Block-2

Space for Learner

Unit 1 : Virginia Woolf: *To the Lighthouse* (Background)

Unit Structure:

1.1 OBJECTIVES

This is the first unit of block 2. In this unit you will be provided with information regarding one of Virginia Woolf's most powerful fictional attempts, *To the lighthouse*. After you finish reading the unit you will be able to

- *relate* the novel to Woolf's own personal history
- *discuss* Virginia Woolf as a literary modernist
- *understand* Contexts that shaped Woolf as a novelist
- *situate* To the lighthouse in the context of modern novel.

1.2 INTRODUCTION

In the year 1922, Woolf brought out her third novel *Jacob's Room* in which she claimed "I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice." It was also a time when the Hogarth Press, run by both Mr. and Mrs. Woolf, published *The Wasteland* by T S Eliot, who persuaded her into believing that James Joyce's *Ulysses* had destroyed the whole of the nineteenth century in fiction, and showed the futility of all English styles. There are very few modern writers who are as creative or as productive as Virginia Woolf. Recognizing the considerable possibilities in the 'novels', she was trying hard to make use of the written records of her life, her feelings and the changes of her time. Gradually, Woolf came to realize that it was not her destiny to become a popular writer, as her interest laid not in the strength, passion or the representation of anything spectacular and extraordinary, but in what she had

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called her 'queer individuality'. Eventually this spirit turned into one of her most important and powerful works of fictional modernity *Mrs. Dalloway*. Originally it began as a short story entitled *Mrs. Dalloway in Bond Street*, completed in October 1922 and published in 1923 in the American magazine *The Dial.* However, she was also thinking of expanding it into a complete novel.

Her initial attempts were not what we read today in the novel. It was supposed to have six or seven chapters, dealing with London social life, making the Prime Minister an important character and finally converging on the party at the end. In a preface found in some early editions of the novel, she tried to explain that the central figure Clarissa Dalloway was to kill herself, or perhaps die at her party. However, this view was later changed but the preoccupation with death was to play a dominant role in the story- line, as she was trying to conceive of another new central character, the shell–shocked war victim Septimus Warren Smith, whose death was announced at the party and with which the novel also ended. Over the rest of 1922, Woolf continued to re-plan and re-arrange the book in which the storyline changed and a new technique of presentations through consciousness and awareness was adopted. However, in this attempt, the influence of Joyce's *Ulysses* was quite visible. Consequently, all the events, like Joyce's novel were to occur on one single day on which Clarissa held the evening party.

Woolf made it customary to maintain diaries since 1915 which continued up to her death in 1941.Actually, it was through her diaries, letters, and notebooks that she tried to explain her writing methods. Even the accounts she gives in her diaries about the composition of the novel provides a clear idea regarding the genealogy of the novel

1.3 BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH (1882-1941)

Virginia Woolf is known mostly for her central position in the Bloomsbury Group, her feminist undertakings, her troubled married life, her lesbian tendencies, her essays on various contemporary topics, her ancestry and her beauty, her place and function in the Hogarth Press, her radicalism in terms of narrative forms and finally her contribution to literary modernism at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was to cope with her pain of loss caused by the death of her parents, her aunt, and many of her family friends at a young stage, that she sought recourse to writing at an early age.

It was through her father Leslie Stephen that Woolf had an entry into the world of literature. Her father was the editor of *The Dictionary of National Biography* and *The Cornhill Magazine,* and the author of *Hours in a Library, History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century.* He also wrote for *The Saturday Review, The Pall Mall Gazette,* and *The Cornhill Magazine* as a true Victorian man of letters. His biographer Noel Annan wrote that he could surpass his contemporaries with his enormous range of readings and intellectual power. Her mother, Julia Stephen, was a stunningly beautiful woman and by the effect of her beauty she could turn to any thing such as tending to the sick, and perfecting the social order. From the sick she could derive the feeling of being needed. Within four years of the marriage of her parents they bore four children, Vanessa, Julian Thoby, Adrian, and Adeline Virginia.

Virginia was born on January 25, 1882 and sent happy times in her childhood as the four children lived and played in the nursery until the boys were grown up to go to school. The two sisters were left behind to the care of the parents and later several governesses. Virginia proved her inclination towards a culture of learning by showing an early interest in languages, history, and literature. Her home in Hyde Park Gate in the Kensington section of London was known for its upper-class taboos and gossips. But the children were fully aware of their neighbours and could share the same community feeling. But after the death of their parents they could not but leave that place.

From her childhood Virginia had a deep liking for her brother Thoby and sister Vanessa. But throughout her childhood she also vied with Vanessa for the affection of Thoby. Vanessa later in her *Notes on Virginia's Childhood* wrote about the ability of producing sarcasm in Virginia Woolf from an early age. Virginia was very conscious about people and relationships. The intensity of her relation with Vanessa lasted throughout their lives. Virginia had a habit of taking to understanding things verbally whether it was writing or speaking with her husband, her sister or any close friend.

The first combined literary effort of the Stephen brothers and sisters was their *The Hyde Park Gate News*, a small serial news paper written just to impress their parents. Virginia and Thoby presented most of the writings while Vanessa the illustrations. They covered daily events, made occasional announcements, caricatured so on and so forth. This paper also contained serial love stories which were of particular delight for Virginia. However, it was not their days spent at Hyde Park Gate but the summers they had spent at Talland House by the sea in Cornwall that Virginia later remembered most.

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Because Talland House was the place that became a place of family legends where the children could remember their parents most. The house also served as an early illustration of her attachment to the idea of a place to derive which she was struggling so hard.

However, the happiness of childhood met with an abrupt ending when her mother died on May 5, 1895. The fear of death was there to haunt Woolf throughout her whole life. But the peculiarity of her nature came out when her mother was lying dead and she was leaning towards her cheek to kiss her. Then she left, noting 'I feel nothing whatever." But she was not all prepared to deal with the loss. After the demise of the mother, their half-sister Stella began to play the role of the mother by tending to the household, placating Stephen and caring for the children. But Stella too died after one year leaving Virginia motherless once again. Then it was the turn of Vanessa to play a role in the life of Virginia. But Vanessa was severely scolded by her father and Virginia found herself in an ambivalent position.

In between 1899-1904, Virginia got a chance to read voraciously. During that time she read Macaulay, Pepys, Montaigne, Lamb's *Essays of Elia*, Lockhart's *Life of Scott*, Washington Irving, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Adam Bede*, *Felix Holt* and many more. In 1899, she took to book-binding and along with that lessons in Greek and Latin with Walter Pater's sister, Clara. Then, she developed a friendship with one Janet Case who provided so many topics to discuss. In addition to her friendship with Case, she also befriended several other women from Kensington one of whom, Kitty Lushington, provided the model for Clarissa Dalloway. She was a socialite who died an untimely death, believed to be a suicide.

Leslie Stephen, Virginia's father also passed away on February 22, 1904. He died of cancer. After his death the depressed and grief-stricken children decided to move to Bloomsbury. Then Virginia exchanged several letters with her friends, Emma and Violet, whom she had met on her journey to Italy and Paris. The impression she gave of herself through those letters proved later to be of great help for her biographers. In those letters she was desperate and confused regarding her love for her father, as she was meant to live a tragic life surrounded by death. Actually, it was the beginning of what we can call mental ill-health or 'madness' in which she would try to kill herself. Once, Violet took Virginia to her house at Burnham Wood where she tried her first attempt at suicide by throwing herself out of the window. Although Virginia

was not seriously hurt, her relatives were now clear regarding the madness in Virginia. Then she was sent to her aunt, Caroline Amelia, at Cambridge. She wrote to Violet that she was ready to begin writing again although the doctor advised her against that. Ultimately Vanessa called her back to their newly-built house at Gordon Square. During that time, Violet introduced her to Kathleen Lyttleton, the editor of the 'Women's Supplement' of the *Guardian.* Virginia began her work as a regular reviewer and writer of articles.

The new house at Gordon Square proved to be a freedom from family constraints and the old patriarchy under which they had lived. The Bloomsbury neighbourhood provided new scope to ponder over new materials and her diaries speak much of the details of lives she liked most to describe.

Stop to Consider

Bloomsbury Group

It was the name given to a group of friends-writers, artists and intellectuals who began to meet in or about 1905 at the Bloomsbury house of Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf. Its members included Woolf herself, Clive Bell, Lytton Strachey, Leonard Woolf, Maynard Keynes, E. M. Forster, G. E. Moore, Desmond MacCarthy, David Garnett, and Lady Ottoline Morrell.

Although its members refused to be called a group in the formal sense, they were all united in a belief in the importance of the arts. Their philosophy could be best summarized by Moore who said that "one's prime objects in life were love, the creation and aesthetic experience and the pursuit of knowledge." They all were skeptical and tolerant, reacting against the artistic and social restraints of Victorian society. They exercised a considerable influence on the avant-garde generation of the early twentieth century. Accused by some of intellectual elitism, its reputation faltered in the 1940s and 1950s, but since 1960, there has been a critical revival of their achievements.

On Thursday evenings, these men gathered together and waited for the conversation to begin. Several topics were offered and discussed. It had a life-changing effect on Virginia. It was a place where Virginia could be more intelligent, more intellectual, investigative, and open. Some of the men were openly homosexual, and others seemed asexual without any marital

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attractiveness. Virginia described this understanding in her "Old Bloomsbury" in these words: "It seemed incredible that any of these men should want to marry us or we should want to marry them…" Though the situation was contrary to what Virginia wanted, and at first Virginia and Vanessa both were shy and quiet, they actively took part in the conversation about things they found intellectually exhilarating. Around 1905-07, Virginia was trying out for more intellectual opportunities. She regularly wrote and reviewed articles for a number of magazines, *The Guardian*, *The Times Literary Supplement, Academy, Speaker*, and so on. Then she got the job of an instructor of English composition in Morley College. But she was never a teacher in the making. Instead she began to gather some important distinction about class from her interactions with the working class which further found a place in her novels.

On November 20, 1906, Virginia's brother Thoby died of typhoid. Thoby was her intellectual mentor after her father. The character of her brother comes alive as Jacob of *Jacob's Room.* For several weeks after his passing away, Virginia kept him alive still further through letters to Violet Dickinson who was seriously ill. The death of her brother actually gave her the opportunity to recreate Thoby as a fictional character and through writing she could adjust to the shock of his death.

Since then Virginia led a more secluded life. In February, 1907, Clive and Vanessa got married which was simply another reminder of the fact that she was outside the circle of happiness. She then started to write *Reminiscences*, an account of her sister Vanessa, part memoir, part biography, part paean. In some ways, it was her other attempt to recreate her sister as a full-grown fictional character. At the same time she was working on her novel, *The Voyage Out.* By 1910, Bloomsbury could make its presence felt nationally. But this was also a time of illness for Virginia, which would run on through World War I. At the same time, Roger Fry was astonishing London audiences with the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition at the Grafton Gallery and Woolf returned to work on her *The Voyage Out*.

Stop to Consider

Roger Fry and the Post-Impressionist Exhibition:

Born in London, Roger Fry grew up in a wealthy Quaker family. He was educated at Clifton College and King's College, Cambridge, where he was also became a member of the Cambridge Apostles. Later,

he went to Paris and then to Italy to study art. Eventually he became a specialist in landscape painting.

In 1906, Fry was appointed Curator of Paintings at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. He got acquainted with the art of Paul Cézanne, and he shifted his scholarly interests away from the Italian Old Masters to the modern French art. In 1910, Fry organized the exhibition *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* (a term which he coined) at the Grafton Galleries, London. Despite the derision with which the exhibition was met, Fry followed it up with the *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition* in 1912. It was patronised by Lady Ottoline Morrell, with whom Fry had a romantic attachment. In 1913, he founded the Omega Workshops, a design workshop based in London's Fitzroy Square, whose members included Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant.

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In January, 1912, Leonard Woolf proposed marriage to Virginia. Initially she neither refused nor accepted, but exchanged views through letters. Finally she got him as a partner who respected her both as a writer and as a person. Leonard was then working as a colonial civil servant at Ceylon but soon he was fed up with the colonial system. Their intimate friendship finally resulted in their marriage on August 12, 1912. Virginia's health started to deteriorate rapidly. Initially they also faced monetary troubles as Leonard did not have a stable job. He was temporarily working as a secretary for the Second post–Impressionist Exhibition with Roger Fry. But gradually Leonard strengthened his political career by working for the Women's Co-operative Guild, for the cause of British socialism, and for the Fabian Society, a socialist group responsible for the implementation of socialism in England.

Stop to Consider

Fabian Society

The Fabian Society is a British socialist movement, whose purpose was to advance the principles of Social democracy through reforms, rather than revolutionary means. It is best known for its initial ground-breaking work beginning late in the nineteenth century and continuing up to World War I. The society laid many of the foundations of the Labour Party and subsequently affected the policies of states emerging from the decolonisation of the British Empire, especially India. Since its inception, the Fabian Society began attracting many prominent

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contemporary figures like George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, Annie Besant, Graham Wallas, Hubert Bland, Edith Nesbit, Sydney Olivier, Oliver Lodge, Leonard Woolf and Virginia Woolf, Ramsay MacDonald and Emmeline Pankhurst. Even Bertrand Russell later became a member. The two members John Maynard Keynes and Harry Dexter White were delegates at the 1944 United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference, commonly known as the Bretton Woods Conference. At the core of the Fabian Society were Sidney and Beatrice Webb. Together, they wrote numerous studies of industrial Britain, including alternative co-operative economics that applied to ownership of capital as well as land.

The society is still in existence today and forms a vanguard "think tank" of the centre-left New Labour movement in contemporary England.

Then Virginia made another attempt to commit suicide by taking more than 100 grains of veronal, used as sleeping tablets. Doctors called it neurasthenia, but fortunately she was once again saved. After recovery, Virginia again started reading and writing her diary. Then in 1915, the couple decided to buy Hogarth House and a printing press that was to play a crucial role in the times to come. But she became deranged again. Moreover, the revelation of the doctors that she would not be able to become a mother further triggered more illness in her. So, the only consolation left for her was the intellectual undertakings. Then the war, the Zeppeline attack on London, shattered most of their complacency as writers. The majority of the Bloomsbury intellectuals did not support the war for many reasons. But the same war became a part of Virginia's aesthetic, as images of bombs and destruction began to appear in her writings. She could also understand the power she and Leonard could have with a press which could be used for wartime censorship and propaganda. On April 24, 1917, Virginia and Leonard's dream of owning a press became a reality. As Leonard had believed, it could give her something else other than illness and writing to concentrate on.

Stop to Consider

Hogarth Press

The Hogarth Press was founded in 1917 by Leonard and Virginia Woolf. It was named after their house in Richmond, in whose dining-room the books were first printed. From being a hobby, it grew during the inter-war years to being a business, with the books being printed by commercial

printers. In 1938, Woolf relinquished her interest in the business and it was then run as a partnership by Leonard Woolf and John Lehmann until 1946, when it became an associate company of Chatto & Windus.

As well as publishing the works of the members of the Bloomsbury Group, the Hogarth Press was at the forefront of publishing works on Psychoanalysis and translations of foreign, especially Russian, works.

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By 1921, depression again overpowered her. She once again began to think of suicide. She finished *Jacob's Room* by November. By 1922, she attempted another story, 'Mrs. Dalloway on Bond Street'.

But it received certain negative responses. Her illness progressed. She could use her fury and disillusionment with the doctor, to create the doctors of Septimus Warren Smith in her *Mrs. Dalloway.* 1922 also brought Virginia into contact with the most passionate romantic love of her life, Vita Sackville West, a novelist as well as the renowned lesbian. The year 1924 proved to be a major boon to the Hogarth Press as Leonard could successfully manage to get the publication rights of the first two volumes of Freud's *Collected Papers* to be published in English.

Then she tried to imitate her father and recreate him through her *To the Lighthouse.* For this she first went to Thomas Hardy as her father was the first to encourage him as a young writer. But the book reminded her of her parents and it left her tired and depressed. On May 1926, ultimately the book came out and brought the sisters closer. It was dedicated to Roger Fry for his support and encouragements in that undertaking. Then she tried to bring Vita back to life as a character in *Orlando,* who leaves through five hundred years and one sex change. Vita was both man and woman for Virginia and she finished the novel by March 1928. Following the success of the book Woolf was invited for lectures at Cambridge University. The papers that she delivered, *Women and Fiction*, later became *A Room of One's Own*, a famous feminist treatise. It was to address issues related to the position of a woman in a patriarchal society, her status in the family, her sexual life and so on.

Virginia was becoming a literary success. Her old friends were dying. Both Virginia and Leonard decided to go for a small vacation in Greece. When she returned to London, she was faced with the criticism of the contemporary critic, M. C. Bradbrook, who claimed that she usually used

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rhetorical paddling to avoid saying things which were truly harsh. By late May, she again underwent depression which included fainting and headaches. Then, to soothe herself she turned to *The Years*. She began to write this novel in October 1932. She planned it as a novel-essay, altering forms by chapters. She was working steadily on the role of the women and their sexual lives in that book. By 1938, she finished her *Three Guineas*. It was the time for Hitler's invasion of Austria. And to avoid the mental disturbances caused by the war, she retreated into her work. She was worried about the reception of *Three Guineas*. In that book, she had denounced both the war and those who fought for the war. The atmosphere of the country was tense with the talk of war and the novel made an entry into literary circles at the right time. Virginia published *Roger Fry* in March, 1939, and started to work on her own autobiographical piece *Between the Acts*, following the advice of Vanessa.

The situation that followed was more grim. Writing, which was regarded as a major force in society became obsolete and lost much of its relevance. There was little time to think about fiction. Virginia was trying a common history-book but in vain. Everywhere there was the sound of fighting and explosions and there was no role to be played by the writers. Virginia again started to feel lost. She started to write again to make her presence felt. She made another suicidal attempt by drowning in the river Ouse, but escaped death. Finally on March 28, 1941, Virginia left a suicide note for Vanessa and Leonard, put on her fur coat, took her walking-stick, left towards the river, added stones to her pockets and drowned herself. Leonard found the suicide note and understood that his wife was no more, although the dead body could not be found until the next month, on April 18.

There are various views regarding her death. Some people suggest that Woolf's suicide resulted from an old madness which started to show its effect, and the terrified Woolf decided to commit suicide rather than suffer the same tortures of her former experience with mental illness. Some also opine that she failed to cope with contemporary war-ridden England with its terror of bombing as a part of World War II. Other still suggest that she was not willing to further burden her husband with her madness.

Check Your Progress

1. Name the major publications of Virginia Woolf.
2. List the major incidents that altered Virginia Woolf's life.
3. Do you think that the happenings at home triggered her mental ill-health?
4. Who were the people from whom Virginia got intellectual inspiration?
5. How do her letters to various friends help the readers in knowing her better?
6. How do you think the intellectual surrounding had a dominant effect on Virginia's upbringing as a writer?

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1.4 PLACING THE WORK

Virginia Woolf's career, her sensibility as a writer and her attitude to modern fictions was greatly shaped by the World War I. Since she also happened to be a part of the Bloomsbury Group, the literary and intellectual community shaped her thinking mind to a great extent. Bloomsbury for her was not just an intellectual community, but also a social caste, an attitude to life and values, an intimacy amongst friends, marriages and much more.

T. S. Eliot calls Woolf the representative of the modern novelists. He commends her distinctive descriptive art which does not lead to ecstasy from a momentary observation. In this context he writes, "she does not illumine with sudden bright flashes but diffuses a soft and placid light"(*Critical Tradition*, 192). Eliot's assessment, for sure, holds good for *To the Lighthouse* too. Woolf's modernity in this text can be perceived in a number of ways, both in terms of form and content. Besides offering a representive presentation of ordinary life reminiscent of twentieth century British life, the novel presents a picture of family life which is not isolated like in a Victorian novel. It is concerned with love, relationship, art, death –themes which are not necessarily modern, but a persistent interrogation complicates their representation. The novel calls attention to its author's intellectual and political milieu. Roger Fry, a key figure in the Bloomsbury Group, in his book *Vision and Design* (1920) writes about the importance of perspective in the constitution of aesthetic experience. In a similar way, Woolf foregrounds in

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To the Lighthouse the experiential dimensions the external world through an unmasking of individual consciousnesses. The novel, then cannot be categorized in the fixed categories of tragedy or comedy, as Sanders contends. More importantly, its break with the nineteenth century classic realism is clear: conventional pattern of plot and character, pervasive use of an omniscient narrator are not its features. *To the Lighthouse* is concerned with the idea of 'reality' itself, and hence an epistemological question is made pertinent. The author takes us to the flow of consciousness of the characters, yet identity remains problematic. There is no direct access to 'sensible objects' here, to evoke Fry again.

