COURSE CODE: MAEGD 401

COURSE NAME: MODERN POETRY

CENTRE FOR DISTANCE AND ONLINE EDUCATION
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY

MASTER OF ARTS

ENGLISH

BLOCK II

Tezpur University
Centre for Distance and Online Education
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To grow to be a leading centre for human resource development through distance, open and universal learning system.

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MAEGD 401: MODERN POETRY

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BLOCK II

MODULE IV: MODERN IRISH POETRY	**UNIT 10: TRENDS IN MODERN IRISH POETRY**
	UNIT 11: SEAMUS HEANEY: "DIGGING", "THE TOLLUND MAN", "PUNISHMENT", "ACT OF UNION"
	UNIT 12: GEOFFREY HILL: MERCIAN HYMNS (SELECTIONS)
MODULEV: CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH POETRY	**UNIT 13: TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH POETRY**
	UNIT 14: JOHN AGARD: "LISTEN MR OXFORD DON", "CHECKING OUT ME HISTORY", "HALF-CASTE", "FLAG"
	SIMON ARMITAGE: 'KID', 'MOTHER' ANY DISTANCE GREATER THAN A SINGLE SPAN', 'NOVEMBER'
	CAROL ANN DUFFY: "ANNE HATHAWAY", "LITTLE RED-CAP", "ACHILLES"

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INTRODUCTION: BLOCK II

MEG 401: Modern Poetry , Block II deals with some important contemporary poets and their poetry. This section also includes Irish poetry and their trends as it constitutes a major bulk of English poetry. Block II has two Modules.

Module IV: Modern Irish Poetry deals exclusively with Irish poetry, its trends and the contribution of few prominent Irish poets to the bulk of English literature. ***Unit 10: Trends in Modern Irish Poetry*** will introduce you to enormously rich archive of Irish poetry and its experimentation with style, its technical achievements, and the Irish heritage reflected in their poetry. From the Celtic revivalism of the late 19th century to the radical experimentation of the 20th century, poets such as W.B. Yeats, Patrick Kavanagh, Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoon have all contributed enormously to what is now known and studied as Irish poetry contribution of which will be a part of discussion in this unit. ***Unit 11: Reading the poet: Seamus Heaney*** introduces you to Seamus Heaney, one of the most eminent Irish poets of our times . A 1995 Nobel laurate, Heaney has attracted a readership across the world because of his patriotic subject matter of modern Northern Ireland, its farms and cities, its natural culture and language overrun by English rule. ***Unit 12: Reading the poet Geoffrey Hill*** gives you an elaborate study of select poems of Geoffrey Hill and his other contributions. Hill's poetry encompasses a wide range of style, from being dense and allusive to the more accessible and readable. Memories of war, contemplation of European history, the holocaust, the meaning of Christianity, the ups and downs of culture are some of the major concerns of his poetry.

Module V: Contemporary English Poetry deals with the social, political and cultural developments that began in the 1970s. Though the idea of 'contemporary' is a debatable one, the more culturally tied up, more complex, and more nuanced literature from last eighteen years from present time is roughly included within the concept of contemporary. Divided into two units, ***Unit 13: Trends in***

Contemporary English Poetry introduces you to the emergence of contemporary poetry under various changing circumstances. The year 1977 and onwards may be considered as the year that Contemporary Poetry began because it marks the defeat of the avant-garde movement and also marks the end of the radical linguistic innovation and experimentation that became prominent in the English poetry of the first half of the 20th century. ***Unit 14: John Agard, Simon Armitage and Carol Ann Duffy:*** will introduce you to three of the most prominent poets of recent times John Agard, Simon Armitage and Carol Ann Duffy. The second half of the twentieth century is marked by more personal and intimate concerns that replaced the broad idea of nation and brotherhood. The language discourses in the poetry of John Agard, the drifting and waning relationships in the poetry of Simon Armitage and the personal yet mythical poems of Carol Ann Duffy marked this contemporariness which will be the prime focus of this unit.

Best effort has been made to facilitate the learners with adequate amount of information while discussing these poets and their time. We have also given the select poems as appendix at the end of the SLM. It is advised to the learners to go through the texts of the poems for better understanding of the subject, thematic concerns, symbols etc of the poets.

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MODULE IV: MODERN IRISH POETRY

UNIT 10: TRENDS IN MODERN IRISH POETRY

UNIT STRUCTURE

10.0 INTRODUCTION

The history of Irish poetry is enormously rich and is notable for its experimentation with style, its technical achievements, and for its uncompromising rootedness to the Irish heritage. Poets from every generation have shaped and redefined Irish poetry continuously – from the Celtic revivalism of the late 19th century to the radical experimentation of the 20th century.Poets such as W.B. Yeats, Patrick Kavanagh, Seamus Heaney and Paul Muldoonhave all contributed enormously to what is now known and studied as Irish poetry. In thisunit, you will be introduced to a brief history of Irish poetry and you will also be introduced to the trends and tendencies that have emerged in Irish poetry in recent times. To understand the historical background of Ireland we suggest the learners to go back to MEG-101: British Social History.

10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit you will be:

- familiarised with a brief history of Irish poetry and the trends in modern Irish poetry
- able to critically analysemodern Irish poetry within the Irish social context
- able to grasp the major thematic concerns and stylistic features of modern Irish poetry
- familiar with the socio-cultural and political background that shapesmodern Irish poetry

10.2 A BRIEF HISTORY OF IRISH POETRY

Irish poetry dates back to the 6th century AD and is more than 1500 years old.Both the oral tradition of storytelling and the written works of Irish literatureenjoy the status of being the oldest within the European cultures. Much of Irish poetry was however transferred through oral tradition, and even when paper was invented, they continued with this tradition because they believed committing something to paper runs the risk of being lost or destroyed.It was during the mid-medievalages (8th –12th Centuries) that two distinct hierarchies in Irish poetic tradition were established – the *Ollamh*, and the *Bard*. Both types of poets were revered in the Irish society; they were storytellers and archivists of all important Irish affairs. And even to this day Irish poetry still embodies, to a certain extent, the storytelling tradition of the past.

After the 15th century two major movements happened in the literary history of Ireland – first is the *Early Modern period*which lasted from the 16th century till the early 19th century, and second, the *Irish Literary Renaissance* that germinated in the late 19th century and continued throughout the mid-20thcentury. Both of these two historical timelines brought profound changes in the literature produced during the time, most importantly in poetry. They are discussed below.

10.2.1 THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD

The Early Modern period in Irish literary history began in the 16th century and lasted until the mid-19th century. The first wave of acute linguistic and literary change came with the tightening of the English control in the Irish soil. This resulted in the suppression of the Irish aristocracy and with it the Irish heritage as well. The quelling of the aristocratic class directly affected the literary class because it severelydiminished the number of patrons. The new English nobility that ruled Ireland had little regard for the older culture and hence over time the Irish prosody, distinct for its elaborate classical metre, lost its hold and was slowly usurped by more contemporary forms. Although prose satirical works, notably the works of Jonathan Swift, which wereinfluenced by the growing political tension, was becoming popular in Ireland, it was poetry which still reigned as the dominant literary medium. The practitioners of poetry, however, were now limited to scholars trained in the classics in local schools;and although their poetry was polished their audience was limited to the local crowd. However,even these poets always upheld the Gaelic heritage in their poetry. The two 18th century Irish poets EoghanRua Ó Súilleabháin and Aogán Ó Rathaille are now remembered as the last of the Gaelic poets. The 18th century also saw the works of non-Gaelic tradition poets like Oliver Goldsmith, who movingly reflects on his youth in Ireland in pastoral poems such as*The Deserted Village* (1770) which strikes both as a reminder of the beauty of the peasantry and a lament on the rapid modernisation and festering greed that had emerged in the new Ireland.

10.2.2 THE IRISH LITERARY RENAISSANCE

In the late 19thand early 20thcentury Ireland, the Irish Literary Renaissance took place.It was a part of the manifestation of a largerrevivalist movement that occurred in Ireland more commonly referred to as the Celtic Twilight and wascomposed of a variety of other concurrent movements and trends with a singular goal – the resurrection of the old Celtic culture. The Celtic Twilight materialized in different avenues of the Irish culture includingliterature. The Irish

poet William Butler Yeats spearheaded the literary renaissance by taking up projects such as the archiving of tales and folklore of Ireland which he later published in a volume titled *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*(1888) and a collection of Celtic mythology titled *The Wanderings of Oisin* (1889). Yeats alsoplayed a major role in setting up the Irish Literary Society in London and the National Literary Society in Dublin, both in the same year, in 1892. W.B. Yeats" publication of another volume titled *The Celtic Twilight* (1893), from where the name of the movement is derived, and his contributionsin the foundation of the Abbey Theatre, the first national theatre in Ireland in 1904 also helped in anchoring the movement to its literary roots and gave it a firm direction.

The Irish literary renaissance, however, did not germinate out ofvacuum. The movement is regarded as a reaction to the modernization that was coming in full force in the nineteenth century which was beginning to profoundly affect the tradition and culture in Ireland, among the rest of the western civilization. It was this tension between ideologies – the *archaic* versus the *modern* that threw the Irish literati into a trajectory towards a romantic reconciliation with the past. And any movement that looks back to past heritage with a sense of nostalgic longing naturally becomes political. Nationalism and pride of the Gaelic heritage were inherently at the core of the Irish literary renaissance. The literary works that were produced during this time dealt with an idea of an unadulterated Ireland, an Ireland before the arrival of modernism. For instance, the Irish Literary Theatre established in 1898 distinguished itself by excelling in the production of peasant plays, and the great Irish dramatist John Millington Synge also wrote powerful plays of great beauty in a stylized peasant dialect.

In poetry, in addition to W.B.Yeats, George William Russell also composed poems of enduring interest. In his poems like "A New World" and "An Irish Face"Russell touches upon the romantic idea of the old Ireland. Their younger contemporaries Padraic Colum, Seumas O'Sullivan, and F.R. Higgins, who was a student of Yeats all contributed in keeping the Celtic revival alive through their poems and their work on Irish folklore. The Irish Republican

Brotherhood, which was a concurrent movement to the Celtic Twilight, although more political and a little militant, was also an attempt to revive and consolidate Irish heritage by denouncing the British establishment in Ireland. The movement also spawned its own poets such as Patrick Henry Pearse, Thomas MacDonagh, and Joseph Plunkett who were all executed for their participation in the Easter Rising of 1916, an event which W.B Yeats later commemorates with ambivalent emotions in his poem "Easter, 1916".

LET US STOP AND THINK

In 1903, the Irish-American lawyer and collector John Quinn arranged a tour for W.B. Yeats in America. Yeats travelled across the country delivering lectures at Harvard, Yale and many other prestigious colleges and universities except Princeton because they claimed the $100 fee for the lecture was too high!

10.3 TRENDS IN MODERN IRISH POETRY

Modern poetry, in general, has a strong synergy with the visual arts. The initialization of the "imagist" movement in the early twentieth century had a profound affect on all poetry that wereproducedduring the modernist years and afterwards. This visual element in poetry, also known as *ekphrasis,* has become a signature ingredient of modern poetry, almost endemic. It was W.B.Yeats who initiated modern Irish poetry, and he himself was once a student in art school, and not surprisingly we often find references to paintings and sculptures in his literary works, both his verse and in his prose. Yeats and his sense of style – of marrying the visual and the literarybecame the primary aesthetic, not just for Irish poetry, but also for modernist poetry in general. The influence of this "symbolist"style of poetry passed from Yeats to the later generation of Irish poets including Seamus Heaney, Patrick Kavanagh andPaul Muldoon.

10.3.1 THE NORTHERN RENAISSANCE

Although the legacy of modernismcast its long shadow on poetry throughout the 20th century, it did not prevent poets from inventing new tendencies that challenged or modified poetic architecture to accommodate the reigning social milieu.The works of the mid-twentieth centurypoet Patrick Kavanagh, for example,refashioned the YeatsianIreland into something more contemporary, something more rural and closer to the history of Ireland. His poem "The Great Hunger" (1942) for instance is a literary masterstroke about ordinary life in an ordinary Irish farm presented in earthy lyricism –

The world looks on
And talks of the peasant:
The peasant has no worries;
In his little lyrical fields He ploughs and sows;
He eats fresh food,
He loves fresh women, He is his own master
As it was in the Beginning
The simpleness of peasant life.

The poem's controlled anger and mocking tone are quite tangible. It captures the irony, and contradicts the urban sympathizerswith the lives of the completely satisfied peasants. Once again like the poets before him such as Oliver Goldsmith, Kavanagh goes back to the roots of Irish heritage and talk of the peasantry, but while Goldsmith laments, Kavanagh satires. The title of the poem, "The Great Hunger" is a direct reference to the great hunger of Ireland which lasted from 1845 to 1849 which caused mass starvation, diseases, death and exodus. In poems like "On Ragland Road" Kavanagh returns to the lyric tradition and images of the Celtic. And the preoccupation with the peasantry are once again revived –

On Grafton Street in November we tripped lightly along the ledge
Of the deep ravine where can be seen the worth of passion's pledge,

The Queen of Hearts still making tarts and I not making hay -
O I loved too much and by such and such is happiness thrown away.

The schism that took place between Ireland and Northern Ireland in 1921 also spawned, especially in poetry, a counter revival to the Irish Literary Renaissance,now commonly referred to as the Northern Renaissance. Patrick Kavanagh was a part of this counter revivalist movement, and in his poetry, he brought a luminous spirituality while portraying the grim rural life in Northern Ireland. Thus landscape and Irish localities always play an important presence in his poetry. Kavanagh's biographer John Nemo writes –

Kavanagh's point of view evolved primarily from his response to life, which was emotional rather than intellectual. . . . In place of the logic that directs the creative vision of poets like T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats, Kavanagh's creative faculties rely on inspiration and intuition. Artistically, he reacts rather than acts. Unlike many modern poets, his poems are not assembled piecemeal like contemporary sculptures but are deliveredwhole from the creative womb. (Nemo, 1979)

Another poet who worked hard to escape the shadow of W.B.Yeats was Austin Clarke, but unlike Kavanagh, Clarke's approach to poetic composition was more cerebral than intuition. His long poem "Mnemosyne Lay in Dust" (1966) recounts the nervous breakdown the poet had suffered five decades ago.What stands out as a poetic culmination and literary expression of modern Ireland is the sudden rise of epic poems. Both Kavanagh's"The Great Hunger" and Austin Clarke's"Mnemosyne Lay in Dust" are expansive long works offering an overview of the contemporary times. Both move away remarkably from the use of myths in the classical sense and instead attempt an investigation of modernisation through real histories.

10.3.2 THE 1960S AND BEYOND

The arrival of Seamus Heaney in the Irish literary scene with his first major volume titled *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) published by Faber & Faber eclipsed the other poets in Ireland of the time. Hailing from Northern Ireland, Heaney himself was deeply influenced by Kavanagh's poetry and this is evident

in his lyrical, earthy, aural poetry. He too delved into the Irish past and into the Irish landscape."Digging", the first poem in his collection is an attempt on Heaney's part to understand his position as an individual and an artist within the Irish historical context –

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I"ve no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I"ll dig with it.

Heaney's engagement with the Irish cause continues in poems such as "Causality" which retells the historical events of the violence in Northern Ireland, specifically the event of January 30, 1972, which has now become to be known as Bloody Sunday because of the civilians causalities that resultedafter a clash with the British army.The poem itself is written as a moving elegy for his friend Louis O'Neill, who was a victim of the violence –

But my tentative art
His turned back watches too:
He was blown to bits
Out drinking in a curfew
Others obeyed, three nights
After they shot dead
The thirteen men in Derry.

The poetry contained in his volumes *Field Work* (1979) and *Stations* (1975) keep going back to tell stories about the victims and perpetrators of the violence. His collection *North* (1975) also deals with the conflicts of the late 20th century byresurrecting symbols and images from the past.

Although there has been an undeniable progression in poetic tendencies in Irish literature, the poets and their rootedness to the Irish soil and to Irish history still continues and bonds them to the ancient Bardic tradition. Yeats, Kavanagh, Heaneyare all archivists of Irish history in their own way.

Another parallel poetry movement that has been undergoing rapid expansion in the Irish soil is the rise of women poets since the mid-1970s. The publication of MedbhMcGuckian's debut collection *Single Ladies* (1980) and Eavan Boland's*In Her Own Image* (1980) in the same year marked a new era in women's poetry in Irish literature. Both poets questioned the male-oriented tradition and invented a new feminine position within the national through dislocation and by initiating a dialogue between the mythical and real histories in the context of their lived experiences. These collections are characteristic of their constant pre-occupation with feminine activities including marriage and childbirth and introduced a serious gender dialogue with the already prevailing Irish poetry.

One characteristic of the Irish women poets that come out during the 1980s was their insistence on the recognition of their gendered identity. For instance, the Irish poet Paul Muldoon while writing his introduction to *Single Ladies* was asked to use the term "poetess" instead of the gender neutral "poet". Eavan Boland on the other hand in her memoir *Object Lessons*(1995) reflects on her former life and poetry in the 1960s – "You are Irish. You are a woman. Why do you keep these things at the periphery of the poem? Why do you not move them to the centre where they belong?" This new tendency concerning the *self-centring* of the feminine identity in women's literature has been increasing gradually over the decades. To a certain extent it was also influenced and motivated by the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement which began in 1975. Moreover, the establishment of feminist publishing houses like Attic Press in Dublin and Salmon Press in Galway also promoted and encouraged the new women poets in Ireland. The move from *silence* to *subjectivity* and form being *removed* to *self- assertion*thus became very prevalent in the works of the new Irish women poets. This has also contributed to the emergence of a stylistic verse.

Contemporary women poets likeVonaGroarke, for example,uses her poetry to focuson the difficulties of being an expatriate poet and interrogates questions of belonging, nationality and shared history in poems like “Away” and “An American Jay”. She often overlays frequently a complex and witty arrangementof words bycombining the historical and the political in poems such as “Imperial Measure” which discreetly references to a gathering which involves the preparation of a meal for the insurgents on Easter 1916. But onceagain, the long shadow of Irish history prevails even in their poetry.

LET US STOP AND THINK

- The Imagist movement was a literary movement initiated by American and English poets in the early 20th century in reaction to Victorian sentimentality. The movement’s main axiom was the use of common speech in free verse with clear concrete imagery, preferably in short bursts.

The Easter Rising took place on April 24, 1916 in Ireland. It was an uprising by the Irish republicans against the British rule but ended unsuccessfully and was followed by the execution of the Irish Republican leaders including many well-known poets.

10.4 SUMMING UP

By now you must be familiar with the history of Irish poetry – its beginnings, its progression towards modernism in the 16^{th} – 18^{th} century, the march towards Celtic Twilight in the 19^{th}-20^{th}century, the schism between Ireland and Northern Ireland which influenced a counter revivalist movement called Northern Renaissancegiving birth to peasant poets such as Patrick Kavanagh and Austin Clarke whose style was rooted more towards real histories than the mythical past, and finally with the trends that have been unfolding post 1950s with poets such as Seamus Heaney whose poems are triggered by intimate memories rendered in linguistically pleasant arrangement of words. The Irish

women poets who emerged in the 1980s although different in their objective towards their male counterparts regarding the representation of lived experiences in their poetry do not escape the long shadow of the Irish Republic. The nostalgia for homeland in the works of expatriate women poets like VonaGroarke is evidence that the Irish roots still run deep.

