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COURSE INTRODUCTION (BEGE-141)

Welcome to the course entitled Understanding Prose, the code for which is BEGE-141.

This course has four Blocks and deals with the varieties as well as forms of prose – both fictional and non-fictional. But before we talk about these, let us consider what prose is. Let us take an example, from a great French comedy *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* by the writer Moliere (1622-73). This is the story of a man who has suddenly made a lot of money but does not have social status. In short, he would like to be a ‘gentleman’. So, he employs several teachers in order to learn how to move in polite society.

One day, during the course of conversation, his elocution teacher tells him that what he speaks is prose. His surprised response is: ‘To think I have been speaking prose these last forty years without knowing it!’ Isn’t that the case with many of us? But is the prose of everyday conversation the same as “literary” prose? Or is it different? Is “literary” prose more elaborate, artificial and stylized? In our course, we shall look at various samples of literary prose and try to understand what constitutes its “literariness”. You will read a wide and interesting selection of varieties and forms of prose.

This course consists of 4 Blocks:

Block 1: Varieties of Prose

Block 2: Forms of Prose: Short Stories and Essays

Block 3: Biography and Autobiography

Block 4: Diary, Speech, Letters and Travelogues.

In Block 1 we have dealt with three varieties of prose: descriptive, narrative and expository. But can these three varieties be separated into watertight compartments? No. it is only for purpose of analysis that we have made this distinction. You will find that the dividing line between these categories is rather thin and you can find samples of all three varieties in any one prose form. For example, if we take a passage from a short story or novel, we may find that it may have description, narration and exposition all in the space of a few lines.

In the next 3 Blocks we shall introduce you to prose forms such as the short story, essays, biography, autobiography, diary, speeches, letters and travelogues.

The aim of this course is to improve your reading skills by exposing you to a wide range of prose selections. Why do we study literature? The study of literature involves not only enjoyment but also awareness. This stems from our participation in the human experience which is highlighted in particular uses of language and various literary devices. We must understand what these device are if we are to enjoy the full range of aesthetic experience that literature has to offer.

BLOCK 1 INTRODUCTION

As we have already told you in our course introduction, BLOCK 1 is devoted to varieties of prose. This Block has **four** Units.

Unit 1: In this Unit we have given you a general introduction to understating prose. We've spoken about the various varieties of prose as well as the forms of prose. We have also introduced various figures of speech in this Unit.

Unit 2: This Unit has been devoted to descriptive prose and we have explained how one can identify descriptive prose, by giving you examples from texts.

Unit 3: Similarly in this Unit we have taken up narrative prose and given you passages from texts to explain it better.

Unit 4: Last but not the least, we have taken up expository prose in this Unit.

In keeping with our format, we have interspersed the Units with check your progress exercises. You should attempt these before looking at the answers provided at the end of each Unit.

We hope you enjoy studying this Block.



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UNIT 1 UNDERSTANDING PROSE: AN INTRODUCTION

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Prose and Poetry
 - 1.2.1 Difference Between Prose and Poetry
 - 1.2.2 Denotation and Connotation
- 1.3 Varieties of Prose
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 - 1.4.5 Diary, Speeches, Letters and Travelogues
- 1.5 Figures of Speech
- 1.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.7 Answers to Check Your Progress

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall give you a general introduction to the various varieties of prose as well as to different prose forms. If you read this unit carefully, you should be able to:

- distinguish between prose and poetry;
- define descriptive, narrative and expository prose;
- describe prose forms such as the short story, novel, essay, biography and autobiography.
- recognise various figures of speech.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

As you know, this course is divided into two parts. The first deals with varieties of prose while the second concentrates on different prose forms. This Unit aims to provide a general introduction to the varieties and forms of prose. In this unit, we shall first examine the difference between prose and poetry. This will be followed by a discussion of three varieties of prose.

Figurative language is used extensively by most writers. We have defined some figures of speech so that you will be able to identify these in your critical appreciation of literary prose.

1.2 PROSE AND POETRY

The word 'prose' is taken from the Latin '*prosus*' which means 'direct' or 'straight'. Broadly speaking, prose is direct or straightforward writing. In poetry, which is generally written in verse, a lot of things may be left to the imagination of the reader.

In ordinary prose, the aim is to communicate one's thoughts and feelings. What is important then is (a) *what* one wants to say, and (b) *how* one chooses to say it. **What** is said, is the topic or subject of the composition. **How** it is said, is the style or manner in which the topic is expressed. The style of course greatly depends upon who we are writing for and what sort of personality we have. There are different topics and different styles. Whatever the number of topics, they all come under one or another variety of prose and each variety may have a distinct style of its own.

What then are the different varieties of prose? For purposes of analysis we have categorised them as (a) descriptive, (b) narrative and (c) expository. But these three are not mutually exclusive. Sometimes you find more than one variety in a piece of work. It depends on the skill and intention of the writer. For example, in a novel or short story, we are likely to find all these varieties of prose worked together in interesting and innovative combinations.

1.2.1 Difference Between Prose and Poetry

A French poet and critic, Paul Valéry, compared prose to walking and poetry to dancing. We walk in order to go from one place to another. We do it for a particular purpose. When we walk for exercise, we do it for the improvement of our health. In other words, walking is utilitarian, that is, it is something that we do with a *purpose* in view. We are talking about ordinary prose and not literary prose. Ordinary prose is like walking. We use words to give information, to get something done, to make someone do what we want him/her to, and so on. In ordinary prose, what is important is the message. But this is not the primary consideration in literary prose. What is important also is how language is used, how ideas and emotions are communicated and how the style suits the content.

When you go to see a dance you are not interested in seeking information. When you see a good dance, you enjoy it. In other words, the objective is enjoyment and not mere information or instruction. When you like a particular dance, you go and see that dance over and over again because every time you see it, you get a new aesthetic experience. In the case of poetry and literary prose, you have what you call your favourite poem or passage. You read it several times and are not tired of it. If it is an ordinary prose passage, the moment you understand the meaning, you don't want to read it again. In literary prose as well as in poetry, it is not just the meaning that is important, but also the medium. It is often difficult to say what is more important, the form or the content. There is, however, an inseparability between the two, a togetherness. This is exactly the meaning of the Indian term '*Sahitya*'. '*Sahitya*' literally means 'togetherness'. It is the togetherness of the sound and the sense, it is the togetherness of form and content. This is what is unique to great literature.

In dancing, every gesture is important for the position that it occupies in that particular dance. No one posture is more important or less important than another.

Each gesture contributes to the total effect of the dance. In the same way, in a good poem or a piece of literary prose, every word is important for the position it occupies in it, and contributes to its total effect. Again, in a good dance, when the dance is on, you cannot distinguish the dancer from the dance. In any great poem or passage of literary prose, it will be difficult to separate the effect of the medium from the effect of the message. We do paraphrase a poem, but the paraphrase of a poem is not the poem. A prose piece can be paraphrased, summarised, but not a poem. The meaning of the poem is the meaning that you experience every time you read the poem and you cannot say of any poem that you've exhausted it. The 'literariness' of a particular poem or prose piece lies partly in this quality. A literary piece usually has layers of meaning, for the writer works through suggestion, allusion, imagery and other such devices. The use of literary devices alone does not make a piece "literary". What is important is the way in which they contribute to the unity and thereby the final effect of the piece. Every time you go to it, you get a new meaning, a new aesthetic delight. This is mainly because of the connotation of the words in poetry.

1.2.2 Denotation and Connotation

Words have a denotative and also a connotative meaning. Denotation is the literal meaning of a word. For example, when you say 'This is a stone', you are referring to an object which is a stone. It is a clear statement. There is no other meaning of this sentence. On the other hand, if we say 'he has a heart of stone' the meaning changes. What does it mean? It simply means that he is cruel or hard-hearted. In fact, it refers to all the qualities you associate with the stone. This is what we mean when we say that a word has several connotations. The word 'home' means a place where one lives with one's family. This is its primary meaning. But it suggests warmth, intimacy, family, security, comfort, affection. A house is also a place where one lives. Does it have the same connotations of the word 'home'? No. Poetry is full of connotations and our appreciation of poetry stems a great deal from the connotations of words used in it.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) In about 3-4 sentences, enumerate some differences between prose and poetry in the space provided below.

.....
.....
.....
.....
.....

- ii) What do you understand by the denotation and connotation of words? Can you think of some examples?

.....
.....
.....

(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit).

1.3 VARIETIES OF PROSE

Now that you have seen the general difference between poetry and prose, let us turn to the varieties of prose. Let us examine the nature and characteristics of descriptive, narrative and expository prose briefly.

1.3.1 Descriptive Prose

Descriptive writing describes things as they are or as they appear to be. It can be the description of a person or a landscape or an event. In descriptive writing, we are able to see things as they are, or were seen, or heard, or imagined by the describer. A narrative tells us what happens or happened. It deals mainly with events. A good description translates the writer's observation into vivid details and creates an atmosphere of its own. Through his/her description, the author tries to recreate what s/he has seen or imagined. A fine description is a painting in words. Here is a description of Mr. Squeers in Charles Dickens' *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39):

Mr. Squeers' appearance was not **prepossessing**. He had but one eye, and the popular prejudice runs in favour of two. The eye he had was unquestionably useful, but decidedly not ornamental: being of a greenish grey, and in shape resembling the fan-light of a street door. The blank side of his face was much wrinkled and **puckered up**, which gave him a very **sinister** appearance, especially when he smiled, at which times his expression bordered closely on the villainous. His hair was very flat and shiny, save at the ends, where it was brushed stiffly up from a low **protruding** forehead, which assorted well with his harsh voice and coarse manner. He was about two or three and fifty, and a trifle below the middle size; he wore a white neckerchief with long ends, and a suit of **scholastic** black; but his coat sleeves being a great deal too long, and his trousers a great deal too short, he appeared ill at ease in his clothes, and as if he were in a perpetual state of astonishment at finding himself so respectable.

Glossary

prepossessing: inspiring

puckered up: full of folds and wrinkles

sinister: wicked, evil

protruding: jutting out, projecting

scholastic: formal/academic

This is a graphic description of the appearance of Mr. Squeers. The details are so sharp that we can easily visualize the person. We are told about his height, his eye, his face, hair, forehead and dress. A successful description, enables us to picture the person vividly. It is also a very enjoyable passage. Did you notice the irony in "He had but one eye, and the popular prejudice runs in favour of two"? The *irony* and subtle humour continue throughout the passage so that the reader cannot help smiling to her/himself. The eye is further likened to the 'fan-light of

a street door’ – a very interesting and unusual analogy. You must also have noticed how carefully Dickens chooses his words so that we can see the hair that was ‘very flat and shiny’, hear his ‘harsh voice and so on. These are some of the devices that you will find used effectively in literary prose.