This novel became well-known for its departure from earlier representations of reality and was never meant to be complete like the other realist novels. It can be placed in an age of changed relations and fractured connections. In her essay "Modern Fiction" (1919), Woolf says that modern novelists should not choose to create plots, comedy, tragedy or catastrophe in the traditional sense. Again, elsewhere in her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924), she had insisted that the modern novel was a novel of character and she very whimsically claimed that by 1910, human nature had changed.

Interiority is a central aspect of *To the Lighthouse*. In victorian fiction , even in post-Victorian novels, interiority of characters is grounded on the fact of external reality which served as the canvass of representation. Here, interiority is the mainstay, the springboard of human reality, the locus of truth. Representation of consciousness, therefore, is a crucial project here, as in other novels of Woolf. Flow of mental facts, emotions, sensations and thought is what constitutes the 'action'. In this project of exploring or 'externalizing' the interior landscape of consciousness, the external world is never dissolved. Rather, link to the outward facts of reality is maintained. This correspondence between the interior and the externality is sustained especially in the first and the third parts, which lends *To the Lighthouse* its distinctive structure.

1.5 Summing Up

After going through the previous sections you have seen that to Virginia Woolf's credit goes the achievements of nine novels, several feminist essays, the critical books, and the biography of Roger Fry, several periodical articles, the diaries, and the letters, most of which were published posthumously. All of them seem central to her time, her intellectual world, and modern artistic ideas.

A new questioning of realism, a new kind of experimentalism, and the rise of feminism have all contributed a lot to the understanding of the nature of her works and their significance at present. Although her sense of society, history and human condition was set within its chosen limits, she did not lack a sense of history and society. But she rebelled against the role that social and historical forces were made to play in creating the seeds of modern writings.

Woolf's novels are more domestic in nature and are enclosed in their own sense of aesthetic wholeness. But their significance also lie in their assumptions about literary modernism because the modernist belief was never founded on the assumption that reality had changed but on the attitudes and tools of perceiving reality. Moreover, the contemporary discoveries in psychology, philosophy, and painting supported much of what she was trying to prove.

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1.6 References and Suggested Readings

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Unit 2 : Virginia Woolf: *To The Lighthouse*

Reading the Novel

Unit Structure:

2.1 Objectives

After reading this unit, you will be able to

- *understand* the storyline of the novel
- *appreciate* the main events/incidents of the novel
- *learn* about the characters in the novel

2.2 Introduction:

Virginia Woolf Started writing To the Lighthouse in 1926, completed the first part in mid-April and finished the whole book in September that year. She revised the novel and published in 5 May, 1927. The book was dedicated to Roger Fry whose artistic ideas she shared. By July, the book sold over 3000 copies. Woolf's popularity as a novelist rose , even as she continued experimenting with the form of the novel. Today, there would be few questioning its status, along with Mrs. Dalloway, as a classic. Even discerning reviewrs and critics and writers of the contemporary time praised the novel. F.R.Leavis

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placed it alongside T.S.Eliot's The Waste Land and James Joyce's Ulysses. Hugh Walepole explicitly confessed to its liberating effect on him. (*Critical Tradition* 19) and Ford Madox Ford placed it after the work of Joseph Conrad.

I hope in the previous units you have been acquainted with the nineteenth century novel. As you go on reading this novel, you will find how in a unique fashion Woolf sought to break with the English novelistic tradition, and how this text requires a new mode of reading. Expectations , suspense, climax, intense dramatic scenes replete with dialogues, pathos or hearty laughter—these are some of the 'effects' that conventional fictional narratives create. It is important to mark where and how the novel departs from such conventional fictional pattern. Let me reiterate that Virginia Woolf sought to write a new kind of fiction and to expound a new realism. Her rejection of social realism of John Galsworthy and Arnold Bennett is a known fact. There are many dimensions and levels of reality. Representation of the institutions—the industry and the legal institutions, for instance, was to Charles Dickens a realistic project through which he also offered a critique. To Woolf, the external world is not the object of imaginative meditation. The external reality has its crucial and complex links with the internal world of consciousness. She sought, therefore, to create a total realism by bringing together the external and the internal, the world of incidents and the inner world of the characters. As you go through *To the Lighthouse*, you might feel that the outer reality of speech, action and objects are fragmentary whose true import is difficult to gauge without looking into their link to the inner realm of thought and feeling. In other words, the fictional world of Virginia Woolf will allow you to face another level of human reality which is often ignored but is central to our existence.

2.3 What Happens in *To the Lighthouse*

The novel cosists of three parts: "The Window", "Time Passes" and "The lighthouse". The first part describes a summer day in a summer house in the Hebrides when the Ramsays with eight children and guests spend a leisurely time. The second section evokes the pasing of time and describes how it wreaks destruction and ruin to the physical house and some of its members. In the third part Mr. Ramsay returns to his house with two memebrs of his family and two other old friends, and sets out for a voyage to the lighthouse across the bay with his two children.

2.3.1 "The Window"

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The novel starts with a mother affirming to her six year old son that they will make a trip to the lighthouse the next day. The son is overjoyed, as the trip is his persistent wish. His father rules out the prospect , forecasting a bad weather. The son is frustrated and teems with an inward rage against his father.

Thus, the novel introduces motifs of longing, desire , conflicts and frustration in a family where we are introduced with the key figures Mrs. Ramsay, Mr. Ramsay and their son James. The first part takes us to a time before the World War I when the Ramsays with their eight childen stay in the summer house in the Isle of Wight. They host a number of guests there, that represents a variety within the intelligentsia—Charles Tansley, a philosopher; William Bankes, a botanist; Lily Briscoe, a painter; Augustus Carmichael, a poet and others. No substantial incident takes place. Instead, a considerable space in this part is occupied by strolling, casual chat or talking sessions, eating together and so on. Charles Tansley is a companion in Mr. Ramsay's walks and also accompanies Mrs. Ramsay in her errands at the town. Mrs. Ramsay is seen reading a folk-tale to her son James, and knitting stockings for the lighthouse-keeper's son. The children are seen to go for excursions to the hills. The guests are seen dining at the table in a special invitation from the Ramsays. Much of the action in the novel takes place in the consciousness of the characters, most notably in the mind of Mrs. Ramsay.

We can, however, identify a set of conflicts. (how these conflicts can be read or made sense of , is a matter of interpretation.) as I have already pointed out, the novel starts with conflicts regarding the issue of journeying to the lighthouse. Charles Tansley sides with Mr. Ramsay when his curt comment dismisses the prospect of the journey. The Ramsay children not just dislike but ridicule Mr. Tansley because he is a self-aggrendizing man who disparages them. Mrs. Ramsay is not as averse to him as her children are, and finds in him such qualities as valour and chivalry , efficiency as well as a glamour derived from his association with the colonial administration. She makes him accompany her to the town. If not conflict, a contrast of mental temperament of both is dramatized in this episode which is narrated with a mild comic touch.

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Not everything takes place in strict chronological sequence. Within the space of the summer house, things occur simultaneously. Mrs. Ramsay is consoling her youngest son, suggesting the weather would be fine. She hears Mr. Ramsay reciting Tennyson's poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade". On the other hand, Lily Briscoe struggles with her painting at the lawn as she tries to convert her vision to a concrete picture on the canvass. They Lily and William Bankes go out for a stroll when Jasper's gunshot passes close by, and they face Mr. Ramsay.

Conflict in a larger sense inhabits everywhere in the novel's diegesis. Lily Briscoe is troubled with the gap between her vision and execution, while she fails to make her marital choice because of the difficulty in knowing people. Mrs. Ramsay, on the other hand, wistfully muses on the prospect Lily's marriage with Mr. Bankes. Again, conflict among the Ramsays is explicit with regard to Jame's future career. She wishes her son to become a great artist while her husband wants him to become a professor and follow his steps.

Mr. Ramsay stops at his wife and son, and replies to her query for the next day's journey in a blatantly negative way: "There was't the slightest possible chance that they would go to the lighthouse tomorrow, Mr. Ramsay snapped out irascibly(Woolf, 37). He walks out for an evening air, and her reassuring smile allows him to delve into the solitude of his 'splendid mind'. And we are given a glimpse of his thought , albeit with an abiding irony.

After Mr. Ramsay's harsh comments on James , we see her reading him the story, and afterwards James goes to bed. In this quietness and solitude , she continues knitting and thinking. Mr. Ramsay steps beside her, remorseful for his harsh words a while ago, seeks to leave her alone, when she responds and walks with him for a stroll. But like in previous encounter, this stroll of the married couple only heightens our sense of how different they are temperamentally.Mr. Ramsay says in a self-glorifying tone that he can even spend a whole day walking. She does not disagree, but we discern how she fashions her social self as a façade to cover up and secure her private self.

A key episode in the first part is the dinner party, arranged in honour of William Bankes. Mr. Tansley affronts ordinary talks and

offers blatantly misogynist comment about women, saying—"they did nothing but talk, talk, eat, eat"(93). He even carries it to an extreme , saying that women are impediments to the pursuit of civilization. Lily's reaction here is utterly negative and reproachful. On the other hand, William bankes feels the discomfort of such sociality and prefers, instead, to immerse in solitary reading. The dinner party begins with an awkward silence. We learn, however, that beneath the surface of this silence or sparse talk enormous surge of inner thought and emotions and complex mood is working to break open into the realm of language. On the level of external event, again, we can mention August Carmichael the poet, asking for a second plate of soup, to which Mr. Ramsay reacts harshly.

The party is over. Mrs. Ramsay feels the party is memorable. And she finds her children still awake. James reiterates his question about the rip to the lighthouse, and this time she utters a clear 'no'. the trip is postponed. She sees Minta and Paul watching the waves at the bay, and finally goes inside to join her husband , instead. In the parlour , sensing Mr. Ramsay reading a book who does not wish to be disturbed, she returns to a book of Shakespeare's poetry. When their eyes meet, she feels that he wants her to say she loves him. She does not fulfill that expectation, but says that there would be no trip the next day.

Space for Learner

Check Your Progress

1. Recount the Main 'events' in the first part of the novel. (100 words)

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2. Do you think that the focus is on the externality of the events? Give a reasoned answer. (60 words)

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2.3.2 "Time Passes"

This short section between the first and the third part describes how the summer house fared in the intervening ten years and what happened to its people. We are ushered a house in ruins and covered by weeds. It is overwhelmingly empty and presents a scene of destruction ravaged by winds and infested by insects and wild grass. We are informed that Mr. Ramsay is now a poor desolate man and that Mrs. Ramsay id dead. Prue, the beautiful daughter of the Ramsays, marries , but she dies in childbirth. Andrew, the eldest child, dies in the War. We further learn the family never visited the house for ten years. Mrs. MacNab is seen cleaning the house , having it repaired and making it a livable space in anticipation of a visit by Mr. Ramsay, his children and guests. Towards the end of this part, Lily Briscoe arrives , followed by Mr. Carmichael. This part ends with Lily waking up a the summer house after she arrived the previous night.

Stop to Consider

This section is something that invited criticism during Woolf's time, though there were critics who appreciated its uniqueness and significance. Read this section not just for what 'happens' here but to see how the novelist articulates a set of feelings by evoking an atmosphere. It is in this section that the novel attains a rare poetic grandeur. You may look at the language used here and try to find out the tone of the utterance, the metaphors drawn from the sea and the wind, for instance. You may attempt a note on the section as a whole.

2.3.3 "The Lighthouse"

After ten years, Mr. Ramsay, James, Cam, Lily Briscoe and Mr Carmichael the poet arrive at the deserted summer house in the Isle of Wight. Lily occupies a greater narrative space here, compared to the first part. She is haunted by the memory of Mrs. Ramsay. She occupies herself with the painting which was left unfinished ten years back. Mr. Ramsay's attraction for Lily is evident, while she feels disturbed at his proximity. In his histrionic mode, he conveys to her a need for emotional support and sympathy. She is not disposed to satisfy his need, and she understands it as her failure. Instead, she

complements on his boots. Elated, he starts a self-glorifying discourse on footwear, ending up with tying her shoes. This final gesture softens her who now feels some sympathy for the fellow. On the whole, his presence disturbs her work , and she heaves a sigh of relief when the father with two children sit on the bot and set off to the lighthouse.

Th voyage, like the beginning of the novel, starts with another conflict. Mr. Ramsay's rude words to the fisherman's boy infuriates James. The fisherman and his son are compelled ,inspite of themselves, to assist the family on the boat, and this breeds discontent in James's mind. James and Cam's silent resistance to their father's 'tyrrany' is clearly hinted at. Cam is doggedly silent to her father's questions, a sure hint of revolt.

Back at the summer house, Lily is seen speculating on art and life, and struggling to resolve her artistic dilemma and her newly awakened sympathy for Mr. Ramsay deepens this dilemma. We further know that Lily is yet unmarried. She perceives the entire panorama of the sea from a painter's eye, as a work of art. She reproaches herself for not being able to give him sympathy which he desperately needed. On the boat, the sail sags and the vessel comes to a halt. At this impasse, seeing his father immersed in a book, James feel a rage of revolt. Like Lily's panoramic view of the sea, Cam now experiences an extraordinary joy at this expedition and escape. For a moment, she has fond memories of her father writing and reading silently, in that way she feels safe with him. The impasse , however, ends, and the boat starts again in greater speed.

As they almost reach destination, Mr. James completes reading and shares food with them, and also gives a gingerbread nut to Cam—a small but crucial gesture of his love for her. The most important gesture comes from him to James when he openly praises his son for his skills as a sailor with these brief yet genuinely suggestive words "well done!". James is overwhelmingly pleased with this simple words of appreciation. When the fisherman says that three men were drowned on that spot, Mr. James eases the situation with a line of poetry. Back on the shore, Lily almost completes her work. She thinks that Mr. Ramsay must have reached the lighthouse, and with a final stroke finishes her painting.

Space for Learner

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Check Your Progress

1. What happens in this part of the novel? (80 words)

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2. Passage of ten years' time separate the first summer stay with the second. How does this part of the novel connects back to the past? (100 words)

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2.4 Characters:

Before I introduce the characters of the novel, a few introductory words would be quite in order. What is a character? Isn't somehow linked to the notion of human identity, which entails a precondition of 'knowing'? The proper name given to a fictional personage (a fictional 'character') is just a label stamped from outside, but the label may not describe identity in an authentic way. As you read the novel, you will learn how Lily Briscoe is often confounded by the fact that she does not really know that people she meets. Virginia Woolf seriously deals with this epistemological issue in this novel, and hence 'knowing a character' is a central concern here. In that sense, you may say that 'character' is itself a theme of *To the Lighthouse.* So, without thoroughly reading the play and teasing out its key issues and themes as well as the question of how these are represented, we will only have an incomplete grasp of the characters. Secondly, the description of 'characters' with complete detachment from value judgement is not possible, and hence might differ from reader to reader. (For instance, Mrs. Ramsay's silence may be seen as her lack of voice and her acquiescence to the patriarchal order of the summer house, but it can also be seen as a mode of inward resistance to that order.) Still, from the scattered textual evidences we can at least provisionally reconstruct the characters.

Mrs. Ramsay: One of the central characters of the novel, Mrs. Ramsay is the key figure in part 1, who also makes her presence felt through Lily Briscoe's memories of her, ten years later, in the third part. She is the hostess of the dinner party at the summer house, a charismatic woman, who is well

aware of her beauty and and its effect on her guests. She is sociable, impressionable, kind and caring. Compared to the adult male characters, she has wider range of sympathies, and can connect practically or imaginatively to people from across social divides. She visits the town with Charles Tansley—an event that unravels a number of traits in her character. She may be aware of how her proximity would enliven him, and thus compensate for the harsh reaction shown him by her children following his dismissal of the prospect of journey to the lighthouse. There are other evidences to drive home the fact that she is disposed to reconcile contradictions rather than further it. She can host forms of sociality with ingenuity and intelligence. Secondly we learn that Mrs. Ramsay is a socially sensible lady who is connected to the other members of society—be it Mr. Carmichael, Elsie, her grandmother's friends from the past, or the one-armed man who put up posters form the advertisement of a circus.

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Mr. Ramsay: He is Mrs. Ramsay's husband, and a philosopher. He is often saddled by an anxiety over the apprehension that his work will receive critical neglect,and that he will not be remembered by the future generation. Towards the end, he is referred to as a 'tyrant' by his son James. We do not have big evidence of his 'tyrrany' in the novel in the form of some external event, but his children's memories authenticate this trait. Nothing significant happens in the first part; the 'action' is restricted to ordinary affairs of domestic life. Still, Woolf takes care to conjure up a character through few small, scattered details registered in consciousness. The first clue of Mr. Ramsay's cruelty is his outright dismissal of the trip to the lighthouse in the beginning. Mr. Ramsay upholds the principle of 'fact' over one's subjective wish or yearning. But his rationality has turned out to be an instrument to subdue other's wish. He is a domineering father who would submit his children to do his bidding. Though we are not explicitly shown this trait of his character through some poignant event, James and Cam's rage against him and bitter memories of his exercise of patriarchal power amply demonstrates it. there is an element of levity in the portrayal of Mr. Ramsay especially when his flair for the grand and the marvellous is demonstrated in contrast to Mrs. Ramsay's domesticity. For instance, in a time when Mrs. Ramsay consoles James and reads him Grimm's tale , and Lily Briscoe is struggling to covert her vision into a full-fledged painting, Mr. Ramsay's bombastic recitation from Tennyson's war poem seems frivolous. This further suggests another trait of his character: his self-aggrandizing moves and talks. In fact, Mr. Ramsay's intellectual feats are not self-absorbed engagement but self-conscious performance in

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anticipation of praise. Mush of what he is , can be gauged through Mrs. Ramsay's perception of him. In fact, Mr. Ramsay's sense of selfhood is helplessly contingent on other's impression of him. This is the reason why he needs other's sympathy and reassurance. Such reassuring gestures do not transform him inwardly , but, ironically boosts up his egotism. After getting affirmative gestures from his wife, he steps out to dele deep into his 'splendid mind'.

The life of mind has for him certain degrees of excellence, like letters in an alphabet. This frivolous theory of alphabetical degree of excellence is his own invention. And the whole discourse of journey across this alphabetic sequence of excellence, presented through an interior monologue, counterbalances serene gravity of inward life of women in the summer house with a laconic comic tone. His self-proclaimed , loud intellectual heroism is steeped in the imagery of arduous adventure and expedition and is an expression of his patriarchal and paternalistic attitude. His self-portrait as a protector or a messiah is based on his construction of the other as vulnerable: he sees his wife and children as defenseless. (39)

However, Mr. Ramsay is transformed towards the end of the novel. After ten years he comes back to the summer house only to sail, along with James and Cam, to the lighthouse. Though for a considerable length of time in the voyage, he isolates himself by reading, Mr. Ramsay finally regains practical consciousness and shares food with others. The novelist captures small, yet significant hint of his transformation such as sharing food and appreciating James's skills at the boat—something that finally brings harmony to the family.

Lily Briscoe: Lily Briscoe is a guest to the summer house, and a sensitive and diligent painter. She struggles hard to translate her artistic vision into a complete painting. She begins the portrait of Mrs. Ramsay in the first part of the novel, but she is troubled by the apprehension that her art work would be hung in the attics. Mr. Charles Tansley's comment that women can neither paint nor write haunts her deeply and persistently. She is unmarried. Though there is suggestion of the prospect of her marriage with William Bankes, his contrary impressions makes her realize how difficult it is to know and judge people. The same epistemological uncertainty troubles her while making art. She does not merely seek to make a portrait of Mrs. Ramsay; through art she also strives to understand her from a variety of angles. Once she captures silhouetted image of the Ramsays with their children and inwardly entertains an idealized picture of a family. But the more mundane and realistic view of them dissolves this idealized notion.