Considering its geographical and demographic scale and its rather unsettling violence history Ireland occupies an unexpectedly exalted position in European literature. In poetry, the endless preoccupation with its past –with the social, literary and political, has provided an immovable anchor and in turn, an immovable identity which is both cyclic yet vibrant and promising at the same time.

Glossary :

Aesthetic - Relating to or dealing with beauty, taste and style.

Archaic - Extremely old; seeming to belong to an earlier period.

Endemic - Constantly present to greater or lesser extent in a particular locality

Gaelic - Any of several related languages of the Celts in Ireland and Scotland.

Literati - The literary intelligentsia.

Prosody - The patterns of stress and intonation in a language, especially in poetry.

Quelling - Forceful prevention; putting down by power or authority.

Usurp - Take control of, possibly with force, one's right or possession.

10.5 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Briefly discuss the History of Irish poetry from its Gaelic years to the early Modern period focussing on the major shifts that took place.
2. What was the Irish Literary Renaissance? Discuss in relation to a few of the poets who played a major role in the movement.
3. How did the second wave of revolution in Irish poetry arrive? Discuss in relation to the NorthernRenaissance.

4. What were the major tendencies of the women Irish poets and their works in the 1980s? Discuss in about 400 words.
5. Irish poetry seems to be unable to escape from its volatile political and historical past. Do you agree? Write a brief discussion bringing into focus the revolutions that took place in Ireland and the role poets and poetry played in those revolutions?
6. The pastoral theme seems to recur in Irish poetry repeatedly. Discuss briefly a few Irish poets whose work deals withthe tension between the pastoral life in rural Ireland and the rapid modernisation of Ireland.

10.6 REFERNCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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UNIT 11: SEAMUS HEANEY

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.0 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to Seamus Heaney, one of the most eminent Irish poets of our times .Heaney has attracted a readership across the world and has won prestigious literary awards and honours including Nobel Prize in 1995. The unique quality of his poetry is that he is highly rated by critics and academics yet popular with the common reader. Part of Heaney's popularity stems from his subject matter- modern Northern Ireland, its farms and cities, its natural culture and language overrun by English rule. Heaney's poetry is grounded in actual detail - filtered through childhood and adulthood - making us "see, hear, smell and taste" Irish life These observed and recollected facts of his early rural experience are conveyed in a language of great sensuous richness and directness

which weaves 'a strong gauze of sound' around their occasions. Yet, Heaney is not merely a regional poet and it would be grossly unfair to read his poems as only reflecting the culture and crises of Irish life. His poetry, in many ways, invites responses from other critical positions, which go beyond the parameters of his location.

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- acquaint yourself with the life and works of the Irish poet Seamus Heaney.
- read critically some of the representative poems of Heaney
- analyse the major thematic concerns in Heaney
- discuss the language, style and poetic devices used by the poet
- understand the socio-political background which shaped the poetic oeuvre of Heaney

11.2 SEAMUS HEANEY: LIFE AND WORKS

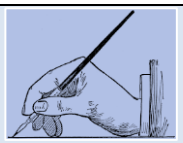
Seamus Heaney was born on 13th April, 1939 to Patrick and Margaret Kathleen Heaney, on a farm called Mossbawn, near Ulster, Northern Ireland. He was the eldest of nine children, two girls and seven boys. His father, apart from being a farmer also worked as a cattle dealer. The family belonged to the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. He attended St. Columbia's College, Derry in 1951 and moved in 1957 to Belfast to continue his studies. In 1961 Heaney graduated from Queen's University, Belfast with first class honours in English literature. It was during this period that Heaney gained access to the English, Irish and American letters, giving him a firm knowledge of Latin, Anglo- Saxon and Irish-Gaelic which immensely helped him in his translation works. After this, he was trained as a teacher at St. Joseph's College of Education. After one year as a secondary teacher, Heaney returned to St. Joseph where he was a lecturer for three years. In 1966, however, Heaney joined Queen's University as a lecturer.

His years at Belfast proved a turning point in his life as it brought him into the company of people like Laurence Learner and Philip Hobsbaum, founder of the Belfast Group, who urged him to take up the vocation of a writer in all earnestness. During this period Heaney's first book *Eleven Poems* came out in 1965. At the age of twenty seven he won in 1966 the Eric Gregory Award with *Death of a Naturalist.* With these works Heaney established his reputation as a poet. It was also during this period that he married Marie Devlin in 1965 to whom he dedicated his second book.

In 1972, Heaney gave up his work at Queen's partly to escape the violence of Belfast and he moved to County Wicklow, where he was a freelance writer for three years. The success of his third volume of poetry *Door into the Dark* (1969) encouraged him to test himself as a poet without resorting to the security of an academic job. During this period he made his living by accepting invitation to read and lecture both at home and in USA. In 1975, he once again returned to teaching at Carysfort College in Dublin and became increasingly concerned regarding the situation in Northern Ireland. In *North* (1975) Heaney addressed the ongoing civil strife which attracted wide spread attention and he had to face controversy and criticism but was also showered with praise and admiration. After *North* he was considered the finest Irish poet since W. B. Yeats and with Ted Hughes among the leading poets of the English reading world. It won several awards, including the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize. *Field Work* (1979), his next work, also addressed the social and political in Northern Ireland. Strong individualistic, meditative mood marks his later works including – *Station Island* (1984), *The Haw Lantern* (1987), *Seeing Things* (1991) and *In Electric Light* (2001).

Meanwhile, Seamus Heaney worked in a number of academic Institutions in Britain and America, establishing his reputation as one of the finest poets of the modern era. In 1989 he was appointed as Professor of Poetry at Oxford University where he remained till 1994. In 1995 he was awarded the Noble Prize for Literature in recognition of his achievements.

Heaney also published miscellaneous prose writings and translated works like *Sweeney Astray* (1983), *The Cure at Troy* (1991) and *Beowulf* (1999). The last won him the Whitbread Award as the best book of 1999. In 2003 Heaney won the Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism. Heaney's eleventh collection *District and Circle* (2006) won the T.S. Eliot prize after which he wrote *Human Chain* (2010) which fetched him the Forward Poetry Prize for Best Collection. In June 2012, Heaney accepted the Griffin Trust for Excellence in Poetry's Lifetime Recognition Award. Seamus Heaney died at the age of 74 on 30 August 2013, Dublin ending a career that was both "critically feted and publicly popular".



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Mention three salient features of Heaney's poetry.

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2. Give two or three examples of Irishness that you see in Heaney's poetry.

11.3 READING THE POEM 'DIGGING'

'Digging' is the first poem of Seamus Heaney's debut collection of poetry *Death of a Naturalist* (1966). The free structure of the poem allows Heaney to

freely articulate the various themes of the poems such as the pride and dignity of his forefathers and search for self. The poem also outlines Heaney's struggles between honouring and departing from the traditional calling of his ancestors and justifying his modern calling as a poet. He celebrates these themes with vivid imagery, sensory descriptions and a sense of music that becomes apparent the moment you start reading the poem.

The speaker opens the poem by giving us the image of a writer ready at his desk, his pen poised to begin writing. The first two lines are powerfully graphic and vivid as the poet startlingly throws a simile at us: "Between my finger and my thumb/ The squat pen rest; snug as a gun". In his hand, the pen feels like a gun. The simile comparing a pen to a gun serves a number of purposes. For instance, it indicates "the power that writing can have" (Hannah Blackwood). It also suggests that the speaker feels poetry to be a forceful, even a violent activity. Another interpretation of this simile could be that the poet was referring to the Troubles (discussed later) raging in Northern Ireland. A master at creating ambience, Heaney swiftly brings a shift in vision as another world comes alive in his words. As he begins to write he is disturbed by the sound of the spade at work just "under the window". This is the sound made by his father's spade digging the earth, an act that brings into the poem a string of allusions which Heaney tries to unravel in the lines that follows. Also, Heaney brings into the poem the role of memory and the act of remembering (both private and public) which remains a significant feature of Heaney's poetry.

In lines 6-9as he looks at his father, there is a flow of associations as he recalls memories of his father digging for potatoes and later recalls a similar memory of his grandfather cutting turf. Note the shift to the past tense here. Before this moment in the poem, the poet was using the present tense, but this shift to the past tells us we have entered a memory. The poet continues to live in the past recollecting his father and grandfather at their work. There is a sense of tradition and ritualistic devotion in their engagement which has spanned across generations. The image of a firm hold or grip on things is indicated by the references to the spade- lug, which is quite similar to the experience of taking the

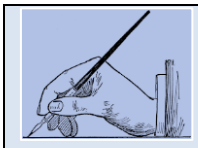
pen in a comfortable grip. The imagery of 'lug' indicates the firm hold or grip on things which his father had with his 'spade' and now which the poet has with his 'pen'. Both these images of the spade and the pen suggest skill and expertise, as Heaney acknowledges his father's deft handling of the spade. The entire process of potato farming is presented as a family affair which is indicated by the use of the word 'we' in line 13 when the poet recollects fond memories of picking potatoes that his father dug up. Note Heaney's use of sound effects such as onomatopoeia and its alliterative effects (e.g. "tall tops", "buried the bright edge"; "potatoes that we picked"; "hardness in our hand") which were the results of his interest in Anglo- Saxon poetry and in Hopkins. Lines 15-16 vividly recreate the image of his grandfather and his excellence as a farmer and turf cutter. The words "By god" grab our attention and show us just how much enthusiasm and admiration the speaker has for his father and grandfather's skill. The poet indicates that he comes from a long line of farmers and seems proud of his ancestral tradition. The speaker recollects his grandfather's strength and skill in cutting turf. He is able not only to cut 'more turf' than others but also the 'good turf'. The image of the poet as a little boy carrying milk to the grandfather while he was working is a fond image of the child-grandfather relationship. By including these memories and reminiscing on the traditions of his family, Heaney indicated why it is so hard for him to depart from his family history and choose a different path in life as a poet. In spite of the fact the speaker can't dig the turf the way his ancestors did, yet he is able to situate himself within the rich traditional heritage for he too is involved in another kind of digging- that of going deep into his cultural roots through the route of his pen. These ideas are further reinforced in the lines that follow. In lines 25-28Heaney here makes use of words that again appeals to the senses. He brings up the smell of potato mould, the sound of peat bog and the cuts of the spade as it digs down into the earth. Heaney here is making use of sight, smell, sound and touch imagery to give us a sense of how his memory makes him feel. The phrase 'living through the roots' has layers of meaning in it. On one hand, he is talking literally about the roots of a plant but is also referring to his own 'roots', that is, memories of his own ancestors and that

of a home land. It is evident through Heaney's memories and description that he is far removed from his father's lifestyle and he admits that he has 'no spade to follow men like them'.

In the end, the speaker circles all the way back to where he started and repeat the first two lines of the poem. In doing so he manages to convey the idea that he is no different from his father and grandfather. He is just using a different tool and a different method. While his ancestors dug with spade, the poet plans to dig with his pen into his own memory, into his family lineage, into his and Ireland's past. He honours and admires their works, but has chosen to take a different path. He acknowledges the rich heritages of the past. At the same timeshows his inability to carry it forward.It is because the old order is being gradually over shadowed by a generation whose horizons are now much wider due to changes in life style, culture and historical circumstances.

GLOSSARY:

- **Potato drills:** Potato drills are evenly spaced rows of potatoes in a field. In the poem it refers to the act of drilling little furrows into the earth to make a hole in which you plant the potato. Potato farming was a major farming activity of the people of Ireland and nearly two fifth of the population was solely reliant on this cheap crop.
- **Lug:** A lug here refers to the top of the blade of the spade, which sticks out on either side of the shaft or handle. Stepping on the lug and putting all the weight of the user on it helps sink the tool into the ground to dig a hole as the speaker's father does in the poem.
- **Toner's bog:** A bog is a patch of wet, muddy ground, covered in plant or turf, which forms the grassy top layer. Heaney's mention of a place called 'Toners bog' gives the poem an "insider" feel as it refers to a place that was part of his neighbourhood, not quite a place that we could locate on the Irish map.
- **Peat:** Peat is organic material found in marshy ground composed of partially decayed vegetation. It is an early stage in the formation of coal. It is cut, stacked and burnt as fuel.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How can you tell the speaker admires his father and grandfather? Which lines in the poem tell you this?

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2. How does Heaney juxtapose the two worlds of writing and farming in the poem. Give examples from the text.

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2. Analyse the use of memory and the past in the poem.

11.3.1 READING THE POEM 'THE TOLLUND MAN'

Heaney's fascination with the bog bodies started with the publication of P. V. Glob's book *The Bog People* who conducted an in depth research of the people buried under the peat who were found naked, strangled or with their throat cut. The English translation of his book appeared in 1969, the year the killing began in Northern Ireland. The book explained that the bodies of men and

women recovered from these peats of Jutland, buried since the times of Iron Age, were sacrifices to the goddess Nerthus. The belief was that she needed new bridegrooms to ensure fertility of the crops next spring. The first of Heaney's poem to reflect on these images was 'The Tollund Man' in *Wintering Out*, in which he analogized the ritual sacrifices of the ancient times to the sacrifices of the Irishmen for the sake of their motherland. The Tollund Man was, thus not intended as a simple recognition of an ancient mummy. Rather, Heaney employed the corpse as a metaphor for the decaying old ways characterized by the sectarian violence raging across Ireland and the seeds found in its stomach as symbolizing the birth of a new day.

The poem opens quietly and effectively, almost like Glob's initial description, in an evocative and poetic prose. The first verse is mostly monosyllabic, "Some day I will go to Aarhus/ To see his peat-brown head" making the words sound hard, which sets the scenes as it is a serious subject. It begins with a promise of a pilgrimage to Aarhus- a place in Jutland where the bog bodies were found. He describes the man meticulously down to every detail- his peat brown head, eye-lids shaped like pods, his cap, his noose and girdle and his naked body. Heaney makes a reference to the legend of his dying in the winter, "last gruel of winter seeds". Heaney calls him the "bridegroom to the goddess" and his burial and preservation is described in sexual terms. This refers to the myth that the goddess of the land wanted the sacrifice of a male so that she could conceive with him. Thus he is the bridegroom of the goddess who must become pregnant so that the earth may become fertile and crops may flourish in the next season. The speaker thus imagines the killing of the Tollund Man and his subsequent burial in the bog as a kind of sexual union between the victim and goddess, in which Nerthus opened her fen, preserving the victim's body by immersing it in her "dark juices". The "turf cutters" are the insects which have become one with the dead man's flesh.

Inthe second section (lines 21-32), the mood changes dramatically and the connection between Jutland and Ireland is made more explicit. Both places have had their innocent victims. The speaker imagines that, if he addresses a

prayer to the Tollund Man and calls the bog a ‘cauldron’ made holy by the sacrifice (thereby risking ‘blasphemy’ as Christian by aligning himself with pagan rituals), then perhaps the potential for germination and regeneration inherent in the Tollund Man’s sacrifice, and in his very body (‘winter seeds’), might be released, not in the victim’s Jutland, but in contemporary Ireland. He then compares these sacrificed bog men to the ‘labourers’ of Ireland whose dead bodies were found in the field. They are not revolutionaries but innocent labourers who were killed mercilessly in the civil war in Ireland. Heaney also recalls an incident in which bodies of four young Catholics, murdered by Protestant militants, were dragged along a railway line in an act of mutilation.

The last part of the poem returns to the quite beginning, but here instead of determination and looking forward, there is sorrow and despair. As he is travelling through Aarhus he seems to feel like the Tollund Man, when he travelled to his death. The idea of isolation is brought sharply to the reader through the idea of being ‘lost’ in a foreign land, but at the same time, he realizes that he feels at ‘home’ in a state of homelessness because he knows if he visited the scene of the sacrificial killing he would be able to recognize the same vengeful practices that violate his own society. In other words, though the names of the regions he passes through (‘Tollund, Grabaulle, Nebelgard’) will be alien to him and the local language unknown , he imagines that , as an Irishman , burdened with the weight of his country’s’ troubled history, he will feel a kinship with a landscape that has witnessed similar conflicts and killings. The terrible paradox of, thus, feeling ‘lost’ and ‘unhappy’, while ‘at home’, show the correspondence between Neolithic Jutland and modern Ireland. Though there is resignation but still there is a desire for peace that underlines the final lines and in the whole poem.

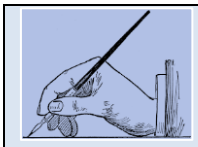
LET US STOP AND THINK

On the afternoon of May 6, 1950, two brothers while working in the Bjaeldskov bog, an area about six miles west of the Danish town of Silkeborg, found the lifeless body of a man. The man's physical features were so well preserved that he was mistaken for a recent murder victim. The police in an attempt to unravel the mystery sought the help of archaeology Professor P. V. Glob who came to the conclusion that the body was two thousand years old and most likely the victim of a ritual sacrifice to Goddess Nerthus. The Tollund man lay fifty meters away from firm ground, buried under two meters of pit, his body arranged in a fetal position. Glob noted that the man's skin was coffee brown and his short hair was read and he wore a pointed skin cap, fastened under his skin by a hide thong and a belt around his waist. Additionally, the copse had a noose around the neck and trailing down his back. Otherwise, he was naked. The body of Tollund Man, at present, is displayed at the Silkeborg Museum in Denmark, although only the head is original.

GLOSSARY:

- **Aarhus-** A sea port and city in eastern Jutland, Denmark. It was the site of a major discovery of human bodies in a pit, and these bodies came to be known as the bog people and become subject of many Heaney's poem.
- **Peat- brown head-** the body of the Tollund Man was found buried in the peat bog. Pit is vegetable matter decomposed by water and partly carbonized. Acids in the peat and bog water could preserve a human body over a long period.
- **Winter seeds-** the researchers found out that the Tollund Man at the time of sacrifice was fully fed with a kind of porridge made from vegetables and seeds.
- **Saint's kept body**-Heaney's vowed journey to Aarhus in Jutland recalls the Catholic custom of pilgrimage to a saint's shrine, which sometimes features the miraculously preserved body of the saint. The Tollund Man is compared to a saint, whose body is incorrupt and is prayed to, hoping the dead would 'germinate' again, as his killers hoped he would.

- **Torc-** A torc is a large rigid neck ring in metal, made either as a single piece or from strands twisted together. Gods and goddesses of Celtic mythology are often depicted wearing or carrying torcs, which often represented power or riches. In the poem, the Tollund Man stands for the Irish people killed for their allegiance to Ireland, a suggestion which is symbolically rendered as the embrace of goddess Nerthus.
- **Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard–** These three places in Jutland, Denmark were sites of a major discovery in 1950 of human bodies in a peat bog.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Who is the Tollund Man? How did his body survive?

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2. What is 'bog poems' of Seamus Heaney?

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3. How did he utilize the bog bodies as metaphors to draw parallels with the political and social situation in Ireland?

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4. What is the significance of the place Aarhus in the poem?

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5. Do you think 'The Tollund Man' depicts the picture of an oppressive culture?

11.3.2 READING THE POEM 'PUNISHMENT'

'Punishment' has often been described as the central point of the bog poems. Like Tollund Man, the poem is based on a real incident which is reported to have taken place in the first century AD about which Heaney had read in *The Bog People* (1969). The poem is a vivid voyage through Heaney's imagination as he describes the corpse of a young girl found in a peat bog in Germany in 1952 who had been brutally tortured and killed as punishment for adultery. Heaney makes this victim – called the Windeby Girl - relevant to his era, seeing similarities with Irish women punished for having relationship with British soldiers. In doing so, present and past history become one as the poet creates for himself an Irish persona that exist across time, and can dwell simultaneously in the Irish past and the present as he envisions himself watching generations of Irish women condemned to death in the poem. Such historical context provides Heaney with motifs through which he can confront larger issues like morality and social responsibility. Heaney's perspectives and time frames appear to shift from past to present, and by using his imagination, presumption and his own memories he attempts to investigate in the poem the cruelty of human nature, guilt and on the question of whether we have changed and evolved over time or whether we are still, deep inside, as barbaric and savage as we once were.

