

स्वाध्याय

स्वमन्थन

स्वावलम्बन

UTTAR PRADESH RAJARSHI TANDON OPEN UNIVERSITY
(Established vide U.P. Govt. Act No. 10, of 1999)



Indira Gandhi National Open University



UP Rajarshi Tandon Open University

MAEN-07
NEW LITERATURES IN ENGLISH

FIFTH BLOCK : A House for Mr. Biswas : V.S. Naipaul

**SIXTH BLOCK : Caribbean Poetry : Derek Walcott and
Edward Brathwaite**

SEVENTH BLOCK : The Solid Mandala

EIGHTH BLOCK : The Stone Angel : Margaret Laurence



Block

5

A House for Mr. Biswas : V.S. Naipaul

Block Introduction

UNIT 1

Naipaul and his Critics 5

UNIT 2

Mr. Biswas and the Tulsis 16

UNIT 3

Mr. Biswas and his Dream House 27

UNIT 4

Why did Mr. Biswas want a House? 38

UNIT 5

Putting *A House for Mr. Biswas* in Perspective 47

BLOCK INTRODUCTION

In the previous block (block 4) you read about Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice-Candy-Man*. In this block I shall be taking up V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Through the fictional account of a man (Mr. Mohun Biswas), V.S. Naipaul throws light on some major aspects of Caribbean life and yearnings. *A House for Mr. Biswas* etches the life of Indian immigrants in the Caribbean island of Trinidad. Caribbean society emerged out of successive waves of free as well as forced migration from Europe, Africa and Asia. The cultures of these various people contributed to the formation of what we broadly refer to as Caribbean culture – and yet these varied people preserved the markers of their distinct identity. This fact is what you should have in mind when you begin reading this block.

Unit 1 will introduce you to the life and works of V.S. Naipaul so that you can understand the complex influences that shaped his thinking as a writer. The indenture system has also been explained in this unit so that you have a kind of framework within which you can study *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

Units 2 & 3 contain a chapter-wise analysis of the novel in sequential order. I have also commented upon autobiographical parallels and Naipaul's narratorial skills.

Unit 4 In this unit, certain aspects of the novel have been taken up, eg. *A House for Mr. Biswas* as a diasporic novel, or as a chronicle of the changing political and social order of the times. The use of irony and humour has also been highlighted.

In **Unit 5**, *A House for Mr. Biswas* has been compared to Naipaul's other Caribbean novels, so as to enable you to look at the ways in which Naipaul has worked and reworked the same material into the increasing complexities of his later narratives.

A word of caution here – it is very important that you read and perhaps re-read the novel along with these notes, to understand it in totality. Also, do attempt the questions at the end of each unit for self-assessment to see how well you have understood the novel.

UNIT 1 NAIPAUL AND HIS CRITICS

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 A Biographical Note
- 1.2 An overview of Naipaul's Fiction and Non-Fiction
- 1.3 The 'Girmit' people
- 1.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.5 Glossary
- 1.6 Questions
- 1.7 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this unit are to provide information about the life of V.S. Naipaul so that the complex influences that shaped his thinking as a writer are understood, and to examine in detail some of his other works besides *A House for Mr. Biswas*. This would give you a further insight into the different phases of his creativity. Finally it is also my endeavour to provide an overview of the indenture or 'girmit' system, which will serve as a backdrop against which you are to study *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

1.1 A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad Naipaul (b. 1932) has been awarded almost every international literary prize except the Nobel for which he has been shortlisted many times. Despite controversial attitudes and statements, some of which he shrugs off contemptuously like his alleged support of Hindutva in a newspaper interview, he remains one of the best writers of our times. His concern with the quality of his work comes out in a recent interview-based feature published in *Indian Today Plus*. To quote: "I spend a lot of time writing in my head when I am working on a book" (p.57) Only when he is satisfied with the way the day's writing has taken shape, does he put it on the computer. The result is predictable and in Naipaul's own words, "I have never written an unconsidered sentence. I have never even put an unconsidered punctuation mark." (p.57) For him writing is a liberating experience as one of his letters, written in 1987, suggests.

I wanted to be a writer because I wanted to be famous; because I wanted to be free... The contemplation that goes with writing, and the clarity it requires, make for calm. It is for me the equivalent of religion.
(Naipaul Archives)

Before we get on to some of the biographical details that provide a background against which *A House for Mr. Biswas* should be studied, a basic question has to be answered. Why did V.S. Naipaul decide to live and write in England? Naipaul has answered this question himself in his acceptance speech on being awarded the first David Cohen British Literature Prize in 1993 for a 'lifetime of achievement':

Writing is more than a matter of spirit. A book is a physical commercial object. It requires a well-organised society. If you are going to make a living

as a writer you need publishers, reviewers, bookshops, libraries, a public looking for new work : a book trade.

When I was starting in the mid 1950s, there was no other place where I could have set up as an English-language writer, and found encouragement. It is, of course, different now. So as a writer I was separated, and sometimes deeply separated, from my background – if you take Trinidad as my ancestral background.

The concluding sentence of the passage cited is significant as it provides a valuable clue to the persona of exile that Naipaul assumed at the outset of his writing career and which has since been associated with his creativity. This can be linked with his ancestry of indentured labour, his brahmanic upbringing (which he tries to subvert but which surfaces time and again in his writings) and his colonial education in Trinidad and England, all of which combined to breed an exclusivity, an impelling desire to assert and retain one's individuality. So all his writing is done in his Wiltshire cottage where he gets the silence and solitude needed for his concentrated work.

In his early writing, namely *A House for Mr Biswas* the novel under study, Naipaul draws upon his life and experiences in Trinidad, especially the relationship with his own father Seepersad Naipaul. However, he does not talk about his ancestry or his early life till much later. *Finding the Centre: Two Narratives* (Andre Deutsch, 1984) is made up of two "personal" pieces, "Prologue to an Autobiography" and "The Crocodiles of Yamousoukro". Of these, the first attempts to trace the beginnings of Naipaul's literary career. To quote him : "It is an account of something less easily seized : my literary beginnings and the imaginative promptings of my many-sided background." (p.9)

"Our own past was, like our idea of India, a dream." (p.61) says Naipaul in *Finding the Centre*. This is true not only of the descendants of indentured workers in Trinidad but most of those in Mauritius, Fiji and other former colonies where they had gone towards the end of the nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth century to work on the plantations. While the third section of this unit will be devoted to a detailed discussion of this category of immigrants, it is sufficient to say that most of them were poor and illiterate, venturing out of their village for the first time in the hope of earning a better livelihood or at times to ward off starvation or disgrace. Very few of them preserved any letters or records pertaining to their lives in India and over the years, the tenuous links snapped.

However, Naipaul has some idea of the region from where his ancestors had migrated though he does not know much about them as this remark suggests. "Of my mother's father, so important to our family and my father's childhood I knew almost nothing. My father's father had died when my father was a baby." (p.61)

Naipaul's great grandmother on his father's side, migrated to Trinidad towards the end of the nineteenth century. According to Naipaul, she was in dire circumstances.

About 1880, in the ancient town of Ayodhya in the United Provinces in India, a young girl of the Parray clan gave birth to a son. She must have been deeply disgraced, because she was willing to go alone with her baby to a far-off island to which other people of the region were going. That was how the Parray woman came to Trinidad. She intended her son to be a pundit; and in the district of Diego Martin she found a good pundit who was willing to take her son in and instruct him. (There was no hint, in the tale I heard, of sugar estates and barracks and contract labour.)

The years passed. The boy went out into the world and began to do pundit's work. He also dealt, in a small way, in the goods Hindus used in religious

ceremonies. His mother began to look for a bride for him. . . . It happened that three brothers of a suitable clan had made the journey from India together, and it happened that one of these brothers had seven daughters.

The Parray boy married one of these daughters. They had three children, a girl and two boys. They lived in the village of Cunupia, not far from Chaguanas, in a house with a galvanized-iron roof. Quite suddenly, when the youngest child, a boy, was only two, the young Parray fell ill and died. Somehow all the gold coins he had hoarded disappeared; and the aunts and uncles thought the children and their mother be sent back to India. Arrangements were made but then at the last moment the youngest child didn't want to go. He ran away and hid in a latrine, and the ship sailed without them. (Ibid p.65-66)

The "Parray" woman who took such a bold step to ensure her son's happiness in surroundings where no one would know about the circumstance of his birth, was Naipaul's great grandmother. The young boy who did not want to go back to India was Naipaul's father Seepersad Naipaul. He was later sent to school and not made to work in the sugar cane plantation as was customary so that he might become a pundit and carry on the traditional vocation of the family.

The word "Parray" is sure to make the Indian student curious. One can safely assume that it is a derivative of "Pande", a brahmin surname quite common in that region. It is significant that Naipaul's father wanted to become a writer, though he came from a background with little education and equally little knowledge of English, in a small agricultural society where writing was considered an indulgence. Evidently there was a creative impulse which got transmitted to the son and found fulfillment. As Naipaul puts it, "The ambition to become a writer was given me by my father." (p.33) The relationship between Mr Mohun Biswas and his son Anand in the novel, which will be analyzed in later units, draws on this aspect of Naipaul's relationship with his own father.

Like Naipaul's paternal great grandmother, his mother's father had travelled out of India as an indentured immigrant at the turn of the century. He appeared to have done well as the description of the family house in Chaguanas, a little market town in the Indian area of Trinidad, indicates:

My mother's family house in Chaguanas was a well-known local 'big house'. It was built in the North Indian style. It had balustraded roof terraces, and the main terrace was decorated at either end with a statue of a rampant lion. (Naipaul, *Finding the Centre*, 35)

Though Naipaul says, "I didn't like or dislike living there; it was all I knew" (*Finding the Centre*, 35) it is clear that the house provided a kind of security that Naipaul's father with his poor agricultural labour background and inability to find a stable job, could not offer independently. When Naipaul was born, his father was the *Guardian* staff correspondent in Chaguanas, a job he quit two years or so later. After that he picked up odd jobs here and there, sometimes for his wife's family, sometimes for an uncle by marriage, "a rich man, founder and part owner of the biggest bus company in the island." (*Finding the Centre*, p. 34)

Naipaul realized as an adult what he might have sensed as a child that his father "dangled all his life in a half-dependence and half-esteem between these two powerful families" (*Finding the Centre*, p. 34). This has been fictionally represented in *A House for Mr Biswas*.

It took Naipaul a long time to be able to talk about his childhood. He could do it only in 1984 when he was an established writer himself, having got over the financial as

well as emotional insecurities of his early years. Even then he chooses to blur the temporal sequence of events in his childhood. To quote him:

Disorder within, disorder without. Only my school life was ordered; anything that had happened there I could date at once. But my family life-- my life at home, in the street--was jumbled, without sequence. The sequence I have given it here has come to me only with the writing of this piece.
(*Finding the Centre*, p.41)

In 1950 Naipaul won a Trinidad Government Scholarship. The basic purpose of such scholarships which could last for seven years was to help with the student's education till he had a profession. Naipaul's scholarship enabled his study in England at Oxford, not because he wanted to be an academic but because he thought it would help him to get away from Trinidad and become a writer in England. He imagined that in his three or four scholarship years at Oxford, his talents would be recognized and "....the books would start writing themselves." (Ibid p. 46)

That was not the way it worked out. In England Naipaul realized that he had no understanding of societies other than his own in Trinidad, and his life and reading in England did not provide him with material for a book. In 1955, five years after leaving Trinidad, he realized while working for the BBC as a freelance that the material for his writing had to be gleaned from his own experiences. He generalizes, "To become a writer, that noble thing, I had thought it necessary to leave. Actually to write, it was necessary to go back. It was the beginning of my self-knowledge." (*Finding the Centre*, p. 47)

So, after two failed attempts, Naipaul sat at the typewriter in the room in the Langham Hotel, sifting his Caribbean or more specially Port of Spain memories, settling finally on the image of Bogart whose father had travelled together with Naipaul's maternal grandfather as an indentured immigrant on the same ship. Some time during the long and frightening voyage they had sworn a bond of brotherhood which was honoured by their descendants.

The story of Bogart was highly appreciated by Naipaul's three colleagues in the freelancers' room, an Englishman named John Stockbridge, a Jamaican named Andrew Salkey who also wanted to be a writer and Gordon Woolford from British Guiana. This story, later included in *Miguel Street*, Naipaul's first work (though not the first to be published), led to many others. As Naipaul puts it:

Over the next few days the street grew. Its complexities didn't need to be pointed; they simply became apparent. People who had only been names in one story got dialogue in the next, then became personalities; and old personalities became more familiar. Memory provided the material city folklore as well, and city songs... My narrator consumed material and he seemed to be able to process every kind of material. (*Finding the Centre*, p.28-9)

Naipaul finished writing the story in five or six weeks but found no takers. He went on to write a second work, a novel titled *The Mystic Masseur* which was the first to be published. He was still very anxious and insecure but did not let these feelings blur his ambitions.

In the next section I will discuss briefly Naipaul's works of fiction and non-fiction, other than those to be taken up in detail in conjunction with the novel under study, so as to give you a comprehensive idea about the different phases in his creativity. This would help you to place *A House for Mr Biswas* in the right perspective.

1.2 AN OVERVIEW OF NAIPAUL'S FICTION AND NON-FICTION

In a literary career spanning a little over three decades, Naipaul has written twenty three books. In chronological order they are *The Mystic Masseur* (1957), *The Suffrage of Elvira* (1958), *Miguel Street* (1959), *A House for Mr Biswas* (1961), *The Middle Passage* (1962), *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* (1963), *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *A Flag on the Island* (1967), *The Mimic Men* (1967), *The Loss of El Dorado* (1969), *In A Free State* (1971), *The Overcrowded Barracoon* (1972), *Guerrillas* (1975), *India: A Wounded Civilization* (1977), *A Bend in the River* (1979), *The Return of Eva Peron with the Killings in Trinidad* (1980), *Among the Believers* (1981), *Finding the Centre* (1984), *The Enigma of Arrival* (1987), *A Turn in the South* (1989), *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), *A Way in the World* (1994), and *Beyond Belief* (1998).

A detailed study of *A House for Mr Biswas* should be preceded by a brief look at some of his other works in order to put him in perspective and in tracing some of the different phases in his creativity. This would include a look at his early works, namely those three which preceded *A House for Mr Biswas*. Naipaul's complex relationship with India started with initial sharp first impressions which have mellowed over the years. Therefore it is necessary to know something about his three books on India in order to comprehend *A House for Mr Biswas* better. A brief look at his two books based in England (*Mr Stone and the Knights Companion* and *The Enigma of Arrival*) and his latest book, is in order for a comprehensive outlook on Naipaul. Taken together this would provide a useful backdrop to one's reading of *A House For Mr Biswas*.

Caribbean history records a long period of colonization. Whether the colonial masters were British, French or Dutch did not really make a difference to the subject people. What mattered was its total impact which intensified over the years. In the words of a critic, "The history of the region . . . carries the burden of a profound erasure, the traces of which haunt the area with a memory but no recognition of an autochthonous cultural base. What remains startling about Caribbean history . . . is the stark transparency of its European manufacture: of its populations, social structures, political organizations, and the outside orchestration of the region's participation in the events of the larger world." (Mustafa, 30)

Naipaul's early novels should be considered against the backdrop of this multiple colonialism. The choice of the East Indian Trinidadian community into which he was born and was familiar with, is natural. (This community consisted largely of indentured immigrants working as agricultural labour, who were relative newcomers in Trinidad. Also they carried with them their experiences and mainly insular outlook from the remote villages in British India from where they had been recruited. They clung to their cultural roots that often manifested themselves in rituals and traditions as a form of security which the new environs did not offer them.) Over a period of time Trinidad's Indian community like any diaspora, "developed idiosyncrasies and cultural changes in their efforts to maintain their customs and traditions....The adherence to categories of caste, and their kinship patterns all transmuted to the colonial setting of Trinidad's already stratified society....eventually their insularity only deepened their rigidity to custom as it had been practised in India at the time of their initial emigration." (Mustafa, 31-32)

While *The Mystic Masseur* is Naipaul's first published work, and *The Suffrage of Elvira* his second novel to be published, *Miguel Street* with its seventeen episodic sketches of characters and events loosely held together by a young boy narrator who leaves home for study abroad, was the first to be written. This departure can be read as a symbol of transience or a continued migratory process that one finds in a number

of Naipaul's later works. Also the mode of discourse allows the narrative to fluctuate between a mature voice recollecting the impressions of childhood and the child's own vision which is much more limited. In the words of a critic :

"*Miguel Street*...lays the foundations for Naipaul's increasingly more concentrated examinations of the colonized condition. In both *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*, *Miguel Street*'s communal space is reworked into a more overt "national" framework, and the domesticity of its Dickensian "characters" into a sophisticated allegory of colonialism in *A House for Mr Biswas*." (Mustafa, 44)

In *The Mystic Masseur* and *The Suffrage of Elvira*, Naipaul concerns himself with his version of the political reality of Trinidad, before and after the country became independent. Naipaul's colonial perspective gave his writing a pro-white bias. He looked at post independence indigenous entrepreneurship and related activities in Trinidad in an ironical manner. Ganesh, the protagonist of *The Mystic Masseur*, is the stereotypical upwardly mobile first generation colonial entrepreneur who capitalized on the political opportunities that came his way. The recurring reference to him in *Miguel Street*, *The Suffrage of Elvira*, *A House for Mr Biswas* and certain stories in *A Flag on the Island* is an early example of Naipaul's "....intertextual unfolding whereby he is able to create an internal narrative authority premised upon recognition and familiarity." (Mustafa, 45)

The Suffrage of Elvira continues the political themes dealt with in *The Mystic Masseur*. It is the story of the election campaign in one district called Elvira by the candidate called Surujput Harbans. Both novels satirize a national political process after making the reader aware of a long tradition of political brokering and polarization characteristic of Trinidad's ethnic and class divisions. This has been challenged by George Lamming who denounces Naipaul's position as wholly Eurocentric. To quote him, "When such a writer is colonial, ashamed of his colonial background and striving like mad to prove himself through promotion to the peaks of a 'superior' culture whose values are gravely in doubt, then satire, like the charge of philistinism, is for me nothing more than a refuge." (Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*, cited by Mustafa, 56-57). We will discuss these three books in greater detail in the last section when we relate them to *A House for Mr Biswas*.

Naipaul's three books on India trace the growth of Naipaul's attitude towards India and Indians from sharp impressions and disappointments of the first visit as expressed in *An Area of Darkness* to a perception of India, in *India: A Wounded Civilization*, as a decadent civilization which needs to make a clean break with the past in order to progress. There is a gradual resignation to all that he sees in India and he attempts to interpret current situations and issues to his largely western readership in *India: A Million Mutinies Now*.

Naipaul's quest for India, a country that aroused his curiosity and which he had reconstructed in his mind from bits and pieces gleaned from racial memory and a childhood in a Brahmin household in Trinidad, started even before he first visited it in 1962. The first visit itself, ostensibly undertaken as a quest for his roots in the country of his grandparent's origin, was not a happy experience. It took him some time to get used to the vast physicality of India which threatened to submerge his identity.

Later, as Naipaul gave up his search for his "imaginary homeland", he became more responsive to the India that he visited in the seventies and eighties. He realized that while India was not and could not be his home, he could not reject it or visit the country as a casual tourist. The complexity of this relationship is suggested in a comment he makes in *India: A Wounded Civilization*: "I cannot travel only for the sights. I am at once too close and too far" (p.8-9). This spirit of acceptance can be related with the absence of anxiety, which indicates a shift from the outsider, colonial position he had taken earlier. Even the title is less negative, and Naipaul attempts to

transcend his itinerary and understand some of the issues and problems confronting India in the seventies.

Naipaul and his Critics

This process is continued in *India : A Million Mutinies Now*. The deliberate colonial slant of the title can be simplistically interpreted as an indicator of the colonial bias in Naipaul's writing. It would be wiser to read it as the author's hint at the imperialistic attitude of a central government viewed as a neocolonial power, suppressing assertions of identity by the numerous socioethnic / religious / political groups in India which had till then been marginalized. Economic progress and political clout have combined to strengthen them, giving them a voice which they raise in their march to the centre from the peripheries. However, the approach remains journalistic and Naipaul's attempts to study the problems of separatism in India are remembered as vignettes that stand out for their brilliant style (perfected over the years) rather than insightful observations.

One can juxtapose Naipaul's books on India with those based in England only to find a similar sense of alienation, an attitude that located the author somewhere between the country of his origin and the country of his adoption, in a state of permanent self-imposed exile. This could be linked up with the fact that *Mr Stone and the Knights Companion*, Naipaul's first "English" novel, was written in Kashmir, a place that calmed his hysteric response to the overpowering impressions of India. Kashmir had an idyllic insularity when Naipaul first visited it in 1962. The "English" character can be read as another of Naipaul's explorations of states of alienation. As a critic puts it, "Mr Stone's Prufrockian disaffection does suggest that life in the metropole, so fantasized about by distant colonials, houses its own varieties of rootlessness and frustrations." (Mustafa, 91)

"Prologue to an Autobiography" which is one of the two narratives in *Finding the Centre* and *The Enigma of Arrival* are possibly the most autobiographical of Naipaul's writings. The former has been used to substantiate facts from Naipaul's life and his development as a writer in the first section of this unit. The latter, an autobiographical work, is based in rural England, in Wiltshire where Naipaul has a cottage to which he often retreats. The novel is an acknowledgement of the narrator's imaginary England, especially the English countryside which is much more peaceful than the Caribbean Island or India. Also, the metaphor of the journey which recurs in Naipaul's works, gains prominence. "The protagonist knows that the journey he undertakes into the Wiltshire countryside is different from all previous journeys – it is an arrival with a difference... This arrival ... is a new life because he comes here having faced the final annulment – the deaths of those he has valued... And so this stranger in a new land has arrived in many ways." (Kamra, 170-1)

Naipaul's recent book *A Way in the World* starts by reiterating what he had taken up in *The Enigma of Arrival*, namely his own experience of racial politics in Trinidad in the late 50s. Characteristically, he is not interested in exploring the socio-economic reasons behind this. Possibly, Naipaul's own uprooted Indian identity, especially the idea of Hindutva which he has been partial to and argued for, is instrumental in distancing him from black politics in the Caribbeans. At the same time exploring Caribbean history through reminiscences and historical fiction is Naipaul's way of coming to terms with his own personal history. At the same time a discriminating reader can make out that his alienation stems from personal vanity and not just from cultural difference.

It would be difficult to place the book generically. At best it is formed of complicated, discontinuous but carefully arranged narrative fragments, oscillating in time, assimilating Naipaul's own experience as well as the experiences of Sir Walter Raleigh the explorer and Francisco Miranda, the nineteenth century Venezuelan revolutionary. What makes the book stand out is Naipaul's awareness of the fact that he cannot find what he is looking for, something that gives the book a sense of disquieting ambiguity which generally characterizes diasporic writing.

Naipaul's latest book *Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions Among the Converted People* based on five months of travel in four non-Arab Muslim countries – Indonesia, Iran, Pakistan and Malaysia--shows a similar ambivalence and fragmented perception of Islam. The basic idea developed in this book is that all non-Arab Muslims have to reject their own history and heritage and adopt the Arab heritage. As this may be a perception that disturbs the existing society and sows the seeds for fundamentalism, it has been challenged and refuted by non Arab Muslims all over the world as a distorted view.

1.3 THE 'GIRMIT' PEOPLE

Documentary evidence shows that overseas migration was rare in pre-colonial India though within the country the mobility rate among Indian villagers was fairly high. Kings often spent a large share of the state revenue on their armies which consisted of professional as well as peasant soldiers. Since no single employer could provide them full security and adequate wages, they often shifted their loyalties and hence travelled from one region to another.

While this pattern of migration has been an ongoing process from the medieval times, nineteenth century overseas migration was an offshoot of colonialism. The migration from India, mainly as unskilled labour to work on plantations in Mauritius, the Caribbeans, and Fiji, began in the 1830's. European imperialist expansion in the nineteenth century with its new industrial and commercial ventures, especially plantations, created the initial milieu for large scale migration which generated expanding demands for labour. In most cases, the colonial governments and planters, working in tandem, did not consider it economically or politically correct to recruit the indigenous people.

With progressive prohibition of African slavery in the first half of the nineteenth century, India and China became the main alternative sources of labour. This was the main "pull" factor. Also, European colonialism had created severe economic and social disturbances among the peasantry of these two countries. The officers or labour recruiters or 'arkathis' went to remote villages in the interiors of the country which were stricken by drought or famine (often artificially created, as the colonizers shipped out foodgrain from India to their own armies fighting somewhere) or during a season when those working as tenant farmers or agricultural labour were unemployed.

In other words, the offers of arkathis in most cases were not accepted because they were tempting but because they were the only way out in a difficult situation. Not much is known about the cause of emigration from Gujarat. So far as emigration from eastern and southern India is concerned, it was mainly caused by financial loss. Fragmentation of the Mughal empire and administrative reorganization that the British colonizers introduced was greatly responsible for impoverishment. Often landowners became tenants at short notice and were not able to exercise their hereditary rights or fulfil their customary duties. This loss of status, and not just poverty induced many to leave the country despite traditional aversion to crossing the seas or *Kala pani*. This was the 'push' factor.

Also, the development of colonial economies created several commercial though low-level industrial opportunities at these points where the western capitalist economy interacted with the indigenous rural economy in the areas of retail trade and in the manufacture of goods needed by the increasingly cash conscious peasantry. Since native populations lacked entrepreneurs who could tap these limited but lucrative opportunities, India and China provided the risk takers.

Thus, there were two kinds of Indian and Chinese emigrants to the colonies: unskilled labourers and small-scale entrepreneurs. Among Indians the distinction between the kind of emigrants was largely (though not absolutely) region-based. The unskilled labourers came mainly from eastern Uttar Pradesh, Western Bihar, and provinces in Tamil Nadu then known as Madras. The entrepreneurs were largely from the northern district of Bombay province (now part of Maharashtra), Gujarat and Sind (now in Pakistan). As mentioned earlier this regional distinction is not absolute; for example both unskilled labourers and chettiar entrepreneurs came from Madras. However, in countries where the two types of emigrants or their descendants coexist, the distinction between them is a characteristic of intragroup relations in the Indian community.

Three main types of emigration and settlement stand out from others, a) the *kangani* system in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and Malaya (now Malaysia) b) indentured labour in the Caribbeans, Mauritius and Fiji and c) free emigration to East Africa. In the *kangani* system, the migrants were recruited by headmen known as *kanganis*. Each *kangani* recruited a group of men belonging mainly to his caste and kin group, and from the turn of the century migration by families became quite common. Sometimes a number of emigrant bands, each with its own leader, combined under the direction of a high-caste head *kangani*. Often, the *kangani*, a man of means, lent his followers money to travel to settle down in a plantation. He negotiated with planters on wages and work conditions and could remove members of his group to another plantation if not satisfied with either. Each group occupied makeshift barracks known as 'lines' and pooled resources to meet common expenses. Even outside the workplace the *kangani* had considerable influence over the lives of his band of workers, establishing and exercising a kind of patronage over them. Within the system there were variations but one need not go into them.

Migration to the West Indies was organized by the indenture system introduced in the nineteenth century but discontinued in 1917, when the Government of India placed an embargo on indentured emigration. Emigration to Trinidad started in 1845, to Mauritius in 1834, to Fiji in 1878, to Guyana in 1838. Most of these emigrants did not return to the countries of adoption after completing their terms of indenture, something that can be linked with the reasons that made them emigrate, which has been discussed earlier. Significantly free emigration to these countries took place simultaneously but increased considerably only after 1917.

Indenture was basically a contract by which the emigrant agreed to work for a given employer for a period of five years for a specified wage. At the end of five years, the emigrant was free to reindenture or to work elsewhere in the same colony; at the end of ten years he was entitled to a subsidized air passage. The fulfilment of the contract was governed by an Immigration Ordinance enacted in the country of destination. Prospective emigrants testified before a magistrate in India that they understood the terms of the contract. On making such a deposition they were housed in a depot in Calcutta until a ship was ready to take them to their place of work.

In order to avoid cut throat competition, the Governments of Jamaica, Trinidad, Mauritius and Fiji maintained an emigration agency jointly in Calcutta. The agency issued licenses to subagents who were paid a commission on each satisfactory recruit. These hired recruiters or *arkathis* went round market towns, pilgrimage centres or wherever they were likely to find people desperate to get away from their present environs. The only qualifications required were physical fitness and experience of agricultural work. Initially almost all these recruits were male, later a quota of 40 percent females for every shipload was imposed by the colonial governments. Generally emigrants volunteered as individuals, emigration by family units, or caste groups or village communities were rare.

Most indentured emigrants were unrelated to one another and found themselves among strangers during the voyage and on the plantations where they were made to work. In the absence of any real kinship or family bonds, the establishment of a bond of brotherhood known as *jahazi* or *jahazi bhai* among individuals who had befriended each other during the long voyages, was instituted. The *jahazis* often got themselves assigned to the same plantation and the same barracks, regarded each other as real brothers, and treated each other's children as close kin. Marriage between the children of *jahazi bhai*s was considered incestuous. In Naipaul's *Finding the Centre* there is a mention of Bogart whose ancestors from Punjab travelled with Naipaul's grandfather on the same ship and developed the *jahazi bhai* kinship. As Naipaul weaves the various strands of his Trinidad memories into his early fiction, Bogart comes to occupy a significant position.

Life in the colonies was hard. The indentured immigrants lived an isolated and insulated life, little better than slaves. Any contact with the outside world was mediated by the plantation manager, the magistrate, the police and the immigration department. Desertion laws limited their freedom of movement. The indenture contract which the emigrants called the 'girit', an obvious distortion of 'agreement', placed them under complete control of their employers. The manager or his deputy herded the emigrants together each morning, assigned tasks, judged performance, gave some permission to report sick, and chastised others for feigning sickness. Those found guilty of indiscipline were sent to the magistrate's courts to be punished for breach of ordinance.

On completing indenture, some immigrants stayed on at the plantations, others moved out into the rural areas. In West Indian colonies the bulk of the population was of immigrant origin. So, the society as a whole, bore the strong imprint of the plantation system, its structures deeply influenced by the institution in which almost everyone and his immediate forbears had participated. Large numbers of Indians moved into villages and towns after completing their indenture, settling on the periphery of black villages, combining subsistence farming with wage labour. Indians seldom combined to form villages on their own and wherever exclusively or predominantly Indian villages were found, it was under government sponsorship.

In these old settled overseas Indian communities there were no agencies of social control comparable to panchayats in rural India. Religion, on the other hand, was used as a means to organize and orient their lives. However, rigours of plantation life, uncertainties of an alien environment and competition from Christian missionaries, changed the form and content of religious activities. In this social set up, the brahmin pundits in Trinidad came to acquire considerable status, wealth and power in the community as compared to their counter-parts in India. Hinduism in India is a way of life whereas among the overseas Indians religion is formalized. Organizations of *yagna*, the sponsoring of *pujas* and *satsangs* were forms of religious activities which became more and more frequent. Festivals like Diwali, Id etc., were celebrated with great pomp and show and participation extended to Hindus as well as Muslims. In this ambience Tulsi Das's *Ramcharitmanas* acquired a new significance as the indentured emigrants visualized themselves banished from their familiar surroundings like Rama and undergoing great hardship. Along with this, *bhajans*, *kirtans* and readings from the *Bhagwad Gita* was part of the immigrant's socio-cultural life apart from giving them a spiritual sustenance.

In conclusion I would like to tell you briefly about yet another kind of emigration which took place along with the kinds that have been discussed. This is free emigration of traders and skilled artisans who were under no social or financial constraint to emigrate but did so to try their luck in a new country. They did not settle on the land as farmers or labourers. This emigration was not entirely unorganized as those who established themselves brought over their fellow villagers, kin and others belonging to the same caste. In that sense there is a basic similarity between free emigration and the *kangani* system. Free emigration prevailed largely

in East Africa, a desired destination to a large number of entrepreneurs from Sind and Gujarat. To an extent this kind of emigration can be compared with twentieth century emigration of entrepreneurs and professionals to the Gulf region, Europe, America and Australia as a) there are no compulsions to emigrate and b) they often sponsor their immediate family members.

A study of diasporic Indian writing needs to be accompanied by a brief discussion of the various kinds of emigration as that would help to put our study of Naipaul's *A House for Mr Biswas* in perspective.

1.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit I gave you a complete overview of the indenture or 'girmit' system. You will have to keep this in mind when you read the text *A House for Mr Biswas*. This will serve as a backdrop against which you will make a textual analysis.

Apart from this I also discussed some of Naipaul's other fiction and non-fiction so as to give you a comprehensive idea about the different phases in his creativity. This too will help you to place *A House for Mr Biswas* in the right perspective.

Last but not the least I provided an introductory note to Naipaul's life and works.

1.5 GLOSSARY

- Temporal sequence** : A sequence or chronological order based on actual time of occurrence of events.
- Autochthonous** : Found in the place of origin.

1.6 QUESTIONS

1. Write a note on V.S. Naipaul's early life in Trinidad and London, substantiating it with comments made by him in his books.
2. Write a brief note on nineteenth century migration with special reference to indentured immigrants in Trinidad.

1.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

- Naipaul, V.S. – *A House for Mr Biswas*. 1961. Penguin, 1969.
- Naipaul, V.S. - *Finding the Centre : Two Narratives*. Andre Deutsch, 1984.
- Jain, Ravindra K. *Indian Communities Abroad : Themes and Literature*. Manohar, 1993
- Mustafa, Fawzia. *V.S. Naipaul*. Cambridge University Press, 1995

UNIT 2 MR. BISWAS AND THE TULSIS

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Prologue
- 2.2 Pastoral
- 2.3 Before the Tulsis
- 2.4 The Tulsis
- 2.5 The Chase
- 2.6 Green Vale
- 2.7 A Departure
- 2.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.9 Glossary
- 2.10 Questions
- 2.11 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to examine *A House for Mr. Biswas* in detail. Each section of this unit and the next one, is devoted to one chapter in the novel (in sequential order) and should be read along with the text so that the references autobiographical or otherwise, are clarified and your reading of the text is insightful, enabling you to interpret the text in your own way on the basis of the referential aids provided.

The first unit with its introductory note on Naipaul and the complex influences which shaped his thinking as a writer and an overview of the indenture or 'gimmit' system should serve as a backdrop against which you are to study *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

2.1 PROLOGUE

A House for Mr. Biswas starts with the death of Mr. Mohun Biswas who had been working as a journalist with the *Trinidad Sentinel* and had been sacked ten weeks before his death. The character of Mr. Biswas is obviously based on Naipaul's own father Seepersad Naipaul, a journalist with the *Trinidad Guardian*. His journalistic career tapered off before coming to an end with the departure of the managing editor of the paper, Gault MacGown, who had inspired him to be a journalist. Seepersad had never realised his ambition to become a writer.

Mr. Biswas's desire to have his own house was natural as he did not want to live with the Tulsis. Naipaul would have sensed a similar desire in his own father who remained financially and emotionally dependent on his wife's family the Capil Deos, a rich and influential family of Chaguanas, a district of Trinidad. So Mohun Biswas who "...had moved from one house of strangers to another" as a boy and felt "...he had lived nowhere but in the house of the Tulsis" (p.8) was "...struck again and again by the wonder of being in his own house". (p.8) To quote from Peter Hughes's monograph on Naipaul (Routledge, 1988) "The house desired by Mr. Biswas is an object of desire created by the unhoused state of his (V.S. Naipaul's) own father, long homeless under the roof of his extended family." (p.40)

On another level the house is a trope for anchorage, a common feature of diasporic writing, to be juxtaposed with the idea of homelessness that was deeply embedded in the psyche of emigrants; more so as the process of crossing the *kala pani* and settling down in an alien land was far from enjoyable or even voluntary. In Naipaul's case the emigration from Trinidad to London makes him doubly dispossessed in a way and the image of the homeless wanderer has been projected through most of his writings.

Ironically, the house which had seemed a fine one to Mr. Biswas when he had first seen it, appeared full of flaws as soon as it was bought. The staircase was dangerous, there was no back door, one door could not be opened. However, the disappointment appeared to fade in no time as Mr. Biswas and his family "... accommodated themselves to every peculiarity and awkwardness of the house" (p.12) regarding it as simply their own house. On a macro level the same holds true of the process of emigration and settling down in one's country of adoption, where everything appeared uncomfortable and bleak till the emigrants got used to their new surroundings.

Naipaul tells the reader that Mr. Biswas had built two houses of his own and spent a lot of time looking at houses. His idea of a good house was a brightly painted modern looking concrete structure, something that he assumed would be beyond his budget. So, when he saw something that broadly tallied with his expectations, he was enchanted with it and bought it without weighing the pros and cons. Naipaul's detailed description of the house is possibly assembled from childhood memories of houses he had lived in, apart from the "big house" belonging to his mother's family in Chaguanas. /

While reading the text you would notice Naipaul's eye for detail and the irony that the description of the house is laced with. A couple of passages are cited from the text as illustrations :

Because the house faced west and had no protection from the sun, in the afternoon only two rooms were comfortably habitable : the kitchen downstairs and the wet bathroom-and-lavatory upstairs.

In his original design the solicitor's clerk seemed to have forgotten the need for a staircase to link both floors, and what he had provided had the appearance of an afterthought.(p.9)

These narratorial skills, displayed early in Naipaul's writing, have been perfected over the years. In "A Reporter at Large : After the Revolution" an article written for *The New Yorker*, Naipaul who visited Iran for the second time after the Islamic Revolution (the earlier visit had been in 1974), in 1997, a week before the election says :

I was staying this time at the Hyatt. It wasn't absolutely the Hyatt now : it was the Azadi Grand Hotel... All the five-star hotels of Iran had been taken over by the state and renamed... The polished marble floor of the big lobby was reassuring... But the piece of carpet in the lift was dirty and stained and didn't fit. The gilt of the lift floors.... had been torn or worn away in places.... The hotel porters were all in open-necked shirts; this was one of the badges of Revolution... Many of the porters were unshaven: this was Islamic. Some were shiny-faced and dirty. This was social defiance: the two styles of revolution, the religious and the political, running together. (p.45)

His writing is full of such passages, each word loaded and conveying layers of meaning. The latter passage shows how, over the last few decades he has perfected his style.

In the "Prologue to an Autobiography" Naipaul refers to a heavy bookcase-and-desk made from pine and packing crates, part of his father's furniture which he could relate to and slowly take a liking to. In the novel the bookcase becomes the slumbering bed which had become as useless to Mr. Biswas as the glass cabinet bought to please his wife Shama. Starting with Mr. Biswas on his deathbed, Naipaul goes back to his early life, a *bildungsroman* in reverse, setting a literary trend of sorts.

2.2 PASTORAL

Even before one starts reading the first chapter, one is intrigued by the title. A reading of the chapter confirms what had occurred to one earlier – the use of the word "pastoral" is ironical as the ambience is anything but that. Mr. Biswas's parents are literary creations based on what Naipaul had heard of his father's parents. To quote from the "Prologue to an Autobiography" in support of my statement:

My father's father had died when my father was a baby. My father knew only his mother's stories of this man : a miserly and cruel man who counted every biscuit in the tin, made her walk five miles in the hot sun to save a penny fare, and, days before my father was born, drove her out of the house. My father never forgave his father. (p.61)

It appears from a reading of the text that Naipaul's father transmitted a dislike of his own father to his son. This is evident when one looks at the similarity between two passages, the first from the opening paragraph of a story titled "They Named Him Mohun" from a collection of Seepersad Naipaul's stories titled *The Adventure of Gurudeva*, the second from *A House for Mr. Biswas*. To quote :

Mohun's coming into this world of light was not an occasion of joy for anyone. There were reasons. In the first place, three months before his birth, Bipti, his mother, had left his father's home, as it turned out, never to return. With her two children – Sohani, aged four, and Krishna, a little over two years old – she had trudged seven miles to her mother's on a hot and dusty day. (*The Adventures... p.125*)

Shortly before he was born there had been another quarrel between Mr. Biswas's mother Bipti and his father Raghu, and Bipti had taken her three children and walked all the way in the hot sun to the village where her mother Bissoondaye lived. (*A House for Mr. Biswas. 15*)

Mr. Biswas's father Raghu was mainly concerned with hoarding money, not caring if his family was deprived of necessities in the bargain. Since no one, not even his wife Bipti knew where he had hidden his hoard, no one benefitted from it when he died.

If you read the passage describing his death you would notice that there is no real sense of loss or grief, instead there is an urge to finish the rituals as quickly and correctly as possible and get down to sorting out the inconveniences caused by Raghu's death. In fact Raghu's death comes across, not as a tragic incident but an inconveniencing one which needed to be tackled efficiently, almost professionally. So, Tara, Bipti's sister, a woman of considerable means and social standing, received a message from her sister and arrived promptly. The author's comment, "She left the mourning to Bipti and arranged everything else." (p.32) leaves one in no doubt as to what was more important, the "mourning" or "everything else" which refers to the arrangements for the funeral. That this includes a pundit and a photographer, suggests a blending of the traditional with the modern, the sort of life the upwardly mobile descendants of indentured immigrants led.

Tara belongs to this class by virtue of marriage to a man who had "freed himself from land", a phrase clearly indicating that post-indenture farming was not a free choice but a compulsion in the absence of better options. Indenture can thus be interpreted as, not just a period of five or ten years during which the immigrants had to work on plantations but the life that followed, mainly that of doing odd jobs or small time farming, both barely sufficient to provide the necessities of life.

You should note the strict adherence to rituals which are most obvious during ceremonies connected with birth, death and marriage, as these gave the Indians in Trinidad a sense of security and affinity to the mother country though some of them had never seen it. The rituals were many : such as proclaiming Bipti a widow, unsalted, unseasoned food cooked in someone else's house as there could be no cooking in the house where someone had died. Tara saw to it that all these customs were observed, even "instructing" her sister's children how to behave during the ceremonies. The sombreness of the description is broken by the fact that there was no real grief and Tara the self-proclaimed master of ceremonies had come wearing all her jewellery as if she had come to attend a family wedding and not a funeral.

There were compromises in view of the law of the land. Since cremation was forbidden, there was a burial which shortened the period of mourning considerably. After all customs had to be oriented according to one's circumstances. To survive in an alien land, often in adverse conditions, called for flexibility and a functional attitude to life often dispensing with traditions that could not be carried on. Predictably, Raghū's daughter Dehuti was less concerned with her father's death and more with her future prospects in living with her childless aunt Tara who would give her new clothes, jewellery and in all possibility, arrange a good match and a sizable dowry.

Of late, creative writing in English has been flooded with linguistic experiments, mainly to give a story/novel/play/poem a regional flavour, especially when it is based in a locale that is not an English speaking area. When Naipaul was writing *A House for Mr. Biswas* such experimenting with English was practically non-existent. Keeping this in mind, his handling of English as a language spoken by people who speak in Hindi, is deft. Tara's command to the photographer in English, "All right. Draw your photo now". (p34) a literal translation of "*Theek hai. Ab photo kheench lo,*" conveys the ethos of a people who think in Hindi but speak in English if the situation demands it. The literal translation does not seem gimmicky, it hints at the dualities of language that the indentured emigrants had accepted as a part of their lives.

2.3 BEFORE THE TULSIS

After his father's death Mr. Biswas lost his moorings as his mother Bipti sold the hut and land and moved to Pagotes where they became dependants of Tara though they did not live with her. Mr. Biswas went to the Canadian Mission School where the contemptuous behaviour of his teacher Lal who had "...converted to Presbyterianism from a low Hindu caste"(p.42) towards Hindus, specially Brahmins like Mr. Biswas, suggests that caste-based communal feelings carried from India, very often, determined patterns of behaviour. Lal did not lose a chance to poke fun at Mr. Biswas for not possessing a birth certificate. That he pronounces it as "buth sutificate" heightens the irony of the situation.

Another instance of similar behaviour is noticed in the attitude of F.Z. Ghany "solicitor, conveyancer and a commissioner of oaths"(p.42) to whom Tara takes Bipti and Mr. Biswas for the birth certificate. In case the reader has missed the "good humoured scorn" in the way Ghany greeted the trio, the authorial voice reaffirms it as

one is told, "He made his money from Hindus, but, as a Muslim, distrusted them." (p.43)

Conditions of abject poverty in Pagotes are conveyed through subtle touches. The school teacher never changed his jacket, he possibly had only one; most of his students dressed in hand-me-downs, at times their garments were originally meant for women. One can safely deduce that Naipaul wrote from personal experience. His father came from a family of agricultural labourers. Like Mr. Biswas, he had lost his father as a child and was nearly sent back to India with his mother and brother on an immigrant ship. Naipaul refers to the incident in *Finding the Centre*. To quote :

The family had been 'passed' for repatriation; they had gone to the immigration depot on Nelson Island. There my father had panicked, had decided that he didn't want to go back to India. He hid in one of the latrines overhanging the sea, and he stayed there until his mother changed her mind about the trip back to India. (p.62)

Though he does not talk about it, Naipaul himself would have had a hard time during his childhood, dependant on his mother's family and living with them with his mother and four brothers and sisters. After his father left the *Trinidad Guardian*, he did not have a fixed source of income to look after his family, apart from the odd job he did here and there. This bred in him a sense of insecurity and abhorrence of poverty. While the first is covered by an arrogance, the way in which he distanced himself from his father's relations in India as recounted in *An Area of Darkness* (which will be taken up in detail later) definitely suggests the latter.

In an essay titled "London" which was first published in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1958 and later included in *The Overcrowded Barracoon*, Naipaul articulates his strong feelings for Trinidad:

Trinidad may seem complex, but to anyone who knows it, it is a simple colonial philistine society. Education is desirable because it may lead to security, but any unnecessary acquaintance with books is frowned upon. (p.9)

This is reflected in his description of the education that Mr. Biswas received at school, making "copious" notes dictated by the teacher which had no meaning for him.

Naipaul's colonial conditioning and education prevented him from perceiving that the "philistine" character of Trinidad's society was not indigenous, it was a product of the colonizer's conscious efforts to strip the colonized people of their history, their cultural heritage in the name of improving them. In this context, the purpose of education was to make the student ashamed of his/her own history/heritage and adopt western ones. In the colonial context, it was dangerous to let the colonized develop a sense of pride or even a sense of curiosity about one's heritage as that might give rise to nationalist feelings. Also, in the stratified society of Trinidad, privileged ones like Tara's husband Ajodha might not be able to read but they could get others like Mr. Biswas dependent on them, to read to them. Education thus had a functional role to play.

Mr. Biswas's training with Pundit Jairam appears to be based on Naipaul's father's experience. While reading it you would notice a mechanical, ritualistic approach to religion without a trace of spirituality. A reference to the *Ramayana* along with its Hindi commentary reaffirms the statement made earlier about its special place in the psyche of the indentured emigrants who believed themselves to be exiled from their mother country. They identified with the image of Rama.

Even today in countries like Fiji and Mauritius, public readings from the *Ramayana* are common, something that is a dying tradition in rural India, especially in the face

of the TV serial or the epic. There is a reference in this chapter to another tradition that is still common in parts of rural India, that of putting one's palm-prints on the walls of one's house, not so much as a decoration as the novel suggests but as a post-marriage/post-festival ritual.

**Mr. Biswas
and the Tulsis**

The chapter highlights Mr. Biswas's inability to train as a pundit not because of any special shortcoming but because, as the narrator suggests, the system is hollow and uninspiring. It ends with a mention of Mr. Biswas's meeting with Shama at Hanuman House. Another autobiographical parallel that you will notice in this chapter is the effect of the pundit's training and the harsh attitude of Pundit Jairam towards Mr. Biswas, resulting in stomach trouble that caused him acute pain when he was excited, depressed or angry. In *Finding the Centre* Naipaul talks about his father's stomach pains and depression.

2.4 THE TULSIS

The overwhelming presence of the Tulsis in the novel parallels the role played by Naipaul's mother's family in real life. The opening sentence in this chapter suggests the superior standing of the Tulsis in Arwacas as seen in the house they lived in. Surrounded by timber-and-corrugated iron buildings in dilapidated condition, Hanuman House "...stood like an alien white fortress." (p.80) assertive, defiant. The statue of "a rampant lion" on each side of the terrace as described by Naipaul in *Finding the Centre* (p.35) is replaced by "....A concrete statue of the benevolent monkey-god Hanuman" (p.80-81) in the novel drives home the traditional Sanatani identity of the inhabitants of the house who would have nothing to do with the reformist attitude of the Arya Samajists.

The debate between Sanatanis and Arya Samajists often threatened to become conflictual in early twentieth century northern India. The Sanatanis had a brahmin-oriented approach to religion and traditional customs whereas the Arya Samajists attempted to evolve a simpler approach to both by cutting down rituals. This annoyed the brahmins and made the situation conflictual. These conflicts found their ways into the psyche of the Indian Community in Trinidad. Predictably, established brahmin families like the Tulsis would have nothing to do with Arya Samaj while Mr. Biswas, like Naipaul's father, found it inspiring and the narrator sides with him. Mr. Biswas found the statues of Hindu gods in the formal drawing room of the Tulsis heavy and ugly and made fun of them, agreeing with a local social reformer called Pankaj Rai (partially because he was patronized by the Naths, rivals of the Tulsis) who considered idols an insult to human intelligence and to God and proclaimed that man's caste should be determined by his actions and not his birth. Rai's mysterious disappearance did not dampen his fervour and his place was taken by one Shivlochan who along with an idle journalist named Misir, passed impressive resolutions which would never be implemented.

Mr. Biswas's support for the Arya Samaj can be interpreted on another level. It is a manifestation of his resentment against the Tulsis who were avowed Sanatanis. He did not like the way he was sucked into the household by marrying Shama. To quote from the novel, "The world was too small, the Tulsi family too large. He felt trapped." (p.91) His initial euphoria at being married to a daughter of the Tulsis disappeared when he realized that he had been chosen simply because he belonged to the right caste, like Govind the illiterate coconut seller. He had neither money nor position to be able to afford a separate establishment with Shama, so he was expected to become one of the Tulsis, a sort of *ghar-jamai*, something that he found hateful and rebelled against.

Another thing that you would note while reading this chapter is the way it details intricate operations of the extended Tulsi family, the power politics and the ways in which individual assertions of identity were nipped in the bud so as to keep the monolithic structure of the family intact. The narrator talks about complex relationships between individuals at Hanuman House, even those closely related, like sisters.

There is a touch of humour in the way petty jealousies between sisters are made to appear as close bonds of affection. (Mr. Biswas, absolutely ignorant about power politics in the family, decides to criticize Mrs. Tulsi and her sons to Goyind, husband of Chinta, Shama's sister, to whom she is apparently very close. However everything is reported back to them and he has a hard time defending himself.) In keeping with the politically correct traditions of the extended family, Mr. Biswas's attempts to walk out are thwarted by Chinta since her husband is responsible for the row. Mr. Biswas slowly becomes familiar with the working of the extended family and knows he would have to tackle it from within instead of running away. Since his resistance affected the powerful hold of the Tulsis on the other dependent sons-in-law as well, he was literally ordered to move to The Chase, "a long straggling settlement of mud huts in the heart of the sugarcane area" (p.141). The next section will take up his life and travails there.

2.5 THE CHASE

Naipaul's father had tried his hand at a number of odd jobs when his son was a child. Mr. Biswas did the same. This chapter takes up his attempts to live on his own in a plantation area known as The Chase for some mysterious reason. The contrast between the colonial name of the place and the miserable conditions prevailing there, parallels the irony of Mr. Biswas's situation. His hopes and expectations from his small shop selling food items, should be juxtaposed with the reality, namely the poverty of the people living there as well as the hostility of the other shopkeepers who were determined to stall any competition.

Of course the move from Hanuman House did not really make him independent of the Tulsis. The small shop with the two rooms and a kitchen ("a derelict makeshift structure in the yard" p.142) along with space at the back that the villagers and later Mr. Biswas called "the bandon" meaning abandoned land, belonged to the Tulsis, and was an unprofitable property which they had not been able to utilize in any way at that point of time. From the detailed description of the people one can safely deduce that Naipaul had lived in a house like that as a child when his father had been variously employed.

It took time for Mr. Biswas to get used to living independently. Without the security provided by the warmth and noise that was part of the ambience of the Hanuman House he was generally afraid to face life on his own. "afraid to disturb the silence, afraid to open the door of the shop, to step into the light" (p.145), one of the early symptoms of the hysteria that was to overcome him later. As Naipaul describes the furniture in Mr. Biswas's house in the Chase, one feels that he had in mind the few pieces of furniture bought by his own father in Port of Spain. This was the first furniture he had considered his own, especially the large "canopy-less cast iron fourposter whose black enamel paint was chipped and lacklustre." (p.145)

Characteristically, it was his wife Shama who provided him with the feeling of security and stability. Earlier she had protested at leaving Hanuman House but now she was reconciled to the idea and tried her best to make the rest of her family feel at home. This is conveyed subtly by a show of confidence verging on aggression. "Her actions were assertive, wasteful and unnecessarily noisy. They filled shop and house;

they banished silence and loneliness.” (p.146) Possibly Naipaul’s own mother played a similar role when the family moved from place to place in his childhood.

**Mr. Biswas
and the Tulsis**

While reading this chapter you would notice Shama’s insistence on the house-blessing ceremony which turned out to be a Tulsi dominated event. This along with the ‘mounting’ of the sticks indicates the diasporic Indian’s penchant for elaborate rituals. Stick fighting has been one of the most popular martial arts in certain parts of rural India. In the absence of recreational facilities; it became a pastime and an assertion of identity among the emigrants, absorbing some of the local myths and acquiring an added aura of romance, awe and mystery.

The autobiographical note that pervades the book can be perceived in the description of Mr. Biswas’ fits of hysteria which came on while Shama went away to Hanuman House after a quarrel and stayed there for sometime before returning home. Actions like growing fingernails to an unnatural length and holding them up to people to startle them can be interpreted as a craving for attention which has not been received in the normal course. The same would hold true for applying dabs of healing creams of different colours on self-inflicted wounds on his face and standing in his shop doorway to greet people. On the whole this chapter gives you a glimpse of the kind of life which Naipaul might have led as a child as his father struggled to make ends meet, in conditions far from congenial.

2.6 GREEN VALE

The bleak note of the previous chapter titled “The Chase” is carried on to “Green Vale”. The title would suggest a soothing place but the trees with half the leaves dead and the other at the top “a dead green” (p.205), indicate otherwise. Even the new leaves had nothing fresh about them, “they came into the world old, without a shine, and only grew longer before they too died.” (p.206) These were the trees surrounding the barracks where the labourers working on the estate lived and Mr. Biswas as their “driver” or sub-overseer lived among them. Nature evidently offered nothing to soothe the bleakness from the lives of those who lived in the barracks.

The barracks themselves, built in a line, offered the labourers little more than a roof over their heads and were not built with a thought for any privacy or comfort. There is a lot of reference to barrack life in diasporic literature from countries like Fiji, but none of it even remotely suggests that the indentured emigrants liked living in them. Therefore it should not come to you as a surprise that the sight of them aroused in Mr. Biswas the strong desire to build his own house, “by whatever means” (p.206). Nothing could make the barrack room a ‘room’, least of all, the furniture that Mr. Biswas had bought in the last days at the Chase.

Mr. Biswas’s yearning for the outside world can be read as Naipaul’s father’s desire to get out of what he considered the claustrophobic life in Trinidad, a desire that he passed on to his son. Please recall that Naipaul won a Trinidad government scholarship. He decided to use it to study English at Oxford, not because he was particularly interested in the degree, but because he wanted to get away.

The indication that Mr. Biswas was absolutely dissatisfied with his work and environment is effectively conveyed by the author. His complaints to Shama, “Look at me... You could look at me and say that this is my sort of work?” (p.209) His itching skin, insect bites and dried dirt on fingernails were symptomatic of physical discomfort and self-loathing. There was no alternative so he carried on, finding an escape route in incessant baths, which any psychologist will tell you, is often a desperate subconscious attempt to get out of a situation while the individual knows consciously that it is not possible. One can sense the dissatisfaction in the description

of Christmas celebrations at the Hanuman House which was "only a series of anticipations" (p.215) instead of being a festive occasion.

An incident that needs to be considered seriously in this chapter is the breaking of the doll's house by Shama. She had reduced the doll's house to a bundle of firewood. "None of its parts was whole. Its delicate joints were exposed and useless. Below the torn skin of paint... the hacked and splintered wood was white and raw." (p.219). It could be read as a betrayal, an instance of Shama siding with the Tulsis instead of with her husband, which adds to his insecurity. Also, the doll's house can be interpreted as a symbol of Mr. Biswas' dreams and aspirations which were rudely shattered when he went against the code of conduct prescribed by the Tulsis, upon whom he was dependent.

This can be related directly to his hysteria which the chapter details, dwelling on its different manifestations at different points of time. His reaction to Shama's fourth pregnancy can be cited as one such instance when his insecurity overwhelmed him. To quote, "He was falling into the void, and that terror, known only in dreams, was with him as he lay awake at nights, hearing the snores and creaks and the occasional cries of babies from the other rooms." (p.227) The chapter describes a number of such manifestations, Mr. Biswas' paranoia about his house being burnt down, his unnatural suspicion of Shama and children with whom he was unable to establish a normal relationship, his bitten down fingernails, a deep sense of depression and a constant fear of being killed. Evidently Naipaul who was close to his father, observed him during his fits of depression and recreated Mr. Biswas' paranoia and hysteria fictionally from his memories.

The chapter ends with a severe storm that all but demolishes Mr. Biswas's house and can be read as an externalization of his inner fears. He could not offer even a word of comfort as Anand screams, terrified by the havoc created by the storm. He only lies on his bed muttering ineffectively as the house almost collapses. Ultimately a person called Ramkhilawan (note the name and the association that goes with it), a labourer from the barracks, comes, possibly after hearing Anand's screams and closes the windows, lights the lamp and comforts Anand. Once again Mr. Biswas' attempt to build his own house and live in it, fails.

2.7 A DEPARTURE

The concluding chapter of the first part of the novel tries to round off the happenings in this section. The inevitability of Mr. Biswas's return to Hanuman House is juxtaposed with the reassuring warm treatment which gradually brings him back to normal. To some extent he is still disoriented and "... couldn't assess what had gone before or what was to come." (p. 295), oscillating between the comforting warmth of his present situation and the sharp disturbing memories of what had happened the reassuring.

The registration of Indian doctor, respected by the Tulsis, not for his professional capabilities on good manners and affluence, diagnoses the problem as nerves and a certain vitamin deficiency. In keeping with the community's superstitious feelings, attempts are made to exercise the evil spirits that had supposedly caused the mishap.

At this point you should be able to discern the paradox of Mr. Biswas situation which is subtly conveyed. On one hand he did not belong with the people at Hanuman House like Seth and Mrs. Tulsi, as he found them rather patronizing. On the other deficiency is a part of Hanuman House. "an organism that possessed a life, strength and power to comfort which was quite separate from the individuals who composed it (p.302).

Another thing that you would notice in the description of Mr. Biswas' convalescence is a touch of tenderness in the narratorial voice, almost as if the narrator were trying to soothe his troubles away by enveloping him in a dark cocoon, almost womblike :

"...Mr. Biswas slept and woke and slept again. The darkness, the silence, the absence of the world enveloped and comforted him. At some far-off time he had suffered great anguish... Now he had surrendered, and this surrender had brought peace."(p.299)

As a young boy Naipaul would have watched his father racked by fits of hysteria helplessly; as an adult he tries to atone for it by placing Mr. Biswas in as comfortable a situation as possible, such that enables him to sleep away his troubles.

What keeps the chapter from getting too bleak is the light touch of humour that Naipaul manages to infuse in a situation which would have become far too depressing otherwise. The comic relief is provided by Ramchand, husband of Mr. Biswas's sister Dchuti. He worked in a lunatic asylum and when he came to visit Mr. Biswas, he took it for granted that his brother-in-law was a certified lunatic and had to be treated accordingly. So he suggested that a gramophone be provided for Mr. Biswas so that he could listen to music as the inmates at his asylum did. A well-meant suggestion takes on a farcical note because of the aside, "We does play music to them all the time."(p.300)

The author adds his bit to make Ramchand's suggestion even more absurd. To quote: "He spoke of prerequisites of the job as though the Lunatic Asylum had been organized solely for his benefit." (p.300) A discriminating reader, familiar with Naipaul's brahminic arrogance (despite professed agnosticism) would cite this as an instance of the same, as Ramchand was from a lower caste, something that the women in Hanuman House made fun of. As one of them said, "However much you wash a pig...you can't turn it into a cow." (p.301) In the closed society of Trinidad caste hierarchies were important and transgressors were not looked upon kindly, even if they had succeeded in life.

The first part of the novel ends on a positive note though there is uncertainty regarding the future. Mr. Biswas looked upon the past as "...counterfeit, a series of cheating accidents." (p.305) and was determined to start life afresh, on his own, away from Hanuman House. As he set out with his small brown cardboard suitcase, he experienced no "spasms of terror" (p.305) as in the past, the "...knots of fear were still in his stomach, but they were so subdued he knew he could ignore them."(p.305). His nails were unbitten and whole. Mr. Biswas's resilience can be read as a wish fulfillment on a fictional level, something that Naipaul would have liked to see in his father in real life.

2.8 LET US SUM UP

In this unit the first part of the novel has been analysed section by section. Certain autobiographical parallels have also been pointed out. Naipaul's narratorial skills have been commented upon and Mr. Biswas' relationship with the Tulsis has been focused upon.

2.9 GLOSSARY

Trope : Metaphor

Bildungsroman : A novel concerning the early emotional or spiritual development or education of its protagonist. Famous

examples are Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774); Dicken's *David Copperfield* (1849-50) and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

Pastoral :	Related to shepherds or the kind of peaceful rural life that they lead. Often treated with irony, for the most part pastoral tends to be an idealization of shepherd life, and creates an image of a peaceful and uncorrupted existence.
Duality of language :	The double role played by a language. In this context the knowledge of English suggests power as used by the speaker to assert herself. At the same time the regional flavour suggests a lack of education.
Colonial conditioning :	An upbringing that instils abiding faith in the colonial set up and the ideology that supports it.
Monolithic structure :	An architectural term meaning a structure held up with the support of a single pillar. In this context it refers to a joint family controlled by a single person who is head.
Paranoia :	Intense and irrational fear or suspicion.
Comic relief :	According to western literary tradition a continuously sad situation needs a comic respite. Otherwise the reader's response is affected.

2.10 QUESTIONS

1. Mr. Mohun Biswas is a character based on V.S. Naipaul's own father. Substantiate with reference to *A House for Mr. Biswas* and other texts that have been cited in this unit.
2. Discuss the significance of the title, highlighting the way the house is used as a trope to indicate certain situations or states of mind.
3. Irony and humour add a lightness of touch to a situation which would otherwise have become very bleak and depressing. Elaborate with instances from the first part of *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

2.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| Naipaul, V.S. | <i>The Overcrowded Barracoon</i> . 1972. Penguin. "A Reporter at Large : After the Revolution" <i>The New Yorker</i> , May 26, 1997. P45-69 |
| Hammer, Robert D. | Ed. <i>Critical Perspectives on V.S. Naipaul</i> . Heinemann, 1979. |

UNIT 3 MR. BISWAS AND HIS DREAM HOUSE

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 'Amazing Scenes'
- 3.2 The New Regime
- 3.3 The Shorthills Adventure
- 3.4 Among the Readers and Learners
- 3.5 The Void
- 3.6 The Revolution
- 3.7 Coming Home
- 3.8 The Epilogue
- 3.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.10 Glossary
- 3.11 Questions
- 3.12 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In the previous unit we analyzed the first part of the novel, noted certain autobiographical parallels and commented on Naipaul's narratorial skill. In this unit we shall examine the second part of the novel, chapter by chapter. You are advised to read the text along with these notes so as to comprehend the fine nuances of the novel. Farrukh Dhondy, the well known novelist and playwright based in UK who is associated with BBC channel IV, is making a telefilm based on the novel. If you manage to see the film, the visual impact will add to your appreciation of the novel.

3.1 'AMAZING SCENES'

The first part of the novel ended with Mr Biswas leaving the Hanuman House, determined to find his way in the world and make a living for himself and his family, so as not to be dependent on his in-laws. He had not decided where to go but his unbitten nails and the absence of spasms in his stomach, suggest that the uncertainty about the future did not make him nervous.

The question that you would naturally ask, at this point is, why did Mr Biswas choose to visit Dehuti and Ramchand rather than his brothers or Ajodha and Tara? Before answering this question you must remind yourself exactly why he left Hanuman House. Once you do that, finding an answer to that question becomes easier. It was no use visiting his brothers; they worked on plantations as labourers and would not be able to help him to find work in keeping with his aspirations. Ajodha and Tara did have money and position but their unhelpful attitude on an earlier occasion had been evident. Mr. Biswas had visited them intending to borrow money to build a house for himself but had came away without voicing the request.

Ramchand was a successful man in Mr. Biswas' opinion; he had risen from humble beginnings, had a regular job and had defied social norms to marry a brahmin girl though he came from the lowest social strata. Though Mr Biswas did not say

anything directly, one can safely deduce that such considerations guided the choice of Ramchand. When he actually turned up at Dehuti's place, the squalor of the imagined comforts surprised him, and he stayed on because there was nowhere else to go. Predicably, the symptoms of his hysteria came back, the spasms, the bitten nails, an external manifestations of his frustration at not being able to find work.

Finally, he got a job with the *Trinidad Sentinel*, first on a trial and then on a regular basis, at a salary of fifteen dollars a fortnight. Naipaul has based Mr Biswas' journalistic forays on his own father's experiences as a reporter of the *Trinidad Guardian*. For instance in *Finding the Centre*, he refers to the time when for some reason his father had to spend the night on a tree, something that is fictionally recreated in the novel. In *Finding the Centre* Naipaul questions his father's account. He says, "My father had his own adventures. Once, on a rainy night and far from home, his motorcycle skidded off the road and for some reason he had to spend the night up a tree ... I understood that the story was exaggerated," (p.38) The situation is reconstructed more meaningfully in the novel. The friendly editor of the *Trinidad Sentinel*, Mr Burnett whose help launched Mr Biswas' journalistic career, is based on Mr. MacGowan, the editor of *Trinidad Guardian*, whose guidance turned Seepersad Naipaul into a good journalist. You should read "Prologue to an Autobiography" for Naipaul's account, albeit sketchy, of the father's years as a journalist.

Now that he had a steady job, Mr Biswas acquired a status in his family which he did not enjoy earlier. The children at the Hanuman House gave him a magnificent reception when he went there, clamouring for the *Sentinel* dollar tokens which might get them a prize. Shama's new found respect for him, particularly his position, can be discerned in her admonishment to the children as they clambered on to his lap. "Anand you will get your father's suit dirty." (p.329) You should read this section of the chapter along with chapters in the first part in which Shama had adopted a martyred attitude or openly expressed her exasperation at his inability to establish himself financially. This chapter also records the start of a relationship, at times verging on awkwardness, between Mr Biswas and his son Anand. When one reads this along with Naipaul's references to his father in "Prologue to an Autobiography" one feels that he would have liked the relationship with his father to have developed similarly.

You should note the semi-festive occasion, almost like a family wedding that preceded Mrs Tulsi's son Owad's departure to study abroad. The women in their bright clothes and best jewellery came with their children and brought musical instruments with them, which they played till late at night. You can read this as a conscious attempt to blot the racial memory of the sombreness and apprehension and tears which would have preceded occasions when their ancestors sailed out of India in very different circumstances. Since the chapter ends with a reference to Mr Biswas's ill health, it is possible that Naipaul drew upon his own memory of the time he left Trinidad for England. A lifting of the bleakness, a promise of better things to come, are some of the indications in this chapter.

3.2 THE NEW REGIME

Naipaul's father had worked contentedly at *Trinidad Guardian* as long as MacGowan edited it. Recollecting the rapport between the two men, Naipaul says:

... a relationship was established between the two men. And my father – at a starting salary of four dollars a week – began to do reporting. There the voice was his own, the knowledge of Trinidad Indian life was his own; and the zest – for news, for the drama of everyday life, for human oddity – the zest for looking with which MacGowan infected him became real. He developed fast. (*Finding the Centre*, p. 69-70)

MacGowan increased the circulation of the paper but ran into trouble with its management. Some of the directors who had local business interests felt that he was harming those. Naipaul recalls, "MacGowan, fresh from the depression in England, wanted to run a 'Buy British' campaign; the Chairman of the *Guardian* Directors owned a trading company which dealt in American goods." (*Finding the Centre*, p.71) To put it in a nutshell, MacGowan's priorities were journalistic and at times they clashed with the business interests of the management of the paper.

Things came to a head when MacGowan ran stories in the *Guardian* about "mad bats" that flew about in the day light and he sent cables to the *The Times* and *New York Times* about vampire bats rampant in Trinidad and responsible for paralytic rabies. The story was based on facts. A local doctor had established the link between bats and paralytic rabies and was experimenting with a vaccine for the same. His work was soon to be acknowledged in text books of tropical medicine. But some of the directors had invested in tourist ventures which suffered because of this exposure and the *Guardian* Chairman who said he had never heard of anyone in Trinidad dying from a bat bite, decided that MacGowan must go. Since MacGowan had a contractual job and could not be sacked, he was harassed into leaving. This went on for some time and had an impact on the *Guardian* and its employees, especially those close to MacGowan like Naipaul's father. Finally MacGowan had to leave and predicably Naipaul's father lost his job after some time.

Years later, Naipaul could talk about it objectively and say, "MacGowan left. My father stayed behind. He became disturbed, fell ill, lost his job, and was idle and dependent for four years ... in his clipping book, an old estate wages ledger, I came upon his relics of his heroic and hopeful time with MacGowan." (*Finding the Centre*, p. 72)

This was two year after he had written about Bogart and the life of the street in Trinidad in his first three works and was looking for fresh material. It occurred to Naipaul that he could reconstruct the life of someone like his own father on a fictional level. This was the genesis of *A House for Mr Biswas* which took three years to write and Naipaul considered it very much his father's book.

The purpose of this digression from the novel is to establish the strong autographical parallels in this chapter which you should not miss when you read about the relationship between Mr Biswas and Mr Burnett which came to an abrupt end when Mr Burnett left Trinidad. Mr Burnett was possibly the only person whom Mr Biswas could relate to and share his thoughts and aspirations with, knowing there would be understanding and the right kind of advice. Also Mr Burnett was Mr Biswas' only link with the world outside Trinidad, a world that he longed to visit and explore but could not.

This chapter also traces the growth of a new bond between Mr Biswas and his son Anand as "each saw the other as weak and vulnerable, and each felt a responsibility for the other, a responsibility which was disguised by exaggerated authority on the one side, exaggerated respect on the other." (*A House for Mr Biswas* p.374). Anyone familiar with Naipaul's style would deduce that it is part truth and part fiction, highlighting the closeness to his father that Naipaul was denied as an adolescent, something that was not possible because of Seepersad's nervous ailments. You should be able to make out the contempt in Naipaul's tone as he details the futility of the mechanical system of education that Anand was subjected to and which Naipaul must have been caught in, himself.

Last but not the least, the way in which Seth forcibly parks his lorries in the shed at the side of the house, uprooting the rose plants, can be read as trampling on Mr Biswas' finer feelings by Seth who stands for insensitivity and callousness that Naipaul associated with Trinidad.

3.3 THE SHORTHILLS ADVENTURE

Indentured immigrants generally dreamt of coming back to India after completing the bond period. The idea of settling down in an alien country across the *kala pani* did not appeal to them. Most of them wanted to go back to their village and lead a comfortable life now that they had some money. This posed various practical problems. The money saved was inadequate for the return passage of the entire family; links with the village had snapped, land and house had been taken over by others who were not willing to vacate. This desire to go back to India diminished with the coming generations. So, with the death of Pandit Tulsi in the novel, the chances of the family returning to India diminished. In Naipaul's own family, after his grandfather's death, his mother was almost sent back to India with her children. The plans had to be abandoned when Naipaul's father could not be found at the time of departure.

An extended family runs smoothly as long as it has an effective head to supervise everything. When the head is old or ill, generally losing a grip over the family, disintegration sets in. You would notice this in the chaotic situation in the Tulsi family with Mrs Tulsi confined to the bed. Seth, who had been her right hand man previously, was now living separately with his family, the disagreement between them having already turned to open war. Naipaul tells the reader, "The cause of the quarrel remained obscure, each side accusing the other of ingratitude and treachery." (p. 391) and you realize that the cause did not matter, it was the growing rift between the two sides which was inevitable in the given circumstances. However all this did not weaken the bond between Seth's wife and the Tulsis.

Without a manager, the Tulsi household drifted like a rudderless ship. Very skilfully Naipaul conveys the prevailing chaos and dereliction. He refers to the lack of authority in the sugarcane fields with the crop season at hand and the acute shortage of provisions. He mentions economising measures like using maize flour from the crop grown on the estate, making coconut oil instead of buying it and looking for all kinds of food substitutes, some of them desperate like Mrs Tulsi's order to the widows to experiment with cooking meals with birds' nests.

The move to the Shorthills was doomed from the beginning. Even as the grandiose plans of becoming rich quickly by dairy farming, rearing sheep etc. are unfolded you know that nothing will come out of them. One could side with Mr Biswas for making fun of such visions. Nothing that the Tulsi widows tried their hands at, worked, not even the shack which was set up to sell coca cola, cakes, oranges, and avocado pears and later rum to American soldiers. There is no evidence in Naipaul's autobiographical writings that his mother's family went through this phase of destitution, so one can safely deduce that this was imaginary, possibly Naipaul's way of getting back at his mother's family for dominating his father. He refers to his father's resentment of his in-laws in *Finding the Centre*. To quote, "My father, when I got to know him, was full of rage against his mother's family." (p. 75)

Life at Shorthills was bleak and Naipaul's description of it has traces of black humour of the kind later perfected by Salman Rushdie. Let us look at a passage describing an occasion when the car meant to transport the children to school broke down and the driver, who knew nothing about cars, enlisted their help.

Like ants around a dead cockroach the children surrounded the car (the dark girls in their dark blue uniforms) and pushed and pulled. Sometimes they pushed for more than a mile. Sometimes they pushed the car to the top of a hill, jumped aside as it rolled down, heard it start, raced after it, the driver

urging them to hurry, sprang inside three at a time ... Sometimes the car got into Port of Spain with one side of the bonnet up and a child on the wing, operating a pump of some sort. Sometimes the car didn't go to Port of Spain at all. This pleased the children more than the driver : he had not packed lunch.

(p. 410-11)

Mr. Biswas and his Dream House

The atmosphere at Shorthills was not particularly cordial and Mr Biswas hardly saw his own children. He noticed that there was no affection between them and Anand was ashamed of his sisters as he considered them weak. Mr Biswas decided it was time for him to move and kept his eyes open for a suitable site. You might have noted that the trope of travel recurs in Naipaul's fiction and non-fiction. In the latter he likes to project himself as the perennial wanderer without a fixed home. In *A House for Mr Biswas* moving from one house to another serves a dual purpose. On a general level it suggests the homeless status of the indentured immigrant and a yearning for a home of one's own in the literal as well as metaphorical sense. Interpreted autobiographically, it seems to have originated from Naipaul's early memories when he had to move along with his family as his father changed jobs.

Finally Mr Biswas found the site he wanted and had a house constructed. The process is described in great detail along with the furniture that he acquired for the new house. But an attempt to have a hill on fire close to their own backyard set the house on fire and once again Mr Biswas was left homeless.

In this chapter one notices that Anand is growing up. His ransacking of Shama's dressing table drawers can be compared to Naipaul's reference to the contents of the drawers of his own father's desk. One can discern a growing sense of detachment in Anand, an unwillingness to conform, traits that Naipaul often associates with himself.

3.4 AMONG THE READERS AND LEARNERS

"Among the Readers and Learner" opens with another move by Mr Biswas, this time to Port of Spain. Mrs Tulsi's house there had fallen vacant and he was offered two rooms in it. He had to share the house with the Tuttles, Govind's family and Basdai, a widow. Two items of furniture had been acquired – the Slumberking bed and Théophile's bookcase, symbols of material possessions, but Mr Biswas was still without a house of his own, and by implication, far from settled in life.

The lack of privacy, the clutter, the impermanence about their life in the house in general did not deter Shama from trying to make it a home. The glass cabinet ordered by her suggests a pathetic yearning for elegance which was doomed from the beginning. Life in this overcrowded house was far from smooth. Without Mrs Tulsi's harmonizing presence, there were squabbles and petty jealousies among the sisters. In this hostile atmosphere, Mr Biswas' indigestion started bothering him again and the children were afflicted by various nervous ailments. Mr Biswas managed to establish some rapport with his children as he spoke to them of his own childhood. He was disgruntled with everything, as Naipaul's father would have been with his creativity thwarted and no appreciation or encouragement from his colleagues or family.

The chapter hints at a changing social order in which some people managed to make a lot of money while others became poorer. The means was not always honest. Govind made a lot of money driving a taxi and his son Vidiadhar said at school that his father worked for the Americans. The value system was changing and those who had recently acquired money were reluctant to reveal their methods in an attempt to appear more respectable. Mr Biswas did not join the rat race but slowly he acquired

power and status in the *Sentinel*. He became the paper's special investigator and his recommendations entitled persons to be treated as "Deserving Destitutes" to benefit from a fund set up by the *Sentinel* management. You will notice in this a record of the growing power of the English language press in a developing country. Quite evidently the written word was treated with high respect.

You should also note in this chapter a complex relationship developing between the two cousins Anand and Vidiadhar. Since Naipaul won the Trinidad government scholarship to study abroad, one can deduce that there was envy and heartburn in the family, feelings of rivalry among cousins of the same age. Anand was the more sensitive of the two and it is easy to see the young Naipaul in him, keen to succeed and get out of Trinidad. However, one need not stretch the similarities between the two; Anand is also the stereotypical second generation young immigrant who has no attachment to the country of his parents' origin or the country they migrated to under some pressure, but dreams of affluence in another country. The exhibition examination in the novel brings out the desperation of such dreams, not just among the young but their parents as well.

The mention of the death of Bipti, Mr Biswas' mother, in this chapter, brings to one's mind the death of Raghu his father, earlier in the novel. There is no personal grief, only dutiful mourning and mechanical observance of funeral rites. Note the key sentence: "He (Mr Biswas) might have been attending the funeral of a stranger ... He longed to feel grief. He was surprised only by jealousy." (p.480). One is reminded of Meursault, the protagonist of Albert Camus' *The Outsider* (1942) whose sense of alienation makes him react to his mother's death in much the same way. What hurt Mr. Biswas deeply was the disrespect shown by the doctor to Bipti's body before issuing the death certificate. One can visualize a similar scene in an Indian village or small town, sometimes even big hospitals in metropolitan cities when relatives of the dead are not assertive or affluent.

As has been said before, Mr Biswas's literary aspirations like those of Seepersad Naipaul, remained unfulfilled, something that he possibly mentioned to his son. As Mr Biswas tried to create a story from his present circumstances, Naipaul churned his Caribbean memory in his first three books of fiction, falling back on Hat and Bogart who were his neighbours in Port of Spain. The chapter marks the end of a phase in Anand's life as he joins college, something that his parents had always dreamed of.

3.5 THE VOID

As you start reading this chapter entitled "The Void", you gradually become aware of Mr Biswas's unconsciously restrictive presence in Anand's life, not allowing him to enjoy the freedom that comes with admission in college.

The metaphor of the house with its elusive promise of security and stability continues, though Mr Biswas's conscious distancing of himself from houses ["he had grown to look upon houses as things that concerned other people" (p.494)] indicated a recognition that he could never own a house. The loss of such a personal vision took away something vital from his life. "He sank into despair as into the void which, in his imagining, had always stood for the life he had yet to live." (p.495) In short without a house or hope of acquiring one, life did not seem worth living.

His "revivification" to borrow a word from the text, came with a job as the Community Welfare Officer that gave him a high salary and fair amount of power. The mood continued as Mr Biswas went for a holiday to the seaside at Sans Souci with his family in his colleague Miss Logie's car. He had a nice time there despite Miss Logie's condescending attitude, and the holiday acquired a dreamlike quality

when recalled later in their present congested and unfriendly environs. Mr Biswas was slowly getting to be a gentleman and had a suit made in keeping with his newly acquired status. They bought a new car, much to the chargin of the other Tulsi daughters and their families. As Naipaul describes the trip to Balandra undertaken by Mr Biswas and his family in their own car, he conveys the idea that the lanscape did not interest the family as much as the ownership of a car and the novelty of travelling in it.

Disruptive forces had become a part of Mr Biswas' life and they overtook him again when his preoccupations with new acquisitions had made him almost forget them. Owad, Mrs Tulsi's younger son was returning from England and room had to be made for him. The house had to be renovated as well. So, Mr Biswas was shunted off to a room in a tenement, a dislocation he resented and balmed Mrs Tulsi for.

The alternative accomodation with its unpainted, grey-black, rotting wooden walls and the "naked galvanized roof" without a proper ceiling was like the barracks which provided shelter to indentured immigrants when they first came to work on the plantations. To add insult to injury there was no electricity. Mr Biswas fell into confusion and dismay. 'Where would the furniture go? Where would they sleep, cook, wash? Where would the children study?' The answers did not matter; there was no choice. The immigrant status of the protagonist reflects the irony of the situation. As in the case of the other houses in the novel, the room in the tenement is described in detail, emphasizing the demeaning nature of the accomodation offered. Mr Biswas had saved some money in anticipation of a crisis but six hundred and twenty dollars would not help him buy a house.

Ultimately they were allowed to move back to the old house after the renovations were over and more importantly, Owad had come. However, Mr Biswas was given only one room for himself, his family and furniture. This action makes Mrs Tulsi the prototype of the colonizer/planter who could shift dependents when and where convenient.

Towards the end of the chapter changes in the social set up of Trinidad are hinted at. The description of the Tulsi store suggests degeneration and after talking about Seth's wildness and the punishment, Naipaul states clearly, "neither Seth nor the Tulsis were as important in Arwacas as they had been." (p.530) The Sindhis who had taken over the shop next door, were definitely not indentured immigrants. They were petty traders who might have migrated recently from India, something that is hinted at by the way they played "mournful Indian film songs" (p. 530) as if to remind themselves of the mother country. Mr Biswas had survived another move though the prospect of having his own house now seemed even more remote.

3.6 THE REVOLUTION

This chapter "The Revolution" starts with a festive mood pervading the house where Mrs Tulsi was living, in anticipation of Owad's homecoming. "It was like an old Hanuman house festival." (p.533) Naipaul tells the reader that there had been nothing like it since Owad's departure for England. One way of reading the effusive welcome is treating it as a tribute to colonial education, specially a professional one, in the former colonies. Over the years the adulation has waned but in the fifties and sixties it was at its peak. Also, to be noted is the boost that it gave to the status of the Tulsi family which had been steadily going down as other families made more money and asserted themselves like the Sindhi family next door.

To come back to Owad, his homecoming was as dramatic as anticipated. With his Robert Taylor moustache which was possibly the fashion in England at that time and partly an attempt to appear grown up, as well as his hefty appearance, Owad made his presence felt in his family. His behaviour, verging on pompousness, was in keeping with the image that he tried to project and it was evident that he was the new head of the family despite the fact that his elder brother Shekhar was living in the same town. In his new role he could afford to ignore Seth and be casual towards Mr Biswas.

