



COURSE CODE: MAEGD 102

COURSE NAME: ENGLISH  
LITERATURE FROM CHAUCER TO  
MARLOWE

**CENTRE FOR DISTANCE AND  
ONLINE EDUCATION  
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY**

**MASTER OF ARTS**

**ENGLISH  
BLOCK I**



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## **MEG-102: ENGLISH LITERATURE FROM CHAUCER TO MARLOWE**

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# BLOCK I

## MODULE I: CHAUCER: *THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE*

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## COURSE INTRODUCTION

After acquainting you to different periods of socio-political and cultural developments that had taken place from the medieval times to the Contemporary period in the previous course (MEG 101), we would now familiarize you with English poetry starting from Chaucer's Age to the Restoration period. In this course you would read the lives and works of major English poets over a period of two hundred and fifty years.

Chaucer is intentionally and ideally the opener of the course as his contribution to English poetry is immense, in form and content. He introduced or made popular many rhyme schemes and also the secular topics. He is the pioneer of modern poetry and rightly called the 'Father of English literature'. It is difficult to cover in detail the wide range of literary products created during the prescribed period, but best effort has been made to present a comprehensive idea of the major literary trends of each period and the representative poets of each period.

All the units and the texts discussed include a brief discussion on the socio-cultural background. This is because literature does not exist in a vacuum. It is produced, circulated and consumed in a certain set of circumstances. This includes the political, economic and social conditions of a particular time.

The course is divided into five Modules, each consisting of multiple units. This has been done to discuss the prime issues more elaborately and learner friendly way.

**Module I** deal with Chaucer's tales from *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Nun's Priest's Tale*. The tale, based on the then popular beast fables, raises questions of pride, belief, status and philosophy that concerned the people of that period. It is relevant because in the midst of the stories of greed, money and wealth presented by the religious group of the pilgrimage, Nun's Priest's story comes as a refreshing wind.

Divided into three units, each unit will throw light on an important aspect of the poet and his work. **Unit 1** presents the background of Chaucer's time and his works and the influence of French, Italian and Roman writes on him. **Unit 2** discusses the detail summary of the text prescribed and the major characters along with their participation in the narrative. This will prepare the learners for an in depth critical



appreciation of various aspects of the text in **Unit 3**. In this unit the learners will be made acquainted with themes and beliefs associated with the themes.

**Module II** is about *Elizabethan Poetry* that found expression in the mid sixteenth century, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. This is considered to be one of the most prolific periods of English literature. In this unit we have suggested for the learners few select and representative early poets of the period. The Elizabethan age was an age of beautiful lyrical poems, including sonnets. Lengthy love poems such as epithalamion were also in vogue which found finest expression in the hands of Sydney and Spenser. **Unit 4** will exclusively discuss some select poems of these two poets along with their theme, style and other literary aspects. **Unit 5** deals with one of the most popular form of English poetry, i.e. sonnets. An understanding of sonnets is very important for the learners in the sense that it was a literary form that lasted till modern times. This unit will give a detailed background of this poetic form and will prepare the way for the learners to know how sonnet form came to England and found deviations and refinement in the hands of great sonneteers like Shakespeare in **Unit 6**.

**Module III** deals with *Metaphysical Poetry* that came into existence in early 17<sup>th</sup> Century; that is, the Jacobean age, the reign of James I who followed Queen Elizabeth to the crown. Metaphysical poetry is an interesting bunch of poems written by a group of well learned people whose poetic style was completely different from the previous age. They were more logical and reasoning than the Elizabethan lyricists. We have chosen representative poets and their poems in this course. Learners will be able to get an in depth knowledge of these poets. **Unit 7** will elaborately present the background of metaphysical poetry, their trends and style. **Unit 8** will discuss few select but representative poets of this group and their poetry. The theme and the structure will be discussed in this unit. **Unit 9** will critically analyse, with the help of the poems their style, symbols, wit and conceit.

**Module IV** titled *Cavalier Poets* is about a group poets who came into being during the rule of Charles I, known as the Caroline Age ( Latin word *Carolus* for Charles) . These are the soldier poets who fought for the king during Civil War and wrote beautiful lyrics of courtship and gallantry. Headed by Ben Jonson, his followers were termed as the ‘Sons of Ben’. Divide into three units, **Unit 10** will give a background of the Cavalier poets and their poetic trends. In **Unit 11 and 12** the

learners will be able to learn about few representative poets and their poetry to acquire a substantive knowledge of this genre of that period. These two units will discuss few select poems of these poets and their unique style and compositions.

In **Module V** we have dealt exclusively with *John Milton*, the greatest of all time, the author of English epic *Paradise Lost*. The creator of epic Grand Style, it is very essential for any student of literature to read Milton. Keeping this in view we have given a comprehensive idea of the age of Milton in **Unit 13**. Some select portions of *Paradise Lost* are discussed in detail in **Unit 14 and 15**. Though we have suggested select portions of Book I and Book IX, it is comprehensive and learner friendly. Best effort has been made to incorporate extracts from the texts to give the learners a good impression of Milton's similes, metaphor and other epic grandeurs.

The complete course is divided into two Blocks. **Block I** contains Module I and II. **Block II** will have Module III, IV and V.

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## MODULE I: CHAUCER: *THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE*

## ***UNIT 1: READING THE AGE OF CHAUCER***

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

#### 1.0 Introduction

#### 1.1 Learning Objectives

#### 1.2 Chaucer

##### 1.2.1 Life and Works

##### 1.2.2 Major events

##### 1.2.3 Social Structure

##### 1.2.4 Chaucer and the Fourteenth Century Church

#### 1.3 Summing Up

#### 1.4 Assessment Question

### ***1.0 INTRODUCTION***

As we have learnt in the previous course, the age of Chaucer, that is, the 14 century was an age of great socio-political turmoil. It was a transitional period in England after many wars, the Black Death, the Peasants' Revolt and reformation in the Church. It was also the time that laid the foundation for modern English literature, particularly poetry. In this unit you will be introduced to one major literary figure of this period, Geoffrey Chaucer. This unit would discuss the voluminous poetic output, the treatment of thematic concerns, art of characterization, the stylistic innovations.

### ***1.0 LEARNING OBJECTIVES***

This is the first unit of the three courses on British poetry and we will introduce you to Chaucer who shaped modern English poetry to a great extent. By the end of this unit, you would be acquainted with:

- the life and works of Chaucer
- the socio-political and religious happenings of the period that helped in shaping Chaucer's literary genius
- the role of the Church and its effect on the works of Chaucer

## 1.1 GEOFFREY CHAUCER

### 1.1.1 Life and Works

The author of the most famous and critically acclaimed work in English literature *The Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer, is a late fourteenth century English poet. Not much is not known about Chaucer's life and related events, such as education etc.

Chaucer was born in London in the early 1340s, as the only son to his family. Chaucer's father, a wine merchant, was extremely wealthy by dint of inheriting the property of those relatives who did not survive during the Black Death of 1349. Therefore, instead of following his ancestors' footsteps and become a merchant, young Geoffrey was sent off as a page to the Countess of Ulster. Eventually, Chaucer began to serve the countess's husband, Prince Lionel, son to King Edward III and involved himself with courtly affairs. Continuing this involvement, Chaucer served most of his life in the fighting for England in the Hundred Years War between England and France, both as a soldier and as a diplomat. Since he was conversant in French, Italian, Latin besides English, it was obvious that he would be sent on diplomatic missions. During his diplomatic travels he visited Italy twice, where he might have met Boccaccio and Petrarch, whose writings widely influenced Chaucer in his early work.

During Chaucer's time French and Latin were the languages of the English court and the Church. English was considered as a language of the commons. Chaucer wanted to write in a language that might be accessible to all or at least those people in and around London. In or around 1378, Chaucer began to develop his vision of an English poetry that would be linguistically vernacular, the English that was spoken — obedient neither to the court, nor to the Church. As mentioned earlier, Chaucer was influenced and inspired by Florentines' Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio not only in their writings, but also their use of the Italian vernacular in their greatest works.

### LET US STOP AND THINK



#### **Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375)**

Giovanni Boccaccio was an Italian writer, poet, and an important Renaissance humanist. Boccaccio wrote a number of immortal works, including *The Decameron* and *On Famous Women*. *The Decameron* is a collection of tales, around hundred stories told by ten young narrators who were the survivors of the Black Death. Boccaccio was also a correspondent of Francesco Petrarca or Petrarch.

#### **Petrarch (1304-1374)**

Francesco Petrarca or popularly known as Petrarch, was an Italian scholar, poet, and humanist. He is primarily known as the pioneer of the sonnet form which is known as Italian or Petrarchan sonnet form, whose poems in sequence addressed Laura, an idealized beloved. Petrarchan sonnets hugely contributed to the Renaissance lyric poetry, popularised by Watt and Surrey and variedly used by Milton, Wordsworth, and other poets.

#### **Dante (1265-1321)**

Dante or Dante Alighieri, Italian poet, prose writer, literary theorist, moral philosopher, and political thinker. He is best known for the monumental epic poem *La commedia*, later named *La divina commedia* (*The Divine Comedy*). Considered as one of the greatest works ever, epic poem may be read as an

allegory, taking the form of a journey through hell, purgatory, and paradise.

Both Richard II, and then Henry IV, including the nobles were impressed with Chaucer's skills as a negotiator and Chaucer was rewarded many a times for his service. In the late 1360s, he married Philippa Roet, who served Edward III's queen and sister to the mistress of John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster. Chaucer wrote one of his first poems, *The Book of the Duchess*, which was a lament for the premature death of John's young wife, Blanche. Chaucer and Philippa had at least two sons together. Philippa died in 1387.

Chaucer was appointed the Controller of the Customs of Hides by the king, specially, Skins and Wools in the port of London in 1374, and became a government official who worked with cloth importers. Chaucer held the position at the custom house for twelve years. It was this experience that enabled him to describe in detail the garments and fabric that his characters wore in his poems. After this he left for Kent, the county of the Canterbury which is documented in the epoch making *The Canterbury Tales*. He served as a justice of the peace for Kent, living in debt, and was then appointed Clerk of the Works at various holdings of the king, including Westminster and the Tower of London. After he retired in the early 1390s, he seems to have been working primarily on *The Canterbury Tales*, which he began around 1387. By the time of his retirement, Chaucer had already written a substantial amount of narrative poetry, including the celebrated romance *Troilus and Criseyde*. Property, higher appointments, money, provisions, eventually provided him a retirement on a royal pension.

Chaucer's poetic career stretches over a period of thirty years which could be divided into three clearly defined periods. Before 1369 he mostly picked poems from French literature and translated them. This period can correctly be termed as the **French Period**. The most important translation of this period is *Roman de la Rose*, originally written by two poets, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun. Meun had contributed nearly eighteen thousand lines to the original four thousand lines of Lorris and imparted a satirical discussion on the politics and morals of the period. Chaucer fully subscribed to the poetical temperament of Meun. *Roman de la Rose* describes the attitude of ideal chivalrous love, the exalted code of honour and courtesy, typical to French Romance. The poem is full of pictorial descriptions befitting to the world of lovers, presented in the form of a dream dreamt by the poet which became very popular and widely adopted poetic device by later poets.

Some of the important tales of *The Canterbury* hail from this period. Amongst them *The Second Nun's Priest's Tale*, *The Clerk's Tale*, *The Monk's Tale*, *The Man of law's Tale* etc. can be mentioned.

Chaucer's first original poem belongs to this period. *The Book of the Duchess*, is an elegy written on the death of Blanche, wife of John of Gaunt who was the patron to Chaucer. Following the trend of *de la Rose*, the poem was written in the dream form.

The second phase of Chaucer's career extends roughly from 1379 to 1385, during which period he seemed to be influenced by Italian poets. While the first phase is characterised chiefly by works of translations of great authors, in the second period Chaucer imitated great classical poets.



The important works of this period are *Troilus and Criseyde*, *The Parliament of Fowls*, *The House of Fame* and *The legend of Good Women*.

*Troilus and Criseyde* is the finest of Chaucer's finished works. The influence of Boccaccio's *Filostrato* is evident in the poem, though almost two third of the lines are Chaucer's original. Divided into five books, *Troilus* well reflects Chaucer's poetic power in his modifications that excels even Boccaccio. *Troilus* is also indebted to Petrarch and Dante in its poetic style. This poem established Chaucer as a narrative genius.

*The Parliament of Fowls* was written on the occasion of the marriage of Richard II to Anne of Bohemia. Written in the form of a beast fable, that became very popular in the Middle Ages, the poem depicts the selection of mates by the fowls. Like his other popular poems, *Fowls* is also written in the form of dream sequence. The humour and the dialogue written in skilful manner shows marked advance of Chaucer as a poet. The style adopted in the poem in the form of debate between birds and beasts is more skilfully and elaborately used in later stage in *The Nun's Priest's Tale*.

### LET US STOP AND THINK



#### **Allegory, Dream allegory or dream vision**

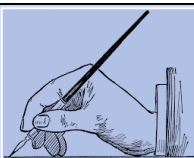
An allegory is a narrative, in prose or verse in which characters and action and sometimes the setting itself mean something more than is actually depicted, both literal and metaphorical.

#### **Dream allegory or dream vision**

Dream allegory or dream vision was a popular device in the Middle Ages where the narrator falls asleep and in his dream experience event with allegoric purpose.

*The House of Fame* was written in the year 1384. Modelled upon Dante's *Divine Comedy* in its structure of three books, *The Fame* is also written in the form of a dream. Though the poem lacks Dante's intensity of expression and the strong religious note, it gives us an entirely new style—informal, easy, familiar and conversational that becomes unique of Chaucer in the later stage of his poetic career. What makes *The Fame* a different type of imitation is the personal note denoted by the poet with a strong vein of ironical humour with a grave undertone of contemplation of human folly.

*The Legend of Good Women* is another unfinished poem of Chaucer's second period. The plan was to take twenty women of history and legend who had been true lovers. But instead of twenty, there are nine stories that can be found in the book, including Cleopatra of Egypt and Dido of Carthage. The most beautiful part of the work is its Prologue where Chaucer apologises in his poetic manner for his satirical criticism of true love in *Roman De La Roses*.



### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What are the main literary periods of Chaucer?

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2. Name the chief literary works of each of the Period.

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3. Write two characteristics of the **French Period** of Geoffrey Chaucer.  
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The work for which Chaucer is remembered through ages is *The Canterbury Tales* and its Prologue. Chaucer's original plan for *The Canterbury Tales* was to put together a bunch of people from all strata of the society, both secular and religious in the same platform of a pilgrimage to Canterbury. Each character was supposed to tell four tales, two while traveling to and two while returning from Canterbury. In this way, though there should have been 120 tales, the text contains only twenty-four tales. It is assumed Chaucer either planned to revise the structure after twenty-four tales, it remained incomplete when he died on October 25, 1400. Anyway, *The Canterbury Tales* soon attained recognition as a masterful and highly original work. But like Boccaccio's *Decameron* which was not accessible to most English readers, so the format of *The Canterbury Tales*, and the intense realism of its characters, were virtually unknown to the readers in the fourteenth century. With the invention printing machine by William Caxton, the history of book publication reached a new height. *The Canterbury Tales* was published in the 1470s, and it continued to enjoy a rich printing history that never truly faded. Printing and subsequent circulation of the book truly fulfilled Chaucer's dream to create a literature and poetic language for all classes

of society and Chaucer still stands as one of the great shapers of literary narrative and character.

### ***1.1.2 Major events***

Chaucer lived through a time when the society of England went through incredible tension. The Black Death, which ravaged England during Chaucer's childhood and remained widespread afterward, wiped out an estimated thirty to fifty percent of the population. Feudalism began to break down, resulting in the labour force gaining more power and bargaining for better wages. This resulted in strong resentment from the nobles and propertied classes. Another blow was received when in 1381, the peasantry, helped by the artisan class, broke into a revolt. The Hundred Years War created a social structure in England where people became prone to luxury and comfort. It caused to create a new merchant class. In due course this class became so powerful that they attempted to control both the aristocracy and the lesser artisan classes.

Chaucer's political sentiments are unclear, for although *The Canterbury Tales* documents various social phenomenon in the manner of the popular genre of estates satire with the help of the characters picking from different strata of the society, the narrator refrains from making overt political statements. We shall briefly discuss all the major events of his time that shaped Chaucer as a writer in the next sub unit. Before that we shall have an overview of major works of the father of English poetry.