The poem directly addresses the past by describing the death of the bog girl in the first half of the poem. It begins with a focus on her body, describing it in anatomical and visual detail on a level similar to Tollund Man, yet this time there is a degree of empathy absent in the other poem. It is intensely personal, rooted in the senses. "I can feel the tug/ of the halter". So great is his pain at her suffering, that he appears to "feel the tug" of the noose himself. In the second stanza, the wind blows against the nipples of the breasts that are like "amber beads" and "shake" her thin ribs. The excruciatingly detailed imagery explicitly describes her feminine vulnerability and defencelessness which contrast sharply with her violent death that leaves her also with a shaved head. Her frailty is further emphasized in the third stanza as Heaney explains that he can see her body, drowned in a bog, with a "weighing stone" attached to hold her body beneath the water. Heaney intense scrutiny of the body in stanza four and five forces the reader to picture the detestable manner in which she was treated. She is now reduced to inanimate objects – 'barked sapling', 'oak bone' brain ferkin', 'stubble of black corn'. 'Barked sapling' infers that the body was found beneath the sapling that had been dug up ; 'oak bone' suggest the condition of her weak, petrified bones; 'brain- ferkin' refers to her skull which is now nothing more than a small casket and the 'stubble of black corn' reveals the state of her blond hair. The first two lines of the fifth stanza begins with a violent image "her blindfold a soiled bandage" which is softened to 'her nose a ring/ to store/ the memories of love". By means of her ironic 'ring', in which her 'brief memories of love' will be stored forever, she is led to her drowning. Heaney now shifts to the scene before she was punished. He excites our sympathy for the bog-girl as she is being led to her drowning with a series of adjectives- 'Little', 'flaxen haired', 'undernourished'; 'beautiful', ' poor scapegoat' which have the effect of poignantly bringing out her vulnerability and powerlessness in the face of greater unfathomable powers. The entire scene Heaney can imagine so vividly that he is moved to address her directly. "I almost love" he declares, but he finds himself guilty, however, of remaining silent. Heaney now shifts the perspective from the accused to the accusers, and the equally culpable onlookers, like himself. He

admits that he lacks the moral courage and like many among the onlookers he would not have intervened to save the girl, but rather "would have cast, I know/ the stones of silence". Disturbed and driven to self approach, Heaney condemns himself as merely an "artful voyeur" who has been, in a sense, exploiting the girl's body by gazing at it to fulfil his artistic compulsions. He also realizes his inadequacy as an observer because his is, after all, a male point of view. Heaney thus, wonderfully weaves into the text the issues of gaze, voyeurism and sexuality apart from the more obvious concern of crime and punishment.

LET US STOP AND THINK

Windeby Girl is the name given to the bog body found preserved in a peat bog near Windeby, Northern Germany, in 1952. The body was discovered by commercial peat cutters and is now on display at the Landesmuseum in Schleswig, Germany. Though damaged at discovery, researchers state that the body was well preserved. P. V. Glob graphically describes the body in his book *TheBog People*. The body was found with no article of clothing except for a leather collar and a coloured strip of cloth that had been over the eyes which Glob feels was "used to close her eyes to the world". While found naked, Windeby Girl was also found underneath several branches and a large stone both of which acted as anchors to keep the body submerged. Evidence from the body led researchers to interpret that she was an adulteress and was killed as a punishment for her crime. The girl's hair was removed completely, perhaps shaved off to show her disgrace. This was a common practice in a Roman world for women who violated the strict norms of social conduct. The body was re-examined in 1970 and questions arose regarding its gender. About thirty years later in 2007, DNA test revealed that the body belonged to a sixteen year boy and **Windeby Girl** was renamed as **Windeby 1**.

GLOSSARY :

• **Tug –** a hard or sudden pull; however the word has layered meanings in the context of the poem. It anticipates the 'struggle' that the speaker undergoes in the later part of the poem.

• **Halter-** a strap round an animal's head, used for leading it. In the poem, it is used as a 'noose' to lead the girl to be drowned in the bog.

• **Amber bead-**a hard yellowish substance used in jewellery. In the poem, Heaney uses the word as an analogy to bring out the effects of the wind on her naked body, including her nipples.

• **Flaxed-haired-** pale yellow, the colour of flax. In the poem, it's used to describe the colour of her hair before she was punished and which adds to her fragile beauty.

• **Scapegoat-** a person blamed for the wrongdoings of others. In the poem, the poet refers to the girl as 'my poor scapegoat' as she was victimized as a result of the barbaric act of the tribe.

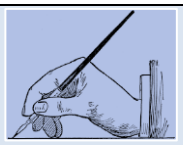
• **Voyeur-** a person who gets pleasure by watching sexual acts or objects without being seen. In the poem, Heaney realizes that he is guilty of voyeurism as he 'stood dumb' and watched her with a 'male gaze', unable to speak out and resolve the conflicts within him.

LET US STOP AND THINK

The Troubles is the common name that refers to the political tension, sectarian feuding, and guerrilla violence in Northern Ireland. The Troubles began in the late 1960s and continued till 1998 but sporadic violence has continued since then. Northern Ireland has become a state plagued by divisions since its creation. On one side of this divide were Unionists, staunchly Protestant, loyal to their British heritage and determined to remain part of the United Kingdom. On the other side were Northern Ireland's Catholics, a minority suffering political and economic marginalization. The British government desperately tried to achieve reconciliation in Northern Ireland and had to engage in violent conflicts with terror outfits like Irish Republication Army (IRA) and Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) which resulted in heavy loss of lives. Catholic students arranged civil rights marches that had many similarities with protest movements in Europe and in the United states.

The shifting time frame continues in the last three stanzas as Heaney moves back to the image of the girl found in the bog. He studies of what is left of her: brains, muscles and bones exposed. The poem acquires another dimension as Heaney recalls the savage treatment of some Belfast girls by IRA in 1972 for having relations with the British soldiers. Heaney admits in the last two stanza of the

poem that he did nothing as he “stood dumb” and watched those women being stripped and tarred in the streets and tied or chained to railings. He, like many others in the strife-torn North, did nothing except “connive/ in civilized outrage”. Heaney feels that he, and all those, like him who stood by and did nothing are equally to be blamed. Even though he can understand the reasoning behind the brutally ‘exact’ laws of the tribe, he cannot take sides. Because to understand is not to forgive, or to be freed from conflicting allegiances which threatened to make him a traitor. The presentation of, thus, a helpless narrator suggest the inadequacy of ‘culture’ and ‘knowledge’ in resisting acts of savagery in an age of supposed civilization. As a result Heaney becomes extremely critical of the intelligent and the educated middle class who merely “connive in civilized outrage.”



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Who is the Windeby Girl?

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2. Describe the punishment of the girl in the poem.

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2. What is the poet’s reaction to the punishment?

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3. How does the poet beautify the dead body?

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4. What is the real incident on which the poem is based?

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5. What is the significance of the word 'voyeur' in the poem?

11.3.3 READING THE POEM 'ACT OF UNION'

As you have seen, many of Seamus Heaney's poems explore the manner in which the past can haunt the present and the coming together of the personal and the community: 'Act of Union', from his 1975 book of poetry *North*, however displays a shift from personal to political. The obvious reference to the 'Act of Union' 1801 makes it clear to the reader that there will be a political theme in the poem. However, the double meaning of the title in reference to the sexual act

signals a poem which emphasizes that Heaney is a master craftsman rather than a political commentator. In 'Act of Union', Heaney uses metaphors of sexual arousal, rape and the resulting birth to symbolize the historical relations between Ireland and Britain. 'The Act of Union', Heaney once remarked before reading out the poem, was both a political and sexual concept. "To put it metaphorically , and yet historically , Ireland, the feminine country, was entered by England, possessed by England, planted with English seed, withdrawn from by England, and left pregnant with an independent life called Ulster, kicking within her,".

The poem is structurally divided into two sonnets but the form is used not to express love and romance but is manipulated to depict a brutal political relationship. It uses strong sexual metaphors to compare the colonization of Ireland by England to that of a rape. The first stanza itself suggests Britain's sexual attractions toward Ireland. The poet begins the poem with many pauses in order to build up suspense and tension which makes the reader anticipate an event about to take place: "To night, a first movement, a pulse". Besides, it also represents the sexual arousal between the 'couple'. The metaphor for colonization, the rape itself, is expressed through words which have sexual connotation. "….. a bog burst/ A gash breaking open the ferny bed". This metaphor of England and Ireland being in a violent sexual act of union is the key to the meaning of the poem. The phrase 'breaking open' has violent connotation which implies images of rape and forced entry. It contrasts vividly with the peaceful and quiet picture of 'ferny bed'. Heaney's imaginative use of personification further brings out the aggressive nature of the relationship. The image "Your back is a firm line of eastern coast/ And arms and legs are thrown/ Beyond your gradual hills" clearly describes Ireland's geographical location on the map. The positioning of the two also subtly implies their relationship: Ireland's back faces Britain, as if trying to flee Britain's grasp. Topography is also used to accentuate gender roles. The 'firm line' and 'gradual hills', fits upon Ireland as a female persona and Britain as the aggressive male who "caress/ The heaving province where our past has grown", subtly imply that Ireland is pregnant with their child. The offspring that results from this troubled relationship is Ulster

which is the political outcome of the Union. While Heaney uses feminine features to describe Ireland, Britain is described in dominating masculine terms; “I am the tall kingdom over your shoulders/That you would neither cajole nor ignore”. Thus Britain’s dominance over Ireland is clearly stated with such strong dominating words like ‘tall’ and ‘kingdom’. The supremacy of England is juxtaposed against Ireland’s vulnerability and lack of defence. Heaney wrote “Act of Union” from Britain’s perspective, illustrating the nation as a dominating sexual being which forces Ireland into something she never desired. Ireland is, thus, conceptualized as a feminized being at the mercy of male violence. She is seen as ideally pure, weak and passive. Towards the end of stanza one, Britain’s defends his action. By declaring ‘Conquest is a lie’ Britain seeks to deny the accusation of rape. He refuses to see it as conquest, indicating that it was more of a consensual act. The political relationship between the two countries is again stressed upon in the last line of the first sonnet. Britain admits that the half-independence status enables him to take advantage and he takes pride in possessing her. The sense of pride in the words “.. .now my legacy culminates inexorably” is unmistakable. Besides, his dominant and sexually aggressive character is also played upon as Britain knows a violent attack can be stopped by none.

The second sonnet (lines15-28) continues the theme introduced in the first and is narrated, once again, by Britain. Use of imagery and metaphors helps Heaney to sustain the theme of Britain’s dominance on Ireland throughout the rest of the poem. The imaginary of rape and violence is touched upon again in these opening words: “I am still imperially male, leaving you with pain”. It indicates the violent, unhappy union between the powerful and all mighty Britain and the weak and vulnerable Ireland. Besides, Heaney brings into play the male-female dichotomy where the male (England) has always enjoyed a dominant role and the female (Ireland) has always been subverted and unacknowledged. This is reflected throughout the poem, where Ireland is denied a voice or response towards the relationship, and on the other hand the reader constantly gets to hear Britain’s dominant point of view.

Britain takes advantage of Ireland in an act of union that satisfies him but leaves Ireland painfully abused, hurt and pregnant. The phrases "battering ram" and "boom burst from within" further reinforce the sexual and violent acts forced upon Ireland. In the next line "The act sprouted an obstinate fifth column" Heaney underscores the consequence of the act. The 'fifth column' is the child produced from the rape, and in reality it refers to Northern Ireland which struck back by planting bombs in Britain as revenge to his oppressive conquest. The line "His heart beneath your heart is a war drum/Mustering force.'' brings in the note of violence that rocked Northern Ireland during the late 1960s to the late 1990s, the period commonly referred as Troubles. Britain has left Ireland in 'pain' with the 'parasitical' off spring beating at their borders in anger. The poem ends with Britain excessive regrets that nothing can be done because Ireland can never be healed because it has been scarred for live and left in pain: "No treaty/I foresee will salve completely your tracked/And stretchmarked body,the big pain/That leaves you raw like open ground". The aggressive dominant 'male' in the beginning of the sonnet is toned down as Heaney ends the poem with less violence and instead, with remorse and guilt. After the violent, forceful act, Britain, now, realizes that nothing can be done to repair the damage inflicted, nothing will remove the pain and the scares will remain forever to remind their 'complicated heart throbbing past'. Just as the woman will always carry the experience with her, in her child and stretch marks, Ireland will always carry the memory of violence and the core fundamental problem will never fade away.

In recent times, Heaney's "Act of Union" has been scrutinized intensely in terms of the construction of gender and in terms of post-structuralist concepts of language. For instance, Clair Wills in "Language Politics, Narrative, and Political Violence" examines the problematic aspect of Heaney's poetry that uses the "metaphor of woman as topography, the motherland and the idea of the mother tongue." Similarly, during this period, Heaney's poems have also been the subject of the feminist criticism. In her 1990 essay, "Thinking of Her as Ireland" , Elizabeth Butler Cullingford attacks the use of allegorised female figures within such poems as "Act of Union" and "Bog Queen", which she sees as naturalising

the reification of women in Irish society. Since the land is seen as an object to possess or repossess and to gender it as female, according to Cullingford, is to confirm and reproduce the social arrangements which construct women as material possession and not as "speaking subjects". Thus within Heaney's re-presentation of earth- goddesses and ordinary mortal female figures, Cullingford detects traces of the misogynistic tendencies inherent within Catholic ideology. Critics like Patricia Coughlan also objects to Heaney's projection of Ireland in terms of a passive woman. In her 1997 essay "Bog Queen: The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney", Coughlan accuses Heaney of being dangerously gendered, portraying the feminine as nothing more than the ground against which the masculine is defined. Similarly, Edna Longley in her 1997 essay "Inner Émigré or 'Artful Voyeur'? Seamus Heaney's North" questions the ramifications of and reasoning behind what she sees as Heaney's mythologizing of the Northern Irish violence, especially in sexual terms. Objections to Heaney's treatment of women have continued till the present times. In the introduction to Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives, (2010), the authors Thompson and Gunne suggest that, in 'Act of Union', "Heaney uses the metaphor of rape as a means to understand imperialism without considering the violence and violation at the heart of the act or the implication this has for woman's subjectivity".

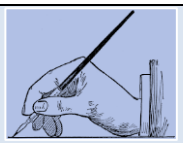
GLOSSARY

• **Bog bursts-** bog (Irish term for peat land) bursts are flows of purely organic debris. They usually occur during heavy and prolonged rainfall and involve the rupture of the peat surface, followed by the release of liquefied peat from the interior of the bog. In the poem, 'bog burst' is used as a sexual metaphor and it paints a vivid picture of sexual energy about to explode.

• **Battering ram-** a battering ram is a siege engine originating in ancient times and designed to break open the masonry walls of fortification or splinter their wooden gates. In the poem it is used as a metaphor to reinforce the sexual and violent acts forced upon Ireland by Britain.

• **Fifth column-**it is a group of people who undermines a larger group – such as a nation or a besieged city – from within. The activities of a fifth column can be overt or clandestine. In the poem the 'obstinate fifth column' refers to Ulster.

• **Stretch marked body-** stretch marks are a form of scarring on the skin with an off –colour hue. They are caused by tearing of the dermis, which over the time may diminish but will not disappear completely. Stretch marks are often the result of the rapid stretching of the skin which often occurs during pregnancy. In the poem Ireland is personified as a woman who has been left with stretch marks and pain after being forcefully impregnated by Britain.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What does the title of the poem'Act of Union'refer to?

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2. How does Heaney use allegory to depict a series of historical events affecting Irish independence

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3.How does Heaney compare the Act of Union, 1801 with the violation of a

woman.

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4. What was feminist critics' reaction to Heaney's use of allegorized female figures in poems like "Act of Union"?

11.4 MAJOR THEMES

The following section discusses some of the major themes in the poems about which you have read in this unit. Heaney's poems explore a number of intriguing themes such as self-discovery, national and cultural past of his homeland, childhood memories, life, death, gender and land, myths and legends etc. which bring about a unique vision of Ireland's rich and bloody history.

11.4.1 CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

Heaney grew up on a small farm in County Derry, in Northern Ireland, and the observed and recollected facts of his early rural experience finds expression in his early poetry. Digging potatoes and turf, picking black berries, churning butter and ploughing are all vividly rendered in his poems. 'Digging',

the first poem in Heaney's first collection of poetry, Death of a Naturalist, and also in a discussion as well reflects on his childhood memories of potato farming and growing up in rural Northern Ireland. The poem highlights many of the themes of his poetry. In "Digging" Heaney recalls memories as a child of his father digging for potatoes and his grandfather cutting turf. But Heaney does not merely stop here but attempts to reconcile his farming background with his desire to write, and describes his choice of tool as powerful a weapon as any, "as snug as a gun". In this context "digging" becomes a means to retrieve the past. It relates to digging into his own memory, into his ancestors, into his and Ireland's past and into the myth and legends that define the character of the people of his country. His poetry thereby exhibits a powerful devotion to the earth, particularly to the landscape and soil of his native Northern Ireland.

11.4.2 IRISH HISTORY

As a poet, Heaney puts great reliance on the importance of past history for understanding present events. In order to fully comprehend and find a solution for the troubles ailing Ireland, Heaney resorts to the wisdom of the past, relying on objects unearthed from the bogs to provide him with answers. Heaney uses the bog bodies as symbolic figures with the zeal of an archaeologist and brings about a meshing together of Irish past and present events that generate historical awareness. In 'The Tollund Man', for instance, Heaney compares the bog bodies of ritual sacrifices of ancient Celtic Europe to the similar "sacrifice" of those murdered by the IRA during the Troubles. In 'Punishment' Heaney makes the victim – called the Windeby Girl- relevant to his era, seeing similarities with Irish women having relationship with British soldiers. The poet uses these symbolic figures not to give a solution to the Irish conflict but rather give expression to the conflict within him. Heaney's 'Act of Union' is another poem with historical references in which he compares the signing away of the country with the rape of a women. Seamus Heaney was in Belfast when the Troubles started but soon left to escape the violent incidents. His works like North reflect his experience of the Troubles. While Heaney himself was Catholic and expressed sympathy for Irish Nationalism, he refused to take sides as he was extremely conscious of defending

the right of poets to be private and apolitical so that s/he can interpret the hidden roots of the violence s/he observes without being biased. Heaney was extremely critical of the all-pervasive nature of violence and never allowed himself to be a spokesman for violent extremism.

Poetry, for Heaney, is not a space for offering political solutions but where introspections can take place and critical issues discussed. Poetry, in this sense, becomes socially responsible but at the same time, remains creatively free. In the bog poems Heaney compares the ritual sacrifices of ancient Celtic Europe to the similar 'sacrifices' of those murdered during the Troubles. This enabled him to convey the pervasive effect of politics, violence, history and the past on everyday lives.

