

Block-5

**Unit 1 : Seamus Heaney: : “Digging”, “The Tollund Man
in Springtime”**

**Unit 2 : Elizabeth Jennings: “Song at the Beginning of
Autumn”, “A Game of Chess”**

**Unit 3 : Simon Armitage: “Look, Stranger”,
“Abstracting Electricity”**

Unit 1 : Seamus Heaney: : “Digging”, “The Tollund Man in Springtime”

Space for Learner

Unit Structure :

- 1.1 Objectives
- 1.2 Introduction
- 1.3 Works of the Poet
- 1.4 Critical Reception
- 1.5 “The Tollund Man in Springtime”
 - 1.5.1 Context of the Poem
 - 1.5.2 Reading the Poem
- 1.6 “Digging”
 - 1.6.1 Context of the Poem
 - 1.6.2 Reading the Poem
- 1.7 Summing Up
- 1.8 Glossary
- 1.9 References and Suggested Readings

1.1 Objectives

This unit has been designed to help the students acquaint themselves with Seamus Heaney’s first poem on a bog body titled “The Tollund Man.” Attempts have been made to highlight Heaney’s touch with his land and the love that he harboured for his countrymen. Seamus Heaney’s poetic techniques have been discussed in relation to the poem which would help students to connect to his other poems too. The unit will help the students to:

- place the poems in their proper context.
- appreciate the poems in its totality.
- appreciate the connect between the poet and his work.

1.2 Introduction

Seamus Justin Heaney is one of the living, major and well-known Nobel Prize winner modern poets. It was in 1995 that Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for his works composed during what he called, in his Nobel Lecture, ‘a quarter century of life waste and spirit waste’. (“Crediting Poetry”, the Nobel Lecture 24). Seamus Heaney is also a representative of Irish tradition and culture. His poetry reflects his love for Irish culture. His first volume of poetry is about

‘digging’ in the sense that the act of writing is for him an unearthing of his past and the historical roots of his nation. By taking his own materials and myths from his Irish background, he has also been able to achieve universality as a modern interpreter of ancient myth as significant for modern age.

Heaney belonged to a place called Northern Ireland where till recently violence was the order of the day. So, it is quite natural for Heaney to refer to that turmoil through his writing. Heaney’s Irishness was made strong by the sense of his own place. Heaney, in his essay “The Sense of Place” says—”Irrespective of our creed or politics, irrespective of what culture or subculture may have coloured our individual sensibilities, our imaginations assent to the stimulus of the names, our sense of the place is enhanced, our sense of ourselves as inhabitants not just of a geographical country but of a country of the mind is cemented.”

Heaney was born on 13th April 1939, at Mossbawn, near Castledawson, county Derry in Northern Ireland. His father, Patrick Heaney, a Roman Catholic was a cattle-dealer and his mother was Margaret Kathleen McCann. Heaney was the eldest of nine children. Margaret Heaney, along with her sister-in-law, Mary, who lived with the family, formed a special bond with the eldest child. The family as well as his birth-place, Mossbawn, helped form young Heaney’s personality.

Heaney’s father, Patrick Heaney, was a cattle-dealer who owned a forty-acre farm. Patrick Heaney served as a member of the rural council. The two poems in Heaney’s first volume of poetry— ‘Digging’ and ‘Follower’ refer to the poet’s father. ‘Digging’ is about discovering the poet’s connection between his vocation and his inherited traditions. Although he has come away from his father’s ways of living, yet he does dig on with his pen. In his memoir, *Preoccupations*, Heaney laments—”When I was learning to read, towards the end of 1945, the most important books in the house were the ration books—the pink clothes coupons and the green points for sweets and groceries.” Thus from his early childhood, he made it a promise to stick to the pen and to dig with it

“Between my finger and my thumb

The squat pen rests. I will dig with it.” (‘Digging’, *The Death of a Naturalist*.)

His first volume explores the transformation of the boy into man, farmer into poet and the whole volume is ‘digging’ in the sense that the act of writing is an attempt to explore the poet’s past and the historical roots of his society.

The other poem “Follower” is an apology to his father that he is not, nor can ever be, truly like him. In the Irish psyche, ancestry is a potent force, steadying the

individual and shaping his or her sense of identity. It is perhaps even more important in the north of Ireland. Michael Parker in his book, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet* says—”It is perhaps even more important in the north of Ireland where the Catholics are a minority ‘in a province that insists that it is British’, and where the notion was pronounced that British and Protestant cultures was superior. Though breaking with family tradition by working the field of literature, Heaney maintains his links with ‘the energies of generation’ in celebrating his forbears.”(p 6). Michael Parker says—”Ancestry, like history and myth enabled Heaney to connect the current of past and present.” Heaney is always true to his own place and he had a special bond with his place and ground. So in his poem ‘Kinship’, Heaney asserts—“I step through origins like a dog turning its memories of wilderness on the kitchen mat. (“Kinship”, *North*).

The frequent tributes in poetry and prose to neighbours from his home-ground reveal the debt he feels he owes to them, and his desire to fuse his achievements with theirs. In “A Poet’s Childhood” (1971), we meet Joe Ward, a carpenter and ‘a kind of poet too’, since ‘making a rhyme is like making a joint’ and an unnamed young girl to who came to darn old socks, whose needle-work also provides a metaphor for the ‘stitching and unstitching’ of the poet’s task.

In his earliest poem we meet Dan Taggart, Big Jim Evans and Henry McWilliams, the ‘Achilles’, ‘Ajax’ and ‘Nestor’ of the local ‘epic’ world. In the community in which Heaney grew up, Protestants and Catholics “lived in proximity and harmony with one another” and generally showed tolerance and courtesy to each other, such as that displayed in “The Other Side” in *Wintering Out* and ‘Trial Runs’ in *Stations*. In the latter, a protestant neighbour returns from Italy with a particularly imposing set of rosary beads for his father. Heaney won scholarships at St. Columb’s college, before being appointed lecturer at Queen’s University, Belfast. He worked as an English teacher at St. Thomas Secondary school, Belfast and at St. Joseph’s College, before being appointed lecturer at Queen’s University. He was guest lecturer at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1970-71 and in 1976 settled in Dublin to work as part-time lecturer at Carysfort, a college of education. He began teaching at Harvard University in 1982, becoming Boylston professor of Rhetoric, Harvard, in 1984. From 1989 to 1994, he was professor of poetry at Oxford University. Heaney, who now lives in Dublin, drew on his farm childhood and wrote about nature in his early poetry. In the 1970s he began writing about the political turmoil of Northern Ireland in such works as *North* and *Field Work* and *The Sunday Times* of London described Heaney as ‘the finest poet writing in English’. Heaney has been writing extensively and it is Heaney whose poems carry a universal appeal to the problems of Northern Ireland. In 1995, Heaney was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

For Heaney, poetry has some legislative power. ‘In his essay, “The Government of the Tongue” Heaney says, “What had in mind was this aspect of poetry as its own vindicating force. In this dispensation, the tongue. (representing both a poet’s personal gift of utterance and the common resources of language itself) has been granted the right to govern. The poetic art is credited with an authority of its own.”

In an interview in *Irish Times* in 1972, Heaney said—“I have been writing poems lately that grow out of words and ways of talking.” Heaney’s ‘etymological’ poems are rituals that recreate the bond between word and root, place-name and sacred earth. Etymologist, in fact, means a “studier of roots”. Latin Stoics such as Varro during the first century A.D claimed that by discovering the original forms of words, called *etyma* or roots, the precise correspondence between reality and language could be ascertained.

1.3 Works of the poet

Seamus Heaney drew his poetic inspiration from different ends. It is clear that his ancestors as well as his neighbours helped him from his poetic sensibilities. Several names of his neighbourhood so appear in his poems, like Dan Taggart, Big Jim Evans and Henry Mc Williams, the ‘Achilles’, ‘Ajax’ and ‘Nestor’ of the local world. Heaney grew up in a community in which Protestants and Catholics lived in harmony with one another. This can be ascertained from the poems like “The other Side” in *Wintering Out* and “Trial Runs” in *Stations*.

Mossbawn pump, Heaney’s birthplace, appears as a source for Heaney’s creativity. The pump appears in “Rite of Spring” and “Mother” in *Door into the Dark*, in “Sinking the Shaft” in *Stations*, in “A Drink of Water” and “The Thome Road” in *Field Work* and in “Changes” in *Station Island* and in several poems of his other books.

Heaney published his first collection of poems *The Death of a Naturalist* in 1966. This collection shows the influence of Kavanagh’s faith on Heaney, that the local could articulate the Universal. Heaney’s own place, Mossbawn, provided Heaney with a source for creative energy in this path of poetry.