After ten years she revisits the summer house only to be haunted by the memories of Mrs. Ramsay who is no more. She undertakes to complete her unfinished painting this time, and eventually completes it. She feels embarrassed and disturbed when Mr. Ramsay comes close to her. It is her undying memories of Mrs. Ramsay that remains a driving force of her life. With a stiff indifference, she resists Mr. Ramsay's need of sympathy, as he departs in the boat she feels emotionally drawn towards him. The novel ends with Lily completing her painting with a final stroke, suggesting that she has achieved a new, stable ground of life amid the incessant flux of reality.

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James Ramsay: James is the youngest child of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay. He is persistently propelled by an ardent wish to make a trip to the lighthouse. His father denies it, saying the weather would be foul, to which he reacts with an inward rage. Charles Tansley's support of his father increases his disappointment and frustration. He is a sensitive child who wants his mother's love. He is offended once by the sharp tone of his mother's words to make him stand still for measuring a stocking. Cutting picture is his favourite pastime, a faint suggestion of his artistic bent of mind. Mrs. Ramsay reassures him with the prospect of a good weather, and consoles him by reading a story from Grimm's Tales. After listening to the story James again gazes at the distant lighthouse across the bay. On the whole, the first part establishes James's character in terms of his persistent with to go to the lighthouse.

When James comes back to the summer house after ten years, he is a young man skilled in sailing. As a child he felt a murderous instinct for his father. Now , while voyaging across the bay, he conceptualizes something of a systematic revolt against his father's tyrrany and anxiously looks for Cam's solidarity. Finally, however he is able to realize his long-cherished dream to reach the lighthouse. At the same time, Mr. Ramsay's brief words of appreciation of his skills on the boat dissolves all frustrations and violent emotions in him.

Cam Ramsay: In the first part of the novel, Cam is introduced in terms of speed: 'dashed past', 'off like a bird, bullet, or arrow', 'projectile'(60-61). We further learn that Mrs. Ramsay takes special care of James and Cam because of their sensitivity. In the third part Cam journeys with others to the lighthouse. Though we do not have any clues to her experience as a child in the first part, a brief confessional statement made in the third part through free indirect discourse helps us reconstruct her childhood: "(…)what remained

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intolerable, she thought, sitting upright, and watching Macalister's boy tug the hook out of the gills of another fish, was that crass blindness and tyranny of his which had poisoned her childhood and raised bitter storms(…)"(185) Cam's dogged silence as a response to her father's half-joking quiz about directions is an ample proof of her mode of revolting against that tyranny.

As with James, in Cam too we see transformation. In the flow of consciousness fond memories of her father reading and writing in silence and the liberating touch of the water allows her to reassess her father through a flash of insight. She connects the fond memories of Mr. Ramsay with his present moment of reading whereby a tacit reconciliation with him is forged.

Charles Tansley: A young philosopher and a friend to Mr. Ramsay and a guest to the summerhouse. He is a person utterly disagreeable to the Ramsay children. In support of Mr. Ramsay, he also rules out the prospect of the much-awaited trip. Like Mr. Ramsay, Charles Tansley is a self-aggrandizing fellow whose personality is summarized in a cryptic yet expressive language by Woolf: " his acid way of peeling the flesh and blood of everything"(12).

The account of his visit to the town with Mrs. Ramsay reveals a few traits of Mr. Tansley. For one thing, his vanity and vacuous sociality expresses itself through a contrast with Mrs. Ramsay's genuine concern for others and her ability to freely mingle in the society. He hates the idea of watching a circus. This reveals another important fact of his mental disposition: he is deeply insecure regarding his poverty in the past. His self-glorification is depicted by Woolf in a strangely comic way. In the dinner party episode Mrs. Ramsay asks him about his ability to sail a boat. He replies that he has never been sick in his life. These words, however, are on the surface of a whole body of feeling of self-glory working at the subterranean level of consciousness.

Charles Tansley is a strong character who can affect the mind of others. His misogynist assertions of women's artistic and intellectual inabilities instinctive turns Lily Briscoe rebellious. We are also offered a hint of how his negative comments on Walter Scott affects Mr. Ramsay's reading of his work.

William Bankes: Another guest at the Isle of Wight, a botanist by profession, and a widower. He is supposed to marry Lily Briscoe, though the marriage never happens. He is a person in the novel who gives contrary impressions to other characters. Lily finds incongruity in his personality, something that makes her dismiss the prospect of marriage with him. On the

other hand, Mrs. Ramsay feels pity for the solitary man. Lily feels that he is not a person to be pitied.

On the other hand, William Bankes's hatred of sociality, his resentment of everydayness of life, and his preference for solitary act of reading bears some similarity with Mr. Ramsay.

Other Characters in the Novel: Not all the characters are given equal importance in the text. The overall artistic design of the book puts various characters at varying distances from the centre. Some of them have localized importance, such as the Macalister and his boy who accompanies Mr. Ramsay in the voyage at the bay. They are functionally important for illustration of James's state of mind. Mrs. McNab is relatively more important not for her role as the caretaker of the summerhouse which some 'more important' people will revisit after a gap of ten years, but for the way she exemplifies the glory of mundane labour. Rose, Nancy, Prue are briefly sketched out characters—the Ramsay children. Jasper, another sketchy character, can only be associated with his habit of hunting birds, and with the 'gunshot. August Carmichael is a poet and a guest of the Ramsays. He has his own familial circumstances which makes him cynical towards women. He keeps aloof from the rest of the people at the summer house, but his silent presence is so poignantly impressive. Again, Carmichael illustrates an important trait in the character of Mrs. Ramsay. She understands how the poets present aloofness is rooted in his troubled relationship with his wife—something that foregrounds, more than the perceived predicament of the poet, Mrs. Ramsay's concern and sympathy for others.

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Check Your Progress

1. Write a critical note on the characters of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe.(150 words)

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2. Why has the author not given an 'objective' description of the characters? Does it enable her to materialize her vision of human reality? Discuss. (200 words)

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2.5 Summing Up:

In "Modern Fiction", Woolf articulates her notion of human reality through exposition of how human consciousness registers fleeting impressions of the external world. Woolf does not, however, confine fiction to subjective domain of consciousness in a narrow sense. Rather, she expands the boundary of fiction rejecting the notion of 'proper stuff of fiction: "everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought, every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss." (*The Common Reader* 87). *To the Lighthouse* is a seminal modernist text which departs from conventional novel of her predecessors, even from some of her contemporaries on many counts. In this unit we have related the 'story' in brief and introduced the characters. The next unit will take you back to the text more closely and sensitize you to aspects of the novel's structure, narrative style as well as themes.

2.6 References and Suggested Readings

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Unit 3 : Virginia Woolf : *To the Lighthouse*

Themes and Techniques

Unit Structure:

3.1 Objectives:

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- *Appreciate* the main themes of the novel
- *Learn* about the novel's structure
- *Perceive* the link between the ideas depicted in the novel and its structure
- *Evaluat*e the representations in terms of the narrative style of the novel

3.2 Introduction

To the Lighthouse calls for a consideration of multiple contexts. First, after *The Voyage out*(1915) and *Night and Day* (1919) which were steeped in conventional realistic mode, Woolf increasingly experimented with the form and exhibited concern with language and its possibilities in the texture of fictional work. After *Mrs. Dalloway*, she wrote *To the Lighthouse*, both of which

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are placed on the high pedestal of modernist works. An instance of her formal experimentation in the novel under discussion is Woolf's treatment of time. Woolf's association with the Bloomsbury Group and , especially her friendship with Roger Fry also has its effect on this novel. the Post-Impressionist Exhibition of 1910 was a remarkable event which not only deeply affected Woolf but shaped her notion of how reality can be captured through multiple perspectives. On the socio-political side, the World War I (1914-18) and its devastating effect and trauma deeply moved the novelist. *To the Lighthouse* responds to this turmoil and devastation by foregrounding the theme of death and memory. This unit will finally enable you to perceive the link between form and content, or style of narration and themes that are depicted in the novel.

3.3 Themes

3.3.1 Loss and Memory

To The Lighthouse presents a human world where people sharing the same space have differing viewpoints whose clash often frustrates expectations leaving in its wake its indelible mark in consciousnesses. From that perspective life in the summer house, as depicted in the first part of the novel, is not serene and tranquil however it might outwardly seem. Still, the evening stroll, reading stories to one's son, the dinner party, Lily Briscoe's companionship with Mrs. Ramsay, the attraction of the physical presence of the hostess—these constitute an image of living that would persist in the reader's memory. However, the first part is not concerned with memory or loss. There is a slight hint of the theme of loss when Minta loses her grandmother brooch as they go on a hunting spree to the hillside. The whole incident of 'loss' is understood as an 'appalling experience'. Paul , her suitor, persistently consoles her promising to search the brooch or buy her a new one. The ornament was a token of Minta's love and connection; their prospect of marriage offers a symbolic possibility of recovery. But we know from Lily's memory as she revisits the summer house ten years later that Minta and Paul's marriage turned out badly. The loss of the ornament anticipates a more profound loss of happiness.

The second part presents the summer house after ten years—now a deserted building whose interior is probed by a brooding, disembodied voice in the darkness of the night. You can see how a lyrical, evocative language foregrounds and amplifies the utter emptiness of the house. The house is in ruins, covered by weeds, turning into a habitat for insects and birds. The whole scene of the dilapidated house ravaged by winds and forces of nature is a persistent remainder of a life that existed ten yeas ago. We come across a number of deaths: Mrs. Ramsay died, her elder daughter Prue died in childbirth, the eldest son Andrew died in War. Though mentioned off-handedly and within parenthesis, the deaths make emptiness of the deserted building more acute and painful. Every single household item described here is suffused with the significance of a past life. Look , for instance, at how Mrs. Ramsay's shawl is described in its various states of crumbling.

The third part figures Lily Briscoe more prominently and presents her as the central consciousness. She might revisit the summer house but cannot re-live the past. She is haunted by the memory of Mrs. Ramsay whose death is repetitively referred to in the first section. In fact, a considerable part of Lily's thought is centered on this loss and memory, paving the way for further meditations on life.

It would, however, be misleading to understand memory in this nostalgic or elegiac sense. Memory connects past to the present, but these connections may be constantly remade. With James, as we learn with hindsight, the lighthouse has been a constant presence in his consciousness, an eternal aspiration, as it were. Yet, he fails to rid himself of his rage against his father, until towards the end of the voyage, because of bondage and 'tyranny' of his father. As for Cam, memory of her commanding father has not faded yet, whose "blindness and Tyranny" has "poisoned her childhood and raised bitter storm"(185). But fond memories persist alongside bitter memories. The touch of water as she sails on the boat to the lighthouse has a profound liberating effect when she recalls her father reading and writing in silence. This memory of the past gives way to the sight of Mr. Ramsay actually reading a book—within a flow of her consciousness. And that is the moment when she feels reassured with her father.

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Check Your Progress

Do you think that *To the Lighthouse* carries an elegiac note? Explain with instances from the text. (200 words)

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3.3.2 Ordinary Life in *To The Lighthouse*

Woolf presents before us a world where characters are endowed with an inner life and are characterized by interiority. As we have mentioned, her aim is to explore the consciousness of the characters, their mental processes. We can easily discern how the novelist focuses on this interiority of the characters by seeing how *To the Lighthouse* is devoid of plot in the conventional sense. The novel does not depict any great external circumstances or extraordinary events. in the section "Time Passes" death is mentioned within parenthesis. This absence of supposedly 'great' external event is connected to depiction of ordinary circumstances and familiar reality. Two women, Mrs McNab and Mr.s Bast, clean the house which involves a most 'ordinary activities'—but, as Liesl M. Olson says, these ordinary activities normalizes traumatic events of the external world, and suggests human endurance in the face of greatly unsettling events(60). Woolf in "Modern Fiction" describes how this ordinary, everyday reality constitutes a broad canvas for a novelist:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial,fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it.(61)

Look at the world of *To the Lighthouse*: there is casual stroll with friends, a dinner party, casual intellectual talk, and sight of a lighthouse, advertisement of circus in a town street, making clothes for somebody, reading, contemplating, taking care of guests. But this ordinary frame of life is not just an external setting to foreground the profound internality of the minds. Rather ordinary experience is the source from which the characters emerge. Ordinary experience is the fabric in which a character reveal itself. However, representation of the ordinary is a complex issue. The atoms of the external world affect, and is affected by, the mind in an unique way within a specific temporality. Take, for instance, the lighthouse—a common sight from the Ramsay family's summer house. To Mr. Ramsay, it is just a 'fact'. But to James it is suffused with meaning signifying an alternative world, an idyll. Woolf's commitment to the ordinary throughout this novel, is extraordinary. The novel in fact begins with a serious conflict. Source of this conflict is the lighthouse itself: a common object of perception among people living in the summer house. The characters reveal themselves through their own consciousness or through the consciousness of others, but a perception of the ordinary is a major content of consciousness.

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Stop to Consider

Now it is your task to consider the various characters' attitude to ordinary life. Do you think that Mrs. Ramsay's engagement with familiar domestic life can be posited as a counterpoint to some of the male characters' fascination with the extraordinary? Do you also think that in 'Time Passes" section the housekeeper's and other working people's 'ordinary activities' are highlighted by the novelist? If so, how? Think about it!

3.3.3 Experience of Time

Time is both a theme as well as a structuring principle in To *The Lighthouse*. (I will discuss the second part later.) as we learn from the novel's treatment of everyday life, the text frustrates the reader's expectations of big events and their succession in a long-wided plot. But this seeming eventlessness does not suggest the author's indifference to human experience. In fact, Woolf keenly probes a

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fundamental human experience: the experience of time. If we keep aside the middle part, the characters are captured in their present , so that that the reader can follow them in slow, or rather sluggish linearity. The represented summer stay in the island is short—less than a complete day. Because they are not shown to be passing through great span of time in the first and third parts, we also see them in their simultaneous present. But the present is not an autonomous and isolated temporal space; it is dynamically linked to the past and future in relation to the subject of (temporal)experience. Past is accessible through memory and future is the realm of anticipation, expectations, possibilities and apprehension. (We have already discussed the novel's concern with loss and memory). If these dimensions of time are brushed aside, the novel's meditations on human situation and experience will be missed. In this context, the phrase I just used a while ago—the 'subject of experience' is important to consider. Woolf is not concerned so much about the strictures of objective time as with its subjective experience. (The summer stay provides scope for relaxed strolling painting, storytelling and casual chat). Subjective experience of time is not bound to the present object but ushers us, instead, into the realm of fleeting streams of perception within the inner flow of consciousness. It is a realm where perception about the world and the self are constantly modified and invalidates any claims of external, timeless truth. This partly explains why Mrs. Ramsay inwardly resists Mr. Ramsay's vehement and authoritarian weather-forecast. The unity of the first part can be understood in terms of the characters' attitude to futurity. As we have discussed in the previous unit, the novel starts with the concern for a journey: tomorrow's trip to the lighthouse. James's expectations are frustrated, and in the couse of ten years he carries it in his mind as a bitter memory which even propels him , albeit inwardly, to the verge of murdering his father. You may observe how the yearning for the future constitutes a dominant motif of the first part, and memories of the past troubles Lily Briscoe in the final part.

But apart from these dimensions of time, w also see another consequence of subjective experience.: its simultaneity. A microscopic look at the incidents in the first summer stay reveals simultaneous temporalities. Lily Briscoe's engagement with the present is radically different from Mrs. Ramsay's. Mrs. Ramsay, for instance, sees Lily

and William Bankes together when she wistfully muses on the prospect of their marriage. Simultaneously, Lily is saddles by contrary impressions of Mr. Bankes—his goodness and his oddities, and recoils from the prospect of marriage. on the whole, the subjective experience of time confounds any notion of stability and order and invites one to ponder on the elusive nature of reality.

Against this microscopic view of time, Woolf presents a broad, panoramic vision in the middle part. The title ("Time Passes") is self-evident. It is now a view of passing of objective time on a broader scale whose enormity and descructive character can be experienced through the view of the dilapidated summer house. Here the passing of time is depicted in more than one way: a description of the passage of the seasons,; brief, intermittent mention of what happens to the Ramsay family; reference to silence and its contrast to sound of shell exploding. We not just learn the passing of time but feel the utter shock and agony of its effect.

SAQ

How does the novel dwell on time and its manifold significance and experience? (200 words)

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3.3.4 Self and the Other

What the characters think about themselves, what they think about others and how they are related to the other is a central theme in the novel. Think about Mr. Ramsay. A brilliant philosopher, he expresses himself through his consciousness and through others' impressions of him. His self-centred intellectual exercise is inspired by a vision of an adventurous intellectual journey. He feels that he is to achieve intellectual excellence through a trajectory of gradual improvement. But this self-centred intellectual journey is crucially dependant on the condition of other's praise. In other words, Mr. Ramsay's self-centredness has to be sustained by a crucial dependance

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on the other. In domestic life, as we can see retrospectively from Cam's and James' memories, his relations to the children is that of domination where he persistently commands them to do his bidding. He upholds the centrality of objective truth when he dismisses the trip to the lighthouse, a principle that does not take cognizance of the subjective needs of James. In this rule of 'objective truth', apathy, indifference and domination are the possible modes of relating to the other. His self-proclaimed intellectual expedition is also linked to his self-imposed messianic role to protect his wife and children whom he sees as vulnerable. Not that he does not discern the effect of his words on Mrs. Ramsay, but a silght hint of reassurance from her is enough to push him into the cocoons of intellectual thought. Further, his perception of other's vulnerability is ironically overturned into his apprehension of his own failure. He needs constant reassurance and sympathy from his wife.

Mrs. Ramsay , in contrast, is concerned for others. This is a brighter aspect of her personality. Her concern for her children and recognition of their individuality stands in stark contrast to Mr. Ramsay. She is a sociable woman and hosts her guests efficiently. Her concern for James is highlighted not only through her reassurance of the trip but through her reading Grimm's tale to him. her trip to the town illustrates her social relations. She is also concerned with social disparity, and the division between the rich and the poor glimpsed through the window affects her inwardly.

Mrs. Ramsay stands for harmony and reconciliation. She hopes for the marriage of Lily Briscoe and William Bankes, or between Paul and Minta. However, we are also shown in some details moments of her silent introspection. Outward concerns modes of sociality are dissolved in this serene moment when she regains a sense of liberation. As for Lily Briscoe, she is baffled by ambiguity of other characters. In the second visit to the summer house, she feels disturbed by the presence of Mr. Ramsay as she woks at her painting. She is able to compelte her painting only after she reconciles herself to the fact of her sympathy for Mr. Ramsay. Reconciliation the self and the other is the theme of the voyage episodes. The reunion of the father and the children—James and Cam, accomplishment of the trip to the lighthouse, and the finishing of Lily Briscoe's painting illustrate this theme at different levels.

3.3.5 Centre and Margin

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Issues of social classes and social mobility never constitute the centre of Woolf's fictional world. You will do well to know that Woolf decried social realism of her predecessors and contemporaries because her focus is primarily on working of individual mind. However, this does not mean that Woolf was totally indifferent to the social reality of the time. In *To the Lighthouse* we see occasional reference to class origins, such as in the character of Charles Tansley, whose humble origin he keenly tries to cover up. Mrs. Ramsay, on the other hand, beyond the immediate concern for family, is also troubled by the social disparity between the rich and the poor which she glimpses through the window. On the margins of *To the Lighthouse* are seen the lower class people. Mrs. Ramsay is affected, albeit momentarily, by the sight of one armed climbing up the top of a ladder to advertise a circus, "whose left arm had been cut off in a reaping machine" (15). Mrs. Ramsay is also concerned for the housemaid Marie whose father is dying of cancer. In "Time Passes" section we have Mrs. MacNab taking care of the desolate summer house all through the ten years. The prospective visit of the Ramsay family prompts her to arrange for mending and cleaning the summer house which requires a great deal of manual labour. It is through this exhaustive labour of the lower class people that comfortable stay of a group of upper-middle class people is facilitated and ensured. The novel highlights the importance of ordinary work of ordinary people. After a description of the impending collapse of the summer house, the novelist highlights the work of Mrs. MacNab and Mrs Bust which is "not highly conscious" and devoid of "dignified ritual or solemn chatting" but which finally rescues the house from oblivion (151). You may note meticulous and concrete way in which manual labour in the summer house is described. Look, for instance, at how various verbs of action are brought together to transform the ruined landscape back again to a livable space: "Attended with the creaking of hinges and the screeching of bolts, the slamming and banging of damp-swollen woodwork, some rusty laborious seemed to be taking place as the women, stooping, rising, groaning, singing, slapped and slammed, upstairs now, now down in the cellars. Oh, they said, the work!" (152).