11.4.3 NATURE

Since Heaney's family lived on a farm and he grew up surrounded by nature, as a result of which it is a prevalent theme in his work. For Heaney, nature is wild and unexplainable and may sometimes appear beautiful or comforting, but it can also be grotesque and alien. His pleasant experiences of growing up close to nature are more apparent in "Digging" but it is in "Death of a Naturalist" where Heaney talks about his personal experience with the horrors and wonders of nature. The fascination of the hidden secrets of the earth takes another direction in the bog poems where nature becomes a source of mystery and power. Closely associated with the theme of nature is Heaney's preoccupation with violence and death. Whether it is from ancient times or from around the time of Irish Troubles, conflict and violence is an ever present part of Ireland and consequently makes it to Heaney's poetry. He needed to understand the myth of the ancient in order to comment on the troubles of the present, and he found that in the bog world where nature goddess is "simultaneously spouse, death – bringer and nurturer." (Patricia Coughlan).

11.5 HEANEY'S POETIC STYLE

Irish politician Enda Kenny once said that for the Irish he was the "keeper of language, our codes, our essence as a people". Indeed, Heaney's poetic style is grounded in actual local detail, often in memories of Derry or of his adopted home in the Republic of Ireland. In his intimate, accessible style, Heaney balances a sense of natural speech with his commitment to what he describes as "a musically satisfying order of sound". It is these blend that gives his poetry a formal skill, yet gives the impression that we are being confided in by the man whose poetry remains highly personal.

Heaney adopts a deliberately casual style, narrating in the first person, events and occurrences that readers readily receive and comprehend. He has extremely accurate communication skills that allow readers to familiarize themselves with the writing and feel the emotion behind each poem. His poetry is able to create exciting settings and is often delivered in short statements that stimulates and involve the reader from the very beginning. Such a style enabled Heaney to retain his political consciousness even though he wrote in a seemingly apolitical poetic style and allowed him to negotiate between the public and the private, the political and the personal, myth and the reality.

Perhaps one of his most famous poems, 'Digging' represents his poetry both in terms of content and style. The observed and recollected facts of his early rural experience are conveyed in a language of great sensuous richness and directness. His writing is full of taste, touch, smell, sight and hearing. This is clearly shown in the second last stanza of 'Digging' when the poet describes the sensory experience of the memories that are triggered by the sound outside his window. "The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap/ Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge/ Through living roots awaken in my head./But I've no spade to follow men like them." The most obvious characteristic of the sound effects of these lines are its onomatopoeia and alliterative effects. Such astute use of sound came naturally to Heaney as a result of his interest in Anglo- Saxon poetry.

Further, Heaney brings personal and Irish history and imagery together to form an entirely unique and insightful style of writing. In 'Digging', the basic metaphor, the pen as spade – informs a great deal of Heaney's subsequent work, when it is taken out from its agricultural context into a view of poetry as an act of cultural and historical retrieval. In this context, digging and the bog become dominant tropes of the retrieval of different layers of the past. He uses these bog bodies as metaphors and images to draw parallels with what was happening in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. In 'Act of Union' Heaney took the map of Britain and Ireland and turned it into an image of a married couple lying in a bed together, Ireland surrounded and mastered by the masculine Britain.

Many of Heaney's poems are elegiac in nature as he commemorates, like W.B. Yeats, the victims of war or sites of terror. He wrote mostly in free verse which allowed him to articulate his diverse themes. At the same time, Heaney is very careful in the design of a poem as well and often manipulates traditional forms like sonnet to define, not love, but politics and history.

11.6 SUMMING UP

By this time you have understood that the distinctive quality of Heaney's poetry is the intensity of the Irish experience. Your reading of Heaney's life and work must have familiarised you with the various influences in his life and how necessary it is to place his poems in the larger contexts of his experience in Northern Ireland. Allusions to sectarian difference, widespread in Northern Ireland through his lifetime, can be abundantly found in his poetry which he wrote with a deep humanity and understanding and communicated through the particular and personal. Regarding the major themes of his poetry, you have learnt that Heaney often deals with the local surroundings of Ireland and his childhood memories of his life in a farm. Also, Heaney frequently explores the manner in which the past can haunt the present, which is particularly seen in the bog poems. Besides, the political note in his poems, Heaney also talks about his personal

experience with the horrors and wonders of nature which is expressed with brilliant linguistic power and evocativeness

11.7 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the salient features of Heaney's poetry.

2. Elaborate on the note of Irishness in Heaney's poetry.

3. How, according to Heaney, the sense of the past influence a poet?

4. How does Heaney bring about a blending of the personal and the political in his poetry

5.How did Heaney utilize the bog bodies as metaphors to draw parallels with the political and social situation in Ireland?

6.Discuss the major themes in Heaney's poetry?

7.Comment on Heaney's use of language in his poetry with special reference to the poems prescribed for you.

6. Do you think the poem 'Punishment' is merely a re-creation of the crime and punishment of the girl? Justify.

7. How does Heaney make the bog body relevant to the present era in 'Punishment'?

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UNIT 12: GEOFFREY HILL

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.0 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces you to one of the most celebrated contemporary English poet Geoffrey Hill, hailed as "the strongest British poet" (Harold Bloom) and one of "the best poet" of present times (Christopher Ricks). He has lived a life devoted to poetry and scholarship, morality and faith. Geoffrey Hill's poetry encompasses a wide range of style, from being dense and allusive to the more accessible and readable. His poems are often "multi-voiced, polylingual, dissonant and radically playful". He is deeply rooted in the history and landscape of Britain and has been consistently drawn to its "morally problematic and violent episodes". Memories of war, contemplation of European history, the holocaust, the meaning of Christianity, the ups and downs of culture are some of the concerns of his poetry which has continued to intrigue and startle readers and critics alike.

12.1. LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- acquaint yourself with the life and works of contemporary British poet Geoffrey Hill
- read critically some of the representative poems of Hill
- analysethe major thematic concerns in Hill's poems
- examine the style and poetic devices used by him
- understand the socio-political background which shaped the poetic oeuvre of Geoffrey Hill

12.2 GEOFFREY HILL: LIFE AND WORKS

Sir Geoffrey William Hill was born on June 18, 1932, in Bromsgrove in Worcestershire, England. But he grew up in nearby Fairfield where his family moved to when he was six. His father and grandfather being village policemen, Hill identifies himself as working class. He attended the local primary school, after which he studied at the grammar school in Bromsgrove. Though Hill suffered from deafness in his right ear from the age of eleven because of severe mastoiditis, he was excellent in studies and became a Prefect. His love for poetry was evident quite early in his life. "As an only child, he developed the habit of going for long walks alone, as an adolescent deliberating and composing poems as he muttered to the stones and trees" (Vincent Sherry). He often carried with him on these walks, Oscar Williams' *A Little Treasury of Modern Poetry* (1946) until Hill remembers "there was probably a time when I knew every poem in that anthology by heart".

Hill was admitted in 1950 to Keble College, Oxford to study English where under the influence of the American poet Donald Hall, published his first poems in 1952 in an eponymous Fantasy Press volume. These poems were later collected in *For the Unfallen: Poems 1952-1958* (1959) which marked the beginning of an astonishing literary career. After graduating from Oxford with a first, he began teaching English in the University of Leeds from 1954 until 1980

and as Professor of English Literature from 1976. Even though consumed with academic responsibilities, Hill continued to write although it took ten long years to publish his second volume *King Log* (1968). After leaving Leeds, he spent a year at the University of Bristol on Churchill scholarship. In 1980, he was elected fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, and continued to serve until 1988. He married Alice Goodman in 1987 after his first marriage ended in divorce 1983. He then moved to United States where he served as Professor of Literature and Religion in Boston University. At Boston, Hill wrote quite often and published several volumes of poetry. However, he moved back to Cambridge, England, in 2006.

Like Heaney, Hill won numerous awards in his lifetime and is considered among England's "most highly decorated living poets". *For the Unfallen* was awarded the E. C. Gregory Award for Poetry in 1961; the Hawthornden Prize for *King Log* in 1969 and the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize in 1970. *Mercian Hymns* won the Alice Hunt Bartlett Prize and the inaugural Whitbread Award for Poetry in 1971, while the *Tenebrae*was awarded the Duff Cooper Memorial Prize in 1979. His *Collected Critical Writings* won him the Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism in 2009. In addition, to such recognition of his individual works, he has also been honoured with laurels for his contribution to literature.

One of the most distinguished poets of his generation, Hill has been called "one of the most fascinating poets at work today" (Adam Kirsch). But he enjoys far less popularity than Heaney and is known for being a "difficult poet", regarding both his subject and style. It is no wonder that his poetry "is more highly regarded than widely read and more admired than liked" (*Great World Writers).* Or as John Hollander remarks "Geoffrey Hill may be the strongest and most original English poet of the second half of our fading century, although his work is by no means either easy or very popular. Dense, intricate, exceedingly compact, his poetry has always had great visionary force." Hill, however, defended the right of poets to be difficult and argued in an interview in *The Paris Review* that "difficult poetry is the most democratic, because you are doing your

audience the honour of supposing that they are intelligent human beings. So much of the populist poetry of today treats people as if they were fools".

Hill's first poem was published at the age of twenty when he was still studying at Oxford by the poet Donald Hall. They were later included in his first collection *For the Unfallen: Poems 1952-1958* (1959) which marked "an astonishing debut". These early poems exhibit his distinctive style and concerns which are rendered in "gnarled syntax and tremendous rhetorical power". Hill's poetry is remarkable for "it seriousness, its high moral tone, extreme elusiveness and dedication to history, theology and philosophy". His *King Log* and *MercianHymns* (1971) has been much admired by critics for its use of Christian symbolism with the "high seriousness" of his style. His next collection *Tenebrae* (1978) is one of his most overtly religious works and deals with Christian rituals. His *The Mystery of Charity of Charles Peguy*(1983) is based on the real life of the French poet Charles Peguy who underwent a striking conversion from being a youthful socialist to nationalist.

After Hill shifted to Boston, he started to write more frequently and this "late-flowering" saw the publication of six volumes in ten years: *Canaan* (1997), *Speech*! *Speech*! (2000), *The Orchards of Syon* (2002), *Without Title* (2006) and *Treatise of Civil Power* (2007). However, the volumes attracted wide spread criticism as well as appreciation. While some critics hailed Hill and declared him to be the greatest poet writing in English, others thought his works suffered from "unnecessary obfuscation". While *Canaan* dealt with Christian themes, his other books were difficult and intricate. In *Speech! Speech!* Hill's poetic concerns are wide ranging from theology, cultural criticism to autobiography, history and elegy while in *The Orchards of Syon, Hill* goes back to the landscape of his childhood.

Hills *SelectedPoems* which appeared in 2006 was well received and he was seen as the most 'avant-garde' poets of the times. Though the poems "were densely allusive, multi voice, poly lingual, dissonant and radically playful" they were rewarding to the attentive readers. Hill's next books were *Oraclau/Oracles* (2010), a long sequence dealing with Welsh history, *Clavics*(2011), *OdiBarbare*(2012) and *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012* (2013) . The last

one is a collection of Hill's sixty years of works which was highly acclaimed by the critics. Hill is also well known as an essayist. His books like *The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas* (1984)*, The Enemy's Country* (1995), *Style and Faith* (2003), and *Collected Critical Writings* (2008) considers "issues of morality, judgment literary production and civic engagement" with great depth and scholarship

LET US STOP AND THINK

Offa was an Anglo- Saxon king who ruled Mercia from 757 to 796 who brought practically all of England southof the Humber under his control, with Northumbria and Wessex as allies. During his forty years reign, four achievements are significant:

i) He was the first English king to be accepted as an equal on the Continent. Charlemagne sought his friendship and wanted their children to marry.

ii) Offa signed the first commercial treaty in English history.

iii) In his reign, Offa introduced a new currency - coins "broader, thinner, and heavier" than before, bearing his name and portrait

iv) Under Offa, a great earthwork, known as Offa's Dyke was constructed to define Mercia's frontier against the British.

(Source: A Mercia of the Mind by Christoph Bode/Kiel)

12.3 READING THE POEM *MERCIAN HYMNS (SELECTIONS)*

Mercian Hymns published in 1971, is a cycle of thirty prose poems that simultaneously focuses on the ancient Mercian king Offa and a contemporary persona. Though a historical figure, the details of Offa's reign are unknown and the relics of his rule are few.As a protagonist, Offa therefore, does not confine Hill into a large number of facts and dates and allows him to enter into the history and cultural life of the West Midlands – the land where Hill spent his childhood. Being an enigmatic figure, Offa becomes a fit subject for Hill's poetic sensibility

as he is both given private and public attributes. As Lloyd remarks "Offa might be described as a fluid mixture of private and public attributes. His character sometimes combines Hill's life and consciousness (mostly his childhood years), with what we know of the historical Offa, but he also sometimes includes the public elements of legends, traditions, historical forces and the environment or the topography of the British West Midland, site of the ancient kingdom of Mercia". Thus the scarcity of information about Offa's reign makes him the "ideal unifying principle" for a sequence of thirty hymns which deal with large expansive themes of 'region', 'landscape', 'history' and myth. For Hill, this hollow shape was ideally suited to allow the free play of his imagination. We will deal with only sections of Mercian Hymns, namely Hymn I, III, XXI and XXV. But we would urge you to study the other sections for a more comprehensive and rich understanding.

12.3.1 HYMN I ("THE NAMING OF OFFA")

Mercian Hymns begins with "a voice singing or chanting for King Offa a list of sometimes incongruous and anachronistic titles or accolades, many of which derive from West Midland topography" (Lloyd). The first hymn, "The Naming of Offa", is thus a panegyric and is inspired by similar openings in the Anglo Saxton traditions. We are introduced to Offa on whom Hill heaps a series of accolades: 'king', 'overlord', 'architect', 'guardian' 'contractor', 'money changer', 'commissioner', 'martyrologist' and 'friend of Charlemagne'. Each accolade is divided by a colon to make them seem "equal and co existing" so that "one accolade generates the next".

The first title "King of the perennial holly- groves" suggest "continuity of rule", a presence which extends in time from the times of Mercia to the present day Worcester which is living and green like the "holly groves". The second title, "overload of the M5", reinforces Offa's power, venerating him as the "supreme ruler presiding over a strategically vital road into his kingdom which link him with the present time" (Louise Kemeny). The road touches Bromsgrove (where Hill was born) and Worcester (where he grew up) and hence personally significant for him. The title of "architect of the historic rampart and ditch" refers

to Offa's Dyke, the most famous monument of Anglo-Saxton history, which is credited to have been built by him though there is no direct evidence. The "citadel at Tamworth" refers to the fortification at Tamworth which had been used by the Mercian Kings. The "guardian of the Welsh Bridge and the Iron Bridge" refers to certain significant structures built across River Severn in Shropshire, England. In other words, Offa "presides over connections and separations, movement and blockade" (Michael North). Offa was a famous "money changer" known for the high quality of his coinage which became "the model for all subsequent coinage in the old English period, and even beyond it" (Dodsworth). Offa's title of being a "commissioner for oaths" refers to the practice of subservient kings and lords swearing allegiance and royalty to their overload. This was a common practice followed by rulers of large kingdoms as it was difficult to impose direct rule over the entire region. Such a system was followed by Offa which helped him to extend his rule over a large area. A 'martyrologist' is a person who keeps "a list or account of martyrs". Hill refers to Offa as a martyrologist as he is said to have discovered the bones of St. Alban and built the famous monastery to mark the site. Hill concludes by finally addressing Offa as the "friend of Charlemagne" since he offered one of his daughters in marriage to the sons of the French king. In the last line of the hymn we are finally introduced to the real Offa whose voice we hear as he urges the speaker to 'sing' again as he is immensely pleased with the panegyric.

Hills's persistence of history in all his works of poetry suggest that it was more likely "to have been a desire on his part to write of his native Mercia and of the relationship between his own childhood there and the rooted history of the area which generated his initial "irrational enchantment" with Offa" (Milne). Besides, according to Milne, Hill discovered interesting parallels between Offa and Cymbeline, upon whom he wrote an essay in 1969. Hill marvelled how Shakespeare correlated the story of Cymbeline (an early British king) with the contemporary politics of the Tudor-Stuart era. Hill used the similar technique on a smaller scale and attempted to fuse the story of Offa with mid-twentieth century Britain. As Milne remarks "he employs the myth of Offa as Shakespeare

had that of Cymbeline." This is perhaps best embodied in the opening hymn that we have just discussed. In this hymn Hill juxtaposes contemporary reality (the M5) with Anglo-Saxon history (Offa's dyke) and of eternity (the perennial holy groves) with time (riven sand-stone) in the space of a few lines. Thereby, history in *MercianHymns* is not presented in a chronological pattern. Instead, Hill enriches the present with the past simultaneously. "From the first hymn, the events of Mercia over the last twelve centuries are never treated as a linear development: there are no pure "moments" of history. Hill shifts freely between historical periods as well as between public and private experience"(Lloyd). Hymns lll ("The Crowning of Offa") offers a good instance of Hill's use of this technique.

12.3.2 HYMN LLL ("THE CROWNING OF OFFA")

The hymn portrays a group of twentieth century English children who get "remission from school" to celebrate the coronation of a King. Hill here is perhaps referring to the coronation of George Vl in 1937 when Hill was five years old. What follows is a blending of the ancient and the contemporary to produce what many has described as sheer poetic brilliance. Hill begins by creating a scene which is obviously modern England but certain images- the ritualistic 'bonfire'; the 'holly boughs' (always a part of English landscape and folklore); the chef's king "sealing his brisk largesse" and the title of the hymn, all refer back to ancient ceremonies. It is these "flickering from the past" that makes the voice of a modern adult, describing a childhood memory, take on the characteristics of a historian or a chronicler (LIoyd).

Hill, at the beginning, seems to "deflate the ancient" by humorously "crowning" the chef at the pub and by creating a modern environment where crowds wave "hankies" and merchants try to sell "gifts-mugs'' and the celebratory "bone fire" is fuelled by "beer-crates" burning on tar. For the children, let out of school to celebrate the coronation is like a "remission", as from an illness. Ironically, they find the chef more fascinating than the real king who appear to them as a 'foreign' presence. Any "largesse" offered by the real king is less relevant for the children than the chef's "largesse" of generous

helpings of mustard on a sandwich. Yet though the speaker may seem to compare a "glorious past with a degraded present" we must realize that the scene of the hymn is the car park of "The Stag's Head" pub and in modern England such pubs are thriving centres of social and communal life. In a sense, therefore, the hymn portrays an actual viable community ceremony and by substituting the pub for the mead hall, Hill is not being fully ironic. Instead in the words of Lloyd, "the interaction of past and present in this hymn highlights a cultural continuity that Hill celebrates throughout *Mercian Hymn".*

12.3.3 HYMN XXL ("THE KINGDOM OF OFFA")

We encounter, once again, in this hymn the modern/ Saxon split whereby Hill "fuses ancient border battles and the excursions of some West Midlands tourists to Wales" (Lloyd). In one sense, the scene depicted is mundane in modern times. On summer weekends, busload of tourists are taken to Wales and are often "stranded on hill tops" as their bus breaks down due to overheating. They spent their time by sightseeing, drinking tea, imagining about the romantic Celtic past when Camelot and the legendary King Arthur existed. After the trip ends, the tourist returns with photographs and souvenirs to England. This entirely modern exercise is given Anglo-Saxon colour by using a language which is heavy with archaic military words which conjure up suggestions of military forays from Offa's kingdom, beyond the dyke, to enemy Wales in the eight century. The hymn is thus full of words with double meanings, words which help Hill to convey his modern/ Saxon ideas. For instance, "cohorts" may refer either to the tourists or to a military unit. When the "charabancs"(tourist buses) overheat, the tourists signal "with plumes/of steam" in the manner of soldiers using military code. Also, Hill plays with words like "fanfared" and "treasures". The tourists buses which "fanfared Offa's province," indicates the movements of modern sightseeing buses, but also, at the same time, denotes an ostentatious military display with a flourish of trumpets. Such use of double entendres allow Hill to introduce a note of "deflation and satire" in the hymn. This is particularly evident in the scene when Hill describes how tourists bring "treasures" back from Wales:"the harp-shaped brooches,/ the nuggets offool's gold" – these are

not, of course, valuable treasures but cheap souvenirs which are sold in modern tourist shops. By making such a suggestion, it is not "only the English tourists who are satirized, however; by linking the eight century military forays with tourists excursions, those forays are portrayed not as heroic adventures but petty, treasure-seeking aggressions."(Lloyd)

Hymn XXI also reveals, besides its comedy and satire, a common thread of attitude that binds the excursions which takes place in the ancient Mercia and in the modern England. The tourist bus which conduct numerous expeditions to Wales constitute a kind of cultural invasion which have more destructive effects than Offa's invasion. "Offa's eighty century attitude towards Wales as a land to be exploited for cattle and slaves finds its modern equivalent in the attitude of 'heedless' tourists 'dipping into the Welsh valleys'" (Lloyd).