Heaney, from the early collections, tried to combine in his work personal memories with images of Irish heritage and the landscape of Northern

Ireland. There are also references to English-Irish and Catholic-Protestant conflict. His second collection, *Door into the Dark*, was published in 1969 and his early Collections were praised as nature poetry of the kind written by Ted Hughes. *Wintering Out* in 1972, *North* in 1975 established him as a more

substantial writer, engaging with serious cultural and political issues of Irish identity in a territory torn by dispute. With *North* he began to explore themes of violent Irish history (“Mother ground/ sour with the blood/ of her faithful”) that he confronted with a more urgent and autobiographical emphasis in *Field Work*, which contains public and political poems of great achievement. Heaney’s other published works are *Poems 1965-1975* in 1980, *Sweeney Astray* in 1983, *Station Island* in 1984, *The Haw Lantern* in 1987, *The Cure of Troy* in 1990, *Seeing Things* (Collection of Poems, in 1991), *Beowulf* (Translation of *Beowulf* from Old English to modern English by Seamus Heaney, 1999) *The Spirit Level* in 1996, *Electric Light* in 2001. The increasing violence from 1969 onwards and the sufferings of his community, however, made it necessary for Heaney to probe more deeply and critically into his catholic origins from *Wintering Out* onwards.

And, his prose works are *Preoccupations* (Selected Prose, 1968-78), *Government of The Tongue* (Essays, 1988), *The Place of Writing* (Richard Ellmann Lectures, 1989), *The Redress of Poetry* (Oxford Lectures, 1995), *Finders Keepers* (Selected prose, 1971-2001) in 2001. Heaney’s *Preoccupations* traces how “his roots were crossed with his reading”.

1.4 Critical Reception

Seamus Heaney is generally considered as the next great poet of Ireland after W B Yeats. Like Yeats, Heaney has touched several aspects of Irish culture, history, folklore, song, myth and religion and has written a kind of poetry that embodies the experiences and emotions of the Irish people. But critics like Terry Eagleton say—”There are two particular reasons, among thousands others, why the comparison of Heaney with Yeats is inept. Yeats’s conception of poetry was a fairly commonplace Romantic inspirationalism, entailing an irrationalism not unconnected with his politics. Heaney, by contrast, conceives of art as labour, craft and production, precariously analogous to manual labour, traffic with Nature mediated by verbal rather than material instruments.” On the contrary, critics like Edna Longley and Ciaran Carson accuses Heaney of distorting history with myth. Henry Hart in his book says—“Mythopoetic poets are usually autobiographers in disguise, yet Heaney is not simply promoting Catholic and nationalist ideologies by linking his Irish roots with a prelapsarian Eden. He dwells on those place-names and archaeological names with English, Scottish and Irish origins, records a pastoral Gaelic past that perhaps never existed and laments social and personal falls that certainly did. While British planter plays antithesis to Irish native, Heaney always aims for a dialectical synthesis. His allegorical symbols and etymological

myths are meant to highlight the present troubles against a more fertile, unified background.” Heaney has been compared with the great Irish Poet, William Butler Yeats, and in fact several critics have called Heaney “the greatest Irish Poet since Yeats.”

1.5 “The Tollund Man in Springtime”

1.5.1 Context of the Poem

Seamus Heaney’s poem on the Tollund Man was inspired by a bog body that was discovered in peat in Denmark. In the Jutland peninsula of Denmark, in 1950s two brothers were cutting peat in their farmland. They stumbled upon a dead body and thought that it was a murder victim. When this was reported to the administration and investigations were carried out, it was revealed that the body belonged to the Iron Age, approximately dating it back to 400 B.C, 2400 years old. It looked recent because it was so well preserved by the bog. This body was named the Tollund Man since it was discovered in a place called Tollund in the Jutland peninsula of Denmark. Archaeologists, forensic scientists, radiologists, paleobotanists and even dentists conducted various studies on his body. Silkeborg Museum carried out these researches and the body after discovery was initially kept at the Silkborg Manor for public display. Bog bodies inspire four poems in Heaney’s poetry collection *North*.

As a child, Heaney had spent a lot of time among peat diggers and had witnessed the excitement and curiosity that was aroused when the bog bodies were discovered by peat diggers. He had also worked in the peat bog. Many thoughts came to his mind when the body of the Tollund Man was discovered; the incident transported him to his own childhood days among the peat diggers. In a talk in Silkeborg museum in 1996, Heaney recollects his childhood days:

“When I was a child and an adolescent I lived among the peat diggers and I also worked in the peat bog myself. I loved the structure the peat bank revealed after the spade had worked its way through the surface of the peat. I loved the mystery and the silence of the place when the work was done at the end of the day and I would stand there alone while the larks became quiet and the lapwings started calling, while the snipe would suddenly take off and disappear...”

“The Tollund Man in Springtime” is a poem which describes the rebirth of a bog body that was unearthed. With meticulous use of imagery Heaney describes how a man from pre historic times would feel in an age which is considered to be the springtime of human civilization, an age when technological advancements had supposedly paved new roads of the development of human race.

1.5.2 Reading the Poem

In the poem “The Tollund Man in Springtime”, Seamus Heaney describes the Tollund Man who is out of his peaty grave and has an experience of a security sensitive suburban world. He is baffled by surveillance that exists in various forms in the city- “scans, screens, hidden eyes.” As somebody who has been resurrected after ages (2 millennia), he is neither God nor a Ghost- somebody who cannot feel at ease in a technology driven modern world. He is perplexed by the worldly situation in which he finds himself.

The resurrected Tollund Man talks about his past. He confesses that he was buried by the people of his community for reasons unknown to him. As he wakes up in a new world, he hears the familiar sounds of nature- in the songs of the birds, in the sound of the rain. However, his sixth sense prompts to him that things are not the same; nature has undergone a considerable change. He senses unpleasantness in the song of the lark which is quite low in the sun and the presence of pollutants in the rain that pours down. This stanza draws a contrast between the expectations of the Tollund Man and the reality which is a far-flung experience from that expectation. He reveled when he was brought back to life but then, little did he expect that the world had degenerated to such an extent in all these years.

The Iron Man of Heaney’s poetic world finds himself lost in this technology driven world. Much juxtaposition finds expression in the first stanza- the juxtaposition of life against death, of reality against expectation, of nature against technology. But somewhere in experiences perhaps, there seems to be a blur in these juxtapositions; giving rise to a question that the Tollund Man might have been buried for selfish reasons but will his resurrection help him achieve his desired ends? Having found himself in an awkward world, will the Tollund Man wish to go back to his death in the bogland?

With an earthen sensuousness, Heaney describes the unearthing of the body of the Tollund Man. The Tollund Man could feel the cutter's spade and hear its sound. The entire process is described by a creation cycle. As he lay in the layered peat- "scon of peat, composite bog-dough", "muddy vintage", lukewarm bog, he could feel the excitement of being unearthed; the exhilaration of the moment of birth. He felt as if God had breathed life into him after all these years. He could feel the leverage of the spade and blinked awake as the peat lid was raised and fresh air flowed in. This moment of rebirth has been described by Heaney with a kind of Keatsian sensuousness. The bog where the Tollund Man's body lay has been personified- "swamp-breath", "flue", "soughing".

In the third stanza of the poem, Heaney describes the Tollund Man as an object of study. It is no longer the perspective of the Tollund Man which finds expression now, but the perspective of the observer. It is the 20th century looking at history through this bog body and trying to make sense of a bygone age. The Tollund Man who is now referred to as the Green Man is in a display case in the museum at Silkeborg in Denmark. As an object, he is studied by visitors to the museum. The observer measures his head; his skeleton is laid with utmost care. As he is cradled comfortably and lay with utmost care on the ground, the Tollund Man experiences retrieval from the violent fate. It was in a violent manner he was buried many years ago. Now, he is resurrected in a totally amicable way- a comforting hold, cradled and pit safely on the ground. He is an ancient relic in the museum and has been in display for sixty years. He is an Iron Age body which hits the headlines of 1950s- a significant death, a much more significant rebirth.

This poem was written in response to violence and murders in Northern Ireland. Heaney uses the poem as a way to think about the violence in Derry. He draws a parallel between the ritual killings in Jutland and the murders in Northern Ireland.

