

SECTION 9

The Story of Poetry

You have read many poems in your textbooks '**Rainbow**' Part 1 & 2. You must have noticed certain common things in them. The meaning of words in a poem is quite different from what we find in a short story or in a drama. Here, words are used not just for meaning, but also for their sound and images; let us recall the following lines from W.H. Auden:

*Now the leaves are falling fast,
Nurse's flowers will not last;
Nurses to the graves are gone,
And the prams go rolling on.*

You must have noticed the images of leaves, flowers, graves and prams. What about arrangements of words in separate lines which rhyme at the end? Don't you think they together suggest the cyclic process of life and death!

You may be interested in having an idea of the time when poetry began to be written in England. Poetry started its journey from the time Man used language to express his emotion. It began with the beginning of the history of the English people on the continent. During the Anglo Norman and Anglo-Saxon period English language was in its primitive form. The 'Old English', as it is called, had many French and German words. The poets told the stories of great crusades and sea-voyages. The tales of King Arthur and his Round Table were the result of this trend.

During the Middle English period we notice the emergence of a national language and literature. Geoffrey Chaucer made great contribution in this regard. In his **The Canterbury Tales** he describes the country, the people and their beliefs. These things still appeal to us. The poem presents characters such as the wife of Bath, the noble knight, the Squire, the Friar, Prioress and others. They still amuse us because of their peculiarities. In his poetic works Chaucer did not use the Old English irregular lines and alliteration, "the rim, ram, roff" as he humorously calls it. Another important poet of the time was William

Langland. His **The Vision of Piers the Plowman** consists of a series of dream visions. In this poem, he attacks the social ills and urges men to “learn to love”.

It may be surprising for you to know that for nearly 200 years after Chaucer there was no great literary work produced in England. One important exception is Sir Thomas Malory’s **Le Morte d’Arthur**. The poem is a collection of stories about King Arthur.

During the 15th century an intellectual movement called the Renaissance swept Europe. The word Renaissance means ‘rebirth’ and refers to revival of ancient Greek learning. The spread of learning was aided by the Printing presses. This made the classics available for the common men. This generated a new spirit of enquiry and overthrew the institutions and beliefs of the mediaeval age. In England, the influence of the Renaissance was felt clearly during the period from the accession of Elizabeth in 1558 to the death of James I in 1625. Under Elizabeth’s brilliant rule, England experienced internal peace and economic prosperity and emerged a world power. The three great poets of the time were Christopher Marlowe, Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare. They practised and perfected several kinds of verse-forms such as epic-romance, pastoral, elegy, sonnet, lyric, satire etc. Marlowe was basically a lyric poet. Even his plays like **Tamburlaine the Great, Dr Faustus, and Edward II** reveal his imaginative approach and a quest for ideas. Spenser’s **Shepherd’s Calendar** is a pastoral poem. His best known work **The Faery Queene** is a romantic epic based on chivalry. It is also read for its allegorical meaning and design. From this point of view, the poem portrays the political and religious problems of the age. Shakespeare was the greatest poet of the age. In his romantic comedies and tragedies he presents the Renaissance concept of ‘free will’. Human destiny is shaped by human actions themselves. God or ‘fate’ does not influence it. His tragedies, specially **Othello, Hamlet, Macbeth and King Lear** contain fine poetic passages. Written in blank verse they explore the working of human passion and emotions. Shakespeare has to his credit two narrative poems, **Venus and Adonis** and **Lucrece** and a sequence of 154 of sonnets. These sonnets deal with tragic failure in love and broken friendship. Another important thing is that he developed his own structure and rhyme-scheme of a sonnet. You are correct in your guess that his sonnets are called Shakespearean sonnets because of this reason.

It was the time when poetry began to be published in anthologies. The best known of these is **Tottle’s Miscellany** (1557). It contained songs and sonnets of poets like Wyatt and Surrey. They adopted the Italian sonnet for English use. A third nobleman with a talent for writing was Sir Philip Sidney. He wrote a beautiful sonnet, **Astrophel and Stella** (1591).