Stop to Consider

Characters of lower social stature occupy the margins of the text, while life of an upper-middle class family and their circles constitutes

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the core of Woolf's representation. You may read this as a contrast to some nineteenth century novel, such as *Hard Times* by Dickens where the lives of an industrial worker, and other figures from the margins of society, are given a considerable narrative space, and through it the novelist offers a critique of the industrial civilization. You may attempt a comparative reading of *To the Lighthouse* with other texts that depicts similar marginal figures.

3.4 Narrative Style

The tripartite division of the novel also has behind it a narrative strategy. The narrative style of the first and third part differs from that of the middle section "Time Passes". The novel as a whole is written in third person, but the third person narrator is not an omniscient narrator characteristic of conventional novel. The narrator fluidly shifts position from character to character so that for the majority of the novel the reality is described from the character's point of view. Assumption of a character's perspective entails presentation of his/her thought and feeling without authorial mediation. For instance, the effect on James of Mr. Ramsay's dismissal of the trip in the beginning of the novel is expressed thus: " Had there been an axe handy, a poker or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's breast, and killed him , there and then, James would have seized it"(8). The shift is fluid and effortless from one character to another without any narratorial judgement. Even the shift in point of view can take place within a sentence. look at the sentence next to the one I just quoted whose first part upholds James's point of view ("grinning sarcastically" etc.) but from the next part in the sentence to the next couple of lines Mr. Ramsay's perspective is foregrounded.

This perpetual shift in point of view is instrumental in bringing out a central concern of the novel—the subjective character of human reality. Question may arise: bereft of a central moral perspective whose custodian should be an all knowing narrator operating as the mouth piece of the author, how does Woolf negotiate the question of moral judgement? Let us make it clear that the novel does not uphold any moral viewpoint in an explicit way nor does it evaluate the characters from a moral or ethical point of view. Nevertheless, Woolf is acutely sensitive to issues of power , domination and modes of subjection. But there is, to Woolf, no authentic way to forground it except by focusing on the impressions of people and events in the mind of the characters

and by delving in to the zone of their consciousness. You can see this in James's and Cam's attitude to their father in the boat scene.

Shift in point of view unfolds the characters putting them in relative perspective. Mrs. Ramsay's glimpses Lily Briscoe and William Bankes together and perceives the desirability of their marriage. When the next moment the third person narrator shifts to Lily's point of view, Mrs. Ramsay's view is subverted through a 'closer' look at the kind of person Mr. Bankes is. In fact, switching between consciousnesses is a crucial narratorial task in this novel where transition from one character's mind to another's in a seamless way unmasks a different level of reality. This partly explains why the novel makes sparce use of dialogue, though it depicts sessions of verbal interaction. unfolding of consciousness can itself be a mode of representation of a character, and it may carry some judgement. By attending to the consciousness of Charles Tansley or by unravelling the mind of Mr. Ramsay in the form of interior monologue , Woolf manages to carry a subtle ironic tone. Look , for istance, at Mr. Tensley's constant awareness of Mrs. Ramsay in the trip to the town, or Mr. Ramsay's plan to gain intellectual excellence through a self-imposed path of alphabetic order, or his planned discourse of civilization just to win admiration from intellectual circles.

In the section "Time Passes" we hear a different, unusual narrative voice. Technically it is third person narrator, but the tone, style and mood point towards an unusual narrative consciousness more akin to the brooding, elegiac aura of a nightmare. Here, events figure as something of a dream with the house dilapidating, and storms rising in the seas, garden covered by grass. Death is mentioned in a cursory and commonplace fashion, though its effect is registed symbolically. The narrator is almost abandoned here, and more than who tells, the profundity of the meditations on time's ravages, ruins and destruction occupies the reader's attention.

Stop to Consider

Stream of Consciousness: A host of modernist novels are labelled 'stream-of-consciousness novels' becaue they refer to human consciousness from within, their thought emotions, associations, sensations. Stream of consciousness is a theory rooted in the psychological theory of William James. Mary Sinclaire used it to describe Dorothy Richardson's technique in her novel *Pilgrimage*. Though often used

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synonymously, interior monologue refers to representation of stream of consciousness in language.

SAQ

'Woolf's makes unique use of 'stream-of-consciousness' technique because she does not represent one single consciousness but several consciousnesses.' Do you agree? Explain with reference to novel. (250 words)

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3.5 Art of Characterization in *To the Lighthouse*

Woolf departs from conventional mode of characterization, because the idea of human character has changed. Woolf's other writings would provide ample proof of her meditation on this changed notion of human character. There is a wide philosophical-intellectual backdrop behind it. Crisis of all kinds of philosophical positivism and the concomitant rise of psychological theories such as that of William James provides a backdrop that propels Woolf to look for a new mode of characterization. Her objections to contemporary novelists such as Arnold Bennett was grounded on the perception that socio-economic contexts of a character marginalizes the subjective dimension of human self and experience. Another thrust for a new mode of character portrayal came from Post-impressionism. Roger Fry's Post impressionist exhibition in 1910 prompted her to declare that "on or around December 1910 human character changed" (*Theorists of Modernist Novel* 68). It is not difficult, therefore, to find the legacy of post-impressionism in Woolf's novelistic art, especially her art of characterization. Post-impressionism departed from realism in its bid to capture a level of reality closer to human perception: the fleeting , evanescent impressions of things in the consciousness where certitude of identity is lost, and which does not follow any definitive social order.

Central to Woolf's art is construction of human personality through external perceptions of others as well as through their inner consciousness. Self is not a distinct, solid entity; it is fluid and permeable. Thus, to know the

character A, we need to delve into the inner consciousness of A, and also approach B and C who contemplate A. Conventional mode of character portrayal depends pervasively on the notion of external appearance as indicator of inner reality. Woolf also increasingly detached herself from assumptions based on racial identities, thanks to her association with the liberal circles who did not believe in racial hierarchies.

Let us discuss Woolf's method in the context of the novel under discussion. Construction of the characer of Charles Tansley is built up by allowing the reader to put together various traits of him from impressions of other characters as well as rendering of his inner consciousness. The Ramsay children hate him because of his constant disparagement of them. His almost sadistic assertion of the denial of the trip to the lighthouse torments the the delicate minded child James. His misogynist comment about women's lack of intellectual/artistic abilities is something that pushes Lily Briscoe to the verge of mad rage. Further, his accompaniment to Mrs. Ramsay to the town is an important episode where Mr. Tansley's mental disposition is unraveled through a depiction of his 'stream of consciousness'.

But when depiction of character A is contingent, among other things, upon its impression in the mind of B, certitude of identity is at stake and ambiguities surface. Look at the episode of Lily Briscoe strolling with William Bankes. She inwardly praises him for his 'goodness', and for being 'the finest human being', but all this is undercut by his frivolities and oddities. This is the moment she feels how she lacks a sure ground to love him.

Impression does not necessarily imply vagueness. Look at how Woolf suggests an element of violence and atrocity in conveying the children's view of Mr. Tansley with this phrase- "his acid way of peeling the flesh and blood of everything"(12)

Use of memory is also instrumental in illuminating certain traits of a character. The figure of Mr. Ramsay would not have been complete without the use of the children's memories of him during the voyage. At a point during the voyage Cam identifies herself with the Macalister's boy whom Mr. Ramsay is watching, she is reminded of her father's "crass blindness and tyranny" which "poisoned her childhood"(185).

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Stop to Consider

In the light of what we have discussed, think about the main characters of the novel: Mr. Ramsay, Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe. Description of a character is different from art of characterization, as you may know. What kind of a person Lily Briscoe is, is a matter of description. How do you come to know a set of traits that you identify with Lily Briscoe pertains to Woolf's art. Now, make a note on Woolf's method of construction of the characters of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe. Also , think about a character whose inner consciousness has not been depicted, such as Augustus Carmichael. How does, then, the novelist depict Carmichael?

Check Your Progress

Does Woolf's art of characterization enable her to assess the characters from a distant, omniscient point of view? Does Woolf intervene in a sort of 'moral assessment' of the characters? Give a reasoned answer. (200 works)

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3.6 The Structure of *To the Lighthouse*

As already mentioned in the previous unit, *To the Lighthouse* is organized in three parts : the first and the third part recounting a day's events each, a brief intervening part depicting the passing of ten years. In other words, to single days are linked through a time span of ten years. The structure of the novel, then, is principally determined by the temporal principle. Expansion and contraction of time is a method through which Woolf brings in the purview various dimensions of life and achieves artistic effect in the text. This shifts in the story-duration (from a single day to ten years again to another single day) also determines what counts as object of narration. Minimized story-duration in the first part enables us to delve into the characters' flow of consciousness in a seemingly eventless situation. This enables the author to explore another level of reality: the reality of the mind's flow. On the other hand, when the story-duration is increased to ten years, even bigger external historical forces

would occupy little narrative space. Death of the three members of the Ramsay family, especially of the protagonist Mrs. Ramsay whose inner recesses of mind the reader had access to a while ago, is presented in an indifferent, matter-of-fact manner. In fact, Woolf does not want to indulge in what she understands as 'Victorian centimentality'. It also invites the reader to ponder on the sheer indifference of history to humanity. Despite such manipulations of time in the process of structuring, the second part also manages to evoke through a brooding disembodied consciousness the image of a dark night. Look at the second section of 'Time Passes". The proliferation of darkness through which a disembodied hand gropes in the interior space of the summer house. Time described in the first part is late afternoon, in the second, night, and in the third, morning when Mr. Ramsay embarks on the long-postponed journey. In that way time is metaphorically linked to the central mood of each part: frustrations of expectations for the trip to the lighthouse is linked to the aura of late afternoon, an overwhelming sense of loss is suggested by the description of night in the middle part, while the journey to the lighthouse and its accomplishment is in tune with the atmosphere of morning in the third part.

To the Lighthouse is a novel that uses stream of consciousness and interior monologue technique. But consciousness unfolds thoughts and emotions of Mrs. Ramsay and Lily Briscoe, and also reveals attitude to people. The character of Mr. Ramsay is structurally important here , because it is somehow in relation to him that other characters express themselves either externally or in inner processes of mind. Lily Briscoe's idea of Mrs. Ramsay can not be separated from him. Mr. Ramsay, in that way, is an important figure who exerts profound impact on his guests, wife and his children, notably James. Please mind that no crucial event is posited at the centre of the novel's structure. James's murderous rage against his father is not an outward 'event'. Understanding of Mr. Ramsay has to be gained through looking at the ways in which he affects other lives and created impressions of him. the 'tyranny of Mr. Ramsay allows us to evaluate the past in terms of how the others negotiated with this 'tyranny'.

Another structuring principle is at work. The novel foregrounds a prolonged engagement of an artist with her art work. A host of people gather around a space amid everyday domesticity and interactions. We are witness to various consciousnesses without a mediating omniscient narrator. Consciousness registers response to the other, while the subject-object relation is constantly overturned as the author keeps on navigating various

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consciousnesses. This intersubjective dynamics exerts profound effect on a particular character's consciousness. Lily Briscoe's struggle with her painting is not restricted to her artistic aims alone; it has significance for the entire novel. The lack of harmony among the people, as exemplified in the dinner party episode, is reflected in her embittered awareness of her inability to realize her artistic vision. Thus the first part shows structural link between two developments—postponement of the trip to the lighthouse and the painting remaining incomplete. The last part shows that through flashes of insight people regain the ability to relate to the other in a harmonious way. Lily successfully completes her art while the long-postponed 'action' is accomplished in the form of reaching the lighthouse.

Check Your Progress

Is the novel's tripartite division enough to describe the novels' structure? What are the points to ponder upon, while we discuss its structure? (150 words)

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3.7 Summing Up

In this unit, we have discussed in some detail some of the themes and aspects of structure and narrative style of Virginia Woolf's *To the lighthouse*. The discussion, however, is not exhaustive. *To the lighthouse* asks abiding questions about human reality; it modes of representing it and the problem of knowledge. In that sense, the novel has a philosophical core beneath the veneer of familiar , everyday reality, and the vision it offers of human existence invites attention to the need to bring coherence and order to the incongruities and chaos that surround our existence. We have discusses isses of time, memory and loss, relations between the self and the other. We have also dwelt on the mode and style of narration used in this novel as well as its structure. This should enable you to go back to this key modernist text and explore many areas not covered or only hinted at in our discussion.

3.8 References and Suggested Readings

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Unit 4 : Ian McEwan: *Atonement* (Background)

Unit Structure:

4.1 Objectives

The aim of this unit is to provide an insight into the life and literary contribution of one of the unique and path-breaking writers in English literature-i.e. Ian McEwan. McEan has established himself as a foundational writer through his novels, short stories and screenplays. This section will prepare you to approach the prescribed text from several dimensions.With this object in mind, the unit is prepared to enable you to

- *familiarize* yourself with the biography of Ian McEwan
- *identify* McEwan's notable literary works
- *assess* the relevance of McEwan's work in the Modern and Postmodern contexts.
- *examine* the novel from a critical perspective.

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4.2 Introduction

Ian McEwan is one of the most reputed and notable authors in contemporary English literary circles. His innovative writing skills have earned him sufficient fame in the realm of literature. In addition to his novels and short stories, McEwan has also written screenplays that have contributed to his renown. Because of the radical outlook expressed in his works most of them invited to critical responses. The narrative techniques adopted in his writings display the revisionist approach which is mostly apparent in his novels. His recalcitrance is witnessed in certain preposterous claims related to marriage and baffling relationships as expressed in his trailblazing works. He primarily weaves his delineations through experimental techniques in characterisation and plot construction, pushing the boundaries of artistic expression. McEwan's other contemporaries such as Margaret Atwood, Julian Barnes and Martin Amis also mirrored the problematic relationships that govern the lives of postmodern industrial and complex societies. McEwan's works project the dark realities and the bizarre prospects of life which is often accompanied by a troubling narrative.

The profound rationality underlying his narratives necessitates that negativity and ethical voids govern the lives of the majority of his characters. His intricate and challenging narrative strategies, frequently explore the unconventional form of novelistic exposition, replicating the intricacy of life. His novels' fragmentary narrative, intertextual structure, and play of perspectives are examples of the many postmodern techniques he frequently uses.

SAQ

Who were the contemporary writers of Ian McEwan? What were the subject matters of the novels of these authors? (70 words)

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The early writings of McEwan were characterised by a strange outlook on life that reflected the curiosity of a young writer who explored the dark and ugly side of life. The bold and audacious themes elicited strong reactions in response to his viewpoint. His intense focus on provocative themes like incestuous relationships, violence, murder, repulsively disturbing settings, and subjects like paedophilia evokes a cynical response from his peers. However, his narrative excellence surpasses the rudimentary remarks which are targeted solely at his themes and subjects matter. So far he has been recognised as a controversial writer because of his iconoclastic standpoint and his deliberate refusal to justify his characters' aberrant actions.

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SAQ

How was McEwan received by his contemporaries? Give reasons to your answer (40 words)

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Stop to Consider

McEwan wrote during a time when modernism was passionately embraced and entwined with the fervour of postmodernism. Contemporary British authors delve into themes that address the pressing concerns of our modern society. The literature of this period is predominantly characterized by the exploration of social inequality and individual hardships. Beyond depiction of social realities, there is a notable emphasis on delving into the psychological dimensions of characters, inviting readers to introspect and cultivate empathy and understanding through their psychological struggles. Some of the pioneering authors of this generation include Kazuo Ishiguro, Hilary Mantel, Jeanette Winterson, Julian Barnes, Gail Honeyman, David Mitchell, Margaret Atwood etc., who take up the issues of class, racism, immigration and the ecological

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crisis to evoke concern among the readers of the modern world. Their works delve into the evolving dynamics of modern society, and examine and scrutinize the influence of technology and the transformative effects of virtual realities and surveillance culture on society. The historiographic revisitation leaves readers contemplating on the turbulent past and critically assessing the colonial and imperial legacies. The writings of various current British authors are motivated to address the issue of national identity with a focus on political instability to provide a perspective on the shifting socio-cultural and political environment of modern civilization.

McEwan's writing style is evocative in nature as he meticulously handles the complexities of human relationships and their impact on the respective lives of the characters. His storylines place the characters grounded as they replicate relatable individuals in society. His excessive attention to detail creates a vivid picture that adds life to the settings. His choice of works creates a sensory impression on the readers immersing them in the world of the characters. McEwan permeates the psyche of the characters by giving them access to their thoughts, intentions and motives. The profound insights enable the readers to decipher the intent of the characters. His characters are mostly introspective ones that constantly analyse their viewpoints of life, society and situations. The moral dilemma is explored through a revalidation of the complexities of human psychology. His works witnessed the intertwining of history, fiction and biography. The diverse personal experience led him to discover the further course of action of his characters. The love-fear element of his relationship with his father is reflected in many of his novels including *The Cement Garden.* The issues, silences and tensions get explored in his novels.

Stop to Consider

McEwan's language as well as his choice of diction appeals to readers of any generation. His skilful employment of metaphors and images weaves an artistic sequence of linguistic order. His rich images add

vibrant colours even in a desolate setting. The precision with which he draws his landscape leave the readers contemplating on his mastery of creative writing. His word choice reflects how well-versed he is in the subject under consideration.

SAQ

Comment on Ian McEwan's writing style. (60 words)

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4.3 Biographical sketch

4.3.1 Life of Ian McEwan

A thorough understanding of McEwan's biography will lend insight into the circumstances that transformed him into the writer he turned out to be.

Ian Russell McEwan (1948-), born on 21st June, 1948, in the garrison town of Aldershot, Hampshire England, was brought up under the care of his father, David McEwan, who was an army officer. Belonging to the member of military services enabled him to spend most of his boyhood on army bases with his father's company in the Far East, Germany, and North Africa. In an interview with Kate Kellaway, McEwan stated that his childhood was all about how he "grew up with the detritus of war around him". (Kellaway 2001) Despite being raised in a fairly orderly and civilised environment, he developed a fondness for reading in his days of yore. In 1959, he attended the state boarding school, Woolverstone Hall in Suffolk, which was also the alma mater of writers such as Rudyard Kipling. In

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1967, he pursued his studies in English and French literature at Sussex University. His father was pleased that his son was pursuing a degree at a university because he himself had to leave school to pursue a career. While his family lived abroad, he pursued his interest single-mindedly in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia. MA in Modern Fiction and Creative Writing was a new discipline at the university during those days. It was introduced for the first time by Professor Malcolm Bradbury and Sir Angus William. Ian McEwan was one of the first scholars to enrol in the course in 1971. His enthusiasm extended beyond literature alone, encompassing a deep interest in various art forms and cultural expressions. He joined the Royal Society of Literature and the Royal Society of Art to keep his passion for arts and writing ignited. His pursuit of learning took him to various places like Afghanistan, the North West Frontier Province and Greece, Norwich, Stockwell and so on.

Stop to Consider

The plethora of experiences he gained from his travels manifest themselves in his depictions of characters. This is the reason why his reservoir of literary production is versatile, each where each work is unique in quality and spirit. He is fairly outspoken in his approach, as he boldly expresses his opinion on issues of religion and the liberty of women. This is what testifies to his iconoclastic nature.

During his post-MA year in 1971-72, he embarked on a transformative journey, encountering numerous literary giants whose influence would resonate with him for years to come. It was during this time that he fortuitously crossed paths with Deborah Rogers, who would later become his esteemed literary agent in 1973. In 1974, while residing in Stockwell, a significant turning point occurred when

he became involved with the *New Review*, providing him with an invaluable avenue to connect with esteemed literary figures such as Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, and Craig Raine. His literary pursuits were nurtured during this tenure.

In 1982, he entered into a union with Penny Allen, a compassionate counsellor and healer who became his spouse. Together, they welcomed the arrival of two sons named Gregory and William. While Penny provided him with unwavering support, their relationship eventually encountered difficulties, leading them to part ways. Subsequently, in 1997, he found love once again and tied the knot with Annalena McAfee, a remarkable woman who, at the time, held the esteemed position of founder and editor of the *Guardian Review*.

Stop to Consider

McEwan has established himself as a prominent figure in the British literary landscape, captivating readers with his compelling novels, intriguing short stories, and thought-provoking screenplays. Through his writings, he skilfully unveils the shadowy and unconventional aspects of life, offering an alternative perspective on existence. His works delve into themes of sexual exploration, and complex and troubled relationships between characters, and explore sensitive subjects such as incestuous afflictions, presenting a thought-provoking examination of human experiences.