Here is another descriptive passage:

Ishtiaq Ali is a thin man of medium height. He looks older than his age – he is about 50.... Even after a long service, his salary remains meagre. An unlettered man, his family expanded in a big way – he has nine children.

Does this delight us in the same way that the previous passage did? Perhaps not. Although it certainly does give us some information about Ishtiaq Ali. Where is the difference? It is in the use of language. Here the language is purely functional with bold statements aimed at providing information rather than delight. In the earlier passage, it is a pleasure to read the sentences again and again, savouring their suggestiveness.

As we have seen, successful description makes you visualize the scene or the person. Generally, description is not an independent form of writing, that is, a whole book will not consist of descriptions alone. It is often used as an aid to narrative or expository writing. Its main purpose is to describe a sense impression or a mood. We will discuss this in greater detail in the next unit.

1.3.2 Narrative Prose

A narrative is a description of events. It may deal with external or internal events. By internal events, we mean the thoughts, feelings and emotions of individuals. Narrative writing tries to recreate an actual experience or an imaginary one in a way that we are able to experience it mentally. We lose ourselves in the characters and events of the narrative temporarily. Narratives can deal with the facts or fiction. Autobiographies, biographies, histories are narratives of fact. The short story and novel come under the category of narrative fiction.

In a narrative, we are carried along the stream of action. When we narrate a story, we concentrate on the sequence of events. It is the action that grips the attention of the reader. The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are examples of narrative writing. Narration is concerned with action and actors, it may make use of description but description is secondary. Action, characters and setting are the elements that are woven into a pattern to make the narrative interesting. Rudyard Kipling mentioned the ingredients of a narrative in the following verse:

I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.

What happens? Why does it happen? When does it happen? How does it happen? Where does it happen and to whom does it happen? All these questions are answered satisfactorily in a narrative. What makes a narrative interesting is not just what is said but the way it is said. Look at this passage from Charles Dickens’s novel *Oliver Twist* (1837). Here we shall read about the trial of the Artful Dodger when he is produced in court on charges of pick-pocketing.

It was indeed Mr. Dawkins, who, shuffling into the office with the big coat sleeves tucked up as usual, his left hand in his pocket, and his hat in his right hand, preceded the jailer, with a rolling gait altogether indescribable, and, taking his place in the dock, requested in an audible voice to know what he was placed in that 'ere disgraceful situation for.

'Hold your tongue, will you?' said the jailer.

'I'm an Englishman, ain't I?' rejoined the Dodger; 'where are my privileges?'

'You'll get your privileges soon enough,' retorted the jailer, 'and pepper with 'em.'

'We'll see wot the Secretary of State for the Home Affairs has got to say to the beaks, if I don't', replied Mr Dawkins. 'Now then! Wot is this here business? I shall thank the madg'strates to dispose of this here little affair, and not to keep me while they read the paper for I've got an appointment with a genelman in the city, and as I'm a man of my word and very punctual in business matters, he'll go away if I ain't there to my time, and then pra'ps there won't be an action for damage against them as kept me away. Oh, no, certainly not!'

At this point the Dodger, with a show of being very particular with a view to proceedings to be had thereafter, desired the jailer to communicate the names of them two files as was on the bench, which so tickled the spectators, that they laughed almost as heartily as Master Bates could have done if he had heard the request.

'Silence there!' cried the jailer.

'What is this?' inquired one of the magistrates.

A pick-pocketing case, your worship.'

'Has the boy ever been here before?'

'He ought to have been, a many times,' replied the jailer. 'He has been pretty well everywhere else. I know him well, your worship.'

'Oh! you know me, do you?' cried the Artful, making a note of the statement.

'Wery good. That's a case of deformation of character anyway.'

Here there was another laugh, and another cry of silence.

This is a hilarious passage that tells us about the Artful Dodger's defiant conduct at his trial ('I'm an Englishman, ain't I?...where are my privileges?'). We respond at one level to the hilarious situation but at another we also wonder: what should the poor do against such oppressive judicial systems? We also get a clear picture of the Artful Dodger: his 'coat-sleeves tucked up', his 'hand in his pocket' and his 'rolling gait' are described vividly at the outset. What then follows is a dialogue full of ironical, witty and quick rejoinders by this habitual offender. This is alternated with third person narration: 'At this point the Dodger, with a show of being very particular with a view to proceedings to be had thereafter, desired the jailer to communicate the names of them two files as was on the bench, which so tickled the spectators, that they laughed almost as heartily as Master Bates could have done if he had heard the request'. In short, what we wish to point out is that narrative writing makes use of narration as well as description. In order to

understand the situation, dialogues and conversations are introduced so that the writer is able to recreate the situation and communicate the experience.

1.3.3 Expository Prose

Expository writing deals in definition, explanation or interpretation. It includes writing on science, law, philosophy, technology, political science, history and criticism. Exposition is a form of logical presentation.

Its primary object is to explain and clarify. It presents details concretely and exactly. Expository writing is writing that explains. But we are not interested in writing that merely explains. We are interested in expository writing that can be read as literature. The following is a piece of expository prose:

In the leg there are two bones, the *tibia* and *fibula*. The tibia or shin-bone is long and strong and bears the weight of the body. The fibula or splint bone is an equally long but much slenderer bone, and is attached to the tibia as a pin is to a brooch.

Leonard Hill, *Manual of Human Physiology*

This piece clearly defines the two bones, the tibia and the fibula. But can this be read as literature? Now let us look at another piece of expository prose.

Now mark another big difference between the natural slavery of man to Nature and the unnatural slavery of man to man. Nature is kind to her slaves. If she forces you to eat and drink, she makes eating and drinking so pleasant that when we can afford it we eat and drink too much. We must sleep or go mad: but then sleep is so pleasant that we have great difficulty in getting up in the morning. And firesides and families seem so pleasant to the young that they get married and join building societies to realize their dreams. Thus, instead of resenting our natural wants as slavery, we take the greatest pleasure in their satisfaction. We write sentimental songs in praise of them. A tramp can earn his supper by singing Home, Sweet Home. The slavery of man to man is the very opposite of this. It is hateful to the body and to the spirit. Our poets do not praise it; they proclaim that no man is good enough to be another man's master. The latest of the great Jewish prophets, a gentleman named Marx, spent his life in proving that there is no extremity of selfish cruelty at which the slavery of man to man will stop if it be not stopped by law. You can see for yourself that it produces a state of continual civil war – called the class war – between the slaves and their masters, organized as Trade Unions on one side and Employers' Federations on the other.

(G.B. Shaw, 'Freedom – one of a series of BBC Radio Talks – 18 June, 1935 in *Modern Prose*, Michael Thorpe, pp 147-48)

There is a clear difference between the two passages. Shaw puts across his argument logically and convincingly.

He first talks about the natural slavery of man to Nature by giving a series of examples. He then contrasts this with unnatural slavery of man to man. By use of contrast, this argument is further strengthened. The result is that difficult concepts like freedom and slavery are readily understood. What is however, remarkable is

that his use of simple language, tongue-in-cheek manner and conversational style immediately strikes a sympathetic and receptive chord in the reader. These two passages must have given you some idea about the difference between literary and non-literary expository writing.

1.4 FORMS OF PROSE

The division of prose into three kinds – descriptive, narrative and expository, is a rough one. You may find good description in narrative writing. When you explain, you may also describe and narrate to make your explanation effective. The three divisions are not rigid. A good writer may use a little description here, a little narration there, and a bit of exposition in another place. Knowledge of the three varieties is useful in that you can appreciate how the writer makes use of one or more of them effectively. You would realize that they are very often used in combination and they rarely exist alone.

Having discussed the different kinds of writing, let's discuss briefly the different literary forms in prose. Some of the prose forms are the novel, short story, essay, biography and autobiography, letters and travelogues. Let us look at each of these forms briefly now. They will be discussed in detail in subsequent blocks.

1.4.1 Short Story

A short story is not a novel in an abridged form. A short story is complete in itself. Therefore a short story writer must have great skill to achieve an impression of completeness in a few pages. The characters and incidents are sketched in a few effective strokes. A short story thus has intensity and a singleness of purpose. There is no single acceptable definition of a short story. All that we can say is that it is short, has a plot and character(s) and has a beginning, a middle and an end. According to one definition, a short story is a relatively short narrative which is designed to produce a single dominant effect and which contains the elements of drama. The aim of a good short story is to make the reader feel, to make him/her enter into the experience of the characters.

1.4.2 Novel

Like the short story, it is difficult to define a novel. When we talk about a novel, we usually mean a piece of fiction, written in prose and of a certain length. A novel is an individual vision of the novelist. It is a picture of life as viewed by the writer. It has a story which tells us what happened and a plot which tells us how it happened. E.M. Forster, an English novelist, said this of the difference between a story and a plot: 'The King died and the Queen died' is a story. 'The King died and then the Queen died of grief is a plot'. The difference is quite clear from this example.

The plot and characters in a good novel leave a lasting impression on the reader. A good novel gives us an insight into the world and ourselves; it is full of vitality and humanity and appeals to human sensibilities. The style varies from one novelist to another. Each novel bears the signature of the novelist. A good short story is like a small garden. A fine novel is like a forest.

1.4.3 Essay

An essay is a piece of prose composition usually of moderate length. The word 'essay' derives from the French word *essai* or attempt. It attempts to throw some light on the subject under discussion.

There are two kinds of essays. One is informal or personal and the other is formal. You can say anything you like in an informal essay so long as it is interesting and pleasing to the reader. It is written in a light style. Its purpose is to delight and entertain the reader. The style of the essay is generally familiar and conversational. The subjects can often be light such as in 'Apology for Idlers', 'On Tremendous Trifles', 'On Bores' and so on. The informal essay tries to inform, persuade or entertain the reader.

A formal essay is a serious one and it weighs, evaluates and judges. It discusses the merits and the demerits of the topic in question. The style is objective and serious. A good essay however, is balanced, thoughtful and not biased. The judgement is based on facts.

1.4.4 Biography and Autobiography

A biography is the story of the life of an individual. Our concern here is with biography as a piece of literature. A good biography usually tries to project an objective picture of the life of a particular person. It avoids the temptation either to praise too much or to be too severe and critical. In this kind of writing, the writer selects the salient features of a particular life and gives them a shape. It tries to make the reader share the hopes, the fears, the interests and aspirations of that person. In an autobiography, the writer attempts to reveal selected experiences of his/her own life in retrospect. Here the picture presented is necessarily subjective. It presents the events and impressions of the past as recollected by the writer at the time s/he is writing the autobiography. It cannot be a complete account of one's life, as the future has still to be lived.