The 17th century is called both an age of transition and an age of revolution. The English society witnessed political and social struggles. These resulted in the civil war and

the formation of government under Oliver Cromwell. The old unity of the Elizabethan life was gone. The national pride of Englishmen lessened as the crown lost dignity. The activities of James I Charles I and Charles II showed a downfall from the Elizabethan height. A new middle class began to show power. The imagination and enthusiasm of Marlowe and Spenser gave way to a rational and scientific attitude.

The scientific spirit of the time, however, did not destroy poetry. The great poet of the time was John Milton. He was a Puritan who served Cromwell as Latin Secretary. He first wrote

some short poems such as **L'Allegro** and **IL Penseroso**.

His elegy **Lycidas** laments the death of a friend. He is mainly known for producing truly

English epics such as **Paradise Lost** and **Paradise Regained**. These epics seek to 'justify the ways of God to Man'. Milton is regarded the most sublime of English poets. He is a master of what is called 'the grand style'. He makes use of abstract words, many of them of Latin origin.

An important group of 17th century writers were the metaphysical poets. With John Donne as the leading figure, George Herbert, Andrew Marvell, Richard Crashaw and Henry Vaughan were important poets of the group.

While reading Donne's poem – you may have noticed the use of uncommon similes and metaphors! Do they have some important function in the poem? They bring to our notice relationships among uncommon things. The metaphysical poets wrote on spiritual aspects of life. But their love poems are equally fascinating.

The major poet of the later part of the country was John Dryden. His major poetic works **Mac Flecknoe** and **Absalom and Achitophel** are satires; they deal with the political controversies of the time. He is basically a satirist.

Still, he makes imaginative and creative use of language. We also know him for his use of classic or heroic couplet for serious English poetry. Only one other poet of the period is important for us. This is Samuel Butler whose **Hudibras** is a satire on the Puritans.



John Milton



John Donne



George Herbert

When we approach the 18th century, we find reason and optimism as the main qualities of the age. People believed that theirs is a golden period similar to that of the Roman Emperor Augustus. Hence, the name ‘Augustan’ was given to the early 18th century. The poets used Greek and Roman authors or classical antiquity as models of style. Hence, the period is also described ‘neo classic’. Alexander Pope was the representative poet of the time. He has written some short poems on nature and seasons, such as **Four Pastorals**. But he is mainly known for his critical and satirical pomes such as the **Rape of the Lock**, the **Dunciad** and the **Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot**. His poetry is noted for ‘verbal intelligence’; it is also called ‘wit’. He makes fine use of classic couplet to make condensed observations; such as:

‘A little learning is a dangerous thing’

OR

‘To err is human, to forgive divine.’

Before we come over to the early part of the 19th century we meet several poets who contributed to the ‘romantic revival’ in English poetry. James Thomson, Robert Blair, William Collins, Thomas Gray, Robert Burns and William Cowper are regarded the poets of the age of transition. Their love for nature and presentation of human feelings in simple language are noteworthy. Don’t you feel that Burns’ “*My love is like a red, red rose*” and Gray’s “*Elegy written in a country Churchyard*” look like any other ‘romantic poems’?



William Wordsworth

The Romantic Revival in English poetry is often associated with the works of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The movement refers to a

renewed interest in Nature and simple life, an interest in the past and the exotic. Don’t you notice certain common things in the works of the poets? - individualism, free play of imagination and a humanitarian outlook. You may regard it a ‘democratic’ or liberalising movement. The poets sought to do away with the rigid application of classic norms and conventions in their writing. In this regard, you will have to remember the great influence of the French Revolution that made ‘Liberty, equality and Fraternity’ the very basis of social life. There were also certain other influences at work: the writing of the French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, the works of German Schlegel brothers (August Wilhelm and Friedrich) and the growing interest in ballads and English medieval literature. Bishop Percy’s **Reliques of Ancient English Poetry** (1765) kindled this interest. Wordsworth wrote

lyrics, ballads, odes, sonnets, verse-tales and reflective poems. Be it Lucy-poems or **The Prelude**, his love of nature is always prominent. Nature, for him, is a spiritual presence; it provides creative training to human sensibility.