As a discriminating reader, you realize very soon what a fraud Owad was and how parochial he could get. It is not clear whether he was a good doctor or not. What comes across is his boasting about eminent persons he met in England (mainly Indians) and got the better of. He specially targetted Indians from India who were abominable in every way, he felt. Apart from the humorous side of Owad's description of life in England and Indians who had gone there to study, the irony of the situation is to be noted if one takes into account Naipaul's views on Indians as expressed in *An Area of Darkness*.

In the 1930s and 40s communism was fashionable among students in English universities in the wake of the Revolution in Russia. In fact many veteran Marxists in India had first received their initiation in the west. With Owad, Marxism was clearly a fad rather than an ideal or a set of beliefs. This is evident from the way in which Naipaul describes Owad's fascination with everything Russian, starting from the achievements of the Red Army to anything connected with Russia, even a Russian name. This, juxtaposed with Mr Biswas' deliberated mockery of Russian names gives a comic tinge to the hostility expressed in their word slinging. Owad considered Mr Biswas little more than a hanger on, the latter firmly believed that, given the same opportunities, he would have achieved much more.

The inevitability of Anand's encounter with Owad strikes the reader even before it actually takes place. I am sure you feel sorry for Anand after he is humiliated by Owad. Owad is the stereotypical brown sahib who tried to project a patriotic image with standards borrowed from the west. Would you have apologized to Owad if you had been in Anand's place? Possibly not, but times are different now and Mr Biswas' semi-dependent status makes things awkward for his son as well and Shama despite her great anguish had to make her son apologize to Owad as she realized it would be impossible for them to continue living in that house otherwise.

Mr Biswas was humiliated by Owad as well, and when he refused to compromise, Mrs Tulsi gave him notice and he had to start looking for another house. The two storeyed house on Sikkim Street that the solicitor's clerk proposed to sell him with its vines of Morning Glory seemed attractive but inaccessible, till a turn of fortune made it possible for him to think of buying it. Shama, who might have noticed the gross flaws in the construction of the house, only had a fleeting glimpse of it from their moving car and the sales deed was finalized. Mr Biswas was firmly convinced that his would be a home without the intrusive presence of the Tulsis. Of course the conviction wore off with each successive visit to the house as necessary repairs had to be undertaken before they could move in. How they settled down in the house on Sikkim Street and got used to its irregularities will be taken up in the next section.

3.7 COMING HOME

What had seemed the ideal house to Mr Biswas at night, revealed itself to be far from it as he took his family to it one afternoon. The elusive ideal house/home was not meant for the wanderer/immigrant, even after a lifetime of searching. Only

something far less, the shadow of a dream. As in the case of the other houses in the novel, this one is described in details, especially the flaws, which surfaced as they started living in it. Some were repaired but it was impossible to correct all of them and soon they decided not to talk about the flaws. Their ancestors had lived in barracks where conditions had been worse. Presumably, they could live in this defective house.

The elderly Indian next door with his solid, well-constructed house does not really serve as a contrast that might be the initial impression. He had not always lived in such a well-built house. The key sentence, "The past lay in the shed at the back of his house, in the ruinous wooden houses in the street." (p.577-8) suggests that the old Indian had risen from humble beginnings and others around them were still struggling. It implies that Mr Biswas should not have any regrets about the house, there was still a future to look forward to.

Over a period of time Mr Biswas and his family not only got used to the house on Sikkim Street but started appreciating it as relatives from the extended Tulsi family like the Tuttles visited them and approved of the house. Such approval added value to the house and ironically, "Soon it seemed to the children that they had never lived anywhere but in the tall square house in Sikkim Street." (p.581) The sentence that follows is even more ironical. To quote, "From now their lives would be ordered, their memories coherent." (p.581) This statement is contradicted by what Naipaul says about his own childhood in "Prologue to an Autobiography";

Disorder within, disorder without. Only my school life was ordered;
anything that had happened there I could date at once. But my family life –
my life at home or my life in the house, in the street was jumbled, without
sequence.

(Naipaul, *Finding the Centre*, 40-1)

This is one of the instances of contradiction that you will find throughout Naipaul's work and should learn to recognize as characteristic of his style.

The chapter ends on a positive note, indicating the human capacity to adjust to adverse circumstances and making life bearable, even happy. Slowly Mr Biswas settled down in the house on Sikkim Street, specially after he had called the solicitor's clerk all the names he wanted to and got the bitterness out of his system. The discovery of the extra space in the deed that was twelve feet away from the fence made him feel that the deal had been worthwhile and his love for gardening was once again reawakened. The laburnum tree planted by him "... gave the house a romantic aura, softened the tall graceless lines, and provided some shelter from the afternoon sun." (p.584) This was the closest Mr Biswas could get to his dream house and he made the best of it. This was the right house for Mr Biswas. It had put an end to his wanderings and granted stability to his life. The immigrant had finally come "home".

3.8 THE EPILOGUE

The Epilogue, short when compared to the chapter preceding it, attempts to round off the happenings in the novel, tying up loose ends. You get to know what Owad and Shekhar were doing though you might just be casually interested in their affairs. You learn that after the abolition of the Social Welfare Department Mr Biswas went back to the *Sentinel*. Was that a comedown for him? Monetarily yes, but Mr Biswas found it stimulating to work as a journalist and the only thing that depressed him was the debt of four thousand dollars that he had incurred because of the house, specially in the nights when he brooded over it, feeling that time was flying by and disaster was looming over him, "devouring his life" (p.586)

The description of his life and career makes it clear that both were on the decline, and the first heart attack came as a surprise to him though the reader had expected something of the sort.

If you are reading the book from the psychoanalytical angle, the Epilogue will provide clues about Naipaul's relationship with his own father who died when he was studying in England. One detects traces of guilt in the way Naipaul talks of Anand's cold response to his father's letters, specially Shama's letter informing him of the seriousness of Mr Biswas' illness. The difference in the ways in which Anand and Savi react to Shama's letter, emphasizes the point. To quote ;

She wrote to Anand and Savi. Savi answered in about a fortnight. She was returning as soon as possible. Anand wrote a strange, maudlin, useless letter. (p.588)

Savi's return and her new job at a big salary made Mr Biswas' last days happy so that the novel, though it ends with Mrs Biswas' death, suggests continuity through the daughter rather than the son, a point which should be of interest to feminist critics. On the whole the women in the novel, Mrs Tulsi, Shama and Savi among others, are more resilient and stronger than the men, something possibly based on Naipaul's observations in his own family when his father did not have a job but his mother managed to run the family.

3.9 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, I gave you a chapter-wise analysis of the second part of the novel, including the Epilogue. Autobiographical parallels and contradictions were also pointed out. The chapter by chapter analysis of the text in this unit and the preceding one should not be treated as exhaustive. Read in conjunction with the novel it should trigger off your own line of thinking and help you to critique the text, something that would be helped by the broad guidelines in the next two units.

3.10 GLOSSARY

Narratorial skill:

Devices used by an author to enhance the structure and content of a narrative or mode of presentation.

Racial memory:

Deep rooted memory, generally of a traumatic experience, of a group of people, that is transmitted to the generations to come and finds a voice in literature/art produced by them.

3.11 QUESTIONS

1. Why did Mr Biswas choose to visit Dehuti and Ramchand rather than his brothers or Ajodha and Tara when he left Hanuman House?
2. How did he get a job with the *Trinidad Sentinel*? What difference did it make to his status in the family? How far can this be compared to Seepersad Naipaul's journalistic career?

3. Do you think that the house on Sikkim Street is the ideal house Mr Biswas had been looking for? Give reasons for your answer.

Mr. Biswas and
his Dream House

3.12 SUGGESTED READINGS

Naipaul, V.S. *The Middle Passage*. Andre Deutsch, 1962

Gusson, Mel "The Enigma of V.S Naipaul's search for himself in writing" *New York Times*, 25 April 1987. P3, 29-30.

UNIT 4 WHY DID MR. BISWAS WANT A HOUSE?

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Diasporic Novel
- 4.2 Socio – political chronicle
- 4.3 Irony and Humour
- 4.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.5 Glossary
- 4.6 Questions
- 4.7 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying the conditions that provided a backdrop to Naipaul's creativity and after critiquing the text of *A House for Mr. Biswas*, you are sure to have formed your own opinion about the novel. The objective of this unit is to answer a few questions on the novel in an attempt to find out why and to what extent it is of interest to the postcolonial reader. This is done under three heads: *A House for Mr. Biswas* as a diasporic novel or diasporic allegory, the novel as a chronicle of the changing political and social order and the use of irony and humour in the novel. However this should not be taken as a comprehensive assessment of the novel but as an indication of some of the ways in which it can be approached.

4.1 DIASPORIC NOVEL

The diasporic sensibility is valuable for attempting to bridge cultures through a widening of experience. Experience might be widened but bridging cultures, especially for one who has been away from the mother country and generally not in touch with it, is almost impossible. In the process, the diasporan suffers from a sense of loss and unhappiness.

A postcolonial reconstruction of *A House for Mr. Biswas* reveals this unhappiness. Despite the statement made in the title, Mr. Biswas did not find a house in keeping with his expectations. He accepted the shortcomings of the house on Sikkim Street in his last days, to the extent that at times it gave the illusion of being the ideal house in the soothing shade of the laburnum tree. But you know that it is the quest that engaged the seeker, not the particular object that he sought.

A key text that should help your reading of diasporic history is *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* by Paul Gilroy (Harvard University Press, 1993). Gilroy juxtaposes the metaphors of "root" and "route" in his study of diasporic literature. The "root" metaphor reconstructs memorially a pristine, pure, uncontaminated homeland to which the first generation immigrant dreamt of returning. In the novel one reads about Pundit Tulsi's dream of returning to India, a dream that became meaningless after his death. In *Finding the Centre* Naipaul talks about his grandfather who died on his way back to his native village near Gorakhpur. The "route" metaphor suggests the journey and the historical interactions between

masters and indentured immigrants little better than slaves, which have forever "contaminated" the diasporic ethos and memory. Vijay Mishra in his "(B) ordering Naipaul : Indenture History and Diasporic Poetics" locates the "route" metaphor in two geographical spaces : the ship and the plantation barracks. Of the first Mishra says:

Why did Mr.
Biswas want a
House?

The ship ... is the first of the cultural units in which social relations are re-sited and renegotiated. For the old, exclusivist Indian diaspora, the ship produced a site in which caste purities were largely lost (after all the crossing of the dark ocean, the *kalapani*, signified the loss of caste) as well as a new form of socialization that went by the name of *jahaji-bhai* (ship-brotherhood). Social interactions during these lengthy sea voyages began a process that led to the remaking of cultural and ethnic identities, to a critical self-reflexivity of the kind missing from the stratified and less mobile institutions of the homeland. (Mishra, 195)

For most of these immigrants who had rarely travelled out of their villages, prior to this voyage, it took time to comprehend the restrictive implications of indenture. When it did, these people, most of whom carried the *Ramcharit manas* and the *Gita* with them as talisman, the experience of indenture was likened to a long exile similar to Rama's *vanavasa*, out of which they would emerge purer than before.

In the barracks, also known as coolie lines, both because the labourers lived in them and they were lines of thirty or forty rooms constructed back to back, each family was allotted a room with no place for cooking, no bathrooms or toilets. To quote from "Tota's Tale" a poem by Satendra Nandan, a Fijian Indian poet, critic and statesman now living in Australia:

An empty line of twenty-four rooms :
Eight feet by twelve feet.
Once it housed native workers
Eight died : others fled
Who would live among the dead?
Homeless I had come in search of paradise
This house of hell was now all mine.
(Nandan, *Lines Across Black Waters*, 11-12)

It was Mr. Biswas's experience in the barracks of Green Vale that triggered off his desire to own a house. Another Fijian Indian writer Totaram Sanadhya, referred to those dark, monotonous and menacing lines/ barracks as "*bhut len*" (lines of ghosts / devils) and titled his book of poems "*Bhut len ki Katha*" (Saraswati Press, 1994). Thus an indentured labourer lured by promises of a life more comfortable than what he had led in his village plus a reasonably high pay, was for all practical purposes a slave, imprisoned on his master's estate with considerable limits set upon freedom. The working hours were long and arduous – twelve to sixteen hours at a stretch and wages which remained unchanged throughout the ninety years of indenture, a mere pittance, about twenty five cents per day from which over one third was deducted for rations supplied. Sharing rations was considered an offence. Possibly a racial memory of this prompted V.S. Naipaul to write:

Growing up in Trinidad, I had never wanted to be employed. I had always wanted to be a free man. This was partly the effect of my peasant Indian background and the colonial agricultural society of Trinidad. And though it had not been easy in the beginning, I had remained a free man.
(Naipaul, *A Turn in the South*, 261)

In the passage just cited, Naipaul does not mention the unequal power relations in the plantations and the politics of the desire for independence on the part of the

descendants of indentured immigrants. By essentializing this desire and presenting this as an act of pure will, people in the space of the plantation are erased and the experience becomes part of the diasporan aesthetics.

Struggle for space in barrack life was replicated in Hanuman House where no one got enough space except for Mrs. Tulsi the matriarch, her two privileged sons Shekhar and Owad and her sister's husband Seth who managed her estate. Everything had to be shared – space, lives and valuables, there was no privacy, no exclusivity. That was why the doll's house was broken up by Shama, it had been bought only for Savi, not all the children and such a thing could not be allowed within the domain of Hanuman House.

Yet it was Hanuman House, the warmth and reassurance of the Blue room in it, which healed Mr. Biswas after the traumatic experience of the stormy night. The name of Hanuman as a source of physical and spiritual strength, is often invoked when one is afraid. The analogy is clear. The indentured immigrants or 'girmityas' as they called themselves, considered themselves banished from their mother country for a specific period like Rama and hoped to return to it in glory like him, some day. You might find such analogizing very simplistic but that is because your thinking and conditioning is urban, possibly secular, unlike theirs. During the long and traumatic voyage and in the alien land *Ramcharit Manas* and to an extent the *Gita* gave them the needed solace and became part of their lives. A reading of the text in this light reveals many things. Hanuman House presided over by Mrs. Tulsi with Seth's help was a tower of strength, emphasizing the significance of the trading class along with their religious beliefs; the three families to which Mr. Biswas was related by blood or marriage were called the Raghu family, the Ajodha family and the Tulsi family.

Putting the names of the family this way, an inter-text, that of Tulsi's *Ramcharit Manas*, reveals itself with certain modifications. To quote Vijay Mishra, "The real genealogy of the people...gets overlaid by an earlier memory of the vernacular epic; which is then symbolized through the inhabitants of the space of houses and barracks. Any departure from the world order so constructed, and the equal spaces occupied by most people...leads to swift revenge and spiteful action." (Mishra, 218) So the house had to be broken up by Shama as a ritualistic gesture to retain the prevailing order.

Debates between the Sanatanists and Arya Samajists often became open conflicts and generated a lot of bitterness among people of the old Indian diaspora wherever they had settled down. Even now in Fiji there is a clear divide between the two sects. A student from Fiji told me of her family's refusal to cremate her father in a crematorium owned by an uncle who was an Arya Samajist. Naipaul's maternal uncle Simbhoonath Capildeo, one of the two "gods" in the novel, was a staunch Sanatanist and Naipaul's father, like Mr. Biswas became a member of the Arya Samaj for a brief period, possibly to defy the dominance of his wife's family. In a letter to Richard Forbes the West Indian critic who asked Naipaul about his father's pamphlet "Religion: Pandit Ayodhya Prasad and Trinidad", Naipaul wrote:

My father did write the pamphlet and published it too. I remember it as a very slim red covered booklet in our bookcase. I believe my father said that (a certain relative) had bought the stock and destroyed it – but I do not know whether I really heard this or whether I have made this up... My father at one stage read parts of the pamphlet to me... The booklet was later lost or destroyed.

(Cited by Vijay Mishra, 231)

As a self-proclaimed agnostic (another paradox, as you will find traces of Brahmanic arrogance in him) Naipaul finds it easier to empathise with Mr. Biswas's preference for the Arya Samaj. However, others who made long speeches and considered

themselves reformist leaders, exposed themselves when scrutinized. Naipaul consciously makes fun of any kind of religiosity whether it is the "heavy and ugly" statues of Hindu gods in the Tulsi drawing room or the long winded speeches made by Arya Samajists. This is a departure from the stereotypical diasporic sensibility which considers religion some sort of talisman, a link with the country of origin, to be cherished and suitable rites to be observed though often in modified form.

Why did Mr. Biswas want a House?

However, you should be wary of oversimplifying Naipaul's cultural prejudices and locating him simply in the narrative of exile and loss, for then you would miss the complex counternarrative in his writing, something that can be traced back to Naipaul's own father and the predicament in which the latter was placed circumstantially. To quote:

My father rejecting one world, came into contact with another. In him was played out the whole tragic drama of an ancient civilization coming into contact with a hideous colonial mimicry of another civilization.

(V.S.Naipaul, Archive 1:1.3 Cited by Vijay Mishra, 194)

Mishra rightly points out that this mimicry is "... a forced aesthetic intervention when writing is really the pursuit of signs without any real understanding of their referents". (Mishra, 194) Mishra gives the example of daffodils from the essay 'Jasmine' in *The Overcrowded Barracoon* which is identified as a sign but its referent cannot be conceptualized. "A pretty little flower, no doubt; but we had never seen it. Could the poem have any meaning for us?" (*The Overcrowded Barracoon*, p.24) Your reading of *A House for Mr. Biswas* would reveal many such signs.

Interestingly, Naipaul never uses the word "diaspora" but it is clear from his works that the diasporic experience – that of displacement and migrancy along with a yearning for an imagined homeland which they cannot go back to gives his writing "... the rawness of nerves, the neurosis that gives his prose the special quality of panic." (Mishra, 225) This turns into a creative hysteria when confronted with the vast physicality of India. The last unit attempts a comparative study of *A House for Mr. Biswas* as a diasporic novel with strong expressions of the displaced sensibility.

4.2 SOCIO-POLITICAL CHRONICLE

A House for Mr. Biswas can be read as a chronicle of socio-political changes that swept over Trinidad in the early years of this century, giving a new direction to the second and third generation immigrants who had no plans of going back to India. Occasional trips to India in search of roots, and in case of older persons, to revive racial memory, were common. What this section of the unit proposes to do is to critique Trinidad society as depicted in the novel, as it moved towards post-coloniality, with a view to identifying the specific changes that contributed to this socio-cultural shift.

Ironically titled "Pastoral", the first chapter in Part One looks at first generation "girmitiyas" who had finished their indenture and had decided to stay on in the colonies, working as farm labourers and straining to make both ends meet. The social set up was colonial and the clerk and the overseer in the farm jointly calculating and disbursing salary were immediate representatives of the colonizer.

Mr. Biswas with his aspirations of getting a job and a house on his own was something of an anomaly in this society where power equations were gradually changing with money and success being prioritized. People such as Tara, Ajodha and Mrs. Tulsi emerged as decision makers. However, their importance dwindled even as Trinidad established contacts with the west wherein persons like Miss Logie became

synonymous with power and authority. Even Mr. Biswas gained status, first as a media person and later as the Community Welfare Officer. The respect for the written word and the power that is associated with journalism is conveyed effectively. Mr. Biswas's stint with the Community Welfare Office can be read today as a job with a well established NGO, wielding considerable power in a postcolonial society.

Mr. Biswas anticipated changes in Trinidad society. Like Seepersad Naipaul, he was contemptuous of old icons, statues of Hindu gods that Pundit Tulsi had brought home from his Indian visits. His contempt for Mrs. Tulsi's younger son who tried to dominate the household can be read as a colonizer-colonized relationship in a newly independent society where neo-colonialism often replaced the old order.

In keeping with these changes, western education gained importance. While the English medium school in Trinidad with its scruffy looking teacher and students in ragged clothes, is a caricature of western education as it was imparted in colonies for a specific purpose, it was clearly the ambition of every immigrant parent to try and send children abroad for higher studies. The situation in India in the fifties and sixties was much the same. This can be contrasted with the earlier part of the novel where no parent, except someone well off like Mrs. Tulsi could think of sending children abroad to study. Mr. Biswas had to make do with whatever rudimentary education he could avail of locally and did not cost too much only because he was supposed to train as a Pundit. His brothers had no such privilege; they worked as farm labourers. He, on the other hand, educated all his children; Savi and Anand got scholarships to study abroad. The importance attached to the scholarship examination which Anand cleared, reminds one of the zeal and hard work which young people put into their preparations for examinations/interviews, which if cleared successfully, enable them to study abroad on scholarships and get well paid jobs there. While Mr. Biswas' generation did not send daughters to study abroad, preferring to spend money on their marriage and their sons-in-law, the focus shifts with Savi getting a scholarship to study abroad even before her elder brother Anand does.

The indentured immigrant had little or no contact with the world outside his plantation. In *A House for Mr. Biswas* you will find his world enlarging as he attempted to find an identity for himself in the opportunities available outside the plantation. You will notice this in Mr. Biswas' progress through life, his struggles to get away from farming or working under the Tulsis, his achievements and failures as well as the aspirations that he passed on to his son, Anand. With each new house that Mr. Biswas moved to, his personal world gained a little more space. Correspondingly, the houses improved and the last one enhanced by the labrunum tree, seemed to resemble to some extent, the house that Mr. Biswas had always dreamt of.

Architectural changes in the houses described minutely are indicative of changes that swept over Trinidad. I will cite a few examples and you can work out the rest. The "crumbling mud hut in the swamplands" (p. 15) in which Mr. Biswas was born, belonged to his mother's father, drained of life and energy by hard work on the sugar plantation. His father Raghu lived in a similar hut.

Pundit Jairam lives in a "...bare, spacious, unpainted wooden house smelling of blue soap and incense...its cleanliness and sanctity maintained by regulation awkward to everyone except himself." (p.50). As an apprentice here Mr. Biswas lived in brahmanic exclusivity and severity. When you examine the detailed descriptions of houses in the novel, reading between the lines will help you in your attempt to trace the changes in Trinidad society as well as the evolving attitude of the characters who built or bought the house. A house was more than a home to the immigrant, it was an anchorage, to an extent it still is. I'm sure you have read in recent news-papers the extent to which Salmani Rushdie went to reclaim an old house in Solan in Himachal Pradesh through law courts, an act that can be read as a successful reclamation of his Indian roots.

The house on Sikkim Street where Mr. Biswas spent the last few years of his life was different from the other houses described in the book. For one thing there was nothing about it that would remind the occupants of their indenture or Indian origin. The garden with its rose trees, anthurium lilies and breadfruit tree, indicates a desire to adapt to the new environs, borrowing from the west only to bring order in their lives ("From now their lives would be ordered, their memories coherent." p.58) The immigrant had arrived at last and there was nothing enigmatic about this arrival. Sudha Rai considers this attitude typical of expatriate sensibility. She says: "The expatriate finds that childhood connects with India, but adulthood with its burden of reality (seeing) and reason, separates... The criticism and rejection of modern India defends the painfully developed expatriate self. As a result, the two halves of the expatriate identity – reality and fantasy, can never be fitted together." (Rai, 19)

You cannot discuss the changes that came into the field of trade and commerce without bringing in the change in the status of the Tulsis, "neither Seth nor the Tulsis were as important in Arwacas as they had been." (p.530) Even the store now was not wholly owned by them as this remark made by the author, suggests. "In the store the Tulsis name had been replaced by the Scottish name of a Port of Spain firm, and this name had been spoken for long so that it now fully belonged and no one was aware of any incongruity." (p.530)

The Sindhis "who had taken over the shop next door" (p.530) seemed to have migrated to the Caribbeans much later for business purposes, and had stronger links with India as the Indian songs played on their gramophone and the "strange" (to the descendants of the girmitiyas) smells of their food suggested. There does not seem to be any interaction between the two. Most immigrants who went later to these colonial outposts were semi-skilled or had business interests along with the capital to further them. Since monetary success is the yardstick by which immigrants like to judge themselves and others, there is an insurmountable barrier between those who have succeeded and those who have not.

Blacks are not mentioned in the first part of the novel. The black solicitor's clerk from whom Mr. Biswas bought the house on Sikkim Street, is deliberately referred to as a "negro" and dismissed as "...an illegal immigrant from one of the smaller islands." (p.566) Predictably he overcharged Mr. Biswas for the house though the extra space of twelve feet inside the boundary indicated in the deed, seemed a victory of sorts. Except for Brathwaite in recent years, not many Caribbean writers have projected the multicultural, multi-ethnic character of society in their writing.

The changes that one reads about in *A House for Mr. Biswas* are both sweeping and subtle. From being mainly agricultural at the beginning of the novel, society evolved into a more complex web. If you read carefully you will notice that priorities changed in the course of the novel, values became money-based and slowly individuals came into their own, shedding their group based identity. The society in which Mr. Biswas spent the last few years of his life, was definitely a fore - runner to postcolonial society in the former colonies though its postcoloniality had yet to acquire a definite shape. The women in the novel were more resilient and accepted the changes in their stride while Mr. Biswas took time to adapt to them, as a result of which his relationship with his son Anand was often conflictual. As you glance through the text and pass on to other samples of post-colonial condition, it is time to examine another aspect of the text, its use of irony and humour.

4.3 IRONY AND HUMOUR

Any discussion on the use of irony and humour in *A House for Mr. Biswas* would start with a look at the title and what it signifies. The title of the story by Seepersad Naipaul on which it is based, is "They Called Him Mohun", much more informal with a touch of closeness/intimacy, conveyed in the use of the first name.

Though Mr. Biswas was named Mohun Biswas, the author never refers to him by his first name, not even when he was a baby. This by itself is ludicrous and you read about the superstitions associated with him like his "unlucky sneeze" because he was born at the inauspicious hour of midnight (no one knew the exact time; Bissoondaye and the midwife had assumed it was midnight) and had six fingers on one hand. Ironically, he was indirectly responsible for his father's drowning and his notoriety as a harbinger of bad luck grew.

That he did not have a "buth sutificate" did not disturb Mr. Biswas unduly till he went to the Canadian Mission School and the ragged looking teacher demanded one. The way in which he acquired one is a humorous dig at the way in which the law was executed in a colonial society, it appeared absurd though the original purpose had been rational. The system of education which made a mockery of knowledge served no purpose except to train petty clerks. It had no relation to their daily lives and was therefore unconvincing. Even the teacher who taught them, did not believe in it. "The history Lal taught he regarded as simply a school subject, a discipline, as unreal as the geography." (p.46)

You must have observed that the nature of humour in the novel varies. Sometimes it borders on pathos as when describing the education system. Sometimes there is a black edge to it as in the passages describing the way in which Mr. Biswas and Shama get married. At times it is light hearted with just a trace of resentment at being patronized. Mr. Biswas' resentment at being sucked into the Tulsi household found an outlet in the absurd names that he made up for the prominent members of the family. Mrs. Tulsi was the "old hen"/ "old cow"/ "old queen" and her sons the "little dogs" and Seth was "Big Boss". Predictably confronted by Seth and Mrs. Tulsi, Mr. Biswas had no way of defending himself and when pushed into a corner, lost his temper and shouted at everyone. Even a humorous situation can become awkward if not handled properly.

Quite a bit of the humour in the novel is generated by Mr. Biswas' ineffectual railing against members of his wife's family, ineffectual because he was dependant on them financially as well as emotionally, a situation that he tried to get out of but could not. One suspects that V.S. Naipaul was trying to undo the hurt of situations which held painful memory. Humour was the best literary device for gaining control over a hapless past.

While dealing with Mr. Biswas, Naipaul often uses the technique of the caricaturist, blowing a trait out of proportion till the situation acquires a comic exaggeration. While Mr. Biswas' apprehensions at the sugarcane plantation might have been justified, the precautions taken by him, were amusing. As if sleeping with a cutlass and *poui* stick (that had belonged to his father) were not enough, he kept a dog and called it Tarzan, hoping that would make it fearsome. Ironically "...Tarzan turned out to be friendly and inquisitive, and a terror only to the poultry." (p.263) His profound conversations with the dog amuse, at the same time convey the pathetic mind set of someone who could not communicate with anyone else. Even the therapeutic presence of the dog did not soothe his fears.

Mr. Biswas is not the only one in the novel to contribute to the irony and humour. Authorial comments, sometimes on the most unlikely subjects, are laced with it. Talking about the beggars who had made their home on Woodford Square and cooked, ate and slept there. Naipaul says, "They worried no one, and they all had excellent physiques, and one or two were reputed to be millionaires" (p.317). It is possible that Salman Rushdie was inspired by this when he wrote a story about the theft of the relic from the Hazrat Bal Mosque in Srinagar which was accidentally touched by a crippled beggar who had become a millionaire. Touching the relic made him whole again and his lucrative source of income was gone. Though black humour was perfected by Rushdie, there is a blackness about Naipaul's humour too.

Why did Mr. Biswas want a House?

Among other characters who amuse the reader in the novel, is Ramchand, Mr. Biswas' brother-in-law. His job in a lunatic asylum gave him a sense of security, even cockiness, to the extent he believed that the place was created for the likes of him. Also, when he came to see Mr. Biswas after the latter had a nervous breakdown, he behaved as if his brother-in-law was a certified lunatic. In terms of worldly success, Ramchand was a winner, but the question that disturbs one is, did he deserve the success that came his way? In other words, the novelist suggests that though success was something everyone aimed at, in the colonial set up, it was not necessarily attained by the most deserving candidate.

I have drawn your attention to examples of irony and humour in the novel on a broad basis. You should read it carefully for more references. Look out for the nuances of language which capture the ethos of a people who thought in one language, spoke in another, altogether trying to grow out of their girmitya background and occupations. *A House for Mr. Biswas* is the most humorous of Naipaul's novels and you should be able to enjoy it as such.

4.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit I have attempted to look at the novel from three angles. There are possibly more ways of approaching *A House for Mr. Biswas*. Make your own observations, and draw your own conclusions. The vast dimensions of the novel allow different readings at socio-political and cultural / economic levels, exploring and commenting on different aspects of life led by the girmityas and their descendants in a society changing from colonial to post-colonial. Naipaul wrote many works of fiction and non-fiction after *A House for Mr. Biswas* but none so multi-layered or so open to different interpretations. A comparative study of the novel, in juxtaposition to the texts that came before it and in conjunction with Naipaul's books on India in the next section, would bring out aspects of the novel hitherto untouched, yet another proof of its rich textual fabric.

4.5 GLOSSARY

Postcolonial reconstruction: A reading of the text from the postcolonial viewpoint, means adding new meaning and significance to it, also reading between the lines to look for hidden meanings, deliberate omissions/inclusions overlooked earlier.

Counternarrative: A narrative that counters the main one and can be traced to autobiographical parallels or racial memory, something deeply entrenched in the writer's psyche.

4.6 QUESTIONS

1. Examine *A House for Mr. Biswas* as a diasporic novel.
2. Write a note on the use of irony and humour in *A House for Mr. Biswas*.

4.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Mishra, Vijay. "(B) ordering Naipaul : Indenture History and Diasporic Poetics", *Diaspora* 5:21, 1996 p. 196-236

UNIT 5 PUTTING A HOUSE FOR MR BISWAS IN PERSPECTIVE

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Naipaul's early works : *The Mystic Masseur*
- 5.2 *Miguel Street*
- 5.3 *The Suffrage of Elvira*
- 5.4 *Middle Passage*
- 5.5 Naipaul and India : *An Area of Darkness*
- 5.6 *India : A Million Mutinies Now*
- 5.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.8 Glossary
- 5.9 Questions
- 5.10 Suggested Readings

5.0 OBJECTIVES

What more is there to know about *A House for Mr Biswas*? I can see the question forming in your minds. You have studied the background of the novel, glanced at biographical material on V.S Naipaul, read the text in an attempt to reconstruct it and looked at some critical approaches to the novel.

But, as postgraduate students you would know that you cannot study a work of fiction in isolation. Apart from the background and all that went into the making of this particular novel, you should know about other related works of the novelist so as to put the text prescribed for you in a literary context.

By implication, you would comprehend *A House for Mr Biswas* better if you compare it with Naipaul's Caribbean novels, *The Mystic Masseur*, the *The Suffrage of Elvira* and *Miguel Street* and his impression of colonial society in the West Indies in *The Middle Passage*. This would enable you to look at the ways in which Naipaul has worked and reworked the same material into the increasing complexities of more self sustaining narratives. The first part of this unit guides you through the comparisons.

Naipaul's strange relationship with India is shaped by his double diasporic psyche. This would be explored in the second part of this unit by locating *A House for Mr Biswas* in the context of Naipaul's three books on India – *An Area of Darkness*, *India: A Wounded Civilization* and *India : A Million Mutinies Now*. I would also bring in some relevant interviews given by him to the media. All of this is essential. A proper perspective on Naipaul is a difficult task to achieve when one considers the writer's elusive and contradictory remarks, yet nothing can eclipse the brilliance of his writings, though you may not agree with many of his opinions.

5.1 NAIPAUL'S EARLY WORKS: *THE MYSTIC MASSEUR*

The transformation of Ganesh Ramsumair, from a masseur to a mystic to the impeccably dressed G.R. Muir Esq., MBE is clearly a trope for the socio-cultural and political changes on the island even as the colonizer tried to strengthen his position by involving more and more local individuals in governance.

Ganesh was a successful person. Named after the god who proffers *siddhi* or success to the hard working, Ganesh would be considered lucky in more ways than one. He and Mr Biswas complement each other, the former moved from success to success in a planned, careful sort of way, whereas the latter tired his hand at practically everything though he rarely met with success. Wealth was an important yardstick in measuring social status in early twentieth century Trinidad. After all, the immigrants had crossed the *kala pani* in their quest for money and position. So, someone who could attain both without apparently compromising his ideals or tarnishing his public image was held in awe, almost like Ganesh who epitomizes success in the Hindu pantheon.

The Mystic Masseur is Naipaul's first novel and it has the simplistic approach of most first novels. The language is direct with hints of irony and humour that Naipaul was to perfect in *A House for Mr Biswas*. The first page of *The Mystic Masseur* offers an example of the use of humour in Naipaul's early works. I quote: 'I know the sort of doctors they have in Trinidad', my mother used to say, 'They think nothing of killing two three people before breakfast.' (p.11) In *A House for Mr Biswas* the doctor was a disliked person, always fleecing poor people like Mr Biswas' brothers and being rude to them. The masseur who could heal people by his magic touch and chants provided an alternative medicine held in high esteem by many, mostly in rural areas. Even today, if someone breaks a bone in the old city or rural areas of India, he may go to a masseur for a therapeutic massage and bandaging rather than to an orthopaedic in a hospital.

Mr Biswas loses his parents in the novel but the deaths do not cause much grief as has already been pointed out in an earlier section. Ganesh's response to his father's death is much the same. He fulfils the ritual tasks as commanded by the pundit, Ramlogan and his own aunt, without asking questions. "He remembered having to walk round the body of his father, remembered applying the last caste marks to the old man's forehead, and doing many more things until it seemed that ritual had replaced grief." (p.30)

A newly evolved feeling of respect for the written word and respect for an author who has garnered a reputation runs through Naipaul's early writing. Trinidad did not look upon writing as a profession and offered no encouragement to a writer until he made money. Naipaul's father had not been successful and he himself was a struggling writer in London when he wrote his early novels. Ganesh did not write novels, he wrote philosophical books with titles like *The Road to Happiness*, *The Soul as I see It* and others which made his name in Trinidad. But his ultimate success came when he became president of the Hindu Association, Trinidad and Tobago, and after that Member of the Legislative Council. While his early political career was modelled on Gandhi's, he slowly became more and more westernized, an MBE tilting the balance towards westernization so that at the end of the novel he was very much the picture of an English gentleman except in appearance.

As for the format of the two novels, *The Mystic Masseur* strikes the reader with its direct appeal. When compared to *A House for Mr Biswas*, *The Mystic Masseur* is almost schematic. The multi-layered narrative that has made *A House for Mr Biswas* a favourite with the post colonial reader, has replaced a simply structured novel with some irony and humour. There is one major innovation. At a time when dialect-dominated novels had not yet come into vogue, Naipaul uses the dialect spoken by Indian immigrants in Trinidad in an authentic way, something that gives the novel a contemporaneous crispness. This technique has been perfected by Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children*.

The stories collected in *Miguel Street* have a much more definite approach. They were written before *The Mystic Masseur* though published later. The opening lines of the first story titled "Bogart" had been in the writer's mind for a long time. It was a conversation, the first part sifted from memory and the second created by imagination. To quote the conversation:

Every morning when he got up Hat would sit on the banister of his back verandah and shout across, 'What happening there, Bogart?'
Bogart would turn in his bed and mumble softly, so that no one heard, 'What happening there Hat?'
(Naipaul, *Miguel Street*, p. 9)

If you read *Miguel Street* and *The Mystic Masseur* together you will find that many characters as well as situations overlap, some of which have been taken up and honed to perfection in *A House for Mr Biswas*. Bogart used to live in the same house as Naipaul for quite sometime. It is possibly this close bond that made the narrator gloss over his act of bigamy, even valorize it.

A very close bond existed between all those who lived on *Miguel Street*, a kinship that can be traced back to the *jahazi* brotherhood. Even when Popo the carpenter was caught for stealing, his friends on *Miguel Street* agreed that his stupidity had led to the arrest. The feeling of the community are reflected in words such as these ".... We felt deep inside ourselves that Popo was really a man, perhaps a bigger man than any of us". (Naipaul, *Miguel Street*, p. 20) In *A House for Mr Biswas* there was no such kinship, only jostling for space where no act of creativity could find encouragement.

The limited world of the *gimritiya* which Mr Biswas tries to transcend, make him an oddity in the eyes of his family as well as others. The camaraderie and an acceptance of one another's failings is possible only if space is shared willingly. Mr Biswas was compelled to share his space with the Tulsi family. As has been pointed out earlier this sharing made him resentful, though at the same time the Tulsi household provided a security which he could not experience on his own. This appears paradoxical, till one looks closely at Mr Biswas's relationship with the Tulsis which oscillates between dependence and resentment.

The *Ramcharitmanas* and the *Gita* were important to the immigrant. Apart from providing a link with India, these texts also gave them a socio-religious anchorage. In *Miguel Street* there is an attitude of defiance towards them, something that was voiced by Mrs Morgan towards a person called Bhakcu who was fond of reading the *Ramcharitmanas* in a doleful singsong voice, lying on his stomach on the bed. Her railings are addressed to Mrs Bhakcu, "Why don't you get your big-belly husband to go and fix some more motor-car, and stop singing" (*Miguel Street*, p. 65). In colonial Trinidad the *Ramcharitmanas* had ceased to be a talisman along with the *Gita* after the indenture period was over. So Bhakcu's knowledge of the *Ramcharitmanas* was not respected till the money making possibilities were suggested to his wife. To quote from "The Mechanical Genius":

My mother said, 'Well, it easy, easy. He is a Brahmin, he know the *Ramayana*, and he have a car. It easy for him to become a pundit, a real, proper pundit.'

Mrs Bhakcu clapped her hands. 'Is a first class idea. Hindu pundits making a lot of money these days.'
So Bhakcu became a pundit.
(Naipaul, *Miguel Street*, p. 126-7)

The concluding sentence of the story, "I was haunted by thoughts of the dhoti-clad Bhakcu crawling under a car, attending to a crank-shaft, while poor Hindus waited for him to attend to their souls." (Naipaul, *Miguel Street*, 127) is an instance of humour in Naipaul's earliest work. Bhakcu was one of his favourite characters and in real life, it was he who drove the narrator to the airport when he was going abroad to study.

Mr Titus Hoyt, who was never called Titus or Mr Hoyt but Mr Titus Hoyt by all those who knew him, reminds one strongly of Mr Biswas who was never referred to as Mohun by the author, always Mr Biswas. Titus Hoyt's photograph in the newspaper along with a letter from one of his young students anonymously contributing to the *Guardian's* "Neediest Cases Fund" was developed into two incidents in *A House for Mr Biswas*. The first was Mr Biswas' attempts to pose as Scarlet Pimpernel for his readers early in his journalistic career, a gimmick that failed miserably and showed the absurdity of his aspirations. The "Neediest Cases Fund" can be identified as the precursor to the Deserving Destitutes Fund that provides many humorous situations in *A House for Mr Biswas*.

Naipaul's first collection of stories compares favourably with *A House for Mr Biswas*. There is a freshness about its humour and a liveliness about the characters and the pace at which the stories move. *Miguel Street* was published at a time when English literature had not acquired a multiracial, multiethnic identity as it has today. The book may now receive a wider readership from those interested in the postcolonial subject.

5.3 THE SUFFRAGE OF ELVIRA

The Suffrage of Elvira was Naipaul's first political novel written at a time when any liaison between politics and literature was distrusted. The title is ironical, the word "suffrage" meaning general elections, at the same time hinting at the suffering/inconveniences caused by the elections. Interestingly, Naipaul did not show much interest in the political scene in India in his first novel located in the country. In *A House for Mr Biswas* there is hardly any mention of the political scene in Arwacas, the principal site of the novel.

The Suffrage of Elvira reminds an Indian reader of the way in which general elections were conducted in India in the fifties. Surujput Harbans with his professed secularism, low self esteem despite a sound financial background, could easily pass off as the stereotypical political candidate, not very sure of the votes he controlled. Through him Naipaul makes fun of the elections conducted in former colonies by showing how vote banks were identified and how they were nurtured.

Characters like Ganesh Pundit hovered briefly in the background conveying the idea that Naipaul was working and reworking the same material – his experience in Trinidad. The autobiographical parallels were not so pronounced at this stage as they later became in *A House for Mr Biswas*. Writing about the political situation was an experiment of sorts, later taken up on a large scale in his non fiction as he became a self-appointed spokesperson for several developing nations.

Naipaul often prioritized the situation and not the characters. In *Suffrage of Elvira* the dog named Tiger reminds one of Tarzan in *A House for Mr Biswas*. Like *Miguel Street*, *The Suffrage of Elvira* is quite simplistic, descriptive rather than analytical, presenting a slice of life from the Caribbeans, rather than going into the depths of social organisation. Naipaul was clearly looking for a theme which would serve as a metaphor of the life of the immigrants.

5.4 MIDDLE PASSAGE

Putting *A House for Mr. Biswas* in Perspective

Middle Passage, a collection of six long essays, collaging travel impressions in Trinidad, British Guiana, Surinam, Martinique and Jamaica, came after *A House for Mr Biswas* and the opening sentence indicated the colonial thrust of the discourse. To quote, "There was such a crowd of immigrant-type west Indians on the boat-train platform at Waterloo that I was glad I was travelling first class to the West Indies". (Naipaul *Middle Passage*, p.11) The descendants of indentured immigrants were trying to sever links with working class immigrants to England and adopted a supercilious attitude towards them. Coming back to Trinidad for a visit was not a homecoming at all for Naipaul. It could not provide a house to a later day Mr Biswas and he associated it with his father's failure. Predictably the judgement passed by Naipaul on Trinidad is harsh and reflects his wish to dissociate himself altogether from the country to which his forefathers migrated. I will quote from it at length as it will help you to link *A House for Mr Biswas* as with Naipaul's books on India which will be taken up in the concluding section of this unit. He says in *Middle Passage* :

Trinidad was and remains a materialist immigrant society, continually growing and changing, never settling into any pattern, always retaining the atmosphere of the camp; unique in the West Indies in the absence of a history; yet not an expanding society but a colonial society, ruled autocratically if benevolently, with the further limitations of its small size and remoteness. All this has combined to give it its special character, its ebullience and irresponsibility. And more : a tolerance which is more than tolerance and indifference to virtue as well as to vice; The Land of the Calypso is not a copy-writers phrase. It is one side of the truth, and it was this gaiety, so inexplicable to the tourist who sees the shacks of Shanty Town and the corbeaux patrolling the highway, and inexplicable to me who had remembered it as the land of failures, which now, on my return, assailed me. (Naipaul, *Middle Passage*, p. 54)

Clearly Naipaul had made up his mind to assume the persona of the exile, made easier by his double diasporic status. This helps one to understand his attitude to India and compare it to the novel under study that the next part of this unit will undertake.

5.5 NAIPAUL AND INDIA : AN AREA OF DARKNESS

Naipaul has yet to write a novel with India as its locale. If one were to go by his vehement condemnation of the novel as a genre in an interview with Ahmed Rashid in Lahore, one would not expect such a novel, or, for that matter any novel. To quote : "I hate the word novel. I can no longer understand why it is important to write or read invented stories. I don't need those extravaganzas". (Interview in *The Observer Review*, p. 16) However, his paradoxical nature and a remark made in India in a television interview in 1998 to the effect that he was being pressurized (by his wife Nadira ?) to write a novel based in India, makes one hope that such a novel may yet be forthcoming.

Among post-1947 travellers to India, Naipaul has a special place because of his curious-love-hate relationship with this country. It is a strange predicament, mainly a tension trying to balance between a desire to remain detached from the mainstream tradition of the country visited and not quite succeeding, out of which is born some sensitive travel writing, impressionistic, emotional and in the first book on India,

A visit to this village of Dubey's and Tiwaris with an IAS officer was not a satisfying experience for Naipaul. Two things about his childhood influenced his reaction to the village of the Dubey's in general and his Indian relative Ramchandra in particular. He was disappointed by the absence of community living in his ancestral house, the sort he had experienced in Chaguanas and later in Port of Spain as part of an extended family on his mother's side (fictionally represented as the Tulsi household in *Hanuman House*). The second was more complex. He had possibly expected his grandfather's branch of the family to be prosperous like others in the village. The poverty that he saw, along with Ranchandra Dubey's tendency to cling to him and make use of him, put an end to his wish to be identified with the Indian branch of his family in any way. Poverty and failure reminded him of his own father.

Another aspect of India that Naipaul encountered early in life was the caste system and the Hindu-Muslim divide in Trinidad society. F.Z. Ghany the pompous "solicitor conveyancer and a commissioner of oaths" (*A House for Mr Biswas*, p. 42) made most of his money from Hindus but distrusted them as a Muslim. Even the way he greeted Tara, Bipti and Mr Biswas indicated a scornful attitude. Such caste loyalties not so obvious normally, erupted violently when the situation was explosive as during the General Elections depicted in *The Suffrage of Elvira*. In *An Area of Darkness* and *A House for Mr Biswas* Naipaul expressed no special preference for politics. Later, during subsequent visits to India, he developed an interest in the political set up here and attempted to analyze it in *India ; A Wounded Civilization* and *India : A Million Mutinies Now*.

52

This explains his use of the word "pilgrimage" for a visit to the Amarnath Cave, a trip which he enjoyed as much as his trip to Kashmir. To quote from his reminiscences :

It was the joy of being among the mountains; it was the special joy of being among the Himalayas. I felt linked to them. I liked speaking the name. India, the Himalayas : they went together. In so many of the brightly coloured religious pictures in my grandmother's house I had seen these mountains, cones of white against simple, cold blue. They had become part of the India of my fantasy. It would have astonished me then, in a Trinidad achingly remote from places that seemed worthwhile and real become fully known, to be told that one day I would walk among the originals of those mountains.

(Naipaul, *An Area of Darkness*, p.176 – 7)

This was one of the few places where the physical India corresponded with the India of Naipaul's dreams and provided a resting place for his imagination.

In the course of his post-1962 visits to India, Naipaul concerned himself with ethnographic analyses of Indians, at the same time keeping a distance from the ordinary person most of the time, talking mainly to those in authority and power, like the IAS officer in Bombay, the commissioner in Rajasthan. As a postcolonial traveller who was unable to establish an Indian identity and had given up the attempt to do so after his first visit to this country, Naipaul predictably held the view that India should sever all connections with the past, as perhaps Mr Biswas had done by finally moving into a house that was more western than Indian in appearance and a contrast to Hanuman house.

5.6 INDIA : A MILLION MUTINIES NOW

One cannot really compare Naipaul's third book on India, *India : A Million Mutinies Now* with *A House for Mr Biswas* but there are certain perceptions which can be traced back to his Trinidad Indian background. For example, his sympathy for minorities in India can be interpreted as a vicarious association with his own past, expressed from a secure position in the west, financially and professionally. So, a visit to the Muslim ghetto on Muhammad Ali Road in Mumbai made him understand the strong bond between the residents.

I felt that if I had been in their position, confined to Bombay, to that area, to that row, I too would have been a passionate Muslim. I had grown up in Trinidad as a member of the Indian community, a member of a minority, and I knew that if you felt that your community was small you could never walk away from it ; the grimmer things became, the more you insisted on being what you were. (Naipaul, *India : A Million Mutinies Now*, p. 31)

The same applies to his perspective on the Punjab problem, which sees resentment against the central government as the root cause.

To some extent you can compare *An Area of Darkness* with *A House for Mr Biswas* but an attempt at analogizing Naipaul's other books on India do not yield too many parallels.

5.7 LET US SUM UP

You would have, by now formed your own opinion on V.S.Naipaul. Let me warn you he is paradoxical and often changes views expressed on an earlier occasion. An example : after declaring to a journalist last year that the novel was extinct, when

Putting *A House for Mr. Biswas* in Perspective

Tarun Tejpal of *Outlook* asked him whether he was serious about writing another novel, his answer was, "I'm being pressed, you know. I'm being pressed although I feel I've moved away from the form and read very few novels now and I thought that the kind of work I have to do should be a little bit in the nature of my last four books. But I'm pressed and I might do something like a political fairy tale." (*Outlook*, 88 March 23, 1998)

What you should prioritize in your study of Naipaul is the way he develops his style, striving to make his prose jargon free, more "transparent" to use his words, as he considers words "valuable" and to be used with a lot of thought and care. This, I feel is the reason that makes Naipaul one of the greatest writers of the world though his viewpoints are often controversial.

5.8 GLOSSARY

- Self-sustained narrative:** A narrative that can stand on its own.
- Multi-layered narrative:** A narrative that is open to different levels of reading and interpretation.

5.9 QUESTIONS

- 1 Naipaul's ambivalence towards India originates from his diasporic status. Comment with a comparatist study of *A House for Mr Biswas* and Naipaul's three books on India.
- 2 In *A House for Mr Biswas* Naipaul works and reworks the same material used in his earlier fiction. Comment with examples from the relevant texts.

5.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

- Naipaul, V.S. *The Mystic Masseur* 1957. Andre Deutsch
..... *The Suffrage of Elvira* 1958. Andre Deutsch
- - - *Miguel Street* 1959, Andre Deutsch
- - - *An Area of Darkness*, 1964, Andre Deutsch
- - - *India : A Wounded Civilization*, Vikas, 1977
- - - *India : A Million Mutinies Now*, Minerva, 1990
- - - Interview with Tarun Tejpal. *Outlook* March 23, 1998

Nixon, Rob. *London Calling : V.S Naipaul Post- Colonial Mandarin*. Oxford University Press, 1992

Rai, Sudha. *V.S. Naipaul : A Study in Expatriate Sensibility*. Arnold Hennimann 1982.



Uttar Pradesh
Rajarshi Tandon Open University

MAEN-07
**NEW LITERATURES
IN ENGLISH**

Block

6

CARIBBEAN POETRY: *DEREK WALCOTT AND EDWARD BRATHWAITE*

Block Introduction

UNIT 1

Introduction to Caribbean poetry 7

UNIT 2

Derek Walcott-I 18

UNIT 3

Derek Walcott-II 34

UNIT 4

(Edward) Kamau Brathwaite-I 56

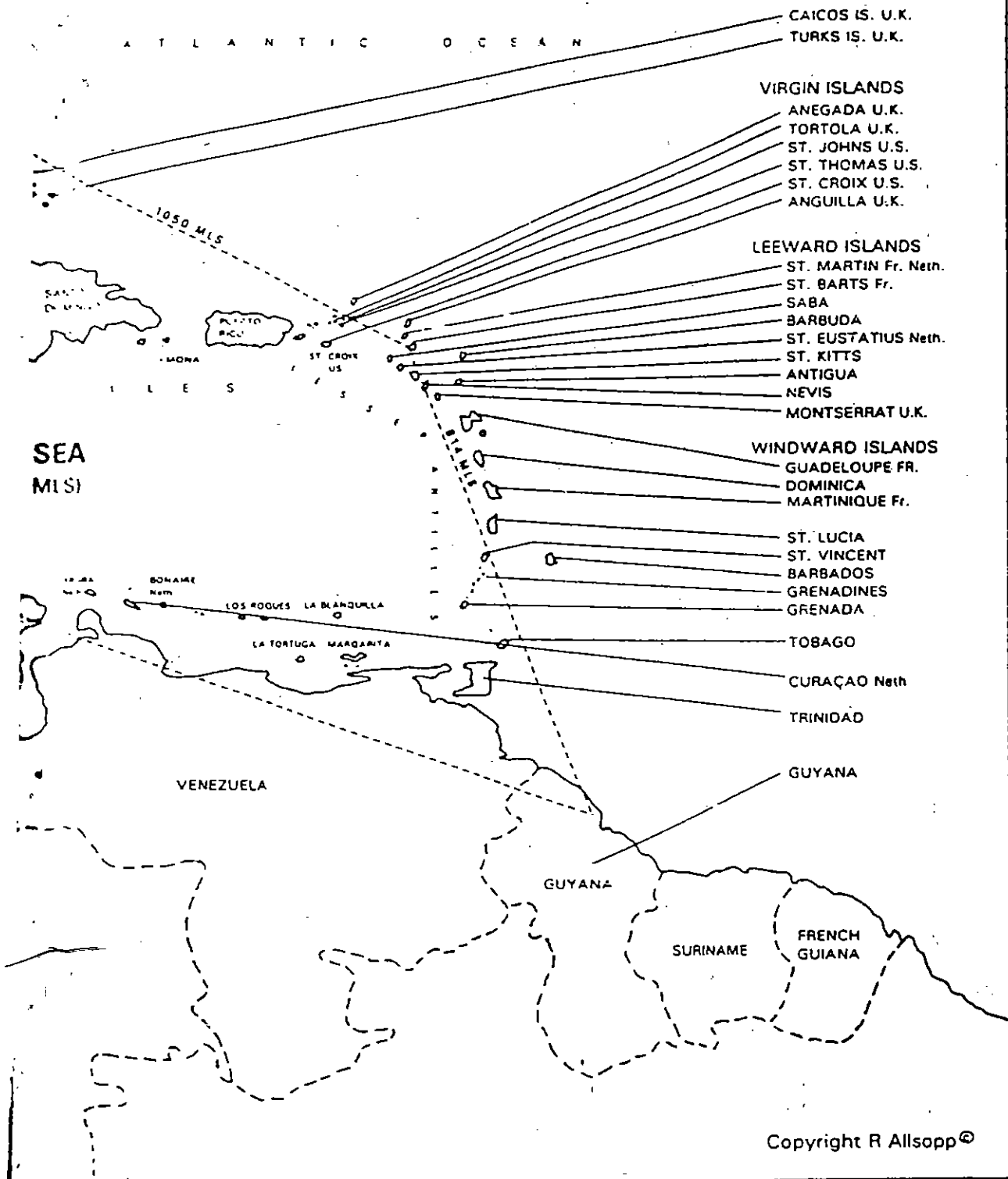
UNIT 5

(Edward) Kamau Brathwaite-II 73

UNIT 6

Theoretical Paradigms for Caribbean Literature 93

THE CARIBBEAN & RIMLANDS



INTRODUCTION TO BLOCK 6

CARIBBEAN POETRY: DEREK WALCOTT AND EDWARD BRATHWAITE

In the previous block you read about V.S. Naipaul's *A House for Mr. Biswas* which etches the life of Indian immigrants in the Caribbean island Trinidad. Caribbean society emerged out of successive waves of free as well as forced migration from Europe, Africa and Asia. The cultures of these various people contributed to the formation of what can, broadly speaking, be called Caribbean culture and yet they preserve the markers of their distinct identity. It is the apparently conflictual paradigms of distinctness and the possibility of assimilation which emerge as important issues in the poetry of Derek Walcott and Edward Brathwaite. Reading the work of these two poets together in this block will enable you to get a clearer picture of this issue since Walcott and Brathwaite articulate two almost diametrically opposed stands on it. While Walcott has laid emphasis on the multicultural diversity of the Caribbeans, Brathwaite's focus has been almost exclusively on the African roots of Caribbean culture. The colonisation of the region will be the context within which Caribbean poetry will be discussed. The six units will be structured on the basis of the following outlines:

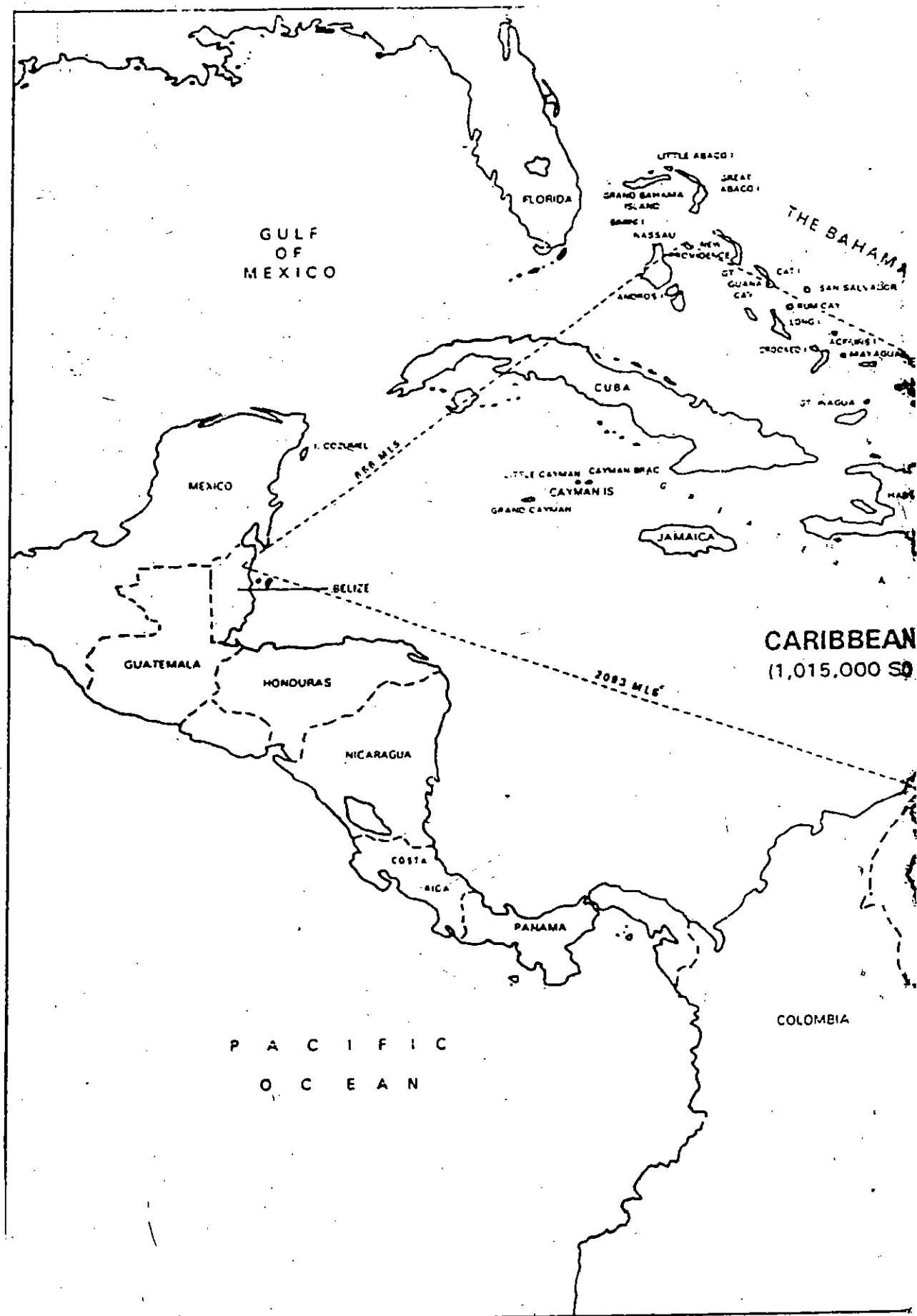
UNIT ONE contains an account of the history of the colonisation of the region with emphasis on the patterns of language usage by the colonised population. This will be followed by an introduction to Caribbean poetry and how it variously endorses, reflects and subverts the processes of colonial control.

UNITS TWO AND THREE will focus on the biographical details, drama and criticism of Derek Walcott followed by a discussion of his poems.

UNITS FOUR AND FIVE will outline the biography, the cultural and historical commentary of Edward Brathwaite and an analysis of poems from his oeuvre.

Walcott's, Brathwaite's and others' views on aspects of Caribbean, literature and cultural and theoretical paradigms, will be summarised in **UNIT SIX**.

You can begin by reading Unit One and then move on directly to the poems. This will enable you to see for yourself to what extent historical processes influence the literature of a particular region. It is very important that you read and re-read the poems, first without the explanation and subsequently with the detailed comments I have given. This will help you to understand the various culture specific words and ideas used in Caribbean poetry. For an extended discussion of these, the last unit will prove useful. Do not forget to attempt the exercises at the end of each unit to find out how much you have understood of Caribbean poetry.



UNIT 1 INTRODUCTION TO CARIBBEAN POETRY

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 The Region
 - 1.1.1 Colonisation
 - 1.1.2 Resistance
 - 1.1.3 Emancipation
- 1.2 Language
 - 1.2.1 Creole, creole, the creole continuum
 - 1.2.2 *creolité* and *antillanité*
 - 1.2.3 nation language/creole
- 1.3 Literature
 - 1.3.1 creole poetry
 - 1.3.2 History and poetry
- 1.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.5 Glossary
- 1.6 Questions
- 1.7 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will provide an introduction to the historical processes which have given the Caribbean islands their cultural and literary identity. The discussion will be with reference to the various ways in which the historical fact of colonisation imbricates peoples' minds. The direct consequence of this was slavery accompanied with attempts to eradicate through all means the traces of their own culture from the slave population's consciousness. I deal primarily with what I consider the most effective means employed to do so, the imposition of the colonisers' language and the subversion of this means of control by the slaves' use of creole. The pan-Caribbean dimensions of the politics of language is apparent from the writings of Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Édouard Glissant. The unit concludes with a survey of twentieth century Caribbean poets' perception of history and the ideology informing their representations.

1.1 THE REGION

The term 'Caribbean' indicates the geographical region including all the territories associated with European powers like Britain, France, Spain, Portugal and others. The territories that were part of the British empire came together as the West Indian Federation in 1962. After the break-up of the federation the islands comprising it became independent in the 1960s. Even now there is a common cricketing team of the West Indians. Like sports, literature also continues to be considered regionally rather than nationally. Thus accounts like Stewart Brown's which discuss West Indian poetry are more common than those of Barbadian, St. Lucian or Trinidadian poetry. So the term 'West Indian' is based on the linguistic determinant of the use of English while 'Caribbean' emphasises geographical and historical determinants (Ashcroft *et al* 18).

1.1.1 Colonisation

At the time of Columbus's 'discovery' of Hispaniola in 1492 the Caribbean islands were inhabited by the Caribs who were in the process of subduing the ~~culturally~~ less

advanced tribes of the Tainos, the Arawaks and the Ciboneyes. It is from this date till about the middle of the sixteenth century that native depopulation took place in this region. A small number of African slaves came on Columbus's second voyage in 1494 and in 1498 six hundred Indians were shipped back to Spain. By the sixteenth century the demand for African slaves had increased in the wake of the decimation of the **Amerindian** tribes. In this period African slaves were being imported in large numbers first to work in mines and then as workers in sugar plantations. Following the capture of some of the islands by the British a sizeable population of West African slaves had been brought over by them as manual labour for the cultivation of sugarcane. If you have read Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* you will remember that Fanny's uncle Sir Thomas Bertram leaves England to look after his Antiguan estates or that Mr. Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is married to Bertha Mason, the daughter of a Jamaican plantation owner. The above-given examples point to the fact that British authors were aware of the economic imperatives involved in its overseas dominions and their impact on the social structure at home.

The major European powers which sought control of the Caribbean were Britain, France and Spain. The development of the territories controlled by them followed almost the same pattern leading them to become "plantation colonies." However, the slave population differed significantly in these regions. In the Hispanic Caribbean islands the slaves comprised about fifty per cent of the total population whereas in the British and French Caribbean they formed eighty five to ninety per cent of the inhabitants. It should be obvious to you that the main motives for colonisation were economic. Here is what Aimé Césaire from Martinique, a former French Caribbean colony, has to say in response to the question, "What, fundamentally, is colonization?":

neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise, nor a desire to push back the frontiers of ignorance, disease, and tyranny, nor a project undertaken for the greater glory of God, nor an attempt to extend the rule of law. . . . the decisive actors here are the adventurer and the pirate, the wholesale grocer and the ship owner, the gold digger and the merchant, appetite and force, and behind them, the baleful projected shadow of a form of civilization which, at a certain point in its history, finds itself obliged, for internal reasons, to extend to a world scale, the competition of its antagonistic economies. (10-11)

I find this passage remarkable for the way in which Césaire here lists the religious, philanthropic, psychological, ethnographic, sociological and political justifications offered by the colonisers and demolishes any attempt on their part to show the innate superiority of European systems of social organization. Materialism in its legal and illegal forms is shown to be the primary motive behind the colonial enterprise. The ideological thrust of Césaire's work *Discourse on Colonialism* (1995) is a systematic defence of "Negro civilization," as the passage just quoted aptly demonstrates in its overturning of European civilizational superiority.

1.1.2 Resistance

The exploitation of the slaves by their colonial masters did not go unchecked. Resistance took many forms, primary among them being the slave revolts which occurred sporadically all over the Caribbean. In the sixteenth century there were revolts in various parts of the Hispanic Caribbean: Cuba, Puerto Rico, Honduras and New Spain. In the seventeenth century there was a series of slave revolts historians have labelled the "Akan revolts" in the British Caribbean island of Antigua. In 1655 when the British captured Jamaica from the Spanish some African slaves escaped to the hills. They joined others who were hunters and herdsman and who were

thoroughly familiar with the mountainous region. These were the first Maroons, a group which refused to accept slave status and resorted to guerrilla tactics to protect themselves. From 1690 to 1740 the Maroons were engaged in almost constant guerrilla warfare with the British forces. These risings did not imply that all the Africans were united in their struggle against slavery. For instance the Maroons, who had always been free, looked down upon the escaped slaves. This view included Creoles, that is, those slaves born on the islands, descendants of those who were transported through the **Middle Passage** from Africa to the New World. New arrivals from Africa, derisively known as Freshwater Negroes, were also looked down upon. There was also hostility between the Creole slaves and the Africans, the former accusing the latter of inciting them to rebellion. Hence the revolts which occurred during the sixteenth and seventeenth century were made less effective due to lack of cohesiveness. Historically the most important insurrection took place in the French Caribbean island of Haiti at San Domingo in 1791. Under the leadership of Toussaint L'Ouverture (Pierre Domingo), a black man who had been a slave till the age of forty five, the San Domingo revolution culminated in the establishment of Haiti as the first black republic of the New World.

You may wonder why it is important for us to know about the history of resistance in the Caribbean. This is because the leaders of these struggles, men like Toussaint, became transformed into heroes in the popular imagination. Songs were sung about these victories, poems were written about them. Speaking about how he came to develop the concept of **Negritude**, Césaire, in an interview with the Haitian poet and militant René Depestre said: "Negritude [is] action. Haiti is the country where Negro people stood up for the first time, affirming their determination to shape a new world, a free world" (75). Explaining the concept of **Antillean** Negritude Césaire says "it was really a resistance to the politics of assimilation," and came into existence because "Antilleans were ashamed of being Negroes." Haiti represents for him "the heroic Antilles, the African Antilles . . . Haiti is the most African of Antilles. It is at the same time a country with a marvellous history: the first Negro epic of the New World was written by Haitians, people like Toussaint l'Ouverture, Henri Christophe, Jean Jacques Dessalines . . ." (72-74).

The case of Haiti illustrates the importance of successful resistance. Its effect on the creative imagination is evident in Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* (1939) where the first occurrence of the word Negritude coincides with an allusion to the Haitian fight for independence.

1.1.3 Emancipation

At the beginning of the nineteenth century the slave imports continued unabated. Between 1801 and 1807 sixty three thousand slaves were brought to the island of Jamaica. Oppression was practiced with a different emphasis, it was not so much physical as institutional violence which was the norm particularly after Britain was forced to abolish slavery in its territories due to growing pressure at home. Even though slavery ended by 1833 in the British colonies, all major decisions were made through the colonial office. Thirty thousand pounds per annum were granted for the education of former slaves. Religious and secular education was imparted in an effort to convert them into docile wage earners. The nineteenth century saw an intensified growth of both the formal church and authentic African cults. An important rising of this century was the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion in Jamaica. Largely a demand for control of their rightful share of the land which was under the absentee owners of large estates, the march to the Morant Bay court resulted in the execution of over four hundred people. Among those executed were Paul Bogle, a Baptist minister, and a coloured member of parliament, George William Gordon.

Violence against the peasantry took severe economic forms as well. Indentured labourers from China, India and some European countries were brought over to keep the wages low and the peasantry in a state of perpetual poverty. The opening decades of the twentieth century were years of economic crisis. Hurricanes and droughts

caused losses to the sugar industry which was already losing out to foreign competition in the world market. In spite of high levels of unemployment planters in Guyana, Jamaica and Trinidad chose to bring over East Indian indentured labourers rather than pay high wages to local people. Due to unemployment there was widespread migration from rural areas into cities, the departure from the land being associated with a sense of spiritual loss.

1.2 LANGUAGE

1.2.1 Creole, creole, the creole continuum

Colonial control and resistance to it took the form of revolutions and battles. Language too is an effective medium for exerting control and battles can be fought on the linguistic terrain. Discussing the politics of language in African literature the Kenyan novelist, playwright and activist Ngugi wa Thiong'O states: "The domination of a people's language by the language of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised" (16). Applying this to the Caribbean situation one sees the various ways in which the slaves were discouraged from using their native languages. They were separated from other slaves of the same linguistic background because their masters feared that communication between them might lead to plans of escape or rebellion. The gradual erasure of the native language from their minds was accompanied with the use of creole, an adaptation of the coloniser's language. Please do not confuse between Creole and creole. Both words derive from the Spanish word "*criollo*" which means native born in the New World. However, the former (spelt with a capital C) was first used with pride by European colonists to refer to themselves as born and bred in the New World and was later used to distinguish slaves born in the Caribbean as distinct from those brought over from Africa. The latter, creole, (spelt with a small c) refers to any one of a family of languages developed in the Caribbean by African slaves in contact with one or more of the European languages (English, French, Spanish, Portuguese or Dutch). It became the first language for succeeding generations.

In any given region in the Caribbean a multitude of dialects interweave to form a generally comprehensible linguistic continuum, thus making the discourse "polyglossic or polydialectal" (Ashcroft *et al* 39). The theory of the creole continuum or more accurately the "post-creole speech continuum" arises out of this polyglossic situation. I shall explain what this means in simple terms. In a single speech community (say English speaking) people might use variants ranging from creolized forms at one end to language forms closer to standard (English) language at the other end. Most individuals command competence of a small range of varieties along the linguistic continuum, "the breadth of the span depending on the breadth of [their] social contacts" (Decamp qtd. in Donnell and Welsh 13). To put it simply, the more educated a person the more likely is he to speak the standard form of the language. Or a person might speak creole as the language of daily common contact and use the standard form at his place of work. This theory then affirms the notion of language as practice.

1.2.2 creolité and antillanité

The status of creole has been one of the most widely debated theoretical issues in the Caribbean. It is from the francophone Caribbean island of Martinique that most theoretical discussion has been produced. Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon and Edouard Glissant have given considerable attention to the disputed terrain of language in the Caribbean. Like the anglophone Caribbean islands, the francophone Caribbean faced linguistic imperialism. This was experienced in an intensified form in Martinique which continues to be an overseas department of France following a legislative act of 1948. When Césaire was born in 1913, Martinique, his "native land" was still a

French colony which bore the traces of three hundred years of slavery. He forwards the idea of breaking free from French literary traditions and of creating "a new language, one capable of communicating the African heritage" (*Discourse* 66-67). The creative expression of this is his *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* (1939). Although Césaire spoke of inscribing French with the African heritage he had a very conservative position on *créolité* or creolity, he said that it was already included in Negritude. His own knowledge of creole was very poor and he remarked on the low level of creolity which made it incapable of expressing abstract ideas.

Recently a group of Caribbean writers have adopted *créolité* as a key word and see themselves as direct descendants of Césaire. So although Césaire did not use creole himself, his work on language has inspired others who, even while acknowledging his influence, move away from some of the tenets of Negritude and embrace a more global and less essentially racial theory of *créolité*. Glissant for instance speaks of *antillanité* as "more than a theory, a vision," the word can be translated as Caribbeaness. Referring to the anglophone Antilles or English speaking Caribbean, Glissant comments that they distrust the theory of Caribbeaness but try to make it work. In *Caribbean Discourse* (1989) Glissant discusses the relationship between language and identity in an essay titled "Natural Poetics, Forced Poetics." Here creole is seen as an expression of forced poetics "created from the awareness of the opposition between a language that one uses and a form of expression that one needs" (121). This means that creole emerged from the clash of the language(s) used by the slaves which they were forbidden to speak in their new surroundings and the language of the colonial masters which they perforce needed to use for communication. Since creole was also the language used by the slaves to communicate with their owners it developed subversive strategies. According to Glissant the subversive potential inherent in its usage was a kind of conspiracy to conceal meaning by its public and open expression (125). He does not foresee the continuance of creole usage in Martinique but his views about the possibility of it being used in the anglophone Caribbean are optimistic. This is because although the people from these countries are as English as the Martinicans are French, "they do not want to be English" (Glissant 261). And it is this desire to be Caribbean not English which is reflected in Brathwaite's coinage of the term "nation language."

1.2.3 nation language/creole

Before I go on to outline Brathwaite's views on language I will point out some of the class-based assumptions associated with the use of creole. Commenting on the negro and the question of language in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) Fanon focussed attention on the class dimension in the use of creole in Martinique. It was, as Fanon said, used only by the middle class to speak to their servants. Children were taught to avoid creolisms. He locates in this a colonialist strategy for alienating coloured people from their own civilization and culture. Recently Merle Hodge has observed that although creole is the main medium of communication in the Caribbean, the attitude of the people towards it is one of contempt, parents reprimand their children for using it. This, she says, has serious implications for the mental health since the deepest thought processes of the people are bound up in the structure of their language (Hodge, *Reader* 495).

The term "creolized English" refers to spoken English that has retained some obvious structural characteristics of creole while it develops more of the features of internationally accepted spoken English. I have pointed out above how the use of creole is looked down upon so it is no wonder that in the anglophone Caribbean there is a move towards the use of standard English. The authors of *The Empire Writes Back* distinguish between English and what they call "post-colonial englishes" to indicate the forms taken by this language in post-colonial societies. Creolized English would, in the terms set out by the authors of this book, be an example of the "linguistic code, english, which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world" (Ashcroft *et al* 8). The term "non-standard forms of English" when applied to creoles can be taken in a pejorative sense

but I think what Ashcroft *et al* are emphasizing are variations in the use of the language rather than passing any value judgement on "englishes." Quite often creoles are erroneously considered to be approximate language systems whereas in fact they are language systems in their own right, with considerably sophisticated syntax and lexicons. Brathwaite's term "nation language" affirms a positive status for an English "influenced by the underground language, the submerged language that the slaves had brought" (262). It is a non-standard form of English inasmuch as its syntax, rhythm and timbre is concerned. Brathwaite contrasts "nation language" with dialect which is thought of as "bad English." Like Glissant, Brathwaite outlines the subversive potential in the use of nation language because it is the submerged area of a dialect which is closely related to the "African aspect of experience in the Caribbean" (266). Its characteristic features are its orality and musicality and its effect is lost if it is written down (270-71). Brathwaite's own poetry, much of which is performative, concretises the "total effect" of nation language. The importance of Brathwaite's coinage of the term and his explication of its meaning lies in the revolutionary potential he attributes to language as an effective means of cultural resistance. It does away with the traditional denigration of creole and asserts its efficacy as a means of literary expression.

1.3 LITERATURE

1.3.1 creole poetry

Claude McKay's collections *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) and *Constab Ballads* (1912) provide one of the earliest instances of the use of creole for literary purposes. McKay (1899-1940) was born in Jamaica and was a policeman in the constabulary there for some years before emigrating to the States. There he became a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance so much so that he is often thought of as an American poet. Brathwaite calls McKay's first two books of poetry published in 1912 "the first all-dialect collections from an anglophone Caribbean poet" (275). Here is an extract from the ending of his poem titled "A Midnight Woman to the Bobby":

Say wha'? res' me? - you go to hell!
You t'ink Judge don't know unno well?
You t'ink him givin' go sentence me
Wid out a soul fe witness I?

(Reader 66)

Here the "midnight woman," probably a prostitute, is expressing her indignation at the high-handedness of the policeman. What I want to bring to your notice in the lines given above is the immediacy and resilience of ordinary speech patterns. The woman challenges the policeman to arrest her, then says that the judge knows all about him and won't sentence her without any witnesses to the crime (of soliciting customers) she is charged with. The creole words used here are "unno," which means "you" collectively and "fe" which is a preposition widely used in narrative dialogue to indicate "for." On the basis of the language he uses one would expect McKay's poetry to be called nation language poetry. However, he is denied the status of a nation language poet by Brathwaite primarily because of his "literary colonialism and primordial anglicanism" as evinced in his early works. According to Brathwaite, McKay let himself be "imprisoned in pentameter" (275). This clearly indicates that it is not merely the words used, but also the ideology espoused by an author in his choice of structure, style and content which raises a poem from dialect to nation language. So although McKay's is creole poetry, in Brathwaite's view, it does little in terms of the "revolutionary" impact language can be made to possess.

I cite Brathwaite's views on McKay only to indicate how what is new may not be perceived as entirely radical. This does not in any way undermine his achievement or his influence on later poets. McKay's insistence on the value of everyday speech and

experience and his interest in folk traditions in these early collections is one of the first instances of a re-version of the paradigms of what constitutes literariness in poetry. This is also evident in the poetry of Una Masson (1905-65) and Louise Bennett (b.1919-) and has led to problems in the critical reception of their work. Bennett's poetry in particular is primarily oral in its thematic and structural principles. Here are a few lines from her poem "Jamaica Oman":

Jamaica oman, cunny, sahl!
Is how dem jinnal so?
Look how long dem liberated
An de man dem never know!

Look how long Jamaica oman
-Modder, sister, wife, sweetheart -
Outa road an eena yard deh pon
A dominate her part!

(Reader 145)

Notice that the style is similar to McKay's, with a similar omitting of certain letters in a word (like the w from woman) and use of creolisms. In the first line it is said that the Jamaican woman is cunning, a quality revealed in "jinnal" or the ability to find quick solutions to a difficulty. The poet makes a feminist statement when she says that these women have been "liberated" for a long time without letting the men have any knowledge of it. In the same poem Bennett goes on to say that long before women's liberation was heard of, the Jamaican women had chalked out their plans. It is a part of her feminist agenda that she chooses to write in everyday speech and about ordinary experiences. She is also a performer of her own poetry and is a pioneering figure in the oral traditions of Caribbean poetry. The titles of some of her other poems "Bed-time story," "Proverbs" indicate her close connections to folk traditions. In her poetry there is a conscious rejection of imposed traditions and imitative style. In an interview with Dennis Scott she has talked about her reasons for writing in dialect: "I began to wonder why more of our poets and writers were not taking more of an interest in the kind of language usage and the kind of experiences of living which were all around us, and writing in this medium of dialect instead of writing in the same old English way about Autumn and things like that" (*Hinterland* 47).

I hope that you have understood why the use of creole for poetic purposes was so important. First, it indicated an acceptance of non-standard forms of the English language even if it continued to be called "dialect" both by the practitioners and their critics. Second, at least for some of the poets who used creole, it marked a break from slavish imitation of English poetry ("Autumn and things like that"). Finally, and this is linked to the second reason, it was the language which could most suitably express the Caribbean or the local reality perceived by the poet.

1.3.2 History and poetry

In discussing poetic uses of creole I have tried to emphasise the resistance to the language and poetic forms of the coloniser. It would be simplistic to say that Caribbean poetry, like Caribbean history, is an expression of almost continuous resistance, whether stylistic or thematic. Edward Baugh in *West Indian Poetry 1900-1970: A Study in Cultural Decolonisation* traces the earliest poetic expressions of the West Indian situation and affirms: "The development of poetry in the West Indies reflects the colonial experience of the region" (Reader 100). According to Baugh, poets before 1940 produced a "strictly colonial poetry" influenced by the Neo-classical, Romantic and Victorian poetry of the "mother country," Britain. It is easy to see that such generalisations are inapplicable in many cases when applied to pre-1940 poetry like McKay's early collections. Baugh's definition of "colonial poetry" does not merely include poetry which glorifies or endorses colonialism but also that which, although it might be rooted in local reality and express patriotic sentiments, is servilely imitative of the trends in English poetry. An instance of the former is to be

found in Albinia Hutton's poem "A Plea" (1932) in which Britain is seen as a caring mother and the inhabitants of the colonies as her children:

We have our Christian names, and what they are
Thou knowest, nay, who knowest half so well
As thou dost, thou the Mother? Canada,
South Africa, Australia, India,
New Zealand. Far too numerous to tell,

With them a host of smaller gems as fair
Sweet pearls ingathered from the Summer Seas
And strung together for a necklet rare
To deck thy queenly bosom, shining there
In loveliness, Jamaica is of these.

(Reader 55)

This has been called the "gendering of colonial affiliation" as evinced by Britain being personified as the queenly mother who is adorned ("smaller gems," "sweet pearls," "necklet rare") with her colonies. Such a clear acknowledgement and endorsement of Britain's supremacy is also present in the poetry of Tom Redcam and J.E. McFarlane. In Redcam's poem "O, Little Green Island Far Over the Sea" (1929) the feelings of nostalgia and admiration for England mingle with his love for Jamaica, the Caribbean island he had adopted as his home:

For England is England, the strong and the true,
Whose word is her bond in her march through the blue.

.....
But my little Green Island, far over the sea,
At eve-tide, Jamaica, my heart turns to thee.

(Reader 46)

It was not as if all the poetry written in the first half of the twentieth century was jingoistic in tone or imitative in style. In 1904 Mary Adella Walcott, under the pseudonym of Tropica, wrote about various aspects of plantation culture: the slaves, the big houses run efficiently by coloured servants cum housekeepers called "Nanas" and "Bushas" or overseers on cane and banana plantations. Her poem "The Undertone" has for its epigraph two lines from Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey." The "still sad music of humanity" whose undertone can be caught beneath "the brightness of the Southern day" is the "far, faint cry of wounded slaves in chains." The guilt-ridden past and attempts to obliterate it by dismissing it as "nonsense" and "old nurses' tales" is foregrounded in this poem which makes no claims to British superiority in order to justify colonialism.