1.4.5 Diary, Speeches, Letters and Travelogues

All these constitute forms of prose that you will be studying in this course in different blocks.

1.5 FIGURES OF SPEECH

Let us now discuss some of the more commonly used figures of speech. This will help you identify them when you are analysing a particular passage. Is it enough to identify figures of speech? No. We must also be able to say why the writer has used them and to what effect.

Figures of Speech

Let us consider this scenario. Deeply in love, a young man tells his friend: 'My girlfriend is very beautiful. Without going into the question of whether the young lady in question was indeed beautiful or not, let us consider the sentence. It is clearly a straightforward statement. On the other hand, Robert Burns (1759-96), a Scottish poet, says the same thing but in more poetic words: 'My luv is like a red red rose'. This is what we would call figurative use of language. In other

words, the poet is making use of a figure of speech, a simile in this case, which we shall discuss a little later. First, let us be clear about what figurative language is. By comparing the above sentences, you must have got an idea about what a figure of speech is. The first statement gives us the literal meaning whereas in the second, words are used in a way that is different from their literal meaning.

Why do writers use figurative language? In order to draw attention to the language and to communicate the experience more effectively. For example, when we read 'My love is like a red red rose', the sentence evokes images of a beautiful red rose and a very young rosy-cheeked girl who is as beautiful as this exquisite flower. Do poets alone use figures of speech? No. Figures of speech are used in all types of writing: prose, poetry, drama. In fact, we too use figurative language in our daily conversation. When we say, 'He drinks like a fish' or 'It's raining cats and dogs', we are using figurative language.

We shall now briefly discuss some of the more common figures of speech : simile, metaphor; image; symbol; personification; hyperbole; understatement; irony.

Simile

A simile is a comparison between different terms belonging to different classes to the purpose of describing one of them. The comparison is usually made by the use of connectives such as 'like' or 'as'. For example, when we say 'as sweet as honey', 'white like snow', we are using similes. But if we say 'Ram is like Shyam', is this a simile? No. Because Ram and Shyam belong to the same class, i.e., male human beings.

Metaphor

Broadly speaking, a metaphor is also a comparison. But here there is no direct comparison as in a simile. Nor are any connectives such as 'like' and 'as' used. The writer uses an expression which describes one thing by stating another. For example, we can say 'The road snaked its way up the mountain'. Here the word 'snaked' is used metaphorically. The word snaked suggests a winding path. You must have noticed that there is no direct comparison between the snake and the course of the road. The comparison with the snake is indirect and implied.

Image

An image is a visual picture evoked by the use of either a word or phrase. Writers use imagery to make descriptive writing more effective. Does an image only refer to the visual? No, an image can also refer to the sense of taste, smell, touch and hearing. An image is usually written in the form of a simile or metaphor. For example:

There is a garden in her face,
Where roses and white lilies grow.

What a beautiful and vivid word-picture is evoked by these lines! Do you think this is a simile or metaphor? It is a metaphor, isn't it?

Symbol

An image is a description that enhances the significance of a literary work. A symbol is something that stands for something else. A dove is a symbol of peace.

It is a concrete expression of an abstract concept such as peace. A literary symbol is not simply descriptive like an image. It usually has a range of meanings. In *Bleak House*, the novel by Charles Dickens, we have ‘*Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, fog down the river...*’ Fog here is the symbol of confusion, obscurity and the endless delays caused by outdated legal practices.

Personification

This involves giving human characteristics, powers or feelings to objects or to abstract qualities. As in a metaphor, a comparison is implied. The purpose is to make the description more vivid and concrete. The writer speaks of something which is non-human as if it were human. For example, ‘The sun traced his footsteps across the sky’ is a more poetic way of expressing the passing of a day. Joseph Conrad has personified the West Wind in *The Mirror of the Sea*, ‘The West wind reigns over the seas surrounding the coasts of these kingdoms...’ As you read on you will find that Conrad conceives of the West Wind as a despotic ruler with the capacity for doing good as well as evil.

Hyperbole

A deliberate exaggeration for the sake of effect. For example, we often say ‘I nearly died of laughing’. We often use hyperbolic expressions without realising it. Here is another example from Thoreau: ‘The blue bird carries the sky on his back’.

Understatement or Litotes

This is the opposite of hyperbole. Instead of exaggeration, the author expresses him/her with restraint. The British are known for their habit of understatement. If someone is looking extremely ill, the Englishman may just say ‘You do look a bit under the weather!’ Or for a person who died of a bullet shot ‘He stopped a bullet last night, poor chap’.

Irony

One of the most important figures of speech in English, irony is saying one thing while meaning another. In short, irony occurs when a word or phrase has one surface meaning and another different meaning beneath this surface. The reader must be able to understand the hidden meaning. Charles Dickens describes Mr. Squeers in his novel *Nicholas Nickleby*: ‘He had but one eye, and the popular prejudice runs in favour of two. The eye he had was unquestionably useful, but decidedly not ornamental...’ Irony usually gives pleasure or relief and must not be confused with sarcasm which deliberately inflicts pain.

This list is by no means exhaustive. However, we hope it will be useful not only in analysing the prose passages in this course but will also help you with your reading of poetry and drama.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Why do writers use figurative language?

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- ii) Show your familiarity with the figures of speech that you have learnt in the above section.

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(Check your answers with these given at the end of this Unit.)

1.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed:

- the general difference between poetry and prose;
- how words have denotations as well as connotations;
- how descriptive prose describes things as they are seen or imagined;
- narrative prose recreates an actual or imaginary experience or sequence of events;
- expository writing deals in definition, explanation or interpretation;
- the novel, short story, essay, biography and autobiography are forms of prose;
- the different figures of speech used by writers to convey their feelings and thoughts more effectively.

1.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- i) Prose is direct or straightforward writing. Here the writer communicates his/her thoughts or feelings as clearly and precisely as possible. On the other hand, poetry which is generally written in verse leaves a lot of things unsaid and to the imagination of the reader. Prose is like walking, that is, it is functional and provides information. Poetry on the other hand, is like dancing, and aims to delight. A prose piece can be paraphrased or summarized but not a poem. We can and do paraphrase a poem, but the paraphrase of a poem is not the poem. In prose, what is important is the message but in a poem what is important is the experience conveyed rather than any meaning or information.
- ii) Words, as we know, have a denotative as well as a connotative meaning. Denotation is the literal meaning a word has, whereas the connotation is the meaning it has gained by association. For example a snake as we know is a reptile but it is also very dangerous. If we call a human being a snake we mean that that person is dangerous. The word rose denotes a flower but because it is such a beautiful flower, if we call anyone a rose, we are referring to that person's beauty.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) In order to draw attention to language and communicate the experience more effectively.
- ii) Please refer to 1.5 for the answer.

UNIT 2 DESCRIPTIVE PROSE

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Passage from H.G. Wells' *The War of The Worlds*
 - 2.2.1 Text
 - 2.2.2 Glossary
 - 2.2.3 Discussion
- 2.3 Passage from Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*
 - 2.3.1 Text
 - 2.3.2 Glossary
 - 2.3.3 Discussion
- 2.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.5 Answers to Check Your Progress

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall introduce you to different varieties of descriptive prose. We shall do this by outlining the characteristics of descriptive prose and then explaining these by giving you two passages to read.

If you read this unit carefully and complete the given exercises, you will be able to:

- summarise the passages;
- analyse and appreciate their stylistic features; and
- become more perceptive readers of other descriptive passages.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

It is not always easy to distinguish between descriptive and narrative prose. One way of making a distinction is to group them both together and to say that descriptive prose is “passive” and narrative “active”. This means that descriptive prose is concerned mainly with seeing things as they are, recording the impressions received by our senses: what we see, hear, touch, smell and taste. Narrative deals with what actually happens, that is, with events. This may not be true in every case, and may very well be an over-simplification, as we shall see in the course of the lessons that follow.

But, all the same, this distinction can be useful up to a point. Essentially, describing people and places and objects and narrating what happened to them are two related and complementary activities, indeed very often writers do both in the course of the same sentence. However, description and narration need to be examined separately for the sake of training ourselves in looking at and recognising the different functions of language. Various kinds of methods and techniques are employed by writers for describing and narrating. The real distinction between the two is one of focus, and focus can keep shifting from one to the other, according to the writer's purpose and design. If the writer's purpose is to introduce us to an important character in a story, the author can attempt this

introduction either in any one of these ways or by using a combination of several techniques. Take, for example, the case of the Martian in our very first extract in this lesson. H.G. Wells does not directly present the Martian to us. He does this through another character in the novel, who narrates the story as well as describes what the Martian looks like.

2.2 PASSAGE FROM H.G. WELLS' *THE WAR OF THE WORLDS*

Descriptive writing, as you will see may be either purely fictional as in H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* or it may present factual details as in the passage from Isak Dinesen's *Out of Africa*. You will notice that the presentation techniques will differ in both cases. In your first passage, the Martian is not like any human being that anyone has seen before. The author, therefore, goes about this difficult task using many subtle tricks of the writer's craft. Describing and narrating might very well be considered two sides of the same coin. Both descriptive and narrative elements are found throughout this passage. In describing the Martian in *The War of the Worlds*, Wells has to make his description convincing, giving it the illusion of reality. The Martian who exists only in the writer's imagination must be presented to the reader in such a way as to make him/her believe that the Martian is real. Let's see how the writer accomplishes this task.

H.G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds* is a book of science fiction published in 1898 long before man had landed on the moon. The passage describes what happened after the Martians arrived inside a cylinder which landed on the earth with such great force that it made a large crater in the ground. The person who describes it returns to the site after a brief interval. In the meantime a big crowd has collected around the crater. This extract has a few narrative elements but the main focus is on the writer's description of the Martian. Let us now take up this passage for discussion. The first thing to do is to read it carefully two or three times if necessary. Some of the words and phrases that are likely to be unfamiliar have been given in the glossary at the end of the passage.

After you have made sense of all the strange and not so familiar words whose meanings you are not sure of, you should look up the references and allusions in the passage. In this case the references to the Gorgons is of crucial importance to the understanding of the passage, because it is intended to suggest something equally terrifying and deadly.

2.2.1 Text

I saw a young man, a shop assistant in Woking. I believe he was standing on the cylinder and trying to scramble out of the hole again. The crowd had pushed him in. The end of the cylinder was being screwed out from within. Nearly two feet of shining screw projected. Somebody blundered against me, and I narrowly missed being pitched on to the top of the screw. I turned, and as I did so the screw must have come out, and the lid of the cylinder fell upon the gravel with a ringing **concussion**. I stuck my elbow into the person behind me, and turned my head towards the thing again. For a moment that circular cavity seemed perfectly black. I had the sunset in my eyes.