12.3.4 HYMN XXV ("OPUS ANGLICANUM")

The speaker in this hymn can be identified with Hill himself. Although the hymn acts as an elegy for Hill's grandmother, there are larger motifs in the poem. It has a political note, since it uses literary and historical references to create "an impassioned attack on industrial exploitation and its human cost". The clear and precise language enables the reader to feel the emotional urgency behind the speaker's intense outrage. The repetition of the first verse at the end further reinforces the subjective note of the poem and its intensity. While the immediate theme of the hymn is to provide emotional tribute to the toil and sufferings of Hill's grandmother, it also confronts the larger issue of providing a severe indictment of capitalism which flourished in the nineteenth century. The 'forge' which had mushroomed all over England became notorious centres where the British working was profitably exploited by the capitalist. The cultural criticism that Hill introduces in the hymn is supported by the literary reference in the first line: "brooding on the eightieth letter of *ForsClavigera".* It refers to John Ruskin's "Letter 80" of *ForsClavigera*where industrialization was condemned for dividing the society into two classes- "the one, on the whole, living in hardship - the other in ease". Ruskin, in the book, describes two women "nailing" much like Hill's grandmother. Their pitiable condition is emphasized when Ruskin informs

that the women work from "seven to seven- by the furnace side" for eight shilling a week. The literary references in the hymn "infuses the elegy with the historical context of industrial exploitation in nineteenth century England, broadening the poem's reference and transforming Hill's private grief into public outcry" (Lloyd).

Hill, like Heaney, brings about a meshing together of the past and the present, the private and the public, the personal and the political, myth and reality in his sequence of poems in *Mercian Hymn.* This enables him to explore a wide range of themes which form a pattern in English history from Anglo-Saxon to modern times - imperial privilege, economic oppression, use of violence to achieve political or economic ends.

Glossary

• **M5 –** is a motorway in England that runs from Extern to Birmingham and is the primary gateway to South West England.

• **Holy Cross** – it is the name of the town in the district of Bromsgrove, where Hill was born.

• **Welsh Bridge**- it is masonry arch viaduct in the town of Shrewsbury, England which crosses the River Severn. It was built in 1966.

• **Iron Bridge**- it refers to the iconic bridge that spans the River Severn. It was built in 1775 and became the first arch bridge in the world which was made of cast iron.

• **Charlemagne-** Charlemagne, also known as Charles the Great or Charles l, was the king of France during the Middle Ages.

• **Camelot-** is a castle and court associated with the legendary King Arthur.

12.4 POETIC TECHNIQUE IN MERCIAN HYMNS

"The use of prose verse, the anachronism, the reference to childhood and the generally informal language disarm the highly intellectual and passionate nature of Hill's poetry, making *Mercian Hill* the most generally accessible of his

works". These words by a critic summarize Hill's poetic technique in the *Mercian Hymns*. The use of 'prose poem' (which Hill preferred to refer as 'versets') adds an innovative quality to his work. The form has been rarely used in the English language though they resemble the versets in the Psalms in length, rhythm and grammatical structure. The cycle of thirty poems, about the mythical and historical Offa and a contemporary persona are to be regarded as "commentaries on the subjects" indicated by the headings. These headings do not appear before each hymn but are gathered separately in both the editions. Almost all the hymns relate to the episodes, activities and attributes of King Offa or refer to the legacies of his reign. There are only a very few like Hymn XIV (which present the persona of a rural magistrate of West Midland) and Hymn XXV (which is a tribute to Hill's grandmother) which do not concern Offa directly. Each hymn is divided into parts which set off as separate paragraphs and though they may be individually clear, the relation between them is based upon the "use of parallelism" which informs the whole structure of *Mercian Hymns* and which give its characteristic verbal compression or tension (Milne). As it is impossible to give a traditional narrative basis to the poem due to the vast time scale, Hill builds his structure around the historical figure of the eight century Mercian King Offa, who is also (in Hills own words) the "presiding genius of the West Midland". Milne's observation on the structure of the Mercian Hymn is particularly relevant here.

Hill resolves the problem of structure by bonding his juxtaposition or paralleling of disparate event and images (often ironically) in time with a symbolic figure, Offa, who lies outside time. Rather than traditional narrative, then, Hill adopts myth as his method of cohesion: Offa is an archetypal symbol of all history, having a mythological transcendence which serves as an analogue for the whole of the Mercian past including that small parts which is Second World War childhood: Mercia's landscape, legendary first king, battles, children, industries, laws, death and arts. It is this firm foundation of myth, enhanced by an array of secondary symbols (coins, bestiary, needlework, nail-forge, crown and

sword) and images that "leap-frog" the centuries" which provides Mercian hymns with a cohesive structure.

The thematic strands of the poem are also reinforced by a tense, rhythmical prose which is grounded in the impersonal speech of Mercia and that of Hill's native landscape and language. Hill had praised George Eliot for her "restrained prose rhythm and economy of words", qualities which can be identified in Hill's own prose style in *Mercian Hymns*. The rhythms and words in the poem which echoes the "macrocosmic rhythms of Mercian speech" succeed in weaving together the strands of varied themes. A distinctive quality of Hill's rhythmic prose is the combination of Latinate and Anglo Saxon vocabulary in many of the hymns. But this blending has been equally appreciated and criticised by critics. Louise Kemeny in *Archaeology of Words- Geoffrey Hills's Mercian Hymns* traces the two opposing camps of critics:

> The relationship between the Anglo-Saxon and the Latin etymologies in *Mercian Hymns* has divided critics into two camps: there are those that see it as a partnership and those that see it as frictional cohabitation. Peter Robinson and William Wootten, of the latter camp, acknowledge Seamus Heaney's argument that the idioms 'go hand in glove' in *Mercian Hymns.*Robinson argues that 'rather than conspiring together, here there is an impacted conflict between etymologies whilst Wootten holds that 'It is rare (…) that Latin and Anglo-Saxon English can meet in *Mercian Hymns* without a trace of blood' and that Hill's 'diction relentlessly veers between (…) the Anglo-Saxon and the Latinate.'

It is, however, *significant* that both the sides agree that the two etymologies are seen together only at instances of violence as in Hymn XVII and XXVII. There is without doubt, a "combative element" in the blending in the two etymologies but there are also hymns where its use"bolster" the impact of the poetry.

A sardonic humour and plangent irony are the other traits that one traces in Hill's work. While the "tensions of irony" in *Mercian Hymns* exist between "the mystical Offa and historical king: distant and more recent history: time and

eternity", the sardonic humour which pervades all the hymns "carefully undermines the possibility of the larger themes appearing too pompous." (Milne)

12.5 SUMMING UP

Hill's poetry is dense, allusive, intricate, and difficult. Like Heaney, he addresses violent and morally problematic issues in British and European history and expertly weaves the contemporary world with the history of the past. This is particularly seen in the *Mercian Hymns* where history and memory are blended in moving images. The life and times of King Offa, Hill's own childhood spent in West Midlands and his experience of the Second World War are all inter woven to address themes like "national identity, collective memory, the nature of authority and worth, Englishness and the English landscape". Like Heaney poems, his *Mercian Hymns*is "immensely readable" and Hill's language, in the poem, is devoid of any obscurity and inaccessibility that is usually present in his other works.

12.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. What are the distinctive qualities of Geoffrey Hill as a poet?
2. Why Geoffrey Hill is considered a 'difficult' poet?
3. Who was King Offa? Discuss his significance in the history of England.
4. Discuss the structure of Mercian Hymns.
5. Discuss Geoffrey Hill's poetic style in Mercian Hymns.
6. How does Geoffrey Hill blend the character of King Offa with a contemporary Persona in Mercian Hymns.
7. Discuss Geoffrey Hill's meshing of the past and the present in Mercian Hymns.
8. Discuss the auto biographical elements in Mercian Hymns.
9. Discuss Hill's treatment of history in Mercian Hymns.
10. What are the titles given to Offa in Hymn I?

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MODULE V: CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH POETRY

UNIT 13: TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH POETRY

UNIT STRUCTURE

13.0 INTRODUCTION

The question of "what is contemporary?" is still a debatable one. Does contemporary mean only the immediate or does it also extend to incorporate a range of ideas spanning several years, or sometimes even decades? Historians over the years have come to agree without a formal coalition that the last eighteen years from the present should be considered as contemporary, but it remains debatable. The social, political and cultural developments that began in the 1970s and the anxieties it spawned still continue to this day, and they have become more culturally tied up, more complex, and more nuanced.

The decline of Britain's position as a superpower after the Second World War had a profound effect both on the economic front and the literature produced during the time. Although the 1950s saw the rise of angry literature in England it was more or less limited to the theatre and fiction, whose most celebrated works were headed by John Osborne and Kingsley Amis. But it was also during this period that poets such as Philip Larkin and Thom Gunn began writing poetry with

an angry outlook. The conservatism of the Thatcher era (1979-1990) also left its mark on British society. Over the course of the eighties, Britain was transformed into a significantly different society than what it was before.

Immigration from the former British Empire including India, Bangladesh, the Caribbean and South Africa has also influenced British literature in general and British poetry in particular. Since the 1970s, the influx of new population and new cultures into the British soil has resulted in a significant blending of culture, ideas, and languages over the years. While the Scottish and Welsh strain and Irish influence still remain there also has been a lot of experimental mixing of the avant-garde with conservative texts over the years, leading to an entirely new breed of poetry. Throughout this unit, questions such as what are the trends of contemporary English poetry and what kind of criticism should be employed to understand them will be discussed while also looking at some of the life and works of some contemporary British poets.

13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit you will be:

- introduced to the trends in Contemporary British Poetry
- able to critically understand the different ways in which contemporary British poets have presented the modern world.
- able to understand the major thematic concerns and poetic style of Contemporary British Poetry
- familiarised with the various political and socio-cultural issues that are shaping Contemporary British poetry in general

13.2 THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY BRITISH POETRY

The year 1977 may be considered as the year that Contemporary Poetry began because it marks the defeat of the avant-garde movement and also marks the end of the radical linguistic innovation and experimentation that became prominent in the English poetry of the first half of the 20th century. This was seen

as an influence of American modernism and throughout the most part of the 1970s, the Poetry Review under the supervision of Eric Mottram supported young poets and pushed them away from it into a new poetic direction. 1977, as far poetry is concerned, also marks the beginning of the right-wing ideological backlash following the uprising of the left wing liberals in the 1960s throughout Europe and America.

The idea of anger as a force which had its origins in the literature of the 1950s left its impression on the poetry that followed afterwards. The Movement which was a gathering of poets spearheaded by well-known individuals such as Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Elizabeth Jennings, Thom Gunn and D J Enright. Their literature was an aggressive backlash against the cosmopolitan elites of the 1930s and 1940s. Modernism, romanticism and avant-garde experimentation were rejected as they opted for a more rooted, ironical and unsentimental verse. But until the 1950s the English society was predominantly a working-class society, and the individuals who were at the core of these literary movements were Oxbridge-educated, white, predominantly male individuals from middle-class families. But it cannot be denied that they did not capture the social milieu in their literature. However, the social makeup of the English literati began to change in the 1970s but not without its own challenges. The beginning of Margaret Thatcher's corporate-authoritarianism rule in 1979 and which continued until 1990 had its share of influence on the literature and poetry produced in Britain during these years. This new political wave directly resulted in the long retrenchment of British Poetry along market-oriented, publisher-driven works of literature and non-conformist poets and poetry were subsequently purged.

Margaret Thatcher and her government's enactment of multiple measures to weaken the worker unions and its ability to organize strikes had far-reaching effects. This brutal privatization of government had immediate effects in both the social and economic front of the everyday life in Britain. Events such as the 1984 nationwide strike began by the National Union of Mineworkers and which lasted for almost a year has become an emblem of the struggle between the Thatcher's conservative government and workers and unions in Britain. Thatcher and her

government did not grant a single demand and the miners were eventually compelled to return to work.

The 1980s Britain under the rule of Thatcher is also defined by her premiership during the Falklands War which started on 2 April 1982 when Argentina tried to invade and capture the Falkland Islands controlled by the British. Although Argentina eventually surrendered two months later on 14 June and the operation was hailed as a great success, Thatcher came under criticism for having neglected defence on the Falkland Island which could have prevented an actual war. But the turmoil of Britain under Thatcher's rule did not end there. The country's often violent and contentious relationship with Northern Ireland manifested again in 1984 when an assassination attempt of Thatcher was made by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) on her way to a meeting in Brighton. However, her reluctance to reschedule the meeting and her passionate speech which was given later enhanced her popularity with the public and her rule continued until her resignation in 1990, but the Britain that she left behind had forever changed from the Britain that she took over.

The Britain of the 1980s was a decade of survival rather than flourishing. The immediate post-war bleak suffering from the long winter of the Second World War represented by Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis and Elizabeth Jennings of the 1950s was followed by poets such as Craig Raine and Andrew Motion, both of whom brought disastrous consequences in the poetry of Britain with their Tory, conservative outlook. Nevertheless, under Thatcher's rule, a new generation of young poets also began brewing something new to reinvigorate British poetry. In 1988 a major anthology titled The New British Poetry, edited by John Muckle and containing the works of a host of younger writers as well as important established poets of the 1960s and 1970s was published. In 1996 another anthology titled Conductors of Chaos which collected poetry with a similar goal as the British Poetry Revival was published. These anthologies have consolidated contemporary British poetry and they hold the key to understanding the trends of poetry in recent times.

13.3 TRENDS IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH POETRY

There is no single category that has the capacity to accommodate contemporary British poetry. This is mainly because poetry today is not influenced by an overwhelming event like war or modernisation, issues that formed unanimity in theme and concern in the poetry of the first half of the twentieth century. However, the absence of an overarching event does not mean that contemporary British poetry is without direction. There has been an exploration in both ethnic and gender-themed poetry in recent years and these waves and developments in contemporary British literature may be understood as the new movements.

13.3.1 THE 1980S AND AFTERWARDS

A distinctive feature of the new poetry from the 1960s onwards is the development of performative styles and an increase in awareness of the importance of the poet's voice as an instrument. Poetry clubs in places like London has led to the development of very personal styles of performing poetry. Readings accompanied by 'house' music, dancing or the sound of tribal chants break open a space in which the audience is compelled to listen as the poetry is read. This is truly an ultra-modernist approach of creating poetry. Performance has become an important aspect to get an audience to read poetry. This has led to the belief that a poem only really exists once it has been voiced.

One of the main reasons why the poetry of contemporary Britain is so different from the poetry of the early half of the twentieth century is because the lives and work of the early poets were shaped and influenced by the two world wars. There has been no event of that magnitude since 1945 but that doesn't mean that the world has been peaceful altogether. The experiences of contemporary poets are more culturally and socially diverse today. And even more interesting is the nature of the problems of the world today which are more of a social and cultural nature. Contemporary poetic development is directly influenced by the need to engage with what is immediate. Questions of the natural world, notions

of self and of one's place in society have become recurrent themes in contemporary poetry.

13.3.2 LANGUAGE AND CITY

One aspect in which all of the contemporary poets converge together is the way in which they make use of the English language. Black British poet like John Agard, by deliberately using misspelt words and decapitalization, questions the authoritarian and elitist nature of the established Englishmen's English as opposed to the English spoken by Caribbean immigrants. It is not the extreme experimentalism that took the poetry world in the 1960s, but the common free verse of everyday speech yet they are charged. John Agard's poetry is provocatively simple, humane and political at the same time. Contemporary poets such as Simon Armitage and Carol Ann Duffy write a simple and serious style of poetry. Duffy resurrects the old language of the Greeks and Shakespeare into modern language. And although experimentalism is absent the poetry of contemporary Britain is far from dull, they are "linguistically innovative" poetry, to borrow the descriptive term invented by Robert Sheppard in his book Far Language (1999).

The techniques of contemporary poetry are also hugely influenced by the world of art and media alike - cinema in particular. Techniques of fast cuts and montage often appear in new poetry, an interest inherited from cinema and American modernism, especially from the Black Mountain Poets. Interest in contemporary music, especially in London has led to a close association with the free improvisation technique. This is visible in the poetry of John Agard and his rhythmic poetry.

Another distinctive feature of contemporary British poetry, especially in the London school, is the interest in the city as a focus of attention, both historical and political. The 1970s saw the publication of a major series of poems known collectively as Place (published in 2005) by Allen Fisher focussing on London, its history, landscape, rivers, trade, agitation and unrest and population, demonstrating the link between all of these aspects of the city. These traditions have survived and poet Sean Bonney has written some remarkable poetry about

travelling around London, hounded by war and oppression, rage and despair. Stephen Mooney has also begun a project of tracing back the gay subculture in the London Underground District Line through poetry. Lastly, the final major aspect of contemporary poetry is the interest in the city as a character, especially among the London poets. The interest in the city as a locus of attention, both historical and political is very much evident in their poetry; a certain type of poetry whose objective is the exploration of the history, landscape, rivers, trade, agitation, unrest and population.

13.3.3 BLACK BRITISH POETS

In cultural debates, people have been questioning the question of what it means to be 'British' with increasing intensity in recent times. But nationhood has become to accommodate more than race now. It has become an intertwining of culture, literature, food, philosophy, etc. And the second half of the 20th century has seen Britain transform into a multicultural country with races from all the colonies coming in to inhabit the land. So the existence of a rich poetic tradition, along with other manifestations of immigrant culture is not surprising. The brilliant black British poet Benjamin Zephaniah famously declines his OBE (Order of the British Empire) in 2003 on the pretext that the word "empire" reminded him of slavery. Zephaniah poetry which is often composed in a Rastafarian style carries within it the history of his Jamaican heritage. John Agard, another brilliant black British poet, in his poetry focuses on the Caribbean immigrant experience in England and is consistent with the question of cultural hegemony, focusing on the lived experience of Caribbean immigrants in England. They are often scorned for their so-called "improper" English which is different from the English spoken by native Englishmen because the immigrant English embodies the Caribbean rhythm and deviates from the standard grammatical structure. The poetry of the Black British poets is unique in the sense that it is far removed from the erudite works of the preceding generation of poets – the erudition of the modernists, of the sentimental nostalgia of Stephen Spender or Dylan Thomas. The black British poetry is a poetry of eruption, of explosion and of outburst.