### ***1.1.3 Social Structure***

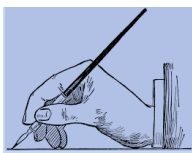
In the previous course (MEG101) we had elaborately discussed the predominant social feature of medieval times. Here we will refresh ourselves with what we had learnt in the previous sections. Europe was predominantly feudal during those times. As we had learnt, it was a social system in which the king was the owner of all the land in the kingdom. The feudal lords who would hold land from lords stood after the king in the social hierarchy. The *vassal* who received land from a feudal lord would take an oath of allegiance to him and promise to provide military and financial support in case the latter was in trouble. The feudal lord in turn would pledge protection to the vassal against all dangers the latter may become subject to from time to time. The lowest of the low were the serfs who held small strips of land in an open field where they did some subsistence farming. The condition of the serfs was miserable in that period.

This is the age that also witnessed the terror of *Black Death* (1348-49) which greatly reduced the population of England. It caused great scarcity of labourers and brought drastic change in the socio-economic structure of the period. A money economy came into being replacing the system of forced manual labour of earlier times.

The *Peasants' Revolt* of 1381 struck a blow against the feudal order. The peasants, who had been smarting under various levies, rose in revolt against an unjust poll tax and went to the extent of putting unpopular people like the Archbishop of Canterbury to death. The spirit which prompted the revolt ultimately led to the collapse of the feudal system. Among other factors responsible for the decline of the feudal order, mention may be made of the influence of Christianity which preached the brotherhood of men and condemned exploitative behaviour. With the passage of time

the power exercised by the feudal lords was lessened with a more centralized royal authority.

The influence of the feudal system can be seen in the literary works of the period. The sonnet form which became popular all over Europe during medieval times transposed the relation between the lord and vassal to the relation between the lover and the beloved. The lover is the vassal prostrating himself before the lady who, with her whims and caprices, is like the feudal lord in the wider social realm.



### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Mention three major events of 14th Century England.

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2. Write chronologically social structure of the 14th Century England.

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#### ***1.1.4 Fourteenth Century Church***

Throughout medieval Europe, Christianity was a powerful institution and the people were profoundly religious. They followed the teachings of the church which laid more

importance on life to come after death rather than on life in this world. People were enjoined to avoid sin, lead lives of austerity, penance, and charity. Apart from the secular courts there were ecclesiastical courts to try moral offences. There was unquestioned belief in the teachings of Christianity and any person who dared to profess views antithetical to the teachings of the church was dismissed as a heretic. Many heretics faced persecution throughout the Middle Ages. Friars went from place to place hearing confessions and prescribing penances like giving money for charitable purposes or going on a pilgrimage.

Pilgrimages were an important part of the religious life of the people in medieval times. People travelled on horseback or on donkeys to such holy places as Canterbury or Walsingham. To enliven the journey they told stories or took professional storytellers or singers with them. One of the most famous works of medieval times – Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* is centred on a pilgrimage. Pilgrims from different walks of life gather at the Tabard Inn in Southwark with the intention of setting out on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Saint Thomas à Beckett at Canterbury. *The Canterbury Tales* is constituted by the tales the pilgrims tell on their way to Canterbury and back.

Chaucer’s pilgrims belonged to different walks of life and tell stories in tune with the particular sphere of life he or she comes from. The knight, for instance, tells a tale of chivalry in keeping with the station of life he comes from while the much married Wife of Bath narrates her marital exploits to the great merriment of the pilgrims.

Like the secular order, the church was also hierarchically arranged with the Pope at the highest rung of the hierarchy followed by dignitaries like the Archbishop,

Bishop, Deacon, Abbot etc. Chaucer starts the representation of the ecclesiastical characters in the prologue with the knight who stood at the top of the hierarchy and moves down the ladder, ending with the poor parson.

With the passage of time, the church began to depart from the ideals of austerity and piety enjoined by the saints. The wealth accumulating in the church was in a large measure responsible for this. People paid handsomely to get the church's pardon for their sins for it was believed that no man could get access to God without the intervention of the clergy. The clergy became materialistic and some of them sold pardons to people who did not do the requisite penance. The worldliness of the clergy is satirized by Chaucer in his prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*.

The ecclesiastical characters in the prologue with the exception of the parson who is described as "poor" are more interested in leading lives devoted to material pursuits than in lives devoted to religion.

The monk, for instance, does not want to waste his time pouring over scriptures in the confines of the monastery. Showing utter disregard for the rules formulated by the saints, the monk loves to eat, drink and have a merry time.

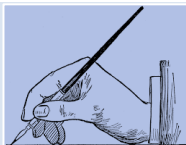
The friars were required to lead lives of poverty and live by begging. They went from place to place preaching, hearing confessions, and prescribing penances and at the same time taking the latest news and thoughts to all corners of the nation. Chaucer's Friar is however more intent on making money than on fulfilling the duties assigned to his vocation. He gives absolution easily to people who can pay money.

The Summoner and the Pardoner represent the worst kind of corruption of the clergy. They are physically repulsive which symbolically points to their moral depravity. The



Summoner loves drinking though the clergy were supposed to abstain. The pardoner sells false relics and makes money. Some of the clergy were themselves outspoken critics of the church. Church dignitaries often exposed each other as in Chaucer's *Tales* where the Friar and the Summoner expose each other's tricks to the great merriment of the company.

It is only the poor parson who adheres to the ecclesiastical doctrines and goes from place to place attending to the sick and the needy. In Chaucer's depiction of the characters from the clergy one can form an idea about the materialism of the times and how it seeped into every section of the society. The other important writers of the period, Gower and Langland also show concern about the corruption in the church in their works. It is not as if the higher clergy like the bishops, who were men of great integrity and learning, were unaware of what was happening in the church, but they were so preoccupied with their involvement in their secular duties that they had no time to devote to checking ecclesiastical corruption. As bishops were men of great learning they were appointed by kings to high offices of the state like chancellors and some became ambassadors to foreign powers.



### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What is the plan behind *The Canterbury tales*?

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2. Name few representations of the medieval church you find

in the *Prologue*.

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It is against the corruption that had crept into the church that a reform movement began all over Europe under the leadership of Martin Luther. In England, John Wycliffe and his followers, the Lollards, spearheaded the reform movement which ultimately led to the reposing of faith in the Bible instead of on church dignitaries. The Bible which was earlier in Latin was translated into English during this period. This facilitated people's interaction with the Holy Scriptures while earlier they had to rely on the interpretation provided by the clergy who manipulated the scriptures for their own benefit.

### **1.3 SUMMING UP**

In this unit we have not only refreshed our reading of the medieval social system, but also discussed briefly its influence on the works of Chaucer. Each of the literary periods of Chaucer, which we roughly divided into three phases was discussed with specific details of his works and influences on such works. For understanding of the learners, Chaucer's *The Canterbury tales* was analysed in detail and correlated with the changing scenario of 14 Century England and its reflection in *The Tale*. Thus, we paved a way for the next unit in which we are going to discuss one of the tales that found place in the grand plan of *The Tale*.



#### ***1.4 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS***

1. In his early literary period Chaucer was primarily experimental of great classical writers. Enumerate the statement with reference to the influences Chaucer had in his literary creations.
2. Do you think an author can be influenced largely by the socio-political condition of his/her time? Discuss this with special reference to Chaucer's great works of 14 Century.
3. Elaborately discuss the three periods of Chaucer's literary creations with brief description of the works of the respective periods.

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## JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS

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## ***UNIT 2: THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE: READING THE TEXT***

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

#### 2.0 Introduction

#### 2.1 Learning Objective

#### 2.2 *The Nun's Priest's Tale*

##### 2.2.1 Detail summary of the text

#### 2.3 Summing Up

#### 2.4 Assessment Questions

### **2.0 INTRODUCTION**

*The Nun's Priest's Tale* is one of the 24 stories in *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer. The stories in Canterbury tales have one or another link with the other, either in thematic structure or the narrator as the composition of a particular social group. This story has a clear link with the Monk's Tale finished just before the beginning of this story. The Monk's story containing despots, criminals and fallen heroes was not like by the pilgrims and the Knight in particular protested against it.

The host, Harry Bailly agreed with the Knight's complaint and orders the monk to change his story. When the Monk refuses to do so, the Host asks the Nun's Priest to tell the next tale and requests him to narrate something refreshing. The Nun's Priest is not substantially depicted in Chaucer's general *Prologue*, but in the tale's epilogue the Host is moved to give a highly approving portrait which highlights his great physical strength and presence.

*The Nun's Priest's Tale* is based on the medieval tale of Reynard the Fox, common to French, Flemish, and German literature. As the poem is written in English unlike the one we use in modern times, best effort has been made to make the summery meaningful to the learners.

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## **2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVE**

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The objective of this unit is to familiarise the learners with the plot of *The Nun's Priest Tale*. After the reading of the summary you will be able to know

- the plot of the Tale
- detailed meaning (change the word) of the Tale
- interpretation of important portions with text
- overview of major characters and themes

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## **2.2 THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE**

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The Tale is one of the finest of *The Canterbury Tales* as it tells in most simple way a story that has far implication for the whole lot of the pilgrims. After the Monk's tale on a trail of 'tragedies' and encyclopaedic account of the lives of those 'fallen out of high degree into misery', both the Knight and the Host plead that no more tragedies be told and his "talking is not worthy of a butterfly". With this the Host turns to the Priest traveling with the Prioress and her Nun, and demands that he tells a tale that will gladden the hearts of the company members. The Nun's Priest readily agrees, and begins his tale of Chauntecleer, a fox, and his dream.

### 2.2.1 *Detail summary of the poem*

It is the story of a Cock named Chauntecleer and his wife Lady Pertelote. This cock is a prized possession of a poor widow living a humble life in a little cottage with her two daughters. Chauntecleer, who is the best singer in the land, is also the greatest possession of this noble woman.

A poor widow, somewhat advanced in age,  
Was once dwelling in a small cottage,  
Beside a grove, standing in a dale.  
This widow, of whom I tell you my tale,  
Since that same day that she was last a wife  
In patience led a very simple life,  
For little was her possessions and her income.  
By husbandry of such as God sent her  
She provided for herself and also her two daughters. (55-63)

Next many lines are dedicated to describe the features of Chauntecleer which makes him different from other cocks of that area. He is the one who crows the time more accurately than the church clocks. His coxcomb is red as coral, his beak black as jet, and his feathers shine like burnished gold. He is the master, so he thinks, of seven lovely hens. The loveliest of these is the beautiful and gracious Lady Pertelote

In which she had a cock, called Chauntecleer.  
In all the land, there was not his peer in crowing.  
His voice was merrier than the merry organ  
That goes in the church on mass-days.  
Well more accurate was his crowing in his lodge  
...  
His comb was redder than the fine coral,  
And notched with battlements as if it were a castle wall;  
His bill was black, and it shone like the jet stone;  
Like azure were his legs and his toes;

His nails whiter than the lily flour,  
And like the burnished gold was his color.  
This gentle cock had in his governance  
Seven hens to do all his pleasure,  
Which were his sisters and his concubines,  
And wonderfully like him, in their colors;  
Of which the fairest colored on her throat  
Was called fair demoiselle Pertelote.  
Courteous she was, discreet, and gracious,  
And companionable, and bore herself so fair (83-104).

One morning, Chauntecleer awakens from a terrible nightmare. He tells Pertelote that a savage, reddish, beast was about to swallow him. He described his dream in these words:

Within our yard, where I saw a beast  
Was like a hound, and would have seized  
Upon my body, and would have had me dead.  
His color was between yellow and red,  
And tipped was his tail and both his ears  
With black, unlike the rest of his hair;  
His snout small, with two glowing eyes.  
Yet for fear of his look I almost die;  
This caused my groaning, doubtless.".' (133-141)

Pertelote sarcastically scolds Chauntecleer, saying that she cannot love a coward who is scared of a dream. She agrees with Roman philosopher Cato who said that it does not suit a man to be scared of dreams. She further adds that dreams have no meaning and are only result of certain physical disorder or lethargy, such as too much of eating. With this she urges him to take a medicine to get rid of such disorder.



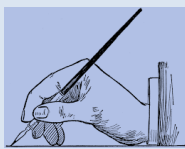
Chauntecleer thanks Lady Pertelote for her support and insists that he does not need any laxative. However, he too mentions scholars like Macrobius, Scipio, Joseph, and Croesus who maintain that dreams are not meaningless, rather have very definite meanings “Dame Pertelote, I tell you verily Macrobius, who wrote of Scipio The African a vision long ago, He holds by dreams, saying that they have been warnings of things that men have later seen” (citation). He further cites that there are examples of premonition or forecasting of death, murder etc. seen in dreams which proved to be true later on. Though Chauntecleer is depicted as one well versed in books and authors, however, in the end, he chooses to abandon his own wisdom for the sake of his wife.

Next morning, Chauntecleer catches sight of a fox named Don Russel, who is hiding near the farmyard. Chauntecleer tries to run away, but the fox gently calls out that there is no need to fear him. He had come only to hear Chauntecleer's beautiful voice. Hearing this, the vain cock shuts his eyes and bursts into song. At that moment, the fox races to the cock, grasps him by the neck, and makes off with him. The hens in the barnyard make such a terrible commotion that they arouse the entire household. Soon the widow, her two daughters, the dogs, hens, geese, ducks, and even the bees, are chasing the fox.

Chauntecleer suggests the fox to turn around and shout insults at his pursuers. The fox, thinking Chauntecleer's idea a good one, opens his mouth, and Chauntecleer silently escapes to a treetop. The fox tries once again to lure Chauntecleer down by compliments and flattery, but the rooster has learned his lesson.

Usually, the clever fox defeats the rooster in this type of beast fable, but here, Chauntecleer tricks the fox at his own game and foils Russell. The moral of the story, says the Nun's Priest, is to never trust flatterers—perhaps a subtle jab at some of his fellow pilgrims. It is also worth noting that there is a moral of not trusting women or wives, the Nun's Priest does not explicitly mention it in his tale.

At the conclusion of the tale, the Host praises the Nun's Priest. Observing the Priest's magnificent physique, he comments that, if the Priest were secular, his manhood would require not just seven hens, but seventeen. He thanks "Sir Priest" for the fine tale and turns to another for the next tale.



### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What animals does Chaucer catalogue as belongings of the poor widow?

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2. What nightmare did Chauntecleer have that made him groan and cluck in his sleep?

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3. What is Pertelote's view of dreams?

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4. What did Chauntecleer do to trick the fox to escape?

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5. How did the fox attempt to lure Chautecleer down once again?

### **2.3 SUMMING UP**

In this unit you have gone through the story of the *Tale* and also gathered some idea of the underlying meaning inherent in such fables. The major characters and the events that had taken place in the story were also introduced. You have come to know how these participants, i.e. the animals and birds talk and behave like human beings. The philosophical thought revealed during the conversation of Chauticleer and Pertelote prepares us for the critical study of the tale in the next unit. Moral is the prime focus of this kind of tales where a simple looking story leaves behind arena of experience of human life. In the forthcoming unit we shall discuss how it happens.



### **2.4 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS**

1. Discuss in details the three literary periods of Geoffrey Chaucer with a critical analysis of his style.
2. Give a vivid description of the discussion between Chauticleer and Pertelote regarding dream. What

argument did Chauticleer place to establish his fear as meaningful?

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### JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS

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## **UNIT 3: CRITICAL READING OF 'THE NUN'S PRIEST'S TALE'**

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

- 3.0 Introduction
- 3.1 Learning Objective
- 3.2 Major Themes
  - 3.2.1 The Significance of Dreams
  - 3.2.2 Relations between husbands and wives
  - 3.2.3 Fortune
- 3.3 Themes of Dream in *NPT*
- 3.4 *The Nun's Priest Tale* as a Beast Fable
- 3.5 Summing Up
- 3.6 Assessment Question
- 3.7 References and further Readings

### **3.0 INTRODUCTION**

Apparently *The Nun's Priest's Tale* looks like a simple beast fable in which, instead of presenting the event through actions of human beings, animal and birds are made to do the same. But why does the poet use such a device while he could have shown human beings? Does he achieve any specific purpose? Is the poem really a simple folktale written in the style of Aesop? Or does it have more layers of meanings that need to be analysed? A critical reading of any text leads us to answer all these and more. In this unit our effort will be to go beyond the surface of the tale and see what relation it has with the ideological aspects of its time.