I think everyone expected to see a man emerge – possibly something a little unlike us **terrestrial** men but in all essentials a man. I know I did. But, looking,

I presently saw something stirring within the shadow – greyish **billowy movements**, one above another, and then two luminous discs like eyes. Then something resembling a little grey snake, about the thickness of a walking stick, coiled up out of the **writhing** middle, and **wriggled** in the air towards me – and then another.

A sudden chill came over me. There was a loud shriek from a woman behind. I half turned, keeping my eyes fixed upon the cylinder still, from which other **tentacles** were now projecting, and began pushing my way back from the edge of the pit. I saw astonishment giving place to horror on the faces of the people about me. I heard inarticulate exclamations on all sides. There was a general movement backward. I saw the shopman struggling still on the edge of the pit. I found myself alone, and saw the people on the other side of the pit running off, Stent among them. I looked again at the cylinder, and ungovernable terror gripped me. I stood **petrified** and staring.

A big greyish, rounded bulk, the size perhaps, of a bear, was rising slowly and painfully out of the cylinder. As it **bulged up** and caught the light, it glistened like wet leather. Two large dark-coloured eyes were regarding me steadfastly. It was rounded, and had, one might say, a face. There was a mouth under the eyes, the brim of which quivered and panted, and dropped saliva. The body **heaved** and **pulsated convulsively**. A **lank tentacular appendage** gripped the edge of the cylinder, another swayed in the air.

Those who have never seen a living Martian can scarcely imagine the strange horror of their appearance. The peculiar V-shaped mouth with its pointed upper lip, the absence of **brow ridges**, the absence of a chin beneath the **wedge like** lower lip, the **incessant** quivering of this mouth, the Gorgon groups of tentacles, the tumultuous breathing of the lungs in a strange atmosphere, the evident heaviness and painfulness of movement, due to the greater gravitational energy of the earth – above all, the extraordinary intensity of the immense eyes – culminated in an effect akin to **nausea**. There was something **fungoid** in the oily brown skin, something in the clumsy deliberation of their tedious movements unspeakably terrible. Even at this first encounter, this first glimpse, I was overcome with disgust and dread.

Suddenly the monster vanished. It had toppled over the brim of the cylinder and fallen into the pit, with a thud like the fall of a great mass of leather. I heard it give a peculiar thick cry, and forthwith another of these creatures appeared darkly in the deep shadow of the aperture.

At that my rigour of terror passed away. I turned and, running madly, made for the first group of trees, perhaps a hundred yards away; but I ran slantingly and stumbling, for I could not avert my face from these things.

There, among some young pine-trees and **furze-bushes**, I stopped, panting, and awaited further developments. The common around the sand-pits was dotted with people, standing, like myself, in a half-fascinated terror, staring at these creatures, or, rather, at the heaped gravel at the edge of the pit in which they lay. And then, with a renewed horror, I saw a round, black object bobbing up and down on the edge of the pit. It was the head of the shopman who had fallen in, but showing as a little black object against the hot western sky. Now he got his shoulder and knee up, and again he seemed to slip back until only his head was

visible. Suddenly he vanished, and I could have fancied a faint shriek had reached me. I had a momentary impulse to go back and help him that my fears overruled.

2.2.2 Glossary

concussion: violent blow, shock; sound caused by it.

terrestrial: of or related to the earth (rather than some other planet)

billowy movements: swelling out like sails

writhing: twisting the body (like a snake)

wriggled: twisted from side to side

tentacles: long snake-like boneless limbs without joints

petrified: in a state of shock or fear, losing all power of thought or action; to become like a stone

bulged up: swelled out (came out)

heaved: rose and fell regularly

pulsated : shook rhythmically

convulsively: unnaturally and violently

lank: hanging loosely and without strength

tentacular: like tentacles (explained above)

appendage: a thing hanging from something larger

brow ridges: eyebrows that project (the Martian had no eyebrows)

wedge-like: V-shaped

incessant: never stopping

nausea: a feeling of sickness and desire to vomit

fungoid: like fungus, a fast growing variety of plant growth generally considered a disease

furze-bushes: wild bushy plants with prickles and yellow flowers.

2.2.3 Discussion

When we read the passage carefully we notice that the author employs several devices (or artifices, if you like) to avoid a direct description because the subject is so unfamiliar, that the reader's credibility has to be built up step by step. So Wells does not describe the Martian directly, the way perhaps an ordinary man or woman or an event could have been described. The person who describes the Martian in the book keeps reminding us that he is part of the crowd, and comes back again and again to the reactions of the others with him. His own reactions, of course, are also recorded. If we pay particular attention to the words, phrases and sentences in the passage we can see that the man takes his own time in coming to the actual description of the Martian. This delayed description heightens suspense and arouses our expectations. At the end of the first paragraph, he reveals his inability to see things clearly: "For a moment that circular cavity seemed perfectly black. I had the sunset in my eyes." In the second paragraph, he gradually arouses the reader's curiosity, without really satisfying it. "I think everyone expected to see a man emerge.... I know I did...." In the third paragraph, he

describes his own reactions and those of the crowd. “A sudden chill came over me. There was a loud shriek from a woman behind. I saw astonishment giving place to horror on the faces of the people about me.... saw the people on the other side of the pit running off....and ungovernable terror gripped me. I stood petrified and staring.” It is only after all this that he attempts to say what the Martian looks like. In the fourth paragraph, the point of view shifts again. It is now assumed that all those present have become familiar with the sight of the Martian and their reactions are now commented upon.

Note the clever repeated use of the definite article. “The peculiar V-shaped mouth....the absence of chin, the incessant quivering of the mouth....” In fact all these have not been described before, only mentioned; but the reader is made to believe that these features are already familiar to the people who have by now become acquainted with the sight of the strange creature. It is necessary for a discerning reader to get behind the mass of words and sentences and paragraphs with which the literary artist constructs his elaborate verbal edifice, the product of his imagination.

From the discussion so far, we realise how important it is for us to consider the point of view of the describer and what he does or does not describe and to what extent we are to take what he says literally as ‘the truth’, or ‘the actual reality’. Because, after all, the fictional world is the product of the writer’s own creative imagination.

Check Your Progress 1

The following questions relating to the passage will enable you to examine it more closely and to grasp the full significance of the description of the Martians. Give your answers in about 4-6 sentences.

- i) What words in the passage indicate the attitude of the describer towards the Martian? Do you think the Martian had human feelings?

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- ii) Why do you think the describer was terrified? Is there any evidence in the passage to justify it?

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- iii) What tells us that the Martians were not very comfortable on the earth? List the words and phrases that convey this impression?

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- iv) Did anyone among the spectators feel sympathetic towards the Martians? Why were they reacting as they did?

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit.)

2.3 PASSAGE FROM ISAK DINESEN’S *OUT OF AFRICA*

We shall now look at a passage containing a description of African birds by Isak Dinesen, who lived in Africa for a long time. Her book *Out of Africa* has been made into an outstanding film.

Descriptive writing, whether it is imaginative or factual, faces the problem of selection as well as of presentation. Too much detail can be confusing or bewildering just as inadequate or haphazard choice of detail will result in disorganised and blurred presentation.

The passage is an excellent model for study and analysis from this point of view: it depends on objective fact (in the sense that we can see them and recognise them in reality). Although other writers might write very different descriptions about the same things, they cannot often distort reality beyond the bounds of credibility. Degrees of objectivity are of course bound to differ from writer to writer, depending on his/her perceptions and purposes. Writing about African birds, the author makes deliberate choices, relating both to inclusion and exclusion, since exhaustiveness is neither possible nor called for. In presenting them, the writer also decides consciously the order in which they are to be introduced, their distinguishing individual characteristics, and the nature of the emotions or attitudes that the writer wishes to project. Let us see what happens in this passage.

2.3.1 Text

Just at the beginning of the long rains, in the last week of March, or the first week of April, I have heard the nightingale in the woods of Africa. Not the full

song: a few notes only—the opening bars of the **concerto**, a rehearsal, suddenly stopped and again begun. It was as if, in the solitude of the dripping woods, someone was, in a tree, tuning a small **cello**. It was, however, the same melody, and the same abundance and sweetness, as were soon to fill the forests of Europe, from Sicily to Elsinore. We had the black and white storks in Africa, the birds that build their nests upon the thatched village roofs of Northern Europe. They look less **imposing** in Africa than they do there, for here they had such tall and **ponderous** birds as the **Marabout** and the **Secretary Bird** to be compared to. The storks have got other habits in Africa than in Europe, where they live as married couples and are symbols of domestic happiness. Here they are seen together in big **flights**, as in clubs. They are called locust-birds in Africa, and follow along when the locusts come upon the land, living high on them. They fly over the plains, too, where there is a grass-fire on, circling just in front of the advancing line of small leaping flames, high up in the **scintillating** rainbow-coloured air and the grey smoke, on watch for the mice and snakes that run from the fire. The storks have a gay time in Africa. But their real life is not here, and when the winds of spring bring back thoughts of mating and nesting, their hearts are turned towards the North, they remember old times and places and fly off, two and two, and are shortly back after wading in the cold **bogs** of their birth-places.

The Crested Cranes, which come on to the newly rolled and planted maize-land, to steal the maize out of the ground, make up for the robbery by being birds of good omen, announcing the rain; and also by dancing to us. When the tall birds are together in large numbers, it is a fine sight to see them spread their wings and dance. There is much style in the dance, and a little **affectation**, for why, when they can fly, do they jump up and down as if they were held on to the earth by magnetism? The whole ballet has a sacred look, like some ritual dance, perhaps the cranes are making an attempt to join Heaven and Earth like the winged angels walking up and down **Jacob's Ladder**. With their delicate pale grey colouring, the little black velvet skull-cap and the fan-shaped crown, the cranes have all the air of light **frescoes**. When, after the dance, they lift and go away, to keep up the sacred tone of the show they give out, by the wings or the voice, a clear ringing as if a group of church bells had taken to the wing and were sailing off. You can hear them a long way away, even after the birds themselves have become invisible in the sky: a chime from the clouds.