13.3.4 THE RISE OF WOMEN POETS

Another facet of contemporary British poetry is the rise of women poets in the literary scene. But they are not necessarily feminist poetry in a deliberate sense. The Women's Liberation movement opened avenues for women writers in literature. The emergence of publishing houses like Virago Press (1973) with a special focus on women's writing also helped much in assisting the movements: both literary and political. What began as a counter-cultural movement in the 1970s in sparse revolutions culminated into the creation of a different kind of literature and a different kind of cultural production.

One of the major female poets to come out of these interesting times is poet Carol Ann Duffy, who writes poetry that retells old stories and myths. This is indeed an interesting way of writing poetry because fairy tales and myths are archetypal stories that have proven to be true throughout history. Duffy, in her poetry, cleverly utilized the power of these stories to comment on pressing contemporary issues. Her poem 'Little Red Hat' for example reinterprets the old story from a new feminist perspective. The girl is not the victim in her poem but an individual with the capacity to think. The wolf does not sneak into her house; on the contrary, she follows him into his lair, voluntarily. The language of the women poets is accessible to the common men, but that does not mean that their poetry is common and without merit, they are simple yet surprisingly profound. And the universality of their poetry is merit unto itself.

The vibrant contemporary poetry scene in Britain composed of Black British poets and the Feminist poets all write a kind of poetry which is deeply personal and universal at the same time. They deal with issues that are directly related to their own lived experiences. And despite a common ancestry in concrete poetry, text and sound, there has been a tendency to combine the lessons learnt from older forms with what is new and radical to produce a fresh and invigorating form, almost resulting in a mini-renaissance of these forms (see the poetry of Carol Ann Duffy). An interesting feature of the emerging poets of the twenty-first century is the playfulness with which they have adopted older poetic forms and made them anew. It can be concluded that Radical pastoral poetry,

latter-day Romantic mysticism, Blakean derangement, and revolutionary political anguish are some of the on-going trends in contemporary British poetry.

13.4 SUMMING UP

It is never easy to pinpoint the exact moment of the birth of a new mode of thinking. New ideas always germinate from the cusp of the dying old ideas and the arrival of the new radical thinking. In the case of Contemporary British Poetry, the year 1977 may be taken as the locus year because it saw the fall of the great "avant-garde" movement and linguistic experimentation as far as poetry is concerned. The year 1977 also marks the beginning of the right-wing's rise in power throughout Europe; a direct reaction to the liberal frenzy that spread prominently in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Margaret Thatcher's corporate-authoritarianism rule which continued from 1979 to 1999 had a profound effect on the socio-political milieu and also affected the literature produced during this time as well.

The concerns of the poets that emerged during and after the 1970s, however, are vastly different from their predecessors. The concerns of the contemporary British poets are more of a cultural and social nature. The development of these new kinds of poetry has given birth to a new set of tools to study them as well. Since the poetry of the Contemporary British poets often deals with cultural and social issues, criticism of poetry now offers a wide range of focal points, be it a feminist interpretation, working class interpretation, Marxist interpretation or Eco-critical interpretation, where man's relationship with his surrounding is established. And these tools will only evolve with the evolution of poetry. However, the question of how radical new forms of art negotiate with the existing or the old forms will always remain a question of paramount importance for the study of poetry and literature in general.

13.5 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. England's decline as a superpower after the Second World War had a profound effect on the socio-political condition and the literature produced during the period. Discuss and illustrate your answer with examples.

2. The year 1977 is regarded as the beginning of the contemporary poetry scene in Britain. Explain the various tensions, political and literary, that occurred within the various literary circles that affected the poetry produced during the time.

3. There is no single category that can accommodate the wide trends of poetry style that is being practised in contemporary British poetry. Briefly discuss the works of any three contemporary poets by focussing on their unique form and style.

4. How has the change in stylistic and thematic concerns in the British poetry of the second half of the twentieth century? Discuss some of the trends that have emerged in contemporary British poetry.

5. Write a brief note on how the city appears as a character in the poetry of contemporary Britain, especially among the London school of poets.

6. Would you agree that the contemporary poets move away from extreme experimentalism of language? Discuss briefly how language is utilized by contemporary poets to make their poetry more forceful.

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UNIT 14: JOHN AGARD, SIMON ARMITAGE AND CAROL ANN DUFFY

UNIT STRUCTURE

14.0 INTRODUCTION

This unit will introduce you to three major contemporary poets, namely John Agard, Simon Armitage and Carol Ann Duffy. We have already noted the decline of Britain as a superpower after the Second World war and the concerns of the second half of the twentieth century are very different from the concerns of

the pre-war Britain. Subsequently, these concerns are reflected in the poetry produced in these years. The idea of nation and brotherhood thus become replaced with more personal and intimate concerns in the second half of the twentieth century. These issues are reflected in the language discourses in the poetry of John Armitage, the drifting and waning relationships in the poetry of Simon Armitage and the personal yet mythical poems of Carol Ann Duffy which will be discussed in this unit.

14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this unit you will be:

- familiar with the life and works of three contemporary British Poets, namely: John Agard, Simon Armitage and Carol Ann Duffy
- able to critically understand the prescribed poems
- familiar with the thematic concerns and poetic style of the poets in their poetry
- aware of the various political and socio-cultural issues that have given shape to contemporary British poetry in general.

14.2 JOHN AGARD: AN OVERVIEW OF HIS LIFE AND WORKS

John Agard was born on 21 June 1949 in British Guyana. He grew up in Georgetown where he listened to radio programs as a kid and developed a love for language and later went on to study English, French and Latin in school. After leaving school in 1967, he taught the languages he had learned while working in a local library and also worked as a sub-editor and feature writer for the Guyana Sunday Chronicle. When his father finally settled in London, Agard also moved to Britain in 1977 settling in Ironbridge, Shropshire. His job included working for the Commonwealth Institute and also for the BBC in London. He later became a touring lecturer, travelling to schools throughout the UK to promote a better understanding of Caribbean culture. In 1993, Agard was appointed as a 'Writer in Residence' at the South Bank Centre and also became a 'Poet in Residence' at the

BBC, both in London. This appointment was created as part of a scheme run by the Poetry Society in London.

Agard started writing poetry from his early school days, around the time he attended sixth-grade. His poetry collections include Man to Pan (1982), Limbo Dancers in the Dark Glasses (1983), Mangoes and Bullets: Selected and New Poems 1972-84 (1985), Poems for children: Lend Me Your Wings (1987), Life Doesn't Frighten Me At All (1989), Lovelines to a Goat born Lady (1990), Laughter in an Egg (1990), and Weblines (2000), which is a sequence of poems on the spider trickster god, Anansi. Rooted in the oral tradition of West Africa and the Caribbean, Agard uses the trickster god to critique modern issues of identity, capitalism, gender and even the internet. His later collection, Come Back to Me, Mr. Boomerang (2001) is an intelligent dialogue poem between a circle and a square, each commenting on their unique respective qualities. Later works include We Brits (2006), Clever Backbone (2009), and Alternative Anthems (2009), a selection of his best poems for adults and children.

Agard was awarded the Paul Hamlyn Award for Poetry in 1997. His other achievements include the Cholmondeley Award in 2004 and the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 2012. He was the 'Poet in Residence' at the National Maritime Museum in 2008.

14.3 READING THE POEMS OF JOHN AGARD

14.3.1 'LISTEN MR. OXFORD DON'

The poem 'Listen Mr. Oxford Don' first appeared in Agard's collection, Mangoes and Bullets (1985) and it focuses on the language problem of the Black immigrants living in Britain. Agard himself was an immigrant and a common complaint against the immigrants is their inability to speak 'proper' (British) English. He deliberately uses wrong spelling and incorrect syntax. Each stanza constitutes about four lines and the rhythm comes with the last line of the stanzas and is concentrated on last few words.

In this poem Agard attempts to explore the question of language ownership and ethnicity. It vividly portrays the discrimination perpetrated against non-standard

speakers of English. Agard uses a literary device to create two contradictory voices: the addressee "Oxford don", who is an allusion to both the academia and the dictionary, and the speaker, an uneducated immigrant as suggested by the Caribbean Creole "Me not no Oxford don":

Me not no Oxford don
me a simple immigrant
from Clapham Common
I didn't graduate
I immigrate

The alliteration and half-rhyme in "graduate" and "immigrate" suggests that a person can be either one of the two: educated or an immigrant, not both. While Agard himself defies this cliché, being of Afro-Guyanese origin and a respected member of British academia, his poem also turns it on its head, hiding dictionary references – such as "concise peaceful man" – and cleverly misspelling them – "So mek dem" to both celebrate and challenge the cliché.

In his protest, Agard mixes freewheeling, grammarless verse with traditional metre to challenge accepted linguistic stereotypes in Britain. This disruption of convention extends to rhythm which builds up and picks apart the stereotype. The alliteration in "Clapham Common" for example, adds a calypso rhythm to complete the "simple" picture, but Agard then switches it to a more menacing beat with the refrain "man on de run", the rhyme with "dangerous one", and alliteration in "de run" and "dangerous" to evoke images of a runaway criminal's heavy feet pounding on the street. Almost hearing the heavy breathing in the background, the reader is reminded how speakers of non-standard English are often perceived as knife-wielding, gun-toting criminals. This is immediately mocked as Agard switches to rhyming couplets, juxtaposing instruments of offence – "axe/hammer" with instruments of language – "syntax/ grammar" showing not only how well the speaker understands the mechanics of English, but also that the only crime being committed is on language:

But listen Mr Oxford don
I'm a man on de run
and a man on de run
is a dangerous one

I ent have no gun
I ent have no knife
but mugging de Queen's English
is the story of my life

I don't need no axe
to split/ up yu syntax
I don't need no hammer
to mash/ up yu grammar

The "violent man" is armed with nothing but "human breath", an interesting irony so soon after the breathless imagery evoked earlier. He is as innocent as the "Queen's English".

In his poem 'Listen Mr. Oxford Don', John Agard puts focus on the language problem of immigrants by deliberately misspelling and using incorrect grammar. Agard perhaps is trying to make a point that despite the fact that it sounds incorrect people are capable of understanding it. In other words complaining about misspelling is only possible if you comprehend the sentences - which means that whoever uses this "incorrect" English has made themselves understood despite having trouble with dialect, grammar or spelling. Agard complains that people complain about the language skills of immigrants. According to him, society has nothing to say against refugees surviving with bare minimum language skills, but expects immigrants to usually have proper language skills.

14.3.2 'CHECKING OUT ME HISTORY'

John Agard's poem 'Checking Out Me History' is a poem that challenges readers to reconsider the meaning of History and reveals how we are often taught not the real history but the accepted versions of history. It is a provoking poem that demands readers to revisit one's own histories, particularly if they include periods or important figures that are omitted in school education.

Like any good John Agard poem, 'Checking Out Me History' is written in a mixture of standard and creole English as is meant not to be read or merely recited but to be sung in places as well. The word "Dem" for example becomes the nonstandard version of "them" and one has to understand that Agard here is referring to the people in authority: then and now, back in the times of slavery and also now.

Dem tell me
Dem tell me
Wha dem want to tell me

Bandage up me eye with me own history
Blind me to me own identity

The poem's persona is a single character, who has been told what his history is, narrating his own cultural identity. It is an investigation of his own understanding of his genealogy and history and not the whitewashed history like the year of the Norman Conquest "1066" and subjects like "Dick Whittington and his cat" which are generally taught in school:

Dem tell me bout 1066 and all dat
Dem tell me bout Dick Whittington and he cat
But Toussaint L'Ouverture
No dem never tell me bout dat

To Agard, this one sided teaching he has received has in effect, "blind [ed] me [him] to me [his] own identity." It has made him a half taught, incomplete individual with little concept of his own culture. He uses the example of "Toussaint L'Ouverture" who was "a slave with vision," who "lick back Napoleon battalion." Clearly, this person and the heroics mentioned here is an important factor in Guyanese/Haitian culture but this is the sort of thing that British history lessons do not cover. It is a criticism therefore, of how we teach our children about the world. It is a criticism of what we consider to be important to teach our children.

He is proud enough to say that he has learnt about "Lord Nelson and Waterloo" but at the same time he was taught nothing about "Shaka de great Zulu". British education does at times cover people like "Columbus and

1492”and he uses the example of the “Caribs and de Arawaks” to make his point. Agard makes an interesting comparison and mentions that most of us know about “Florence Nightingale” and her actions in the Crimean conflict, as well as nursery rhymes like “ole King Cole” and how he was a “merry ole soul” but we are sadly lacking in knowledge about “Mary Seacole” simply because she is not considered by an educational system to be of merit. Now that is a pity, for she was from the Caribbean herself, travelled to the Crimean conflict even though she was advised not to and was, in Agard’s words, “a healing star among the wounded, a yellow sunrise to the dying.”

> Dem tell me bout Florence Nightingale and she lamp
> And how Robin Hood used to camp
> Dem tell me bout ole King Cole was a merry ole soul
> But dem never tell me bout Mary Seacole

‘Checking Out Me History’ oscillates between two structures, marked by two very different styles. The first uses repeated phrase such as "Dem tell me" to indicate the white version of history. It is written in rhyming couplets, triplets or quatrains. The second dimension of the poem is the the stories of the three black historical figures: Toussaint L'Overture, Nanny de Maroon and Mary Seacole interspersed in the poem which are told using abbreviated syntax with words missed out, shorter lines and an irregular rhyme scheme. This theme of inherent racism within institutions and countries alike is continued throughout the poem. The double standard of the English education system and the history that is perpetrated in schools is criticised in Agard’s poem. Simply keeping in mind that telling about white victory is not enough, Agard is of the opinion that the children must be taught something of other identities, something of other cultures, so that mutual understanding can be developed and we all can live as individuals in a multicultural setting.

LET US STOP AND THINK

Toussaint L'Ouverture was a well known leader of the Haitian Revolution. His military and political astuteness saved the gains of the first Black insurrection in November 1791.

14.3.3 'FLAG'

The poem 'Flag' explores the dichotomy that exists between the literal and the symbolic and Agard uses the image of the flag to explore these two dimensions. Literally, a flag is 'just' a piece of cloth and it flies freely but the results it produces, though, are vast.

The poem opens with an image of a fluttering flag and the consequences of this little piece of cloth. The flag "brings a nation to its knees". Ideas and history of slavery, subjugation and dominance are resurrected in the first stanza of the poem itself. The act of crouching on one's "knees" is contrasted with the vast scale of the word "nation". The flag - though literal becomes both symbolic and immense.

What's that fluttering in the breeze?
It's just a piece of cloth
that brings a nation to its knees.

The play of the literal and the symbolic continues in the second stanza as the flag inspires bravery in "the guts of men". Agard uses colloquial, familiar language - to represent powerful emotions in blunt terms. In stanza three, however he moves from the "bold" to "cowards" dealing with the traditional antithesis of bravery versus cowardice. Nationalism and war polarises opinion: if you're not with us, you're a "coward" - a negative, insulting term for what could be re-termed as a pacifist, a peaceful person.

What's that unfurling from a pole?
It's just a piece of cloth
That makes the guts of men grow bold.

What's that rising over the tent?

It's just a piece of cloth
That dares the coward to relent.

The mood darkens as the poem progresses. Agard no longer interrogates the meaning of the cloth - asking “What’s that?” Instead he begins asking questions like how “I” can “possess” it. He dramatizes the question thus exploring the individual desire for power, which itself is a disturbing idea. In the final line, he uses the imperative: “blind your conscience to the end”. Here, end represents the bitter end, death or to the last. Conscience enables us to see right from wrong and it is this moral sense that Agard says is lost in war, and the frenzy of ideals.

Agard’s poem ‘Flag’ is tightly regular in its length, rhyme scheme and in the refrains. In the first line of each stanza, the language is literal, not metaphorical. Agard describes the flag in factual terms as “fluttering”, “unfurling”, “rising” and “flying”. But as the poem progresses the metaphorical meaning of the flag takes over the poem and these are corruptible ideas like power and nationalism. Agard in this poem presents the two sides of human desire - the good and the bad.

14.3.4 ‘HALFE- CASTE’

John Agard’s poem ‘Half-Caste’ is a powerful but humorous attack on racism. Specially in British society the term ‘half-caste’ is used as a racial slur to describe people of the races. It is a residual slur which originated during the days of slavery along with others such as “half-blood”, “mulatto”, and “quadroon” were used to divide and label people on the amount of blackness they were. In the poem, Agard ridicules the term and shows that though it is meant to be offensive, it has/makes little or no sense.

The tone of the poem is argumentative. Just like many other of his previous poems, Agard deliberately uses misspelled words to disrupt the hierarchy of the “civilized” English language. It is evident from the very opening of the poem.

Excuse me
Standing on one leg
I'm half-caste

Explain yuself
Wha yu mean
When yu say half-caste
Yu mean when picasso
Mix red an green
Is a half-caste canvas?

Though the poem is humorous like most of Agard's poems, at one point the humour becomes serious. The notion of "purity" is endemic to every culture and nation. The fear of being impure or half-caste has brought about much suffering in a racist society. But the significance of colour or being dark transcends beyond the color of the skin colour. Darkness is seen as a symptom of an inner depravity.

The poem begins with the declaration of the poet being "half-caste" and accepting that fact. The seriousness of the statement is undercut by the fact that he is standing on one leg. The line '"Explain yuself" could be addressed to the silent reader. It is a dramatic monologue. The poets ask the silent reader to explain what is meant by "half-caste". He begins with a series of funny comparisons. Firstly he asks whether Picasso's paintings are "half-caste" canvas because he used red and green. It is interesting to note that Agard does not use capital letter for Picasso, a very famous twentieth century painter. Perhaps, Agard is critiquing the White people and their modern culture which includes painters like Picasso and composers like Tchaikovsky, a famous Russian classical composer, both symbols of high culture.

The poem descends to buffoonery as the poet explains that he is listening with half of his ear working with half eye. He also offers only half-a-hand to shake. He goes on enumerating things that he does half like sleeping with only one eye closed and hence dreaming only half-a-dream. Since he is a "half-caste" human being, he casts only half-a-shadow. The tone of the poem turns with the use of the word "but". He requests the listener to "come back tomorrow". But he

must come with whole of “yu” (you) and whole of “yu ear/yu mind”. For the poet would then tell the other half of his story.

But yu come back tomorrow
Wid de whole of yu eye
An de whole of yu ear
And de whole of yu mind

An I will tell yu
De other half
Of my story

Structurally, the short lines and lack of punctuation make the poem feel aggressive and confrontational. The poem does not rhyme in a structured way, but at times Agard uses rhyme and half rhyme to build up a rhythm e.g. “Half-caste till dem overcast/ So spiteful dem dont want de sun pass”. This rhythm is something that is inherent in the tradition of Caribbean way of speaking and Agard has brought it into this poem.

LET US STOP AND THINK

The word “caste” comes from the Portuguese word “casta” which meant “race”. It was borrowed from the Latin word “castus” which meant pure. This word was used from the 16th century to describe Indian society in which different “castes” of people were placed in a hierarchy.

- The poem ‘Halfe-Caste’ is partly autobiographical because Agard had white blood. He had a Caribbean or black father and Portuguese or white mother.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Who or what does “Oxford don” represent in John Agard’s poem ‘Listen Mr. Oxford Don’?

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2. What does the flag represent in Agard's poem 'Flags'?

14.4 SIMON ARMITAGE: AN OVERVIEW OF HIS LIFE AND WORKS

Simon Armitage was born in 1963 in the small village of Marsden, England. He attended Colne Valley High School, Linthwaite and later graduated with a degree in Geography from Portsmouth University and later attended Manchester University for post-graduation. He was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters by the University of Portsmouth in 1996. He has served as lecturer at the University of Leeds, the University of Iowa, and Manchester Metropolitan University. He also served as an Artist in Residence at London's South Bank from 2009 to 2012.