Over the years the Tollund Man has had an exposure to modern life and he has learnt the ways of the modern world through observation of the environment around him. He has observed lives of the technology dependent modern men around him with the realization that all the progress and development that has been much talked about in the world has not been a source of greater happiness. Rather people

have turned into “wired, far-faced smilers.” Heaney draws a stark contrast between history and man’s encounter with history. A person from the 20th century would have looked down on a person from the Iron Age as a pagan relic; but it is the other way round in the poem. The Tollund Man is not impressed by the new world rather he would prefer to go back to his ancient world. He feels exiled in the new world and feels the pull of a much more preferred habitat- his ancient world or perhaps even his burial in the peat.

The final stanza of the poem is a moment of decision for the Tollund Man. It is a time for him to engage with the new world. He contemplates upon the situation. He is aware that it would be a different/ difficult world where- “Every green skinned stalk turned friable”

Heaney draws images of a decadent world- “stairwell... broom cupboard”, “musty”, “friable”. Although the Tollund Man is aware that his origins were better than the modern world he is posited, he stands up determined. He- “spat on my hands... and/ spirited myself into the streets.”

The body of the Tollund Man becomes an icon and the unearthing of the body from the peat is perceived as a moment of rebirth. Heaney, in his bog body poems describes the various bog bodies such as the Tollund Man, the Grabelle Man that were found by peat diggers in the Irish bogland. In the poem “The Tollund Man in Springtime”, Heaney concentrates on the reaction of a man from ancient times (Iron Age) when he wakes up in a modern world. Heaney while choosing the Tollund Man chooses the best preserved body from the pre historic times. In an interesting manner with the use of imageries, Heaney describes how somebody from the pre historic times would see our world which we consider to be so developed. Perhaps, it is a call by the poet to relook at our own selves and redefine our notions of development and happiness.

SAQ

How does Heaney employ the idea of resurrection in the poem?

(60 words)

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Compare and contrast the Tollund Man's initial response after his resurrection to his experience by the end of the poem. (80 words)

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1.6 Digging

1.6.1 Context of the Poem

Seamus Heaney's poems are anchored in Northern Ireland- a territory characterized by clashes between the Union Protestants loyal to the British and the Republic Catholics. Heaney negotiates very successfully between the two domains- the personal and the public. "Digging" is one of his early poems. Though the poem resembles a simple farm poem, it is Heaney's use of symbolism which renders it complex to the readers. There are numerous references to violence that can be read in the poem. Violence exudes not only in the use of the shovel to dig in the earth but also the physical act of violence is manifested when the speaker looks at the body of his father. The energy that the father exudes while using the shovel is read as manifestation of physical violence.

1.6.2 Reading the poem

The poem "Digging" starts with two contrary images of the pen and the gun. The gun here symbolizes the violence on the Irish soil. As the young speaker, who is supposedly Heaney himself contemplates on the choice of whether to pursue his career as a writer or whether to take arms, he hears a sound below his window. As he goes hear the window and looks down, he can see his father busy digging. The imagery of the old man digging in the soil with his spade resonates with the violence on the Irish soil for Heaney. The very act of digging is a common activity among the Irish folk who are involved in the cultivation of potatoes. But Heaney sees it otherwise; for him the physical strength that his father employs in digging into the soil is an act of violence. As he watches his father, Heaney is taken twenty years back. The image of his father digging in the potato drills reminds Heaney of his grandfather who would also be engaged in this farm

activity when Heaney was a child. The mention of his grandfather is significant because it talks of a family lineage which throughout generations has been engaged in potato farming. This is emblematic of a rural Irish tradition. With utmost concentration, Heaney observes the way in which his father uses the spade, how he

“nestled on the lug, the shaft

Against the inside knee was levered firmly.”

His father worked in the same manner as his grandfather used to work.

Heaney is reminded of an incident from his childhood days- how he had gone to give milk in a bottle to his grandfather while the grandfather was busy in the farm. His grandfather who was leaning over the potatoes, digging the soil, had straightened himself up for only a few minutes to drink the milk and then without wasting any time had resumed his digging. This impressed upon the young mind the sincerity with which his grandfather used to dig. He says that his grandfather was one of the best diggers and he cut the best turf.

The smell of the potato mould jolts Heaney from nostalgia and he again watches his father digging in the potato fields. There are peat diggers in Ireland who have also been engaged in this activity throughout generations. It is these diggers- the potato diggers, the peat diggers who are the living roots of Irish tradition. It is these people who have kept the Irish tradition of digging alive. Heaney says that he too wishes to be a part of that tradition but he does not have the skills of digging with the spade like his father and his grandfather.

The final stanza of the poem is a moment of decision. After all these ruminations, Heaney comes to a decision regarding his way of life. He decides that he will also be digging but with the pen. This implies that he will not choose the gun. Rather he chooses the pen to dig into the Irish history and bring that history to the forefront. He distances himself from the work of his ancestors and chooses to write. In away he distances himself from violence, from shooting. The reference to his ancestors is also a reference to the internecine wars that his ancestors were involved in. The spade is not a simple farming instrument; it symbolizes the gun, hence a reference to the gun in the first stanza. Heaney choice of the pen is a metaphor. The poet realizes

that he is not a hardman like his ancestors who can use the gun but he is a man who can exercise his physicality only with the use of his finger and the thumb, hence the choice to use the pen. This interpretation of a seemingly simple farm poem like “Digging” portrays Heaney as a political poet.

SAQ

- (a) The metaphor of “digging”- its relevance in farm life and its significance in Heaney’s life.
- (b) How does Heaney employ farm life imagery against a larger ramification of Irish way of life and the Irish revolution?

1.7 Summing Up

Seamus Heaney was one of the finest English writers from Ireland. His poems are significant for the symbolism and imagery that he engages in and also for the historical context that they are situated in. Even in the simplest of his approaches, we can read into Heaney’s love for Ireland and the connection he tries to establish with his roots. “The Tollund Man” starts with a discovery of a naturally mummified corpse about 2400 years old and very appropriately goes to connect to the issues in Ireland during Heaney’s time. For Seamus Heaney, it has been the process of “digging” with varied manifestations and a desire to resurrect.

1.8 Glossary

Aarhus- Danish town on the east coast of the Jutland peninsula close to which bog bodies were discovered by PV Glob

Saint’s kept body- the miracle of his preservation in peat makes the Tollund Man a religious relic

Honeycombed workings- patterns made by peat diggers spades resembling a honey bee’s store

Tumbril- open cart

Tollund, Grauballe, Nebelgard- sites (villages) associated with the discovery of bog bodies

1.9 References and Suggested Readings

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Space for Learner

Unit 2 : Elizabeth Jennings: “Song at the Beginning of Autumn”, “A Game of Chess”

Space for Learner

Unit Structure:

- 2.1 Objectives
- 2.2 Introduction
- 2.3 Her Works
- 2.4 Critical Reception
- 2.5 Context of the Poems
- 2.6 Reading the Poem: “Song at the Beginning of Autumn”
- 2.7 Reading the Poem: “A Game of Chess”
- 2.8 Summing Up
- 2.9 Glossary
- 2.10 References & Suggested Readings

2.1 Objectives

This unit aims at familiarizing the students with two representative poems composed by Elizabeth Jennings, viz. ‘Song at the Beginning of Autumn’ and ‘A Game of Chess’. The learners will get an overview of both the life of the poet and her contribution to the volume of poetry produced during the twentieth century. The socio-political events of the period that had its impact upon Elizabeth Jennings in particular and her contemporary writers in general will also be dealt with. From our reading of the verses of the different periods we understand that at every age the style and diction of poetry changes. It is this remarkable nature of the poetry of the twentieth century and Jennings’ conformity or deviation from the trend of the period will be focused upon. Thus, in this unit the students will be:

- *introduced* to the poet’s style of writing,
- *able to* understand the context in which the poems were written,
- *acquainted* with the contributions made by the poet to the twentieth century literature,
- *made* to know about the prevalence of the thoughts reflected in the poems her contemporary times
- *enabled* to recognise the specific themes that reflect in the writings of the poet.