The Greater Hornbill was another visitor to the farm, and came there to eat the fruits of the Cape-Chestnut tree. They are very strange birds. It is an adventure or an experience to meet them, not altogether pleasant, for they look exceedingly knowing. One morning before sunrise I was woken up by loud **jabbering** outside the house, and when I walked out on the terrace I saw forty-one Hornbills sitting in the trees on the lawn. There they looked less like birds than like some fantastic articles of finery set on the trees here and there by a child. Black they all were, with the sweet, noble black of Africa, deer darkness absorbed through an age, like old soot, that makes you feel that for elegance, vigour and vivacity, no colour rivals black. All the Hornbills were talking together in the merriest mood, but with choice **deportment**, like a party of inheritors after a funeral. The morning air was as clear as crystal, the sombre party was bathing in freshness and purity, and, behind the trees and the birds, the sun came up, a dull red ball. You wonder what sort of a day you are to get after such an early morning.

The Flamingoes are the most delicately coloured of all the African birds, pink and red like a flying twig of an Oleander bush. They have incredibly long legs and the bizarre and **recherché** curves of their necks and bodies, seem as if from some exquisite traditional **prudery** they were making all attitudes and movements in life as difficult as possible. I once travelled from Port Said to Marseilles in a French boat that had on board a consignment of a hundred and fifty Flamingoes, which were going to the *Jardin d'Acclimatation* in Marseilles. They were kept in large dirty cases with canvas sides, ten in each, standing up close to one another. The keeper, who was taking the birds over, told me that he was counting on losing twenty per cent of them on a trip. They were not made for that sort of life, in rough weather they lost their balance, their legs broke, and the other birds in the cage trampled on them. At night when the wind was high in the Mediterranean and the ship came down in the waves with a thump, at each wave I heard, in the dark, the Flamingoes shriek. Every morning, I saw the keeper taking out one or two dead birds, and throwing them overboard. The noble wader of the Nile, the sister of the lotus, which floats over the landscape like a stray cloud of sunset, had become a slack cluster of pink and red feathers with a pair of long, thin sticks attached to it. The dead birds floated on the water for a short time, knocking up and down in the **wake** of the ship before they sank.

2.3.2 Glossary

concerto: a piece of music for one or more solo instruments and orchestra

cello: (full form-violincello) a large violin-type musical instrument

imposing: large in size, powerful looking

ponderous: large and heavy; hence slow and awkward; dull and solemn

Marabout: a large African stork

Secretary Bird: a large African bird, its crest resembles quill pens stuck over the ear, hence its name

flights: group of birds flying together

scintillating: sending out quick flashes of light or sparks, sparkling, hence brilliant

bog: soft wet marshy area

affectation: not natural behaviour, but what appears put on

Jacob's Ladder (biblical allusion): a ladder, seen by **Jacob** (son of Isaac) in a dream connecting earth and heaven

frescoes: painting on walls

jabbering: quick unclear speech or noise; here, unpleasantly noisy

deportment: manner of standing or walking

recherché (French): too rare or strange

prudery: over-sensitiveness, tendency to be easily shocked; excessive modesty

wake: here a path or tract of foam left by the moving ship

2.3.3 Discussion

The passage is full of delightful descriptions of some birds. The first paragraph is about the nightingale, the bird with rich and varied associations in Western

literature. The black and white storks again are European birds. From time immemorial (until popular scientific knowledge destroyed the myth) they were engaged in the safe delivery of new born infants to every household (according to children’s story books) and lived like ‘married couples’, and ‘symbols of domestic happiness’. In Africa they have a gay time but ‘their real life is not here’ and they prefer the cold bogs of their birth-places’ when winter comes. It is quite a change for them.

The crested cranes described in the next paragraph are ‘birds of good omen’ announcing rain. They are like winged angels walking up and down Jacob’s Ladder, attempting to join heaven and earth.

Note the sudden change in the author’s attitude to the ‘Greater Hornbill’; the diction signals a more critical and less endearing tone. If you contrast the words and metaphors used for them with those found in the previous paragraph this change will appear dramatic: ‘strange’, ‘jabbering’, ‘exceedingly knowing’, ‘a party of inheritors after a funeral’, indicate the author’s attitude to them.

The last paragraph is devoted to the flamingoes. The passage ends on a sad note, lamenting human cruelty and indifference to these delicate birds and to nature in general. You will, no doubt agree that although only six birds out of hundreds of varieties are described here, there is a certain artful rounding-off of this topic; what is presented is beautiful and memorable, each bird has its individuality, every paragraph a self-contained theme and tone, the well-chosen figures of speech helping to bring out their unique features.

Some words have strong overtones or connotations in addition to what is often described as their simplest meaning found in a small dictionary. While words like ‘table’, ‘chair’, ‘read’, ‘sit’, ‘stand’, etc. have only their lexical meanings, or what is usually called denotation, words like ‘ponderous’, ‘shrieks’, ‘affectation’, ‘jabbering’, ‘trample’, ‘sombre’ have suggestions that tend to be unfavourable. Similarly words like ‘delicate’, ‘spirited’, ‘fantastic’, ‘noble’ have favourable connotations.

Some words may also take on special meanings from the context, particularly when irony is intended and so one has to watch out for such words. As students of literature we have to be constantly alert and ready for surprises. We have also to learn to use a good dictionary.

Check Your Progress 2

Now read the passage carefully once more (in fact as many times as you think necessary) and do the following exercises:

- i) What is the point of view of the author? Are the birds described from the point of view of an African or an outsider? Give your reasons.

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ii) What is the significance of the phrase ‘from Sicily to Elsinore’?

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iii) Comment on the tone of the last paragraph. Do you think the writer is critical of the way the Flamingoes are transported to France?

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iv) Besides telling us about the appearance of African birds, what does the passage do? Pick out some of the metaphors and similes from the passage that you find striking. Justify your choice.

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit)

2.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have:

- introduced you to different kinds of descriptive writing;
- shown you how words acquire different connotations in different contexts;
- pointed out how the choice of point of view determines the overall artistic effect of the writing

2.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

i) Ungovernable terror gripped me; I stood petrified and staring; the strange horror of their appearance; groups of tentacles; and effect akin to nausea; something fungoid in the oily brown skin; clumsy deliberation of their tedious movements unspeakably terrible; overcome with disgust and dread; the monster.

That the Martian had hardly any human characteristics or feelings can be easily seen from the extract. There is nothing even remotely human about the Martian. He is compared to a bear.

- ii) The describer was terrified because the faint shriek made by the disappearing shopman caused terror and a strange feeling of dread.
- iii) Look at the paragraph beginning ‘Those who have never seen a living Martian....’ Carefully note expressions like the ‘tumultuous breathing’, ‘evident heaviness and painfulness of movement’, ‘clumsy deliberation of their tedious movements’, which indicate that they were out of their element.
- iv) The answer is clearly No. Go back and read the passage again, if you are in doubt. You will see that the reactions of the crowd are described and these were not at all sympathetic. No one is inclined to go and help the Martians. Instead they are terrified by their very sight.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) The very first paragraph makes this clear. The point of view is that of a European. There are several more clues in the passage. The birds are, in the eyes of the author, visitors in Africa, more or less like herself, except that their visits are seasonal migrations.
- ii) Sicily is practically the southernmost point of Europe and Elsinore is one of the northernmost. In fact the whole of Europe is thus indicated.
- iii) Yes. The author’s disapproval is clear and she laments human cruelty and indifference to these delicate birds.
- iv) The passage describes the kind of life that they live in Africa, what they do, what they eat, etc. Re-read the passage if necessary and pick out the comparisons relating to the song of the nightingale; the sea and the African plains; Jacob’s ladder, the sound of church bells; inheritors after a funeral; etc.

UNIT 3 NARRATIVE PROSE

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Passage from Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*
 - 3.2.1 Text
 - 3.2.2 Glossary
 - 3.2.3 Discussion
- 3.3 Passage from Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake*
 - 3.3.1 Text
 - 3.3.2 Glossary
 - 3.3.3 Discussion
- 3.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.5 Answers to Check Your Progress

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we shall introduce you to narrative prose. At the end of this unit you will be able to:

- describe the nature and functions of narrative prose;
- distinguish between descriptive and narrative prose;
- analyse different varieties of narrative prose.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Unlike descriptive writing, which mainly concentrates on the scene, the presentation of objects, events, and situations, narrative prose shifts the focus to what happens next, or what follows. In short, a narrative presents a sequence of events. In fact there is no 'story' without a narrative. Description calls for a certain kind of sustained effort, as we saw earlier. It calls for the ability to capture the very essence of the arrested moment, to render it powerfully and evocatively, to recreate an incident or scene in all its vividness and immediacy. Narration, on the other hand, can take several forms. It can be slow or rapid in tempo, exciting and colourful, or matter-of-fact and solidly truthful, prejudiced, distorted or heightened to impress or mislead. Narration can be purely objective as in most scientific and technical writing. It can also come alive in the hands of highly imaginative scientists, scholars and historians. Historians have also narrated historical events, as though the past had been brought back to life for the special benefit of their readers. Creative writers as well as scientists and scholars and those who tell their own life stories – everyone has to choose the appropriate narrative to suit their purposes.

For our purpose here, we shall examine some specimens of narrative prose analysing their prominent features, as we did earlier with descriptive passages. We have selected two passages for you: one from Charles Dickens's novel *Great Expectations* and the other from a travelogue *From Heaven Lake* by Vikram

Seth. You will find two kinds of narrative here. In the course of our discussion, we shall analyse the difference between the two.

3.2 PASSAGE FROM CHARLES DICKENS' *GREAT EXPECTATIONS*

We shall begin with an excerpt from Charles Dickens' novel *Great Expectations*. This passage introduces us to three of the principal characters, Pip, Estella and Miss Havisham, through Pip's narrative. Pip narrates his first visit to Miss Havisham's house. We know about her strange destiny, her futile but pathetic efforts to arrest time from the moment tragedy struck her before she could actually become a bride. She decides to take revenge on the world by preparing the way for an identical tragedy involving two innocent young people she brings together. Miss Havisham says most casually to Estella towards the very end of the passage "Well? You can break his heart." These words are central to the plot. The narrative, though presented through the eyes of an adolescent boy, has the advantage of hindsight, since it is narrated years later, after he becomes an adult. He is then in a position to fully understand the implications of the various incidents that he witnessed and participated in as a boy. The boy's complete innocence and bewilderment at their occurrence are interpreted and explained by a mature mind which sees the whole story in retrospect. Everything then falls into place. This narrative lacks immediacy and urgency that go with events that are narrated as and when they occur, but has the benefit of long contemplation and patient analysis of motive after emotions and feelings have had time to cool down. Let us first read the selected passage.

3.2.1 Text

Though she called me 'boy' so often, and with a carelessness that was far from complimentary, she was of about my own age. She seemed much older than I, of course, being a girl, and beautiful and self-possessed, and she was as scornful of me as if she had been one-and-twenty, and a queen.

We went into the house by a side door – the great front entrance had two chains across it outside and the first thing I noticed was that the passages were all dark, and that she had left a candle burning there. She took it up, and we went through more passages and up a staircase, and still it was all dark, and only the candle lighted us.