Prior to his mainstream publication, Simon Armitage published several pamphlets with small local poetry presses, which have now become highly collectible items. These included his pamphlets such as *Human Geography* (1986), *The Distance Between Stars* (1987), *The Walking Horses* (1988), and *Around Robinson* (1991). His first full-length poetry collection, *Zoom!* was published in 1989 by Bloodaxe Books. Subsequent poetry collections include *Xanadu* (1992), *Kid* (1992), *Book of Matches* (1993), *The Dead Sea Poems* (1995), *Moon Country* (1996), *Cloud Cuckoo Land* (1997), *Killing Time* (1999),

Travelling Songs (2002), *The Universal Home Doctor* (2002), and *Seeing Stars* (2011).

Armitage has received numerous awards for his poetry including the Sunday Times Young Author of the Year, The Forward Prize, The Lannan Award and the Keats-Shelley Poetry Prize. In 1999 Armitage was named the Millennium Poet and published a one-thousand line poem called 'Killing Time'. At the 25th Hay Festival, Armitage was presented the Hay Medal for Poetry in 2012. He has written for radio, television and film, and is the author of several stage plays, including *Mister Heracles*, a retelling of the Euripides play *The Madness of Heracles*, and *Jerusalem* which was commissioned by West Yorkshire Playhouse. His has done a dramatization of Homer's *The Odyssey*, which was commissioned by the BBC in 2004. A later book version titled *Homer's Odyssey - A Retelling* was published by Faber and Faber in 2006. His many contributions to BBC Radio 4 include his co-hosting of Armitage and Moore's Guide to Popular Song and as a reviewer for the weekly arts programme Front Row. He is also a regular contributor to BBC 2's The Review Show. In 2011 he wrote *Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster*, the Radio 4 play which created unprecedented feedback and listener-response, was repeated soon after its original transmission and short-listed for the 2011 Ted Hughes Award. His first novel, *Little Green Man*, was published in 2001 and was followed by his second novel, *The White Stuff* in 2004. His other prose work includes his memoir *All Points North* (1998) and *Gig: The Life and Times of a Rock-Star Fantasist*, in which he documents his life-long passion for popular music and his role as lead singer and lyricist with the band The Scaremongers.

For services to poetry, Armitage was awarded the CBE in 2010. And in 2011 was appointed as Professor of Poetry at the University of Sheffield. He is the co-organiser of Sheffield University's Annual Lyric Festival. In 2012, while serving as an artist in residence at London's South Bank Centre, he initiated 'Poetry Parnassus' - a gathering of world poets from every Olympic nation of the world as part of Britain's Cultural Olympiad, a landmark event generally

recognised as the biggest coming together of international poets in history. He lives in West Yorkshire.

14.5 READING THE POEMS OF SIMON ARMITAGE

14.5.1 'KID'

The poem 'Kid' by Simon Armitage is a dramatic monologue written in the voice of Robin or "The Boy Wonder", Batman's sidekick. The poem deals with the nature of growing up and separation from parents or in this case, the parental figure, Batman. From the tone of the poem, Robin is clearly bitter about his separation from Batman, which is carried out against his will. It reads like an exposé by one half of a famous duo about the other, attempting to "set the record straight", something which appear very frequently in newspapers. Robin's "revelations" draw attention to what he claims were Batman's neglect of him.

> Batman, big shot, when you gave the order
> to grow up, then let me loose to wander
> leeward, freely through the wild blue yonder
> as you liked to say, or ditched me, rather,
> in the gutter ... well, I turned the corner.

Robin clearly feels bitter and resentful at having been forced into the "gutter", but at the same time proud of himself for managing to "turn the corner" after having lived through the trauma. He claims he has "scotched that 'he was like a father / to me' rumour" as well as "blown the cover / on that 'he was an elder brother' / story" making it clear that Batman neglected him and that he felt rejected as his partner. Moreover, far from being a bastion of moral virtue Batman was a womaniser who embezzled money to fuel his lifestyle. Line 12 and 13 are written as tabloid newspaper headlines that also have the air of the cartoon about it:

> Holy robin-redbreast-nest-egg-shocker!
> Holy roll-me-over-in-the-clover.
> I'm not playing ball boy any longer
> Batman, now I've doffed

This alerts the reader to the idea of tawdry revelation typical of such journals but is also a comic presentation of Robin's favourite adjective. He would frequently prefix his statements with "holy". The sexual indiscretion of Batman is a comic idea in itself when one imagines him in his outfit. He would hardly be inconspicuous unless, of course, he was meeting someone in his guise of Bruce Wayne. Robin asserts his new-found independence by asserting that he is "not playing ball boy any longer", a colloquialism meaning he will not collude in keeping Batman's good reputation intact. This involves rejecting the requirement to dress effeminately in "that off-the-shoulder / Sherwood-Forest-green and scarlet number" (lines 15-16) in favour of "jeans" and "jumper" (line 17). He has grown "taller, harder, stronger, older" (line 18). The preponderance of feminine rhyme in the poem may be a joke made by Armitage at the expense of Robin who is clearly keen to prove his masculine credentials.

Robin concludes by gleefully imagine Batman in decline "without a shadow" in a flat with bare cupboards and little to eat. Robins' trademark mannerism of "punching the palm" of his hand as he worked out some clue, will be done by Batman "all winter". Of course, this gesture will be done by Batman to keep warm and not to indicate the sudden solving of a clue. Robin finishes by asserting his importance, using his old tag of "boy wonder" as a sign of superiority in contrast to his previously subordinate role.

Although this poem is ostensibly about Robin and his relationship with Batman, we know that both are fictional characters so obviously need to recognise that Armitage is reflecting upon rivalry in the general sense and the tensions that can exist between partnerships in the public eye that only comes out long after they have professionally parted. It also reminds us that anyone can feel forced to be the "kid", subordinate to an older sibling.

14.5.2 'MOTHER, ANY DISTANCE GREATER THAN A SINGLE SPAN'

The poem 'Mother, Any Distance Greater than a Single Span' is a poem about the sacred relationship that mothers share with their children. In the poem

the mother helps her son set up his new house, perhaps his first one. The limits of relationship are measured as well as the dimensions of a house.

> Mother, any distance greater than a single span
> requires a second pair of hands.
> You come to help me measure windows, pelmets, doors,
> the acres of the walls, the prairies of the floors

The precise though mundane details that Armitage chooses to focus upon in this poem help to remind us that it is the ordinary day to day shared activities that are the repositories of love. This love is unspoken on a day-to-day basis but this poem draws attention to that very fact by being emotionally understated.

> I space-walk through the empty bedrooms, climb
> the ladder to the loft, to breaking point, where something
> has to give;
> two floors below your fingertips still pinch
> the last one-hundredth of an inch

Armitage is extremely subtle in his choice of form, too. He employs the framework of a sonnet but does not elect to follow a standard rhyme scheme. The poem is organised into two quatrains and a sestet with a tailpiece. He gives us a poem that is recognisable as a sonnet but does not draw attention to itself in an ostentatious of way. This is in keeping with the unemotional tone of the poem, which leaves the reader to infer that the son has strong feelings of love and attachment to his mother. The fact that love was a traditional theme for the sonnet is also something that alerts us to the nature of the son's feeling.

Armitage's other poem titled 'My Father Thought It Bloody Queer' can be clearly paired with 'Mother Any Distance Greater than a Single Span' as it has the speaker's father as its subject. Both the poems are composed in conversational tone and keeping in mind with dynamics of the relationships of family members: sons drifting apart from mothers, and the familiar struggle between fathers and sons as the son grows up and tries to assert his own identity.

14.5.3 'NOVEMBER'

Armitage's poem 'November' recalls the memory of driving a friend's terminally ill grandmother to a hospital or old age home where she will eventually die. The title of the poem not only records the time of year in which the incident happened but also emphatically suggests the dying time of autumn and the arrival of a cold winter.

The poem takes the reader right into the middle of the action from the very beginning. It accurately presents a situation in which so many people with elderly relatives find themselves in. The difference between the able bodied younger adults and the frail, elderly grandmother is presented in the line "your grandma taking four short steps to our two":

> We walk to the ward from the badly parked car
> with your grandma taking four short steps to our two.
> We have brought her here to die and we know it.
>
> You check her towel. soap and family trinkets,
> pare her nails, parcel her in the rough blankets
> and she sinks down into her incontinence.

The second stanza shifts the focus form "we" to "you" as the speaker is clearly someone who is sensitive to the friend's need to minister to her last needs. The need to treat the dying with dignity is foregrounded here. The friend tends to the grandmother's needs, ensuring that her washing things and comforting "family trinkets" are with her.

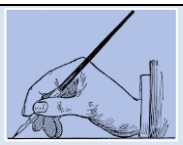
The description of what old age does to the human body is viscerally described in stanza three. The speaker catalogues "bloodless smiles", "slack breasts", "stunned brains" and "baldness". He tells his friend in a moment of recognition that so often accompanies the experience of being so close to the elderly and to death when we ourselves reach a certain age: "we are almost these monsters" (line 9). The word "monsters" may seem a very harsh word to use about other human beings but it is not necessarily to be construed as callous in this context because the speaker is clearly aware of their deed, but life revolves around certain things these days and one is often forced to admit the elderly into care

homes, which are different from a real family, but where they will be provided with attention they need and which their own family cannot provide.

> It is time John. In their pasty bloodless smiles,
> in their slack breasts, their stunned brains and their baldness
> and in us John: we are almost these monsters.
>
> You're shattered. You give me the keys and I drive
> through the twilight zone, past the famous station
> to your house, to numb ourselves with alcohol.

The speaker's concern for his friend continues as he offers to drive his car home for him, because he was aware of his friend's "shattered" nature. The "drive / through the twilight zone" has air of surreality about it because not of them had assumed that this kind of day would come to them when they were younger. The poet and his friend head home so they can "numb" themselves with alcohol to try and forget their own mortality and guilt.

The first five stanzas of the poem presents the reader with the experience of death and modulates into a couplet at its conclusion. "Sometimes the sun spangles and we feel alive./ One thing we have to get, John, out of this life." This closing couplet emphatically affirms life at the ends of both of lines: "alive" and "life" remind John that life must go on. There is a sense that buried in the line is the idea that we need to make sure that we get something out of this life before we are forced to get out of it.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Who is the "kid" in Armitage's poem 'Kid'?

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2. What does the color of Robin's costume represent?

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3. What is the main subject of Armitage's poem 'Mother, Any Distance Greater than a Single Span'?

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4. How many personages are present in the poem 'November'?

14.6 CAROL ANN DUFFY: AN OVERVIEW OF HER LIFE AND WORKS

Carol Ann Duffy was born on 23 December 1955 in Glasgow, Scotland to Frank Duffy, an electrician and Mary Black. She is the only girl among her four siblings who are all boys. She attended the University of Liverpool and graduated with a degree in philosophy in 1974. And in 1996 was appointed as lecturer in poetry at Manchester Metropolitan University. A position which she is still serving today.

Duffy's poetry collections include *Standing Female Nude* (1985), winner of a Scottish Arts Council Award; *Selling Manhattan* (1987), which won a Somerset Maugham Award; *The Other Country* (1990); *Mean Time*(1993), winner of the Whitbread Poetry Award and the Forward Poetry Prize; *The World's Wife* (1999); *Feminine Gospels* (2002); *Rapture* (2005), winner of the 2005 T. S. Eliot Prize; *The Bees* (2011), winner of the 2011 Costa Poetry Award and the 2011 T. S. Eliot Prize; *The Christmas Truce* (2011); *Wenceslas: A Christmas Poem* (2012), illustrated by Stuart Kolakovic; and *Dorothy Wordsworth's Christmas Birthday* (2014). In 2012, to mark the Diamond Jubilee, she

compiled *Jubilee Lines*, 60 poems from 60 poets each covering one year of the Queen's reign. In the same year, she was awarded the PEN/Pinter Prize.

Her children's poems have been published in a collection titled *New & Collected Poems for Children* (2009). She also writes picture books for children, and these include *Underwater Farmyard* (2002); *Doris the Giant* (2004); *Moon Zoo* (2005); *The Tear Thief* (2007); and *The Princess's Blankets* (2009). Carol Ann Duffy also edited the anthologies: *Out of Fashion* (2004), in which she creates a vital dialogue between classic and contemporary poets over the two arts of poetry and fashion; *Answering Back* (2007); and *To The Moon: An Anthology of Lunar Poems* (2009).

One of the most significant voices in contemporary British poetry, Carol Ann Duffy has achieved both critical and commercial success. Her poetry is equally read and enjoyed by critics, academics and common men alike, and it features regularly on both university syllabuses and school syllabuses. Language and the representation of reality; the construction of the self; gender issues; contemporary culture; alienation, oppression and social inequality are some the recurring themes that appear in the poetry of Duffy. Using everyday conversational tone, she creates contemporary versions of traditional poetic forms. She frequently utilizes the dramatic monologue in her exploration voices identities, and also the sonnet form. Her work has been linked to postmodernism and poststructuralism thematically but not stylistically.

Duffy was awarded the Eric Gregory Award in 1984 and a Cholmondeley Award in 1992 from the Society of Authors, the Dylan Thomas Award from the Poetry Society in 1989 and a Lannan Literary Award from the Lannan Foundation (USA) in 1995. She was awarded an OBE in 1995, a CBE in 2001 and became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1999. Carol Ann Duffy is currently a resident of Manchester and is the acting Creative Director of the Writing School, Manchester Metropolitan University.

14.7 READING THE POEMS OF CAROL ANN DUFFY

14.7.1 'ANNE HATHAWAY'

Carol Ann Duffy's poem 'Anne Hathaway' appears in the collection *The World's Wife* (1999). It is a sonnet that resurrects the life of another great sonneteer, William Shakespeare. The title of the poem is a direct reference to Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway, who he married because she was pregnant when he was only eighteen years old. Anne was nine years elder to him. When Shakespeare in 1616, despite being a man of considerable wealth, specified in his will that Anne was to receive only his "second best bed". Scholars have generally interpreted it as a deliberate insult to Anne; Shakespeare's way of demonstrating that he had been unhappy in the marriage. Carol Ann Duffy, in her poem, takes the opposite view of the instruction in Shakespeare's will, and imagines the "second best bed" as a mystical place of passionate love and delight. It is evident in the beginning lines:

> The bed we loved in was a spinning world
> of forests, castles, torchlight, clifftops, seas
> where we would dive for pearls. My lover's words
> were shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses
> on these lips;

The poem is a tribute to Shakespeare's sonnets, but it is also a re-examining of the poet and playwright from a different perspective. Whilst keeping the rough outline of the sonnet, Duffy does not use the traditional rhyme scheme that all Shakespearean sonnets follow; *abab cdcd efef gg*. She keeps the rhyming couplet at the end, but otherwise her lines are only loosely joined together through assonance. The poem asserts the timelessness of great love-how even death can't erase the living memory of love. The language here is not Elizabethan, it is the language of the contemporary, so "Anne Hathaway" is made relevant. Carol Ann Duffy uses her poem to try and challenge these stereotypical assumptions about Shakespeare's wife by reimagining the gift of the second best bed not as a petty demonstration of marital discontent, but as the

place where husband and wife experienced their most romantic and intimate moments.

Much of the imagery in this poem is sexual and allows us to see the relationship between husband and wife as one that is both spiritually and physically fulfilling. From being a mundane gift to a neglected spouse, the bed in Anne's eyes is transformed into "a spinning world/of forests, castles, torchlight, clifftops, seas". Duffy creates a magical world of romance and intrigue, with subtle nods towards key elements in Shakespeare's own plays, such as the forest and castle in *Macbeth* or the sea of *The Tempest*. She creates a fantasy landscape where Shakespeare's writing and his love for Anne are intertwined. Shakespeare's words become "shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses/on these lips". His words are stars up in the sky that everyone can see and admire, but his poetry is also something intimate that only Anne can experience and fully comprehend.

Duffy further develops this notion by using the language of poetry to describe the lovemaking between Anne and Shakespeare. Sex and poetry are interwoven as his touch becomes "a verb dancing in the centre of a noun". Anne imagines she is a product of her husband's imagination, written into existence through their passionate exchanges, whilst the second best bed functions as "a page beneath his writer's hands". She is his ultimate muse, not just inspiring him to produce great works but actually becoming them. Rather than living in an atmosphere of hostility, the couple lives in a world of "romance and drama", brought into being through their physical and emotional love for each other.

It was customary in Shakespeare's time to give up the best bed in the house for guests. Anne imagines the guests in the next room, "dribbling their prose", whilst herself and her husband create poetry and drama. Anne and Shakespeare inhabit a world full of senses, "played by touch, by scent, by taste", whilst all the guests are able to do is dribble:

> In the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on,
> dribbling their prose. My living laughing love –
> I hold him in the casket of my widow's head
> as he held me upon that next best bed.

The poem concludes with Anne claiming that all her memories of her husband are stored “in the casket of my widow’s head”. He is preserved not in a coffin or urn, not even in his writing, but in the thoughts inside Anne’s head, implying that the real William Shakespeare was a man that only his wife could ever truly know.

A prominent theme that runs through the poem is Anne’s loss of her husband and her genuine grief. Duffy’s Anne is full of admiration and love for her husband, cherishing her precious memories that nobody else can share. The poem also seem to address the true identity of William Shakespeare, a man about whom scholars still know surprisingly little. By presenting this poem in the voice of Anne Hathaway, Duffy makes it convincing, that Anne was a central part of his life, as well as a passionate, creative and articulate woman in her own right.

14.7.2 ‘LITTLE RED-CAP’

Carol Ann Duffy’s poem ‘Little Red Cap’ was by published by Picador as a part of her 1999 collection titled The World's Wife. The poem ‘Little Red Cap’ is based on the German fairy tale story known as ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ by Wilhelm Grimm. Duffy alters the original storyline to create a dominant female character. In the original story the little girl’s role is obscured by the Wolf, but these roles are reversed in Duffy's version.

Duffy’s poem ‘Little Red Cap’ begins with the line "At childhood's end ...", announcing from the very beginning of the little girl’s transition out of childhood and into adulthood:

> At childhood’s end, the houses petered out
> Into playing fields, the factory, allotments
> Kept, like mistresses, by kneeling married men
> The silent railway line, the hermit’s caravan
> Till you came at last to the edge of the woods
> It was there that I first clapped eyes on the wolf

The poet explains her childhood ended once the wolf came to “the edge of the woods”. Little red cap, who is now a girl of sixteen examines the wolf, and finds herself getting excited by the physical features of the wolf:

> Red wine staining his bearded jaw. What big ears
> He had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!
> In the interval, I made quite sure he spotted me
> Sweet sixteen, never been, babe, waif, and bought me a drink

The wolf is portrayed as an older, experienced character by the reference of alcohol used in his description "his hairy paw, red wine staining his bearded jaw". And Little Red Cap now pursues the older wolf, marking her sexual awakening and her transition to adulthood. Little Red Cap was prepared for what was to come. She knew that the wolf would lead her into the woods yet accepts the drink the wolf buys her. This marks the beginning of the relationship of Little Red Cap and the Wolf. She discovers an abundance of books within the Wolf's lair. The two grow close as their relationship blossomed and after ten years she leaves the Wolf’s lair, wandering again into the woods, after ending their relationship.

