

K N Govt. P G College, Gyanpur

M.A. SEMESTER II (ENGLISH)

PAPER V

TWENTIETH CENTURY LITERATURE

(SHORT NOTES)

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UNIT-I SOCIAL AND LITERARY SCENE

I. ALBERT CAMUS: THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS [Chapter 1 and 4]

- *Myth of Sisyphus* is a 1942 philosophical essay by Albert Camus. The English translation by Justin O'Brien was first published in 1955.
- Influenced by the philosophers Søren Kierkegaard, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Friedrich Nietzsche, Camus argues that life is essentially meaningless, although humans continue to try to impose order on existence and to look for answers to unanswerable questions.
- Camus uses the Greek legend of Sisyphus, who is condemned by the gods for eternity to repeatedly roll a boulder up a hill only to have it roll down again once he got it to the top, as a metaphor for the individual's persistent struggle against the essential absurdity of life.
- According to Camus, the first step an individual must take is to accept the fact of this absurdity.
- If, as for Sisyphus, suicide is not a possible response, the only alternative is to rebel by rejoicing in the act of rolling the boulder up the hill.

- Camus further argues that with the joyful acceptance of the struggle against defeat, the individual gains definition and identity.

Chapter 1: An Absurd Reasoning

- Camus undertakes the task of answering what he considers to be the only question of philosophy that matters: Does the realization of the meaninglessness and absurdity of life necessarily require suicide?
- He begins by describing the absurd condition: we build our life on the hope for tomorrow, yet tomorrow brings us closer to death and is the ultimate enemy; people live their lives as if they were not aware of the certainty of death.
- Once stripped of its common romanticism, the world is a foreign, strange and inhuman place; true knowledge is impossible and rationality and science cannot explain the world: their stories ultimately end in meaningless abstractions, in metaphors.
- This is the absurd condition and "from the moment absurdity is recognized, it becomes a passion, the most harrowing of all."

Chapter 4: The Myth of Sisyphus

- In the last chapter, Camus outlines the legend of Sisyphus who defied the gods and put Death in chains so that no human needed to die. When Death was eventually liberated and it came time for Sisyphus himself to die, he concocted a deceit which let him escape from the underworld.
- After finally capturing Sisyphus, the gods decided that his punishment would last for all eternity. He would have to push a rock up a mountain; upon reaching the top, the rock would roll down again, leaving Sisyphus to start over.
- Camus sees Sisyphus as the absurd hero who lives life to the fullest, hates death, and is condemned to a meaningless task.
- Camus presents Sisyphus's ceaseless and pointless toil as a metaphor for modern lives spent working at futile jobs in factories and offices. "The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and this fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious."

2. JEAN PAUL SARTRE: EXISTENTIALISM AND HUMAN EMOTIONS

- Jean Paul Sartre was a French philosopher, playwright, novelist, screenwriter, political activist, biographer, and literary critic. His work 'Existentialism and Human Emotions' was published in 1948.
- Sartre's existentialism is a philosophy that tries to face the implications of a universe without purpose. We are therefore personally responsible for what we are and what we do.
- There are no values external to the human being and no given human nature which defines or obligates us. Radically speaking, man chooses his values and makes himself, and may therefore choose to be a different person.
- Sartre's existentialism is defined by the slogan "Existence precedes Essence." We create our own nature, because we are thrown into existence first without a predetermined nature and only later do we construct our nature or essence through our actions.
- Jean-Paul Sartre refutes the idea that existentialism drains meaning from human life, by claiming that the philosophy instead gives man total freedom to achieve his own significance.

This can be summarized in these statements:

1. We have no predetermined nature or essence that controls what we are, what we do, or what is valuable for us.
2. We are radically free to act independently of determination by outside influences.
3. We create our own human nature through these free choices.
4. We also create our values through these choices.