In his later poetry Claude McKay fixes the blame for the colonial guilt expressed in the writings of Mary Adella Walcott and other white poets. Written in standard English his poems "In Bondage" and "Outcaste" (both 1953) express a longing for the African past lost forever by forced emigration to the New World. The nostalgia for a "native clime" is juxtaposed with "the white man's menace" which made black people "simple slaves" of "ruthless slaves," the latter being the white masters who were enslaved to "insatiate lust" for power. These expressions of oppression are balanced by poetic articulations of moments of resistance. Mervyn Morris's (b.1937) short poem "The House Slave" captures succinctly the aftermath of a slave rebellion through the thoughts of a slave left alone in the house abandoned by his former master: "And these are my rooms now:/ My pallid masters fled,/ freeing the only home I knew" (*Hinterland* 167). Significantly the slave does not use the word "freedom" in connection with himself, he applies it only to the house. This indicates an internalisation of oppression which does not lift even under changed circumstances. And yet there are poetic expressions which move beyond the past towards an optimistic future. Vera Bell's 1948 poem "Ancestor on the Auction Block" takes cognizance of the humiliating past of slavery only to signal towards

emancipation: "My freedom is within myself." The poem also indicates the role played by the ancestors, who were slaves, in the birth of a "country":

Introduction

Within your loins I see the seed
Of multitudes
From your labour
Grow roads, aqueducts, cultivation
A new country is born
Yours was the task to clear the ground
Mine be the task to build.

(Reader 156)

The last line of Bell's poem points to a sense of responsibility felt by the poetic persona who feels the need to "build" upon the foundations laid by the ancestor.

One of the main concerns of post-1950 Caribbean poetry is to "build" a literary edifice not based on European models but reflective of Caribbean reality. Here is the narrator of Olive Senior's (b.1943-) poem "Cockpit Country Dreams" who remembers her mother showing her photo albums of "black ancestors" and telling her that "Herein/ Your ancestry, your imagery, your pride./ Choose *this* river, *this* rhythm, *this* road./ Walk good in the footsteps of *these* fathers" (*Hinterland* 218). The title of the poem derives from cockpits, deep depressions or glens found in the mountains of Jamaica. This was the rugged terrain preferred by the Maroons, people who refused to accept their slave status. The child in the poem feels a sense of cultural maroonage or alienation from the reality around her. Her mother's exhortation does not suffice to keep her mind "slipping/ those well-worn grooves of piety, work, praise" and she feels "drown[ed] in the other's history" (*Hinterland* 218, 219). The idea that the Caribbean is a region without history "discovered" by Europe, from which discovery its history is said to begin, was perpetuated by colonial historiographers. Arguments countering this view include the attempts to make available the hitherto undocumented facets of Caribbean history: cultures of the tribes existing before Columbus's arrival, slave rebellions during the era of colonialism, existence of communities like the Maroons and the continuance of African traditions in the Caribbean. I have discussed this in greater detail in Unit 6.

As has previously been mentioned, the Caribbean became home to people from Asia who came as indentured labour and then stayed on. In trade, commerce, religion, food, dress, music and language, the descendants of these emigrants, particularly the Indians and the Chinese, have influenced Caribbean culture in a major way. In Guyana and Trinidad over half the current population are of East Indian descent. V.S. Naipaul is perhaps the best known Indo-Caribbean writer of our times. The writers of these ethnicities have documented their ancestors' and their own presence in the Caribbean. Writing in the 1980s, Mahadai Das in her poem "They Came in Ships" attempts to link the arrival of indentured labourers or "Coolies" with the coming of African slaves. At the same time she is fully aware of the very different socio-historical conditions which led to these two "diasporas" to the Caribbean. Cyril and David Dabydeen from Guyana have also voiced the diasporic consciousness of people of Indian origin from a very different perspective. Their bonding with the Caribbean is one with an "imaginary homeland" since they have opted to migrate to Canada and Britain respectively. In his poems David Dabydeen speaks both of Indians in the Caribbean as in "Coolie Mother" and also of those chosen few like the "Coolie Son" who migrate to the first world in search of better prospects. Ironically the coolie mother who wants her son to "Learn talk proper, take exam, go to England university,/ Not turn out like he rum-sucker charmar dadee" receives a letter from her coolie son who is a toilet attendant in England (*Heinemann Book of Caribbean Poetry* 62-63). Notice the use of words like "charmar" and "coolie" and observe how Hindi words have become a part of Caribbean poetic vocabulary.

I have chosen to give examples from Indo-Caribbean poetry in the last part of this section. This does not in any way indicate that only poets of Indian descent have had

an impact on the Caribbean literary and cultural scenario. The writers of Chinese, Portuguese, Irish and Syrian ancestry have also contributed significantly to the eclectic nature of Caribbean literature and society.

1.4 LET US SUM UP

From a Eurocentric perspective Caribbean history is said to begin with Columbus's arrival in 1492. The colonisation of the region was based on economic imperatives and consisted largely of forced migration of Africans as slaves who were denied even linguistic freedom. Almost continuous resistance, whether on the level of language through the use of creole or on the level of combat through the existence of Maroons, characterises the three hundred years of oppression. A variety of stances are evident in Caribbean poetry: the colonialist impulse which leads to jingoistic and imitative poetry like the work of Albinia Hutton; the anti-colonial strategies as evinced in the use of creole language by Claude McKay and Louise Bennett and finally poetry expressing post-colonial concerns of multi-culturalism, hybridity, diaspora. These concerns have been voiced by writers of various ethnicities including those belonging to East Asian Caribbean communities like Cyril and David Dabydeen. The Caribbean culture is a site of amalgamation and assimilation of many different cultures: Amerindian, European, African and Asian. The term creolization when applied in the sense of the development of marked Caribbean characteristics can serve as an apt metaphor for its cultural syncretism.

1.5 GLOSSARY

Amerindian :	A member of the Mongoloid race of people whose many 'tribes' were the original inhabitants of the Caribbean and the Americas.
Antilles :	Collective name for all the Caribbean islands except The Bahamas. Conceived of as falling into two broad groups - the Greater Antilles (Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico) and the Lesser Antilles comprising all the other islands to the East and South of these four.
Dialect :	Subordinate variety of a language with non-standard vocabulary, pronunciation or idioms.
Diaspora (in <i>this</i> context):	A term used for large scale migration of people from the country of their origin to other countries, either voluntarily or due to economic or political compulsions. When we speak of the Indian diaspora we mean Indians settled in England, America, Africa, the Caribbean. Similarly one can discuss the Caribbean diaspora to England, Canada and France.
Middle Passage:	The sea journey from Africa to the Caribbean which represents the temporal moment when the slaves were dislocated from Africa.
Negritude:	A word coined by Aimé Césaire defining the qualities of the values of Black civilisation in the world. It provided a positive image of race for Black people. It was criticised for its essentialist racial approach.

Patois:

French word for provincial dialect, sometimes loosely applied to anglophone Caribbean creoles in general.

Intro letter

1.6 QUESTIONS

- Q. 1. How does Caribbean poetry reflect the region's experience of colonisation? Support your answer with examples.
- Q. 2. Write a note on the poetry of Caribbean writers of Indian descent.
- Q. 3. What were origins of the use of creole English in Caribbean poetry? Explain with reference to any one early twentieth century poet.

1.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Primary Material

Brown, Stewart and Ian McDonald, eds. *The Heinemann Book of Caribbean Poetry*. New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1992.

Donnell, Alison and Sarah Lawson Welsh, eds. *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Markham, E.A. ed. *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies and Britain*. Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1989.

Theoretical Material

Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literature*. London: Routledge, 1989.

Brathwaite, Kamau. "History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry." 1979/1981. *Roots*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993.

Cesaire, Aime. *Discourse on Colonialism*. 1955. Trans. Joan Pinkham. New York: Monthly Review, 1972.

Cudjoe, Selwyn R. *Resistance and Caribbean Literature*. Ohio: Ohio UP, 1980.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 1952. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove P, 1967.

Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. 1981. Trans. J. Michael Dash. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1989.

Ngugi, wa Thiong'O. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey, 1986.

UNIT 2 DEREK WALCOTT - I

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 St. Lucia
- 2.2 Derek Walcott
 - 2.2.1 Poet
 - 2.2.2 Painter
 - 2.2.3 Dramatist
- 2.3 *Crusoe's Journal*
 - 2.3.1 Literary Source/Post-colonial Re-source
 - 2.3.2 The Text
 - 2.3.3 Analysis
 - 2.3.4 Mimicry
- 2.4 Names
 - 2.4.1 A New World and a New Language
 - 2.4.2 The Text
 - 2.4.3 Analysis
 - 2.4.4 *Nommo*
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Questions
- 2.7 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this unit are (a) to provide information about Derek Walcott's life and work as a poet, painter, dramatist and essayist, (b) to look at a representative selection of his poetry till 1980. The major themes and concerns of Walcott's poetry will be indicated through a detailed analysis of each of the poems included in this unit. You can begin by reading the poem and looking up the difficult words in the glossary accompanying it. Then read the poem along with its analysis. Finally think about how the poems reflect various aspects of Caribbean culture, what stance the poet has towards it, and how it is similar to or different from the poets discussed in the previous unit.

2.1 ST. LUCIA



Walcott was born in 1930 on the island of St. Lucia which is a member of the Eastern Caribbean Association formed after the collapse of the West Indian Federation in 1962. The island is on the Windward side of the Caribbean basin along with Grenada, Martinique, St. Vincent, Grenadines and Dominica. In the 1500s and 1600s Britain and France fought for control over these islands. The culture of St. Lucia reflects the duality of the colonial powers that contended for it for over 160 years. In 1804 the English acquired control but the French left their mark on the language and customs of the island which had a population of mainly Africans or part-Africans. The French influence is also visible in Roman Catholicism which is still the principal religion of the island. Most of the St. Lucian population is bilingual or even trilingual but more comfortable in French creole than in any other language. Walcott is of African and English parentage and has called his boyhood "schizophrenic." In an interview with Robert Hamner he said, "I have not only a dual racial personality but a dual linguistic personality. My real language, and tonally my basic language, is patois." Walcott's poetry reveals the interpenetration of languages: French creole, English creole, English and even European languages like Latin. As has been observed by commentators on Walcott's language, there are small examples of "West Indian vocabulary" placed in "a Standard English setting." Walcott has written about his "illegitimacy" in the West Indian tradition in his essay "What the Twilight Says: An Overture" ("WTS"). Here he calls himself "this neither proud nor ashamed bastard, this hybrid, this West Indian" (10). His poetry reflects this hybridity both at the level of language as well as identity. The title of his poem on St. Lucia is "Sainte Lucie," the creolization indicating the exploration of language thematized in it. Similarly one of his early poems "A Far Cry from Africa" expresses this theme of an hybrid identity:

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this African and the English tongue I love?
(*Collected Poems*, hereafter CP, 18)

When I discuss Walcott's poetry I will point out further elaborations on the theme of hybridity, a much discussed concept in post-colonial theory. One of these is the feeling of dis-location experienced by the individual who feels a sense of rootlessness in the culture of his/her origin. Walcott was born in St. Lucia, received "a sound colonial education" there, studied and worked in Jamaica and Trinidad for some time, but since the 1970s he has been teaching in the United States. However, the Caribbean and St. Lucia in particular continues to impress on his creative imagination. In his epic poem, *Omeros* (1990), modelled on Homer's *Odyssey*, he presents St. Lucia as "the Helen of the West Indies" because thirteen battles were fought for its control by rival colonial powers. And yet the poet feels a sense of dissociation from his island when he returns there. This is expressed in "The Light of the World" in which he represents St. Lucia by means of female figures, but as he passes from the town to the hotel he says it is full of "transients" like himself. St. Lucia's history, language and culture are constituents of the structure of feeling which informs Derek Walcott's multigeneric creativity. It is to the various aspects of this that I will now draw your attention.

2.2 DEREK WALCOTT

2.2.1 Poet

When Walcott was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992 the Swedish Academy made a special mention of his epic poem *Omeros*. Regarded as his *magnum opus* this poem transposes Homeric characters to a St. Lucian setting to make the epic reflect Caribbean reality. Walcott has never been reticent about

acknowledging that the major influences on his poetic career have been European and American. Among the poets he most enjoys reading are Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes and Edward Thomas. He admits to have written poems in the manner of Eliot and Auden at the beginning of his poetic career. That his acknowledgement of influence might lead to the charge of imitation or non-originality is a danger Walcott is well aware of. His self-confidence in such acknowledgements stems from what he calls a "tribal accent." He believes that people in many of the erstwhile colonies who "grow up speaking the English language" experience no "alienation" from it and hence their claim that the language belongs to them is justified. Imitation arises only when these speakers forget their "tribal accent" and try to speak in imitation of the accent of the original tongue. To this end he has never thought of himself as an English writer but has let native rhythms permeate his work so that it is not one particular writer which has influenced him but rather "Literature" in general (Brown and Johnson, 176-77). Walcott's early poetry is full of echoes from canonical texts of European literature. This is especially evident in collections like *In A Green Night* (1962) where the title poem refers to Marvell, *The Castaway and Other Poems* (1965) and *The Gulf* (1970). In his later poetry the work of New World poets like St. John Perse from Gaudelope, Aimé Césaire from Martinique and Pablo Neruda from Chile is often acknowledged as providing poetic models. Walcott's friendship with contemporary poets like Joseph Brodsky, Seamus Heaney, Robert Lowell and Ted Hughes has also played a part in his poetic development. Through Brodsky he links himself to the Russian poet Mandelstam and through Lowell to the idea of America evinced in his later poetry.

I point out all these varied influences to counter Walcott's appropriation as an English poet in recent critical scholarship on the one hand and his dismissal on grounds of unoriginality on the other. Like T.S. Eliot's idea of tradition and the individual talent, Walcott's formulations about a poetic tradition emphasise its continuity: "The new poet enters a flux and withdraws, as the weaver continues the pattern, hand to hand and mouth to mouth, as the rock-pile convict passes the sledge" ("The Muse of History," henceforth "MH"). This last comparison between the poet and the convict links the exercise of the poetic craft to the idea of a continuity of enforced labour. The way Walcott perceives poetry it becomes a laborious exercise with the poet being chained to his craft much like a convict. Given the history of slavery and enforced labour in the Caribbean this seems to me a particularly apt metaphor for describing his postcolonial poetics.

2.2.2 Painter

Walcott's artistic development has been strongly imprinted by his father's work as a painter. Although Warwick Walcott died when Walcott was an infant, he left behind water colour paintings which, in the author's own words, "gave me a kind of impetus and a strong sense of continuity. I felt that what had been cut off in him somehow was an extension that I was continuing." For a long time Walcott veered between painting and poetry. He has continued painting over the years and has had important relationships with the painters Harry Simmons and Dunstan St. Omer, a childhood friend, to whom some of his poems are dedicated. In Chapter 9 of *Another Life* Walcott speaks of abandoning his painterly ambitions for poetry:

I hoped that both disciplines might
by painful accretion cohere
and finally ignite,
but I lived in a different gift,
its element metaphor.

Nevertheless, as Rei Terada has observed, his poetry "often considers the arts' interrelations" and his poems "quietly merge the verbal with the visual" (119). The evanescence of both painting and poetry is a theme often expressed in his work. It is from his interest in the visual arts that the landscape descriptions in his poetry draw

their concreteness and detail. Visual extravagance in Caribbean art and literature is something he defends with reference to Greek art. According to him the Greek sculptures were painted very brightly unlike the bleached out quality they're now associated with: "All the purple and gold . . . is very Caribbean, that same vigor and elation of an earlier Greece, not a later Greece . . ." (Brown and Johnson 183). With such correspondences in mind it is easy to see why Walcott chose Homer's Greek epic as the model for his Caribbean epic *Omeros*.

2.2.3 Dramatist

In "What The Twilight Says: An Overture," the essay which forms the introduction to a selection of Walcott's early plays, he describes "two pale children" watching the drama being enacted on the streets from an upstairs window. Reading this account about how these children created their "little theatre" of men made from twigs it is easy to conceive how Derek and his twin brother Roderick Walcott grew up to be the most significant Caribbean playwrights of this century. In 1950 Walcott along with Maurice Mason founded the Arts Guild of St. Lucia. When he left the island to take up a scholarship at the University of West Indies the leadership of the Guild was taken over by Roderick. It was in Trinidad that Walcott's plays *The Sea at Dauphin* and *Henri Christophe* were first staged in the 1950s. In 1958 the highpoint of the celebrations to herald the inauguration of the West Indies Federation was an open air production of the epic drama written by Walcott titled *Drums and Colours*. In 1959 Walcott formed the Trinidad Theatre Workshop, one of the most influential groups working in theatre at that time. In his essays and interviews Walcott has described his twenty year struggle to form a professional theatre company and the sense of failure which he felt at its break up. The note of despondency is summed up succinctly in the statement: "In these new nations art is a luxury, and the theatre the most superfluous of amenities" ("WTS" 7).

Over the years many of Walcott's plays have drawn upon folklore for source material. In the fifties and sixties the plays *Ti-Jean and His Brothers* and *Dream on a Monkey Mountain* drew upon folk tales and legends. Versions of European classics include *The Joker of Seville* and an adaptation of Homer's *Odyssey* for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Walcott is an extremely prolific playwright whose plays have been performed all over the world. For many of his plays he draws upon the traditions of popular culture in the Caribbean specially the Carnival which has been called theatre on the streets. Coming from a region of the world where the theatre is all around "in the streets at lampfall in the kitchen doorway," it is no wonder that the region's most famous poet should also be its best known playwright.

2.3 CRUSOE'S JOURNAL

2.3.1 Literary Source/Post-colonial Resource

The title of this poem points at its literary source, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* published in 1791. The poem reworks the associations this literary character conjures with the aim of abrogating it for specifically voicing post-colonial concerns. You would remember that Defoe's novel is about a man shipwrecked on an island who, being the only survivor, fends for himself making the best use of what he can salvage from the wreck and of the resources available on the island. During the course of his long stay on the island he rescues a savage from cannibals whom he later names Friday. Friday becomes Crusoe's companion and servant on the island. I hope this outline has refreshed your memory of the text and you can see how the narrative can be read as being about colonisation. Crusoe is the discoverer and coloniser of the island, if only an unwilling one, since it is his misfortune to be stranded there. He longs for human company but in Friday he finds a savage whom he must civilize by teaching him the English language and Christian morality. The hierarchical relation between the two is reinforced by Friday calling Crusoe "Master."

Can you think of any other canonical English work which can also be interpreted in this manner? Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* immediately comes to my mind. In the play Prospero, the deposed duke of Milan cast adrift on a boat with his daughter Miranda, lands on a lonely island inhabited by the witch Sycorax who has kept spirits imprisoned. The witch's son Caliban is the sole inhabitant of the island when Prospero lands on it. With the aid of his magic Prospero frees the spirits and keeps Caliban in his service having taught him his language so that he can obey orders. Prospero's control over the island and its original inhabitants like Ariel and Caliban can be seen as another narrative of colonisation.

The similarity between these two examples of canonical texts which can be read in this way should be clear to you. Pay special attention to the fact that both Crusoe and Prospero teach their language to the savages they control.

Both *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Tempest* have been subject to many such readings. In 1960 George Lamming in *The Pleasures of Exile* dismantled the hierarchy of Prospero, Ariel and Caliban to see Caliban as a West Indian whose human status is negated by the European who denied him his inheritance. In 1969 Aimé Césaire reworked the play in an African context rewriting it in French (Ashcroft *et al* 189). Walcott's poetic rendition of the figure of Crusoe in this and other poems is one of the earliest re-readings of Defoe's classic text. It is useful to remember that Defoe based his story on the experiences of Alexander Selkirk. Selkirk was a member of a privateering expedition. Having quarrelled with his captain he asked to be put ashore on the island of Juan Fernandez in 1704. He remained on the island till 1709 when he was rescued by a ship. So the context of the original work is not unlinked to the mercenary motives of colonial enterprise. There have been other interpretations of Defoe's novel in recent times. In 1986 the South African novelist J.M. Coetzee published *Foe*, a fictional re-interpretation in which the narrator is a white, female castaway who tells her story to "Robinson Crusoe." It is later that the reader comes to know that the narrator is addressing her story to "Daniel Foe" so that he can write about it. The latter part of the novel is in the form of her journal. Coetzee chooses to write the novel from the point of a woman indicating the masculinist ethos of an adventure novel like Defoe's. Walcott's agenda in this poem seems to be to posit Crusoe as a New World Adam from whose journals "the language of a race" took its present form. The language is of course English but adapted to the surroundings Crusoe finds himself in. Through his journals it also becomes the language of those who succeed him. The post-colonial poetics is evident in Friday's claim to what was initially an imposed language.

2.3.2 The Text

Crusoe's Journal

*I looked now upon the world as a thing remote, which I
had nothing to do with, no expectation from, and, indeed,
no desires about. In a word, I had nothing indeed
to do with it, nor was ever like to have; so I thought
it looked as we may perhaps look upon it hereafter,
viz., as a place I had lived in but was come out
of it; and well might I say, as Father Abraham
to Dives, "Between me and thee is a great gulf fixed."
—ROBINSON CRUSOE*

Once we have driven past Mundo Nuevo trace
safely to this beach house
perched between ocean and green, churning forest
the intellect appraises
objects surely, even the bare necessities
of style are turned to use,

like those plain iron tools he salvages
 from shipwreck, hewing a prose
 as odorous as raw wood to the adze:
 out of such timbers
 came our first book, our profane Genesis
 whose Adam speaks that prose
 which, blessing some sea-rock, startles itself
 with poetry's surprise,
 in a green world, one without metaphors;
 like Christofer he bears
 in speech mnemonic as a missionary's
 the Word to savages,
 its shape an earthen, water-bearing vessel's
 whose sprinkling alters us
 into good Fridays who recite His praise,
 parroting our master's
 style and voice, we make his language ours,
 converted cannibals
 we learn with him to eat the flesh of Christ.

All shapes, all objects multiplied from his,
 our ocean's Proteus;
 in childhood, his derelict's old age
 was like a god's. (Now pass
 in memory, in serene parentheis,
 the cliff-deep leeward coast
 of my own island filing past the noise
 of stuttering canvas,
 some noon-struck village, Choiseul, Canaries,
 crouched crocodile canoes,
 a savage settlement from Henty's novels,
 Marryat or R.L.S.,
 with one boy signalling at the sea's edge,
 though what he cried is lost.)
 So time, that makes us objects, multiplies
 our natural loneliness.

For the hermetic skill, that from earth's clays
 shapes something without use,
 and, separate from itself, lives somewhere else,
 sharing with every beach
 a longing for those gulls that cloud the cays
 with raw, mimetic cries,
 never surrenders wholly, for it knows
 it needs another's praise
 like hoar, half-cracked Ben Gunn, until it cries
 at last, "O happy desert!"
 and learns again the self-creating peace
 of islands. So from this house
 that faces nothing but the sea, his journals
 assume a household use:
 we learn to shape from them, where nothing was
 the language of a race,
 and since the intellect demands its mask
 that sun-cracked, bearded face
 provides us with the wish to dramatize
 ourselves at nature's cost,
 to attempt a beard, to squint through the sea-haze,
 posing as naturalists,
 drunks, castaways, beachcombers, all of us

yearn for those fantasies
of innocence, for our faith's arrested phase
when the clear voice
startled itself saying "water, heaven, Christ,"
hoarding such heresies as
God's loneliness moves in His smallest creatures.

Glossary

hewing:	to chop or cut
odorous:	diffusing fragrance
adze:	tool for cutting away the surface of wood
Genesis:	first book of the Old Testament with an account of the Creation
Christofer:	Christopher Columbus
mnemonic:	designed to aid the memory
Proteus:	a minor sea-god in Homer's <i>Odyssey</i> who has the power to assume different shapes
derelict:	person abandoned by society
leeward:	towards the sheltered side
canoe:	slender wooden boat with pointed or open ends
Henty:	George Alfred Henty (1832-1902), a war correspondent most famous as the author of stories for boys mainly based on military history. The best remembered of these are <i>Out in the Pampas</i> (1868), <i>The Young Buglers</i> (1880), <i>Under Drake's Flag</i> (1883) and <i>With Clive in India</i> (1889).
Marryat:	Captain Frederick Marryat (1792-1848), a naval captain, wrote several novels of sea life among them <i>Midshipman Easy</i> (1836), most famous for his children's books especially <i>The Settlers in Canada</i> (1844) and <i>Children of the New Forest</i> (1847).
R.L.S.:	Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-94). His first full length novel was <i>Treasure Island</i> (1883) followed by <i>The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde</i> (1886). Also remembered for the popular Scottish romance <i>Kidnapped</i> (1886).
hermetic:	alchemical
cay:	insular bank or reef of coral, sand etc.
Ben Gunn:	a character in Stevenson's <i>Treasure Island</i> , a marooned pirate who helps Jim and Squire Trelawney secure the treasure
beachcomber:	white man in the Pacific islands who lives by collecting goods thrown over-board from ships
heresy:	opinion contrary to the doctrine of the Christian Church

2.3.3 Analysis

The poem begins with an epigraph from *Robinson Crusoe* in which Crusoe articulates his feeling of alienation from the world. He experiences a disconnection

from it which he says might be comparable to what one experiences "hereafter," after death when one looks upon the transient world. It is the same feeling which is expressed by the poet in the first few lines. Keep in mind that the poem is from Walcott's 1965 collection *The Castaway and Other Poems*. A comment made by Walcott explaining how he came to write the title poem of this collection is of relevance to "Crusoe's Journal" as well. He says he wrote "The Castaway" at a beach house in Trinidad where the "beaches . . . are generally very empty - just you, the sea and the vegetation around you." At that beach house, he conceived "an image of the West Indian artist as someone who was in a shipwrecked position" (Hirsch qtd. in Terada 158). This poem begins by mentioning a beach house located between the ocean and the forest. The image of the artist as situated between worlds is continued when the Crusoe-artist is shown as fashioning "a prose as odorous as raw wood." The craft of the carpenter and artist are brought together in the use of the word "timber," which literally means wood but has the same pronunciation as 'timbre,' denoting the characteristic quality of sounds. The word "green" repeated twice in the first stanza indicates both the uncorrupted Edenic vitality of the island where Crusoe was shipwrecked and also the fresh, unclipped language he uses, "one without metaphors." Three figures are brought together in this stanza: the literary (Robinson Crusoe), the Biblical/mythological (Adam) and the historical (Christopher Columbus). Linking them is their use of language. Crusoe is the New World Adam who, like the Biblical Adam, names his surroundings. He is also like "Christofer" (Walcott uses the creolized version of his name) inasmuch as he attempts to Christianize his servant Friday, the "converted cannibal." The Biblical echoes in the last line of the stanza are skillfully woven in: "Word" is the word of God as well as language in general; the savage sprinkled with water is baptized but sprinkling with a few drops of water can also mean granting a limited knowledge of the language; "good Fridays" indicates obedient servants but it is also the Friday before Easter commemorating the crucifixion; and finally towards the end Christianity is presented as a cannibalistic religion as the phrase "eat the flesh" indicates. The varied aspects of Crusoe's personality - he is at once a castaway, a discoverer, a coloniser, a linguist and a missionary - delineated by the poet in the previous stanza make him Protean. It is this ability to assume various shapes, almost like a god, which is so fascinating to the poet in his childhood. A child's fascination with literary characters and situations is concretised in the middle of the poem by mentioning the names of famous nineteenth century writers of adventure tales for children. Henty, Marryat and Stevenson all wrote works which have become classics of children's literature. That the poet is remembering the incidents read in his childhood is stylistically indicated through the use of parentheses. The sense of awe and wonder at "savage settlement[s]" and "crouched crocodile canoes" is evident in the obvious alliteration, that it is also bracketed off makes it a long forgotten sensation. The boy standing at the edge of the sea is a mental image of childhood, the words "what he cried is lost" indicate that it is an incomplete image. It is a Wordsworthian reminiscence specially in terms of the contrast set up between the "stuttering" past and the "serene" present. And this serenity is not an unmixed blessing for since his boyhood days there has been a multiplication of the poet's loneliness. Notice once more how the poetic persona and his Crusoe mask came together in the phrase "natural loneliness" which indicates that alienation is both inherent as well as circumstantial, as in the case of Crusoe when nature, in a sense, conspired to his being the lone survivor of a shipwreck.

This conjunction is continued in the last stanza of the poem where the poet's craft of shaping poetry from the clay of language is called "hermetic." The word carries associations of magic as well as insularity. The image of shaping vessels from clay is carried over from the first stanza where "earthen, water-bearing vessel[s]" are mentioned. Thinking back on *Robinson Crusoe* I am reminded of the incident in it when Crusoe tries to make vessels from clay, first unsuccessfully and then later, by accident, successfully. Again relating the poetic craft to that of the humble potter the poet labels it as "something without use." In him the desire for isolation contends with an opposing need for recognition, "another's praise." Ben Gunn, the pirate who was deserted by his crew in Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, is an apt figure for

concretising these paradoxical desires. The dangers of isolation are pointed out through the phrase "half-cracked." While solitude and "peace" is essential for creativity, too much of it can lead to mental imbalance. The appropriation of Crusoe's language by Friday, the savage, leads to the shaping of the "language of a race." Crusoe's journal, the repository of the script, is the main source of the language the colonised take over and make their own. It is also suggested that Crusoe is just a personification of man's desire for self-dramatization, a boyhood or adolescent fantasy untenable in the real world. In contrast to the questioning faith of childhood, adult life is marked with alienation so that it (alienation) is seen as a part of all God's creations. The transference of a personal experience to all of God's creatures is a "heresy" the poetic persona is acutely conscious of.

2.3.4 Mimicry

Now that I have analysed the poem I want you to notice its structure and to make interrelations between its form and content. Notice that each of the three stanzas consists of long lines alternating with short lines. Each stanza comprises one long sentence with clauses and the end of the sentence also marks the end of the stanza. The first and last stanzas posit the person's identification with both Crusoe and Friday, whereas the second consists of boyhood reminiscences. Walcott's poetics of affiliation make him identify the poetic persona with both the coloniser and the colonised, Crusoe and Friday. This probably explains the alternation of long and short lines, Friday "learns to shape" the language so that presumably the structure of the poem visually enacts this learning process indicated by the shorter lines. But do not forget that the shorter lines are enclosed within the longer sentence comprising the stanza, suggesting, in my view, that if Friday learns from Crusoe, the latter's language too is inflected with the former's. The poet envies the "raw, mimetic cries" of the gulls on the beach, the word "mimetic" should alert you to the fact that from one perspective Friday's language of the race, which is also the poet's, can be dismissed as colonial mimicry. Walcott counters this idea in his essay "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?" by writing: "When language itself is condemned as mimicry, then the condition is hopeless and men are no more than jackdaws, parrots, myna birds, apes" (7). Go back to the lines in which the poet hears the gulls and you will notice that there is a longing for mimesis expressed there. As Terada has pointed out mimicry is a survival and evolutionary technique and hence has anthropologically positive connotations (23). Walcott's most thorough debunking of the notions of originality and mimicry occurs in his play *Pantomime* (1978) where the black servant Jackson Phillip and his white master Harry Trewe each play the role of both Friday and Crusoe. By underscoring the effects of the written word through the mention of adventure novels by Henty, Marryat, Stevenson and Crusoe's journal, Walcott reinterprets the binary opposition between speech/writing, original/mimesis. Friday and the poet fashion their language from the written word, hence if they can be accused of mimicry it is not of the original but of something which is itself a representation or mimesis.

2.4 NAMES

2.4.1 A New World and a New Language

The arbitrariness of language in a New World setting is a commonplace in religious, literary and theoretical discourse. I use the phrase "New World" not only in the specific sense of the American continent, as I have done so far, but also to refer to the newly created world mentioned in Genesis and its literary elucidation in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). *Genesis* begins with an account of the Creation of the world and man. Chapter 2 v.19 describes how God leaves it to Adam to name the birds and the beasts: "and whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof." You can see for yourself that no reason is given for assigning a particular name to a particular creature, the whimsicality of Adam seems to underlie the

important task of nomenclature which can be said to be the first step towards the development of language. Adam's first words are nouns but the *Genesis* does not specify whether these bear resemblance to the creatures or objects they denote. Milton gives an account of Creation as narrated to Adam by the angel Raphael in Book VII of *Paradise Lost*. Raphael lists the beasts, birds and insects created by God and then tells Adam: "thou the Natures know'st, and gav'st them Names." The link between nomenclature and the object to be named is clearly not arbitrary here, the nouns have a basis in the "Natures" or attributes of the creatures. Observe how a new world necessitates the invention of a new language but that the connection between the two parts of a linguistic sign - the 'signifier' (a spoken or written mark) and the 'signified' (what is thought when the mark is made) - may not be either apparent or present. The problem is intensified when both the world and the language is new as was the case with all those who arrived to the Caribbean under the system of slavery or near-forced labour like the Africans and later the Indians and the Chinese. The Crusoe and Caliban paradigms cannot be rigorously applied here because out of language and world, both figures possess one familiar entity. Crusoe found himself in a new world but had his language to express its reality, Caliban experienced imposition of a new language but his surroundings were familiar to him. As far as Africans being brought to the New World are concerned, both language and surroundings were alien and hence it was inevitable that they could perceive no connection between the signifier and the signified. It is the disorientation resulting from this which Walcott highlights in this poem.

2.4.2 The Text

Names

[for Edward Brathwaite]

I

My race began as the sea began,
with no nouns, and with no horizon,
with pebbles under my tongue,
with a different fix on the stars.

But now my race is here,
in the sad oil of Levantine eyes,
in the flags of the Indian fields.

I began with no memory,
I began with no future,
but I looked for that moment
when the mind was halved by a horizon.

I have never found that moment
when the mind was halved by a horizon—
for the goldsmith from Benares,
the stonecutter from Canton,
as a fishline sinks, the horizon
sinks in the memory.

Have we melted into a mirror,
leaving our souls behind?
The goldsmith from Benares,
the stonecutter from Canton,
the bronzesmith from Benin.

A sea-eagle screams from the rock,
and my race began like the osprey
with that cry,

that terrible vowel
that I!

Behind us all the sky folded.
as history folds over a fishline,
and the foam foreclosed
with nothing in our hands

but this stick
to trace our names on the sand
which the sea erased again, to our indifference.

II

And when they named these bays
bays,
was it nostalgia or irony?

In the uncombed forest,
in uncultivated grass
where was there elegance
except in their mockery?

Where were the courts of Castille?
Versailles' colonnades
supplanted by cabbage palms
with Corinthian crests,
belittling diminutives,
then, little Versailles
meant plans for a pigsty,
names for the sour apples
and green grapes
of their exile.

Their memory turned acid
but the names held;
Valencia glows
with the lanterns of oranges,
Mayaro's
charred candelabra of cocoa.
Being men, they could not live
except they first presumed
the right of every thing to be a noun.
The African acquiesced,
repeated, and changed them.

Listen, my children, say:
moubain: the hogplum,
cerise: the wild cherry,
baie-la: the bay,
with the fresh green voices
they were once themselves
in the way the wind bends
our natural inflections.

These palms are greater than Versailles,
for no man made them,
their fallen columns greater than Castille,
no man unmade them
except the worm, who has no helmet,
but was always the emperor,

and children. look at these stars
over Valencia's forest!

Derek Walcott-I

Not Orion,
not betelgeuse,
tell me, what do they look like?
Answer, you damned little Arabs!
Sir, fireflies caught in molasses.

Glossary

fix:	position found by astronomical observations
Levantine:	inhabitant of Levant, countries belonging to the Eastern part of Mediterranean like Morocco
Benares:	a holy city on the banks of the Ganges in India
Canton:	a province in China
Benin:	a small West African country
sea-eagle:	a kind of fishing eagle
osprey:	a large bird preying on fish, also called the fishing eagle or sea-hawk
bay:	a bark or howl; part of sea filling a wide mouthed opening of land; kind of wreath worn by conquerors or poets. All three meanings applicable in this context.
Castille:	Spain
Versailles:	a city in France
colonnades:	series of columns
Corinthian:	Greek style of architecture having a bell shaped capital with rows of leaves
cabbage palms:	a lofty palm with a cylindrical trunk and a large crown of fronds
Valencia:	a province of Spain
candelabra:	branched candlestick or lampstand
acquiesced:	agreed
moubain, cerise, baie-la:	French creole words whose English equivalents Walcott provides in the poem
Orion, Betelgeuse:	names of constellations

2.4.3 Analysis

The lack of both a language and a point of cultural origin due to the enslavement of the African people are seen by the poet as negating the linear view of history. In this sense the sea, a seemingly endless expanse of water with no beginning or end in sight, is an apt metaphor for the flux of the non-linearity of history. Behind this idea is Heraclitus's comparison of the flux of time to the flowing of a river. The comparison with the sea is extended and developed in the first few lines of the poem specially with the idea of "pebbles under . . . [the] tongue" and "a different fix on stars." The rocks under the surface of an apparently transparent sea can be compared to coercion underlying the use of colonial languages by the slaves. The nature of perceived reality also suffers an enforced change much like the alteration of the position of the stars depending upon the point from which they are observed. A

drastic alteration effected in both language and reality arose out of the journey across the Middle Passage and culminated in the arrival "here," the Caribbean. The sadness in the eyes of those brought from Morocco or those who came from India attests to the sense of deprivation felt by them. The word "horizon," reiterated continuously in the first part of the poem is the object of search. If taken to mean the point of cultural or historical beginning then the "mind halved by a horizon" would be that of a schizophrenic, one marked by disconnection between thought, feelings and actions. As the goldsmith from Benares or stone-cutter from Canton become accustomed to the colonial servitude, which demands from them not their traditional skills but those of the unskilled labourer, the schizoid tendencies disappear, "the horizon sinks in the memory." When men are looked upon as mere labour it is a degradation of their humanity for they are important only for their physical attributes or mirror image, the soul ceases to be of any consequence. The traditional crafts they were engaged in (that of the goldsmith, stonecutter and bronzesmith) required a spiritual as well as physical effort, but only the latter is demanded of them in the New World. The language corresponding to such a situation can only be one of anguish, a scream or a cry. The nature-culture opposition is emphasised and resolved in the beginning of language with the cry of a bird. Language does not refer to the reality outside, its only referent is the individual, "that I," whose anguish it reflects. Correspondences between the sea and history which Walcott explicates movingly in a later poem "The Sea is History" are anticipated in the concluding lines of the first section of "Names." Dispossession leaves the poet's race with "nothing in . . . [their] hands," the historical erasure of their suffering is here emblematised as the sea erasing the names on the sand. This image has its literary antecedents in Spenser's *Amoretti*: "I wrote her name upon the strand," where it is used to depict the evanescence of love and beauty. The difference in the context of the usage serves to highlight the irony inherent in its use.

After having outlined the historical imperatives Walcott turns to linguistic ones. The second part of the poem begins with a questioning of the interrelationship between the signifier and the signified in the sign "bays," a word which has multiple meanings. The emotion underlying this nomenclature could be "nostalgia" for power and glory which the colonisers tried to re-enact in the New World, if the word is taken to mean the wreath of bay leaves worn by conquerors. But two other meanings of the word - a bark or howl and a part of the sea filling in an opening in the land - could also have been implied in an ironical usage. The howl of the slave and the roar of the sea would testify to the glory of the colonisers at the same time as it would be an ironic reminder to the slaves of their misery. The elegance invested in the language is, according to the poet, not reflective of the surroundings and hence constitutes "mockery." Examples of this mockery include speaking of the New World in terms borrowed from the Old World which carry the grandeur associated with its civilizational accomplishments like art and architecture. Thus the cabbage palms are compared to Versailles' colonnades, for nature provides the architecture of this world. The fronds on the palms are equated with rows of acanthus leaves on corinthian pillars. When the name of a city like Versailles is applied to a pigsty the poet thinks that it is the exiles' revenge for being forced to leave Europe. Walcott is here delineating the factors governing the Europeans' use of language just as he had in the previous section discussed the historical conditions which led to its imposition on others. Most of the white population in the Caribbean is descended from convicts for whom the region was at once a haven as well as exile. Probably this is the reason for their dissatisfaction which the poet indicates by the phrases "sour apples" and "green grapes." The other markers of the world they have left behind, as reflected in the varied means of lighting (lanterns and candelabra), are to be found as oranges and cocoa, much like the colonnades being cabbage palms.

Nouns are the primary markers of identification in the object world and the beginning of language. That the African transformed this language is indicated in the poem by means of what is called "internal translation." The poetic persona in the concluding section of the poem is that of a school-teacher teaching the children nouns, names of

fruits and trees found in the Caribbean. The teacher gives the creole names and then explains them by their English equivalents. He rejects the received ways of pronunciation when he asks the children to utter the names "with fresh green voices" and "our natural inflections." In my introduction to Walcott's poetry at the beginning of this unit I had referred to Walcott's idea of the "tribal accent," the teacher is here asking the students to speak the language with their own and not received notions of the tribal accent. The pronunciation is one of the ways in which Africans "changed" the language imposed on them. A direct correlation is established between language and reality, culture and nature. Whereas the Europeans value their linguistic and cultural supremacy, the Caribbean school teacher in the poem overturns the hierarchy which places culture above nature to say that "These palms are *greater* than Versailles," "their fallen columns *greater* than Castille" (emphasis added). The superiority of nature's handiwork is proved by the "worm," signifying the destructibility of all objects. Towards the end of the poem he asks the children to describe the stars, forbidding them to use the names given to constellations. The children's answer that the stars look like "fireflies caught in molasses" is a perfect example of the correspondence between language and nature which the teacher had sought to establish. Molasses is made from sugarcane which along with bananas is one of the principal crops of the Caribbean. The sticky, sweet molasses often attract insects like fireflies. The descriptions draws on the Caribbean reality and hence constitutes a re-naming of the constellations.

2.4.4 *Nommo*

The poem I have just analysed is divided into two parts. To make further discussion on it comprehensible I will call these parts "historical" and "linguistic." The cultural critic who has most comprehensively explored the connections between history and language in the Caribbean is Edward Brathwaite to whom Walcott dedicates this poem. In *Contradictory Omens* (1974) Brathwaite wrote about the repressive conditions making up the history of the Afro-Caribbeans. From within an oppressive system these people "have been able to survive, adapt, recreate . . . and begin to offer to return some of this experience and vision." Re-naming is one of the modes of adaptation and recreation in which language is made to correspond to perceived reality. Brathwaite has further explicated this concept as that of the *nommo* which means the word or name, held to contain secret power. As he says, "[the] way of using the word depends very much upon an understanding of the folk tradition out of which it comes" (*Roots* 241). In this context the folk tradition is the creolization of language and Walcott has foregrounded this by giving, in the first part of the poem, the historical background to linguistic and cultural creolization, a method Brathwaite followed in his pathbreaking *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica* (1970). One interesting feature of the poem is the shift in the person and number of the pronouns used. The poem begins with the use of the first person possessive pronoun "My race" and then moves to the first person singular "I", then the plural "we," which is continued in the "our" with which the first section ends. The poet claims both to speak of his race and for it. In the second part the third person plural pronoun "they" is used for the Europeans, towards the end there is a return to the first person form of address. Terada is of the opinion that this echoes the poem's theme but she does not provide a convincing explanation of this (98). In my opinion the multiplicity of pronouns used attests to the different persona the poet adopts in the poem: a poet (who gives poetic form to African history); a member of the African race; a member of the various Asian communities (Indian, Chinese); a commentator on the linguistic excesses of the Europeans; and finally a school teacher teaching students the correct approach to language. These are all "names" which can be given to a persona who in himself embodies all the different races who have contributed to the linguistic hybridity of the Caribbean. Finally the poem is a tribute to Brathwaite, who through his writings has done the most to have this hybridity recognised as "nation language" and not dismissed as dialect or patois.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

Walcott spent his childhood and some part of his adult life in St. Lucia where he received a "sound colonial education" familiarising him with Western culture. This explains the commonly found references to Western art, culture and literature in his work. But that the Caribbean reality is also deeply impressed on his creative imagination is indicated by his view of nature as constituting the history and civilization of these islands. This is briefly touched upon in his poem "Names" but elaborated fully in "The Sea is History":

Where are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?
Where is your tribal memory? sirs,
in that grey vault. The sea, the sea
has locked them up. The sea is History. (CP 364)

Refusing to adopt a stand of "recrimination and despair" or one of "remorse" towards history he prefers "a truly tough aesthetic of the New World [which] neither explains nor forgives history" ("MH" 39). This is apparent in poems like "Crusoe's Journal" where the poet aligns himself both with Crusoe the coloniser and Friday the colonised. Reworking canonical literary characters like Crusoe for a specifically post-colonial agenda on the language politics in the Caribbean is a technique used quite often in Walcott's early poetry. The multilingual heritage of the Caribbean and its multicultural society are reflected in Walcott's poetry not only through the different poetic persons but also in poems like "The Saddhu of couva" and "Nights in the Gardens of Port of Spain." The enforced migrations of people which gave this society its multicultural identity is remembered in "A Far Cry From Africa," and the plantation system which was sustained by it in "Ruins of a Great House." In the latter poem Walcott's stand on history outlined in "The Muse of History" is presented in poetic idiom:

Ablaze with rage I thought,
Some slave is rotting in this manorial lake,
But still the coal of my compassion fought
That Albion too was once
A colony like ours . . . (CP 20)

While this stand can be read as pacifist and liberal humanist I hope to show in the next unit that this would be a ridiculously simplistic view of Walcott's poetic ideology.

2.6 QUESTIONS

- Q1. To what end are literary characters re-worked in post-colonial literature? Discuss with detailed reference to one of Walcott's poems.
- Q2. The structure of Walcott's poetry reflects the theme. Elaborate on this statement giving examples from two poems.
- Q3. Write a critical account of the relationship between history and language in Walcott's poetry.

2.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Primary Material

Walcott, Derek. *Collected Poems, 1948-1984*. New York: Noonday-Farrar, 1986.

-- "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry." *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott*. Ed. Robert D. Hamner. Washington: Three Continents, 1993. 51-57.

Derek Walcott-I

-- "The Muse of History." 1974. Extr. in *Critics on Caribbean Literature*. Ed. Edward Baugh. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978. 38-43.

-- "What the Twilight Says: An Overture." *Dream on a Monkey Mountain and Other Plays*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1972. 3-40.

Secondary Material

Brathwaite, Kamau. "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature." 1970/1973. *Roots*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993. 190-258.

Terada, Rei. *Derek Walcott's Poetry: American Mimicry*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1992.

Walcott, Derek. "Thinking Poetry: An Interview with Derek Walcott." 1990. By Robert Brown and Cheryl Johnson Rpt. in *Conversations with Walcott*. Ed. William Baer. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1996. 175-178.

UNIT 3 DEREK WALCOTT - II

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 The Traveller
- 3.2 The Spoiler's Return
 - 3.2.1 The Cutting Edge of Satire
 - 3.2.2 The Text
 - 3.2.3 Analysis
 - 3.2.4 Carnival
- 3.3 From *Midsummer*
 - 3.3.1 Poetry as Autobiography
 - 3.3.2 The Text
 - 3.3.3 Analysis
 - 3.3.4 Imagi/nation
- 3.4 From *Omeros*
 - 3.4.1 Cultural Translation
 - 3.4.2 The Text
 - 3.4.3 Analysis
 - 3.4.4 Epic Re-vers[e]ions
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Questions
- 3.7 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to discuss Walcott's poetry published in the 1980s and 1990s. In doing so I shall touch upon various aspects of Caribbean culture and society which Walcott has incorporated to a much greater extent in his later work. The poems to be discussed are from his collections *The Fortunate Traveller* (1981), *Midsummer* (1984) and *Omeros* (1990). It is absolutely essential for you to have read carefully the poems discussed at length in the previous unit and the extracts from other poems. This will help you in noting for yourself the differences between Walcott's early and later poetry.

3.1 THE TRAVELLER

Since the 1970s Walcott has divided his time between the Caribbean and the United States. He has taught at Yale, Columbia, Boston and other universities. The title of his 1981 collection of poetry *The Fortunate Traveller* indicates this movement between two regions and cultures and the poems reflect the diasporic or exilic perspective. In "The Hotel Normandie Pool" he writes, "corruption, censorship and arrogance/make exile seem a happier thought than home" (CP 442). However it is not as if the condition of exile is an unmixed blessing. In interviews Walcott has acknowledged, that contained in the exile's physical separation from the place of origin, is "this physical nostalgia for simple things like warm sea, sun, a certain kind of food" (White 157). Linking the art of poetry to the idea of heaven which posits that we are in exile from a place to which we really belong, Walcott calls poetry "a situation of divine discontent" (White 158). The exile's discontent can take as its reference point both the place of origin as well as the place of present abode. Walcott is aware of the haunting, abiding presence of racism in America. The title poem of his collection *The Arkansas Testament* (1977) explores this issue in detail. Since 1990 Walcott has been teaching creative writing at Boston University. He has called Boston the "toughest city in terms of Black fear" explaining that there is a fear of using Blacks in the theatre of this town. Aware of the problems of both the regions

between which he divides his time, Walcott is, in a sense, like his literary creation Shabine, the "red nigger" from "The Schooner *Flight*" who "had no nation now but the imagination" (CP 350). And yet, paradoxically, "the effort to create a nation as if it were an act of imagination" is present in Walcott's later poetry along with the distancing which arises out of his status as an exile (White 90).

3.2 THE SPOILER'S RETURN

3.2.1 The Cutting Edge of Satire

Walcott's engagement with and distancing from the Caribbean is suggested in this poem through the persona of Spoiler, a calypsonian, who has come back from hell to visit Trinidad by special permission of his master Satan. The identification of Spoiler as a calypsonian immediately places him in the satirical tradition for the calypso is a popular satirical song in rhymed verse. Cultural critics locate the calypso's origin at the time of French settlement of Trinidad in the 18th century as songs sung in praise of a master or beration for his enemies. At the beginning of the twentieth century calypsos sung by masquerade bands became a part of formally organised carnival competitions. The first calypso competition was arranged in 1914. In it the competitors sought to outdo each other in wit and rhyme. Errol Hill who has researched the form and function of the calypso in his book on the Trinidad carnival calls it "an instrument of social criticism" and "an escape measure for resentful public feelings." He has also pointed out that one of the earliest surviving calypsoes in the English language is levelled at a 19th century British governor Sir Hubert Jermingham. Spoiler's criticism of opportunist politicians, profiteers and bureaucrats is in keeping with this satirical tradition.

The other satirical tradition invoked in the poem is Western. Spoiler asks the Roman satirists Juvenal and Martial to "back me up." These satirists worked in the epigrammatic style which in its pithiness is quite similar to the succinctness of calypso couplets. Their evocation of Roman life, criticism of fortune-hunters, gluttons, drunkards, debauchers and sympathy for the poor is comparable to Spoiler's picture of contemporary Trinidad. He also places himself in the line of English satirists from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. Rochester, Dryden, Pope, Swift, Byron whom he labels "lords of irony" are visualised as contenders in Satan's "tent." The allusion is to calypso tents during carnival where competitions were held and in which a small fee was charged for admission. Walcott brings together the Trinidadian and Western forms of satire by making the Roman and English satirists competitors in a calypso tent. I want to bring to your attention the fact that there are two forms of satire mentioned in the poem: the calypso which as an expression of popular culture can be called a part of 'the little tradition,' and literary satire which can be seen as comprising 'the great tradition.' Such a hierarchical division would entail denigrating the calypso, which is primarily oral, below the Western mode of satire as literature. Spoiler's and Walcott's attack on contemporary Trinidad is double edged in its use of both oral and literary resources. This enables the poem, which is after all in print, to be seen as "orature," literature inscribed with orality.

3.2.2 The Text

The Spoiler's return

[for Earl Lovelace]

I sit high on this bridge in Laventille,
watching that city where I left no will
but my own conscience and rum-eaten wit,
and limers passing see me where I sit,
ghost in brown gabardine, bones in a sack,

and bawl: "Ay, Spoiler, boy! When you come back?"
and those who bold don't feel they out of place
to peel my limeskin back, and see a face
with eyes as cold as a dead macajuel,
and if they still can talk, I answer: "Hell."
I have a room there where I keep a crown,
and Satan send me to check out this town.
Down there, that Hot Boy have a stereo
where, whole day, he does blast my caiso;
I beg him two weeks' leave and he send me
back up, not as no bedbug or no flea,
but in this limeskin hag and floccy suit,
to sing what I did always sing: the truth.
Tell Desperadoes when you reach the hill,
I decompose, but I composing still:

*I going to bite them young ladies, partner,
like a hot dog or a hamburger
and if you thin, don't be in a fright
is only big fat women I going to bite.*

The shark, racing the shadow of the shark
across clear coral rocks, does make them dark—
that is my premonition of the scene
of what passing over this Caribbean.
Is crab climbing crab-back, in a crab-quarrel
and going round and round in the same barrel,
is sharks with shirt-jacs, sharks with well-pressed fins.
ripping we small-fry off with razor grins;
nothing ain't change but colour and attire,
so back me up, Old Brigade of Satire,
back me up, Martial, Juvenal, and Pope
(to hang theirself I giving plenty rope),
join Spoiler' chorus, sing the song with me,
Laord Rochester, who praised the nimble flea:

*Were I, who to my cost already am
One of those strange, prodigious creatures, Man,
A spirit free, to choose for my own share,
What case of flesh and blood I pleased to wear,
I hope when I die, after burial,
To come back as an insect or animal.*

I see these islands and I feel to bawl,
"area of darkness" with V.S. Nightfall.

Lock off your tears, you casting pearls of grief
on a duck's back a waxen dasheen leaf,
the slime crab's carapace is waterproof
and those with hearing aids turn off the truth,
and their dark glasses let you criticize
your own presumptuous image in their eyes.
Behind dark glasses is just hollow skull,
and black still poor, though black is beautiful.
So, crown and mitre me Bedbug the First—
the gift of mockery with which I'm cursed
is just a insect biting Fame behind,
a vermin swimming in a glass of wine,

that, dipped out with a finger, bound to bite
 its saving host, ungrateful parasite,
 whose sting, between the cleft arse and its seat,
 reminds Authority man is just meat,
 a moralist as mordant as the louse
 that the good husband brings from the whorehouse
 the flea whose itch to make all Power wince,
 will crash a fete, even at his life's expense,
 and these pile up in lime pits by the heap,
 daily; that our deliverers may sleep.
 All those who promise free and just debate,
 then blow up radicals to save the state,
 who allow, in democracy's defence,
 a parliament of spiked heads on a fence,
 all you go bawl out, "Spoils, things ain't so bad."
 This ain't the Dark Age, is just Trinidad,
 is human nature, Spoiler, after all,
 it ain't big genocide, is just bohbohl;
 safe and conservative, 'fraid to take side,
 they say that Rodney commit suicide,
 is the same voices that, in the slave ship,
 smile at their brothers, "Boy, is just the whip,"
 I free and easy, you see me have chain?
 A little censorship can't cause no pain,
 a little graft can't rot the human mind,
 what sweet in goat-mouth sour in his behind.
 So I sing with Attila, I sing with Commander,
 what right in Guyana, right in Uganda.
 The time could come, it can't be very long,
 when they will jail calypso for picong,
 for first comes television, then the press,
 all in the name of Civic Righteousness;
 it has been done before, all Power has
 made the sky shit and maggots of the stars,
 over these Romans lying on their backs,
 the hookers swaying their enormous sacks,
 until all language stinks, and the truth lies,
 a mass for maggots and a fete for flies;
 and, for a spineless thing, rumour can twist
 into a style the local journalist--
 as bland as a green coconut, his manner
 routinely tart, his sources the Savannah
 and all pretensions to a native art
 reduced to giggles at the coconut cart,
 where heads with reputations, in one slice,
 are brought to earth, when they ain't eating nice;
 and as for local Art, so it does go,
 the audience have more talent than the show.

Is Carnival, straight Carnival that's all,
 the beat is base, the melody bohbohl,
 all Port of Spain is a twelve-thirty show,
 some playing Kojak, some Fidel Castro,
 some Rastamen, but, with or without locks,
 to Spoiler is the same old khaki socks,
 all Frederick Street stinkiiing like a closed drain,

Hell is a city much like Port of Spain,
 what the rain rots, the sun ripens some more,
 all in the due process and within the law,

as, like a sailor on a spending spree,
 we blow our oil-bloated economy
 on projects from here to eternity,
 and Lord, the sunlit streets break Spoiler's heart,
 to have natural gas and not to give a fart,
 to see them line up, pitch-oil tin in hand:
 each independent, oil-forsaken island,
 like jeering at some scrunter with the blues,
 while you lend him some need-a-half-sole shoes,
 some begging bold as brass, some coming meeker,
 but from Jamaica to poor Dominica
 we make them know they begging, every loan
 we send them is like blood squeezed out of stone,
 and giving gives us back the right to laugh,
 that we couldn't see we own black people starve,
 and, more we give, more we congratulate
 we-self on our own self-sufficient state.
 In all them project, all them Five-Year Plan,
 what happen to the Brotherhood of Man?
 Around the time I dead it wasn't so,
 we sang the Commonwealth of co-iso,
 we was in chains, but chains made us unite,
 now who have, good for them, and who blight, blight;
 my bread is bitterness, my wine is gall,
 my chorus is the same: "I want to fall."
 Oh, wheel of industry, check out your cogs!
 Between the knee-high trash and khaki dogs
 Arnold's Phoenician trader reach this far,
 selling you half-dead batteries for your car;
 the children of Tagore, in funeral shroud,
 curry favour and chicken from the crowd;
 as for the Creoles, check their house, and look,
 you bust your brain before you find a book,
 when Spoiler see all this, ain't he must bawl,
 "area of darkness," with V.S. Nightfall?
 Corbeaux like cardinals line the La Basse
 in ecumenical patience while you pass
 the Beetham Highway-Guard corruption's stench,
 you bald, black justices of the High Bench-
 and beyond them the firelit mangrove swamps,
 ibises practising for postage stamps,
 Lord, let me take a taxi South again
 and hear, drumming across Caroni Plain,
 the table in the Indian half hour
 when twilight fills the mud huts of the poor,
 to hear the tattered flags of drying corn
 rattle a sky from which all the gods gone,
 their bleached flags of distress waving to me
 from shacks, adrift like rafts on a green sea,
 "Things ain't go change, they ain't go change at all,"
 to my old chorus: "Lord, I want to bawl."
 The poor still poor, whatever arse they catch.
 Look south from Laventille, and you can watch
 the torn brown patches of the Central Plain
 slowly restitched by needles of the rain,
 and the frayed earth, crisscrossed like old bagasse,
 spring to a cushiony quilt of emerald grass,
 and who does sew and sow and patch the land?
 The Indian. And whose villages turn sand?

The fishermen doomed to stitching the huge net
of the torn foam from Point to La Fillette.

Derek Walcott-II

One thing with hell, at least it organize
in soaring circles, when any man dies
he must pass through them first, that is the style,
Jesus was down here for a little while,
cadaverous Dante, big-guts Rabelais,
all of them wave to Spoiler on their way.
Catch us in Satan tent, next carnival:
Lord Rochester, Quevedo, Juvenal,
Maestro, Martial, Pope, Dryden, Swift, Lord Byron,
the lords of irony, the Duke of Iron,
hotly contending for the monarchy
in couplets or the old re-minor key,
all those who gave earth's pompous carnival
fatigue, and groaned "O God, I feel to fall!"
all those whose anger for the poor on earth
made them weep with a laughter beyond mirth,
names wide as oceans when compared with mine
salted my songs, and gave me their high sign.
All you excuse me, Spoiler was in town;
you pass him straight, so now he gone back down.

Glossary

limers:	an idler standing at a public place
gabardine:	a kind of cloth used for making suits
limeskin:	an old felt hat that has lost its shape
macajuel:	a large snake also called a boa - constrictor or anaconda
caiso:	alternative spelling for calypso, a popular satirical song in rhymed verse, often performed by a male singer with body gestures
flocy:	made of wool
Desperadoes:	person of reckless or criminal undertakings
crab-quarrel:	fight with the intention of pulling the other down
shirt-jacs:	loose-fitting, shirt-like garment, worn on official occasions
rip off:	defraud
small-fry:	inconsequential people
Martial:	Roman poet of the first century A.D., especially famous for his work <i>Epigrams</i> which satirize diverse characters of contemporary Rome.
Juvenal:	Second century Roman satirist, author of <i>Satires</i> , characterised by bitter invective and grim epigrams.

Pope:	Alexander Pope (1688-1744), Augustan poet famous for his satires <i>Dunciad</i> on Dullness. <i>Imitations of Horace, Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot</i> .
Rochester:	John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (1647-80), lyric poet and satirist. One of the first Augustans to write social and literary verse satires. The poem contains a quotation from his "Satyre on Mankind."
"area of darkness," V.S. Nightfall	V.S. Naipaul wrote a highly controversial novel about India titled <i>An Area of Darkness</i> (1964).
Lock off:	choke back or stop
dasheen:	a large tuber with big, heart-shaped leaves
carapace:	shell
mitre:	Bishop or abbot's tall cap, a symbol of episcopal office
mordant:	caustic or biting
louse, flea:	small parasitic insects
crash a fêlé:	interrupt a party or a public dance
lime pits:	for steeping hides to remove hair
Dark Age:	5th to 10th cent. A.D., the period preceding the Middle Ages was known as the Dark Ages, a period of unenlightenment.
genocide:	deliberate extermination of people
bohbohl:	to steal company or public funds
Rodney:	probably Walter Rodney, a radical Guyanese lecturer and writer whose deportation from Jamaica in 1968 sparked off a massive student demonstration which was taken over by the general public and ended in violent clashes with the police.
goat-mouth:	ability to cause minor misfortune by predicting the future, also called bad mouth
Atila, Commander:	stage names of famous calypsonians
picong:	spontaneous verbal battle in rhymed song between two or more contending calypsonians
hookers:	small fishing boats
Carnival:	the massive, nationally organised festival of competitive, costumed street-dancing, calypso singing held usually in the last four days before Ash Wednesday.
tart:	sharp, cutting

Rastamen:	members of the Rastafari cult, developed in Jamaica, believing Ethiopia to be the ultimate home of all Black people and the Western society as a survival of the wickedness of Babylon. Characterised by dread-locked hair and ganja smoking, its members reject private property.
Port of Spain:	capital of Trinidad
Fidel Castro:	leader of the Marxist-Leninist government in Cuba
pitch-oil:	kerosene
scrunter:	derogatory term for a person reduced to begging
bold as brass:	defiantly
blight:	cause harm
Phoenician:	inhabitant of Syria
Corbeaux:	carion crows
cardinals:	leading dignitaries of the Roman Catholic church
ecumenical:	representing the whole of the Christian world
mangrove:	tropical tree or shrub
ibises:	stork-like birds with long, curved bills, found in lakes and swamps
flags:	yellow fibrous shaft
bleached:	whitened by exposure to sunlight
arse:	damned, accursed, a term expressing frustration
bagasse:	dry pith of sugarcane, also indicating the dregs of society
emerald grass:	bright green grass
cadaverous:	corpse-like
Dante:	Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), Italian poet and author of <i>Divina Commedia</i> comprising the <i>Inferno</i> , the <i>Purgatorio</i> , and the <i>Paradiso</i> .
Rabelais:	Francois Rabelais (1495-1553), French physician, humanist and satirist whose great works are the satirical entertainments on popular giants titled <i>Gargantua</i> and <i>Pantagruel</i> .
Byron:	George Gordon Byron (1788-1824), English poet, dramatist and satirist, author of <i>English Bards and Scotch Reviewers</i> , a satirical poem in which he attacks many of his contemporaries.

Quevedo:

probably Raymond Quevedo who wrote a memoir titled *Attila's Kaiso* (1983), containing an anecdotal history of Trinidad calypso, written in the 1950s by this early practitioner who performed as 'Atilla the Hun' but most likely Francisco Gomez de Quevedo (1580-1645), Spanish poet and prose writer famous for his satires which show the commercialism, racialism, imperialism, slavery in his age.

Dryden:

John Dryden (1631-1700), English poet, dramatist and satirist, wrote a biting satire on his contemporary poet Shadwell in *Mac Flecknoe* (1682) and on the state of the times in *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681).

Swift:

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), attacked contemporary politics, literature, religion, society in satires like *The Battle of Books* and *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) and *Gulliver's Travels* (1726).

3.2.3 Analysis

Spoiler's return to Laventille and people's surprise at seeing him is the subject of the opening section of this poem. That this place was where Spoiler was famous as a calypsonian is obvious by his own statement that he had left his "conscience" and "rum-eaten wit" here. Indications of the poverty and squalor he lived in are provided by this phrase, which indicates he was a hard drinking man, and the next line in which he is described as a bag of bones. People express their curiosity at his return but some are put off by his ghostly appearance. Spoiler talks about his sojourn in hell where Satan, called "Hot Boy" by him, is a fan of his and listens to his songs on his stereo. Satan's partiality towards Spoiler makes him send the latter back to earth, not as a "bedbug" or a "flea" but as man dressed in a suit and a hat. He hints at the social function performed by the calypsonians, that of singing the "truth." Playing on the word "compose," he sends out a message that even though his physical appearance is subject to decay ("I decompose") his artistic abilities are still intact ("I composing still"). To give evidence of the latter he sings a snatch from one of his compositions about the attractions of women.

Spoiler's meditations on the current political and social situation in the Caribbean bring out the predatory instincts of those in power, whom he calls "sharks." These sharks thrive by exploiting the "small-fry" or ordinary people. The line "crab climbing crab-back, in a crab-quarrel" is wonderfully evocative of people using other people to attain power at somebody else's expense. The marine imagery used in the passage to describe bureaucrats and politicians as sharks and crabs accentuates their influence. If the Caribbean is an area of pristine, Edenic beauty with "clear coral rocks," these people are like ominous dark shadows across it. Spoiler hints that commoners aren't any better off under their chosen representatives than they were under a colonial government. The "colour and attire" of those in power may have changed but the exploitative mentality is still the same. The change in attire is indicated by the word "shirt-jacs," a name for a shirt-like garment which originated in Guyana in 1969 and which is worn for official occasions. For Spoiler the most effective weapon against the current scenario is satire and he invokes satirists like Martial, Juvenal and Pope to aid him in his endeavour. He laments the contemporary situation in the Caribbean and through Rochester's words expresses a pessimistic outlook towards it in his desire to be born as an insect or an animal. This is connected to his previous mention of Satan's kindness in allowing him to be reborn as a man rather than as a lower form of life. It seems as if taking into consideration the present circumstances Spoiler is regretting having come back to earth in human form. Spoiler is aware that his despondency is shared by other artists of the region

particularly the East Indian Caribbean author V.S. Naipaul who has analysed aspects of Caribbean culture and society in his novels and essays. Naipaul's critics have often accused him of presenting too gloomy a picture of the Caribbean in general and of Trinidad in particular. This explains Spoiler's play on Naipaul's name, "V.S. Nightfall" and the evocation of his most pessimistic work to date, *An Area of Darkness*. These two lines serve as a refrain underscoring the bleakness and despondency of Spoiler's vision of the Caribbean and of Trinidad. His realization that his grief is misspent is expressed as self-rebuke. He realizes that his "pearls of grief" are like water off a duck's back. This popular English idiom is made Caribbean by affixing another comparison with it. Spoiler's tears are also like water slipping off the smooth surface of a dasheen leaf. The majority of the populace remains unaffected by what is happening around them, turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to it, insulating themselves against the "truth" which upsets Spoiler. Bemoaning the lack of intelligence which makes people of colour objects of aesthetic appreciation without in any way alleviating their material conditions he says, "black still poor, though black is beautiful."

Continuing the insect imagery which had been introduced in the opening section of the poem, Spoiler compares the effect of his mockery to that of an insect bite. The point of comparison is the nuisance value of vermins like bedbugs, fleas and lice. The hypocrisy of those who make pretensions to liberal thoughts and action, and yet persecute others who are willing to effect change root and branch, is a prelude to their violent actions. These are effected to curb the fundamental democratic principle of freedom of expression and justified in the name of "human nature." Extenuation for these actions is provided by contrasting them with heinous historical crimes like genocide. Walcott puts a typical Trinidadian word "bohboh!" in Spoiler's vocabulary to ensure readers' understanding of corruption in Trinidad's economy.

One instance of public apathy to social concerns is the acceptance of restrictions on their freedom. The attitude is one which did not object to slavery in the past and didn't have an understanding of radical ideology like that propagated by Walter Rodney. Spoiler is himself accustomed to censorship but this does not stop him from giving voice to the misfortunes afflicting the country like the well known calypsonians who performed under the names Atilla and Commander. The technique of the calypso is that of "picing," a verbal war which according to Spoiler might soon be outlawed by the authorities. The various ideological state apparatuses like the television and press become vehicles for government propaganda. Complete control over natural resources and even nature itself is expressed in scatological terms. Even language has been corrupted by being used for nefarious means at the hands of unscrupulous journalists. Language is also wielded by the calypsonian but for ends quite different from that of the "local journalist" with his pretensions to a thorough understanding of the artistic and political scenario. The degeneration of the artistic impulse to a market oriented commodity, the hawking of a false idea of the "folk" has become a characteristic of all forms of art including the carnival. The commercialisation of this public celebration has made it another means to hoodwink the locals as well as the tourists. Music and melody are no longer what they previously were. The carnival masquerade consists of people dressed up in various costumes. In these days of role-playing some of the most popular figures people dress up as are Fidel Castro and Rastafarians who embody political justice. But since this ideal is far removed from Trinidadian society Spoiler comments that this is just "playing" or imitation.

Starting from a description of the squalor of Port of Spain, Spoiler extends the scope of this critical gaze to include Trinidad and the Caribbean. The stinking streets of the city make Spoiler call it hellish. The "oil-bloated economy" of the country suffered a serious blow in the eighties when the government found itself unable to call in the loans it had made to other Caribbean territories. Spoiler personifies the small nations of this part of the world as beggars with tins in their hands lining up to receive gratefully whatever meagre aid is doled out to them. The richer nations of the region, like oil-rich Trinidad, condescend to themselves on the charity they bestow to other

smaller regions in the name of black solidarity which couches their materialistic intent. Spoiler says he preferred the unity which resulted out of all the countries being under colonial servitude, "the Commonwealth of caiso," rather than this pseudo alliance of provider and dependents. Such a system has been responsible for the wide gap between the rich and the poor, it has led to the typical feature of a capitalist, consumerist society in which "who have, good for them, and who blight, blight." Bitterness and gall feed the calypsonian's anger, fortified with such nourishment it is no wonder that he expresses a death wish by uttering the words "I want to fall."

The multiracial identity of the Caribbean comprising Creoles and other ethnicities like Syrian and Indian, each community playing an important role in the economy, is evoked by Spoiler. He mentions the different occupations they are engaged in: the Syrian is called a "Phoenician trader" and the Indian is described as an agriculturalist. Both are shown as eager for profit whether monetary or political, it is the Creole who remains illiterate and unambitious. Lest this seem too harsh a depiction Spoiler hastens to add that every community is exploited by corrupt officers of the law. The pastoral scenario of ibises standing in the swamps, flags of corn waving in the fields and the drumming of a tabla across the plain is undercut by the use of phrases like "flags of distress." The Indians are called "children of Tagore" but this ancestry in which they are identified with this nationalist social reformer and man of letters is ironical especially in a scenario where such ideals and accomplishments have ceased to be virtues. Here poor farmers and fishermen work desperately to eke out a meagre living, existence is worse than hell where at least punishment is meted out to sinners according to the severity of the sins committed. The idea of hell as a graduated conical funnel, to the circles of which various categories of sinners are assigned, is from Dante's *Inferno*. Spoiler mentions Jesus, Dante and Rabelais as being in this hellish city for some time and acknowledging his presence by waving to him. I think this probably refers to the carnival masqueraders being influenced by mythology and literature and dressing up or "playing" these parts. The next few lines confirm this interpretation because all those playacting as satirists say they can be seen in "Satan tent" at the next carnival. During carnival the calypsonians contended for the title of calypso king by engaging in verbal wars, sometimes two of them combined forces to sing duets. One of the first duets was sung by Atila the Hun and Roaring Lion. These contests for supremacy or "monarchy" not only served the purpose of entertainment but also of social criticism. In the last few lines of the poem Spoiler speaks of the calypsonian as the keeper of social conscience and acknowledges the influence of the famous verbal and literary satirists he has just named. The insignificance of this art in the present times is evident in the way Spoiler's return fails to evoke any excitement in the town. It is this which makes him go back "down" to hell. That satire has lost its cutting edge and has become ineffective as a weapon of social criticism is evident from the despondent choral refrain repeated at regular intervals in the poem and the pessimistic ending.

3.2.4 Carnival

The form and function of calypso can be interpreted within Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque outlined in *Rabelais and His World* (1965). Bakhtin read the carnival as part of a thousand year tradition of folk humour. The calypso, an inextricable part of carnival celebrations in Trinidad, has preserved the major types of traditional songs functionally associated with the lives of folk at work, at play, at worship and even in revolt (the insurrectionary songs of slaves). Carnival in Bakhtinian terms "belongs to the borderline sphere between art and life." Comic verbal compositions in it used a variety of genres and styles, both the official and the vernacular. If the calypso is taken as such a composition it can be seen to exhibit these features of mixing high and low vocabulary. Walcott's poem about a calypsonian is itself structured like a calypso, a dramatic monologue in rhymed couplets. Before Walcott Errol Hill had used this form in his play *Man Better Man* in which the dialogue is entirely in calypso couplets. "The Spoiler's Return" in its intermingling of standard English and localisms in words, phrases and syntax subverts the hierarchy which

undervalues creole. Folk laughter and the ribaldry intrinsic to carnival traditions are present in the few lines of a calypso sung by Spoiler in the opening section of the poem. Grotesque realism associated with bodily functions is also effectively used in phrases like "What sweet in goat-mouth sour in his behind." Both Rabelaisian and Trinidad carnival ambience involves a participation of all sections of society, here the calypsonian is a spokesman for these oppressed masses. The established order is temporarily suspended during carnival celebrations when the utopian ideal and the realistic merge as servants don the garb of their masters who dress in rags. Spoiler's composition and the Trinidad calypso, though part of the temporary suspension of reality, express a wish for an inversion in which freedom of speech, social justice and solidarity becomes the order of the day. Reality, pointed out through satirical means, is never lost sight of, but the possibility of change is an unexpressed hope which is never really abandoned in the calypso.

3.3 FROM MIDSUMMER

3.3.1 Poetry as Autobiography

Like *Another Life* (1973), a sequence of lyrics from Walcott's middle period of poetry, *Misummer* is an exploration of aspects of the poet's intensely personal moments of life. In both collections the influence of the American poet Robert Lowell's much acclaimed *Life Studies* (1959) can be traced. Lowell's work contains poetic and prose recollections of his family, his childhood and his mature experiences of marriage, imprisonment and hospitalization for mental problems. This started the trend for what came to be called "Confessional" poetry in which the revelation of the private universe with all its attendant irrationality became acceptable. Madness, for instance, was a hitherto taboo aspect of private life but in the poetry of Lowell and Sylvia Plath it became a theme for the enunciation of one's identity. Walcott's poetry has its moments of tortured anguish which indicates its links with confessional verse. However since these moments are only one aspect of these two collections I prefer to use the term 'autobiographical poetry' for them. Let me point out some similarities between them. Immediate family members are made the subjects of poetry. Some poems in the early collection are addressed specifically to Walcott's mother while in the later work his first wife and his daughters figure prominently. The memory of his father Warwick Walcott and the paintings he left behind is reworked into poems in both *Another Life* and *Midsummer*. The visual arts, especially in comparison to the verbal art of poetry, is a much discussed theme. To this end *Another Life* alludes principally to Italian Renaissance painters while *Midsummer* refers to Northern painters like Breughel, Durer, Vermeer and in the French tradition to Chardin and Gauguin. The poet's painter friends Harry Simmons and Dunstan St. Omer (called Gregorias) are mentioned as playing a significant role in his artistic development. The future trends this development might take are prefigured in *Midsummer*. In the two untitled sections of this collection chosen for discussion I shall be pointing out these trends.

3.3.2 The Text

FROM MIDSUMMER

XXV

The sun has fired my face to terra-cotta.
It carries the heat from his kiln all through the house.
But I cherish its wrinkles as much as those on blue water.
Gnats drill little holes around a saw-toothed cactus,
a furnace has curled the knives of the oleander,
and a branch of the logwood blurs with wild characters.
A stone house waits on the steps. Its white porch blazes.

I tell you a promise brought to me by the surf:
You shall see transparent Helen pass like a candle
flame in sunlight, weightless as woodsmoke that hazes
the sand with no shadow. My palms have been sliced by the twine
of the craft I have pulled at for more than forty years.
My Ionia is the smell of burnt grass, the scorched handle
of a cistern in August squeaking to rusty islands;
the lines I love have all their knots left in.
Through the stunned afternoon, when it's too hot to think
and the muse of this inland ocean still waits for a name,
and from the salt, dark room, the tight horizon line
catches nothing, I wait. Chairs sweat. Paper crumples the floor.
A lizard gasps on the wall. The sea glares like zinc.
Then, in the door light: not Nike loosening her sandal
but a girl slapping sand from her foot, one hand on the frame.

XXVI

Before that thundercloud breaks from its hawsers,
those ropes of rain, a wind makes the sea grapes wince,
and the reef signals its last flash of lime.
Feeling her skin cool, the housemaid August
runs into the yard to pull down clouds, like a laundress,
from the year's meridian, her mouth stuffed with wooden pins.
She's seen these flashes of quartz, she knows it's time
for the guests on the beach to come up to the house,
and, hosing sand from scorched feet, let the hinges rust
in holes for another year. But an iron band
still binds their foreheads: the bathers stand
begging the dark clouds, whose spinnakers race over the dunes,
for one more day. Here, the salt vine dries
as fast as it grows, and before you look, a year's gone
with your shadow. The temperate homilies can't
take root in sand; the cicada can fiddle his tunes
all year, if he likes, to the twig-brown ant.
The cloud passes high like a god staying his powers-
the pocked sand dries, umbrellas reopen like flowers-
but those who measure midsummer by a year's trials
have felt a chill grip an ankle. They put down their books
to count the children crouched over pools, and the idolaters
angling themselves to the god's face, like sundials.

XXVI

Certain things here are quietly American-
that chain-link fence dividing the absent roars
of the beach from the empty ball park, its holes
muttering the word umpire instead of empire;
the grey, metal light where an early pelican
coasts, with its engine off, over the pink fire
of a sea whose surface is as cold as Maine's.
The light warms up the sides of white, eager Cessnas
parked at the airstrip under the freckling hills
of St. Thomas. The sheds, the brown, functional hanger,
are like those of the Occupation in the last war.
The night left a rank smell under the casuarinas,
the villas have fenced-off beaches where the natives walk,
illegal immigrants from unlucky islands
who envy the smallest polyp its right to work.

Here the wetback crab and the mollusc are citizens,
 and the leaves have green cards. Bulldozers jerk
 and gouge out a hill, but we all know that the dust
 is industrial and must be suffered. Soon-
 the sea's corrugations are sheets of zinc
 soldered by the sun's steady acetylene. This
 drizzle that falls now is American rain,
 stitching stars in the sand. My own corpuscles
 are changing as fast. I fear what the migrant envies:
 the starry pattern they make-the flag on the post office-
 the quality of the dirt, the fealty changing under my foot.

Derek Walcott-11

Glossary

Midsummer XXV

terra-cotta:	unglazed, brownish-red pottery
kiln:	furnace or oven for firing pottery
gnats:	small, winged insects
oleander:	evergreen shrub
logwood:	a tree found in the Caribbean whose wood is used for dyeing and blossoms for honey
Helen:	in Homer's <i>Iliad</i> the wife of Menelaus, King of Sparta whose free or forced elopement with Paris causes the war between the Greeks and Trojans.
twine:	rope
Ionia:	a region away from mainland Greece where early Greek literature and philosophy were principally developed
cistern:	tank for storing water
line:	piece of cord or rope e.g. fishing line
knots:	intertwining of ropes
Nike:	in Greek religion the female personification of victory, statues depict her with wings

Midsummer XXVII

pelican:	large water bird with pouch in its bill for storing fish
Maine:	a region in New England, U.S.A.
freckling:	light brown coloured
St. Thomas:	small U.S. island in the Caribbean
Occupation:	occupation of France by German forces during the Second World War

Casuarinas:	tree with needle-like, leafless branches
polyp:	simple organism with tube shaped body
molluse:	soft bodied, hard shelled animals like snails and oysters
green card:	prerequisite for citizenship in the U.S.A.
corrugation:	contract into wrinkles or folds
acetylene:	flame used for soldering
fealty:	a feudal tenant's loyalty to the lord

3.3.3 Analysis

These two numbered sections from *Midsummer* contain detailed descriptions of the landscape and illustrate Walcott's "contribution to the resurrection of 'landscape poetry'" (Jones 37). In an early poem addressed to Edward Thomas (1878-1917), whose work shows a keen observation of English pastoral scenes, Walcott had said "topography delineates its verse." This can just as easily be applied as a general characteristic of Walcott's oeuvre. Dr Johnson has described topographical poetry as "local poetry, of which the fundamental object is some particular landscape . . . with the addition of . . . historical retrospection or incidental meditation." Here topography becomes the point of entry for meditations on the poet's sources of creativity. "XIV" begins by describing the poet's acute consciousness of the process of ageing. The brownish red hue of terra-cotta acquired by firing it in a kiln becomes an image for the poet's aged and weather-beaten appearance. But this is not a source of grief since co-relates for this process can be found in nature: the ripples on the water are like "wrinkles," the pointed leaves of the oleander droop in the sun as sapped of energy as people and a branch of a tree shows signs of decay ("blurs with wild characters").

It appears as if the direction the poet's creativity will take in the future is also delineated by the topography, the waves make a "promise" to him. The mythological figure of Helen is described as the dominant icon of this creativity whose moment of inspiration is fleeting. The evanescence is accentuated by the words "transparent" and "weightless" used for this momentary vision of Helen vouchsafed to the artist. The apprenticeship for this moment has been long and hard, "forty years," for this is the midsummer of the poet's life. Playing on the dual meanings of the word "craft," as an acquired skill and a small boat, Walcott says he has "pulled" or laboured at it. The mention of Ionia, away from mainland Greece, indicates the awareness of the marginality of poetry from this region. Both landscape and seascape are evoked through the words "scorched grass" and "cistern," the unpolished rough hewn quality of the poet's work being a reflection of the "rusty islands" themselves. The pun on the word "lines" which have "knots" in them becomes ironical in the context of critics' valuation of Walcott's poetry as exhibiting a too-finished quality in its form and content. Besides meaning a rope or a cord and a line of poetry, "line" is also used in another sense of a fishing rod which "catches" nothing. The second time it is mentioned it is made into a compound word "horizon line," the horizon catches fire with the blaze of the setting sun, the glow symbolising poetic inspiration which is denied to him in the darkness of his room. The crumpled papers are evidence of the poet's labour at his craft which at certain times, like the moment described here, is uninspired by the muse. The gasp of the lizard and the metallic glare of the sea seem to blame the poet's seemingly futile efforts. Even when the door opens to let in the light it is not the brightness of victory over lack of poetic inspiration, "not Nike loosening her sandal," but a local girl entering the room.