### 3.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVE

A critical reading of this unit will enable you to

- Know *The Nun's Priest's Tale* to its depth
- Help you to grasp the major thematic issues and stylistic features of the prescribed text
- Certain beliefs of Chaucer's time
- Chaucer's alteration of the existing thematic and stylistic features in the *Tale*.

### 3.2 MAJOR THEMES

The *Nun's Priest Tale* uses many of the conventions of both courtly romance and Homeric epic to describe his barnyard scene, lifting his story from a simple fable to the genre of mock epic and social satire. By taking noble concepts and ideas and putting them in mouths of chickens and foxes, the tale suggests that perhaps these high ideas, or those who talk about them, are not as noble or serious as they seem.

#### 3.2.1 *The Significance of Dreams*

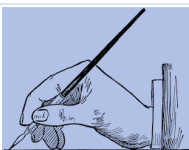
Chauntecleer and Pertelote behave like an old married couple, howsoever grandiose their description are in the *Tale*. When Chauntecleer groans in his sleep Pertelote's first reaction is to ask him about his problem and came up immediately with a practical solution. However, Chauntecleer feels otherwise and for him the dream is anything but a problem to be solved. It becomes an opportunity for self-aggrandising. He thinks the dream is a message from God warning of his imminent fall from the top of the Wheel of

Fortune, and by implication associates himself with tragic heroes who also suffer the whims of Fortune. Pertelote tries to goad Chauntecleer into losing his fear by saying that women like fearless men. There may be further meaning behind her mention of not like 'any boaster' (151), as if she senses Chauntecleer's pride swelling. Her practical solution is to argue that this particular dream is a *somnium naturale*, a dream with physical causes, namely an imbalance of humours, the bodily fluids on which medieval medicine was founded. It's all logical, she says: the two colours, red and black, which feature in the dream, represent superfluities of choleric and melancholic humours, since these are red and black. For good measure, she cites a proverb to effect that dreams are meaningless from Cato. Pertelote says she'll make Chauntecleer a prescription of herbs which will purge him of the offending humours. In a nice touch, she prescribes worms, a recognised medieval cure for tercian fevers, but also what you might expect a bird to eat. Medieval dream-theory was complicated, and Chaucer doesn't give very much of it here. The major source-text was the *Somnium Scipionis*, a chapter of Cicero's *De Republica* with commentary by Macrobius. Macrobius exhaustively categorised different kinds of dreams according to their causes. In the *Nun's Priest's Tale* we are given two possibilities: the natural dream and the celestial or prophetic dream, which is a message from God. Chauntecleer gives us both anecdotal evidence and cites authors to support his case that his dream is of the latter type.

Chauntecleer tells us two extended stories, which almost constitute digressions within a digression as well as stories within a story. These descriptions of dreams having significance constitute around 286 lines in the poem. But they are not so extended that they disrupt the flow of the narrative.

So we have the two pilgrims, one of whom is murdered because his friend ignored the dreams which told of his murder. Chauntecleer goes rather over board describing the survivor's distress, as if he is rather enjoying the tale. The moral is that 'Here men may seen that dreams are to be feared' (296). Next we have the tale of the two travellers. One has a dream that they will drown if they go on their journey. He stays, but the other laughs and embarks on the ship, which then sinks. The moral is 'That many a dream is very greatly to be feared' (343). Next we get the story of Saint Kenelm, king of Mercia, who dreamt himself in a tree which was chopped down and was murdered after ignoring it. A host of other examples is given before he decides that Pertelote's beauty 'It makes all my dread die' (396).

In Chauntecleer's defence of dream interpretation, the old question of experience and auctoritee returns. But returning to his subject matter he gets the narrative going on a new digression. The cockerel followed the advice of a woman, poor fool — just like Adam, who got kicked out of Paradise. And then he says that he's not really blaming the counsel of women; it's just the game. For the authoritative opinion you should read what the real auctores say; what I've said here is just the words of a cock: 'I kan noon harm of no woman divyne' which means 'I can think of no harm in women' or 'I know no harm in a religious woman'. Perhaps this is the Priest's way of staying in the good books with his employer, the Prioress.



### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. What is Chauntecleer's view on dream?



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2. Mention the two stories that Chauntecleer presented in support of his argument.

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### 3.2.2 *Relations between husbands and wives*

Chauntecleer's response to his wife's advice is exactly what most men would do in a similar situation. They think it is beneath their dignity to listen to women's advice. In fact, listening to Pertelote's advice at all is beneath his dignity. So he launches into a learned argument, a spectacular performance of rhetoric designed to contradict and impress his wife. Of course, we don't read her response to his words. In the end of the day, Chauntecleer ignores the dream, despite his argument. We can ask three questions:

- (a) What was Pertelote's main advice, the laxative or the ignoring the dream?
- (b) Does Chauntecleer just argue against Pertelote's theory to escape the laxative?
- (c) Are the later comments by the Nun's Priest that Chauntecleer took his wife's advice accurate?

Chauntecleer turns his attention to more pleasurable pursuits, namely the seduction of Pertelote. His final parting shot in the argument is his mistranslation of *mulier est hominis confusio*

in line 398 as ‘Woman is man's joy and all his bliss’ (400) instead of “Woman is man’s ruin”, which he knows she will not catch (Cato was available in English, but most of his sources were not). There is gentle humour of this type running throughout the tale: Chauntecleer’s name means ‘sing-clear’, and Pertelote’s name means ‘one who confuses someone’s fate’.

### *3.2.3 Fortune or Destiny*

The theme of fortune can be seen in Chaucer’s tale. Chauntecleer jumps down from his perch and begins to reign over his hens, ‘Thus royal, as a prince is in his hall,’ (418). The implication is again that he is at the top of Fortune’s wheel – until a certain day. The elaborate chronology establishes the date as Friday, 3 May, which is traditionally unlucky. It was the date when Palamon escaped from prison in the Knight’s Tale. It is a day for Fortune to operate. The Nun’s Priest may even be working in a reference (possibly humorous) to the Knight’s Tale, given that it was the Knight’s prompting which got him going. The theme of Fortune is taken up again, explicitly: ‘For ever the latter end of joy is woe./God knows that worldly joy is soon gone’. Of course, this is also taking up the theme of the Monk’s Tale. In the context of Chauntecleer and his wife, or wives, it is equally applicable to the blissful married state he appears to be enjoying.

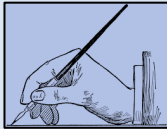
Don Russell, the col-fox or crafty fox is introduced as lying in wait in the hedge for the opportunity to pounce on Chauntecleer. He is there by “By exalted imagination predestined” (451), which could mean either Chauntecleer’s

dream or God's ordinance. Don Russell is described in a melodramatic mock heroic, being equated with the cause of the fall of Troy, of all things. But then the narrator lapses into a short digression about the scholastic debate on predestination. The debate is between the orthodox Augustinian 'we are granted free will by God to use such as God allows us', against Boethius's distinction between simple necessity (e.g., by necessity all men are mortal), and conditional, or implied, necessity (e.g. if you know that a man walks, you can infer that by necessity he does — but your knowledge is not the cause of his walking. Hence God's foreknowledge is not a necessary cause of man's actions).

Note the question of how dreams may or may not provide foreknowledge connects with the question of how foreknowledge, if we get it, affects the freedom of our actions. The Nun's Priest doesn't solve the conundrum, saying his tale is of a cock, so what is the point? This raises the question of allegory. Does a tale of a cock provide us with any useful understanding? Does Chauntecleer behave the way he does just because, being a cock, it is his nature? Or does Chaucer come down on one side by the end of the tale? After all, we're invited in the end to find meaning in this tale of the cock and the fox.

The only way the fox is going to catch Chauntecleer is to trick him, so he says he came to hear his singing, which has more feeling than Boethius, whose work on music advocated amore mathematical model. Don Russell says that he has had Chauntecleer's father and mother in his house 'to my greet ese' (3297). He goes right to Chauntecleer's pride, and Chauntecleer falls right into the flatterer's trap. Don Russell grabs him by the neck and heads for the woods.

Well, we're not going to hear his fate until he is properly lamented by the narrator. The irony is that it is all for nought, since the horrible fall on Fortune's Wheel never comes to pass. But we get good apostrophes starting in line on how Friday was unlucky: the Expulsion from Eden, the Flood, the Betrayal of Christ, the Crucifixion, and the fatal wounding of Richard I. This high tragedy culminates in a comparison with the events in the *Aeneid*. But then the hens start to shriek and it all turns into barnyard chaos. It is almost as if the tragedy, the fall of a king leads to the collapse of order itself. There is even a passing reference to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Who is Don Russell?

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2. What he was waiting for behind the hedge?

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3. How did the speaker describe the fox?

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Everything is solved with a typical turn of medieval humour in which you get what you deserve. Just as the jealous husband deserves to be cuckolded (Miller's Tale, Merchant's

Tale) and the deceiver deserves to be cheated (Reeve's Tale), so the fox deserves to be outfoxed. Like Chauntecleer, he too falls into the trap of pride. He has to brag about his feat. Just as pride brought the first turn of Fortune's Wheel, it causes that wheel to turn back. There is something profound being said here about the way one interact with Fortune. But the sentence, as it were is encapsulated by two sententiae or morals, one by the frustrated fox and one by the narrator. The fox says, ' "Nay," said the fox, "but God give him misfortune,/Who is so indiscreet of governance/ That he chatters when he should hold his peace." The Priest says 'Lo, such it is to be careless/And negligent, and trust on flattery'. But then he reminds us to take the morality lest we think the tale is just a folly.

So does the tale give us a more sophisticated view of Fortune than 'don't talk too much or God will get you' or 'don't let yourself be flattered into foolish negligence'? Are we really to take these morals seriously? Some people have seen the Tale as an allegory of the Fall of Man, and presumably later redemption. What is certainly there is respectful ridiculing of rhetorical practice. Not only does rhetoric take up most of the tale, but it seems to reduce very thing to rather banal sententiae in the end.

Towards the end of the Tale, the Nun's Priest addresses his audience directly:

Lo, such it is for to be reckless  
And negligent, and trust in flattery.  
But you that holden this tale a folly,  
As of a fox or of a cock and hen,  
Taketh the morality, good men.  
For Saint Paul says that all that written is,  
To our doctrine it is y-writ y-wis.<sup>1</sup>

Taketh the fruit, and let the chaff be still.  
Now good God, if that it be thy will,  
As saith my Lord, so make us all good men,  
And bring us thy high bliss. Amen." (670-680)

Thus, the Priest concludes with an assertion that his tale is not a simple looking tale on cock, hen or fox. It is rather as St Paul said, all things are written for our learning. We need to differentiate between the fruit and the chaff (Taketh the fruit, and let the chaff be still). The idea that literature was for teaching religious doctrine, was a prevailing one in the Middle Ages. The primary model for literary interpretation was biblical exegesis: the practice of interpreting the meaning of the Bible. This involved training, which is why the Church did not advocate translating the Bible so that everyone could read it and form their own interpretations. They feared that people would always take the Bible literally and so form interpretations that ran contrary to Christian doctrine. In fact, there was a sophisticated exegetical tradition which specified four ways of understanding the Bible:

1. Literal (historical): what the story actually says. E.g. the crossing of the Red Sea by the Hebrews was actual history.

2. Typological (allegorical): illustrating truths. E.g. the story of the crossing of the Red Sea by the Hebrews is to be understood Hebrews as exemplifying "type" or model of the soul redeemed by Christ.

3. Moral (tropological): illustrating what should be done for the conversion of the soul. For example, the story of the crossing of the Red Sea by the Hebrews is a lesson: that humans are all sinful and must leave wicked habits and cross over to God, with His help.

4. Anagogical (eschatological): dealing with the four last things – Heaven, Hell, Death, and Judgement – or eternity. For example, the story of the crossing of the Red Sea by the Hebrews is illustrative of the way God's universe is ordered, all leading out of evil and upward into Heaven. The Nun's Priest seems to invite the reader to engage in an interpretation of his non-biblical story. But do any of these methods help us to find the "fruit"? Is biblical exegesis even appropriate for understanding such a story?

### 3.5 MAJOR CHARACTERS

#### *Chauntecleer*

When the Nun's Priest turns to Chauntecleer, he begins to comment on the life of the rich in other ironic ways. Chauntecleer has great talents and grave responsibilities, but the cock's talent, i.e. crowing, is a slightly absurd one, however proud he may be of it. In Middle English, as in modern, "crowing" can also mean boasting or bragging. Chauntecleer's responsibility, making sure the sun does not go back down in the morning, is ludicrous. His other responsibilities — taking care of his wives — are equally silly. Part of the Nun's Priest's method in his light-hearted analysis of human pride is an ironic identification of Chauntecleer with everything noble that he can think of. His physical description, which uses many of the adjectives that would be used to describe a knight. These include "crenelated," "castle Wall," "fine coral," "polished jet," "azure," "lilies," and "burnished gold," which reminds one of an elegant knight in shining armour.

The learner should be constantly aware of the ironic contrast between the barnyard and the real world, which

might be another type of barnyard. That is, the ‘humanity’ and ‘nobility’ of the animals is ironically juxtaposed against their barnyard life. This contrast is an oblique comment on human pretensions and aspirations in view of the background, made clear when Don Russell challenges Chauntecleer to sing, and the flattery blinds Chauntecleer to the treachery. Here, the tale refers to human beings and the treachery found in the court through flattery. Chauntecleer's escape is also affected by the use of flattery. Don Russell learns that he should not babble or listen to flattery when it is better to keep quiet. And Chauntecleer has learned that flattery and pride go before a fall.

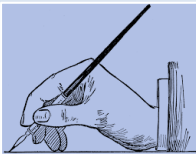
He is proud, arrogant, quick-thinking and good looking. “His bill was black and shone as bright as jet, / Like azure were his legs and they were set/ On azure toes with nails of lily white,/ Like burnished gold feathers, flaming bright.” Describing Chauntecleer’s good looks, and one of the many passages displaying how good he is at what he does or how well suited he is to his environment. He has seven lovers that exist only to do him pleasure. Another passage exists to show how Chauntecleer is dominant in his environment. “This gentle cock was a master in some measure/ of seven hens, all there to do his pleasure”.

### *Lady Pertelote*

The favourite among Chauntecleer’s wives, she is companionable, loving, and courteous. “Courteous she was, discreet and debonair,/ Companionable too, and took such care/ In her deportment, since she was seven days old/ She held the heart of Chauntecleer controlled/ Locked up securely in her every limb;/ O what a happiness his love to him!” When Chauntecleer has a bad dream she rebukes him “For



Shame,’ she said, ‘you timorous poltroon! / Alas, what cowardice! By god above/ You’ve forfeited my heart and lost my love.” Pertelote is portrayed as a sensible character, with practical knowledge and wisdom of everyday life. In that sense Both Chaucer and Pertelote seem to present to opposite views of human understanding; believing in predestiny and creating destiny by man himself. While *The Nun’s Priest’s Tale* is also seen presenting the age’s view on women as cause of all destruction “O woman’s counsel is often cold! A woman’s counsel brought us first to woe”, one who is responsible for driving Adam out of Heaven, it is through Chaucer such a view seems to be nullified by Chaucer. But, in the overall presentation of Pertelote as “all bliss”, not because she is wise, but because she is beautiful and a prized possession of Chaucer, the traditional role attributed by the society to women cannot be overlooked.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Mention two special attributes of Lady Pertelote.

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2. What specialty do you see in Chaucer? Mention at least two.

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### 3.6 THE NUN'S PRIEST TALE AS A BEAST FABLE

*The Nun's Priest Tale* is an outstanding example of the literary style known as a *bestiary* (or a *beast fable*), a popular form of preaching morality used by Aesop in his *beast fables*. In *beast fables* animals behave like human beings. Consequently, this type of fable is often an affront to man or a commentary on man's foibles. To suggest that animals behave like humans is to suggest that humans often behave like animals.

Chaucer wanted to criticize humans and the meaninglessness of life. The sermon that Chaucer would like to narrate is that the fox stands for the devil which wants to seduce the Christian, the cock and the widow stands for the church. Moreover the *Tale* is of the cock in charge of hens, which is closely related to the priest's own authority over women.