2.2 Introduction

Elizabeth Joan Jennings was a British poet by origin who got a warm reception as a poet in Britain during her lifetime. She was born on July 18, 1926 in Boston, Lincolnshire, England. When she was six years old her father who was a Chief Medical Officer shifted the family to Oxford. Jennings received her education from Oxford High School, and St. Anne's College, Oxford from 1944-1947. She had tried her hands on poetry since she was at Oxford High School. After completing her studies from St. Anne's College, she also got appointed as a librarian at the city library in Oxford. In 1953, her first pamphlet, titled *Poems* was published, which immediately caught the attention of Robert Conquest. Later on, he published her poems with other great authors of the period like - Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin, and Thom Gunn in his *New Lines Anthology* (1956). She had received the Somerset Maugham Award for her collection *A Way of Looking* which appeared in 1955, gave her the opportunity to visit Italy. A considerable part of her life was spent in Rome which was nevertheless enriching. Her collection *Song for a Birth or Death* (1961) reveals a confessional note and a wild picture of love. However, her later poems included in the volumes *Recoveries* (1964) and *The Mind has Mountains* (1966) have been considered to have undertones of the nervous breakdown that she had gone through. Other collections of poetry by Jennings *The Animals' Arrival* (1969), *Lucidities* (1970), *Relationships* (1972), *Extending the Territory* (1985), and *Familiar Spirits* (1994). She also translated a work, *The Sonnets of Michealangelo*, which was later revised in the year 1969. The concerns of her poetry are found to be mostly personal, and the language is plain. Her devotion towards Roman Catholicism finds reflection while she adopted the objective and traditional style of delivering her verses. Moreover, in her poems a deep sense of love for Italy can be felt. It is in fact interesting to know that she was also appointed as the Commander-in-Chief in the British army. She did not get married throughout her life and was one of the most well received poets of 1960s. She was conferred with an Honorary Doctorate of Divinity from Durham University some time before she died. Jennings breathed her last on October 26, 2001 in Bampton, Oxfordshire. Her last remains were buried in Wolvercote Cemetery in Oxford.

Stop to Consider

‘The Movement’ was a literary development of 1950s which saw remarkable changes in the approach towards poetry. It was the deviation from the norm that was already accepted. In 1954 the term ‘Movement poetry’ was first coined by J. D. Scott, who was the editor of the periodical – Spectator. From then on, a new trend of poetry emerged with several poets contributing to it.

The group that propagated the ideals of the ‘Movement poetry’ constituted of both poets and novelists who had a wide acclaim during the 1950s. This group consists of Robert Conquest, Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, Dennis Enright, Thom Gunn, Elizabeth Jennings, John Wain, John Holloway, Anthony Thwaite, Vernon Scannell and George MacBeth.

The movement poetry did not emphasize on the spontaneity of emotions to be expressed in poetry. The practitioners of this form were against the Romantic tradition as well as the various experimental techniques used by the modernist writers. The poems written by the Movement poets were therefore not in line to the then famous poets like T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and even Dylan Thomas.

The poets of the Movement wrote poems which had an ironic tone and realistic outlook. In their poems their attitude towards the world being materialistic, hackneyed and immoral finds expression. The Movement poets did not give in to sentimentality. Rather their poetry was more intellectual in nature.

It is however notable that the ideologies and principles of the Movement poets was indicated in the collection of poems, “New Lines”, edited by Robert Conquest. This collection was published in 1956 and consists of poems by most of the Movement poets. Another anthology with the same title came out in 1963.

Space for Learner

SAQ

1. What were the concerns of the authors who were a part of “The Movement”? (50 words)

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2. Why do you think is Jennings’ poetry different from that of her contemporary poets like T.S. Eliot or Ezra Pound? (30 words)

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2.3 Her Works

Elizabeth Jennings had established her fame through her poetry in the 1950s with not just her collection of poetry but also by publishing her verses in many British magazines. In 1953 she had published a pamphlet consisting of a few poems, *Poems* for which she bagged the Arts Council of Great Britain Prize. At the age of 29, in 1955 her second collection of poems *A Way of Looking* was out in print. This book not only won the prestigious Somerset Maugham award the same year but also financially helped her to visit Italy for three months. The time spent in Italy had an indelible impact upon her life as a writer. Her conviction about the Roman Catholic ideals got deeper and as a result her poems turned out to be more personal gradually. Elizabeth Jennings had also received the W.H. Smith Literary Award in 1987.

For a considerable period of time Elizabeth Jennings had a scuffle with her mental state. In the collections *Recoveries* (1964) and *The Mind Has Mountains* (1964) she had expressed about the fact that she had a nervous breakdown in the year 1962. The translation of The Sonnets of Michelangelo was done Jennings. Other anthologies by her include *A Sense of the World* (1958), *Let's Have Some Poetry* (1960), *Animals' Arrival* (1969), *Lucidities* (1970), *Collected Poems, 1967* (1971), *Consequently/Rejoice* (1977), *After the Ark* (1978), *Moments of Grace* (1979), *Growing-Points* (1979), *Elizabeth Jennings: Selected Poems* (1980), *Celebrations and Elegies* (1982), *Extending the Territory* (1985), *Collected Poems: 1953-1985* (1986), *Tributes* (1989), *Time and Seasons* (1992), *Familiar Spirits* (1994), *Every Changing Shape* (1996), *In the Meantime* (1997), *Praises* (1999), and *Timely Issues* (2001). She had also written the book on a famous poet Robert Frost titled *Frost* (1964) which was a series of the books published on different writers and critics.

Stop to Consider

Jennings does not remember her childhood as a glorious one because she had gone through headaches and a very bad health. When she was a child, she hardly played with toys, dolls or acted Cowboys and Indians like that of her age. Rather she talked to her imaginary brother, Jack Baycock who presumably lived in the garage. Else she sometimes played with her sister and blabbered in attempts to speak Latin. She once commented:

“I envied the boys lighting candles and swinging incense. I had a very rich imaginative life.”

For Jennings poetry was the only resort after going through a disturbed childhood and she was already practising poetry at the age of 15. After she completed her studies at Oxford, Jennings started working at the Oxford City Library and continued for eight years. In the next two years she joined the Chatto in the 1950s. But when in 1960 she had a nervous breakdown her work and social life came to a halt as she had to spend two years in a psychiatric hospital undergoing therapy for several years thereafter. Regarding her stay at the hospital, she said, “To say I didn’t get on very well with the doctors is an understatement.”

Jennings had written poems specially for children. *The Secret Brother and Other Poems* (1966) and *A Spell of Words: Selected Poems for Children* (1997) consist of poems for the young minds.

Among the most famous poems of Jennings ‘In Praise of Creation’, ‘My Grandmother’, ‘Delay’, and ‘One Flesh’ are exceptional. In these poems the themes dealt with are about familiar aspects of life.

Although she led a really lonely life, yet Elizabeth Jennings penned down on the idea of relationships, both on the familial ground and on nuances of romantic relationships. In the poem ‘Delay’ (1953) she expresses the difficulties of finding love and also how love can be complex at times. To emphasise on this, she uses an extended metaphor of the star light.

‘One Flesh’ is written in ABAB rhyme scheme. It deals with the thought that time flies away and growing old is inevitable. In this time the speaker grieves over her inability to take a decision at the right time due to hesitation at times, which resulted in the loss of some better opportunities. Here the poet emphasises on how life is a balance of being cautious and taking risks to achieve something. The overpowering themes that the poem focuses on are fear, the time factor and the unpredictability of life. However, the speaker in a very lucid language and clear imageries points out the strife that one goes through while making significant decisions.

The speaker of this poem is a child of a married couple. The relationship of the parents is critically observed by the child and the readers understand that although the couple had a long-term relationship the love and romance between the two has lost with time.

Stop to Consider

Elizabeth Jennings uses many biblical references in her poems. Poetic devices such as simile, enjambment, and caesura are commonly employed in her poetry. In her works the postmodern preoccupation with death, alienation, change, complexities in relationships, corruption in the social order are reflected distinctly.

In ‘My Grandmother’, the speaker’s regret over not spending enough time with their grandmother can be felt. This poem has five quatrains written in a ABAB rhyme scheme. No adherence to a definite meter is seen.

The themes that are commonly taken up by Jennings like nature and religion are evident in this poem too. In this poem the speaker talks about her grandmother who used run an antique shop. Also, the former is remorseful as she could not invest in more quality time with her grandmother. When Jennings remembers about her grandmother and the antique shop, it becomes evident that whenever she comes across some customary antiques she is filled with a sense of guilt.

The poem ‘In Praise of Creation’ (1987) echoes her strong belief in the ways of God and religion. The speaker finds purpose in everything that is natural and also sees order in all things of the Universe. Basically, this poem is a eulogy of the world and the Creator. Throughout the poem the poet sings praise of the varied designs of the natural world and the beauty of it all.

Her passion for writing poetry drove her to publish around twenty-seven collections of poems in her lifetime. Nonetheless, she was popular as a prolific reviewer of her time as she was associated several magazines like *Dublin Review* and *London Magazine*. Jennings had also edited many anthologies. The book *New Collected Poems* appeared posthumously in 2002.

Check Your Progress

1. How do we place Jennings among the other Movement poets?
(Hint: By analysing her poems in the context of their common preoccupations.)
2. Comment on the religious affiliation of Elizabeth Jennings?
(Hint: Her inclination towards Roman Catholic ideologies which was ignited by her stay in Italy for three months.)