This girl is personified as "the housemaid August" in section XXVI of *Midsummer* which is not discussed in this unit. In the next section XXVII the poet describes in detail the "quietly American" landscape of the island of St. Thomas. The "chain-link fence" which divides the sea from the ball park or the elemental from the civilizational is like the hedge rows dividing the "wild green landscape" from the "pastoral fanns" in Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey." The sense of supervision and control implied by the word "empire" is both contained and extended by "umpire." Only the rules of the game have altered, since what was once a playground for the empire builders has now become a resort for rich tourists whose means of relaxation here are the sea and sports. The continuation of colonialism as neo-colonialism involves only a slight shift signified by the change effected in empire by replacing the letter e with u. The Americanised way of life is perceived as mechanical, the pelican's gliding over the sea is like an airplane's with its "engine off." In the last few lines the bright glare of sunlight is referred to as the acetylene flame which is soldering the zinc-like rippled surface of the sea. The Americanisation of the landscape is reinforced by comparisons with places like Maine in the New England region of America. Small air crafts used by the tourists for commuting are linked to those used by the Germans for the "Occupation" of France in the Second World War. The imperialistic overtones are hard to miss specially in the lines where developmental work is seen as hazardous to the landscape from which hills are gouged out by bulldozers. The tourism industry and its detrimental impact on the Caribbean is a topic much discussed in literature. Trevor Rhone's play *Smile Orange* (1971) is a comic elaboration of this theme in contrast to Walcott's grim presentation of it in this poem.

The affluent class whose members pay for the rights and privileges of living or holidaying on St. Thomas jealously guard the natural surroundings from natives. There is a great disparity between the economies of the various Caribbean islands. Those who migrate from impoverished or "unlucky" islands seek employment in places like St. Thomas, lucky enough to be a part of America. A migrant's dream of citizenship to the U.S.A., fulfilled on acquiring a green card, is gently satirized by the poet when he says that the leaves on the island have green cards. The aggressiveness of the residents of this place in safeguarding their interests and their indifference to the social inequality is brought out in the poet's nomenclature of the citizens as "crabs," ever ready to attack and "molluscs," who retreat into their shells. The pattern of stars and stripes on the American flag is worked into the poem through the star-like indentation made on the earth when raindrops fall on it. The migrant's desire for belonging to a more affluent country is called "envy" and distanced from the poet's "fear" of it. When even the soil seems to lose its Caribbean identity in favour of an American one, the poet's anxiety, about the psychological changes effected due to the topographical changes involved in migration, becomes understandable.

3.3.4 Imagi/Nation

In making poetry out of his most private experiences, like the difficulties of creative output and his fears of migrancy, Walcott has used a long, expansive verse line. By his own admission it is "reflective, and contains a lot of indirection, and psychology, and self-analysis and connotation" (Walcott, "Thinking Poetry" 186). The free verse pattern with its irregular, unrhymed lines which has been followed in *Midsummer* seems best suited to express the autobiographical, introspective concerns. One facet of this introspection is themes for poetry to be written much later. In "XXVI" it appears to have been prophesied to the poet that he will write about Helen which in turn leads him to think of his Ionia. This prophecy is fulfilled, as it were, in the publication of *Omeros* in 1990 in which Helen is both a stunning negro woman as well as the poet's island St. Lucia. The creative imagination elucidates a Greek epic with St. Lucia, the nation, as its epistemological context.

This closely approximates to the migrants' fear of losing touch with the nation as a source of creativity expressed poignantly in "XXVII" as "the fealty changing." In

"*Midsummer LIV*" there is an attempt to imprint the landscape that "made" the poet. The guilt as well as the necessity of movement to another land is conveyed in the line "the faith that I betrayed, or the faith that betrayed me." I pointed out at the beginning of this unit that from the 1970s Walcott began spending part of every year in America and the other part in the Caribbean. The idea of straddling two cultures and the danger of prioritising the adopted over the native is an anxiety which besets the poet. The concluding lines of "*LIV*" express this by mentioning Joseph, Jacob's son, who was forced to stay away from his homeland: "Ah Joseph, though no man ever dies in his own country,/ the grateful grass will grow thick from his heart" (CP 510). Nation thus emerges as the basis of identity in Walcott's poetry and imagination as the migrant's only means of reclaiming it.

3.4 FROM OMEROS

3.4.1 Cultural Translation

In relocating characters from Homer's epic into a Caribbean setting Walcott effects a cultural translation which can be compared to James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In his seminal essay on this topic Homi Bhabha uses translation as a metaphor, a rhetorical figure describing the "increasing internationalisation of cultural production." The performative terms of cultural engagement, the introduction of other incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition is seen by Bhabha as an act of cultural translation. He insists on the canonising and sacralising of the "transparent assumptions of this translation attempted from a migrant, hybrid perspective. I have shown how this is true of re-versions of canonical texts like *Robinson Crusoe* and *The Tempest*. Based on Walcott's statements I think this can partially explain the author's agenda in re-writing the Homeric epic in *Omeros*. The author's views on literature, like his pronouncements on history, have come under attack in recent times when post-colonial writers are expected to "write back" with a vengeance. He has often commented on the similarities between Mediterranean and Caribbean cultures, the most obvious reason for this being that both regions are characterised by their proximity to the sea. He does, however, take issue with those who question his claim to the idea of Greece but accept unquestioningly Joyce's right to it because of a shared European-ness:

As West Indians, we are closer in temperament to the Greeks than they are. . . . If I think of the classic in the Caribbean, I think of modern. I think of the freshness of Homer. I don't think of the antiquity of Homer. I think of the immediacy of Homer. So if I feel this, yes: I understand islands, I understand sails, I understand wind, and I understand the weather. I understand that. I understand what he felt. It's not that I'm trying to be Homeric. I am on an island in an inland ocean, so the correspondence leaps centuries . . . (Walcott, "Interview" 291).

Look closely at the above quotation, the word "understand" is reiterated no less than five times. So it would not be accurate to say that Walcott's cultural translation of the Homeric epic is merely an attempt to appropriate and subvert the dominant literary tropes of a canonical Western work. Rather it can be seen as setting up "correspondences" between two cultures and their literatures. Walcott has often expressed his view about the cultural peripherality of the Greeks: "the Greeks were the niggers of the Mediterranean" (Walcott, "Thinking Poetry" 183). In the context of this it becomes important to see the relations and affiliations between the works and only then turn to the appropriations and subversions. In an essay on the wound trope in *Omeros* John Ramazani has stressed these very "interethnic connection[s]". The conclusion of this essay provides a qualification to postcolonial theory which sets up an opposition between the margin and the centre with its attendant idea of the

victim and the victimiser, "Appropriating a Western icon of suffering and refashioning a polysemous and multiparented trope, Walcott's *Omeros*, together with the poetry of Goodison, Brathwaite, p'Bitek, and Ramanujan, champions a post colonial poetics of affliction that obliterates the distinction between "victim's literature" and its supposed opposite" (Ramazani 415).

Derek Walcott-II

3.4.2 The Text

From *Omeros*

III

"O-meros," she laughed, "That's what we call him in Greek,"
stroking the small bust with its boxer's broken nose,
and I thought of Seven Seas sitting near the reek

of drying fishnets, listening to the shallows' noise.
I said: "Homer and Virg are New England farmers,
and the winged horse guards their gas-station, you're right."

I felt the foam head watching as I stroked an arm, as
cold as its marble, then the shoulders in winter light
in the studio attic. I said, "Omeros."

And *O* was the conch-shell's invocation, mer was
both mother and sea in our Antillean patois,
os, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes

and spreads its sibilant collar on a lace shore.
Omeros was the crunch of dry leaves, and the washes
that echoed from a cave-mouth when the tide has ebbled.

The name stayed in my mouth. I saw how light was webbed
on her Asian cheeks, defined her eyes with a black
almond's outline, as Antigone turned and said:

"I'm tired of America, it's time for me to go back
to Greece. I miss my islands." I write, it returns-
the way she turned and shook out the black gust of hair.

I saw how the surf printed its lace in patterns
on the shore of her neck, then the lowering shallows
of silk swirled at her ankles, like surf without noise,
and felt that another cold bust, not hers, but yours
saw this with stone almonds for eyes, its broken nose
turning away, as the rustling silk agrees.

But if it could read between the lines of her floor
like a white-hot deck uncaulked by Antillean heat,
to the shadows in its hold, its nostrils might flare

at the stench from manacled ankles, the coffed feet
scraping like leaves, and perhaps the inculpable marble
would have turned its white seeds away, to widen

the bow of its mouth at the horror under her table,
from the lyre of her armchair draped with its white chiton,
to do what the past always does: suffer, and stare.

She lay calm as a port, and a cloud covered her
with my shadow; then a prow with painted eyes
slowly emerged from the fragrant rain of black hair

And I heard a hollow moan exhaled from a vase,
not for kings floundering in lances of rain; the prose
of abrupt fishermen cursing over canoes.

Glossary

Omeros:	Greek name for Homer, author of the epic poems the <i>Iliad</i> and the <i>Odyssey</i>
Seven Seas:	the blind seer in <i>Omeros</i> , intended as the St. Lucian analogue of Homer who was said to be blind
shallows:	submerged sandbank
winged horse:	in Greek mythology Pegasus is a winged horse
sibilant:	with a hissing sound
washes:	agitated motion of water as in waves
Antigone:	in Greek mythology one of the four children of Oedipus, the subject of a tragedy by Sophocles in which she disobeys her uncle Creon to bury the body of her brother Polyneices
caulk:	stop up the seams of a ship with oakum and melted pitch
hold:	a cavity in a ship below the deck where cargo is stored
coffled:	train of slaves fastened together
inculpable:	not worthy of blame
seeds:	generations
bow:	fore-end of a ship
lyre:	musical instrument
proW:	projecting front part of a ship
floundering:	move with great difficulty
lances:	long spear used by horsemen

3.4.3 Analysis

This extract from *Omeros* delineates one of those moments in which the author makes his presence felt in the narrative. The narrator's memory of a conversation about Homer, called Omeros in Greek, provides an entry point into the literary and social ancestry. A statue of Homer with a chipped nose reminds him of Seven Seas, the Homeric persona in this work. In a section preceding the one from which this extract has been taken Seven Seas' daily rituals involving homely details like preparation of breakfast, waiting for the sunrise had already been detailed. The conjunction between the marble statue of Homer and Seven Seas had already been made there.

Except for one hand he sat as still as marble with his
egg-white eyes, fingers recounting the past of
another sea, measured by the stroking oars.
(*Omeros* 14)

Derek Walcott-II

If *Seven Seas* is a localised Homer it is no wonder that New England farmers are called by the names of epic poets like Homer and Virgil or even that the winged horse becomes the sign for a local gas station or petrol pump. This is in keeping with the use of Homeric names for the St. Lucian villagers who are the "heroes" of this Caribbean epic. So Philoctetes becomes "Philoctete," Achilles is named "Achille," and Hector and Achille complete for the attentions of Helen, a local girl who has worked as a housemaid and a waitress.

Homer's statue kept in the "studio attic" of the artist-narrator is invested with a life-like presence. The narrator feels it is "watching," and later senses its "turning away." The utterance of its name "*Omeros*" is linked to the sounds of nature like the "crunch" of dry leaves and the water moving in and out of cavernous openings in rocks. This can be seen as an acknowledgement of the detailed descriptions of various aspects of nature which characterise the Homeric epics. The breaking of the word into its constituents to make it signify natural manifestations invests it with accretions of meaning, much like a neologism. Both the nurturing and the destructive potential of the sea is highlighted through the division of the word and the explanation of its parts. The invocation contained in the letter "O," a feature of epic poetry connoting high classicism, is counterpoised with "Antillean patois" in which "mer" means both mother and sea. French creole, used in interpreting "os" as the grey bone, is posited as having at least equal standing with the language of the classical epics. The crashing of the surf on the shore is onomatopoeically reproduced in the pronunciation of *Omeros*.

Significantly even the woman who uttered the word has a Greek name, Antigone. And yet her appearance is Asian with big almond shaped eyes accentuated by the light filtering through a window in the studio attic. Links between the American islands where the narrator and his work are located and the Greek islands to which both the poet's literary precursor *Omeros* and his muse Antigone belong are made when the latter expresses a wish to go back to her islands in Greece. That this is a memory of events long past is indicated by the phrase "I write, it returns." The image of the woman with black hair, a lacy collar and a swirling silk dress is curiously conjoined with that of a ship sailing upon the seas. The sea waves beating at the ship are like the silk swirling at the ankles forming a picture observed by the all-knowing eyes of Homer who, the narrator says, would be shocked if he could "read between the lines." The narrator taps ancestral memory to revive the horrors of the Middle Passage when slaves were bundled in the hold of the ship like cargo. The caulking of a ship's floor hides its seams, an "uncaulked" surface or unsmoothed reality would not be a very attractive sight. The "Antillean heat" which uncaulks the deck of the ship is the poet's own creativity laying bare the foundations of Caribbean society under the veneer of civilized sophistication symbolized by the "white chiton" covering the armchair. *Omeros* only observes this vision and turns away his head, it is up to the modern *Omeros*, the narrator himself, to interpret the past and put it to creative use in his "craft," the pun linking poetry and ship or by extension the muse of his poetic inspiration who is also the vessel carrying memories underlying his poetry.

The collation of the two is extended towards the end of the extract. The cloud covering the vessel is also the poet consummating his union with the muse (the Asian looking woman with the Greek names) attesting to the varied cultural sources the narrator taps on for the distinctly Caribbean voice he achieves. The "hollow moan" he hears from the vase-like throat of his muse carries within it the suffering of the enslaved Africans as well as the frustration of their descendents, the fishermen,

bending over their canoes in stormy waters. Consciously distancing himself from the epic situations described by Homer in which heroic kings like Odysseus are shown as being caught in tempests at sea, the narrator calls his medium of expression "simple prose" as opposed to the epic verse of Homer.

3.4.4 Epic Re-vers[e]ion

When asked about the metrical form of his epic, Walcott replied that it was "Roughly hexametrical with a terza rima form. It's like a combination of a Homeric line and a Dantesque design" ("An Interview" 174). The hexameter is the metre of epic and didactic poetry consisting of six metra (a short sequence of syllables). Every line has a caesura or 'cut' which means that a word-end occurs regularly within a particular metron. The *terza rima* form consists of a series of interlocking tercets in which the second line of each one rhymes with the first and third lines of the succeeding one. It is Italian in origin and was first successfully used by Dante in *Divina Commedia*. Ramazani commenting on Walcott's versification says, "Perhaps the most ambitious English-language poem of the decolonized Third World, Walcott's *Omeros* fills hundreds of pages with rolling hexameters in terza rima . . ." (406). The word "rolling" in the above comment captures succinctly the sea-like rhythm of the tercets. You must also keep in mind that the author does not strictly adhere to these metrical regulations. Let me give you an example from the passage just analysed:

I felt the foam head watching as I stroked an arm, as
cold as marble, then the shoulders in winter light
in the studio attic. I said, "Omeros,"

and O was the conch-shell's invocation, *mer* was
both mother and sea in our Antillean patois,
os, a grey bone, and the white surf as it crashes

The rhyme scheme of the two tercets given above is not aba, bcb as demanded by the *terza rima*, it is rather aba, āca. Also the third line being shorter than the others is not hexametrical. Other innovations include ending many of the lines with words containing the "s" sound which reproduces the sound of the sea within the structure of the poem. Even the relatively conventional versification contains strategic re-versions which make them more reflective of the Caribbean ethos evoked in the work.

3.5. LET US SUM UP

By now you should be able to comprehend the differences between Walcott's work till the seventies and the poetry he wrote in the eighties and nineties. I have analysed three pieces from his later work which are varied in terms of their form and content. "The Spoiler's Return," a dramatic monologue, satirically comments on the socio-economic situation in Trinidad. The numbered passages from *Midsummer* are introspections in free verse capturing an exile's sensibility. The extract from *Omeros* in hexametrical *terza rima* stresses both the literary and social heritage of the narrator, or the poetic persona in the epic. Walcott's later poetry is characterised by woman as an image of poetic inspiration whether it is the maid in the *Midsummer* passages or Antigone in *Omeros*. In this Walcott adheres to stereotypes of archetypal male representations of women which can be effectively analysed from a feminist perspective.

3.6 QUESTIONS

- Q.1 Examine the impact of popular cultural forms like the calypso on Walcott's poetry.
- Q.2 Discuss any two innovations in rhyme you find in Walcott's poems.

- Q.3 Analyse the representation of women in "Midsummer XXVI" and the extract from *Omeros* given in this unit.

Derek Walcott-II

3.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Primary Material

Walcott, Derek. *Omeros*. 1990. London: Faber and Faber, 1991.

Secondary Material

Walcott, Derek. "An Interview with Derek Walcott." By J.P. White. 1990. Rpt. in *Conversations with Walcott*. Ed. William Baer. Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 1996. 151-74.

"Interview." By Richard E. Smith. 1991. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism* 76 (1992): 289-96.

Ramazani, Jahan. "The Wound of History: Walcott's *Omeros* and the Postcolonial Poetics of Affliction." *PMLA* 112 (1997): 405-17.

Theoretical Material

Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Carnival Ambivalence." *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*. Ed. Pam Morris. London: Edward Arnold, 1994. 194-244.

Bhabha, Homi K. "How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and the Trials of Cultural Translations." *The Location of Culture*. 212-35.

Hill, Errol. *The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre*. Austin and London: U of Texas P, 1972.

UNIT 4 (EDWARD) KAMAU BRATHWAITE-I

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Barbados
- 4.2 Edward Kamau Brathwaite
 - 4.2.1 Poet
 - 4.2.2 Historian
 - 4.2.3 Cultural Commentator
- 4.3 Wings of A Dove
 - 4.3.1 Counterculture
 - 4.3.2 The Text
 - 4.3.3 Analysis
 - 4.3.4 Drum Poetry
- 4.4 Ananse
 - 4.4.1 Folk Imagination
 - 4.4.2 The Text
 - 4.4.3 Analysis
 - 4.4.4 Magical Realism
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Questions
- 4.7 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of this unit are (a) to introduce Edward Kamau Brathwaite as a poet, historian and cultural commentator, (b) to look at his early poetry especially from the trilogy *The Arrivants*. The poems will be discussed in the context of Brathwaite's historical and cultural analysis included in *Roots*, a representative selection comprising essays from the 1950s to the 1980s. For understanding Brathwaite's poetry you must pay special attention to his use of culture-specific concepts from Africa and the Caribbean, his use of nation language and the oral narrative tradition he incorporates in it.

4.1 BARBADOS

Barbados, the island where Brathwaite was born in 1930, is the most easterly of the Caribbean island chain and is located some eighty miles out from that chain, alone in the Atlantic. It had been deserted by indigenous Carib Indians by the time the English arrived in 1625. The first African slaves were brought to it in 1627. Because the island is relatively small and its open terrain allows access to all parts of the country it had been assumed that the slaves were completely engulfed by the dominant European culture and lost all traces of their African past. Brathwaite comments on this assumption in the preface to *Mother Poem*. Barbados is the "most English of West Indian islands but at the same time nearest, as the slaves fly, to Africa. Hence the Protestant Pentecostalism of its language, interleaved with Catholic bells and kumina." Kumina is a ritual ceremony of singing, drumming, dancing and spirit-possession brought over from Africa to the New World by the slaves. Its prevalence attests to the continuance and resilience of African culture in Barbados. Racially the island is one of the most demographically homogeneous territories in the Caribbean, with more than ninety per cent people of African descent and the rest of European or non-African mixed ancestry.

The evolution of Brathwaite's poetic career has often been linked to that of his country. At the time when Brathwaite was growing up Barbados was still an English colony. Brathwaite left for England in the 1950s to study History at Pembroke

College, Cambridge University. He worked in Ghana for eight years and came back to join as Professor of History at the University of West Indies, Jamaica. Apart from his childhood and adolescent years he has never stayed at Barbados for an extended period of time and yet the sense of being a "Bajan," of belonging to Barbados, permeates his work. So it is only appropriate to view the appearance of his first major volume of poetry, *Rights of Passage* (1967), a year after the island's independence, as events reinforcing each other, the poetry marking an independence of language. The first volume of his second trilogy, *Mother Poem*, published in 1977 has been called by the poet as being all about "my mother, Barbados." The landscape of this region-Barbados is a coral island with an underground water supply, filtered through the porous limestone coral rock - is detailed in the opening poem of this collection:

The ancient water sources of my island
 echo of river, trickle, worn stone,
 the sunken voice of glitter inching its pattern to the sea,

 memory of form, fossil, erased beaches high above the eaten
 boulders of St. Phillip.
 my mother is a pool. (Mother Poem, hereafter M, 3)

A recent collection in which the sense of being a part of and yet apart from his native land is thematised is titled *Barabajan Poems (1492-1992)* (1994). Mixing genres the collection includes poetry, prose, proems (prose poems), the letter, the footnote, autobiography and bibliography. It includes selections of Bajan poetry and hence can also be called an anthology of sorts. But while it is a celebration of Bajan creativity it is also a severe indictment of the recent history of the island which has made it a tourist paradise at the expense of its inhabitants. One instance of this is the connection the poet makes between the building of golf courses, which he calls golf "curses," and the serious drought which has prevailed in Barbados over the past few years (Savory 756).

Despite the growing menace of tourism and increasing Westernisation, the persistence of Afro-Caribbean culture becomes a cause of celebration in this collection. Linkages are made between Barbados and the African Igbo culture and the language used is Bajan dialect or nation language as Brathwaite would prefer to call it. The critical, cultural and historical concerns of the author inform his poetry, the African connection and the control of language are issues he has discussed in various essays over the years. I shall now briefly touch upon the various facets of this creativity and scholarship.

4.2 (EDWARD) KAMAU BRATHWAITE

The 1994 Neustadt Prize Ceremonies, 30 September 1994



Kamau Brathwaite, Djelal Kadir, Walter Neustadt Jr.,



WALTER NEUSTADT JR., AMBASSADOR RUDI WEBSTER, KAMAU BRATHWAITE,
MARY BRATHWAITE MORGAN, WLT BOARD OF VISITORS MEMBER TANIA NORRIS

4.2.1 Poet

Brathwaite's poetic career parallels Walcott's in many respects. Not only are they poets of international repute, both are authors of works which have been called "epics" of Caribbean literature. Brathwaite's epic is titled *The Arrivants: A New Word Trilogy* (1973) and comprises his early collections of poetry interlinked by the trope of a journey which is also the governing idea of Walcott's *Omeros*. He has explained the trilogic form in the dialectical terms of raising an issue, replying to it and trying to create a synthesis:

In other words, the first question, which is in *Rights of Passage*, is: How did we get into the Caribbean? Our people, the black people of the Caribbean - what was the origin of their presence in the Caribbean? And the antitheses to that was - well, the answer to that which emerged was that they came out of migration out of Africa, so that the second movement in the trilogy was the answer to that question. We came out of Africa. Hence, *Masks*. And then, we came out of Africa and went into the New World. Hence, *Islands*.
(Brathwaite "An Interview," 13)

Like Achille in *Omeros*, the poetic persona journeys back to the land of his ancestors: "Exiles from here// to seas/ of bitter edges,/ whips of white worlds,/ stains of new// rivers,/ I have returned" (*Arrivants* 153). The trilogy has been seen as providing an "etiology" of Afro-Caribbean experience through a narrative of an African experience originating on the mother continent and extending to the diaspora (Irele 721). Historical, autobiographical and poetic concerns are interwoven in the work. It presents simultaneously a historical account of the New World civilization and its roots in Africa. It is not a literature of despair or recrimination but about the foundation of Caribbean culture in its varied forms be it Rastafarianism, Jazz, Calypso or cult practices like Shango worship. The diasporic experience articulated is that of the author himself who has lived away from Barbados and whose stay in Kenya even resulted in his re-naming from Edward to Kamau.

Much has been written about American and Caribbean influences on Brathwaite's work. Attempts have been made to link his poetry to major American poets like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and Charles Olson. But apart from acknowledging his attraction

for Eliot's "speaking voice," Brathwaite has denied their work as having had an impact on his creativity, "I cannot say I've been influenced by them, I don't know them well enough." In contrast to this he has acknowledged a Caribbean tradition within which his poetry can be placed, "There - if people want to - yes, that's the lineage: Césaire, Brathwaite, Guillen, Damas" (Brathwaite, "An Interview" 25). The most clear correspondences drawn are those between Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* and Brathwaite's *Arrivants*, both starting from local reality to etch the topographical, linguistic and sociological aspects of the Caribbean. Other Negritude poets like Senghor and Damas were available to Brathwaite through anthologies. Manifestations of orality and the importance of music in his work can be said to owe something to them. Brathwaite's efforts in founding and running the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM), started by him in London in 1967 along with John La Rose and Andrew Salkey, brought him in touch with Caribbean poets based in Britain. He has read poetry with dub poets like Linton Kwesi Johnson, Mutabaruka and Amiri Baraka. Performing his own poetry was in a way a natural corollary to the oral rhythms in Brathwaite's work. His reading of the *Arrivants* trilogy was issued as a five-disc set in the 1970s under the record label Argo.

4.2.2 Historian

Brathwaite trained as a historian first at Cambridge where he received his Bachelor's degree and then at Sussex where he submitted his Doctoral thesis entitled "The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820." This was published by the Oxford University Press in 1971. In this work he calls creolization a "cultural action" or a "social process" based upon the response of individuals within society to their environment and to each other. The process takes place in stages, starting with the "seasoning" of slaves when they were branded, given new names and put under apprenticeship to already creolized slaves. During this period they learnt the language and the work. This led to their "socialization" which, in cases where the slaves lived in close proximity with their masters, like the household slaves, resulted in imitation. Forms of imitation could be behavioural as well as linguistic in which case the typical West Indian imagination could be characterised by the phrase "The snow was falling in the canefields." Brathwaite criticizes the elite blacks for losing touch with their folk culture and hence losing their chance for independence. An extremely important section of this work is that in which he describes the African orientation of Jamaican folk culture and the continuances and subversive potential of the slaves' rituals and language. This was published separately as *The Folk Culture of the Slaves in Jamaica* by New Beacon Books in 1971. In his articles for *Timheri* Brathwaite extended the concept of creolization to a socio-cultural description of the four main culture carriers of the region - Amerindian, European, African and East Indian - and how they interacted with each other. However, even here he stresses the recognition of an ancestral relationship with the folk or aboriginal culture. I shall summarise Brathwaite's cultural commentaries in the next section.

4.2.3. Cultural Commentator

Brathwaite's single most important and most controversial work on Caribbean culture is *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (1974). It was originally presented as a paper at a conference at John Hopkins University. In the introduction he talks of the Caribbean environment needing its own aesthetic, and of being the only delegate to a conference "dripping with the tropical sun." The essay makes statements like Africa is the "submerged mother of the Creole system" which can be questioned on the basis of Brathwaite's own pronouncements about the four different ethnicities together contributing to the creolization of Caribbean culture. Similarly his famous comment on Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* that white Creoles had not suffered enough in the Caribbean to belong is debatable to say the least. However it is the last line of the essay which is often quoted in discussing the Caribbean ethos. "The unity is submarine" is both a poetic statement of the pan-Caribbeanness he advocates as well as a challenge to the

academic conventions of the essay form, the limits of which Brathwaite explores in *Contradictory Omens*.

Besides this full length study of Caribbean culture Brathwaite has discussed aspects of it in essays and articles over a span of more than forty years. According to him artists in the West Indies face a "fragmented culture" which has led to a dissociation of sensibility in the early post-colonial literature. As and when consciousness of "rootlessness" has emerged, it has been from an emigrant perspective. Walcott, according to Brathwaite, expresses the pressures and dilemmas of this plural society. One aspect of this pluralism is the existence of subcultures and their impact on other aspects of cultural production like literature. Rastafarianism and the Jazz aesthetic are two such subcultures he discusses with respect to literature especially the West Indian novel. One of Brathwaite's major essay of recent years is "Metaphors of Underdevelopment: A Proem for Hernan Cortez" in which he begins by speaking of "a Bajan labourer" who is caught in "a cultural catastrophe." He explains that by culture he means "the texture and life-style of peoples . . . culture seen as dialectic of motion." Towards the end of the essay he has moved to a position in which cultures are seen as icons of the missile and the target, "just as the symbol of the expansionist is the missile, so the symbol of the subsistence exploited cultures becomes the circle, hole or target" ("Metaphors" 250). Brathwaite's cultural commentaries have, over the past three decades, widened in their focus from a delineation of Jamaican folk customs to a discussion of Caribbean cultural forms and finally encompassing underdeveloped third world nations.

4.3 WINGS OF A DOVE

4.3.1 Counterculture

In the previous unit I briefly explained Rastfarian beliefs. Here I forward the idea of Rastfarianism as a counterculture to the prevailing cultural mores in the Caribbean and particularly Jamaican society, as revealed through the beliefs and the language used by members of this sect. The existence of Rastas on the margins of society has been the subject of Caribbean fiction and poetry. Roger Mais's novel *Brother Man* (1954) depicting a Christ like Rastafarian has been analysed by Brathwaite in detail as an epitome of Jazz aesthetic. In the 1970s Orlando Patterson wrote a novel on the same theme titled *Children of Sisyphus* which shows the influence of Mais's work. In poetry the work of Dennis Scott and James Berry has dealt with this figure.

Rastafarianism developed in Jamaica, believed Ethiopia to be the ultimate home of all black people and its emperor, Haile Selassie, to be divine. The word originated from 'ras', 'chief', the title of an Ethiopian lord or prince and 'tafari,' family name of the emperor. The appearance and practices of members of this cult are a marker of their peripheral position. They follow certain Old Testament tenets including refusal to cut the hair and beliefs which include vegetarianism, ganja (opium) smoking and rejection of private property. In keeping with this last tenet they use the word Babylon in its Biblical sense to denote any society characterised by sinful pursuits. Such is the Westernized Jamaican society where people are engaged in dishonest commercial and political dealings. From its beginnings in the nineteen thirties the Rastafarian movement has had a great impact on the people of Jamaica and the Caribbean. Many of its ideas, considered marginal at its inception, have passed into the mainstream and become commonplaces of thought on black power and majority control. This appropriation has been oriented towards a demand for social justice in opposition to hegemonic practices exerted by the state and its apparatuses like the police and the judiciary. The impact of these ideas has been documented by historians like Walter Rodney and cultural critics like Rex Nettleford who see it as an expression of "black consciousness" in the face of a "continuing colonial society" based on suppression and oppression.

The Rastafarian efforts to counter power structures in society include a dismantling of hegemony imposed by structures of language. This is particularly evident in modes of address used for asserting identity. They consciously refer to themselves as "black men" rather than "Negroes," as a reaction to the derogatory use of the latter word since colonial times. In Jamaican creole the first person singular is usually expressed by the pronoun "me", and the plural by "we." To the Rastafarians, however, both "me" and "we" as objects of the sentence are always governed by the subject much like the way in which Europeans governed the slaves. Because the Rastas think the use of "me" points to a subservient attitude on the part of the blacks they insist on the use of "I" for the personal pronoun (Ashcroft 48-49). The letter can also be a homonym with "high" and indicates the spiritually bound human self shared by all believers probably because it is also the last syllable of Ras Tafari. While reading the poem you will notice that Barthwaite has used the counter-language of the Rastas as an inextricable element of his poetic idiom.

4.3.2 The Text

Wings of a Dove

1

Brother Man the Rasta
man, beard full of lichens
brain full of lice
watched the mice
come up through the floor-
boards of his down-
town, shanty-town kitchen,
and smiled. Blessed are the poor
in health, he mumbled,
that they should inherit this
wealth. Blessed are the meek
hearted, he grumbled,
for theirs is this stealth.

Brother Man the Rasta
man, hair full of lichens
head hot as ice
watched the mice
walk into his poor
hole, reached for his peace
and the pipe of his ganja
and smiled how the mice
eyes, hot pumice
pieces, glowed into his room
like ruby, like rhinestone
and suddenly startled like
diamond.

And I
Rastafar-I
in Babylon's boom
town, crazed by the moon
and the peace of this chalice, I
prophet and singer, scourge
of the gutter, guardian
Trench Town, the Dungle and Young's
Town, rise and walk through the now silent
streets of affliction, hawk's eyes
hard with fear, with

affection, and hear my people
cry, my people
shout:

Down down
white
man, con
man, brown
man, down
down full
man, frown-
ing fat
man, that
white black
man that
lives in
the town.

Rise rise
locks-
man, Solo-
man wise
man, rise
rise rise
leh we
laugh
dem, mock
dem, stop
dem, kill
dem an' go
back back
to the black
man lan'
back back
to Af-
rica.

2

Them doan mean it, yuh know,
Them cahn help it
But them clean-face browns in
Babylon town is who I most fear

an' who fears most I.
Watch de vulture dem a-fly-
in', hear de crow a-dem crow
see what them money a-buy?

Caw caw caw caw.
Ol' crow, ol' crow, cruel ol'
ol' crow, that's all them got
To show.

Crow fly flip flop
hip hop
pun de ground; na
feet feel firm

pun de firm stones; na
good pickney born
from de flesh
o' dem bones;

naw naw naw naw.

3

So beat dem drums
dem, spread

dem wings dem,
watch dem fly

dem, soar dem
high dem,
clear in the glory of the Lord.

Watch dem ship dem
come to town dem

full o' silk dem
full o' food dem

an' dem 'plane', dem
come to groun' dem

full o' flash dem
full o' cash dem

silk dem food dem
shoe dem wine dem

that dem drink dem
an' consume dem

praisin' the glory of the Lord.

So beat dem burn
dem, learn

dem that dem
got dem nothin'

but dem
bright bright baubles

that will burst dem
when the flame dem

from on high dem
raze an' roar dem

an' de poor dem
rise an' rage dem

in de glory of the Lord.

Glossary

Dove:	a bird symbolising peace, particularly appropriate here since the Rastafarian motto is "peace and love."
Brother Man:	a familiar form of address for male members of the Rastafarian cult, also the title of a novel by the Jamaican novelist Roger Mais (1905-1955).
lichens:	a skin disease with reddish eruptions
downtown:	away from the centre of the town
shanty-town:	town consisting of huts, cabins and shacks
pumice:	light porous lava sometimes used as powder for polishing
ganja:	opium
ruby, rhinestone:	precious and semi-precious stones
Babylon:	in the Bible references to Babylon are disguised attacks on Rome seen as the ancient capital of persecution and paganism. The Rastas use the word to refer to any wicked Westernised society.
boomtown:	town flourishing from a period of prosperity or sudden activity in commerce
chalice:	literally goblet or Eucharist cup, here refers to the ganja pipe
scourge:	person regarded as bringer of punishment
Dungle and Young's Town:	Kingston's Dungle in Orlando Patterson's Rastafarian novel <i>Children of Sisyphus</i> (1965), elsewhere described by Brathwaite as a "city smouldering in garbage."
Soloman:	Brathwaite's neologism for the Biblical Solomon, a king famous for his wisdom, combining the senses of the only (solo) wise man and a lonely (solo) man
leh:	to permit, also used in the imperative to imply persuasion or threat
na:	no, especially at the folk level in answering a question
pickney:	young child of Black or East Asian parentage
dem:	used with a noun to indicate a group or a set
Crow:	different from an ordinary crow, used in the sense of a carrion crow who is almost as big as a vulture and feeds on carcasses.
baubles:	showy trinkets

4.3.3 Analysis

Edward
Barthwaite-I

The characteristic Rastafarian term of address with which the poem begins sets the tone for other such conventions used in it. The shabby, unkempt appearance of the Rasta in this poem is not cultivated but all too real. His dilapidated lodgings in a "shanty-town" arise out of his poverty. It is true the members of this sect believe in a rejection of private property but the picture of squalor presented here goes far beyond idealistic beliefs. The mice coming up through his floorboards seem to the Rasta to embody his own situation of weakness of body and spirit. Like them he is tucked away in one corner of the house, stealthily passing his days, enveloped in beliefs born out of convictions or necessity. The only escape possible is derived from smoking ganja. The effect of the drug on him is almost instantaneous, suddenly it seems as if the eyes of the mice shine like diamonds. An ironic juxtaposition of imagined riches and the "poor hole" in which they suddenly appear is made in the second stanza. Here the drug induced hallucination makes the Rasta's "head as hot as ice," the phrase pointing to the illogical and extraordinary sense perceptions experienced in a drugged state. This state provides him with a respite from his poverty and social alienation, albeit a temporary one.

The return to reality is marked by an assertion of selfhood as the reiterated "I" testifies. Amidst the economic prosperity of modern day Jamaica the Rasta feels "crazed" and acknowledges that the drug is what offers him "peace." Smoking of ganja is prohibited by the rules of the wider society but for the Rastas it is a holy and wisdom-giving weed. It endows "Brother Man" with vision, imagination and the courage to step out of his hiding hole into the world outside. Here he notices that if suffering is a fact of existence for people, revolution is not far behind. His piercing hawk-like gaze takes in the toiling masses' cries for social justice which are transcribed in the poem. The socially privileged classes are the whites, the browns who are of mixed Afro-Caribbean and European ancestry and those among the blacks who ape them ("white black man"). Rastas are seen as agents of social amelioration, there is a call for the rise of men with "locks," matted or plaited hair of members of this sect. Not only is the Rasta wise like Solomon in his vision of equality and justice for all, he (Brathwaite insists on "man") is probably the only person who can translate this vision into reality. In "Solo-man," one of his more successful neologisms, Brathwaite has captured at once the wisdom and alienation of this "man." He realizes that satire as a weapon is useless against those who exploit others in "Babylon" hence violence remains the only effective means of counter-attack. Once these people are exterminated a true return to African values becomes possible. The phrase "back to Africa" is significant here because Rastafarianism is sometimes seen as having evolved out of Marcus Garvey's movement which used the same phrase. In it the raising of black consciousness was a prelude to an actual return to Africa.

In the second section of the poem the Rasta expresses the mutual distrust and fear characterising relations between his community and the "cleanfaced browns" who control society at large. Calling them predators by speaking of their meteoric rise as the flight of crows and vultures, he emphasizes the vice like grip ensured by the power of money. You will remember that in Walcott's poem "The Spoiler's Return," Spoiler had spoken of Trinidadian society in almost the same terms. Here Brathwaite reproduces sound effects by incorporating a rendition of the crow's cawing, flying and skipping on the ground: "caw, caw," "flip flop" and "hip hop." These phrases are used to indicate the relentless speechfying and the ubiquitousness of the people who actually control the country's resources. But that they are out of touch with the ground realities and that they pass on their attitudes and prejudices to the next generation constitutes another aspect of the Rasta's indictment. His protest is voiced in the reiteration of the word "naw" which in its strategic alteration of "caw" signifies a countering of the predatory order of things. An aspect of this order is the conspicuous consumption of articles of luxury like silk, shoes and wine listed in the third section of the poem. The tourist culture has contributed to the already sorry

state of affairs. The lure of the tourists' cash proves irresistible for some who use it to fulfil their desire for "bright bright baubles." These people, according to the Rasta, must be taught by violence or by education the insignificance of the things they crave for, suggesting that any affirmative action must be potentially revolutionary to be even remotely effective.

Biblical references and motifs present in the poem as in the phraseology "Blessed are the poor" and in words like "Babylon," "Solomon" and "chalice" gather momentum in the last section where the phrase "the glory of the Lord" is used like a refrain. Even the idea of the "boom-town" being overrun by birds of prey is derived from the book of *Revelation* in the Bible where Babylon's doom is predicted in these words: "Babylon the great is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird." The blaze of fire destroying the town is a vision of the apocalypse again showing the influence of Biblical sources as is the idea of the rich being destroyed and the poor rising out of it pure in body and mind. The poem therefore links up social and religious ideas as embodied in Rastafarian principles.

4.3.4 Drum Poetry

"Wings of a Dove" is from the "Rights of Passage" volume of the *Arrivants* trilogy, and first appeared in 1967. The title of the poem is from the first line of a popular ska tune of the early sixties which begins, "If I had the wings of a dove, I would like to fly away and be at rest." The song echoes a line from the *Psalms* and has also been used by Henry James as the title of one of his novels. This song expresses a yearning for escape also articulated by the Rasta in Brathwaite's poem when imagines he has grown wings to fly away (Rohlehr, "Blues" 72). Rohlehr comments that Brathwaite brings us closer to the Rastafarian experience by creating the drum rhythms of the cult (73). The music closely associated with Rastas is reggae in which a heartbeat rhythm is played on a kettledrum as an accompaniment to mournful lyrics on the theme of hardship and protest. The ska tune from which the title derives also has a quick lively 1-2-1-2 drum-beat and is considered the forerunner of reggae. This drum rhythm is present most clearly in the last section of the poem. Speak out the words "silk dem food dem/ shoe-dem wine dem" and you will feel that the rhythm underlying them is that of the heartbeat. One of the aspects of nation language which Brathwaite mentions in "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature" is the setting up of "certain tunes, tones and rhythms which are characteristic of the folk tradition" (243). The West African connections of Caribbean vocabulary are present in words like "dem" and the call and response pattern is evoked by "na." The folk theme, rhythm, syntax and vocabulary make this poem a creative exposition of Brathwaite's theoretical formulation "nation language."

4.4 ANANSE

4.4.1 Folk Imagination

Anancy or Ananse as Brathwaite chooses to call him is the cunning trickster hero of a number of Caribbean folktales in which he appears as a mythical spider in a human form. Derived from West African culture especially that of the Akans in Ghana, the folklore associated with this figure is called *Anansem*. By using the African spelling for the name of this figure Brathwaite seems to be highlighting its African origins. This is not surprising considering the author spent eight years in Ghana working with the Ministry of Education. In that country the person who has done the most to popularise Ananse lore is the theatre activist and folklorist Efua Sutherland. In her play *The Marriage of Anansewa* (1975) and *Anansegoro* (plays based on the Ananse stories) she has sought to make the exploits of this figure contemporary. In the conclusion to the play she observes, "That Ananse is, artistically, a medium for society to criticise itself can be seen in the expression 'Exterminate Ananse, and

society will be ruined.” The association of Ananse with the power of words (folktales are passed by word of mouth and Ananse usually talks himself out of a tricky situation in them) and the impact of words in changing the course of history is the focus of this poem.

Edward
Barthwaite-1

Significantly Brathwaite aligns Ananse with Legba, regulating deity of communication between humans and gods, patron of metamorphosis, transition, and uncertainty in West African mythology. There is no direct mention of Legba in the poem but frequent references about lameness confirm the presence of this aged, lame, hunch-backed or one-legged god. Ananse is the culture-hero of intelligence and common-sense and hence has the ability to triumph over disabilities. This wit is the gift of Onyame, the Akan Supreme Divinity. Legba is quintessentially located at transition points of time and space. In fusing the two figures the poet is probably seeking the elevation of a folkloric figure to mythical dimensions and hence striving “to rehabilitate the significance of the lowly creature . . . [to] become an icon charged with transformative potential” (Warner-Lewis 59). This also enhances the social relevance of Ananse particularly in the Caribbean which has been the site of transformative disruptions like revolts and rebellions. Brathwaite’s reclamation of Anancy from the African to the Caribbean scenario is in the tradition of folklorists and creative writers like Louise Bennett and Andrew Salkey who have retold the exploits of this trickster as children’s tales. John Figueroa’s rendering aptly sums up this reclamation:

Anancy is a spider;
Anancy is a man;
Anancy’s a West Indian
And West African.

4.4.2 The Text

Ananse

With a black snake’s un-
winking eye
thinking thinking through glass
through quartz

quarries of stony water
with a doll’s liquid gaze, crystal,
his brain green, a green chrysalis
storing leaves,

memories trunked up in a dark attic,
he stumps up the stares
of our windows, he stares, stares
he squats on the tips

of our language
black burr of conundrums
eye corner of ghosts, ancient his-
tories;

he spins drum-
beats, silver skin
webs of sound
through the villages;

Tacky heard him
and L’Overture

all the hung-
ry dumb-bellied chieftains

who spat
their death into the ground:
Goave, Port-au-Prince, Half Moon Fort,
villages,

dead lobster-pot crews,
wire, red sea shells, coconut trees' hulls, nodding skulls,
black iron bells, clogged,
no glamour of noon on the man-

grove shore.
Now the poor hang him up in the ceiling,
their brooms cannot reach his hushed corner
and he sits with the dust, desert's rainfall of soot,
plotting a new fall from heaven

threading
threading
the moon
moonlight stories

his full mouth agape
a black pot
grinning
grinning

round fire that boils in his belly
walloboa wood words,
eyes, fireflies, sparks,
crashing coals' waterfalls,

grey ashes aroused,
old men's ghosts,
cinders,
burnt memories' eyes in the hot hut,

flesh,
curling silver,
revealing their shadows of meaning
as the god stares down,

black beating heart of him breathing
breathing
consuming our wood
and the words of our houses
black iron-eye'd eater, the many-eye'd maker,
creator,
dry stony world-maker, word-breaker,
creator...

In the yard the dog barks at the stranger.

Glossary

quartz: mineral crystallising in the shape of prisms

crystal: clear transparent ice like mineral found in rocks

chrysalis:	form taken by an insect while developing hence preparatory or transition state
stares:	probably a homophone (words identical in sound but not in meaning, origin or spelling) for "stairs"
conundrums:	riddle with a pun in the answer
Tacky:	leader of a slave rebellion in Jamaica in 1760-61 involving a dozen plantations in the vicinity of St. Mary's Parish in which as many as 400 slaves revolted.
L'Ouverture:	Toussaint L'Ouverture, leader of the Haitian revolution from 1792-1804, see Unit 1
lobster-pot:	a trap made of wire netting, designed for catching lobsters on the sea-bed
walloboa wood:	probably wood from the wallaba tree, which is reddish-brown in colour and is widely used for building

Edward
Barthwaite-1

4.4.3 Analysis

Ananse is a frozen, inert presence staring through the "glass" and "quartz," and yet the potentiality inherent in the figure is highlighted by the repetition of the word "thinking." This passive state of development is linked to a "chrysalis" which stores leaves in anticipation of growth. Ananse, the culture-hero, is so embedded in the popular imagination that his "reincarnation in the flesh of the living" at opportune moments of history is a distinct possibility (Rohlehr, "Rehumanization" 186). The physical actions of Ananse as spider-man are fused with the verbal dexterity which is his chief characteristic in folk narratives, as is the idea of geographical space with mental space in the formulation "memories trunked up in a dark attic." An attic, a storing area for old, ancestral possessions with memories associated with them, conjures up an idea of a musty, cobweb-filled place, the common haunt of spiders. Ancestral memory is the favourite source of folktales like the ones in which Ananse figures. Much like the objects in an attic it is always at hand and needs only a little effort to be recalled and given a new form such as the one a chrysalis develops into. The memory evoked here is clearly linked to the African heritage the slaves brought with them to the Caribbean. These are the "ancient histories" of various tribes transported *en masse* from Africa who have kept the African connection alive in language through proverbs, riddles, "conundrums." Ananse "spins" riddles which contain traces of an ancient way of life resonant with drums beating to convey messages from one village to another. The connection is reinforced with a linkage of Ananse to Legba whom Brathwaite's notes to *The Arrivants* call "the Dahomean/Haitian god of the gateway . . . the crucial link between man and the other gods . . ." (273). Ananse's stumping up the "stares," (stairs) of the windows and a mention of his "fall from heaven" stresses his relationship with lame deities, be it Legba from Caribbean mythology or Hephaestus from Greek mythology.

The "reincarnation" of Ananse qualities is to be found in the historical figures of Tacky and L'Ouverture whose exploits in popular slave rebellions occupy the popular imagination as much as Ananse lore. Besides them other "chieftains" also set little value on their life and the names of various places given in the poem carry mnemonic associations of other slave revolts. While history may have glamourised these, Brathwaite's presentation of them is in terms of the human losses suffered about which there is no glamour. Living off the sea for sustenance the "lobster-pot crews" were the first casualties of war, their "nodding skulls" floating on the water,

their lobster traps and fishing vessels made out of coconut trees lying as abandoned as the "black iron bells," remnants of a colonially imposed religion. Intrigue as practised by men like Tacky and L'Ouverture was required for the overthrow of colonial slavery. This is equated with the spider's ability to spin webs which ensnares unsuspecting victims. The "poor," who benefited most from the revolutions, are the keepers of these accounts. Try as they might the future descendants of those emancipated cannot obviate the traces of history: "their brooms cannot reach his hushed corner."

The sustained relevance of Ananse to Caribbean society is in the revolutionary capacity of language. The nets he now weaves are linguistic, the "moonlight stories" are as evocative of ancestral heritage as the "silver skin webs of sound" which were a call to subversive actions. In West African culture traditional story-tellers, *griots*, often narrate stories to a gathering of villagers around a fire. The *griot* is usually considered to be divinely inspired in his narration which transcends the narrative act and becomes the social act of performance. Ananse, the spinner of words brings the community together performing the function of the *griot*. His are "walloboa wood words" describing the Caribbean milieu since the walloboa tree is native to this region. That these words can kindle the latent revolutionary potential is imagistically rendered by an evocation of fire, the symbol of inspiration: "fireflies, sparks,/ crashing coals' waterfalls, // grey ashes aroused. . . ." I mentioned earlier that Brathwaite has collated the figures of Ananse and Hephaestus, the lame Greek god of fire and of crafts. The images of fire just explained are an extension of this linkage. Like Ananse, Hephaestus is a weaver of sorts, he trapped his unfaithful wife Aphrodite with the god Ares in a net of his own devising. Another similarity between the two is their craftsmanship, with "words" in the former case and with objects in the latter.

The "god" who looks down is also Legba, who enables communication between the human and the non-human worlds. When the Ananse tale is recounted the boundaries between these two dimensions collapse, the magical seems real in the narration of the *griot*. One aspect of this figure was manifested in the rebel leaders who are responsible for the Caribbean as it exists today. Hence Ananse is "world-maker" and "creator" in a typically Caribbean sense. But since battles can be fought on the terrain of language Ananse is an epitome of the folk imagination which is instrumental in providing the working features of a language. So he is also a "word-breaker" since the transformation effected in an imposed language is through these features. The scenario of the *griot* narrating stories to the villagers gathered around a fire, which had been bracketed off by the poet's discussion of Ananse's multifacetedness, is evoked in the concluding line of the poem. The dog barking at the "stranger" interrupts the telling of the tale, just as the arrival of colonising "strangers" had disrupted the African culture to which Ananse originally belongs.

4.4.4 Magical Realism

Commenting on *Islands*, the third book of his *Arrivants* trilogy from which this poem is taken, Brathwaite draws attention to it being much more fragmented than the previous two collections. This is because it reflects the "physical and geo-psychic fragmentation of the islands themselves" (Brathwaite, "Interview" 19). The fragmentation is evinced in the heterogeneity of images as in this poem. The boundaries between the natural and the supernatural are collapsed and both are presented without any hierarchical presuppositions on the part of the author. Ananse is at once a common house spider in the homes of the poor people as well as the figure who inspired the heroes of Caribbean history. The various different cultures with their attendant histories (the British Caribbean in Jamaica and the French Caribbean in Haiti) interpenetrate each other within the poem. A similar fusion occurs in the case of folklore and different mythologies such as the Haitian and the Greek evoked through the presence of the gods Legba and Hephaestus. Since the

term magical realism has general reference to fiction and has rarely been applied to poetry. Brathwaite has given his own interpretation of it:

Edward
Barthwaite-I

How the metaphors and images interlock and interweave and interpenetrate each other, so that you increasingly have . . . a seamless kind of poetry, increasing without punctuation, where images inform, flow and influence each other. It is a kind of surrealism as well, but magical realism, I think, is nearer to it, because it is the transformation of reality into the prism of imagination and light.

("Interview" 22)

I have already explained how the images fuse into one another. Stylistically this is presented by the short lines of the poem running into each other as in this example, "no glamour of noon on man-// grove shore," where the word mangrove broken into two conveys an "osmosis" of human actions into the natural surroundings. This was historically proved by the various battles for freedom fought using guerrilla tactics in which the natural surroundings became an ally. In the last few lines of Brathwaite's comment there is the idea of reality seen through the "prism" of imagination. This is also the idea with which "Ananse" begins. The prismatic qualities of glass, crystal and quartz, mentioned in the first few lines of the poem, in which Ananse is fossilized, waiting to be revitalized through folk memory, poetically render the same image Brathwaite has used in the interview.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

Brathwaite's work as a historian and cultural critic informs his poetry. An awareness of the cultural origins of certain phenomenon like Rastafarianism and figures like Ananse is evinced in their contextualisation both in poetry and prose. These are a medium for the expression of "folk" or people's views on the social reality of their existence. The Rastafarian's critique of materialism and Ananse's ability to inspire historical figures are instances of popular and folk culture playing a decisive role in socio-historical processes. Another aspect of Brathwaite's poetry at this stage is the incorporation of oral rhythms. The free verse pattern he uses facilitates this orality since it allows him to experiment with varying line lengths, some even comprised of one word or one syllable.

The poems from *Masks*, the central volume of the trilogy, express the rootedness of Caribbean culture in Africa through the journey of the Ashanti people in search of a new land. Here the poetic persona returns to the land of his ancestors, a journey which might have influenced the section in Walcott's *Omeros* when Achilles in a quest of identity visits the land of his origins and meets his father, Afolabe. Brathwaite's persona in *Masks* undertakes an unsuccessful search for roots:

I travelled to a distant town
I could not find my mother
I could not find my father
I could not hear the drum
Whose ancestor am I? (Arrivants 125)

Some connectedness with the African past is expressed in the last volume *Islands* in poems like "Ananse," "Vévé" and "Negus," but ultimately it is aspects of the region's degeneration - its racial disharmony, materialist and tourist oriented economy, fraudulent religious cults - which underlie the pessimistic vision with which the trilogy concludes, "making/ with their// rhythms some-/ thing torn// and new" The lack of punctuation at the end of the last verse-line pointing to the continuation of the process of "making" the islands.

4.6 QUESTIONS

- Q.1 Compare and contrast Brathwaite's Rastafarian analysis of Jamaican society in "Wings of a Dove" with Walcott's views on Trinidadian society in "The Spoiler's Return."
- Q.2 Discuss the oral rhythms incorporated by Brathwaite in his poetry with reference to any two of his poems.
- Q.3 Analyse the magical realist elements in "Ananse." Support your answer with detailed textual analysis.

4.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Primary Material

Brathwaite, Edward. *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*. Oxford: OUP, 1973.

Brathwaite, Kamau. "Metaphors of Underdevelopment: A Proem for Hernan Cortez." Brown 231-53.

Secondary Material

Brathwaite, Kamau. "An Interview with Kamau Brathwaite." By Nathaniel Mackey. Brown 13-32.

Brown, Stewart. Ed. *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite*. Glamorgan: Seren, 1995.

Irele, Abiola. "The Return of the Native: Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *Masks*." *World Literature Today*. 68(1994): 719-25.

Rohlehr, Gordon. "Blues and Rebellion: Edward Brathwaite's *Rights of Passage*." *Critics on Caribbean Literature*. Ed. Edward Baugh. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978. 63-74.

"The Rehumanization of History: Regeneration of Spirit: Apocalypse and Revolution in Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* and *X/Self*." Brown 163-207.

Savory, Elaine. "Wordsongs and Wordwounds/Homecoming: Kamau Brathwaite's *Barabajan Poems*." *World Literature Today*. 68 (1994): 750-57.

Warner-Lewis, Maureen. "Africa: Submerged Mother." Brown 52-61.

UNIT 5 (EDWARD) KAMAU BRATHWAITE-II

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 The "Video Style"
- 5.2 Angel/Engine
 - 5.2.1 Shango/Ogun
 - 5.2.2 The Text
 - 5.2.3 Analysis
 - 5.2.4 Breathweight
- 5.3 Stone
 - 5.3.1 Death of the Author
 - 5.3.2 The Text
 - 5.3.3 Analysis
 - 5.3.4 Performance Poetry
- 5.4 Colombe
 - 5.4.1 The Discoverer
 - 5.4.2 The Text
 - 5.4.3 Analysis
 - 5.4.4 Seametrics
- 5.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.6 Questions
- 5.7 Suggested Readings

5.0 OBJECTIVES

The primary objective of this unit is to familiarise you with poetry from Brathwaite's oeuvre published in his second trilogy and in works of the late 1980s and 1990s. The poetry analysed in this unit is from the collections *Mother Poem* (1977), *Jah Music* (1986) and *Middle Passages* (1993). It demonstrates Brathwaite's broader engagement with Caribbean religious cults, literature and historical antecedents. The unit will also include some details about Brathwaite's recent experiments with poetic forms particularly evident in print and typography.

5.1 THE "VIDEO STYLE"

Reception of Brathwaite's poetry in the eighties and the nineties has shown two contradictory trends. On the one hand he has gained recognition as a poet of international repute and on the other he is finding it increasingly difficult to find publishers for his work. In 1986 he was awarded the Casa de las Américas Prize for Literature for *Roots*, a volume of essays on Caribbean literature and culture. In 1994 he was selected by an international jury of writers as the thirteenth laureate of the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. In the same year the autumn issue of *World Literature Today* was completely devoted to his work and contained articles by internationally renowned critics. It is therefore surprising to learn that many of the writer's completed works, both prose and poetry, have not been accepted for publication on the grounds of there being no market for experimental work.

In my analysis of "Ananse" I had explained how Brathwaite conceives the role of the poet in the Caribbean as similar to that of the *griot* in African cultures. The *griot* is both carver of wood and singer of songs thus combining the aural and visual aspects of creation. Brathwaite speaks of his recent creative output in these terms:

When I started off, everything I did I read aloud into the tape recorder. I also wanted it to look interesting. Now, with the

computer. I have really gone into that, into what I call my Video style.

I think that oral traditions do have a very strong visual aspect. In the African tradition, they use sculpture. Really, what I'm trying to do is create word-sculptures on the page, but word-song for the ear. (qtd. in Rigby 708)

forget being 'the most lit/erate of West Indian islands' for nuffen Bu/ So to my surprise, he TOOK ONLY TWO - his 'justification' being 'WE LL ITS A BIT OF A PIG IN A POKE, ISN'T IT? (to translate which I had to remember that Barbados was/ ?is also the most English of the Caribbean islands.')

**LE IS ALSO THE ONLY MU-
OF LITERATURE-PRODUCING
CARIBBEAN TERRITORY WITH
OUT A NATIONAL ANTHOLOGY
OF ANY SORT TO ITS NATURE.**



The Islands roared into green plantations
ruled by silver sugar cane
sweet & profit
cutlass profit
Islands ruled by sugar cane

And, of course it was a wonderful time
a profitable hospitable well worth-your-time

120

FROM KAMAY BRATHWAITE, *BARBADOES POETRY*, 1991

The poetry in *The Zea Mexican Diary*, *Middle Passages*, *Barabajan Poems* and the prose of *Dream Stories* is written in this style. Brathwaite's "word sculptures" explore the capacity of the computer to render graphically the nuances of language by experimenting with several font and type styles. The reader is unsettled by the different fonts and types used on the same page to indicate tonal quality. For instance a word spoken in a higher than normal pitch in ordinary conversation might be in large type and be highlighted or italicized. Words are broken, deliberately misspelt, given faulty punctuation, interspersed with brackets, asterisks,

abbreviations and other characteristics deliberately in opposition to the poetic conventions of "Prospero's language." As Elaine Savory has observed, Brathwaite has forwarded the idea of Caliban returning home, linguistically and spiritually, to his mother Sycorax. There is more freedom for Caliban in turning to his mother's language than in using his energy to curse Prospero. He recounts his relationship to the computer, his aide in the reclamation of his mother's language, in "Letter Sycorax" from *Middle Passages*:

Edward
Brathwaite-II

Dear *mamma*
i writing you dis letter/wha?
guess what! pun a computer o/kay?
like i jine de mercantilists?
well not quite . . .
if yu cyaan beat prospero
whistle

Brathwaite has spoken of Sycorax as the muse in the computer. This is a playful way of accounting how the computer has become an ally in his poetic challenge to Prospero's world (Savory 228). This extract contains many features of the video style such as the use of italics, slashes and lack of punctuation in the first and last lines. It is, however, fairly close to normal type settings which makes it relatively easy to publish unlike some of Brathwaite's other poems.

Given above is a page from *Barabajan Poems*. You can see for yourself the difficulty which any publisher would face in printing this, and yet, since the work has come out in print, the problems are not as insurmountable as they are made out to be. The reluctance of leading publishing houses like Oxford University Press who were associated with Brathwaite's early work can therefore be seen as Prospero's containment of Caliban's rebellion against language (Savory 221).

5.2 ANGEL/ENGINE

5.2.1 Shango/Ogun

Worship of the Yoruba deities Shango and Ogun is concretised in this poem through the chants of the worshippers and an enactment of possession. The poem captures ideas of transition between the indigenous world and modernity, between the African past and the Caribbean present, as well as the presence of the one in the other. Ogun is the Yoruba patron deity of war, iron and metallic instruments; Shango is the god of the thunderbolt and lightning. Together the Ogun/Shango persona is a spirit of fire, energy and iron resolve in the breasts of the subjugated (Rohlehr, "Rehumanization" 175). In his essay "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature" Brathwaite has outlined the attack launched on African forms of worship and socialization by the plutocracy in colonial times. This was intended to prevent the slaves from grouping as a community. The legislation passed against cults of *Shango* worship, *obeah* and *cumfu* persisted in many Caribbean countries like Trinidad and Surinam even after independence. However, these spiritual traditions have become politically important as defences against oppression in recent times. In this poem the poor woman who joins a worship group is one of the common exploited masses for whom possession by *loas* (gods) is a possible means of escape from her existence.

The setting for the rituals of this worship group is a Zionist chapel rather like the one described by Walcott, "a tin-roofed shed in the back of a choirmaster's house, half shango-chapel, half Presbyterian country vestry . . ." ("WTS" 28). Here the repetitive chanting induces a state of transcendence in the chanters. As Brathwaite has explained in *The Arrivants*, possession is induced by the drums or by rhythmic hand-clapping and chanting. The celebrant's body acts as a kind of lightning conductor for god, the "divine electrical charge" becomes grounded so that the earth and the things

of the earth assume a special significance. He also adds that this experience was commonplace in the early Christian churches which, in many ways, were more "African" than "European" (271). The reference to Christianity is significant because of the relationship of some shango cult beliefs to *vodoun* in which Christian saints are merged into the rituals. The title of the poem indicates this by the word "Angel" included in it. The second word of the title refers to the engine of the locomotive which has become one of the guises of Shango, god of thunder and creativity, in the New World. Their almost-similar pronunciation and the slash between them points to the identity-in-difference between the Christian and African forms of worship mentioned by Brathwaite in his notes to *The Arrivants*.

5.2.2 The Text

Angel/Engine

1

The yard around which the smoke circles
is bounded by kitchen, latrine and the wall
of the house where her aunt died, where

her godma brought her up, where she was jumped
upon by her copperskin cousin
driving canemen to work during crop

time, smelling of rum and saltfish;
who gave her two children when, so she say,
her back was turn to the man, when she wasn't lookin.

the children grew up quietly
the boy runnin bout like a pump-
kin vine, the girl name christofene

they went to st saviour primary school
then the boy sit down an win a exam
an gone down de hill to de college.

christie still bout here turnin foolish
she us:ed to help me to sew
an mek up de cloze pun de singer

sewin machine: but she fingers gone dead
and she int got eyes in she head.
then one two tree wutless men come up in here

an impose a pregnant pun she.
one tek
but de other two both foetus dead.

now she sittin up dere wid she hann in she lapp in de corner
rockin sheself in a chair by de window
and as far i know, she too cud be dead

2

i tek up dese days wid de zion
we does meet tuesdee nights in de carpenter shop

praaize be to god
i hear de chapman hall preacher shout out

praaaze be to god

Edward
Barthwaite-II

an i hear de black wings risin
and i feel de black rock rock

*praaaze be to
praaaze be to
praaaze be to gg*

*praaaze be to
praaaze be to
praaaze be to gg*

an i holdin my hands up high in dat place
and de palms turn to

*praaaze be to
praaaze be to
praaaze be to gg*

an the fingers flutter an flyin away
an i cryin out

*praaaze be to
praaaze be to
praaaze be to
softly*

an de softness flyin away

is a black
is a bat
is a flap

o de kerosene lamp

an it spinn
an it spinn
an it spinn-

in rounn
and it stagger-
in down

to a gutter-
in shark
o'de worl'

*praaaze be to
praaaze be to
praaaze be to gg*

*praaaze be to
praaaze be to
praaaze be to gg*

de tongue curlin back
an muh face flowin empty
all muh skin cradle an crackle an ole

i is water of wood
ants
crawlin crawlin

i is spiders weavin
away

my ball
headed head

is ancient an
black an it

fall from de top
o de praaaze be to

tree to de rat-
hearted coco-

nut hill.

so uh walk-
in an talk-

in: uh stepp-
in an call-

in thru
echo-

in faces
that barren an bare of my name

thru crick
crack

thru crick
crack

a creak-
in thru crev-

ices, reach-
in for i-

cicle light
who hant me
huh

who haunt me
huh

my head is a cross
is a cross-

road

who hant me
is red

who haunt me
is blue

Edward
Barthwaite-II

is a man
is a moo
is a ton ton macou

is a coo
is a cow
is a cow-

itch

bub-a-dups
bub-a-dups
bub-a-dups

huh

bub-a-dups
bub-a-dups
bub-a-dups

hah
is a hearse
is a horse
is a horseman

is a trip
is a trick
is a seamless hiss

that does rattle these i: ron tracks

bub-a-dups
bub-a-dups
bub-a-dups

huh

bub-a-dups
bub-a-dups
bub-a-dups

hah

is a scissors gone *shhaaaa*

under de rattle an pain

i de go
huh

i de go
shhhaaaa

an a black curl callin my name

praaaze be to
praaaze be to
praaaze be to

sh

praaaze be to
praaaze be to
praaaze be to

shang

praaaze be to
sh

praaaze be to
gg

praaaze be to
praaaze be to
praaaze be to

ssssssssssssshhhhhhhhhh

3

an de train comin in wid de rain ...

Glossary

copperskin:	brown-skinned
canemen:	workers in sugarcane plantations
saltfish:	salted dried codfish imported from Canada, historically as standard food for slaves, but currently a valued item in many Caribbean dishes. The word is also used as a derogatory reference to somebody of a low class or character. Both senses are implied here.
Christofene:	creolized version of the name Christophene
wutless:	worthless
zion:	name for nonconformist chapel
chapman:	literally pedlar but probably used here by Brathwaite because of its similarity with chaplain, a clergyman officiating in a private chapel.
flap:	broad hanging piece attached by one side only
shark:	"sharking" in Caribbean vocabulary is a word used for greedy, gluttonous behaviour
water:	a disease which causes swelling of the body with fluid

rat:	a prostitute of the lowest kind
crick crack:	formula used to introduce and end an Anancy story or folktale, in some cases the storyteller first cries out Crick and the audience response is Crack! i.e. Go ahead.
red:	the colour red is a prominent feature of Shango worship
moo:	probably Brathwaite's abbreviation of "moo-moo," a person who is shy or afraid to speak and by extension a stupidly silent person.
ton:	possibly a form of "tonto" meaning foolish
macou:	it is quite likely Brathwaite had in mind "mako," an inquisitive, meddlesome individual
coo:	the word "kuku" was used in W. Africa for a professional cook
cow:	to "work cow" is a phrase implying to work on the side for one's personal gain using the employer's equipment, materials and time.
cow-itch:	a plant with pods densely covered with hair which can cause skin-irritation

Edward
Barthwaite-II

5.2.3 Analysis

The "womanist" experience is central to this poem in which the first section mentions a series of relationships between women: the house belongs to the subject's aunt, she was brought up by her "godma" and has a "foolish" daughter named "christofene." The poverty-stricken surroundings are evoked in the first few lines with a mention of the communal yard around which the kitchen, the "latrine" and the house is grouped. The setting is typical of lower working-class neighbourhoods as described in H.G. De Lisser's novels at the turn of the century. De Lisser was a Jamaican novelist whose works *Jane's Career* and *Susan Proudleigh* appeared posthumously in the 1950s. He was one of the few writers to evince interest in working-class female subjects. Brathwaite's exploration of this sensibility shows the influence of this early twentieth century writer. Like De Lisser the women in Brathwaite's poetry are survivors. The unnamed female subject central to this poem lives through orphanage, poverty and sexual exploitation by her drunkard cousin who is probably an overseer at a sugarcane plantation. The low character of this man is indicated not only in the derogatory reference to him as "smelling of rum and saltfish" but also in his use of the woman as an object for his perverse sexual needs. Of the two children she has out of her sexual encounters with him only the girl is identified by name. While the boy is physically and mentally agile and succeeds in winning a scholarship for higher studies, the girl is "foolish" or simple minded. She is another one in the family's line of women taken advantage of by worthless men. That she wasn't always listless and foolish is said so by her mother to whom she was a help in her work of stitching people's clothes. It is only when she loses her child or "foetus," as her mother clinically observes, that she becomes her present self. What happens to the one child she conceived and gave birth to, as the word "tek" indicates, is not made clear. However, from the inactive, depressed state in which she sits by the window in her rocking chair the evident surmise would be that this child too must have died soon after birth.

While the first part alternates between the poet's and his subject's (the woman's) voice, the second section of the poem is entirely the latter's first person account. She describes how she joins a group of worshippers who meet every Tuesday night in a carpenter's shop. The plebian origins of this worship group with a "chapman hall preacher" ensure some kind of solidarity on non-exploitative terms for people like this poor woman. Her experience is interspersed with the chants of the preacher and the congregation. Although she undergoes a transcendental experience in which she feels her fingers reaching towards heaven, she cannot bring herself to join in the chanting. It is almost as if she chokes on the word god, unable to pronounce it, "praaaze be to gg." Like her fingers she feels her "soft" voice ascending upwards. This she compares to a bat and to the flap of a kerosene lamp. The bat's flight and the flame of the lamp both convey a sense of movement. She experiences possession which might be the result of the chanting she tries to participate in. Her voice raised in praise seems to have acquired a will of its own for it eddies round and round like a whirlpool and then finally descends to the lower depths of this materialistic world. Probably what is being suggested is that worship is a temporary solace and that finally adherents in any belief have to cope with the actualities of the world, however sordid they might be.

This realization taken in conjunction with her inability to articulate the name of "god," whom the others are praising, brings grief to her. Although her tongue curls back to utter the word the effort is a wasted one and brings tears which run down her "crackled," wrinkled skin. She feels that she has incurred the wrath of the deity she is unable to invoke. The feeling of guilt manifests itself in the sensations of her body swelling, ants crawling, getting trapped in a web of her own "weavin" and falling from heights. The call and response pattern of the chanting is indicated through the formula "crick crack." Echoing the preacher's voice the people in the congregation seem to be linked to each other. But this is only a superficial unity, for apart from the name of "god" they do not know each other even by name. In their search for the "light" of belief they are like mice digging upwards from the earth. The woman feels she is haunted by a presence which, going by the colour "red," could be a shango visitation. Rather than feel elated by this experience she feels disturbed, equating this with the presence of an inquisitive, meddlesome, foolish person. The series of images given here is linked by sound rather than strict logic. See for instance the passage in which she calls her visitant a cook and a manipulating person who is as irritating as the "cow-itch" plant. In another passage he is seen in conjunction with images of death: "hearse," "horse," "horseman." The liberation she feels is a "trip" of joy but since it is short-lived it is also a "trick."

An additional association of Shango, linked not only with railroads but more commonly with bursts of rage against dishonesty and injustice, occurs not only in this poem but also in "Word Making Man," a poem from Brathwaite's *Middle Passages*. The last part of the poem stresses these associations repeatedly through the various sound effects. The "rattle and the pain" of this woman is temporarily suspended in the mysticism of possession. Hers is not anger against an unjust society but rather a hope of amelioration. This repository of this hope is the being under whose influence she believes herself to be even if she is not able to utter this deity's name. The god/shango duality becomes an unresolvable choice for her since she is unable to speak either word. The last line of the poem contains a reference to the "train," one of the guises of Shango. It seems to proffer the view that caught between the Christian/African world views, each with their attendant religious beliefs, it is the latter at which people will arrive after achieving some kind of a resolution of these almost contradictory belief systems which are the legacy of colonialism to Caribbean society.

5.2.4 Breathweight

"Angel/Engine" is from the final section of Brathwaite's 1977 collection *Mother Poem*. This section is entitled "Kournfort" and in its the possibility of spiritual

renewal is imagined. Coined from the Haitian creole word for temple, *houmfor*, the title of this section suggests ways in which African connections are preserved (Dash 206). Religion is one such way and this poem details its performative nature primarily through the oral effects captured in it. I have called this section "Breathweight" which is a Brathwaite neologism and a pun on his own name, particularly apt in terms of the way in which his work plays on the voice. The sound of the steam engine hissing is onomatopoeically reproduced in the reiteration of "bub-a-dups." Besides signalling the presence of Shango it probably indicates the location of the area where the meetings of these worshippers are held. I pointed out at the beginning of the analysis that this is a working class neighbourhood. It could well be that it is a shanty town clustered, like many such towns, near the railway tracks. The sound effects interspersed through the poem are also present in the form of explosions of breath: "huh" and "hah." These have been explained as the primal sounds of the *loa*'s lovemaking and as the early stages of divine language when "words were breathed sounds scarcely differentiated from one another" (Rohelehr, "Rehumanization" 199). Under the influence of the *loa*, vocabulary becomes monosyllabically primal. As the woman becomes completely possessed by the *loa* her voice is subsumed until towards the end the hissing sound has only Shango as its referent.

5.3 STONE

5.3.1 Death of the Author

Political censorship and violence is a feature of contemporary Caribbean culture. Martin Carter of Guyana, an activist, poet and historian has described how he was arrested in Trinidad and later extradited to Guyana, his native country, only to face three months at a detention camp. This was in 1953 when Britain imposed direct rule on Guyana. Carter's *Poems of Resistance*, published in 1954, arose out of this experience of persecution for his nationalist political activities. Edgar Mittleholzer from British Guiana faced rejection slips from his British publishers for nearly twelve years. He had attempted suicide in 1936. Eric Roach of Trinidad who wrote lyric poetry with peasants as his subjects swam out to sea in 1974. The bomb which killed the radical Guyanese historian Walter Rodney in 1980 was labelled a successful suicide attempt by the authorities. In an address given at the Guyana Prize for Literature, 1987, Gordon Rohlehr commented on the detrimental effect of the Caribbean social, political and cultural conditions on writers: "Under such states, such unchange, some writers have chosen the amnesia of alcohol. Others, like Mittleholzer, Leroy Calliste, Eric Roach, the painter and folklorist Harold Simmons, committed suicide by rope, poison, the knife or fire" (qtd. in Markham 40). I use the word "Death" in the title of this section not metaphorically (as in Roland Barthes's essay with the same title) but literally. Silencing here is not only by the imposition of censorship and publishing restrictions but more often by the death, self-imposed or murderous, of the author.

The life and career of Michael or Mikey Smith (1954-83) prove that even death may not succeed in silencing a revolutionary voice. Smith was born in Kingston, Jamaica and came from a working class background (his father was a mason and his mother a factory worker). Although he claimed to have been educated on the streets he did graduate from the Jamaican School of Drama in 1980. There he used to "hang out" a lot with Brathwaite with whom he became, in Brathwaite's own words, "quite close" as a student. Smith's rise as a performer of his own work was meteoric. He performed at the Carifesta (Caribbean Festival of Arts) in Barbados in 1981, at the First International Bookfair of Radical Black and Third World Books in London in 1982, did a B.B.C. commentary and a UNESCO performance in Paris in the same year. On 17 August 1983 he was stoned to death by four men at Stony Hill, St. Andrew, Jamaica, during the election campaign. Brathwaite's poem "Stone" from the 1986 collection *Jah Music* is a tribute to Mikey Smith. In the same year *Race Today*

Publishers published a collection of Smith's work, *It A Come*, selected and introduced by the Jamaican poet Mervyn Morris. Records of Smith's performances specially "Mi Cyaan Believe It," his film for the BBC along with Brathwaite's poem and Morris's collection of his work, ensure that death has not silenced his voice which continues to influence poets and performers.

5.3.2 The Text

Stone

(for Mikey Smith)

When the stone fall that morning out of the johncrow sky
if was not dark at first, that opening on to the red sea sky
but something in my mouth like feathers. blue like bubbles and light
carrying signals & planets & the sliding curve of the world like a water
picture
in a raindrop when the pressure drop

When the stone fall that morning i
couldn't cry out because my mouth was full of beast & plunder
as if i was gnashing badwords among tombstones
as if angry water was beating up against the curbstones of the
palisadoes
as if that road up Stony Hill round the bend by the churchyard on the
way to the

post office was a bad bad dream and the dream was on fire all the way
past the
white houses higher up the hill and the ogogs bark
ing all teeth & furnace and my mother like she upside down up a
tree like
she was screaming and nobody i could hear could hear a word i
shouting
even though there were so many poems left and the tape was switched
on & running
and the green light was red and they was standing up everywhere in
London
& Amsterdam & at UNESCO in Paris & in West Berlin & clapping &
clapping &
clapping & not a soul on Stony Hill to even say amen. and yet it was
happening happening
the fences began to crack in my skull and there were loud *booooooongs*
like
guns going off them ole time magnums or like fireworks where i
dreadlocks were in fire
and the gaps where the river coming down and the dry gully where
my teeth used to be
smiling and my tuff gong tongue that used to press against them &
parade pronunciation

now unannounce and like a black wick in i head & dead
and it was like a heavy heavy riddim low down in i belly bleeding dub
and there was like this heavy black dog thumping in i chest & pumping
murdererrrrrrr

and my throat like dem tie like dem tie a tight tie around it. twist
ing my neck quick crick quick crick and a never wear neck
tie yet and a laughing more blood and spittin out lawwwwwwwwwd
and i two eye lock to the sun and the two sun staring back bright from
the grass and i

bline to de butterfly flittin. but i hear de tread of my heart
the heavy flux of the blood in my veins silver tambourines
closer & closer. st joseph band crashing &
closer & bom sicai sica boom ship bell &
closer & bom sicai sica boom ship bell &
when the saints...

and it was like a wave on Stony Hill caught in a crust of sunlight
and it was like a broken schooner into harbour muffled in the silence
of its wound
and it was like the blue of peace was filling up the heavens with its
thunder
and it was like the wind was growing skin the skin had hard hairs
hardening
it was like Marcus Garvey rising from his coin. stepping towards his
people
crying dark. and every mighty word he trod the ground fell dark &
hole behind
him like it was a scream i did not know and yet it was a scream. my
ears were bleeding
sound. and i was quiet now because i had become that sound

the sunlit morning washed the coral limestone harsh against the soft
volcanic ash
i was & it was slipping past me into water & it was slipping past me
into root
i was & it was slipping past me into flower & it was ripping upward
into shoot
while every tongue in town was lashing me with spit & cutrass wit &
ivy whip &
wrinkle jumbimum. it was like warthog grunting in the ground. and
children run
ning down the hill run right on through the splashes
that my breathing made when it was howl & red & bubble and sparrow

twits pluck tic & tapeworm from the grass
as if i-man did never have no face as if i-man did never in this place

When the stone fell that morning out of the johncrow sky
i could not hold it back or black it back or block it off or limp away
or roll it from me into memory or light or rock it steady into night be
cause it builds me now and fills my blood with deaf my bone with dumb &

lawwwd

i am the stone that kills me.

Glossary

curbstones:	stones forming the border or edges
palisade:	fence of iron railings or wooden stakes
ogogs:	probably dogs
magnums:	bottle containing two quarts of wine

dreadlocks:	members of the Rastafarian cult usually wear their hair uncut and falling in long, plaited or matted locks about their shoulders.
dub:	dub music has a two beat rhythm and is associated with Black folk-culture in the Caribbean.
tambourines:	small drum held in the hand with loose jingling metal discs.
band:	at Carnival a group of masqueraders in highly ornate costumes illustrating in particular sections a particular theme (historical, topical or imaginary). They jump through the streets to the music of a steelband.
boom:	a big bass drum used by masquerade bands
schooner:	a ship with more than one mast
Marcus Garvey:	founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Jamaica in 1914. It was later based in USA and gave rise to Garvey's 1922 'Back-to-Africa' repatriation movement.
cutrass:	probably 'cutlass,' a labourer's tool for cutting cane, bush, etc.
wrinkle jumbim:	a jumbi is an evil spirit of the dead that assumes human form. In the story "Ol Higue," a Guyanese folktale retold by Ralph Prince, an old woman "wrinkled skin Becky Winter" sheds her skin every night to suck the blood of children.
warthog:	a large-headed African swine

5.3.3 Analysis

The poet assumes the persona of Mikey Smith to present the last moments of his life when he was stoned to death. Nature assumes a predatory aspect, the sky is first called threatening or "Johncrow" and then later, when the stone comes flying through it, "red sea sky." I think here the allusion is to the waters of the Red Sea parting to allow the Israelites to pass through and then closing in to drown the Pharaoh's soldiers pursuing them. Besides the Biblical allusion the colour "red" also assumes symbolic significance because of the perpetration of violence on the individual whose thoughts constitute the poem. Before the stone hit him there was no darkness but rather a feeling of peace, almost ecstasy, which is compared to a microcosmic view of the world reflected in a drop of water as it falls from the sky.

The persona describes how he was not able to articulate the pain he felt that morning because he seemed to be choking on all the anger, rage, resentment he had within him. The futility of these emotional outbursts against injustice, which Smith expressed in his poetry, is captured in the words "gnashing badwords among tombstones." Other images used to describe the same feelings are: water beating against barriers and the dogs barking with nobody paying any attention to them. This refers to the social and political implications of Smith's poetry which dealt with issues like poverty, education, exploitation of the lower classes, and materialism in contemporary society. The most powerful image conveying futility in the poem is that of the mother hanging upside down from a tree with nobody paying any attention

to her screams. Please recall that Smith's mother was a factory worker, so this image is probably meant to convey the hapless life-in-death existence of all working class women in general. Looking at this sight the poet "shouts" out his indignation (in verse) but it seems as if his words are wasted, "nobody i could hear could hear a word i-shouting." These would also have been the themes of his future poetry had he been given a chance to keep "the tape . . . switched on and running." Smith had performed his poetry all over Europe and had also given a performance for the UNESCO in 1982. The acclaim he received there is indicated by the reiteration of the word "clapping." This is contrasted with the silence on Stony Hill where there is nobody to pronounce even a blessing on the dying man.

The last moments of Smith's life are described by him in terms of a release of all the emotions which were expressed in his poetry. Fences cracking, guns going off, a river rushing down a gully, dreadlocks on fire are images used to convey both the physical and the emotional effects of the attack. The blood running inside his mouth is like a river flowing down; his tongue has lost its power to speak with the emphasis it previously had. Like a dysfunctional instrument it now has the power only to "unannounce." The only word which comes out, in a "heavy riddim" from the guts, is "murdererrrrrrr." Life ebbing out of him is experienced as somebody slowly twisting his neck so that the only activity possible is spitting out the blood and uttering the name of the lord. Nature as an unresponsive witness to this act is evinced in the "stare" of the sun and the "flittin" of the butterfly. In these few moments before death he becomes acutely conscious of usually unnoticed functions like the flow of blood in the veins. This natural bodily music is like the music played by "bands" at Carnival. The masqueraders in Carnival select a particular theme each year whether historical, topical or imaginary. Smith imagines that the band whose music he hears has selected a nautical theme. The noise of the ship bells reproduced in the poem is a reverberation of the sound of his own bodily functions heard by the dying man. Wave-like, the music rises only to hit against the "broken schooner" of his injured body seeking its "harbour."