Using the fable as an amusing means to teach morality, the cock has fallen because of his pride, which is a cardinal sin or in fact the worst sin that a Christian can commit. After all, Satan fell from heaven because of pride. Eve first ate the forbidden apple because she was flattered by the serpent or Satan in disguise. Chaucer gives the reader an idea about flattering and flatterers and he helps to censure this human aspect. Chaucer uses allusions or references to people, places or even historical events such as Troy, Adam, Eve, cries of Roman matrons, and Joseph's interpretations of dreams etc. These allusions appeal to the reader, so that he can reflect the trivial issue he wants to convey. Free will is also treated in this tale. God must at all times have correct foreknowledge of human actions, since He is the Omniscient.

As a man has —free choice, he is responsible for the good and the evil (Austin, 30).

This tale is told using the technique of the *mock-heroic*. When Don Russell, the fox, runs off with Chauntecleer in his jaws, the chase that ensues involves every creature on the premises, and the entire scene is narrated in the elevated language (heroic style) found in the great epics where such language was used to enhance the splendid deeds of epic heroes. Chaucer uses elevated language to describe a fox catching a rooster in a barnyard — a far cry from the classic epics. The chase itself reminds one of Achilles' chasing Hector around the battlements in the *Iliad*. To compare the plight of Chauntecleer to that of Homer's Hector and to suggest that the chase of the fox is an epic chase similar to classical epics indicates the comic absurdity of the situation.

### **LET US STOP AND THINK**



#### **Beast Fable**

Beast fable, a prose or verse fable or short story that usually has a moral. In beast fables animal characters are represented as acting with human feelings and motives. They are usually related to folklore and very old form of proverbs. Among the best-known examples in Western literature are those attributed to the legendary Greek author Aesop. More recent examples are Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*(1902), James Thurber's *Fable of Our Time*(1940), and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945)

#### **Mock Heroic**

Mock heroic refers to the style which takes a trivial event and elevates it in style and language into event of great universal import. It is in reality an imitation and parody of the epic style used in by Homer in *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. Alexander Pope's poem *The Rape of the Lock* is an excellent example a mock-heroic composition. It treats a trivial event (the theft of a lock of hair, in this case) and events related to the act in the manner

of describing wars between Gods in Homer's epics.

Chaucer utilized many literary forms when composing his *Canterbury Tales*. Among these forms were the beast fable and romance. We find elements of both of these forms in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. Yet Chaucer was an original poet. He took these forms and made them his. He often diverged from the accepted norms to come up with stories that were familiar to the fourteenth century reader yet also innovative.

First let us look at the use of beast fable and how Chaucer diverged from tradition. One significant difference is that there is almost no human interaction with the animals. We have a brief description of the human inhabitants of the farm and then they disappear until the end. The true "humans" are the animals themselves as they possess almost total human qualities. For example, Chauntecleer and Pertelote is a "married" couple and bicker as humans. They also "love" each other. "He loved her so that well was him because of that".

Most striking is the logical analysis both chickens are capable of. Where beast fables would be resolved by action, these chickens think through the situation. Both Chauntecleer and Pertelote quote authoritative sources. Pertelote quotes: "Lo Cato, who was so wise a man, / Said he not thus, 'Attach no importance to dreams'?" Chauntecleer replies then "But nonetheless, as touching dan Cato,/ That has of wisdom such a great renown,/Though he commanded (us) to dread no dreams,/By God, men may in old books read". This is an interesting quote for it touches upon many of the differences this Tale in relation to other beast fables. The rooster quotes

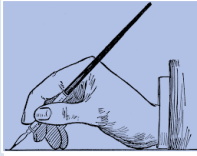
an authority, refers to a God and discusses dreams. Chauntecleer is embarrassingly pedantic.

The rooster's dream is significant as it and the discussion that follows it takes up much of the tale itself. The focus is not on the action i.e. Chauntecleer's capture by the fox, but on who is correct. Is Chauntecleer's position on dreams correct or is Pertelote's? The extensive discussion of the dream steers the story away from the 'moral' of Chauntecleer's vanity.

Romance in medieval literature concerned itself with noble knights and Chaucer departs from this by having his noble knight a rooster. The noble character is also peerless in a certain ability. Chaucer tells us that Chauntecleer has the best crow: "Then he [Chauntecleer] crowed so that it could not be improved." Chauntecleer is described as quite dashing, fitting the noble heroic characterization. "His comb was redder than the fine coral,/ And notched with battlements as if it were a castle wall". Chauntecleer also has his ladies, but the others are pushed into the background – his heart belonged to Pertelote. All these breaks from conventional romance illustrate the parody that Chaucer utilizes.

The ending has a moral as all beast fables do. Yet this is not the purpose of the Tale. Beast fables have explicit morals practically shouted to the audience. *The Nun's Priest's Tale* lacks this. In fact there is not a singular moral to be had from the story. There are several such as "do not be overly proud"; "listen to your intuition". While traditional beast fables had anthropomorphic animals, these represented one stereotypical human characteristic. The "romance" aspect helps to further the break from this tale being just another

beast fable. Chaucer's beasts are more diverse, and thus making them more human.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1 Mention two characteristics of Beast Fable.

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2. Mention two references of Mock Heroic poetry that you find in the poem.

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### 3.7 SUMMING UP

The critical reading of *The Nun's Priest's Tale* unfolds several meanings that one may not usually notice after a casual reading of the tale. Though Chaucer followed the tradition of fables started by Aesop, he added many variants to the tale which makes it richer and more complex in meaning and significance. By now you must have realized why Chaucer is referred to as the “original of the moderns”. He stands between the moralizing medieval tales and the rich, entertaining and critical modern literature.



### 3.8 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. In the Tale Chauntecleer lists six more examples in which dreams proved to be prophetic. Who are these six people and what is each one's story?
2. After "winning" the argument with Pertalote, what does Chauntecleer assert about his fear of dreams?
3. The Nun's Priest compares the fox to Scariot, Genylon, and Greek Synon. Explain these three allusions. Who is Judas Iscariot, Ganelon from The Song of Roland, and Sinon from Homeric writings?
4. According to the Nun's Priest there is a difference between his own attitude toward women and Chauntecleer's attitude. What is that difference?
5. When the Nun's Priest calls out, "Allas, his wyf [Pertalote] ne roghtenat of dremes!" what is the irony here? Who else (in addition to Pertalote) ignored the warning of the dream?
6. The fate of Chauntecleer and the accompanying lamentation is compared to the Iliad, the Aeneid, Hannibal's attack on Rome and the Roman destruction of Carthage, Nero's destruction of Rome, and so on. What is the intended effect of applying this comparisons to the possible death of a chicken?
7. What is the significance of the entire farm (including ducks and bees) pursuing the fox to rescue Chauntecleer?
8. The rooster earlier made a moral point about events. However, he offers a better moral to the story later. What moral does Chauntecleer offer?

9. The fox, however, sees a different moral to the story. What moral or lesson does Russell draw from past events? Which moral do you like better-- Chauntecleer's or Russell's?
10. What effect does the *Nun's Priest's Tale* have on Harry Bailey? How does he change in the way he addresses the priest? What does the Host say would have been the case if the Priest had been "secular"?



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## MODULE II: ELIZABETHAN POETRY

## **UNIT-4: EDMUND SPENSER: “EPITHALAMION”.**

**PHILIP SIDNEY:** *LOVING IN TRUTH, AND FAIN IN VERSE MY LOVE TO SHOW*”,

*“WHEN NATURE MADE HER CHIEF WORK”, “STELLA’S EYES, STELLA, THINK NOT THAT I BY VERSE SEEK FAME”*

### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

4.0 Introduction

4.1 Learning Objective

4.2 Edmund Spenser: Life and Works

4.3 *Epithalamion*

4.3.1 Reading the poem *Epithalamion*

4.4 Sir Philip Sidney: life and work

4.5 Reading the poem “*When Nature made her chief work, Stella’s eyes*”

4.5.1 Literary Devices

4.6 Reading the poem “*Stella, think not that I by verse seek fame*”

4.7 “*Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show*”

4.8 Summing Up

### **4.0 INTRODUCTION**

This unit is about Elizabethan Poetry that found expression in the mid 16 century, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. This is considered to be one of the most prolific periods of English literature. After a dark period with Edward and Mary, the accession of Queen Elizabeth like a breath of fresh air for England and English people. Elizabeth, despite her

vanity and certain inconsistencies, loved England and her greatness; and disseminated that nationalistic outlook to all her people....”with the unbounded patriotism which exults in Shakespeare, and with ‘the personal devotion which finds a voice in the Faery Queen. Under her administration the English national life progressed by gigantic leaps rather than by slow historical process, and English literature reached the very highest point of its development” (Long, 2009). The age also well defined by Milton, “we suddenly see England, a noble and puissant nation, rousing herself, like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks”( Long, 2009).

It is the national life that concerns the literary student, since you are already told that any great development of the national life is invariably associated with a development of the national literature.

Keeping this in view, in this unit we have suggested for the learners few select and representative poets of the period. Elizabethan age was an age of beautiful lyrical poems, including sonnets. Long love poems such as epithalamions were also in trend which found finest expression in the hands of Sydney and Spenser. Knowledge of sonnets is very important for the learners in the sense that it was a literary form that lasted till modern times. Learners will know how sonnet form came to England and found deviations and refinement in the hands of greatest sonneteers like Shakespeare.

#### **4.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

In this unit, we are going to

- Introduce you to two great poets of the Renaissance/Elizabethan


period; namely, Edmund Spenser and Philip Sidney

- Present a comprehensive and detailed understanding of Spenser's poem *Epithalamion*.
- Analyse the thematic concerns of select poems of Philip Sidney.

#### 4.2 EDMUND SPENSER: LIFE AND WORKS

By now you have a detail reading of Chaucer, one of the first truly English poets who had given a shape and form to English poetry. It is with Edmund Spenser that the golden age of English poetry, i.e. Elizabethan age begins. He was definitely the great synthesizer who combined in his poetry the different threads of European traditions and English national spirit. He brought the broad spectrum of Classical, medieval, and the humanist currents. Spenser was inspired equally by the new Puritan idealism, and by the Catholic sense of the unity of Western culture. Spenser was a supreme craftsman, and was endowed with an intensely imaginative mind. It was to the poetry of Virgil that Spenser mostly looked up to as his poetic model. He borrowed a great deal from the poetic techniques and conventions used by the great Latin poet.

#### LET US STOP AND THINK

	<p><b>Vergil</b></p> <p><b>Publius Vergilius Maro</b> (70 BC-19 BC), commonly known as Virgil or Vergil in English, was an ancient Roman poet belonging to the Augustan period. Most famous and known for his epic <i>Aeneid</i>, he also authored the <i>Eclogues</i> (or <i>Bucolics</i>), the <i>Georgics</i>, and A number of minor poems, collected in the <i>Appendix Vergiliana</i>.</p> <p>Virgil is traditionally ranked as one of Rome's greatest poets. His <i>Aeneid</i> has been considered the national epic of ancient Rome</p>
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since the time of its composition. He modeled his epic after Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Virgil's work and style kept wide and deep influence on Western literature. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, in which Virgil appears as Dante's guide through Hell and Purgatory, is deeply influenced by Virgil.

### *Life of Spenser*

Little is known about the early life and parentage of Spenser, except that he was born in poor family in East Smithfield, near the Tower of London. His education began at the Merchant Tailors' School in London and was continued in Cambridge. Here in the glorious world that Spenser tried to create for himself the atmosphere and he read the classics, made acquaintance with the great Italian poets, and wrote numberless little poems of his own. Chaucer was his ideal in poetry, but unlike him his ambition was to express the dream of English chivalry.

After leaving Cambridge (1576) Spenser went to the north of England, on some unknown work or quest. This period records his love and his melancholy over the lost Rosalind which we find in the *Shepherd's Calendar*. Upon his friend Harvey's advice he came to London, bringing his poems; and here he met Leicester. This encounter facilitated Spenser an opportunity to live at Leicester House and royal favour. Here he met Sidney and all the queen's favourites and also knew the royal court as full of intrigues, lying and flattery, about which he documented in *Mother Hubbard's Tale*. During his connection with the court he completed the *Shepherd's Calendar*.

In 1580, through Leicester's influence, Spenser, who was utterly weary of his dependent position, was made

secretary to Lord Grey, the queen's deputy in Ireland, and the third period of his life began. After nearly sixteen years' residence he wrote his *View of the State of Ireland* (1596), his only prose work, in which he submits a plan for "pacifying the oppressed and rebellious people." This work is most statesmanlike, and was widely well received in England.

*The Faerie Queen* marks a departure from Spenser's early poetry in that here he chooses distinctly political and military subjects. This highly complex epic poem is undoubtedly his masterpiece. Spenser originally planned a poem consisting of twelve books. So in its present form, the poem remains incomplete. The influence of Vergil is strongly felt from the beginning of the poem—from its allegorical narrative to its structural design. The allegory is built around the stories of the several knights who symbolize different virtues. The allegorical design meant much to Spenser. In his own words, the poem "is cloudily enwrapped in allegorical devises". Regarding the objective behind the poem, he said that it was to "fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline" ("A Letter of the Authors).

It is true that Spenser, to a great extent, moulded his poetry in the lines of the classical poets. But he did not stop at that. He attempted simultaneously to produce poetry which would be able to give voice to or reflect the English national life in its diverse aspects – society, culture, history, politics and religion, and in this regard, he is the truest inheritor and propagator of the poetic traditions as established by Chaucer and other English writers. Like Chaucer, Spenser, too, gave his poems English settings and peopled them with figures from English history and folklore.

*The Faerie Queene* became instantly popular as soon as the first three Books were published in 1590 in Kilcolman, surrounded by great natural beauty. He was granted a royal pension by Queen Elizabeth who greatly admired the poem. In 1596 Books IV, V, and VI came out in print. The poem was rightly praised by Elizabethan men of letters as the finest poetic work of that generation. In 1591, two other works were printed. Of these, *Daphnaïda* is a pastoral elegy based on Chaucer's "Book of Duchess". Spenser made a lot of experiments in this highly symbolic poem. It is generally regarded as a stepping stone for the kind of symbolic poetry he later perfected in *Epithalamion*. The other volume *Complaints, Containing Sundrie Small Poems of the Worlds Vanitie*, contains nine lengthy poems, a couple of which were revised versions of his earlier poems. The collection included "The Ruins of Time", an elegy on Sidney, dedicated to Sidney's sister, the Countess of Pembroke; "Mother Hubbard's Tale", "Muiopotmos", "The Tears of the Muses", and "Virgil's Gnat". The overarching themes of the volume are mutability, change, decay, and the futility of earthly desires. The poems show the broad range and versatility of the poet, his romantic sensibility, and his passionate desire to speak out against the vileness, follies and foibles of his times. In 1595, Spenser published *Colin Clouts Come Home Againe*, an allegorical pastoral dedicated to Raleigh. In the same year, the highly admired and popular sonnet sequence *Amoretti* and equally famous *Epithalamion* came out in print.

The eighty nine sonnets in *Amoretti* are unique and interesting because they re-work the sonnet convention established by Petrarch. At a time when Petrarch's influence on the Elizabethan poets and sonneteers was quite strong, Spenser

goes against this tradition. While Sidney's sonnets are overwhelmingly modelled on Petrarch in that they depict an immensely beautiful, yet unattainable woman, Spenser describes a courtship that ends in happy matrimony. He celebrates a quite earthly love-affair and ultimately glorifies marriage in the companion poem *Epithalamion*. The sonnets commemorate his love-affair with Elizabeth Boyle. The poems are characterized by subtle humour and rhetorical flourish as well as parody in depicting the beauty of the lady and the varied experiences of the poet during the period of courtship. But nonetheless, continental poets like Petrarch, du Bellay and Phillippe Desportes exerted lasting influence in the poetic development of Spenser as a sonneteer. It is to his credit that he still looked for and successfully managed to find his own voice and idiom.

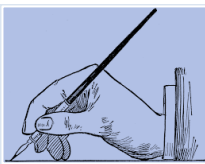
Sidney's influence on Spenser was strong, a fact that he himself acknowledges in his tributes in the poems of *Complaints* and *Colin Clouts*. Like Sidney, Spenser revelled in the mixing of the epic and the pastoral, mostly in his magnum opus *The Fairy Queen*. This influence of Sidney is also evident in the sonnet sequence *Amoretti*. Sidney's sonnets in *Astrophel and Stella* depict his courtship of Penelope Rich. Likewise, Spenser's sonnet sequence is about his love and courtship of Elizabeth Boyle who became his second wife. But Spenser's poems are much more characterized by Christian piety which restrains the wild passion we see in Sidney's sonnets. His courtship is not with another man's wife (as was Sidney's), and throughout the sequence he upholds the virtues of healthy love-relationship which teaches man self-control, and motivates to depart



from follies and excessive infatuation, and move towards the joy of Christian marriage.