It may be an interesting fact to know that Coleridge joined Wordsworth in the publication of the **Lyrical Ballads** (1798), the book which gave a new direction to English poetry. While Wordsworth represented the familiar as 'unfamiliar', Coleridge did the reverse. In **Kubla Khan**, **The Ancient Mariner** and **Christabel**, Coleridge shows his interest in medieval folklore and legend. Other poets like Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley and John Keats are regarded the younger Romantics. Byron's works – **Manfred**, **Cain**, **Childe Harold**, **Vision of Judgement** and **Don Juan**, show his passion for liberty and defiance of convention. Shelley as a poet is a revolutionary idealist. Some of his well known poems are '*Adonais*', '*The Skylark*', '*The Cloud*', the '*Ode to the West wind*', and '*Revolt of Islam*' and '*Queen Mab*'. In his longer poems he gives vent to his passion for reform. In the shorter poems like odes and lyrics, he laments the hardships into which he has landed. In Keats's narrative poems like the **Eve of St Agnes**, **Lamia**, the odes and ballads we find his sensitive approach to the beauty of nature. He has also an admiration for the Greek love of perfection. The most striking quality of Keats's poetry is its appeal to the senses.



John Keats

In the following lines from '*Ode to Psyche*' the words present to the eye the picture of the Nature:

*hushed cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,
Blue, silver-white and budded Tyrian,*

As we proceed further, we find Queen Victoria ascending the throne. The period from 1837 to 1901 witnessed some important events – the rise of democracy, the expansion of the British Empire and the progress of science and technology. A number of inventions and discoveries took place during the period. The most significant of them was Darwin's theory of the Origin of Species. It had the greatest impact on the age. It challenged the biblical version of the creation and shook people's faith in Christianity. Despite this, romantic tradition continued in the later part of the 19th century. However, the rise of democracy and the expansion of the reading public changed function of poetry. It came to be related more to life than the romantic. The representative poets of age – Alfred Tennyson, Robert

Browning and Matthew Arnold – gave voice to the common man's doubts, fears and distractions. At the same time, they reassured them that all was right with the world. Tennyson's poems and well-known elegy **In Memoriam** make an attempt to reconcile the conflicting claims of science and religion. Browning's poetry made use of a new technique known as 'dramatic monologue'. It is used to explore the thoughts and feeling of the poet himself. Arnold describes poetry as the criticism of life. His **Sohrab and Rustam**, **The Scholar Gipsy** and some memorable poems '*Dover Beach*', expresses the doubts and frustrations of the age. At the same time, he insists on a code of conduct. For him, the object of poetry is to make men happy.

Besides these poets, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, A.C. Swinburne, C.G. Rossetti also deserve our attention. They are known as the Pre-Raphaelites, the term owes its name to a school of painting, called the Pre-Raphaelites Brotherhood. It aimed to revive in poetry the ideals of painting - sincerity, simplicity and truths to life – that inspired the Italian painters before Raphael. In the works of these poets there is a stress on beauty, an interest in middle ages and use of words for their pictorial quality.

Gerard Manley Hopkins is a poet different from his age. His poems were published in 1918 after his death. His poems normally deal with religious aspects of life. Some of his poems like '**Pied Beauty**' portray Nature. But he certainly turns away from the romantic style of poetry. His imagery and rhythm are quite modern and has influenced many poets of the 20th Century.

English poetry in the 20th century is varied in theme but more sensitive to the new crises in human life. Poets like Robert Bridges, A.E. Houseman and John Mansfield continued with the 'romantic themes'. They also expressed the 'pessimism' of the age. Walter de la Mare, in his '**Songs for Children**', '**Peacock Pie**' and other poems, explores the wonder of the child's world and the 'fantasy' of the supernatural world. The poets, who had Irish origin, were rooted in the history and tradition of Ireland. Poets like W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge and Lord Dunsane looked to their own country for inspiration. W. B. Yeats (1865-1939) in the poems such as '**Among School Children**', '**Sailing to Byzantium**' and '**Second Coming**' reveals his concern for youth, 'age' and the possibility of regeneration.

