for long the most popular of his works. The plot here tells how Valentine, at odds with a critical father, is likely to lose his estate to a sea-going younger brother and thus, miss getting his beloved heiress, Angelica. The intrigue is deftly suspensive, turning largely on the ultimate triumph of the intelligent younger couple over a star-crazed uncle and an unnatural father, with, in the last act, a masked marriage that tricks the fop Tattle into wedding the blemished Mrs. Frail, instead of the expected Angelica. In terms of its comic effect, the plot is perhaps Congreve's best.

Congreve's vastly acknowledged best comedy remains *The Way of the World* (1700). It is generally said that though Congreve had an excellent plot, he treated it rather carelessly. It is alleged that he had too much love of topical conversation to waste time in telling the story of how Mirabell evades the malicious plotting of Lady Wishfort, Mrs. Marwood, and her lover Fainall, and persuades the aloof but charming Millamant to marry him. Obviously, all these plots are conventional: we have a comedy, not of love, but of the love chase. Financial reverses, irate fathers, jealous cast mistresses (particularly coquettish aunts of the pursued lady), are the chief obstacles to success, and legal documents, signed

or unsigned, disguising, and masked marriages that involve mistaken identities, are common episodes. It is the same old deck of cards, but Congreve does clever tricks with them. One can easily conclude that the power that moves the plot is the “intrigue,” not what Johnson calls “nature”. In other words, incidents that take place in the plot are contrived. As such, they look less life-like, less natural, and more cooked-up. Although Congreve is considered the best of the period in the genre of the comedy of manners, his plots sound rather artificial.

### 27.5 HIS CHARACTERS

Just as the plots of Congreve’s plays are conventional, so are his characters. More often than not, his men and women are relatively flat. They are two-dimensional characters. Once in a while, his imagination works wonders and he creates, not only interesting, but also three dimensional, complex characters. As E.M.Forster has defined in his *Aspects of the Novel*, while the flat characters are simple, in that they are easily distinguished by one or two traits of their persons, round or complex characters are growing, in that they are not the same all the time. Encountering fresh experiences of life, while the flat characters remain unchanged, always the same, as if nothing new had happened, the round characters, who expose themselves to new experiences and absorb them, grow and are found different after every encounter. In Act II of *The Way of the World*, Mirabell talking to Mrs. Fainall about her husband, remarks, “when you are weary of him you know your remedy.” The significance of the remark is apparent only at the final discovery in Act V that before marrying Fainall the lady had, with remarkable prescience deeded her entire estate in trust to Mirabell. She would never have done that to Dormant : the Congreve gentlemen can be trusted.

Congreve’s female characters are, of course, not so finely drawn as his gentlemen. His leading female characters – the virtuous heroines of his plays—are not so finely imagined as his leading male characters. Of all his heroines, Millamant alone has colour and charm. But it is also Millamant who, above the other heroines of Congreve’s comedies, is the clear victim of affectation. She finds the thought of a husband a little too tedious to bear. In her case, it is perhaps Congreve’s wit,

rather than her charm, that is truly vivid. Her entry, which takes place in Act II, in full sail with “a shoal of fools for tenders” is unsurpassable. Equally unsurpassable is her capitulation to Mirabell at the end. Early in the play Mirabell and Fainall talk of her, and when Fainall opines that she has wit, Mirabell replies, “She has beauty enough to make any man think so, and complaisance enough not to contradict him who shall tell her so.” Mirabell continues to say that even Millamant’s affectation makes her more agreeable. The passage in question is in Congreve’s finest vein. It is a specimen of excellence both in prose as well as wit.

Congreve’s portrait of Millamant remains, however, an exception. Generally, he is at his best when he is drawing the portraits of incidental or inferior persons. His second gentlemen are negligible plot-ridden sketches. His villains and scorned ladies (except perhaps Lady Wishfort) are rather melodramatic. They actually belong in the species of the heroic plays. But his valets, his gulls, and his fops are quite likely to be superbly sketched. They are literary and not, like Sir Fopling Flutter, addicted to mere overdressing. Congreve’s one worthy country squire, Sir Wilful Witwoud, is much underrated as a character. Sir Wilfull’s eagerness to get his books off in the drawing room or to get at his sack, and his lack of eagerness to get at his wooing are all broadly, but finely, tuned. When we appreciate Congreve’s artifice and elegance we must make a mention of his roistering drunken squire, who nevertheless so pleases Congreve that he is made, before the end of the play, a friend and ally to Millamant. In this latest role he is far more acceptable than his affected, foppish brother.

Congreve’s portraits of the gentleman’s gentleman are, decidedly, original and unexpected. For instance, the admirable Waitwell can disguise himself as Sir Rowland and come a-wooing Lady Wishfort most genteelly: Of his lawfully wedded wife—another of Mirabell’s thoughtful precautions to protect Lady Wishfort—Waitwell can say with Jeeves-like dignity: “With submission, we have indeed been solacing in lawful delights; but still with an eye to business, sir. I have instructed her as well as I could”. But if Waitwell is prophetic of the Victorian butler, Jeremy of *Love for Love* surpasses prophesy. Note him, for instance, in Act V as he underlines the contrast between himself and his “betters”:

*Jeremy*– Sir I have the seeds of rhetoric and oratory in my head; I have been at Cambridge.

*Tattle*– Ay! ‘Tis well enough for a servant to be bred at a university: but the education is a little too pedantic for a gentleman. I hope you are secret in your nature, private, close, ha?

*Jeremy*– O, sir, for that, sir, ’t is my chief talent: I’m as secret as the head of Nilus.

*Tattle*– Ay! Who is he, though? A privy counsellor?

*Jeremy*– [Aside] O Ignorance! —[Aloud] A cunning Egyptian, sir, that with arms would overrun the country: yet nobody could ever find out his headquarters.

*Tattle*– Close dog! a good whoremaster, I warrant him....

Such passages in Congreve, and they are not in scarcity, illuminate his unrealistic but amusing characterizations. They also reflect his gifts in wit, and above all, his eagerness to take time out, even in a final act, for superfluous verbal by-play. It is, in fact, from these incidental passages, which overlay his plots invariably, that Congreve’s rather sorry and not very comic stories gain life and sparkle.

## 27.6 CONGREVE’S WIT

The kind of conversation we just cited constitutes what is called “superadded social vignette” in Congreve’s drama. These vignettes are, in fact, the quintessence of Congreve’s genius. He incessantly dabbles in such witticism, which is sometimes antithetical in structure, sometimes pungent in repartee. It is, however, generally deftly humorous in its implications. If in the scale of being there had to be a maidservant called Mincing, she would inevitably announce dinner as Congreve makes her: “Men, I am come to acquaint your la’ship that dinner is impatient.” And her la’ship, who has “a mortal terror at the apprehension of offending against decorums,” bravely trusts that “Sir Rowland” will not think her “prone to any iteration of

nuptials.” Verbal wit was perhaps Congreve’s highest value, and apparently it was that of all his gentleman fools (not of his servants) who aspire to wit but for whom it is, as Swift said, “the lost language.” For Congreve words danced with stately precision or with gay levity. No English dramatic writer has surpassed him in cool intellectual majesty of diction. He was perhaps too subtle for his own good. Here is a sample of Congreve’s wit at its best:

*Millamant* – Mirabell, Did not you take Exceptions last Night? O ay, and went away—now I think don’t I’m angry—no, now I think don’t I’m pleas’d—For I believe I gave you some Pain.

*Mirabell* – Does that please you?

*Millamant* – Infinitely; I love to give Pain.

*Mirabell* – You would affect a Cruelty which is not in your Nature; your true Vanity is in the Power of pleasing.

*Millamant* – O I ask your Pardon for that—One’s Cruelty is One’s Power; and when one has parted with that, I fancy one’s Old and Ugly.

*Mirabell* – Ay, ay, suffer your Cruelty to ruin the Object of your Power, to destroy your Lover—And then how vain, how lost a thing you’ll be! Nay, ‘tis true : you are no longer handsome when you’ve lost your Lover; your Beauty dies upon the Instant : For Beauty is the Lover’s gift; ‘tis he bestows your Charms—your glass is all a Cheat. The Ugly and the Old, whom the Looking-glass mortifies, yet after Commendation can be flatter’d by it, and discover Beauties in it : For that reflects our praises, rather than your Face.

*Millamant* – O the Vanity of these Men! Fainall, dye hear him? If they did not commend us, we were not handsome! Now you must know they could not commend one, if one was not handsome. Beauty the Lover’s Gift—Lord, what is a Lover, that it can give? Why one makes Lovers as fast as one pleases, and they live as long as one pleases: And then if one pleases one makes more.

*Witwound* – Very pretty. Why you make no more of making of Lovers, Madam, than of making so many Card-matches.

*Millamant* – One no more owes one's Beauty to a Lover than ones Wit to an Echo: They can but reflect what we look and say; vain empty things if we are silent or unseen, and want a Being.

It is this sparkling wit, displayed here in the cited dialogue, which gave Congreve an edge over all other contemporary dramatists. His gift of wit was far above the gift of any other in his time. Dennis paid Congreve great tribute for his wit: "Congreve quitted the stage in disdain, and Comedy left it with him." Byron felt equally ecstatic about the wit in Congreve's plays: "What plays!" What wit! *Helas!* Congreve and Vanbrugh are your only comedy. Our society is too insipid now for the like copy." Byron's instinct was right: the strengths of Restoration Comedy, which ended with Congreve, like its weaknesses and limitations, were to a great extent dependent upon a particular social situation. No equally adequate dramatic form was discovered when Sense, and later Sensibility, joined and replaced wit as the social ideal.