1. W.B.YEATS:

I. BYZANTIUM

- William Butler Yeats was an Irish poet and one of the foremost figures of 20th-century literature.
- *Byzantium* is his symbolic poem that started life as a note in the diary of W.B.Yeats in 1930.
- He'd long been an admirer of Byzantine art and culture and wanted to combine this passion with his belief in the spiritual journey of the artistic human soul.
- It has a sister poem 'Sailing to Byzantium' published earlier in 1925.
- Byzantium started life as a Greek colony before becoming Constantinople under the Romans and is now modern Istanbul - the feeling persists that this could all be someone's exuberant dream laid bare in the imagination of Yeats.
- It is known that Yeats had a great enthusiasm for the ancient culture of Byzantium. He believed it represented an ideal, that the community who lived and worked there were somehow united in spiritual and artistic purpose.
- There are several interwoven themes noted in *Byzantium*:
 - ◆ Battle Between Immortality and The Creative Process
 - ◆ Human imperfection and the perfected form of art
 - ◆ Nature versus Art
 - ◆ Spiritual Regeneration Through Aesthetics
 - ◆ Tension Between Terrestrial Life and Soul Life

II. SAILING TO BYZANTIUM

- "Sailing to Byzantium" is a poem by W.B. Yeats first published in the 1928 collection 'The Tower'.
- It uses a journey to Byzantium (Constantinople) as a metaphor for a spiritual journey.
- Yeats explores his thoughts and musings on how immortality, art, and the human spirit may converge.
- Through the use of various poetic techniques, Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" describes the metaphorical journey of a man pursuing his own vision of eternal life as well as his conception of paradise.
- "Sailing to Byzantium," is essentially about the difficulty of keeping one's soul alive in a fragile, failing human body.

2. T S ELIOT: THE WASTELAND

- Thomas Stearnes Eliot was a poet, essayist, publisher playwright, literary critic and editor.
- He is considered one of the major poet of the 20th century.
- The Wasteland was published in 1922.
- It is regarded as a central of modernist poetry.
- The main theme of Eliot's poem "The Waste Land" is the decay of the Western world which is barren means devoid of traditional values. According to Eliot, present day culture is a kind of wreckage of the past. He says that present age is a post- historical age-devoid of the greatness of the previous ages.
- The waste land is also a metaphor here: in which the significant things are the remaining fragments of the past.
- The poem has many allusions to past cultural symbols and quotes or paraphrases of past literature. For example, the very opening lines of the poem:
 - April is the cruellest month.....
- Is a paraphrase of the prologue to Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales". But Chaucer's view of spring as a time of hope and renewal is changed into despair here.

- “The Waste Land” is a poem of intellectual’s resignation and despair. Further Eliot has feeling that the modern world is meaningless and chaotic.

3. PHILIP LARKIN

I. NEXT, PLEASE

- Philip Larkin is one of Britain’s most celebrated poet of the 20th century.
- His poem Next, Please is a bleak reflection on life and the inevitability of death.
- He argues that people spend too long fixated on the future, forgetting to live in the present. In this poem he looks at people who have wasted their present, waiting for a future that never comes.
- Larkin implores the reader to focus on the present, before it’s too late.
- The title ‘Next Please’ summarises the sense of urgency the people feel within the poem.
- *Next, Please* founds itself upon the extended metaphor of ships in the distance representing the future. This far off ‘armada’ is glorified, with Larkin’s imagery painting the sought future as something remarkable and beautiful. He depicts people as waiting on the shores of the present, looking out over an ocean, longing for their futures.
- Instead of representing promise, the ship in Stanza 5 is used to represent death. This sudden change from the glorified future to the harsh actuality of approaching death is incredibly depressing.
- In this poem ‘Next’ symbolises the future, with the demand for its arrival suggesting a dangerous disregard of the present. In this poem Larkin is pointing out the stupidity of asking for the future instead of enjoying the present. While the future does indeed draw closer, so does the inevitability of death.