From the outset of his career, McEwan left an indelible mark on the literary world. Although his early works may have displayed rawness and lacked the refined fervour of his later creations, they still showcased the manifestation of his learning from his creative writing course. These early works were meticulously crafted, attending to the intricacies of everyday existence. Infused with a touch of realism, his writings skilfully

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portrayed the genuine dilemmas that characters face in their daily lives. He emerged as a promising writer with his very first publication, which is a collection of short stories entitled *First love, Last Rites* (1975). This work ushered in a ray of hope that further prepared the way for the advent of a literary maestro. This collection of short stories not only cemented his position in the literary world but also made him a contender for many awards and recognitions. His early works were based on certain recurrent themes such as violence, relationships, dilemma, the crisis of the modern man, and so on.

Stop to Consider

Ian McEwan and Ian Macabre

The introspective nature of McEwan's characters manifests through the exploration of unsettling and disconcerting themes. Within his novels, he delves deeply into the complexities of the human psyche, weaving intricate reflections of delusion and darkness. To reduce his works to a mere salute to the Macabre would overlook the depth and artistry of his literary portrayals. While his works have garnered popularity, they have also been subject to controversy, sometimes due to his revolutionary opinions and other times due to his depiction of anti-social characters. Beyond their popularity, McEwan's works provoke thought and engage in provocative conversations, leaving an indelible impact on readers.

Some of his works have faced scrutiny and censorship due to their challenging subject matter, delving into unsettling themes such as paedophilia, brutality, rape, child abuse, incestuous relationships, adultery, and deviant sexuality. These disturbing elements raise serious questions about the acceptability of his writings. While macabre themes are indeed prominent in McEwan's works, they serve as a reflection of the contemporary crises that plague the modern psyche. The exploration of psychologically

disturbed behaviour and psychopathy is often intertwined with themes of guilt and exclusion. By exposing the hidden desires of his characters, McEwan's works can provoke controversy among readers, as they confront societal taboos and challenge prevailing norms.

His literary repertoire includes works such as *The Cement Garden* (1978), which broaches the controversial topic of incest, deemed unacceptable in civilized society. McEwan's exploration of such themes and subject matter has led to critical commentary, with some labelling him a "literary psychopath." The toxic manner in which his characters grapple with life's choices raises questions about decaying moral values in the modern world. Through his depiction of a dystopian modern society, McEwan has earned the epithet "Ian Macabre," underscoring the unsettling nature of his literary portrayals.

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4.3.2 Awards, Accolades and Recognition

Despite the fact that his creative works had already established his reputation and notoriety, the numerous accolades he had won since the publication of his first piece served as proof of his accomplishment. The number of honours Ian McEwan has received over his illustrious career is never-ending. Although he is most well known for winning the famous Man Booker Prize in 1988, he has received numerous additional honours that attest to his contributions and popularity among readers. His debut collection of short stories *First Love, Last Rites (1975)* enabled him to win the Somerset Maugham Award. The Society of Authors presented the prize to British authors under the age of thirty five. As his subjects replicated a problematic social life his readers could easily identify with the plot. Apart from winning several accolades he was also nominated for many other awards including the Booker Prize for Fiction and the Whitebread Novel Award. He was shortlisted for the novel

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Atonement (2001) in the aforementioned awards. Aside from that, he was awarded the James Tait Black Memorial Prize twice: once in 1978 for his first novel, *The Cement Garden*, and again in 1987 for his second novel, *The Child in Time*. In 1993 he was also honoured with French literary award Prix Femina Etranger for his novel *The Innocent.* He won the Golden PEN Award in 1998 for his significant contribution to literature. He was recognised by the association for fostering freedom of expression since he supported freedom of speech in the majority of his literary interests. He was honoured with the Whitbread Novel Awards for two works viz, *The Child in Time* in 1997 and *Amsterdam* in 1998. McEwan won the Man Booker Prize in 1998 for his novel *Amsterdam*. He received the W.H. Smith Literary Award in 2002 for the novel *Atonement*. In 2010 his book titled *Solar* helped him win the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize. As he promoted many social activities such as advocating the freedom of individuals in society he was also the recipient of the Jerusalem Prize in the year 2011. In 2016, he received the Shakespeare Prize, which is awarded by the FVS Foundation in Hamburg, Germany. Thus, all these awards stand as a testimony to Ian McEwan's contribution to the fields of literature, art and society as a whole. In the present time, he is still recognised as one of the most accomplished contemporary authors.

Stop to Consider

Ian McEwan emerges as a versatile writer who has left an indelible mark on the postmodern literary landscape. While his command over the subject matter is commendable, equal recognition must be given to his narrative strategies. McEwan's meticulous writing style embodies the essence of postmodernism, as he expertly weaves together fragmented narratives. These narrative fragments intertwine vignettes from the past, present, and anticipated future, creating a tapestry of storytelling. The interplay of these intertwined plots offers critical insights that enrich the overall narrative structure of his novels.

4.4 McEwan's Literary works

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This section will give you a better understanding of Ian McEwan's seminal works. The description of his works will lend an insight into the themes and style of his novels. It will help you analyse the context of his works and the circumstances within which the characters are made to function. This section will also emphasise on McEwan's role as a writer who projects the postmodern world in his novels.

McEwan's literary career can be churned out on the basis of his divided interests from his childhood till his maturity. His early works were driven by a pinch of vigorous curiosity in his young mind. Gradually, his works witnessed the darker side of human nature that affects the psychological dimensions. His later works saw a delineation of the morality and didactic pattern of life. However, the moralistic fervour gets compromised in the process of underlining the social spectrum of life. He had a penchant for novels and movies about Britain. His innovation and juxtaposition of the gruesome occurrences with the normal regularity of life helped him attain the nickname "Ian Macabre". The novels started to take shape due to the growing crisis of modern man. The modern-day tragedies that were falling on men gave him content for his latest novels. The pandemic that struck the current generation gave him scope to delve deeper into the uncertainties that govern modern man.

His appreciation for artistry flourished as he delved into the writings of perceptive authors such as Fyodor Dostoevsky and Joseph Conrad, whose literary works shaped his discerning sensibilities. His literary endeavours unfolded on three distinct levels: initially, he embarked on a path as a short story writer, where his remarkable power of storytelling garnered him well-deserved recognition. Though his position as a short story writer paved his way as a novelist, his position as a foundational literary figure was cemented with the publication of his path-breaking novels, which cater to the second phase of his literary career. Apart from his interest in prose fiction, he also wrote numerous plays and screenplays for movies which were based on novels by other authors, as well as screenplays for the adaptation of his own novels. This can be conceived as the third phase of his literary interest. Though his life was surrounded by several controversies, such as those pertaining to accusations of plagiarism and censorship, he paid no heed to such allegations and instead aimed at ameliorating his artistic skills.

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Stop to Consider

Recurrent themes of McEwan's novels at a glimpse

McEwan's novels serve as thought-provoking vehicles that tackle significant issues surrounding mental well-being, trauma, and the complexities of human dilemmas. Through his works, he compels readers to ponder these modern-day problems, shedding light on sensitive issues that demand attention. His deep understanding of life and mental health allows him to navigate such topics with remarkable ease, offering profound insights into the human condition. McEwan deserves commendation for fearlessly addressing subjects that are often deemed socially unacceptable, using his voice to bring awareness and initiate important conversations. McEwan's works challenge conventional notions of relationships, presenting narratives that unfold in abnormal and often bizarre circumstances. Within these narratives, his characters grapple with extraordinary chaos that profoundly impacts their psyches, posing threats to their personal lives. Through his foray into the crime, thriller, and suspense genres, McEwan compels readers to contemplate the disquieting disturbances that lurk within the minds of both criminals and seemingly ordinary individuals. The portrayal of disturbing relationships within his works serves as a reflection of the crises faced by modern individuals, where issues such as growing infidelity and deep-seated insecurities become prevalent challenges.

Till date, McEwan has several novels and short story collections to his credit, each unique in style and innovative in its themes. The works of Ian McEwan, which earned him fame and reputation, will now be discussed in brief to extend an overview of his prominent novels.

The Cement Garden (1978): McEwan's debut novel delves into the unsettling lives of four siblings, grappling to survive in the aftermath of their parents' demise. While the central focus revolves around the troubled household of Jack and his siblings, the story is laden with explicit sexual undertones. The narrative deeply explores questions of morality and challenges established social norms. The plot ventures into the darker aspects of human nature, vividly depicting the psychological impact of incestuous relationships and repressed sexual desires on the characters. In an attempt to escape societal expectations, the siblings bury their deceased father in the garden, encased in

cement, and construct their own secluded world. The novel's success is evident in its inclusion on numerous award shortlists, such as the White Novel Award in 1978, cementing its status as one of McEwan's highly acclaimed works.

The Child in Time (1987): It stands as one of McEwan's most acclaimed literary achievements, earning him the prestigious Whitebread Novel Award in 1987. The novel centres on Stephen Lewis, a children's author, and explores the profound connection between a father and his daughter, who goes missing in a supermarket. This devastating abduction completely upends Stephen's world, as he grapples with the aftermath and trauma it inflicts upon his life. The novel delves into themes of parental love, grief, evolving human relationships, and the profound sense of loss through Stephen's perspective. The introspective tone of the narrative deeply resonates with the pain and overwhelming sense of loss experienced by a father. Throughout the novel, McEwan skilfully examines Stephen's plight and presents how he navigates his present crisis. The book stands as a testament to McEwan's mastery of capturing the complexities of the human condition, delving into the psychological depths of the victim.

Enduring Love **(1997):** In this exceptional novel by McEwan, the storyline revolves around the traumatic events that unfold within the romantic relationship of Joe Rose, a science writer, and his girlfriend Clarissa. Their love affair becomes disrupted when Parry intervenes, forming a complex love triangle that delves into layers of obsession. As the characters descend into their own individual paranoia, the novel explores the fragility of human relationships amidst enduring love for one another. The psychological and emotional toll of love becomes entangled, exposing the darker aspects of human nature. Within the exploration of love and obsession, the novel delves deep into the intricate complexities of human emotions, portraying the characters' struggles with profound intensity and depth. Overall, it stands as a compelling narrative crafted by McEwan.

Amsterdam(1998): This award-winning novel by McEwan is set in Amsterdam and was honoured with the Man Booker Prize in 1998. The exploration of complex love remains a central theme in this work. The story primarily revolves around the intricate relationship between Molly Lane and Clive Linley, with the narrative predominantly taking place in retrospect after Molly's death. The novel opens with Clive and Vernon Halliday, former lovers of Molly, engaging in a conversation about their shared past with her during

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her funeral. This conversation uncovers several darker aspects of their relationships. The intertwined web of personal and professional conflicts strains the friendship between Clive and Vernon, as the novel delves into themes of loyalty, infidelity, shifting emotions, and the consequences of one's actions. McEwan skilfully manoeuvres access to the characters' internal struggles and psychological imbalances, offering brilliant insights throughout the novel. The city of Amsterdam serves as a backdrop, reflecting the morally ambiguous and morally challenged choices faced by the characters. As a result, the novel deeply explores the complexities of human relationships and blurs the lines between personal and public morality, making it a thought-provoking and captivating read.

Saturday (2005): The novel *Saturday* revolves around a single day in the life of Henry Perowne, a successful neurosurgeon. It meticulously traces the series of events that unfold, encompassing Henry's personal life, work, and relationships. However, as the day progresses, Henry's routine is abruptly disrupted when he encounters a thug named Baxter. This encounter sets in motion a chain of events that culminate in a climactic moment, forcing Henry to confront his fears and test his moral convictions. The narrative style is introspective, delving into the inner struggles of Henry's mind as he navigates the complexities of both his personal and professional lives. Through this novel, McEwan showcases his skill and mastery in crafting character-driven narratives and capturing the subtle nuances of human experience. With its exploration of family dynamics, professional ethics, and the impact of political events on individuals, *Saturday* offers ample scope to resonate with readers, earning widespread admiration within the reading public.

On Chesil Beach (2007)*:* This critically acclaimed novel delves into themes of love, communication, and sexual repression, garnering praise from both readers and critics alike. The story revolves around a newlywed couple, Edward and Florence, who embark on their honeymoon at Chesil Beach in Dorset, England. The dynamics of their love are heavily influenced by the class difference between them, as each comes from different backgrounds with contrasting sets of values. Edward, from a lower-middle-class family, is passionate about history and music, while Florence is captivated by violins and becomes a talented violinist herself. The class struggle amplifies the tension and cultural divide within their relationship, raising profound questions and challenges. The weight of societal expectations and personal ambitions plays a significant role in determining their actions and choices. This novel beautifully

combines social commentary with the complexities of human connection, exploring the impact of obstacles and the consequences of misunderstandings and unspoken desires. It provides profound insight into the fears, hopes, and aspirations of the characters, making it a captivating exploration of the complexities of love and societal pressures.

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SAQ

Comment on McEwan's recurrent themes addressed in his acclaimed novels. (50 words)

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.....

How does McEwan address the darker side of the human psyche in his novels? (60 words)

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McEwan's other works of considerable merit include:

- *The Comfort of Strangers (1981)*
- *The Innocent (1990)*
- *Black Dogs (1992)*
- *The Daydreamer (1994)*
- *Solar (2010)*
- *Sweet Tooth (2012)*
- *The Children Act (2014)*
- *Nutshell (2016)*
- *Machines Like Me (2019)*
- *Lessons: A Novel (2022)*

His non-fictional works are:

- Beyond Belief (2001)
- Only Love and Then Oblivion (2001)
- How Could We Have Forgotten This Was Always Going to Happen? (2005)
- A Parallel Tradition (2006)

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- An Inspiration, Yes. Did I Copy from Another Author? No (2006)
- The Day of Judgement (2008)

His novels that were adapted into films are

- *Atonement (2007)*
- *Enduring Love*
- *The Children Act*
- *On Chesil Beach*

4.5 Placing the text

In this section, you will be introduced to McEwan's most celebrated work *Atonement.* It is a work that shaped the way readers perceived the works of Ian McEwan. Though the novel seems to replicate the Austenian touch of love and marriage, it clings to the darker and far more heinous suffering in the process of attaining love. It offers a realistic depiction of love, which does not necessarily lead to happy ending. The popularity of the work can be ascribed to McEwan's mastery in handling the structure, main themes and characterisation along with other literary qualities like realism, modernism and postmodernism. Appreciating the unique style of McEwan, Colm Tobin, who is a remarkable reviewer of McEwan's novel, comments: "The writing also shares almost stilted diction of McEwan's novel *Atonement*, a diction used with immense care to create distance and irony, without creating too much of either. It is like putting just enough air in a hot air balloon to allow it to fly, making sure, however, that it can land as well". ("Dissenting the Body" 29)

Among his inexhaustible gamut of literary offerings, the novel *Atonement (2001)* stands as a testimony to McEwan's excellent novelistic exercise. This particular work is frequently recognized as a highly commendable piece of literature. It established him as a pioneering author of literary fiction. The novel *Atonement* by Ian McEwan is an engrossing literary work that explores the complexities of love, guilt, and storytelling's transformative power. In 2001, the novel was published to critical acclaim and captured the imaginations of readers worldwide with its thought-provoking themes, intricate plot, and rich prose. The plot of the novel revolves around the incredible depiction of love and heartbreak. In *Atonement,* the consequences and repercussions of a single lie are explored through the lives of the characters against the backdrop of World War II. The novel takes inspiration from Jane Austen's *Northanger*

Abbey by incorporating its epigraph, and creating a parallel tone between the two works. This epigraph establishes a shared theme of mistaken assumptions, suspicions, and false accusations, drawing a connection between the narratives. By using the epigraph, the novel prepares readers for the unsettling, tumultuous, harrowing, and painful discoveries that lie ahead. The novel is set in England during the 1930s and 1940s, during the pre-war era, the Dunkirk evacuation, and the post-war era. This novel is centred on Briony Tallis, a budding writer with a vivid imagination. The protagonist finds herself entangled in a crime, embarking on a lifelong journey of atonement. Her misinterpretation of a sequence of events set in motion a life-altering accusation, forever altering the lives of her sister, Cecilia, and Robbie Turner, a young man who was harbouring a secret affection for Cecilia. As the story unfolds, the characters confront their inner struggles, wrestling with guilt and the transformative power of love, all set against the backdrop of a world engulfed in war.

In the novel, McEwan delves into the dual nature of love to explore its ability to both transform and destroy. The story highlights the power and repercussions of love in its diverse manifestations, ranging from the intense passion shared by Cecilia and Robbie to Briony's unrequited longing. Remorse serves as a central theme, as the characters wrestle with the aftermath of their actions and seek redemption for their transgressions. Throughout the narrative, McEwan delves into the innate human capacity for self-forgiveness, highlighting the extraordinary lengths individuals may go to in order to achieve reconciliation. The novel provides a profound exploration of love's influence and the profound impact it can have on the lives of those involved.

The book explores the fallibility of memory and the subjective nature of truth, presenting a narrative that revolves around the haunting presence of memories in the characters' lives. Through Briony's unreliable narration and the shifting perspectives of the characters, McEwan delves into the blurred boundaries between reality and perception, prompting readers to critically examine their own preconceived notions of what constitutes truth. Briony, with her vivid imagination, at times blurs the line between fantasy and reality. Her assumptions and declarations led to Robbie being falsely accused of sexual assault. The way she perceives events ultimately shapes the trajectory of the character's actions and the course of their lives. The novel invites contemplation on the complexities of memory and the profound impact it can have on shaping individuals' experiences and relationships.

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McEwan's skilful storytelling is evident in the significant role played by the novel's narrative structure. The book employs multiple viewpoints, seamlessly transitioning between first-person and third-person narratives, offering diverse interpretations of the events depicted. The author also incorporates metafictional elements that emphasize the influence of storytelling itself and its profound impact on lives and perspectives. The narrative unfolds in a fragmentary manner, oscillating between different characters' viewpoints. This back-and-forth movement allows for shifting perspectives and provides insight into the inner workings of the characters' minds. The novel is also steeped in intertextuality, which contributes to its postmodern flavour. While McEwan faced accusations of plagiarism from some of his contemporaries regarding *Atonement*, many writers, such as Thomas Pynchon, stood by him, viewing intertextuality as an integral element of postmodern historiography.

Atonement garnered immense praise upon its release, earning a nomination for the esteemed Man Booker Prize for Fiction and solidifying Ian McEwan's status as a highly revered literary figure. The novel's depiction of themes such as guilt, love, and the complexities of human nature struck a chord with readers, leading to thought-provoking discussions surrounding the profound influence of storytelling and the far-reaching consequences of our actions and decisions.

Stop to Consider

Atonement delves deep into the realm of human emotions, traversing themes of love, guilt, and the profound nature of storytelling. With its engaging characters, intricately woven plot, and compelling motifs, the novel beckons readers to ponder the intricate complexities that define human relationships and the redemptive potential of forgiveness. *Atonement* captivates audiences with its enduring impact, leaving an indelible imprint on the literary landscape and solidifying McEwan's reputation as a masterful storyteller.

Check Your Progress

1. How does McEwan deal with the theme of love and separation?
2. Have you noticed how McEwan explores realism in his works?
3. What is the novel *Atonement* all about?
4. How does McEwan deal with the postmodern element in his novels?