The sense of peace which he now feels outside is also within him. Experiencing oneness with the elements of nature he speaks of the wind as a tangible presence much like Marcus Garvey come alive. An affinity with Garvey is stressed because of his emphasis on social reform and on Africa as a means of asserting Black identity. Garvey's ideas were considered the precursor of the Rastafarian movement. Smith's links with the Rastas are evinced throughout the poem in his use of the pronoun "i" and a mention of "dreadlocks." Garvey's words did have an effect on people's minds in his times and on subsequent generations. This is presented as his "mighty word[s]" making holes in the ground he trod upon. It impinges upon Smith's consciousness like a "scream" quite unlike his own scream in the first half of the poem which is not heard by anybody. In a way Garvey's demands for social justice and equality were echoed by Smith. He becomes conscious of this only in the moment when his ears "bleed" or are full of sounds which had an impact on him and he recognises "i had become that sound."

Throughout my analysis of the poem I have emphasised how the elements are invested with the emotions of the dying man. These last few lines which I will now discuss reinforce this theme. Fire, water and air are the three elements the poet has already touched upon. Now it is the earth or rather the "soft volcanic ash" which he sees as having regenerative potential. While nature follows its own course, giving rise to life in the form of flowers and other plants, it is men who deviate from the natural course of their lives to attack others. These attacks can be verbally or actively vicious. No poet with a reformist agenda can please everybody. It is to his detractors, who attacked him with a violent "wit" and with threats of possession by "jumbis" or evil spirits, that these lines are directed. They are labelled "warthogs" snouting around for something they can take offence at. Idyllic scenes of children running, birds twittering are juxtaposed against his own agonised breathing which is more like a howl. The birds are as indifferent to his plight as if he never existed. Towards the end of the poem it is the inevitability of the attack which is highlighted:

"i could not hold it back or black it. . . ." The coming together of the object as well as the subject of attack concludes the poem. Unlike an imaginative perception which the poet can retain in his memory and later transmute into poetry, the stone is a concrete material object which leads to the physical effects of impairment and finally death. It is significant that the Smith persona in this poem does not directly affix the blame on his attackers. The stone, from being the instrument of death, comes to epitomise the condition of the man who has died since he becomes as inanimate as it: "i am the stone that kills me."

5.3.4 Performance Poetry

In the Caribbean, poetry is not just words printed on a page but also spoken aloud for an audience. There has been a tradition of poets teaming up with musicians for performances. Even the deejays, who erase the words from records, retaining the music to improvise the words as they perform, have been labelled as poets. Michael Smith belonged to a group of poet-performers called "dub poets" by the British Caribbean performer Linton Kwesi Johnson. Dub poetry is characterised by lines meant to be spoken, generally to a two-beat rhythm, dealing mostly with the life experiences or point of view of Black people. The most celebrated example is Smith's frequently anthologised poem "Me Cyaan Believe It." I give below a few lines from it:

Me seh me cyaan believe it
Me seh me cyaan believe it
Room dem a rent
me apply widin
but as me go een
cockroach rat and scorpion
also come een

(*Hinterland* 286)

If you read these lines aloud you will be able to get some idea of its beat. As is apparent the lines are about a poor man forced to rent a room (probably in a tenement) infested with insects and animals. It is in this poem that Smith uses the technique Brathwaite has incorporated in his tribute to him: "But me know yuh believe it/ Lawwwwwwwwd/ me know yuh believe it." Elsewhere Brathwaite has commented on Smith's remarkable voice and breath control on stage accompanied by the "decorative" noise of the Japanese S90 motorbike: "On the page, Smith's *Lawwwwwwwwd* is the S-90" ("History" 301). Not only is this reproduced in this poem but it is also added to when Brathwaite makes the Smith persona pronounce "murdererrrrrrr." The inclusion of these sound effects is Brathwaite's tribute to the performative aspect of poetry epitomised by Michael Smith.

5.4 COLOMBE

5.4.1 The Discoverer

Christopher Columbus (in Spanish, Cristobal Colon) 'discovered' the New World on October 12, 1492 when he landed on an island called Guanahani by the Indians and named San Salvador by him. It is this moment which is the subject of this poem. The poem is from Brathwaite's 1992 collection *Middle Passages*, the year which marked the Columbus quinqucentennial 'celebrations.' These were embroiled in controversy following protests by native Americans for whom the discovery had also meant extermination. As far back as 1967 Naipaul had written an article "Columbus and Crusoe" in which he had commented with characteristic irony: "He [Columbus] claimed . . . that he had got rid of two-thirds of the natives of Hispaniola in two years; the remainder had been set to gathering gold dust. (This was an exaggeration : he

had only got rid of a third)" (221). The beginnings of this moment which inaugurates New World history for Europe is delineated in Brathwaite's poem.

Edward
Barthwaite-11

The figure of Columbus, like that of Crusoe, has held a special attraction for Caribbean writers. Brathwaite himself has used the Columbus motif in many poems in *The Arrivants*. As Simon Gikandi has observed: given the consequences of European "modernization" of the New World, it appears almost impossible for Caribbean writers to accept Todorov's claim that "we are all direct descendants of Columbus" and that "it is with him that our genealogy begins" (2). The claims to modernization and discovery made on behalf of Columbus's arrival are all more problematic considering the fact that it was by accident that he came here. He had originally set out to reach Asia by a Western route. To add to this was the fact that his motives were openly mercenary, only tangentially geographical and civilizational only in so far as they helped further the former. This should put to rest any Eurocentric assumptions about Columbus's arrival being universally beneficial and hence a cause of 'celebration.'

5.4.2 The Text

"Colombe"

C

olumbus from his after-
deck watched stars, absorbed in water,
melt in liquid amber drifting
through my summer air
Now with morning shadows lifting
beaches stretched before him cold & clear
Birds circled flapping flag & mizzen
mast. Birds harshly hawking. without fear
Discovery he sailed for. was so near.

C

olumbus from his after-
deck watched heights he hoped for
rocks he dreamed. rise solid from my simple water
Parrots screamed. Soon he would touch
our land. his charted mind's desire
The blue sky blessed the morning with its fire
But did his vision
fashion as he watched the shore
the slaughter that his soldiers
furthered here? Pike
point & musket butt
hot splintered courage. Bones
cracked with bullet shot
tipped black boot in my belly. The
whips uncurled desire?

C

olumbus from his after-
deck saw bearded fig trees. Yellow pouis
blazed like pollen & thin
waterfalls suspended in the green
as his eyes climbed towards the highest ridges
where our farms were hidden
Now he was sure
he heard soft voices mocking in the leaves
What did this journey mean. this
new world mean. dis
covery? or a return to terrors
he had sailed from. Known before?
I watch him pause
Then he was splashing silence
Crabs snapped their claws
And scattered as he walked towards our shore

Glossary

afterdeck:	deck near the rear portion of a ship
amber:	yellow coloured
mizzen mast:	mast next to the rear of the main mast
hawking:	flying with the intention of preying on other birds
Pike:	long wooden shaft with pointed metal head
musket:	gun
bearded fig tree:	a tree with fig like berries, called bearded because of the resemblance of its hanging aerial roots to beards
pouis:	a large decorative tree which sheds its leaves and flowers annually

5.4.3 Analysis

The letter "C" in bold type with which each stanza of the poem is superscribed is apparently formed by splitting Columbus's name so that all three stanzas begin with "olumbus." Not only is the letter "C" indicative of the name of the explorer but also of the region he claimed to have discovered: the Caribbean. It also has the same pronunciation as "sea," on which the discoverer sailed to come to this region. Brathwaite's play with language acquires other dimensions if the word "olumbus" is broken into its constituent words, each of which has a typically Caribbean meaning. It can be seen to be made up of "ol," "um" and "bus." Take the first word which means old and implies that Columbus was in his old age when he discovered the region. This is historically accurate for his date of birth is usually taken to be c.1445 which means that he was approaching old age when he landed at San Salvador in 1492. The second constituent "um" is creole for the third person pronoun 'him,' sometimes used derogatively. The last word "bus" is a shortened form of "bluss" meaning to deliver a sudden blow, cut, wound or whip. Taken together these words posit Columbus as the perpetrator of violence which is elaborated upon in the second stanza.

The idea of peace conveyed through Columbus's observation of the stars reflected in the sea gives a false sense of security. Towards morning the sight of the beaches a little distance away marks the goal of his voyage. The poem is from the perspective of a native inhabitant of the area discovered by the voyager. This Amerindian shifts between the first person singular and plural pronouns, "my" and "our," to describe the devastation wreaked on his land and its inhabitants. It is therefore curious to observe that Columbus's anticipation and expectation is also vividly presented in the poem. The Amerindian persona clearly has an omniscient perspective. That the scenario would be a wish fulfilment fantasy for Columbus is borne out by the words that the land is "his charted mind's desire." An idyllic sunrise in the blue skies, the sight of trees native to the region (bearded fig and pois), the gushing waterfalls are all a fulfilment of his exotic imaginings. This exoticism is undercut by the harsh reality of the violence unleashed on the natives by the soldiers accompanying and following Columbus. Significantly the weapons used for attack: the pike and the musket emblemise the missile which, in Brathwaite's view, is the governing symbol of Western culture. Needless violence is a prefiguration of colonialism, "whips uncurled desire."

Even the fulfilment of his longed for dream of discovery does not satisfy Columbus. He imagines he hears voices among the trees which mock his life's endeavour. Breaking the word "discovery" into two Brathwaite changes its sense so that it comes to mean an uncovering of "dis," the underworld in classical mythology. This does not mean that the New World is hellish but rather that the impulse which led Columbus to its search was dark in its origin. If he had undertaken the voyage for a cathartic purpose, to rid himself of whatever was dark or negative in him, then clearly that purpose has been defeated. Like the crabs snapping their claws the colonists reveal the ugly side of human nature when they come in contact with those living on the land they claim to have discovered. It is with this potent image of antagonism embedded in human nature that the poem ends.

Edward
Barthwaite-II

5.4.4 Seametrics

A previous version of this poem was published in the first volume of *The Arrivants*. There it is a part of a longer poem from the "Islands and Exiles" section of *Rites of Passage* and is titled "The Emigrants." Like the Caribbean emigrants to first world countries Columbus is seen as an emigrant to the New World, a placing which somehow represses the historical enormity of Columbus's "emigration" for the Amerindians. This is not surprising for at that stage in his career Brathwaite has admitted to "having written a history book which had said there were no Amerindians. . . ." With a change in perspective there came a changed version of the poem. The difference is primarily in the typography. If you look at this poem carefully you will observe that the printed matter tapers upwards from the left and right sides at "c." The last line is longer than the others and forms a kind of a base. Draw lines along the printed matter and observe that the shape is very much like a rocket or a missile. And yet the poem captures the ebb and flow of the sea thematically. Brathwaite has explained this through his concept "seametrics":

I have a thing that I call seametrics, because the sea influences
the landscape. The sea influences the nature of poetry—the
pauses between the words, the tidalectic nature of the sea;
which is different from the notion of the dialect of the
marksman: all of these things are there in the poetry.

(qtd. in James 763)

While the 'shape' of the poem is that of the marksman, the pike, the bullet, the missile are symbols of an expansionist like Columbus; the rhythm or dialect is that of the sea. This movement of the water backward and forward is expressed through the close and distant scenes which alternate in the poem. From the stars in the water to the heights of the rocks, from the trees near the shore to the "hidden" farms, all are filtered through the consciousness of the Amerindian persona who imagines Columbus observing them. The juxtaposition of an icon of Western civilization with the rhythm of the New World illustrates their encounter in visual and thematic terms.

5.5 LET US SUM UP

I hope you have read Brathwaite's later poetry carefully and now have an idea about the change in his poetic concerns particularly in the eighties and nineties. The diversity of perspectives exhibited is a particularly noticeable feature. Based on an assessment of his first trilogy many commentators had dismissed Brathwaite as a "folk" poet with all the pejorative connotations of parochialism this word seems to have acquired. The selection of poems in this unit is intended to dispel this erroneous notion about his poetry. Freedom from the shackles of pentameter, conventional punctuation, print format and fixed meanings of words through the evolution of a distinct "video style" is evinced in all the poems analysed.

5.6 QUESTIONS

- Q.1 How has Brathwaite presented the impact of religion on the sensibility of the common people in "Angel/Engine"?
- Q.2 What aspects of the "video style" can you discern in the three poems included in this unit? Examine the politics behind them.
- Q.3 Brathwaite often gives us paradigms for an analysis of his own work by coining neologisms. Discuss any two coinages with reference to his poetry.

5.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Primary Material

Brathwaite, Kamau. *Jah Music*. Savacou, 1986.

-- *Middle Passages*. 1992. New York: New Directions, 1993.

-- *Mother Poem*. Oxford: OUP, 1977.

Secondary Material

Dash, J. Michael. "Edward Kamau Brathwaite." *West Indian Literature*. Ed. Bruce King. Sec. ed. London: Macmillan, 1995. 194-208.

James, Cynthia. "The Unknown Text." *World Literature Today*. 68 (1994): 758-64.

Naipaul, V.S. "Columbus and Crusoe." 1967. *The Overcrowded Barracoon and Other Articles*. London: Penguin, 1972. 221-25.

Savory, Elaine. "Returning to Sycorax/ Prospero's Response: Kamau Brathwaite's Word Journey." Brown. 208-30.

UNIT 6 THEORETICAL PARADIGMS FOR CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 History
- 6.2 Intertextuality
- 6.3 Orality
- 6.4 Diaspora
- 6.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.6 Questions
- 6.7 Suggested Readings

6.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit I shall be providing some theoretical paradigms for Caribbean literature. You have already read about the creative uses of issues like history, orality, intertextuality, diaspora in addition to metaphors drawn from these and other fields of popular culture. I will now summarise their theoretical formulations as provided by Walcott, Brathwaite and other Caribbean and post-colonial writers. Do remember that although Caribbean literature can be discussed under various rubrics these are not mutually exclusive categories. Indeed all of them have points of contact and a work analysed from one of these angles will invariably contain insights of other approaches.

6.1 HISTORY

Michel Foucault first forwarded the idea of history as a disconnected range of discursive practices. Each practice is a set of rules and procedures governing writing and thinking in a particular field. These rules exclude and regulate knowledge and taken together they form a culture's "archive." As Edward Said demonstrated in his highly influential work *Orientalism*, Western discursivity "produced" the Orient or an "idea" of the East based on certain stereotypical representations. An exploration of the history of colonialism and its literary manifestations is one way of examining how power structures discourse. One instance of this is the teleological view of Western historiography which sees Western man's colonising impulse as the historical "origin" of colonial societies, particularly those in the New World.

Caribbean writers have vehemently rejected this idea which not only undermines the cultural diversity of the region by constituting all its inhabitants as colonial subjects but also invests them with the powerlessness accompanying this situation. A rejection of the linearity of history is combined with a negation of its claims to objectivity. Making a connection between history and literature Edouard Glissant comments: "The surface effects of literary realism are the precise equivalent of the historian's claim to pure objectivity" (74). Glissant's theoretical pronouncements on the subject echo, in many ways, Derek Walcott's views in "The Muse of History." Walcott makes a similar comparison, "the method by which we are taught the past, the progress from motive to event, is the same by which we read narrative fiction." Both writers spell out the consequences of such a reading of history in very similar terms:

In the New World servitude to the muse of history has
produced a literature of recrimination and despair, a
literature of revenge written by the descendants of slaves or
a literature of remorse written by the descendants of masters.
(Walcott, "MH" 39)

We can be the victims of History when we submit passively
to it--never managing to escape its harrowing power.
History (like Literature) is capable of quarrying deep within
us, as a consciousness or the emergence of a consciousness,
as a neurosis (symptom of loss) and a contraction of the self.
(Glissant 70)

The effects of submission to history are pointed out by both writers: the "recrimination and despair" of the victim spoken of by Walcott is like the "passive" submission which Glissant mentions. These adjectives suggest a torpor and inaction which in its futility is quite like the sound and fury of those who perceive an affirmation of identity to lie in their dismissal of all colonial influences including language. Searching for an alternative tradition they become, in Walcott dismissive words, "the new magnifiers of Africa." This phrase immediately brings to my mind Brathwaite's work. You are already aware of the importance accorded to African traditions by him. For Walcott history "begins" not "ends" with the arrival of migrants rather than European discoverers in the New World. When Brathwaite discusses the African base of Caribbean folk culture or the African presence in Caribbean literature it does seem that he posits Africa as the teleological origin of this region's culture. This view would ignore the cultures of other ethnicities: Amerindian, European, East Asian, Chinese. When one remembers that it is this diversity which Walcott celebrates as "fragments of an epic memory" in his Nobel lecture, his position on the foundations of Caribbean history seems diametrically opposed to Brathwaite's stand on it. Brathwaite's early writings on history and culture are characterised by a distinctly African orientation. *The Development of Creole Society in America* is about the inter-culturation of West African slaves and in part also deals with European adaptations to this "creole" culture. So in its focus on "two cultures": African and European and their interaction Brathwaite's account can be critiqued on the grounds of ignoring Amerindian influence on creolization. Brathwaite's work is not caught in the despair-recrimination pattern Walcott outlines. And in later essays he has acknowledged the role of other ethnicities on the culture of the Caribbean. *The Arrivants* trilogy is heavily influenced by the author's historical research. An interaction between the two disciplines has, in Brathwaite's poetry, produced a rejection of the "idea of history as time for its original concept as myth, the partial recall of a race" (Walcott "MH"). So you can see that starting from contradictory positions on history, Brathwaite and Walcott's positions on its uses in literature are not very different.

Another Caribbean writer who has written extensively on this issue is George Lamming who, like Walcott and Glissant, forwards the idea of history as the discourse of the powerful. Discrediting the concept of discovery Lamming writes:

The early European arrivals may look very heroic for what they did. . . . Yet the history of their arrival has been reconstructed in very strange ways, such that there is no greater collection of lies than what has been written about it. Columbus's journal speaks about meeting a Caribbean aboriginal on arrival and conversing with him. Yet, as far as I know, Columbus spoke not a word of any aboriginal Caribbean language, and the aboriginal spoke neither Italian nor Spanish; it is peculiar that they could understand each other: what Columbus really did was to create what he ordered, because he represented power.
(Lamming, "Concepts" 2)

This has been supported by discursive analyses of Columbus's journals which Peter Hulme has called "by turns a personal memoir, an ethnographic notebook, and a compendium of European fantasies about the Orient: a veritable palimpsest" (367). It contains two distinct discursive networks, a "discourse of Oriental civilization" and a "discourse of savagery." Following Foucault's theories and Said's application of them commentaries like Lamming's and Hulme's have been useful in discovering the

assumptions which govern colonial historiography based on accounts like Columbus's journal. Unreliability is embedded in these narratives or as Walcott puts it, history is fiction subject to a "fitful muse, memory." This effectively puts to rest any claims to objectivity and 'truth value.' These insights can be used to study the textuality of history as well as the historicity of texts. Many Caribbean authors draw on historical events for their poetry, prose, drama or criticism. An examination of the sources used, the aspects foregrounded, their choice of genre, the authorial agenda and effective impact can be made to see in what way the work, whether critical or creative, contributes to the revisionist historiographical impulse of new historicism.

6.2 INTERTEXTUALITY

A revisionist agenda is based on the assumption that no text is self-referential. The inter-relationships between various systems of signs and the transposition of one or several of these systems into another is intertextuality at its broadest level. In practice it has always been a part of the production of textuality. Consciously or unconsciously the writer absorbs something from the world and other literary and non-literary texts. Thus many works use historical, political or cultural intertexts. The term was coined by Julia Kristeva in her essay "Word, Dialogue and Novel" in which she said, "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (66). The concept has been further elaborated upon by Roland Barthes, Gerard Genette and Michael Riffaterre.

As has already been indicated in the analysis of Derek Walcott's poetry, many post-colonial writers are using canonical European works as intertexts to subvert colonial discourse and cultural stereotyping. Helen Tiffin calls this "canonical counter-discourse." This project, according to her, involves an investigation of European textual capture and containment of colonial and post-colonial space and an intervention in that originary and continuing containment (97). The examples she gives are those of Jean Rhys writing back to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Samuel Selvon to Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in *Moses Ascending*. Besides these other Caribbean authors have also used the figure of Crusoe and characters from Shakespeare's plays. In what follows I will explicate this by referring to Miranda from the much reworked play *The Tempest* and to Othello, the "noble Moor" who is the protagonist in Shakespeare's play of the same name.

As the original inhabitant of the island, which Prospero claims as his, Caliban is the colonised native. Prospero's daughter Miranda is silently complicitous in the project of colonisation. The focus of reworkings of this play has been on the self-Other duality of Prospero-Caliban and on the question of the former's language being imparted to and acquired by the latter. In Shakespeare's play Miranda is presented as an object of desire: illegitimate in the case of Caliban and legitimate when Ferdinand woos her. In David Dabydeen's poem "Miranda" a "black bony peasant" fantasises about her but in curiously asexual terms. This is Dabydeen's transformation of the monstrous Caliban whose attempt to rape Miranda invites Prospero's wrath. Here the peasant's dream of Miranda as a maternal figure is the colonial "fantasy" of attachment to and sustenance from the imperial mother, England. She is,

Sea blue and bountiful
Beyond supplication or conquest
A frail slave vessel wracked upon a mere pebble of her promise
And the sun resumed its cruelty
And the sun shook with imperial glee
At the fantasy.

(Heinemann 64)

Dabydeen has, in this poem, made a political statement about the exploitation of colonies through the figure of Miranda.

Michael Gilkes in *Prospero's Island* juxtaposes the activities of Ferdinand and Miranda in poems which are titled on their names. The oppositional terms in which

they are described is the reason/imagination, culture/nature, male/female binarism. Ferdinand arrives on the island with his scientific vision and instruments and becomes the "cosmic cartographer" of this New World. Miranda's life on the island with its daily routine of "sand to be swept,/ firewood to fetch" subverts an Edenic view of the island. Her routine is not conducive to the exercise of the imagination:

But mind, her mind has mountains
where deep forests grow,
liana-hung;
another Eden where, as yet,
no bird has sung.

(Arnold Anthology 556)

In this poem too Miranda is a maternal presence. It is she who comforts Caliban "when he screams" out of fear of the storms at sea. Gilkes establishes Miranda in quintessentially idealised feminine terms. Her appearance has the perfection of girls on tourist brochures; her domestic instincts are manifested in daily chores and taking care of Caliban. Gilkes has at once recuperated Miranda from her role as complicit coloniser in Shakespeare's play and positioned her as entrapped in gender based-stereotypical representations.

Sylvia Wynter's afterword, intended as a conclusion to a collection on essays on Caribbean women and literature, interprets this figure from the point of view of metropolitan versus third world feminist discourse. Published in 1990 this essay is titled "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman.'" The "theory speak" of this essay does not make easy reading. Broadly Wynter suggests that the play shows "a mutational shift from the primacy of the *anatomical* model of sexual difference . . . to that of the *physiognomic* model of racial/cultural difference" (Reader 477). What this means is that there is a substitution of the woman as Other to that of the native as Other. Caliban's physiognomically complementary mate whom Wynter calls "Caliban's Woman" is conspicuous by her absence. This silencing of the "native" woman enables "the partial liberation of Miranda's hitherto stifled speech" (478) and is symptomatic of the power structures inherent in feminist discourse in which the Euro-American intelligentsia dominates and suppresses the discourse of Caribbean and other third world feminists. It is this "demonic ground" which Wynter strives to recover by pointing out Miranda's unsilencing at the expense of Caliban's Woman.

Another instance of canonical counter-discourse evolving a critical paradigm is to be found in Caribbean born British author Caryl Phillips's formulation based on what he perceives to be Othello's function in the Shakespearean play. His work *The European Tribe* has a chapter on Othello, "A Black European Success," which deals with the options for a black person from the colonies who has been made or shaped in the developed world. Othello is a moor in the service of the Venetian state and is made commander of the forces against Cyprus. Phillips comments that the figure of the black person of African origin who is used as a weapon against non-Europeans begins with the figure of Othello (191). Relating this to the hegemonic desire of co-opting black people in a struggle against other black people, he sees this as symptomatic of insecurity at the heart of the hegemonic power (192). Like Caliban, Prospero, Crusoe and Bertha Mason the figures of Miranda and Othello have been used anew to raise gender and racial construction with reference to power relations. Intertextuality in its specific form of canonical counter-discourse is pan-generic. Besides fiction, poetry and drama the scholarly critical essay is another important site from which post-colonial literatures actively engage with Western literary forms of representation. The subversive implications of such an engagement can be spelt out in an analysis of the intertext vis-a-vis the literary or critical text.

6.3 ORALITY

The spoken word can be just as effective a means of subversion as the written word. Walter J. Ong has called the electronic age of telephones, radio, television (we might

add computers to this list) as the age of "secondary orality." It depends on writing and print for its existence and in it orality and literacy exist synchronically (2-3). The Caribbean cultural scenario with an interweaving of high and popular culture exhibits what Viv Edwards and Thomas Seinkewicz call the "oral-literate continuum." This continuum recognizes the skills of the oral performer and at the same time does not view literate people as hopelessly cut off from oral skills. Sometimes this is perceived as a divide rather than a continuum then the oral/literary polarity is the creole/English debate outlined in Unit 1. Ong expands the term "verbomotor" first used by Jousse to include all cultures that retain enough oral residue to remain significantly word-attentive in a person-interactive context (67). The calypso with its disputed status as oral poetry is perhaps the most important popular cultural form to emerge out of the Caribbean which illustrates this word-attentiveness.

The origins and subversive satirical effects of calypsos have been spelt out in the discussion on Walcott's poem "The Spoiler's Return." I will here focus on how expressions of popular culture like the calypso thematise the oral/literary polarity. The famous calypso "Dan is the Man in the Van" sung by Mighty Sparrow - he was crowned calypso king four times and was involved in a song feud lasting several months with Lord Melody - outlines this theme. In it a sustained attack is mounted on Cutteridge's *West Indian Readers*, a six-volume textbook widely used in the Caribbean for three decades:

The poems and the lessons they write and send from
England
Impress me they were trying to cultivate comedians
Comic books made more sense
You know it was fictitious without pretence
But like Cutteridge wanted to keep us in ignorance.

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
Humpty Dumpty did fall
Goosey Goosey Gander
Where shall I wander
Ding dong dell . . . Pussy in the well
RIKKI . . . TIKKI TAVI
Rikki Tikki Tavi

(Reader 161)

The English nursery rhymes mentioned in the above passage, meant to be memorised and narrated by children, were transcribed in Cutteridge's *Reader* for the education of Caribbean children. The oral is inscribed or as the calypsonian says "written" not with the purpose of imparting knowledge or education but "to keep us in ignorance." Children learning these in schools would, according to Sparrow, grow up to be "damn fool[s]." Sparrow prioritises street smartness and verbal dexterity above a conventional colonial education which has no connection with the Caribbean ethos. The hierarchy of the oral/scrabal he establishes is discussed by Brathwaite under the concept and use of the word as revealing itself in "our love of courtroom scenes (both factual and fictional), the rhetoric of yard quarrels, 'word throwings,' tea-meetings and preacher/political orations. The whole tradition of the calypso is based on it" ("African Presence" 240).

The social, communal occasions detailed by Brathwaite attest to the *copia* and agonistic tonality of oral cultures. The calypso relies on repetitive rhythms and competitions in the form of verbal battles are often a source of enjoyment for the public. However with the increasing trans-cultural popularity of Carnival celebrations the calypso form has been appropriated so that it now owes its popularity more to chirographic (written) and secondary oral sources. The publication of "Dan is the Man" in the *Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature* is a case in point. Record labels vie with each other to offer contracts to calypsonians some of whom have become internationally known.

Myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, riddles which form an inextricable element of the folk culture carry the traces of a primary oral culture with no knowledge of the written word. Their being used in literary and secondary oral forms, much like the calypso, suggests Caribbean culture's embeddedness in orality. Fiction has drawn heavily on folkloric figures by investing characters with some of their features. Oral forms of expression, be it the calypso or an Anancy folktale, is often used as an intertext by Caribbean writers. Probably an interpretative paradigm based on an oral aesthetic can discuss the transformation of orality in the contemporary context.

6.4 DIASPORA

The diasporic approach to Caribbean literature expressed in critical essays from the turn of the century has drawn on metaphors for interpretation. Whereas the work of post-colonial migrant intellectuals like Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and Salman Rushdie can prove useful in analysing diasporic literary production in general, one must not forget that Caribbean intellectuals at home and abroad have provided their own interpretative models. Bhabha speaks of the "metaphoricity of the peoples of imagined communities - migrant or metropolitan" in "Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation." "Their metaphorical movement," according to him, "requires a kind of 'doubleness' in writing; a temporality of representation that moves between cultural formations and social processes without a centred causal logic" (141). This doubleness or their positioning at the interstices of culture is a major theme in literature of the diaspora. In my account of this literature I shall try to show how this metaphoricity has been itself theorised through metaphor by Caribbean writers.

The situation in the Caribbean is more complicated than those of other post-colonial societies with a significant migrant population in metropolitan centres of power. As Stuart Hall has explained, the New World presence is itself the beginning of diaspora, diversity, hybridity and difference, making the Afro-Caribbean people already a part of the diaspora (401). Hall's statement can be extended to include people of all ethnicities in the Caribbean except the Amerindians who are natives of the region. Hall defines the diaspora experience as the "recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity

... a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite difference, by hybridity" (402). Since this is by now a commonplace of literary theory one might miss its metaphoricity if one forgets that literally the word diaspora refers to those scattered tribes whose identity can be secured in relation to some sacred homeland. You can see for yourself the similarity between Bhabha's and Hall's formulations: both point out the inbetween-ness of the diasporic experience and see it as an enabling position.

As early as 1957 Edward Brathwaite had said, "the desire (even the need) to migrate is at the heart of West Indian sensibility-whether that migration is in fact or by metaphor" ("Sir Galahad" 7). Brathwaite traces the theme of emigration and/or escape in Caribbean writing as far back as C.L.R. James's *Minty Alley* (1936) and Alfred Mendes's *Black Films* (1935). He suggests that it is both the perceived cultural and actual material poverty of the islands that makes authors explore this theme. A way out of this would be to establish connections with the folk culture which can enrich the writer's imagination and establish his (Brathwaite uses the masculine pronoun throughout the essay and discusses only male authors) rootedness in the very culture he desires to escape from. Galahad of Samuel Selvon's novel *The Lonely Londoners* is the figure Brathwaite uses to metaphorically delineate this situation. He concludes that only when the writer gains a sense of community "will Sir Galahad be able to turn and attempt to return to his own native society" ("Sir Galahad" 207). Galahad, the eternal quester of Thomas Malory's *The Death of King Arthur*, transformed to the migrant individual by Selvon becomes, in Brathwaite's essay, the author internally (metaphorically) or externally (spatially) exiled from the islands.

George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* published in 1960 is a non-fictional work about "the migration of the West Indian writer; as colonial and exile, from his native kingdom, once inhabited by Caliban, to the tempestuous island of Prospero's and his language" (Lamming, *Arnold Anthology* 482). In the same work he has described subjective experiences of migration including his own. He has also spoken of the material impact of this move in terms of publication opportunities for writers and their "hunger for recognition." These imperatives constitute the "pleasure and paradox" of exile, a condition in which the creative imagination continues to be nourished by the place of origin even while acknowledging the possible gains of being situationally, albeit not socially or culturally, metropolitan. More recently Lamming has again spoken of the Caribbean presence in North America and Europe in terms of the metaphorical usage of "frontier," literally meaning the borders of civilization. Whereas colonial history posited the idea of the Caribbean as an imperial frontier, Lamming forwards the idea of the Caribbean presence in cities like Amsterdam, Paris, London, Birmingham, New York and other parts of North America as making these centres into an "external frontier." Reversing the centre-periphery hierarchy Lamming has, in a sense, made the erstwhile centre the outpost or the frontier of a culture originating in the Caribbean ("Concepts" 9). An almost similar overturning of the materially exploitative aspects of colonialism is outlined in Louise Bennett's poem "Colonisation in Reverse":

What a joyful news, Miss Mattie;
Ah feel like me heart gwine burs-
Jamaica people colonizin
Englan in reverse.

By de hundred, by den tousan,
From country and from town,
By de ship-load, by de plane-load,
Jamaica is Englan boun.

(*Hinterland*, 62)

The above lines express, in nation language, the immigrants arrival to England as a historical revenge. In the same poem she goes on to describe how a woman on dole passes her days, not searching for a job as she is supposed to, but reading "love-story book[s]." A significant Caribbean presence in England has led to British-born or British-based writers of Caribbean descent to be labelled as "Black British," a term which has been rejected by some who are included in it. Some of these are the poets Linton Kwesi Johnson, David Dabydeen, Jean 'Binta' Breeze and Grace Nicols. Within the last few years many anthologies of their work, like the one from which the above lines are taken, have appeared.

The Caribbean authors you have read about in this course: Naipaul, Walcott and Brathwaite are also a part of the Caribbean diaspora. Most of their literary activity has been carried out away from the Caribbean and their works are now published by foreign rather than local publishers. It would be a valuable research exercise to examine whether their later works differ significantly from their early work in keeping with their almost confirmed diasporic status.

6.5 LET US SUM UP

I have attempted to point out a few of the myriad possible approaches to Caribbean literature. This is by no means an exhaustive account and can be supplemented by, for instance, forms of popular culture like music and dance which have been appropriated to analyse literature. Brathwaite's use of the Jazz aesthetic to interpret fiction and Wilson Harris's account of the limbo imagination originating in a popular dance form are only two of many other paradigms. Due to constraints of space and because I have dealt with the connection between music and poetry in previous units I have not outlined these in this unit. However, you can read about them in the books mentioned in the reading list. It would be a fruitful endeavour for you to choose a

poem from the ones you have studied and try to apply more than one of the paradigms suggested here and any other you can think of to appreciate the eclecticism of Caribbean poetry.

6.6 QUESTIONS

- Q.1 Suggest any two possible ways of looking at the use of Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* in Caribbean literature
- Q.2 Spell out the implications of the use of metaphors as frames of interpretation.
- Q.3 In what way has modern critical theory facilitated our understanding of literature from erstwhile colonised regions like the Caribbean?

6.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Primary Material

Thieme, John. Ed. *The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures*. London: Arnold, 1996.

Secondary and Theoretical Material

Bhabha, Homi K. "DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation." *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. 139-70.

Brathwaite, Kamau. "Sir Galahad and the Islands." 1957/1963. *Roots*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1993. 7-27.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. Ed. J. Rutherford. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990. 222-37.

Hulme, Peter. "Columbus and the Cannibals." 1986. Extr. in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Eds. Ashcroft et al. London: Routledge, 1995. 365-69.

Kristeva, Julia. "Word, Dialogue, and Novel." *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. 1977. Ed. Leon S. Roudiez. Trans. Thomas Gora et al. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1981. 64-91.

Lamming, George. "Concepts of the Caribbean." *Frontiers of Caribbean Literature in English*. Ed. Frank Birbalsingh. London: Macmillan, 1996. 1-14.

"From *The Pleasures of Exile*." 1960. Extr. in *The Arnold Anthology of Post-Colonial Literatures*. 477-81.

Ong, Walter J. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. Methuen: London, 1982.

Phillips, Caryl. "The Legacy of Othello, Part (2)." *Frontiers of Caribbean Literature in English*. Ed. Frank Birbalsingh. London: Macmillan, 1996. 191-97.

Tiffin, Helen. "Post-Colonial Literatures and Counter-discourse." 1987. Extr. in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Eds. Ashcroft et al. London: Routledge, 1995. 95-98.

Wynter, Sylvia. "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman.'" 1990. Extr. in *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*. 476-82.



Uttar Pradesh
Rajarshi Tandon Open University

MAEN-07
**NEW LITERATURES
IN ENGLISH**

Block

7

THE SOLID MANDALA

Block Introduction

UNIT 1

The Novelist and The Novel	5
-----------------------------------	----------

UNIT 2

Openings and Preoccupations	14
------------------------------------	-----------

UNIT 3

Denizens of the Australian Emptiness	21
---	-----------

UNIT 4

Messages in Motifs	33
---------------------------	-----------

UNIT 5

Techniques	42
-------------------	-----------

UNIT 6

Perspectives	49
---------------------	-----------

BLOCK INTRODUCTION

There is no dearth of opinions about Patrick White, his place in the Australian literary canon, or the place of *The Solid Mandala* (1966) in his oeuvre. Ken Goodwin in *A History of Australian Literature* (1986) avers that the "eleven published novels of Patrick White constitute the most impressive oeuvre in Australian fiction, a judgement verified by his being the only Australian writer awarded the Nobel Prize". This assessment however elides the early hostile reception to his works in Australia and debates about the 'Australianness' of his writing, which became substantially muted after the award of the Nobel Prize in 1973. George Steiner called *The Solid Mandala* White's "best novel" and White himself has identified it as one of his favorites. Still others, like Marshall A. Best, have seen it as a "worthy 'near miss' - stimulating but not convincing".

Set largely in the fictional suburban milieu of Sarsaparilla, *The Solid Mandala* revolves around the lives and thoughts of Arthur and Waldo Brown. These twins become the focus of a convoluted and textured narrative that can be read from many perspectives. It is hoped that this block will introduce you to some of those readings and help you to make assessments of your own. The text used is the 1969 Penguin edition and all page references are to it.

The Solid Mandala is a challenging novel but it's rewarding to make the effort to become familiar with its nuances at first hand. Making notes as you read and answering the questions given at the end of each unit will help you develop a better personal understanding of the text. It will also enhance your orientation to tackle the assignments and exams.

UNIT 1 THE NOVELIST AND THE NOVEL

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 The Play of Dichotomies
- 1.2 Insider / Outsider
- 1.3 *The Solid Mandala*
- 1.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.5 Questions
- 1.6 Glossary
- 1.7 References

1.0 OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this unit is to introduce you to Patrick White, to give you some insight into the links between his life and some of the issues that colour his literary status, in general, and *The Solid Mandala*, in particular. This section will, thus, introduce some of the contexts within which a reading of *The Solid Mandala* can be made.

1.1 THE PLAY OF DICHOTOMIES

"The life and novels of Patrick White provide a classic example of the divided loyalties that have afflicted many sensitive Australian writers.", wrote Geoffrey Dutton in *Patrick White* (1962: 5), a study that came out before White published *The Solid Mandala*. The formative years of White's life and literary career were marked by cleavages in expectations and realities that coloured his decision to become a novelist as well as the initial reaction of the Australian reading and critical public to his work.

Patrick White (1912-1990) came from settler stock. His great-grandfather had come to New South Wales in the early nineteenth century and received a grant of Crown land. However, Patrick was born on 28th May, 1912 to Victor White and Ruth Withycombe in London. He grew up in Sydney and studied in Australia till he entered his teens. He writes, "When thirteen I was uprooted from Australia and put at a school at Cheltenham, England, as my mother was of the opinion that what is English is best, and my father, though a chauvinistic Australian, respected most of her caprices" (1990: 40). Near dichotomous pulls, such as these, were to leave their imprint on his sensibility at several junctures in his life.

Reminiscing about his youth, Patrick White comments, "Almost all the Whites remained wedded to the land, and there was something peculiar, even shocking, about any member of the family who left it. To become any kind of artist would have been unthinkable. Like everybody else I was intended for the land, though vaguely I knew this was not to be" (1990: 39-40). On his return to Australia after completing school, White worked for two years as a jackeroo to see if he could adapt himself to "life on the land". His first year left him with the impression that the mountainous terrain of New South Wales was "the bleakest place on earth". Nor did the rough life during his second year in the "flat, blistering north", leave him enamoured of the wild Australian outback or the much celebrated camaraderie of the bush. He says, "The life in itself was not uncongenial, but the talk was endlessly of wool and weather" (1990: 40). During this time, he is said to have first tried his hand at the

novel. His sense of liminality was exacerbated when he found that, "after being a colonial at my English school, I was now a 'Pom' in the ears of my fellow countrymen. I hardly dared open my mouth, and welcomed the opportunity to escape"(1990: 40-41). White was thus caught between a family tradition that linked the career expectations connected with him to the land, and a proclivity that along with his upbringing made "the habit of writing novels" (1990: 40) a vocation that was less forced. The dynamic tension between his exposure to the ethos of the colonial centre and that of the antipodean margin made this situation even more fraught.

White went on to read modern languages at King's College, Cambridge, graduating in 1935. The interest he had taken in the European tradition of Ibsen and Strindberg in his school years was supplemented by his introduction to French and German literature. After graduation, his father agreed to send him an allowance while he tried to make a living out of writing. His writing career started with the publication of smaller pieces in revues and literary magazines. *Happy Valley* (1939) was the first of his novels to be published in London. The novel was eventually accepted by the Viking Press in New York as well. *The Living and the Dead* (1942) like its predecessor appeared both in England and the United States. During the Second World War, White served as an R.A.F. intelligence officer in Africa, the Middle East, the Western Desert and Greece.

The Aunt's Story (1948) was published before he finally returned to set up home at a farm in Castle Hill outside Sydney with his Greek partner, Manoly Lascaris. Interestingly, James Waites notes that White was, in his later years, to describe Manoly as his own "solid mandala". His autobiography pays tribute to Manoly Lascaris as the "small Greek of immense moral strength, who became the central mandala in life's hitherto messy design". (in Joyce, 170)

This was a period marked by several displacements in White's life and career. For a few years he stopped writing. He says of this period, "If anyone mentioned Writing, I would reply: 'Oh one day perhaps.' But I had no real intention of giving the matter sufficient thought. *The Aunt's Story* ... had succeeded with overseas critics, failed as usual with the local ones"(1990: 14). He goes on to reveal what had precipitated this sense of stagnation. "Most of them [Australians] found the book unreadable. Just as our speech was unintelligible during those first years at Castle Hill, I had never felt such a foreigner. The failure of *The Aunt's Story* and the need to learn a language afresh made me wonder if I should ever write another word"(1990: 42-43). However, the reconnaissance into amateur farming and animal breeding couldn't hold him for long, just as his earlier stint as a jackeroo failed to help him develop conventional bonds with the land. He admits quite candidly, "[W]riting novels was the only thing I could do with any degree of success; even if my half-failures were some justification for an otherwise meaningless life"(1990: 15).

White also found himself coming into the open about some other choices, this time with respect to his attitude to Australia and how that would evince itself in his writing. His now famous words about seeing in "all directions stretched the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions... and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves" (1990:15), resound with echoes of the modernist critique of philistinism. It was a critique of "the exaltation of the 'average'" that was to lead to the conceptualisation of *The Tree of Man* as a book in which he wanted to suggest "every possible aspect of life, through the lives of an ordinary man and woman": At the same time he wanted to "discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and the poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people, and incidentally, my own life since my return" (1990:15).

When *The Tree of Man* was published in America in 1955 and in England the following year, it won accolades on both sides of the Atlantic. Australian critics were not as forthcoming. With the exception of Kenneth Slessor who called it a 'timeless

work of art', the reactions were negative. A.D. Hope went as far as to dismiss it as 'illiterate verbal sludge'. White returned the slight by referring to his detractors as 'howling dingoes'. *Voss* (1958) and *Riders in the Chariot* (1961) too drew hostile reactions in Australia and praise outside it. In the autobiographical essay written in association with the Nobel Prize, White reminisced on this trend which showed the first signs of turning with the *The Solid Mandala*.

The Novelist and the Novel

Then about 1951 I began writing again, painfully, a novel I called in the beginning *A Life Sentence on Earth*, but which developed into the *The Tree of Man*. Well received in England and the United States, it was greeted with cries of scorn and incredulity in Australia: that somebody, at best a dubious Australian, should flout the naturalistic tradition, or worse, that a member of the grazier class should aspire to a calling which was the prerogative of school-teachers! *Voss*, which followed, fared no better: a newspaper printed its review under the headline *Australia's Most Unreadable Novelist*. In *Riders in the Chariot* it was the scene in which Himmelfarb the Jewish refugee is subjected to a mock crucifixion by the drunken workmates which outraged the blokes and the bluestockings alike. Naturally, 'it couldn't happen here' - except that it does, in all quarters, in many infinitely humiliating ways, as I, a foreigner in my own country, learned from personal experience.

A number of Australians, however, discovered they were able to read a reprint of *The Aunt's Story*, a book which had baffled them when first published after the War, and by the time *The Solid Mandala* appeared, it was realised I might be something they had to put up with. (1990: 43)

In 1964, as the Sydney suburbs began encroaching on the country, White and Manoly shifted to a house by Centennial Park in the heart of the city. This was to remain their home to the end of White's days. He writes, "Looking back, I must also have had an unconscious desire to bring my life full circle by returning to the scenes of my childhood, as well as the conscious wish to extend my range by writing about more sophisticated Australians, as I have done in *The Vivisector* and *The Eye of the Storm*" (1990: 44). Published respectively in 1970 and 1973, these two novels were to lead up to the Nobel Prize in 1973. Since then White published two more novels - *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976) and *The Twyborn Affair* (1979) - not to mention the plays, short story collections, verse collections and some of the other writings that constitute his oeuvre. White's participation in the 1972 rally to protect the Centennial Park too saw him emerge as a public figure who joined cause on many issues such as nuclear arms, the monorail and the Bicentenary celebrations. The tide had begun to turn.

1.2 INSIDER / OUTSIDER: SOME PERSPECTIVES

White had always felt the insider / outsider dialectic at play in his life - both as a man and as a novelist. His continental education and cultural exposure to the European tradition in modern literature left him out of synch with the cultural ethos and literary traditions evolving in Australia. His years abroad had rendered him, he says, "a foreigner in my own country" (1990: 43). There have been many attempts to analyze "the peculiar mixture of fascination and respect, of hostility and dislike which his work evokes amongst his country men; his own peculiar love-hate relationship with his native Australia" (Driesen, 119).

At times critics have diagnosed the source of the problem as being largely one of form and White's closer familiarity with European literary traditions in genre, subject and stylistics. "White's symbolic novels, with their sometimes slow openings, their many new starts, their frequent time and place shifts, their fastidious fascination with bodily functions and oddities, and their homiletic passages, took some time to gain

acceptance", remarks Ken Goodwin. He argues that White's familiarity with twentieth century French and German experimental writing set him apart from the mould of the social-realist writing that was in vogue during the 1930's in Australia (Goodwin, 167). However, in 'The Prodigal Son', White admits to being consciously "determined to prove that the Australian novel is not necessarily the dreary dun-coloured offspring of journalistic realism" (1990: 16). Joseph Jones also notes how White inspired others like Randolph Stow to depart thematically from an Australian literary tradition that concentrated on "The Spell of the Bush" and "The Great Australian Dream"; soon in their works, "adventures are subordinated to interiorized events" (Jones, 57). "White had offended against the unwritten law of Australianism", writes Geoffrey Dutton, elaborating, "stringy-bark and green-hide may have been the mainstay of Australia, but here was a man insisting that now it is time for imagination and humility to take their place; amongst those who laughed and gave it a fair go he cried out in agony and looked without sentiment at tragedy" (Dutton, 9).

Others see White's inability to capture the zeitgeist of Australia at the heart of the matter. "A vast majority of White's Australian readers would appear to be ambivalent in their acceptance of his work. On the one hand a sense of patriotism prompts them to embrace White as one of their own kind, while on the other their anxiety over the nature of his work gives them cause to be less than enthusiastic in hailing him as a genuine Australian writer" (Singh, 117). Kirpal Singh cites as factors contributing to this phenomenon the "strong influence of a European background" and a "lack of sympathy or lack of a fundamental rapport with the way of life of most Australians" (Singh, 117). He continues, "White's is not merely the case of the alienated artist. For him alienation takes on a greater meaning... White's problem springs from an excruciating dissatisfaction with the superficiality of existence around him... White suffers from an impoverished spiritual kinship with the society in which he lives; both artistically and spiritually White writes in a vacuum" (Singh, 117-8).

Paradoxically, White spelt out that he made it his literary credo, to not only consciously work against the Australian literary tradition that celebrated realism and naturalism, but also that he meant to continue "to people the Australian emptiness in the only way I am able" (1990: 44). What White saw as his oeuvre's greatest strengths were being vaunted as the very sites that undermined his acceptance with the reading and critical public. According to Adrian Mitchell, "White has never been really comfortable, imaginatively, with the local. He has worried at the fact of Australia, and tussled with its spiritual geography, but the strongest statements have again and again been negative" (Mitchell, 15). Who indeed, can forget White's caustic vignette in 'The Prodigal Son' of

the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which beautiful youths and girls stare at life through blind blue eyes, in which human teeth fall like autumn leaves, the buttocks of cars grow hourly glassier, food means cake and steak, muscles prevail, and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from average nerves (1990: 15)

Cynthia Vanden Driesen attempts to collapse this paradox by placing White within the Jungian framework of mapping the relationship between the artist and the spirit of the epoch. She sees White as being sharply divided from the life of his contemporaries because he purports to respond to what he diagnoses as a deep spiritual need for the 'average' Australian to break free of the hold of materialism and superficiality. Quoting Erich Neumann's elaboration of Jung she posits, "Compensation for the cultural canon means opposition to it – that is opposition to the epoch's consciousness and sense of values. The creative artist whose mission is to compensate for consciousness and the cultural canon is usually an isolated individual who must destroy the old order to make possible the dawn of the new" (Driesen, 121).

How plausible these positions are remains for you to decide. What is even more interesting is how these positions tap into thematic veins in *The Solid Mandala* as it maps the equally paradoxical love-hate relationship between the twins, Waldo and Arthur and obliquely delves into the nature and purpose of art. "The tension in White's relationship with his own country is a revealing facet of that profound quarrel with himself (to adapt Yeats' phrase) out of which his fiction comes" (Barnes, 3).

1.3 THE SOLID MANDALA

"In tracing the development of a major writer one perceives continuity as well as growth: each new work is organically related to its predecessors, yet this does not preclude the possibility of surprise," comments Thelma Herring. She goes on to point out these links when she opines, "Presenting, with a compression equaled only in *The Aunt's Story*, two lives as simple and ordinary to outward view as those of the Parkers in *The Tree of Man*, *The Solid Mandala* uses them to explore further the theme of man's potential divinity already treated on a epic scale in *Voss* and *Riders in the Chariot*" (Herring, 72). However, even as the novel marks continuities, the points of departure remain significant. Peter Craven notes, "From the late 1960s there was a drift away from the mythopoeic, away from the symbols of the bush country. This is discernable in the later work of Patrick White. *The Solid Mandala* (1966) is a story of two brothers, one cosmically inclined and 'mad', the other schizoid yet 'sane'. The book displays not only White's interest in the ideas of Jung, but his willingness to experiment with black comedy and kitchen-sink realism. After *The Solid Mandala* White never again sounded the biblical note of *The Tree of Man*." (Craven, 46)

One finds in this novel no synoptic vision trying to encompass expansive macrocosms. In the sense that on the surface of it, the novel does not try to hold within its narrative canvas extensive timeframes, an enormous cast of characters or an extremely convoluted widespread narrative. It is concerned with two twins and their consciousness that defines the world they live in and colors their interaction with people. *The Solid Mandala* is about two twins - Waldo and Arthur. However, in a strange and poetic journey, we realize that it can transcend the bounds of their microcosm to envelop more cosmic strains. Into the ostensibly simple tapestry of the lives of two nondescript men from the suburbs of Sydney, are woven threads linked to questions such as the nature of artistic creation, the search for spiritual and emotional wholeness, the holocaust and an impinging ethos of materialism.

The narrative is divided into four unequal parts. Brief opening and closing sections have Mrs. Poulter as the principle actor. According to Thelma Herring, these sections "form a frame which puts the timeless theme in a contemporary context" (Herring, 73). The expository section introduces the bachelor twins through the perspectives of Mrs. Poulter and Mrs. Dun as revealed in a conversation that they have as they ride the bus between Sarsaparilla and Barranugli. The exterior sections impose the outside world's perspectives on the narrative even as it subtly critiques that world's materialistic values and narrowness of vision. The two central parts recount the lives and thoughts of Waldo and Arthur from Waldo's perspective first and then more briefly from Arthur's perspective. These sections deal more extensively with two seemingly antithetical approaches to life in that society, which through the device of the twins, are shown to be also almost inextricably linked.

The narrative takes off with a bus journey in which Mrs. Poulter and Mrs. Dun are introduced directly and the Brown brothers obliquely through their conversation. In this section called 'In the Bus', the Brown brothers are shown stumbling along the road between Barranugli and Sarsaparilla with their blue terriers, Runt and Scruffy. There is a combination of the omniscient narrator commenting on the thoughts and nature of the two women, the women being characterized through their overt actions

and words, as well as the women indirectly characterizing the Browns through their observations.

The narrator hints repetitively at the narrow and materialistic perspectives Mrs. Dun and Mrs. Poulter are able to bring to bear on the things they talk about. For example, when Mrs. Poulter comments that some women end up spending a shilling in order to save the occasional half-penny, the narrator reveals to us how Mrs. Dun mentally fixates on this piece of information. Having made the appropriate calculations for the half-penny, she is fascinated that some women may actually be losing one-and-eleven on a shopping trip between Sarsaparilla and Barranugli. The significance of these minute details in their lives is underscored time and again, throughout this first section. Mrs. Poulter and Mrs. Dun had met for the first time only recently on a similar bus ride, in spite of them both having lived on the same road for years. As they discuss what brought them both to Terminus Road, Mrs. Poulter mentions her neighbours, the Mister Browns. Mrs. Dun is simultaneously put off by the possibility that the Browns may be her social superiors and pacified by the fact that they are from England. The pettiness of her focus is evinced when she picks out for negative comment things like the strangeness of Waldo's name and the fact that the two aged brothers are holding each other's hands. The former is to her indicative of snobbish elitism and the latter of the possible perversity of the two men. Her observations reveal her insecurities and the limited nature of her mental horizons. This section also presents through these two women the socio-cultural frame within which the story of Waldo and Arthur unfolds.

The Brown brothers are concretized by these two ladies as at once repulsive but intriguing, almost hideous and pitiable to the outsider or onlooker. On Mrs. Dun the impression is totally negative. She 'resentfully' notices 'the two old men, stumping, trudging' almost 'tottering' along worn down by 'their age and infirmities' and 'holding each other by the hand' (18-19). The sense of repulsion she feels, but cannot quite quantify, has been echoed earlier in Mr. Poulter's contemptuous dismissal of them as a 'couple of no-hopers with ideas about themselves' (18). Their only demotic ally, Mrs. Poulter, too finds herself unable to go on defending them and disowns them reiterating Mrs. Dun's 'They're nothing to me' (19). The exposition sets the dismal tone for a narrative which reveals, as William Walsh puts it, that the two brothers, "are handcuffed, as they grope down the path negotiating the irregular bricks, by love and hate, memory and genes, horror and misery" (Walsh, 86).

The second and third sections, named 'Waldo' and 'Arthur' respectively tell the same story through two perspectives. Here again the characterization is through a combination of the omniscient narrator commenting mostly on the brother used to focalize the text, direct characterization of the brother concerned through his thoughts and actions and his indirect characterization of the other players in the drama of his life. As in the other sections, even when the author privileges a particular point of view by giving it almost complete say in 'telling' the story, he also uses the omniscient narrator to balance that point of view by revealing its own biases.

Relationships form the thematic content of the two intermediate sections. Thelma Herring points out that one can read the predominant emotion dominating the 'Waldo' section as hatred born of deep seated insecurity and increasing isolation (Herring, 75). Waldo has a deep sense of being chained in a disadvantageous relationship to his twin brother. As a result of this, he either has to suffer being excluded when Arthur is patronizingly preferred over him because of his disability or the equally strong sense of mortification of constantly being associated with Arthur. His greatest sense of humiliation and anger however, is to see Arthur actually doing and surpassing him in the areas he deems his territory. Thus, that Arthur manages to capture and hold Dulcie's affection, that Arthur reads literary classics and is disturbed by the larger questions of life they raise and that Arthur actually writes, are blows that quite devastate Waldo's construction of a superior self-image in relation to his brother. The loss of this image, both gradually throughout his life and more suddenly

towards the close of his narrative infuse his being with palpable abhorrence for things and people, springing from personal despair as the success and place in life he had envisaged for himself slip further out of his reach.

The Novelist and the Novel

If hatred for others and an incipient self-hatred are part of Waldo's constitution of himself, then the third section devoted to and entitled 'Arthur' is infused with the thematic concerns of positive relationships and an almost religious spiritual search for wholeness. Most of the episodes that figure in the Waldo section are reinscribed here through the mellow perspective of Arthur. What were sources of humiliation for Waldo, become sources of affection and part of a continued process of personal enlightenment for Arthur.

Although they are twins, and although "the lives of the brothers fused by consent at some points"(81), they are opposites, physically, mentally and spiritually points out Thelma Herring. Waldo is depicted as a pseudo-intellectual, who excels at writing English essays and becomes a librarian. He assumes a sense of superiority that fuels and legitimizes his hatred of and scorn for the people around him. Waldo, however, has aspirations to be a novelist when he eventually hopes to find something to write about. The elitist and esoteric view of art and himself, he holds fails to keep him in touch with the realities that could have nourished his aspirations into fruition. Arthur is portrayed as an alleged simpleton, who is a failure at school except for a surprising flair for figures, becomes a grocer's assistant and humbly accepts the realities around him. He loves and is loved by people (and dogs) and seeks to share a redemptive totality with the lives of those he touches. "Their experiences, however often coincide: they love the same woman (after their different fashions), both write "poems" and read books, each acquires a dog, both on occasion play the woman, both give Mrs. Poulter a "child"(Waldo in the form of a plastic doll, Arthur by accepting the relationship himself), each is accosted by a whore on the night that the Second World War ends, each becomes in a sense the other's murderer." To Mrs. Dun, watching from the bus as they walk hand in hand, "It was difficult to decide which was leading and which was being led. But one was the leader, she could sense"(19). Waldo, of course, believes himself to be the leader, and the protector of Arthur; Arthur feels from the beginning that he is protected, and is the protector of his whole family. (Herring, 73-74). The denouement reveals that both visions of life though seemingly at odds with one another interpenetrate one another, constituting parts of a whole.

The final section, like the opening section, imposes the perspective of the outside world onto the narrative. As in the opening section, the closing section entitled, 'Mrs Poulter and the Zeitgeist' combines negative impressions of the fate of the Brown brothers and a more positive apprehension of the same by Mrs. Poulter. Only this time her perspective holds sway over the denouement giving it a stronger sense of thematic coherence.

To touch upon some more autobiographical and personal notes that impinge upon the book: "White testifies in *Flaws in the Glass* to his own anxiety at the time he was writing *The Solid Mandala*. He and his friend Lascaris had decided to move from "Dog woods," their home of many years, because the suburban nuisances were becoming oppressive. He feared that the uprooting might be fatal to his writing, that *The Solid Mandala* might be his "swan song". Inevitably the novel "was infused with an amount of fatality and foreboding." For those interested in the sources of White's inspiration and possible prototypes of his characters, he identifies the twins as "my two halves," with Waldo as "myself at my coldest and worst." Mrs. Poulter "grew out of" a neighbor lady, and Dulcie "has both the goodness and the smugness of a fulfilled Jewish acquaintance"(Jones, 72-73). Patrick White counted the novel as one among his favorites. "I like *The Aunt's Story* and *The Solid Mandala* best - the first because for so long nobody would pay attention to it,...and *The Solid Mandala* because it's a very personal kind of book, I suppose, and comes closest to what I've wanted."(1990: 21-2)

1.4 LET US SUM UP

Patrick White's life and career as an Australian novelist are marked by paradoxes and tensions that are subtly evinced in his novels in general, and *The Solid Mandala* in particular. The tension between tradition – be it familial or literary – and the proclivities of his individual talent that consciously strove against more rigidly defined horizons of national and literary expectations lead to the paradox of accolades abroad and ambiguity in reception in Australia. *The Solid Mandala* taps in on these ambiguities in its portrayal of the twins – Waldo with his abhorrence of the society in which he lives and fear that it will contaminate his art; Arthur with his love that seeks to open the eyes of people to the potential for redemption and totality.

1.5 QUESTIONS

1. What were the dichotomous pulls that were in play during the formative years of Patrick White the novelist that have a bearing on *The Solid Mandala*?
2. Discuss what you think of some of the positions that have been taken to account for White's paradoxical reception in Australia.
3. Give a brief analysis of the structural and narrative paradoxes in *The Solid Mandala*.

1.6 GLOSSARY

Antipodean margin:	Parts of the British Empire on the opposite side of the earth, used to refer to New Zealand and Australia
Black comedy:	A type of comedy that employs black, cynical or wry humour
Colonial centre:	The centre of colonial power, England
Denouement:	The outcome or unraveling of the plot of a narrative
Dialectic:	Oppositional ideas or that pervade and unify an argument, work or system
Dingoes:	Australian wild dogs, used here metaphorically
Expository section:	The initial part of a literary work that explains the situation at the beginning of the narrative action or establishes the context for the action
Jackeroo:	Colloquial Australian term for a man arrived from England to gain experience in the bush often as a novice at a sheep or cattle station
Jungian framework:	A psychoanalytical framework of criticism that places emphasis on how a work embodies archetypes, the collective unconscious and the spirit of the age

Kitchen-sink realism:	A genre of realism that focuses on the mundane realities of daily existence, having as its setting areas in the home, often the kitchen
Liminality:	The state of being on the border of two conditions and as a result not fully a part of either
Outback:	The sparsely settled flat arid inland area of Australia
Pom:	A derogatory term for an immigrant from Britain still snobbishly clinging to the cultural values of the mother country
The bush:	The Australian wilderness raised to the status of a national myth related to the pioneering ethos of British settlement on the Australian continent
Zeitgeist:	The spirit of an age or the trend of thought and feeling in a period

1.7 REFERENCES

- Barnes, John. 'Introduction' in *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*. Edited by R.E. Shepherd and Kirpal Singh. Adelaide: Flinders University Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978. p 1-4.
- Craven, Peter. 'Australia' in *The Oxford Guide to Contemporary Writing*. Edited by John Sturrock. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. p39-50.
- Driesen, Cynthia Vanden. 'The Artist and Society: Jung and Patrick White' in *Australian Literature Today*. Edited by R.K. Dhawan and David Kerr. Delhi: Indian Society for Commonwealth Studies, 1993. p 19-132.
- Dutton, Geoffrey. *Patrick White*. Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1962.
- Goodwin, Ken. *A History of Australian Literature*. London: Macmillan, 1986.
- Herring, Thelma. 'Self and Shadow: The Quest for Totality in *The Solid Mandala*' in *Ten Essays on Patrick White Selected from Southerly (1964-1967)*. Edited by G.A. Wilkes. Sydney and London: Angus and Robertson. 1970. p72-82.
- Jones, Joseph. *Patrick White*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983.
- Joyce, Clayton ed.. *Patrick White: A Tribute*. North Ryde: Angus and Robertson, 1991.
- Singh, Kirpal. 'Patrick White: An Outsider's View' in *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*. Edited by R.E. Shepherd and Kirpal Singh. Adelaide: Flinders University Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978. p117-122.
- Walsh, William. *Patrick White's Fiction*. Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1977.
- White, Patrick. *Flaws in the Glass: A Self-Portrait*. New York: Viking Press, 1981.
- White, Patrick. *Patrick White Speaks*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1990.

UNIT 2 OPENINGS AND PREOCCUPATIONS

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Opening Gestures
- 2.2 Thematic Preoccupations
- 2.3 A Sense of Place
- 2.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.5 Questions
- 2.6 Glossary
- 2.7 References

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This section attempts to suggest the significance of the epigraphs to the text and briefly go over some of the themes evolved in the text. It also looks at the way Sarsaparilla is evoked as a setting to the text's themes and narratives. The aim is to introduce you to some of the textual frames of reference relevant to making a reading of *The Solid Mandala*.

2.1 OPENING GESTURES

Patrick White places four epigraphs as pointers to chart the course the narrative will take en route its odyssey of exploration. All four of them weave together a similar thread of thought. They are the opening notes to a concerto of the soul that sees the possibility of mandalic totality in putatively mundane marbles, and intimations of salvation in a supposed simpleton. Below I have juxtaposed the epigraphs and some of the observations they have evoked to help you capture the ambience White wished to evoke at the threshold to *The Solid Mandala*.

There is another world, but it is in this one
Paul Eluard

"Patrick White is pre-eminently a novelist of consciousness. Whatever the archetypal metaphors of the unconscious, whatever the structures of image, symbol or theme from which he or his critics might claim his novels are constructed, they find their meanings outside these closed systems - in the world. The epigraph to *The Solid Mandala* - "There is another world, but it is in this one" - does not necessarily mean that there is some magic or archetypal or even unconscious reality behind these appearances. All possible worlds are immanent to consciousness" (Ashcroft, 124).

"The essential insight, without which all endeavour will be in vain, is that the metaphysical is recognized as illusory. There is no "other world", "no beyond", no "real" world: the "apparent world", our world, transitory, meaningless, continually becoming, never reposing in being, is the only world. ... White's elected characters act out White's struggle to find transcendence which occurs within the world....The god that Arthur sees is...in the world" (McCulloch, 32-33).

It is not outside, it is inside: wholly within.
Meister Eckhart

"A whole universe is summoned up in the novel's slim beginning, a world which includes the clotted paddocks of Terminus Row, and the world in which people lived, belonged to Fellowships and Lodges, and are not afraid of electric gadgets. That world is the context for the tragedy of the Browns, parents and children, which is itself a comment on the words of Meister Eckhart quoted as an epigraph, 'It is not outside, it is inside: wholly within'" (Walsh, 86).

*... yet still I long
for my twin in the sun...*
Patrick Anderson

"*The Solid Mandala* dramatizes a search for Divinity in the art form itself; it is a quest for wholeness which seeks to contain an energy or power that may ultimately give expression to another world that White perceives as being "inside" and "wholly within" the visible one" (McCulloch, 27). According to McCulloch, the novel postulates "the question of whether or not art is able to constitute the religious activity of man" and that White envisages the "pursuit of the perfect art form, in quest of the marriage between Apollo and Dionysos ("...yet still I long for my twin in the sun")" (McCulloch, 28).

*It was an old and rather poor church, many of the
ikons were without settings, but such churches are
the best for praying in.*
Dostoyevsky

Carolyn Bliss posits that in the denouement Arthur becomes a type of Christ-figure. This motif is gradually built up in the text with references to 'The Grand Inquisitor' and the central finale of Arthur's mandala dance that reenacts the Passion of Christ. "Subsequently, he sets Waldo's death on a Thursday and Arthur's reappearance at Mrs. Poulter's on the Saturday. Thus Arthur is absent for the traditional three days, although the timetable of the Passion has been slightly skewed" (Bliss, 112). Bliss reads echoes of the epigraph from Dostoyevsky into the evocation of the police sergeant's memories "of a boyhood smell of cold, almost deserted churches, and old people rising transparent and hopeful, chafing the blood back into their flesh after the sacrament" (313).

2.2 THEMATIC PREOCCUPATIONS

The Solid Mandala, is densely overlaid with thematic interpretations and readings of the narrative. Most of these themes are textually worked out through the twins, Waldo and Arthur. As a result, much overlapping of thematic possibilities takes place. As a framework to explore the possibilities this novel lays open, several of the thematic preoccupations of this novel have been listed. It is for you to add to or take away from this list as your own reading breathes life into this thematic skeleton and fills it out with the flesh and blood of the character's actions and thoughts.

- **The human sense of isolation and the search for meaning.** This constitutes an abiding thematic concern in White's oeuvre. Waldo and Arthur embody an almost Nietzschean theme of the lonely agnostic's agonized quest for the capacity of insight into the very nature of things. Waldo's futile struggle to exert his sense of identity leads him further and further along the path of alienated isolation. Arthur takes up the pursuit of meaning against the enervating rationalism of his family and reaches for a greater understanding of mankind, the nature of existence, pain and totality. He manifests a longing for truths beyond material knowledge - the nature of redemption, the large meaning and design of life. The semi-mystical vortex of the narrative

climaxes at a final epiphany that leaves them both tormented by their vision and humanity.

- **The malaise of empty materialism.** Emotional incapacity, unrequited desire, spiritual numbness, an analysis of social pretensions, the startling human capacity for savagery and hollow narcissism are thematically explored through Waldo and other denizens of Sarsaparilla. Thelma Herring comments about White, "He is still concerned with the necessity for love and humility in human relationships, with the inadequacy of reason and the superiority of the mystic's intuition of reality, but the division into the elect and the damned no longer seems so drastic" (Herring, 72). This is especially seen through White's portrayal of Mrs. Poulter who inhabits the spheres of the enlightened Arthur, as well as the narrowly materialistic and judgmental spheres of Mrs. Dun and her husband. However, McCulloch is of the opinion that the divisions are clearly marked especially in the case of the two protagonists. "Arthur is presented as authentic man, that is archetypal man cleansed of the illusion of culture. He is more truthful than Waldo who represents civilized man. The contrast between the truth of nature and the pretentious lie of civilization can exist as an analogy of contrast between the eternal core of things, and the phenomenal world" (McCulloch, 34)
- **Religion.** "Religion. Yes, that's behind all my books.", averred Patrick White, "What I'm interested in is the relationship between the blundering human being and God.... I think there is a Divine Power, a Creator who has an influence on human beings if they are willing to open up to him" (McGregor, 218). In a letter to Beatson, White explained, "I suppose what I am increasingly trying to do in my books is to give professed unbelievers glimpses of their own unprofessed factor. I believe most people have a religious factor, but are afraid that by admitting it they will forfeit their right to be considered intellectuals" (Beatson, 167). He adds elsewhere, "In my books I have lifted bits from various religions in trying to come to a better understanding; I've made use of religious themes and symbols. Now, as the world becomes more pagan, one has to lead people in the same direction in a different way" (1990, 19). *The Solid Mandala* is suffused with a confluence of religious motifs drawn from across the spectrum of Oriental tantric mandalas to Occidental allusions to Judeo-Christianity. This theme of religious responsibility is played out in the relationship between the two brothers. "White works out an intimate connection of transcendental and rationalistic attitudes in the twins Arthur and Waldo. The intimacy and inescapability of the relationship between them produces a constant and destructive collision of viewpoints, and confronts Arthur again and again with his responsibility toward a temperament hostile to the values his mysticism has led him to cherish. He cannot voluntarily renounce his brother ...because he has not voluntarily taken him on. And it is from this agonizing, tense contiguity of opposites that the book derives part of its disturbing power" (Edgecombe, 62).
- **Failure.** This theme manifests itself variously – as Waldo's sense of failure as a writer, his failure to win Dulcie – quotidian and worldly failure. To this Carolyn Bliss adds, "The failure of love to be strong enough to save is a familiar vehicle for the theme of failure in Patrick White's fiction" (Bliss, 110). Arthur feels this sense of failure when he finds his love fails to integrate Waldo fully into the mandalic dance, to negate the consuming power of Waldo's hatred – spiritual and cosmic failure. White's preoccupation with failure as a theme draws on his belief that, "The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming" (in Joyce, 47).

- **Literary creation.** "The recurring subject in *The Solid Mandala* is literary creation. Arthur's experiences are an enactment of life's essence, its joy and its suffering which ideally could be the source of Waldo's creative literary capacities. But Waldo turns from the source and is left with dry empty form" (McCulloch, 30). McCulloch sees the novel as using Waldo and Arthur as "plausible embodiments of the Apollonian and Dionysian duality" (McCulloch, 28) where Apollo is the god of individuation, dream and illusion, and Dionysos is the god of intoxication and the forces of nature. He goes on, "Waldo is potentially the provider of Apollonian form. Arthur is the source, the wild inebriated Dionysian force that requires form. Waldo must accept Arthur's love, his source, before he can create and become one with the universe. The goal is unity" (McCulloch, 28).

2.3 A SENSE OF PLACE

The imaginary suburbs of Sarsaparilla, which appears also in *Riders in the Chariot* written just before the *The Solid Mandala*, acquire the status of the fictional landscape of Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, Joyce's Dublin, Hardy's Wessex or Arundhati Roy's Ayemenem. The role of the everyday folk in Sarsaparilla, like Mr. Poulter or Mrs. Dun, is to represent the dull, commonplace, ignorant averageness that made for 'the Great Australian Emptiness' as White saw it. Sarsaparilla inscapes or captures the sterility and materialism of White's vision of a spiritual wasteland. According to Ken Goodwin, the place is modeled on the Castle Hill suburb, which used to be the home of White and Lascaris before they moved to the heart of the city (Goodwin, 169).

When the narrative opens it is in a "a place once a village now a suburb, in which the remnants of the country die in the suburban landscape" (Walsh, 85). In this mildly caustic idyll of suburban life, Australia is center stage. The larger world impinges in the form of the Jewish question and the allusions to the World War and the holocaust. But these are worked into the lives of the Brown brothers in such a way as to condense the macrocosmic upheavals – such as the holocaust or the Peace – into the microcosms of their personal failures, tragedies of rejection or acceptance. The narrative keeps them within the perspective of the lives of the twins. The Jewish question becomes coalesced with attempts to establish a relationship with Dulcie Feinstein, and the end of the Second World War is marked for both brothers by encounters with prostitutes.

According to Walsh, White evokes "not only the exact registration of the physical appearance of the place, but also a sense of the community's reaction, its ethos and feeling. There is a considerable stress on the rougher and more abrasive elements of Australian common life. The names of the people and places, for example, are redolent of a kind of truculent glumness: Wally Pugh, Mrs. Purves, Mrs. Musto, Mrs. Mutton, Norm Croucher, the dogs Scruffy and Runt, O'Halloran Road, Ada Avenue, Sarsaparilla, Barranugli, Shadbolt Lane, Gippa Gunyan, Mungindribble. The ugliness these names stand for is confirmed by the half aggressive idiom which is the common idiom of communication and the two together convey, negatively and positively, the feeling of a society which is both traditionally and visually uneducated, and possessed of an openness and freedom untrammelled by the weight of an oppressive inheritance" (Walsh, 88). As Mr. Brown said once to Waldo and Arthur, 'There's too much you boys, reared in the light of an empty country, will never understand. There aren't any shadows in Australia. Or discipline. Every man jack can do what he likes' (161).

Sarsaparilla is debunked in the final section when the modern idea of comfort and material progress in the suburbs is reduced to "the electricity...the phone...the electric frying-pan...the telly"(295). It's a closed world, where human relationships

become just habits and the television is a substitute for friends. Mrs. Poulter muses, "If she didn't have any friends without the ones she yarned with over fences, in buses, or the street, she didn't need any. She had the telly, the nice announcers, and world figures in your own lounge. She could afford to mind her own business, without Mrs. Dun reminding her of it"(295). The outer socio-political reality barely impinges on this microcosm of self-complacent containment. The real world is transformed into a hyperreal source of diversion from moments of unpleasantness in local life – for example when Mrs. Poulter's pigs are butchered. Mrs. Poulter waited most for "the real programmes, when they let off one of the bombs, or an aeroplane caught fire at the moment of crashing, or those guerillas they'd collared, of course they were only Orientals, and once it showed you the bodies they'd shot....the news items so real, you only sometimes overheard the squeals of a stuck and bleeding pig"(299). Only after she sees the dead and mutilated Waldo, at the end of the narrative, do these become realities she can connect with; even if in her imagination they metamorphosize into a kind of armageddon. "She knew now. All the films, all the telly, all the black-and-white of the papers was turning real, as the great clouds, the great tanks, ground up groaning over Sarsaparilla....Hope was faint. She knew now. The flat faces of all those Chinese guerillas or Indonesians, it was the same thing, dragged out across the dreadful screen. All those Jews in ovens, that was long ago, but still burning, lying in heaps. Lone women bashed up in Mosman, Marouba, Randwick, places you went only in your sleep"(302).

Veena Noble suggests that "Perhaps the most common theme of Australian literature is the lack of intensity, passion and spiritual consciousness in middle-class life"(Noble, 31). However, this is a theme that has begun to wear thin and sit uneasily with an Australian audience. Adrian Mitchell traces this phenomenon with reference to "that collective state of mind or mindlessness, called Sarsaparilla. When White first began writing of this social territory, his readers shared his savage delight as he slashed his way through the values, the speech patterns, the affectations of mid-suburban Australia. The consensus is that he was wickedly accurate. He had the mannerisms down...and he knew just how to expose the private vulgarities. The public vulgarities were easy game....He had discovered the subtleties of the demotic, he knew the vulnerable spots...he understood the true function of gossip in a social group, the definitions that small talk established.... Sarsaparilla has become a convention"(Mitchell, 14-5). While admitting that White's work has put Australian literature on the world map, Kirpal Singh says that he would not add "that White's work gives us the Australian character or, indeed, is even a representative of Australian society! Even Sarsaparilla which appears to be firmly located as some recognisably Australian suburb could just as well have been situated in any of the big European cities. Subtle nuances and cadences aside, there is nothing particularly Australian in an ethos whose chief characteristics are a vulgarity of living and an emptiness of soul"(Singh, 119).

2.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have been given a textual frame of reference within which *The Solid Mandala* can be approached. The epigraphs point towards the leitmotif of a spiritual quest within the quotidian and the themes play upon variations of this leitmotif. The wasteland-like setting against which this narrative is plotted, however, has been a site of criticism of White's vision and presentation of Australia.

2.5 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the significance of the epigraphs to the main narrative.
2. Elaborate on the thematic strands that frame the characters of the twins.

3. Discuss White's comment on the effectiveness of evocation of Sarsaparilla.

2.6 GLOSSARY

Apollo:	God of music and light in classical mythology; the symbol of reason and culture manifested in writing as a serene orderly quality
Archetypal:	Referring to the concept of recurring archetypes or cross-cultural images, figures or narrative patterns that reflect the collective unconscious
Contiguity:	The relation of belonging to the same or associated group
Dionysos:	God of wine and revelry; signifying impulsiveness, irrationality and passion in writing
Hyperreal:	A term used by Baudrillard to speak of a condition in which the distinctions between real and imagined, reality and illusion are eroded
Leitmotif:	Recurring image that subtly unifies a text
Oriental tantric mandalas:	Symbols of auspicious wholeness in tantric oriental belief systems such as Buddhism and forms of tantric yoga
Passion of Christ:	Suffering of Jesus Christ after the Last Supper and during the Crucifixion

2.7 REFERENCES

- Ashcroft, W.D.. 'More Than One Horizon' in *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*. Edited by R.E. Shepherd and Kirpal Singh. Adelaide: Flinders University Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978. p 123-134.
- Beatson, Peter. *The Eye in the Mandala: Patrick White: A Vision of Man and God*. London: Paul Elek, 1976.
- Bliss, Carolyn. *Patrick White's Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure*. London: Macmillan, 1986.
- Edgecombe, Rodney Stenning. *Vision and Style in Patrick White: A Study of Five Novels*. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1989.
- Goodwin, Ken. *A History of Australian Literature*. London: Macmillan, 1986.
- Herring, Thelma. 'Self and Shadow: The Quest for Totality in *The Solid Mandala*' in *Ten Essays on Patrick White Selected from Southerly (1964-1967)*. Edited by G.A. Wilkes. Sydney and London: Angus and Robertson, 1970. p72-82.
- Joyce, Clayton ed.. *Patrick White: A Tribute*. North Ryde: Angus and Robertson, 1991.

McCulloch, A.M. *A Tragic Vision: The Novels of Patrick White*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983.

McGregor, Craig ed. *In the Making*. Melbourne: Nelson, 1969.

Mitchell, Adrian. 'Eventually, White's Language: Words and More than Words' in *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*. Edited by R.E. Shepherd and Kirpal Singh. Adelaide: Flinders University Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978. p 5-16.

Morley, Patricia. *Mystery of Unity: Theme and Technique in the Novels of Patrick White*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1972.

Noble, Veena. 'A Study of the Hermaphroditic Element in Patrick White's *The Solid Mandala*' in *Australian and Indian Literature: Studies in Mutual Response*. Edited by D. Kerr and R.K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Indian Society for Commonwealth Studies, 1991. p 30-35.

Singh, Kirpal. 'Patrick White: An Outsider's View' in *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*. Edited by R.E. Shepherd and Kirpal Singh. Adelaide: Flinders University Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978. p117-122.

Walsh, William. *Patrick White's Fiction*. Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1977.

White, Patrick. *Patrick White Speaks*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1990.

UNIT 3 DENIZENS OF THE AUSTRALIAN EMPTINESS

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Characterization
- 3.2 The Core of Reality
 - 3.2.1 Waldo
 - 3.2.2 Arthur
- 3.3 Circles of Existence
 - 3.3.1 The Inner Circle
 - 3.3.2 The Outer Circle
- 3.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.5 Questions
- 3.6 Glossary
- 3.7 References

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This section will look at some of the premises and practices that underlie White's mode of characterization on a theoretical and pragmatic level. It will also deal with some critical perspectives on White's techniques of characterization and the characters in *The Solid Mandala*. The delineation of characters in the novel will be examined at length.

3.1 CHARACTERIZATION

"Characters interest me more than situations. I don't think any of my books have what you call plots.... I always think of my novels as being the lives of the characters. I have the same idea with all my books: an attempt to come close to the core of reality, the structure of reality, as opposed to the merely superficial. The realistic novel is remote from art. A novel should heighten life, should give one an illuminating experience; it shouldn't set out what you already know."(1990: 21)

In 'The Prodigal Son' while Patrick White decried "the Great Australian Emptiness", he explains that it "was the exaltation of the 'average' that made" him panic and feel impelled to write. So when he began writing his next novel, *The Tree of Man*, his mode of characterization drew on an epistemological stance with reverberations of the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*. "Because the void I had to fill was so immense, I wanted to suggest...every possible aspect of life, through the lives of an ordinary man and woman. But at the same time I wanted to discover the extraordinary behind the ordinary, the mystery and poetry which alone could make bearable the lives of such people"(1990: 15). He concluded the auto-biographical piece he did on the occasion of the Nobel Prize with the words, "Here I hope to continue living, and while I still have the strength, to people the Australian emptiness in the only way I am able"(1990: 44).

This aspect of White's characterization holds true also for *The Solid Mandala*. The Brown brothers, on the surface of it, are far from extraordinary. And it is this almost nondescript aspect of the brothers that White first presents to the readers in the opening section of the book, where they are apprehended through the eyes of an

'average' suburbanite, Mrs. Dun. The central sections unfold the interior drama of their lives, paradoxically plumbing the mystic depths of Arthur who to an outsider's perspectives seems well below 'average'. Yet it is he who is "the keeper of mandalas"(240).

This is a paradox – of extraordinary ordinariness – that Adrian Mitchell too notes. "White's characters are an extraordinary set of figures, not at all (initially) prepossessing. Most of them ...are awkward, angular, uncomfortable, brittle, though some of the lesser figures may be big, billowy, wheezy...". Mitchell however penetrates this surface reality to ascertain the way character functions in White's novels and comes up with some interesting observations. "My interest is in the nature of character in White's novels. Character, as I read it there, is a "given"; it is fixed right from the beginning. There isn't change in character itself, but change in understanding. The protagonist discovers by painful experience something about the nature and extent of his spiritual resources....But the character of the protagonist does not in itself change. ...Arthur and Waldo Brown dance around each other; they don't evolve, they revolve. White...conceals a relatively simple sense of character within the complexity of his patterns of symbols and metaphors, the literary allusions and the enigma of his mandalas"(Mitchell, 6-8).