### 27.7 CONGREVE'S STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS

"Since the *Plain-Dealer's* Scenes of Manly Rage," wrote Congreve, "Not one has dar'd to lash this Crying Age". Congreve, whom Gay called "friendly Congreve, unreprouchful man," did not try to lash this age either. *The Old Bachelor* (1693), his first play, is a medley of unequal interest. The play's opening dialogue, however, suggests where his talent lies. *The Double-Dealer* (1693), too, is a mixture of different, and more discordant, kind; it mixes melodrama with romance and light comedy. But he again shows his individual talent, his "prodigious sense of human absurdity" in his portrait of Lady Plyant, and an uncommon tenderness and sensitivity in the love scenes between Mellefont and Cynthia. Congreve's most popular comedy was, *Love for Love* (1695), and it has justly remained a perennial stage-favourite. Even the minor characters in this play have moments of dramatic life. They belong to familiar types, but are vivified and individualized by the excellence of dialogue which

Congreve gives to them as well as to his Wits. Here, Valentine's "mad" speeches, if not the "pure poetry" as some have asserted, are an admirable artefact. One can see in this play, as well as in others, " a strong element of wistfulness...a constant fear of disillusion." It is perhaps merely the case that Congreve, like his fellow-dramatists, was unable fully to imagine and present, without sentimentality, a permanent affection or relationship.

Congreve's best play, *The Way of the World* (1700), was not, and has not proved, so successful a stage-piece, though it contains some of the best scenes and acting roles in the Restoration Comedy. The character of Millamant has been especially charming, and has been universally acclaimed as Congreve's finest dramatic creation. She represents the finest blend of gaiety, mockery, and genuine affection. Equally brilliant in the plays is its dialogue. Congreve's phrasing is fine, often surprising: this strength is indeed, too consistently and exclusively exploited. He delights the style-fanciers, such as Hazlitt, but he works too much in terms of the fine phrase, the dazzling or more robustly amusing scene. However, even this best of his plays, like his others, lacks coherence; the parts are more important than the whole. There is, in fact, no whole of any importance. The plot is rather intricate, but also meaningless. Congreve has, no doubt, a sharp eye for certain situations, such as, the gross self-deception of Lady Wishfort, the back-biting of Witwoud, the inability of Millamant, who loves Mirabell rather "violently," to say more to his face than that she "might by degrees dwindle into a wife," or the love that Mirabell feels for her :

...For I like her with all her faults; nay, like her for her faults. Her follies are so natural, or so artful, that become her; and those affectations which in another woman would be odious, serve but to make her more agreeable.

However, Congreve's perceptions are not extensive. They do remain the perceptions of a dramatist who chose to quit the theatre at the age of thirty, and whose primary inspiration was literary rather than dramatic. Dr. Johnson noted this tendency in Congreve's very first play, which is true, as well, of his last. Congreve

equally answers to the description commonly given of Jane Austen, that she is the amusing but superficial observer of a superficial and restricted society. He sometimes attains the depths of implication (Millamant's love is the best example), but he lacks the understanding of and concern for human values, which makes Jane Austen a major, while he remains a minor, writer. Thus, while Congreve's strength as dramatist lies in the power of individual scenes and in the working out of wit, his weakness lies in his inability to construct coherent plots and failure to comprehend the complexity of human life. With all his imperfections of plot-construction and life-comprehension he still remains the best and most representative writer of his age. The limitations of his age and his own weaknesses have direct correspondence with each other. Since the age was such, his options were limited. If he is superficial in drama, so was the age in life. If he is given to getting absorbed in scenes, forgetting the purpose of the entire life, so was the age engrossed in the momentary pleasures of life, which ignored the serious concerns, of viewing life steadily and viewing it whole. Hence, the writer and the age in Congreve walk hand in hand.

### **27.8 LET UP SUM UP**

William Congreve shaped the English comedy of manners through his brilliant comic dialogue, his satirical portrayal of the war of the sexes, and his ironic scrutiny of the affection of his age.

### **27.9 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. Discuss William Congreve as a dramatist.
2. Evaluate wit and humouristic elements in William Congreve's plays.
3. Analyse the characters portrayal in William Congreve's plays.

### **27.10 SUGGESTED READING**

Hodges, John C. *William Congreve, the Man : A Biography from New Sources*, Kraus, 1966.

Thomas, David. *William Congreve*. Macmilan, 1992.

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## **THE RESTORATION COMEDY**

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

- 28.1 Introduction
- 28.2 Objectives
- 28.3 The Restoration Comedy
- 28.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 28.5 Examination Oriented Questions
- 28.6 Suggested Reading

### **28.1 INTRODUCTION**

The lesson will introduce the learners with salient features of Restoration comedy.

### **28.2 OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this lesson is to familiarize the learner with the salient features of Restoration comedy and also to acquaint the learner with the major writers of Restoration period.

### **28.3 THE RESTORATION COMEDY**

Among the various forms of literature, drama is, decidedly, the most dependent upon and sensitive to its audience. Shakespeare's achievement

was, at least partly, owing to a happy cross-fertilization between the genius of Shakespeare and the spirit of the age. Of course, this coincidence of the man and the moment does not take place very often, but whenever it does, it produces greatness or excellence just as it did in the case of Shakespeare, or the Renaissance as a whole. English drama since the age of Shakespeare has been on a perpetual downward slide. Several attempts have been made to revive the English drama in its past glory, but none really succeeded to achieve the intended goal. There have been some achievements but only to an extent. Oscar Wilde, for instance, succeeded in a certain form of farcical comedy. So did Shaw, again in the limited form of social drama. And so did Eliot, to an extent, in recapturing the spirit of the poetic drama. All these attempts, however, were highly limited, confined to one or another small department of drama, and even as such did not last long.

Restoration Drama sparkles by comparison with the virtual nullity, which followed it, but it is clearly inferior, both in range and depth, to the Elizabethan Drama. The course of deterioration of the drama after the age of Shakespeare shows how much the individual talent is dependent upon the environment and tradition. Of course, like most periods of history, the Restoration period also took pride in considering itself superior to the preceding. We know how the Restoration writers (such as Dryden) considered “the last age,” “barbarous or Gothic.” They always considered their own period “our refined age.” The age of Dryden (as Restoration period is called) was highly self-conscious, especially about those social practices which distinguished it from the pre-Commonwealth England. It was the Restoration comedy, more than any other form of literature in the period, which provided the principal literary expression for this self-consciousness. The spirit of the age, so to say, produced a new form of comedy, which later received the title of “Comedy of Manners.” This new comedy was, obviously, an expression of these new

habits and values of the Restoration Society. No such values and habits favoured tragedy of the age, that is perhaps the reason why so little of it has survived. While the tragedies of the age reflect the sentimentality of cynicism, the comedies reflect cynicism itself. While the former sounds pathetic, the latter sounds pompous.

The spirit of the age of Restoration was well represented by king Charles II himself, whose coronation in 1660 was termed Restoration (of Monarchy). As Bishop Burnet observed, "His private opinion of people was very odd. He thought no man sincere, nor woman honest, out of principle; but that whenever they proved so, humour or vanity was at the bottom of it." Charles's love-life, another contemporary reported, manifested "the effects of health and a good constitution, with as little mixture of the seraphic part as ever a man had." Charles is said to have notoriously differed from his entourage rather in the scope than in the nature of his private activities. As the most illustrious and one of the most assiduous of the drama's patrons he exercised an exceptional influence on the drama of the age. We know how during this period (full forty years between 1660 and 1700) English literature, as well as culture, was totally "upper-class," to an extent that it had never been before. On the reopening of the theatres in 1660 (they had remained closed during the period of the Commonwealth from 1642 to 1660), two companies, sometimes even one, sufficed for London, though the smaller Elizabethan London supported as many as six companies. The tendency of the drama to appeal less generally, and more specifically, to the court, had been noticeable before 1642. However, during the Restoration period the audience became limited and homogeneous as never before.

The Restoration audience took pride in being critical. No doubt, there remained during the period a good deal of discussion about dramatic theory among the readers as well as the writers of drama. But the taste of the audience, such as it was, cannot be considered nice, and the least of all was this audience critical of itself. The comic dramatists of the period depicted this rather degenerate and decadent upper-class society without making any

attempt to disturb its self-complacency. Such an attitude of the dramatists did, of course, provoke some protest but the coterie of the upper class endorsed and enjoyed the depiction of their life on the stage. An important attack on Restoration comedy at the time came from Collier, who wrote *a Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage, 1698*. Later critics, of course, condemned more openly. Macaulay's powerful essay on the subject is well known. Leslie Stephen echoes Macaulay when he describes this comedy as "written by blackguards for blackguards." Dr. Johnson earlier in the eighteenth century, had given to this common attack on "the wits of Chares" his usual weight and finality of phrasing :

Themselves they studied, as they felt they writ;  
Intrigue was plot, obscenity was wit.  
Vice always found a sympathetic friend;  
They pleas'd their age, and did not aim to mend.

Some of the more sensible Restoration dramatists did "aim to amend." Wycherley was one of them. His attitude was ambiguous. Another was Dryden, who felt quite unhappy with both the ethos and the form of contemporary drama. But as a professional dramatist Dryden had to comply with popular taste, so he contrived his "mechanical obscenities" and continued writing in loose dramatic form inherited from the Elizabethans, though he found it hard to believe in it himself. Shadwell's fate was not different. He began his career protesting against the bawdy and repartee so popular in the comedy, as in the life, of the period, but he, too, succumbed to the pressure of the times. As a result, he created conventional characters, situations, dialogues, and attitudes. The authority of the social mode becomes quite clear when we find Dryden saying that repartee is "the very soul of conversation," and Steel insisting that "the chief qualification" of a dramatist is "to be a very well-bred man."