4.6 Summing Up

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This unit has given you an understanding of Ian McEwan's contribution to the literary world. It has elaborated on McEwan's life and biography so that it is easier to comprehend his literary works. consideration of autobiographical elements in McEwan's works may prompt consideration of the Intentional Fallacy, as argued by Wimsatt and Beardsley. However, McEwan himself has asserted in numerous interviews that his novels are indeed infused with his personal experiences and real-life incidents. Thus, the section on the biographical sketch will help you *to identify* the stepping stones of his early life that shaped him into the celebrated figure he eventually turned out to be. Again, it will also help you *to familiarize* yourself with some of his foundational texts that shaped his personality as a writer of wide acclaim. His works are mostly revolutionary and path-breaking in nature as he addresses some of the crucial issues pertaining to the human mind. The modern milieu gets represented in an atypical manner to cling to profound sensibilities affecting relationships and familial bonds. His versatility is apparent in his ability to bring about a significant shift in the meticulous handling of subjects, showcasing his craftsmanship in intricately weaving his works together. The section on Awards and Recognition aims *to highlight* the broad readership and deep acceptance that he has garnered from the public. Additionally, the section on his works provides insight into the diverse themes and subjects explored in each of his seminal pieces. In the final section of this unit, you are introduced to Ian McEwan's intriguing novel *Atonement*. The purpose of this section was to *provide* you with a strong foundation and knowledge of the book, both of which are crucial for understanding the remaining units of the novel. It aimed to provide you with the necessary information to critically analyse and assess the work by acquainting you with the novel's themes and plot. The novel explores a wide range of challenging ideas and complicated problems. In this section, an attempt was made to raise your interest in the novel and get you ready for the more in-depth investigation that will take place in the following unit. The themes mentioned in the section serve as markers, pointing out significant elements of the book that will be analysed and examined in more detail. You will have the chance *to delve* more deeply into the complexity of the plot and concepts as you move through the following units on *Atonement*. Through this investigation, you'll be able *to gain* a deeper grasp of the novel's narrative structure, character development, and overarching themes. By analysing *Atonement*, you can improve your analytical thinking and develop a greater understanding of Ian McEwan's creative devices. The upcoming

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units on *Atonement* will allow you to immerse into the text and uncover its multiple layers of meaning. You will encounter thought-provoking topics, examine the moral complexities of the narrative, and contemplate the repercussions of the characters' actions.

4.7 References and Suggested Readings

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Ellam, Julie. *A Reader's Guide to Ian McEwan's Atonement.* Continuum Contemporaries, 2009.

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Unit 5 : Ian McEwan: *Atonement* (Introducing the Novel)

Unit Structure:

5.1Objectives

The unit intends to introduce the text *Atonement* by Ian McEwan and to help you to analyse the plot and understand the standpoint from which the characters are made to act and behave. The plot analysis will also give you an understanding of the contemporary themes and the art of characterization that will help you decipher the motifs of the novel. With this in mind, the unit is designed to enable you to–

- *read* the text of *Atonement*
- *estimate* the role of characters and assess their actions in the course of the story
- *interpret* the novel from your perspective to formulate your own interpretation of the text.

5.2 Introduction

Ian McEwan, renowned for his contributions to contemporary British fiction, is a novelist who skillfully engages with profound ideas in his works. His unique literary style positions him as both a postmodern and modernist author, as he challenges prevailing perspectives within narratives. While his novels initially convey an illusion of psychological realism, McEwan intentionally disrupts this perception by emphasising the inherent impossibility of achieving

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true realism in a novelistic exercise. His writing grants readers intimate access to the minds of his characters, enabling them to navigate the dynamic and ever-shifting perspectives within his narratives.

McEwan's works stand out for their remarkable depiction of the characters' psychological acuity. His talent for immersing himself in the intricacies of their thoughts and emotions is truly commendable. Through the skilful use of literary techniques like interior monologues and stream of consciousness, his novels provide a revealing exposition of the characters' complex and nuanced emotional landscapes. In addition to his exploration of the psychological dimension, McEwan's art of characterization demands profound comprehension. Critics have widely praised his remarkable skill in crafting vivid and realistic characters. His meticulous attention to intricate details, coupled with a willingness to tackle the complexities of character and narrator, creates a sense of detachment and an unreliable narrative voice. In depicting characters, McEwan delves into their transformative journeys, a theme shared by notable modern writers such as Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence. Consequently, McEwan firmly establishes himself as an integral part of the modern canon of authors who have explored the depths of human transformation and narrative complexity.

Geoff Dyer, in his review in the *Guardian*, argues that "McEwan uses his novels to show how this subjective or interior transformation can now be seen to have interacted with the larger march of twentieth-century history" (Dyer, 2001). Dyer draws a parallel between McEwan and other modern authors, emphasizing their shared preoccupations. McEwan's works resonate with the voices of classical modernist writers, reviving the use of realism and modernism. This resonance is particularly evident in the novel under consideration, where the psychological complexities take centre stage, allowing the readers' access to the characters' internal crises through a stream of thoughts. McEwan's novels have garnered popularity due to their innovative narrative approach. The reader is actively invited to respond to the story's unfolding events, engaging with the narrative on multiple levels. McEwan's writing style demonstrates a keen sense of control, with precise and controlled prose. Critics often praise his ability to construct intricate plots while maintaining a firm grip on the story's structure. Through his meticulous attention to plot arrangement, coupled with exquisite prose and vivid imagery, McEwan showcases his mastery as an author of remarkable talent.

His exploration of morally complex situations and ethical dilemmas is particularly evident in the novel under study. McEwan skillfully combines tension and mystery, ensuring that readers remain captivated as they unravel the dominant suspense of the narrative. Anticipation permeates his storytelling, with a multitude of coincidences and chances introducing unexpected twists. This deliberate weaving of suspense and surprise keeps readers fully engaged throughout his works. *Atonement*, regarded as one of his best works, was chosen by the Times Magazine in 2010 as one of the top 100 English novels published since 1923. Even though the book is written from a postmodern standpoint, it adopts a historiographical approach and is set before, during, and after World War II. *Atonement* is a postmodern literary work that includes a number of postmodern literary tropes. It serves as an exemplar of metafiction, as it diverges from conventional texts by not only exploring specific themes but also acquainting readers with the process of writing fiction itself. The novel encourages readers to doubt the narrator's position even if it initially gives the appearance of verisimilitude, which is typical of realist novels. Because of the realistic portrayal of love, emotions, and sorrow, readers could easily relate to the characters. As a postmodern work, the novel acknowledges the existence of multiple realities that cannot be neatly reconciled into a single narrative. This is reflected in the three-part structure of the novel, where various perspectives are interwoven. The unconventional traits of the narrative structure contribute to the growing popularity of the novel, while its tone and style engage readers, fostering a cohesive and immersive reading experience.

Structurally, the novel *Atonement* is divided into three distinct parts, each representing different time periods, locations, and perspectives. Part I unfolds at the Tallis estate, while Part II delves into the wartime experiences at Dunkirk. Part III explores Briony's role as a nurse. The Epilogue serves as the final section, unravelling the mysteries set up in the preceding parts. In this concluding section, conflicts within the characters find resolution, and the significance of the title becomes apparent. It is revealed that the entire narrative has been crafted by Briony herself, as evidenced by her initials, B.T. This revelation offers a fresh perspective, as the story is retold in retrospect by an older Briony. Through her act of writing, Briony re-evaluates and filters her past actions, seeking repentance and atonement for the mistakes she made as a young girl. The novel thus explores themes of seeking redemption and salvation for past sins.

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5.3 What happens in the Novel

It is well understood that from the above discussion, you have withdrawn certain assumptions related to the text *Atonement* and have discovered how, apart from the story, the process of framing the narrative is indispensable. You should have also briefly identified what makes this text postmodern in nature. However, while analyzing the plot, pay special attention to the context as well as the narrative structure. This will help you to unravel the dynamics related to metafiction and self-conscious narrative framework. I would urge you all to refer to the William H. Gass' work on metafiction to understand the intricacies of metafiction and relate the concept to the novel. I would also encourage you to read the text before diving into the plot, as it would help to develop subjective interpretation and engage in further discussion or analysis. Reading the text would allow you to gain a comprehensive understanding of its depth and meaning and help you to approach the novel from different angles to form a well-rounded interpretation.

The novel revolves around three parts.

***Part I*:** In Part I, the central character, a 13-year-old Briony Tallis, is introduced. Briony, a young and aspiring author, possesses a vivid imagination and a desire for control that shape the unfolding events. The story is set in 1935 England, primarily at the Tallis estate, where Briony's family resides. Mr. Tallis, the master of the house, is mostly absent, while his wife Emily suffers from severe migraines. Their children include son Leon, elder daughter Cecilia, and their younger daughter Briony. There are multiple points of view at work in this part. At the start of the novel, the Tallis family hosts the visiting children of Emily's sister, who have come for a visit before their mother's second marriage. Among the visiting children are an 11-year-old elder daughter, Lola, and twin siblings, Pierrot and Jackson. Briony's passion for writing is evident, as she has already completed a play called *The Trials of Arabella* and eagerly plans to stage it to celebrate Leon's arrival. However, while preparing for the guest's arrival, Briony witnesses a scene through the window that leaves a lasting impression on her. From Briony's perspective, she sees her sister Cecilia and Robbie, the son of the housekeeper whose education is funded by the Tallis family, engaged in a heated argument. In a rush of emotions, Cecilia partially undresses and jumps into the fountain, to this Briony forms the assumption that Robbie is threatening Cecilia and that her sister is defenseless.

However, the narrative also provides Cecilia's perspective on the incident at the fountain. Their argument stemmed from Cecilia's attachment to an antique vase, while Robbie dismissed her obsession and, in a moment of romantic playfulness, accidentally broke the vase, with a piece falling into the fountain. Cecilia, valuing the vase greatly, jumps into the fountain partially undressed to retrieve the detached piece. It is during this moment that Briony witnesses the altercation between Cecilia and Robbie, leading to her misguided assumptions. Subsequent layers of misunderstanding and suspicion unfold as the story progresses.

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Stop to Consider

The Tallis estate in the novel *Atonement* serves as a central setting that holds symbolic significance throughout the story. Located in the English countryside, the estate is a sprawling property with a grand mansion, beautiful gardens, and vast grounds. It represents the privileged and sheltered world of the Tallis family, particularly the matriarch, Emily Tallis. The estate's physical features, such as the meticulously maintained gardens and the imposing mansion, embody the wealth, status, and social standing of the Tallis family. It reflects their aristocratic background and the sense of superiority associated with their position in society. The estate also plays a crucial role in the narrative. It is at the Tallis estate that the pivotal event of the story takes place, involving a misunderstanding and a false accusation that lead to life-altering consequences for the characters. The grandeur and seclusion of the estate magnify the impact of the events and contribute to the intense emotional atmosphere of the novel. Furthermore, the Tallis estate acts as a metaphorical boundary between the protected, ordered world of the family and the chaotic, unpredictable outside world. It represents a realm of privilege and control that gradually crumbles as the novel progresses, mirroring the disruptions and ruptures occurring in the lives of the characters. Overall, the Tallis estate in *Atonement* symbolises social class, repression, personal transformation, and the consequences of actions, making it an integral part of the novel's thematic exploration.

Leon returns to the estate with his friend Paul Marshall, who owns a chocolate factory. Briony assigns roles to her cousins for the play *The Trials of Arabella*, with Lola insisting on playing the actress and Briony taking on

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the role of the director. Leon invites Robbins to a dinner party. Robbie decides to apologise to Cecilia and writes a letter expressing his desire for her, intending to discard the draft. However, he mistakenly gives Briony the explicit letter instead of the apology letter. Briony reads the letter and forms a negative opinion of Robbie, seeing him as immoral and sexually deviant. Cecilia reads Robbie's letter and becomes enamoured with him. In the family library, Briony witnesses Cecilia and Robbie in a compromising position and assumes Robbie is assaulting her, solidifying her negative perception of him. Cecilia leaves the library, leaving Robbie to explain himself to Briony, but he also departs without saying anything.

During the dinner, news spreads that the twins have escaped, prompting everyone to search for them. In the midst of her own search, Briony makes a horrifying discovery: Lola is being sexually assaulted by an unknown assailant. The culprit escapes, leaving Briony and Lola uncertain of their identities. Driven by her preconceived notions, Briony concludes that Robbie is the rapist and convinces Lola of his guilt, despite her own uncertainty. Meanwhile, Robbie returns with the twins after finding them. Briony, still doubtful, accuses Robbie of the assault, leading to his arrest by the police based on her accusation: "Everything connected. It was her own discovery. It was her story, the one that was writing itself around her." (McEwan 144)

SAQ

Explain the importance of altering perspectives between characters in the novel. (40 words)

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.....

.....

Stop to Consider

The points of view in *Atonement* offer diverse perspectives on the story, contributing to its multi-layered narrative and enhancing the reader's understanding of the events. By presenting the viewpoints of different characters, such as Briony, Robbie, and Cecilia, the novel enables us to grasp the subjective interpretations, biases, and motivations that shape their actions and perceptions. This narrative technique adds depth and complexity to the story, capturing the complexities of human experience and emphasizing the intricacies of truth, memory, and perspective.

Briony's false accusation devastates Cecilia, and nobody speaks up or defends Robbie's innocence, leading to his arrest by the police. Briony's suspicions gain strength with Robbie's arrest, as she perceives him as a sexual maniac. During the police interrogation, Briony's statements lack consistency, weakening her allegations. She initially claims to have witnessed the act but then asserts that she simply knows it was Robbie. The investigating officer questions her, highlighting the inconsistency, but Briony firmly maintains that she saw Robbie assault Lola in a secluded part of the estate. The onlookers remain silent as Robbie is taken away by the police. Cecilia weeps, while Robbie's mother curses the upper-class family for wrongly accusing her son.

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SAQ

What do you think about Briony's character? Is she impulsive or does she possess perfect traits to be a writer? (50 words)

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.....

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Part II

This part of the novel presents a stark contrast to Part I, shifting abruptly from the Tallis estate to the war-torn setting of World War II. It is narrated from Robbie's point of view. This narrative division effectively showcases the unconventional arrangement of the story. The section highlights the profound impact of war, capturing its numbing effect. The impending sense of doom becomes palpable as the crisis in the war zone takes centre stage. Robbie's identity undergoes a significant transformation from lover to soldier. After his arrest based on Briony's accusations in Part I, Part II takes us three and a half years into the future. It begins with Robbie serving in the British Army and advancing through France alongside his comrades, Corporal Nettle and Corporal Mace. Amidst the grim aftermath of war, with corpses scattered and limbs severed, Robbie comes across a map that will guide them on their path. The harrowing scenes of war intensify Robbie's suffering. The circumstances that led Robbie to this point are gradually unveiled through the author's innovative narrative strategies.

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Stop to Consider

Part II of the novel lacks any chapterization and the entire part is clubbed under one chapter. This is perhaps done as an experiment to embark on the hardship of the characters. This part highlights the trials and tribulations the lovers had to undergo as a result of Briony's one error of judgement. The chaotic setting gives way to a series of agonies and no break in the chapter could end the continuation of trauma for Robbie as well as Cecilia. The break from Part one is abruptly done to introduce the fragmentary scope of narrative. The time travel enables us to view the sharp contrast from Part I in terms of tone, setting and style.

A series of flashbacks and fragments from the past enable the readers to decipher the reasons. It is also brought to light that Turner is striving to endure the pain of the shrapnel wound in his chest. His two fellow soldiers accompany Robbie to find some solace from the dread of the war. They are in search of their fellow soldiers and aspire to reach Dunkirk so that they can reunite with their separated team. They managed to take a rest in a barn, where they met a few Frenchmen who shared their common contempt for the Germans and earnestly wished for the defeat of Germany. As Turner rested, his memory brought back how he spent his days in prison and how he was haunted by Cecilia's memory. He recalls how Cecilia promised to wait for his

Stop to Consider

The psychological displacement experienced by Robbie becomes prominent in Part II. He engages in a process of navigating his memories, with past events significantly influencing his sense of self. The desire to achieve his aspirations and meet expectations intensifies, even as the likelihood of attaining them diminishes. Throughout, there is a persistent urge to discard the burdensome weight of memory. The guilt he carries, despite being innocent, contaminates his thoughts and undermines him internally. The hallucinations and flashbacks serve as glimpses into his suppressed yearnings to absolve himself of blame and be reunited with his beloved Cecilia.

return. The letters from Cecilia kept him moving and motivated him to be hopeful for their reunion. His recent meeting with Cecilia in a cafe in 1939

makes him hopeful. After years, the lovers met, and he was spellbound to see Cecilia after years dressed in a nurse's attire. It was the day when his tenure in prison was about to end and his life as a soldier was yet to begin. It was Cecilia who constantly wrote to Robbie and their love and fondness grew across the walls of the prison. The day they met, their revived vigour towards each other was heightened, along with a pinch of awkwardness at meeting each other after a long time. As they were about to depart, Turner informed Cecilia of his enlistment in the war, which attracted Cecilia, who desperately waited for his return. As Robbie heads towards the warzone,e the only means of connection between the lovers are letters. While Robbie was disbursing his duty in the war, Cecilia imparted her duty as a nurse. It is revealed that Cecilia had abandoned her family since the day of Robbie's arrest in 1935. She has cut off ties with her entire family for the sake of Robbie. Cecilia regrets how her family treated him and the failure of a proper investigation into his rape charges.

Amidst the war, Robbie's departure intensifies the distance between him and Cecilia. Despite the separation, they continue to correspond through letters. Robbie urges Cecilia to reconcile with her family, while Cecilia shares that Briony expresses a desire to mend their sisterly bond. Briony has abandoned her plans for Cambridge University and is now pursuing nursing. Cecilia discovers Briony's remorse and plea for forgiveness. However, Cecilia's focus remains on waiting for Robbie's response, paying little attention to Briony's explanation.

The narrative shifts to the present time in the war zone, focusing on Turner's compassionate nature as he prioritises the safety of civilians despite his own crisis. Upon reaching Dunkirk, they anxiously await evacuation amidst chaotic scenes among the soldiers. Nettle and Turner encounter a woman who is searching for her pig. In a display of humility and assistance, they help her find the pig amidst the war's turmoil. Turner's sole desire is to be evacuated so that he can reunite with Cecilia and fulfil his longing to be with her. While seeking rest in a crowded basement, memories from his past flood his mind, and he begins to hallucinate about Cecilia. He envisions her eagerly awaiting his arrival, their reunion, and the fateful day of his wrongful arrest despite his innocence.

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Check Your Progress

1. What happens to Robbie in the war?
2. What kind of memories haunts him?
3. Does his memory reveal his repressed desires?
4. What impact did the war have on the lovers?

Part III

This section focuses on Briony's journey of atonement for her past sins. We are introduced to adult Briony, who, at 18 years old, has decided to dedicate her life to serving as a nurse. The narrative continues in the third person, and thematically, it can be seen as an extension of Part II, as the trauma and suffering of soldiers remain prominent. Structurally, it mirrors Part II as well, lacking chapter divisions and being summarised in a single chapter. Briony undergoes nurse training and tends to wounded soldiers who have arrived from Dunkirk, burdened with guilt and striving to make amends. Her choice to forfeit her place at Cambridge University and become a nurse is also her way of repenting for her mistake. Following in Cecilia's footsteps, she does not attend Cambridge and instead finds herself in the hospital. Briony struggles to navigate the dual challenges of attending to injured soldiers while trying to please her head nurse, Sister Drummond. Although she finds it difficult to adapt to this new profession, it becomes a means for her to inflict discomfort and punish herself for wronging Robbie. While she corresponds with her mother through letters, she decides to dedicate her life to the service of patients. As a curious writer from childhood, Briony continues the habit of writing and records her daily experiences in her diary. She sends a draft of her recent work to the magazine *Horizon* but receives no response. Learning from her father about Lola and Paul's marriage, her past anxieties get triggered, reminding her of Robbie and leading her to wonder if he is still at war or has survived. She regrets her past decisions and desperately wants to repair the damage caused during her younger years.

Amidst the challenges of her life as a nurse attending to injured and dying soldiers, Briony encounters a French soldier named Luc Cornet on his deathbed. They exchange conversations about their families, and when he asks her to remove the bandage on his head, she discovers his partially decomposed skull. Although he succumbs to his injuries, he leaves a lasting

impact on Briony's mind. She shares an inexplicable bond with him as his memories transport her back to her past. Seeing a reflection of Robbie in Luc intensifies her guilt.

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Receiving a rejection letter from the magazine, Briony gets motivated to work on her errors, encouraged by the reviewers' feedback. She writes two stories based on Cecilia and Robbie, titled *Two Figures by a Fountain*. The magazine's editor suggests an alternative viewpoint, cautioning that Briony's perception of the couple may be misleading and harmful to their love. Dealing with anxiety and inner pain, Briony attends Paul and Lola's wedding, which further transports her back to the day when Lola was assaulted by Paul. However, Lola avoids interaction with Briony.

Briony decides to meet Cecilia and is met with shock upon arriving at her apartment. Initially, Cecilia remains cordial, but she cannot forgive her and reprimands her. Briony is surprised to see Robbie present in Cecilia's place. Despite his anger at her presence, Robbie urges Briony to alter her false testimony and asks her to return the five years he spent in immense suffering. Cecilia tries to console him and implores Briony to retract her previous testimony. They believe Danny Hardman was the true culprit and ask Briony to recall the incident accurately. However, Briony clarifies that the rapist was Paul, not Danny, and that she had just attended Lola and Paul's wedding. This infuriates Robbie, who apologises for doubting Danny.