Spenser invented and perfected a verse form which became very popular. It came to be known as the Spenserian stanza and he wrote *The Faerie Queen* and many other works in this form. It consists of eight five-stress iambic lines, followed by an iambic line of six feet (an Alexandrine), rhyming *ababbcbccc*. He also wrote his sonnets in a form which was distinctively his own.

Spenser died in London in 1598, and was buried near his favourite Chaucer in Westminster Abbey. His monument describes him as “The Prince of Poets in His Tyme.” His poetry has remained popular through the ages and many later poets drew inspirations and acknowledged their debt to his poetic influence. Milton poetry owes a lot to the pictorial and musical quality of Spenser’s poetry. Among the Romantic poets, Wordsworth, Keats and Lord Byron, and later Tennyson, among others, were influenced by him. Earlier, Alexander Pope likens Spenser to “a mistress, whose faults we see, but love her with them all.”



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Name few important works of Edmund Spenser.

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2. What *Faerie Queen* is all about?

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3. What is *Amoretti*? What style and theme did Spenser adopt in this collection?

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### 4.3 EPITHALAMION

“*Epithalamion*” was written on the occasion of Spenser’s marriage to Elizabeth Boyle which took place in Ireland, probably in 1594. This celebratory poem shows Spenser’s poetic imagination at its peak. He uses lush imagery and captivating rhythm for enriching and transfiguring the bare facts. It is a long narrative poem with wide ranging use of Christian and pagan myths and legends. It consists of 24 stanzas with an elaborate and complex structural pattern. Spenserian scholars have pointed out that Spenser’s symbolic use of 365 long lines indicated the days of the year, the 359 before the envoy hinting at the discrepancies between solar and sidereal measurements; and of twenty-four stanzas to signify the hours of the day, the sixteen before the change of refrain referring to the hours of daylight in Ireland on June 11, 1594.

#### 4.3.1 Reading the poem *Epithalamion*

Spenser’s *Epithalamion* is, undoubtedly, one of the greatest lyrics of the Renaissance. Written as a celebratory ode

on the occasion of his marriage with Elizabeth Boyle, the poem has pleased readers through the ages by its rich poetic splendour, vivid pictorial and musical elements. The poem shows clear influences of Greek poets Theocritus and Sappho, and Latin poets such as Catallus. The lyrical poetry of French poets Ronsard and Du Bellay's influences are also visible. The poem, which is like a rich pageant, is written on a vast canvas where both pagan and Christian figures and elements mingle. The poem possesses a harmonious blend of vivid natural descriptions and personal emotions.

The narrative of the poem covers a single day, from dawn to midnight. In the true classical tradition of epithalamia, Spenser begins his poem with an invocation of the Muses. He asks for the favour of artistic energy and creative strength. He further appeals to the Muses to send all the nymphs to the bedside of his sleeping beloved so that they can gently wake her up. The bride wakes up and then the poet praises the purity and beauty of her. The wedding party gets larger with the joining of more and more figures and characters. Then we have a description of the procession of the wedding party to the church. In the convention of epithalamia, young boys and girls appear as minstrels and they along with others sing the "Hymen Hymenaeus"—a ritualistic prayer offered to the Greco-Roman god of marriage.

The bride bestirs as the bright day approaches, and she comes to the "temple" (the bower in the church where the wedding is to formally take place) in a joyous procession. The actual wedding ceremony is solemnized, and then a huge colourful celebration goes underway. The groom becomes impatient to have some intimate time with his groom, and he wishes that the day ends soon and wants the guests to leave the

wedding bower. The night arrives and the groom thinks of his future life with the groom and about the fruits of their love. He prays to the gods to grant fertility to them and his wife the gift of many children. The poem ends with the couple lying beside each other in the darkness before the break of day, and the groom remembering their love-affair, and the process by which they have come together. He then puts his thoughts to posterity as he anticipates their final rest and thinks about their yet unborn children in “heavenly tabernacles.”

### LET US STOP AND THINK



#### Epithalamion

Epithalamion is a wedding song. The word comes from “thalamus” meaning a “bridal chamber”. It originates from the ancient Greek tradition of celebrating the bride and the bridegroom through songs sung by young boys and girls outside the bridal chamber. The custom was to sing one song at night and another in the morning to awaken the couple. These songs invoked happiness and blessings for the newly-weds, and they also prayed for fertility. The Romans had also a similar tradition, but in their case, these bridal songs were sung only by girls after the departure of the guests, and these Latin songs were more erotic and vulgar than the Greek bridal songs. This verse form retained their popularity throughout the Classical period. The famous Roman poet Catullus also composed an epithalamium which was modelled on a poem by the ancient Greek poet Sappho.

Sir Phillip Sidney wrote the first English epithalamion in about 1580, and fifteen years later Edmund Spenser composed his “Epithalamion” to celebrate his wedding ceremony. John Donne, Ben Jonson, Robert Herrick and many other Renaissance poets composed wedding poems that were solemn or ribald, according to the intended audience and the poet’s own temperament. The

tradition persisted, and among later instance, we have Shelley's "*Epithalamium*" and Tennyson's epithalamion at the end of his great elegy *In Memoriam*. Among the moderns, W. H. Auden wrote an "Epithalamion" in 1939.

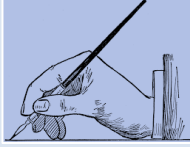
As mentioned earlier, Spenser composed *Epithalamion* to celebrate his marriage with Elizabeth Boyle. The poem traverses the entire wedding ceremony—starting with the dawn of the wedding day, with the restless, excited groom, to the departure of the guests and the late night scene of the passionate couple in the consummation of their marriage. In the poem, Spenser very methodically depicts the passing of time, the minutes and the hours. Time and its passing is both a chronological fact and also a binding trope in the poem. It is both objective, as well as subjective in that the passing hours mark the attitudes and perceptions of those who wait with expectations and fear in the poem.

In the tradition of classical poetry, Spenser begins the ode by invoking the Muses to come to the assistance of the groom. The invocation to the Muses is made not to seek help in writing poetry (as is usually the case), but to help the groom in awakening the bride from her slumber. Various figures form a procession to awake the bride and the mingling of pagan and Christian characters and figures give the poem a peculiar charm and uniqueness. The day of Spenser's wedding was 11<sup>th</sup> June, 1594; it was Saint Barnabas's Day, and the longest day according to prevalent calendar in the Elizabethan times. A. Kent Hieatt has written an elaborate summary of the temporal structure of the poem. He shows that the 24 stanzas represent the hours of the day. The temporal sequence is very precisely drawn by Spenser. Through this precise temporal structure, Spenser depicts the activities and ceremonies performed during

the day ending with the departure of the guests and the two lovers at the hushed hours of the dawn. The stanzas that lead to the announcement of the nightfall contain a refrain that speaks of the joyous sounds of the day, birds' songs at dawn when the bride awoke to the happy sounds of the church-bells ringing at the end of the wedding ceremony. The stanzas that come after night, however, are about silence: "Ne let the woods us answer, not our Eccho ring." The passing of the hours during the day is related to the facts of life itself. In this way, the micro cycles of the hours lead to the macro cycle of years and life. By depicting the wedding ceremony in a temporal manner that seems to last for a year, Spenser actually wanted to highlight the significance of the marriage ceremony.

Throughout the poem we discern a delicate and effective balance between the divine and the earthly, the Christian and the pagan/classical. In the beginning, the poet invokes the Muses and also to many things in nature such as trees, rivers etc. At the same time, there is also the presence of classical gods, goddesses and other figures—Hymen, Bacchus, Juno, Cynthia, the Graces, Venus etc. The poet invites the entire creation to join in the celebration of the wedding ceremony. The bride comes to the Church in a great procession looking like a goddess. The wedding ceremony is presided over by a priest amidst joyful music. Once the ceremony comes to an end, a great feast goes underway with sounds of bells and songs and wine poured out "by the belly full." At last, the wedding guests depart and the poet is alone with his beloved. It is night, and the poet invokes silence to descend as they get busy in their love-making. Cupids play all around them all through the night. Spenser asks Juno, Hymen and Hebe to bless their married life and he wishes for the gifts of many children.

The final scene is of Spenser lying in bed beside his lovely wife thinking of posterity and of the joys of heaven.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is the context of composition of *Epithalamion*?

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2. Name few Greek Gods and Goddesses that you find in *Epithalamion*.

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3. Give an example of the treatment of Christian and pagan in the poem.

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### 4.4 SIR PHILIP SIDNEY: LIFE AND WORKS

Poet, diplomat, courtier, and soldier, a legendary figure of the English Renaissance, Sir Phillip Sidney, was born to a noble and wealthy family in 1554 at Penshurst. His father Sir Henry Sidney was an advisor to the young King Edward VI, and after Edward's death, his connection to royalty continued favourably under Queen Mary. Sir Henry named his son after the husband of the Queen, Philip II of Spain (Philip II even

became the godfather of the child). He started his schooling in Shrewsbury School, eventually entering into Christ Church, Oxford. He was respected for his intelligence and brilliance from his early youth. But he left Oxford in 1572 without earning any degree, and embarked on a three year tour through France, Germany, Austria, Poland, and Italy.

Sidney served as a diplomat in Europe like his father. Returning to England, he entered into the hectic life of the aristocracy living in London with his uncle (the Earl of Leicester) and at the country home of his sister, the Countess of Pembroke. In 1576, he went to Ireland, where his father was Lord Deputy during this time, and studied closely the social and political situation there. Upon his return, he wrote a *Discourse on Irish Affairs* addressing it to the Queen. He wrote it mainly to defend his father's administration which was facing much criticism. Despite being a trusted political advisor and diligent diplomat to Queen Elizabeth, Sidney earned her anger for his opposition to her French marriage. He went to Germany in 1577 on a diplomatic mission. During this assignment, he tried to forge reconciliation between the various warring Protestant factions but was unsuccessful. As his relationship with the royalty was turning sour, he left the court and concentrated on his literary works.

Added to his bitter experience with the court was his unhappy love for Penelope Devereux. She was the daughter of the Earl of Essex and she married Lord Rich in 1581. She was the Muse and the inspiration for his sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella*. Sidney later married the daughter of Sir Francis Walsingham in 1583 and in the same year he was given the knighthood. Sidney's first work of distinction was *Lady of May*



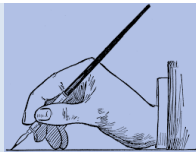
(1578) which is an entertaining masque written for Queen Elizabeth.

Much of his poetic work was in circulation in manuscripts, and it was *Arcadia* which was his first printed work (1590). A most ambitious work, this romance combined the traditions of epic and chivalric romance with elements from the Greek pastoral poetry. Sidney's *Arcadia* is a prose romance written to amuse his sister, the Countess of Pembroke. Though largely a prose work, *Arcadia* is interspersed with verse. It exists in two versions: the first completed by 1581 is known as the *Old Arcadia*. The second, much revised version, is known as the *New Arcadia* composed around 1583-84, but was never completed. It was this revised version which was first printed in 1590, with chapter divisions and summaries not of Sidney's own, and then in 1593 and thereafter with books III-V of the *Old Arcadia* added to make it a complete but hybrid work.

In *Arcadia*, Sidney takes a high moral, ethical and political stance, and ideal love, ideal friendship, and the ideal ruler are discussed, suggested, and embodied. The ethical and didactic element is heightened in the revised version, and the relatively simple romance of the *Old Arcadia* is overlaid with so much new and more serious matter that the whole character of the work is altered. Like Spenser's epic, *Arcadia* has as its "general aim" the fashioning of a "gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline"; and is, like Spenser's poem, a work of Protestant Humanists, combining Christian, Platonic, and the Renaissance ideals.

The famous sonnet sequence, the earliest of the many sequences during the Elizabethan period, *Astrophil and Stella* came out in print in 1591, though the most of the poems were

composed in the early 1580s. Sidney made new experiments with the sonnet form, providing a fluid rhyme scheme, variation of emotion, sense of a dramatic narrative to the individual poems, and a distinctive philosophical tone. Critics agree that Sidney's sonnets are markedly superior to that of many sonneteers of that period. His *Apology for Poetry* (1583, also known as *A Defence of Poesie*) is the first major work of criticism of the English Renaissance. It is believed that this critical work was partly motivated by Stephen Gosson's *School of Abuse* (1579) – a book which was dedicated to Sidney and is an attack on the contemporary English drama. In 1586, Sidney went to fight in the Lowlands alongside his uncle Robert Dudley to defend the Protestants. He was wounded in battle and died a few weeks later, on October 17. He was given a lavish funeral with full state honour.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What *Lady of May* is all about?

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2. Name the famous book on criticism written by Sidney. What is the other name of the book?

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#### **4.5 READING THE POEM “WHEN NATURE MADE HER CHIEF WORK, STELLA’S EYES”**

The sonnet (No. 7) beginning with the line ‘When Nature made her chiefe worke, Stella’s Eyes’ starts with puzzle: “When Nature made her chiefe worke, Stella’s Eyes,/In colour blacke, why wrapt she beames so bright?” This riddle about what Nature was up to, is carried over other “questions” to which Sidney provides three possible “answers”. The first possible answer is: May be Nature was trying to bring some aesthetic effects by making a contrast between Stella’s black eyes and her white complexion. The speaker imagines that Nature like the great painters knows how to bring “luster” to black by mixing light and dark paint together.

The second possibility is that Nature out of concern for us prepared us beforehand so that we would not be overwhelmed by the dazzling beauty of Stella. So Nature decided to “knit” or support/strengthen our vision. Perhaps, Nature is a boastful artist and she is displaying her great creative power by making the blackness of Stella’s eyes immensely beautiful. Traditionally Black is not regarded a beautiful colour; but the artistic hands of Nature has endowed it with great charm and attraction.

Then the final and the true response is provided: the colour black in Stella’s eyes expresses the mourning for all those lovers who have died for her love. Nature makes Love reside in Stella’s eyes, but he must wear the black cloth of mourning (“mourning weed”) inside that residence in respect for the lovers who died and continue to “bleed” for her and because of her. Though most of the time Astrophil speaks about Stella’s eyes, he can make no accurate statement about the eyes. It is

only in the couplet at the end that he says the only certain thing about those eyes: that those eyes are deadly and they have killed many as they can kill Astrophil, too. Thus the couplet makes an ironic shift.

#### 4.5.1 Literary Devices

This sonnet is virtually composed of rhetorical questions that Sidney answers in the final verses. Sidney uses various devices like alliteration, oxymoron, personification, symbols and similes.

##### Alliteration:

*“In colour black why wrapp’d she **beams** so **b**right?  
Would she in **beamy black**, like painter wise  
In object best to knit and strength our sight,  
Lest if no veil those brave gleams **did disguise**,  
They sun-like should more **dazzle** than **d**elight?  
  
whereas **black** seems **B**eauty’s contrary”*

**Oxymoron:** “Would she in **beamy black**, like painter wise”

##### Personification:

*“When **Nature** made **her** chief work, Stella’s eyes.  
Lest if no veil those **brave gleams** did disguise”  
  
“minding Love should be/Placed ever there...”*

**Simile:** “Would she in beamy black, **like painter wise**”,

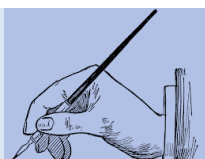
(The beloved lady is like a skilful painter.)

*“They **sun-like** should more dazzle than delight?”*

(Sydney compares the eyes of the lady with the sun.)

**Symbol:** The two dominant symbols in the poem are Stella’s eyes and the colour black. The symbol of the eye belongs to the

Renaissance tradition. Most sonneteers of the time use the eye to express the beauty, almost fatal beauty of the lady. The lady's eyes could kill the men who loved her. The colour black was commonly associated to darkness, evil and death. But here Sidney says that even if her eyes are black and she is surrounded by that colour, she shines. The blackness of her eyes is a symbol of respect towards all of the men she has killed with them.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Mention at least two symbols used in the poem.

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2. What is personification? Give one example from the poem.

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### 4.6 READING THE POEM “STELLA, THINK NOT THAT I BY VERSE SEEK FAME”

In this sonnet, Astrophil makes clear to Stella that his motivation for writing poetry is not worldly fame. He wants her to understand that he does not seek fame or praise from the world. In fact, he does not even want to be considered a poet. He wishes that his gravestone must not declare him to be a poet. If he wants praise from someone it is from Stella herself.