The most common setting for the Restoration comedies was London. The action was generally seen through the eyes of the Metropolitan wit, who would invariably be the play's hero. Also, equally commonly, the hero would be a projection of the dramatist himself, who accepted the common assumptions

like, the Countryman was a boor, the Puritan a hypocrite, and the citizen the husband of a wife who might be tempted. The presence of the upper-class wit, impoverished though he often was, at the center of the comic play's action distinguished Restoration comedy from its predecessors. Traditionally, as a middle-ranking literature, comedy dealt with lower-class persons. Jonsonian comedy followed this model. So did most Elizabethans and Jacobean. One of the limitations that the Restoration found in the comedy of its preceding periods was its poor showing in "gentlemen." Dryden himself complained that the Elizabethan dramatists' wit "was not the wit of gentlemen." At the same time, it cannot be denied that the Restoration comedy was derived from the Elizabethan comedy. Of course, not from Shakespeare, whose comedy was romantic, but from Ben Jonson, whose comedy was realistic. The descriptive surnames of the characters in the Restoration comedy were a direct echo of Jonsonian practice. Even more than Ben Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher provided the true model for the Restoration comedy. Dryden, in 1668, noted that among the Elizabethans the last two (Beaumont and Fletcher) were most popular :

...they understood and imitated the conversation of gentlemen much better; whose wild debaucheries, and quickness of wit in repartee, no poet before them could paint as they have done.

It was this pair, no doubt, that had introduced and popularized "witty obscenity" in English drama. The Restoration dramatists made it their sole occupation, an exclusive concern. The best of them, we have seen, could not resist its vogue.

Decidedly, then, the Restoration Comedy has serious and conspicuous limitations, the extent of which becomes clear if it is compared with the Elizabethan comedy. However, within its own limited range, certain situations and character-types are seen sharply and amusingly. The most conspicuous quality of Restoration Comedy is the witty exchange of words. Wit and repartee were, of course, highly prized qualities in the conversation of gentlemen. Verbal cleverness and intellectual agility of this kind were comparative novelties in English social life. These qualities might have been overrated by the

Restoration gentry as well as dramatist, they do remain attractive elements in the comedies which reproduce them. No comedies, however, rely entirely on wit exhibitions. Dryden, the greatest poet of the period, sensibly advocated “the mixed way of comedy; that which is neither all wit, nor all humour, but the result of both.” In this way, the various titles the critics have awarded the Restoration Comedy of manners, of intrigue, of wit, of immorality—are indicative of the different qualities this comedy displays. These different qualities also catered, so to say, to the different sections of the audience—the wits of the Pit, the ladies of the Boxes, and the servants and wenches of the Gallery. Drama, being more directly meant to be enjoyed by the people, is largely shaped by the morals and manners of the society of its time.

Every dramatist of the Restoration period mixed the elements just mentioned in varying proportions, but a look at the early comedies of the period shows quite clearly that its strength lies in the witty scenes. The dramatists of the time realized it, and there can be seen steady increase in and refinement of the “Manners” element. One can notice how the early plays of Dryden and Etherege are a hotchpotch of gay-couple adventures, low farcical intrigues and humours, and romantic-heroic, love-and-honour plots in verse. The vitality, however, clearly belongs to the gay-couples. The introduction of actresses on the stage by the Restoration theatres also contributed to the success and popularity of these sharp encounters between the sexes. For instance, one important element in Dryden’s plays was the “Proviso-scene,” in which hero and heroine bargained about the conditions under which each might contemplate matrimony. Dryden’s success with these scenes established them as stereotype, and they were much imitated and burlesqued. The most brilliant of such scenes is, of course, the bargaining of Congreve’s *Mirabell* and *Millamant*. Dryden’s gay couples begin from such premises as these :

*Florimel (a maid of Honour)* – But this marriage is such a bugbear to me! Much might be if we could invent but any way to make it easy.

*Celadon (a Courtier)* – Some foolish people have made it uneasy

by drawing the knot faster than they need; but we that are wiser will loosen it a little. (*Secret Love, or, The Maiden Queen*)

The couple traverse some familiar grounds for marital discord: Florimel hopes that Celadon may find “marriage as good as wenching,” if they are married, not into the damning titles of “husband and wife,” but “by the more agreeable names of mistress and gallant.” Such scenes are, decidedly, bright and shrewd, but they are, certainly, not penetrating.

Part of this brilliance of the Restoration came from its imitation of the French dramatist Moliere. Dryden’s *Sir Martin Mar-All* (1667) is a direct imitation of the French model; it proved one of the gayest farces of the period. It must, however, be noted here that the Restoration adaptations of Moliere were always made both more coarse and more complicated than their originals. For example, Dryden’s addition of a subplot to the French model in his *Sir Martin Mar-All*, was not only coarse but rather nauseous. The popular demand for the multiple-plot was actually a legacy of the Elizabethan habit. But while it worked very well in the Elizabethan comedy, especially the Shakespearean, it proved rather disastrous for the Restoration Comedy. Although most comic dramatist of the period abandoned the mixture of verse and prose – another Elizabethan habit—it is rarely that any unity of impression is achieved. Wycherley and Congreve are extreme in retaining melodramatic plots in, *Love in a Wood* and *The Double Dealer*, but most plays of the period have at least three plots of various kinds, connected in so bewildering a way that one is often left asking: “How could an audience both be clever enough to understand the story, and stupid enough to be interested by it when they did?”

Etherege, of all the dramatists of the period, achieved unity in his plays, dropping some of the favourite scenes of contemporary drama, making shrewd selection of incidents. However, by the time Etherege wrote his last play, Restoration Comedy had its favourite character-types and situations. There were of course, individual modifications of the pattern. Marriage as an institution remained more of a joke, a butt of ridicule. Similarly, country remained another butt of ridicule. The rake-heroes

persisted until they were gradually ousted by Virtue and Sense after the Restoration period was over in 1700. Congreve's *The Way of the World*, commonly considered the finest of Restoration comedies, is also their quintessence. There is hardly, for sure, any incident or character or dialogue which can be called original. He only perfected the common mode used by all the dramatists of the age. He added to the mode a nicety of feeling and phrasing. Congreve's main contemporaries were rather individual in their divergencies from the mode. For instance, Shadwell is uneven. He aspired to a Jonsonian breadth and seriousness, but he was in the habit of getting easily deflected by need or whim. We find that there is gay bawdy in his *Epsom-Wells* (1672); virtuous didacticism in *Bury fair* (1689); amusing satire in *True Widow* (1678). Shadwell's *Squire of Alstia* (1688) is a lively play, which depicts a vivid picture of London's underworld, but also ballasted with some well-meant discussions on the theory of education. Dryden may have depicted Shadwell as a dull writer, and he may not have been as great a dramatist as Dryden, he succeeded in doing something which none of his contemporaries, including Dryden did: he followed the Jonsonian ideal of exploring social classes which his contemporaries completely ignored.

While Sir John Vanbrugh (1664-1726) and George Farquhar (1677-1707) remained rather at the tail end of the long line of Restoration dramatists, following the traditional Restoration mode, Wycherley was unmistakably the most individual of his contemporaries. He does impress us by the sheer vehemence of his language and the energy of his characterization. One can see in his plays the force of a moral passion made even Collier acknowledge him "an author of good sense." But considered in harsh terms, he is found rather too narrow and confused in his apprehension of moral issues. What he did was to satirize the stock butts of Restoration comedy – fops, lawyers, country-folk, the overforties. However, his distinctive gifts only appear when he can exercise his indignation against "that heinous, and worst of women's crimes, hypocrisy." His first play, *Love in a Wood* (1671), is a confused mixture of various stock situations of characters. The play's strength

lies in its scenes involving the hypocritical Alderman Gripe and Lady Flippant. His second comedy, *The Gentleman Dancing Master* (1672), too, does not engage Wycherley's major talent. It is an amusing, if trivial farce. It is characteristic of the dramatist only in its main fault—that of iteration. Here it is more of a joke, not a moral or a hatred, that gets repeated only to become rather over-obvious. It is well said that Wycherley never learned discretion or economy in his dramatic depiction. The lengthy asides which take place rather implausibly and undramatically in almost all of his plays are, surely, a sign of this unwillingness to leave anything to the imagination of the viewers. In his later plays—*The Country Wife* and *The Plain Dealer* – we notice a force, a bitterness and scorn unique in Restoration Comedy. One can understand, if not share, the enthusiasm Dryden felt for “The satire, strength, and wit of Manly Wycherley,” who had “obliged all honest and virtuous men by one of the most bold, most general, and most useful satires which have ever been presented in the English theatre.”

When we read the representative Restoration plays of Wycherley, Etherege and Congreve, the best dramatists of the genre, our first impression, for sure, is that we have left behind the ordinary people and entered the closed and charmed world of the fashionable *beaumonde*. These plays are mostly set in London, where elegant ladies and handsome gentlemen are shown living a life of languid luxury, spending the day in witty conversation among themselves. The ladies sometimes go out for a stroll in the fashionable St. James's Park and are then, joined by their gentlemen lovers or admirers. The gentlemen, while not in the company of the ladies in the park, sit in chocolate-houses where they enjoy their drinks and play cards. In this closed world there are two principal engagements – sex and repartee. The gentlemen are always on the look out for sexual adventures, so are the ladies equally anxious to have extra-marital escapades. Husbands and wives are shown leading independent lives; their indifference to each other is a byword in the conversation among the “gentle” folk. Mrs. Squeamish in *The Country Wife*, significantly, complains that the men of quality “use them with the same indifferency and ill-breeding as if we were all married to them.” By clear implication, marriage is a matter of

joke in this complaint.