3. Why is Jennings’ poetry considered to be confessional?
(Hint: Because she deals with the themes that are very commonplace and related to her own experiences.)
4. What inspired Jennings to become a poet?
Hint: (She made up her mind that she would spend her life in writing when she was pursuing her studies in St. Anne’s College, Oxford. There she had come across many personalities like C.S. Lewis which also became a great source of inspiration.)

Space for Learner

2.4 Critical Reception

After her breakdown, Jennings’ poetry became more experimental and less well-received by critics. However, she won praises from the critics of her period for engaging less or getting swayed away by emotions while writing poetry. She was recognised for her representation of the subjects chosen for poetry in an unassumingly realistic manner.

Horace Gregory opined about Elizabeth Jennings in this way:

Miss Jennings is English—and the curse of contemporary British verse is an imageless run of too many toneless words, in which, at their worst, these poems share. At her best, Miss Jennings knows her own mind; free of her instructors, her voice is heard in “Mirrors”.

The response of Timothy Gardener OP regarding her poetry is remarkable, “Whether the *Movement* ever existed at all has been much debated, but the mature Elizabeth Jennings that we find in *New Collected Poems* shows what a different trajectory she had followed from that of her laconic and wry contemporaries”.

SAQ

What are the major themes that Elizabeth Jennings deals with?
(30 words)

.....
.....

How do you place Jennings as a postmodern poet? (70 words)

.....
.....

2.5 Context of the Poems

The contexts of both the poems are varied. It can be understood from the fact that the two poems given for study are from two different phases of Elizabeth Jennings' life. 'Song at the Beginning of Autumn' incorporated in the anthology *A Way of Looking* was published in the early years of her writing career, i.e., 1955. This poem and the rest of this collection were so promising that it immediately gained popularity and won her the Somerset Maugham Award.

It is remarkable that in this poem the autumn season is introduced only in the last line of the poem. However, from the beginning itself the poignant imageries that are created in the poem are related to autumn. The images are related to many memories of the past. The speaker begins by referring to Proust as she is driven down the memory lane by the scent in the air. Although summer is very much in action at that time, yet she could sense the arrival of fall.

Whereas, 'A Game of Chess' included in the collection *Song for a Birth or Death* was published in 1961, a year after her nervous breakdown. This time seems to be a tumultuous one for Jennings as she was undergoing treatment for her mentally stressful condition. The reflections of her state definitely find expression in 'A Game of Chess', though in very subtle manner.

2.6 Reading the Poems: "Song at the Beginning of Autumn"

'Song at the Beginning of Autumn' is a four-stanza poem which is organised in the abcabc rhyme scheme. Each of the stanzas consist of six lines called sextains. The rhyme scheme is at times alternately arranged.

Now watch this Autumn that arrives
 In smells. All looks like Summer still;
 Colours are quite unchanged, the air
 On green and white serenely thrives.
 Heavy the trees with growth and full
 The fields. Flowers flourish everywhere.

In this first stanza of the poem by Elizabeth Jennings the speaker starts by conveying that she could smell the coming of Autumn in the air though summer was vigorously present in nature. She points out that everything in nature is bountiful. The leaves of the trees were green, the fields were full of crops and flowers were blooming heavily. In short, there was no trace of Autumn to be found in the environment.

Proust who collected time within
A child's cake would understand
The ambiguity of this –
Summer still raging while a thin
Column of smoke stirs from the land
Proving that Autumn gropes for us.

The above stanza begins with a reference to Proust, the French novelist, due to the fact that he wrote a book titled *In Search of Lost Time*. In this piece of work Proust has dealt with memory and time. A similar attempt seems to be made by Jennings. In this venture she is believed to have referred to Proust's work, *Swann's Way*, where the narrator is overpowered by a childhood memory that came back to the latter when he had a small cake emersed in tea.

In this second stanza the analogy of a cake floating on the tea and memory gliding on the mind. There is also the consciousness that everything cannot be remembered as it took place. But with memory the emotions and experiences of a man are attached. In the last three lines of the stanza the speaker shows us that time is moving swiftly and Autumn season is reaching out for us with every passing moment. This is suggestive of the span of life too, which hurriedly keeps elapsing from childhood and we are left with only memories as we arrive at the autumn of our lives and ultimately meet our death.

But every season is a kind
Of rich nostalgia. We give names –
Autumn and Summer, Winter, Spring –
As though to unfasten from the mind
Our moods and give them outward forms.
We want the certain, solid thing.

In this stanza Jennings lightens up the tone. Here the speaker seems to acknowledge that all the seasons have their unique charms and memories attached to them. As she utters the names of the seasons, she also points out the human tendency of naming things. This she addresses as the urge of all human to 'give them outward forms' and ascertain the concreteness of things.

But I am carried back against
My will into a childhood where

Space for Learner

Autumn is bonfires, marbles, smoke;
I lean against my window fenced
From evocations in the air.
When I said Autumn, Autumn broke.

The fourth and final stanza of the poem begins with the speaker being engrossed in a memory of her childhood. The three words ‘bonfires, marbles, smoke’ are symbolic of her nostalgia. These words carry the memory of some time in her childhood when she might have played with marbles around some bonfire where smoke from the fire engulfed the surrounding.

In the next three lines the poet comes back to her present when she was leaning by the window and nostalgically reminiscing of moments which fills her mind with a void. The imagery is therefore indicative of a sense of loss.

The concluding line of the poem, “When I said Autumn, Autumn broke” suggests as if the speaker possesses the power to compel summer to make its appearance by hailing it once. The readers can however feel the speaker’s dissatisfaction at accepting the dramatic changes that heralds in one’s life with the march of time like the change of seasons.

SAQ

How does Jennings deal with the Autumn season here?

.....
.....

How is childhood treated in this poem?

.....
.....

Stop to Consider

Elizabeth Jennings is basically known as a traditionalist and widely known for writing lyric poetry. Her mastery over the form of poems she writes is recognised by critics. There is a remarkable fluency, simplicity, melody and a sense of spontaneity in Jennings’ poetry.

Though Jennings had lived through the Second World War, the impact or the devastating effects of a war never fought in human history cannot be figured out in her works. She seems to deliberately ignore this

and focused her aspects that were personal and bothered people in their everyday lives. Her style is observed to be objected and language very lucid. For her devotion to writing poetry she is counted as one of the greatest English poets of the second half of the twentieth century.

Space for Learner

2.7 Reading the Poem: “A Game of Chess”

‘A Game of Chess’ is a poem that appeared in the collection *Song for a Birth or Death* published in 1961. This is also a four-stanza poem like ‘Song at the Beginning of Autumn’. let us look at how the poem begins:

The silent moves, the gently shaded room:
It is like childhood once again when I
Sat with a tray of toys and you would come
To take my temperature and make me lie
Under the clothes and sleep. Now peacefully

In ‘A Game of Chess’ Elizabeth Jennings seems to grapple with similar themes as in ‘Song at the Beginning of Autumn’. The speaker begins the first stanza by sharing with the readers an experience of the past. She ruminates over the love and care she received as a child. The images of those days of childhood when her mother used to take utmost care by checking her temperature and letting her sleep with clothes over her body seems to reflect clearly in her memory.

We sit above the intellectual game.
Pure mathematics seem to rule the board.
Emotionless. And yet I feel the same
As when I sat and played without a word
Inventing kingdoms where great feelings stirred.

This stanza appears to be a continuation of the previous stanza. There is a tone of lamentation as the speaker becomes aware of the flow of time and that she is an adult now. The realisation that in the adult world the relationships, feelings and emotions change dawn on her. Remorsefully thus she uses the word “Emotionless” here. By the phrases “intellectual game” and “pure mathematics” the speaker seems to indicate the calculative designs of the adults. But she says that though she is no longer a child, the memories of those moments when she sat down and played with toys come back to her. By remembering those times, she feels like a child who played different games with her dolls.

Is it that knight and king and small squat castle
Store up emotion, bring it under rule,
So that the problems now with which we wrestle
Seem simply of the mind? Do feelings cool
Beneath the order of an abstract school?

In this penultimate stanza some questions preoccupy that mind of the speaker are put up. The thoughts here are complex. The speaker wonders how the king and knights controlled their emotions and ruled a kingdom. The conviction that the problems that bother us originate in our minds and feelings are tamed by different forces at work.

Never entirely, since the whole thing brings
Me back to childhood when I was distressed:
You seem the same who put away my things
At night: my toys and tools of childish lust.
My king is caught now in a world of trust.

