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Literature and Human Rights

[FOR LIMITED CIRCULATION]

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Literature and Human Rights

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George Orwell, *1984*

Aisha Quadry

Structure

1. Introduction
2. Learning Objectives
3. Biographical Details of George Orwell
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Part-I

1. Introduction

1984 is a dystopian novel written by George Orwell and published in 1949. The story is set in a totalitarian society where the government, led by the Party and its leader Big Brother, exercises complete control over every aspect of its citizens' lives. Winston Smith, the protagonist, is a low-ranking employee working for the ruling Party rewriting historical records for the Ministry of Truth to fit its propaganda. However, Winston rebels and begins to question the Party's oppressive rule. He also begins a clandestine love affair with Julia, who is a fellow party rebel. Together, they both delve into outlawed artefacts and ideas. Orwell moulds Winston into a symbol of resistance against the Party's thought control and surveillance tactics. *1984* explores themes of totalitarianism, surveillance, individuality and freedom, and the politics of language, leaving an impactful influence on readers since its publication. Orwell's novel continues to be relevant in discussions related to government control and individual freedoms even in contemporary times.

In Part I of this unit, we will familiarize ourselves with the author's background and the summary and analysis of the text.

2. Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- ◆ Understand the life of the author and the context in which the work was written
- ◆ Understand the genre of human rights literature



- ◆ Summarize and critically analyze the novel
- ◆ Understand the literal depth of the work and be able to appreciate it

3. Biographical Details of George Orwell

Born on June 25, 1903, in Motihari, Bengal Presidency (now Bihar), India, as Eric Arthur Blair, George Orwell was an English novelist, essayist, and literary critic best known for his allegorical novella *Animal Farm* (1945) and his dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). He has also published several non-fiction pieces such as *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), in addition to multiple essays on politics, literature, language and culture, and poetry. His first book *Down and Out in Paris and London* was published in 1933 as the work of George Orwell—the surname inspired from the picturesque river Orwell located in East Anglia. Soon, his *non de plume* became so entwined with his personality that apart from only close friends and family nobody really knew him as Blair. According to critics, the change in the name represented a significant shift in the author’s lifestyle—from being a name ensconced in the British imperial establishment to being a literary and political rebel like his protagonist Winston.

Orwell’s father Richard Walmesley Blair, worked as a Sub-Deputy Opium Agent in the opium department of the Indian Civil Service, and his mother Ida Mabel Blair, was the daughter of an unsuccessful teak merchant in Burma (now Myanmar). He had two sisters: Marjorie, five years older; and Avril, five years younger. Orwell earned scholarships to the two prestigious English schools, Wellington and Eton. After briefly attending Wellington he transferred to Eton, where he studied from 1917 to 1921. It was there where he met Aldous Huxley, that subsequently led Orwell to begin publishing his writing in college publications.

Instead of pursuing a university education, Orwell chose to honour his family’s tradition and, in 1922, traveled to Burma as an assistant district superintendent in the Indian Imperial Police. Initially, he seemed to be a model colonial officer, serving in many rural areas. However, with a desire to become a writer since childhood Orwell’s perspective changed when he witnessed firsthand the oppressive British rule over the Burmese, leading him to feel increasingly conflicted about his role in the colonial administration. These recounts of his shifting views on imperialism can be seen in his novel *Burmese Days* (1934) and in his two acclaimed autobiographical essays, “Shooting an Elephant” and “A Hanging”.

In 1927, while on leave in England, Orwell made a pivotal decision not to return to Burma. He took the decisive step of resigning from the imperial police and becoming a writer. Feeling guilty about the racial and caste barriers that had kept him from truly



connecting with the Burmese people, he sought to assuage his guilt by immersing himself in the lives of Europe's poor and outcasts. Thus, dressing in ragged clothing, Orwell would live in cheap lodging houses among labourers and beggars in the East End of London and spend time in the slums of Paris or washed dishes in French hotels and restaurants. These experiences materialized into *Down and Out in Paris and London*. Published in 1933, the book brought Orwell some initial literary recognition. Then, Orwell's next novel, *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935), features an unhappy spinster who experiences a brief and accidental liberation among agricultural labourers and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936) tells the story of a bookseller's assistant who despises the materialism of middle-class life but ultimately accepts bourgeois prosperity through a forced marriage to the woman he loves.

Orwell's initial foray into socialist literature was a unique political treatise *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). The book begins with his firsthand experiences living among the destitute and unemployed miners of northern England. While *The Road to Wigan Pier* was being published, Orwell found himself in Spain, initially sent there to report on the Civil War. He eventually joined the Republican militia, serving on the Aragon and Teruel fronts and rising to the rank of second lieutenant. Orwell was seriously wounded at Teruel, resulting in permanent damage to his throat that gave his voice a distinctive quietness. Following his participation in the fighting in Barcelona against communist forces suppressing their political opponents, Orwell fled Spain in fear for his life in May 1937. This experience left him with a deep-seated fear of communism, a sentiment vividly captured in his memoir of his Spanish experiences, *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). Upon his return to England, Orwell's writing took on a paradoxically conservative tone in *Coming Up for Air* (1939). The novel uses nostalgic recollections of a middle-aged man to explore the virtues of a past England and express concerns about a future threatened by war and fascism.

Despite his desire to serve in World War II, Orwell was deemed unfit for military duty and instead assumed a role at the Indian service of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). He later left the BBC in 1943 to become the literary editor of the *Tribune*, a left-wing socialist newspaper. During this period, Orwell was a prolific journalist, writing numerous newspaper articles, reviews, and serious critiques, including his renowned essays on Charles Dickens and boys' weeklies.

In 1944, Orwell completed *Animal Farm*, a political allegory based on the events of the Russian Revolution and the subsequent betrayal by Joseph Stalin. The story depicts a group of barnyard animals who overthrow their oppressive human masters and establish an egalitarian society. However, the pigs, the intelligent and power-hungry leaders, gradually corrupt the revolution, establishing a dictatorship more oppressive and heartless than the humans.



While *Animal Farm* is considered one of Orwell's finest works, his final book, *1984* (1949) is written as a cautionary tale. *1984* is set in a dystopian future where the world is controlled by three perpetually warring totalitarian states. Orwell penned the final pages of *1984* in a secluded house on the Hebridean island of Jura, which he purchased with the earnings from *Animal Farm*. Suffering from tuberculosis, Orwell passed away in a London hospital in January 1950.

4. Summary and Critical Appreciation

The novel is divided into three parts.

Let us now take a close look at the novel.

4.1 Book I

Winston Smith returns home to Victory Mansions on a cold, dreary April day. As we see him walking through the hallways, a coloured poster depicts an enormous face, "*the face of a man of about forty-five, with a heavy black moustache and ruggedly handsome features.*" (Orwell, p. 3). We can see Winston walk past it making his way toward the stairs as the lift was not working because these days there are power cuts in the city—part of an economic drive for Hate week. Thirty-nine and with a varicose ulcer above his right ankle, our protagonist climbs the seven flights of stairs in great pain. On each landing, he walks past the enormous face that looks at him from the wall—a poster you would feel is always looking at you. To create an eerie, unsettling moment we read that the caption that ran beneath the poster was: BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU.

As he looks outside, Winston sees a desolate calmness spread across this city. Despite the colours of the sky and sun, there is no colour except the colour of the posters that are plastered across everywhere commanding attention. As readers we also learn about the police patrol whirring around in the helicopter snooping into its citizens' windows. But soon we are told that it is actually the 'Thought Police' that mattered and not the patrolling guards. With Winston looking outside, the telescreen in his apartment continues playing. The unique telescreen is equipped to transmit and receive therefore any sound that was above a low whisper would be registered and there was no way of knowing whether the 'Thought Police' was watching you or not at any moment, At the very outset of the novel, Orwell is showcasing the extent of the government's surveillance and control over the lives of its citizens.

With the image of Winston standing with his back to the telescreen, Orwell allows the readers in on his protagonist's defiance against the oppressive regime of Oceania.



Looking out at the dilapidated state of London, Winston deliberates whether it has always been this way. He can see ‘The Ministry of Truth’, a stark white pyramid, standing out against the rundown surroundings, a symbol of the regime’s control over information and history. Winston tries to reminisce about his childhood, finding only broken memories. Here we see for the first time the reality of Oceania and the pristine facade of its institutions, reflecting on the theme of totalitarianism and the manipulation of truth. We are also told of other ministries that are part of the government: the ‘Ministry of Peace’, which is involved in war mongering, the ‘Ministry of Plenty’ which deals in economic strategies and the ‘Ministry of Love’ which is considered to be the compendium of the Inner Party’s most distasteful activities.

In his very first act of rebellion, Winston, away from the eyes of the telescreen, pulls out a small diary and begins writing in it. Doing this is an act of rebellion against the party. Upon noticing that he has repetitively written “*DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER*” in his journal, Winston realizes he has committed a thoughtcrime—the gravest offence and anticipates the inevitable intervention of the ‘Thought Police’. At that very moment, a knock echoes at his door. Terrified, Winston opens the door assuming that he has been caught in the crime but it turns out it is his next door neighbour Mrs. Parsons who needs his help with plumbing as her husband is away. As Winston heads to Mrs. Parson’s apartment to help her, he is tormented by the Parson children who as Junior Spies accuse him of committing a thoughtcrime. The Junior Spies—composed of youngsters, vigilantly keep adults under surveillance for any signs of disloyalty to the ruling Party. As readers we can see even Mrs. Parsons appeared apprehensive about her own children. The children we read about are extremely restless as they are not permitted to attend a public execution of political adversaries of the Party that was scheduled in the park that evening. Once back in his apartment, Winston hurries back to hide the diary knowing the incriminating words written within it and his ink-stained fingers can make him a dead man.

Taken into Winston’s past, we see him dreaming of his mother—finding himself aboard a sinking ship haunted by a sense of responsibility for her disappearance during a political upsurge almost two decades ago. He envisions a realm known as The Golden Country, where a brunette girl races toward him for an embrace—symbolizing a liberation that obliterates the Party’s influence. But Winston’s reveries are rudely interrupted by a shrill call from the telescreen, signaling the start of the Physical Jerks—a routine for the party’s office workers. During the exercise, Winston reflects on his childhood which is shrouded in faint recollection because of the absence of tangible records like photographs and documents. Thus, when he contemplates Oceania’s relations with other nations—Eurasia and Eastasia—he acknowledges the discrepancies between the official recorded



history and his own awareness. Although the Party asserts that Oceania has always been at war with Eurasia and allied with Eastasia, Winston recalls that there has been a manipulation of records. Furthermore, he recalls the absence of any mention of Big Brother, the Party's leader, before 1960, that seems to be in complete contrast with contemporary narratives that actually date back to the 1930s. While Winston is lost in contemplation, the voice from the telescreen, calls him out and chastises him for his perceived lack of efforts during the Physical Jerks routine. Startled, Winston breaks into a sweat doubling his efforts to reach his toes.

After the routine, a harried Winston heads to his job at the Records department within the 'Ministry of Truth', where he operates a "speakwrite" machine that transcribes dictated text and disposes of outdated documents. Winston's primary job is to align Big Brother's directives and Party records with current events, ensuring that Big Brother remains infallible, such as despite dwindling food supplies, citizens are fed propaganda proclaiming abundance, which many accept without question. Later in the day, Winston is assigned to amend a speech from December 1983, erasing any mention of Comrade Withers, who is now considered an enemy of the Party after being vaporized. We are told like Withers' disappearance, many in the state have also disappeared:

"The great purges involving thousands of people, with public trials of traitors and thought-criminals who made abject confession of their crimes and were afterwards executed, were special show-pieces not occurring oftener than once in a couple of years. More commonly, people who had incurred the displeasure of the Party simply disappeared and were never heard of again. One never had the smallest clue as to what had happened to them. In some cases, they might not even be dead. Perhaps thirty people personally known to Winston, not counting his parents, had disappeared at one time or another" (Orwell, p. 57).

To complete his assignment for the day, Winston fabricates a certain Comrade Ogilvy, an exemplary Party member created solely from his imagination, while Comrade Withers becomes an "unperson," erased from existence. There, observing his colleague, Comrade Tillotson, Winston reflects on the pervasive manipulation of history within the 'Ministry of Truth', where thousands diligently rewrite records to align with Party ideology, producing propaganda, including pornography, to pacify the oppressed masses.

At lunch, Syme, a philologist, and a specialist in Newspeak working in the Research Department tells Winston that he is working on a revised dictionary of Newspeak—the official language, Winston learns that Newspeak aims to limit thought to prevent rebellion. Syme tells him, "Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of



thought? In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it” (Orwell, p. 67). As Syme tells him more, Winston is convinced that one of these days Syme’s intellect and ideas will get him vaporized. Winston’s neighbour Parsons interrupts their conversation, by seeking contributions for the neighbourhood Hate Week, and expressing pride in his children’s zeal in being Spies. During the lunch hour, a broadcast from the Ministry of Plenty announces increased production, though Winston knows it’s a lie. As everyone celebrates around him, Winston feels scrutinized by a dark-haired girl whom he suspects of being a Party informant. He thinks that he may have committed a ‘Facecrime’ which was to improperly express a look on your face.

Later, Winston defiantly records in his diary his last sexual encounter with a prole prostitute, reflecting on the Party’s disdain for pleasure in sex, viewing it merely as a duty for procreation. As readers we are told, “*There were even organizations such as the Junior Anti-Sex League, which advocated complete celibacy for both sexes. All children were to be begotten by artificial insemination (ARTSEM, it was called in Newspeak) and brought up in public institutions...The Party was trying to kill the sex instinct, or, if it could not be killed, then to distort it and dirty it*” (Orwell, p. 84). He also thinks of his wife Katherine who is now separated from him. In his diary, Winston writes that any prospect of overthrowing the Party rests with the proles. He doubts the Party’s vulnerability from within, dismissing even the Brotherhood, an underground resistance group, as insufficient against the manacles of the Thought Police. With eighty-five percent of Oceania’s population, we are told that the proles possess the numerical advantage and potential strength to challenge the Police, but it is their primitive, uninformed lifestyles that hinder any inclination toward revolt.

Turning to a children’s history book for new insights, Winston finds a stark contrast between the Party’s claims of ideal cities and the dilapidated state of London which is marked by scarce electricity, crumbling infrastructure, and economic inequalities. Lacking reliable historical archival material, Winston doubts the Party’s assertions of progress in literacy, infant mortality, and living standards, suspecting them as *propaganda*. Recalling a moment when he caught the Party in a lie, Winston reflects on encountering deposed leaders of the Revolution, disproving the Party’s accusations of treason with evidence of their presence elsewhere. Although he destroyed the incriminating photograph out of fear, the memory serves as a tangible example of Party deceit.

Now, viewing his diary entries as communiqués to O’Brien, who Winston thinks secretly opposes the Party, he acknowledges the Party’s control over truth, compelling its members to deny reality, highlighting the essence of freedom in the ability to perceive



and express reality independently, epitomized by the simple affirmation, “*Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows*” (Orwell, p. 103).

Strolling through the prole district, Winston admires the simplicity of the common folk’s lives. Entering a pub, he encounters an elderly man who might hold clues to the past. Conversing with him, Winston seeks insight into whether pre-party society truly suffered under exploitative capitalists, as Party records claim. However, the old man’s recollections are too hazy to provide a conclusive answer, leaving Winston disheartened by the prospect of the past fading into obscurity under prole neglect.

While visiting the store where he purchased his diary, Winston is guided to a private room devoid of telescreens, he notices a print of St. Clement’s Church, evoking nostalgic rhymes. On his way home, Winston spots the dark-haired girl, dressed in blue Party overalls, seemingly trailing him. Fearing for his safety, he fantasizes about attacking her with a cobblestone or the paperweight in his pocket, growing increasingly desperate. Contemplating suicide to evade the Thought Police’s torture, Winston tries to find solace in thoughts of O’Brien and the elusive place free from darkness mentioned in his dreams. Disturbed, he gazes at a coin bearing Big Brother’s image, haunted by the Party’s slogans: “*WAR IS PEACE,*” “*FREEDOM IS SLAVERY,*” “*IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH*” (Orwell, p. 6).

Check Your Progress

- (i) How does Orwell create a sense of surveillance and control in Winston’s environment?
- (ii) Describe Winston’s reflections on the state of Oceania and his doubts about the Party’s propaganda.
- (iii) Discuss the relevance of Winston’s encounter with the old man in the prole district.

4.2 Book II

One morning at work, Winston meets the dark-haired girl in the hallway, her arm in a sling. As she stumbles and he helps her up, she surreptitiously passes him a note confessing her love for him. Bewildered by this unexpected declaration from someone he suspects to be a Party spy, Winston is interrupted by Parsons before he can fully process the note’s significance. Despite his initial confusion, the girl’s declaration fills Winston with a newfound sense of purpose and vitality.

In the ensuing days, Winston grapples with the tension of their clandestine connection, hesitant to engage with the girl. However, they eventually manage to share a table in the lunchroom, conversing discreetly while avoiding attention. Planning a secret rendezvous in Victory Square, they strategize how to evade the omnipresent telescreens amidst the



bustling crowds. Meeting at the appointed place, they observe a procession of Eurasian prisoners subjected to the wrath of the mob. With the girl providing directions, they arrange the meeting point in the countryside, stealing a moment to briefly clasp hands amidst the chaos of their surroundings. Putting their plan into action, Winston and the girl meet at a safe place.

Despite Winston's lingering suspicions, he no longer views the dark-haired girl, now revealed to us as Julia, as a spy. Julia's boldness takes him by surprise. Shedding her Junior Anti-Sex League sash, she shows her rebellious nature completely entrancing Winston. They then engage in a passionate lovemaking session reminiscent of his dreams. As readers Orwell tells us, "*No emotion was pure, because everything was mixed up with fear and hatred. Their embrace had been a battle, the climax a victory. It was a blow struck against the Party. It was a political act*" (Orwell, p. 159). We learn more about Julia and the activities she has been involved in toward the state which include attending lectures and demonstrations, distributing literature for the Junior Anti-Sex League, preparing banners for Hate Week, making collections for campaigns. She thinks that if she abides by these small rules, she can forgo the bigger ones. Presently, Julia works at the novel-writing machines in the Fiction Department where narratives are created and approved by the Planning Committee. Additionally, we learn that she has been the captain of the hockey team, played gymnastics, been a troop leader in the Spies, a branch secretary in the Youth League before joining the Junior Anti-Sex League and worked at the Pornosec, the sub-section of the Fiction Department which worked on state-sanctioned cheap pornography for distribution among the proles.

Curious about Julia's sexual history, Winston learns that she has engaged in similar liaisons numerous times, a revelation that both thrills and reassures him, as it signifies widespread dissent among Party members. Delighted by this revelation, Winston declares that her encounters with others only deepen their bond, as each liaison represents another act of defiance against the Party. In the ensuing weeks, they meet for several discreet encounters. During one such meeting, Julia shares anecdotes about her time living in a crowded hostel and reminisces about her initial foray into forbidden intimacy. Unlike Winston, Julia's motivations are not driven by a desire for widespread rebellion—she simply enjoys the thrill of outsmarting the Party and indulging in these pleasurable encounters. She tells Winston that the Party's prohibition of sex serves to redirect the citizens' pent-up sexual frustration towards fervent opposition against Party adversaries and zealous devotion to Big Brother.

As Winston predicted would happen, Syme vanishes. During the preparations for Hate Week, the city comes alive with the heat of the summer, and even the proles seem row-



dy. Parsons hangs streamers everywhere and his children boisterously sing the new party song, called “Hate Song,” dedicated to the event. We can see Winston becomes increasingly obsessed with the room above Mr. Charrington’s shop, thinking about it even when he cannot go there with Julia. He fantasizes that Katherine will die, which would allow him to marry Julia; he even dreams of altering his identity to become a prole. Winston and Julia talk about the Brotherhood; he tells her about the strange kinship he feels with O’Brien, and she tells him that she believes the war and Party enemies like Emmanuel Goldstein are all Party inventions. Winston is put off by her thoughtlessness.

In an interesting turn of events, the infamous O’Brien finally reaches out to Winston, a moment he’s been eagerly anticipating his entire life. During their brief encounter, Winston is filled with both anxiety and anticipation. O’Brien references Syme and offers Winston the opportunity to peruse the new Newspeak dictionary if he visits O’Brien’s residence one evening. For Winston, this meeting with O’Brien is significant—for the first time Winston takes a conscious step down the rebellious path that began with his first defiant thought of writing in his diary. Despite his sombre realization that this path may ultimately lead him to his demise, Winston accepts his fate with a mixture of resignation and excitement, grateful to have O’Brien’s address.

One morning, when Winston wakes up in tears with Julia by his side, she inquires about his distress and he confides that he had been dreaming of his mother and has long harboured guilt over her fate, believing he had led to his mother’s demise. Suddenly flooded with suppressed memories, Winston recalls his tumultuous childhood marked by air raids and food shortages, culminating in his desperate attempt to steal chocolate from his sister and a subsequent disappearance of his family. Winston and Julia fret over their heightened risk of capture despite acknowledging the inevitable torture and potential death they may face if captured, yet they find solace in knowing their unwavering love for each other. While they agree that leaving the room would be the wisest choice, they find themselves unable to do so.

Taking a perilous gamble, they head together to O’Brien’s residence. Inside his apartment, O’Brien surprises Winston by disabling the telescreen, creating an illusion of privacy. Emboldened, Winston boldly proclaims their defiance against the Party and their desire to join the Brotherhood. O’Brien confirms the Brotherhood’s existence, the reality of Emmanuel Goldstein, and initiates them into their circle of outlaws. O’Brien pledges to provide Winston with a copy of THE BOOK. As they part ways, O’Brien hints at the possibility of future encounters, alluding to a place devoid of surveillance. Before Winston leaves, O’Brien reveals missing verses from the St. Clement’s Church rhyme. As Winston exits, O’Brien resumes his work, reactivating the telescreen.



That week, Winston is utterly drained due to a gruelling ninety-hour workweek. Amidst the chaos of Hate Week, Oceania abruptly shifts its allegiances in the ongoing war, burdening Winston with an overwhelming workload to adapt to the change. At a rally, the speaker is compelled to alter his speech halfway through, asserting that Oceania is not, and has never been, at war with Eurasia, but with Eastasia instead. Despite this abrupt change, the populace shifts their hatred seamlessly towards Eastasia, blaming Emmanuel Goldstein's agents for the confusion.

In the sanctuary of Mr. Charrington's room, Winston immerses himself in Goldstein's "The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism," provided by O'Brien. This extensive tome, structured with chapter titles derived from Party slogans like "WAR IS PEACE" and "IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH," delves into the hierarchical social structure comprising the High Class, Middle Class, and Low Class—corresponding to the Inner Party, Outer Party, and Proles respectively. Goldstein reveals the origins of the three superstates, emphasizing how perpetual border wars maintain the ruling elite's power by diverting the populace's attention. The war serves as a mechanism to perpetuate ignorance among the masses, epitomized by the Party's mantra "WAR IS PEACE."

While engrossed in reading, Julia enters and embraces Winston. After sharing an intimate moment, Winston reads excerpts to Julia, exposing the Party's control over history and the concept of doublethink. As they lie in bed, reflecting on the woman singing outside, they ponder the significance of the Proles in potentially challenging Party dominance. Suddenly, their musings are interrupted by a third voice, signaling their capture. Discovering a hidden telescreen behind a picture, they are besieged by black-clad troops, who brutally subdue them. In a shocking revelation, Winston realizes that Mr. Charrington, the seemingly benign proprietor, is a member of the 'Thought Police', orchestrating their capture.

Check Your Progress

- (i) How does Winston initially react to the note passed to him by the dark-haired girl?
- (ii) What significant information does O'Brien reveal to Winston during their encounter at his residence?
- (iii) What does Winston discover about Mr. Charrington that shocks him during the raid by the 'Thought Police'?

4.3 Book III

Winston sits in a bare cell in which the lights are always on—he has, at last, arrived at the place where there is no darkness. Four telescreens monitor him. He has been transferred



here from a holding cell in which a huge prole woman who shares the last name Smith wonders if she is Winston's mother. In his solitary cell, Winston starts envisioning his captors beating him, and he worries that the sheer physical pain will force him to betray Julia. Ampleforth, a poet whose crime was leaving the word "God" in a Rudyard Kipling translation, is tossed into the cell along with Winston too. He is soon dragged away to the dreaded Room 101, a place of mysterious and unspeakable horror. We read that Winston is sharing his cell with a variety of fellow prisoners, including his neighbour Parsons, who is turned in by his own daughter for committing thoughtcrime.