Rural England, whenever we are shown a glimpse of it, comes in for heavy ridicule. Country born are considered louts by birth. They neither know nor have the opportunity to learn the ways of “high” life considered civilized and refined. In Congreve’s *The Way of the World*, for instance, Sir Willfull is shown to shock all around him by starting to take off his boots in Lady Wishfort’s parlour and by getting repulsively drunk soon after. As for the country women (mostly girls), their problem is shown to be not that of modesty and innocence. For instance, Sue in *Love for Love* and Margery Pinchwife in *The Country Wife* both are shown as famished for sex. They are shown to be only too eager to learn the ways of the world and acquire lovers. Obviously, the implication is that it is the “ways” of the degenerate world of lords and ladies that constitutes the ideal of life. Since there would be hardly any countryman among the audience, the dramatists had the unlimited liberty to ridicule the country characters to any extent. The closed world of the King’s coterie, no wonder, produced the closed comedy in the reign of Charles II.

Keeping in view all these aspects of the Restoration comedy it is not hard to understand why it came to be called “Artificial Comedy.” In this world of Restoration drama, as also perhaps in the world of Charles’s Court, there was too much concentration on the manners, so much so that it had forgotten its natural instincts and feelings, even the moral and serious concerns of life. In such a world, obviously, life gets reduced to the externals only, one’s dress, one’s manners, one’s physical appetites of sex and sensuous pleasures. The other, the deeper side of man’s life, his moral and spiritual concerns, are completely obliterated. In such a case, “artificial” is the most appropriate title one can think of. Collier’s attack on the artificial and immoral comedy, although forcefully countered by the defenders of the Restoration comedy, had its impact on public opinion. Unable to face the popular wrath against it, the plays dwindled away. Within a few years of the staging of *The Way of the World* in 1700, the wave of virtue replaced that of immorality. We can conclude our discussion of Restoration comedy with the opening remark of Charles Lamb (in his brilliant essay “On the Artificial Comedy of

the Last Century”): “the artificial comedy or comedy of manners, is extinct on our stage... the times cannot bear them.... The business of their dramatic characters will not stand the moral test.” Since then, the moral opprobrium has not yet fully gone and, even today, admirers have to take a defensive attitude, in fact, apologetic attitude. The case of the Restoration comedy once again proves the intimate link between art and life, drama and society. Whatever be the style of like in an age, so shall be the style of its drama.

#### **28.4 LET US SUM UP**

The term “Restoration Comedy” refers to English comedies written and performed in the Restoration period from 1660 to 1710. *Comedy of manners* is used as synonym of *Restoration Comedy*. These comedies were rowdy and dirty, with lots of hilarious and scandalous dialogues focussing on sex. These comedies make fun of people and sometimes entire social classes. The plot revolves around unfaithful wives, cuckolded husband and tricky lovers.

#### **28.5 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. Discuss the features of Restoration comedy.
2. Define comedy of manners. What are its main components? Explain with illustrations.
3. Discuss Restoration Literature and its characteristics.

#### **28.7 SUGGESTED READING**

1. Fisk, Deborah Payne. *The Cambridge Companion to English Restoration Theatre*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
2. Styan, J.L. *Restoration Comedy in Performance* Cambridge University Press, 1986.

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**COURSE No.111**  
**M.A. ENGLISH**

**DRAMA-I**  
**THE WAY OF THE WORLD**  
**WILLIAM CONGREVE (1670–1729)**

**LESSON No. 29**  
**UNIT - VI**

## **STRUCTURE**

- 29.1 Introduction
- 29.2 Objectives
- 29.3 Themes of Restoration Comedy
- 29.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 29.5 Examination Oriented Questions
- 29.6 Suggested Reading

### **29.1 INTRODUCTION**

The lesson will introduce the learners with salient features of Restoration Comedy.

### **29.2 OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this lesson is to give the learner an insight into the various themes of Restoration Comedy.

### **29.3 THEMES OF RESTORATION COMEDY**

The very epigraph to the comic play, lifted from Horace, gives an indication of this theme of the play. The quotation reads as follows: “It is worth your while to listen, you who do not wish things to go well for adulterers” and “she who is detected fears for her dowry....” Significantly, the often-

repeated phrase “the way of the world” is invariably used in the context of marriage. No wonder that at the end of the play Congreve emphasizes the moral “The marriage Frauds too oft are paid in kind.” The play presents several pairs of lovers, but in no case the early stages of love are shown on the stage. Mrs. Fainall’s amour with Mirabell, for instance, is something that belongs to the past. What we see on the stage is the aftertaste of the affair, which is not very palatable. When we see Fainall for the first time, he has already been married for some time. Also, even his extra-marital has begun to show the effects of satiety. By the time we reach the later part of the play’s action, we find that Fainall and Mrs. Marwood cling to each other more as co-conspirators than as lovers. As for Mirabell and Millamant, they are accepted, right from the play’s opening, confirmed lovers. The play only stamps the seal of betrothal on their love affair. Only in the case of Lady Wishfort do we see some of the titillations of love as she rehearses to herself the various poses in which she will receive Sir Rowland. But her affair is meant to be a mock-romance, not a genuine love-affair. In other words, while in the Elizabethan comedy the subject is love as such, without the trappings of sex or marriage, in the Restoration Comedy, the entire emphasis is on sex rather than love, on the extra-marital affairs, and that too for the purpose of marriage or property or both, never love for its own sake.

It is for this very reason that the heroes and heroines of Restoration Comedy are not young men and women as in the Elizabethan comedy. They are mature men and women of experience, who have had affairs, at times marriages, before we see them on the stage. Here, the focus is on the follies, not flowering, of love; and how these follies lead to consequences which one cannot escape. One of the points driven home in the Restoration Comedy is that there is no way to get away with one’s actions of indiscretion. Much of what happens towards the end of the play is shown to be a direct result of one’s earlier acts of folly or wrong-doing. Mrs. Fainall’s past affair with Mirabell, for instance, brings upon her a near disaster. Similarly, Mr. Fainall’s adulterous liaison with Mrs. Marwood comes back full circle

upon him. Inversely, Mirabell's responsible action of safeguarding his former mistress's wealth helps to save the situation. We may recall here how in the Elizabethan comedy there are no post-marriage affairs, nor even those contrived for marriage. The exclusive focus is on the blooming of love between two young individuals and its ennobling effect on their characters, on their growth as humane personalities.

In the Restoration Comedy, the need for true adjustment between married man and woman is coupled with the need for responsibility. Fainall and Mrs. Fainall are an example of a maladjusted married couple. Then, there are Fainall and Mrs. Marwood who, despite their being lovers, lack faith in each other. Against these mismatched or maladjusted couples, whose cases demonstrate the unpleasant consequences of incompatibility, is placed the ideal pair of lovers in Mirabell and Millamant. The love between these two does not bear any relationship to the rest of the story of the play. It seems to pursue an independent course, quite unconcerned with the general wrangle over property and wealth. No doubt, the lovers are involved rather directly in all the plots and counter-plots. In fact, Mirabell himself is the master-mind behind most of them. But all these matters are irrelevant so far as the personal relationship between the lovers is concerned. Their love remains their private drama. Before their love can be sealed with marriage they must come to terms with each other, which would require mutual honesty and reciprocal trust. This greatest moment in the play's action marks also the high watermark of Congreve's art. It is said to be superior to any other scene in the entire range of the Restoration comedy so far as its brilliance, its depth of emotion and profundity are concerned. After a long hide-and-seek between the lovers for reasons of ego and individuality, the bargaining scene arrives. Millamant has finally agreed to meet Mirabell, ending the love chase that has been going on for a long time.

In keeping with the Neoclassical obsession with reason and rationality, the lovers must come to terms with each other not as lovers, but as rational human beings. The Restoration belief was that it is only on the basis of reason, unclouded by emotion, that the sound basis for marriage can be formed. Congreve,

therefore, deliberately makes them use legal language, for marriage is considered a sort of legal contract. In the contest for bargain, Millamant stakes claims for her privileges, for her liberty, for her right of privacy, for her freedom to meet whosoever she pleases. If these articles are subscribed, she would agree to marry. In the comic spirit of the age, Mirabell also asks, in the bargain, for certain articles ensuring his independence from the tyranny of the weaker sex. The scene is, of course, meant to sound unnatural and artificial, for no living man or woman, much less the lovers, would insist upon the kind of legal provisions that both sides insist upon in the marriage contract. Of course, artificiality, here, is more than a literary device. The idea is that mere natural instincts or emotions are not the sound basis for human relationship in a civilized society. Marriage, therefore, has to-be some sort of nature methodized. Mind and heart, reason and emotion, art and nature, therefore, have to be reconciled and integrated for a civilized life.

Thus, Congreve, like a true neo-classical writer, states his theme, then proceeds step by step on the ladder of rationality, reaching finally to logical conclusion, winding up the theme that was being developed. In its own terms, *The Way of the World (1700)* is the best and the greatest play of its period. The treatment of the theme is single-minded, making the work an intense effort at presenting something central to the society it chose to depict. It remains a sort of social document so far as the play is concerned. Free from the tempting digressions of the Elizabethan drama, it remains neat and clean as a neoclassical construction.

#### **29.4 LET US SUM UP**

During Restoration period writers wrote comedies criticizing the society as people, particularly upper classes, living without moral standards. The Restoration dramatists wrote works based on a satirical observation of the social behaviour.