> But then I was young – and it took ten years
> In the woods to tell that a mushroom
> Stoppers the mouth of a buried corpse, that birds
> Are the uttered thought of trees, that a greying wolf
> Howls the same old song at the moon, year in, year out
> Season after season, same rhyme, same reason. I took an axe

The male hierarchy in the original version of the ‘Little Red Riding Hood’ story is disrupted in Duffy’s poem. Duffy creates a feminist edge in her poem by altering the roles of the characters. The Wolf is no longer a villain, but a rather valuable and warm hearted character. Little Red Cap (the girl) on the other hand transforms from a foolish young girl to a more independent, and clever adult. But they are not binary characters opposing each other. The Wolf, instead of an enemy Wolf becomes a guide for her through her journey. The description of the Wolf’s lair “where a whole wall was crimson, gold, and aglow with books” reveals another

side of the wolf's lair, although the lair might look nasty on the outside it contains beautiful things on the inside.

Colour is used to symbolize different things in the poem. Gold is the colour of riches, wealth and knowledge in the poem and is used to describe the true nature of the Wolf's lair. Red isn't just the colour of little red riding hood's coat but it is also a colour of passion and it also symbolizes blood and sexual maturity in this poem. Besides colour, animal motifs are used to symbolize different things within the poem. The wolf represents the male of masculine characteristics; precisely the male in Duffy's live. Wolf has been viewed differently according to different culture over centuries, some describe wolf as evil as they carry disease However it was also viewed as a loyal and intelligent animal like dogs. This also shows how a male can contain different personality, the fact that they could be nice and sweet as well as evil and cunning at the same time. The Owl symbolizes knowledge and wisdom of the wolf. The white dove is used to symbolize the beauty and purity of little red riding hood before she turned sixteen and followed the wolf to his lair.

LET US STOP AND THINK

Duffy is known for her trait to take previous stories, tales, etc. and change them into her own "What you can do as a poet is take on a story and make it new" she once said to Barry Wood in an interview. Duffy's Little Red Cap is great model of her style of poetry in the collection.

14.7.3 'ACHILLES'

Carol Ann Duffy's poem 'Achilles' is a poem with classical content. Duffy resurrects tale, in this case a Greek mythical hero, to comment on a contemporary subject. In this poem, Achilles and his mythical strength and weaknesses is used to talk about one contemporary figure, the English footballer David Beckham. Duffy slyly refers to various stories about great mythical hero; his mother, the goddess Thetis, dipping him in the river Styx, making him impervious to injury. But she held him by his ankle, leaving it untouched by the

water making it his most vulnerable spot - thus the proverbial “Achilles' heel”. The poem begins thus:

> Myth's river – where his mother
> dipped him, fished him, a
> slippery golden boy flowed on,
> his name on its lips.
>
> Without him, it was prophesied,
> they would not take Troy.

According to Greek myths, during the Achaean recruitment drive at the start of the Trojan War, Thetis attempted to conceal her son, Achilles on the island of Scyros among the women of the palace of Lycomedes so that he'd escape having to fight. Duffy resurrects this scene in her poem with the word "sarong", but she also seems to be making a comment on Beckham’s metrosexual fashion habits and his slightly, very Beckhamian gender ambivalence.

> Women hid him, concealed him
> in girls' sarongs; days of
> sweetmeats, spices, silver songs ...

The third stanza continues the comparison between Achilles and Duffy raises Beckham to mythical level and compares Achilles’ grace in the battlefield to Beckham's ability in the football field. In both cases the crowds roar. But every hero has a weakness too and just like Achilles, Beckham’s heel was injured and Carol Ann Duffy expresses the agony of a nation when Beckham suffered an Achilles injury before he could participate in the 2010 World Cup.

Beckham's injury might have drawn the sympathy of much of the nation during the World Cup, but Britain's Poet Laureate Duffy in this poem has elevated his ruptured Achilles tendon to the stuff of heroic myth.

LET US STOP AND THINK

In 1998, Beckham dressed himself in a sarong making him look like he was a member of the Spice Girls.

- Beckham’s allure has transcended sports – he

definitely is a “slippery golden boy”– and in an interview Duffy talks about how Beckham has a mythic aura like Achilles.

- Duffy’s reference to “spices” in the poem second stanza undoubtedly points to Victoria Spice of the Spice Girls. After he married her, Beckham was criticized by his Manchester United coach for being more focused on his life as a celebrity than on soccer, and in one photograph with her he is wearing a sarong. Nevertheless, when England needed him, he answered the call.

14.8 SUMMING UP

By now, as we have come to the end of the unit, you must have become familiar with the life and works of the three contemporary British poets discussed in this unit, namely John Agard, Simon Armitage and Carol Ann Duffy. It is evident from the poetry of these poets that the contemporary poetry scene is not swayed by one idea or style. The concern of each poet is very personal and universal at the same time. John Agard’s poetry celebrates the Caribbean culture while at the same time problematizes the experiences of immigrants in England, which is evident in the way of the treatment they receive from white people and white culture. Agard’s focus mainly remains on language, history and cultural differences. Simon Armitage’s poetry on the other hand focuses on human relationship and more importantly familial relationship and how time and age slowly forces people to drift away from each other. All the three poems discussed in this unit revolve around these themes - a boy growing up and distancing away from his father figure in ‘Kid’, a son moving away into his own house in ‘Mother Any Distance Greater than a Single Span‘, and a man admitting his old grandma into an old age home in ‘November’. Carol Ann Duffy’s poetry makes the “old” into new. In all of her poetry discussed in this unit, she resurrects an old story or myth and places them in the contemporary context. What is similar, however in all of these poets’ works in the language used which is liberated from all kinds of

linguistic structure. The second thing that is common to these poets is their concern for humanity. They take the particular and use it to comment on universal problems and therein lays the value of their poetry.

14.9 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Explain how Agard attempts to explore the question of language ownership and ethnicity in his poem 'Listen Mr. Oxford Don'.
2. Do you think John Agard makes a stance against the hypocrisy of the society when they raise no questions against refugees speaking false English but expects immigrants to speak proper English. Discuss.
3. Agard poem 'Checking out Me History' oscillates between two sides of history. Discuss how the poet brings to the surface the whitewashing of History in the poem.
4. Agard's poem 'Flag' uses the image of the flag to explore these the two dimensions of the literal and the symbolic. Explore the dichotomy that exists between these two by analysing the influence the flag has on people.
5. Explain how Agard used the concept of "half" to reveal and ridicule the social treatment of mixed race people in British society in his poem 'Halfe-Caste'.
6. Simon Armitage using Batman and Robin as metaphors unlocks the dynamics and tensions of familial relationship and growing up in his poem 'Kid'. Discuss.
7. Discuss the use of dramatic monologue in Armitage's poem 'Kid'
8. Armitage's poem 'Mother, Any Distance Greater than a Single Span' has a lot of undercurrent of unspoken feelings among family members but they manifests in little gestures. Discuss how Armitage presents these gestures in his poem.
9. The title of the poem 'November' by Simon Armitage not only records the time of year in which the grandmother is admitted to the care home but also seem to emphatically suggest the dying time of autumn and the arrival of a cold winter. Discuss
10. Simon Armitage's poem 'November' through the scene of a parting comments on the more universal nature of relationships and human mortality. Discuss.

11. Armitage's poem 'Kid' touches upon the subject of gender normative and the power politics that exists between Batman and Robin. Discuss.

12. Carol Ann Duffy reassesses history and turns them around in her poem 'Anne Hathaway'. Explain the stylistic and historical devices Duffy uses to tell a different history in this poem.

13. Duffy's poem 'Little Red Cap' uses an age old fairy tale to make a comment on the new world where women are empowered to make choices and follow them. Discuss the characters and the roles they play in telling this new story in 'Little red Cap'.

14. Duffy uses a the myth of Achilles to tell the story of a contemporary footballer in her poem 'Achilles'. Discuss the thematic concerns of the poem and the relationship that exists between events like war and sports.

14.10 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

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ANNEXURE

SEAMUS HEANEY

Digging

Launch Audio in a New Window

By Seamus Heaney
Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked,

Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God, the old man could handle a spade.
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
Over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

The Tollund Man

I

Some day I will go to Aarhus
To see his peat-brown head,
The mild pods of his eye-lids,
His pointed skin cap.

In the flat country near by
Where they dug him out,
His last gruel of winter seeds
Caked in his stomach,

Naked except for
The cap, noose and girdle,
I will stand a long time.
Bridegroom to the goddess,

She tightened her torc on him
And opened her fen,
Those dark juices working
Him to a saint's kept body,

Trove of the turfcutters'
Honeycombed workings.
Now his stained face
Reposes at Aarhus.

II

I could risk blasphemy,
Consecrate the cauldron bog
Our holy ground and pray
Him to make germinate

The scattered, ambushed
Flesh of labourers,
Stockinged corpses

Laid out in the farmyards,

Tell-tale skin and teeth
Flecking the sleepers
Of four young brothers, trailed
For miles along the lines.

III

Something of his sad freedom
As he rode the tumbril
Should come to me, driving,
Saying the names

Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard,

Watching the pointing hands
Of country people,
Not knowing their tongue.

Out here in Jutland
In the old man-killing parishes
I will feel lost,
Unhappy and at home.

Punishment

I can feel the tug
of the halter at the nape
of her neck, the wind
on her naked front.

It blows her nipples
to amber beads,
it shakes the frail rigging
of her ribs.
I can see her drowned
body in the bog,
the weighing stone,
the floating rods and boughs.
Under which at first
she was a barked sapling
that is dug up
oak-bone, brain-firkin:
her shaved head
like a stubble of black corn,
her blindfold a soiled bandage,
her noose a ring
to store
the memories of love.
Little adulteress,
before they punished you
you were flaxen-haired,
undernourished, and your
tar-black face was beautiful.
My poor scapegoat,
I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.
I am the artful voyeuur
of your brain's exposed
and darkened combs,

your muscles' webbing
and all your numbered bones:
I who have stood dumb
when your betraying sisters,
cauled in tar,
wept by the railings,
who would connive
in civilized outrage
yet understand the exact
and tribal, intimate revenge.

Act of Union

I

To-night, a first movement, a pulse,
As if the rain in bogland gathered head
To slip and flood: a bog-burst,
A gash breaking open the ferny bed.
Your back is a firm line of eastern coast
And arms and legs are thrown
Beyond your gradual hills. I caress
The heaving province where our past has grown.
I am the tall kingdom over your shoulder
That you would neither cajole nor ignore.
Conquest is a lie. I grow older
Conceding your half-independant shore
Within whose borders now my legacy
Culminates inexorably.

II

And I am still imperially
Male, leaving you with pain,
The rending process in the colony,
The battering ram, the boom burst from within.
The act sprouted an obsinate fifth column
Whose stance is growing unilateral.
His heart beneath your heart is a wardrum
Mustering force. His parasitical
And ignorant little fists already
Beat at your borders and I know they're cocked
At me across the water. No treaty
I foresee will salve completely your tracked
And stretchmarked body, the big pain
That leaves you raw, like opened ground, again

JOHN AGARD

Listen Mr. Oxford Don Lyrics

Me not no Oxford don
me a simple immigrant
from Clapham Common
I didn't graduate
I immigrate

But listen Mr Oxford don
I'm a man on de run
and a man on de run

is a dangerous one

I ent have no gun

I ent have no knife

but mugging de Queen's English

is the story of my life

I don't need no axe

to split/ up yu syntax

I don't need no hammer

to mash/ up yu grammar

I warning you Mr. Oxford don

I'm a wanted man

and a wanted man

is a dangerous one

Dem accuse me of assault

on de Oxford dictionary/

imagine a concise peaceful man like me/

dem want me to serve time

for inciting rhyme to riot

but I tekking it quiet

down here in Clapham Common

I'm not violent man Mr. Oxford don

I only armed wit mih human breath

but human breath

is a dangerous weapon

So mek dem send one big word after me

I ent serving no jail sentence

I slashing suffix in self-defence

I bashing future wit present tense

and if necessary

I making de Queen's English accessory/ to my offence

Checking Out Me History

Dem tell me

Dem tell me

Wha dem want to tell me

Bandage up me eye with me own history

Blind me to me own identity **5**

Dem tell me bout 1066 and all dat

dem tell me bout Dick Whittington and he cat

But Toussaint L'Ouverture

no dem never tell me bout dat

Toussaint ***10***

a slave

with vision

lick back

Napoleon

battalion ***15***

and first Black

Republic born

Toussaint de thorn

to de French

Toussaint de beacon ***20***

of de Haitian Revolution

Dem tell me bout de man who discover de balloon

and de cow who jump over de moon

Dem tell me bout de dish ran away with de spoon

but dem never tell me bout Nanny de maroon 25

Nanny

see-far woman

of mountain dream

fire-woman struggle

hopeful stream 30

to freedom river

Dem tell me bout Lord Nelson and Waterloo

but dem never tell me bout Shaka de great Zulu

Dem tell me bout Columbus and 1492

but what happen to de Caribs and de Arawaks too

Dem tell me bout Florence Nightingale and she lamp
and how Robin Hood used to camp
Dem tell me bout ole King Cole was a merry ole soul
but dem never tell me bout Mary Seacole

From Jamaica
she travel far
to the Crimean War
she volunteer to go
and even when de British said no
she still brave the Russian snow
a healing star
among the wounded
a yellow sunrise
to the dying

Dem tell me
Dem tell me wha dem want to tell me
But now I checking out me own history
I carving out me identity

Half-Caste

Excuse me

Standing on one leg

I'm half-caste

Explain yuself

Wha yu mean

When yu say half-caste

Yu mean when picasso

Mix red an green

Is a half-caste canvas?

Explain yuself

Wha u mean

When yu say half-caste

Yu mean when light an shadow

Mix in de sky

Is a half-caste weather??

Well in dat case

England weather

Nearly always half-caste

In fact some o dem cloud

Half-caste till dem overcast

So spiteful dem dont want de sun pass

Ah rass

Explain yuself

Wha yu mean

When yu say half-caste?

Yu mean tchaikovsky

Sit down at dah piano

An mix a black key

Wid a white key

Is a half-caste symphony?

Flag

What's that fluttering in the breeze?

It's just a piece of cloth

that brings a nation to its knees.

What's that unfurling from a pole?

It's just a piece of cloth

That makes the guts of men grow bold.

What's that rising over the tent?

It's just a piece of cloth

that dares the coward to relent.

What's that flying across a field?

It's just a piece of cloth

that will outlive the blood you bleed.

How can I possess such a cloth?

Just ask for a flag my friend.

Then blind your conscience to the end.

****

SIMON ARMITAGE

kid

Batman, big shot, when you gave the order

to grow up, then let me loose to wander

leeward, freely through the wild blue yonder

as you liked to say, or ditched me, rather,

in the gutter ... well, I turned the corner.

Now I've scotched that 'he was like a father

to me' rumour, sacked it, blown the cover

on that 'he was like an elder brother'

story, let the cat out on that caper

with the married woman, how you took her

downtown on expenses in the motor.

Holy robin-redbreast-nest-egg-shocker!

Holy roll-me-over-in the-clover,

I'm not playing ball boy any longer

Batman, now I've doffed that off-the-shoulder
Sherwood-Forest-green and scarlet number
for a pair of jeans and crew-neck jumper;
now I'm taller, harder, stronger, older.
Batman, it makes a marvellous picture:
you without a shadow, stewing over
chicken giblets in the pressure cooker,
next to nothing in the walk-in larder,
punching the palm of your hand all winter,
you baby, now I'm the real boy wonder

Mother, Any Distance Greater Than A Single Span

Mother, any distance greater than a single span
requires a second pair of hands.
You come to help me measure windows, pelmets, doors,
the acres of the walls, the prairies of the floors.

You at the zero-end, me with the spool of tape, recording
length, reporting metres, centimetres back to base, then leaving
up the stairs, the line still feeding out, unreeling
years between us. Anchor. Kite.

I space-walk through the empty bedrooms, climb
the ladder to the loft, to breaking point, where something

has to give;

two floors below your fingertips still pinch

the last one-hundredth of an inch...I reach

towards a hatch that opens on an endless sky

to fall or fly.

November

We walk to the ward from the badly parked car

with your grandma taking four short steps to our two.

We have brought her here to die and we know it.

You check her towel. soap and family trinkets,

pare her nails, parcel her in the rough blankets

and she sinks down into her incontinence.

It is time John. In their pasty bloodless smiles,

in their slack breasts, their stunned brains and their baldness

and in us John: we are almost these monsters.

You're shattered. You give me the keys and I drive

through the twilight zone, past the famous station

to your house, to numb ourselves with alcohol.

Inside, we feel the terror of the dusk begin.

Outside we watch the evening, failing again,

and we let it happen. We can say nothing.

Sometimes the sun spangles and we feel alive.
One thing we have to get, John, out of this life.

****

CAROL ANN DUFFY

Anne Hathaway

'Item I gyve unto my wief my second best bed…'

(from Shakespeare's will)

The bed we loved in was a spinning world
of forests, castles, torchlight, cliff-tops, seas
where he would dive for pearls. My lover's words
were shooting stars which fell to earth as kisses
on these lips; my body now a softer rhyme
to his, now echo, assonance; his touch
a verb dancing in the centre of a noun.
Some nights I dreamed he'd written me, the bed
a page beneath his writer's hands. Romance
and drama played by touch, by scent, by taste.
In the other bed, the best, our guests dozed on,
dribbling their prose. My living laughing love –
I hold him in the casket of my widow's head

as he held me upon that next best bed.

Little Red Cap

At childhood's end, the houses petered out
Into playing fields, the factory, allotments
Kept, like mistresses, by kneeling married men
The silent railway line, the hermit's caravan
Till you came at last to the edge of the woods
It was there that I first clapped eyes on the wolf

He stood in a clearing, reading his verse out loud
In his wolfy drawl, a paperback in his hairy paw
Red wine staining his bearded jaw. What big ears
He had! What big eyes he had! What teeth!
In the interval, I made quite sure he spotted me
Sweet sixteen, never been, babe, waif, and bought me a drink

My first. You might ask why. Here's why. Poetry
The wolf, I knew, would lead me deep into the woods
Away from home, to a dark tangled thorny place
Lit by the eyes of owls. I crawled in his wake
My stockings ripped to shreds, scraps of red from my blazer
Snagged on twig and branch, murder clues. I lost both shoes

But got there, wolf's lair, better beware. Lesson one that night

Breath of the wolf in my ear, was the love poem

I clung till dawn to his thrashing fur, for

What little girl doesn't dearly love a wolf?1

Then I slid from between his heavy matted paws

And went in search of a living bird – white dove –

Achilles

(for David Beckham)

Myth's river – where his mother dipped him, fished him, a slippery golden boy – flowed on, his name on its lips. Without him, it was prophesised,

they would not take Troy.

Women hid him, concealed him in girls' sarongs; days of sweetmeats, spices, silver songs . . .

but when Odysseus came,

with an athlete's build, a sword and a shield, he followed him to the battlefield, the crowd's roar,

and it was sport, not war,

his charmed foot on the ball . . .

but then his heel, his heel, his heel . . .

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JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS

JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS

The Centre for Distance and Online Education was established in 2011 with the aim of disseminating knowledge and imparting quality education through open and distance learning mode. The Centre offers various post-graduate, undergraduate, diploma and certificate programmes in emerging areas of science and technology, social sciences, management and humanities with flexible system to cater to the needs of the learners who otherwise cannot avail the regular mode of education. The basic focus of the centre is to prepare human resources of the region and the country by making them skilled and employable.

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