Mitchell argues that because of this static characterization, the visionary status of his illuminati or enlightened characters becomes just a verbal artifact. Spiritual perception is rarely reciprocated or acted upon, according to him. "Mrs. Poulter appears to understand Arthur's dance, but that is something we have to take on trust because it doesn't seem to accomplish much. Unless to say that Arthur is sometimes comprehensible. *The Solid Mandala* (1966) measures not only the difference between the twin's knowledge of each other, but perhaps too easily sets up the inadequacy of Waldo's knowledge, the misunderstanding that his kind of intelligence precipitates" (Mitchell, 9). Continuing about White's mode of presentation of his characters Mitchell notes, "We discover that beyond what we might call the poetic excitement of these privileged moments of perception, White will frequently insert his moral visions into the fabric of the story, to explain what the characters cannot explain. Their visions ultimately lack conviction, because they can only be communicated by assertion"(10).

Others too have commented on the forced nature of White's characterization. "His novels tend to move from outer reality into the disturbed or fragmented mind (a process influenced in later works to some extent by his reading of Jung), and, for a few central characters, the unsuccessful spiritual impulse to understanding. Despite the jerkiness of parts of the narrative, the thematic construction is always carefully molded, sometimes seeming to be imposed on the characters irrespective of their natures"(Goodwin, 167). One major reason for this is that the dramatis personae have to function humanly as well as symbolically. Besides which, narrative is filtered through the minds of characters revealing their nature. While Kirpal Singh agrees that White's characters seem "flat, pre-fixed and pre-determined to act out a certain sequence of events" he places this within the classical Aristotelian frame of reference where action has precedence over character. "Like the tragic heroes of ancient Greeks, White's protagonists are consistently exploring and bursting through their hubris to arrive at a newer, fuller, richer, revelation of themselves"(Singh, 120).

3.2 THE CORE OF REALITY

3.2.1 Waldo

Born with his innards twisted, Waldo is emblemized by the taw with a knot at the centre. Tense and rigid, he is an involuted misanthrope marked by a self-enclosed fastidious disgust for people and things. He rejects love and relationships as a sort of threat to his personal identity as a potential artist. Besides a guilt-ridden obsession for

the necessity of loneliness, he is unwilling to yield to sensuousness. His is a retreat into isolation. His powerful egocentricity is not open to compassionate treatment. In the end there is no redemptive transfiguration for him. He strives towards an indelible individuality but ends up with obscurity. His self-limited interest makes him remote and self-absorbed, even callous. "Waldo carries this fierce sense of his own identity and his resistance to the intrusion of others to a point where it is pathological and, since it is invariably connected with self-love, evil. ...he is a spiritual and emotional solipsist. Life and experience seem to him a violation of his enclosed perfection, an assault on his privacy"(Walsh, 93). Moreover, Waldo is even as a youth aware of the malaise that condemns him to anomie. The narrative voice in the novel reveals, "On the whole, though he would only have confessed it to himself, he did not understand people, except those he created by his own imagining. If it hadn't been for his own visions he might have felt desperate"(98).

He resents, but is sustained by his bondage to Arthur. Putatively superior, he fails and ends his life hating Arthur, his only contact with real life. He and Arthur are presented in Manichean opposition. Waldo's is a quest for personal identity while Arthur's is for insight into the very nature of being. Waldo's ego imprisons the spiritual sense as materialism can do. His relationships breed frustration and a sense of inadequacy. Arthur with his open display of affection, his intuitive irrationalism is a constant repudiation of his failure. "Waldo is disappointed in love and in authorship and is increasingly resentful of his half-witted, incomprehensible brother" (Goodwin, 173).

Waldo's rationalist approach to life was a legacy his parents had left him. "Waldo had not been taught to pray, because, said Mother, everything depends on your will, it would be foolishness to expect anything else, we can achieve what we want if we are determined, if we are confident that we are strong"(77). As a substitute to the apotheosis of a transcendent entity, Waldo places himself on an imaginary pedestal and from his vantagepoint presumes to look down on all else. "If any, his religion had become a cultivation of personal detachment, of complete transparency – he was not prepared to think emptiness – of mind. In this way he suffered no immediate hurt"(177).

He had a taste for the intellectual life and had literary aspirations. His fragmentary attempt at writing a novel - *Tiresias a Youngish Man* - became the stigma of his anemic sterility. "I want to, and am going to write about myself"(94) he wants to tell Dulcie when she enquires about his writing. His writing achievements include several articles, a fragment of a novel, membership of the Fellowship of Australian Writers, and reading a paper on Barron Field to the Beecroft Literary Society. In old age he imagines that a fragment of Tennyson's "Fatima" that he has copied out, is the product of his own muse. "Waldo is the sterile artist without a source, without connection to the source of life. He is a representative of twentieth century intellectual man who has cut himself off from love and the mystery of the universe"(McCulloch, 50).

McCulloch points out how Waldo's relationship with his brother is paradoxical. Waldo's need, hatred, love and jealousy of Arthur distort and twist his perspective of the world. Superficially, he lives and acts out a life nourished by the belief that Arthur is an idiot, an inferior being. But the closeness he has with Arthur draws out from within him admissions: "Perhaps he dreaded Arthur most of all, because of something Arthur might tell him one day"(167) (McCulloch, 40). Even Waldo muses at the ineffable and yet inextricable interpenetration of their existence; "With Arthur it was different. There was no escaping Arthur. At best he became the sound of your own breathing, his silences sometimes consoled....Life as he began in time to see it, is the twin consciousness, jostling you, hindering you, but with which at unexpected moments, it is possible to communicate in ways both animal and delicate"(76). Arthur would remain an inescapable taunt to Waldo's very existence. "He has hated Arthur for everything he is: for his ability to love people, for his capacity for

experiencing, for his insight into the truth of things, for his appearance, and most of all for the fact of his existence" (McCulloch, 52).

Narcissism and insensitivity become a response to Waldo's failure to love. The fullest expression of his self to the world is consequently superficial and egocentric. His self-absorbed belief in his greatness leaves him in silent competition with Arthur. "Waldo didn't believe it was possible to have more than one genius around"(35). When Mrs. Brown doesn't allow Waldo to squeeze the butter and knead the dough because Arthur has according to her "a particular gift for it", Waldo is piqued, all the more so, when Arthur calls these homely occupations his "vocation".

"Waldo was more jealous of that word than he was of Arthur's privilege. He wondered where he had got it from. Because words are not Arthur's line. It was Waldo who collected them, like stamps or coins. He made lists of them. He rolled them in his mouth like polished stones. Then Arthur went and sprang this vocation thing of his."(35-6)

This jealousy also manifests itself as a defense to keep a part of him inviolate. When Arthur asks him if he can act in Waldo's play, Waldo refuses. He realizes his creative life "was something he could not bear to share with his brother, whose breathing he used to listen to whenever he woke in the night, the brother who looked almost right inside him when they opened their eyes on twin pillows in the morning"(39). This resentment ossifies into hatred as the fear of being upstaged resurfaces when he finds Dulcie and Arthur together, finds Arthur reading *The Brothers Karamazov* in the library and reads Arthur's poem. It envelops him in hatred. "He hated his brother Arthur, although, or perhaps because, Arthur was the thread of continuity, and might even be the core of truth"(186-7).

"Waldo's is a polished, metallic surface, impermeable to others, whether in the community or the family"(Walsh, 93). He can't commune with his father, "Sitting in the train Waldo suddenly looked straight into his father's face....Waldo might have leant back to continue the escape he had made, if his clothes tightening hadn't constrained him, together with the fear that freedom might be the equivalent of isolation. So that in the end he would have liked to touch his father's goodness, but could only be touched by it"(79). Similarly, "Mrs. Poulter was one of the fifty-seven things and persons Waldo hated"(58). His passionate loathing becomes in White's prose a laughably precise and constrictive tabulation that lumps inanimate things and people in a way that imbues the comic with pathos. Even his curious relationship with Arthur as a child was half histrionic, half natural - "So they moved through the landscape of boyhood, two figures seen at a distance, or too close up... he learned to give them what they wanted. Occasionally, in passing, after returning the scones to the table, he would very carefully brush the crumbs which had fallen on Arthur's knees, with a candid though ostentatious charity which moved the observer - as well as the performer"(75-6). Even when he contemplates marriage to Dulcie just prior to anticlimactically finding her with Arthur, he figures most prominently in his considerations:

Waldo went over the way in which he would benefit by marriage with Dulcie. On the financial side they might have to skimp a bit at first, because he would refuse to touch anything Dulcie brought with her until he proved himself as a husband. Nobody would be in a position to say theirs was not an idealistic marriage....Then the home. Undoubtedly he would benefit by having a home of his own. A bed to himself....But it was his work which would benefit most. The atmosphere in which to evolve a style. The novel of psychological relationships in a family, based on his own experience for truth, illuminated by what his imagination would infuse. One of the first things he intended to do was buy a filing cabinet to install in his study. (149-150)

- his colleagues - Miss Glasson, Cornelius and Parslow - at the library too are repulsed
- as he keeps up the pretense that marks the dichotomy of his split existence:

Denizens of the Australian Emptiness

Because Mr. Brown of the intellectual breathers in the Botanic Gardens must never be confused with the subfusc, almost abstract figure, living on top of a clogged greasetrap, and the moment of creative explosion, under the arches of yellow grass, down Terminus Road. Waldo Brown, in whom these two phenomena met on slightly uneasy terms... looking out from behind his barricade of words and perceptions... his less approachable self....

So Waldo, who was in frequent demand, continued to refuse, on principle, by formula.

To submit himself to the ephemeral, the superficial relationships might damage the crystal core holding itself in reserve for some imminent moment of higher idealism. Just as he had avoided fleshly love - while understanding its algebra, of course - the better to convey eventually its essence. (183)

Thelma Herring feels, "The novelist systematically undermines all Waldo's pretensions, and his final judgement on him, conveyed through the dog's symbolic mutilation of his corpse, could not be harsher: yet the reader who remembers the all-too-human embarrassment of the young Waldo, writhing under the physical protection of his imbecile brother, the diffident warnings of his unworldly father, the patronage of the wealthy Mrs. Musto, is likely to retain for him, even in his desiccated and self-cherishing old age, some grains of sympathy that may soften without fundamentally changing the verdict that White clearly invites us to make" (Herring, 75).

3.2.2 Arthur

The intensity of Arthur's vision creates for him his own mystical drama, until he is lost in its many rich moments. He lives out a vivid individual life. White attempts to show the failure to combine two ways of seeing and hence of life into one complete whole through Arthur and his brother. Failure to reconcile and integrate their differences results in an intense love-hate relationship. Even though the twins are, as the blurb says, "two people living one life. ... They shared everything - except their view of things. Waldo, with his intelligence, saw everything and understood little. Arthur was the fool who didn't bother to look. He understood." Arthur is vignettised as a holy fool that is judged by all, save perhaps Dulcie and Mrs. Poulter, as a madman. Paradoxically, Arthur's outer seeming derangement bespoke of mystical intimation within.

Presented as a sort eccentric seer that sees into the heart of the matter, his inner life merges memory, creative memory and the present in a soft-edged shifting pattern in which the motif of the mandala stands out. His character is developed by sacramental images and sibylline language redolent of a luminous vision. Wordlessly, because he finds that language can be a menace alienating even those whose lives are interwined inextricably.

'Words are not what make you see.'

'I was taught they were,' Waldo answered in hot words.

'I dunno,' Arthur said, 'I forget what I was taught. I only remember what I've learnt.' (56)

He smiled, though for all those pairs of twins with no word between them to express the truth. (280)

But language and its reified form of art do have meaning and immense potential in his schema. During his encounter with a piqued Waldo who feels threatened to see his 'dill' brother at the library encroaching on what he has come to deem his domain

of words, language and literature, Waldo asks in jealous exasperation of Arthur who has been explaining his difficulties with *The Brothers Karamazov*:

What will it do for you? To understand? The Grand Inquisitor?....

'I could help people,' Arthur said, beginning to devour the words. (199)

Knowledge is not a source of self-congratulation or for superior perception for Arthur, but a means of altruism and selflessness, of responsibility. This perception also defines what Arthur considers the purpose of writing and its subjects. When he tells Waldo he should write about Len Saporta the reason he gives is that, "simple people are somehow more...transparent...you can see right into them. Then you can write about them....it doesn't matter what you write about, provided you tell the truth about it"(29). According to Rodney Edgecombe, Arthur's is not an esoteric closed notion of literature like his brother's, but a more mimetic view, utilitarian and socially relevant as opposed to self-justifying culture or egoistically self-expressive aesthetics (Edgecombe, 75).

He seems to be positing a transparent nature in opposition to a nature that contrives to be opaque with screens of privacy and pride. After Waldo's gruesome death, Arthur returns to the Library in the course of his confused ramblings and realizes that life has taught him more than literature can.

he squared his shoulders, he put on the cloak of an air, and swirled inside the Public Library, squelching over the polished rubber, trailing his identity round the room in which he had begun the struggle to find it. If he no longer felt moved to take down a book, it was because in the end knowledge had come to him, not through words, but lightning. (307)

White in *Flaws in the Glass*, admits he has come to believe that truth may be "the property of silence – at any rate the silences filling the space between words", over which he only "sometimes" has control (1981: 42).

Through understanding and identifying with others he shows a capacity to love which is not mawkish as the hieratic elements in his character are emphasized. The spontaneous and unaffected profound inner tranquility of the supposed 'imbecile' rejoices in the palpable actuality of common life and communicates the intimations of other realities which lie locked within quotidian experience. William Walsh notes that the societal response to Arthur's simplemindedness, varies between the horror of worried parents when Arthur is young – 'I warn yer, Mr. Brown,' Mr. Haynes was saying, and his usually jolly chins were compressed, "you'll have to restrain him. Yer don't realise a big lump of a boy like that can turn violent. In his condition. It's hard, I know, for the parents to see.'(47) – to the exaggerated bonhomie of the men hiding their embarrassment at the Speedex Service Station when Arthur is old – 'Hi, mate! Hi, Arthur! How's the Brown Bomb?'(59)(Walsh, 88-89). Arthur has as his creed the trust of everyday tangibles:

Arthur eventually added Mr. Allwright to what he knew as truest: to grain in wood, to bread broken roughly open, to cow-pats, neatly freshly dropped. If he did not add Mrs. Allwright it was because she did not fit into that same world of objects, she never became distinct, she was all ideas, plots and tempers. In myth of life, he never ever took to Hera. (227)

His is the arena of simple, down-to-earth practical abilities – milking the cow, making bread, and enjoying his work as a delivery boy with the Allwrights. He is good with animals, has a prodigious gift for sums, an openness and unaffected candor which enamour him to Dulcie Feinstein, Mrs. Poulter and his mother. He empathizes and emotes with others genuinely. William Walsh comments, "Arthur passes almost effortlessly into the lives and feelings of others, but he is entranced by the images of

these as he is infatuated with the glints and clouds and lights in his glass marbles”(Walsh, 92-3).

Denizens of the Australian Emptiness

Ken Goodwin feels that Waldo’s “sterile, jaundiced view of life is balanced by Arthur’s. Confused and inarticulate, he nevertheless has a radiant goodness and insight that are represented by his four mandala-like marbles. He realizes that most of those around him cannot appreciate them or their meaning, that ‘It was himself who was and would remain, the keeper of the mandalas, who must guess their final secret through touch and light.’ The struggle to guess their meaning is symbolized by the ‘red gold disc of the sun’, which he strives to hold, but also by the icebergs, that ‘moaned and jostled one another, crunching and tinkling... to splinter into glass balls which he gathered in his protected hands’” (Goodwin, 173). Arthur’s solid mandala is a symbol or image for his insight and need for an encompassing totality. Walsh remarks, “Arthur contemplates his marble almost in a religious sense, seeing in it mysteries, realities, symbols and significances – an endless range of reality enclosed in a miniature universe”(Walsh, 92).

After seeing a performance of *Gottterdammerung*, he wonders “Who and where are the gods? He could not have told, but knew, in his flooded depths”(217). The question of god is one of the thematic preoccupations of the book worked out extensively through the persona of Arthur at several narrative junctures. Thelma Herring notes, “Brought up by parents who are conscientious unbelievers, Arthur is untroubled by religious questions until in old age he becomes perplexed by the problem of pain and the Christian emphasis on “the blood and the nails”, and begins the search for his identity, which he finds, however, “not through words, but by lightning”. To Dulcie Feinstein, with whom he experiences spiritual union, he is the instrument through whom her dying father is reunited to God; and to Mrs. Poulter...he becomes the object of faith when her God is brought crashing down by the shock of the discovery of Waldo’s defiled body”(Herring, 78). Mrs. Poulter is restating the message of the text’s epigraphs and perhaps of Arthur’s very persona when she declares, “This man would be my saint...if we could still believe in saints. Nowadays...we’ve only men to believe in. I believe in this man”(214). McCulloch concurs, “Arthur the Divine fool, the holy idiot, is developed to bring forth, by means of contrast with Waldo, the concept of the sterility of the intellect when it is divorced from the spirit and from love” (McCulloch, 39).

His faith and love however cannot redeem his alter ego. He realizes, “Waldo had always hated people, but always rather, well, as a joke. Waldo had done his block at Arthur, but always more or less as a brother. Till it was made plain as a bedstead that the life, the sleep they had shared, must have been jingling brassily all those years with the hatred which only finally killed”(305). Waldo’s death is a revelation about their relationship, but it also cuts Arthur loose. “All his family gone, he was threatened with permanent manhood”(306).

McCulloch argues, “It is important to realize that neither Arthur or Waldo can exist as a whole individual without the other. Consequently there is a logical reason for Arthur ending up in a “nut house” at Waldo’s death.... Waldo should not be viewed merely as a character who exists as a contrast to the true seeker, Arthur. It is through the form and structure of “Waldo’s section” that we can understand “Arthur’s section”. Although structured separately the two parts interact, and the interdependence of the two sections reflects the necessary interdependence of the two brothers” (McCulloch, 50).

3.3 CIRCLES OF EXISTENCE

The other denizens in the world of *The Solid Mandala* constitute the web of interactions that frame the lives and thoughts of the Brown brothers. They are

sparingly etched and our perception of them is deeply colored by the personas that filter through the consciousness of the two brothers. White, in this novel, employs a combination of indirect and direct modes of characterization. In the indirect mode of characterization, the traits and thoughts of a character are revealed through an omniscient narrator who seems to have complete access to the thoughts and actions of the character or through what other characters in the novel think or say about the character concerned. In the direct mode of characterization, the reader is allowed to draw his own conclusions from the concerned character's actions and words. Thus the characters are constructed, as much by their actions or words as how those actions are perceived by the slightly veiled omniscient narrator. For the sake of analysis, I have divided some of the remaining characters in the text into two categories – the inner circle of Mrs. Poulter, Mrs. and Mr. Brown who have the most direct contact with the twins; the outer circle of other people who appear in the novel and frame some of its perspectives.

3.3.1 The Inner Circle

Mrs. Poulter is revealed as an ordinary suburban housewife in the first section, 'In the Bus'. Portrayed with a degree of condescension reflected off the perceptions of the supercilious Waldo and patronizing Mrs. Brown in the second section, the final two sections filtered through the consciousness of Arthur and the narrator add dimensions of unsuspected mysticism to her portrayal.

She is initially established as a sympathetic character when she defends the twin brothers from Mrs. Dun's disapproval of their holding hands and Mr. Poulter's denigrating references to them. "Attempts on herself seldom hurt Mrs. Poulter; it was the attacks on other people. The Mister Browns, for instance. Unable to decide how they might be protected she would take them a baked custard. And return the better for it"(18). Though no intellectual, her unaffected simplicity and openness allows her to comfortably talk to and enlighten Arthur. Filtered through the disdainful perspective of Waldo, this translates differently – "Arthur...loved to talk to Mrs. Poulter. He loved to ask her questions, and Mrs. Poulter, curiously enough, although an inalterably stupid creature, usually seemed to find an answer"(61). Thelma Herring comments on the function of such focalization within the text. "That Mrs. Poulter, through her simple humanity that enables her to find answers to Arthur's questions and respond to his goodness with affection, can earn a mandala and burn with Arthur "in a fit of understanding or charity"(p. 310) seems to imply that a measure of illumination is attainable by most people"(Herring, 81).

Her portrayal oscillates between the mundane and the quasi-mystic. She is the lonely, sixty-seven year old housewife "who still liked a bit of colour" and takes great pleasure in her new "watermelon cardigan" (296). When she remembers that she had not seen the Brown brothers, curiosity and subterfuge coalesce in her special brand of good naturedness. "It was a Saturday afternoon, when Mrs. Poulter, trying to mind her own business, failing to outstare the hedge opposite, decided to bake a nice custard. After all, someone could be sick, and the neighbourliness was another thing to curiosity"(301). Thus, it is that she discovers the sordid and mutilated corpse of Waldo which shakes her faith and sense of secure distance.

Until then she had clung to "faith, which her husband Bill didn't altogether approve of, but it was what she was brought up to, if she didn't always understand, but hoped to in time, not through the ministers, she would never of dared ask, but somehow, She had her Lord Jesus"(298). However, after she sees the desecrated Waldo, Armageddon is unleashed and her iconization of Christ is shown to be insubstantial, "And He released His Hand from the nails. And fell down, in a thwack of canvas, a cloud of dust"(303). Arthur becomes the testament of a more vital faith. "Since her Lord and master Jesus had destroyed himself that same day, she had been given this man-child as a token of everlasting life"(312). Her discovery that "we've only men to believe in", echoes the sentiment of the epigraphs to the novel. The novel closes with

her laying out tea for her husband just as it opened with her conversing with her neighbor. However, White reveals that her quotidian reality has changed permanently. – “Then she turned, to do the expected things, before re-entering, her actual sphere of life” (316). Geoffrey Dutton comments “the mandala of wholeness is given to ... Mrs. Poulter at the very end of the book, who performs the ordinary expected things, and then re-enters that inner life which the exterior world cannot destroy” (in Edgecombe, 87).

The parents of the twins are largely narratively mediated by the gossip exchange between Mrs. Poulter and Mrs. Dun in the first section, and then by their sons’ points of view in the central sections. We learn their social value for the gossiping women comes from their being bonafide English in origin – having “come out from Home...when the boys were only bits of kids” (15), – and the material wellbeing indicated by their house having a veranda. The hint of class superiority connoted at by Mr. Brown being a white-collar worker who works at a bank and reads books in his spare time is neutralized for them by Mrs. Poulter’s, “Mr. Brown senior was a gentleman...[b]ut not any better than us” (15). It’s an introduction that tells us as much about the speakers as the spoken.

A shy bookish bank clerk and renegade Baptist, Mr. Brown, is described as a man of principle and kindness by his wife on his demise. He had a taste for, but not the circumstances for an intellectual life. He insists on having a Greek pediment in the classical style on his roof and attempts to learn Norwegian to read Ibsen in the original. The image Waldo paints of him is of a conscientious bank clerk dulled by entrapment in a life of mechanical alienation.

It was, he thought, the occasion of their last visit to the bank as children, that Waldo noticed his father looking out from the cage in which he stood.... Their father’s eyes were brown, which Arthur had inherited. Their father’s stare was at that moment directed outward, and not.... Suddenly his shoulders hunched, to resist it seemed, compression by the narrow cage, his eyes were more deeply concentrated on some invisible point. More distinctly even than the morning he found their father dead Waldo would remember the morning of their last visit to the bank. (54)

The effete and pallid character of Mr. Brown is drawn with a measure of delicate compassion. Enervated he lives a life of silent disappointment and mild self-delusion.

After he retired, Dad would sometimes recall...his escape by way of Intellectual Enlightenment, and the voyage to Australia, ... but in the telling, he would grow darker rather than enlightened, his breathing thicker, clogged with the recurring suspicion that he might be chained still. (145)

Anne Brown, is the product of a colonial upper-class milieu. Mrs. Poulter in describing the Browns says, “Mr. Brown was a good man. Now Mrs. Brown...she was always doing a favour. Even to her husband. She was good too mind you, but she never stopped letting you see she had thrown herself away” (16). Proud of her Quantrell heritage she proves an indelible and mildly baleful influence. Having “Married Beneath Her” (35) she manages to cling to vestiges of bygone days and mores even as she copes with the realities of working class life in Australia. There is in her the aloofness of gentility bruised, a screen for the humiliation of her simpleton son, decline in status and polite poverty. Self-deception is another psychological defense she employs. Waldo recounts, “Mother never grew disappointed to the same extent, because if she wanted to, she could dare the truth to be the truth. For a long time after everyone else realized, she persuaded herself Arthur was some kind of genius waiting to disclose himself. But Dad was not deceived” (35). Even when her husband dies and she has to deign to use Mrs. Poulter’s phone to call the doctor, divested of spontaneity there is sense of put on theatre in her reaction, an emotional legacy she leaves Waldo:

Waldo followed her because she was technically their mother. Whereas their mother crossed Terminus Road because she was their father's widow.

....
'It's my husband, Mrs. Poulter. I should like to ring for the doctor. If you will allow me. Though we must realise nothing can be done.'

Her pure, inherited voice erected a barrier not only between herself and Mrs. Poulter, but those she had conceived in an adulterated tradition. Though Waldo could imitate voices, even adapt himself to situations, if they didn't threaten to extinguish his individuality.... After briefly rehearsing the part, he was running springily in, ignoring Bill Poulter in his own house. (72)

As she aged, sinking into querulous and at times imperious inebriation, the pinched gentility barely softened. Decrepit, in a tipsy moment, she asks Arthur if he feels she has failed him, only to turn back from the moment of revelation. 'No!' she said, quickly in her own defense. 'Don't tell me! Nobody normal ever enjoyed settling their accounts... Nobody likes to be told. That they have got a spot. On their nose. On the night of the ball' (271).

Assessing them William Walsh concludes, "Nourished by the most anaemic of abstractions of high-minded rationalism and genteel socialism the Brown parents live a dumbly desperate life, balancing in the air – just – their hopeless aspirations, their painful memories, their present disappointments, their insoluble problems with the twins. ... Each in his limited way is a good person, each is a failure, each inadequate for the strains put on them" (Walsh, 91).

3.3.2 The Outer Circle

The outer circle of characters in *The Solid Mandala* holds an assortment of people. Most of them are marked as inhabitants of 'the Great Australian Emptiness'. Mrs. Dun's is a mundane existence untouched by the need to seek meaning and vitiated by concerns of society and the flesh. The narrator comments on her relationship with Mrs. Poulter: "The private life of other parties act as the cement of friendship. The Brother's Brown could be about to set the friendship of the friends" (14-15). In the text, she is early established as an unsympathetic character when she disapproves of the Brown brothers holding hands and predicts something horrible will happen. Curiously throughout the opening section, she dwells on the possibility that "they could come and murder you in broad daylight" (14) or that a hedge like the Browns have might be a hindrance "when someone's got you by the throat" (15) almost prefiguring the gory denouement of the narrative.

The pragmatic quotidian existence of Mr. Poulter too eschews the need for seeking deeper meaning in life. He is portrayed as a representative of the phlegmatic dailiness of life. Going by his wife's account, apparently the war changed and hardened him. He describes the brothers as "A couple of no-hopers with ideas about 'emselves" (18). He functions as a foil and context for the delineation of Mrs. Poulter. Just as the Feinsteins, who with their Jewish cultivation and intelligence, allow White to generate superb social comedy from the encounter between the callow twins and the sophisticated but gentle family. Others like Waldo's colleagues at the Municipal Library, the Allwrights who kept the shop Arthur worked in, and the rich eccentric Mrs. Musto form the backdrop of humanity against which Waldo and Arthur are delineated and live out their destinies.

3.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit you have been shown that White's characters function within a narrative paradigm that seeks to rise above realism. As a result, at times they seem flat and

forced by certain modes of critical assessment. This however, can and has been defended by using alternative frames of reference. The narrative agenda to reach at the core of human reality and White's mythopoeic conceptualization of the nature of that core, frame and determine the light in which he depicts his characters, as does the perspective through which they are focalized.

3.5 QUESTIONS

1. What is your assessment of Patrick White's characterization with reference to *The Solid Mandala*?
2. Compare and contrast the characterization of Waldo and Arthur Brown. How does White use his characters as vehicles for the novel's themes?

3.6 GLOSSARY

Armageddon:	A Biblical reference to the scene of the last deciding battle between good and evil
Brothers Karamozov:	The final novel of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, it presents a search for faith, for God as its central idea. The famous 'Legend of the Grand Inquisitor' embodies and dramatizes Ivan's repudiation of God. In <i>The Solid Mandala</i> the novel becomes a signifier of Arthur's ability to appreciate literature of this calibre and the questions it raises
Dill:	Slang for mentally retarded
Götterdämmerung:	A music drama by Wagner, which concludes with the end of the gods being marked by the crashing of the beams and rafters at Walhalla. The drama is used in the novel to bring to the fore Arthur's first inklings of interest in spiritual questions.
Greek pediment:	An ornamental triangular roof structure over a doorway; in the text it is symbolic of Mr. Brown's slightly misplaced taste for what is classical and intellectually superior.
Manichean opposition:	binary opposition between two quantities seen as being in complete contrast to one another
Mythopoeic:	Relating to the creation of myths or a mythic framework for a literary work

3.7 REFERENCES

Ashcroft, W.D., 'More Than One Horizon' in *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*. Edited by R.E. Shepherd and Kirpal Singh. Adelaide: Flinders University Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978. p 123-134.

Bliss, Carolyn. *Patrick White's Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure*. London: Macmillan, 1986.

Craven, Peter. 'Australia' in *The Oxford Guide to Contemporary Writing*. Edited by John Sturrock. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. p39-50.

Dutton, Geoffrey. *Patrick White*. Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1962.

Edgecombe, Rodney Stenning. *Vision and Style in Patrick White: A Study of Five Novels*. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1989.

Goodwin, Ken. *A History of Australian Literature*. London: Macmillan, 1986.

Herring, Thelma. 'Self and Shadow: The Quest for Totality in *The Solid Mandala*' in *Ten Essays on Patrick White Selected from Southerly (1964-1967)*. Edited by G.A. Wilkes. Sydney and London: Angus and Robertson, 1970. p72-82.

Lawson, Alan. *Patrick White*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.

McCulloch, A.M. *A Tragic Vision: The Novels of Patrick White*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983.

McGregor, Craig ed.. *In the Making*. Melbourne: Nelson, 1969.

Mitchell, Adrian. 'Eventually, White's Language: Words and More than Words' in *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*. Edited by R.E. Shepherd and Kirpal Singh. Adelaide: Flinders University Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978. p 5-16.

Singh, Kirpal. 'Patrick White: An Outsider's View' in *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*. Edited by R.E. Shepherd and Kirpal Singh. Adelaide: Flinders University Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978. p117-122.

Walsh, William. *Patrick White's Fiction*. Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1977.

UNIT 4 MESSAGES IN MOTIFS

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Androgyny Motif
- 4.2 Mandala Motif
- 4.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.4 Questions
- 4.5 Glossary
- 4.6 References

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will discuss in detail two motifs that are central to the narrative. It will examine the occurrence in the text of the androgyny and mandala motifs and some implications they have for the interpretation of the novel.

4.1 ADROGyny MOTIF

The allusions to Tiresias and the hermaphrodite Adam are the strongest manifestations of the androgynous figure in the text. A weaker version of this motif is seen in textual representations of transvestitism. "The union of opposites, a distinctive feature of many of White's novels, here takes the image of androgyny, the attraction-repulsion relationship of the twins for each other"(Goodwin, 173). Androgynous figures in the novel can be read as symbols of wholeness and inextricable connection.

When Mr. Brown asks the young Arthur if there is "any character, any incident, that appeals" to him from his reading of Greek Myths, Arthur answers 'Tiresias' but knows he can not explain the full intensity of his feelings.

They would laugh to be told how shocked he was for Tiresias when Zeus took away his sight at the age of seven – *seven* – for telling people things they shouldn't know. So Arthur kept quiet. He was only surprised they didn't notice how obviously his heart was beating when Zeus rewarded Tiresias with the gift of prophesy and a life seven times as long as the lives of ordinary men. Then there was that other bit, about being changed into a woman, if only for a short time. Time enough, though to know it wasn't all that different. (224)

To Arthur, then, Tiresias is a motif of the visionary who 'sees' and is confusingly punished for it. There is a measure of personal identification implied in the palpitation he experiences. Tiresias points to the fate of the visionary for the young Arthur. At another level, the Greek figure, who had been both a male and a female in his lifetime, plays on the unifying potential of androgyny, one that is elaborated in Arthur's apprehension of the significance of the hermaphrodite Adam.

A.M. McCulloch points out that Waldo borrows Arthur's love for Tiresias for the title of his work, 'Tiresias: A Youngish Man'. However according to him, it is the more sordid aspects of Tiresias that Waldo finds a personal analogy with, "Tiresias is the character in Greek mythology who, having looked upon the lovmaking of the gods, becomes wise but blind. Waldo is given a window view of Mrs. Poulter at her

ablutions and about to be seized by her husband". Furthermore, McCulloch opines, it is not the androgynous potential for understanding or totality that rubs off on Waldo, but the figure's sterility. "Waldo, in projecting his identity into the Tiresias figure, does so with a rigidity that curtails any possible passionate expressions of life. His "creative" concerns are arid areas of grammar" observes McCulloch.

On one occasion he wrote: In the extreme of his youth, which was fast approaching, Tiresias suffered difficulties with his syntax and vocabulary, he found that words, turning to stones would sink below the surface, out of sight"

He did not care for that, but kept it. He kept everything now, out of spite for Goethe, or out of respect for posterity. (211)

McCulloch goes on to say that in contrast to this, Waldo recognized that Arthur's poem contained "warmed stones of words"(213) and that Arthur was capable of touching the essence of tragedy that his unresolved syntax could not reach. However, this is a realization that Waldo could not admit openly; instead he calls Arthur's poem a "disgusting blood myth"(213). Waldo attempts to accept the rationalist viewpoint towards mythology expressed by his father when reading the Greek myths to his children: "None of this is real, none of this is true"(223). He denigrates the liberating potential of myth even further by convincing himself that he'd known, right from the beginning, that "All this reading from Greek myths was really for Arthur"(33)(McCulloch, 38-9). In the end, after the near cataclysmic realization that was brought on by Waldo's discovery of Arthur's poem, Waldo becomes the cursed and doomed Tiresias of his plagued imagination as he prepares to burn his writing - "About four o'clock he went down, Tiresias, a thinnish man, the dress-box under his arm, to the pit where they had been accustomed to burn only those things from which they could bear to be parted".

Thus the same motif has almost dichotomous implications for the two brothers whose lives are marked by two ways of seeing the same thing. At this level the Tiresias motif becomes yet another structural element used to reinforce the paradoxically linked dichotomy of sensibility manifested by the two brothers. The other variation of this motif, the hermaphrodite Adam, emphasizes the interpenetrating destinies of the two, as opposed to their incomplete and almost impossible union.

Once while in the library as Arthur 'wrestled with the Books', he came upon the other motif that was to portend wholeness for him. The passage has been identified by Thelma Herring to have been taken out of Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy* (Herring, 80).

On one occasion, in some book, he came across a message. Pinned to the back of his mind, it rattled and twitched, painfully, hopefully, if obscure:

As the shadow continually follows the body of one who walks in the sun, so our hermaphrodite Adam, though he appears in the form of a male, nevertheless carries about with him Eve, or his wife, hidden in his body.

...And if one wife, why not two? Or three? He could not have chosen between them. He could not have chosen between them. He could not sacrifice his first, his fruitful darling, whose mourning even streamed with a white light. Nor the burnt flower-pots, the russet apples of his second. Or did the message in the book refer, rather, to his, third veiled bride? (281)

According to Carolyn Bliss, "The implication is that Arthur, like the hermaphrodite, could embrace within his single life and being these conflicting opposites, that he could bring quaternity and sexual duality into controlled but dynamic juxtaposition which the mandala symbolizes. Arthur nearly does this, if only briefly, in the mandala dance he performs for Mrs. Poulter. In this ritual celebration of his fullness,

he dances the essence of the four beings who shape his life." (Bliss, 109) The first wife is identified with Dulcie, the second Mrs. Poulter and his veiled bride is revealed to be Waldo when the motif is repeated as Arthur leaves the library, "his shadow following him in the sun, as he carried away inside him – his brother." (285)

That both Tiresias and the hermaphrodite Adam are linked motifs with shifting emphasis is indicated when Arthur answers Waldo's accusation that he thinks nothing and has no worries in his head thus:

'If you want to know, I was thinking about Tiresias,' Arthur said to interest him. 'How he was changed into a woman for a short time. That sort of thing would be different, wouldn't it from the hermaphroditic Adam who carries his wife about inside him.' (282-283)

Transvestitism is yet another manifestation of the androgynous motif. It does not however, signify a genuine wholeness but a kind of put on identity, a shadow of reality. When Waldo puts on his mother's old dress, it is an attempt to connect with a "sense of moral proportion" and of a heritage he feels he can take pride in. He is imaginatively transformed into a personification of Memory: "although memory is the glacier in which the past is preserved, memory is also licensed to improve on life" (191-3). This trope can also be an oblique pointer to the position that identity itself is a construct. This may be significant in the light of *The Twyborn Affair* which has been described as "the fictional swan-song in which White mythicized his homosexuality" (Craven, 50) and employs the motif of transvestitism to denote more explicitly themes of sexual ambiguity and narcissism.

4.2 THE MANDALA MOTIF

"In its simplest form a mandala is a circle enclosing a square. While the outer circle constrains, the inner square seems to strive to escape. A solid mandala is three-dimensional; in its simplest form it is a sphere enclosing a cube. The cube, however, may add striations of color or become a randomized shape, such as one finds in glass marbles and paperweights." (Jones, 66)

The mandala, the eponymous motif of the novel recurs throughout the narrative as a symbol of totality and wholeness, especially in a spiritual sense. The way it is used in the novel, places added emphasis on the accessibility of this completeness and its presence in the simplest and most mundane aspects of life. This is quite a displacement from its conceptualization as an esoteric and exotic Oriental religious motif. The mandala is first mentioned in the text in a typically abrasive exchange that brings out some of the tensions between the two brothers at the centre of the narrative.

'Oh,' cried Waldo Brown in anguish, but I have not expressed half of what it is in me to express!

'Don't worry,' he blubbered. 'There's time, Waldo, isn't there? ... You can write about Mr. Saporta and the carpets, and all the fennel down the side roads.'

Just then that Mr. Dun straightened amongst the stakes up which he had been coaxing up his peas. He looked away quickly though, from what he saw. Waldo Brown saw a small mean face recognizing.

.... 'One of the carpets had,' Arthur whimpered, 'right in the centre, what I would say was a mandala.'

Waldo could not walk too fast. He had hoped originally for intellectual companions with whom to exchange the Everyman classics and play Schubert after tea.

'Come on!' he mumbled
He hated his brother. (30)

The sterile and subjectless Waldo excludes Arthur from intellectual equality with him and Arthur's suggestions are only met with bitterness and the discontent. Waldo feels he is being made a spectacle of in public and as a result responds to Arthur not with quietude but taunting asperity. In many senses this passage is a capsule of the text's tensions. The tension between the intellectually inaccessible or aloof and the inspiration immanent in quotidian realities as well as mundane personalities. The motif attempts to hold both these in one entity, resolving the tension into a wholeness.

The motif appears or is chronologically prefigured in the narrative in the child Arthur's fascination during their cruise from England with "the red gold disc of the sun". Arthur ran to the rails only to be pulled back and told he might fall into the sea and "be lost forever" by his mother.

He looked at her and said: "Yes. I might. For ever."
Feeling the cold circles eddying out and away from him. (215)

The words describing the waves evoke a vignette of receding mandalas, as if symbolic of the possibility for totality reflected in everything. Again they reappear in his desire to see the icebergs which appear only in his dreams:

Only in sleep the icebergs moaned, and jostled one another, crunching and tinkling. The moons of sky-blue ice fell crashing silently down to splinter into glass balls which he gathered in his protected hands.
Somehow at least he knew from the beginning he was protected. (218)

When he is a schoolboy, Arthur finds solace in the marbles which become central mandalic motifs in the novel. Once again, the ordinariness of this motif is underscored in being linked to the marbles and to Arthur to whom it would easily be assumed the finer things in life were inaccessible.

He was different then, in several ways. But did not mind since he had his marbles.
However many marbles Arthur had – there were always those which got lost, and some he traded for other things – he considered four his permanencies. There were the speckled gold and the cloudy blue. There was the whorl of green and crimson circlets. There was the taw with a knot at the centre, which made him consider palming it off, until, on looking long and close, he discovered the knot was the whole point.
Of all these jewels or touchstones, talismans or sweethearts, Arthur Brown got to love the knotted one best, and for staring at it, and rubbing at it, should have seen his face inside. After he had given two, in appreciation recognition, the flawed or knotted marble became more than ever his preoccupation. But he was ready to give it, too, if he were asked. Because this rather confusing oddity was really not his own. He seemed more the coil of green and crimson circlets. (228)

The emphasis on permanence is significant. As also the knot in the marble meant for Waldo that indicates the knot of opaqueness in his nature which makes him inaccessible to others, while Arthur manifests a nature of complete openness. At times the iterative symbolism seems intrusive. Dulcie and Mrs. Poulter are given one marble each, the flawed or knotted one is intended for Waldo, rejected by him and finally lost in a dark alley after Waldo's gruesome end, the one with whorls in it is kept by Arthur. According to Ashcroft, "Arthur sees that the 'flaw', the 'knot' at the centre of his marble, is the 'whole point'. The mandala shows that man is 'surrounded' by perfection in the sense that it remains the ultimate horizon of his existence, and while wholeness is unenclosable by consciousness, man 'obtains' infinity when he becomes aware of its intimation in ordinary experience" (Ashcroft,

126). Waldo's mandala lost in a back alley the night of his death thus, becomes an image of unrealized hope.

There are also variations on the mandala motif that interpretations have thrown up. For example, William Walsh posits, "Waldo sees himself as a crystal core to be held in reserve. Arthur's favourite glass marble, susceptible to light and touch, the image of the depths and contradictions of human nature, as it exists in the community, in the family, in a pair of friends, or lovers, or brothers, or in the single individual and stricken soul that Waldo and Arthur together compose" (Walsh, 96). Similarly, Ken Goodwin comments, "His sterile, jaundiced view of life is balanced by Arthur's. Confused and inarticulate, he nevertheless has a radiant goodness and insight that are represented by his four mandala-like marbles. He realizes that most of those around him cannot appreciate them or their meaning, that 'It was himself who was and would remain, the keeper of the mandalas, who must guess their final secret through touch and light.' The struggle to guess their meaning is symbolized by the 'red gold disc of the sun', which he strives to hold, but also by the icebergs, that 'moaned and jostled one another, crunching and tinkling... to splinter into glass balls which he gathered in his protected hands'" (Goodwin, 173). The realization that the nature of the mandala he held made them open to misinterpretation as 'simply marbles' and him as just 'simple' was not lost on Arthur who strove to protect the mandalas and their observers from the crassness of such observations. He realizes he cannot force his vision upon others, least of all his own brother. The mystery and magic of the mandalic marbles were safeguarded by him, preserved for people and relationships that would honor their value and be touched by their totality.

Sometimes ... he took out those marbles left over from the school yard. Not to play with. It had developed into something more serious than play. For the circle of the distant mountains would close around him, the golden disc spinning closer in the sky, as he contemplated the smaller sphere lying on the palm of his hand.

He would put it away quickly, though, on hearing anyone approach from behind. He was less afraid of theft, or even total destruction, than he was of damage by scorn. (233)

To Arthur the marbles become symbols of momentary centrality and meaning that keep gaining significance with time. "Arthur contemplates his marble almost in a religious sense, seeing in it mysteries, realities, symbols and significances – an endless range of reality enclosed in a miniature universe." (Walsh, 92) This is reinforced by the text's allusions to Jung's concept of mandalic totality. Arthur stumbles upon this textual validation of what he had always known when he is visiting Mrs. Musto's house. Arthur read from the encyclopedia of Mrs. Musto's husband Ralph:

'The Mandala is a symbol of totality. It is believed to be the "dwelling of the god". Its protective circle is a pattern of order super-imposed on – psychic – chaos. Sometimes its geometric form is seen as a vision (either waking or in a dream) or –'

His voice had fallen to the most elaborate hush.

'Or danced,' Arthur read. (238)

This brings out the validity of this personal vision to mankind at large and prepares us for the dance which has like Jung's mandala four corners to himself. He asks his father what the meaning of totality is, and Mr. Brown can only fumble with a dictionary meaning which made Arthur realize "Dad would never know, any more than Waldo. It was himself who was, and would remain, the keeper of mandalas, who must guess their final secret through touch and light" (240). The motif is brought to a sort of climax in Arthur's mandalic dance.

So Arthur Brown danced, beginning at the first corner, from which he would proceed through stages to the fourth, and beyond....

In the first corner, as a prelude to all that he had to reveal, he danced the dance of himself. Half clumsily, half electric. He danced the gods dying on a field of crimson velvet, against the discords of human voices. Even in the absence of gods, his life, or dance, was always prayerful. Even though he hadn't been taught, like the grocer, to go down on his knees and stick his hands together. Instead, offering his prayer to what he knew from light or silences. He danced the sleep of sleep, their secrets locked prudently up, safe, until their spoken thoughts or farts, gave them away. He danced the moon, anaesthetized by bottled cestrum. He danced the disc of the orange sun above icebergs, which was in a sense his beginning, and should perhaps be his end....

In the second corner he declared his love for Dulcie Feinstein, and for her husband, by whom, through their love for Dulcie, he was, equally possessed, so they were all three united, and their children still to be conceived. Into their corner of his mandala he wove their Star, on which their three cornered relationship was partly based. Flurries of hydrangea-headed music provided a ceremony of white notes falling exactly into place, and not far behind, the twisted ropes of dark music Waldo had forced on Dulcie the afternoon of strangling. There she was the bones of her, seated on the upright chair, in black. And restored to flesh by her lover's flesh. The inextinguishable, always more revealing eyes....

... In Mrs. Poulter's corner he danced the rite of ripening pears, and little rootling suckling pigs. Skeins of golden honey were swinging and glittering from his drunken mouth. Until he reached the stillest moment. He was the child she had never carried in the dark of her body, under her heart, from the beat of which, he was already learning what he could expect. The walls of his circular fortress shuddered...

He had begun to stamp, but bitterly rigid, in his withering. In the fourth corner, which was his brother's, the reeds sawed at one another. There was a shuffling of dry mud, a clattering of dead flags, or papers. Of words and ideas skewered to paper. The old, bent, over-used aluminum skewers. Thus pinned and persecuted, what should have risen in pure flight, dropped to a dry twitter, a clipped twitching. He couldn't dance his brother out of him, not fully. They were too close for it to work, closest and farthest when, with both his arms, he held them together, his fingers running with candle-wax. He could not save. At most a little comfort gushed out guiltily, from out of their double image, their never quite united figure. In that corner of the dance his anguished feet had trampled the grass into a desert.

... Till in the centre of their mandala he danced, the passion of all their lives, the blood running out the backs of his hands, water out of the hole in his ribs. His mouth was a silent hole, because no sound was needed to explain.

(265-6)

The varied symbolism of the mandala dance - the Chinese woman under the wheel tree, the evocation of the dying gods, the moon, the orange sun, the Star, the pears and pigs and goldenhoney, the blood of the Passion points to the truth not of any one creed but of a perennial philosophy "offering his prayer to what he knew from light and silences"(265) - are narrative resonances that make divinity seem immanent in Arthur's very being.

According to Edgecombe, the dance begins with a Walt Whitmanesque paean to an inclusive encompassing self that brings together the formative influences in his life and conceptualization of religion. "His religion is one that transcends all religions" (Edgecombe, 84). The dying gods of *Gotterdammerung* are reduced to a theatrical rite, the dogmatic and formulaic creed of Mr. Allwright, the sterile and forced agnosticism of his rationalistic family and the solar and lunar portents symbolic of the mandalic wholeness. The "androgynous trinitarian unity" which includes Dulcie, her

husband and Arthur are connected by love to the former's children yet to be conceived. Thus the second corner presents the "representatives of the continuity of life" (Edgecombe, 85). The Star of David, two triangles inverted upon each other becomes a mandalic symbol choreographing religion and unity into the dance. Mrs. Poulter's corner "is a Keatsian hymn to ripeness" (Edgecombe, 85), it enacts and through childlike simplicity rectifies the childlessness of its medial figure. It also recalls the sterility of Waldo's plastic doll that engendered only negative emotions of vulnerability in Mrs. Poulter. Waldo can't be integrated as easily. "The tragedy of Waldo's life, its meaninglessness and vacancy, is contained in the imagery of skewered words and of language crumpling up in sterile self-enclosure" (Edgecombe, 86). Arthur experiences a sense of failure and responsibility. Finally, there is "the coda in which the sacrifice of Christ is reenacted, fixing and steadying the four corners of the dance by its centrality, and exorcising the misery woven into the pattern, not by evading it but by transfiguring it" (Edgecombe, 86).

Edgecombe connects this to the poem of Arthur's that precipitates the novel's denouement. "It is finally this search for a transcendent, passional significance in suffering that Arthur tries to convey through his poem" (Edgecombe, 86). The dance encompasses in its choreography his insights, knowledge and experience, the poem encapsulates his vision of the place of pain in human reality.

my heart is bleeding for the Viviseckshunist
Cordelia is bleeding for her father's life
all Marys in the end bleed
but do not complane because they know
they cannot have it any other way(212)

Thelma Herring comments, "The main device for linking characters is, however, the central symbol of the novel, Arthur's four marbles or "solid mandalas" which signify the integrity of the self. (The Sanskrit word "mandala", denoting the ritual or magic circle used in Lamaism and in Tantric yoga as an aid to contemplation, is used to signify the self or totality.) ... But the mandala symbolism extends much further. Jung points out ... that lamaistic mandalas are based on a quaternary system (hence the number of Arthur's marbles and the four corners of his mandala dance) and that the figure of the square often gives the idea of the house or temple - which surely explains the insistence on the shape of the Brown's house with its Greek pediment. ... In fact, by imagery and allusion White constructs a network of mandala symbols" (Herring, 79). The wheel, the lotus, the rose (it is perhaps significant that Arthur refers to a wreath of roses framing Waldo when he puts on his mother's dress, since this cryptically described incident seems to suggest a vain search for totality through family heritage), the Star of David which Len Saporta gives to Dulcie, the central design in Saporta's carpet, the rock crystal, the sun, the orange colored jujubes which the orange-haired Arthur asks for are all part of this constellation of mandalic totems according to Herring.

Some like Joseph Jones have extended the motif to the structuring of the novel as well. "The novel is divided into four parts, the first and the fourth parts framing the second and the third parts. The body of the novel consists of two long flashbacks in which the histories of the other main characters, twin brothers are explicated and dramatized both together and individually. The four-part structure and the central search for the meaning of the novel, which the novel self-consciously pursues, make it resemble a solid mandala" (Jones, 67).

4.3 LET US SUM UP

The androgyny and mandala motif recur in the novel, either directly or obliquely. Both point mainly to the theme of wholeness and the possibility of totality in this world.

4.4 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the use of Tiresias as an archetypal motif with special reference to the antithetical implications the same motif has for the two brothers in the novel.
2. How does the mandala motif work in different ways, at the level of theme and structure, in the text?
3. Discuss the effectiveness of the use of Arthur's mandala dance in the text.

4.5 GLOSSARY

Androgynous:	Possessing the underlying potential to develop both traits thought of as masculine and those thought of as feminine
Hermaphrodite:	an entity in which the male and female rgans are found simultaneously
Lamaism:	A form of Buddhism practiced in Tibet and Mongolia
Star of David:	A six-pointed star formed of two overlapping equilateral triangles; a symbol of Judaism
Transvestitism:	The act of cross-dressing or dressing in the attire of the opposite gender

4.6 REFERENCES

- Ashcroft, W.D.. 'More Than One Horizon' in *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*. Edited by R.E. Shepherd and Kirpal Singh. Adelaide: Flinders University Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978. p 123-134.
- Bliss, Carolyn. *Patrick White's Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure*. London: Macmillan, 1986.
- Buckley, Vincent. 'The Novels of Patrick White' in *The Literature of Australia*. Edited by Geoffrey Dutton. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964. p413-426.
- Craven, Peter. 'Australia' in *The Oxford Guide to Contemporary Writing*. Edited by John Sturrock. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. p39-50.
- Edgecombe, Rodney Stenning. *Vision and Style in Patrick White: A Study of Five Novels*. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1989.
- Goodwin, Ken. *A History of Australian Literature*. London: Macmillan, 1986.

Herring, Thelma. 'Self and Shadow: The Quest for Totality in *The Solid Mandala*' in *Ten Essays on Patrick White Selected from Southerly* (1964-1967). Edited by G.A. Wilkes. Sydney and London: Angus and Robertson, 1970. p72-82.

Messages in Motifs

Jones, Joseph. *Patrick White*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983.

McCulloch, A.M. *A Tragic Vision: The Novels of Patrick White*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983.

Walsh, William. *Patrick White's Fiction*. Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1977.

UNIT 5 TECHNIQUES

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Narrative Strategies
- 5.2 Language and Imagery
- 5.3 Myth, Symbol and Allegory
- 5.4 Humor and Satire
- 5.5 Voices
- 5.6 Time
- 5.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.8 Questions
- 5.9 References

5.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will introduce you briefly to some technical aspects of the novel. It is hoped that this will make you more conscious of how the text is structured and introduce you to some stylistic interpretations of the novel. It will also help you note how White alters his techniques to achieve different effects for different characters, especially for the twin protagonists.

5.1 NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

"The narrative manner of this novel is, as in all White's major work, thick with explicit particulars. Everything is embodied and illustrated. Each shade of feeling or quirk of action is solidly realised. ... The narrative technique... swoops and turns and flicks from point to point, with a logic different from simple sequence.", comments William Walsh. He goes on to draw comparisons between White's narrative technique and D.H. Lawrence's formulations on "the movement of the emotional mind" which speaks of how "...the mind makes curious swoops and circles. It touches the point of pain or interest, then swoops and circles, coils round and approaches again the point of pain or interest..." In the text, for example, the frame narrative for the 'Waldo' section is constituted by a walk the brothers take on Waldo's suggestion. The same walk during which Mrs. Dun and Mrs. Poulter had seen them in the opening section. Arthur proposes that if they hang around they might meet Mrs. Poulter and walk together to the bus. Waldo refuses the suggestion but the reference to Mrs. Poulter sets off a train of reminiscences that go back to his childhood memories. The narrative from there moves back and forth between the walk and snatches from the past – for Waldo, mostly memories tinged with pain and humiliation. Walsh continues, "In *The Solid Mandala* the procedure is one of shading and emphasis, of varying the point of entrance and sweeping backwards and forwards in a way which impresses the reader as a composition rather than a linear progress." (Walsh, 86-87)

Walsh's observations apply more to the 'Waldo' section which constitutes the bulk of the text than to the 'Arthur' section which is more linear in its narrative progression. In fact Arthur's narrative opens with an "In the beginning there was the sea..." (215) with its Biblical intonations echoing the opening words of the book of Genesis. Carolyn Bliss too discusses White's technique of producing an "evocative blending of a novel's themes and motifs in a single scene, a practice which seems to owe as much to music as to literature." She cites one of the best examples for this as coming

"from *The Solid Mandala*, for, in Arthur's mandalic dance, imagistic motifs associated with each major character and with several thematic concerns are counterpointed in a comprehensive pattern which centres the novel's meaning in a possible order, harmony and wholeness" (Bliss, 198-9). To bring out the hieratic nature of Arthur's apprehension of reality, White infuses the narrative with religious allusions, quasi-sacramental motifs and a heightened sense of poetry. This is however juxtaposed with the demotic nature of the icons through which this apprehension of reality is purveyed. The demotic and hieratic, the mundane and the elevated are shown to be part of one whole.

5.2 LANGUAGE AND IMAGERY

White's style and content bespoke a new voice in the Australian canon. It was both ironical and whimsical; not to mention almost surrealist in the 'Arthur' section. The novel, *The Solid Mandala*, is a minor epic about common life infused with the mystical lyricism and pulsating prose poetry of the 'Arthur' section. The thick texture in the idiom is evocative of character and social ambience in the narrative framework. William Walsh discusses White's use of language in the context of the rest of his oeuvre: "To go from *Riders in the Chariot* to *The Solid Mandala* (1966), is to move from a novel which is spacious and inclusive to one in which the field of action is confined, in which the language is more abstinent, the metaphorical habit less florid, the manner altogether trimmer and sharper.... This spare novel – spare by Patrick White's standards, that is – is one of the most beautifully organized of White's works and one marked by an unusual blend of inwardness and control, life and impersonality" (Walsh, 85).

The use of alternative techniques to portray the twins at the centre of the narrative's dialectic continues at the level of the stylistic and figurative use of language as well. A.M. McCulloch notes how "White describes Waldo with a language that matches the character's primness, nearness and love of order" (McCulloch, 48). Waldo is etched, with limpid precision of the prose, as a man whose "thin, male steps crunched. He walked primly, in the sound of his oilskin, planning in advance where to put his feet" (27). When he had worked at the Sydney Municipal Library for a while he consciously projected the image of "the neat, the conscientious type, tie knotted rather small, the expanding arm-bands restraining the sleeves of his poplin shirt" (69). He is repetitively described in strong olfactory imagery as being aware of the smell of mucus in his own nostrils, rotting wood and cold fungus (26-7, 56) and in the library of decaying, aged flesh (121).

Thelma Herring warns against seeing the recurrent mordant imagery of the 'Waldo' section as all pervasive as "in Arthur's part the prose is free of it but is rich in images of religious associations" (Herring, 74). She notes however, that "Traversing most of the twins' life-span of seventy-years, from the time when their parents bring them from England as small children, the story is from one point of view a chronicle of senescence and decay. Both parents die, the weatherboard house that George Brown has built for himself on arrival begins to disintegrate, the young quince trees become wormy and woody, the sea of grass encroaches more and more, the young dogs, like the brothers themselves, grow old and feeble: in Waldo's part, startling images of squalor and decay (mice nesting in burst leather chair, mutton fat curdling in skeins, and so on enforce the impression of lives petering out in sterile loneliness (but also reflect the mental obliquity of Waldo)" (Herring, 74). This is shown to be a matter of Waldo's perspective and the point of view he brings to bear on life. The images are indicative of Waldo's spiritual decay and enervation.

McCulloch commenting on the sensuous imagery used in association with Arthur says, "Arthur seems to be the essence of the senses themselves. White communicates this by descriptions of Arthur which are markedly different in texture from those

reserved for Waldo." Arthur is able to hear and "see in advance the splotches of sound"(232); he "would roll on his seat in time with the buggy long before its motion called for it"(234); can "smell the smell of cold mud"(246) and "sing shapeless songs"(251). "The language used for the "Arthur section" succeeds in interrelating the senses when touching the world" (McCulloch, 34). As in the case of Waldo, these images reflect Arthur's character and the way in which he frames reality.

Moving to a more general apprehension of how the book uses figurative language, Carolyn Bliss offers an interesting intervention on the subject. "White sometimes fashions a continuum of imagery, from the ant on the pavement to the sun in the sky, which sets man as a middle term and suggests that all share the same vital impulse. Alternately, actions may illuminate each other by their contiguity. For example, in *The Solid Mandala*, Mrs. Feinstein tells Arthur and Waldo about visiting her European relatives:

'I don't know what Daddy would have to say to so much Jewish emotionalism. I was thankful we did not have him with us, either in Paris or Milan. Poor things, *they* are devout.' Mrs. Feinstein smiled for the sick, though it could have been she enjoyed the illness. 'Of course we did whatever was expected of us while we were there. We did not have the heart to tell them we have given up all such middle-aged ideas, to conform,' she said, 'to conform with the spirit of progress. Daddy, I am afraid, who is more forceful in his expression, would have offended.'

After that she disappeared, trailing the outdoor coat she was wearing. It was so out of place. It was so shapeless it might have been inherited. (p. 132)

Simply by appending the trailed, 'inherited' coat to Mrs. Feinstein's smugly modern point of view, White comments ironically on her hope that the inheritance of faith may be discarded. At the same time, the repetition of the word 'conform' suggests that her modernism reflects nothing more than capitulation to a new kind of pressure"(Bliss, 198). Such subtle use of imagery infuses the text with nuances that can be picked up only with multiple and careful reading, as well as creative interpretation. As in the case of Arthur's marbles, it involves seeing the possibilities of the putatively mundane.

5.3 MYTH, SYMBOL AND ALLEGORY

Patrick White's avowed desire to rise above realistic writing and discover the poetry and mystery encapsulated in ordinary lives has made him extensively use mythopoeic elements in his works. His works embody a structure or framework linked to myths and parallel motifs. *The Solid Mandala* is no exception, though how exactly he has employed these elements and to what effect remains a matter of interpretation. He has drawn on Christian motifs, beginning with the Adam and Eve motif in *The Tree of Man* right through to the crucifixion motif in *Riders in the Chariot*. Marshall Best sees a continuation of this trend in his interpretation of the relationship of the two brothers. "In *The Solid Mandala*, still absorbed with aspects of the problem of personal identity, he tried out his own version of the Cain and Abel legend in a story of two contemporary brothers"(Best, 692). Patricia Morely interprets that same relationship as allegory. "On the allegorical level there is the further connotation of the mystery of the relationship between man's body and soul, identified with Arthur and self-will, identified with Waldo"(Morley, 5).

Equally significant is White's ability to invest an ambience of myth and cosmic symbolism replete with allusions to many kinds of religions - ancient, modern, Eastern, Western around the most mundane of situations. Life itself becomes a series of epiphanic moments for Arthur. For example, when Arthur delivers groceries, Mrs. Feinstein offers him lemonade and asks him to "drink it slowly and concentrate" so

he can "extract the *prana* from this lemonade"(241). Some of this is again a matter of interpretation and having an eye for details. For example Walsh says, "The bus journey has in it a certain ritual quality, as though the two ladies were not only beating the bounds of the terrain of the novel but defining its sensibility"(Walsh, 85). Similarly, Thelma Herring comments, "The symbolic use of physical characteristics is in fact a marked feature of the novel. Arthur's brown eyes link him not only with his gentle father but also with Dulcie, Len Saporta, and their children... while Waldo with his "inherited eyes", pale and cold, is linked with the mother whose aristocratic connections fascinate him, and feels an affinity with other blue-eyed people"(Herring, 79).

Techniques

5.4 HUMOUR AND SATIRE

In dealing with the serious themes he has in hand Patrick White lapses into the humorous mode very subtly and across a wide range, if at all. There is the social satire of the portrayal of the petty materialism and shallow perspectives of ordinary Sarsaparillites like Mrs. Dun. There is the homely humour of the lesser local characters like the eccentric Mrs. Musto or the snobbish Miss Dallimores when they come to tea with the Browns. There is the element of social comedy in the awkward visits of the brothers to the Feinsteins with Waldo desperately trying to maintain a façade of pseudo-respectability and Arthur's childish candor spoiling the intended effect. There is the confluence of rhetoric and mantric utterance, as in the lemonade-*prana* episode when Mrs. Feinstein just afterwards adds the rationalist caveat "Of course we don't know exactly if this is a practice which has been *scientifically approved of*, but it's a nice idea, don't you think?" The dark, almost pathetic comedy of Mr. Brown inadequately trying to tell Waldo about the facts of life and ending up telling him about precautions he should take with public lavatories.

Andrew Riemer puckishly points out that the religious intensity of Arthur is at times played out against a backdrop of suburban satire. "White spoke with many voices. What has been difficult for some to recognize is that strain of mordant comedy that accompanies many of his metaphysical peaks, enriching rather than diminishing the intensity of those moments. When Arthur Brown's concentration on the mystery of things in *The Solid Mandala* is momentarily diverted by a faring dog, the indecent and the indecorum somehow allows us to accept the validity of this outrageous fable, an account of the quest for salvation in the pedestrian outer suburbs of Sydney" (in Joyce, 158-9).

5.5 VOICES

White, in the novel, employs a patois of voices and narrative points of view. The range extends from omniscient focalization, where the narrator can focalize the point of view of any character, to narration through internal point of view, presented in terms of the feelings and perceptions of characters. So most of the time, the voices are of intradiegetic narrators like Waldo, Arthur and Mrs. Dun who are personally involved in the action being narrated. This is laced with the barely distinguishable extradiegetic omniscient narrator with no involvement in the action but comments on it from the outside. The interpenetration of both points of view acts to establish balance in the composite narrative point of view. It reveals that there are ever so many stories or perspectives that emerge from an ostensibly simple single story.

Carolyn Bliss notes how shifting modes of focalization bring about shifts in our perspectives as well. "The opening section, 'In the Bus', consists of nervous small talk which Mrs. Poulter makes while riding the bus with her new friend Mrs. Dun.

We approach the Brown brothers as these women do, at the distance of gossip and by way of a quick glimpse from a bus window. Even the excruciatingly painful and personal events of the final section come to us filtered through the responses of others: horror and nausea of the police sergeant and his young assistant, the terror of Mrs. Dun, the ribaldry of the drunks in the alley, and the unfeeling officiousness of the librarians.... In both outer sections, the reader is kept at a certain remove" (Bliss, 101-2). For the inner sections, Caroline Bliss notes, he uses "indirect discourse, in which the narrator's voice speaks in phrases and cadences which would be used by the character, thereby disclosing feelings, values and reactions... one of White's favorite methods for maintaining an ironic perspective on character and one of the sharpest weapons in his satiric and comedic arsenal" (Bliss, 102). There are constant shifts between authorially endorsed narrative and indirect discourse. Bliss argues that the use of indirect discourse is strategic for there is no other way to penetrate Waldo's reserve and Arthur's ramblings. "Because Arthur is born to his visionary status, he is subjected to very little of the irony White trains on his protagonists. Waldo, on the other hand, is treated with satire more biting and a contempt more unmitigated than any previous protagonist has undergone" (Bliss, 114).

White also reproduces the speech and thought of characters, using the colloquial idiom. The novelist's cool ironic mocking voice is heard in comments like "The girl Dulcie was probably poor. In her pink, as opposed to white, dress. Not that he doesn't despise Dulcie as well. In his crusade of bitterness there was only room for one ardent pauper." (89) or "Nobody remembered her husband, or knew whether she had ordered him out of existence so that she might enjoy a breezy widowhood" (85). White never attaches himself to the flow and pulse of his character's lives as a result of which he seems to mime their thinking at times making his explicit commentary seem even more supercilious and lacking in magnanimity especially in the case of Waldo.

In the novel, White lends Waldo his caustic wit to make judgements that characterize Waldo's vindictive malice more than the person on whom the judgement is passed. As when Waldo finally realizes he has lost out on Dulcie and envisions her as Saporta's wife.

He did look back just once at Mrs. Saporta, increasing, bulging, the Goddess of a Thousand Breasts, standing at the top of her stairs, in a cluster of unborn ovoid children. This giant incubator hoped she was her own infallible investment. But she would not suck him in. Imagining to hatch him out. ...So much for Dulcie Feinstein Saporta and her lust for possession." (157)

Adrian Mitchell says that these shifts in narrative focus can be read as having a rather postmodernist effect of undermining the 'truth' claim of any one perspective. "Ambiguously, the story is the set of events, at yet another level the story is only a record of the set of events, an interpretation. Hence White's fondness for alternative versions or accounts of central events - most obviously in *The Solid Mandala*" (Mitchell, 13). This perspective bring into play a combination of voices and points of view allowing the reader to make his or her own assessments, if at all.

5.6 TIME

"The novel swoops backwards and forwards in time... with the fleeting but severe logic of poetry or life." (Walsh, 86) Time shows an element of repetitive frequency by which same events are narrated several times in the novel. This also falls within the postmodernist contestation of time as linear and unitary.

Carolyn Bliss offers an in-depth analysis of the deployment of the time factor in *The Solid Mandala*. "The 'Waldo' section is told largely as a series of flashbacks

stimulated by incidents that occur while the elderly brothers take their daily constitutional. This walk, which occupies nearly two thirds of the book, takes place probably only a few days or weeks before the murder attempt, with which the 'Waldo' section culminates. White accomplishes two things by organizing Waldo's section in this manner. First, he gives us a sense of the stagnation in Waldo's life: so much time, so much talk, so little motion. Waldo lodges himself in the imagination, endlessly plodding but never progressing. Secondly, because chronology is utterly disrupted, we sense the incoherence and anarchy which Waldo's nihilism has wrought.... Narrative method here effects a kind of mimesis of the inner being....

Where the 'Waldo' section was disjointed, its events standing isolated and discrete, 'Arthur' is cohesively chronological. Even in the case of the occasional brief, flashback, the relationship of events to time and to each other is preserved" (Bliss, 106). She continues, "Structurally, the novels tend towards episode and epiphany... The episodic progress of plot, interrupted by frequent and sometimes unexplained gaps in time, suggests a world in which human actions are rarely attuned to nature's rhythmic constancy... his tendency to disrupt chronology (as in *Riders in the Chariot*, *The Solid Mandala* and *A Fringe of Leaves*)... support a view of human experience as discontinuous and fragmentary" (Bliss, 197).

5.7 LET US SUM UP

This section, it is hoped, has given you some indications of the technical finesse that has gone into the effective presentation of themes and characters. White employed a range of devices and techniques making the text a rich quarry for stylistic analysis. Most of the technical aspects used are directed towards simultaneously comparing and contrasting the twins even as it is shown that they are inextricably linked.

5.8 QUESTIONS

1. Elaborate with examples how the text uses language and imagery for characterization.
2. Is the use of myths and symbols convincing in *The Solid Mandala*?
3. Discuss critically Carolyn Bliss's views on how White has used time as the structuring principle.

5.9 REFERENCES

- Best, Marshall A.. 'White, Patrick (Victor Martindale)' in *Contemporary Novelists*. Edited by James Vinson. 3rd Edition. Surrey: Macmillan, 1982. p691-692.
- Bliss, Carolyn. *Patrick White's Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure*. London: Macmillan, 1986.
- Craven, Peter. 'Australia' in *The Oxford Guide to Contemporary Writing*. Edited by John Sturrock. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. p39-50.
- Edgecombe, Rodney Stenning. *Vision and Style in Patrick White: A Study of Five Novels*. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1989.

Herring, Thelma. 'Self' and Shadow: The Quest for Totality in *The Solid Mandala* in *Ten Essays on Patrick White Selected from Southerly (1964-1967)*. Edited by G.A. Wilkes. Sydney and London: Angus and Robertson, 1970. p72-82.

Joyce, Clayton ed.. *Patrick White: A Tribute*. North Ryde: Angus and Robertson, 1991.

McCulloch, A.M. *A Tragical Vision: The Novels of Patrick White*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983.

Mitchell, Adrian. 'Eventually, White's Language: Words and More than Words' in *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*. Edited by R.E. Shepherd and Kirpal Singh. Adelaide: Flinders University Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978. p 5-16.

Morley, Patricia. *Mystery of Unity: Theme and Technique in the Novels of Patrick White*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1972.

Singh, Kirpal. 'Patrick White: An Outsider's View' in *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*. Edited by R.E. Shepherd and Kirpal Singh. Adelaide: Flinders University Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978. p117-122.

Walsh, William. *Patrick White's Fiction*. Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1977.

UNIT 6 PERSPECTIVES

Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 The Twins as a Structuring Principle
- 6.2 Points of Criticism
- 6.3 Counterpoints of Defense
- 6.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.5 Questions
- 6.6 Glossary
- 6.7 References
- 6.8 Consolidated Suggested Readings

6.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will look at the twins as a structuring principle in the novel and at certain critical positions on *The Solid Mandala* and Patrick White's art. Diversities of interpretative perspectives have been presented to encourage you to arrive at your own assessments.

6.1 TWINS AS A STRUCTURING PRINCIPLE

The twins have been used as a structuring principle in the narrative of *The Solid Mandala*. The tension between the brothers is comic and grave and brilliantly sustained. White at one level attempts to show the failure to combine two ways of seeing, and hence of approaching reality. The twins are as the blurb says "two people living one life. ... They shared everything – except their view of things. Waldo, with his intelligence, saw everything and understood little. Arthur was the fool who didn't bother to look. He understood." First, we see things from Waldo's point of view, and then Arthur's. Both these perspectives are further sandwiched between the outer framing perspectives of society. There is a virtuoso use of polyphonic techniques that allow the interaction of multiple voices and perspectives and dramatic structures which brilliantly juxtapose clashes of color and dissonances of tone – the dryness of Waldo and the mystical lyricism of Arthur.

William Walsh comments, "The twins are themselves divided parts of one person, and the tension which divides and unites them dramatizes the disturbance within man and within the single person. They act out that impure mixture of love and hate which is both the condition of the relationship of every human being to another and the condition of the attitude of the individual within himself to himself" (Walsh, 86). Thelma Herring concurs when she posits that "Waldo and Arthur, in fact are not ordinary twins, but rather a device for dramatizing the concept of the antithetical self. ... From the technical point of view the device is handled brilliantly: the twin narratives do not ask of the reader the kind of imaginative co-operation demanded by *Voss*, but Arthur's account is a check on Waldo's, showing how his apparent blunders are deliberate (as when he calls to the dogs *after* seeing Waldo in their mother's dress, to warn him of his presence) (Herring, 74).

This antithesis pervades the structuring of the central sections of the novel, according to Edgecombe. "For if Waldo's section is longer and more discursive, less reliant on symbolism, it tends to reflect the intellectual precedence he has always assumed over his brother and the rationalism that will seek meaning through statement rather than

through sacramental imagery. The events common to both narratives... articulate most acutely the points at which the temperamental and philosophical divide between the two brothers declares itself" (Edgecombe, 62). He continues, "the twinning is one of emotional warmth to rational coolness, of approach to recession, of extra - to introversion, of inclusiveness to fastidious rejection, indeed of centrally antithetic tendencies of human nature" (Edgecombe, 64).

Even as the text, uses the twins to personify dichotomous pulls, it also employs them at the level of structure to reiterate the inextricability of the connections. Kirpal Singh points out, "It is a mistake, I feel, to see White as an anti-intellectual. Waldo's knowledge in *The Solid Mandala* may be faulty, bigoted, narrow and perverse, but it is as necessary to a complete grasp of reality as is Arthur's morbid and childish fascination with his orange marble. Waldo and Arthur are twin manifestations of a whole that is out of joint"(Singh, 120). McCulloch too notes, "It is important to realize that neither Arthur or Waldo can exist as a whole individual without the other. Consequently there is a logical reason for Arthur ending up in a "nut house" at Waldo's death.... Waldo should not be viewed merely as a character who exists as a contrast to the true seeker, Arthur. It is through the form and structure of "Waldo's section" that we can understand "Arthur's section". Although structured separately the two parts interact, and the interdependence of the two sections reflects the necessary interdependence of the two brothers"(McCulloch, 50).

6.2 POINTS OF CRITICISM

Patrick White has been no stranger to criticism. We have had a look at some of the negative positions on him that have emerged as a result of his deviations from what was seen as the Australian literary tradition. Others have focussed more specifically on the epistemological premises that go into his world view as presented in his books. Vincent Buckley, for example found fault with his penchant for infusing cosmic implications into the quiddity of things. It is a critique that can easily be applied to a novel where marbles carry the weight of the central motif mandalic totality. "He is, I think, a victim of a mysticism of objects - or, better still, a mysticism of sensations. Far too many objects are presented as revelations; and it is through an unremitting concern with sensations that they are so presented.... This is unmistakably fine, but only a rigid control keeps it from inanity"(Buckley, 417).

Veena Noble comes out with a more pointed attack. Like Marshall A. Best who felt the novel was "stimulating but not convincing in its arbitrary re-shuffling of the brothers"(692), Veena indicates the forced thematic and character positions in the novel. "When we find ourselves not liking characters as much as the author wants us to (like Arthur and Mrs. Poulter in this novel) and liking a character more than he wants us to (like Waldo) there seem to be two factors especially at work; the author's values are too arbitrary and his presence is too obtrusive. It is the author's obligation to demonstrate to us through his portraiture and his selection of significant incidents that his values are acceptable. But White's values are too ambivalent for us to be in definite agreement or disagreement with them; and his attempts to sway us into agreement or disagreement with his mood of the moment by intrusions of his personal judgement give us small credit for an ability to arrive at our own perceptions"(Noble, 32).

She critiques the novel on the grounds that the characters are too weighed down by moral significance and mysticism which are not given foundations in acceptable human values and hence fail to be convincing. "One of White's less successful works, *The Solid Mandala* is a curious melange; an unhappy blend of mysticism and satire, it preaches the values of love but is prone at times to mockery. It holds up as saint figures a physically gross idiot and an unthinking suburbanite, and it damns a poor paranoid"(Noble, 33). She accuses White of adopting Mrs. Allwright's crotchety

6.3 COUNTERPOINTS OF DEFENCE

Bliss is aware that the design of the novel can be critiqued for being "too patent" and of such a "programmatic quality that undercuts any sense of 'felt life'"(13) in it. But she also opposes a defense to this allegation that reads the novel as an allegory and argues for a middle ground which allows for both humanistic impact and allegorical or symbolic implications. This call to reconcile, if not collapse opposites seems very important to an appreciation of White's work. To move from thesis and antithesis to synthesis. Interestingly, *The Solid Mandala* attempts to show the stultifying effects of not doing that on a thematic level.

More positive responses to White have ranged from hyperbolic positions such as, "Patrick White remains the one who showed the way to understanding that comprehension is ubiquitous and that goodness is fragile."(Carolyn Van Langberg in Joyce, 124) to positions that attempt to account for the ambiguities in his work. "White's talents as a novelist were paradoxical in many ways: melancholy yet excitingly powerful; controlled yet furious; there was a dazzling vision and yet the most exact and precise eye for detail. It is an art prolific with symbolism and images and yet hardly concealing a palpable anxiety, sometimes a loathing for human kind."(Clement Semmler in Joyce, 105)

Ken Goodwin writes, "White's corpus deals in every style from farce to tragedy, with a small number of themes but a vast number of characters. He has conducted a continuous literary protest against materialism and the dullness of realism. His positive values are an integration of the divided soul, receptiveness through genuine goodness to moments of illumination, and the struggle for creative forms capable of expressing these ideas. Novels, stories and plays tend to alternate between identifiably placed social satire and commentary and more timeless and placeless settings. No other Australian writer has displayed such capacity to hate and to love humanity or such capacity to create comic and tragic character. He has always, as he says in *Flaws in the Glass*, been, 'embarking on voyages of exploration which I hope may lead to discovery'."(Goodwin, 179) Thus perhaps the best thing about the paradoxes, dichotomies and dualities that pervade White's work is that they force you to read and to critically arrive at your own position. "Patrick White, thought-provoking and entertaining, sets us, speculating, adrift – forcing us to think for ourselves"(Elizabeth Jolley in Joyce, 138)

6.4 LET US SUM UP

Patrick White and *The Solid Mandala* are replete with dual pulls but the idea is to reflect on them, to let them make you think.

6.5 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the use of the twins as a structuring principle.
2. Is the novel programmatic in your opinion? Give reasons and examples for your positions.

3. Discuss the play of dualities at various levels in the interpretation of *The Solid Mandala*

6.6 GLOSSARY

- Epistemological premises:** Assumptions that underpin a framework of knowledge or point of view
- Quiddity:** The real nature or essence of a thing that makes it what it is

6.7 REFERENCES

- Best, Marshall A.. 'White, Patrick (Victor Martindale)' in *Contemporary Novelists*. Edited by James Vinson. 3rd Edition. Surrey: Macmillan, 1982. p691-692.
- Bliss, Carolyn. *Patrick White's Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure*. London: Macmillan, 1986.
- Buckley, Vincent. 'The Novels of Patrick White' in *The Literature of Australia*. Edited by Geoffrey Dutton. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964. p413-426.
- Edgecombe, Rodney Stenning. *Vision and Style in Patrick White: A Study of Five Novels*. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1989.
- Goodwin, Ken. *A History of Australian Literature*. London: Macmillan, 1986.
- Herring, Thelma. 'Self and Shadow: The Quest for Totality in *The Solid Mandala*' in *Ten Essays on Patrick White Selected from Southerly (1964-1967)*. Edited by G.A. Wilkes. Sydney and London: Angus and Robertson, 1970. p72-82.
- Joyce, Clayton ed.. *Patrick White: A Tribute*. North Ryde: Angus and Robertson, 1991.
- McCulloch, A.M. *A Tragic Vision: The Novels of Patrick White*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983.
- Noble, Veena. 'A Study of the Hermaphroditic Element in Patrick White's *The Solid Mandala*' in *Australian and Indian Literature: Studies in Mutual Response*. Edited by D. Kerr and R.K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Indian Society for Commonwealth Studies, 1991. p 30-35.
- Singh, Kirpal. 'Patrick White: An Outsider's View' in *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*. Edited by R.E. Shepherd and Kirpal Singh. Adelaide: Flinders University Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978. p117-122.
- Walsh, William. *Patrick White's Fiction*. Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1977.

6.8 CONSOLIDATED SUGGESTED READINGS

- Ashcroft, W.D.. 'More Than One Horizon' in *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*. Edited by R.E. Shepherd and Kirpal Singh. Adelaide: Flinders University Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978. p 123-134.

- Barnes, John. 'Introduction' in *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*. Edited by R.E. Shepherd and Kirpal Singh. Adelaide: Flinders University Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978. p 1-4.
- Beatson, Peter. *The Eye in the Mandala: Patrick White: A Vision of Man and God*. London: Paul Elek, 1976.
- Best, Marshall A.. 'WHITE, Patrick (Victor Martindale)' in *Contemporary Novelists*. Edited by James Vinson. 3rd Edition. Surrey: Macmillan, 1982. p691-692.
- Bliss, Carolyn. *Patrick White's Fiction: The Paradox of Fortunate Failure*. London: Macmillan, 1986.
- Buckley, Vincent. 'The Novels of Patrick White' in *The Literature of Australia*. Edited by Geoffrey Dutton. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964. p413-426.
- Craven, Peter. 'Australia' in *The Oxford Guide to Contemporary Writing*. Edited by John Sturrock. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. p39-50.
- Dutton, Geoffrey. *Patrick White*. Melbourne: Lansdowne Press, 1962.
- Edgecombe, Rodney Stenning. *Vision and Style in Patrick White: A Study of Five Novels*. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1989.
- Goodwin, Ken. *A History of Australian Literature*. London: Macmillan, 1986.
- Herring, Thelma. 'Self and Shadow: The Quest for Totality in *The Solid Mandala*' in *Ten Essays on Patrick White Selected from Southerly (1964-1967)*. Edited by G.A. Wilkes. Sydney and London: Angus and Robertson, 1970. p72-82.
- Johnson, Manly. *Patrick White*. New York: Ungar, 1980.
- Jones, Joseph. *Patrick White*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983.
- Joyce, Clayton ed.. *Patrick White: A Tribute*. North Ryde: Angus and Robertson, 1991.
- Kiernan, Brian. *Patrick White*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980.
- Kuiper, Kathleen ed.. 'White' in *Merriam-Websters Encyclopedia of Literature*. Springfield: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1995. p1197.
- Lawson, Alan. *Patrick White*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- McCulloch, A.M. *A Tragic Vision: The Novels of Patrick White*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983.
- McGregor, Craig ed.. *In the Making*. Melbourne: Nelson, 1969.
- Mitchell, Adrian. 'Eventually, White's Language: Words and More than Words' in *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*. Edited by R.E. Shepherd and Kirpal Singh. Adelaide: Flinders University Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978. p 5-16.
- Morley, Patricia. *Mystery of Unity: Theme and Technique in the Novels of Patrick White*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1972.