His poetry is dedicated to her beauty and the celebration of it. The praise of other people, however great, does not mean anything to him. His poems are all for her, and she is the inspiration and the reason of his success as a poet. Every word or poem that he writes is loaded with love that he carries for her. In *An Apology for Poetry* Sidney stated that poetry is his “unelected vocation”—and this poem reflects this sentiment. But despite such avowed indifference for fame and name, Sidney knows that his poems are read by people who may praise or blame him.

#### **4.7 READING THE POEM “*LOVING IN TRUTH, AND FAIN IN VERSE MY LOVE TO SHOW*”**

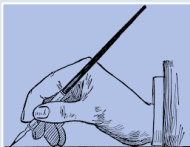
The sonnet beginning with “loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show” is a kind of explanation on Sidney’s part as to why he is composing these poems in the first place. He explains that the prime motivation behind the writing is to draw out affection from his beloved for him. He hopes that when, and if, she reads his poems, she will not only enjoy but also have a glimpse into his suffering soul. The pleasure that is derived from reading is, of course, born out of the pain of unrequited love. The poet believes that his poetry will help her realize his great affection for her. He also believes that she will take pity on the poor lover and soon this pity will transform into love and grace. After that, the speaker describes how much he has had to struggle in giving poetic expression of his pain and misery. He implies that the task of writing his sonnets has not been easy, and that he had tried to learn from other poets the craft of expressing emotion. But all his attempts have been in vain as his unbounded love for Stella bore no fruit. At last,

he comes to the realization that instead of looking for inspiration in other poets, he must write from his own heart. It is only by being faithful to his deeper emotions and instincts that he can give truest expression of his love for his beloved Stella. The dawn of this realization results in the poem, a product of pure and spontaneous feelings. The poem is interesting because Sidney projects himself not just as a desperate lover but also as a self-critical poet. The besotted lover that he is, he is miserable in his awareness of his failure to attract Stella, thereby satisfy his emotional and physical needs. But as a Protestant, he is compelled by his training not to be swayed by his desire and longings. The sonnet skilfully and very subtly presents the tension arising out of such conflicts. The first sonnet is also the most popular and iconic of Sidney's poems. The skilful use of pun (of the word "feet"), mixed metaphor, oxymoron ('feeling skill'), alexandrine etc. make this poem a unique one in the annals of Elizabethan sonnet. There is the crowd of '-ing' words—"loving", "studying", "turning", "halting", "wanting", "biting" and "beatin")—but event after all this the speaker was nowhere near his goal or close to achieving what he was really looking for, until the "Muse" told him in direct, imperative, monosyllabic language: "Fool...look in thy heart, and write." This plea for writing poetry according to the spontaneous impulse of the heart anticipates the Romantic philosophy of poetic creation in the 19 century.

In the quatrain, there is optimism in the speaker as he hopes that Stella, according to his plan, will bend to his will and he will be able to gain her "grace." This note of optimism fades as the poem moves forward. The second quatrain depicts the speaker as putting his plan into action, as he tries to learn the art of poetry from others to be able to compose a kind of

poetry that will move Stella in loving him. The sestet opens with the word “But” and he confesses that his attempts to bask in the glory of other poets have resulted in a “sunburnt brain.” The gnawing doubt already hinted at is confirmed here, and the last six lines show a man who has lost the intensity of before, and the motivation for action, and has become “helpless.”

Sidney very intelligently shows the sway between hope and frustration by using words making up contrasting images. On the one hand, he uses words such as “leaver” (pages of books) and “showers” (rain/hope/inspiration) in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> lines as images of renewal and life and freshness, and on the other hand he evokes despair and frustration with the phrase “sunburnt brain.” Some commentators have read the poem as representation of the pain and anxiety of a writer experiencing the ‘writer’s block.’ At the same time, the poem very memorably sums up the frustrating process of writing to make others empathize and the nervous energy that it entails.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What reason does the speaker place in ‘Stella, think not....seek fame’ of writing his poem?

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2. What, according to the speaker, is the intention behind writing these poems?

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#### 4.8 SUMMING UP

Both Spenser and Sidney exercised the deepest influence on a host of poets in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While Sidney was considered as one of the greatest Elizabethan sonneteers, Spenser was addressed as “The poets’ poet” by Charles Lamb indicating the excellence that he bestowed during his generation. Spenser’s contribution is discerned in his use of imagery, particularly nature imagery. This nature imagery may well be taken as a precursor of Shakespeare’s memorable depiction of nature in its beauty as well as its decay. His poems have a classic example of the “carpe-diem” theme which was later popularized in the memorable poem “To His Coy Mistress” by Andrew Marvel. There is a deliberate shift from the convention of the courtly love, unlike the other sonneteers of the time where the lady-love is treated as the unattainable goddess, worthy of praise but not of satiety. In Spenser one finds the sensuousness that may be associated with physical love and intimacy. Thus these poets paved the path for love poems that we see in the coming generations.



#### 4.9 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

- 1) Does the passage of time in *Epithalamion* parallels the stages of human life? Justify.
- 2) What makes Spenser’s *Epithalamion* one of the greatest lyrics of Renaissance?

- 3) Comment on the use of literary devices in Philip Sidney's poem "*When Nature made her chief work, Stella's eyes*".
- 4) Describe the pagan & Christian elements in *Epithalamion*.
- 5) Discuss the development of the theme of frustration and hope in '*Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show*'

**JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS**

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## **UNIT-5: ELIZABETHAN SONNET AND SONNETEERS**

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### **UNIT STRUCTURE**

- 5.0 Introduction
- 5.1 Learning Objectives
- 5.2 Defining Sonnet
- 5.3 Elizabethan Sonnet and Sonnet Sequences
  - 5.3.1. Spenser's *Astrophil and Stella*
  - 5.3.2 Sidney's sonnets: Critical comments
  - 5.3.4 Shakespearean Sonnets
- 5.4 Other Elizabethan sonneteers
- 5.5 Assessment questions

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### **5.0 INTRODUCTION**

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The reign of Queen Elizabeth is considered to be one of the most prolific periods of English literary history. It is an age of all round progress in drama, love poems, lyrics, especially sonnets. In this unit we are going to invest our effort chiefly discussing the most popular version of poetry that came into being during this period, that is, sonnets. Sonnet sequences were in vogue in which poets wrote whole lot of sonnets in the name of his beloved. We shall also discuss few such sonnets which are written in sequence.

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### **5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

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After reading of this unit, we are going to learn,

- The social and cultural history of the period.

- Sonnet as a genre, its origin and history, and its transformations in the hands of the English sonneteers in the Elizabethan period – the period that witnessed the most glorious flowering of the form.
- Contributions of Elizabethan sonneteers such as Sidney, Spenser, Drayton.

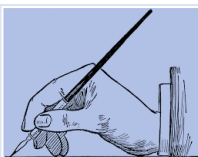
## 5.2 DEFINING SONNET

A sonnet is a poem of fourteen lines (of eleven syllables in Italian, generally twelve in French, and ten in English), with rhymes arranged according to one or other of certain definite schemes, of which the Petrarchan and the Elizabethan are the principal. The Petrarchan or Italian sonnet consists of two parts: the octave or octet, rhyming *abbabba*, and the sestet, rhyming *cdecde*, or *cdccdc*. This form of sonnets is known as Petrarchan after the 14 century Italian love poet who perfected this form.

Unlike the Italian form of sonnets, the other form known as Elizabethan or Shakespearean (after its greatest practitioner) sonnet has three quatrains (four stanzas) and one couplet (two lines of closed rhymes). The quatrains are arranged in various ways by Shakespeare and Spenser. In Shakespeare, the quatrains are arranged as *abab cdcd efef* and the couplet *gg*. Spenser arranges them as *ababbcbccdc*, and the couplet *ee*. The Spenserian sonnet is also called “linked-sonnet”, because of its peculiar rhyme scheme where the three quatrains are linked together. The last line of the first quatrain rhymes with the first line of the second quatrain, and similarly the last line of the second quatrain rhymes with the first line of the third

quatrain. Thus, in Shakespearean sonnets the quatrains are not linked and each quatrain has its own rhyme scheme.

The sonnet originated in Italy in the 13 century. It is generally held that it was Giacomo da Lentino, who lived in the early part of the century, invented the sonnet form. He wrote 14 line hendecasyllabic poems rhyming *abababab, cdecee*, thus dividing the poem into octave and sestet. Most of his poems are now in oblivion, but that once he could influence other poets is evident from the fact that Dante quotes him in his *De Vulgarieloquentia* and mentions him in the *Divine Comedy*. Though Lentino invented the form, it was perfected by another Italian poet Guittone of Arezzo (1230-1294) of Tuscany. His most important contribution to the sonnet form was his invention of the hitherto unknown *abbaabba* octet. Dante used this rhyme scheme in his *Vita Nuova* and *Canzoniere* (or sonnet sequence) and Petrarch. Petrarch's sonnets remained popular for a long time. His sonnets are conspicuous for the intensity of love and the artificiality of style. Dante addressed his sonnets to his lady-love Beatrice, and Petrarch to his beloved Laura. Their loves were not carnal, but purely Platonic. Petrarch invented newer ways to express the numerous shades of emotions of love and gave memorable expression to feelings and ideas in a concentrated manner. In the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16 centuries, the Italian sonnet sailed to Spain, Portugal, France, the Netherlands and England. The sonnet has been so applauded by people of the whole world that there have been very few languages in the world in which poets have not tried their hands at sonnet writing.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Write two characteristics on Sonnets as form of poetry.

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2. How many quatrains do Elizabethan sonnets have?

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3 Name the ladies to whom Dante and Petrarch dedicated their sonnets?

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### 5.3 ELIZABETHAN SONNET AND SONNET SEQUENCES

The sonnet form was introduced in England in the third decade of the 16 century by two poets and translators – Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey. Both of them imitated the Italian model of Petrarch whose poems they also translated. Wyatt and Surrey's contribution to the development of this new form was noteworthy. But it took some time to gain popularity. It was towards the last decade of Elizabeth's reign that there was a resurgence of the form and sonnet writing enjoyed an extraordinary popularity among the poets. The publication of Phillip Sidney's sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella* in 1591 played the vital part of restarting the fashion. During the next two or three decades after that sonnet writing became the overwhelming and universal habit

among Elizabethan poets, both major and minor. Another trend that emerged in the Tudor period was that sonnets were being written in sequences, and the greater numbers of these sonnets were written around the theme of love addressed to sweethearts, real or imagined.

This phenomenon of sonnet sequences remained a major literary and cultural influence until around 1620. While Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* was the first sequence to be published, Shakespeare's sequence of 154 sonnets was published in 1609 (though much of it was written earlier) and Spenser's collection entitled *Amoretti* followed soon. In 1619, Michael Drayton completed his final version of his famous sequence *Idea*. Shakespeare transformed the Italian sonnet form as practiced by Petrarch, and gave it a distinctive rhyming pattern which became the staple for most of the later poets.

Other famous instances of sonnet sequences were Henry Constable's *Diana*, Samuel Daniel's *Delia*, and Fulke Grenville's *Caelica*. The impact of the sonnet and sonnet sequence was seen everywhere during this time. Writers like John Donne in a later period insisted that only fools could not write sonnets. Queen Elizabeth was also known to use the language of sonnets while conducting foreign policy.

Elizabethan sonnets borrowed heavily from foreign sources, but the sonneteers forged a distinctive tradition of English sonnet in those couple of decades, and this body of poetry is undoubtedly one of the most precious possessions of the literature of the whole world. While Petrarch and the Italian masters provided the first model, the later French poets such as Marot, Du Bellay, Ronsard and Phillippe Desportes also played substantial roles in tutoring the English poets in the

craft of sonnet writing. But, Petrarch remained the most potent influence on English sonneteers at the close of Queen Elizabeth's reign.

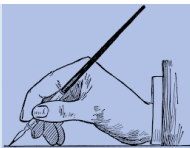
The Elizabethan public were fond of music, and wanted the beauty of modulating tunes, and so the sonnet could easily find a place in their hearts. Yet, it must be admitted that a great amount of the Elizabethan sonnets could not touch the mark. Derek Traversi writes: "Not all the poems are in any sense equal in interest. A high proportion clearly consists of little more than literary exercises, addressed either to a patron of letters or, especially in the case of the later numbers, to an imaginary and conventional mistress" (Ford 186). However, the Elizabethan sonnets, in general, are distinctive for their varieties, mellifluousness, and sincerity of passion – particularly in the sonnets of Sidney, Spenser, Shakespeare and Drayton.

The Elizabethan poets heavily experimented on the form and content of the sonnet, and thus raised the artistry of the sonnet to glorious heights. They tried it on all passions, they assayed the elasticity of the form, and thus they shaped the sonnet as a very pert vehicle of expressing a broad spectrum of emotions, including complex ones. Apart from the characteristic 14 lines of iambic pentameter, the Elizabethan sonnet has other distinctive elements within it which are important in themselves. Stock metaphors were commonly used by Elizabethan poets. In typical fashion of the time, the beauty of the mistress was often described in terms of precious and rare objects; the stormy love affair was described as a battlefield, and the plight of the hapless lover to a lonely ship in the sea etc. The Renaissance world-view and the philosophical ideas regarding the "great chain of being"



provided the genesis of these very interesting and often intriguing metaphors in the sonnets.

Other important characteristics of the sonnets were allusion to classical mythology, paradox, word repetition, and alliteration. In a sonnet, one or two of these devices were used skilfully around an overall theme as thematic devices. Words or ideas or images were repeated throughout a poem to emphasize the dominating theme or the emotional state. Use of alliteration was common and very often sounds were carefully chosen to evoke particular emotions: soft sounds for the emotion of love (e.g. “l” and “r”), and harsh sounds for sad and painful emotional states. Allusions to mythology (mostly Greek) were made by the poets. Paradox (use of opposites e.g. “I freeze, I burn”), puns, and pastoral imageries are abundant in the sonnets.



### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Name few prominent sonneteers of Elizabethan period with a mention to their chief works.

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2. What is Sonnet Sequence?

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### 5.3.1 Spenser's *Astrophil and Stella*

Phillip Sidney's poetry was not published when he was alive, but it was in circulation in manuscript forms and his poetic genius was recognized and appreciated during his lifetime. In 1591, his sonnet sequence *Astrophil and Stella* was posthumously published and with it the great rage for sonnet writing started in Elizabethan England. *Astrophil and Stella* is widely considered to be the first of the great Elizabethan sonnet sequences. Sir Philip Sidney was considered the first major writer of the Elizabethan sonnet sequence, and is considered to be a major influence on Shakespeare's form *abab-cdcd-efef-gg*.

Sidney's sonnets were widely influenced by Petrarch and the French poet Ronsard. While Petrarch's were addressed to his poetic mistress Laura, Sidney narrates his unhappy but passionate love affair with a lady named Stella, and he himself takes the name Astrophil. Sidney actually writes about his own long-time beloved Penelope Devereux, the daughter of the Earl of Essex. Sidney first met Penelope when he accompanied Queen Elizabeth to Essex, where Penelope's father was Earl. It was her father's dying wish that they marry, but all plans of a union between the two were dashed when his widow Lettice married the Earl of Leicester and Sidney's uncle, Robert Dudley. Penelope was presented to the court without immediate prospects, and was snatched up within a few months by the Baron Robert Rich. In some of the sonnets, Sidney plays with this word "Rich". Especially in Sonnet 9, Sidney writes parenthetically that Stella's cheeks "endure" the adjective "rich" with strong but subtle scorn. With the English court being as small and socially insulated as it was, nearly all within it would have been receptive to such a direct allusion to one of their peers. While there's little in the way of significant, real-

world meaning behind this derisive line, it demonstrates the tight author-audience relationship that was founded on a common social habitat. Sidney, whose work was meant for the eyes of court members, knew that his fellow gentlemen and women were aware of his prevented engagement to Penelope—and, of course, her subsequent marriage to Robert Rich. To a twenty-first-century reader, Sidney's involvement of his personal life may come as a surprise, but the specificity of this reference equips that reader with a firm understanding of the social proximity Sidney had to the audience for whom he wrote. Sidney continued to write many of the sonnets in the sequence addressed to Stella (Penelope) even after her marriage to Lord Rich. He himself married in 1583 and lived a happy married life. But Sidney continued to write poetry in the memory of Penelope till the end of his life.