Seeing starvation, beating, and mangling, Winston hopes dearly that the Brotherhood will send him a razorblade with which he might commit suicide. His dreams of the Brotherhood are wrecked when O'Brien, his hoped-for link to the rebellion, enters his cell. Winston cries out, "*They've got you too!*" to which O'Brien replies, "*They got me long ago*" (Orwell, p. 301). identifying himself as an operative of the Ministry of Love. O'Brien asserts that Winston has in fact known O'Brien was an operative all along, and Winston admits that this is true. A guard smashes Winston's elbow, and Winston thinks that no one can become a hero in the face of physical pain because it is too much to endure.

O'Brien oversees Winston's prolonged torture sessions. He tells Winston that his crime was refusing to accept the Party's control of history and his memory. As O'Brien increases the pain, Winston agrees to accept that O'Brien is holding up five fingers, though he knows that O'Brien is holding up only four—he agrees that anything O'Brien wants him to believe is true. He begins to love O'Brien, because it is O'Brien who stops the pain; he even convinces himself that O'Brien isn't the source of the pain after all. O'Brien tells Winston that Winston's current outlook is insane, and therefore the torture will cure him. As weeks of interrogation and torment ensue, O'Brien elucidates the Party's insatiable thirst for power, dismissing Winston's speculation about the Party's governance of the proles for their benefit. Instead, O'Brien asserts the Party's relentless pursuit of absolute dominion over every facet of human existence, transcending the constraints of natural order. Reduced to a skeletal, desolate figure, Winston confronts his shattered reflection in the mirror, laying blame on O'Brien for his condition.

In a chilling denouement, O'Brien acknowledges Winston's resilience in not betraying Julia but dismisses it, revealing that regardless of Winston's actions, death ultimately awaits him. Thus, amidst Winston's overwhelming feelings of love and gratitude towards O'Brien for recognizing his fortitude, O'Brien callously assures Winston that his fate, like all dissenters, culminates in execution. After a period of time, Winston experiences a transfer to a more comfortable space. He finds solace in dreams featuring Julia, his mother, and O'Brien within the idyllic setting of the Golden Country. Gradually, he regains



weight and gains privileges such as writing on a small slate. Winston begins to question his past defiance against the Party and attempts to convince himself of the validity of Party slogans. He dutifully writes phrases like “*FREEDOM IS SLAVERY*,” “*TWO AND TWO MAKE FIVE*,” and “*GOD IS POWER*” on his slate.

In a moment of intense despair, Winston succumbs to a passionate outburst, repeatedly screaming Julia’s name, knowing it will result in renewed torture from O’Brien. Despite his efforts to suppress his hatred for the Party, Winston realizes his deep-seated desire to continue opposing it. He aims to conceal his true feelings, even from himself, hoping to maintain his hatred until his eventual demise—a personal triumph over Big Brother. However, when confronted by O’Brien, Winston defiantly expresses his hatred for Big Brother. In response, O’Brien insists that mere obedience is insufficient; Winston must learn to love Big Brother. Subsequently, Winston is led to Room 101. There, Winston is strapped into a chair and immobilized, while O’Brien reveals that it houses “the worst thing in the world”—a reminder of Winston’s darkest fears. O’Brien unveils a cage filled with ravenous rats and threatens to release them onto Winston’s face. Overwhelmed by terror, Winston breaks down and begs O’Brien to subject Julia to torture instead. Satisfied by this betrayal, O’Brien removes the cage.

Following his release, Winston finds himself at the Chestnut Tree Café, frequented by dismissed Party members. He numbs himself with Victory Gin and submits to the Party’s propaganda broadcasted on the telescreen. Despite outward compliance, Winston still senses the lingering presence of the rats, a reminder of his traumatic ordeal. Reflecting on his encounter with Julia and their mutual betrayal, he witnesses the image of Big Brother on the telescreen, eliciting feelings of happiness and security. As he listens to the war news, Winston reassures himself of his supposed victory over his own rebellious instincts and his newfound devotion to Big Brother.

Check Your Progress

- (i) Who is torturing Winston, and what does Winston agree to believe to stop the pain?
- (ii) What happens when Winston is threatened with a cage of rats in Room 101?
- (iii) Where does Winston find himself after his release, and how does he react to the propaganda broadcasted on the telescreen?



Part II

Background, Characters and Themes

Structure

1. Introduction
2. Learning Objectives
3. Background to the Novel
4. Characters
5. Themes
6. Additional Perspectives on the Novel
7. Suggested Readings

1. Introduction

In Part I we familiarized ourselves with the background information of the author, the context in which the novel was written and the narrative of *1984*. Part II of the Unit will provide you with several access-points to the text to help you formulate your own interpretations of the novel.

2. Learning Objectives

In this unit the student will learn about:

- ◆ The characters in the narrative.
- ◆ How the text can be interpreted from various perspectives
- ◆ Significant themes that are knitted in the text, such as totalitarianism, surveillance and control, individuality and freedom and language

3. Background to the Novel

Now that we have gained an understanding of the plot structure of the novel, it's time to look at the broader questions that *1984* asks us readers. Why do you think we are outraged by the representation of surveillance, totalitarianism, and the erosion of individual values in the text? The answer lies in our knowledge and understanding of human rights, many



of which are being usurped in the text. Therefore, our interpretations of the text must be guided by a close analysis of human rights and human rights literature to form an informed opinion on not just the text at hand but also citizenship, justice, and democratic processes.

3.1 Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is an international document that was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948. It underscores the rights and freedoms of all individuals and consists of 30 articles affirming these rights as universal and therefore applicable to all people. The Declaration, while not legally binding, has influenced international human rights law and inspired subsequent treaties and legal codes worldwide. Its structure includes a preamble and articles detailing individual rights, civil and political freedoms, and social, economic, and cultural rights. The UDHR is considered a milestone document for its universalist language and has been translated into over 530 languages.

The Universal Declaration was adopted by the General Assembly on 10 December 1948 in Palais de Chaillot, Paris.

3.2 Human Rights Literature

Human rights literature is a genre that discusses human rights issues and promotes the values of human rights, directly or indirectly, through narratives, poetry, essays, and other creative forms of literature. This genre aims to blend narratives of literature toward *action*. This is based on the concept of engaged literature, as articulated by the French writer and philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. At its core, human rights literature is committed to society advocating the moral duty and power of individuals to effect social change. It recognizes the immense influence of literature in bringing about change, underscoring the author's responsibility to readers, both socially and artistically.

The concept of human rights literature was first discussed in the foreword to *Freedom*, an anthology of short stories published in 2010 by Mainstream Publishing in cooperation with Amnesty International. The stories in this anthology were written in the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Furthermore, it is also Jean-Paul Sartre's idea of "engaged literature" that forms the basis of human rights literature—a literature advocating for writers and intellectuals to take a stand on major political conflicts. Alternatively, critics have argued that engaged literature has the ability to be reduced to propaganda, but Sartre believed that engaged literature could elevate readers' intellectual level and offer them something beyond the ordinary.

This genre challenges dominant narratives and exposes the injustices perpetrated by those in power. For example, in Harper Lee's classic *To Kill a Mockingbird* the novel



explores themes of racial injustice and moral growth through the character of Atticus Finch, a lawyer who defends a black man who is falsely accused of raping a white woman in the segregated American South. Moreover, human rights literature frequently highlights the resilience and courage of individuals who resist oppression and fight for justice. In *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, the novel portrays the struggles of its protagonist, Amir, as he grapples with guilt and seeks redemption in war-torn Afghanistan, shedding light on the human cost of conflict and the power of forgiveness. Additionally, human rights literature should not be limited to fictional works as it also includes memoirs, essays, and journalistic accounts that document real-life experiences of injustice like *I Am Malala* by Malala Yousafzai that chronicles Malala's fight for girls' education in Pakistan and her survival of an assassination attempt by the Taliban, highlighting the importance of education as a human right.

3.3 George Orwell and Human Rights Literature

Edmond van Den Bossche wrote in The New York Times: “1984 is a political statement. It contains no prophetic declaration, only a simple warning to mankind.”

Orwell's works are seminal to human rights literature as they are unflinching interrogations of totalitarian regimes and advocacy for individual freedom and dignity. In both the texts, *Animal Farm* and *1984*, Orwell critiques authoritarianism and the erosion of civil liberties, warning his readers of the dangers of unchecked state power. As stated before, *Animal Farm* allegorically portrays the Russian Revolution and subsequent Stalinist regime, illustrating how idealistic movements can be corrupted by greed and tyranny. Similarly, *1984* as you have read in the first section, depicts a dystopian society where surveillance, propaganda, and thought control are used to maintain a totalitarian regime, highlighting the importance of freedom of thought and expression, both of which are basic human rights.

We can also see Orwell's commitment to truth and justice in his non-fiction works as well. In essays like “Shooting an Elephant” and “A Hanging,” he reflects on his experiences as a colonial police officer in Burma, critiquing imperialism and its dehumanizing effects on both the oppressor and the oppressed. These essays reveal Orwell's empathy for the marginalized and his belief in the inherent dignity of every individual.

Check Your Progress

- (i) What is the significance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?
- (ii) How does human rights literature play a role in advocating for social change?
- (iii) In what ways do George Orwell's works, such as *Animal Farm* and *1984*, contribute to the genre of human rights literature?



4. Characters

4.1 Winston Smith is a complex character whose experiences provide us with a lens through which we explore the dystopian world of Oceania. Winston is portrayed as a disillusioned and rebellious individual who yearns for freedom and truth in a society dominated by oppression and propaganda. At the beginning of the novel, we read that Winston is a low-ranking member of the Party, outwardly conforming to its rules while harbouring deep-seated resentment and scepticism towards the State's ideology, "*He was already dead, he reflected. It seemed to him that it was only now, when he had begun to be able to formulate his thoughts, that he had taken the decisive step [to write in his diary]*" (Orwell, 36). Despite his outward compliance, Winston possesses an apparent hatred for Big Brother—questioning the Party's control over every aspect of life and longing for a sense of individuality and autonomy.

Among all the characters in the text, Winston stands out for his capacity to think critically. He is acutely aware of the contradictions and falsehoods perpetuated by the Party and therefore seeks the truth in an atmosphere riddled with deception and manipulation. Through activities, such as keeping a diary, ("*the writing ... was not more dangerous than the initial act of opening the diary*" (Orwell, p. 23-24); visiting the proles neighbourhood ("*'If there is hope,' wrote Winston, 'it lies in the proles.'*" (Orwell, p. 89) and engaging in an illicit affair with Julia, Winston demonstrates his defiance against the Party's suppression of independent thought and emotion.

As the novel progresses, Winston undergoes a profound transformation, driven by his increasing disillusionment with the Party and his growing awareness of the extent of its tyranny. His encounters with O'Brien who is initially seen as a potential ally in his rebellion, ultimately lead to his betrayal. Winston's experiences in the 'Ministry of Love', where he is subjected to torture and psychological manipulation, strip away his sense of self and break his spirit, culminating in his eventual acceptance of Party orthodoxy and betrayal of his love for Julia.

Despite his ultimate capitulation to the Party, Winston, for the readers, remains a symbol of resistance and defiance against authoritarianism. His internal struggles and moral dilemmas reflect the universal human desire for freedom and individuality in the face of oppression. Through Winston's journey, Orwell offers a poignant commentary on the dangers of totalitarianism and the importance of preserving individual liberties and truth in the face of tyranny.

4.2 Julia's actions and beliefs provide a stark contrast to those of the protagonist, Winston Smith. She embodies rebellion and defiance against the oppressive regime of the Party in



1984. Unlike Winston, who harbours a deep-seated desire to dismantle the Party's control, Julia's rebellion is more immediate and personal, driven by a selfish desire for freedom and individuality rather than a broader ideological struggle. Described as youthful and vibrant, with an air of sensuality, Julia's character contrasts sharply with the bleakness of the dystopian world in which she lives. Her appearance suggests an audacious fearlessness throughout the novel.

Julia's rebellion is manifested in her pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment, particularly in defiance of the Party's strict regulations on sex and relationships. She engages in secret affairs and displays a carefree attitude toward the Party's restrictions, viewing them as opportunities for subversion rather than constraints. Despite this seemingly hedonistic behaviour, she possesses a shrewd understanding of the Party's mechanisms of control and manipulation. She navigates the oppressive environment with a combination of cunning and pragmatism, avoiding detection while actively seeking out moments of joy and fulfilment.

Julia's relationship with Winston serves as both a source of comfort and a catalyst for further rebellion. While their connection initially revolves around shared desires and physical attraction, it evolves into a partnership marked by mutual support and solidarity in the face of adversity. However, Julia's rebellion at the end of the book is ultimately tempered by a sense of self-preservation. When confronted with the harsh reality of the Party's power, she willingly compromises her ideals in order to survive because she had no memories of a time before Big Brother. As Orwell writes, "*She had no memories of anything before the early sixties and the only person she had ever known who talked frequently of the days before the Revolution was a grandfather who had disappeared when she was eight*" (Orwell, p. 164). Therefore, her betrayal of Winston while being tortured highlights the brutal extent to which the Party is able to manipulate and exploit its citizens. Despite her flaws and limitations, she remains a symbol of resilience and defiance in 1984's dystopian world.

4.3 O'Brien is the embodiment of authority, and ambiguity. As readers we are first introduced to O'Brien as a dissenter against the oppressive regime of the Party and a member of the Inner Party, where he holds significant authority, making him an influential figure. His eloquence, intelligence, and seemingly rebellious demeanour draws the reader and Winston in as he views him as a potential connection to the underground resistance movement, the Brotherhood. However, O'Brien's true allegiance remains shrouded in mystery, serving as a central source of tension and suspense in the novel. Despite initially presenting himself as a comrade, sympathetic to Winston's dissent, O'Brien ultimately reveals himself to be a loyal servant of the Party, functioning as an agent of the dreaded Ministry of Love.



This revelation subverts our expectations and underscores Orwell's exploration of betrayal and manipulation.

Later, as Winston's interrogator and tormentor in the Ministry of Love, O'Brien embodies the brutal and authoritarian nature of the regime he serves. Through his interactions with Winston, O'Brien demonstrates a deep understanding of psychological warfare, employing tactics designed to break the protagonist's spirit and reshape his beliefs.

Despite his role as an antagonist, O'Brien remains a complex and compelling character, challenging readers to question the nature of power, authority, and morality. We see him as a sobering reminder of the dangers of blind obedience and unchecked authority.

4.4 Big Brother is the omnipresent figurehead of the Party. Despite never making a physical appearance in the novel, Big Brother's influence permeates every aspect of the dystopian society depicted in the novel. As the leader of the Party, Big Brother is the representation of totalitarianism, manipulating reality and perpetuating propaganda to maintain dominance over Oceania's citizens. Through slogans like "*BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU*" and images plastered on posters and telescreens, the Party reinforces the idea of Big Brother as a benevolent and omnipotent figure, deserving of unwavering loyalty and obedience. Throughout the novel this character is characterized by ambiguity and mystery, serving as a symbol rather than a flesh-and-blood individual. While the Party claims that Big Brother is a real person, capable of leading and guiding the nation to greatness, the truth remains elusive. Winston Smith, continues to harbour doubts about Big Brother's existence, questioning whether he is merely a propaganda tool used to manipulate the masses:

"Nobody has ever seen Big Brother. He is a face on the hoardings, a voice on the telescreen. We may be reasonably sure that he will never die, and there is already considerable uncertainty as to when he was born. Big Brother is the guise in which the Party chooses to exhibit itself to the world. His function is to act as a focusing point for love, fear, and reverence, emotions which are more easily felt towards an individual than towards an organization." (Orwell, p. 262)

Despite Big Brother's intangible nature, he exerts a profound influence on the lives of Oceania's citizens, instilling fear, conformity, and submission. The constant surveillance and monitoring by the 'Thought Police' reinforce the notion that Big Brother is always watching, eroding individual freedoms and privacy in the name of security and stability.

Big Brother represents the ultimate manifestation of tyranny, a figurehead whose image inspires both reverence and terror in the hearts of Oceania's inhabitants.



4.5 Emmanuel Goldstein never physically appears in the novel yet can be seen as a shadowy figure and a symbol of opposition to the Party's regime.

Goldstein is depicted as the principal enemy of the Party, a “renegade” and “backslider” who once belonged to the Inner Party but rebelled against its authority. He is the author of “The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism,” a book considered taboo by the Party. His book serves as a manual for dissenters and provides a critique of the Party's oppressive tactics and manipulation of truth. Despite being vilified by the Party for being a traitor, Goldstein's character also remains ambiguous throughout the novel. While the Party portrays him as a dangerous enemy of the state, some characters, like Winston Smith, harbour doubts about Goldstein's true intentions. Winston even questions whether Goldstein is a real person or merely a fabricated scapegoat used to unite the populace against a common enemy: “*The tales about Goldstein and his underground army, [...]. were simply a lot of rubbish which the Party had invented for its own purposes and which you had to pretend to believe in*” (Orwell, p. 192). Therefore, in many ways, Goldstein embodies the inherent tensions and contradictions within Oceania's society. While the Party suppresses dissent and promotes conformity, Goldstein's existence as a symbol of resistance underscores the human desire for freedom.

4.6 Parsons is Winston's neighbour, residing in Victory Mansions. He is described as a zealous supporter of the Party, enthusiastically participating in various Party activities and initiatives. Parsons worked at the ‘Ministry of Truth’ in some subordinate position. Despite his fervent loyalty to the Party, Parsons is ultimately betrayed by his own daughter, who reports him to the ‘Thought Police’ for allegedly committing a thoughtcrime.

Parsons' character serves as a stark contrast to Winston Smith. While Winston actively hopes to challenge the Party's authority, Parsons unquestioningly embraces Party ideology and willingly conforms to its dictates. Through him we see the extent to which the Party's propaganda and surveillance apparatuses have succeeded in indoctrinating and controlling the populace.

Check Your Progress

- (i) How does Julia's rebellion differ from Winston's defiance against the Party?
- (ii) Describe O'Brien's initial portrayal and his ultimate revelation in the novel.
- (iii) Discuss the significance of Big Brother in *1984* and his impact on the citizens of Oceania.
- (iv) What role does Parsons play in the novel, and how does his character contrast with that of Winston Smith?



5. Themes

5.1 Totalitarianism

In *1984* we see a harrowing vision of totalitarianism, of a dystopian society where the ruling Party exerts complete control over every aspect of its citizens' lives. Totalitarianism, as portrayed in the novel, is characterized by pervasive government surveillance, the manipulation of information, and the suppression of individual autonomy. The ruling Party is led by the figure of Big Brother, who maintains its grip on power through a combination of surveillance and propaganda. The use of telescreens, 'Thought Police', and informants ensures that every citizen is under constant scrutiny, with even the slightest hint of dissent swiftly punished. This pervasive surveillance creates a climate of fear and paranoia, where citizens are afraid to express their true thoughts and feelings.

As readers we also see how propaganda plays a central role in maintaining the Party's control over the population. Through slogans such as "*War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength,*" we see the Party manipulates language to warp reality and control public perception. By rewriting history and disseminating false information, the Party maintains its authority and suppresses any opposition.

Furthermore, language itself becomes a tool of oppression through the introduction of 'Newspeak'—a language designed to limit freedom of thought and expression. By eliminating words that could be used to express dissent and creating a new dictionary, Big Brother wants to seek to control the very thoughts of its citizens, ensuring their complete submission to its authority.

The psychological impact of totalitarianism can be seen in the experiences of Winston Smith and Julia. Winston's struggle to maintain his individuality and resist the Party's indoctrination serves as a powerful metaphor for the human spirit's resilience in the face of oppression. However, Winston's eventual surrender and betrayal underscores the overwhelming power of totalitarianism to crush dissent and extinguish hope.

Orwell's critique of totalitarianism extends beyond political oppression to encompass the erosion of personal relationships and the destruction of basic human freedoms. The Party's relentless pursuit of power leads to the breakdown of trust and intimacy, as individuals are forced to betray their loved ones in order to survive such as Parson's daughter who puts her own father behind bars.

What we therefore see in Orwell's, *1984*, is a chilling portrayal of totalitarianism, highlighting its ability to strip individuals of their humanity and subjugate them to the will of the state. As readers we must be attentive as to how Orwell's exploration of totalitar-



ianism remains relevant in the contemporary world, reminding readers of the importance of vigilance and resistance in safeguarding democracy and human rights.

5.2 Politics of Language

Steven Blakemore notes in *Language and Ideology* in Orwell's *1984* that "Orwell's great insight was to see that any ideological assault on human nature is intimately connected to the assault on human language; he saw that human experience is expressed and passed down through a language which must be conserved in or intelligible to future generations. Moreover, he saw that the textuality of human time and history is precarious in a world where language and texts are destroyed" (Blakemore, p. 356). Therefore, in the text we see that through the manipulation of language, the Party sought to shape and control thought, eradicate dissent, and maintain its authoritarian regime. The Party's linguistic manipulation is through the introduction of 'Newspeak', a language designed to restrict freedom of thought and expression. As discussed before, Newspeak aims to eliminate words that could be used to articulate dissent or rebellion, thus narrowing the range of thought permissible within society. By controlling language, the Party seeks to control the very thoughts and beliefs of its citizens, ensuring their complete submission to its authority. Through the character of Syme, we learn that the elimination of certain words from the language reflects the Party's desire to eliminate certain concepts from society altogether. For example, the removal of words like "freedom," "equality," and "justice" serves to erase the possibility of questioning the Party's authority or advocating for political change. So, what Orwell intends to show is that in Newspeak, words are stripped of their nuanced meanings, reducing language to a tool of ideological conformity and social control. We also see that apart from the manipulation of language, the Party also engages in the distortion of existing language through propaganda and doublespeak. With slogans like "*War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength,*" the Party twists the meaning of words to justify its oppressive actions and maintain its grip on power.

5.3 Surveillance and Social Control

Surveillance and social control are omnipresent elements of the Party's totalitarian regime, serving as tools to maintain power, enforce conformity, and suppress dissent. The most prominent symbol of surveillance in *1984* is the ubiquitous telescreen, which monitors citizens' every move and word, blurring the line between public and private spaces. Citizens are constantly under surveillance, unable to escape the watchful eye of the Party. The telescreens serve as both a physical and psychological mechanism of control, instill-



ing a sense of paranoia and self-censorship among the populace—“*But at any rate they could plug in your wire whenever they wanted to. You had to live—did live, from habit that became instinct—in the assumption that every sound you made was overheard, and, except in darkness, every movement scrutinized*” (Orwell, p. 5).

Furthermore, we see that the Party’s surveillance apparatus is further reinforced by the presence of the ‘Thought Police’, who actively seek out and punish any form of dissent or independent thought. Citizens live in constant fear of being reported for thoughtcrime, leading to widespread conformity and obedience to the Party doctrine. The threat of surveillance and punishment creates a culture of distrust and betrayal, where even intimate relationships such as Winston and Julia or Parsons and his kids, are suspect. When Winston asks Parson who turned you in, we receive a chilling response, “‘*It was my little daughter,*’ said Parsons with a sort of doleful pride. ‘*She listened at the keyhole. Heard what I was saying and nipped of to the patrols the very next day. Pretty smart for a nipper of seven, eh? I don’t bear her any grudge for it. In fact, I’m proud of her. It shows I brought her up in the right spirit, anyway*’” (Orwell, p. 295).

Surveillance in *1984* extends beyond physical observation to include psychological manipulation and control. Through propaganda, censorship, and historical revisionism, the Party seeks to shape public perception and erase any memory of dissent or resistance. By controlling the past, the Party seeks to control the present and future, ensuring its continued dominance over society. On multiple occasions in the text, we see how history is doctored to suit the requirements of the Party like the creation of a fictional Comrade Ogilvy to alter historical artifacts or the ever-changing political adversaries of Oceania. By depicting a society where privacy is non-existent and individual autonomy is crushed under the weight of state surveillance, we see how Orwell highlights the dangers of unchecked government power and the erosion of basic human rights.

Check Your Progress

- (i) How does the Party maintain control over its citizens in 1984 through surveillance and social control mechanisms?
- (ii) What role does Newspeak play in the Party’s efforts to manipulate language and control thought?
- (iii) How do characters like Winston and Julia resist the Party’s totalitarian regime, and what are the consequences of their rebellion?



6. Additional Perspectives on the Novel

6.1 Class Consciousness in 1984

Orwell's *1984* offers an interesting portrayal of class consciousness and Marxism, weaving elements of socialist critique into its dystopian narrative. George Orwell, a socialist himself, can be seen employing the novel as a platform to explore themes of social hierarchy, exploitation, and resistance. At the heart of Orwell's critique is the stark class division within Oceania, where society is stratified into the ruling Inner Party, the bureaucratic Outer Party, and the oppressed proletarian masses, or proles. This hierarchical structure mirrors Karl Marx's analysis of class struggle, with the Inner Party representing the bourgeoisie, the Outer Party as the bureaucratic enforcers of the regime, and the proles as the exploited working class.