Following this encounter, Briony seeks forgiveness from the lovers and is relieved to witness Cecilia's genuine love for Robbie. Upon returning, she feels an urgent need to begin her "atonement" for the lives she destroyed. The chapter concludes with Briony's signature, "BT, London, 1999."

Epilogue: The epilogue serves as a definitive moment in the novel and is presented in a first-person narrative. It begins with Briony, now 77 years old, deciding to visit the library on her birthday. She reveals her struggle with vascular dementia and her determination to record and preserve everything before her memory fades. In the library, she hands a bundle of letters, including those she received from Corporal Nettle and Cecilia, to the Keeper of the Documents. Briony then prepares to attend her birthday party while reflecting on a photograph of her husband, Thierry. The party takes place at Tilney's Hotel, formerly the Tallis estate. The view of the hotel triggers memories of her childhood, evoking images of the lake and the lawn. Briony addresses the

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gathering, which includes Leon, her great-grandchildren, grandchildren, and children. Her grandchildren surprise her with a performance of *The Trials of Arabella*. After the party, Briony feels anxious about her recent and possibly final novel, which she began writing in 1940. She emphasises the importance of recording Robbie's tragedy with her own hands and revealing the crimes committed by Paul and her in the summer of 1935. The novel contains real names and was meant to be published only after the deaths of Paul and Lola. However, since Paul is still alive, she hesitates about its publication. Briony mentions that in her novel, Robbie and Cecilia are reunited. She reveals that Robbie died of sepsis on his way to Dunkirk, while Cecilia was killed in an underground bombing. Briony's meeting with Robbie and Cecilia in London was purely a product of her imagination, an attempt to depict them together. The lovers never actually witnessed the sun together. In her final novel, Briony sought to unite them in eternal togetherness, which was her way of atonement. She acknowledges that it was she who separated the lovers, and thus, it became her earnest duty to bring them together, even if it was only through fiction: "When I will be dead, and the Marshalls are dead, and the novel is finally published, we will only exist as my inventions." (McEwan 326)

5.4 Major Characters:

Briony Tallis: Briony, the central character and narrator of the novel, reflects on her past mistakes that profoundly impact the lives of numerous characters. The narrative follows Briony's psychological growth, starting with her at 13 years old in the beginning, transitioning to 18 years old in Part III, and ultimately reaching 77 years old in the epilogue. The story revolves around her journey of trying to make amends for her one act of misjudgment, which leads to the separation and enduring suffering of the lovers. As a writer, Briony possesses a creative imagination that initially casts Robbie as a villain based on certain misconceptions and deceptions. However, throughout the novel, she desperately endeavours to atone for her sins. Her final act of atonement comes to fruition as she memorializes the love between the lovers in her novel. Her perception of Robbie as a maniac is influenced by various factors, including her own infatuation with him, which is sparked when she witnesses Robbie and Cecilia together. The societal gap or class difference between them may also contribute to her viewing Robbie as a criminal. The workings of Briony's mind as a young girl reveal her lack of experience and her struggles to distinguish right from wrong. However, her single action causes irreparable damage to multiple lives, leading her to dedicate her lifetime to seeking atonement.

Robbie Turner: Robbie, the son of the housekeeper, had the opportunity to pursue his education at Cambridge University alongside Cecilia, due to the sponsorship of the affluent Tallis family. He harbored strong romantic feelings for Cecilia, but their relationship was tragically altered by the misinterpretation of a young Briony, who saw it as a disturbing sexual fixation. Briony's misunderstanding led to devastating consequences for Robbie. Falsely accused of rape based on Briony's accusations, he faced arrest and endured the anguish of being wrongfully branded a criminal. His lower social status played a significant role in his unjust apprehension, as his lack of privilege made it easier for authorities to believe the accusations without conducting a thorough investigation. The question of class emerges as a crucial factor in Robbie's suffering. His social position contributed to the ease with which he was presumed guilty, and the absence of resources available to him for a fair defence. This unjust treatment highlights the societal disparities that perpetuate the oppression of individuals from lower classes. Despite his immense hardships, Robbie clung to the hope of reuniting with Cecilia. He endured unimaginable torment during his service in the war, awaiting the opportunity to be with the woman he loved. Sadly, Robbie's fate was sealed when he ultimately succumbed to death, forever denying him the chance of a fulfilling life. While Briony's depiction suggests a fictional union between Robbie and Cecilia, the reality of Robbie's existence was one marred by hardship, torment, and an untimely demise. His tragic tale exemplifies the profound consequences of societal prejudice and class distinctions, ultimately demonstrating that love was the sole unwavering force that remained by Robbie's side until his last breath.

Cecilia Tallis: Cecilia, the sister of Briony, emerges as a resilient character whose love for Robbie withstands the test of time. Their connection deepens after their return from Cambridge University, and Cecilia proves herself as a determined woman who knows what she desires from life, regardless of societal class boundaries. In the pursuit of love, she willingly sacrifices everything, abandoning her family, luxury, and comfort, as no one else stood up to defend Robbie's innocence. Cecilia chooses the path of nursing, dedicating herself to the care of ailing patients. Despite facing tremendous hardships in this role, her love for Robbie remains unwavering. Overwhelmed by guilt for Robbie's suffering, she willingly sacrifices everything to support him. However, her wait for Robbie's return is never fulfilled, as he is unable to come back to her, and she too ultimately succumbs to her fate. Cecilia holds a deep sense of resentment towards her sister, as a single act from Briony has irrevocably

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disrupted their lives. Cecilia's yearning to reunite with Robbie remains unfulfilled, tragically culminating in her death during a bombing raid in 1940. Thus, her patient wait is forever immaterialized, leaving her unable to find a true reunion with Robbie in reality. It is only in Briony's literary imagination that Cecilia and Robbie find the happiness and reconciliation that eluded them in their actual lives.

Lola Quincey: She is the cousin of Briony and Cecila, accompanied by her twin brothers during their visit to their aunt at the Tallis estate. Portrayed as a distressed figure, she bears the weight of responsibility as the eldest daughter, entrusted with the care of her siblings in the absence of their mother. Their mother, having forsaken them for another man she intended to marry, left her fraught with trauma and anxiety that incessantly haunted her. Regrettably, she becomes a victim of assault by Paul on that fateful summer night in 1935, while her brothers escape from the estate. She emerges as a vulnerable character who easily succumbs to the harrowing events unfolding around her. Captivated by Briony's claim that Robbie was the perpetrator, she readily embraces it, despite her inability to positively identify the assailant. Her support of Briony's accusation sets the stage for the immense hardships that Robbie would subsequently endure. Though she is aware of the uncertainty surrounding Robbie's guilt, she exhibits little to no remorse. Eventually, she enters into a marriage with Paul, the actual rapist, but remains unable to confront Briony. As Briony reaches the age of seventy-seven, Lola enjoys unblemished well-being while her husband succumbs to old age. Evidently, Briony eagerly anticipates the demise of Paul and Lola, as this would enable her to publish a novel bearing the true names of the characters.

Paul Marshall: A companion of Leon who accompanies him upon his return to the Tallis estate, Paul is introduced as the owner of a successful chocolate business that profited from supplying soldiers during the war. Initially he was considered to be worthy of Cecilia for marriage due to his sophisticated reputation. Symbolising upper-class society, he is depicted as someone who capitalises on the labour of the working class. Unbeknownst until the end, Paul emerges as the most malevolent character in the novel. From the moment of his arrival at the estate, his lecherous gaze towards Lola evokes a sense of unease. In an attempt to win Lola's trust, he entertains both the siblings and Lola herself. On the night of the fateful incident, he cunningly avoids drawing attention, despite being the primary culprit. Subsequently, Paul's mention is limited to his wedding with Lola. Towards the conclusion, Briony is repulsed

to find Paul still alive, as his presence poses a legal threat to both Briony and the publisher if the novel is published. He appears to be a philanthropist for the rest of his life but his classy demeanour was still evident.

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5.5 Minor Characters

Emily Tallis: The matriarch figure of the Tallis property, frequently plagued by debilitating migraines, who yearn for respite. She is the parent of Leon, Cecilia, and Briony. In the absence of her spouse Jack, who is fulfilling duties in World War I, she assumes responsibility for the household but hardly engages with any chores wholeheartedly. She supports her daughter Briony's literary pursuits but lacks any ardent interest in her work. Her negligence as a parent to her children is conspicuously visible throughout. She was not supportive enough in sponsoring and encouraging Robbie's education. Being moulded by the mindset of the upper class, she unquestioningly accepts Robbie's accusation and summons the authorities to apprehend him. She neglects to initiate a proper inquiry to uncover the truth and identify the true wrongdoer.

Jack Tallis: Father to Leon, Cecilia, and Briony, whose physical presence is largely absent throughout the novel. He is kind and humble. He dedicates his service to the Second World War as a bureaucrat and exhibits minimal interest in the events taking place at the Tallis Estate. His communication with his family is primarily through written correspondence, and it was through a letter that he informed Briony about Paul and Lola's wedding. Despite potentially harbouring a belief in Robbie's innocence, he did not advocate for a comprehensive investigation into the crime.

Grace Turner: Mother of Robbie Turner who serves as a housekeeper at the Tallis estate. When her son was arrested, she beseeched for mercy and shouted "Liars! Liars" as her pleas were dismissed. In unison with Cecilia, it was exclusively his mother who believed in his innocence. She faithfully remained by her son's side throughout his journey and consistently communicated with him until her final days.

Pierrot and Jackson: The twin cousins of Briony experienced a profound sense of melancholy during their early years, as they were forsaken by their mother. Upon Leon's arrival, Briony expressed her desire to showcase her play, The Trials of Arabella. However, the twins exhibited disinterest in

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participating. When Lola was assaulted that fateful night, the twins, disillusioned by their own helplessness in the absence of their mother's affection, fled from the premises. Nonetheless, it was Robbie who guided them back to the estate. As time passed, they gathered together to commemorate Briony's seventy-seventh birthday and made the decision to assist their grandchildren in bringing forth the play, *The Trials of Arabella,* which they themselves were unable to perform during their youth.

5.6 Summing Up

In this unit, the endeavour is to provide you with a thorough understanding of the postmodern context prevalent in the novel. This unit aims to enhance your comprehension of the actual events that have moulded the identities of all the characters. The systematic analysis of the text section by section will unveil fresh dimensions of the narrative and facilitate the exploration of innovative perspectives. The intricate layers of the text will reveal new outlooks on the novel. The abundance of characters will enable you to perceive the world and its happenings from their unique viewpoints. Consequently, this unit will facilitate the formulation of thematic understanding and the comprehension of various techniques employed in the novel.

5.7 References and Suggested Readings

Dyer, Geoff (2001), 'Who's Afraid of Influence?', *Guardian.* 22 September.

Ellam, Julie. *A Reader's Guide to Ian McEwan's Atonement.* Continuum Contemporaries, 2009.

McEwan, Ian. *Atonement.* Anchor Random House, 2002.

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Unit 6 : Ian McEwan: *Atonement* (Themes and Techniques)

Unit Structure:

6.1 Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- *assess* the prominent themes in the novel
- *examine* the narrative structure employed in the novel
- *analyse* the art of characterization prevalent in the novel
- *interpret* the other relevant issues addressed in the novel

6.2 Introduction:

After a discussion of the plot and character portrayal in the previous unit, it is assumed that you have understood the plot development and the characterization in McEwan's novel *Atonement.* The previous unit will help you extract the themes and techniques employed in the novel as a result of reading and re-reading the text. Placing the text in a postmodern milieu, the innovative narrative structure catches the attention of the readers. As

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postmodernism entails experimentation in art, a plethora of experimentation is constantly at work in the novel. The factors of self-reflexivity, the unreliability of the narrator, fragmentary parts, and the movement of the plot to dismantle the impression of realism and embark on the notion of relative truth over absolute truth are part of the narrative structure. Textually, Briony, the central character, is herself filled with predicaments and uncertainties, yet the audience follows her lead throughout the narrative. But, apart from her version, there is the other side of the story, which is explored through Cecilia's version or Robbie's perspective. The structure of the novel itself becomes the subject of inquiry in the novel. As a modernist, McEwan's themes are mostly a depiction of the modern world's crises. The psychological displacement of the characters is manifested in the actions of the primary characters. His artistic endeavour itself becomes a thematic area of discussion as it touches upon metafictional elements.

The next section will highlight some of the significant themes that have been formulated from a critical reading of the text. After the themes, the narrative techniques will also be closely examined to address the innovative elements evident in the novel.

6.3 Major Themes:

Crime and Punishment

The dichotomy of crime and punishment runs parallel throughout the novel. Though the crime is severe, the process of investigation to find the real culprit is unjustly downplayed. The crime of rape is not the only heinous crime; the other most menacing offence is committed by Briony. In addition to the crime of rape that pervades the narrative, Briony commits an equally serious offence by falsely accusing Robbie based on her mistaken assumptions. Briony's perception of wrongdoing arises from a fountain scene where she witnesses a heated exchange between the lovers. Misinterpreting it as Robbie's attempt to harm Cecilia, she falsely believes she is protecting her. Briony's misconception is reinforced when she comes across Robbie's misplaced letter, followed by an intimate scene in the library. At the tender age of 13, the intensity of the scene is enough for her to interpret it as a crime. This solidifies her negative opinion of Robbie and paves the way for her subsequent actions. Although Briony realises the truth behind the crime early on, it takes time for the full realisation to manifest. As she witnesses a series of events, she constructs

her own narrative, fueled by her imaginative interpretations. Robbie's life is irreparably shattered by the false accusation, and the novel explores the precarious interplay between crime and punishment, where the equilibrium is disturbingly skewed. The crime in the novel is a dreadful one; Paul rapes a minor, a young girl who is outside searching for her twin brothers who have run away. The one who commits the crime moves freely, while the one who was innocent is punished brutally. Apart from physical punishment, psychological punishment is more apparent as memory constantly haunts the lovers and enhances their punishment. Furthermore, Briony subjects herself to self-imposed penance as a consequence of her crime, forsaking a life of privilege and devoting herself to a life of service for the betterment of humanity. The theme of crime and punishment permeates the entire narrative, shaping the characters' fates. Robbie, in particular, endures the most extreme form of punishment through his harrowing experiences during the war, ultimately leading to his tragic death. The intensity of his suffering is further amplified by the fact that he is unable to reunite with his beloved Cecilia, who anxiously awaits his return. The unfulfilled longing and separation from his true love serve as an additional form of torment, heightening the emotional anguish that Robbie endures.

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Guilt and Redemption: The profound impact of guilt on individuals and the lengths they go to seek redemption for a past mistake is closely examined in the novel. It delves into the themes of guilt and redemption, examining how these forces shape the lives of its characters: "Within the half hour, Briony would commit her crime', but the guilt is immediately undercut by self-justification: 'Conscious that she was sharing the night expanse with a maniac, she kept close to the shadowed walls of the house at first, and ducked low beneath the sills whenever she passed in front of a lighted window' (p. 156)" The story revolves around Briony's haunting power of guilt and her ardent quest for atonement, as she grapples with the consequences of her actions. Briony's guilt-ridden conscience bothers her as she falsely accuses Robbie Turner of a crime he did not commit. This accusation, leading to Robbie's unjust imprisonment, fundamentally alters the course of his life and weighs heavily on Briony's conscience. Throughout the novel, Briony is driven by her overwhelming guilt, dedicating her life to atoning for her mistake. Briony's pursuit of redemption takes the form of a writing career. Through her literary endeavours, she endeavours to rewrite the story, seeking alternative versions of events that may offer restitution. By crafting different endings and alternate realities, Briony attempts to reconstruct her own narrative and provide

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a semblance of redemption for herself and Robbie. The theme of redemption also manifests through Robbie Turner, who, upon his release from prison, joins the British Army during World War II. Robbie hopes that his acts of heroism on the battlefield will serve as a form of redemption, enabling him to escape the guilt and shame brought upon him by Briony's false accusation. Unfortunately, his quest for redemption was tragically curtailed by his untimely death in the war. The novel's narrative structure further underscores the themes of guilt and redemption. McEwan employs multiple perspectives, illuminating how guilt and the yearning for redemption ripple through the characters' lives over time. Through these shifting viewpoints, the complexities of guilt and the elusive nature of redemption are brought to the forefront, highlighting how different individuals interpret and grapple with the ramifications of their actions. In *Atonement*, guilt and redemption intertwine inextricably. The characters' guilt serves as the impetus for their relentless pursuit of redemption, yet they also confront the inherent limitations and uncertainties surrounding the attainment of true atonement. The novel profoundly explores the far-reaching impact of guilt on individuals and their arduous journey to reconcile with their past actions, ultimately questioning the attainability of true redemption.

Literary pursuits: The theme of literary allusion is loaded in the novel. As the novel starts, readers are introduced to Briony, who is a budding reader at the age of 13 and has finished her play, *The Trials of Arabella.* She is passionately involved in the art of writing and lives in a world of fantasy. The novel explores the themes of storytelling, imagination, and the power of fiction to shape reality. She aspires to become a writer and spends much of her time crafting stories. Her imagination often blurs the line between reality and fiction, leading to significant consequences for the other characters. The story embarks on how narratives can shape people's lives and alter their perceptions of reality. Briony's false accusation against Robbie Turner, driven by her storytelling impulse and misinterpretation of events, leads to tragic consequences and impacts the lives of all the characters involved. The novel explores how different perspectives and interpretations of events can shape the narrative. The story is told from multiple perspectives, revealing the subjectivity of truth and emphasising the importance of empathy and understanding in storytelling. McEwan employs metafictional techniques in *Atonement* to emphasise the role of the literary imagination. The novel is divided into different sections, including a metafictional segment where Briony reveals that she has fabricated events and manipulated the story. This self-awareness challenges the reader's perception of truth and raises questions

about the reliability and fallibility of narrators. Writing becomes a source of healing as she decides to give an alternative view of reality. The lovers are given a platform in Briony's novel to unite forever. The entire novel is an attempt at literary imagination framed in the quest for atonement, as entailed by Briony in the epilogue of the novel. The dangers of literary imagination have also been highlighted in the novel, as making connections between an author's life and their fiction poses challenges, as conflating the two risks oversimplification and undermines the complexity of both narratives.

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Class: The question of class brings an entirely new perspective to the novel. The theme of class plays a significant role in shaping the characters' lives and influencing the events that unfold. Set in England during the 1930s and spanning several decades, the novel explores the stark divisions between different social classes and the consequences of these divisions.

The class difference becomes the reason for the characters suffering. The character of Robbie is assessed throughout because of his class and status. At the heart of the story is the young protagonist, Briony Tallis, who comes from a privileged upper-class background. As a member of the wealthy Tallis family, Briony enjoys a life of comfort and security. Her upbringing instils in her a sense of entitlement and superiority, which affects her perceptions and actions throughout the novel. Her naivety and desire for control led her to make a false accusation against Robbie Turner, the son of the Tallis family's housekeeper and a talented Cambridge-educated servant. Robbie, who belongs to the working class, serves as a stark contrast to the privileged characters in the novel. Despite his intelligence and aspirations, his social status prevents him from fully realising his potential. His relationship with Cecilia Tallis, Briony's sister, challenges the strict class boundaries of the time, leading to tension and disapproval from both his own social group and the Tallis family. The novel also delves into the experiences of the soldiers during World War II, illustrating the impact of class on their lives. The war brings together men from different backgrounds, forcing them to confront their differences and form unlikely bonds. The class distinctions that were once so prominent begin to blur as they face the horrors of war together, highlighting the shared humanity and vulnerability beneath their social labels. Throughout the novel, the class serves as a barrier to understanding and empathy. It creates divisions and misunderstandings between characters, leading to tragic consequences. Briony's false accusation, born out of her privileged perspective and inability to comprehend the complexity of class dynamics, destroys lives and shapes

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the course of the narrative. Moreover, McEwan explores how class affects the perception of truth and the power dynamics within society. The Tallis family's wealth and status grant them authority and influence, enabling them to shape the narrative and control the lives of those beneath them. Robbie's lower social standing leaves him marginalised and vulnerable, making it easier for him to be scapegoated and denied justice.