II. HIGH WINDOWS

- "High Windows" is a poem from Philip Larkin.
- Written in 1967, this poem explores the onset of the era of sexual liberation from the point of view of a persona past his youth.
- In the poem, he makes his personal observations figure in this rather new climate of *free love*. Though the sexual revolution broke out in the US in the 1960s, it wasn't until the 1970s to 80s that Britain followed suit.
- The poet is probably speaking of the 1920s, an equally ripe time in terms of revolutionizing the world socially, politically, culturally, and economically. Fondly called "the roaring 20s," this was an era of liberation from rigid thought and existing social structures as well. As the country reshaped itself in the midst of the devastating effects of war, tightly held belief systems were suddenly being dismantled in 1920s Britain.
- High windows depict largeness of space with their placement above standard height. They participate in one's confinement by being part of the wall in marking the limits of interior space. They give a glimpse, however, of what is beyond.

4. TED HUGHES

I. HAWK ROOSTING

- "Hawk Roosting" is a poem by Ted Hughes, one of the 20th century's most prominent poets. It was published in 1960.
- In the poem, a hawk is given the power of speech and thought, allowing the reader to imagine what it's like to inhabit the instincts, attitudes, and behaviours of such a creature.
- It is a typical Ted Hughes animal poem, being unsentimental and unromantic. The poet concentrates on the dominance of the hawk, as it sits in the wood reflecting on what it is and what it does. The hawk has an air of authority, looking down on the world from its high vantage point in the trees and feeling like everything belongs to it.

- The poem is particularly keen to stress the way that violence, in the hawk's world at least, is not some kind of moral wrong—but a part of nature. Being at the top of the food chain this bird's instinct is to hunt down quarry; it lives by the deaths of other creatures; it kills in order to survive. It has no enemies except perhaps for humans so it does not fear life as other creatures further down the chain fear it.
- 'Hawk Roosting' on its literal level of meaning is an expression of a bird of prey, the hawk.
- The poem is an implicit satire on a tyrant that the bird represents. More generally, it could be said that the bird is a symbol of the human evils of arrogance, destructiveness, conceited and egotistical attitude, obsession of power and tyranny; in short, the hawk is a symbol of inhumanity.

II. THE THOUGHT FOX

- 'The thought-fox', published in 1957, is a poem about writing a poem.
- Its external action takes place in a room late at night where the poet is sitting alone at his desk. Outside the night is starless, silent, and totally black. But the poet senses a presence which disturbs him.
- The disturbance is not in the external darkness of the night, for the night is itself a metaphor for the deeper and more intimate darkness of the poet's imagination in whose depths an idea is mysteriously stirring.
- The remote stirrings of the poem are compared to the stirrings of an animal – a fox, whose body is invisible, but which feels its way forward nervously through the dark undergrowth.
- Ted Hughes is popularly known for the use of animal imagery.
- The title of the poem itself is loaded with animal imagery where the fox is compared with the thought process of a writer before composing something great.
- This process beautifully connotes the forming of the thought more clear and concrete. The shadow of the fox is becoming more clear and clear and its advancement through the snowy woods, leaving the foot print beautifully and artistically states that the dim thought is now clear and it is being printed in white paper. The white snow with the foot print stand for the blank paper printed with the poetic creation of the poet.

1. G B SHAW: SAINT JOAN

- George Bernard Shaw was an Irish playwright, critic, and political activist.
- He published the play in 1924, and won the Nobel Prize for literature the following year.
- Saint Joan is a play by George Bernard Shaw about 15th-century French military figure Joan of Arc. Saint Joan chronicles the life, death, and legacy of Joan of Arc.
- Joan, though she is a simple country lass, stands out above all others due to her honesty and honour. She has tremendous faith in her "voices" which, she is convinced, convey God's commands to her. Her faith remains unshaken — except for her brief recantation during her trial — through all her "miracles," victories and ordeals.
- Not only did she challenge the place of women, but her actions attacked the entire power structure of medieval society. By making the King in charge of everything, she took power away from the feudal lords. By saying she got her information directly from God, she challenged the power of the Church.
- Armed with the power of her convictions (and occasionally a sword), Joan of Arc went up against every major establishment of her day. English invaders, the Catholic Church, a male-dominated society, Joan opposed it. She backed down for no one, convinced in her heart that her cause was just.
- By standing up for herself in a world that was totally stacked against her, Joan is an inspiration. As one of the first feminists, women can look to her example as she proved that she was just as capable as the men. As a free thinker, she proved that divine inspiration was not just something the Church could hand out whenever it felt like it. Joan is still inspiring as a person who was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for what she believed in.