As mentioned earlier, we see that Orwell portrays the proles as the potential agents of revolution, as they possess the numerical strength to overthrow the Party's oppressive regime. However, their ignorance and apathy serve as barriers to collective action, highlighting the challenges of organizing resistance among marginalized communities. We can see Winston Smith emerging as a symbol of class consciousness and rebellion within the rigid social hierarchy of Oceania. Despite his (considerably) privileged position within the Outer Party, Winston nurtures a deep sense of alienation and disillusionment with the Party's oppressive tactics. His many acts of defiance, such as keeping a diary and engaging in an illicit affair with Julia, reflect his growing awareness of the injustices perpetuated by the Party.

Orwell's depiction of Winston's trajectory parallels Marxist ideals, wherein individuals awaken to their exploitation and unite in solidarity against their oppressors. However, Winston's ultimate fate, subjected to brutal torture and psychological manipulation by the Party, shows the formidable challenges of resisting totalitarian control, a thought also espoused by critic Robert Paul Resch in "Utopia, Dystopia, and the Middle Class in George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four" that, "Orwell demonstrates that, as long as capitalism dominates the world system, totalitarianism remains a real possibility, and the notion of a progressive alliance of the middle and working classes a chimera." (Resch, p. 140)

6.2 Technology in 1984

Technology plays a pivotal role in the oppressive regime's surveillance and control of its citizens. Orwell shows us how every aspect of life is monitored and manipulated by the ruling Party. The most prominent technological device in the novel is the ubiquitous, two-way television that not only broadcasts propaganda and Party directives but also puts individuals under surveillance in their own homes. The telescreens symbolize the intrusive nature of government surveillance and the erosion of privacy in the dystopian world of Oceania. We



see Winston Smith living in constant fear of being observed and punished for any deviation from Party orthodoxy, creating a pervasive atmosphere of paranoia and self-censorship. Furthermore, the telescreens exemplify the theme of doublethink, as citizens are compelled to simultaneously accept contradictory information presented by the Party. For example, while the screens proclaim slogans like “WAR IS PEACE” and “FREEDOM IS SLAVERY,” they also monitor and manipulate individuals’ behaviour to ensure compliance with Party ideology. This manipulation of truth and reality through technology underscores the Party’s control over both the minds and bodies of its subjects. In addition to the telescreens, other forms of technology contribute to the oppressive atmosphere of Oceania. The ‘Thought Police’ employ advanced surveillance techniques, including hidden microphones and cameras, to root out dissent and punish thoughtcrime—the mere act of thinking rebellious or subversive thoughts. This constant surveillance creates a sense of omnipresent authority, where even private moments are subject to scrutiny and punishment. Moreover, technology in *1984* is used not only as a means of control but also as a weapon of psychological manipulation.

6.3 The Dystopian Novel and *1984*

Dystopian novels present imagined societies that are characterized by oppression, suffering, and often a loss of individual freedoms. These narratives typically explore themes of totalitarianism, surveillance, and the consequences of unchecked power. Dystopian worlds are often depicted as grim and oppressive, serving as cautionary tales about the potential dangers of societal trends or political systems taken to extreme ends. Through dystopian literature, authors critique contemporary society, challenge political ideologies, and prompt readers to reflect on the implications of certain societal structures. Seminal texts of this genre include George Orwell’s “*1984*,” Aldous Huxley’s “*Brave New World*,” and Margaret Atwood’s “*The Handmaid’s Tale*.”

As already established, *1984* is a quintessential dystopian novel that offers a portrayal of a totalitarian regime and its impact on individual autonomy. Set in a future world where government surveillance is omnipresent and dissent is ruthlessly suppressed, the novel explores themes of power, control, and the erosion of truth.

6.4 Title of the Novel

The origin of the title remains shrouded in mystery. Robert McCrum notes in *The Guardian*, that critics have speculated that it may be a reference to the centenary of the Fabian Society in 1884, while others suggest connections to Jack London’s novel *The Iron Heel*, where a political movement rises to power in 1984, or to GK Chesterton’s story “The Napoleon of Notting Hill,” set in the same year. Despite the uncertainty surrounding the title’s origins, we know for sure that the initial title “The Last Man in Europe” was abandoned completely



as Orwell himself had reservations about it, and it was his publisher, Fred Warburg, who proposed the title *1984*.

6.5 Orwell and Neologism

1984 has had a profound impact on the English language, particularly through the introduction of new words and concepts. Orwell's creation of terms like "Big Brother," "thoughtcrime," "doublethink," "Newspeak," and "memory hole" has not only enriched the literary landscape but also become ingrained in popular culture and everyday discourse. Famous Orwell scholar John Atkins writes, "In Orwellian terms, *1984* means menace; it stands for the triumph of Totalitarianism—a useful word with which Orwell familiarized us, preferring it to either Communism or Fascism because it covered both." (Atkins, p. 34). Let's look at more of these neologisms from the text that serve as powerful tools for describing and critiquing oppressive political regimes, surveillance states, and the manipulation of language for control and propaganda. For example, "Big Brother" has come to symbolize government surveillance and intrusion into personal privacy, while "thoughtcrime" encapsulates the notion of punishing dissenting or unorthodox thoughts.

In the same vein, we also have the adjective "Orwellian," which describes oppressive, authoritarian, or totalitarian practices reminiscent of those depicted in the novel. The term "Orwellian" is often used to characterize government surveillance, censorship, propaganda, and the manipulation of language to control the thoughts and actions of citizens.

The enduring relevance of Orwell's work has led to the widespread use of "Orwellian" to critique real-world developments that echo the dystopian elements of *1984*. Whether applied to instances of mass surveillance, restrictions on freedom of speech, or attempts to rewrite history, the term serves as a warning against the erosion of civil liberties and the encroachment of state power.

Check Your Progress

- (i) Discuss Orwell's depiction of class divisions within Oceania in *1984*.
- (ii) What role does technology play in maintaining the Party's control over its citizens?
- (iii) Discuss George Orwell's *1984* contributions to the English language.

Let's sum it up!

In Part I of this Unit, we learned about how Indian-born author George Orwell travelled around the world learning about the intricacies of political structures during the imperialist period to translate them into seminal texts that can now be classified as Human Rights



Literature—a genre that delineates a commitment toward an equal and just society. We also closely analyzed the plot structure of the text.

In Part II, we discussed several themes that interweave through the text making it a seminal text in dystopian writings appeal. Moreover, we looked at each character and their role in the development of the text. Themes such as surveillance and control, language and totalitarianism were examined in detail with the use of examples from the text to help you form an informed interpretation of this text.

Your study of Parts I and II will provide you with a thorough understanding of the text that tells you a chilling tale of a totalitarian society ruled by oppression, surveillance, and the systematic erasure of individual freedom.

7. Suggested Readings

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Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Dr. Seema Suri

Structure

- 2.1 Learning Objectives
- 2.2 Harper Lee: Life and Work
- 2.3 The Historical Context
- 2.4 Study-Guide
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- 2.6 Characterization
- 2.7 The Themes of Race Relations and Human Rights
- 2.8 *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a Novel About Growing Up
- 2.9 Summing Up
- 2.10 Questions
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2.1 Learning Objectives

First published in 1960, Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* remains one of the most popular works of American fiction. Read the novel before going through this unit. The main objectives of the study material are to;

- ◆ Familiarize you with the author and her place in American literature;
- ◆ Provide a historical context to the novel;
- ◆ Draw your attention to Lee's narrative style; and
- ◆ Discuss the themes of race relations and human rights.

All references to the novel are to the following edition: Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. 1960 Penguin Random House, London, 1989.



2.2 Harper Lee: Life and Work

Harper Lee (1926-2016) is an American novelist whose world-wide fame rests, almost exclusively, on one novel, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). She was born in Monroeville, in the Southern state of Alabama. Her father Amasa Coleman Lee was a reputed lawyer and her mother, Frances Cunningham, a homemaker. Lee was the youngest of four siblings and attended the Monroe County High School, before proceeding to study law at the University of Alabama. However, she did not complete the course and shifted to New York City in 1949, where she worked as an airline reservation agent. She wrote in her spare time and, with encouragement and financial support from friends, quit her job to devote herself to writing.

Lee spent the next three years writing *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which was published in 1960. It was a phenomenal success, winning the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1961. However, Lee did not publish anything else for a long time, except a few essays. She lived the life of a recluse and evaded interviews and public appearances. There are accounts of her struggle with alcoholism and writer's block; and feelings of being overwhelmed by the success of her first novel. In 2007, President George Bush presented her with the highest civilian award, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In 2015, her second and last novel *Go Set a Watchman* was published, but it was not well received. Lee passed away the next year, in an assisted living facility in Alabama.

To Kill a Mockingbird is based on Lee's childhood in her home in Monroeville, between the years 1933-35. Most of the characters are based on Lee's family and neighbours. Her father is the inspiration for Atticus Finch; and Truman Capote (1924-84), the well-known American novelist, screenwriter, and actor, has been identified with the precocious Dill. The trial of Tom Robinson bears striking similarity to the well-known trial of the Scottsboro Boys: nine young Black men, who were accused of raping two white women in 1931. It was a long-drawn legal battle, often cited as an example of racial inequality and injustice. In another such incident in 1955, Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Black boy, was murdered in Mississippi, for allegedly flirting with a white woman. The woman's husband and brother-in-law, who killed him, were acquitted by the jury. All over the nation, the case highlighted the racial violence prevalent in the South.

In America, the novel has become something of an institution. In 1962, it was made into an Oscar winning film. More than seventy per cent of the schools in the US have it on their curricula and it has been translated into more than forty languages; selling millions of copies. Though Lee chose to keep away from the limelight, the courthouse in Monroeville is now a Mockingbird Museum, selling memorabilia like T-shirts and fridge magnets to the tourists.



2.3 The Historical Context

The first Black slaves were brought by Dutch traders to the British colony of Virginia in 1619. The white-owned plantations needed cheap labour and European and American slave traders transported millions of slaves from Africa to work there. Slavery began to flourish in the Southern states of Georgia, Maryland, South Carolina, and Missouri, among others. The American Revolution (1775-1783) ended British colonial rule and the United States was formed in 1776. However, in spite of the ratification of the Constitution of the U.S. in 1788, there was no end to the slave trade.

In 1807, President Thomas Jefferson signed a legislation that made it a federal crime to import or export slaves, but domestic trade continued. The cotton, sugar, tobacco, and indigo plantations in the south depended on the labour of slaves. The Fugitive Slave Act, passed in 1850, allowed runaway slaves to be captured and returned to their owners. It is estimated that, in 1860, there were around four million slaves in the Southern states. There was a growing fear in the South that their way of life was threatened by increasing demands for the abolition of slavery in the North.

In 1860, Abraham Lincoln, whose Republican party was openly anti-slavery, was made President. Within three months, the Southern states of Alabama, South Carolina, Mississippi, Texas, Florida, Georgia, and Louisiana seceded from the Union to form the Confederate States of America. They were joined by four other states. The American Civil War (1861-65) was fought between a sharply polarized nation: the culmination of decades of discord over the issue of slavery. The northern states wanted to abolish slavery, whereas the Confederate States wanted to form a separate nation that supported slavery. In 1863, Lincoln, who wanted the gradual abolition of slavery, issued the Emancipation Proclamation, and effectively freed four million African American slaves. Thousands of formerly enslaved people, who were now landless and jobless, migrated to the North, where conditions were better. The Confederate Army surrendered on 9 April, 1865, putting an end to the Civil War.

In 1864, the Thirteenth Amendment to the United State Constitution, abolished slavery but was ratified in 1865, after the end of the Civil War. The Fourteenth Amendment in 1865 granted citizenship to African Americans and the Fifteenth Amendment granted voting rights. However, these were largely ignored in the South. White supremacy returned with the Jim Crow laws – a series of discriminatory laws, passed by state legislatures between 1870-1960, that institutionalized racial segregation in schools, hospitals, waiting-rooms, restaurants, and public transport; and prohibited inter-racial marriages. Black people were denied voting rights, by imposing a poll tax and literacy test as mandatory requirements.



Race riots and lynchings were common and historians estimate that, between 1877-1950, around 3959 lynchings took place in the South alone. In the North, there was the emergence of a civil rights movement. The formation of organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909 and the National Urban League in 1910 gave impetus to the struggle of formerly enslaved Black people for equality and dignity. The Harlem Renaissance in New York City saw the emergence of race consciousness and pride in African heritage and identity.

Segregation in public schools was outlawed in 1954. After the Alabama bus boycott of 1955-6, led by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., segregation in public transport was declared unconstitutional in 1956. After a long and bitter struggle, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which forbade discrimination in voting, public accommodation and facilities ensured that the legislative goals had been met. From the 1970s onwards, affirmative action programs have attempted to remedy the effects of historical discrimination.

It is important to understand that the United States has a long and troubled history of race relations. The uncomfortable legacy of slavery is something that the U.S. is still grappling with, in subtler forms. A report by Human Rights Watch observes: “Structural racism and xenophobia persist as powerful and pervasive forces in American society” (2022). This attests to the relevance of the novel even today, with its simple tale about small town Alabama, observed through the eyes of a nine-year-old child. The novel is set during the Great Depression, when America saw a decline in industrial output, severe unemployment, and economic hardship.

Activity

To gain a better understanding of the topic discussed above, read the following:

1. U. S. Slavery: Timelines, Figures and Abolition <[history.com/topics/black-history/slavery](https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/slavery)>
2. American Civil War <<https://www.britannica.com/event/American-Civil-War>>

A Note on the Language

Over the years, in spite of its position as a classic of the twentieth-century, *To Kill a Mockingbird* has, time and again, been removed from the curricula of some schools and shelves of libraries because of the deemed unsuitability of its racist language for young children. However, it is important to remember that the author uses the N-word for historical realism.

The epithet ‘nigger,’ considered a racial slur, is used a number of times in the novel. Derived from the Latin word for black, ‘niger’ it was the term used by slave owners in



the South. Every dictionary describes this word as extremely insulting and racist. Though it is acceptable for a Black person to call himself/ herself a ‘nigger,’ others may not. During the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, the term Negro or African American was used; to signify pride in their heritage. Nowadays, the preferred term to refer to African Americans is Black, always spelt with a capital ‘B’ – to differentiate it from the colour black. However, it is to be used as an adjective, not as a noun. For instance, write ‘Black people,’ not ‘Blacks.’ Remember to always use this in place of ‘nigger,’ as language is the first step towards eradicating racial prejudice.

2.4 Study-Guide

This study-guide includes a summary, with critical insights and questions to check your understanding. A *Glossary* at the end of this unit explains most of the allusions in the novel.

PART I

Chapter 1

The narrator is Jean Louis Finch, nicknamed Scout. She is around six years old and lives with her elder brother Jem and lawyer father Atticus Finch in the small town of Maycomb in Alabama. Scout and Jem lost their mother when they were very young, and their Black helper, Calpurnia, looks after them. Scout, an adult now, looks back to the time when Jem, who is four years older than her, broke his arm.

Scout gives us a quick account of her family history. Their ancestor, Simon Finch came to Alabama from Cornwall in Britain to escape religious persecution. He settled at Finch’s Landing on the banks of the Alabama River and the family home is now inhabited by Scout’s Aunt Alexandra and her family. Scout’s father Atticus, preferred to settle in Maycomb and his younger brother Jack, a doctor, lives in Nashville. In Maycomb, the family leads a simple, quiet life:

People moved slowly then. They ambled across the square, shuffled in and out of the stores around it, took their time about everything. A day was twenty-four hours long but seemed longer. There was no hurry, for there was nowhere to go, nothing to buy and no money to buy it with, nothing to see outside the boundaries of Maycomb Country. (6)

Remember, it is the Depression era and money is sparse. During their summer vacation Scout and Jem meet Dill or Charles Baker Harris; the seven-year-old nephew of their neighbour Miss Rachel Haverford. Dill has come from Mississippi and impresses them with his knowledge of books and films. They immediately strike up a friendship



and spend most of their time in attempting to get a look at their neighbour Arthur Radley. Scout and Jem have never seen him and are intrigued and fascinated by him.

The Radley family has always been reclusive; not even going to Church or mingling with the neighbours. When he was eighteen years old, young Arthur Radley started to hang out with the wrong kind of gang and was imprisoned. After his father brought him home, he wasn't seen for another fifteen years; till the day his mother ran screaming out that he had stabbed his father in the leg, with a pair of scissors. After that the house remained shuttered up. Mr Nathan, the elder son came to live there after the father died and Mrs Radley could be seen sometimes, watering her cannas. There are wild rumours about Arthur Radley:

Inside the house lived a malevolent phantom. People said he existed, but Jem and I had never seen him. People said he went out at night when the moon was high, and peeped in windows. When people's azaleas froze in a cold snap, it was because he had breathed on them. Any stealthy crime committed in Maycomb was his work. (9)

Dill is especially intrigued and the children dare Jem to go touch the house, which he does. This chapter establishes the characters and setting of the novel. Note how, in a matter-of-fact tone, the acquisition of land by white settlers and the slave trade is mentioned; in Simon Finch's acquisition of "human chattels" (4). In keeping with the child's perspective, Scout is unaware of the historical significance.

In the small-town rural community of Maycomb, gossip plays an important role. Scout's neighbour Miss Stephanie Crawford is the children's source of information about Boo Radley.

Check Your Progress

- (i) What is the ancestral home of the Finch family called?
- (ii) Who is Dill? Why has he come to Maycomb?
- (iii) Write a few lines on Arthur Radley's home and family.
- (iv) How do Scout, Jem, and Dill spend their summer holidays?

Chapters 2-4

Dill returns home and Scout describes her first day at school. Miss Caroline, her class teacher, is not pleased to learn that Scout already knows how to read and write: she has learned to read by going through the newspapers and taught to write by Calpurnia. Most of the other children in her class are from cotton farming families and don't find Miss Caroline's stories



about talking cats amusing. At lunchtime, the teacher notices that Walter Cunningham has not brought lunch. Scout manages to irk her teacher again by trying to explain why Walter will not accept lunch money from her. Miss Caroline punishes her for her impertinence and outside, she takes out her anger on Walter by beginning to beat him up, but Jem stops her and invites Walter home for lunch. Atticus is cordial to him and Scout is scolded by Calpurnia, for drawing attention to Walter's eating habits and food preferences. Back in the classroom, there is another comic moment when it is discovered that Burris Ewell has lice in his hair. He is asked to go home and he announces his intention never to come back. Before leaving he calls Miss Caroline a slut, which makes her cry. Scout is not willing to go back to school, but Atticus makes a deal with her. He will allow her to continue reading if she doesn't talk about leaving school. He tells her that she shouldn't compare herself to Burris Ewell who belongs to a family that is "the disgrace of Maycomb" (33).

Scout's boredom is relieved when she finds some chewing gum in a knot-hole in the oak tree outside the Radley Place. A few days later, she and Jem find two old pennies in a shining box and decide to keep them. Soon, Dill arrives at his aunt's place to spend the summer. The three children spend a lot of their time enacting events from Arthur Radley's life: "a melancholy little drama woven from bits and scraps of gossip and neighbourhood legend" (44).

In these chapters, Lee mocks the educational system. Scout feels cheated and Jem mixes up the John Dewey's progressive system of education with "Dewey's Decimal System," meant for classifying library books. She thinks her father, who was home-schooled, has done well for himself.

Check Your Progress

- (i) Why is Miss Caroline upset with Scout?
- (ii) Who is Burris Ewell?
- (iii) Explain "Dewey Decimal System" and "Group Dynamics."
- (iv) What objects does Scout find in the oak tree outside the Radley Place?

Chapters 5-8

Miss Maudie Atkinson, who lives across the street, often talks to the children and they consider her their friend. Miss Maudie tells Scout that Arthur Radley's father was a "foot washing Baptist" who believed "anything that's pleasure is a sin" (49). There is a suggestion what Mr Radley's religious beliefs are, perhaps, responsible for his son's self-imposed isolation. But she is certain that he is not "crazy" (51).



This does not diminish Scout's curiosity and she joins Dill and Jem in their plan to give Arthur a friendly note, pushed through a broken shutter at his home. But they have to abandon the scheme halfway as Atticus walks in on them. He is annoyed and asks them to leave Arthur alone. It turns out that he is aware of the little dramas they have been enacting for their entertainment.

Undeterred, the children plan to sneak into the Radley Place at night and peep in through the windows. One night, they enter the back garden through the wire fence. Jem climbs the back porch and tries to peer in when the shadow of a man moves across and frightened, they all run back. At the same time, they hear a shotgun. In a state of panic, they crawl back under the fence, but Jem's pants get entangled and he leaves them behind after getting out of them. The sound of the gun has woken up the neighbourhood and there is a small crowd outside their home. People say Mr Nathan Radley has shot a "nigger." Suddenly, Miss Stephanie notices that Jem is not wearing his pants, but Dill covers up and says they were playing strip-poker.

Dill returns home and another school year begins. Jem confides in Scout that the night he went back to retrieve his pants, he found that they had been mended and neatly folded, as if by someone who knew he would come back for them. A few days later, they find some twine in the tree hole and then, on another day, two figures carved on soap – a boy and girl resembling them. Over the next few days, they find a package of chewing gum, a medal for a spelling contest and then, an expensive pocket watch. Jem and Scout leave a thank you note in the hole but the next day, they are dismayed to find the hole filled with cement. Mr Nathan Radley admits he did it to save the dying tree but Jem is upset. Scout sees tear marks on his face.

That winter Mrs Radley passes away and they are certain Boo Radley has killed her, but Atticus' reply that she died of natural causes, disappoints them. It snows for the first time since 1885. Excited, the two collect snow and build a snowman of sorts. The same night they are woken up by their father as Miss Maudie's house is on fire. Atticus asks them to go and stand outside the Radley Place and they watch as the neighbours come together to save her belongings and three fire trucks come to put out the fire. Back home Atticus notices that there is a blanket around Scout's shoulders. It seems that their neighbour, Arthur Radley, put it around her when she wasn't looking.

These chapters build on the mystery surrounding Arthur Radley. In spite of rumours about his ghostly appearance, the three children are consumed with curiosity and a desire to talk to him. Atticus' warnings and Miss Maudie Atkinson's dispelling of the rumour that he is crazy has no impact on their mischievousness. On the other hand, Arthur Radley leaves them little gifts.

**Check Your Progress**

- (i) Why do the children consider Miss Maudie their friend?
- (ii) What is written on the note that Jem tries to give to Arthur Radley?
- (iii) Which objects to Jem and Scout find in the knothole of the tree?
- (iv) Why does Atticus ask his children to leave Arthur alone?

Chapter 9

In school, Cecil Jacobs taunts Scout, saying that her father defends “niggers” and she beats him up (83). Atticus explains to her that she shouldn’t be using this word and Scout switches to “Negro.” She asks her father why he is defending Tom Robinson if people in town believe he shouldn’t:

‘For a number of reasons’, said Atticus. ‘The main one is, if I didn’t, I couldn’t hold up my head in town, I couldn’t represent this country in the legislative, I couldn’t even tell you or Jem not to something again. (83)

Scout is reminded of her father’s cousin, Ike Finch, a Confederate Army veteran. It is ironic that Atticus, coming from a family that fought the Yankees in the Civil War, is now defending a Black man.

On Christmas eve, their Uncle Jack comes to visit, bringing air rifles as gifts. As per custom, they all go for lunch to Finch’s Landing, where Aunt Alexandra lives. Scout doesn’t hide her dislike for her aunt, who constantly criticizes her for her attire. Her aunt’s eight-year-old grandson Francis is an unpleasant child, who makes fun of Dill and calls Atticus a “nigger lover.” Furious, Scout begins to punch him but is held back by her uncle Jack. Christmas is destroyed and they all return home. When her uncle comes to talk to her, she accuses him of being unfair and not listening to her side of the story. He is angry when he finds out why Scout punched Francis, but she tells him to let it go. Later, she overhears Atticus and Jack talk about the Tom Robinson case:

You know what’s going to happen as well as I do, Jack, and I hope and pray I can get Jem and Scout through it without bitterness, and most of all, without catching Maycomb’s usual disease. Why people go stark raving mad when anything involving a Negro comes up, is something I don’t pretend to understand . . .” (98)

Note how the narrative builds up the sense of impending trouble. The people in town have begun to talk of Atticus as a “nigger lover,” and the children feel confused. Cecil Jacobs and Francis are both beaten up by Scout for this reason. Atticus corrects Scout



and calls Tom Robinson a ‘Negro’; a more acceptable term at the time. However, he does not use the word ‘racist’, but the euphemistic “Maycomb’s usual disease,” to describe his neighbours.