There is a sudden transition of thoughts in this stanza, similar to a game of chess. From nostalgia it shifts to some kind of angst that she might have developed for some relationships over the years. The speaker also used the word “distressed” in association with some moments of childhood. A sense of dualities in people around is also implied when she says that she had trust issues. The closing line of the poem, “My king is caught now in a world of trust” immediately brings in the image of a chess board where the opposite player has jeopardised the king.

As the poem is analysed it can be understood that Jennings has tried to deal with themes of time, relationships, loss of faith and the memories good and bad.

Check Your Progress

- (a) What role does memory has to play in the poems of Elizabeth Jennings?

Hint: (In both the poems she mentions her childhood and becomes nostalgic about it at times)

- (b) Comment on the title ‘A Game of Chess’.

Hint: (The changings contours of life at large with the passage of time is shown through various imageries.)

(c) How do you come to know about her nervous breakdown?

Hint: (She has clearly mentioned about that phase of her life in two of her poetry collections published after 1960)

(d) How did her stay in Italy help her in developing her art of poetry?

Hint: (Jennings visited Italy after receiving the Somerset Maugham Award and stayed there for three months. The culture and the religious fervour of Italy encouraged her a lot.)

Space for Learner

2.8 Summing Up

Elizabeth Jennings has written both the poems at different periods of her life and are included in two different anthologies. ‘Song at the Beginning of Autumn’ incorporated in *A Way of Looking* (1955) belongs to the cluster of early poems. On the other hand, the collection *Song for a Birth or Death* where the poem ‘A Game of Chess’ is included is written after she went through a nervous breakdown and was going through treatment. However, as we analyse the poems it can be conjectured that the themes dealt with are similar. In both the poems the fleeting nature of time is focused. Moreover, the complexities of relationships and concerns about family seem to be the overpowering things. Jennings’ invocation of Autumn when summer was still bountiful conveys her wish to take control over the changes that were rapidly taking place with the flow of time. The images shared in the ‘A Game of Chess’ are mostly ambiguous, yet those reveal Jennings’ preoccupation with the memories of her lost childhood. Both ‘Song at the Beginning’ and ‘A Game of Chess’ are representations of Jennings’ nostalgia about the childhood that is lost and therefore through her poetry she attempts to relive and preserve the memory of those moments in words.

2.9 Glossary

“**Abstract school**” – This phrase seems to imply the social order that schools young children to follow certain set designs to conform.

“**Autumn broke**” – Autumn season appeared at the speaker’s’ invocation.

“**A child’s cake**” – It refers to the memories one collects as a child. The image is taken from one of Proust’s work mentioned earlier.

2.10 References & Suggested Readings

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Unit 3 : Simon Armitage: “Look, Stranger”, “Abstracting Electricity”

Unit Structure:

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 His Works
- 3.4 Critical Reception
 - 3.5.1 Context of the poem “Look, Stranger”
 - 3.5.2 Reading the poem “Look, Stranger”
 - 3.6.1 Context of the poem “Abstracting Electricity”
 - 3.6.2 Reading the poem “Abstracting Electricity”
- 3.7 Summing Up
- 3.8 References and Suggested Readings

3.1 Objectives

The main aim of this unit shall be to introduce readers to the current in-office Poet Laureate, Simon Armitage and two of his famous poems, “Abstracting Electricity” and “Look, Stranger”. In the course of reading this unit, you will be provided a basic introduction to the biography and literary style of the poet. Alongside, the unit shall also discuss relevant socio-political concerns of the contemporary 21st century which have been represented by Armitage in his works. This has been done with the intention to make the readers arrive at a better understand the socio-literary scenario of the period. The unit has been designed to help you read the prescribed text, “Abstracting Electricity” and “Look, Stranger” as representative poems of the contemporary society. To achieve this, the unit shall attempt to provide a critical perspective to the poems prescribed, along with other important information which shall eventually help learners to develop their own critical expertise in reading literary works.

3.2 Introduction

Simon Robert Armitage was born in Huddersfield on 26 May 1963, West Riding of Yorkshire and grew up in the village of Marsden, where his family still live. He is the son of Peter, a former electrician, probation

officer and a fire fighter who was well known locally for his well-written plays, written mostly for his all-male group, “The Avalanche Dodgers”. Armitage began his writing career at the age of ten. In fact, his initial poems were written as a part of his school assignments. He studied at Colne Valley High School, Linthwaite and later studied geography at Portsmouth Polytechnic. He was a postgraduate student at the University of Manchester, where his MA thesis concerned the effects of television violence on young offenders. After completing his studies, he found himself jobless; which is why he decided to train himself to become a probation officer like his father. Around this time, he also began writing poetry more seriously though he continued to work as a probation officer in Greater Manchester until 1994. He married his first wife, Alison Tootell in the year 1991. After a failed first marriage, he then married radio producer Sue Roberts; with whom he had a daughter, Emmeline in 2000.

He has lectured on creative writing at the University of Leeds and at the University of Iowa, and in 2008 was a senior lecturer at Manchester Metropolitan University. He is a visiting Professor at the University of Falmouth and in 2004 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. He has made literary, history and travel programmes for BBC Radio as well as made a number of TV documentaries. From 2009 to 2012 he was Artist in Residence at London’s South Bank, and in February 2011 he became Professor of Poetry at the University of Sheffield. In addition to this, in the year 2012, he became a part of Britain’s Cultural Olympiad and an Artist in Residence at London’s Southbank, Armitage conceived and curated Poetry Parnassus, a gathering of world poets and poetry from every Olympic nation. This landmark event is generally recognised to be the biggest coming together of international poets in history. From 2015 to 2019, he served as Professor of Poetry at the University of Oxford, and in 2017 he was appointed Professor of Poetry at the University of Leeds. He was named UK Poet Laureate in 2019 for ten years, following Carol Ann Duffy. He has been a recipient for numerous honors and awards such as been conferred the Millennium Poet in 1999, a Fellow of the Royal Society for Literature in 2004, Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2010 and was awarded the Cholmondeley Award in 2014 and the Queen’s Gold Medal for Poetry in 2018. In addition, he has received numerous awards for his poetry including the *Sunday Times* Young Author of the Year, one of the first Forward Prizes, an Eric Gregory Award, a major Lannan Award, the Spoken Word Award (Gold), the Ivor Novello Award for song-writing, BBC Radio Best Speech

Programme, Television Society Award for Documentary and Keats-Shelley Prize for Poetry. He has recently been awarded as the Man of the Year, Yorkshire Awards (2020), Honorary Fellow, British Academy (2021) and the Premio LericiPea Golfo dei Poeti Prize, Italy (2022).

He is also the first poet laureate who is also a disc jockey and a music enthusiast. In fact, he along with his college friend Craig Smith founded the band The Scaremongers; when he faced adversities in his life. From this adventure, the band produced an album, *Born in a Barn*, which was released in 2010. Armitage is also the lead singer of the band Land Yacht Regatta that released their debut album *Call in the Crash Team* in 2020 and a single called *Winter Solstice* in 2021. Throughout his life, Simon Armitage has held several prestigious offices such as being the Vice President of the Poetry Society, a Patron of the Arvon Foundation, a Patron of the Friends of Yorkshire Sculpture Park, a Patron of the Wordsworth Trust, and Official Patron of the Elmet Trust.

3.3 His Works

Simon Armitage is a famous English poet, playwright, musician and novelist who has published over 20 collections of poetry, starting with *Zoom!* in 1989. Many of his poems concern his home town in West Yorkshire; most of which have been collected in *Magnetic Field: The Marsden Poems* (2020). His poetry collections included *Kid* (1992), *Xanadu* (1992), *Book of Matches* (1993), *The Dead Sea Poems* (1995), *Cloud Cuckoo Land* (1997), *Killing Time* (1999), *Travelling Songs* (2002), *The Universal Home Doctor* (2002), *The Shout: Selected Poems* (2005), *Tyrannosaurus Rex Versus the Corduroy Kid* (2006), *Seeing Stars* (2010), *Paper Aeroplane: Selected Poems 1989-2014* (2014) and *The Unaccompanied* (2017). *Killing Time* (1999) was written to mark the turn of the millennium while *Out of the Blue* (2008) consists of three commissioned pieces marking anniversaries of the 9/11 attacks, V-E Day, and the rise of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.