### ***5.3.2 Sidney's Sonnets: Critical Comments***

The popularity of the poetic courtship of Stella is only rivalled by Petrarch's poetry for Laura. Sidney's sonnet sequence became one of the most popular works in the poetic history of English literature. Though some of these sonnets may appear stiff and simplistic to the modern reader, there is much to be admired in them. These sonnets are clothed in a profound lyric emotion. He displays a fondness for felicitous phrases, but the poems are not overburdened with mere dainty words. While admiring this poetic passion and lyric power Charles Lamb described his "glorious vanities" and "graceful hyperboles" as "signs of love in its very heyday," a "transcendent passion pervading and illuminating" his life and conduct. Sidney used his lyrical power to create memorable poetic effects. Despite his heavy debt to French and Italian models, Sidney displays ingenuity and at times great originality

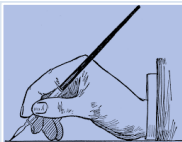
and vivaciousness, making his love poetry some of the best in the world. His supremacy of lyrical power was frankly and justly acknowledged by his contemporaries.

It is true that Sidney's sonnets are heavily influenced by Petrarchan ideals, and he followed the structural composition of Petrarch's sonnets (employing the rhyme scheme invented by and named after the famous Italian). But it would be too simplistic to categorize them simply in those terms alone. However, Sidney's approach to love differs inherently from that of the poets who most faithfully emulated Petrarch in their work. As Paul N. Siegel defines it, "Courtly love poetry in the Petrarchan fashion derives from the chivalric tradition of free love and adultery" ("The Petrarchan Sonneteers and Neo-Platonic Love," 165), a definition that carries extra weight in consideration of the fact that in composing devotional sonnets for Laura, Petrarch composed for a married woman. While Petrarch would later turn to religion following her premature death, the theme of the unattainable woman, often made so by existing bonds of marriage, was preserved in the poetry of his imitators. Sidney, then, cannot be categorized as a Petrarchan sonneteer. While *Astrophil and Stella* is indeed an account of a man's desire for a married woman, its greater message lies in his self-denial and his redirection of his love for Stella unto God. Furthermore, Astrophil's love for Stella does not exist exclusively in the physical sense, as the Petrarchan lover's often does. He admires her physical beauty, but he loves the "true beauty" of her virtue (Sonnet V, 9). Such emphasis on beauty existing in the spiritual realm as opposed to the physical one is a deeply Platonic approach to life and, in Astrophil's case, love. However, even the gratification of this "Platonic

love,” as Siegel explains, does not free him from his desires for something more, something of spiritual perfection:

“When at last Stella is moved to grant him her love, he is overjoyed, although his passion is not to be satisfied. . . . After a period in which he experiences the delights of Platonic love, mingled with strains of longing and outbreaks of grief at her absence or illness, he asks Stella to give him permission to leave her for an enterprise of great moment, in the pursuit of which he may be able to regain his freedom from her. . . . And so, the young courtier frees himself of his knightly passion, which had threatened to wreck the career appointed for him by his great Taskmaster, and devotes himself wholly to the active service of God.”

In the sequence, Sidney's *Astrophil* demonstrates a profound Neo-Platonic love that transcends physical nature and yearns for perfection that can be found in no mortal. In his turn to God, *Astrophil's* quest for true love stretches miles beyond the traditional Petrarchan one of sensual conquest. Here, Sidney demonstrates a major break from convention that not only reemphasizes his individuality for his readers, but encourages them to seek truth in love for God instead of love for woman. *Astrophil and Stella*, then, can be interpreted as a fusion of Sidney's idealistic Neo-Platonic philosophy and fierce Protestant beliefs in a mission to redefine the concept of "love" in love poetry



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Name the poets whose influence can be seen in Sidney's poetry.

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2. To whom did the Sidney dedicate his sonnet sequence?

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3. How does the poet express his non-platonic love in his sonnets?

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### 5.3.3 *Shakespearean Sonnet*

Shakespeare was one of the distinguished sonneteers of his time. He deviated himself from the typical tradition of sonnet writing as a means of praising a woman and her physical beauty. As we have kept a separate unit on Shakespeare's sonnets and their theme, style, form etc., in this unit we are not going to elaborate it.

## 5.4 OTHER ELIZABETHAN SONNETEERS

Michael Drayton was one of the prominent Elizabethan sonnet writers. His well-known sonnet sequence was *Idea* (1619). The title was directly borrowed from an extensive sonnet sequence in French called *L'Idee*. His imitative appeals to night, to his lady's fair eyes, to rivers, his classical allusions—all these themes recall expressions of Ronsard. He represents himself as adventurous sea-farer who has sailed the perilous seas of love. Samuel Daniel (1562-1619) wrote a sequence, *Delia*, which included sonnets with a *carpe diem* theme loosening into near rhymes and feminine line endings. John Davies included several sonnets in three of his

books in the early 1600s. Barnabe Barnes was a very prolific writer of sonnets. Giles Fletcher, Bartholomew Griffin, Henry Constable and Alexander Craig, William Percy and Richard Lynche also wrote sequences.

### **5.5 SUMMING UP**

Thus the Elizabethan sonneteers, which prominently included Sidney, Spenser, Drayton and Samuel Daniel, invested this poetic form of sonnet with unquestionable beauty. They provided an aesthetic interest to the Elizabethan sonnet. Dedicated to their beloved, either real or imaginary, these poets gave finest expressions of love, mostly platonic or neo-platonic where their lovers' inner beauty, rather than physical matters most. Thus, these poets set examples of immortal love through their verses. This aspect of the Elizabethan sonneteers placed them strikingly in a different position than that of their successors, the Metaphysical poets.



### **5.6 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS**

- 1) Discuss Elizabethan sonnet tradition with special reference to Sidney and Drayton.
- 2) Discuss the representation of love in Elizabethan sonnets.
- 3) Discuss the contributions of Elizabethan sonneteers in the growth and development of Elizabethan sonnets.
- 4) Give a critical estimate of the vogue of sonnet sequence in Elizabethan period.

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## JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS

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**UNIT-6: SHAKESPEARE: “WHEN IN DISGRACE WITH FORTUNE AND MEN’S EYES”“SINCE BRASS, NOR STONE, NOR EARTH, NOR BOUNDLESS SEA”, “LET ME NOT TO THE MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS”, “MY MISTRESS’ EYES ARE NOTHING LIKE THE SUN”**

## **UNIT STRUCTURE**

6.0 Introduction

6.1 Learning Objectives

6.2 William Shakespeare: Life and Works

6.3 Shakespeare’s Sonnets: An Introduction

6.4 Reading the poem “*When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes*”

6.4.1 Structure of the Poem

6.5 Reading the poem “*Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea*”

6.5.1 Structure of the Sonnet

6.6 Reading the poem “*Let me not to the marriage of true minds*”,

6.7 Reading the poem “*My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun*”

6.8 Summing up

6.9 Assessment Questions

6.10 References and Recommended Reading

## **6.0 INTRODUCTION**

Shakespeare’s sonnets, through its uniqueness in the style and treatment of subject matter gave birth to a new form of

sonnet writing called the English Sonnets or Shakespearian sonnets. Though sonnet writing as a tradition came from Italy or Italian poet Petrarch, Shakespeare strikingly deviated from him by making his stanza forms into three Quatrains and a concluding couplet where he summarised his concept of love. In this unit an attempt has been made to get the learners acquainted with this unique genius of all time through few select and representative works.

### ***6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES***

After reading of this unit, you will be able to,

- Acquaint yourself with the life and works of Shakespeare
- Learn Shakespeare's contribution in the field of sonnets
- Critically read select sonnets of Shakespeare

### ***6.2 WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: LIFE AND WORKS***

The facts of William Shakespeare's life are open to debate due to lack of evidence of historical certainty. The traditional date assigned to his birth is 26 April, 1564. This was the day on which he was baptized; therefore, his birth must have been a few days earlier. His father John Shakespeare was a successful landowner, moneylender and trader of wool. His mother's name was Mary Arden. John Shakespeare had an illustrious political career serving as Constable and Alderman, ultimately becoming the bailiff of Stratford in 1567. On the basis of town records, it is certain that William was the third child. Not much is known about his childhood apart from the facts that he might have attended the

King's New School which was reputed grammar school providing education in mathematics, science, Christian traditions and classical languages and literature. He had no formal university education. However, he was a brilliant autodidact which is borne out by the vast amount of classical and literary references, historical knowledge and general awareness exhibited in his works.

In the year 1582 Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, who was eight years older than him. He had two daughters—Susanna and Judith and a son Hamnet. The son died young, when he was eleven, and by this time, Shakespeare was a well-known playwright. His first play *Henry VI, Part 1* was written sometime around 1589. As a young man he lived a successful life as an actor and writer in London. There is quite a deal of references of Shakespeare as a citizen of Stratford in the town records. One record shows that he had to go away from London for a while under dubious circumstances. The earliest reception of him as a playwright was not warm and pleasant. The rival playwright and the University Wit Robert Greene calls him an “upstart crow...[who] supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you” (in Greene's *Groatsworth of Witte*, 1592). But now it is generally agreed that Greene's comment was motivated by his professional jealousy for Shakespeare's growing popularity. His fortune and fame came with the tremendous success of plays like *Richard III*, *Henry VI*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *Titus Andronicus* by the year 1593.

In 1593, he came under the patronage of the Earl of Southampton. In the same year he published his famous work *Venus and Adonis*. It was followed by another great work of poetry *The Rape of Lucrece*. Most of his sonnets were also

composed during the 1590s. In 1594 he got associated with the theatre company 'Lord Chamberlain's Men'—an association that lasted till his death.

Shakespeare wrote 37 tragedies of which *Titus Andronicus* (printed in 1594), *Romeo and Juliet* (1594-95), *Hamlet* (1600-01), *Julius Caesar* (1600-01) *Othello* (1604-05) *Antony and Cleopatra* (1606-07) *King Lear* (1606) *Coriolanus* (1607-08) *Timon of Athens* (1607-08) *Macbeth* (1611-1612) are few to name.

He wrote two sequences of English historical plays based on the reigns of various English kings. The historical plays include *King Henry VI Part 1* (printed in 1592); *King Henry VI Part 2* (1592-93); *King Henry VI Part 3* (1592-93); *King John* (1596-97); *King Henry IV Part 1* (1597-98); *King Henry IV Part 2* (1597-98); *King Henry V* (1598-99); *Richard II* (1601); *Richard III* (1597); and *King Henry VIII* 1612-13. The historical plays of Shakespeare reinvent the myths, memories, and constructions of recent history which had so preoccupied Tudor historians.

Shakespeare's comedies include: *Taming of the Shrew* (1593-94), *Comedy of Errors* (1594) *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (1594-95), *Love's Labour's Lost* (1594-95), *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595-96), *Merchant of Venice* (1596-1597), *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598-1599), *As You Like It* (1599-00), *Merry Wives of Windsor* (1600-01), *Troilus and Cressida* (1602), *Twelfth Night* (1602), *All's Well That Ends Well* (1602-03), *Measure for Measure* (1604), *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* (1608-09), *Tempest* (1611), *Cymbeline* (1611-12), *Winter's Tale* (1611-12).

William Shakespeare died in the year 1616 and was buried in the chancel of the Holy Trinity Church at Stratford Upon Avon.

### ***6.3 SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS: AN INTRODUCTION***

Shakespeare's sonnets were first published in a collection in 1609, and this text is still regarded as the most authentic source for all later editions. It contains 154 poems, and two of these cannot be taken as sonnets in the strict sense because those two poems are made up of twelve lines. Scholars have generally concurred that these sonnets fall into three distinct groups. The first 126 sonnets are addressed to a "fair youth"; the next 26 refer to a new association with the "Dark Lady"; the last two give a new twist to the erotic theme by playing fancifully with stories of Cupid and the loss of his (phallic) "brand". These unmarked divisions contain within them subgroups (sonnets 1-17, for example, encourage the youth to marry and to produce children who will carry on his legacy thereby ensuring his immortality; sonnets 76-86, for example, are disturbed by the threat posed by a rival poet). In both the major subgroups, the poet displays very close intimacy, and very openly erotic, sometimes bawdy and ironic humour. In many of the sonnets addressed to the young friend, Shakespeare emphasizes the power of art and verse and also of love to transcend and defeat the decay and destructiveness of Time. The historical identity of the man remains elusive, though many have suggested the Earl of Southampton to be the most likely person. In this set of poems, the woman is spoken about in respectful tone.

In the latter group of sonnets, both the poet and the young friend fall in love with the Dark Lady. This love almost

verges on obsession, and the language of these poems is sensuous, and very passionate. The narrator in these poems is not only torn between the pain and pleasure of love but also between the love for the young man and the love for the woman who appears to have seduced them.

Shakespeare's sonnets are far superior to other Elizabethan sonnets. They represent a most remarkable achievement—in the unfolding of a dramatic story, in the apt mingling of thought and passion, in the turning of the Petrarchan conceits ironically back on themselves to produce a whole new area of expression, in the bittersweet exploration by means of imagery of the mutation of passion, in the careful balancing of the sonnet on the concluding couplet, which often rings out like a sardonic epigram, and in the sheer mastery of phrase. These sonnets by Shakespeare reveal a degree of poetic maturity and subtlety which none of his contemporary sonneteers possessed.

We know nothing about the sonnets of Shakespeare before 1609, in which year Thomas Thorpe practically published the sonnets. This was so because these were circulated only among the poet's friends and admirers. Shakespeare must have composed them between 1592 and 1598.

As to the inspiration behind Shakespeare's sonnets, scholars have listed Horace, Ovid, Petrarch, Tasso, Ronsard, Sidney and Spenser. Dover Wilson suggests that though Shakespeare was influenced by Petrarch, the most potent influence was that of his English predecessors and contemporaries as far as the form, content and conventions of sonnet were concerned. Absorbing a wide range of influences

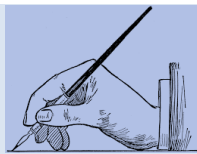
and inspirations, Shakespeare transformed the craft of sonnets in his time, and gave it a wider scope, new themes and new dimensions of feeling and artistry.

The most popular and typical concerns of Elizabethan sonnets—Time, eternity, friendship, desire for immortalizing the love and beauty of the beloved—are also found in Shakespeare’s sonnets. Elizabethan fashion for expression of self-pity and suffering of the lover (the staple of Petrarchan sonnets) are there in Shakespeare – but entirely in a new guise. Shakespeare does not write about his own suffering. In this sense, Shakespeare is not Petrarchan, as he twists the conventions in various intriguing ways – through new metaphors, irony and new idiom of love. His *Sonnets* rejects the courtliness or the mythological paraphernalia of the sonnet sequences of the 1590s. They throb with new metrical energy, explore a new emotional range, wrestle with the implications of a new language, and enact new dramas within their exact, fourteen-line structures.

Since, there are so little recorded facts about Shakespeare’s life; it is safe not to look for autobiographical reference in these poems. It is more fruitful to read these wonderful poems as work of fiction like his drama or the longer poems. We can sum up this brief introduction to the Bard’s sonnets by quoting these insightful words by Anthony Hecht:

“These sonnets are, first and last, poems, and it should be more than enough to read, evaluate, and enjoy them as such. Devoted attention to each of them in its own right will yield striking discoveries. They are not all equally inventive or moving. Some are little more than conventional; others are

wonderfully original and ingenious. Scarcely any lacks true merit, many of them are beyond compare, and in bulk they are without question the finest single group of sonnets in the language. They may contain puzzles which will probably never be fully answered, and this may be a part of their enigmatic charm. But most of all they speak with powerful, rich, and complex emotion of a very dramatic kind, and we cannot fail to hear in them a voice of passion and intelligence.” (Hecht, 28)



### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. Write two characteristics of Shakespearean sonnets?

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2. Mention few commonly discussed themes of Elizabethan sonnets.

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### **6.4 READING THE POEM “WHEN IN DISGRACE WITH FORTUNE AND MEN’S EYES”**

The sonnet beginning with “when in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes” is saturated with feelings of disquiet and despondency. This sonnet belongs to the so-called “estrangement sonnets” (33-36) – a group where we see the recurring theme of dejection and rejection, and violation of some pacts, or betrayal. Here, the speaker projects himself as someone who has fallen into bad times, and his condition is that of a social outcaste. In his isolation and desperate state, he



envies other people who, he thinks, are more fortunate than him. The term ‘disgrace’ is usually applied when someone is demoted or removed from service or office, and is humiliated and has to endure the insult of loss of status. But, here in the poem, it is suggested that the ‘disgrace’ referred to is caused by the failure of achieving status than to loss of status. The ‘Disgrace’ experienced by the speaker here can be real or imaginary. The poet gives us absolutely no clue as to the possible causes behind the state of disgrace and alienation.