Check Your Progress

- (i) Who is Francis? Why does Scout punch him?
- (ii) Who is Tom Robinson?
- (iii) Why is Atticus worried for his children?

Chapters 10-11

Scout and Jem think that their father is “feeble” as he is not interested in outdoor activities. As he married late, he is older than the other fathers, wears glasses, and spends most of his time reading (98). Miss Maudie tells Scout about Atticus’ younger days: how he was a brilliant checker player and could play a Jew’s harp, but she is not impressed. When Scout and Jem begin to learn how to shoot the air-rifles, Atticus tells Jem: “Shoot all the bluejays you want, if you can hit ‘em, but remember it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird” (99). Miss Maudie:

Mockingbirds don’t do one thing but make music for us to enjoy. They don’t eat up people’s gardens, don’t nest in corn cribs, they don’t do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That’s why it’s a sin to kill a mockingbird. (100)

The symbolism of the mockingbird is inescapable and it is not difficult to see that the harmless mockingbirds in the novel are Tom Robinson and Arthur Radley.

One day, Scout and Jem notice Tim Johnson, the dog that belongs to the Mobile bus driver, Harry Johnson, walking down the street in an erratic fashion. Calpurnia understands that the dog is rabid and sends them inside. All the neighbours are warned and Atticus arrives with the sheriff in his car. In a surprising sequence, Heck Tate passes his rifle to Atticus and, even as his glasses fall to the ground, he takes aim and shoots the dog dead. The children are amazed and Miss Maudie tells them how Atticus was “the deadeast shot in Maycomb County in his time” (108).

As Jem and Scout are walking to town to spend his birthday money, their neighbour Mrs Henry Lafayette Dubose calls out to them: “Your father’s no better than the niggers and trash he works for!” (113). She is always nasty and the children usually avoid her, but this time her words make Jem furious. On the way back, he snatches Scout’s new baton and chops off all the camellia buds in Mrs Dubose’s front yard, breaks her baton, and pulls her hair and kicks her when she screams. Atticus is angry and sends Jem to



talk to the old lady. He explains the importance of conducting oneself with dignity, even when things are bad. Jem returns to tell them that Mrs Dubose wants him to read to her for two hours every day, for a month, and help her grow her camellias: as reparation for destroying her garden. Scout accompanies her brother to Mrs Dubose's home, where she lives with her Black maid, Jessie. She is fascinated by the shrivelled old woman, lying in bed, with spittle drooling down her face. Jem reads from *Ivanhoe* and, most of the time, she seems to be asleep. Even in this state, Mrs Dubose doesn't desist from criticizing Atticus' "nigger-loving propensities" (120). But Jem has started to look at her with "polite and detached interest" (122). Scout asks her father what it means and he says,

'nigger-lover' is hard to explain – ignorant, trashy people use it when they think somebody's favouring Negroes over and above themselves. It's slipped into usage with some people like ourselves, when they want a common, ugly term to label somebody. (120)

Scout thinks her father is the bravest man, for always being polite to Mrs Dubose, who is nasty to everyone. Soon their reading sessions are over and, a month later, they learn that Mrs Dubose is dead. Atticus tells them that the old lady was very sick and, in her dying days, had been trying to fight a morphine addiction. Jem's reading provided the much-needed distraction. She has left a box for Jem and, inside, there is a perfect camellia. For some reason, Jem is upset and Atticus tells him: "I wanted you to see what real courage is, instead of getting the idea that courage is a man with a gun in his hand" (124).

Check Your Progress

- (i) Why does Atticus ask his children never to shoot a mockingbird?
- (ii) Who is Tim Johnson? Why is he shot dead?
- (iii) What does Miss Maudie tell Scout about Atticus?
- (iv) Why does Jem chop off all the camellia flowers in Mrs Dubose's yard?
- (v) What lesson does Atticus want Jem to learn from Mrs Dubose?

PART TWO

Chapter 12

Scout notices that Jem has begun to keep to himself. Dill also writes to say that he won't be coming to Maycomb for the summer as he has a new father and they are going to build a boat together. Atticus is away on work and they are left in Calpurnia's care. On Sunday, she takes them with her to the Black church in Maycomb. She takes great care to clean them up and dress them in their best clothes. The church is an old frame building



in the locality known as the Quarters, outside the town. Scout observes the very different cemetery for the Blacks: it is “a happy cemetery,” with broken Coca-Cola bottles lining some of the graves (130). She is unacquainted with racial segregation laws, that insisted on separate places of worship. They are treated with great courtesy by everyone, except Lula, a Black woman who is not happy with white children in their church. Scout notices that there are no hymn books and the congregation sings along with Zeebo, Calpurnia’s son. Reverend Sykes starts a collection for Helen, Tom Robinson’s wife. She is amused by the manner in which he almost browbeats people to part with their money. She wonders why no one wants to hire Tom’s wife and Calpurnia tells her it is because Mr Bob Ewell has accused Tom of raping his daughter. Note that this is the first time in the novel that Tom’s crime is mentioned.

The children want to know how Calpurnia learnt to read and write and she tells them that it was her former employer – Miss Buford, who taught her and she, in turn, taught her son Zeebo. Scout wants to know more about Calpurnia and her world and expresses a desire to visit her home. As they approach their home, they see their Aunt Alexandra on the porch.

For the only time in the novel, we get a glimpse into the lives of the Black community. They worship in a separate church, “First Purchase African M.E. Church,” and have a separate graveyard (130). Most of them cannot read and Calpurnia and her son Zeebo are exceptions. Scout and Jem observe the different manner of singing hymns, known as ‘hymn lining,’ which is an African American tradition, having origins in slavery. To Scout’s surprise, Reverend Sykes calls out people by name, to remind them of their transgressions. As you might have noticed, the Black characters in the novel work at menial jobs: Calpurnia is a domestic help, Tom Robinson works on a farm and Zeebo is a garbage collector. Scout’s descriptions unwittingly point to the discrimination and segregation faced by the community, which comprises formerly enslaved people.

Check Your Progress

- (i) Describe the graveyard next to the Black church?
- (ii) Why don’t the people in Calpurnia’s church use hymn books?
- (iii) Why does Helen Robinson need money?
- (iv) Comment on the significance of the name of the Black church?

Chapters 13-14

Jem and Scout are not too pleased to have Aunt Alexandra, who says they need a “feminine influence” (140). She soon settles down and mingles with the neighbours, all of whom she seems to know well and has her Missionary Society meetings at their home.



Scout provides an amusing account of how Maycomb came to be the centre of governance in the county. One Sinkfield, owner of a tavern, convinced the surveyors sent by the governor that Maycomb was at the centre of the county, by getting them drunk. The town is set in its ways and Aunt Alexandra fits in. However, the children are not comfortable around her. Prodded by his sister, Atticus tries to instil pride in family in his children, but flounders miserably.

Overhearing some people in town talking about the Tom Robinson case, Scout asks Atticus what ‘rape’ is. Her aunt is shocked but Atticus explains it to her in a gentle manner. Aunt Alexandra disapproves of the way her brother is bringing up his children and wants him to dismiss Calpurnia, but he refuses. He appreciates the way she has looked after his children, almost like a mother.

In her room, Scout steps on a living creature in the dark. Afraid that it’s a snake, she calls out to Jem but it turns out to be Dill. He has been hiding under the bed for a long time and weaves an elaborate yarn about being held captive in the basement of his home, tied up in chains, and eventually running away to join a circus, before landing up in Maycomb. The truth is that his parents were not paying attention to him, so he took some money from his mother’s purse and travelled alone to Maycomb. Dill’s aunt is informed and he is allowed to stay with them for the night. He entertains Scout with stories about babies.

Check Your Progress

- (i) Why has Aunt Alexandra come to stay with them?
- (ii) Why doesn’t Atticus want to let Calpurnia go?
- (iii) Why has Dill run away from his home?
- (iv) Write a few lines on Aunt Alexandra’s notions of womanhood?

Chapters 15-16

One night a group of men call on Atticus and he goes out of the house to talk to them. The children stand at the window to listen and Jem is anxious for his father’s safety. It seems that the townspeople are worried that if Tom Robinson is kept in the Maycomb jail over the weekend, there could be trouble, but Atticus convinces them otherwise. The men fear trouble from the “Old Sarum bunch” (160). Back inside, Atticus dispels Jem’s fears of an attack by something like the Ku Klux Klan; saying that the organization is not active anymore.

Aunt Alexandra is convinced that her brother is disgracing the family name. They overhear Atticus talk to his sister: “in favour of Southern womanhood as much as anybody,



but not for preserving polite fiction at the expense of human life” (162). On Sunday, they are surprised to see the sheriff, Mr Heck Tate and the editor of their local newspaper, Mr Underwood in the church. It is apparent that they are there to protect Atticus, as they never go to church.

Later that evening, they see their father leave for his office, with a bulb and extension cord in his hand. Intrigued, they go to his office a little while later but see that he is sitting outside the county jail which has only two cells; reading from the light of the bulb. It is clear that he is guarding Tom Robinson, who is inside. As they watch from a distance, a few cars drive up and some men soon surround Atticus – threatening and hostile: “You know what we want . . .” (167). At this point, Scout, followed by Jem and Dill, runs to her father. Atticus orders Jem to take the younger children home but he stays put. One farmer pushes Jem and Scout kicks him. She recognizes Walter Cunningham’s father in the crowd and starts chatting with him. This seems to dispel the tension and the men go away. A moment later, Mr Underwood calls out from his office window next door, a double-barrelled gun in his hand. It seems he had Atticus covered all the time.

The next morning Atticus tells the children that Mr Underwood’s first name is Braxton Braggs – after a Confederate Army general and that he hated Negroes. But he came to his help that night. He takes a rather benign view of the mob that came to lynch Tom Robinson; convinced that “Mr Cunningham is basically a good man” (173).

On Monday morning, they watch the whole county pass their front porch, on their way to court to watch the trial of Tom Robinson. Note how the religious zealots in the crowd ridicule Miss Maudie’s yard “ablaze with summer flowers” (175). When the children reach the court house, it is like a carnival outside. People have brought food and are picnicking; with the Black people sitting in a separate part of the ground. They notice one white man amongst them. It is Mr Dolphus Raymond, who has a coloured wife and mixed children. He is drinking out of a bottle, covered by a paper bag.

The white people go in first, followed by the coloured people. As they are looking for a place to sit, Scout overhears some old men say that “the court appointed him [Atticus] to defend this nigger” and they object to the fact that Atticus intends to defend him:

This was news, news that put a different light on things. Atticus had to, whether he wanted to or not. I thought it odd that he hadn’t said anything to us about it – we could have used it many times in defending him and ourselves. (180)

In the crowded courthouse, Reverend Sykes who takes the children up to the Coloured balcony, where four seats are vacated for them. From there they can see their father, Tom



Robinson and Judge Taylor – a deceptively laid-back man, with formidable knowledge of the law.

Check Your Progress

- (i) Why is Jem worried for Atticus' safety?
- (ii) Why does the mob leave, without harming Tom?
- (iii) Who is Dolphus Raymond?
- (iv) Describe the scene outside the courthouse?

Chapters 17-18

In the court, Mr Heck Tate, the sheriff is the first to give his testimony. He tells the court how, on 21 November, the previous year Mr Ewell came to his office in an agitated state; asking him to come home as a “nigger” had raped his daughter, Mayella. At the Ewell's home, he found her badly beaten up and when she confirmed that Tom Robinson had raped her, he arrested him. During cross-examination, the sheriff admits that he did not call any doctor to examine Mayella Ewell. He also confirms that it was her right eye that had turned black.

Bob Ewell, full name Robert E. Lee Ewell, comes next. Note that he is named after the Confederate Army General. Scout recalls the Ewell home: a filthy cabin with a yard full of junk. It belonged to a Negro and is located near the garbage dump. Mr Ewell doesn't have a job and hunts animals to feed his children, who don't go to school in spite of the state's efforts. You will recall Burris Ewell who came to school on the first day. Ewell tells everyone how he returned home one evening and heard his daughter's screams. When he looked in through the window, he saw Tom raping his daughter, but Tom managed to run away before he could catch him. At this point, Reverend Sykes asks Jem to take Scout home, but Jem assures him that she is too young to understand anything.

On cross-examination, Atticus asks Bob Ewell the same question he asked the sheriff: why wasn't a doctor called to examine Mayella? Ewell says he couldn't afford one. Again, Atticus confirms that it was Mayella's right eye that was blackened. He then asks Bob to sign his name on the back of an envelope, which he does with his left hand. Even Scout understands that Atticus is trying to demonstrate that Bob Ewell could easily have caused the injuries to Mayella's face.

When it is Mayella's turn to testify, she begins to cry – saying she's afraid of Atticus. After Judge Taylor reassures her, she tells the court that she had seen Tom Robinson pass



by her cabin and called him to chop up on old chifferobe in the yard. She alleges that when she went in to the cabin to get the money to pay him, he caught her from behind, beat her up and raped her. When Atticus cross examines her, he begins by asking her questions about her home and life. It turns out that she is only nineteen years old, but burdened with caring for her younger siblings. Her father goes away for many days and she has no friends. She becomes defensive when Atticus addresses her as ‘Miss Mayella’ or ‘Ma’m.’ He asks Mayella to identify the man who raped her and she points at Tom. As Tom stands up, everyone is shocked to see that his left arm is crippled. Reverend Sykes tells the children that it got crushed while he was working a cotton gin. She gets confused and starts giving contradictory answers. When Atticus pointedly asks her if it was her father who hit her, she starts crying, calling all of them “yellow stinkin’ cowards” (207). The court takes a ten-minute recess and Scout and Dill watch Judge Taylor play with the cigar in his mouth.

Now it is Tom’s turn to testify. He is twenty-five years old, has three children and works picking cotton in Mr Link Deas’ fields. He tells the court how he had to pass the Ewell’s cabin on his way to work and Mayella would often call him to help her chop up old things. He never accepted money for his labour, as he knew she was poor and he felt sorry for her. On the day of the alleged rape, Mayella called him in to look at the door hinges and help her take something off a chiffarobe. As he was standing on the chair, she grabbed him around his legs and when he fell off the chair, she kissed his face:

“She says she never kissed a grown man before an’s she might as well kiss a nigger. She says what her papa do to her don’t count.” (214)

He then saw Mr Ewell looking in through the window and calling Mayella a “whore” (215). Scared for his life, he ran. As he tells Atticus, “Mr Finch, if you was a nigger like me, you’d be scared too” (215). The insinuation of incest is unmistakable, but not commented upon; as if it is an unsurprising characteristic of the Ewells.

At this juncture, Mr Link Deas stands up to say that Tom is a good worker and never gave him any trouble, but Judge Taylor asks him to leave the court. When it’s Mr Gilmore’s turn to cross-examine Tom Robinson, he is insulting. Mark the sarcasm when he asks Tom: “*You* felt sorry for *her*, you felt *sorry* for her?”; Implying that he is surprised that Tom, a Negro, had the impertinence to feel sorry for Mayella, a white woman (218). To all of Mr Gilmore’s barbs, Tom replies that Mayella is “mistaken in her mind” (218). Suddenly Dill starts crying and Scout takes him out. He says he felt sick watching Mr Gilmore treat Tom so badly, but Scout tells him: “Well Dill, after all, he’s just a Negro” (220). She has not fully comprehended the racism at play here.

**Check Your Progress**

- (i) Comment on the significance of Bob Ewell's full name?
- (ii) Why does Atticus ask Bob Ewell to sign on an envelope?
- (iii) Why did Tom Robinson help Mayella Ewell with her chores?
- (iv) Why did Tom run away on seeing Bob Ewell?
- (v) Why does Dill start crying?

Chapters 20-21

Dolphus Raymond, who is sitting outside, offers Dill a drink from his bottle. Scout is convinced its whisky, but Dill tells her its Coca-Cola. Mr Raymond tells them he only pretends to drink whisky so that the people of Maycomb have an explanation for, what they think, is his abnormal behaviour: he prefers to live among the Negroes and has a coloured wife. Like Atticus, he is disturbed by the hatred around him and says that only children can cry about “the hell white people give coloured folks, without even stopping to think that they’re people, too” (222).

Dill and Scout go back inside, just in time to catch Atticus’ speech to the jury. Read it carefully and mark how Atticus goes beyond facts, to present a compassionate perspective on Mayella:

She has committed no crime, she has merely broken a rigid and time-honoured code of our society, a code so severe that whoever breaks it is hounded from our midst as unfit to live with. (224)

At the same time, he points out how Mayella and her father tried to cover up for her crime by accusing Tom: confident that the jury would “go along with them on the assumption – the evil assumption – that *all* Negroes lie, that *all* Negroes are basically immoral beings” (225). He reminds the jury that the courts of America are “the great levellers, and in our courts all men are created equal” (227). He ends his speech with a heartfelt appeal to the jury to do the right thing.

Suddenly they see Calpurnia walking towards Atticus, with a note from their Aunt Alexandra, who is worried sick about them. Mr Underwood tells Atticus that his children have been sitting in the coloured balcony all afternoon. The children are sent home, but not before Jem gets permission from his father to return, as he wants to hear the jury’s verdict. At supper, their Aunt Alexandra is sullen. Back in the courthouse, they have to wait for a long time before the jury returns. The verdict is guilty and Atticus picks up his



papers, whispers something to Tom and walks out. As he is walking out, all the people in the coloured balcony stand up.

Check Your Progress

- (i) What does Dolphus Raymond tell Scout and Dill about himself?
- (ii) Which code has Mayella Ewell broken?
- (iii) Summarize the main points of Atticus' speech to the jury.
- (iv) Why, in your opinion, do the people in the coloured balcony stand up when Atticus walks out?

Chapters 22-23

On the way home it is Jem who weeps. Throughout the trial, he was optimistic, but he is saddened by the injustice and questions his father:

‘How could they do it, how could they?’

‘I don’t know, but they did it. They’ve done it before and they did it to-night and they’ll do it again and when they do it – seems that only children weep.’ (235)

The next morning Calpurnia finds huge quantities of food on their back steps, left by the grateful Black community of Maycomb. Miss Maudie calls them over and helps Jem look at things from a less gloomy perspective; saying that they have started taking “baby steps” in the right direction (238). As they are returning home Miss Stephanie Crawford tells them that, outside the post office, she saw Bob Ewell spit on Atticus’ face and threaten to kill him. However, Atticus dismisses the incident, saying that Bob Ewell simply needed to get the loss of his credibility in court out of his system.

Atticus is confident that Tom Robinson stands a good chance of getting his case reviewed by a higher court. Jem is indignant that a jury allowed to decide or establish the guilt of the accused, especially because, in Alabama, rape is a capital offence. Atticus explains that it is impossible for a jury to be impartial, as it comprises men who “carry their resentments right into a jury box” (245). He takes comfort in the fact that the jury took so long to arrive at a verdict, implying that there must have been a debate: the “shadow of a beginning” (245). He hints that, most probably, it was Mr Cunningham who was in favour of an acquittal. It is the same Cunningham who was part of the mob that came to lynch Tom Robinson in jail. Scout declares that she wants to call his son Walter over to her house to play, but Aunt Alexandra forbids it. She is upset, but Jem explains that their aunt is only trying to make a lady out of her. They wonder why people are mean



to each other and Jem, with a sudden sense of realization, says that he now understands why Boo Radley doesn't want to come out of his house.

Check Your Progress

- (i) Why does Jem weep on the way home?
- (ii) Why have members of the Black community left food at the Finch home?
- (iii) Why is Jem upset with the system of juries?
- (iv) Why is Atticus hopeful even after losing the case?

Chapters 24-25

Aunt Alexandra's Missionary Society is invited for tea, and so are the ladies in the neighbourhood. Scout wears a frock and helps Calpurnia serve. She listens to the ladies lament over the poor living conditions of the Mruna tribe in Africa, while talking dismissively about their own Black helpers; calling them "sulky darky" (256). Helen Robinson is referred to as "That darky's wife" (255). The ladies criticize North Americans for being hypocritical, with all their talk about equality. Listening to Mrs Merriweather ridicule the President's wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, for defying segregation laws in Birmingham, Scout wishes she could become Governor of Alabama for a day and set Tom free. She has heard Calpurnia talk of how he lost hope the day he went to prison.

Atticus arrives home early and calls Calpurnia out. He wants her to accompany him to Helen Robinson's house, to inform her that Tom has been shot dead while trying to escape from Enfield Prison Farm. He was shot seventeen times while trying to jump over the fence. Aunt Alexandra is worried for Atticus' health, but Miss Maudie speaks up for him. The ladies compose themselves and return to attend to their guests. Watching them behave as if nothing has happened, Scout follows their example.

Later, Scout hears an account of what happened at Helen's home. Jem and Dill had gone swimming and, on the way back met Calpurnia and Atticus, who gave them a lift. Dill describes how Helen crumbled on hearing the news of Tom's death. For the rest of the town, Tom's death is just another opportunity to dismiss the Negroes: "Typical of a nigger's mentality to have no plan, no thought for the future, just run blind first chance he saw" (265).

Mr B. B. Underwood is the only resident of the town, who expresses his bitterness in an editorial in his paper, the *Maycomb Tribune*, in which he "likened Tom's death to the senseless slaughter of songbirds by hunters and children" and it takes a minute for



Scout to understand what he means (265). Miss Stephanie Crawford informs the children that Bob Ewell has been going around town threatening to get rid of Atticus.

In these chapters, there is a scathing attack on racial prejudice. Scout unwittingly lays bare the hypocrisy of people like Mrs Merriweather and her missionary circle, who are oblivious to the sufferings of the Black people. President Roosevelt's wife Eleanor Roosevelt was a proponent of racial equality and, in 1938, she broke segregation laws, by sitting next to Black members of the audience, at a conference in Birmingham, Alabama. It is interesting to note that the trial of Tom takes place is said to take place in 1935. This historical anomaly can be excused in light of Lee's intention to satirize the people of Maycomb.

Check Your Progress

- (i) Why are the ladies gathered at Scout's home?
- (ii) Why does Atticus ask Calpurnia to accompany him to Helen Robinson's home?
- (iii) What does Mr B. B. Underwood write in his editorial?
- (iv) What does Scout learn about Tom's state in prison?

Chapters 26-27

Another school year resumes and so does Scout's fascination with Boo Radley. Atticus discourages her, reminding his children that Nathan Radley shoots at shadows. It turns out that Atticus is fully aware of the night they sneaked in through the back garden of the Radley Place to get a look at Arthur.

There is a hilarious sequence in Scout's Current Events class, which is meant to help the children learn 'Group Dynamics.' Without access to newspapers, the children from rural farming families are clueless about their presentations. Little Chuck Little discusses an advertisement for fertilizer as a current event, and Cecil Jacobs confuses 'brain washing' with 'washing' while talking of Adolf Hitler's persecution of Jews. Scout is asked to define 'democracy' and Miss Gates elaborates: "Over here we don't believe in persecuting anybody. Persecution comes from people who are prejudiced" (270). Scout is puzzled by her words because, as she tells Jem, outside the court-house, she heard Miss Gates talking to Miss Stephanie Crawford about Negroes:

'I heard her say it's time somebody taught 'em a lesson, they were getting' way above themselves, an' the next thing they think they can do is marry us. Jem how can you hate Hitler so bad an' then turn around and be ugly about folks right at home - ?' (272)



She is taken aback when Jem, instead of answering her question, asks her never to talk about the court-house again. Later, Atticus tells her that Jem is still processing all that happened and he needs time to come to terms with it.

There are some events in the town that point to Bob Ewell's brewing resentment. He gets a job with the WPA but loses it within days, and blames Atticus for it. Next, a trespasser makes an unsuccessful attempt to break into Judge Taylor's home, and everyone thinks it's Ewell. Tom's former employer, Mr Link Deas gives his widow Helen a job. However, Bob Ewell starts following her, muttering threateningly, and she is forced to take a longer route to work, to avoid him. Mr Link Deas notices this, threatens Bob Ewell with the "Ladies' Law" and puts an end to it (275). Atticus is not worried by any of these developments. He thinks that Bob Ewell must be disappointed that he was not treated like a hero by the people of Maycomb.

It is October and Scout's school organizes a pageant for Halloween, to be presided over by Mrs Grace Merriweather. Scout gets the part of a ham and the local seamstress makes her a costume out of chicken wire and brown fabric.

In this chapter, Lee ridicules the ideas of progressive education. The children are from poor farming communities and the school's attempt to teach them Group Dynamics has disastrous consequences. Like Scout's first grade teacher, Miss Caroline, Miss Gates uses teaching methods that are disconnected from their lives. There is harsh irony in the hypocrisy of the teacher, who teaches equality in class, but berates Negroes outside.