#### **29.5 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. Illustrate the various themes in Restoration comedy.
2. Discuss *The Way of the World* as Restoration Comedy.

3. Why Restoration comedy is called as comedy of manners? Explain with examples.

#### **29.6 SUGGESTED READING**

1. Sharma, R.C. *Themes and Conventions in the Comedy of manners*. Falcroft Press 1970.
2. Lynch, Kathleen Martha. *The Social Mode of Rertoration Comedy*. Biblo and Tannem, 1926.

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## **STRUCTURE**

- 30.1      Introduction
- 30.2      Objectives
- 30.3      Plot Summary of the play
- 30.4      Let Us Sum Up
- 30.5      Examination Oriented Questions
- 30.6      Suggested Reading

### **30.1 INTRODUCTION**

The lesson will introduce the learners to the summary of the play  
*The Way of World*

### **30.2 OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this lesson is to acquaint the learners with the summary of the play and its critical analysis

### **30.3 PLOT SUMMARY OF THE PLAY**

Congreve, in his *The Way of the World (1700)* (considered without any qualification the best play produced during the Restoration period), has perfectly matched the movement of the play's action with the grouping of its characters and the balancing of its antithetical style. The central, and

ideal, pair of play's lovers, Mirabell and Millamant, is balanced by an adulterous pair of lovers, Mr. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood. Above these two antithetical pairs is Lady Wishfort, living in the pursuit of her illusory dreams of wedding bliss. Then, there is in between them Mrs. Fainall, living in the disenchanted world of an unhappy wedding. Complicating and coordinating the inter-relationships among these various characters is, indeed, Lady Wishfort who holds control over almost everyone's wealth. At one level, she constitutes the central link that binds almost all the play's characters together, relates them to one another. With these pillars of the play's action or plot, the structure of *The Way of the World* is raised into a complex but compact whole, the play has never been faulted for its plot construction. In fact, in terms of plot structure, it has always been considered the best piece of its period. The Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end, with the conventional exposition, complication, and denouement, are followed as closely as is possible in a dramatic composition.

The opening Act of *The Way of the World* provides the exposition of the play's action. It introduces to us almost all the male characters, informs us about the others, and supplies us with the necessary background information. The opening scene between Fainall and Mirabell, which later gets echoed and paralleled by a similar scene between Mrs. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood in the beginning of Act II, apprises the audience right away of the necessary events that have already taken place before the play begins. One of the principal things established in the opening dialogue is the very pivot of the play's action—the love-affair between Mirabell and Millamant. The subject is, in fact, introduced obliquely, raising greater curiosity about the nature of the affair. It is done through a remark made by the hero's foil, Fainall, who says, "Confess, Millamant and you quarrell'd last Night." It is followed a little later by an information about the prac-

tical problem that must be solved before they can hope to get united in marriage. The problem in question is that half of Millamant's fortune is under the control of her aunt, Lady Wishfort, whose prior consent is necessary if the fortune is to be claimed by the female lover.

It must be noted here, and not just in passing, that while love is governed by marriage, marriage is overruled by wealth in the society of the Restoration period. In other words, there cannot be any love affair without the legitimacy of marriage, and there cannot be any marriage without the legitimacy of wealth. Thus, while the emotion of love is subordinated to the interest of marriage, the institution of marriage is subjected to the interest of wealth. In this hierarchy of interests, therefore, it is the interest of wealth or property that occupies the uppermost place. One recalls here, by contrast, the Elizabethan world picture, in which love was the superior most value, a sort of virtue, and a reward of its own, never measured in terms of marriage or wealth. Love may lead to marriage, it invariably did, but it was never stringed to extraneous interests like that of wealth. Wherever it was so linked, it was presented as something villainous and vicious. Thus, there is a clear contrast between the romantic world of the Elizabethan comedy and the realistic or practical world of the Restoration.

Here, in *The Way of the World*, the problem of ensuring the possession of wealth before marriage can take place between the principal pair of characters, constitutes the central interest of the play. Every incident in the plot converges towards this event. Mirabell has already attempted one trick on Lady Wishfort and has failed. In a way, Lady Wishfort is true to her name: she holds in her fort the wishes of other characters; unless she releases, their wishes cannot be fulfilled. She is the fort. Equally true to her name is Lady Marwood, who mars or spoils the plans of various characters. Here, in the present case of Mirabell, it is Lady Marwood who exposes to Lady Wishfort the hero's sham of concealing his love for Millamant. Against this background begins the play's action. The elaborate structure of the

subsequent action is built upon Mirabell's second trick, which relates to making his servant Waitwell to pose as his uncle, Sir Rowland, to win the hand of Lady Wishfort. Early hints are thrown about the intrigue afoot in Act I itself. We are told that something is in the offing which is not yet "ripe for Discovery." It is also hinted that this something relates to the secret appointment of Mirabell with Waitwell at one o'clock by Rosamond's pond. We further learn about the hurried and mysterious marriage of Waitwell with Foible, a maid of Lady Wishfort. Once again the names are transparently allegorical or symbolic. While Waitwell is a faithful servant of Mirabell, Foible is the harmless character in the game of intrigue.

Thus, when we approach Act II, everything already stands exposed or explained to us. Mirabell confides his plan or intrigue to his former mistress, Mrs. Fainall, who at once catches upon the plan's implications. The plan is designed to proceed thus: when Lady Wishfort gets contracted to Sir Rowland (actually Waitwell), Mirabell will step in to expose his imposter servant Waitwell. Feeling (supposedly) grateful to Mirabell for having rescued her from a big blunder, Lady Wishfort (hopes Mirabell) would allow him to marry Millamant. The apparent confusion as to details arises from Petulant's information (or misinformation) that Mirabell has an uncle newly arrived in London who not only stands between the hero and his estate but also has an eye on his beloved, Millamant. Actually, as is made clear by Mirabell's conversation (confidential) with Mrs. Fainall that Mirabell himself has indirectly encouraged Lady Wishfort to circulate the rumor so that she can better conceal her affair with Sir Rowland. By the end of Act II Waitwell leaves the stage to get metamorphosed into Sir Rowland. The familiar trick of disguise is to make the plan (or intrigue) a success.

Act II also introduces, as part of the plot's complication, the subplot centering around Mr. Fainall and Mrs. Marwood. Fainall has married a daughter of Lady Wishfort, who was formerly Mirabell's mistress. The marriage is, decidedly, one of convenience for avoiding a public scandal. There is no love lost between the two wedded for convenience. The husband, Mr. Fainall, is already engaged in an affair with Mrs. Marwood, a married woman. This

woman is secretly in love with Mirabell, although he shows no interest in her. But she keeps a close watch on whatever he does and sabotages his moves as and when an opportunity arises. Her game is to secure him for herself. But when she receives no response, she sets out to harm his interests out of spite and jealousy.

Act III further complicates the action in the manner of the established convention of the dramatic plot. The Act stands structurally at the center of the play's action. The intense compilation begins with the entry of Lady Wishfort. The main thread of the action is therefore set in motion. Now begins a series of rapid alteration consisting of reversals and recoveries. This keeps the audience continually on the alert. It also helps to build up dramatic tempo. Mrs. Marwood arrives in haste to convey to Lady Wishfort her suspicion that perhaps Mirabell is up to some mischief involving the latter. Her suspicion is based on her having seen Mirabell privately talking to Foible, a maidservant of Lady Wishfort. But Foible turns out to be smart to save the plot (or intrigue) from the possible threat. She has been now married to Waitwell and has joined, thus, Mirabell's band in his conspiracy against Lady Wishfort. Foible invents a fictitious conversation with Mirabell, which further incenses Lady Wishfort against the gentleman, but it allays her suspicion about the real matter. Soon follows a meeting between Foible and Mrs. Fainall, a confidant of Mirabell, to plan the further execution of the plot against Lady Wishfort. There is also a passing reference in their conversation to the former affair between Mirabell and Mrs. Fainall. The intrigue is, however, met with an intrigue. Mrs. Marwood, hidden in the closet, hears it all.

However, lest the action should collapse into an anti-climax, Congreve holds back the further movement of the play's action. At this stage in the play's action, he throws in a digression. We are invited to enjoy the buffoonery of Sir Willfull, whose name suggests a good deal of fun. The whole of the leftover Act III keeps the main action at bay; it keeps us instead involved in subsidiary matters. In fact, it is not until the very end of Act IV

that Mrs. Marwood is allowed to play her trump card. In the meanwhile, lest we should forget the main plot, or rather to heighten our sense of impending danger, we are acquainted with the counterplot engineered by Mrs. Marwood and Mr. Fainall. This comes about at the end of Act III. These two discuss the details of their plot against Mirabell as to how the latter's intrigue is to be exposed to Lady Wishfort and others concerned. The main action is therefore kept, so as to say, in the state of suspended animation. Meanwhile, Sir Willfull, a nephew of Lady Wishfort and half brother of Witwoud, is kept on the stage with his country antics. Making the country gentleman a butt of ridicule, the Restoration urban gentry always enjoyed the show that nourished their sense of superiority over the unrefined country gentlemen. Meanwhile, the love affair between Mirabell and Millamant, the play's central interest, has not been asleep. It has been independently growing, developing towards consummation. Millamant's superb entry in the middle of Act II remains unforgettable all along. She is introduced in a highly dramatic fashion: "Here she comes as faith full Sail, with her Fan spread and her Streamers out." In the subsequent scenes the affair keeps coming through its mention in different conversations. But Mirabell himself wants to keep it unpronounced. He also wants the chase to be prolonged. Both aspects of the affair add to the heightening of suspense and curiosity about it.