He has also translated several classic poems such as the *Odyssey* (2006), *The Death of King Arthur* (2011), *Pearl* (2016), and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (2007). In fact, the translation of the medieval English poem *Pearl* won the PEN Award for Poetry in Translation. He has written several travel books including *Moon Country* and *Walking Home: Travels*

with a Troubadour on the Pennine Way. He has edited poetry anthologies including one on the work of Ted Hughes. He also wrote novels such as *Little Green Man* (2001) and *The White Stuff* (2004). Armitage's volumes of memoir include *All Points North* (1998) which is a collection of essays on Northern England, *Gig: The Life and Times of a Rock-Star Fantasist* (2009) documented his life-long passion for popular music and his role as lead singer and lyricist with the band The Scaremongers, and *Walking Home* (2012). He has participated in numerous television and radio documentaries, dramas, and travelogues as well as has penned several plays, an opera libretto, and the script for a puppet opera. He was also commissioned in 1996 by the National Theatre in London to write *Eclipse* for the National Connections series, a play inspired by the real-life disappearance of Lindsay Rimer from Hebden Bridge in 1994, and set at the time of the 1999 solar eclipse in Cornwall. His recent work includes a libretto for the opera *The Assassin Tree*, which premiered at the Edinburgh International Festival in 2006. It was based on a Greek myth recounted in *The Golden Bough*. He also wrote the play *Mister Heracles*, a version of the Euripides play, *The Madness of Heracles* that was commissioned by the West Yorkshire Playhouse; *Last Days of Troy*, commissioned by Manchester Royal Exchange, and *The Odyssey: Missing Presumed Dead*. He co-authored *Moon Country* (1996) with Glyn Maxwell, which retraced the 1936 travels of W.H. Auden and Louis MacNeice in Iceland. He co-edited, with Robert Crawford, *The Penguin Anthology of Poetry from Britain and Ireland Since 1945* (1998), and edited *Short and Sweet: 101 Very Short Poems* (1999).

While several of his collections have been short-listed for the Whitbread Poetry Prize; his first book, *Zoom!* (1989), has been a Poetry Society Book Choice. Armitage's poems feature in multiple British GCSE syllabuses for English Literature. Throughout his career, Armitage worked with smaller and specialised poetry presses. Publications of this type include *The Anaesthetist* (Prospero Poets, 1994), *The Not Dead* (Pomona Press, 2008), *Out of the Blue* (Enitharmon, 2008) and the pamphlet "The Motorway Service Station as Destination in its Own Right" (Smith/Doorstep Books, 2009), *Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster* was published by Pomona in 2012, *In Memory of Water* (Fine Press Poetry, 2013), to name a few. The 2007, *The Twilight Readings* is an illustrated publication of Armitage's first residency at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park and his poem "Still"

became a WW1 centenary exhibition which later published again in Armitage's 2016 illustrated book edition which contained a sequence of poems in response to 26 panoramic photographs of battlefields associated with the Battle of the Somme, chosen from archives at Imperial War Museum, London. Famously, he worked on "In Praise of Air" in collaboration with Professor Tony Ryan at the University of Sheffield. It became the world's first catalytic poem that used air-cleansing nanotechnology embedded in a 10m by 20m (33ft x 66ft) poster-poem which was attached to the side of a city-centre university building. The poster absorbed more than two tonnes of air pollution before it was turned into multiple artworks and sold in aid of charity.

Armitage in 2012 wrote a non-fiction book *Walking Home*, which accounted his troubadour journey along the Pennine Way. It became a Sunday Times Top Ten best-seller for over a month and was later shortlisted for the 2012 Portico Prize. Other significant poems written by Armitage in recent years was "The Great War: An Elegy (BBC 2, 2014), written and presented by Simon Armitage, followed seven WW1 stories and featured the new poems they inspired. In 2011, Armitage wrote the BBC Radio 4 docu-drama *Black Roses: The Killing of Sophie Lancaster*, which detailed the murder of Sophie Lancaster. It was repeated soon after its original transmission and became the most re-requested of any programme on BBC Radio 4 in 2010. Later it was awarded the BBC Radio Best Speech Programme of 2011 and short-listed for the Ted Hughes Award that year. The poetic script of Black Roses was published in full by Pomona in 2012. It contributed significantly to change the UK legislation in the reporting of hate crime against sub-cultures.

SAQ

1. What has been Simon Armitage's contribution to 21st century literature? (200 marks)

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.....

3.4 Critical Reception

Simon Armitage is a British poet, playwright, and novelist whose poetry is attuned to modern life and vernacular language and has been regarded as both accessible and revelatory. His works have been widely anthologized and broadly popular as he took an experimental mode of frequently blending genres

like his famous film, *Xanadu* (1992) which is “a poem film for television,” that appeared on BBC television during their “Words on Film” series. He is known for his deadpan delivery which was made possible with his darkly comic poetry. In fact, his unique poetic style is largely influenced by the works of Ted Hughes, W.H. Auden, and Philip Larkin. He is widely considered as an inheritor of Philip Larkin’s dark wit. With his purpose-driven writings, Armitage has become one of England’s most respected poets. His play with language and words has almost been unsurpassable by any of his contemporaries. The linguistic strength along with his creative expertise has enabled him to create both masculine as well as elegant language. His writings have a hint of slang, youthful and up-to-the-minute jargon as he employed the vernacular of his native Northern England. However, the ruggish flavor when mixed with his erudition and wide-range of experience produces poems of moving originality. In addition to these attributes, his works have been characterized by a dry Yorkshire wit combined with an accessible, realist style and critical seriousness.

Through his writings and translation, Armitage has attempted to revamp literature with new literatures of the 21st century. His elegies, royal commissioned works, celebratory poems and his recent poems on lockdown help us to see his strong commitment towards the progress of literature. Realizing this intention of Armitage, many universities such as Portsmouth, Huddersfield, Sheffield Hallam and Leeds have awarded him with Honorary Doctorates. Additionally for his achievements in literature, Armitage has also been elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature (2014), Honorary Fellow at Trinity College, Oxford (2019) and Honorary Fellow at the British Academy (2021). The high point of his selfless love and devotion for poetry was seen when Armitage in November of 2019 announced that he would donate his salary as poet laureate to create the Poetry School’s Laurel Prize for a collection of poems “with nature and the environment at their heart”. His recent poems “Floral Tribute” and “Unexpected Guest” were published in 13 September 2022 to commemorate the death of Elizabeth II and the coronation of Charles III and Camilla on 6 May 2023, respectively.

In addition to his officially sanctioned poems, Armitage’s involvement with music and radio has influenced his poetry. He has also ventured into documentaries and films with great works such as *Child in Mind* (BBC 4, 2017), a commissioned documentary featuring a groundbreaking new scheme in Hull called PAUSE, which aims to break the cycle of repeat care removals. Also, the film *The Brink* (2019), written and performed by Simon Armitage,

was created for Art 50 to explore British identity and meditate on the relationship between Britain and Europe. He further worked in collaboration with the director Brian Hill, for docu-musical productions such as *Drinking for England* and *Song Birds*. He also authored a film about Weldon Kees, and co-wrote *Moon Country* with Glyn Maxwell, which retraced the 1936 trip to Iceland taken by W. H. Auden and Louis MacNeice. He also wrote *A Brief Period of Rejoicing*, a 30 minute film-poem commissioned by Channel 5 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of VE Day, was performed by Sheila Hancock and *Out Of The Blue* was commissioned by Channel 5 to commemorate the fifth anniversary of 9/11 and was performed by Rufus Sewell.

SAQ

1. Critically analyze the writing style of Armitage? (200 marks)

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3.5.1 Context of the poem “Look, Stranger”

The poem “Look, Stranger” has been written by Simon Armitage and it shares a similar title with W. H. Auden’s poem. In fact, both the poems seem to use the image of the ‘sea’ to expand their individual poetic concerns and themes in their works. As both the poems through the sea imagine presents metaphorical journeys of life, Auden’s exclusively deals with a quest that is more psychological than physical. In a similar tone yet different, Armitage deals with the theme of migration through the metaphorical journey that he attempts to presents in his poem. Expanding on it, he also shows how it changes the social and emotional state of these individuals. Although migration may have been prevalent throughout human history, its pitfalls are getting more visible in the 21st century. In fact, it has become a grave concern surrounded by several controversial debates in the recent years in England, especially after they opted themselves out from the European Union. Seeing this as an urgent and relevant issue, Armitage attempts to discuss its current status in this short but impactful poem.

3.5.2 Reading the poem “Look, Stranger”

The poem “Look, Stranger” is a short poetic composition written by the poet laureate Simon Armitage which deals the issue migration.