Check Your Progress

- (i) Comment on the presentations in the Current Events class?
- (ii) Why is Scout puzzled with Miss Gate's observations on Adolf Hitler?
- (iii) Why does Mr Link Deas threaten Bob Ewell with the "Ladies' Law"?
- (iv) Why is Jem angry with Scout?

Chapters 28-29

On Halloween night, Jem and Scout walk through the darkness to their school. As they are crossing the school yard, Cecil Jacobs jumps on them and frightens them. Scout and Cecil go to spend their money at the various stalls in the auditorium, while Jem hangs around with his friends.

While waiting backstage, Scout can hear Mrs Merriweather's presentation about the history of Maycomb County. She dozes off and misses her cue and when she rushes out at the very moment Mrs Merriweather is mounting the stage with the state flag, everyone



laughs. Embarrassed, she wants to wait till the others have gone home. Still in her ham costume, she walks through the dark school-yard with Jem holding the top of her head to guide her. They can hear someone following them and the sound of heavy breathing. They think it's Cecil Jacobs, playing a prank, and call out to him. Suddenly someone runs towards them, and Jem shouts at Scout to run, but she falls. He helps her up, but she feels he has been pushed back and hears a crunching sound. As she rushes towards the attacker, someone tries to crush her, but is flung to the ground. She can hear the sounds of a scuffle and something being dragged across the ground. Searching for Jem on the ground, she feels a man's stubble. She makes her way to the road, where there are street lights and sees a man carrying Jem in his arms and walking towards their home.

Atticus calls Dr. Reynolds and then informs the sheriff, Mr Heck Tate. Dr. Reynolds tells them that Jem's arm/elbow is broken, but he should be alright in a few weeks. Mr Heck Tate returns to inform them that, at the place where Jem and Scout were attacked, he found a pink dress, some pieces of brown fabric, and the body of Bob Ewell, with a knife under his ribs.

Scout tells Mr Heck Tate about the night's events. Atticus brings her crushed ham costume and they all see knife marks on the chicken wire. It becomes clear that Bob Ewell had come with the intent to kill. When Scout and Jem were shouting in the dark at Cecil Jacobs, calling him "a big fat hen," someone must have heard them (295). As she is telling them about how a man came to their help, she notices him standing quietly in the corner, with pale, white hands "that had never seen the sun" and, with a child's infallible intuition, she realizes it is their neighbour and calls out to him: "Hey, Boo" (298).

Check Your Progress

- (i) How do Scout and Jem know that someone is following them?
- (ii) What does Scout see through the holes in her costume?
- (iii) What does Mr Heck Tate find at the place where the children were attacked?
- (iv) How does Scout recognize Boo Radley?

Chapters 30-31

Atticus gently corrects Scout: "Mr Arthur, honey" (298). Dr. Reynolds sends them out of Jem's room and in the porch, she sits next to Arthur. He sits quietly as Atticus and Heck Tate argue. Convinced that Jem must have somehow got hold of Bob Ewell's knife and stabbed him in self-defense, Atticus wants to inform the authorities. Mr Heck Tate, on his part, is adamant that Bob Ewell fell on his own knife and that it was impossible for



Jem, with his broken elbow, to have stabbed him. Though Arthur Radley is never named, it is clear that it is Arthur who must have stabbed Ewell. Heck Tate is upset with Atticus for not realizing what happened and defends Arthur: “I never heard tell that it’s against the law for a citizen to do his utmost to prevent a crime from being committed, which is exactly what he did” (304). Heck Tate asserts his authority and tells Atticus that, as far as he is concerned, Bob Ewell fell on his knife. He doesn’t want Arthur Radley to be exposed to all the attention that would come his way, if the people of Maycomb found out the truth.

Atticus thanks Arthur and goes in. Scout senses that Boo wants to see Jem and takes him inside. He touches Jem’s head, as if to bless him, and indicates that he wants to go home. Scout, careful of his dignity, guides him on how to hold her arm and accompanies him. After he goes in, she imagines how he must have watched them through the shutters, as they played or passed his house on their way to school, almost like a loving father would: calling Jem and herself “Boo’s children” (308).

Check Your Progress

- (i) Why does Atticus want to inform the authorities about Jem?
- (ii) Why does Heck Tate insist that Bob Ewell fell on his own knife?
- (iii) Why does Heck Tate want to keep Arthur Radley away from the town’s attention?
- (iv) What does Scout feel for Arthur Radley in the end?

2.5 Narrative Style

The novel is narrated in the first person by the six-year-old Scout. She covers events in her home-town, Maycomb, in the years from 1933-5. The language is simple and the author has made liberal use of the Southern vernacular: words like ‘yonder’, ‘Nome’, ‘folks’ and ‘dunno’ to establish regional identity. Language is a marker of class as well as race. The Ewells – both Bob and Mayella – speak differently and, as Scout observes, so do the Black people in Calpurnia’s church.

Scout’s feelings are communicated to the reader, in an intimate, conversational manner. Her discomfort at Aunt Alexandria’s presence or dislike for Mrs Dubose is shared, with no attempt to hide it. She confides how she misses Dill, when he returns home to Meridian.

For most of the narrative, the child’s perspective is maintained, observing and noting all that is happening around her, without any intervention. In passages where Scout talks



about what happened in her class on the first day of school or her conversations with Dill, the innocence is endearing:

‘ – Scout, let’s get us a baby.’

‘Where?’

There was a man Dill had heard of who had a boat that he rowed across to a foggy island where all these babies were; you could order one –

‘That’s a lie. Auntie said God drops ‘em down the chimney. At least that’s what I think she said.’ (158)

However, a close reading of the novel reveals that the child’s point of view is not uniform. Many times, the tone and diction changes to that of the mature adult, who has the necessary empathy and ability to evaluate human character. Observing Mayella Ewell in court, Scout is struck by her loneliness:

As Tom Robinson gave his testimony, it came to me that Mayella Ewell must have been the loneliest person in the world . . . When Atticus asked had she any friends, she seemed not to know what he meant, then she thought he was making fun of her. She was as sad, I thought, as what Jem called a mixed child: white people wouldn’t have anything to do with her because she lived among pigs. Negroes wouldn’t have anything to do with her because she was white. (211-12)

In spite of the uneven tone of the narrative, it is the child’s perspective that dominates. Scout’s gaze on the denizens of Maycomb is without prejudice or bias. When she is sitting with the ladies of the missionary society, she notices how Mrs Merriweather’s “large brown eyes always filled with tears when she considered the oppressed” and a few moments later, how she proceeds to call her Black helper a “sulky darky” (254, 256). The child’s innocence becomes the vehicle for satire. The glaring hypocrisy of the ladies who are concerned about the distant Mruna tribes, but don’t shed a tear for the Black people at home is laid bare. In addition to Scout, Dill and Jem are both moved by the hatred on display in the court. Dill cries when Mr Gilmore treats Tom Robinson with contempt, calling him ‘boy’, and Jem weeps when Tom is declared guilty.

In her innocence, Scout too, sometimes, speaks the language of prejudice. When Dill cries at the treatment meted out to Tom, she says: “Well, Dill, after all he’s just a Negro” (220). When the children don’t have enough snow to build a snowman, Jem uses dirt and Scout laughs, “I ain’t heard of a nigger snowman” (73).



In addition to the child's point of view, Lee uses symbols to get her message across; with the mockingbird emerging as the most important one. It is a symbol of innocence and, as the title of the novel indicates, it is a sin to harm the innocent and vulnerable members of society, such as Tom Robinson and Arthur Radley. It is not surprising that 'Finch,' the family surname, is the name for another little songbird found in the south. There is a close affinity between the two species.

Flowers appear at a number of places in the novel, adding another dimension to the narrative. Miss Maudie Atkinson's yard is distinguished by the fragrant mimosas and the bright red azaleas. The sight of her yard "ablaze with summer flowers," invites the scorn of zealots passing by (175). Note that the only time Mrs Radley is seen outside her shuttered-up house is when she comes out to water her cannas. Even the acid-tongued Mrs Dubose, maintains a yard full of camellia bushes. However, the most surprising character to tend to her flowers in her yard, is Mayella Ewell: "Against the fence, in a line, were six chipped-enamel slop jars holding brilliant red geraniums" (198). Her flowers symbolize the desire for beauty and love in her, otherwise, squalid life. Flowers radiate positivity and articulate the women's attempts to hold on to something beautiful; amidst isolation, physical suffering, and loneliness.

2.6 Characterization

In one of her rare interviews in 1964, Harper Lee talks at length about a fast-disappearing way of life in the South, where neighbours sit on porches and gossip on the street, bake cakes for each other, and children play with old tyres. In the absence of other sources of entertainment, it was a society which was "geared to talk," and it was Lee's aim to become "a chronicler of small-town middle-class life"; the "Jane Austen of Alabama" (WQXR 5:07-10:11). Lee has successfully captured the essence of Monroeville, her home town in Alabama. So popular were the characters in her novel that her father, on whom the character of Atticus Finch is based, began to sign his name as 'Atticus Finch' in autographs. The novel has a strong autobiographical element and Lee's observations of her family and friends helped her imagine the characters – with all their eccentricities and quirks: Miss Maudie, with her blooming garden, the caustic Mrs Dubose, or the incurable gossip Miss Stephanie Crawford. Even Scout's little friend Dill, inspired by her childhood friend Truman Capote, is lovingly etched. He is intensely imaginative and can cook up a story in seconds. Scout calls him her fiancé and they write letters to each other. Whereas most of Scout's family and neighbours are sufficiently individualized, the same cannot be said about the Black characters; such as Calpurnia, her son Zeebo, Tom Robinson and his family or Reverend Sykes.



Calpurnia is inadequately sketched and seems to conform to the stereotype of the faithful, self-effacing servant. Her relationship with Zeebo, the garbage collector of the town, is only mentioned in passing and even Tom Robinson is depicted as a “quiet, respectable, humble Negro” (225). The other Black characters, with the exception of Lula in the church, are deferential to white people and portrayed as dependent on them for their welfare. They are physically removed from the town, living outside its limits in what are known as the Quarters. Scout is curious about how Calpurnia lives and would like to visit her home, but her Aunt Alexandra forbids it. There are some markers of cultural differences, as when Scout notices the graves in the Black cemetery, decorated with broken Coca-Cola bottles or the “bittersweet smell of clean Negro” in the church (131). Once when she accompanies her father to dump old Christmas trees, she notices the deliciously different smell of food from the Quarters (188). Though Tom is a significant character in the plot, he appears only in the court scenes and his voice is heard once, from inside the jail, when Atticus is guarding him outside. Recently, some schools in the state of Washington have removed *To Kill a Mockingbird* from its reading lists, for its inadequate depiction of Black voices; questioning its position as a classic.

If the Black community is one-dimensional, the Ewells are no better. Right from the outset, the Ewell clan is dismissed as the “disgrace of Maycomb County” (33). Atticus tells his daughter that the Ewells are never going to change the way they live; they are beyond redemption: “it’s silly to force people like the Ewells into a new environment – “ (34). There is a clear link established between poverty and moral depravity. Mayella Ewell’s desolation and deprivation is somehow held responsible for her inability to comprehend the magnitude of her crime: accusing an innocent Black man of rape (224). Even the mention of incest in court doesn’t elicit a reaction, as if it is endemic to people of their class.

The notion that education or the lack of it is what determines a person’s class and character, runs like a refrain through the novel. Though he comes from a land-owning family, Atticus breaks with family tradition to study law and his brother Jack is sent to study medicine in Boston. As Jem tells Scout: “‘Background doesn’t mean Old Family,’ said Jem, ‘I think its how long your family’s been readin’ and writin’” (250). Calpurnia is viewed with respect by Jem and Scout when they learn that she has taught her son Zeebo to read and write.

In Maycomb, the Ewells are placed even lower than the Negroes. They occupy a former Negro cabin, surviving on white people’s charity – who look the other way when Bob Ewell breaks the law to hunt small animals to feed his children. Mayella Ewell’s geraniums, growing in broken jars in the yard full of junk is the only sign that indicates a desire to transcend the squalor around her.



2.7 The Themes of Race Relations and Human Rights

The systematic racial segregation that existed in the 1930s is only hinted at in the novel. The residents of Maycomb are only a generation or so removed from the Civil War. Atticus' cousin Ike Finch was a general on the Confederate side. Finch Landing, their ancestral home, was built by Simon Finch – a slave-holding plantation owner. Their neighbour, Mrs Dubose keeps a CSA pistol with her and many of the town's residents are named after key figures in the Confederate Army: most notable is Bob Ewell, whose full name is Robert E. Lee Ewell or Braxton Braggs Underwood (check *Glossary*). You would recall how Scout listens to the genteel ladies of her Aunt Alexandra's missionary society call their domestic helpers “darky” and “nigger.” The Black people have a separate church, they even worship differently, live outside the town and work at menial jobs. Calpurnia is a housekeeper, Zeebo a garbage collector, and Tom Robinson a farm hand.

Harper Lee's treatment of race relations in the South, in the 1930s is not historically accurate. Seen through the eyes of Jem and Scout, the violence and discrimination are presented in a sanitized version; confined to a few, misguided individuals like Bob Ewell. Racial prejudice, articulated by people like Mrs Grace Merriweather or Mrs Dubose is shown to reside in otherwise noble human beings. Note how Mrs Dubose, who abuses Atticus Finch frequently, for defending ‘niggers,’ is established as a woman whose courage deserves to be admired. The terror unleashed by the white supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan is brushed aside. When Jem is worried for Atticus, he dismisses them as a bunch of buffoons:

‘way back about nineteen-twenty there was a Klan, but it was a political organization more than anything. Besides they couldn't find anybody to scare.’ (161-162)

The most telling example of sentimentalization is the episode where a mob of farmers, apparently drunk, come to lynch Tom Robinson, while Atticus sits guard outside his cell. Their hostility is dispelled by the innocent chatter of the nine-year old Scout. There is a stark contrast between the historical reality and the fiction. In a well-researched article, Ako-Adjei has quoted from historical records to point out that, according to data compiled by NAACP, there were 3959 lynchings in the South, between the years 1887-1950. Photographs show even little children standing amongst the mob. As she comments, Lee “reimagines Southern history, American history, as something for more benign than its reality” (185). The rumblings of Black discontent, the unrest that led to the Civil Rights Movement is absent from the novel.



Though the novel, in its fictional narrative, presents a skewed image of race relations, it succeeds in its gospel of equality and human dignity, through Atticus Finch's courageous decision to defend a Black man in court. Read Atticus' speech to the jury:

'But there is one way in this country in which all men are created equal – there is one human institution that makes the pauper the equal of a Rockefeller, the stupid man the equal of an Einstein . . . Our courts have their faults, as does any human institution, but in this country our courts are the great levellers, and in our courts all men are created equal. (226)

Many lawyers in the U.S. claim that this novel inspired them to take up the legal profession and advocacy of human rights. Although he loses the case and Tom is declared guilty by the jury, Atticus finds hope in the fact that the jury members took a long time to arrive at a verdict. Though the judicial system is flawed, he remains positive and is not embittered. He gives hope to Tom, when he is sent to prison.

One can understand why Atticus has been termed the 'moral compass' of the novel, but there are others who share his dislike of racial discrimination: Braxton Briggs Underwood, the editor of the local newspaper; Dolphus Raymond and Judge Taylor are some of the other characters who support Atticus. As Miss Maudie Atkinson says it's only a "handful of people with enough humility to think when they look at a Negro, there but for the Lord's kindness am I" (261).

Throughout the novel, Atticus is a model of gracious conduct. He teaches, guides, explains and, if need be, admonishes his children on how to treat others. He ticks off Scout when she declares she will beat up Walter Cunningham when she sees that his father was part of the mob. He gently explains why she shouldn't beat up people who call him a "nigger-lover" and understand that it is a word that should be avoided. His deep compassion and humanity are evident on each page. Atticus believes every person deserves to be treated with respect and courtesy: whether it is Mrs Dubose or his domineering sister. In court, he addresses Mayella Ewell as "Miss Ewell," which she finds unsettling. Atticus doesn't want his children to hold grudges or harbour resentment of any kind, and advises them to maintain their composure even in the face of extreme provocation. When Jem chops off all the camellias in Mrs Dubose's yard after she calls Atticus a "nigger"-lover," his father sends him to read to her and make amends.

Not only through his sage advice, but through his professional conduct as well, Atticus wants to be a role model for his children. For him, professional ethics are not separate from his religious convictions. He tells his daughter:



This case, Tom Robinson's case, is something that goes to the essence of a man's conscience – Scout, I couldn't go to church and worship God if I didn't try to help that man. (116)

When he believes, mistakenly, that it was Jem who stabbed Bob Ewell, he wants to inform the authorities because it would be against his principles to try and protect his son. Note the empathy with which he places Mayella's accusation of Tom before the jury. He excuses Bob Ewell for spitting in his face as he understands that he needed to avenge his humiliation in court. Atticus' set of values verges on the spiritual: compassion, empathy, forgiveness, and respect for all. His compassion extends to all living creatures. Though he's an excellent marksman, he gives up hunting. As Miss Maudie says: "I think maybe he put his gun down when he realized God had given him an unfair advantage over most living things" (109).

The novel ends with a touching scene, where Scout is standing on Arthur Radley's porch, looking at the road ahead, and she is able to imagine the scenes he must have watched from his window. She calls Jem and herself, "Boo's children," and finally understands the joy they must have brought into his lonely life; the love that must have made him leave the little gifts for them in the oak tree and come out of his house to save their lives:

Atticus was right. One time he said you never really know a man until you stand in his shoes and walk around in them. Just standing on the Radley porch was enough. (308)

2.8 *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a Novel About Growing Up

To Kill a Mockingbird is often classified as a 'Bildungsroman,' a novel that traces the trajectory of the growth of its central protagonist. Though the narrative focuses on events in Scout's life, from the age of six to nine, it cannot really be classified as such. The ability to reflect and introspect, that accompanies the emotional or spiritual growth of the protagonist, is not a part of the narrative. She is more of an observer, presenting the child's perspective.

However, there is one aspect in which she acquires some maturity. Scout is the quintessential tomboy; almost always dressed in overalls, playing with the boys, and losing no opportunity to beat them up. The list of people she punches and kicks is a long one: Walter Cunningham, Cecil Jacobs, Dill, Francis, and Jem. She is often admonished by Jem to behave like a girl: "Can't you take up sewin' or somethin'?" Scout faces constant criticism from her Aunt Alexandra, to behave like a girl:



Aunt Alexandra’s vision of my deportment involved playing with small stoves, tea sets, and wearing the Add-A-Pearl necklace she gave me when I was born. (90)

Some critics believe that, during the course of the novel, she starts conforming to societal expectations. To prove this, the scene where she follows her Aunt Alexandra into the drawing room to help serve tea to the ladies of the Missionary Society, immediately after the family learns about Tom Robinson’s death, is often identified as the moment when she is initiated into Southern womanhood: “After all, if Aunty could be a lady a time like this, so could I” (262).

However, Atticus never tries to mould her into anything but a good human being and in the end, Scout does emerge as a lady. Being a true Southern lady is not about wearing pink frocks and pearls or being the gracious hostess, but being able to treat other people with utmost respect and consideration. She has grasped her father’s creed and, at a critical moment, demonstrates her ability to respect the special person that Arthur Radley is. She understands why Heck Tate is protecting Arthur; giving him up to the police would be “sort of like shootin’ a mockingbird” (304). In the end of the novel, there is implicit a redefinition of Southern womanhood – which is not about the appurtenances of femininity, but compassion and consideration for all of God’s creatures.

More than Scout, it is Jem who has to come to terms with an imperfect world. He is not hot-tempered like his little sister, but when Mrs Dubose abuses his father, he loses his cool. When Tom Robinson is declared guilty by the jury, Jem weeps on the way home. Atticus has to make him realize that though what happened was wrong, it should not dishearten him:

As you grow older, you’ll see white men cheat black men every day of your life, but let me tell you . . . There’s nothing more sickening to me than a low-grade white man who’ll take advantage of a Negro’s ignorance. (243)

Jem remains silent for days and Scout wonders why (272). He is disillusioned and trying to come to terms with the injustice he has witnessed. During Tom’s trial, he is in a state of enthusiasm, convinced that his father will win, but Reverend Sykes observes: “Mr Jem, I ain’t ever seen any jury decide in favour of a coloured man over a white man ...” (230).

The flaws in the judicial system and the long struggle ahead, are things that Jem has to learn to accept, without letting it embitter him.



2.9 Summing Up

In this unit, you have read a detailed analysis of Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The novel is, first and foremost, an amusing account of life in the small town of Maycomb, in Alabama, seen through the eyes of a little girl. Viewed from a broad perspective, the author's narrative skill shines in the parts where the children are up to their mischief: playing with old tyres, enacting episodes from Arthur Radley's life, or sneaking in to their neighbour's house at night.

Lee uses the child's point of view as the vehicle to present race relations in the South, in the 1930s. Though the discrimination and injustice faced by the Black community is inadequately presented, the author manages to critique the racial prejudice Scout witnesses all around her. Critical opinion is divided over Atticus Finch's creed of empathy as the panacea for all social ills. However, the life lessons offered by Atticus to Jem and Scout have an enduring appeal. It is not difficult to understand why Lee's novel is considered a classic of human rights, attested to by the fact that, over the years, it continues to sell millions of copies.

2.10 Questions

1. Write an essay on the symbolism in the title of the novel?
2. Would you agree that Jem grows up during the course of the novel?
3. Write about the technique of presenting events from the child's point-of-view.
4. Summarize some of Atticus' views on human dignity.
5. Why, in your opinion, is Arthur Radley always confined to his home?
6. Write about the depiction of the Black community in the novel.
7. Why is Atticus hopeful, even after the jury declares Tom guilty?

2.11 Glossary

Adolf Hitler: (1889-1945) Nazi dictator of Germany

Andrew Jackson: President of the United States (1829-37)

Appomattox: a village in Virginia, where General Robert F. Lee surrendered to the Union forces on April 9, 1865 - thus ending the Civil War.



Battle of Hastings: fought between the French and the British, in 1066, for the throne of England

Blackstone's 'Commentaries': one of the most well-known books on British law.

Braxton Braggs: commander of western Confederate Army during the Civil War.

Confederate veteran: a former soldier of the Confederate Army.

Cotton Gin: machine that separates cotton from seeds

Creek Civil War: (1813-14) fought between Native Americans and colonial forces, after which the fighting factions were forced to surrender 1.9 million acres of land in Alabama and Georgia.

CSA Pistol: Confederate States Army pistol.

Dewey Decimal System: what Jem mistakenly refers to as the Dewey Decimal System is an allusion to well-known educational reformer John Dewey (1859-1952). Lee is mocking at the education system by mixing it up with the system of cataloguing books in libraries.

Distaff Side of the Executive Branch: a reference to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, whose views on civil rights were well-known.

Disturbance between the North and the South: the Civil War (1861-65)

Dixie Howell: popular University football player of the time.

dog Victrola: advertisement for gramophones

foot-washing Baptist: the Baptists in the South American states of North Carolina, Alabama, would wash the feet of fellow members of the church as a form of worship and to express humility. Miss Maudie is expressing her disagreement with their rejection of everything that gives pleasure.

General Hood: Lieutenant General John B. Hood, a Confederate officer.

Governor Williams Wyatt Bibb: first governor of Alabama (1819-20).

Group Dynamics: part of John Dewey's program to reform education in America, to make it more interactive.

Hoover Carts: during the Great Depression, a car that didn't have an engine or windows and was pulled by mules, to save money for gas. Named after President Hoover.

Hunt's 'Light of the World': well-known painting of Jesus Christ.

Indian Heads: in 1900 and 1906, pennies had Indian heads on them, before Abraham Lincoln's head was used.

Ivanhoe: famous historical novel by Sir Walter Scott, 1819.



Jitney Jungle: a super market chain

John Wesley: (1702-1791) founder of the Methodist Church.

Jordan's Stormy Banks: famous Christian hymn

Jubilee: famous Christian hymn

Ku Klux Klan: hate organization, formed after the Civil War, aimed at restoring white supremacy in the South.

Ladies' Law: criminal code of Alabama which makes it punishable to use abusive language in front of women.

Let the Cup Pass from You: let your fate pass you by.

Mennonites: Christian community, whose members eschew modern technology and believe in leading simple lives.

Methodist: a Protestant Christian tradition, based on the teachings of John Wesley.

Missouri Compromise: the MC (1820) allowed Missouri to be admitted to the Union as a slave state.

NRA: National Recovery Act: series of programs set up to revive business from the impact of the Great Depression.

One Man's Family: a popular, serialized radio play at the time.