The early part of the 20th century witnessed World War I. Along with annihilation of life and property, it brought disillusionment and frustration. The poets voiced the concern that knowledge and progress could not save humanity. Some of the early poets like Rupert



Yeats

Brooke and Wilfred Owen had an ideal view on war. T.S. Eliot (1888 -1965) was certainly the most influential poet of the time. In his early poems such as the '**The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock**' and '**The Wasteland**', he presents the hollowness and vulgarity of the modern civilization which does not have any awareness of spiritual values. His later poems such as '**Ash Wednesday**' and '**Four Quartets**', portray the disillusionment, agony and a search for values.

During the 1930s a group of poets such as W.H. Auden, Cecil Day Lewis, Louis MacNeice and Stephen Spender reacted against 'Art for Art's sake'. They tried to combine Marxist philosophy with Freud's psychology. Auden, in his '**Poems**' (1930), and particularly '**Look, Stranger**' reveals his impatience with capitalism. William Empson and Dylan Thomas belong to another group of poets who sought to escape from the world of ideas

and problems. They chose to express the inner chaos through devices such as 'ambiguity' and 'inexact'. Dylan Thomas was a new romantic. His poems have rich Freudian overtones. They explore the relation between man and his natural environment.



Dylan Thomas

During and after the World War II, English poetry became quite diverse. It is difficult to use any single defining term or 'movement'. The significant poets of the period are Thomas Gunn, Ted Hughes, Donald Davie and Philip Larkin. While Hughes in '**Jaguar**' and '**Hawk Roosting**' depict violence and ferocity of animal as well as human world, Larkin was an anti-romantic, who presents in an objective way the harsh realities such as time and death. Some of the distinctive poets, writing during the 1980s and

1990s are Blake Morrison, Peter Reading and Craig Raine. Women poets such as Edith Sitwell, Stevie Smith, Elizabeth Jennings and Carol Ann Duffy, made their presence felt in the second part of the 20th century. They touched sensitive aspects of relationship between husband and wife and mother and children.

The story of English poetry will remain incomplete if we do not take into account poets from the Commonwealth countries, who also used English language for creative purposes. The use of English in America, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, India, South Africa, Nigeria and in Caribbean island, is certainly the result of British colonialism. What was first the language of commerce



Ted Hughes

and administration, soon emerged as a natural medium of exploring and understanding social realities.

American poetry in English began from the American War of Independence. It was basically patriotic but imitative of English poetry. The real poetry, however, was written during the period 1850 -55, also called the American Renaissance. The favourite poets of the 19th century were Edgar Allan Poe and W.H. Longfellow. Longfellow was a story teller in verse. Do you remember his 'A Psalm of Life'? Except for E.A. Robinson, Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg, American poetry in the early 20th century was largely experimental. Frost portrays countryside with a tone of sadness and hint of life's responsibility. Poets like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, William Carols Williams and E.E. Cummings used concrete images and precise words to represent ideas and attitudes of mind. Pound and Eliot made significant contribution by their objective and imperosnal account of the degeneration and depravity of modern life. Most of the American poets writing in English were engaged in two-fold tasks – to define the 'self' and to identify the 'nation'. The two concerns often merge in the question – 'What is an American?'

In India, poetry began to be written as early as the early part of the 19th century. Henry Lois Vivian Derozio, Kasi Prasad Ghosh, Toru Dutt and Manmohan Ghosh, were the pioneers. Their major concerns were patriotism and the glorious past of India. Sarojini Naidu, also known as the 'nightingale of India' wrote poems with ease. Her poems such as 'Village Song', 'Songs of Radha' and 'A Soul's Prayer' reveal the real 'heart of India'. Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel laureate, in **The Gitanjali** and Aurobindo Ghosh in '**The Savitri**' made moral and spiritual quest. Their poetry was an attempt to restore the lost glory of India. Indian poetry in English matured and began to express modern Indian sensibility in the later part of 20th century. Poets like Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, R. Parthasarathy, Jayant Mahapatra, P. Lal, Keki N. Daruwala, Shiv K. Kumar, Pritish Nandi, Arun Kolatkar and Kamala Das transformed Indian poetry in English. When Ezekiel describes the island of Bombay as: -

*Unsuitable for song as well as sense
the island flowers into slums
and skyscrapers, reflecting
precisely the growth of my mind*



Sarojini Naidu

- he voices the disillusionment of his age. At the same time, he uses controlled statements with ironical meaning. The language was suitable for depicting harsh realities of life. Kamla Das is more bold and bitter in portraying her frustration as a woman.