Stop to Consider

The novel is replete with metaphors that totally co-relate to the theme of the novel. The vase, which becomes a source of conflict between Cecilia and Robbie at the fountain, plays a crucial role in the storyline. It symbolically highlights the family's pretensions and serves as a marker of their false appearances. The metaphor of the vase acts as a connection between Robbie and Cecilia. Again, the Tallis House symbolizes the family's aspiration for social acceptance, as it was purchased by Cecilia's grandfather, who accumulated wealth and sought to establish a respectable reputation. The rebranding of the house as Tilney's House has a metaphorical significance. The Tallis house has been revisited and has undergone a transformation, now operating as Tilney's Hotel. This renaming not only represents the shifting post-war era for the Tallis family but also reflects a broader societal shift towards a greater emphasis on leisure. The choice of the name "Tilney" also alludes to the epigraph and connects to the Tilney family mentioned in Jane Austen's novel *Northanger Abbey*.

War: The theme and impact of war are conspicuously elevated in Part II of the novel. The theme of war plays a significant role in the novel *Atonement* by Ian McEwan. Set against the backdrop of World War II, the novel explores the impact of war on individuals, relationships, and society as a whole. The approach of the different characters to the war shows the treatment of war by different sections of society. On the one hand, Robbie and the other soldiers suffer terribly in war; on the other hand, people like Paul Marshall represent the capitalist class, which benefits from war. Briony feels responsible for a grave mistake and seeks to atone for her actions. The war heightens her sense of guilt, as she witnesses the consequences of her earlier actions and yearns to make amends. It tears apart families, separates loved ones, and causes emotional and psychological turmoil. Briony's misinterpretation of events

and her attempt to rewrite them shape the narrative. War acts as a backdrop against which the consequences of her actions are magnified, highlighting the potential for distortion and manipulation of truth during times of conflict. The characters in the novel struggle with the aftermath of war and attempt to cope with the trauma and upheaval it brings. The relationship between Robbie and Cecilia gets shattered by the war, which leads to their separation. Robbie is falsely accused of a crime and sent to prison, but his sentence is commuted on the condition that he joins the army. Cecilia, who is in love with Robbie, is devastated by his departure. The war creates a physical and emotional distance between them, making it difficult for them to communicate and understand each other's feelings. The war also accentuates the social class divide between Cecilia and Robbie. Cecilia comes from a wealthy upper-class family, while Robbie is the son of their housekeeper. The war and its aftermath disrupt social norms, and the rigid class distinctions become less relevant. However, Cecilia's family continues to look down upon Robbie, and the war exacerbates their disapproval. The chaos and uncertainty of war make it even more challenging for Cecilia and Robbie to bridge this class divide. The war in *Atonement* dramatically alters the lives of Cecilia and Robbie. It tests their love, challenges their social positions, and forces them to confront their own vulnerabilities and the need for redemption. The war becomes a powerful backdrop that shapes the characters and their journeys throughout the novel.

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Memory: The theme of memory is a central and complex aspect of Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement*. Through various narrative perspectives and techniques, McEwan explores how memory shapes the characters' perceptions, influences their actions, and ultimately blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction. Briony Tallis, the protagonist, serves as the primary lens through which the theme of memory is examined. At a young age, Briony misinterprets and falsely accuses Robbie of a crime, an event that haunts her throughout her life. The unreliable nature of memory becomes apparent as Briony's recollections are tainted by her imagination and desire for storytelling. She later acknowledges her fallibility and seeks redemption through writing her novel, which attempts to reconstruct and atone for her past actions. Memory's fallibility is further emphasized through the shifting perspectives in the narrative. The reader gains access to different characters' memories and interpretations of events, highlighting the subjective nature of remembering. McEwan challenges the notion of a singular, objective truth by showcasing how memory is shaped by individual perceptions, biases, and motivations. Additionally, the theme of memory is intricately connected to the power of

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storytelling. McEwan explores how memories are not merely passive recollections but active constructions shaped by narrative. Briony's novel, itself a reconstruction of the past, blurs the lines between reality and fiction, underscoring how memory can be manipulated and distorted through narrative devices. Furthermore, *Atonement* delves into the impact of collective memory on historical narratives. The novel is set against the backdrop of World War II, a time marked by societal trauma and shared memory. McEwan examines how collective memory influences the way events are remembered and represented, and how it can shape individuals' understanding of themselves and their place in history. Overall, the theme of memory in *Atonement* highlights its subjective, malleable, and powerful nature. It underscores the complexities of personal and collective memory, questioning its reliability and exploring its role in shaping identity.

Check Your Progress

1. Analyse the themes in the novel *Atonement*.
2. Comment on the impact of war on relationships in the novel?
3. Consider how the subject of the class is treated in the novel.
4. Do you think Briony is the protagonist or antagonist in her actions? Justify your answer with the help of instances from the text.

SAQ

Critically analyse the title of the novel with the help of the theme of guilt. (50 words)

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6.4 Narrative Techniques

6.4.1 Point of view and Narration

Perspective is a vital element in storytelling, forming a foundational pillar of narrative theory. It encompasses the author's deliberate choice to convey the explicit events of a story through a narrator. The narrative point of view assumes immense importance in works of fiction, as it imparts a distinctive lens through which the story unfolds. The overall

structure of a novel heavily relies on the perspective adopted by the author, which shapes the reader's understanding and interpretation of the narrative. Within the realm of narratology, Gerard Genette introduces the term "focalization" as an alternative way to discuss points of view. Genette defines focalization as the general presentation of the standard idea of perspective within a narrative. It encompasses the viewpoint from which the events are perceived, shaping the reader's immersion and comprehension of the story. The chosen focalization determines how the actions within the novel are portrayed, influencing the reader's engagement and emotional response.

The role of the narrator within a narrative is instrumental in shaping the reader's experience. The narrator assumes the responsibility that the author would typically hold in the text. It is through the narrator's voice that the characters are introduced, the setting is established, and the situation is recounted to the readers. The narrator becomes the intermediary between the story and the audience, guiding them through the intricacies of the plot.

The choice of narrative perspective significantly impacts the reader's engagement with the story. Different perspectives offer unique insights into the characters, events, and themes, fostering a multifaceted reading experience. A first-person perspective, for example, places the reader directly within the mind of the narrator, allowing for a deep exploration of their thoughts, emotions, and subjective experiences. This narrative approach often creates a strong sense of intimacy and empathy between the reader and the narrator. Alternatively, a third-person perspective provides a more objective viewpoint, allowing for a broader understanding of the narrative world and multiple character perspectives. Third-person limited point of view focuses on a specific character's experiences and thoughts, providing a deeper connection with their journey while maintaining some distance. The third-person omniscient point of view grants the reader access to the thoughts and perspectives of multiple characters, offering a panoramic view of the story.

The narrative perspective also influences the reliability and trustworthiness of the information presented to the reader. A first-person narrator may exhibit biases, selective memory, or a skewed interpretation of events, leading to an unreliable account of the story.

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In contrast, a third-person narrator, depending on their level of knowledge and access to characters' thoughts, may provide a more objective and comprehensive narrative.

Moreover, the narrative perspective impacts the overall tone and atmosphere of the story. A first-person narrative can evoke a strong sense of immediacy, placing the reader in the midst of the action and intensifying the emotional impact. On the other hand, a third-person narrative allows for more detached observation, enabling the reader to analyse events from a distance and perceive the story's themes and symbols from a broader perspective.

The point of view and narration in *Atonement* by Ian McEwan are crucial elements that shape the story and provide a unique perspective on the events unfolding in the novel. McEwan skilfully employs a multi-layered narrative structure, utilizing different points of view and shifting perspectives to create a complex and engaging reading experience.

The majority of the novel is narrated from a limited third-person point of view, focusing primarily on the perspective of the character Briony Tallis. This narrative technique allows readers to delve deeply into Briony's thoughts, emotions, and motivations. By limiting the perspective to Briony, McEwan offers a nuanced exploration of guilt, personal bias, and the unreliability of memory. The readers are provided with a deep understanding of Briony's mindset and how her actions shape the course of events. While the primary focus is on Briony, McEwan incorporates shifts in perspective to provide a broader view of the story. The narrative unfolds from different characters' viewpoints, allowing readers to gain insight into their thoughts and experiences. For example, in Part Two, the perspective shifts to Robbie Turner, enabling readers to understand his struggles, his relationship with Cecilia, and his own perception of events. These shifts in perspective contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the characters and their perspectives, adding depth to the narrative.

Atonement also incorporates metafictional elements, particularly in Part 3. The novel reveals that the preceding sections were actually written by an elderly Briony as a form of atonement. This self-reflective aspect of the narration adds layers of complexity and raises questions

about the reliability and subjectivity of storytelling. It challenges the readers to critically evaluate the events and interpretations presented, emphasising the role of the narrator as an active participant in shaping the narrative.

The narrative style in the novel often includes reflective passages and commentary from the narrator, providing insight into the characters' thoughts and motivations. This reflective narration adds depth to the storytelling, enabling readers to grasp the characters' inner conflicts, desires, and the consequences of their actions. It also reinforces the novel's themes of memory, guilt, and the power of storytelling itself.

Overall, the point of view and narration in *Atonement* are skilfully crafted to engage readers and offer multiple perspectives on the story. By utilising a limited third-person perspective, shifting viewpoints, metafictional elements, and a reflective narrator, Ian McEwan creates a rich and intricate narrative that explores the complexities of guilt, memory, and storytelling.

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SAQ

Is Briony willing to make amends for the lie she tells? Will she be able to atone for her sins in full?(60 words)

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Comment on the ending of the novel. (50 words)

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6.4.2 Narrative Structure:

The narrative structure in *Atonement* by Ian McEwan is a key element of the novel's storytelling, as it weaves together multiple perspectives and explores the subjective nature of memory and storytelling. McEwan employs a complex and layered structure that enhances the themes of guilt, perception, and the power of narrative.

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Chronological Order: The novel initially follows a linear chronological order, starting with the events of a summer day in 1935 at the Tallis family estate. This section sets the foundation for the story, introducing the characters and the pivotal event that shapes their lives. McEwan meticulously details the events leading up to the accusation against Robbie Turner, creating a sense of tension and anticipation.

Shifts in Time: As the narrative progresses, the structure of the novel incorporates shifts in time, jumping forward and backwards to different periods. This non-linear approach allows McEwan to explore the consequences of the initial event and its far-reaching effects on the characters. The shifts in time create suspense and intrigue, as readers piece together the fragmented timeline and uncover the truth behind the accusations.

Multiple Perspectives: Atonement employs multiple narrative perspectives to provide a comprehensive understanding of the events and the character's motivations. The first part of the novel is primarily narrated from the perspective of Briony Tallis, allowing readers to delve into her thoughts, perceptions, and guilt. However, the subsequent parts shift to different characters' viewpoints, such as Robbie Turner and Briony's sister, Cecilia. This multiplicity of perspectives adds depth to the narrative, revealing different interpretations of events and challenging the notion of objective truth.

Metafictional Elements: In the third part of the novel, McEwan introduces metafictional elements that blur the lines between reality and fiction. The narrative reveals that the preceding sections were actually written by an elderly Briony as a form of atonement and creative reimagining. This self-reflective aspect challenges the readers' understanding of the events and raises questions about the reliability and subjectivity of storytelling. The metafictional elements emphasise the power of narrative and the role of the author/narrator in shaping the story.

Epistolary Format: In addition to the shifting perspectives, *Atonement* incorporates an epistolary format. Letters and diary entries are interspersed throughout the narrative, providing insights into the character's inner thoughts and emotions. These personal documents contribute to the subjective nature of the narrative, offering intimate

glimpses into the characters' motivations and contributing to the exploration of guilt and redemption.

Through its intricate narrative structure, *Atonement* explores the fallibility of memory, the subjective nature of truth, and the profound impact of a single event. The shifts in time, multiple perspectives, and metafictional elements engage readers in a thought-provoking journey that challenges their perceptions of the story and the characters. The novel's narrative structure mirrors the complexity of human experience, emphasising the power of storytelling and the intricate workings of guilt, atonement, and the search for redemption.

Stop to Consider

The novel *Atonement* has seen amazing success both domestically and abroad in terms of popularity and adaptation. In addition to being translated into languages like Spanish, Dutch, and Portuguese, it has become a bestseller. When the book and the movie adaptation came out at the same time, the sales of the book increased. The film adaptation of *Atonement*, produced by Working Title Films, made its debut at the Venice Film Festival in September 2007 as part of a comprehensive promotional campaign. While the critical response to the film was somewhat varied, it gained significant recognition and was hailed as a prominent British film of the year. This acclaim was evident as it received seven Academy Award nominations in 2008 and won both a Golden Globe and a BAFTA for Best Film.

SAQ

Do you consider Atonement to be an instance of metafiction? Justify your answer with the help of instances from the text. (200 words)

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6.5 Critical reception of the novel

Atonement by Ian McEwan received widespread critical acclaim upon its release, garnering praise for its rich prose, complex characters, and thought-provoking themes. The novel's exploration of guilt, redemption, and the power of storytelling resonated with readers and critics alike, resulting in numerous accolades and positive reviews. The novel was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2001 and was lauded for its meticulous research and vivid historical backdrop. Critics praised McEwan's masterful storytelling and his ability to craft intricate narratives that blend personal and societal themes seamlessly. Tom Shone in The New York Times describes it as McEwan's "most complete and compassionate work to date" (Shone, 2002).

The prose in *Atonement* was widely celebrated for its beauty and precision. McEwan's evocative descriptions and attention to detail were often singled out as highlights, creating a vivid and immersive reading experience. Critics commended his ability to transport readers to different time periods and settings, bringing the story to life with his eloquent language. Peter Kemp, an eminent critic and reviewer in The Sunday Times, applauds the novel for the various levels it addresses: "Subtle as well as powerful, adeptly encompassing comedy as well as atrocity, Atonement is a richly intricate book. Unshowy symmetries and patterns underlie its emotional force and psychological compulsion." (Kemp 46)

The character development in the novel received high praise, with critics noting the complexity and depth of the main characters. Briony Tallis, in particular, was hailed as a memorable and multi-dimensional protagonist. Critics appreciated McEwan's exploration of her guilt, the impact of her actions, and her search for atonement. The nuanced portrayals of other characters, such as Robbie Turner and Cecilia Tallis, also garnered praise for their emotional depth and relatability.

The novel's exploration of the themes of guilt, forgiveness, and the power of storytelling sparked discussions among readers and critics. McEwan's examination of the subjective nature of memory and the unreliability of narrative perspectives resonated with many, leading to reflections on the nature of truth and the complexities of human relationships.

While the majority of the critical reception for *Atonement* was highly positive, some critics voiced reservations. Frank Kermode believed that the

characters failed to depict the authentic action evident in the title. He comments, "The title of the book seems to suggest that Briony will do something by way of atonement, but nothing quite fitting that description seems to occur." (Kermode 2001) A few reviewers felt that the novel's metafictional elements, particularly the twist in the third part, detracted from the overall narrative and created a sense of detachment. However, these opinions were in the minority, and the novel's overall impact and craftsmanship overshadowed any minor criticisms.

Atonement received a resoundingly positive critical reception, with reviewers worldwide lauding its compelling narrative, skillful prose, and exploration of profound themes. Ian McEwan's masterful storytelling abilities and his ability to craft complex characters garnered immense praise. The novel's examination of guilt, redemption, and the power of storytelling resonated with readers and solidified McEwan's reputation as a highly talented and accomplished author. Atonement continues to be celebrated as one of his most significant and influential works, exemplifying his skill in creating emotionally resonant narratives that leave a lasting impact on readers.

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6.6 Characterization

Ian McEwan's art of characterization in *Atonement* goes beyond the mere portrayal of individual characters; it extends to the intricate dynamics between them, showcasing the tensions, love, misunderstandings, and conflicts that shape their lives. Through careful crafting and exploration of relationships, McEwan creates a web of connections that enriches the narrative and deepens the reader's understanding of the character's motivations and actions. One of the notable aspects of McEwan's characterization is his skilful use of various narrative techniques to provide insights into the character's inner lives. Through internal monologues, readers gain access to the characters' thoughts, fears, and desires. McEwan employs this technique to offer a window into their consciousness, revealing the complexities and contradictions that lie beneath their outward actions. This allows readers to develop a deeper connection with the characters and enhances their multi-dimensionality.

In addition to internal monologues, McEwan incorporates the use of letters and diary entries as narrative devices. These written forms of communication provide glimpses into the character's private thoughts and emotions, allowing for a more intimate understanding of their inner worlds. By presenting these personal documents, McEwan adds layers to the characters' personalities, making them feel authentic and relatable.

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Briony Tallis, the central character and narrator of the novel, exemplifies McEwan's art of characterization. Through Briony, readers witness the transformation from an innocent and imaginative child to a remorseful and self-reflective adult. McEwan carefully constructs Briony's character by exploring her motivations, insecurities, and the guilt she carries for falsely accusing Robbie Turner. Her internal monologues and letters provide insights into her thought processes, shedding light on her naivety, longing for atonement, and the complexity of her emotions.

Robbie Turner, another central character, is characterised by depth and nuance. McEwan depicts Robbie as an intelligent and compassionate young man who becomes a victim of Briony's accusation. Through Robbie's internal monologues, readers gain insight into his experiences as a soldier during World War II, the trauma he endures, and his unwavering love for Cecilia Tallis. McEwan explores Robbie's resilience, integrity, and the profound impact of societal class divisions on his life.

Cecilia Tallis, a complex and independent character, challenges societal expectations and norms. McEwan portrays Cecilia as a rebel who defies her family's expectations and forms a deep connection with Robbie. Her interactions with Robbie, as well as her personal reflections in letters and diary entries, reveal her fierce loyalty, determination, and willingness to challenge the social barriers that attempt to keep them apart.

The supporting characters in *Atonement* also receive careful attention in terms of characterization. Lola Quincey, Briony's cousin, is a vibrant and spirited young woman whose character is shaped by trauma. McEwan explores the impact of her experiences and her resilience in the face of adversity. Other characters, such as Emily and Jack Tallis (Briony's parents), Paul Marshall, and various hospital patients and soldiers encountered throughout the narrative, are given depth and distinct personalities, adding to the realism of the story.

McEwan's art of characterization is not limited to individual character development; it extends to the interactions and relationships between the characters. The complex dynamics within the Tallis family, the strained relationship between Briony and Cecilia, and the love and longing between Robbie and Cecilia are all carefully crafted. McEwan navigates the intricacies of these relationships, highlighting the tensions, misunderstandings, and conflicts that arise from human interactions. These dynamics shape the characters' choices, actions, and ultimately, their journey towards redemption and

atonement. Through his meticulous attention to detail, McEwan brings the characters to life, making them feel like real individuals with their own unique struggles, desires, and triumphs. The characters in *Atonement* are not mere vehicles for the plot but fully realised individuals who evoke empathy and resonate with readers. McEwan's exploration of their inner lives, the complexities of their relationships, and the consequences of their actions create a rich tapestry of human experiences that leaves a lasting impact on the reader.

In conclusion, Ian McEwan's art of characterization in *Atonement* is a testament to his skill as a writer. Through his use of various narrative techniques, his meticulous attention to detail, and his portrayal of complex relationships, he creates characters that feel authentic and multidimensional. The interactions and dynamics between the characters add depth and richness to the narrative, enhancing the reader's understanding and emotional engagement. The characters in *Atonement* transcend their fictional existence, leaving a lasting impression on readers and reinforcing the power of McEwan's art of characterization.

SAQ

Comment on the treatment of love in the novel *Atonement*. (50 words)

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Check Your Progress

1. Comment on the narrative style adopted in the novel.
2. How does McEwan make the process of writing the subject of the novel?
3. Analyse McEwan's art of characterisation.
4. Justify the reasons that led to Robbie's victimization.

6.7 Summing Up

Thus, the unit offered an overall assessment of the main themes, methods, and issues explored in the novel, which serve as its foundation. The aforementioned concerns discussed will facilitate a broad comprehension of the contentious matters addressed within the book. The extensive exploration

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of the themes will provide a profound understanding of the story. The various techniques employed in the novel have been analysed to enhance one's understanding of the narrative's development. The novel has been examined from multiple perspectives, allowing readers ample space to interpret the novel subjectively. This module aims to aid in the appreciation of both the content and the thematic structure of the novel *Atonement*.

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