Ol' Blue Light: nickname for General Stonewall Jackson, legendary warrior of the Civil War.

Reconstruction: (1867-77) the period after the Civil War, when Southern states were dealing with economic and political challenges of reuniting with the Union.

Rice Christians: converts to Christianity, belonging to third-world countries.

Snipe Hunt: a practical joke; to send somebody to find something that doesn't exist.

Stonewall Jackson: one of the most well-known Confederate Generals.

Strip Poker: a card game in which the loser takes off an item of clothing

The Crash: the Stock Market Crash of 1929, that led to the Great Depression.

truant lady: state-appointed officer, whose task it was to ensure that all children attended school.

Uncle Natchell Story: cartoon mascot for a fertilizer. Little Chuck in Scout's class, mistakes it for a current event.

WPA: Works Progress Administration. Program designed to put millions of unskilled Americans to work.

Yankees: people from the Northern States of America.



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***Freedom: Short Stories Celebrating
the Universal Declaration of Human Rights***
(Compiled and Published by Amnesty International)

Nalini Prabhakar

Structure

1. Learning Objectives
2. General Introduction
3. Human Rights
4. Unit-3(1)
5. Unit-3(2)
6. Unit-3(3)
7. Summing Up
8. References

1. Learning Objectives

This lesson will enable you to:

- ◆ Understand the theoretical foundations of human rights.
- ◆ Explore the connection between literature and human Rights.
- ◆ Critically analyse Paulo Coelho's "In the Prison of Repose", Nadine Gordimer's "Amnesty", and Ishmael Beah's "ABC Antidote" in relation to Articles 19, 23 and 26 of the *UDHR*.
- ◆ Understand how the violation and denial of human rights, nullify the ideas of justice, freedom, equality, and dignity.

2. General Introduction

The book *Freedom: Short Stories Celebrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (2009) is a collection of short stories, compiled by Amnesty International to celebrate the



Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). In the foreword to this book, Archbishop Desmond Tutu underlines the deep connection between art and literature to human rights. He writes, “They are all bound up with this wonderful talent we humans have: to empathise with others. If, by reading any one of the stories in this anthology, we are enabled to step, for one moment, into another person’s shoes, to get right under their skin, then that is already a great achievement. Through empathy we overcome prejudice, develop tolerance and ultimately understand love. Stories can bring understanding, healing, reconciliation and unity.” (*Freedom* 8) All the stories in the collection deal with the theme of denial of human rights and expose the cruelty and unjustness underlying this denial.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was proclaimed and adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in the year 1948. This document has 30 Articles in all and each Article articulates various “rights and freedoms to which every human being is equally and inalienably entitled.” (*UDHR* iii). In this unit, we shall be engaging with three of these thirty Articles by analysing the following three short stories prescribed for you, corresponding to the Articles 19, 23, and 26.

1. Paulo Coelho – “In the Prison of Repose” Article 19 – Freedom of expression.
2. Nadine Gordimer – “Amnesty” Article 23 – Right to work and fair wages.
3. Ishmael Beah – “ABC Antidote” Article 26 – Right to education.

Check Your Progress

1. Why is it important to read stories?
2. What is the aim and purpose of the book, *Freedom: Short Stories Celebrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*?

3. Human Rights

Human rights refer to a set of rights that a person or a group of people have as a consequence of being human or due to the fact that such rights are a prerequisite to the existence of a just society. Regardless of their theoretical foundation, human rights encompass a broad range of principles, capacities, values that are believed to uphold and protect human autonomy as well as safeguard human welfare. These rights are proclaimed to be universal in nature, meaning that they are, in a sense, equally demanded for all human beings, past, present, and future. When a right is deemed to be a human right, it is considered to be fundamentally universal in nature, meaning that all human beings, wherever they may be,



possess these rights. Human rights are theoretically guaranteed to every person on Earth, regardless of merit or necessity, just for being human.

Human rights are born out of, and reflective of, a human being's fundamental needs and the norms that not only define their ability but also enable them to live with dignity. Human rights are about justice, freedom, equality, dignity and respect for everyone. Freedom from discrimination, the right to life, freedom of expression, the right to a family and marriage, and the right to an education are a few examples of these human rights. Everyone is equally entitled to human rights which are inalienable, indivisible, and interdependent, that is, they cannot be taken away. It is to be emphasized that human rights are complementary to each other; for example, the freedom of expression is necessary for the right to participate in government and free elections.

The phrase "human rights" became popular after World War II and was introduced into common parlance thereby replacing the erstwhile "natural rights". The term was further popularized by the founding of the United Nations' in 1945, and the UN General Assembly's 1948 ratification of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*. It is notable that the said *UDHR* was ratified without any dissent. The list of rights it outlines is almost identical to the significant traditional political and civil rights found in most nations' constitutions and legal frameworks. These rights include equality before the law, freedom from ex post facto criminal laws, protection against arbitrary arrest, the right to a fair trial, the right to own property, freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, freedom of opinion and expression, and the freedom of peaceful assembly and association. Economic, social, and cultural rights are also included, including the freedom to work, the freedom to organize and join a union, the right to a living standard sufficient for one's health and well-being, and the right to an education.

In today's day and age, the demand for human rights, including greater economic justice and greater political freedom, is a fact beyond dispute despite the ever-changing attitudes and policies of the government of the moment. The goal of self-determination in a postcolonial era has accelerated a growing concern for the promotion and protection of human rights on all fronts, and this concern is now indisputably sewn into the fabric of current world events.

Check Your Progress

1. Explain the universal nature of human rights.
2. Write a brief note on the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*.



4. Unit-3(1)

Article 19

Freedom of Expression

“In the Prison of Repose”

Paulo Coelho

4.1 Introduction

Paulo Coelho (1947) is a Brazilian novelist, whose parable-like stories, rich in symbolism, engage with fundamental spiritual and philosophical questions and have inspired generations of readers. *The Alchemist* (1988) deals with a journey across North Africa of an Andalusian shepherd-boy, in search of a treasure. The journey and the treasure are mystical in nature and lead to a spiritual awakening. This theme of spiritual awakening is again explored in *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept* (1994), and the protagonist here is a young Spanish woman. His other notable works are *Veronica Decides to Die* (1998), *The Devil and Miss Prym* (2000), *Eleven Minutes* (2003), and *The Witch of Portobello* (2006).

“In the Prison of Repose” is not a short story in the conventional sense. It is a series of diary entries made by Coelho during his period of internment at Casa de Saude Dr Eiras- a mental hospital in Rio de Janeiro. The experiences of his internment are also reflected in the novel *Veronica Decides to Die* (1998).

4.2 Biographical Context

Coelho’s first stint at the mental asylum was in 1965, when his parents on the pretext of a check-up for asthma, admitted him for a period of 28 days. This was his first “encounter” with Dr. Benjamin, “a 52- year old man, with small eyes and a pleasant face.” (Morais 82) In this instance, it was a series of adolescent misdemeanors which caused his parents to take this drastic step. He was on the 9th floor of the asylum, a floor meant for the “docile mad.” (Morais 84) His medical file recorded his ailment as “a patient with schizoid tendencies averse to social and loving contact.” (Morais 86) His medication for the entire duration was heavy doses of psychotropic substances, which kept him in a daze through the day.

The text prescribed for your reading “In the Prison of Repose”, has a few extracts from the diary kept by Coelho in 1966, the beginning of his prolonged incarceration which lasted for three years (1966-68). At the age of seventeen, his parents committed him to Casa de Saude Dr Eiras, and he was released when he was twenty years of age.



He escaped thrice from the institution, but invariably went back, as he did not have the resources to sustain himself. The complaints listed by his parents were no different from that of other parents with adolescent children; complaints such as, not getting good grades at school, being involved in amateur theatre group, wanting to be a writer, and some other not very serious misdemeanors, which certainly did not deserve such harsh punishment.

In his blogpost “On a Mental Institution” dated 10th oct 2019, Coelho writes; “I was not crazy, but I was rather just a 17-year old who really wanted to become a writer. Because no one understood this, I was locked up for months and fed with tranquilizers. The therapy merely consisted of giving me electroshocks.”

In another blogpost “I Have Written a Book About a Mental Institution Dad”, dated 4th March 2022, Coelho offers an explanation for the actions of his parents, “In Brazil at the time, the word “artist” was synonymous with homosexual, communist, drug addict and lay-about.”

Again, speaking on the same subject in an interview with Elizabeth Day titled, “A Mystery Even to Himself” (Telegraph, 2005) he says, “It wasn’t that they wanted to hurt me, but they didn’t know what to do... and they did that to save me. And it happens with love, all the time....”

It was on 22nd January 1999, that the Brazilian congress passed a law forbidding arbitrary admissions into mental institutions.

Check Your Progress

1. Why was Coelho admitted to the mental asylum?
2. What did his treatment consist of?

4.3 Detailed Summary

Writing in a diary is different from other kinds of writing, as one writes for his/her own self and not for any kind of readership. It could be a simple exercise of keeping a record of events in one’s life or, as in this case a record of the innermost thoughts and feelings brought upon by a traumatic, unexpected occurrence. In the detailed summary given below, you will notice the range of feelings that Coelho experiences; anxiety, fear, depression, loneliness and isolation. This is the price he has to pay for upholding his freedom of expression.

Wednesday, 20 July

For 20th July there are 5 entries in the diary, starting at 08.00 and closing at 19.20. Each entry is of one or two short paragraphs, and the one at 17.00 is just a single word “Never?”



On this day he was woken up at 8.00 in the morning and was told to get dressed, before being taken to the car from Emergency Psychiatric Service. He describes himself as a “thin youth with long hair” who got into the car, his head bowed, and his feeling was one of defeat. He is back on the ninth floor, where he had been admitted earlier in 1965, ostensibly for recuperation (**refer to 4.2**). The immediate trigger for this rather extreme measure of punishment had occurred the previous night. He had stayed out late into the night with his girlfriend, and upon his return had found himself locked out, as he disobeyed the curfew time set out by his father. This resulted in an ugly scene. He now regrets having gone back home at all.

The inmates on the 9th floor of the hospital, are described by Coelho as being “sad”, people who have forgotten how to smile, and simply stare into emptiness with vacant eyes. His room-mate is obsessed with death and the general atmosphere, is one of “profound sadness of those who aspire to nothing in life and want nothing.”(*Freedom 299*)

Another young man, who has been at the hospital for two years, and is happy with the situation, fills Coelho with dread and anguish. He is terrified that he will end up thinking like the young man, and be content never to see the outside world, except through the barred windows. He is already thinking of his release and wonders when that time will come.

Coelho is a prisoner on the ninth floor, can neither call nor write letters to those on the outside. His sole anxiety is that he might like the young man, accept this incarceration as normal. Although he feels “half-beaten”, he resolves not to “let myself be beaten.” (*Freedom 300*)

Check Your Progress

1. Describe the inmates on the 9th floor of the asylum.
2. What is Coelho’s immediate concern?
3. What are the conditions of his internment?

Thursday, 21 July

For this day there are 4 entries. The previous night he was administered powerful drugs to make him sleep. His room-mate Flavio, who spends long periods in silence, harks on one question all the time, “How are things outside?”, probably his one effort towards maintaining contact with the outside world. Coelho’s reveals that he spoke to his girlfriend on the phone, and managed to hide his depression. Coelho’s description of the other inmates reveals that he is probably, the only one who doesn’t belong there. The others seem to exhibit one or another kind of deviant behaviour. Coelho quotes Christ on the Cross, and



asks “My God, my God, why has’t thou forsaken me?” He longs for his freedom – “to see the Sun come up, go horseback riding, to kiss my girlfriend and to smile.” (*Freedom* 302) He is waiting eagerly for the visit by his girlfriend, and at quarter to three, gives up hope of seeing her on that day.

Check Your Progress

1. What is the significance of “My God, my God, why has’t thou forsaken me?”
2. What does Coelho long for?

Friday, 22 July

There are four entries for this day. Coelho observes that he has started to “allow sleep to overwhelm” (*Freedom* 302) him, as a means of escape from the reality of his stay at the asylum, and this, he tells himself, must be avoided at all costs. Next, he recounts his conversation with Flavio, his roommate. Flavio is at the asylum for having attempted suicide not once but many times. He prefers death rather than be separated from his lover, a boy, who is described as “effeminate” by him. Coelho remarks on how Flavio’s condition alternates between “normal” and ‘schizoid”.

Coelho mentions two other inmates; Apio, who believes that the Bolshevik revolution was financed by the Americans and another young man, the same age as himself, who makes everybody laugh, and is perfectly satisfied with his situation.

Saturday, 23 July

There is a short single entry for this day. He’s happy as he managed to speak to his girlfriend Rennie, who promises to visit him on Monday.

Sunday, 24 July

Sunday, brings a host of memories. Coelho writes that he is “filled with a terrible sense of solitude, which is slowly killing” him. (*Freedom* 304) The feeling of being all alone in the world makes him feel worthless, as someone incapable of either receiving or giving. He comments on the monotonous nature of life in the asylum, where one day merges into another, exactly similar to the previous one. To maintain a connect with the outside world, he clings dearly to the photographs of Rennie and his cigarettes.

Monday, 25 July

He is waiting for his girlfriend’s visit, and writes that the world is a nicer place, even from within the confines of the prison, because of Rennie and her presence in his life.



Sunday, 31 July

He is elated that his poem has earned him a ninth place from among 2500 entries in the poetry competition. He wishes to be outside sharing this news with everyone.

Check Your Progress

1. Why does Coelho want to avoid sleep?
2. Why is Flavio at the asylum?
3. What effect does Sunday have on him?

Saturday, 6 August

This entry is addressed to Rennie. He wants her to be by his side, at this point more than ever, because he believes that the insulin and electroconvulsive treatment will systematically destroy his being, his original self. The fear of losing himself, his identity, and personality altogether to electric shocks is real. One can sense the sorrow when he writes “then I come up to my room and cry my heart out thinking about what was and what should have been and what can never be.” (*Freedom* 306)

Sunday, 7 August

Coelho recounts his conversation with Dr. Benjamin. The doctor here is referring to the time when Coelho was admitted previously. (Refer to 4.2) The following part of the conversation reveals why Coelho is there in the asylum and also exposes the absurdity of what the doctor considers as a mental problem with Coelho. Dr Benjamin starts off with “what did you get from the trip to Teresopolis?” (*Freedom* 306) Teresopolis is a district situated hundred kilometres from Rio. Coelho had gone there against his parents orders, as his first play “Ageless Youth” was being staged at the Festival de Juventude and Coelho besides being a playwright, was also acting in it. This harmless trip to Teresopolis is viewed by Dr. Benjamin as wilful disobedience and tells Coelho that his only purpose was to “create an image of yourself, a false image, not even noticing that you are failing to make the most of what is inside you. You are a nothing.” Electric shocks and insulin are the doctor’s prescription to make Coelho “forget and make you more biddable.” (*Freedom* 307)

Check Your Progress

1. Why is Coelho afraid of the insulin and electroconvulsive treatment?
2. Why did Coelho undertake a trip to Teresopolis?
3. What is Dr. Benjamin’s clinical assessment of Coelho?
4. How does the doctor propose to make Coelho “biddable”?

**Sunday, 14 August Father's day**

On this day Coelho pens a long poem for his father. The poem begins on a nostalgic note of the happy father's-day celebrations in the past. But the poem soon becomes a powerful evocation of the feeling of betrayal experienced by Coelho. Some excerpts from the poem are given below:

“Good morning, Dad, today is your day,
and I can neither give you anything nor say anything
because your embittered heart is now deaf to words.
You're not the same man. Your heart is old,
your ears are stuffed with despair,
your heart aches. But you still know how to cry. And I
think you're crying the timid tears of a strict, despotic father:
you're weeping for me, because I'm here behind bars,
you're weeping because today is Father's Day and I'm far away,
filling your heart with bitterness and sadness.” (*Freedom* 308)

“your heart is crying,
and I can say nothing except dark words of revolt,
and I can do nothing but increase your suffering,
and I can give you nothing but tears and the regret
that you brought me into the world.” (*Freedom* 309)

Tuesday, 23 August

It is Coelho's birthday eve, and although he has spent 33 days in the asylum, cooped up on the ninth floor, without so much as seeing the sun, or stepping out into the courtyard even once, he resolves to be optimistic and not let the situation bog him down.

Thursday, 1 September

As days progress into months, Coelho is truly afraid. It is possible that he initially expected this incarceration to be for a short duration like the earlier time. This fear makes him docile and he begins to obey the orders from the nurses. Things have gotten worse for him; his girlfriend is not permitted to visit him anymore, and he is forced to shave his head. He however reveals that his friends have smuggled in a gun for him, and if things become



impossible he might use it on himself. The last four lines of the diary record, express his deep dejection and sense of defeat, but the last line in keeping with his rebellious spirit is a testament of courage and resolve not to given but to make a new beginning.

Check Your Progress

1. How does Coelho describe his father in the poem?
2. What privileges have been withdrawn from him?
3. What do the last four lines of the last entry in the diary convey?

4.4 “In the Prison of Repose” and Freedom of Expression

Article 19 of the *UDHR* is about freedom of expression. This Article states, “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.” (*UDHR*, 49)

“In the Prison of Repose” through diary extracts, explores how social institutions, in this case the family, view those in the family who do not subscribe to their way of thinking, and who do not adhere to the social norms to which they conform. The issue here is one of conformity to set rules and principles and any deviation from the same is considered as resulting from mental instability. That there can be alternate world views equally valid, is something that is neither encouraged nor even remotely entertained. What is at stake here, is the individual freedom to express freely without fear, one’s thoughts, and adopt alternate ways of living and feeling without inviting censure with harsh consequences.

Coelho wanted to be a writer and was actively involved in the theatre. His parents however wanted him to have a “respectable” career, as they considered writers, and people associated with the theatre to be vagabonds, homosexuals, and drug addicts. They sincerely believe that the treatment at the mental asylum will reform their prodigal son and make him accept the “rightness” of their way of thinking. What becomes evident here is that Coelho’s parents rationalised their action as “normal” and for the “good” of their son. They did not for once consider the effect such a prolonged period of incarceration in a mental institution might have on a person of sound mental health. Their sole intention was to crush his right to hold opinions which were not in consonance with their opinions.

Check Your Progress

1. What does Article 19 of *UDHR* state?
2. Analyse the story “In the Prison of Repose” within the context of Article 19 of the *UDHR*.



5. Unit-3(2)

Article 23

Work and Fair Wages

“Amnesty”

Nadine Gordimer

5.1 Introduction

“Amnesty” is a short story written and published in 1991 in the New Yorker by Nadine Gordimer (1923-2014), a South African writer and political activist. She joined the African National Congress (ANC) at a time when the organization was declared illegal by the south African government. She was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1991 and recognized as an author “who through her magnificent epic writing has - in the words of Alfred Nobel - been of very great benefit to humanity”¹. Gordimer’s work engages with racial issues in the context of apartheid in South Africa. She takes inspiration from her own environment and bases her writing on incredibly complex interpersonal and social interactions. While politically involved, Gordimer does not let that intrude or affect her writing and keeps the two aspects of her life – as an author and as an activist – separate. Despite this separation, her works contribute in the shaping of political process simply because her writing gives us, the readers, a deep and personal insight into historical events, prejudices, and injustices.

5.2 Apartheid

“Amnesty” deals with the theme of racism perpetrated by the White ruling class against the Black South Africans within the social context of the apartheid. The apartheid was a legal system of segregation whereby the White and Black/colored population of South Africa were kept separate solely on the basis of one’s skin color. Once the all-white National Party government gained power in South Africa in 1948, it promptly began enforcing existing segregation policies, whereby the non-whites were practically excluded from, and segregated in, all spheres of life- political, social and economic. New statutes were introduced to ensure racial segregation even in residential areas. One-tenth of the land was designated for Black “reserves”, and the Blacks were barred from purchasing or leasing land elsewhere. There were strict restrictions for Blacks who lived and worked on farms owned by Whites. Moreover, their access to cities was controlled and they were forced to

1. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1991/press-release/>



live in segregated urban spaces akin to slums. Until the end of apartheid in 1994, nine-tenths of the agricultural land and almost all the mineral deposits were owned exclusively by the Whites. As a social system, the apartheid severely affected the majority of the South African population who were black/colored/Asians, treating them as second-class citizens and discriminated against them, while favoring the White ruling class who were settlers (Europeans, mostly Dutch and British), and were not native to the country.

The designated Black reserves were over-populated, and men and women were forced to move out for their livelihood. They found employment either in White farms or in the towns for extremely low wages, and poor working and living conditions. In the story, the nameless narrator and her family are employed in a White farm, and her would-be husband moves to the town for employment in a construction company. In 1973 a series of strikes were organized by the Black Peoples Convention, founded by Stephen Biko, a Black student leader, demanding better wages and working conditions. The story revolves around the participation of the unnamed would be husband, referred to as ‘the man’ in the story, in a strike organized by the Union.

Check Your Progress

1. What is apartheid?
2. Explain the ways in which the fundamental human rights of the Blacks and the coloured people were denied.

5.3 Detailed Summary

The nameless narrator in “Amnesty” is a young woman who is deeply in love with a man and wishes to marry him and live a happy life. She works in the farm school as she had passed class 8. Her father and one brother work as farm hands for a small pay. They own “two goats” and a “few cows’ and her mother is “allowed” to grow vegetables on a small patch of land. The man reciprocates the narrator’s love and as was the custom in South Africa, begins paying the narrator’s father money for their future nuptials. The man leaves for the city, and starts working with a “construction company- building glass walls up to the sky” (*Freedom* 358) in order to earn enough money for his marriage to the narrator. In the first two years he visited once a month on a weekend, but the transformation happens when he joins the trade union and becomes deeply committed to the cause. He tells the narrator that, “wherever people were fighting against the way we are treated they were doing it all for us, on the farms as well as the towns, and the unions were with them, he was with them, making speeches, marching.” (*Freedom* 358) During the course of his employment with the company, the man joins a workers’ union demanding fair working conditions, minimum



wage, sick leave, the right to strike among other things. Eventually, the cause of the Union becomes the man's passion and he himself becomes a revolutionary – fighting not just for himself and his job, but the entirety of the South African peoples.

The man tries to explain this to our nameless narrator whose sole dream is to marry him and live a happy married life, but to her dismay, her hopes are dashed when the man gets arrested for protesting against the White government which was, of course, an offence. The man does not come back home to marry the narrator who has his child out of wedlock. During the man's trial, the narrator attempts to visit him as often as she can, which is not very often. During one such visit, she takes their infant child, a daughter, to show him. The man and his comrades all cheer and hug the narrator while managing to give her some money for the baby. However, the man is sentenced to six years in prison for his offences and the child grows up without her father around. He is incarcerated along with the other leaders on the Island, which could be reached by a ferry from Cape Town. With little to no money and the great distance being an additional deterrent, the narrator does not meet the man during his imprisonment. The one time she puts by enough money to visit him, she is forced to return from Cape Town, as she did not have a permit to visit the Island. He becomes a memory that she is waiting for, in the hope that she might once again re-live it. He writes to her, tells her that their people are kept suppressed with the notion of God and that God will fix everything, that their people are kept ignorant and that is what ensures that they are kept down, and “won't find the force to do anything to change their lives.” (*Freedom* 360) He dreamed of not only safety and security for their people, but also power – to fight back against the White overlords. During his imprisonment, the man's father dies and his mother like a destitute has to depend on one of his uncles for shelter. It is this situation that he addresses when the man writes to the narrator, “That's what I am on the Island for, far away from you, I'm here so that one day our people will have the things they need, land, food, the end of ignorance.” (*Freedom* 362)

Check Your Progress

1. How is the narrator related to the man in the story?
2. Which activity lands the man in prison?
3. What is the man along with his comrades fighting for?

Five years later, the man is released. The man who comes out has changed completely and is now a true revolutionary with one goal and one goal only – freedom. When the man comes back home to the narrator, she is happy certainly, but also hesitant. The man



does not look like the one she was in love with. Their child does not recognize the man and hides from him. Whenever the narrator speaks to the man, she feels like his mind is elsewhere on more important things. He talks to her at times, of the discrimination their people are facing daily, that their houses are not theirs, that they are only squatting there at the mercy of the White man, and that it is their ignorance which is keeping their people down. He argues that the enlightenment and education have been restricted to the Whites eventually leading to forced intellectual darkness for the Black South Africans making them oblivious to the concept of freedom. He tells her, “look at this place where the white man owns the ground and lets you squat in mud and tin huts here only as long as you work for him.... The farm owns us.” (*Freedom* 364) The narrator has now realized that she has no home – her home is just a place a White man allows her to live in, not an actual home.