While migration, as expressed in the poem has always been present in human society, it has maintained a floating relevance. In fact, its action, response and effect on migrants and the migrated destination has been discussed but these conversations seem to have always been done superficially. This is why the poet in the opening lines stated that the act of migration has always been “Skimmed into the sea of the century”. This line also indicates that migration has been an age-old activity that has continued itself in the contemporary 21st century. Although most migration may have been physically successful, its emotional and psychological destination has always “fell short of the far shore”. This striking line highlights the socio-political discrimination, racial hatred and crimes that the refugees had to encounter as they entered new territories that they came to; in search for better life opportunities and war relief. As we see the journey through the dimension of migration, the refugees become one of the many “stones” (made heartless and emotionally hardened through their traumatic life experiences) in the process whose lives and value have been reduced and “skipp[ed] over the waves of war”. This situation as expressed in the poem seems relevant in the contemporary socio-political context of England which is experiencing massive migration from many war-torn countries such as Syria, Morocco, Lebanon, Middle East, Egypt, Jordan, Nigerians, Pakistanis, Balkans, Bangladeshis and Algeria which seems to have reached a dangerously overcrowding status. The sudden surge of the migrant population grew through the 2015 European migrant crisis that witnessed almost 1.3 million people coming from these militant and war-torn countries and seeking refugee asylum in the developed countries of the European Union.

Despite their traumatic journey which emotionally sinks these migrants, they tend to make the best of all the chances and situations in their life. Upholding the “never-to-give-up” attitude, these refugees try to make their own spaces and opportunities. Despite this, they seem to be limited in a half-sinking, half-submerged and half-floating” situation like “sandbar, reef [and] atoll” that together through ages seem to have created their own “island”. Depicting the migrants arriving in boats from “treacherous storms” brewing in their homeland due to political or militant threats, they actively search for alternatives options for their life through “telescopes strain to pick out the [new] mainland”.

And as they arrive, the first group of travelers encounters “a coast of sharp rocks”, as they are constantly subjected to political deprivation, social hatred and cultural alienation. Soon enough, they come across more complex and discriminatory situations that feel like “sheer cliffs, high tides and a dangerous swell”, all of which indicate their possible traumatic experiences that they shall face as illegal migrants and refugees in the coming future.

Taking a shift from the sea and its related images, Armitage towards the end of the poem attempts to highlight the problems of a migrant life who like a “branch [and] like a vine, [tries to] trail down from the top” to create a new space and identity for themselves as well as for their future generation. However, as they start their tedious journey of “climb[ing]” but they soon “stop” as they get to know the “smell” of socio-political disdain that often stems from racial politics. This tension seems to arise from the feeling of “audacious” that is maintained between the migrants and the population of the destination country. Despite the tension, migrants continue to flock into England in large numbers as it is commonly known for its cosmopolitan, democratic and modernist outlook towards everything and a place where “fruit” could be received by all those who work for it. The poem attempts to document the socio-pol-racial context of England in the 21st century. Although, there is a sense of fear, anxiety and tension felt through most parts of the poem, it ends on a positive and hopeful note.

SAQ

1. Discuss the central theme of the poem “Look, Stranger”? (200 marks)

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3.6.1 Context of the poem “Abstracting Electricity”

In the poem “Abstracting Electricity” Simon Armitage attempts to discuss the on-going ecological crisis in the Anthropocene. In fact, as a writer, Armitage has always been

conscious of the declining health of nature. He has, in many occasions voiced his strong opinions on the pressing necessity to deliberate and take policies as well as actions to combat the planetary threat. However, as noted in this particular poem, Armitage seems to hold a 'light' attitude to the climate crisis that is negatively impacting everyone on the planet. This attitude should not be misjudged as his change of environmental ideals but his repressed frustration, anger and helplessness seeping out of his words in the poem as he has come to realize the emptiness of ecological commitments, movements, deliberation and policies. This long poem is also acts as a warning for his readers that if we don't work in collaboration to save the planet, we shall all thereafter march onto our and the planet's death.

3.6.2 Reading the poem "Abstracting Electricity"

The poem "Abstracting Electricity" by Simon Armitage seems to deal with a serious concern of the Anthropocene. However, he seems to take a slightly different approach as he does not throw facts or draw into his readers a sense of ecophobia. In fact, in the very first line of the poem, Armitage sets the tone which is that of him 'giving up hope for a better ecological future'. He expresses his opinion with a slight sense of aggression and disdain for he feels how people, communities and governments had failed the environment. Keeping this temperament, Armitage casually opens the poem "So that's that," to immediately delve into the matter at hand- global warming and the ozone hole. This outlook is drawn from his realizations that despite the serious warning of climate change and the planet's health, the global conversations on "save the planet" are limited to an echo as its influences have been minimal. In fact, he says that these talks are made with no serious intention but just "for the sake of it". This attitude surprises Armitage as the season has become unpredictable due to climate crisis. He also states that as climate worsens to scorch the towns, it also affects the survival capacities of Man as it starts to gravely effects the economy, environment, and politics of a society. In fact, it slowly starts to break the "main reservoir" as well as the "backbone [and the] benchmarks" required for the healthy sustenance

of humans and the planet. Saddened by the contemporary state of the socio-environmental status of society, Armitage recalls imagery ancient naval powerhouse of the west. He, then states that although we live in the same world as the past; yet it is not the same, for we only walk on “crater and scratch around half-heartedly for keepsakes, or hopscotch over the topsoil”. As we remain only on a limited capacity of the planet, we have tried to advocate this situational crisis through language; which Armitage commented as a redundant effort as its sharpness and serious impact is fading among scholars and enthusiasts. Due to this, he compares language as in “less use than half a scissor” that seems to be “rambling” on unplanned development, exploitation and misuse of natural resources, but with no success. In the poem, he seems to hint as how toxic business spread marketing to not only increase their sales and spread their popularity but also distract people from the pressing issues of society in the Anthropocene. Armitage furthers his list by calling unto lovers, foodie, comfort and luxury seekers who only crave for their materialistic desires while being blind to the environmental crisis.

This unmindful attitude not only leads to our unnecessary penetration into nature as done through skiing (done only to romantically propose to their lover by eventually pulling out the “grandmother’s locket”). Alongside, ignorant humans mindlessly use “two spoons” for “a pineapple sundae” as well as take-out several copies of “prints” at the “photo booth”. This defiant attitude expressed by the living generation of the 21st century, for Armitage seems to be an outcome of our ‘emotional and moral death’. This therefore makes us appear “dead on [our] feet all day”. Opposite to this, we, humans have become nocturnal beings with the advent of technology, mobile phones and internet. As this unhealthy change of lifestyle starts to deteriorate our lives, we start consuming medicines that might make us feel momentarily better but ends up causing other side-effects which generally goes unnoticed. Sooner, the ambitious streak blinds us to get a job which than intensifies our materialistic cravings and purchases. Caught in this web, we forget our roots, value and necessity as we strive to attain more wealth and popularity in life, even if it requires us to take an immoral and corrupt path. While such a decision may get

us momentary benefits, in the long run, it will cause our downfall to come quicker. This can be seen as the car not only new “tyres” and maintenance that is beyond one’s earnings. The ‘show-off’ lifestyle soon shall change into worse days just like the defiant attitude we maintain towards the planet as we express that mindless using of petrol and making “one standpipe doesn’t make a summer” (hot days/climate change). This attitude changes for many as they become parent for then they want a better planet for their children but it becomes too late to regret or ponder; for the current state of nature is not only an outcome of the ongoing anthropogenic actions against the environment. Emphasizing on this further, Armitage states that the concerning health of nature is not like the “wart at the end of your nose, sprung overnight, unsightly whichever side you see it from, unspeakable but there on the tip of your tongue”. In fact, realizing the declining health of the planet late, we don’t seem to know how to alter its situation for better, even though we might want to add its regeneration. Therefore, the complexities of the contemporary ecological crisis is at the “tip of your tongue” but “unspeakable”.

SAQ

1. Through the poem “Abstracting Electricity”, Armitage attempted to bring out the complexities of the declining health of the planet and why have Humans’ efforts to save the planet has been largely unsuccessful? (200 marks)

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3.7 Summing Up

Simon Armitage’s active contribution has not only been the unique style of writing and his blend of the old and the modern as well as his experimental blending of genres, but also his social commitments that he discuss throughout his poems. In the poems prescribed for this course, we see Armitage discuss two pressing issues of UK- migration and ecological crisis. In both the poems, he takes a responsible role of educating his readers about the crisis and providing motivation to bring reforms at both personal and community level.

These literary tendencies of Armitage have resulted in his long list of achievements, honours and awards; all of which that made him the current poet laureate, after Carol Ann Duffy.

3.8 References and Suggested Readings

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