- Noble, Veena. 'A Study of the Hermaphroditic Element in Patrick White's *The Solid Mandala*' in *Australian and Indian Literature: Studies in Mutual Response*. Edited by D. Kerr and R.K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Indian Society for Commonwealth Studies, 1991. p 30-35.
- Sadawarte, R.S.. 'Occult Symbolism in *The Solid Mandala*'. in *Australian and Indian Literature: Studies in Mutual Response*. Edited by D. Kerr and R.K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Indian Society for Commonwealth Studies, 1991, p 36-42.
- Shepherd, R.E. and Kirpal Singh eds.. *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*. Adelaide: Flinders University Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978.
- Singh, Kirpal. 'Patrick White: An Outsider's View' in *Patrick White: A Critical Symposium*. Edited by R.E. Shepherd and Kirpal Singh. Adelaide: Flinders University Centre for Research in the New Literatures in English, 1978. p117-122.
- Walsh, William. *Patrick White's Fiction*. Sydney: George Allen and Unwin, 1977.
- White, Patrick. *Flaws in the Glass: A Self-Portrait*. New York: Viking Press, 1981.
- White, Patrick. *Patrick White Speaks*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1990.
- Wilkes, G.A. ed.. *Ten Essays on Patrick White Selected from Southerly (1964-1967)*. Sydney and London: Angus and Robertson, 1970.



Uttar Pradesh
Rajarshi Tandon Open University

MAEN-07
**NEW LITERATURES
IN ENGLISH**

Block

8

***THE STONE ANGEL: MARGARET
LAURENCE***

Block Introduction

UNIT 1

The Novelist and Her Main Thematic Concerns **5**

UNIT 2

Hager and The Theme of Self-Alienation **17**

UNIT 3

The Stone Angel: A Novel of Awakening **31**

UNIT 4

Major Aspects of the Novel **45**

BLOCK INTRODUCTION

This Block is the last one of the course **New Literatures in English**. In the four units of this Block, *The Stone Angel*, a classic in twentieth century Canadian fiction has been discussed with a view to making you understand and appreciate its salient features and distinguishing qualities. I have also attempted to introduce Margaret Laurence, the author of *The Stone Angel*, to you. The view-points of various critics and scholars, who have analysed and evaluated *The Stone Angel* from various perspectives, have also been compiled in a convenient format for you in this Block.

Unit 1 will acquaint you with the biographic details of Margaret Laurence and her major works, since tracing the development of an author's canon, makes it easier to understand literature.

The purpose of **Unit 2** is to introduce the protagonist Hagar Shipley and through her character throw some light on a whole body of newly emerging literature dealing with the lives of the ageing and elderly.

Unit 3 analyses the novel with a view to establishing a connection between religious concepts and the issues related to female identity and last but not the least **Unit 4** takes up some other aspects of the novel, like an analysis of the title, the use of imagery and the theme of redemption.

However you will find this material worthwhile and useful only when you have read the text of *The Stone Angel*, so do begin by reading the novel first.

UNIT 1 THE NOVELIST AND HER MAIN THEMATIC CONCERNS

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Margaret Laurence - Introduction
- 1.2 Biographical Details – Early Years
- 1.3 The African Sojourn and its Influence
- 1.4 The Canadian Phase
- 1.5 Awards and Recognition
- 1.6 Main Thematic Concerns
 - 1.6.1 Novel of Middle Class Aspirations
 - 1.6.2 View of Fate
 - 1.6.3 Development of Canada
 - 1.6.4 The Quest for Understanding
 - 1.6.5 Freedom and Life's Meaning
 - 1.6.6 Pride in Financial Success
 - 1.6.7 The Theme of Exile and Communication
- 1.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.8 Glossary
- 1.9 Questions
- 1.10 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit will acquaint you with the biographic details of the great Canadian writer Margaret Laurence and her major works. Although the most important thing about a writer is his/her work, yet the career biographies, tracing the development of the author's canon and the evolution of his/her reputation makes literature and its creators better understood and more accessible to students.

1.1 MARGARET LAURENCE - INTRODUCTION

Margaret Laurence is a writer of enormous stature who came out of the Canadian west at a time when the female prairie author was hardly recognized. W.H. New while writing of Margaret Laurence in his *Literary History of Canada* proclaims that the range and quality of her work made her the most recognized and accomplished of the writers of the 1960's. Michael Peterson, in his introduction to a special issue on Laurence in the *Journal of Canadian Studies* writes, that for many Canadians she has "become an eminent, a wise and generous voice providing insight into and guidance for a highly self-conscious nation in the process of reviewing its complicated history and complex character."

1.2 BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS

Early years:

Margaret Laurence was born Jean Margaret Wemyss on 18th July 1926, in the small Manitoba town of Neepawa. Of Scottish ancestry, her father Robert Wemyss, also born in Neepawa was a lawyer of Irish ancestry, her mother Verna Simpson Wemyss was a talented pianist and music teacher. In 1930, at the age of thirty-four, Verna Wemyss died of a kidney infection. Her unmarried older sister Margaret

Simpson returned from Calgary, where she had been teaching, to look after young Margaret and eventually became her stepmother. With her Margaret Laurence's literary career had its beginning for they read many books and talked about literature especially about Canadian literature before it was taught in Canadian Universities and Schools. In 1933 Margaret Simpson and Robert Wemyss had one son. Two years later Robert Wemyss died of pneumonia.

In 1938 Margaret Simpson Wemyss moved the family into her eighty-two-year old father's house, where she cared for him as well as for two children. Young Margaret resented her grandfather's rigid authoritarianism. His strength was her "constant challenge to battle," as Clara Thomas has observed in her 1975 book *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*. "She was challenged, but certainly not crippled, by this old, still fierce and autocratic man; her step-mother's supportive love and encouragement and her own strong spirit, well-matched to her grandfather's strength were constant, counterbalancing dynamics towards growth and achievement."

Six years later in 1944 Margaret Wemyss left Neepawa to take a scholarship at Winnipeg's United College, a United Church arts and theology college affiliated to the University of Manitoba. During her college years as an honors English student, she had several poems and stories published in *Vox*, the under-graduate paper. At this time, as Laurence noted in the essay "Ivory Towers or Grassroots?" (1978), she also became involved with the Old Left, a group of supporters of social reform: "My sense of social awareness, my feelings of anti-colonialism, anti-authoritarianism, had begun, probably, in embryo form in my own childhood; they had been nurtured during my college years and immediately afterwards in the North Winnipeg of the Old Left." The need to alleviate crippling social conditions that prevent man's full realization of his dignity and humanity is a constant theme of her fiction.

Having completed her graduation in 1947 Margaret Wemyss took a job as a reporter for the *Winnipeg Citizen*, where she wrote book reviews, a daily radio column, and reports on labor events. On 13 September of the same year she married Jack Laurence, a civil-engineering graduate of the University of Manitoba.

In 1949 the Laurences left Canada for England, and the following year they went from England to Africa where they lived for seven years. In 1950 Jack Laurence was appointed Director of a dam-building project in the British Protectorate of Somaliland, now Somalia. After the initial stages of the project were finished in 1952, he felt reluctant to stay on when the remaining work could be done by a Somali engineer. From 1952 until 1957 he continued his engineering work in the Gold Coast, now Ghana. Their daughter Jocelyn was born in 1952; their son David was born in 1955. Shortly before the day the Gold Coast received its independence as the state of Ghana in 1957, the Laurences returned to Canada.

1.3 THE AFRICAN SOJOURN AND ITS INFLUENCE

The African years were a stimulating challenge and a formative influence on Margaret Laurence's literary career. The opportunity to immerse herself in a foreign culture was a welcome contrast to the prairie world that pervaded her mental landscape. As Laurence puts it in *Heart of a Stranger* (1976): "The process of trying to understand people of another culture—their concepts, their customs, their life-view is a fascinating and complex one, sometimes frustrating, never easy, but in the long run enormously rewarding. One thing I learned, however, was that my experience of other countries probably taught me more about myself and even my own land than it did about anything else. Living away from home gives a new perspective on home. I began to write out my own background only after I had lived some years away."

Though Somaliland became the setting for only one early short story "Uncertain Flowering," published in Story 4 (1953) her two-year residence there is the subject of the haunting chronicle, *The Prophet's Camel Bell* (1963). Completed in Vancouver in 1962, a decade after her departure from Somaliland, the book is less a travelogue or diary than a vivid re-creation of the confrontation between Canadians and Africans, between a gifted artist and the beliefs and culture of a foreign nation. Beginning as a chronicle of her time in Somaliland the book gradually becomes a portrait of a people. Each episode is a re-creation and a creation, conveying the alien world with factual fidelity yet shaping the facts through art. Again and again Laurence returns in the book to themes that permeate her fiction. She sees the Somalis living by faith, not logic, their faith being a constant source of differentiation between herself and her new world. She writes "But for myself, it did not apply, this faith, perhaps because I had never needed it the way they did. I viewed it from the outside. As far as I was concerned, God was deaf. If we did not hear the sound of each other's voices no one else would." Love is a source of another telling contrast. According to her, "Love between men and women did not here contain the dichotomy long ago imposed upon it in the western world by the church, that of separating it, as though it were oil and water into elements labeled 'spiritual' and 'physical.' And the book records many examples of the Somali ability to find resources, both materialistic and mental, to ensure personal survival.

Fascinated by the extensive oral literature of Somaliland, Laurence began translating poetry and folk tales shortly after her arrival. Her work led to a volume of translation: *A Tree for Poverty: Somali Poetry and Prose* (1954), described in Laurence's introduction as "not the accumulation of the writings of centuries, but the stories of the highly imaginative race without a written language." When the book was republished in 1970, she reflected on its achievements in a new preface: "I suppose if I had known then the difficulties of translating literature, I would have not tried, but when a person is young and naïve, one will try anything, and probably that isn't such a bad thing. These translations are amateurish..., however, I think it was a good thing that the translations.. were done, partly because they constituted the first collection to be translated into English and partly because I think they do convey some sense of life and concepts of the Somali nomadic people... My main reservation about these remarks would be that I was in places unwittingly condescending in the manner of white liberals, out of pure ignorance, for Somaliland was my first contact with a culture other than my own, and I had much to learn about the validity of human differences—I still have, but at least I know it now."

Somali literature heightened Laurence's natural interest in the past and in the social and familial roots. Many contemporary African writers, she observes in *Heart of a Stranger*, "re-create their people's past in the novels and plays in order to recover a sense of themselves, an identity and a feeling of value from which they were separated by two or three generations of colonialism and missionizing. They have found it necessary, in other words, to come to terms with their ancestors and their gods in order to be able to accept the past and be at peace with the dead, without being satisfied or threatened by that past." In another decade Laurence would have begun the arduous task of chronicling the Canadian past.

Laurence set two volumes of fiction in the Gold Coast. Her first novel, *This Side Jordan* (1960), and a collection of short stories, *The Tomorrow-Tamer* (1963). All her African fiction centers on independence, both personal and political, and rarely has an outsider captured with such pathos the struggles and causalities of an alien world coming into self-realization. The fiction shows characters caught between the biases of their traditions and the bid for liberation. Frequently there are clashes between the imperialists viewing with skepticism and bitter resentment the Africanization of their industries and the Africans detesting their arrogant and condescending employees.

The stories in *The Tomorrow-Tamer* were written and published individually from 1954 to 1962. Some have a first-person narrator, some have a third-person narrator,

yet each narrator is an outsider, exiled from some aspect of his natural world. The outsider may be an alien to Africa or he may be an African caught up in the new technology and rendered alien to his tribal values. The point of view in each story is that of an ironist, "not the ironist who assumes superiority of understanding or sophistication of intellect and so condescends to her subjects and characters," writes Clara Thomas, "but the ironist who sees at once the immense vitality and the enormous contradictions of joy and pain, hopes and achievements, among the people of an emergent nation." (*The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*)

The chapters of *This Side Jordan* alternately concern the African protagonist, Nathaniel Amegbe, who though educated by Christian Missionaries and freed in his own mind from his tribal past, remains attached to the ways of his people, and the English protagonist, Johnnie Kestoe, the son of poor Irish Catholics, who has rejected his religious upbringing and come to the Gold Coast as an accountant in a textile firm. As their parallel stories become increasingly interdependent, the novel becomes a chronicle of war between native traditions and the values of the imperialist. Though the symmetry of the plot may be too neat, the novel has an abundance of carefully delineated and realistic characters set on a rich canvas that captures the complexity of social change.

The final dimension of Laurence's African writing is found in her critical study *Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists 1952-1966* (1968). Here Laurence offers the best explanation for her interest in and indebtedness to African literature and culture: "Although Nigerians during the colonial period lost their own past, they never lost their land, for there were no white settlers as there were, for example, in Kenya. Whether or not this may have assisted them in maintaining some kind of inner strength and self-faith, it is impossible to know." Inner strength and self-faith are the goals of the protagonists of Laurence's fiction as described in her essay "Ivory Towers or Grass Roots?" "The themes of freedom and survival relate both to the social/external world and to the spiritual/inner one, and they are themes which are both political and religious. If freedom is, in part, the ability to act out of one's own self-definition, with some confidence and with compassion, un-compelled by fear or by the authority of others, it is also a celebration of life and of the mystery at life's core."

1.4 THE CANADIAN PHASE

When the Laurences left Africa in 1957 they took up residence in Vancouver, where they lived for five years. This phase saw Laurence complete most of her African fiction and write the first draft of *The Stone Angel*, but this time was personally and mentally trying. She was starved for the company of other writers, though she did make the acquaintance of Ethel Wilson, who offered encouragement and support. Her personal life was also trying, and in 1962 she separated from her husband, taking the two children to England where they lived first in London before settling the following year at Elm Cottage, Penn, Buckinghamshire.

Distanced from Canada, she returned to the draft of *The Stone Angel*, rewrote it, and saw it published in 1964. The first of five books set in the fictional prairie town of Manawaka, the novel regarded as a classic, announced the maturity of the talent evident throughout her African fiction, but her fiction was now rooted firmly and fully in her own Canadian world.

Laurence regarded herself as a member of the second generation of Canadian writers. The first generation including Morley Callaghan, Sinclair Ross, Hugh MacLennan, and Ernest Buckler, rejected British and American models to write. Of these writers the most significant for Laurence's writing was Ross. As she remarked to Graeme Gibson in an interview for his *Eleven Canadian Novelists* (1973), when she first read

As For Me and My House (1941) in her midteens, she confronted a novel written "out of a prairie background which was very similar to mine, and I thought: it can be done."

**The Novelist
and Her Main
Thematic
Concerns**

The influence of *As For Me and My House* on Laurence parallels the influence of *The Stone Angel* on younger Canadian writers. Jack Hodgins, for example, acknowledges the importance of the novel as the first he read with a voice and a world directly related to his western sympathies. From the time of the publication of *The Stone Angel*, Laurence has represented for younger writers a voice of intelligence and discernment, a Canadian novelist interested less in social realism than in the paradoxes of the human individual. Of his early days as a writer, Dave Godfrey has commented: "At that time, I was writing very assiduously for Margaret Laurence. I had never met her, but I had this idea of an educated, sensitive, experienced reader who knew the tradition of the story and recent developments and yet was a Canadian with a feel for myth and for all those repressions and fears which hang up twelve Canadians out of ten. So I wrote for Margaret Laurence." (Dictionary of Literary Biography. Vol. 53, Gale Research Inc. Detroit, London, 1986) p.265)

The Stone Angel is Hagar Shipley's personal account of the last few days of her life. With memory in a state of disordered energy, the ninety-year-old narrator unconsciously weaves episodes from her past into her painful present. The novel's structure follows the process of her mind, the entire book being composed of flashbacks occurring in a progressive chronological pattern and alternating with scenes in the present. At the beginning, Hagar is blind, like the statue of the stone angel in the Manawaka cemetery. All her life has been a display of pride as she struggles to hide her emotions and live in self-sufficient isolation. During a life time of wrangling she never learns how to express or to accept love; she tries to hide her inner failure, that she has never known the ability to rejoice. In the end, however her pride gives way to need. In Hagar, as Laurence has noted in an interview included in Donald Cameron's *Conversations with Canadian Novelists* (1973), "part of her goal is simply survival to survive until the moment she dies, with some kind of dignity and some kind of human value. She always tried to put the hooks on people, to influence people, to manipulate them, her husband and her sons, and she has never really allowed them to go free, so she has never been free herself: this is what she comes to understand in the very last days of her life."

Whereas *The Stone Angel* is set in Laurence's grandparents' generation her second Manawaka novel and winner of a Governor General's Award, *A Jest of God* (1966), is set in her own generation. The narrator and protagonist, Rachel Cameron, a thirty-four-year-old single woman, a school teacher, endures the long, hot summer of Manawaka. While resigned to the Presbyterian sterility of the town and the oppressive presence of her mother, she harbours a rebellious craving for love. Though her summer affair with Nick Kazlik, a schoolmate from early years who now teaches in Winnipeg, comes to an abrupt end, it has a positive effect to Graeme Gibson, "We are not God, but what Nick did for Rachel was to enable her to reach out, hold and touch another human being, which was what the sexual experience meant for her. It was the reaching out to another person and making herself vulnerable, as Rachel was able to do ultimately, with Nick, which led her to be able—to some limited extent—to liberate herself." (Gibson Graeme: *Eleven Canadian Novelists*) Laurence's novel served as the source of the 1968 Warner Bros. film *Rachel* and was republished as *Now I Lay Me Down*, during the same year.

The protagonist of the third Manawaka novel, *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), is Rachel's thirty-nine-year old sister, Stacey Cameron MacAindra who buys a railroad ticket out of Manawaka as soon as she has saved enough money. Now through a series of flashbacks, memories, fantasies, through a mingling of first-person and third-person narrative, she examines her tangled life in Vancouver. Instead of the anticipated enlargement of her personal horizon, she finds enslavement to her four children, her dull husband, and approaching old age. By the end of her mental journey, however, she sees the complexity of life and the problems other people face. No longer scarred

by life, she has the will to continue living. "The fire theme threads through the novel," Laurence commented in *Heart of a Stranger*, "the fires both inner and outer, and if we are to live in the present world, we must learn to live within the fires and still survive until we die."

While writing the three Manawaka novels Laurence was also working on a series of seven short stories, "fictionalized autobiography" as she called them, which were published separately in the 1960s. Adding one further story, she collected them under the title *A Bird in the House* (1970). The protagonist, Vanessa MacLeod, is another young inhabitant of Manawaka, and the stories follow ten years in her life that coincide in part with World War II. Though Vanessa is the narrator and protagonist, the center of the book is her hard, autocratic grandfather, and his centrality underlines the importance of the stories as cathartic autobiography. "I did not realize until I had finished the final story in the series," Laurence reflected in *Heart of a Stranger*, "how much all these stories are dominated by the figure of my maternal grandfather, who came of Irish Protestant stock. Perhaps it was through writing these stories that I finally came to see my grandfather not only as the repressive authoritarian figure from my childhood, but also as a boy who had to leave school in Ontario when he was about twelve, after his father's death, and who as a young man went to Manitoba by sternwheeler and walked the fifty miles from Winnipeg to Portage La Prairie, where he settled for some years before moving to Neepawa. He was a very hard man in many ways, but he had a very hard life. I don't think I knew any of this, really knew it, until I had finished those stories. I don't think I ever knew, either, until that moment how much I owed to him. One sentence, near the end of the final story, may show what I mean. — "I had feared and fought the old man, yet he proclaimed himself in my veins."

In 1967, Laurence turned her attention to a children's book. That story became *Jason's Quest* (1970), which she has described as "a gift" because of the rapidity with which she wrote the first draft. Jason, a mole, seeks a cure for the invisible sickness destroying Molanium and the molefolk. "Knowledge," he is told, "can be learned from books. But wisdom, now—wisdom must be learned from life itself." And the acquisition of wisdom has been central to the journey of many of Laurence's protagonists. In the late 1970s Laurence wrote three more children's books, *The Olden Days Coat* (1979), *Six Cows* (1979), *Six Darn Cows* (1970), and *The Christmas Birthday Story* (1980).

For more than a decade Laurence lived at Elm Cottage, though she made frequent visits to Canada. In 1969, when she accepted an appointment as Writer in Residence at the University of Toronto, she had already decided to return to Canada permanently when her children completed their schooling in England. Shortly after beginning the Toronto position, she bought a small cedar cabin on the Otonabee River near Peterborough, Ontario, where she spent the summers of 1971, 1972, and 1973. *The Diviners* (1974), Laurence's fourth Manawaka novel and winner of her second Governor General's Award, was written partly in the winters in England, yet mainly during the Ontario summers. In 1973 Laurence accepted an appointment as Writer in Residence at the University of Western Ontario. The following year she accepted a similar position at Trent University after she had settled permanently in Lakefield, Ontario.

The end of her decade in England and the beginning of her new residence in Canada also marked the publication of *The Diviners*, (1974) a unique portrait of Manawaka since Morag Gunn, the forty-seven-year-old narrator and protagonist, is not a woman of Manawaka. She is an outsider, a girl who comes to Manawaka and later tries to escape from it, only to realize that escape can be solely physical. When Laurence suggested that this novel might be her last or at least her last about Manawaka, she was understating its epic significance, for the novel is the culmination and completion of her investigation of the town. Her investigation comes to an end with her employment of Morag, an outsider and a novelist. Here is Manawaka from the

perspective of the writer in Manawaka. And Morag's personal search for understanding the pattern of her life complements a much larger ambition: *The Diviners* is an exploration of the role of the artist, and most important, the centrality of the past to the artist's understanding of her own position in the flux of time.

Completed when Laurence herself was forty-seven, *The Diviners* is her *bildungsroman*, the novel that records the growth, education, and maturing of the individual, frequently with autobiographical overtones. Laurence's early upbringing corresponds to the family life of Vanessa MacLeod, in *A Bird in the House*. The autobiographical dimension of *The Diviners* finds an embodiment of Laurence's ideas about art and life in Morag. For Laurence, Manawaka's creator, and for Morag Gunn, Manawaka's historian in the fictional world, art is the distillation of the private and the fictional, and the mysterious process of literary creation provides the theme and the form of *The Diviners*. At the end Morag has summoned up all her past and discovers her own place in Canada: "This place is some kind of a garden... Nonetheless, even though it may be only a wildflower garden..." Like her creator, Morag transforms her garden into art. At the conclusion of her mental journey she "returned to the house to write the remaining private and fictional worlds, and to set down her title." With its final setting in eastern Ontario, *The Diviners* is Laurence's farewell to Manawaka, "that prairie town-which is partly my own town and partly a town of the mind." The epic dimensions of Morag's reliving of her life and, through stories and ballads, her ancestral past give the novel a quality of finality and summation that makes it a natural conclusion to its creator's imaginative involvement with the prairie town. Two years after the appearance of *The Diviners*, Laurence's collection of critical and autobiographical essays, *Heart of a Stranger* was published.

1.5 AWARDS AND RECOGNITIONS

Laurence's efforts and her talent have been widely recognized over the course of her career. In addition to her two Governor General's Awards, she has received the Beta Sigma Phi First Novel Award (1961), three president's medals from the University of Western Ontario (1961, 1962, 1964), a Molson Prize (1975), Periodical Distributors' Award (1977), and a City of Toronto Award of Merit (1978). Laurence has been named companion of the Order of Canada (1971), fellow of the Royal Society of Canada (1977), and recipient of honorary degrees from United College (1966), McMaster University (1970), Trent University (1971), Dalhousie University (1971), University of Toronto (1971), Carleton University (1974), Brandon University (1975), Queen's University (1975), University of Western Ontario (1975), Simon Fraser University (1977), York University (1980), and Victoria University (1982). In 1981 she accepted a three-year appointment as Chancellor of Trent University.

When Margaret Laurence died on January 5, 1987 she had published sixteen books along with many poems, addresses and articles in journals, magazines and newspapers.

1.6 MAIN THEMATIC CONCERNS

1.6.1 Novel of Middle Class Aspiration

Despite Laurence's left wing sympathies, despite her growing desire to address issues of dispossession and social injustice, *The Stone Angel* is very much a novel of middle class aspiration, action, and folly. Proud descendent of a family that could claim connections, a lapsed Scottish baronetcy, and self-made success in pioneering Canada, Hagar Shipley has little time for the larger questions of social order and justice. Though she oscillates like a pendulum between her personal impulses, so strong is her ethic of self-reliance that she fails to see clearly the plight of the farmers

she knows during the Depression of the 1930s or the sense of loss, and desperation of the local Metis of Manawaka. Indeed, the novel very carefully suggests that Hagar's blindness to the larger issues of social justice is typical of many people of her generation. As close as she was to the actual effects of the Depression on farmers and to the Metis friends favoured by her husband Bram and her son John, she steered herself against any potential awareness of or empathy with such experiences. Her "respectability" threatened by them, she needs to hold herself aloof from, superior to the "bunch of breeds and never-do-wells and Galicans" she is obliged to feed during harvest time. Pride both blinds and sustains her when her social identity is questioned.

1.6.2 View of Fate in *The Stone Angel*

The Stone Angel is a study of a feisty individual forced to endure circumstances grotesquely at odds with her self-image. It enacts a capricious view of fate and presents fate as an amalgam of character and circumstance, the two forces interacting in a complex manner. The individual is certainly the victim, (in Laurence's phrase in *The Stone Angel*) "of the jokes or jests of God". These "jests" however, often have their root in individual character. In Hagar's case, "it is the pendulum like oscillation between impulses of order and disorder, respectability and passion, dynastic pride and individual need that dictate the unfolding of her life and characterize her blindness." (*Margaret Laurence: An Appreciation* p.77) God's great joke is that "one discovers so many things too late", most notably the wilderness that pride can make of a life and the self-enclosure that is the outward aspect of self-reliance. It never occurs to Hagar to ask the serious question "why" when it comes to the tyranny of social circumstances.

1.6.3 Development of Canada

In her Canadian fiction, by attending tenaciously to the tight-fisted, unyielding, and proud Scottish spirit, Laurence touched a major nerve in the Canadian sensibility. Though *The Stone Angel* is unabashedly middle-class, Scottish and small town in its emphasis, it still captures something essential about the energy, enterprise, and mad pattern of the settlement and development that have characterised not only the growth of Manitoba but of Canada as a whole. The Scot's middle-class outlook incarnated in Jason Currie and passed on to his rebellious daughter, is the firm base upon which, in her later Manawaka novels Laurence was able, without inconsistency to integrate her developing left-wing concerns, particularly her empathy with the victims and the dispossessed who had been cast aside in the provinces and the country's growth. Michael A. Peterman rightly argues that the recognition of *The Stone Angel* "Suggests the success with which Laurence shaped her novel to present a compelling version of formative stages of Canadian identity. In linking her vision to that of her friend, historian W.L. Morton, she assimilated Morton's work with her own experience and the past of her people." (*Margaret Laurence: An Appreciation* p. 80) Laurence cites Morton's *Manitoba: A History* as the "book about my land that has meant the most to me". "When I first read(it)", she adds, "it was with a tremendous sense of excitement, combined with an angry sense of having been deprived, when young, of my own heritage. I have since done a great deal of reading of prairie history, but it was Morton who first gave me the sense of my place's long and dramatic past". (*Books that Mattered to Me* 1981) In *The Stone Angel* the dream of dynasty, in itself both compelling and destructive, becomes a map of Manitoban and Canadian heritage.

1.6.4 The Quest for Understanding

The Stone Angel is permeated with an unflagging quest to know more to understand better, to recover and recognize what is best and most worthwhile in human experience. Michael A. Peterman says that in *The Stone Angel* "the process of and the emphasis upon recovery, the struggle to understand what has eluded knowing is made heroic, heartening and significant". (as quoted by Clara Thomas in her article

Clara Thomas looks at *The Stone Angel* as a valuable study of the enclosed "garrison culture" of North American settlements and of the religion that supported and often distorted the spirit of their people. She argues that the overwhelming question at the heart of *The Stone Angel* is "one of many-prismed conflict, between the individual's needs and demands and society's, between God's law and man's understanding and interpretation of that law, between the rule of the community and the rule of the heart, between pride and love". ("Pilgrims Process: Margaret Laurence and Hagar Shipley")

1.6.5 Freedom, Faith and Life's Meaning

Once when asked about other novelists' influence on her work Laurence could give just one name – the name of Joyce Cary. Cary was a religious novelist and the over-arching themes of all his works are freedom, faith and the revelations of life's meaning and purpose that come as gifts of grace. Shortly before his death, he described his purpose thus: "What I set out to do was to show these people, living each in his own world by his own ideas, and relating his life and struggles, his triumphs and miseries in that world. Their situation, in short, was to be that of everyone who is doomed or blessed to be a free soul in the free world and solve his problems as he goes through it." (*The Writer and the Theme*) Margaret Laurence has written and spoken of freedom as a major theme in her work, but she has publically explored the foundation of her writing much less than Cary did and she has shown the workings of faith and grace in her character's lives rather than writing theoretically about these things. She believed with William James that "to be converted, to be regenerated to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong and inferior and unhappy becomes unified and consciously right, superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities." (*The Writer and the Theme* p.78) *The Stone Angel* while charting the life span of Hagar describes such experiences and their effect on her.

1.6.6 Pride in Financial Success

When Hagar Shipley was a child in the 1880s, Manawaka was still close to its beginnings, with board sidewalks, oil lamps, a few successful businesses such as Jason Currie's store, institutions such as the well-tended cemetery, the everpresent undertaker and the churches, especially the Presbyterian church:

I'd be about eight when the new Presbyterian church went up. Its opening service was the first time Father let me go to church with him instead of to Sunday School. It was plain and bare and smelled of paint and new wood, and they hadn't got the stained glass windows yet, but there were silver candlesticks at the front, each bearing a tiny plaque with Father's name, and he and several others had purchased family pews and furnished them with long cushions of brown and beige velour, so our few and favoured bottoms would not be bothered by hard oak and a lengthy service.

"On this great day", the Reverend Dougall MacCulloch said feelingly, "we have to give special thanks to those of our congregation whose generosity and Christian contributions have made our new church possible."

He called them off, the names, like an honour roll. Luke McVitie, lawyer, Jason Currie, businessman, Freeman McKendrick, bank manager, Burns MacIntosh, farmer, Rab Fraser, farmer.

Father sat with modestly bowed head, but turned to me and whispered very low:
"I and Luke McVitie must've given the most, as he called our names the first."
(*The Stone Angel*, p.15)

Pride in financial success, in "getting ahead" was inextricably linked to religion in Hagar Currie's Manawaka. The isolation of small groups of people in a vast land was one of the factors in the growth of a town's personality; in English Canada the other factor was the drive to build a progressive, successful and Protestant community. Ideals of godliness and business enterprise were closely meshed, especially so for those whose religion incorporated the old, passionately-argued Calvinistic doctrines of predestination and of the elect. Though these grim articles of faith were considerably less than ramrod strong in Canadian Presbyterians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there still existed a residual, crude but powerful belief that the elect of God, the saved, shone by their works and, therefore, the man who succeeded in the world's terms by his own labours had also succeeded in God's terms. His outward success was the sign of his favoured status among the elect. Hence Jason Currie's unrelenting drive for success, his pride in it and its link to his religion:

He was a self-made man. He had started off without a bean, he was fond of telling Matt and Dan, and had pulled himself up by his bootstraps.... *The devil finds work for idle hands*. He put his faith in homilies. They were his Pater Noster, his Apostles' Creed. He counted them off like beads on a rosary, or coins in the till. *God helps those who help themselves. Many hands make light work*. (*The Stone Angel* p.8)

1.6.7 The Theme of Exile and Communication

Margaret Atwood, one of the most formidable and well known writers of Canada states that "Margaret Laurence was no bulldozer. Nor was she the least bit interested in being a legendry figure; she was far too involved in the joys and despairs of being human." (*Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*) The most important and unique talent given to human beings is the ability to communicate. But it is easier said than done. No wonder an important theme running through all the African or Canadian works of Margaret Laurence is the experience of foreignness, of the special self-recognition that comes to exiles, of the difficulty of communicating over cultural barriers. In Somaliland when she could not find any other reading material, she read for the first time the five books of Moses in a Gideon Bible. The lines "Thou shalt not oppress a stranger, for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were stronger, in the land of Egypt," lingered on, echoing through Margaret Laurence's career, summarizing much of her experience as a stranger, and taking on a new relevance when she found that "my experience of other countries probably taught me more about myself and even my own land than it did about anything else." (*Heart of a Stranger* p.11) Certainly the Somali experience, as it affected Laurence herself and other Europeans, underlies the pre-occupation with exile, from one's own land from one's adopted land, even from a traditional way of life in *This Side Jordan* and *The Tomorrow Tamer*. Always behind these stories about exiles or misfits or people thrust out of their traditional ways by the forces of change, there lurks deeper strangeness which comes from the difficulty of human communication of any kind. While writing about Chinua Achebe's preoccupation with communication she ends her study of him in this way, "there is one theme, which runs through everything he has written - human communication or the lack of it. He shows the impossibly complicated difficulties of one person speaking to another, attempting to hear—really to hear—what another is saying. In his novels we see man as a creature whose means of communication are both infinitely subtle and infinitely clumsy, a prey to invariable misunderstandings. Yet Achebe's writing conveys the feeling that we must attempt to communicate, however imperfectly if we are not to succumb to despair or madness." (*Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*)

The difficulty and the necessity of communication is not only the major theme of such novels as *The Stone Angel* and *A Jest of God* and *The Fire Dwellers*, but is also a leading preoccupation of the principal characters in each of these works.

**The Novelist
and Her Main
Thematic
Concerns**

1.7 LET US SUM UP

Margaret Wemyss Laurence grew up in Neepawa, Manitoba, a small town northwest of Winnipeg. Her roots in Neepawa go back to the beginning of the town and its pioneers. Her mother died when she was four and she lost her father when she was ten. Until she went away to the United College in Winnipeg, she lived with her grandfather her step-mother and her brother. She started her writing career with the publication of poems and stories in *Vox*. She wrote for the newspaper and the radio also. She got married to a Civil Engineer in 1947 and in 1949 left Canada for England. The following year the couple left for Africa where they lived for seven years. The African years not only gave her an opportunity to immerse herself in a foreign culture they exerted a formative influence on Laurence's literary career also. Living away from home gave a new perspective on home. She was fascinated by the extensive oral literature of Somaliland. Somali literature heightened her interest in the past and in the social and familial roots as they help an individual in recovering a sense of self, an identity and a feeling of value. In Africa she translated poetry and folk tales. Laurence left Africa in 1957 and lived in Vancouver for five years. During this period she completed her African fiction and wrote the first draft of *The Stone Angel* which was ultimately published in 1964. With the publication of *The Stone Angel* her fiction now rooted firmly and fully in her own Canadian world. Laurence regarded herself as a member of the second generation of Canadian novelists. From among the first generation of Canadian writers, she found Sinclair Ross most significant. As a Canadian novelist she was interested less in social realism than in the paradoxes of the human individual. *The Stone Angel*, *A Jest of God* and *The Fire Dwellers* are known as the Manawaka cycle. *A Bird in the House* is a series of short stories, 'fictionalized autobiography' as she called it. Her fourth Manawaka novel *The Diviners* is a unique portrait of Manawaka since Morag Gunn, the protagonist is not a woman of Manawaka. *The Diviners* is an embodiment of Laurence's ideas about art and life. The merits of Laurence's works and her talent won two Governor General's Awards along with many more and has secured for her a place of pride in the history of Canadian literature.

1.8 GLOSSARY

Condescending:	to descend willingly from a superior position.
Imperialist:	pertaining to, or of the nature of an empire or emperor.
Presbyterian:	a religious body formed by the union of the secession and relief churches in 1847, included in the United Free Church from 1900, and in the church of Scotland from 1929.
Buildungsroman:	a novel that records the growth education and maturing of the individual, frequently with autobiographical overtones.

1.9 QUESTIONS

1. How was Margaret Laurence benefitted by her sojourn in Africa?
2. As a second generation Canadian novelist what are the favourite themes in Margaret Laurence's fiction – both African and Canadian?
3. What are the main thematic concerns in *The Stone Angel*?

1.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

- Atwood, Margaret. *Survival : A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. Toronto: Anansi, 1972.
- Cameron, Donald. "Margaret Laurence: The Black Celt speaks of Freedom." *Conversations with Canadian Novelists*. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1973.
- Fischer, Barbara. *Joyce Cary: The Writer and the Theme*. (London : Collin Smythe, 1980)
- Gibson, Graeme. *Eleven Canadian Novelists*. Toronto: Anansi, 1973.
- King, James. *The Life of Margaret Laurence*. Alfred A. Knoff, Canada, 1997.
- Laurence, Margaret. *Heart of a Stranger*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976.
- The Prophet's Camel Bell*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1963.
- The Side Jordan*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1960.
- The Tomorrow Tamer*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart. 1963.
- Long Drums and Cannons: Nigerian Dramatists and Novelists. 1952-1966*. London and Toronto: Macmillan, 1968.
- The Stone Angel*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1964.
- A Jest of God*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974.
- The Fire Dwellers*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1969.
- A Bird in the House*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1970.
- New, W.H. *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 53, Gale Research Inc. Detroit, London, 1986.
- Peterman, Michael. A. "The Kindredness of Tillie Olsen's Tell Me a Riddle" and Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* in *Margaret Laurence. An Appreciation* ed. Christi Verduyn. Journal of Canadian Studies Book (Broadview Press, Peterboroug, Canada, 1988)
- Thomas Clara. *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*. 1975, Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976.

UNIT 2 HAGAR AND THE THEME OF SELF-ALIENATION

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Hagar Shipley – A Character Portrait
- 2.3 *The Stone Angel* as Vollendungsroman
- 2.4 Self-Alienation of the Elderly and *The Stone Angel*
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Glossary
- 2.7 Questions
- 2.8 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this unit is twofold: to introduce and discuss the enigmatic yet fascinating character of Hagar, the protagonist in *The Stone Angel* and to establish how this classic work, by making the ninety year old Hagar its heroine, has joined the newly emerging literature that deals with the lives of the aging and the elderly.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Clara Thomas in her pioneering work *Margaret Laurence* argues that the deepest well of Laurence's creative vision is her interest in and understanding of human beings, her respect for them and her compassion for their everlasting terrors. *The Stone Angel* the first of Laurence's Manawaka works has received more critical attention than any of her other writings. Opinions are divided as to the success of the novel's technique but critics are unanimous in their praise for Laurence's creation of the novel's central character, Hagar Shipley, who reigns as queen of all characters in Canadian literature. According to Professor Read "Hagar... finally transcends fiction to the world of supra-reality inhabited by literature's great characters." He further remarks "It is the creation of Hagar Shipley that clearly marks for me at least the emergence of Margaret Laurence as a fine novelist. For the first business of a serious novelist is the creation of character. When any character slips, almost imperceptibly perhaps, beyond the realm of obvious fiction into the works of reality then the summit of the novelist's art has been achieved. Such is Hagar. She belongs in that great company that begins with Chaucer's Monk and Pardoner, Prioress and Wife of Bath and stretches through the works of the great, down to our present day. At times vicious and vulgar, irascible and prideful, stubborn and independent, she is by no means lovable; but she is capable of profound feelings and in the end demands respect." (*A Place to Stand On*, p.42) Laurence agrees with Virginia Woolf's famous assertion that the novel exists above all to express character because only there, can the drama of life, and reality itself be seized. For Laurence the novel strives "to catch vast and elusive life." To put down life or one's consciousness, fiction must dramatize the intimate, vital, and contradictory working of the human mind. A great literary work portrays the "human individual" who is inherently paradoxical amazingly strong yet often weak—the source of both wonder and pity. It celebrates his or her uniqueness by exploring his or her inner most being. This is what Margaret Laurence has done in *The Stone Angel*.

2.2 HAGAR SHIPLEY – A CHARACTER PORTRAYAL

According to Michael Peterman, Hagar is characterised in terms of the prairie. She lives as a struggling farmer's wife for some twenty four years, a rugged kind of experience known by none of Laurence's other Manitoba born but town raised protagonists. Having endured the deep rooted quarrel of her marriage and having struggled to raise her children often under difficult and impoverished conditions, Hagar feels much put upon and threatened by others in *The Stone Angel*. "I've never had a moment to myself, that's been my trouble," she thinks, but her real trouble, which she struggles to understand and to put into words, is that "she is strangely cast." Hers is a temperament torn between impulses of order and disorder, refinement and toughness, propriety and desire and impulses justified in her own mind by her pride in her family and the urgency of her own passions. The struggle of her last days is not only a struggle to maintain independence and control: it is an almost "inadvertent plumbing of the junkyard of her memory." In so doing she finds herself at last able to measure the extent of her misjudgements of those closest to her and to break out, to some small extent, of the prison of her nature.

Like her biblical namesake, Hagar wanders in a wilderness and like the stone angel in the Manawaka cemetery, the prairie town where she grew up, "she was doubly blind, not only stone but unendowed with even a pretense of sight." (p.3) At ninety, when the book begins, she is grotesque with the fat ugliness of her old age, and her nature is twisted and distorted by the self-willed tragedies of her life. She is a proud, bitter, sick, and frightened old woman with a whip-lash tongue to cut and mock, even at herself. Above all, she is "rampant with memory": and she is still, and desperately, rampant with life. We share in her last short and bitter struggle to maintain her independence; more important, we share in her halting, unwilling, rebellious journey toward self-knowledge and, finally, peace.

The actual events of the novel take place over a short time span—two, perhaps three weeks. But in the sharp struggle of these last days, Hagar recalls, defends, questions, and finally accepts and understands all the events and the feelings that have always been important to her. She moves from the present to the past and back again, with an ease that is completely familiar to those who have listened to and watched the old. The anxiety, lest she confuses past and present and so prove herself to be as "queer" and incapable as her own son and daughter-in-law think her to be, is familiar too. To one caught up in her struggle, her climaxing, temporary defeat-and-release in irrationality, when she confuses past and present and speaks the healing, forgiving words to her companion in flight (whom she mistakes for her dead son, John), is quite simply, unbearably moving.

Hagar lives with her son, Marvin, and his wife Doris, both of them well into their sixties, in a house in Vancouver which she worked for and bought; a house which is the sum of all her achievements. Its familiarity, its possession, and the tokens it holds from the past—the oak chair that belonged to her father, Jason Curie: the cut glass decanter, her wedding gift from Bram Shipley are the only solid evidences of identity that Hagar now possesses: "If I am not somehow contained in them and in this house, something of all change caught and fixed here, eternal enough for my purposes, then I do not know where I may be found at all." (p.36)

But she is ill, stabbed with a pain under her ribs that grips her without warning; grotesquely fat and uncertain on her feet; sometimes *incontinent*; unable to care for herself and yet resentful of Doris and Marvin's fussy care and bumbling concern; completely at the mercy of her physical debility and revolted at its manifestations; and yet merciless toward those who try to help and capable of merciless honesty toward her physical self: "I give a sideways glance at the mirror, and see a puffed face purpled with veins as though someone had scribed over the face with an indelible pencil. The skin itself is the silverfish white of the creature one fancies must live

under the sea where the sun never reaches. Below the eyes the shadows bloom as though two soft black petals had been stuck there. The hair which should by rights be black is yellowed white, like damask stored too long in a damp basement." (p. 79)

Hager and The Theme of Self- Alienation

Hagar is repellent physically and just as ugly in her cruelty toward Doris. "That Doris, ... she heaves and strains like a calving cow." (p. 31) and blind and mistaken in her judgement of Marvin "There is a boy who never gets upset, not even at what happened to his own brother. (p. 65)" But she demands and compels sympathy, a grudging admiration and the tension of partisanship which one always accords the gallant fighter fated to lose. Only her body has aged: her spirit is indomitably young and brave. "I never got used to a single thing," she says: and her unchanging dark eyes symbolize the stubbornly vital, flaming spirit: "for when I look in my mirror and beyond the changing shell that houses me, I see the eyes of Hagar Currie, the same dark eyes as when I first began to remember and to notice myself... The eyes change least of all." (p. 38)

The sensual aspect of Hagar's character refuses to change. Hagar at ninety is still delighted by her senses' gratification. In fact she is often greedy for them. She loves colour: the back-garden yellow with forsythia; her lilac silk dress, "a real silk, mine, spun by worms in China, feeding upon the mulberry leaves." (p. 29) She grudgingly admires Doris' food and heartily enjoys it, whatever the cost to her tired digestive system. "I eat well. My appetite is usually very good. I have always believed there could not be much wrong with a person if they ate well. Doris has done a roast of beef, and she gives me the inner slices, knowing I like it rare, the meat a faint, brownish pink. She makes good gravy, to give her due. It's never lumpy, always silken brown. For desert we have peach pie, and I have two helpings. Her crust's little richer than I used to make, and not so flaky, but quite tasty nevertheless." (p. 67)

Colours, sounds, smells come to her as vividly as they ever did, from her past and from her present; and the old woman is still almost miraculously identifiable as the same Hagar who had begun to enjoy sex very soon after her marriage, though she was too proud to let Bram, her husband, know it. When she had finally taken John and left Manawaka and Bram, "I'd waken, sometimes, out of a half sleep and turn to him and find he wasn't beside me, and then I'd be filled with such a bitter emptiness it seemed the whole of night must be within me and not around or outside at all. There were times when I'd have returned to him, just for that." (p. 160)

Clara Thomas rightly argues that it is an enormous affirmation of living and feeling that Hagar makes, and to its energy one cannot help responding. Nor can one help a response compounded of pity and wonder at her stubborn gallantry and at the pathos and irony of a recurrent double-exposure image of Hagar—old, ugly, chained, and earthbound by her physical disintegration and young, vivid, strong, as untamed as a hawk: "yet now I feel that if I were to walk carefully up to my room, approach the mirror softly, take, it by surprise I would see there again that Hagar, with the shining hair, the dark-maned colt off to the raising ring, the young ladies' academy in Toronto." (p. 42).

Hagar lives in battle, pitted against everyone who comes close to her and, tragically, she betrays them all—her father, her brothers, her husband and her sons, even John, the younger one, whom she loves and would have helped. But by that time her pattern is set and she does not know the way. The pride that destroys her relations with others is established in the first paragraph of the novel as her father's error also. Like her father's enormous will, Hagar's too is directed towards mean objects, towards "getting ahead" and being a name and a force in the microcosmic, claustrophobic world of Manawaka.

She takes and treasures the ancient battle-cry of the Currie clan, "Gainsay who Dare," but ironically, her "daring" is the destructive defiance of her marriage to Bram Shipley, against her father, against the town which she pretends to despise, and very

shortly against Bram himself. She thinks her son, John is heir to the old spirit of the battle-cry, but she betrays him in the name of "common-sense" and "getting ahead." So John dies, daring all right, as does Arlene whom he loves; but in a stupid, pointless, drunken dare—in hopeless rebellion against hostile circumstances which Hagar has partially contrived.

William New describes Hagar as an essentially tragic figure, and her moment of truth as the deepest point of her tragedy: "Joy is for the Sarahs of the world; but she is Hagar. Her identity will not allow it." (*Introduction* p. lx) Patricia Morle does not endorse this view of Hagar. According to her this interpretation of the biblical archetype slights the tension in Hagar's character. It also disregards the novel's tragicomic tone and most important, Hagar's movement towards freedom in the closing chapters. "Tragic narrative ends in the isolation of the protagonist, while comedy depicts the social integration of the individual. Integration includes an advance in self-knowledge." (*Margaret Laurence: The Long Journey Home*)

The closing chapters chronicle Hagar's gradual reconciliation with her world and herself. At Shadow Point, where Murray Lees's story of losing his infant son in a fire releases her memories of John's death, Hagar speaks to Murray the apology she owes to her son. Sensing her confusion, Murray plays John's role just as Hagar's brother Matt had taken on their mother's role when Dan died. In this replaying of the past, Hagar is permitted to tell John/Murray that his lover Arlene is, after all, welcome in their house. Hagar's descent into her shadow self, a kind of rites de passage, ends with repentance, confession, and peace: "I could even beg God's pardon this moment, for thinking ill of Him sometime or other." (p. 248) In Laurence's words one can almost equate inner freedom with growth. While Hagar fails to reach this inner freedom she is never a pathetic victim. Although she is too old and obdurate to change, she does come to understand herself—her pride, her fear, loneliness and her lack of freedom. At the end she recalls doing only two "truly free" acts, which she calls a Joke and a Lie. Clearly, Hagar refers to fetching the bedpan for the girl in her hospital room; and blessing Marvin, assuring him that he has been a better son than John and stands first in her affection. These two acts are altruistic, directed outwards in the effort to comfort another person.

Hagar's free acts are actually far more numerous. They include many small gestures in the closing chapters. Hagar gives her sapphire ring to her grand-daughter Tina. She forgives Murray for betraying her hiding place in the cannery. She thanks the clergyman, despised earlier, for singing in the hospital and tells Doris that she has done her good. This is not to say that Hagar's pride is banished. She calls herself unregenerate: "the same touchiness rises within me at the slightest thing." (p. 293)

Towards the end of the novel Hagar admits that she always wanted "simply to rejoice" (p. 292) But she never could do that because "pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touch. Oh my two, my dead. Dead by your own hands or by mine? Nothing can take away those years." (p. 292) *The Stone Angel* does not end in this revelation though it is the tragic climax for Hagar, the moment of truth for her and for the reader, the moment of a cathartic release. There is, in the short time left before her story ends, time and opportunity for her to take the steps towards restitution which she needs and to accept the evidence of love that she has always wanted. Marvin cannot rise above the hackneyed common place in speech, but Hagar, who always despised his inarticulateness as she hated his father's vulgarity of language, can now see through the words to the spirit and is, at last, able to rejoice.

A pause, and then Marvin replies.

"She's a holy terror," he says.

Listening, I feel it is more than I could now reasonably have expected out of life, for he has spoken with such anger and such tenderness. (p. 305)

A strongly-marked sacramental pattern moves with benign irony through the novel. The spirit of the religion which Hagar had known only in an emptiness of form takes her through repentance and confession, from the prison of self to the moment of knowledge pointing towards freedom, and on to the simple but single acts of restitution which do give her a sense of freedom. And the pattern culminates as Hagar does lose her life to find it, in the splendid, strongly-marked symbols of the final lines—a fighting, dying, stubborn old woman, a glass of water, the cup of life, the grace of God: “I wrest from her the glass, full of water to be had for the taking. I hold it in my own hands. There There And then...” (p. 308)

Life does not often offer us such a rounded completeness of pattern, though life does most strangely answer the demands of the will. Fortunately, there is art, opening up glimpses of the whole, burning away fear and pity to make places for acceptance, charity and the power to go on.

Symbolically, Hagar is, of course, a wanderer in the wilderness through her own willfulness. Like the biblical Hagar, the second wife of Bram Shipley, resents and despises the memory of the first one just as the biblical Hagar resents Sarah, Abraham's wife. Bram Shipley, with his failure farm, is no patriarch—though sadly and ironically, he wishes to be one and hopes their first child will be a boy: “It would be somebody to leave the place to,” he said. “I saw him with amazement that he wanted his dynasty no less than my father had.” (p. 101) Hagar flees Bram and the farm and lives self-exiled with her son John.

Hagar is a tragic figure finally redeemed. But more than that she is real, with an energy of presence that does burst the frame it is held in, to communicate its power, its pathos and its vitality directly, like a blow or a sharp cry. She is also, as her story begins, grotesque, as the stone angel in the Manawaka cemetery, erected from pride and not from love. Hagar's is a grotesquerie within the real, not beyond its bounds in fairy-tale. Hers is a distortion of normality, the form monstrous without its appropriate spirit; only with hard-won humility does she moderate from enormity to humanity. Patricia Morley rightly argues that, “Seeking freedom, Hagar forges more chains, seeking community she builds psychic walls. Her final self-knowledge accompanies the breaking of these bonds, as Hagar is released into love, death and the new life suggested by images of rebirth and transformation”. (*Margaret Laurence: The Long Journey Home*)

George Eliot spoke of the process of writing a novel as a movement towards conceiving “with that directness which is no longer reflection but feeling—an idea wrought back to the directness of sense.” In her conception of Hagar and in her telling of Hagar's story, Margaret Laurence has done just that—and her subject required the particular directness which Laurence commands best. Hagar exploited a talent that rushed to her creation with the flamboyant vigour and perception and completely answered the requirements of Hagar's total reality.

George Woodcock calls Laurence a “Canadian equivalent to Tolstoy.” Both writers, Woodcock argues, have a panoramic sense of space and history, an ability to preserve lost times and worlds so that outsiders can imaginatively apprehend them. He argues: “... their characters are as impressive as their settings, and their best revelations are achieved not... by explicit statements of historic themes, but rather by the vivid, concrete yet symbolic presentation of crucial points of instinct in individual lives, such as... the moment in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* when the despised minister, Mr. Troy, sings the first verse of the Doxology to Hagar Shipley during her last days in hospital...” (*A Place to Stand On*)

Woodcock concludes that Hagar's recognition of her need to rejoice and her inhibiting pride are intensely personal, yet at the same time one can generalize her situation into a description of the state of mind of a whole generation of English

speaking Canadians. To quote Patricia Morley again: "Hagar Shipley is the first in a series of memorable women. In five closely connected works of fiction Laurence presents universal concerns in terms of Canadian experience over four generations. She allows us to see into the hearts of her individual characters; their society, and ourselves." (*A Place to Stand On*)

To provide us an opportunity to peep into the psychic tumult of her protagonist Margaret Laurence opts for the first person narrative. It can be a limiting device in the hands of a lesser artist but Laurence uses it to the hilt as it provides her an opportunity to reveal to the reader more of Hagar than she knew herself, as her judgements about everything are so plainly and strongly biased. For the same purpose the flash-back method is employed. Laurence believed that the flash-back method suited an elderly protagonist who lives largely in the past. The chronological structuring of Hagar's memories provides clarity and unity to the novel and an immediacy to the past. A more pressing reason for depending on Hagar's voice is its poetic quality. Laurence admits "I finally came to the conclusion that even people who are relatively inarticulate, in their relationships with other people, are perfectly capable within themselves of perceiving the world in more poetic terms. So I let her have her way." ("Gadgetry or Growing...p.6)

2.3 THE STONE ANGEL AS VOLLENDUNGSROMAN

Vollendungsroman as defined by Constance Rooke is the novel of "completion" or "winding up." *The Stone Angel* is regarded as the central or prototypical example of the genre, for a number of reasons. One of the most distinguishing aspects of "Vollendungsroman, in *The Stone Angel* is the kind of alliance between the elderly character and the author—as language itself becomes the agent of affirmation," says Rooke. (*Crossing the River*. p.3)

A special intensity (resulting from the proximity to darkness) characterizes the Vollendungsroman. The writer's imagination is challenged by the prospect of the character's demise, and by the need to "capture" a life before it vanishes. Behind this, and quite apart from the question of the author's own age, is undoubtedly the spectre of the writer's own aging and prospective death. Writing is always an act directed against death; it may become that more specifically and more urgently when the writer's subject is old age. Thus, we feel strongly the need that Laurence feels to let her elderly protagonist speak "before [her] mouth is stopped with dark".

The act of speech operates in the Vollendungsroman in several ways. Broadly or metaphorically speaking it is all of the writing performed on the protagonist's behalf by the novelist; more literally, it includes the inner (silent) discourse of the protagonist; finally, of course, it is all speech performed out loud by the elderly protagonist. Speech of this most literal kind may be divided further. Often there is something that must be said to other characters in order to free them for their own lives; this is illustrated by Hagar's statement to Marvin that he has been "good to [her], always. A better son than John". (p.304) And it is typical of the Vollendungsroman that the truth of this crucial speech is gone. An imprecise formulation—even a lie, though Hagar speaks more truly than she knows—is not only preferable to silence, but all that can be hoped for. If Hagar fails "to speak the heart's truth", she fails in part because we all necessarily fail—and because language fails always. Still it is what we have. Through language, we communicate some portion or version of "the heart's truth" and so become visible, assuming a more or less reliable shape in one another's eyes—so that Marvin, in his turn, can remark to the nurse that his mother is "a holy terror", (p.304) and Hagar can feel this accolade as "more than [she] could reasonably have expected out of life, for he has spoken with such anger and such tenderness." (p.304) However imperfectly, Hagar and Marvin connect in

ne through language and such moments have a heightened importance in the Vollendungsroman, where time is running out.

Hagar and The Theme of Self-Alienation

It is also characteristic of the Vollendungsroman that the elderly protagonist is tormented by the memory of characters who have died before some vital message could be delivered or received. Thus, Hagar wants Bram to know she loved him and wants John to know that she regrets the plot to separate him from Arlene. And it is too late. But *The Stone Angel*, like other Vollendungsromans, supplies amelioration through delayed and displaced speech, as figures like Murray Lees appear to take the words that Hagar needs to give. None of this can change the damage she has done to others in the past; "Nothing can take away those years", as Hagar knows full well, unleashing the savage irony that she hears in the minister's words of comfort. Yet language can begin to repair the damage Hagar has done to herself. Speech acts, exchanged with surrogate figures, help her to see what might have been and what she is capable of being even now. They collapse time, even as they enforce its tragic necessity, and reveal to Hagar her continuing potential for connectedness in the human family. They point both to the past in which she might have spoken thus, and to the present in which she does.

Hagar thinks that she is "unchangeable, unregenerate. I go on speaking in the same way, always"; (p. 293) thus her problem with speech is as much with what she says as what she fails to say, and her problem is that in both ways she separates herself from others. Following this self-accusation, however, Hagar withdraws her dismissive remark about the minister- "We didn't have a single solitary thing to say to one another"- and admits to Doris that "He sang for me, and it did me good." (p. 293) Interestingly, the hymn that Hagar had requested of Mr. Troy is the one "that starts out all people that on earth do dwell", (p. 291) thus the "single solitary" state of alienation and failed speech is pierced by chords addressing all. The song here—as often in the Vollendungsroman—seems to bridge the gap between silence and speech, bringing into consciousness the individual's yearning for community. It propels Hagar into the kind of recognition which occurs most frequently for the elderly protagonist, a need to shake off the "chains within" and welcome joy.

Words that are delivered to surviving characters, messages that are routed to the dead through intermediaries (so that the elderly character may be delivered from the burden of silence or mistaken speech), talk in which the aged protagonist may exercise a freer version of the self—these are some of the speech acts that point toward affirmation in the Vollendungsroman. Always, they are imperfect or imprecise. But that is necessarily the case, since the Vollendungsroman negotiates between speech and silence, between the lived and un-lived life since desire is never satisfied. What seems to matter is that it be expressed.

Hagar's life has been more mistaken than most—her story more unspoken and misspoken—but the distance she feels between what her life has been and what it would have been is entirely typical of the Vollendungsroman. Constance Rooke has coined this German neologism for the novel of old age, of "completion" or "winding up," with a certain measure of irony, since a characteristic of these texts is the recognition that human projects are never completed. Time runs out, as pages do. Only rarely does such a text conclude with a ringing endorsement of what the developmental psychologist Erik Erikson refers to as the old person's "one and only life." *The Stone Angel*, in which Hagar is struggling desperately to change and grow, in which categorically she refuses to gloss over her mistakes and deprivation, is a typical case. Art here reflects and seeks to compensate for the incompleteness of a human life.

Simone de Beauvoir, however, in *The Coming of Age*, takes a very different view of the uses of the elderly in fiction: "If an old man is dealt with in his subjective aspect he is not a good hero for a novel; he is finished, set, with no hope, no development to be looked for ... Nothing that can happen to him is of any importance." (*Essays in*

honour of Margaret Laurence. p.210) Novels like *The Stone Angel* prove her wrong. But what is particularly striking in this statement is the notion that elderly protagonists cannot engage our interest if "dealt with in [their] subjective aspect." For this is exactly the "aspect" of old age that contemporary fiction chooses to reveal. When the closed subject becomes an open book, when the mask of stereotypical old age is torn away and the icon stirs, when the elderly character in fiction is allowed to reveal herself as subject, we discover that indeed there is "development to be looked for." In the case of *The Stone Angel*, that development is "looked for" by all—author, character, and reader.

The Stone Angel gives us the elderly protagonist from the inside. A cantankerous old woman, Hagar Shipley is an obstacle and a problem for her family; but we take her side to a remarkable degree, because we are given access to it. We see what Hagar says and does and the effect she has on others—and much of that we would judge harshly; but because Hagar is allowed to tell her own story, because we enter her consciousness and live there, we can respond to her more fairly. We learn to value her rich sensuality and the free play of her wit; we see the other side of the coin, the capacity for joy, all the positive qualities that have been so tragically denied in Hagar's presentation of self to the world. We come to understand as well the social, familial, patriarchal, and puritanical—which have led her to this distortion. And that very pride which we deplore in its outer workings, as well as for Hagar's sake, is revealed to us as a means of survival.

Constance Rooke argues that the subject of old age is a powerful one for other reasons too. The invisibility or marginalization of old people, their reduction to stereotype, their occupation of a zone behind the mask—all of this provide special impetus to one of the writer's most crucial drives, which is to see other human beings clearly. The indignities suffered by the elderly—as their bodies betray them, as memory fails, as social power is stripped away and condescension mounts—may also stimulate the writer's need to proffer dignity through art. Any reader of *The Stone Angel* will recall how Laurence moves us inexorably from a puerile assumption of the "we"—"Well, how are we today? he inquires" (p. 277)—to a truer sense of the tribulations of old people.

Questions such as these relate to the elderly person's claim upon a writer's empathy or compassion. But the elderly character is also attractive for a number of more 'technical' literary reasons. To begin with, she makes available to the writer nearly the whole span of a life history—as opposed to just that truncated, glibly predictive bit before the heroine decides whom to marry. She picks up the human story at a pivotal and richly dramatic point, when the evaluation of life seems most urgent, and when the old dramatic question of what comes next is most especially poignant. She may also function for the writer as a touchstone (and victim or champion) of social attitudes that have shaped our past and that operate still, even in a climate of radical revision. All of this, Hagar clearly does.

The Stone Angel is a prototypical example of the *Vollendungsroman* also in its extensive use of the most characteristic imagery of old age. Consider, for instance, the image of the house with which Laurence plays so elaborately, in using "tonehouse" as Aunt Doll's surname (to forecast Hagar's tenure as housekeeper in Mr. Qatley's Stone House) and in having Marvin sell housepaint (to imply an interest in appearances, which Hagar forswears when she claims the weather beaten house at Shadow Point as her own). Laurence begins her manipulation of this image with the old woman's characteristic fear of dispossession. The house is then developed as an image of the self, the societal construct and the body. What Hagar must do in preparation for her death is what Saul Bellow's elderly heroine in "Leaving the Yellow House" and countless others must do. She must wean herself from that cocoon, that entrenched idea of the self, and "admit" the forces of nature. Understandably, she is afraid. Her fear of intruders in the house is the fear of death that Laurence explores in many strands of the novel's imagery.

Other images that are typical of the *Vollendungsroman* include the sea (which is opposed to the house, as the site of dissolution and rebirth) and the transitional identification of Hagar as a gypsy (who makes her home in nature). Angels as figures poised between two worlds, as messengers and mediators—are also surprisingly common. Another is the mirror, which Laurence uses (again typically) in two opposing ways. On the one hand, she holds the mirror up to a literal and appalling truth—as Hagar sees in it “a puffed face purpled with veins as though someone had scribbled over the skin with an indelible pencil” (p. 79)—and on the other hand, she permits Hagar to “feel that if [she] were to walk carefully up to [her] room, approach the mirror softly, take it by surprise [she] would see there again that Hagar with the shining hair...” (p. 42). In these examples (and others I might have chosen), the power of the image is unleashed by a sense of rich imagery particularly—as if the image had been minted just for Hagar—and by a sense of universality.

Perhaps the most common feature of the *Vollendungsroman* is the life review in which narrative time is divided between past and present. The past—in which the characteristic matter of the *Bildungsroman* is recapitulated—typically approached and controlled through the operation of the elderly protagonist’s memory. The present “mirrors” the past in a number of complex ways, as the protagonist’s most basic identity themes are both reasserted and deconstructed in the final phase of life. Very often—as happens at the point of John’s death—the narrative of the past will break off sharply, leaving a gap between that period and the narrative present. At such junctures the possibilities of life appear to close down, the seal of failure is imprinted, and a desirable version of the self seems unattainable. The elderly protagonist will often repress this juncture at which vitality was lost; its eventual approach, however, will be another kind of turning point: a courageous breaking of the seal, releasing her into a new sense of possibility.

If the character’s old age is purely a framing device—if little or no attention is paid to development in the present or to the experience of being old—then the novel is not by Rooke’s definition a *Vollendungsroman*. There are also a number of contemporary novels that focus primarily on the present time of elderly protagonists. Thus, a *Vollendungsroman* like Muriel Spark’s *Memento Mori* or Paul Scott’s *Staying On* will contain elements of the life review without being structured by the process in the way that *The Stone Angel* clearly is. Generally however, a considerable portion of the narrative time is spent in the past. In this respect as in many others, *The Stone Angel* is a kind of template for the genre.

The life review is more than a structural device. It has philosophical implications that take us to the heart of the *Vollendungsroman* and the lives of elderly people. In 1963 one year prior to the appearance of *The Stone Angel*, Robert N. Butler published an essay called “The Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscence in the Aged,” in which he posited “the universal occurrence in older people of an inner experience or mental process of reviewing one’s life.” He was arguing against the custom prevailing at the time, which was “to identify reminiscence in the aged with psychological dysfunction.” Butler suggests that “the life review Janus-like, involves death as well as looking back” and that “potentially [it] proceeds towards personality reorganization. Thus, the life review is not synonymous with, but includes reminiscence.” It includes also, as *The Stone Angel* does, a vital concern with the possibility of change.

Many of Butler’s insights and clinical observations are relevant to the case of Hagar. He remarks for instance, that “imagery of past events and symbols of death seem frequent in waking life as in the dreams suggesting that the life review is a highly visual process.” Inherently, then, the life review is a highly literary process as well; and Butler may be cited as supplying evidence for the interpenetration of life and art that helps to characterize the *Vollendungsroman*. The verisimilitude of Hagar’s “poetic” voice, as register of visually proliferating images—birds and eggs, for

example, images that we associate with death and captivity and rebirth—is vindicated by Butler's work.

Butler's essay is also concerned with the question of therapeutic value in the process of the life review. He rejects the position of certain psychotherapists that old people should not be encouraged to engage in life review, since they will only be devastated by their failures and their incapacity to repair them. He argues instead for the inherent value of "truth" and for the possibility of change at any point in the life cycle; he believes in the inevitability of the life review. Yet Butler acknowledges the risk of three kinds of people: "those who always tended to avoid the present and put great emphasis on the future... those who have consciously exercised the human capacity to injure others [and those who are] characterologically arrogant and prideful". Although harsh and incomplete this might serve as a thumbnail sketch of Hagar Shipley. It sounds logical to agree with Constance Rooke's final statement that life review has benefitted Hagar. She says, "Margaret Laurence, however would not be dissuaded any more than Hagar is herself. At risk in all these ways, Hagar profits nonetheless (and we profit) from her life review. She proceeds towards personality reorganisation." (*Essays in honour of Margaret Laurence*, p. 39).

2.4 SELF-ALIENATION OF THE ELDERLY AND *THE STONE ANGEL*

The portrayal of elderly characters as self-alienated is one of the major concerns for many modern writers. Rosalie Murphy Baun has examined Margaret Laurence's fictional portrayal of women in *A Jest of God*, *The Stone Angel*, *A Bird in the House* and argues that the women's patterns of behaviour in old age are simply variations of a neurotic pattern of self-alienation. What Marcia Westcott identifies as a "core dependent character" which is gender-neutral in our culture, begins in childhood, and can continue indefinitely in a parent-child-parent cycle.

Karon Horney a Third Force psychologist in her famous work *Our Inner Conflicts* focuses largely upon three basic patterns of neurotic behaviour which the "core dependent character" can take—the complaint or dependent, the aggressive or domineering, and the detached. All three forms are found in Laurence's fiction. For example, Mrs. Cameron, Rachel's mother in *A Jest of God*, is a good example of an elderly woman in whom complaint ("moving toward") tendencies dominate. Such a person frequently controls others through his or her need of them: he may take the stance that "You must love me, protect me, forgive me, not desert me, because I am so weak and helpless." Hagar Shipley, Marvin's mother in *The Stone Angel*, offers a good example of the aggressive type ("moving against"), who denies his or her softer feelings, abhors helplessness, and seeks independence or mastery. Hagar is a superb example of two varieties of the type which Horney identifies as the perfectionist and the arrogant-vindictive and is Laurence's supreme achievement in characterization. Mrs. Macleod, Ewen's mother Vanessa's grandmother in *A Bird in the House*, offers an excellent example of the detached person ("moving away from"). Such a person feels a strong need for superiority and usually looks at those around him with condescension. He or she frequently suppresses emotion and realizes his/her need for superiority in a world essentially of isolation.

Laurence's portrayal of these three elderly women and their families offers a bleak view of human potential and, more especially, of the mother-child relationship. Although Horney indicates quite clearly that an individual can become neurotic because of the neurotic elements of his or her society and culture—for example, the contradictions between competition and brotherly love or between "conspicuous consumption" and "the reality of limited economic resources," she also feels that appropriate parenting (that is parenting which successfully struggles with the neurotic culture) could make a difference. In Laurence's novels, it is obvious that the neurotic

character in the early childhoods of Mrs. Cameron, Grandmother Connor, and Hagar Shipley has made it impossible for them to offer such parenting.

Hager and The Theme of Self- Alienation

According to Horney, the greatest problem in character development occurs when a child has a "neurotic parent", one for example whose insecurity and vulnerability to the ideals and stresses of a competitive society create within the family itself the very conditions of the society and culture. Most destructive of all is the pattern of treating a child as a narcissistic extension of the parent's idealized self, a situation in which the child is made to feel, usually covertly, that his "right to existence lies solely in living up to the parents expectations, measuring up to their ambitions for him, enhancing their prestige, [or] giving them blind devotion." (*Self Analysis*. p. 44)

By examining Hagar Shipley in the light of Karen Horney's work on neurosis, an attempt is made to focus on the neurotic manner in which she interacts, actually conflicts, overtly or covertly with her son, Marvin with whom she is living. It is important, however, to make clear from the beginning that in no way does Horney suggest that conflict in and of itself, whether it is clashes between ourselves and others or within ourselves, is neurotic. Rather, conflict occurs within and between all of us, the nonneurotic and the neurotic; within the neurotic personality, however, the conflict is distinctive and self-destructive.

The symptoms of an impoverished personality appear with great clarity in the children of Laurence's elderly heroines. However, the pretenses which Horney emphasizes are necessary for the neurotic personality—the pretense of love, the pretense of goodness, the pretense of interest and knowledge, the pretense of honesty and fairness, and the pretense of suffering—are most vivid in Laurence's elderly women.

At the opening of *The Stone Angel*, Hagar Shipley is about ninety, an outrageous, difficult woman being cared for by her son Marvin and daughter-in-law, Doris. She has difficulty remembering what happens from one minute to the next and sometimes confuses events of the past with those of the present; she cries easily, screeches at her daughter-in-law with little or no cause, and is churlish or combative much of the time. In addition, she wets the bed and insists upon smoking in bed even though she frequently falls asleep with a burning cigarette; her arthritis makes her clumsy; and she suffers pain under her ribs, which is later diagnosed as cancer. At the time that she is experiencing these humiliations of old-age and inflicting them, without gratitude, upon her son and daughter-in-law she is "rampant with memory" that is, she relives, through memory, her entire life. In so doing, she recalls her great pride and her fear of emotion. She reviews the many times she has shown strength and control over others, the times she has refused to allow her emotions to show, and the times she has allowed "proper" appearances rather than genuineness or caring to rule her life. In her last days she realizes how pride has been her "wilderness" and fear her "demon". She has lost the two men she loved most in life through her pride: never did she allow her husband, Bram, to see the love and sexual attraction she felt for him, thereby contributing to his alcoholism and death; never did she allow her son John to live his own life until her interference actually led to his death. Hagar realizes in her last hours that she has never really lived, never simply rejoiced. Her life has been all pride and pretense, including many of the pretenses discussed by Horney.

Hagar's son Marvin, with his wife, has devoted the last seventeen years of his life caring for his elderly mother. He has served her in every way he could, cringing from the bickering and recriminations between her and his wife, feeling guilty about the great burden that his wife has to bear from both the physical needs and unkind attitude of his mother. At one point, as he realizes that his wife simply cannot continue to lift his mother when she falls, he is able for a short time to consider placing his mother in a home for the aged; but his "Hopeful desperation" that she will like the place succumbs quickly to his mother's refusal. As a child, Marvin had also tried to serve his mother well, doing his chores ably and hanging around her, fruitlessly hoping for

words of praise or affection. But he has never been important to his mother. Only in her last hours, when Hagar comes to realize something of the emotional desert her life has been, does she see Marvin as a loving, caring, responsible child begging for a blessing from a parent who has always ignored him. With this insight, Hagar blesses him, saying, "you have been good to me, always" (p. 304) and she deliberately and caringly lies to him by adding that he has been "a better son than John", her favourite son. Thus, Hagar lifts from Marvin his sense of weakness and worthlessness, and he believes her. Who would tell a lie on her deathbed? A son whose impoverished personality with its neurotic dependency has struggled responsibly throughout a lifetime of hard work and little joy, Marvin is one of the luckier children in Laurence: he has had limited joy with his wife, Doris, and their children, Tina and Steven, and he receives his mother's blessing and release when she is ninety and he is in his sixties.

Examining Karen Horney's three basic patterns of neurotic behaviour with reference to the parent-child relationships created by Laurence in three of her works of fiction, is especially appropriate because of the very nature of neurotic trends. As Horney points, out, the neurotic is highly dependent upon other people, whatever form his neurosis may have assumed. He depends upon people for moving toward, moving against, or moving away from. One could almost say that the parent-child relationship offers a particularly revealing (if unfortunate) laboratory for examining the variations of neurotic behaviour since the parent-child relationship, by definition, involves two people bound together by the physical and emotional needs of the younger. Laurence's fiction is also especially appropriate for examining such neurotic patterns because Laurence, in the words of John Moss, "celebrates life while lamenting the limitations placed upon it by personality." (*The Canadian Novel*) Laurence's fiction indicates quite clearly that the neurotic bonds established in childhood remain throughout life, even in a case like Marvin, who left home at seventeen, when Hagar was in her early forties, and lived away from her for thirty years. However, *The Stone Angel* also suggests that when the mother-figure has a strong personality like that of Hagar Shipley, the child's personality appears even more impoverished than that of the parent; and the child is certainly a less interesting fictional character than the parent. Hagar's discovery at the end that life's purpose is to rejoice—is ultimately Horney's definition of the goal of therapy—to create "wholeheartedness: to be without pretense, to be emotionally sincere, to be able to put the whole of oneself into one's feelings, one's work, one's beliefs". (*Our Inner Conflicts* p.242) But since it is the neurotic character—especially the grand dame of them all, Hagar—who holds the attention of readers, we cannot help being grateful for such neuroses, at least in fiction if not in life.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit has taken up the discussion of three different yet interconnected aspects of *The Stone Angel*. The first part has studied in detail the complex but memorable personality of the protagonist Hagar Shipley. While highlighting the peculiar and distinguishing qualities of Hagar's character an effort has been made to establish how her ancestry and upbringing plays a vital role in making her extremely proud and a staunch believer in keeping up appearances. This belief has ruined her chances of enjoying freedom and joy within the framework of familial relationships even. Growth and self-knowledge are the two important aims of all major characters in Laurence's fiction. Hagar also, during her last days in the hospital, is blessed with the knowledge of her limitations and the strengths of others with whom she has interacted. She musters up the courage to view them as they are and admits that her own temperament has been her undoing.

Since Hagar Shipley is an old woman of ninety and she is the protagonist of the novel, the novel is discussed as a typical example of *Vollendungsroman* – a novel of

'completion' or 'winding up'. Another related aspect of the novel – the theme of self-alienation of the elderly has also been taken up for discussion.

2.6 GLOSSARY

Irascible:	susceptible to ire or anger, irritable.
Incontinent:	not restraining natural discharges or evacuations.
Restitution:	restoration
Amelioration:	to make better
Prototypical:	an original type or model
Truncated:	short, maimed.
Recapitulate:	to go through the stages of one's life history
Template:	a mould shaped to the required outline from which workmen execute moulding.
Proliferating:	to grow by multiplication of parts.
Vindicated:	justified
Therapeutic:	healing, curative

2.7 QUESTIONS

1. Establish how pride has been the undoing of Hagar Shipley.
2. *The Stone Angel* is Hagar Shipley's progress towards inner freedom. Discuss.
3. What are the distinguishing features of Vollendungsroman? Enumerate them with special reference to *The Stone Angel*.
4. Which type of neurotic personality does Hagar represent? Can you blame her ancestry and upbringing for it? Give reasons.

2.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

Horney, Karen. *Self Analysis*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1942.

-----Horney, Karen. *Our Inner Conflicts*. New York. W.W. Norton 1945.

Laurence, Margaret. "Gadgetry or Growing? Form and Voice in the Novel," Lecture at the University of Toronto, Fall, 1969.

Morley, Patricia. *Margaret Laurence: The Long Journey Home*. McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal and Kingston 1991.

Moss, John, ed. *The Canadian Novel: Here and Now*. Toronto: NCP, 1983.

New, William. *Margaret Laurence. The Stone Angel: Introduction*. New Toronto, 1968.

Read, S.E. "The Maze of Life: The Works of Margaret Laurence" in *A Place to Stand On*. ed. George Woodcode. (Edmonton: Newest Press, 1983).

Rooke, Constance. "Hagar's Old Age: The Stone Angel as Vollendungsroman" in *Crossing the River: Essays in honour of Margaret Laurence*. Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1988.

Thomas, Clara. *Margaret Laurence*. McClelland and Stewart Limited, Toronto, 1969.

Woodcock, George, ed. *A Place to Stand On: Essays by and about Margaret Laurence*. Edmonton: Newest P, 1983.

UNIT 3 *THE STONE ANGEL*: A NOVEL OF AWAKENING

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 *The Stone Angel*: A Novel of Awakening
- 3.3 *The Stone Angel*: The Religious Roots of the Feminine Identity Issue.
- 3.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.5 Glossary
- 3.6 Questions
- 3.7 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit is prepared with the purpose of discussing *The Stone Angel* as a novel of awakening and to analyse the novel with a view to establishing a connection between religious concepts and the issues related to female identity.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In *Diving Deep and Surfacing : Women Writers on Spiritual Quest*, Carol Christ describes a common pattern in women's spiritual quests, which takes a distinctive form in the work of women writers. The first stage in the spiritual quest process is what Christ calls an "experience of nothingness," the second stage, is awakening. Awakening often occurs through the third stage, which she terms as "mystical identification", and frequently takes place in a natural setting. The last stage in the process Christ terms as "new naming of self and reality". Tracing this pattern in Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel* places Hagar Shipley's story in a strong tradition of writing by women: the novel of awakening. Here readers attempt to understand the female protagonists as they attempt to understand themselves.

3.2 *THE STONE ANGEL*: A NOVEL OF AWAKENING

The Stone Angel explores several ideas common to the novel of awakening: the survival of personality, the function of memory, the importance of coming to terms with female sexuality, and the necessity of accepting the past in order to understand the present. Laurence's achievement is that she makes her protagonist's awakening contingent upon her ability to come to terms with her image of the mother and of herself as mother, and that the awakening in *The Stone Angel* evolves in the consciousness of a ninety-year-old woman.

The awakening process that Christ describes begins in an experience of nothingness. According to Christ, women experience nothingness in their own lives, especially in their relationship with men. That is certainly true of Laurence's protagonist Hagar Currie Shipley. Early in *The Stone Angel*, Hagar cries, "Oh, my lost men. No, I will not think of that." (p.6) But Hagar does not have as much control over her thoughts as she would like. She tries to come to terms with her failed relationships with the men in her life: her father, her two brothers, her husband, and her two sons.

Christ says that women also experience nothingness in the values that have shaped their lives. Again that is true in Hagar's case. Because her mother dies when Hagar is born, Hagar's life is shaped and dominated by the patriarchal and materialistic values that she inherits from her stern Scottish father Jason Currie. Laurence has admitted that *The Stone Angel* was an attempt to understand her grandparent's generation. Hagar's father represents the best and worst of that generation, an unbending authoritarian, he is afraid to show love, easily angered, bigoted, ambitious, hard-working, dutiful, proud, and strong. From him, Hagar inherits all those attributes, along with the Scottish clan motto that she lives by all her life: "Gainsay who Dare." (p. 15) From him she also inherits her hatred of even the appearance of weakness. One of her earliest memories is of being beaten by her father and her reaction to the punishment: "I wouldn't let him see me cry. I was so enraged." (p. 9) She also recalls her father's response: "You take after me. . . . You've got backbone." (p. 10) Hagar also inherits her father's brains. Once she overhears her father talking about her: "Smart as a whip, she is, that one." (p. 14) Hagar does not need to hear the end of the sentence, and neither do her brothers.

In her first mention of her brothers, Hagar says, "My brothers took after our mother." (p. 7) She describes them as "graceful uninspired boys." (p. 7) Implicit here is the damaging association between women and weakness that Hagar makes throughout most of her life. The same association is implicit in her opening description of the stone angel which guards her mother's grave: "in memory of her who relinquished her feeble ghost as I gained my stubborn one." (p. 3) It is this association that damages her relationship with her brothers. When her brother Dan is dying of pneumonia, Matt, her other brother, tries to talk the teenaged Hagar into wearing their mother's shawl to comfort Dan. Hagar refuses. "But all I could think of was that meek woman I'd never seen, the woman Dan was said to resemble so much and from whom he'd inherited a frailty I could not help but detest, however much a part of me wanted to sympathize. To play at being her—was beyond me." (p. 25) Hagar wants to do what Matt asks but, as she puts it, she is "unable to bend enough." When she rejects her mother's weakness, she becomes like her stone image. Hagar loses the fullness of her potential self when she cuts herself off from others.