The narrator begins to understand the man’s point of view, and can see that marrying the man would solve nothing, would do nothing. Revolution is the only way forward. At the same time, the narrator also mourns the loss of her naivete and ignorance and the simple life she had once envisioned with the man and their child. She thinks about how her child, having only seen photos of the man, states that “*That’s not him*”, when she sees him for the first time and the narrator thinks that “the little girl hasn’t had time to get used to this man. But I know she’ll be proud of him, one day!... I tell her about the Big man and the Old Men, our leaders, so she’ll know that her father was with them on the Island, this man is a great man too.” (*Freedom* 366) So, in her heart of hearts, she waits – she waits for the man to come home, the home she dreamt of, and the life she hoped for. More importantly, she is herself waiting to “come back home” (*Freedom* 367), “home” here being a metaphor for a free, independent, and just nation, where she and her people can reclaim their land, culture and identity.

Check Your Progress

1. What changes does the narrator see in the man, after he is released from the prison?
2. What is the man fighting for? Explain with reference to the text.
3. The story traces the journey of the narrator from ignorance to awareness. Do you agree?
4. When the narrator says, she is waiting to come back home, which home is she referring to?



5.4 “Amnesty” and Right to Work and Fair Wages

Article 23 of the *UDHR* is about right to work and fair wages. This Article states that, “Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment. (2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work. (3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection. (4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.” (*UDHR*, 57)

Nadine Gordimer uses a nameless narrator to explore the lives of young men and women during the time of minority White rule, while simultaneously shedding light on how many were compelled to become more conscious of their identity and human rights, and make sacrifices – to get back what is rightfully theirs. The system of apartheid ensured that the Black and the coloured population would never receive wages commensurate with their labour. The man in the story, joins a workers’ union demanding fair working conditions, minimum wage, sick leave, the right to strike among other things. He is imprisoned for six years for participating in the strike. His fight however is not limited to wages alone; it is against the White rulers, and the system of apartheid which keeps them as slaves in their own land; it is also about reclaiming their land, dignity and the power to govern themselves. In one of his letters to the narrator, the man writes, “That’s what I am on the Island for, far away from you, I’m here so that one day our people will have the things they need, land, food, the end of ignorance.” (*Freedom* 362)

The narrator and her would-be husband remain nameless because the story is not just about one specific young woman and man living during the apartheid regime, but of countless young men, women and children who lost their lives fighting for their fundamental human rights, the right to live a life with dignity in an equal society. This story therefore can also be read in the context of the following Articles of *UDHR* which are complementary to Article 23:

Article 1 – Right to equality and freedom

Article 2 – Right against discrimination

Article 3 – Right to life, liberty, and personal security

Article 4 – Freedom from slavery

Check Your Progress

1. What does Article 23 of the *UDHR* state?
2. How is Article 23 relevant to the story?



6. Unit-3(3)

Article 26 The Right to Education “ABC Antidote” Ishmael Beah

6.1 Introduction

“ABC Antidote” is a short story written by Ishmael Beah, a Sierra Leonean author and human rights activist who garnered acclaim and fame in literary circles with his autobiographical debut *A Long Way Gone* (2007). His writing is based on his own experiences in the war-torn country of Sierra Leone where civil war broke out in 1993 and the psychological repercussions thereof on a child. When Beah’s hometown was invaded by rebel forces, he found himself separated from his family and wandering around with a group of boys before being recruited by the government army as a child soldier at the tender age of 13 and forced to wage war against the rebels.

6.2 Biographical Context

Beah recalls in his memoir the three years he spent fighting for the government army before being rescued by UNICEF and uses it in his fictional short story “ABC Antidote” to highlight the ease with which children are dehumanized and brainwashed into committing acts of violence, all in the name of a leader and restricting their access to education. He explains the importance of education and how oppressors withhold it to mould children into little more than killing machines who are given orders of where to point and shoot. In an interview with *Willamette Week*, Beah discusses how the government army had hooked its child soldiers onto drugs, making them dependent and keeping them in a haze to control them. He recalls that he, along with most of the other boys, were taking regular cocktails of marijuana, amphetamines, and cocaine which would desensitize them to the violence happening around them. He argues that the addiction to a heavy mix of drugs, the trauma of being torn from their families and being made to kill, and the constant violence – both perpetrated by them and suffered by them – created a situation where the child soldiers were so brutalized that they forgot their humanity, thus leaving them incapable of not only escape but also of thinking.

Drawing from his experience and understanding, of the brainwashing of children who were conscripted as soldiers, Beah emphasizes the importance of education not just for individuals, but society at large in ‘ABC Antidote’.

**Check Your Progress**

1. What is Beah's memoir *A Long Way Gone* about?
2. What were the methods used to control the children conscripted as soldiers?

6.3 Detailed Summary

The story begins with two young boys, Foday and Abu who have been working hard trying to earn enough money to pay their secondary school fees and save enough to attend university. The young boys would do any and all kinds of jobs, sometimes eating only a single meal a day, just so that they may achieve their dream of attending university and getting a college education. Beah then goes on to describe how on the day their dream materialised, the two young boys wore their absolute best clothes, splurged on a taxi, and arrived at University so early that they were the only two people there! It's clear from Beah's writing that the two boys are passionate about a university education and can barely control their eagerness and enthusiasm.

Eventually, other students begin filtering into the classroom where the two young boys waited and soon after, the professor himself. The professor introduces himself and begins the first class by posing a question to the students gathered, – “What does education mean to you? What do you think it does for a society, for an individual, what is its purpose?” (*Freedom* 387) The other students who had not been ravaged by the realities of war and violence gave a plethora of answers claiming that education allows one to use their minds, to reason, to pursue careers, that it is a right. The two young boys, hesitating in the wake of such sophisticated answers – at least to their minds – did not answer, except for Foday who mumbled that education is a right only in a peaceful society.

Beah then employs a literary flashback to the young boys' past as child soldiers camped out in an erstwhile school building. Beah weaves the story to show how these child soldiers were brainwashed by introducing their Commander who called himself “Prophet” and claimed that he could hear the thoughts of the children. Commander Prophet had directed the boy soldiers under his command to go from classroom to classroom and collect all books, papers, and other things which could be used as kindling, for a big fire. Seeing Foday pick up some papers and reading them, recalling his youth spent doing the same assignments, Commander Prophet directed Foday to burn those papers since they were “*not there to read but to fight a war*”. (*Freedom* 389) Noting the nostalgia of the boy soldiers, most of whom had attended secondary school in the very same building they now occupied as a war camp, Commander Prophet addressed them saying that “*Some of you might remember when you were in school and were told that the pen is mightier*



than the sword. Well, we have guns, so they were not talking about us.” (Freedom 389)
The Commander thus, not so subtly, implants the idea in the young children’s minds, that education is not worthwhile in the face of war while also reminding them that they are no longer children or students, but soldiers under his command.

Check Your Progress

1. What is the question posed by the Professor?
2. What are the hardships endured by Abu and Foday to gain admission into the university?
3. In which building were the child soldiers camped?
4. What action does the Commander order them to carry out?
5. What ideas does the Commander implant in the young children’s minds?

Despite the constant reinforcement of the idea that the boy soldiers were no longer children or even human, that they were soldiers first and foremost who could either kill others or be killed themselves, Foday could not help but reminisce about his school days with longing. To distract himself, Foday engages in drug abuse and later in the night is made to kill rebel forces attempting to retake the school. None of the rebel forces survive the night and Foday is numb to the fact that he was responsible for a majority of the violence that took place. He remarks with an unfeeling candor that none of the attackers were allowed to cross the river to safety – only their blood and bodies reached the other shore. As a celebration, the Commander gives his soldiers the day off to do as they wish but the savagery of war has robbed these boy soldiers of their childhood and their memories of being children.

Foday finds himself sitting in a classroom, reminiscing about times spent there learning instead of killing and subconsciously starts singing his school song when his comrades, including Abu find him. They caution him against the wrath of the Commander who has been known to murder his soldiers for less, and Abu informs him that some of the other boys had also been subconsciously singing school songs – probably fueled by the nostalgia of being in their old school building. Foday feels abjectly depressed by the fact that once upon a time his young self, skipping along, singing school songs would have elicited smiles from the people passing him, whereas everywhere he goes now, only fear and death greet him. The boys decide to keep this a secret and attempt to protect the other boy soldiers who find themselves singing school songs by formulating a plan – a plan to sing their squad song loudly to mask the soft sounds of school songs, and ensure that the Commanders would remain happy and the boys could re-live their pasts in their songs till the war ended.

**Check Your Progress**

1. In the midst of the violence, what do the child soldiers long for?
2. How do the child soldiers desensitize themselves from their acts of killing?
3. Explain the significance of the school songs.

Beah then brings the story back to the present to allow Abu and Foday to elucidate their answers to the Professor's question. Speaking first, Abu says "Education, whether brief or just memories of it, creates the anchors that prevent us from losing our humanity completely, as a society and as individuals." (*Freedom* 396) Foday completes the idea being expressed by Abu and adds, "Education is the most powerful medicine that cures violence. It strengthens the mind to resist violence, to transform the elements of violence, which are fear and loss of self. Of course, one has to have some basic understanding of reality. In general, education can reawaken the mind and spirit after it has been broken." (*Freedom* 396) The Professor for a moment is silent, trying to absorb the deeper implications of what has been expressed by Abu and Foday. The experience of war has taught the two boys that education is not just an academic exercise but the "life source of a society and its people" (*Freedom* 396). While Abu's answer tells us what education can prevent, which is the loss of humanity, Foday's answer tells us that education can be a medicine for a broken, traumatised society and its people; it can cure the mind and spirit of the deeply imprinted scars left behind by the violence and brutality of war.

Check Your Progress

1. With specific reference to the answers given by Abu and Foday, explain the purpose and importance of education.

6.4 "ABC Antidote" and the Right to Education

Article 26 of *UDHR* states that: "1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit. (2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace. (3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children." (*UDHR* 63)



In the short story “ABC Antidote” Beah explores the true purpose of education, which is to evolve human minds beyond the physicality and brutality of violence and enable them to traverse the depths of one’s individuality, thus moving beyond fear, hate, prejudice, and propaganda, and allowing them to determine their own sense of self – for only the educated are free. The two child-soldiers Abu and Foday, are brainwashed into believing that violence is not only necessary but also honourable, and have been reduced to killing machines. The brutality of war has so totally numbed their mental and emotional sensibilities, that they have forgotten how to cry. It is the memories of their school experiences that sustains them and eventually helps them reclaim basic human values of love, compassion and respect for human life.

Check Your Progress

1. Analyse the story “ABC Antidote” in the context of Article 26 of the *UDHR*.

7. Summing Up

In this lesson, we have looked into what constitute human rights and why it is important to safeguard these rights at any cost. The book *Freedom: Short Stories Celebrating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (2009) is a collection of short stories, compiled by Amnesty International to celebrate the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*. The three stories which have been prescribed for your reading deal with violation/denial of Articles 19, 23, and 26 of the *UDHR*. In our analysis of the short stories, we have seen how denial of free expression, fair and equitable wages, and education, gives rise to a society which is unjust, and inhuman. Reading stories enables us, the readers, to empathise with the characters and their condition, thereby making us aware of the need to create a just and equitable world, where all people can live with dignity.

8. References

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‘I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings’

Maya Angelou

P.K. Satapathy

Structure

1. Learning Objectives
2. Introduction
3. ‘I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings’
4. What Have We Learnt So Far
5. Glossary

1. Learning Objectives

After going through this lesson, you should be able to:

- ◆ Describe in brief the life of the poet and the things that occupied her as a creative writer.
- ◆ Understand the condition of the Afro-American people during the American Civil Rights movement and the connection between the poem and the civil rights movement.
- ◆ Identify and describe some of the literary devices used in the poem.
- ◆ Identify the main themes of the poem and critically engage with them.

2. Introduction

2.1 About the Author

This will be a brief introduction to Maya Angelou the person and the writer/poet. The focus will be on some significant circumstances and influences that shaped her as an individual and as an artist. Maya Angelou was born on 4th April 1928 in St Louis, Missouri, infamous for race riots, lynching, racial segregation and the victims were mostly Afro-Americans. After the civil war a large number of Afro-Americans migrated to Missouri from the American deep south (states like Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, etc.). It is but natural that they would



end up competing with the white working-class people for jobs and accommodation. They were not only considered racially inferior but also a threat to white neighbourhoods. What followed was a systematic brutalisation of black people. It is during a time like this that Maya Angelou was born and all these things would leave a deep scar on her young mind.



On the personal and family front, things were no better. Her father abandoned her and to make matters worse she was raped by her mother's boyfriend Mr Freeman. She testified against her rapist. He was convicted but let off. He was subsequently found murdered, most probably by her uncles. But she believed that it was her voice that killed him and she did not speak to anyone except her brother Bailey for more than five years. This inward turn drove her to reading and writing that proved to be quite therapeutic. As a young woman, Maya Angelou worked through various kinds of jobs. She married a South African freedom fighter and spent some time in Cairo. But that was short lived and she returned to American and joined up with Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr. in the Civil Rights Movement. Once again, she was devastated after the assassination of both Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr.

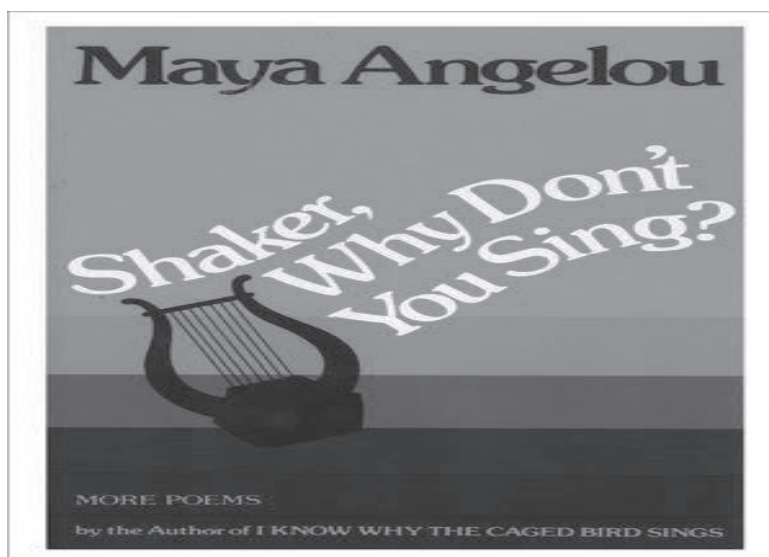
All these experiences, interestingly, did not make her bitter. It made her more determined to rise above her hardships and teach us to love and to forgive. She wrote, "The honorary duty of a human being is to love". In 1969 she published her first autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*; there will be six more in later years.



This book was basically a collection of stories of her childhood and it became an instant hit. She was a prolific writer and wrote about the many varied experiences of her life in a vivid and absorbing style. She went on to win numerous awards and honorary doctorates in her life. She passed away in her home on May 28, 2014.

2.2 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings'

This poem, 'I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings' is from a volume of poetry titled *Shaker, Why Don't You Sing?* that Maya Angelou published in 1983.





This was her fourth volume of poetry. I am sure you must have noticed that her first book was titled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. The title of the book as also this poem is borrowed from a poem by Paul Lawrence Dunbar called “Sympathy” published in 1896.

*I know why the caged bird sings, ah me,
When his wing is bruised and his bosom sore,
When he beats his bars and he would be free;”*

There is deeper connection between the intensely personal experience of the poet as a woman, the image of a cage, and the idea of singing. The early childhood trauma made Mary Angelou turn inward preferring self-imposed silence over speech but this silence was also a cage at the same time. She could easily relate her own experience as a black woman in a deeply racial society with other similarly situated women. She saw herself as caged twice over, as a black Afro-American and then as a woman. It was a cage within a cage. It was during this period of self-imposed silence that her grandmother introduced her to Mrs. Flower and it is this lady, by her own admission, who set her free from her caged silence. It is there that she learnt about the emancipatory power of singing. The idea of singing ones way to freedom allowed her to grow as an individual. The poem “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings” revolves around this idea as do many of her other poems. She firmly believed that black men and women can free themselves by finding their voices, as she herself did, in songs of freedom.

Check Your Progress 1

1. Explain the significance of ‘caged bird’ with reference to the poet’s own life.

3. ‘I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings’

3.1 Stanza - 1 Critical Analysis

“A free bird **leaps**
on the back of the wind
and **floats** downstream
till the current ends
and **dip his wings**
in the orange sun rays
and **dares to claim the sky”**



The first stanza paints a picture of a free bird by using a few powerful images of the very idea of freedom itself. We see a bird floating on the wind with extended wings as the current takes him downstream. The bird's wing tips catch the orange rays of the setting sun. It seems that this little bird is bold enough to claim the sky as its own. The words and images used in the opening stanza sets the tone of the poem and that is the idea of freedom. The idea of exercising a choice is central to the idea of freedom. The free bird occupies the subject position here. He leaps, floats, dips its wings, and dares to claim the sky. He is the master of his actions.

The fact that the bird can 'leap on the back of the wind' whenever it wants is a privilege though we often take for granted. We can only appreciate the value of this privilege in the absence of freedom. Moreover the bird doesn't really struggle to fly. It 'floats' on the wind and is carried downstream. The experience of freedom here is effortless. It dips its wings only when it becomes necessary. The bird is in no hurry. It purveys the world from its position high in the sky and moves wherever it wishes to. It can and it dares to 'claim' the sky because it is not threatened. Because it is truly free. What this stanza is suggesting is that while there are birds that are free and that to be free is a privilege, there are also birds that are un-free. The bird here is a metaphor of freedom and perhaps refers to those white people who enjoyed this privilege as against people of colour who were un-free.

Check Your Progress 2

1. How does the first stanza evoke the idea of freedom?
2. What words and phrases indicate that the bird is the master of its action?
3. Do you think Maya Angelou uses the metaphor of the bird to reflect on inequality in the society?

3.2 Stanza 2 Critical Analysis

"But a bird that **stalks**
down his **narrow cage**
can **seldom** see through
his **bars of rage**
his **wings are clipped** and
his **feet are tied**
so he **opens his throat to sing**"



The second stanza comes as a sharp contrast to the first. We have a caged bird here. And this bird is only able to stalk down its little cage. Its wings are clipped and its feet tied. So, when it can do nothing else, it sings. The stanza begins with a “but” that emphasizes the contrast between a free bird and a caged bird. The caged bird can only stalk the narrow cage. The use of the word “stalk” is quite interesting. The narrow cage has severely restricted the physical space that the bird occupies and forces it to stalk restlessly in the narrow confines of the cage. The physical constraints of the cage are described as “bars of rage” the bars reflect the rage within. The bird is helpless, angry at its own plight. It feels trapped and sees no way out. This is one way in which the poet draws the reader’s attention to the plight of the Black Americans who have faced discrimination and oppression for a long time. At the same time juxtaposing the caged bird with the free bird, the poet is able to bring into focus the deeply racial and unequal nature of American society.

The bird’s wings are clipped and its feet are tied. These images, *clipped wings* and *tied feet* bring out the nature of violent nature of oppression that keeps the bird, and by implication the Black Americans, caged. However, these physical restrictions haven’t completely enslaved the bird. The body is trapped but the soul is not. Despite the hopelessness of its situation, the bird opens its throat to sing. The bird’s response to the confinement is to push back against and resist its enslavement through singing. And what would the bird sing of but freedom. The bird sings against the denial of freedom to float on the wind, to dip its wings any which way it likes and to claim the sky as its own. The juxtaposition of images of freedom in stanza 1 with images of un-freedom of stanza 2 renders the poem powerfully evocative.

Check Your Progress 3

1. What images are used in this stanza to bring out the condition of enslavement of the bird?
2. How does the bird respond to its state of enslavement?

3.3 Stanza 3 Critical Analysis

The caged bird **sings**
with a **fearful trill**
of **things unknown**
but **longed for** still
and his **tune is heard**
on the **distant hill**



for the caged bird

sings of freedom

The third stanza begins to describe the singing of the bird. The “caged bird” sings with a ‘fearful trill’. ‘Trill’ refers to a series of quick and high pitched notes. So the fearful trill of the caged bird would be repeated high pitched and nervous singing. This is not the steady singing of a free bird. What is it that makes the bird’s singing so uncertain and so high pitched? What is it fearful of? The bird is, perhaps, fearful because it is unsure and nervous about its future. It has only known oppression and enslavement. It is not sure if it will ever be free. The bird is singing of ‘things unknown...but longed for’. The bird knows only its cage and nothing of the outside world. Hence when it sings of freedom it is singing about something that it has no knowledge of. Freedom is an unknown category for the bird. It is assailed by anxiety. What does one do when freedom or the things associated with that freedom, become the cause of anxiety. Freedom from confinement could lead to a fear of freedom as well. The trill of the bird, thus, suggests uncertainty. The bird is unsure about ever achieving the freedom that it so desires. And even if it does, will it ever be free of its own ‘bars of rage’? Even if the bars disappear there is a likelihood of the rage lingering on. True freedom is to be free at a physical, mental, and spiritual level. The bird is uncertain if it will ever achieve freedom in its true sense. In this context the birds ‘fearful trill’ adds poignancy and some urgency to the poem.

Though the bird is caged and its song is fearful, it has not been cowed down into silence. The bird, even in the state of un-freedom, refuses to sit quietly. The struggle goes on and this is symbolised by the bird’s singing. It establishes its existence and its power to act through its high pitched trill. It is telling the world that it will not suffer the oppression quietly. This metaphor recalls the struggle of the Black Americans for their civil rights and equality. Maya Angelou herself was a part of the American Civil Rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr.. This was a long struggle and we must remember that music and singing played a big role in mobilising people and giving voice to their aspirations. The songs they sang filled the people with hope and courage. Some of these were songs that were sung by the slaves. The song “We shall overcome” became an unofficial anthem of the Civil rights Movement. I am sure you have heard this song or at least the Hindi version “*Hum honge kamyab*”. In this poem Maya Angelou uses the birds song as a metaphor. She tells us that to hope and to act is to be alive and action is not necessarily movement. Even if the caged bird cannot fly in the sky like the free bird it can still assert its existence through its voice of hope and aspiration. To speak is to exist. The voice of the bird is heard on distant hills and it resonates because it is the voice of freedom, it is the voice of hope and courage.

**Check Your Progress 4**

1. Why is the caged bird singing with a fearful trill?
2. Why is singing important for the bird?

3.4 Stanza 4 Critical Analysis

The free bird thinks of **another breeze**
and the **trade winds soft** through the sighing trees
and the **fat worms waiting** on a **dawn bright lawn**
and **he names the sky his own**

The poet returns to the free bird in this stanza once again. The first two stanzas set up the contrast between the birds and highlight the disparity in the physical space that they occupy. In a similar vein stanza 4 and 5 highlight the different psychological spaces that the birds inhabit. The mental makeup of the birds differs from each other and this difference is the outcome of the differences in their physical existence. By implication, we can say that the poem highlights the difference in the socio-economic condition of the White and the Black Americans and also points to the fact that this socio-economic background shapes, to a very large extent, the mental makeup of the people. Just like the birds, Man is also a product of his circumstances.

This stanza paints a bright picture of the free bird's world. This is a world of possibilities and aspirations. After floating down the back of the wind the bird is already thinking of another breeze and the trade winds blowing softly through the trees. It also hears the sighs of the trees as the wind passes through them. The image here is one of abundance and leisure and joy. The trade winds or easterlies as they are popularly known are extremely important permanent wind systems that cover both the eastern as well as the western hemispheres. They are called trade winds because ships followed the direction of the wind to help them to navigate the oceans. The free bird's world is a world of plenty. The bird thinks of the fat worms that it feeds on, waiting for him on sun-drenched lawns. In this world of plenty, food is indeed waiting for him and he doesn't need to go scouting for it. The free bird lives a privileged existence and this privilege of freedom enables him to claim ownership of the sky.

Check Your Progress 5

1. What images are used in this stanza to convey the ease and abundance of the free bird's world?



3.5 Stanza 5/6 Critical Analysis

But a caged bird stands on the **grave of dreams**
his shadow shouts on a **nightmare scream**
his **wings are clipped and his feet are tied**
so he **opens his throat to sing**
The caged bird **sings**
with a **fearful trill**
of **things unknown**
but **longed for** still
and his **tune is heard**
on the **distant hill**
for the caged bird
sings of freedom

In sharp contrast to stanza 4 where the free bird is luxuriating in the world of plenty, the caged bird in stanza 5 becomes 'a' caged bird that comes to represent all the caged birds. And he is standing on the 'grave of dreams'. The poet now moves from the particular predicament of the caged bird to the general predicament of caged birds. This predicament is highlighted by words like 'grave', 'nightmare', and 'scream'. The death of dreams is a consequence of the bird's enslavement as well as a condition of his existence. The dream of a caged bird ends up in the grave. That is the reality of its existence and yet at the same time it exists because it is able to dream. The duality of the state of enslavement is brought out poignantly in these lines. The nightmarish life that it leads makes even its shadow fearful. The scream represents all the pent up emotions and frustrations that spring from a life of confinement and deprivation. The last two lines of the second stanza are used as a refrain here to emphasize this condition. The bird, faced with impossible odds, sings.