- *Saint Joan* digs into the details of the tragedy, and brings the dusty story of Joan of Arc into the modern world.

2. SAMUEL BECKETT: WAITING FOR GODOT

- Samuel Beckett was an Irish novelist, playwright, short story writer, theatre director, poet, and literary translator.
- *Waiting for Godot* is a play by Samuel Beckett in which two characters, Vladimir (Didi) and Estragon (Gogo), engage in a variety of discussions and encounters while awaiting Godot, who never arrives.
- *Waiting for Godot* is Beckett's translation of his own original French-language play, *En attendant Godot*, and is subtitled (in English only) "a tragicomedy in two acts". The original French text was composed between 9 October 1948 and 29 January 1949. The English-language version premiered in London in 1955.
- In a poll conducted by the British Royal National Theatre in 1998/99, it was voted the "most significant English language play of the 20th century".
- *Waiting for Godot* is a prime example of what has come to be known as the theatre of the absurd. The play is filled with nonsensical lines, wordplay, meaningless dialogue, and characters who abruptly shift emotions and forget everything, ranging from their own identities to what happened yesterday.
- All of this contributes to an absurdist humour throughout the play. However, this humour is often uncomfortably mixed together with tragic or serious content to make a darker kind of comedy.
- As Beckett's title indicates, the central act of the play is waiting, and one of the most salient aspects of the play is that nothing really seems to happen. Vladimir and Estragon spend the entire play waiting for Godot, who never comes. Estragon repeatedly wants to leave, but Vladimir insists that they stay, in case Godot actually shows up.

UNIT-IV FICTION

1. JOSEPH CONRAD: HEART OF DARKNESS

- Joseph Conrad was a Polish-British writer regarded as one of the greatest novelists to write in the English language.
- *Heart of Darkness* is a novella by Polish-English novelist Joseph Conrad about a narrated voyage up the Congo River into the Congo Free State in the *Heart of Africa*. Charles Marlow, the narrator, tells his story to friends aboard a boat anchored on the River Thames. This setting provides the frame for Marlow's story of his obsession with the successful ivory trader Kurtz. Conrad offers parallels between London ("the greatest town on earth") and Africa as places of darkness.
- *Heart of Darkness* examines the horrors of Western colonialism, depicting it as a phenomenon that tarnishes not only the lands and peoples it exploits but also those in the West who advance it.
- Although garnering an initially lacklustre reception, Conrad's semiautobiographical tale has gone on to become one of the most widely analysed works of English literature.
- Critics have not always treated *Heart of Darkness* favourably, rebuking its dehumanizing representation of colonized peoples and its dismissive treatment of women.
- It stands as a Modernist masterpiece directly engaged with postcolonial realities.

2. VIRGINIA WOOLF: MRS DALLOWAY

- Virginia Woolf was an English writer, considered one of the most important modernist 20th-century authors and also a pioneer in the use of stream of consciousness as a narrative device.

- *Mrs Dalloway*, published on 14 May 1925, is a novel by Virginia Woolf that details a day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, a fictional high-society woman in post-First World War England.
 - It is one of Woolf's best-known novels.
 - Created from two short stories, "Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street" and the unfinished "The Prime Minister", the novel addresses Clarissa's preparations for a party she will host that evening.
 - With an interior perspective, the story travels forward and back in time and in and out of the characters' minds to construct an image of Clarissa's life and of the inter-war social structure.
 - It examines one day in the life of Clarissa Dalloway, an upper-class Londoner married to a member of Parliament.
 - *Mrs. Dalloway* is essentially plotless; what action there is takes place mainly in the characters' consciousness.
 - The novel addresses the nature of time in personal experience through multiple interwoven stories, particularly that of Clarissa as she prepares for and hosts a party and that of the mentally damaged war veteran Septimus Warren Smith. The two characters can be seen as foils for each other.
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