In Act IV, the lovers are brought face to face on the stage. While Mirabell has been prolonging his chase, all this while Millamant has been in inner struggle against her own love for him. But now, at long last, she surrenders to her love. This scene comes out to be a great moment of the play. The dramatist places this "Proviso proposal scene" between other two so that an antithesis and a parallel is established on either side of the central interest. What precedes this climactic scene is the encounter between Millamant and Sir Willfull. In an obvious embarrassment and much against his will, the "fool" of the play tries to mumble a few words that a match has been proposed between him and Millamant. He retreats from the room where he was all alone with Millamant in haste as well as relief

when she shows him the door. What follows the climactic scene is another farcical scene in which Waitwell as Sir Rowland enacts his grotesque courtship of Lady Wishfort. Just a little before this scene we see even a more hilarious scene with the drunken triumvirate of Waitwell, Petulant and Sir Willfull reeling across the stage. Thus, between the two farcical scenes is placed the fascinating scene of proposal for wedlock between the hero and the heroine. The contrast between the serious and the comic heightens the effect of the serious all the more.

Framed in such a setting as we have just discussed, like a lily blossoming in a bed of weeds, rests this climactic scene of the play's action. Perhaps in no other way could the dramatist have conveyed to the audience the force of the poetic moment as well as the inherent superiority of the central pair of lovers over all others around them. But even while they remain at a plane higher than the common, they are also a part of the common world. Their descent to commonality is achieved by Congreve with remarkable dramatic skill. Mrs. Fainall comes in to warn Mirabell that Lady Wishfort is on her way, thus bringing him back into the world of intrigues. As for Millamant, she slips back, with great naturalness, to the level of ordinary life when she is found engaged in conversation with Witwoud. Sir Rowland's courtship scene, that follows the climactic one, brings us back to the main action of the plot—Mirabell's plan to involve Lady Wishfort into a situation that should compel her to agree to his marriage to Millamant. Meanwhile, Mrs. Marwood, too, has been active on her side. She has sent an anonymous letter to Lady Wishfort exposing the counterfeit of Waitwell as Sir Rowland. But Foible and Waitwell quickly respond to the situation. They think out an explanation, arousing expectation that the calamity for the lovers would be averted. On this note of suspense falls the curtain, ending Act IV of *The Way of the World*.

The earlier tempo of the middle Act is now given momentum once again, moving rather rapidly towards the climax. By the end of Act IV, it had become clear that Waitwell and Foible's ruse would just not work.

Fainall and Marwood seem surely on the ascendance. They bear down on Lady Wishfort and demand, with accompanying threats and blackmail, the fortunes of both Millamant and Mrs. Fainall, the niece and daughter respectively of Lady Wishfort. The first hint of recovery on this side of the battle line appears in the person of Sir Willfull. He and Millamant appear before Lady Wishfort to assure her that they have collectively consented to her wish that they should become man and wife. This way, Millamant's share of property is taken out of danger. But the fortune of Mrs. Fainall still remains hanging in fire. Even the exposure of Fainall's affair with Mrs. Marwood does not work to stem the ferocity of Fainall. At this point of time when the game seems to have been lost by the central pair of lovers, Mirabell and Millamant, Congreve once again produces his brilliant *Peripeteia* and *Anagnorisis* (Reversal and Discovery) in the form of the black box. Aristotle, we may recall, states in his, *The Poetics*: "A *Peripety* is the change from one state of things within the play to its opposite...in the probable or necessary sequence of events." Totally unexpected as the black box is, it is not, in any way, an external factor – a *deus ex machina* – suddenly introduced to bring about a happy ending. It is both probable and necessary that in a society like the Restoration, sustained by its legal systems, Mirabell, the true wit of his age, would use exactly such a device to protect the interests of Mrs. Fainall. Congreve had criticized the coarser devices of Plautus's plots. His own model was Terence, and like his model, he has given us a play in *The Way of the World* which contains within itself "the artful Solution of the Fable."

Notwithstanding the merits of *The Way of the World* within the matrix of Restoration Comedy, it cannot be ignored that Congreve's play is not free from the common weaknesses of the Comedy of Manners. One of these weaknesses is that the plot gets its wheels, not from the usual course of life so much as the contrived tricks of Wit. The entire action of the play is nothing but a game of Wit. Who outwits whom remains the central interest of the play's action. What we are called upon to appreciate in *The Way*

*of the World* is, not the moral substance of characters and incidents, but the smartness of mind in scheming and counter-scheming. In such a case, it is not our whole being that is called upon to respond to happenings on the stage, but only the top of our head that can admire the intricacies of intrigues, the perniciousness of plots. Compared to the Elizabethan comedy, therefore, the appeal of the Restoration comedy is not very deep. It is highly restricted to the mental and social level only, and does not penetrate beyond into the regions of the heart and spirit. However, within its own genre of the comedy of manners, Congreve's greatest comedy, *The Way of the World*, remains the highest achievement of the Restoration period. Besides, its classical affinity and allegiance gives it a certain perfection of plot construction not possible in the Elizabethan, Shakespearean, or Romantic type of comedy. It may not have the vigour and vitality, or width and breadth, of the Elizabethan plot, but it does have the neatness and unity of the classical structure. Free from the relaxed pace of the Elizabethan comedy, which reveals in digressions, *The Way of the World* is marked by the rapid pace of action and inevitability of the chain of incidents from beginning to end.

### **30.4 LET US SUM UP**

*The Way of World* is generally viewed as the supreme example of its genre. Its characters – the vengeful and ultimately pathetic Lady Wishfort, the sparing lovers Mirabell and Millamant; the dark and devious Mrs. Marwood – remain in the mind long after the play is over.

### **30.5 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS**

1. Write the detailed summary of play *The Way of the World*.
2. Discuss the development of story in the play *The Way of the World*.
3. Write a short note on climax in the play *The Way of the World*.

### **30.6 SUGGESTED READING**

1. Congreve, William. *The Way of the World : A Comedy. Dublin, 1724*

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<b>COURSE No.111</b>	<b>DRAMA-I</b>	<b>LESSON No. 31</b>
<b>M.A. ENGLISH</b>	<b>THE WAY OF THE WORLD</b>	<b>UNIT - VI</b>
<b>WILLIAM CONGREVE (1670–1729)</b>		

## **STRUCTURE**

- 31.1 Introduction
- 31.2 Objectives
- 31.3 Wit, Humour and Character
- 31.4 Characters
- 31.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 31.6 Examination Oriented Questions
- 31.7 Suggested Reading

### **31.1 INTRODUCTION**

Wit and humour were the main characteristics of Restoration Comedy. This lesson will introduce the learners with these characteristics.

### **31.2 OBJECTIVES**

The objective of this lesson is to familiarize the learner with the elements of wit and humour in the play and also to give the learner a critical insight into various characters portrayed by Congreve.

### **31.3 WIT, HUMOUR, AND CHARACTER**

Generally, in the domain of literary criticism, wit and humour are not pitted against each other. In fact, they are always mentioned together as companions or complementary aspects of a literary work. Decidedly, these two

qualities of the human mind are closely linked with each other. They can be rightly termed as the allied activities of the human mind. Congreve, in his own time, preferred to make a distinction between the two. In a letter to John Dennis, he defines wit and humour as two distinct literary qualities. In his view, Humour implies certain eccentricities of behavior that arise from, in his own words, "Constitutions, Complexions and Dispositions of Men." Wit, on the other hand, as Congreve views it, is the art of speaking pleasantly and amusingly. In one sense, while wit is the gift of a civilized mind, humour relates to lack of civilized way of thinking and behaving. No wonder, then, that the bulk of characters carrying comic traits are from areas not refined by civilized life. Thus, there is as much of a clear demarcation between wit and humour as between urban and rural life. This clear-cut division between the two societies gets reflected in the literature of the age as well, more so in the dramatic form. *The Way of the World*, being representative of its period, shows the same division, and as sharply, as any other work of the Restoration period. In the light of Congreve's distinction between wit and humour, let us see how his greatest comedy, *The Way of the World*, responds to this distinction.

So far as humour is concerned, three characters in Congreve's comedy of our concern clearly stand out. These characters are Sir Willfull, Petulant, and Lady Wishfort. One of the aspects of character common to all of them that makes them comic is the eccentricity of their behaviour. Each one of these characters is eccentric in his own way, which makes them ridiculous in the eyes of other characters in the play. They can be compared to the comic characters from Jonson's comedy of humours. Like them, Congreve's comic characters, too, represent one or another humour, reducing each to a static and flat character easily recognizable by the peculiar behaviour each one betrays in different situations of life. For instance, Petulant has "a Humour to Contradict." Sir Willfull's humour stems from his rural background. Lady Wishfort's humour is her self-delusion about her age and beauty. Even in her middle years, she continues believing that she is young and beautiful. As has already been remarked, these humour characters, without any exception, mould them-

selves into stock types which are easily recognizable. For instance, Sir Willfull is the type of provincial country bumpkin. Similarly, Lady Wishfort is the type of an aged woman given to self-love. Such women refuse to admit age, and continue believing that they remain like Cleopatra young for ever, whom "Age cannot wither, Nor custom stale." As for Petulant, he is the type of splenetic character. Congreve's fine art lies in his ability to impart individuality even to such characters as are modelled on standard stock character-types. It is a tribute to his great art that these characters carry more of their individualities than the types in them.