It is this inability to bend that destroys her relationship with her husband, Bram Shipley. Hagar is attached to Bram because of what he represents to her: rebellion against her father's authority and middle class values, and a response to the natural world. It is significant that the first time Hagar sees Bram at a dance she thinks he looks like a bearded Indian, so brown and beaked a face she also "reveled in his fingernails with crescents of ingrown earth that never met a file." (p. 45) She is shocked when during their first dance, he presses his groin against her, yet she accepts his request for another dance. It is clear that Hagar is attracted to Bram's earthy sexuality, but it is also clear that the values she inherits from her father and her training in the cult of true womanhood will not allow her to acknowledge that attraction. Her Currie inheritance and finishing-school training cause her to denigrate the very qualities in Bram that she is drawn to. When her father refuses to have anything to do with her marriage to Bram, or with her, Hagar is at first certain that he "would soften and, yield, when he saw how Brampton Shipley prospered, gentled, learned cravats and grammar." (p. 50) Her ideas about love, like her ideas about everything else, are shaped by her alienating background. If she imagined Bram as a rugged Indian when they first met, in the next instant she "imagined him rigged out in a suit of grey, soft as a dove's breast-feathers." (p. 45) Her romantic conceptions about love prevent her from recognizing her true feelings for her husband. "He had a banner over me for many years. I never thought it love, though, after we wed. Love, I fancied, must consist of words and deeds delicate as lavender sachets, not like the things he did sprawled on the high white bedstead that rattled like a train." (p. 80) Hagar's attempts to tame Bram are futile and destructive. Their battle of wills hurts him, her, and their relationship. She is more successful at taming her own response to her husband. "It was not so very long after we wed, when first I felt my blood and vitals rise to meet his. He never knew I never let him know. I never spoke aloud, and

I made certain that the trembling was all inner. I prided myself upon keeping my pride intact, like some maidenhead." (p.81)

*The Stone Angel:
A Novel of
Awakening*

To show response would be to accept being a woman. Denying her womanliness also means denying her sexuality. Her success at controlling herself is just as destructive as her attempts to control Bram. When she feels tenderness for her husband, as she does when he loses a prized horse, she refuses to express it, seeing such feelings as weak and womanly. The same intolerance of weakness, prevents her from telling Bram of her fears when she finds that she is pregnant. At several points in their relationship, Hagar pulls away when they have chances to pull together. When Bram takes her to the hospital to deliver their son, for example, instead of sharing Bram's excitement, Hagar feels ashamed to be seen with him.

It is concern about what others think, her pride, that causes Hagar to leave Bram, just as defiance of what others think, and her pride, caused her to leave her father and marry Bram. When she leaves him to support herself and her youngest son, John, by becoming a housekeeper for a rich man on the coast, she proves her strength, her independence and her ability to survive. But leaving Bram levies a heavy emotional toll. Hagar's memories of him suggest that not only did she miss him in her bed, but she also missed his recognition and respect of her. Looking back, she thinks "he was the only person close to me who ever thought of me by my name, not daughter, nor sister, nor mother, not even wife, but Hagar, always." (p.80) That Bram is the only one who calls her by her name is important. It gives her a sense of self which her lack of a relationship with her mother has denied.

Hagar's unexpressed, unacknowledged love for Bram affects her relationship with her youngest son, John. Despite hints in her narrative that John is very much like his father, Hagar insists on seeing him as a Currie through and through. She even gives him one of her prized possessions, her Currie clan pin. He asserts his allegiance to Bram by trading it for a knife. John's similarity to Bram is clearest in his relationship with Arlene Simmons. He assumes that Arlene is attracted to him for the same reason that Hagar is initially attracted to Bram, because she is not supposed to be. They first get together at a dance, like Bram and Hagar did. John gets drunk, like his father, who drank himself to death, and Arlene brings him home. When John learns that Arlene took care of him, he grins, and Hagar describes it as "the same distorted mouth as I'd seen before on someone else." (p.199) When Arlene defends John by denying that he is like Bram, Hagar gets angry at the implied criticism of her dead husband. It is clear, except to Hagar, that her preference for the younger son is based on his resemblance to his father.

Just as John resembles the young Bram, Arlene is like the young Hagar. Remembering Arlene taking care of the drunken John, Hagar observes, "She was a very practical girl in some ways." (p.198) When Arlene's parents lose their money during the Depression she is proud of her own self-sufficiency when she gets a job. But unlike Hagar, Arlene is able to express her feelings for the man she loves. When Hagar overhears them making love, it is clear to her that Arlene is enjoying herself, and that is when Hagar takes steps to stop them from marrying. Hagar's reaction to John's marriage is similar to her father's reaction to hers. She arranges with Arlene's parents to send Arlene away. When John learns of Arlene's departure he gets drunk, drives with Arlene on the railway bridge and kills them both in a self-destructive game with a freight train. It is not until Hagar goes through her process of awakening that she is able to come to terms with her guilt over her part in John and Arlene's death.

Whereas Hagar was too protective of John, she almost ignores her elder son, Marvin. While she insists that the wild John is a Currie through and through, it is the hard-working Marvin who seems most like Hagar's father. As John tells her, "You always bet on the wrong horse... Marvin was your boy, but you never saw that." (p.237) It is clear from Hagar's memories that Marvin would have done anything to win her approval. "He was a serious and plodding little boy, and seemed to take to chores

naturally. But when he'd finished them, he'd hang around the kitchen waiting for approval or at least acknowledgement." (p. 112) "But he never wins them from Hagar. The same pattern emerges when he leaves to join the war. Hagar feels a pang of tenderness: "I wanted all at once to hold him tightly, plead with him, against all reason and reality, not to go. But I did not want to embarrass both of us, nor have him think I'd taken leave of my senses." (p. 129) Once again, Hagar's pride comes between her and those she loves. As she says, "the moment eluded us both." (p. 130) The relationship between Hagar and Marvin doesn't improve when he and his wife, Doris, move in with Hagar to take care of her. Living with an aging and irascible Hagar makes life difficult for all of them, as Hagar herself realizes: "I have lived with Marvin and Doris—or they have lived in my house, whichever way one cares to phrase it—for seventeen years. Seventeen—it weighs like centuries. How have I borne it? How have they?" (p. 37) When Hagar's fall and memory lapses convince them that they can no longer care for her, they investigate the possibility of putting her in Silverthreads, a nursing home. Hagar's pride and self-reliance will not permit this and an attempt to stop it leads to her awakening.

As Hagar thinks about her "lost men," it becomes clear that her relationships with them are marked by failure: by her failure to understand those she loves, and by her failure to express her feelings so that they could understand her. Clearly, Hagar experiences the "nothingness" in her relationships with the men in her life that Christ sees in women's novels of awakening, but even more damaging is the nothingness she experiences in her relationships with women, symbolized by the stone angel. *The Stone Angel* opens with a scene that connects the imagery associated with the mother figure and the imagery associated with the natural world. The novel begins with a description of the stone angel which dominates the small prairie town of Manawaka, and the whole novel: "Above the town, on the hill brow, the stone angel used to stand. I wonder if she stands there yet, in memory of her who relinquished her feeble ghost as I gained my stubborn one, my mother's angel that my father bought in pride to mark her bones and proclaim his dynasty." (p. 3)

The stone angel is an emblem of the guilt which Hagar feels for the fact that her birth caused her mother's death, for the weakness that she associates with her mother, and for the power she associates with her father. The mother herself is an emblem and a victim of the colonial system. Yet this image is all Hagar has had for her desire for the mother, her need to be protected, and her pain at her mother's suffering characterize her childhood. Hagar stares at the stone angel's blind eyes, but never sees herself reflected there. Traditional accounts of psychological development argue that the child acquires a sense of self from the nurturing gaze of its mother-figure, grows away from her into an independent being, and goes on to master the world outside, symbolized by the father. The mother figure represents the first external mirror, eventually internalized, into which the girl-child looks to discover her identity. *The Stone Angel* provides a striking version of the absence of a mirroring bond and its painful effects on the heroine. Hagar's life story is the narrative of a subject's painful inability to belong to a place in any secure way, to belong to a larger community until she can come to terms with her image of the mother and with her own role as a mother.

Hagar seems to suffer from what Adrienne Rich calls matrophobia: "the fear not of one's mother or motherhood but of becoming one's mother... the one through whom the restrictions and degradations of a female existence were perforce transmitted." (*Of Women Born*, p. 235) Easier by far to hate and reject a mother outright than to see beyond her to the forces acting upon her. But where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull towards her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her completely. Hagar exhibits the dread that Rich mentions when she refuses to wear her mother's shawl to comfort her dying brother. She also exhibits the debilitating effects of matrophobia that Rich describes in the following terms: "Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mother's bondage, to become

individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mother's and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery." (*Of Women Born*, p.236)

The Stone Angel;
A Novel of
Awakening

Clearly, the stone angel represents the mother as martyr and Hagar performs the kind of radical surgery which Rich fears. She fits Rich's description of the motherless woman: "the motherless woman may also react by denying her own vulnerability, denying she has felt any loss or absence of mothering. She may feel uneasy with equals, particularly women." This is certainly true of Hagar, whose fear of the female and the inability to accept her own womanhood lead to decidedly unflattering images of women in the first half of the novel. Doris is an "unwilling hen," (p.36) Bram's daughters are like "lumps of unrendered fat", (p.56) the old women at Silverthreads are "ewes," (p.98) Although Hagar needs the sense of safety which an acknowledged identification with her mother and other women might confer, the death of her mother and her fear of becoming her, bars her from this feeling of unity and dooms her to a sense of fragmentation, which is reflected in her opening description of the angel and its surroundings. In her opening description of the Manawaka cemetery, Laurence sets up several oppositions that will divide Hagar from herself and from those she loves, especially Bram. The clearest opposition is between the foreign peony and the native cowslip. Hagar remembers "the funeral-parlour perfume of the planted peonies, dark crimson and wallpaper pink, the pompous blossoms hanging leadenly too heavy for their light stems, bowed down with the weight of themselves." (p.4) This recollection contrasts sharply with her memories of the cowslips.

"They were tough-rooted, these wild and gaudy flowers, and although they were held back at the cemetery's edge torn out by loving relatives to keep the plots clear and clearly civilized, for a second or two a person walking there could catch the faint, musky, dust-tinged smell of things that grew untended and had grown before the portly peonies and the angels with rigid wings, when the prairie bluffs were walked through only by Cree." (p.5)

Hagar's disdain for the imported peonies and her respect for the native cowslips suggest her ambivalence about the domestication of the prairie which Kolodny discusses in *The Land Before Her*. This passage could be read as a critique of the pioneer experience, an emblem of one woman's struggle with the conflicting values of domesticity and respect for the natural environment. Several contrasts are suggested in the opening scenes of the novel: death-life, artificial-natural, conscious-unconscious, civilization-nature, repression-passion, present-past, order-disorder, Currie-Shipley. Since all Hagar ever knew was the separation and fragmentation suggested by these binary oppositions, she is condemned to repeat them in all of her relationships. The lack of a bond between mother and daughter results in a painful psychological bondage from which Hagar cannot free herself until her awakening in the western Canadian landscape.

According to Christ, as a result of experiencing nothingness, the female protagonists "question the meaning of their lives, thus opening themselves to the revelation of a deeper source of power and value." (*Diving Deep and Surfacing*, p.13) Hagar's memories can be seen as an attempt to understand her life, and they help prepare her for the transformation she undergoes at Shadow Point. Like her marriage to Bram, Hagar's trip to the abandoned cannery on the edge of the ocean represents her rebellion against authority, against Doris and Marvin and their decision to place her in the Silverthreads nursing home. As Hagar plots her escape to Shadow Point, her defiance is clear: "They are greatly mistaken if they think I will bend meekly and never raise a finger. I have taken matters into my own hands before, and can again, if need be." (p.139)

Hagar's trip to Shadow Point is also like her marriage to Bram in that it represents her repressed response to the natural world. At Shadow Point, Hagar gets in touch with external nature and with her own. She goes there because she is drawn to its quiet

beauty: "I like this green blue-ceilinged place, warm and cool with sun and shade where I am not fussed at. Perhaps I have come here not to hide but to seek." (p.192-93) What Hagar finds at Shadow Point is her own repressed response to the natural world as opposed to the domestic values that she has used to keep herself in check for so many years. This change is signaled when she replaces her old lady hat with the dead June bugs she finds in the abandoned cannery: "I take off my hat it's hardly suitable for here, anyway, a prim domestic hat sprouting cultivated flowers. Then with considerable care I arrange the Jade and copper pieces in my hair." (p.216) Pleased with the effect, Hagar imagines herself "queen of moth-millers, empress of earwigs." (p.216) Hagar's coronation is in keeping with her comparison of herself to Keats' Meg Merrilies.

Old Meg she was a gypsy,
And lived upon the moors;
Her bed it was the brown heath turf,
And her house was out of doors. (p.151)

Hagar's house at the cannery, like Meg's is essentially "out of doors". Under these conditions, Hagar's usual concern with protective boundaries is suspended. Like the house, Hagar is open to the natural world, and her openness is signified by her identification with Meg. According to Helen Buss, Meg also represents Hagar's openness to a new view of womanhood: "coming to terms with feminine values is largely accomplished for her through her identification of her womanhood with the figure of Meg Merrilies." Buss points out that Meg represents the "woman outside the civilized order that Hagar needs to touch in herself." Meg is also "brave as Margaret Queen" and "Tall as Amazon" thus representing a womanly strength based on a female tradition rather than a denial of femininity. According to Buss, "Hagar's chart of brave old Meg gives her a vision of female strength that she has previously lacked." (*Mother and Daughter Relationships*...p.17)

Christ argues that Hagar's awakening takes place in a natural setting and it is presaged by a storm. Since the ocean is the "matrix of creation" in literature, it often represents a desire to return to that "pool of darkness" that is associated with women. The ocean represents surrender, release but also rebirth, a cleansing baptismal plunge. This water imagery represents a condition absolutely opposed to the stony paralysis of the angel. While listening to the soothing sounds of the sea, Hagar does plunge into the depths of her memories with the help of Murray Ferney Lees, an agent for Dependable Life Assurance. Christ notes that in women's spiritual quest literature, the awakening often resembles a conversion experience. There are certainly religious overtones to the scenes between Hagar and Lees. They share a jug of wine and tell each other their confessions. Religion figures prominently in Lees's story, and he tells it in a language reminiscent of an itinerant preacher which is appropriate since he comes from a long line of circuit riders. The confession/sermon which he delivers to Hagar seems tailor-made for her. As Constance Rooke points out, Lees's story is essentially Hagar's "where the chief villains are a concern for appearances and denial of sexuality, and where the catastrophe involves the loss of a son." (*A Feminist Reading of The Stone Angel*" p.31)

Laurence emphasizes the importance of the night that Hagar and Lees spend together in the abandoned cannery by making it the nexus of her dual plots. As she listens to Mr. Lees's tragedy in the present, her memories take her to John's death in the past. Since Hagar was so traumatized by seeing all that she loved destroyed, it is no wonder that she is compelled to repeat it. Lees's confession moves her to make her own, but it is not until he responds to it that she realizes that for the first time in her life, she had spoken her feelings out loud. Her reaction is uncharacteristic, "I am not sorry I have talked to him, not sorry at all, and that's remarkable." (p.253) They discuss their anger about their senseless losses and then Hagar describes the effect of their revelations: "We sit close together for warmth, both of us, leaning against the boxes. And then we slip into sleep." (p.246) When Hagar awakes she feels the effects of spending two nights in the open and Lees's cheap wine. She is sick and confused. In

her confusion she mistakes Lees for her lost son, and tells him that she won't come between John and Arlene. Lees pretends to be John and forgives her. This allows Hagar to forgive herself. At Shadow Point, Hagar comes to terms with the image of the mother on two levels: the image of Meg Merrilies supplants the image of woman as victim which Hagar has carried with her since the death of her mother, and her confession to Lees allows her to confront her own failure as a mother. Her journey to Shadow Point is also a journey into that part of her past, her failure as a mother, that she has been trying to avoid remembering and finally, a journey into acceptance. Her experiences at Shadow Point force Hagar to revise her notion of what being a woman means.

It is through Lees that Hagar achieves the "mystical identification" that Christ cites as a characteristic of women's novels of awakening. The night she spends with him prepares her for what Christ terms "a new naming of self and reality that articulates the new orientation to self and world achieved through the awakening." (*Diving Deep and Surfacing*, p.22) While Hagar does not become a sweet old lady overnight, the effects of her experience with Lees are almost immediately apparent. Her first reaction is anger when she finds that Lees has betrayed her hiding place to Marvin and Doris. When Doris tells her that Lees has saved her life, Hagar is annoyed and amused, "This ridiculous statement makes me laugh, but then, looking into this strange man's eyes, an additional memory returns, something more of what he spoke to me last evening, and I to him, and the statement no longer seems so ridiculous. Impulsively, hardly knowing what I am doing, I reach and touch his wrist." (p.253)

Hagar, who always flinches from human contact, touches him because he has touched her. He has saved her life.

Signs of Hagar's awakening are numerous in the last weeks of her life. While symbols of frozen womanhood, especially the stone angel, dominate the early chapters of the novel, the last two chapters feature images of women, both patients and nurses, as nurturer. As Buss points out, "we may measure Hagar's growth in her last days by her changing attitudes towards women, her increasing ability to receive mothering love and offer love in return. Hagar begins a process whereby she allows other women to touch her life." (*Mother and Daughter Relationships*, p.12) One of the most significant signs of her awakening is that Hagar, who has never been able to form attachments with women, becomes part of the women's community in the hospital where she spends her last days. Initially, she complains to Marvin about the noise and lack of privacy in the women's ward, but when he arranges for her to be moved to a semi-private room, she realizes that she will miss the other women, and the dialogues that they carry on in their dreams. The night cries in the women's hospital ward express their shared psychic field. Their mental barriers are permeable and their sleeping conversation incorporates all of the women's psychic lives.

Another sign of her awakening is Hagar's relationship with two young women—Sandra Wong, the teenager who shares her new room, and Doris's daughter, Tina. Hagar, who cannot think of anything that she has done to help someone else, gets out of her own bed, though she is in great pain, to get a bedpan for her young roommate. This scene is small, but important, for Hagar is able to define herself in a new way so that being a woman does not mean becoming her mother, retaining all the old connections with weakness, assuming automatically the outdated passive roles. Hagar's changing view of womanhood is reflected in her identification with her granddaughter. In Buss's view, Hagar's "gentle feelings towards Tina signal a new stage in her life, one that is to bring her closer to the mother and the values represented by that figure." Constance Rooke argues that Hagar's reconciliation with the image of the mother signifies a connection between four generations of women. According to Adrienne Rich, "Until a strong line of love, confirmation, and example stretches from mother to daughter from women to women across the generations, women will still be wandering in the wilderness." (*Of Women Born*, p.246) Hagar comes to realize that she has been wandering in the wilderness, and her gift of the rings is her attempt to pass on the love, confirmation, and example which she lacked.

The gesture involves not destruction of the "mother" but rather a confrontation with and an incorporation of the matriarchal power to nurture.

The most significant sign of Hagar's growth in the novel comes in its most famous passage, when she faces some difficult truths about herself. "Every good joy I might have held, in my man or child of mine or even the plain light of morning, of walking the earth, all were forced to a standstill by some brake of proper appearances oh, proper to whom? When did I ever speak the heart's truth? Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear." (p.292)

Throughout the novel Hagar is, in effect, reading her own life; in this passage she realizes that she is the author. Although this passage has received a lot of discussion from Laurence scholars, no one except Christ has noticed Hagar's emphasis on her sense of loss as a woman and a mother and her recognition that this loss is tied to her ability to respond to her natural surroundings and caused by the pride and fear of feminine weakness which she inherited from her father. In speaking "the heart's truth", Hagar achieves both a reconciliation with the feminine and a new sense of her own strength as a woman. By facing the stone angel which she has become, Hagar gets in touch with her life giving forces. Hagar looks Medusa's Stone Angel in the eye. Instead of being turned to stone, she is released into the world of feeling away from the frozen rage which Medusa represents. Facing the truth about herself allows her to speak it. When Marvin ask her how she is, she is set to lie, but instead she tells him, "I am frightened Marvin I am so frightened." (p.303) Even more difficult is the lie she tells him that he has been a better son to her than John. Hagar considers her final mothering of Marvin a victory and Buss explains why she is right:

When we consider the distance she has had to reach out to find the mother and the scant hand-holds her society offered her in her search we may be inclined to agree with her assessment of victory, and conclude that Laurence's achievement has not been in her portrayal of isolation but in her portrayal of the feminine search for relatedness despite all the forces of isolation. (*Mother and Daughter Relationships*... p.30)

When she leaves her room, Hagar overhears Marvin discussing her. It is one of the most moving passages in the novel: "She's a holy terror," (p.304) he says. Hagar is a holy terror to the end. In the last scene of the novel, she characteristically refuses to let the nurse help her drink a glass of water and insists on holding it in her own hands, just as she had held her life in her own hands. *The Stone Angel* ends with Hagar triumphantly drinking the water and then the words "And then". (p.308) As W.H. New points out, there are several ways to read this ending. In a novel shaped by Hagar's memory, "And then" could mean "at that time in the past," a final expression of the past imposing itself on the present. Or "And then" could mean "on the other hand" an expression of an alternative possibility. But I prefer to read "And then" as "next" an expression of continuity. It seems fitting that a novel that begins with death, that has at its center an awakening that places it in a long tradition of writing by women, and that attempts to explore the complex relationship between mothers and daughters, should end countering finality with regeneration. That Hagar's recognition of herself as a woman coincides with her own death is not only the tragedy of restricted choices. It is also her triumphant assumption of the female and of the painful but liberating comprehension of it.

3.3 *THE STONE ANGEL: THE RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF THE FEMININE IDENTITY ISSUE*

The major contention of many Liberationists including Mary Days, the author of *Beyond God the Father*, is that a major factor in preventing women from achieving a genuine sense of identity has been the "dominant male" philosophy embedded in

Judaeo-Christian Theology. Accordingly women are urged to expose the sexual politics inherent in the Bible and to construct a new "theology" based upon matriarchal cults and upon the real experiences articulated by contemporary liberated women. Evelyn J. Hinz has insightfully explored the connection between religious issues and female identity in *The Stone Angel*. While doing so she has also questioned many of the premises and conclusions of the feminists.

*The Stone Angel:
A Novel of
Awakening*

The Stone Angel with its flash back technique is designed to provide the causes of Hagar's present loneliness, or gender alienation, and above all her fear of death. Though played out on sociological, psychological, and histo/cultural levels, all of the protagonist's problems are shown to stem from the religious climate in which she has been raised. Thus Laurence, in a seemingly feminist fashion, dramatizes the extent to which religious ideology permeates even secular aspects of human existence.

Hagar could be described as the damaged product of the Judaeo-Christian education that emphasizes mental/male talents. This tradition is made clear through the name – specifically the initials – of her prime mentor, her father, Jason Currie. Similarly, though Hagar's relationship with her father could be studied as a modern version of the Electra Complex, her sense that her husband has committed a sacrilege when he urinates on the front steps of her father's store suggests the religious implications of the episode and so prevents any simple Freudian interpretation of her response.

Or again, if what has prevented Hagar's acceptance of her own femininity has something to do with the biological fact that her mother died in giving her birth and with the culturally upheld ideal of slim, virginal female, these too are shown to have their roots in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Her religious role models are her mother's monument, an "angel of pure white marble", and the sisterly Madonna of Michelangelo's Pieta – the latter being iconographically evoked when Hagar refuses to hold her dying brother and to drape him and herself in their mother's shawl.

Finally, if Hagar's sexual prudery and inability to articulate her delight in carnal love are symptomatic of the Victorian ethos of her time, Laurence also traces the problem to the spiritual orientation of Christianity. Thus, it is in the context of her recollection of the line "His banner over me was love" (p. 80) that Hagar in retrospect acknowledges the way in which she – like the commentators who allegorized the erotic Song of Solomon – refused to let her husband sense her sexual response.

Yet to see *The Stone Angel* purely as a *Dalysque* critique would be to miss Laurence's equal concern with the implications of the decline of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. If Jason Currie's initials suggest the Saviour, for example, his first name also allies him with the questor for the golden fleece. His donations to the church proceed from no religious piety but rather from a desire to broadcast his financial superiority. For him, the importance of the angel tombstone is that it had been bought "at terrible expense" and that of all the angels in the cemetery it was "the first, the largest, and certainly the costliest." (p. 3) Therefore, if like his classical namesake he sacrifices the female for his own interest, he also represents the materialization of spiritual values.

Similarly, far from it being her father's use of religious authority to sanction his notions of dominance, it is his lack of a sense of hierarchy that bothers Hagar. Recalling how in church the congregation sang the psalm "unto the hills around do I lift up/My longing eyes" to "God the Lord, who heaven and earth hath made," (p. 16) Hagar continues: "Auntie Doll was always telling us that father was a God-fearing man. I never for a moment believed it, of course. I couldn't imagine Father fearing anyone, God included, especially when he didn't even owe his existence to the Almighty. God might have created heaven and earth and the majority of people, but father was a self-made man, as he himself had told us often enough." (p. 17)

Conversely, Hagar's real tragedy lies in her "feminist" confusion of spiritual and secular authority figures. Equating God and her father, she stops going to church

because of the way she feels her husband has disgraced her in the father's eyes. "I preferred possible damnation in some comfortably distant future, to any ordeal then of peeking or pitying eyes. But now when time has folded in like a paper fan, I wonder if I shouldn't have kept on going. What if it matters to Him after all, what happens to us." (p. 90)

Another factor to call into question regarding the feminist position is that what bothers Hagar about Christianity is not its "masculinity" as much as its "effeminacy." Here Laurence seems to be suggesting that the new Testament constitutes a decline from the Old. Hagar's husband is also a Christ figure—like Jesus, he was "born in a barn" and although his "feminine" association with the earth strikes a sympathetic cord in Hagar, it is also his lack of masculine assertiveness that is responsible for the failure in their relationship. This recognition comes to him in his last delirious moments when he muses: "That Hagar—I should have licked the living daylights out of her, may be, and she'd have seen I could. What d'you think? Think I should of?" (p. 173) Hagar's response in turn is "I could not speak for the salt that filled my throat and for anger" (p. 173) -not anger at her husband for such a male chauvinist statement, but anger over the realization of how different things might have been if Bram had been a stronger mate.

Furthering her critique of the effeminacy of the New Testament and its degeneracy, moreover, is Laurence's characterization of the surrogate God figure, the minister, who, Hagar's very "religious" (p. 38) daughter-in-law feels will bring the old woman "comfort" in her last days. Far from evidencing any "Trojan" qualities, the Reverend speaks for prayer and comfort, all in a breath, as though God were a kind of feather bed or spring filled mattresses. Not only is modern Christianity too soft, finally, it is also essentially too materialistic:

Even if heaven were real, and measured as Revelation says, so many cubits this way and that, how gimcrack a place it would be, crammed with its pavements of gold, its gates of pearl and topaz, like a gigantic chunk of costume jewellery. Saint John of Patmos can keep his sequined heaven, or share it with Mr. Troy, for all I care, and spend eternity in fingering the gems and telling each other gleefully they are worth a fortune. (p. 120)

Yet what is ultimately most problematic about the Judaeo-Christian tradition, as Laurence sees it, is its egocentricity and the concept of individual uniqueness. To emphasize this point, at the moment of Hagar's greatest sense of loneliness, Laurence has her protagonist ponder the twin issues of identity and the fear of death: "Hard to imagine a world and me not in it. Will everything stop when I do? Stupid old baggage, who do you think you are? Hagar. There's no one like me in this world." (p. 250)

Accordingly, one of Laurence's major strategies in *The Stone Angel* is to evoke biblical prototypes for Hagar, whereby she disproves her protagonist's claims to uniqueness at the same time that she demonstrates that the Bible is merely the Judaeo-Christian rendition—or "signature"—of mythic or eternally recurring experiences. Just as the biblical Hagar was the Egyptian concubine of Abraham, taken by him because his first wife, Sarah was childless, so Laurence's Hagar, who likens herself to "Pharaoh's daughter", is the second wife of Bram, whose first wife, Clara, had provided him with no male heirs. Just as a key episode in the Abraham story is Jehovah's command that he sacrifice his son, so Hagar is subjected to a test of faith when she watches Bram one day "cut a slab of waxen honey and hold it out" to their son, who opens his mouth, afraid to do otherwise, and stands stock still and white, while the honeyed butcher knife rams in ... "offering sweetness on a steel that in another season slit pigs' carcasses." (p. 125)

In turn, with a view to denying chronology – which is the historical equivalent of separateness – Laurence also finds a precedent for Hagar in the succeeding biblical

generation – just as Isaac's wife, Rebecca, helped her son, Jacob, to cheat his brother out of his birthright, so Hagar wants her second son, John to be the true heir of her father's line. Similarly, to demonstrate the universal and therefore non-sex-differentiated nature of archetypal experience, Laurence does not limit Hagar's prototypes to women. Bereft of everything, faced with the seemingly unjust ways of God, constipated Hagar is like "Job in reverse".

*The Stone Angel:
A Novel of
Awakening*

Most important of all, however, are the variations that Laurence plays on the story of Jacob and the angel, by which Hagar becomes identified not only with another masculine type but also with the spirit of Jehovah, so Hagar must realize that her identity crisis stems not from secular issues but from religious ones – from "the lack of a proper foundation garment" in a metaphorical sense. On the other hand, she must come to realize that she is the antagonistic force in her relationship with her son John. As he tries to straighten the toppled angel in the graveyard, she compares him to Jacob "wrestling with the angel and besting it, wringing a blessing from it with his might: But no." (p. 179) Rather it is her other son, Marvin, who plays this role, gripping her hand with all his strength, and bargaining, "I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And I see that I am thus strangely cast, and perhaps have been so from the beginning, and can only release myself by releasing him." (p. 304)

In contrast to feminists who argue that the Bible has absolutely nothing to say to women, *The Stone Angel* argues that it is only the Judaeo-Christian "signature" that is problematic. Nor would Laurence appear to agree with those who argue categorically that what women need is a religion which reverses the Judaeo-Christian alignment of pride and self-assertion with sin and conversely of self-sacrifice with virtue. To the exact contrary, when Hagar explicitly connects her situation with that of her biblical prototype, it is precisely in terms of hubris and to the extent to which she has internalized the egocentric value system of a monotheistic deity: "Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched." (p. 292)

"Nothing can take away those years," Hagar concludes, inquiring into the guilt she feels for the love she has withheld, but with Laurence pointing to what Hagar has missed most of all is her essentially Protestant upbringing: namely, rituals of atonement and exorcism. To provide these is Laurence's purpose in having Hagar escape to an old fishy cannery where she encounters a seedy "life assurance" salesman just as Laurence herein recovers the pagan or Dionysian figure of the redeemer and his cults which lie beyond or have degenerated into the more Apollonian Christian signature. Significantly, the episode takes the form of a descent to "Shadow Point", which would seem to imply both that it is not consciousness-raising but lowering that modern women need, and that such lowering needs to have a religious dimension.

Evocative of a shift from logos to eros, Christian to pagan, the episode begins when Hagar removes her hat and adorns herself with June bugs and rowanberries. And it is in this maenadic attire that she is found by Murray Ferney Lees, himself fleeing in scapegoat fashion from two dogs who would "have torn [him] to pieces." (p. 222) In keeping with his surname, Lees produces a jug of wine and, with Hagar making her offering of soda biscuits, the two enjoy their "Eucharistic Banquet." Lees then tells her of the "nothing meek" lusty-singing form of early Christian evangelicalism he had practiced and of how in this spirit he had met his wife and come to understand the divine ecstasy of sex: "in those days she could have prayed the angels themselves right out of heaven, if she'd been so inclined, and when she lay down on the moss and spread those great white thighs of hers, there wasn't a sweeter place in this entire world." (p. 227) Unfortunately, like Hagar who responds, "Well, that's a mighty odd combination prayer and that," Lees too feels that "God is love, but please don't mention the two in the same breath." (p. 228) Their son dies in a housefire while he and his wife are at a church service on the theme of the end of the world. Clearly,

then, according to Laurence, men like Lees and Bram have suffered as much from the other-wordly orientation of Christianity as have women.

Laurence's immediate point, however is that Hagar is "not alone" in her grief, as the Reverend Troy had earlier tried to convince her. Lees' confession leads to Hagar's own therapeutic recollection of the night her son died. In this recollection, Laurence further emphasises the way in which lack of rituals and of such a religious role model as the "Sorrowful Mother" result in Hagar's turning into "stone". Simultaneously, Laurence ironically evokes as classical prototype for her protagonist, namely, Niobe, another "ubristic" woman who suffered the wrath of Apollo's mother for boasting about her procreative abilities, and who wept for her lost children until her eyes and body became "dry".

Provided with the advantage of confession and, significantly, not conscious of the fact that she has done so, Hagar is able to weep, the purgative aspect of which is also accompanied by her very real fit of vomiting.

The final phase of this revitalized ritual occurs when Hagar, unconsciously acts out her atonement with her son and, with Lees acting as his surrogate, receives his son's forgiveness. As a result, Hagar "could even beg God's pardon this moment, for thinking ill of him some time or other." (p.248) Designed to express her gratitude to God, Hagar's comment also suggests an understanding of what the Divine Parent may have felt in sacrificing his Son.

Yet ultimately it is indeed "God the Mother" who comes to Hagar's aid in her last days, not in any individualized or other-wordly form but rather in the collective experience of love and maternity shared by the dying women who make up "the mewling nursery of old ladies," (p.264) as Hagar at first sarcastically describes them. Significantly a trio – evocative of the Trinity and the triple aspect of the goddess in pagan mythology – each of these women has something in common with Hagar, which, however they manifest in positive and archetypal forms. Most articulate of the three is Eva Jardine, a skinny old crone of a woman who like Hagar stems from garden mother, and who finds her sustenance in her love for her husband. Second is Mrs. Dobereiner whose foreign tongue isolates her from her kind but who finds consolation in singing hymns about the true "home country" she expects to find after death; to these hymns the other women respond even without understanding the words. Finally there is Mrs. Reilly, like Hagar a ton of a woman but whose obesity makes her a type of "Great Mother" and whose prayers are addressed to the Roman Catholic equivalent of that *primordial* figure.

Reluctant at first to join the group, Hagar finally subconsciously acknowledges her sisterhood and her affiliation with these women's mysteries when she joins the nightly litany:

Tom. Don't you worry none—
Mother of God, pray for us now and at the hour of—
Mein Gott, erlose mich—
You mind that time, Tom? I mind it so well—
I am sorry for having offended Thee, because I love—
Erlose mich von meinen Schmerzen—
Bram! (p.275)

And having found this kind of religious support system, Hagar can also acknowledge the Judaeo-Christian deity without lapsing into the role of a suppliant daughter: "Ought I to appeal? It's the done thing. Our Father—no. I want no part of that. All I can think is—Bless me or not, Lord, just as you please, for I'll not beg." (p.307)

Margaret Laurence is thus profoundly concerned with the relationship between women's identity and religious issues. She can be termed an, "evisionist" or

reformist—a feminist who finds many faults with the Judaeo-Christian tradition but still feels it possible to discover or recover a viable female ideology within that religious framework. *The Stone Angel* does not seem to support many feminist contentions but rather points to dimensions which have largely been ignored: namely, the way in which Judaeo-Christian tradition fosters egocentricity and in turn alienation and loneliness on account of its monotheistic character, the extent to which the decline of religious authority reverberates in the secular spheres, and the extent to which this decline can be traced to the aftermath of Renaissance individualism or to the rationalism of the eighteenth century.

***The Stone Angel:
A Novel of
Awakening***

3.4 LET US SUM UP

The Stone Angel is Laurence's best known and most deeply respected novel. It is unique in being a novel of awakening. Carol Christ finds a common pattern in women's spiritual quest. It begins with an experience of "nothingness" and ends with a new naming of self and reality. Christ gives a long list of ideas common to the novel of awakening. These are the survival of personality, the function of memory, the importance of coming to terms with female sexuality and the necessity of accepting the past in order to understand the present. Hagar Shipley's spiritual quest begins with her experience of nothingness in her relationships with her father, her brothers, her husband and her sons. Hagar Shipley's awakening is dependent upon her ability to come to terms with her image of the mother and of herself as mother. The other aspect of the novel discussed in the unit deals with the contention held by liberationists that a major factor preventing women from achieving a genuine sense of identity is the dominant philosophy embedded in Judaeo-Christian Theology. Evelyn J. Hinz has explored the connection between religious issues and female identity in *The Stone Angel*. She argues that the protagonists' problems arise out of the religious climate in which she has been brought up. Hagar's relationship with her father is not simply a modern version of the Electra Complex because of Judaeo-Christian traditions of emphasis on mental/male talents.

3.5 GLOSSARY

Cravat:	a kind of neck cloth worn by men
Allegiance:	relation or obligation to a sovereign
Individuated:	individualised or given individuality
Ambivalence:	coexistence in one person of opposing emotional attitudes towards the same object.
Binary:	composed of two, two fold
Permeable:	worthy of penetration
Iconographically:	by way of a portrait
Effeminacy:	womanish softness or weakness, indulgence in unmanly pleasures.
Degeneracy:	the process of departing from the high qualities of race or kind becoming base.
Egocentricity:	self-centredness or regard only for the ego.

Archetypal:	based on the original pattern or prototype
Logos:	in the Stoic philosophy, the active principle living in and determining the world.
Eros:	the Greek love-God.
Hubris:	arrogance that invites disaster
Maenadic:	in the manner of a female follower of Bacchus.
Primordial:	existing from the beginning
Litany:	a prayer in which the same thing is repeated several times.

3.6 QUESTIONS

1. Hagar is a true example of the mindset of a motherless woman. Do you agree with the statement? Why?
2. The spiritual journey of Hagar is a journey towards acceptance. Discuss.
3. How does Hagar's encounter with Murray Lees help her in getting rid of some of her guilt complexes?
4. The Self-alienation in the case of Hagar is the consequence of her religious background. Substantiate this view from the text of *The Stone Angel*.

3.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Buss, Helen. *Mother and Daughter Relationships in the Manawaka Works of Margaret Laurence*. Victoria: Victoria University Press, 1985.

Christ, Carol. *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on the Spiritual Quest*. Boston: Beacon, 1980.

Rich, Adrienne. *Of Women Born: Mother Head as Experience and Institution*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1976.

Rooke, Constance. "A Feminist Reading of *The Stone Angel*", *Canadian Literature* 93, 1982.

Verduyn, Christl. *Margaret Laurence. An Appreciation*, New York Broadview Press, 1998.

UNIT 4 MAJOR ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 *The Stone Angel*: The Title
- 4.2 *The Stone Angel*: A Referential Object
- 4.3 *The Stone Angel*: Different Meanings
- 4.4 The Functions of *The Stone Angel*
- 4.5 The Biblical Angel
- 4.6 Moving Away from *The Stone Angel*/The theme of Redemption in the Novel
- 4.7 Use of Imagery in *The Stone Angel*
- 4.8 Significance of the Past
- 4.9 Significance of Manawaka
- 4.10 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.11 Glossary
- 4.12 Questions
- 4.13 Bibliography

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In the earlier units some distinguished thematic aspects of *The Stone Angel* have been discussed. This unit takes up for analysis and discussion some technical aspects of the novel. First it deals with the title of the novel. With a view to establishing the appropriateness of the title various issues related to the term "stone angel" are discussed. The theme of redemption and the commendable use of imagery in *The Stone Angel* are also taken up. Laurence felt strongly about the significance of past and place in human affairs and in the moulding of human character. Therefore these two aspects of her fictional art are also being discussed in this unit.

4.1 THE STONE ANGEL : THE TITLE

For Margaret Laurence there is a lot in a name, in a title. "Titles", she says "are important as they should in some way express the theme of the book in a rather poetic way." (Interview with Michel Fabre, *Etudes Canadiennes*, Vol.77 (1981) p.11-12) The title which she chose for her first Canadian novel certainly fits her definition. Simone Vauthier in her essay "Images in Stones, Images in Words" comments: "Solid and ethereal, opaque and spiritual, *The Stone Angel* confronts the reader with a challenge that is felt all the more because of the oxymoron quality of the phrase." The critic further argues, "Announcing the new – the text to come—also resonates with the old: Thomas Wolfe's lyrical novel, *Look Homeward Angel*. Hardly have we had time to puzzle about it, however when the narration blocks our flight of imagination by presenting us with a fictional referent for the title. "Above the town, on the hill brow, the stone angel used to stand...."(p.3)

As the opening paragraph describes the monument and the cemetery where blind and superlative it used to rise, the reader is taken on a tour of Manawaka's burial ground – and of the novel's major semantic polarities. We are in a sense reassured; so that is what the title refers to – this marble statue "brought from Italy at great expense," (p.3) erected in memory of the narrator-protagonists' mother. Nevertheless, the prominence of the statue both in the cemetery and in the narrator's memory and narration, the expansion of its oxymoronic features, as in "she viewed the town with sightless eyes" (p.3) - all this points to its being, more than an element of the décor, a nexus of meaning which we are called upon to (re)construct.

4.2 *THE STONE ANGEL : A REFERENTIAL OBJECT*

The stone angel is one of the most important fictional objects in the novel. Three major characters—the protagonist Hagar, her father Jason Currie, her son John Shipley—are involved with the statue which thereby becomes an actant with a narrative function. What they do to it or about it, how they respond to it, what it means to them is of concern for readers as well as critics.

In the narrative chain of the novel the stone angel's appearance recurs throughout. It figures more or less prominently in several episodes and forms what we call a motif. On its first appearance, the statue is the focal point of a lengthy and highly charged description of the Manawaka cemetery which as an introduction to the lost world of the narrators' childhood, casts the long shadow of death over the ensuing narrative. The second occurrence is also descriptive: the narrator remembers that, leaving Manawaka and her husband Bram for good, she had had a last glimpse of the cemetery and the statue. In two other appearances, the stone angel is shown as the object of a series of actions and non-actions. On a drive to the cemetery with John, Hagar discovers that the statue lies "toppled over on her face" (p. 178) and that it has been painted with lipstick. Towards the end on a parallel visit with her son Marvin, the elderly Hagar observes certain changes in the angel. "The earth had heaved with frost around her, and she stood askew and tilted. Her mouth was white." (p. 305) The memory leads the narrator to speculate on the future, in a matter-of-fact-way which acquires poignancy from the context: "Someday she'll topple entirely and no one will bother to set her upright again." (p. 305)

These occurrences bring to light a number of things. First, the stone angel has a story: the product of "gouging", "gauging", cynical descendants of Bernini, it has both an aesthetic ancestry in the baroque tradition and a mercantile one in the commercialisation of religious art intended to fulfil "the needs of fledging Pharaohs". Brought into an uncouth land, the harsh environment of the prairie, it experiences decline. Like humans in flesh and blood, the stone angel, too is subject to vicissitudes of time, since winters and the earth have power over this representative of celestial creatures. Thus the angel motif emphasises the parallelism of her fate with that of human beings. From the very beginning the narrator, without telling us all that she knows addresses the statue as an animate being: "She viewed the town with sightless eyes. She was doubly blind." (p. 3)

Moreover, the statue's story is also the story of some characters' involvement with her. First there is Jason Currie, the Manawaka store-owner, who bought her "in pride to mark (his wife's) bones." (p. 3) He often tells his daughter that "she had been brought from Italy at a terrible expense and was pure white marble." (p. 3) Currie's claims about the statue connote more of the man and his values and of the culture in which he lives than they do about the artefact. In contrast with the protagonists' father who had the statue erected, her son, it is intimated, is an iconoclast who defaces her with lipstick and overthrows her, an irreverent prank which bespeaks his need for rebellion—and then has to strive powerfully to restore her, on his mothers' orders. Hagar cannot bear the idea of such profanation and cannot leave the statue or her son alone at this point in her life. In all three cases, the character's willingness to take action, whether to pay or play with, or restore the angel, testifies to the importance of the monument as a sign in the narrated world.

4.3 *THE STONE ANGEL : DIFFERENT MEANINGS*

Each of the characters, of course, invests the statue with different meanings. For Jason Currie, the statue is associated with the dead wife to the memory of whom it has ostensibly been erected. But if it marks her bones, it is also intended to "proclaim his

dynasty, as he fancied, forever and a day." (p.3) As it displays his respect for the departed angel of his hearth, it also declares his own wealth, in a way acceptable to a 'Puritan' society, and his rank as one of Manawaka's foremost citizens. "She was the first, the largest and certainly the costliest." (p.3) Although it is supposed to be "harking us all to heaven," (p.3) what the grave marker encodes, in fact, is the "place of the living in the world of the living" a symbol of the ultimate otherness. It is also a rich socio-cultural sign.

Hagar, on the other hand, feels much more ambiguously towards the monument. At one point, the narrator affirms "I never could bear that statue" but events do not fully bear out that assertion. To her, the associations of the stone angel are necessarily double. It is linked with the mother who so easily "relinquished her feeble ghost," (p.3) whose weakness Hagar openly despises. The stone angel emblematises the meekness of "that woman" whom she has never seen, the "frailty" which has been passed to her son Dan who dies young, and which the child Hagar cannot "help but detest". That is to say that the stone emblem of the mother is a reminder both of values which the narrator rejects and of the mortality against which, at the age of ninety, the narrator still keeps raging. Thus the stone angel, mother, death are inextricably and circularly related.

But "her mother's angel" (the phrase is hers) is also her father's monument, a symbol of his attitude towards his family, the community and life. To the extent that it is a reminder of his power and conventionality as well as of the struggles which she had to go through in order to assert herself, the statue is the repository of negative feelings and meanings. To the extent that it embodies paternal and societal values which she still shares, and to the extent that it is a symbol of Currie superiority, difference and triumph over oblivion, the monument cannot but have a positive dimension in Hagar's mind. When she discovers that it has toppled over, she is not only dismayed, she must set it up again. She scrubs off the vulgar pink of the lipstick herself and rationalises her behaviour to her son, explaining that she does not want the Manawaka people to know that such a "wanton thing" could be done to the Currie monument. She is apprehensive further suspecting that since the Simmons plot is just across the way", her childhood rival Lottie would tell everyone. She appears to be motivated only by her recurring worry about what people will think. And even at this level, her concern with appearances reveals how much she shares her father's attitude and small-town mentality and how she extends to the stone angel the function of representing the family and the family's respectability. Hence, for the reader, the image which she wants to project of herself is bound up with the statue.

What is to her a desecration is to John an amusing prank. "Beside me, John laughed. The old lady's taken quite a header." (p.178) He repeatedly suggests that they should leave her lying on her side and painted, which he considers an improvement: "She looks a damn sight better, if you ask me." (p.179) Obviously, he has no reverence for the monument and the Currie greatness it represents. His disregard of respectability, on this occasion as on many others, proves him a Shipley rather than a Currie, despite Hagar's insistence to the contrary. Indeed, when he ironically agrees with his mother that to have Lottie spread the news about the angel "would be an everlasting shame, all right," (p.180) the antiphrase echoes one which Bram Shipley had made in another context. Simon Vauthier argues that there is perhaps more to John's attitude than unconcern about public opinion and general irreverence. In the cemetery scene, a verbal clue sets up a connection between the stone angel and Hagar, when John personifies the statue as "the old lady." The connection in itself would perhaps go unnoticed if it did not recall, and contrast with, an earlier designation when John called his mother "angel". Mother as angel, angel as old lady, the two namings work together to establish a strong link between the living woman and the statue. In this view, the prank on the one becomes a displaced aggression on the other. Moreover, John's attempts to persuade his prim and proper mother to leave the statue alone can be regarded as hints that Hagar should cast off the burden of respectability. His warning that putting back the stone angel is not really worth the risk, acquires metaphorical overtones: "Don't be surprised if she collapses and I break a bone. That

would be great, to break your back because a bloody marble angel fell on you." (p. 178) While John may be aware of the statue as a weight not only of marble but of propriety, one can fully appreciate the symbolic *adumbration* of the character's fate: John is crushed by the burden of his mother's self-centred expectations and fear of life. In this context, the epithet "bloody" does not function simply as an expletive connoting rejection of polite language and social conventions, or the young man's plebeian heritage; it also functions poetically as a qualifier of "marble angel" to form an oxymoron, which points to and enhances the contradiction of the stone angel and of the woman of which it is a symbol.

4.4 THE FUNCTIONS OF THE STONE ANGEL

To start with, the stone angel is the first actant mentioned. "Above the town, on the hill brow, the stone angel used to stand. I wonder if she stands there yet, in memory of her who relinquished her feeble ghost as I gained my stubborn one..." (p. 3) Its apparition in the text is almost concomitant with the emergence of the narrative voice. More importantly it coincides with the beginning of what proves to be an autobiographical relation, just as in the represented universe it is linked with the actor's birth. From its first description, it is clear that the role of the angel is going to be very important, if not in the action, at least in the construction of the novel's meanings. Because it so conspicuously marks a grave and seemingly operates a disjunction between the living and the dead, the sightless statue may blind us momentarily with the dark dazzle of death. At first one may be aware mostly of its negativity: its lack of sight or knowledge, in particular, is repeatedly indicated, often with words or syntagms which are themselves negative forms ("sightless", "doubly blind", "unendowed with even a pretense of sight", "blank", "without knowing who we were at all"). However, such negative features are counterbalanced by verbs which denote a contrary activity, "she viewed", "harking us all to heaven". We soon apprehend that it must play a structuring role in the expansion of the narrative.

From the very beginning, the stone angel appears as a figure both of disjunction and of conjunction. As an actant in the narrative, it emphasises the separation between the living and the dead, this world and the other, the pride of the survivors and the power of death, the "dutifully cared-for habitations of the dead" and the disorder of nature, on the one hand, and the messiness of life (symbolised here by the disreputable old Mrs Weese and her sick-smelling sheets which foreshadow later conditions in Hagar's life), on the other hand. At the same time, in the textual weave, these dichotomies are overcome by a series of semiotic linkages. Eventually, the statue must be seen as partaking of both the natural and the supernatural.

If, on one level of analysis, one may claim, as Sandra Djwa does, that it is a form without spirit, a monument to purity and propriety, on a semiotic level, it remains associated with things spiritual: the marble form functions as a sign, almost a signal: "harking us all to heaven", it has a message, socially coded, to be sure, yet distinct from the more secular "purpose" it assumes for its buyer. An image of a supernatural being, it also attests to man's cultural efforts to manage death and control nature, thereby bringing together several dimensions of human experience.

Throughout, the blank statue in the Manawaka cemetery is projected against a background of angelic information – concerning the angels of the dictionary, "ministering angels", "angels of mercy" and the like, the angels of the encyclopedia scriptural and theological – angels as lesser breeds of powers and dominations, messengers of God and the divine -, but also literary – the angels of Milton and others. Singularly, the opening description calls to mind the line from *Lycidas*, "Look homeward, angel, and melt with ruth" which Thomas Wolfe used as the title of his first published autobiographical novel. From her hilltop, our angel looks homeward towards the town and what turns out to be the bleak lives of its inhabitants. Though it

certainly does not melt with ruth, the possibility has been sown in the minds of the readers aware either of the Miltonic line or simply of the compassionate qualities ascribed to angels. That is to say, because of the vast intertext in which angels play a part, Margaret Laurence's angel reverberates from the start with imaginary resonances that go far beyond the immediate context.

Another important function the stone angel performs is to magnetise recurring notations and images into semantic and thematic patterns that heighten the unity of the novel, and the angel motif with its inner tensions, in fact, energises the plot. There is a strong growing identification which the text builds up between Hagar and the stone angel. That the stubbornly erect Hagar will somehow be brought low in the narrative is programmed in the angel matrix. A foreshadowing of the ultimate fall into oblivion is even presented through yet a different version of the angel motif. After evoking her nights with Bram and how she "prided [herself] upon keeping [her] pride intact, like some maidenhead" (p.81) (an example incidentally, which illustrates the self-generating circularity of pride), Hagar comments on her present loneliness:

My bed is as cold as winter, and now it seems to me that I am lying as the children used to do, on fields of snow, and they would spread their arms and sweep them down to their sides, and when they rose, there would be the outline of an angel with spread wings. The icy whiteness covers me, drifts over me, and I could drift to sleep in it, like someone caught in a blizzard and freeze. (p.81)

The juxtaposition of past and present nights too establishes some relation of cause and effect between the past pride and the present dereliction of the character. Her loneliness is bodied forth in a series of analogies and metaphors which compellingly fuse the horizontal position, the angel figure, sleep, winter and snow into a muted but clear adumbration of death. Here again, angel and death are joined, yet the angel stretched on the ground is a child-made silhouette. Although it is contextualised back into the familiar cluster of death symbolism, this angel appears also as a shadow figure, a sort of double. And thus, beyond the bit of Canadian folklore, we are referred to our angelic intertext --to the idea of the angel as guardian spirit, as the double that stands for the higher part of our nature. This other conception of angels also fleetingly recurs in a humorous remark which Hagar makes about the minister who pays her a visit: "He stares upward at the air, as though birdwatching. Perhaps he hopes for a discarded angel feather to drift down and spur him on." (p.119) Even if we take into account that Hagar is making fun of the clumsy young minister, the reference is, if I may say so to the real thing, the heavenly creature which contrasts with the cemetery angels of rigid wings. Furthermore, although synecdochically represented by a feather, the angel is supposed to play his role of spiritual inspiration.

If Hagar's 'fall' is programmed in the controlling image, it also proves a happy fall, for when, stripped of her mask of strength, she confronts her destructiveness and her fear of death, she can experience some sort of belated spiritual regeneration which Margaret Laurence presents very convincingly through Hagar's retreat and decent to Shadow Point, the meeting with another 'liminal', and the confrontation of past ghosts, the apologies she deliriously makes to John, and so on. The outcome of this process is - the (unconscious) realization of angelism and the breaking of the petrification process.

4.5 THE BIBLICAL ANGEL

Finally, in the episode that shows best the regeneration of Hagar, the angel motif in its positive aspect is foregrounded again. Now the reference is to the last meeting between Hagar and the son whom she had not wanted, whom she considered was none of her but who has cared for her in her old age. For once, Hagar, not knowing

what possesses her, tells Marvin that she is frightened. The unusual admission incites Marvin to apologise for having been crabby with her. And the scene develops in this way:

I stare at him. Then, quite unexpectedly, he reaches for my hand and holds it tightly.

Now it seems to me he is truly Jacob, gripping with all his strength, and bargaining. I will not let thee go, except thou bless me. And I see I am thus strangely cast, and perhaps have been so from the beginning, and can only release myself by releasing him.

It's in my mind to ask for his pardon, but that's not what he wants from me.

'You've not been cranky, Marvin. You've been good to me, always. A better son than John.' (p.304)

To Hagar, this is "a lie, yet not a lie" but her belief that it is a lie measures all the better how far she has come from angelism, from the girl who did not want to impersonate her mother. She has been humanised, and now understands the needs of Marvin, to the extent that she gives up the idea of asking him for his pardon and instead tells him what she knows he needs from her. The dying woman seems unaware that her sense of what Marvin is attempting echoes her earlier image of John, as he struggled with the statue in the Manawaka cemetery.

I wish he [John] could have looked like Jacob then, wrestling with the angel and besting it, wringing a blessing from it with his might. But no. He sweated and grunted angrily. His feet slipped and he hit his forehead on a marble ear, and swore. (p.179)

In both cases, Hagar, whose imagination has been fed on the Book, casts her sons in the same biblical role of Jacob, who incidentally was his mother's favourite. But in the first, the analogy, which reveals that like her father and husband she is not without dynastic hopes, works by contrast to suggest her disappointment. John is no Jacob but a man engaged in an awkward task, who grunts and slips, sweats and swears. Hagar's angelism is frustrated by the incident. Ready as she was to impose biblical symbolism on the scene, she is not prepared to invest it with another meaning. This remains for the reader to seek. In the context, the stone angel appears metonymically and metaphorically linked to Hagar, to the burden of the demands which, angel that she is, she makes on her family and on John in particular. On the other hand, though John, as we have seen, seems to identify symbolically the stone angel with his mother, he is not trying to wrest a blessing from her. Only the overthrow of the angel would be liberating, but, because he is more Shipley than Currie, he complies with the wishes of the phallic mother and restores the phallic statue. Introduced only to be denied, the biblical analogy, however, cannot be fully neutralised. And the absence of the Angel of God who wrestled with Jacob until he could bless him creates a vacuum which the text later partially fills with the return to the Old Testament motif, in the scene with Marvin.

While the first occurrence of the motif displays Hagar's disappointed expectations and reveals her self-deception, the second signals a moment of understanding, consequent upon the recognition of the destructiveness of her pride. This time, Hagar perceives Marvin, her neglected, belittled son, as Jacob – as the heir of her dynasty and of God's promise. The realisation, however, is slightly ambiguous. "Now it seems to me he is truly Jacob," (p.304) she says. What with "now" which may be opposed to then, and with "is truly" opposed to "I wish he could have looked like Jacob," (p.179) it seems as if Hagar were confusing Marvin with John, mixing up her responses to her two sons into one recognition. This time the son is "gripping with all his strength, and bargaining;" not grunting, not yielding, he is wrestling with the messenger of God. This time, too, Hagar's use of the biblical metaphor implicates

her: "I see I am thus strangely cast." (p.304) She again is the angel. But no longer unwittingly, no longer adhering to a false ideal – playing instead a role she had never understood. No longer the stone angel, but the angel of God, and therefore able to release and be released. No longer a destructive victim of angelism but the embodiment of a force that is not hers alone, that has blocked Marvin's past life but can bless/liberate him into his full identity as his mother's son. (Through the encounter with the Angel, the biblical Jacob knows himself as Israel). The angel here is not "antipathetic to life" – Douglas Killam's phrase to define the stone angel. On the contrary, it is life-enhancing. Strikingly, Hagar's recognition of her bond to her son and of her spiritual power comes to her when she has relinquished "angelism".

4.6 MOVING AWAY FROM *THE STONE ANGELS*/THE THEME OF REDEMPTION IN THE NOVEL

In her interview with Michel Fabre and elsewhere, Margaret Laurence has spoken of the sense of redemption in the novel. For Laurence survival does not mean physical survival alone. For her it is the survival of the spirit. She tells Michel Fabre:

"I mean survival of the spirit with some ability to give and receive love. In what happens to Hagar at the very end of the novel there is to me some sense of redemption. Close to the end of her life she for the first time, really can admit to herself, when she says "Pride is my wilderness",.... that she has been unable to give and receive the kind of love she was capable of."

The Stone Angel certainly builds up a thematics of salvation. True, there is no supernatural intercession, not even a fully realised conversion on the character's part. Presbyterian born and bred as she is, Hagar often refers to God but she cannot believe in his mercy. Her conversations with the minister, or her refusal at the end to appeal to God proves this:

Ought I to appeal? It's the done thing. Our Father – no, I want no part of that. All I can think is – Bless me or not, Lord, just as You please, for I'll not beg. (p.307)

Towards the end, she seems to believe in the possibility of an after-life. The prayer quoted above follows immediately upon a meditation on breathing – a condition of human life – and whether there might still be breathing "elsewhere", in an after-life. "If it happened that way, I'd pass out in amazement. Can angels faint?" (p.307) This playful speculation hints that Hagar would like to believe in the existence of angels in heaven, of celestial hosts she might join. At any rate, the speculation keeps alive the angel paradigm in the narrative.

Whatever the character's notions, the novel supports the idea that redemption is possible. In this respect, Hagar is the first adumbration of the protagonist in Margaret Laurence's last novel. Of *Morag*, Margaret Laurence has said that "she comes closer to what might be termed the God within," and the novelist further generalises: "I don't have a traditional religion but I believe that there's a mystery at the core of life." (Interview with Michel Fabre, p.16) This is an important clue to her fiction and to *The Stone Angel* in particular. Hagar's regeneration is a coming closer to the God within, a result and a token of the mystery at the core of life. This sense of mystery the writer weaves into the fabric of the narrative largely through the angel imagery. The angel, among other things, is the symbol of that part of our nature which transcends nature but cannot be separated from it, however the practitioners of "angelism" may strive to dissociate the two. As the symbol of the spiritual, the mysterious, the angel is very remote from the conventional figure of purity. Thus we find Murry Lees, the shabby little man who does represent a form of humility and love in the novel, juxtaposing angels and sexuality in his praise of his wife:

In those days she could have prayed the angels themselves right down from heaven if she'd been so inclined, and when she lay down on the moss and spread those great white thighs of hers, there wasn't a sweeter place in this entire world. (p.227)

Murray Lees sees no disparity between the two talents of his wife, one linking her with angels, the other with one of the sons of men, even though a narrow-minded puritan religion has made her ashamed of her second talent.

With this widening of the angel paradigm, we have left the referential stone angel far behind. As Margaret Laurence said to Michel Fabre, the stone angel in the cemetery is something she needed for her introduction. We might add that she needed it for her whole novel. In the same interview, the writer affirms that the stone angel in the novel is not the biblical angel of the myth and while asserting that it "does dominate the book like an imposing symbol" she limits its role to the symbolising of the blindness of pride – an aspect of it which many critics have emphasised.

While it is difficult to claim that the angel in the novel functions as the biblical angel (but which angel is Margaret Laurence referring to, one wonders?), there are direct echoes, of the Bible, and the motif as it invests the text becomes itself invested with more and more meaning. An oxymoronic signifier, 'the stone angel' straddles the animate and the non-animate, the earthly and the heavenly, death and life, and so on. Exploring and exploiting some of these contradictions, the novel gathers them all into a coincidentia oppositorum in which the socially coded statue of the Manawaka world turns into an emblem of the human predicament. Eventually, the stone angel stands for death-in-life and life-in-death. In the last analysis, it may also serve as a self-reflexive symbol of the work itself, a verbal monument which representing life cannot but inscribe death, and inscribing death ultimately asserts life. In this view, the work itself appears as a monument to the writer's past, factual or phantasmatic – a monument which the reader must deface, upset and restore before it can yield a spiritual depth.

4.7 USE OF IMAGERY IN *THE STONE ANGEL*

Images, metaphors and symbols, the privileged tools of literary creation hold true for most fiction, but they are particularly relevant in the case of Laurence's works. A web of intricate images is the technical excellence of *The Stone Angel*. The universality of the theme, and the intricacy of the images, make *The Stone Angel* a novel that readily lends itself to textual analysis along new critical lines. Students are sometimes surprised by questions on Hagar's prairie environment, as if it were irrelevant. But Hagar is a Scots-Presbyterian from the Canadian West, and her perceptions grow from these roots. The starkly beautiful Manitoba land becomes the analogue for her conflicts. The Manawaka cemetery for example holds formal peonies and upstart ants; wildflowers encroach on its tenuous order. The theme of pride as an isolating wilderness is caught in the class structured guest list of Manawakan parties. Japanese porch lanterns hung from wooden gingerbread trim, are ironic reminders of the exclusion of Orientals from full participation in Canadian society, an exclusion which is the indirect source of Hagar's West Coast job as housekeeper.

By juxtaposition Laurence establishes subtle parallels between the town's social hegemony (shanties and brick houses), its harsh climate contrasts in prairie environment suggest paradoxes in human nature. These include muddy farmyards awash in urine, skeletal machinery and lilacs, "a seasonal mercy." Chokecherries sting sweetly. The "heedless and compelled" sap of Manitoba maples suggest

Hagar's sexual attraction to Bram, but the pride which makes her conceal her enjoyment of their sexual relation, acts once again, to isolate her.

Major Aspects of the Novel

Prairie weather provides analogues for pride, passion, fear, and for Puritan culture whose flaws and strengths provoke ambivalent feelings in Laurence. Bram's beloved horse Soldier freezes to death in a storm; ironically, his fatal freedom stemmed from Bram's fear of fire. As a girl in town, Hagar feels secure during storms, but on the farm storms mean dangerous isolation. Fire and snow, the refrain in Piquette's Song in *The Diviners*, is the culmination of many scenes in the Manawaka books that anchor these images of human pain and passion in prairie weather and culture.

The sight, feel, smell of the land and the culture run through every paragraph. Hagar's arthritic muscles and veins are like pieces of binder twine in her legs. Twenty-four years of bickering with Bram is a prairie river "scoured away like sandbacks." (p. 116) The things Hagar sees as she leaves Manawaka, image the death of her relation with Bram: the cemetery; the railway buildings and water tower painted blood-red, black trees, and farms lost and smothered in winter landscape. The pain of this departure and her latent guilt, are suggested through a prairie thunder storm where lightning rends the sky "like an angry claw at the cloak of God." (p. 161)

The terrible depression of the 1930s, and the drought that compounded its effect in the Canadian West, coincides with Bram's death. Neglected farmhouses and rusty machinery resemble aging bodies; boarded windows are bandaged eyes; warped building "wore a caved-in look like toothless jaws," (p. 169) sunflowers hang empty as unfilled honeycombs; air and land are bone-dry, deathly. Hard work and laziness now yield the same result: nothing. This blunt fact of prairie life in the thirties takes on symbolic meaning in Hagar's decision to let Bram and her father share one tombstone: "They are only different sides of the same coin, anyway, he and the Curries." (p. 184) Biblical analogues spring to mind, such as the parable of the worker who begins his labors late in the day, or St. Paul's reminder that salvation is not bought with works.

One form of pride, or bondage involves Canada's native people. Indian and Metis compose Manawaka's social rejects. *The Stone Angel* touches lightly on a theme that looms larger as the Manawaka cycle progresses. Its opening scene evokes the native people through the wild, musky things on the edge of the town's orderly cemetery. Such plants had flourished when Cree "with enigmatic faces and greasy hair" (p. 5) were the sole inhabitants of the prairie bluffs.

Examples of racial prejudice are unobtrusive, but form a pattern. Matt would have liked to shoot and set trap lines with Jules Tonnerre at Galloping Mountain, but Jason Currie forbids his teenage son to associate with half-breeds. Bram is initially condemned for having been seen with half-breed girls, and continues to joke and drink with Metis after his marriage to Hagar. She is attracted by his dark good looks "I thought he looked a bearded Indian, so brown and beaked a face," (p. 45) but soon comes to share in local prejudices. Hagar despises herself for being forced to serve the threshers, "a bunch of breeds and ne'er-do-wells and Galicians." (p. 114) She refuses to believe John when he describes the Tonnerre shak as passably clean. Her humiliation in Currie's General Store when Bram is suspected of buying lemon extract for resale to Indians triggers her decision to leave. When John tells Hagar, later, of the death of Bram's old metis crony, Hagar replies (albeit with a bad conscience) "Good riddance to bad rubbish." (p. 176)

John's rebellious nature is expressed in part through his friendship with the Tonnerres. As a child, John trades the family crest-pin to Lazarus Tonnerres for a knife, one which Morag inherits in *The Diviners*. As adolescents, John and the Metis boys dare one another to hair-raising escapades. John's death on the railway trestle bridge is the result of a drunken response to a drunken Metis dare. Indirectly, Hagar is partly responsible, having driven John to desperation and drink by plotting to separate him from Arlene. Symbolically, the tragedy suggests that the destinies of

whites and Metis in Canada are conjoined, a theme to be developed at much greater length in *The Diviners*.

Hagar's rebelliousness is expressed in the novel's epigraph "Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light" and the title image. The latter metaphor, like Dylan Thomas's injunction to "rage" against death, catches much of the paradoxical quality of human existence. Hagar's rage, which involves the pride that prevents her from rejoicing, is also her stubborn love of life, her courage, her fighting spirit—qualities lacking in her brothers. The tragic aspect of her experience, her alienation, is thus inseparably united with her admirable fighting spirit. Like the wounded gull in the cannery, Hagar's strength is both her glory and her doom. There is no place for quietism in Laurence's creed.

From a thematic point of view, the five Canadian books (four novels and a collection of short stories) belong to the classic genre of the novel of initiation and self-discovery, implying the protagonists progress from inexperience and innocence to a form of knowledge, which is gradually achieved through a series of trials, affected by inner and external circumstances and chance encounters with other characters, the quest culminating in a revelation or epiphany—the climax of the inner change. In such a perspective, sight as a traditional symbol of intellectual and spiritual awareness stands most naturally as the key element of the pursuit. Chantal Arleltaz argues that "each of Laurence's work set in Canada describes the search for a kind of truth or inner depth, something beyond the immediately visible, through an initiatory travel from blindness to self-awareness. Her five women protagonists are all to some extent victims of outward appearances including their own selves; each of them exemplifies one particular weakness or shortcoming conveyed through visual imagery." The blind stone angel in the *The Stone Angel*, in terms of visual symbolism represents the blindness of Hagar, the protagonists who could not look beyond appearances.

Structurally speaking, the image of the stone angel unifies the novel. The actual angel marks the grave of Hagar's mother who died in giving birth to her stubborn daughter. Purchased to proclaim the Curie dynasty, the angel is doubly blind, carved without eyeballs by cynical stonemasons (Hagar thinks) who accurately gauged "the needs of fledgling pharaohs in an uncouth land." (p.3) Like Jason's church contribution the statue is pride made visible, blind to the needs of others and to the deepest needs of self. As the proud product of an Eastern finishing school, Hagar is "Pharaoh's daughter reluctantly returning to his roof." (p.43) As she leaves the town and her husband, Hagar sees the stone angel in the cemetery, sightlessly guarding emptiness and death. Bram's senility fills her with anger at fate, or God, "for giving us eyes but almost never sight." (p.173) John, who has his own blindness, wrestles with the angel in the cemetery while Hagar looks on. Later, it stands crookedly over two men's graves. The irascible Hagar, prisoner by flesh and pride, waits "stonily" for poor Mr. Troy. In this paradoxical image the stone half (bondage) is more prominent than the linked suggestions of light, love, freedom, and life.

The novel's structure depends as much upon a web of interlocking images as upon its handling of time through flashbacks. Prominent among these patterns are those of houses and birds, archetypal metaphors for human experience which are as old as language itself. Northrop Frye points to two contrasting worlds of metaphoric organization, one desirable and the other undesirable. He calls these the apocalyptic and the demonic respectively, terms that are useful in analyzing Laurence's image patterns.

The demonic world of bondage, pain and confusion is suggested in *The Stone Angel* by the wilderness/Pharaoh pattern and by maimed and captive birds. The sight of Silverthreads a home for the elderly which Hagar envisages as a prison, sets her heart pulsing against its cage of bones "like a berserk bird." (p.95) The gull trapped like Hagar in the old cannery, is wounded by her as it screams their common fear. Horrified Hagar recalls its free soaring. The gull's broken wing reduces it to the level to which age has reduced Hagar, its strength becomes a hazard. Two dogs sound like

merciless wolfish fiends. Hagar's curiosity and fear are answered by the arrival of Murray Lees. The wounded bird that drew the hounds off Murray's trail now appears as scapegoat and sacrificial victim: the demonic parody of Eucharist symbolism in the apocalyptic world.

Chickens serve as a frequent form of demonic bird imagery. The Manawaka dump, which figures much more prominently in *The Diviners*, is the stage here for a grotesque and sickening scene in Hagar's childhood. A load of spoiled eggs has hatched in the summer sun. The feeble, foodless chicks are prisoner by their shells and by each other. Hagar, for reasons she does not understand as a child refuses to help Lottie kill the chicks; at ninety, still puzzled she thinks it was right to refrain, although her reasons are obscure to her.

Worth remembering is the incident when Hagar, en route to Silverthreads thinks of calves struggling to be born. She has always had a fellow feeling for anything struggling into life. We remember it with new force as Hagar and Lottie Simmons sit plotting the separation of their adult children, pretending it is for John and Arlene's good. The two old women attempt to haggle with fate. They agree that Arlene should be sent East until she and John can afford to marry. Hagar and Lottie see the stifling of John and Arlene's relationship as a mercy-killing. At this point, Hagar remembers the bloody chicks, but Lottie has completely repressed the incident.

A concordance would reveal the remarkable frequency of bird patterns. Hagar in hospital, in a restraint, is like a trussed fowl. In the cannery memories swoop like gulls, and the prospect of confronting herself is imaged as a fearsome storm which might sweep bird out to sea and drawn into its depths "as still and cold as black glass." (p.235) Discovered by Marvin, Hagar is "an old hawk caught." (p.251) Hospitalized, her pain beats its wings against her rib cage, while nearby voices like birds caught inside a building are heard.

Birds with their power of flight, are traditional emblems of freedom and the human spirit. Laurence uses this archetype in her pun which recurs in the Manawaka fiction. The demonic form of the image, the captive bird which in prairie folklore portends death, also recurs. The title story of a *A Bird in the House* concerns the death of Vanessa's father and the young girl's loss of religious faith. But the larger narrative of Vanessa's maturation restores to the bird image its apocalyptic suggestions of spirit and freedom. The latter suggest the partial and hard-won freedom of the young adult. It includes an understanding and acceptance of her people and her culture, an inheritance which proclaims itself in her veins.

Houses and furnishing form another prominent image pattern. They serve as analogues for human bodies and by extension, human lives. Lamps and chairs are memories made visible. Laurence's image patterns reflect her wit. Hagar's first experience of sex provides a comical house metaphor: the bride had not known she has "a room to house such magnitude." (p.52) The hen house surrounded by chicken wire sags bunchily "like bloomers without elastic." (p.114) The abandoned house at Shadow Point another container for Hagar and her memories has no lock; this mock castle like her aging body affords neither privacy nor defense.

In the final analysis one can say that in the field of literary creative vision, Laurence has played the part of an interpreter, providing the reader's imagination with a certain vision of the world achieved through the use of language, the choice of themes, characters, narrative patterns, and imagery.

4.8 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PAST

Graham Greene is of the opinion that a writer's "whole career is an effort to illustrate his private world in terms of the great public world we all share." (As quoted by Margaret Laurence in *A Place to Stand On*, Edmonton Ne West Press, 1983, p.15)

Margaret Laurence admits that Graham Green is right in this statement. She believes that for the writer one way of discovering oneself is through the exploration inherent in the writing itself. According to her a great many writers, at all points attempt to understand their background and their past sometimes even a more distant past which they have not personally experienced. This sort of exploration is very clearly seen in the works of contemporary African writers who recreate their peoples' past in novels and plays in order to recover a sense of themselves, an identity and a feeling of value. They have found it necessary in other words to come to terms with their ancestors and their gods in order to be able to accept the past and be at peace with the dead, without being stifled or threatened by that past.

Margaret Laurence realised that much and her own writing had followed the same pattern – "the attempt to assimilate the past, partly in order to be freed from it, partly in order to try to understand myself and perhaps others of my generation, through seeing where we had come from." (*A Place to Stand On* p. 15) In *The Stone Angel* Margaret Laurence has approached her own background, her own past through her grandparent's generation the generation of pioneers of Scots-Presbyterian origin, who had been among the first to people the town she calls Manawaka. This was where her own roots began. Other past generations of her father's generation had lived in Scotland, but for her, her people's real past – her own real past – was not connected except distantly with Scotland, indeed this was true for Hagar as well for she was born in Manawaka.

From the point of view of characterization also, the past plays a significant role. Like humans in real life, great fictional personalities are not static; they evolve, accumulate and alter with age. The notions of inheritance and survival, which Laurence says are essential to all her novels, implicate a character in time, binding her to past and future. David J. Jeffery argues that "Laurence's fascination with time is peculiarly Canadian because it reflects our belief in the existence, utility, and necessity of historical meaning. People cannot understand themselves or their plight in isolation; they need the context of larger cultural forces." When Laurence's characters speak in the voice of memory, they register the passing of time in their style, and by speaking, they seek to ease the burden of the past.

The Past is a lingering presence in the narrator's mind. He or she must disentangle a network of temporal pressures from personal and ancestral pasts, from family inheritance, from historical and legendary traditions. Time itself becomes integral to Laurence's themes and techniques. Because the stories are told in retrospect, the very act of recalling enters into the drama, making memory an important structural principle, a means of both recognition and deception, and a power for integrating past and present in a meaningful whole. Memory becomes a creative power that artfully surveys the past.

In *The Stone Angel* it is weaving of the past and the present strands that makes the final fabric of the work. Through an alternating pattern we are given the story of Hagar's life and the account of her last struggle to maintain her independence. When the weaving is done we see her as a character portrayed with deep understanding and sympathy. Alone, by the edge of the sea, she takes refuge from storm and cold in a crumbling cannery. Hagar reviews the darkest moment of her life—the deaths of her drunken husband and her favourite son John. Then into the blackness of her night comes a fool – a vague parallel to Lear's fool – a tipling insurance salesman, Murray F. Lees. Together they fill their bellies with cheap red wine, then tell each other, sad tales of loss and of sorrow. And to Hagar as she listens to Lees and as she receives from him understanding and kindness, comes understanding of self and the realisation that tragedy is the common lot of man.

By reviewing her past, Hagar, the old stone angel receives eyes and sees with terrifying clarity that she herself has been the cause of her blackened years. "Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else and never free, for I carried my chains within me, and they spread out

...me and shackled all I touched." (p.292) Such profound understanding of oneself as the reward of looking back in Margaret Laurence's fiction.

4.9 THE SIGNIFANCE OF MANAWAKA

Margaret Laurence admits that "much of my writing relates to the kind of prairie town in which I was born and in which I first began to be aware of myself, writing, for me has to be set firmly in some soil, some place, some outer and inner territory which might be described in anthropological terms as "cultural background". She further says, "The name Manawaka is an invented one, but it had been in my mind since I was about seventeen or eighteen, when I first began to think about writing something set in a prairie town. Manawaka is not my home town of Neepawa although it has elements of Neepawa, especially in some of the descriptions of places, such as the cemetery on the Hill or the Wachakwa valley through which ran the small brown river which was the river of my childhood. In almost every way, however, Manawaka is not so much any one prairie town as an amalgam of many prairie towns. Most of all, I like to think, it is simply itself, a town of the mind, my own private world, as Graham Greene says, which one hopes will ultimately relate to the outer world which we all share." (*A Place to Stand On*. p.16-17)

While talking about the influence of a place on one's writing Margaret Laurence argues that a place influences the writing in two ways. "First, the physical presence of the place itself – its geography, its appearance. Second, the people. For me, the second aspect of environment is the most important, although in everything I have written which is not set in Canada, whether or not actually set in Manitoba, somewhere some of my memories of the physical appearance of the prairies come in. I had, as a child and as an adolescent, ambiguous feelings about the prairies. I still have them, although they no longer bothered me. I wanted to go out of the small town and go far away, and yet I felt the protectiveness of that atmosphere, too. I felt the loneliness and the isolation of the land itself and yet I always considered southern Manitoba to be very beautiful, and I still do. I doubt if I will ever live there again, but those poplar bluffs and the blackness of that soil and the way in which the sky is open from one side of the horizon to the other, these are things I will carry inside my skull for as long as I live, with the vividness of recall that only our first home can have for us." (*A Place to Stand On*. p.16)

"Nevertheless, the people were more important than the place. Hagar in *The Stone Angel* was not drawn from life, but she incorporates many of the qualities of my grandparent's generation. Her speech is their speech, and her gods their gods. I think I never recognized until I wrote that novel just how mixed my own feelings were towards that whole generation of pioneers- how difficult they were to live with, how authoritarian, how unbending, how afraid to show love, many of them, and how willing to show anger. And yet, they had inhabited a wildness and made it fruitful. They were in the end great survivors and for that I love and value them." (*A Place to Stand On*. p.17)

About the possibility of an inhibiting or negative fallout of cultural background, Laurence comments, "But I do not believe that this kind of writing needs to be parochial. If Hagar in *The Stone Angel* has any meaning, it is the same as that of an old woman anywhere, having to deal with the reality of dying. On the other hand, she is not an old woman anywhere. She is very much a person who belongs in the same kind of prairie Scot -- Presbyterian background as I do, and it was of course, people like Hagar who created that background with all its flaws and strengths." (*A Place to Stand On*. p.17)

4.10 LET US SUM UP

Margaret Laurence believed that titles express the theme of the book in a poetic way. The title of *The Stone Angel* points to a nexus of meaning which the reader is called upon to reconstruct. The stone angel is the most important referential object in the novel. Three major characters – the protagonist Hagar, her father Jason Currie, her son John Shipley are involved with the statue. What it means for each one of them and how they respond to it is important for both the readers and the critics. For Jason Currie, the statue displays his respect for his dead wife and proclaims his dynasty. It is a rich socio-cultural sign. Hagar's attitude towards the Stone Angel is ambiguous. It is linked with the mother whose weakness Hagar openly despises. It also embodies, for her, the paternal and societal values which she shares and is a symbol of Currie superiority. When she discovers that it has toppled over she is not only dismayed, she must set it up again. John has no reverence for the statue and the Currie greatness it represents. The stone angel performs a very important role in the construction of the novel's meaning and a structuring role in the expansion of the narrative. In the episode that shows the regeneration of Hagar the angel motif is again in the foreground.

The technical excellence of *The Stone Angel* is largely due to a web of intricate images. Muddy farmyards, skeletal machinery, Manitoba maples, prairie weather, Hagar's arthritic muscles and veins, the remarkable bird imagery and above all the stone angel serve as powerful images that convey the social and psychological implication of events, places and characters. For Margaret Laurence all writing is an exploration with a view to understanding oneself. For understanding oneself one has to understand one's background one's past because then alone can one get rid of the burden of the past and make some progress towards understanding others. Hagar confronts her past, analyses it and then alone she makes her limited entry into a world of joy and peace. Laurence also believes that a place, influences the writer in two ways. First the physical geography, its appearance, and second, the people. In her writing one can find both the influences of what she calls a "cultural background."

4.11 GLOSSARY

Oxymoronic:	Combination of contradictory terms so as to form an expressive phrase or epithet.
Semantic:	relating to meaning especially of words.
Polarity:	State of having two opposite poles: the condition of having properties different or opposite
Paradigm:	example
Iconoclast:	a breaker of images
Straddle:	favourable to both sides
Emblematises:	to represent to the mind something different from itself
Adumbration:	foreshadowing
Expletive:	a word inserted to fill up a sentence or line of verse.
Plebian:	a member of a despised social class

Desecration:	an act of profanation
Apparition:	appearance
Concomitant:	he, who or that which accompanies.
Disjunction:	the act of separation
Syntagms:	a systematic body, system or group.
Silhouette:	a shadow outline filled in with black
Synecdochically:	by putting part for the whole, or the whole for part.
Metonymically:	a trope in which the name of one thing is put for that of another related to it, the effect for the cause
Intercession:	act of intercedings or pleading for another.

4.12 QUESTIONS

1. Do you think *The Stone Angel* is an appropriate title? Give reasons.
2. Give in brief the different meanings given to the stone angel by Hagar, Jason Currie and John.
3. What are the various functions the stone angel performs in the novel?
4. Comment upon the nature and significance of bird imagery in *The Stone Angel*.
5. What is the significance of the past for Margaret Laurence. How does Hagar tackle her past and what is the reward she gets?

4.13 BIBLIOGRAPHY

For the preparation of this Block I have heavily depended on the following reading list:

- Colin, Nicholson. *Critical Approaches to the Fiction of Margaret Laurence*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990.
- Coger, Greta M. *New Perspective on Margaret Laurence*. Conneebicut: Greenward Press, 1997.
- Fraser, Wayne. *The Dominion of Women* London: Greenwood Press, 1991.
- Gibson, Graeme. *Eleven Canadian Novelists*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press Ltd., 1973.
- Irvine, Lorna M. *Critical Spaces: Margaret Laurence and Janet Frame*. Columbia: Camedon House, 1995.
- Kertzer, J.M. *Margaret Lawrence and Her Works*. Toronto: E.C.W., 1987.
- King, James. *Margaret Laurence: A Biography*. Toronto: Knoph Canada, 1997.

Morley, Patricia. *Margaret Laurence: The Long Journey Home*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill Queen's University, 1996.

New, W.H. *Canadian Writers in 1984*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1986.

New, W.H. *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1986.

Thomas, Clara. *Margaret Laurence*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1969.

Woodcock, George. *A Place to Stand on*. Edmonton: Newest Press, 1983.

Verduyn, Christi. *Margaret Laurence An Appreciation*. New York: Broadview Press 1988.