There is a strong undercurrent of melancholy in the poem, and it might be caused by Shakespeare’s own personal and professional crisis during this period of life. The years after the composition of “King Lear” were not happy ones for him. At the same time, he was severely criticized as a poet and dramatist by the University Wits, particularly by Robert Greene. But, it is futile to dig into these facts as there is no evidence that they were the prime factors behind the emotional crisis hinted at in the poem. It would be more fruitful to read the poem as an engaging meditation on mortality, the tragic sense of life, and the universal, common causes of sadness in human life. The sonnet alludes to the “Book of Job” in the *Bible*, particularly in line 3 and 4. Job in the “Old Testament” was cast out and he “bewept” his unfortunate state. Job, like the speaker here in line 4, cursed his mournful life and the day when he was born: “Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, ‘There is a man child conceived’”.

In his condition, the poet wishes himself to be like that person who is more hopeful or aspirant than himself. He also wishes to be as beautiful in person, or in bodily aspects, as that person and to have more friends. He wants to possess the

skill or learning, or both, of one who has got all these things, and to get that opportunity of advancement that some possess. All the while, the poet feels that whatever he possesses, in whatever degree can hardly give him peace.

Even though he is full of sorrows and self-hatred, he accidentally or fortunately (“haply”) thinks about his beloved. Then even in his despicable plight, he finds great joy and sings praise to God. The memory of her brings so much of longed-for things (“wealth”) to him that he would then “scorn” to swap his present state of existence even with those of monarchs.

#### ***6.4.1 Structure of the sonnet***

This sonnet (Sonnet 29) is written in the commonly used English rhyme pattern “abab, cdcd, efef, gg”. This poem, however, makes a slight variation in that instead of “efef”, Shakespeare uses “ebef” (identical 2 and 6 rhymes). The speaker depicts his outcaste and sad state in the first octave and the sestet ends on a somewhat positive note when he speaks about the memory of his beloved bringing joy and contentment. The word “state” is repeated three times implying three different things each time. In line 2, the word refers to the condition of the speaker. In line 10, it reflects his mind set; and finally in line 14, the word refers to the “state” of kingdom and kings. According to Paul Ramsey, Line 3 of this poem is “one of the most perturbed lines in our language.” He says that the stressed syllables “trouble”, “deaf” and “heaven” are “jarringly close together.” He goes on to say that “the ‘heav’n with’ is probably the most violent example in the sonnets of a trochee without a preceding verse-pause. The heaping of stress, the harsh reversal, the rush of a vivid stress

– all enforce the angry anti-religious troubled cry.” Ramsay points out that it is the result of Shakespeare’s meticulous and incredible thoughtfulness behind each line that he wrote to give expression to his sentiment and tone.



### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What recurring theme do you notice in this particular Sonnet?

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2. How does the poet present the concept of time in the sonnet?

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### 6.5 READING THE POEM “SINCE BRASS, NOR STONE, NOR EARTH, NOR BOUNDLESS SEA” (SONNET 65)

The sonnet beginning with the line “since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea” makes an emphatic statement on the aspect of Time’s destruction. Time, mortality, havoc wrought by Time are recurrent themes in Shakespeare’s sonnets as they are in Renaissance poetry in general. But at the same time, the poem celebrates love and human relationships and emotion as those forces that have the power to resist the destruction of Time as they are the very stuff with which the poet makes his poetry. His poems written in black ink will endure forever in the flux of Time. The poem starts by listing a few things which are seemingly durable and vast, but still cannot stand the havoc of Time. The sad fact of

life is that when apparently strong and indestructible objects cannot escape decay and dissolution, fragile things such as beauty must doom. Emphasizing the all-consuming power of time and mortality, the poem says that nothing lasts forever in this world. Everything, including love, perishes. So the only escape from this sad and inevitable decay is through the timelessness of art or writing which can preserve beauty and emotion.

When the poet thinks about these bleak facts of the universe, he becomes apprehensive, especially because such thoughts lead him to the conclusion that the Fair Youth (his beloved) also will be ravaged by the cruel hands of Time. Therefore, he wonders where Fair Youth, who is the 'Time's best jewel', most precious thing of the creation, can be hidden. The poet says that none is so strong as to stop the onslaught of Time. Finally, the poet realizes that only his verse can perform the "miracle" because nothing other than poetry can stall Time.

Lowry Nelson, Jr. points out that thematically this sonnet is a continuation of the previous sonnet in the sequence (sonnet 64), and he says: "Both poems are meditations on Time's destructiveness.... Sonnet 65 makes use of the same words (brass, rage, hands, love) and more or less specific notions, but it precedes and culminates far more impressively" compared to the other sonnet (i.e. 64).

Another Shakespearean critic Brents Stirling places this sonnet in a group of sonnets which are supposedly addressed to a young friend of the poet (sonnets 63-68). The phrases "brass", "lofty towers", "firm soil" and "watery main" in sonnet 64 find their exact echo in the first line in sonnet 65.

The “mortal rage” in 64 becomes “sad mortality” here. Stirling says: “Their respective themes, Time's ruin (63-65) and the Former Age, a pristine earlier world now in ruin and decay (66-68), were conventionally associated in Shakespeare's day.”

### 6.5.1 Structure of the Sonnet

Some critics categorize Sonnet No. 65 as a “defective key word” sonnet. Shakespeare frequently used a word or a set of words repeatedly in the quatrains, and also in the couplet, but in a wholly new implication or meaning. But in this particular sonnet, the words “hold” and “strong” (and its variation “stronger” in the first quatrain) are repeated in the quatrains, but not used in the couplet, and so rendering them “defective”.

The sonnet has also a strong presence of cynicism. The speaker here does not seem to believe himself that poetry has the power to withstand death and decay and that it can immortalize love and beauty. The word “still” in line 14 is meant to be a wordplay and so it may be intended to mean “dead, unmoving” instead of “perpetual, eternal.” Though there are disagreements, we are not expected to have any doubt that the ‘miracle’ of making the beloved shine brightly in black ink has might. Of course it does—we have been told so before. ‘Who can hold back time?’ the speaker asks. ‘No one, except me,’ is the answer.”



#### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How does Sonnet 65 depict the power of time and its destruction?

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2. What is the 'miracle' mentioned in the sonnet that  
can save the poet's beloved from the destruction of time?  
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#### **6.6 READING THE POEM "LET ME NOT TO THE MARRIAGE OF TRUE MINDS" (SONNET 116)**

Earlier commentators usually read this sonnet as praise to ideal love. Of course, the poem abounds in those elements with which readers easily identify with and add their own ideas of perfection to the qualities and virtues of true love given in the poem. But much of recent criticism have moved away from such simplistic reading and argue that the sonnet has all too often been misread. They refer to the disturbing aspects of love beneath the idealism that the poet pretends not to see. There is an uneasy ambiguity in what appears to be its confident tone. In addition to the implied limitations suggested by lines 7-8, "The convoluted negatives of the last line...show that the poet protesting too much, losing confidence in his protestations, or at least inviting disagreement with them (by anticipating rebuttal), at their climax". Thus Shakespeare, it is argued, admits, consciously or unconsciously, that the perfection of the abstract idea of love can never be realized in merely human terms.

There is a strong note of subversion and irony underneath the idealism in the poem. It is significant that it is a love poem

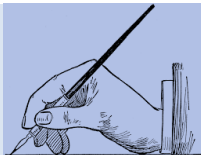
written by a man to a man. Society at large would have never permitted such a love. Shakespeare is not merely speaking about the marriage of minds, because the language directs us to the Christian marriage and its ceremonies. Christian marriage ceremony joins two people together, not two abstracts ideals. But as we read the poem with its constant shift of moods – elation and melancholy or depression – go along by the fact that the poem is a testament of a love that can be experienced by any two lovers, and we gloss over the fact that what the poet is actually saying might be quite unconventional and subversive than we may have perceived.

The Shakespearean critic Tucker Brooke says this about the poem:

[In Sonnet 116] the chief pause in sense is after the twelfth line. Seventy-five per cent of the words are monosyllables; only three contain more syllables than two; none belong in any degree to the vocabulary of 'poetic' diction. There is nothing recondite, exotic, or metaphysical in the thought. There are three run-on lines, one pair of double-endings. There is nothing to remark about the rhyming except the happy blending of open and closed vowels, and of liquids, nasals, and stops; nothing to say about the harmony except to point out how the fluttering accents in the quatrains give place in the couplet to the emphatic march of the almost unrelieved iambic feet. In short, the poet has employed one hundred and ten of the simplest words in the language and the two simplest rhyme-schemes to produce a poem which has about it no strangeness whatever except the strangeness of perfection.

### 6.6.1 *Language and Metaphor*

The strength of Sonnet No. 116 comes from its linguistic brilliance, and the skilful and convincing articulation of emotion. The language is very simple and lacks the complexity of other sonnets. But the poet has woven a complex pattern out of this simplicity. The images and metaphors are not very original, say for instance, love as a guiding star. What is extraordinary is the fact that with this simple language, he has framed the depiction of love within a quite restrained, controlled rhetorical structure. Regarding the rhythm and tone, a critic says: “With a masterful control of rhythm and variation of tone—the heavy balance of “Love’s not time’s fool” to open the third quatrain; the declamatory “O no” to begin the second—the speaker makes an almost legalistic argument for the eternal passion of love, and the result is that the passion seems stronger and more urgent for the restraint in the speaker’s tone.”



#### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. To whom, according to the critics, is this sonnet dedicated?

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- 2 What is the significance of a Shakespearean *Couplet*?

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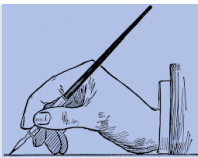
### **6.7 READING THE POEM “MY MISTRESS’ EYES ARE NOTHING LIKE THE SUN” (SONNET 130)**

This sonnet picks up the paradoxical praise of black from sonnet No. 127 and develops the anti-Petrarchan stance of sonnet No. 21. This poem denies to the poet’s mistress the metaphorically hyperbolic attributes conventionally associated with any woman being addressed by a lover like eyes that rival the sun, lips that are redder than coral, hair that outshines gold etc. Thus, the poet claims as in sonnet No. 21, to be speaking the truth, unlike other love poets who lie extravagantly. This poem is an example of what Beauty and Matchett have called “anti-sonnet”, “...which attempts freshness through denying the usual images” that are commonly used by Shakespeare and other poets of his time.

There is a strong satire of the convention in which the lover compares the woman to the beautiful and eternal things of nature, as well as to the divine. The tone which suggests a love/hate, attraction/repulsion relationship, is generally level-headed, clinical and negative. The poet cleverly tells us what his mistress is not rather than what she is, except that she is not conventionally ‘fair’ or beautiful. In the sestet, we see that the narrator gives some complimentary remarks referring to her musical, sweet voice and her beauty which may not be divine, but still beautiful in her human, mortal aspect.

The traditional hyperboles applied to the beauty of the beloved are qualified, questioned and satirized in this sonnet. It was a tradition established by ancient poetry of Rome and Greece to sing the praise of the beloved in extravagant

language and to present it as the most ideal form of beauty. This figure of the ideal lover of great beauty who is very often beyond the reach of the helpless lover is to be found in contemporary Elizabethan poets such as Michael Drayton, Thomas Watson and Barnabe Barnes. Shakespeare's sonnet No.130 is a poem that satirizes this tradition. He mocks the poets of his time for using clichéd and hyperbolic images in describing the woman. Shakespeare chose to describe the lady here in realistic terms and delivers a message in this regard in the poem, and especially in the final couplet: "And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare,/As any she belied with false compare."



### **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

1. How does the sonnet question the old, traditional hyperboles applied to the beauty of the beloved?

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### **6.8 SUMMING UP**

After reading this unit you must have understood the uniqueness of Shakespearean sonnets and how they differed from those written by other poets of his period. Shakespeare not only experimented with the sonnet form but also departed from the standard or stereotypical thematic concerns of his contemporaries. His sonnets were not concerned with conventional and often hyperbolic protestations of love to an

unresponsive beloved. They were instead manifestations of sincere affections, be it be friendship or of love. Thus, the works of Shakespeare have an eternal freshness in them. His appeal is universal and we agree with Ben Jonson's words that Shakespeare not of "an age, but for all time".



#### **6.10 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS**

- 1) Describe the salient features of Shakespeare's sonnets and how it contributed to the literary aspect of the era.
- 2) What is the narrative perspective of Shakespeare's sonnet No. 29 "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes"?
- 3) Give a structural analysis of the poem "Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea."
- 4) From your reading of the poems, throw light on the language of the sonnets. Do you think the language can well depict the emotion of the poet? Give example in support of your answer.



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#### JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS

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## JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS

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## **APPENDIX**

**Philip Sidney**

***Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show....***

**(Sonnet 1, *Astrophil and Stella*)**

Loving in truth, and fain in verse my love to show,  
That she, dear she, might take some pleasure of my pain,—  
Pleasure might cause her read, reading might make her know,  
Knowledge might pity win, and pity grace obtain,—  
I sought fit words to paint the blackest face of woe;  
Studying inventions fine her wits to entertain,  
Oft turning others' leaves, to see if thence would flow  
Some fresh and fruitful showers upon my sunburn'd brain.  
But words came halting forth, wanting invention's stay;  
Invention, Nature's child, fled step-dame Study's blows;  
And others' feet still seem'd but strangers in my way.  
Thus great with child to speak and helpless in my throes,  
Biting my truant pen, beating myself for spite,  
"Fool," said my Muse to me, "look in thy heart, and write."

***When Nature made her chief work", Stella's eyes***

**(Sonnet 7, *Astrophil and Stella*)**

When Nature made her chief work, Stella's eyes,  
In colour black why wrapt she beams so bright?  
Would she in beamy black, like painter wise,  
Frame daintiest lustre, mix'd of shades and light?  
Or did she else that sober hue devise,  
In object best to knit and strength our sight;  
Lest, if no veil these brave gleams did disguise,  
They, sunlike, should more dazzle than delight?  
Or would she her miraculous power show,  
That, whereas black seems beauty's contrary,  
She even in black doth make all beauties flow?  
Both so, and thus, she, minding Love should be  
Plac'd ever there, gave him this mourning weed  
To honour all their deaths who for her bleed.



*Stella, think not that I by verse seek fame*  
(Sonnet 90, *Astrophil and Stella*)

Stella, think not that I by verse seek fame,  
Who seek, who hope, who love, who live but thee;  
Thine eyes my pride, thy lips my history;  
If thou praise not, all other praise is shame.  
Nor so ambitious am I, as to frame  
A nest for my young praise in laurel tree:  
In truth I swear, I wish not there should be  
Graved in mine epitaph a Poet's name:  
Nay if I would, could I just title make,  
That any laud to me thereof should grow,  
Without my plumes from others' wings I take.  
For nothing from my wit or will doth flow,  
Since all my words thy beauty doth endite,  
And love doth hold my hand, and makes me write.

**William Shakespeare**

*When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes*  
(Sonnet 29)

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,  
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,  
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,  
And look upon myself and curse my fate,  
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,  
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,  
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,  
With what I most enjoy contented least;  
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,  
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,  
(Like to the lark at break of day arising  
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven's gate;  
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings  
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

*Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea*  
(Sonnet 65)

Since brass, nor stone, nor earth, nor boundless sea  
But sad mortality o'er-sways their power,  
How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea,  
Whose action is no stronger than a flower?  
O, how shall summer's honey breath hold out  
Against the wrackful siege of batt'ring days,  
When rocks impregnable are not so stout,  
Nor gates of steel so strong, but time decays?  
O fearful meditation! where, alack,  
Shall time's best jewel from time's chest lie hid?  
Or what strong hand can hold his swift foot back?  
Or who his spoil of beauty can forbid?  
O, none, unless this miracle have might,  
That in black ink my love may still shine bright.

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds*  
(Sonnet 116)

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments. Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove.  
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come;  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.  
If this be error and upon me prov'd,  
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.

*My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun*  
(Sonnet 130)

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,  
But no such roses see I in her cheeks;  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
I love to hear her speak, yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound;  
I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.  
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.

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