The Wit characters in the play are a class apart, they belong to the upper strata and they represent qualities that make you a success in "the way of the world." The Wit derives from the other characters. In Congreve's play the wit dazzles us with its "verbal pyrotechnics" on every page. Even a character from low strata of society such as Foible has her moment when she tells Lady Wishfort, with delightful irony: "A little Art once made your Picture like you, and now a little of the same Art must make you like your Picture." Wit can be seen reflected in the perfect control of vocabulary, in the polished, epigrammatic elegance of style, in the delicate antithetical balance of the sentences. The brilliance of the intellectual word-play has provoked some critics to complain that such a wit has blinding effect on the intelligence of the audience. It does not allow their minds to go beyond the sparkling surface where the jugglery of words make it show like the crackers. It blunts our sensitivity, and desensitizes us to the more serious issues of life. Congreve does, of course, take all care to maintain distinction between different characters. In other words, there is a specific tinge and edge to every wit; all are not alike. For instance, Millamant's wit is the most spontaneous. We find that although her speeches have the period and balance of perfectly constructed sentences, we do not see much of conscious artistry in them. As compared to Millamant, Mirabell and Fainall are men of the world, and as such speak in a more studied and sophisticated manner. To begin with, the two sound very similar in their wit, their speeches, but just one tinge of Fainall's cynicism makes all the difference, removing him far,

far away from the more affable character of Mirabell. Witwoud's wit, on the other hand, is forced and artificial. His rather laboured piling of similes drives Millamant to distraction. It is only on rare occasions that he is able to manage a genuine piece of witticism. But then, as Congreve himself so aptly observed, "even a *Fool* may be permitted to stumble on them by chance." Hence, we have in *The Way of the World* abundance of wit and in a great variety, and of different order.

One of the most favourite media of wit is imagery. The antithetical and epigrammatic sentences lend themselves to the use of simile and metaphor. The element of imagery heightens the artistic effect of the speech. It makes the style more vivid and emphatic. Perhaps the most striking image in *The Way of the World* is Mirabell's description of Millamant when he sees her approaching. The imagery used by Congreve in this play, or any other for that matter, is, of course, not confined to a character's description alone. It reflects the life of the times. We get to have a feel of the seventeenth-century England. For instance, the newly developing interests of trade and commerce are reflected in a number of images. We come across references to "Acts of Parliament," "Credit of the Relation," "Exportation," "Trade," "loss," "overstocked," etc. Then there are references to contemporary books and other publications like newspapers and magazines. Besides, there are references to operas, clubs and coffee-houses. In short, there are clusters of imagery that evoke the life of London, which looms large outside the charmed circle of the Restoration society. Lady Wishfort's tirades depict a stark picture of hunger and poverty and seediness of the larger population of London. For example, we hear of long-lane Pent House, of Black Friars. Then we see shivering women sticking themselves around charcoal fires. Then, we further see second-hand shops, roadside stalls, and prisoners in Ludgate fishing for money. The world of Congreve's play may be formally confined to the charmed circle of the upper strata of London society, the city as such always constitutes background to the action. We are made to feel that all that happens in the play is against the background of that city.

Two sets of images stand out from the rest, which are crucial to the play's central concerns. One of these is the image of the "chase." It is introduced by Millamant when she recites Edmund Waller's poems to herself in Act IV. Just as she returns to third line of the poem, Mirabell enters the room and completes the couplet. The poem itself is about a chase, which has central significance in the play's action, for Mirabell is also on a chase of Millamant. Women are objects of chase for male characters in the play. Mirabell himself develops the image when he addresses Millamant and she elaborates on it in her reply. What we need to note here is that the nature of imagery a character uses reflects the type of wit he is. The reading habit, the choice of books, the nature of interest in the different aspects of London life, all help reveal the true nature of wit a character possesses. Every occasion in the play is used for converting the encounter of characters into some sort of combat of wit between and among different characters.

The second set of imagery more directly reflects the characters' preoccupation with the life of wit. This set relates to law and is more predominant in play than the other. We find legal terms scattered all over the play with documents to be prepared and signed by relevant persons. The very language of law and the speech therein is a subject of wit. We find characters taking up matters related to legal tangles, discussing them, showing their acumen for it. In other words, no subject can offer better opportunities for sharpening the wits than law. Thus, wit is central to *The Way of The World* as it is to every Restoration comedy. Characters are placed in the hierarchy of wit, not moral hierarchy. Those with superior wit are better placed in the play's plot. Those with inferior wit are not so well placed in the structure of the comedy. Even matters like love and marriage are determined by the quality of wit one possesses. Wit, in other words, is considered the mark of a man, also of a woman. Those inferior in wit have to be content with lower position in the scale or order of importance.

Humour, too, is largely a matter of wit in the neo-classical comedy, especially the Restoration Comedy. These who have no wit, are made butt of

ridicule. Thus, the sort of humour, peculiar to Restoration comedy, that is there in *The Way of The World*, is generally one-sided. Those who belong to the charmed circle of wit partake of it and enjoy it. Those who do not belong to that circle are disadvantaged and cannot become a part of that circle. In a way, this kind of humour is divisive. It divides society into the wits and others. It is not participatory humour, a jest for life, that we find in the Elizabethan comedy. There, humour is a form of community dialogue, a way of participating in the larger life of society. It gives you health and harmony. Here, it is divisive, has class base, and only the refined and sophisticated members can comprehend and appreciate it. Thus, it is more mechanical also, emanating from stock situations and stereotype wit. In a comedy named artificial, everything, all aspects of drama, have to contribute to the artificiality. So does the elements of humour in *The Way of The World*. Wit and humour are, therefore, near allied.

#### **31.4 CHARACTERS: (I) MIRABELL**

Although *The Way of The World* is as artificial in character portrayal as it is in the other departments of drama, its characters at the center stage are decidedly, memorable. Most of these is the character of Mirabell, the hero of the play. He possesses all the assets of an urbane gentleman. He is gifted with the Restoration virtues of wit, polish, and grace. It is these virtues that the age of sophistication and refinement demanded. It is because of these very virtues that Mirabell succeeds in his battles of wit against his rivals. To the Restoration writers and readers (or audience) the battles of wit were no less than the epic battles of Achilles. Wit was their spear, wit the shield. They solely relied on it for survival as well as success. And the brave among men was the one who had wit in the greatest measure and of the most superior mettle. The Restoration coterie took these battles of wit to be heroic, not in the mock-heroic so much as genuinely heroic. The “heroic” drama of the age is an example of this belief, for in the conventional sense of the epic there is nothing heroic actually.

The immediate rival to Mirabell is Fainall, with whom Mirabell measures

his sword of wit all along the play's action. In Act I itself, the series begins. Fainall initiates. He launches the attack. But Mirabell gives him a crushing reply. In his rejoinder, Mirabell demolishes his rival with effortless ease. He picks up the very words (sort of fire balls) that Fainall has used and, with a brilliant dexterity, tosses them around to impart them with different meanings (force) altogether. Mirabell's wit dazzles like the shining metal of Achilles's shield. It defeats not so much by hurt as by dazzle. The dazzle itself is too powerful to be withstood by the rival. The rival feels blinded by the dazzle. He winks and vanishes. In another instance, when Witwoud and Petulant decide to be severe with the ladies by trying to be witty at the latter's expense, Mirabell, like a true hero, comes to the rescue of these ladies. He not only outwits them but rebukes them, saying, to put "another out of countenance" is something to be ashamed of. What is involved in a battle of wit is a question of morality. Here, are ethics too, just as they are in the epic battles. You do not use underhand means to hit your enemy. You do not hit below the belt.

Mirabell's wit is never lawless or low. It is always governed by its superior force, the force of morality. It is for this reason that Mirabell is not witty just for the sake of being so. The moral seriousness of his personality is revealed in his apparent distaste for frivolous and irresponsible conversation. If he finds even Millamant, his sweetheart, deviating from the moral norm, he admonishes her for the deviation. In a situation of this nature he feels compelled to advise Millamant to avoid "the Conversation of fools." She may tease him by calling him "Sententious Mirabell," but it is for this very seriousness of his mind and moral sense of his person that he stands out in the entire lot of characters in the play as the superior most. He displays his superiority by the exercise of his shrewd judgement, foresight and practical wisdom. These qualities of his character come out most clearly in his arrangement of the legal protection of Mrs. Fainall's wealth. Besides, it is these very virtues that enable him to encounter with victory the various reversals and setbacks in his perpetual battles against his rivals.

In a sense, the ideal of gentlemanliness or urbane refinement for the Restoration dramatist is no less than the ideal of the Christian in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. There is a close similarity between the "allegorical" structures of the two. In the Restoration comedy, the various battles of wit, which make it possible to overcome the several impediments, are very much similar to the various spiritual battles the Christian has to fight to resist and overcome temptations. In the case of the Restoration Comedy, the goal may be urbanity, but it is to be achieved in the same manner Bunyan's hero achieves his ideal of Christianity. Here, the city of God is the paradise of wit. In structural terms, as well as in terms of ends and means, the two illustrate the common technique involved in each. Thus, Mirabell is a sort of Restoration "Christian" seeking the ultimate in the world of wit. He has his power of wit from the very beginning, just as Christian has, but he has to achieve its perfection only through trials. Hence, he is made to undergo those trials out of which he emerges, very much like Christian, fully victorious.