At last we came to the door, and she said: 'Go in'.

I answered, more in shyness than politeness: 'After you, miss.'

To this, she returned: 'Don't be ridiculous, boy; I am not going in.' And scornfully walked away, and — what was worse — took the candle with her.

This was very uncomfortable, and I was half afraid. However, the only thing to be done being to knock at the door, I knocked, and was told from within to enter. I entered, therefore, and found myself in a pretty large room, well lighted with wax candles. No glimpse of daylight was to be seen in it. It was a dressing room, as I supposed from the furniture, though much of it was of forms and uses then quite unknown to me. But prominent in it was a draped table with a gilded looking-glass, and that I made out at first sight to be a fine lady's dressing-table.

Whether I should have made out this object so soon, if there had been no fine lady sitting at it, I cannot say. In an armchair, with an elbow resting on the table and her head leaning on that hand, sat the strangest lady I have ever seen, or shall ever see.

She was dressed in rich materials satins, and lace, and silks — all of white. Her shoes were white. And she had a long white veil **dependent** from her hair, and she had bridal flowers in her hair, but her hair was white. Some bright jewels sparkled on her neck and on her hands, and some other jewels lay sparkling on the table. Dresses, less splendid than the dress she wore, and half-packed trunks, were scattered about. She had not quite finished dressing, for she had but one shoe—the other was on the table near her hand — her veil was but half arranged, her watch and chain were not put on, and some lace for her bosom lay with those **trinkets**, and with handkerchiefs, and gloves, and some flowers, and a prayer-book, all confusedly heaped about the looking-glass.

It was not in the first few moments that I saw all these things, though I saw more of them in the first moments than might be supposed. But, I saw that everything within my view which ought to be white, had been white long ago, and had lost its **lustre**, and was faded and yellow. I saw that the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes. I saw that the dress had been put upon the rounded figure of a young woman, and that the figure upon which it now hung loose had shrunk to skin and bone. Once, I had been taken to see some ghastly **waxwork** at the Fair, representing I know not what impossible personage lying in state. Once, I had been taken to one of our old marsh churches to see a skeleton in the ashes of a rich dress, that had been dug out of a vault under the church pavement. Now, waxwork and skeleton seemed to have dark eyes that moved and looked at me. I should have cried out, if I could.

‘Who is it?’ said the lady at the table.

‘Pip, ma’am’

‘Pip?’

‘Mr. Pumblechook’s boy, ma’am. Come—to play.’

‘Come nearer; let me look at you. Come close.’

It was when I stood before her, avoiding her eyes that I took note of the surrounding objects in detail, and saw that her watch had stopped at twenty minutes to nine.

‘Look at me,’ said Miss Havisham. ‘You are not afraid of a woman who has never seen the sun since you were born?’

I regret to state that I was not afraid of telling the enormous lie comprehended in the answer ‘No.’

‘Do you know what I touch here?’ she said, lying her hands, one upon the other, on her left side.

‘Yes, ma’am.’ (It made me think of the young man.)

‘What do I touch?’

‘Your heart.’

‘Broken!’

She uttered the word with an eager look, and with strong emphasis, and with a weird smile that had a kind of boast in it. Afterwards, she kept her hands there for a little while, and slowly took them away as if they were heavy.

‘I am tired,’ said Miss Havisham. ‘I want diversion, and I have done with men and women. Play!’

I think it will be conceded by the most **disputatious** reader, that she could hardly have directed an unfortunate boy to do anything in the wide world more difficult to be done under the circumstances.

‘I sometimes have sick fancies,’ she went on, and I have a sick fancy that I want to see some play. There, there!’ with an impatient movement of the fingers of her right hand; ‘play, play, play!’

For a moment, with the fear of my sister’s working me before my eyes, I had a desperate idea of starting round the room in the assumed character of Mr. Pumblechook’s **chaise-cart**. But, I felt myself so unequal to the performance that I gave it up, and stood looking at Miss Havisham in what I suppose she took for a dogged manner, inasmuch as she said, when we had taken a good look at each other:

‘Are you sullen and obstinate?’

O, ma’am, I am very sorry for you, and very sorry I can’t play just now. If you complain of me I shall get into trouble with my sister, so I would do it if I could; but it’s so new here, and so strange, and so fine – and melancholy – I stopped, learning I might say too much, or had already said it, and we took another look at each other.

Before we spoke again, she turned her eyes from me, and looked at the dress she wore, and at the dressing-table, and finally at herself in the looking-glass.

‘So new to him’, she muttered, ‘so old to me; so strange to him, so familiar to me, so melancholy to both of us! Call Estella.’

As she was still looking at the reflection of herself, I thought she was still telling herself, and kept quiet. ‘Call Estella,’ she repeated, flashing a look at me. ‘You can do that. Call Estella. At the door.’

To stand in the dark in a mysterious passage of an unknown house, bawling Estella to a scornful young lady neither visible nor responsive, and feeling it a dreadful liberty so to roar out her name, was almost as bad as playing to order. But, she answered at last, and her light came along the dark passage like a star.

Miss Havisham beckoned her to come close, and took up a jewel from the table and tried its effect upon her fair young bosom and against her pretty brown hair. ‘Your own, one day, my dear, and you will use it well. Let me see you play cards with this boy.’

‘With this boy! Why, he is a common labouring-boy!’

I thought I overheard Miss Havisham answer – only it seemed so unlikely – ‘Well? You can break his heart.’

‘What do you play, boy?’ asked Estella of myself, with the greatest disdain.

‘Nothing but **beggar-my-neighbour**, miss.’

‘Beggars him,’ said Miss Havisham to Estella. So we sat down to cards. It was then I began to understand that everything in the room had stopped, like the watch and the clock, a long time ago. I noticed that Miss Havisham put down the jewel exactly on the spot from which she had taken it up. As Estella dealt the cards, I glanced at the dressing-table again, and saw that the shoe upon it, once white, now yellow, had never been worn. I glanced down at the foot from which the shoe was absent, and saw that the silk stocking on it, once white, now yellow, had been trodden ragged. Without this arrest of everything, this standing still of all the pale decayed objects, not even the withered bridal dress on the collapsed form could have looked so like grave clothes, or the long veil so like a shroud.

So she sat, corpse-like, as we played at cards; the frillings and trimmings on her bridal dress, looking like earthy paper. I knew nothing then of the discoveries that are occasionally made of bodies buried in ancient times, which fall to powder in the moment of being distinctly seen; but, I have often thought since, that she must have looked as if the admission of the natural light of day would have struck her to dust.

3.2.2 Glossary

dependent: hanging down

trinket: a small ornament

lustre: brightness of light reflected from a shiny surface

waxwork: (a place where one can see) models of human beings made in wax

disputatious: one who tends to argue, to disagree

chaise-cart: a two-wheeled carriage drawn by one horse

beggar-my-neighbour: a game at cards

3.2.3 Discussion

Pip, a country lad from a working class family (his brother-in-law a blacksmith), was escorted by Estella, who was about as old as himself, but with superior airs, beautiful and self-possessed, to meet Miss Havisham, the lady of the house. They entered by a side door – the great front entrance had two chains across it outside, which meant it was permanently bolted and barred, and ‘the passages were all dark’. Left abruptly in total darkness, Pip entered a room well lighted with wax candles. There, in Pip’s words, ‘with an elbow resting on the table and her head leaning on that hand, sat the strangest lady I have ever seen, or shall ever see’. Pip was at once overwhelmed by the splendour, her sparkling jewellery, and her rich white bridal attire; but he was shocked to notice that her hair was white. He observed that ‘she had but one shoe on’. However, Pip’s first impressions of Miss Havisham were subsequently modified, amplified or reinforced and his attitude to her also underwent considerable change as a result of it.

The first impression of a grand lady in dazzlingly white rich satin clothes and sparkling jewels was gradually replaced by that of a ‘ghastly waxwork’; and a little later by a woman in a ‘waxwork’, ‘the skeleton seemed to have dark eyes

that moved and looked at me'. Since daylight was banished from Miss Havisham's make-believe world, reality took quite some time to establish itself as far as Pip was concerned. He was initially dazzled by the artificial lighting; the soft candle light had marked successfully the obvious marks of decay and the ravages that time had wrought on the once youthful frame of Miss Havisham. It was only gradually that he realized that the artificial world inside the house was indeed most illusory and brittle. His eyes once they had become accustomed to the flattering illusion of eternal youthfulness and the glamour of the bridal dress, began to notice the reality behind them. His earlier admiration of the splendour and wealth of the household gave way to feelings of pity and infinite sadness, and he proceeded to express his sympathy for her openly. Pip confessed 'I should have cried out, if I could.' It was only later when he was playing cards with Estella that he had the leisure to observe that time in the room had stopped, like the watch and the clock a long time ago. He noticed that the shoe, once white, had never been worn; Miss Havisham put down the jewel exactly on the spot from which she had taken it up. Her bridal veil reminded him of a shroud. The climax came in the last paragraph: 'so she sat, corpse-like.....she must have looked as if the admission of the natural light of day would have struck her to dust'.

Pip's narrative is thus developed in stages, interspersed with comments which correct earlier impressions. Pip addresses the disputationous reader to make the incredible situation acceptable. With his great narrative power Dickens makes what may have appeared strange, exaggerated and incredible, plausible to the reader. Dickens further makes Pip apologise for some of his bold comments and conclusions which were the result of the very limited nature of his experience, thus highlighting the credibility of the make-believe world of Miss Havisham.

Check Your Progress 1

Now read the passage slowly and carefully a few times and work through the exercises given below. Answer the following questions in 2/3 sentences.

- i) Who is narrating the events in the story? How does one see the events first through the eyes of a young boy and later through the eyes of an adult who has seen a great deal?

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- ii) What did Pip first notice when he entered the room?

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iii) How are Pip’s first impressions subsequently modified?

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iv) Why does Pip feel sorry for Miss Havisham towards the end of the passage?

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(Check your answers with those given at the end of this Unit)

3.3 PASSAGE FROM VIKRAM SETH’S *FROM HEAVEN LAKE*

The next passage we shall look at, is from a travelogue written by Vikram Seth entitled *From Heaven Lake*, based on an extraordinarily adventurous journey from China through Tibet and Nepal to New Delhi. It was a hazardous journey no foreigner could have accomplished, least of all an Indian student at a Chinese university, except for a series of fortunate coincidences. With the help of a highly ambiguous travel permit, which was capable of being interpreted in several ways, he was ultimately able to visit his parents, despite the many obstacles he faced on the way. When we examine this chapter from his travel book, we notice that he sees and records what he sees with the keen eyes and sensibility of a poet and an accomplished literary craftsman.