The last stanza is a repetition of stanza 3. It is used as a refrain to assert the importance of singing and thereby declaring to the world its intent to continue its struggle for freedom in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. To reiterate the point made about the importance of singing in section 1.5, it must be said that if people keep singing of freedom it will protect them from despair and fill them with hope. Singing asserts the essential humanity of the oppressed. The bird's song resonates all around it and gives everyone the hope that freedom will be theirs sooner or later and that it is worth fighting



for. The poet uses the contrasting metaphor of a free bird and a caged bird to make the point that freedom is a necessary condition for equality in society. In this poem, the poet sends out a message of hope and humanity embedded within the bird's song.

Check Your Progress 6

1. What do expressions like 'grave of dreams', 'nightmare scream' suggest?
2. Why is the third stanza repeated at the end?

4. What Have We Learnt So Far

Some of the things that we have learnt in this lesson are:

- ◆ One needs to pay special attention to the language and literary devices used in a poem to understand poems better.
- ◆ At a very basic level, apart from teaching us the subtle nuances of using language, reading poetry connects us to a wider experience
- ◆ Maya Angelou is one of the foremost 20th century Afro-American writers. She was a writer, poet, activist, singer composer, actor, all at once.
- ◆ Maya Angelou's poem "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" is about the Afro-American experience of oppression and their historical struggle against it.
- ◆ The poem explores the world of the Afro-American people and their struggle for civil rights and equality, through the metaphor of a caged bird.
- ◆ The caged bird suffers a level of deprivation that, apart from physically enslaving it, damages its psyche as well. But the bird doesn't disintegrate. It fights back and sends out a note of hope and courage to others through its song.

5. Glossary

Downstream: In the direction in which a stream or river flows

Stalks: Move silently or threateningly through (a place).

Seldom: Not often; rarely.

Rage: Violent uncontrollable anger.

Clipped: Cut off a thing or part of a thing with shears or scissors.

Trill: Produce a quavering or warbling sound.

Nightmare: A frightening or unpleasant dream.



June Jordan, 'Poem About My Rights'

Dikshya Samantarai

Structure

1. Introduction
2. Learning Objectives
3. African American Writing and Its Contexts
4. June Millicent Jordan (1936-2002); The Author and her Work
5. 'Poem about My Rights': Summary and Analysis
6. Summing Up
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1. Introduction

June Jordan's 'Poem about My Rights' is a profound piece of free verse poetry that explores in depth and reflects upon various social issues, including but not limited to sexism, racism, and political biases. This work emerges as a significant and politically charged feminist composition of the 20th century. Using a stream-of-consciousness approach, this contemporary poem deliberately omits full stops, incorporates enjambment, and presents fragmented lines, all aimed at challenging established conventions. The unconventional structure of the poem serves to mirror the overarching themes of perplexity and unrest, encapsulated within a singular stanza comprising 114 lines of diverse lengths and meters. By intentionally getting rid of conventional punctuation marks, save for backslashes, the poet underscores the interconnected nature of the concepts explored and heightens the organic flow of introspection.

2. Learning Objectives

After reading this unit, you'll be able to:

- ◆ Critically engage with African American literature of the 20th century.
- ◆ Develop a sense of the socio-political settings of 1960s and 70s America.
- ◆ Appreciate June Jordan as a feminist and political writer.



- ◆ Appreciate the poem titled '*Poem about My Rights*'.
- ◆ Critically analyse themes like African American identity rights and Women's rights vis-a-vis the poem.

3. African American Writing and Its Contexts

Following the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery, there emerged an educated and aware middle class African Americans. They engaged in writing literature of protest, highlighting the systemic injustices that their race had suffered for centuries. This literature served as a starting point for the Black literary canon to be established in the following decades. Harlem Renaissance is considered as one of the most crucial periods for the development and expansion of Black literature in the early 20th century. This movement, which was centred in the Harlem neighbourhood of New York City, brought together a flourishing group of Black writers, artists, and intellectuals who sought to express their experiences and challenge the racial prejudices and stereotypes that were prevalent in society at the time. The Harlem Renaissance, which spanned from the 1920s to the middle of 1930s, was not only a literary movement but also a social and cultural one, encompassing music, theatre, and visual arts. It was a time when Black artists and creators were able to freely express their talents and showcase their work to a wider audience, gaining recognition and respect for their contributions to American culture. Poets like Langston Hughes, Claude McKay and novelists like Jean Toomer and Harold Fisher were at the forefront of this movement, using their writing to critique white aesthetics. They exhibited a hitherto unbound self-confidence and awareness regarding their racial identities.

Following the Great Depression, this literary output slowed down considerably. But from 1940 onwards there emerged a new form of African American writing that was steeped in social realism and had distinct political undertones. Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* and *Native Son*, reflect his Marxist ideals coupled with the depiction of the violent history of Blacks in America. In the same period, other influential African American authors, such as Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, also contributed to this literary movement. In 1949, James Baldwin critiqued protest literature, arguing that it generalized humanity. *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison responded to Baldwin's call for a new portrayal of the Black protagonist in post-Depression, post-World War II America. Ellison's narrative features an unnamed Black protagonist on a journey from South to North for success, leading to self-discovery through ironic revelations. Critics compare him to *Odysseus* and *Candide*, praising Ellison's infusion of Western literary essence. *The Invisible Man* symbolizes a Black American's struggle that is enlightening.



During the 1950s and 1960s, a range of literary, cultural, and political advancements, involving Black women writers like Lorraine Hansberry, Adrienne Kennedy, Alice Walker, and Gwendolyn and their growing representation in and influence on the women's rights movement led to what is known as the "the Black women's literary renaissance" of the 1970s. Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Maya Angelou emerged as leading figures during this period, producing some of the most powerful and enduring works of literature. Morrison and Walker's achievements contributed to creating an environment that was conducive to artistic investigations into race, gender, and class across various literary genres. This led to the recognition of novelists like Paule Marshall, Octavia E. Butler, Gayl Jones, and Jamaica Kincaid, poets like Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Rita Dove, and playwrights like Ntozake Shange.

3.1 African American Rights in US

Slavery in the United States officially came to an end with the passing of the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. However, the long-lasting effects of this cruel institution on the African American community lingered on. Despite the Civil War legally ending slavery, racial prejudice against Black African Americans persisted, particularly in the South, causing much hardship. In the mid-20th century, Black Americans, along with many others, embarked on a twenty-year-long unprecedented fight for equality. This fight, known as the Civil Rights Movement, aimed to end racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans, providing them with the same rights and opportunities as their White counterparts. It spanned from the mid-1950s to the late 1970s and was marked by significant events such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 and the March on Washington in 1963. These events brought together key figures of the movement, such as Martin Luther King Jr., who delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech during the March on Washington. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a significant legislative achievement of this movement. This act prohibited discrimination on the basis of race, colour, religion, sex, or national origin. It was a major victory in the civil rights movement, and its passage marked a turning point in the fight for equality and justice in the United States. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 changed the course of American history, paving the way for further advancements in civil rights and inspiring future generations to continue the fight for equality. It served as a catalyst for subsequent civil rights legislations, including the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibited discriminatory voting practices that had been used to prevent Black Americans from exercising their right to vote.

3.2 Apartheid

According to Britannica.Com, Apartheid, derived from the Afrikaans term "apartness," refers to the system that regulated interactions between the white minority and the non-white



majority in South Africa during a major part of the 20th century. While racial segregation was a longstanding practice in the region, the term apartheid was officially adopted around 1948 to refer to the racial segregation policies endorsed by the white minority administration. Apartheid stipulated the residential areas, employment opportunities, educational access, and voting rights based on an individuals' racial background. It was implemented by the National Party government in South Africa from 1948 and continued until the early 1990s. The 1960s and 1970s were pivotal decades in the history of apartheid, marked by intensified resistance, increased international condemnation, and the implementation of stricter apartheid laws. The early 1990s witnessed the abolishment of legislated apartheid. However, the impact on society and the economy persisted for a significant period.

In the 1960s, the U.S. was cautious in its approach to apartheid, largely due to South Africa's strategic importance as a source of minerals critical for the U.S. defence industry and its position as a counterbalance to Soviet influence in Africa (Monson, 2012). During this period, the U.S. government's official stance towards South Africa was influenced by Cold War dynamics, with a focus on anti-communism rather than human rights or racial justice. However, this period also saw the emergence of significant opposition to apartheid within the U.S., particularly among civil rights groups and the African American community, who drew parallels between their own struggle for civil rights and the fight against apartheid (Klotz, 1999). This solidarity was based on the shared experience of discrimination and oppression, as well as a desire to see a more equitable world.

3.3 Women's Liberation in the US

The Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960s in the United States marked a significant step towards gender equality, as it challenged traditional gender roles and advocated equal rights for women across various spheres including employment, education, and reproductive rights. This movement was a part of the larger second-wave feminism that sought to go beyond the earlier focus on securing voting and property rights, which were the main concerns of the first wave of feminism. The Women's Liberation Movement was characterized by grassroots campaigning, protests, and the formation of feminist groups, such as the National Organization for Women (NOW). It was founded in 1966 to address issues of workplace discrimination, equal pay, and legal and social equality of women (Freeman, 1975).

African American women played a crucial role in the Women's Liberation Movement, yet their experiences and contributions were often overshadowed by the predominantly white middle-class narrative of the movement. African American women faced a unique intersection of discrimination based on both their gender and race; a concept later defined



as “intersectionality” by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s (Crenshaw, 1989). They were active in civil rights movements and brought attention to specific issues affecting Black women, which were not always addressed by the mainstream feminist movement. Groups like the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), founded in 1973, sought to address these unique challenges, advocating for an inclusive movement that recognized the diverse experiences of women in America (Springer, 2002). Their efforts to navigate and address the dual oppressions of racism and sexism laid the groundwork for the development of Black feminist thought and the broader acknowledgment of intersectionality within feminist theory and activism (Collins, 2000).

Check Your Progress I

- I. Trace the evolution of African American literature from the Harlem Renaissance to the Black women’s literary renaissance, emphasizing themes of identity, empowerment, and social change.
- II. What were the key goals of the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-20th century?
- III. How did the U.S. government’s stance towards apartheid in South Africa in the 1960s reflect Cold War dynamics?
- IV. Why did the African American community in the U.S. show solidarity with the fight against apartheid in South Africa?
- V. In what ways did the Women’s Liberation Movement in the U.S. in the 1960s advocate for gender equality?
- VI. Why were African American women in the Women’s Liberation Movement advocating for an inclusive approach that recognized diverse experiences?

4. June Millicent Jordan (1936-2002); The Author and her Work

Known as a leading female writer of colour, Jordan has left a strong impact on American and world literature with her influential writings. She was a teacher, a poet, an essayist, an activist and her work encapsulated various topics including race, gender, and African American experiences, touching on important political issues of her times. Born in Harlem, New York, on July 9, 1936, to Jamaican parents, she passed away in 2002 after battling breast cancer. She authored over 27 books, showcasing her diverse talent across different genres. Some of her works include *Naming Our Destiny: New and Selected Poems* (1989), *Civil Wars: Observations from the Front Lines of America* (1981), *His Own Where* (1971), *Who Look at Me* (1969), *Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood* (2001), *Some of Us Did Not Die: New and Selected Essays of June Jordan* (2002), and *Haruko/Love Poems* (1994).



She rose to prominence during the latter part of the 1960s through active involvement in movements supporting civil rights, women's liberation, and anti-racism, advocating ardently for freedom and a range of contemporary societal concerns. She dedicatedly confronted oppression wherever it arose, whether through her voice or through tangible initiatives. Renowned for her meticulous, influential, and elaborate writing style, Jordan exhibited a talent for crafting political proclamations condemning violence with the same fervour that she infused into her abundant collection of love poems.

Often characterized as a “rebel poet,” a “poet of the people,” Jordan found inspiration in the literary heritage of Walt Whitman, the profound works of Langston Hughes, the eloquence of Pablo Neruda, and the harmonious compositions of Beethoven. Jordan greatly admired these significant individuals, viewing them as sources of valuable teachings on seriousness and genuineness that are essential in sincere, remarkable, lyrical, and touching literary works. Her body of work serves as a remarkable compilation of stories, presenting sharp social analyses on the challenges faced by individuals entangled in complex race and gender dynamics, as they manoeuvre through their existence in the American landscape. Being the offspring of West Indian migrants who came to America during the dynamic era of the 1920s, Jordan's literary creations display a deep engagement with these subjects.

Check Your Progress II

- I. How did June Jordan actively participate in advocating for freedom during the late 1960s?
- II. Which literary figures influenced June Jordan's work, and how did she draw inspiration from them?

5. 'Poem about My Rights': Summary and Analysis

Lines 1-9

*Even tonight and I need to take a walk and clear
my head about this poem about why I can't
go out without changing my clothes my shoes
my body posture my gender identity my age
my status as a woman alone in the evening/
alone on the streets/alone not being the point/*



*the point being that I can't do what I want
to do with my own body because I am the wrong
sex the wrong age the wrong skin and*

The poem starts with the pressing need to go for a walk to reflect on the need to write and the things that she should be writing about. Using plain words like “the wrong sex,” “the wrong age,” and “the wrong skin,” the speaker swiftly encapsulates the themes of race and gender. The fact that women need to make several adjustments to what they wear or how they look to just take a walk foregrounds the challenges a woman faces in her everyday mundane activities and more so when you are a woman of colour. These lines suggest that she speaks from personal experience. Published in 1978 during the second wave of feminism, the poem reflects on the prevalent discussions on sexism and misogyny. The speaker’s need to clear her head before speaking shows her deep contemplation on these issues of social and racial discriminations.

Lines 10-20

*suppose it was not here in the city but down on the beach/
or far into the woods and I wanted to go
there by myself thinking about God/or thinking
about children or thinking about the world/all of it
disclosed by the stars and the silence:
I could not go and I could not think and I could not
stay there
alone
as I need to be
alone because I can't do what I want to do with my own
body and*

These lines reveal the fetters placed on her movements, and by implication on women in general. She has very little freedom to undertake even something as simple as going somewhere to be alone or just think. A woman has no control even on her own body. The speaker’s desire to retreat to contemplate on deep topics like God and the world points to a reflective and introspective mood that highlights how constrained rights can hinder personal growth. The mention of thinking about children shows her compassionate nature. The speaker’s observations on social restrictions, is just as relevant today as it was in 1978.

**Lines 21-44**

*who in the hell set things up
like this
and in France they say if the guy penetrates
but does not ejaculate then he did not rape me
and if after stabbing him if after screams if
after begging the bastard and if even after smashing
a hammer to his head if even after that if he
and his buddies fuck me after that
then I consented and there was
no rape because finally you understand finally
they fucked me over because I was wrong I was
wrong again to be me being me where I was/wrong
to be who I am
which is exactly like South Africa
penetrating into Namibia penetrating into
Angola and does that mean I mean how do you know if
Pretoria ejaculates what will the evidence look like the
proof of the monster jackboot ejaculation on Blackland
and if
after Namibia and if after Angola and if after Zimbabwe
and if after all of my kinsmen and women resist even to
self-immolation of the villages and if after that
we lose nevertheless what will the big boys say will they
claim my consent:*

In these lines, the speaker delves deeper into the reasons behind the suppression she faces, intensifying the poem's urgency. Her language becomes more direct and sharper, while vividly depicting the harsh realities of women's struggles, focusing particularly on sexual assault as a prominent form of misogyny. Coming as it does after the lines that shows her desire for solitude, the violence in these lines is quite startling. The alliterative portions of



the poem like 'begging the bastards' creates a feeling of rough struggle faced by victims of sexual violence. The speaker uses rape as a metaphor to highlight not just the sexual violence that it entails but also lay bare the operation of power. The powerful violate the powerless. The powerlessness of the victim is construed as consent and, ironically, that becomes the justification for the violence. Drawing a parallel between the woman's body and political geography of Africa, the speaker highlights the subterfuge used by the dominant white races to subdue the powerless. The victims, just like the speaker here, after suffering the trauma end up playing the oppressors game and blame themselves for being what they are. The reflection on what would constitute rape reveals the callous indifference with which the terms are defined. You will see that the idea of rape as an exercise of power persists throughout the poem.

Discussing consent introduces another theme in the poem: the right to freely express oneself and the patriarchal disregard for it, as debates on consent persist in society. In the poet's time, laws surrounding sexual assault were regressive in most parts of the world. She specifically mentions France where according to the law a rape couldn't be established if the perpetrator did not ejaculate on or inside the woman. By describing the specificity of the absurd law in graphic detail, Jordan forces the readers to confront the issue at hand. Towards the end of this section, the speaker's frustration with the plight of women becomes evident. Despite their best efforts to the contrary women are rendered victims by the "big boys", ironically highlighting the lack of power and agency women experience in such situations.

Lines 45-56

*Do You Follow Me: We are the wrong people of
the wrong skin on the wrong continent and what
in the hell is everybody being reasonable about
and according to the Times this week
back in 1966 the C.I.A. decided that they had this problem
and the problem was a man named Nkrumah so they
killed him and before that it was Patrice Lumumba
and before that it was my father on the campus
of my Ivy League school and my father afraid
to walk into the cafeteria because he said he*



*was wrong the wrong age the wrong skin the wrong
gender identity and he was paying my tuition and*

These lines mark a shift in the speaker's focus from misogyny to racism. This is also the first direct address to the audience. The speaker, in her typical style, shares personal encounters with racism, briefly touching on the theme of US government's interference in South Africa in a bid to maintain Apartheid. Reference to "the Times" alludes to a specific New York Times article, "C.I.A. Said to Have Aided Plotters Who Overthrew Nkrumah in Ghana," published around the same time as 'Poem about My Rights', hence the mention of "this week." By integrating such detailed references, the poem gains a raw and engaging quality. Additionally, the speaker highlights the injustice faced by late African activists like Ghana's President Kwame Nkrumah and the Democratic Republic of Congo's Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, due to racism and colonialism.

"We are the wrong people of/ the wrong skin on the wrong continent" sums up the historical and systemic injustice that Africans have faced as a race for ages. In spite of this awareness, the speaker, possibly overwhelmed with emotions, presents misinformation regarding the fate of her "kinsmen." While Nkrumah was ousted from power, Lumumba was indeed assassinated, not just removed from office. The repeated use of "wrong" in these lines underscores the theme of racism. But in an ironic twist, she refers to herself as the "wrong" here rather than the actual perpetrators of injustice. Given the tension in the poem at this point, this repetition may carry a note of sarcasm.

Check Your Progress III

- I. How does June Jordan's poem 'Poem about My Rights' challenge established conventions through its structure and use of punctuation?
- II. What themes are explored in the opening lines of the poem and how do they set the tone for the rest of the poem?
- III. In lines 10-20 what does the speaker reveal about the limitations and struggles faced by women in society?
- IV. How does June Jordan address issues of sexual assault, specifically focusing on women of colour, in lines 21-44?
- V. In lines 45-56, how does the speaker shift the focus from misogyny to racism, and what specific historical references are made?
- VI. How does the repetition of the word "wrong" in lines 45-56 contribute to the overall theme of racism in the poem?



Lines 57-67

before that

*it was my father saying I was wrong saying that
I should have been a boy because he wanted one/a
boy and that I should have been lighter skinned and
that I should have had straighter hair and that
I should not be so boy crazy but instead I should
just be one/a boy and before that*

*it was my mother pleading plastic surgery for
my nose and braces for my teeth and telling me
to let the books loose to let them loose in other
words*

In these lines, the speaker transitions from discussing racism to addressing sexism and colourism. True to her style, she draws from personal experiences. Unlike before, where the issues highlighted were distant from her, the focus now turns to the speaker's own family. The progression of thought in these lines reveals the depth of the speaker's introspection, offering readers more insight into the challenges faced by black individuals from within their own community. The speaker exposes the underlying beliefs at home, such as fathers valuing sons over daughters, mothers seeing education as unnecessary for women who should prioritize looks, and the preference for lighter skin over darker tones. The sense of the 'wrong' it seems, begins at home. These beliefs remain topics of discussion within African and African American communities even today.

Lines 68-76

*I am very familiar with the problems of the C.I.A.
and the problems of South Africa and the problems
of Exxon Corporation and the problems of white
America in general and the problems of the teachers
and the preachers and the F.B.I. and the social
workers and my particular Mom and Dad/I am very
familiar with the problems because the problems
turn out to be
me*



In these lines, the speaker recaps all the social issues covered so far. She combines all facets of her identity as a wise dark-skinned African American woman. Additionally, she points out the various offenders who take issue with these intersecting aspects of her being. These lines are the most powerful in the poem. The problems that she faces do not exist outside of her. She is the problem; It is her history, her ancestry, her identity, and her location.

Lines 77-101

*I am the history of rape
I am the history of the rejection of who I am
I am the history of the terrorized incarceration of
myself
I am the history of battery assault and limitless
armies against whatever I want to do with my mind
and my body and my soul and
whether it's about walking out at night
or whether it's about the love that I feel or
whether it's about the sanctity of my vagina or
the sanctity of my national boundaries
or the sanctity of my leaders or the sanctity
of each and every desire
that I know from my personal and idiosyncratic
and indisputably single and singular heart
I have been raped
be-
cause I have been wrong the wrong sex the wrong age
the wrong skin the wrong nose the wrong hair the
wrong need the wrong dream the wrong geographic
the wrong sartorial I
I have been the meaning of rape
I have been the problem everyone seeks to*



*eliminate by forced
penetration with or without the evidence of slime and/*

This poem underscores the impact of the injustices faced by black individuals. The poem highlights some consequences of being a woman of colour by prefacing them with “the history of.” This phrase presents the speaker as the living testimony of the social injustices endured by black people. The speaker uses vivid and forceful language to unsettle the readers, particularly those who may be responsible for such injustices.

Lines 102-114

*but let this be unmistakable this poem
is not consent I do not consent
to my mother to my father to the teachers to
the F.B.I. to South Africa to Bedford-Stuy
to Park Avenue to American Airlines to the hardon
idlers on the corners to the sneaky creeps in
cars
I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name
My name is my own my own my own
and I can't tell you who the hell set things up like this
but I can tell you that from now on my resistance
my simple and daily and nightly self-determination
may very well cost you your life*

You must have noticed that the poem starts with the self and then moves on through personal history to the history of the family, the community and nations before turning back again to the self. The circular motion of the narrative is also an inward movement. The ‘wrongs’ that she listed out can only be righted by beginning with the self. The strength to fight comes from the refusal to be a victim. There is a change of tone in the final lines of the poem. The poet refuses to stay a victim. She is willing to fight back and assert her identity. She is not ‘wrong’ and that if anything is wrong then it is ‘them’ the oppressors. The ending is empowering for black women and men of colour who find parts of the poem relatable. The repeated phrase “my own” in line 110 symbolizes the speaker reclaiming rights that were initially suppressed. Line 113 urges her community to



resist oppression through simple actions. The poem concludes with a forceful and slightly menacing tone often seen in certain activist writings.

Check Your Progress IV

- I. Describe the beliefs and attitudes within the speaker's family regarding sexism and colourism as depicted in lines 57-67.
- II. How does this poem underscore the impact of injustices faced by black individuals in lines 77-101?
- III. Explain the symbolism behind the repeated phrase "my own" in line 110 and its significance in the context of the poem.
- IV. Discuss how the themes of empowerment, reclaiming rights, and resistance against oppression are manifested throughout the poem.

6. Summing Up

- ◆ The poet, through this poem, delves into themes such as systemic oppression and injustice, reflecting on social issues like sexism, racism, and political biases. She also explores the debilitating impact of oppression on black individuals within their own community.
- ◆ Further, the poem addresses the intersections of race, gender, and identity, highlighting the challenges faced by black women due to discrimination based on both race and gender, and delves into the complexities of colourism and sexism within African and African American communities. Moreover, the poem portrays the speaker's journey towards reclaiming suppressed rights and resisting oppression and advocates for empowerment through personal and collective action.
- ◆ The poem draws a parallel between the speaker's personal experiences and significant socio-political movements of her times. It highlights the racial and sexist injustices endured by black people and emphasizes the importance of the struggle for equality and justice. Regarding The poet, through reflective insights and a compelling tone, tries to inspire women and men of colour to fight for their own empowerment and secure social justice and change.

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