**(ii) MILLAMANT**

Next to Mirabell in structural, as well as moral, significance in *The Way of The World*, is the character of Millamant. If Mirabell delights by his superior wit, Millamant delights by her superior gaiety. One can see in this a vital difference between two types of wit that these two characters represent. In the case of Mirabell, his wit battles it out with the rivals and shines in enlisting victory over them. In the case of Millamant, her wit is marked by exuberance, not by sharp edge. It is not something acquired through learning. Rather, it is more of a natural gift. One can apply to these two characters the difference, the neoclassical critics made between man of genius and man of learning. In one there is vitality, in the other there is correctness. There is a similar kind of difference between Millamant and Mirabell. They make an ideal couple in the Restoration mould. While she has the warmth of vitality, he has the superiority of sense. She is more spontaneous and forthright whereas, he is more subtle and oblique. Obviously, while Millamant displays her natural gifts, Mirabell demonstrates his gifts of learn-

ing. The two are complementary, not contradictory. That is why the two form a natural companionship, deserving each other. In the same allegorical sense we discussed earlier, their union symbolizes the perfection, the ideal, of Restoration urbanity in which the learning of wit has to be complemented with the warmth of vitality. The cold or lifeless wit cannot ensure a happy society. It must be value-added or enhanced with the warmth of vitality.

Millamant thus represents nature, just as Mirabell represents art. Not that Millamant is without art and Mirabell without nature. Millamant has art just as Mirabell has nature. The difference lies in the combination of the two. It is like preparing a compound by mixing or amalgamating two salts or elements. The resultant compounds show very different qualities, although both are formed by mixing the same two salts, or by amalgamating the same two elements. In the case of Millamant, she uses art in the service of her nature. In the case of Mirabell, he uses his nature in the service of his art. There is lot of art used by Millamant to look natural. No wonder then that Mirabell describes her faults as “so natural, or so artful.” He is right because she uses her sophistication to sustain her natural gifts of beauty, gaiety and sweetness.

Millamant, unlike Mirabell, is more given to private life than to public performance. Mirabell shines in public performance, she impresses in her private moments. We find her relishing her “faithful Solitude” and “darling Contemplation.” She has a world within herself vaster than the world around her. She loves to live in that world intensely and entirely. Of course, she is not shy of walking out of this world. She does like the open air as well. She is not averse to human company. It is only a matter of more or less. Between the private and the public, the inner and the outer, she obviously is richer in the former in the binary oppositions. Otherwise, we know how she can impress even in her external or public appearances. She is the mistress of a certain depth of character that no one else, including Mirabell, has. She may have internal struggles and contests, but she seldom shows them externally. She has the capacity to keep her own problems and struggles to herself. Her love for Mirabell is one such example. She feels it quite strongly, but she does not

easily reveal it. Even Mirabell is not allowed to share this secret. She gives out once that she loves him “violently,” but she permits none to have an inkling of her deep feeling. Millamant is, like Rosalind of *As You Like It*, a loveable and memorable heroine in English drama.

**(iii) MRS. FAINALL AND MR. FAINALL**

Mrs. Fainall is a daughter of Lady Wishfort. As such, she is a cousin of Millamant. As mother of the former and aunt of the latter, Mrs. Wishfort holds power on the wealths of both. While Millamant, however, is yet unmarried, Mrs. Fainall is already married to Mr. Fainall. Not only that, she also has remained a mistress to Mirabell before she got married. In terms of qualities of person, Mrs. Fainall is a good woman. She is shown to bear no malice toward any one, although her own husband is deeply involved in intrigues and counter-intrigues. Although fate has denied her personal happiness, she tries to give happiness to others. Even though she is a former mistress of Mirabell, she creates no hurdles in his love for, and then marriage with, Millamant. On the contrary, she does all she can to see them happily united in marriage. In the matter of property also, where most people stoop down to lower depths, she shows no greed nor malice. Of course, she has no glamour in her person, like Millamant has, but she is extraordinary in her ordinariness. She comes out in less shining colours when compared with Millamant. She remains faithful to Mirabell even after her marriage. Of course, this faithfulness or loyalty is not for maintaining sexual relations. They are not shown to have any such affair once she has been married. Her loyalty is limited to helping the right against the wrong, the good against the evil. Unfortunately, her own husband turns out to be the wrong and the evil, so she helps Mirabell who proves to be right and good.

Fainall is a foil and a rival to Mirabell. If Mirabell is a True Wit, he is a False Wit. But he is not a Witwoud. There is no dearth of cleverness in him. He is clever, no doubt. But his cleverness is rather warped and stunted by his ego. His ego, too, is perverted. He impresses us with his first verbal duel with Mirabell. However, as the conversation proceeds he gets exposed. His cyni-

cism comes out. Even his epigrammatic remarks reveal an unpalatable bitterness. For instance, the following : “I’d no more play, with a Man that slighted his ill Fortune, than I’d make love to a Woman who undervalu’d the loss of her Reputation.” Decidedly, no audience would relish such remarks. Mirabell’s rejoinder tells him as much: “you have a Taste extremely delicate, and are for refining on your Pleasures.” In his typical sophisticated manner, however, as we see here, Mirabell does even his telling through the indirection of irony. He cannot be blunt and crude like his rival. Fainall, cynical as he is, does not attach any value to love or marriage. For instance, when Mirabell speaks of his love for Millamant, Fainall’s cynical advice is that the former should go in for marriage so that he is cured of the disease of love. Obviously, for him, while love is a disease, marriage is a destroyer of all illusions.

Fainall is a thorough materialist. He has no inclination towards things spiritual or emotional. We can recall how he has mercilessly run through Mrs. Marwood’s wealth. Even about his own marriage he makes no bones. Quite brazenly he boasts that he married only “to make lawful Prize of a rich Widow’s Wealth.” He does not consider his wife more than an aging, useless animal. He uses rather objectionable language for her. For instance, he calls her a “leaky Hulk” which he will set adrift to sink or swim. His callousness knows no end. He can enjoy the miseries of others. His sardonic pleasure at the misery of his own mother-in-law, Lady Wishfort, is notorious. When he finds her almost collapsing under the threat of his blackmail, he enjoys rather immensely his own attempt to terrorise her. The more she sulks in terror, the more he enjoys it. He has been a creature of the earth from the very beginning, but his ignoble deeds transform him into a beast of prey. He begins to enjoy the hurts of his victims. He shows the limit to which human nature can degenerate.

#### **(iv) MRS. MARWOOD**

In some ways, Mrs. Marwood is much more complex and much less degenerate than her accomplice, Fainall, in all sorts of sinful activities they commit in the course of the play’s action. She lacks both the ferocity and wit of Fainall. However, within a narrow range of operation, she displays more

cunning than her male counterpart. She also shows greater practical sense than is shown by Fainall. Besides, she has a brand of viciousness which is peculiar to the female species. She does wear a social mask which slips at crucial moments and her true nature comes to light. She is found out to be as violent beneath the mask as she pretends to be smooth with the mask on. The scene in St. James's Park reveals it all. Her violence comes out: "I care not— Let me go — break my Hands, do — I'd leave 'em to get loose."

Mrs. Marwood is a mistress to Fainall, although both are married. However, beyond both her husband and Fainall, she actually has love for Mirabell. In fact, behind all her villainous deeds, this secret love gone sour is the real motivating force. She thwarts very early the marriage proposal between Mirabell and Millamant by using the vulnerable ears of Lady Wishfort. She trusts no one where Mirabell is concerned. She even goes to the extent of hinting her secret love for him to Mrs. Fainall, with whose husband she is carrying on the affair. Her jealousy keeps her alert. It is her most activating force. She is the one who hides herself to hear conversation between Mirabell and Foible, which leads to the exposure of the plot that was afoot against Lady Wishfort. However, all her machinations come to nothing because Mirabell has no time for the likes of her. He has no love to spare for her, entirely absorbed as he is in his love for Millamant. Like other villains in the play, Mrs. Marwood, too, has nothing but defeat in store for her.

### **31.5 LET US SUM UP**

The central theme of the play *The Way of the World* is itself illustrated by its title "The Way of the World". The three dominant themes which develop the plot structure of the play are money, sex and intrigue. William Congreve is direct and ironic. The sincerity of Mirabell's love does not make him lose sight of the importance of Millamant's fortune. Fainall marries for money. Money is Lady Wishfort's sole hold over her child and her ward. *The Way of the World* is full of amorous relationships. Mirabell is involved with Mrs. Fainall. Fainall is in illicit relationship with Mrs. Marwood whereas Lady Wishfort secretly wants to marry Mirabell. Everyone is engaged in intrigue. Mirabell intrigues to gain consent to his marriage from Lady Wishfort and this involves intrigue within intrigue. Fainall intrigues in turn.

### 31.6 EXAMINATION ORIENTED QUESTIONS

1. Write a short note (300 words) on the Restoration Comedy.
2. Discuss the validity of the various labels that have been used for the Restoration comedy, such as the comedy of manners, the artificial comedy, or the immoral comedy.
3. Define and discuss the title of Congreve's *The Way of the World*.
4. Examine the nature and variety of wit and humour in *The Way of the World*.
5. Discuss the theme of love and marriage in *The Way of the World*.
6. Examine the relation between marriage and wealth in *The Way of the World*.
7. Discuss the plot structure of *The Way of the World*.
8. Write a note (300 words) each on the characters of Mirabell, Millamant, Fainall, and Mrs. Marwood.

### 31.7 SUGGESTED READING

1. John H. Wilson. *A Preface to Restoration Drama*. Harvard, 1968.
2. Kenneth Muir. *The Comedy of Manners*. Hutchinson, 1970.
3. Harriet Hawkins. *Likenesses of Truth in Elizabethan and Restoration Drama*. Oxford, 1972.
4. Ben Ross Schneider. *The Ethos of Restoration Drama*. University of Illinois Press, 1971.
5. John Lofts. *Comedy and Society from Congreve to Fielding*. Stanford University Press, 1959.
6. Paul and Miriam Mueschke. *A New View of Congreve's Way of the World*. University of Michigan Press, 1958.
7. W.H. Van Voris. *The Cultivated Stance*. The Dolmen Press, 1965.

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