3.3.1 Text

By afternoon we descend into a pastel-coloured basin, also treeless, and with wide horizons: blues of sky and lake and distant ranges, purples and browns of the soil, white clouds, every colour is light, pastel, delicate. A wind is blowing so it’s cool. In winter this place must be desolately cold. I take a few photographs: grassless, treeless, birdless stone and pebble and rock.

We cross the basin, rise gently for a while, and as we reach the point of maximum elevation, see in front of us a breathtaking sight: a vast slope, as far as the eye can see, as if the world itself sloped, a **declivity** that stretches for perhaps a hundred miles ahead of us; and this plain has ridges rising from its floor, but they are low, abort ridges, and well-spaced, so that you can see the plain continue beyond them. The ridges are of pink and slate and purple rock, with cloud-shadows falling on them and the earth to the right is beige and ochre and fawn. On the tops of the north-facing peaks there is a touch of snow. A little later, snow and

cloud are joined by a different white, that of stretches of salt undissolved on this arid plain. Then comes a feast of geological transformations: nude dunes, unconnected by sand, completely isolated one from another, then black hills, oily and stony, slowly becoming wrinkled and clay-like; later, lakes of a distant blue, with a band of sparse vegetation in front, and a red strip of soil nearest us, like the uninvented tricolour of an artist's republic. A sole gold mountain glows in the late light; camels graze on a green plain: the combed raked clouds are yellowed with sunset; and finally there is darkness, and a salt lake, and the distant lights of Germu.

The road so far is fairly good, except where it is undergoing repair; there temporary and muddy diversions cause us to jolt and slither. The first section of the road was metalled, and there is a plan to metal the entire Liuyuan-Lhasa route. (The present dirt-road has to be flattened every year after the rainy season.) From time to time we came across the People's Liberation Army engaged in road construction on a good scale, with the help of some machinery but mainly spades. These troops work here for half the year. When the winter winds freeze the land they return to Germu or Xining or Lanzhou, making the region even more isolated than before.

For Sui, the scenery of this unpopulated **terrain** is only occasionally captivating, as when under some transitory slant of light an unusual gold touches the evening hills. The dunes and plains, the plate basin of the Chaidam, all the permanent features of the landscape, are fixtures along a route he has travelled every month for years. He is inured to their beauty; his pleasures along the road are mainly social; talk, food, where good food can be obtained, **haggling** in the market, visiting friends. There is no radio in his truck, and when he isn't talking he is smoking. He looks his thirty five years. His face is somewhat full, though he has features sharp for a Han Chinese. His black hair, **unkempt** despite the comb he often uses, is pushed back on his forehead whenever it obstructs his vision. His teeth, like his fingers, are nicotine-stained. His eyes are wonderfully alert and friendly, except that, when he is busy with various errands and preparations, they cloud over with an abstraction almost impossible to pierce until the job is completed.

He has an intuitive practicality. His truck has grown so much a part of him that the occasional repairs he makes are carried out almost unconsciously, as if he were scratching his arm. The truck could be rattling along with fifteen loud mechanical noises merging in **counter-point**: Sui is unconcerned. A sixteenth, seemingly harmless, joins them: he is instantly alert, pulls the truck over, jumps out of the cabin and prods about the engine, unscrewing caps, checking for oil and water, plugging leaks, joining wires. When he gets back into the cabin and starts up again, the sixteenth noise has disappeared.

His hand rests lightly on the wheel while he drives. When he breaks a chain of cigarettes and needs to light up once more, he passes the cigarette to whoever is sitting next to him. Since the windows let in a swift current of air at the top and the sides – the rubber strips have disappeared in places – the operation of lighting a match in the moving truck is not easy, and I usually pass it on to Gyanseng. Sui drives, for the most part, gently; this contrasts with the violence of his gear changes. On mountainous stretches he steers with a sensitive adeptness enjoyable to watch.

He and Gyanseng get along well. They do not speak much. Gyanseng is a little sick of road travel. Sometimes when we are in a transport yard overnight, Sui tells him to sleep in the truck to guard it. Gyanseng grumbles about the cold and discomfort but complies: it is vital the driver gets a good night's rest. When I try to insist on taking over on alternate nights I am over-ruled. In matters relating to the truck, the driver is dictator.

He reads omnivorously: newspapers when he can get them, Xiao San's comic books, novels, short stories in magazines, instruction booklets. 'Poetry,' he tells me, 'is pointless. I can never understand what poets are trying to get at – or why they bother to say things the way they do.' He describes his school life during the Cultural Revolution. 'We never studied, never did anything. I was interested in books, but any reading I did, I did without guidance. My sister's a doctor –you'll meet her at Germu –but that sort of thing is completely closed off to me. I am too old now for higher studies. Besides, I don't have the qualifications.'

'Do you regret it?' I ask.

'Yes, sometimes of course. But what's the point? Even if I didn't accept the way things are, what could I do? And this is not a bad life anyway. I'm lucky as such things go. The one problem with the job is that I'm rarely with my family.'

Together with this resignation comes a certain **savvy**, a street-smartness that enables Sui to find his way about the system, to utilise its flexibilities, to withdraw when effort is useless, to know when and how to bargain, whom to speak with when in trouble, how to get a concession here, a few litres of petrol (when necessary) there. When my luggage fell off the truck he did not spend time thinking about the best course of action; when we realised someone had absconded with it, he looked ahead sufficiently far to ask the identifying witness to come with us to Liuyuan. When, past midnight, we arrived in Dunhuang, he combined argument and pleasantry to get us a room in a yard that we had been told was full. Wherever we are, he looks out for gifts or good bargains for himself and for his friends. He is a generous man. In a sense the hard-bitten side of his nature inspires as much confidence as his patent goodheartedness.

The landscape is so spectacular that I seem hardly to have noticed our more mundane activities today. We have stopped for oil and water and diesel several times, but haven't eaten anything except lunch at a truck depot (bean-curd, and rice, and a kind of squid-like thing I couldn't identify). I felt like eating some grapes but the egg had got squashed into them in transit. From time to time we stop at a checkpoint or fuel station where one or two families have lived in isolation from the rest of humanity for perhaps twenty years. This Chaidam Basin must be among the loneliest parts of the world. Sui invariably asks the old men who are stationed at such places what they would like him to bring for them the next time he is going through.

Sui thinks that young people nowadays are disturbed and selfish, and blames it on the viciousness of the Cultural Revolution, during which they were encouraged to turn against their parents and teachers and everyone in authority, and instead to follow the (prevailing) message of Mao. All decency died during that time, he says, half the cultural heritage of China – books, temples, works of art – was destroyed. People now care only for themselves. And as for their skills, even their literacy – no one really studied anything in school, that is, if they went to

school at all. All day they had to recite and discuss the quotations of the Chairman, as if that was the totality of all knowledge. You should have seen the *People's Daily* during those days – red headlines across the front page: ‘We will endlessly adore the red sun in our lives, Chairman Mao – and who can blame the kids for being influenced by such ever-present propaganda?’

‘Was there nothing good in the Cultural Revolution at all?’ I ask, ‘Some people mention that the only time they got to travel, to see their country, was when they were Red Guards. And they say it cut down on the worst abuses of bureaucracy.’

‘Well I suppose that’s true, though I’m not too sure about the bureaucracy.’ He does not speak for a while, then goes on. ‘Some good things came out of it, as they do out of every disaster. I learned a lot of things about life, and about how people behave: about how far, for instance, you could count on even your best friends to stick by you in times of trouble. Sometimes people wanted to but they didn’t dare help. They feared for themselves and for their families.’

Very late, at one o’clock at night, we arrive in Gernu. The people at the desk at the Transport Yard are surly; in particular the gatekeeper, who is arrogant and suspicious in the extreme. I am given a bureaucratic run-around when I am so sleepy that I can hardly talk. Finally we are given a room, and the manager appears, apologising in the name of international friendship. It is hardly his fault, and he has been woken up as well. I am asleep within minutes.

3.3.2 Glossary

declivity: a downward slope

terrain: a stretch of land

haggling: arguing over something, specially to fix a price

unkempt: here it means untidy hair

counter-point: the musical practice of combining two or more tunes to be played together

savvy: practical knowledge and ability.

3.3.3 Discussion

From the oppressive, artificially darkened interior of the Havisham household we now turn to the living reality of the vast expanses of the Chaidam Basin, which, according to the writer, ‘must be among the loneliest parts of the world.’ What is striking about this passage is the accurate and concrete details that Vikram Seth presents about this practically forbidden part of the world. Besides, there is a very sympathetically and insightfully sketched character of Sui, the driver of the truck, who became a dependable friend, and saw him through numerous difficult situations and tight corners. Sui’s nature is partly revealed in action and the conversations the writer had with him, and also partly through direct statements and comments made by the writer on his appearance, habits, friends, his expertise as a driver, and his quick, easy and frank dealings with acquaintances on the regular route his truck took him. Sui is no ordinary truck driver. He is a thinking, self-reliant and extremely competent and knowledgeable person. While his sister was a doctor, he was fairly satisfied with his job as a truck driver although his work took him away from his family more often than he would have liked.

Let us in particular, look at the diction of the passage. In the first paragraph, one of the suffixes that recurs is 'less': treeless (twice), grassless, birdless. The words 'isolated', 'barren', 'desolate', 'lonely', are repeated in paragraph after paragraph emphasising the remoteness of the area and the extreme sparseness of the population. At the end of paragraph twelve we are told that in places 'one or two families have lived in isolation from the rest of humanity for perhaps twenty years', which sums up practically all that can be said about the near complete isolation of this region.

The next thing that we notice is the well-knit paragraphs. Each paragraph deals with a well-defined idea, theme, or incident. Almost every paragraph ends with an emphatic statement that acts as a punch-line, summing up, what has been said earlier. The beginning of the next paragraph similarly marks a logical and clear development. Take, for example, paragraphs five and six which deal with Sui's practical nature and his skill as a driver. After the short opening sentence of each paragraph we are given concrete details about his 'intuitive practicality' seen in operation. He knew by instinct, as it were, what noises were trivial and could, therefore, be safely ignored, and what were serious enough to need immediate attention, and he promptly carried out those essential repairs with commendable competence. Similarly, in the next paragraph Sui's expertise as a driver is dealt with in a forthright and convincing manner. Paragraph seven too is organised in an equally effective fashion.