Canadian poetry is quite varied in its thematic concerns. Some of the poets like Jeannette Armstrong, Claire Harris, Cyril Dabydeen and Arnold Itwaru suggest a closeness to and harmony with Nature. It reflects the Native's concept of the land as Mother. Their poetic works - **First people, Blood of My Country** and **Wind Women** by Armstrong; **Translation into Fiction** by Harris; **The Forest** by Dabydeen and **Sacred Presence** by Arnold Itwaru – are rich in symbols and metaphors. These depict the agony of the 'colonialism' and an intense search for 'roots'. Margaret Atwood (**The Circle Came**, and **The Animals in that Country**), Robert Kroetsch (**The Stone Hammer Poems** and **Seed Catalogue**), and Fred Wah (**Breathin' My Name With a Sigh**) are some other representative Canadian poets in English. The Montreal Group of poets such as A.J. M. Smith and A.M. Klein, uses simple language to express the metaphysical agony of the uprooted people.



Ezra Pound

It is quite interesting to know that we have some of



the finest poetic utterances by the Nigerian, Caribbean, African, and South African poets. These are the poets committed to a 'cause'. South African poets like Dennis Brutus (**Sirens, Knuckles, Boots, Stubborn Hope**) and Chinua Achebe (**Beware Soul-Brother, Christmas in Biafra**) record the violence and torture of the 'white' rule. They wrote against the intrusion of Western customs into their 'native culture'.

Wole Soyinka, a Nigerian poet, reveals an uncompromising sense of justice and humanity. In his **Poems from Prison**, he tries to locate traditional African beliefs in modern life. He got Nobel Prize for literature in 1986. Chinua Achebe, basically a novelist, is another important Nigerian poet. In his **Beware Soul-Brother** and **Christmas in Biafra**, he resents the loss of traditional values.



Wole Soyinka

Dennis Brutus, a South African poet, is an opponent of apartheid. In his **Sirens, Knuckles, Boots** and **Stubborn Hope**, he voices the suffering and agony of the fellow black. Derek Walcott, who got Nobel Prize for literature in 1992, worked for a Caribbean culture. His

famous poetic works are **In a Green Night**, **The Castaway**, **The Gulf** and the autobiographical poem **Another Life**. He has tried to develop English as the language of the educated people 'Where nothing was/ the language of a race.'

✓ This discussion clearly shows that English as a language is spoken in many parts of the world. Not only this, poets from the commonwealth nations and from African and Asian countries have successfully used English for creative purposes. They have added variety to and infused vitality into what we today call 'English poetry'. Would you not agree that English poetry does not mean today poetry written by English poets alone? It is the total body of poetry being written in English in any part of the world!

Exercises

1. Complete the statements given below:

- Words in a poem are used for,, and
- In his poetic words, Chaucer did not use the
- The word Renaissance means
- The three great poets of the Elizabethan period are,, and
- The Faery Queene** is a
- Shakespeare's sonnets deal with

2. Answer these questions very briefly:

- What does Langland do in **The Vision of Piers the Plowman**?
- When was the influence of the Renaissance felt clearly in England?
- Who wrote **Astrophel and Stella**?
- Name the two epics in English.
- Name four leading Romantic poets of the nineteenth century.
- Who has described poetry as the criticism of life?
- Name any three Pre- Raphaelites poets.
- What aspect of modern civilization does T.S. Eliot present in his poems?
- What were the two concerns of the American poets writing in English?
- What were the major concerns of the early Indian poets writing in English?
- Name four Canadian poets writing in English.