The structure of sentences reveals considerable variety, balance, and rhythm. The author varies his sentences: they differ in length from very short ones to long, intricate ones with parenthetical and objectival and adverbial clauses, which add to, modify and qualify what is being said. Take, for example, paragraph four: ... 'as when under some transitory slant of light... hills; talking, he is smoking; though he has features... Chinese; his black hair, unkempt despite the comb he often uses,... Whenever it obstructs his vision; except that when he is busy....and preparations...'. The rhythm indicates the easy, conversational flow of an alert and sympathetic observer of men and things, which makes the writing singularly attractive. A careful reader will hardly fail to note the sensitive use of words and phrases: words tend to occur in groups of two or three, mostly well balanced; e.g. paragraph one.....every colour is light, pastel, delicate; grassless, treeless, birdless...' paragraph two.... beige, ochre and fawn; and finally there is darkness, and a salt lake, and the distant lights of Germu'. You can pick any number of such examples from the passage.

Also note the way the author uses punctuation: parentheses brackets, commas, semi colons, colons, dashes and full stops. The poet's eye for sound and colour is also in evidence: 'sole gold mountain glows in the late light; camels graze on a green plain; combed raked clouds are yellowed with sunset'. The sound patterns enhance the rhythmic effects of the measured, infinitely varied flow of sentences. To avoid the ever present danger of an overzealous lesson writer exhausting everything that can be said on style and preventing the readers from making their own original contributions (which in fact is the primary objective of these lessons) we shall bring the discussion of this passage by Vikram Seth to a close.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) How does Seth recreate the isolated nature of the Chaidam basin? What devices does he use to build up this atmosphere?

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(Check your answer with that given at the end of this Unit.)

3.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen that

- narrative is the very essence of a ‘story’ and is concerned with what happens next;
- there are several modes of narration;
- narrative in a ‘story’ is somewhat different from narrative prose in a travelogue.

3.5 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

If there is any problem in answering these questions, you can turn once again to Section 3.2.3.

Check Your Progress 2

- i) Seth builds the atmosphere by the use of the following devices:
- use of time-progressive unfolding
 - emphasizes a negative feature; establishes the exact features of the place
 - detailed description is usually evocative if selected with great care
 - informal style
 - recurring use of words isolate, lonely, etc.

UNIT 4 EXPOSITORY PROSE

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Passage from Richard Wright's *Twelve Million Black Voices*
 - 4.2.1 Text
 - 4.2.2 Glossary
 - 4.2.3 Discussion
 - 4.2.4 Style
- 4.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.4 Answers to Check Your Progress

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we shall introduce you to expository prose using Richard Wright's essay 'Twelve Million Black Voices' as an illustration. After completing the Unit, you will be able to:

- Describe the techniques of exposition such as the use of examples, reason and analysis,
- explain the significance of figurative language in expository prose.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The term 'exposition' refers to an act of explaining something or making it clear. The aim of the writer in expository writing is not primarily to narrate or describe; it is mainly to explain something – facts, ideas or beliefs. The writer does this by resorting to various techniques of exposition such as:

- explanation of a process,
- use of examples,
- reasons in support of a statement,
- comparison and contrast,
- classification,
- restatement,
- definition,
- analogy,
- cause and effect,
- analysis

In this unit we shall illustrate the various techniques of analysing expository prose. Though Units 2 and 3 have dealt with descriptive and narrative varieties of prose, the real distinction among the different varieties is one of focus. In descriptive prose the focus is on describing things as they are or as they appear to be. Narrative writing tries to recreate an actual or imaginary experience in a

way that we are also able to experience it mentally. In short, it is a description of events. In expository writing, the focus is on explaining. The writer often combines features of description and narration while explaining. However, expository prose needs to be looked at as a separate variety for the sake of being able to recognise its distinctiveness in terms of purpose, design, and functions of language. We shall also discuss features which lend literary merit to the passage under discussion.

4.2 PASSAGE FROM RICHARD WRIGHT'S *TWELVE MILLION BLACK VOICES*

The extract we present for discussion is a selection from Richard Wright's *Twelve Million Black Voices*, a short illustrated history of the Blacks in America. Richard Wright (1908-1960) has the distinction of being the first Black writer to achieve international fame. His writings include *Native Son* (1940), *Outsider* (1965), *Savage Holiday* (1954), *Uncle Tom's Children* (1965), *American Hunger* (1977) and *Black Boy* (1969).

The passage you are going to study is a good example of the organisation and style of expository prose. The writer uses a particular tone, selects incidents or details as examples, orders his material, even chooses particular words and phrases to explain the miseries of Blacks in America.

4.2.1 Text

The word 'Black', the term by which, orally or in print, we Black folk in the United States are usually designated, is not really a name at all nor a description, but a psychological island whose objective form is the most unanimous **fiat** in all American history; a **fiat** buttressed by popular and national tradition, and written down in many state and city **statutes**; a fiat which artificially and arbitrarily defines, regulates, and limits in scope of meaning the vital contours of our lives, and the lives of our children and our children's children.

This island, within whose confines we live, is anchored in the feelings of millions of people, and is situated in the midst of the sea of white faces we meet each day; and, by and large, as three hundred years of time has borne our nation into the twentieth century, its rocky boundaries have remained unyielding to the waves of our hope that dash against it.

The steep **cliffs** of this island are manifest, on the whole, in the conduct of Whites towards us hour by hour, a conduct which tells us that we possess no rights commanding respect, that we have no claim to pursue happiness in our own fashion, that our progress toward civilization constitutes an insult, that our behaviour must be kept firmly within an orbit branded as inferior, that we must be compelled to labour at the behest of others, that as a group we are owned by the Whites and that manliness on our part warrants instant reprisal.

Three hundred years are a long time for millions of folk like us to be held in such subjection, so long a time that perhaps scores of years will have to pass before we shall be able to express what this slavery has done to us, for our personalities are still numb from its long shocks; and, as the numbness leaves our souls, we shall yet have to feel and give utterance to the full pain we shall inherit.

More than one-half of us Black folk in the United States are tillers of the soil, and three-fourths of those of us who till the soil are sharecroppers and day labourers.

The land we till is beautiful, red and black and brown clay, with fresh and hungry smells, with pine trees and palm trees, with rolling hills and **swampy** delta, an unbelievably fertile land, bounded on the north by the states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana, on the south by the Gulf of Mexico, on the west by the Mississippi River, and on the east by the Atlantic Sea.

Our southern springs are filled with quiet noises and scenes of growth. Apple buds laugh into blossom. **Honey-suckles** creep up the sides of house. Sunflowers nod in the hot fields. From mossy tree to mossy tree, oak, elm, willow, aspen, sycamore, dogwood, cedar, walnut, ash, and hickory, bright green leaves jut from a million branches to form an awning that tries to shield and shade the earth. Blue and pink kites of small boys sail in the windy air.

In summer the magnolia trees fill the countryside with sweet scent for long miles. Days are slumberous, and the skies are high and thronged with clouds that ride fast. At midday the sun blazes and bleaches the soil. Butterflies flit through the heat; wasps sing their sharp, straight lines; birds fluff and flounce, piping in querulous joy. Nights are covered with canopies, sometimes blue and sometimes black, canopies that sag low with ripe and nervous stars. The throaty boast of frogs momentarily drowns out the call and counter-call of crickets.

In autumn the land is afire with colour. Red and brown leaves lift and flutter dryly, becoming entangled in the stiff grass and cornstalks. Cotton is picked and **ginned**, cane is crushed and its juice is simmered down into molasses; **yams** are grubbed out of the clay; hogs are slaughtered and cured in lingering smoke; corn is husked and ground into meal. At twilight the sky is full of wild geese winging ever southward, and bats jerk through the air. At night the winds blow free.

In winter the forests resound with the bite of steel axes eating into tall trees as men gather wood for the leaden days of cold. The guns of hunters snap and crack. Long days of rain come, and our swollen creeks rush to join a hundred rivers that wash across the land and make great harbours where they feed the gulf or the sea. Occasionally the rivers leap their banks and leave new thick layers of silt to enrich the earth, and then the look of the land is garish, bleak, suffused with a **first day stillness**, strangeness and awe.

But whether in spring or summer or autumn or winter, time slips past us remorselessly, and it is hard to tell of the iron that lies beneath the surface of our quiet, dull days.

To paint the picture of how we live on the tobacco, cane, rice, and cotton plantations is to compete with mighty artists: the movies, the radio, the newspapers, the magazines, and even the Church. They have painted one picture: charming, idyllic, romantic; but we live another: full of the fear of the Lords of the Land, bowing and grinning when we meet white faces, toiling from sun to sun, living in unpainted wooden shacks that sit casually and insecurely upon the red clay.

In the main we are different from other folk in that, when an impulse moves us, when we are caught in the throes of inspiration, when we are moved to better our

lot, we do not ask ourselves: ‘Can we do it?’ but: ‘Will they let us do it?’ Before we Black folk can move, we must first look into the White man’s mind to see what is there, to see what he is thinking, and the White man’s mind is a mind that is always changing.

In general there are three classes of men above us: the Lords of the Land — operators of the plantations; the Bosses of the Buildings — the owners of industry; and the vast numbers of poor White workers — our immediate competitors in the daily struggle for bread. The Lords of the Land hold sway over the plantations and over us; the Bosses of the Buildings lend money and issue orders to the Lords of the Land. The Bosses of the Buildings feed upon the Lords of the Land, and the Lords of the Land feed upon the 5,000,000 landless poor Whites and upon us, throwing to the poor Whites the scant solace of filching from us 4,000,000 land-less Blacks what the poor Whites themselves are cheated of in this elaborate game.

Back of this tangled process is a long history. When the Emancipation Reclamation was signed, there were some 4,000,000 of us Black folk stranded and bewildered upon the land which we had tilled under compulsion for two and a half centuries. Sundered suddenly from the only relationship with Western civilization we had been allowed to form since our captivity, our personalities blighted by two hundred and fifty years of servitude, and eager to hold our wives and husbands and children together in family units, some of us turned back to the same Lords of the Land who had held us as slaves and begged for work, resorted to their advice; and there began for us a new kind of bondage: **sharecropping**.

Glad to be free, some of us drifted and gave way to every vagary of impulse that swept through us, being held in the line of life only by the necessity to work and eat. Confined for centuries to the life of the cotton field, many of us possessed no feelings of family, home, community, church, or progress. We would scarcely believe that we were free, and our restlessness and incessant mobility were our naive way of testing that freedom. Just as a kitten stretches and yawns after a long sleep, so thousands of us tramped from place to place for the sheer sake of moving, looking, wondering, landless upon the land. Arkansas, Missouri, Tennessee, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Louisiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, Virginia, and West Virginia became the home states of us freed Blacks.

In 1890 many White people predicted that we Black folk would perish in a competitive world; but in spite of this we left the land and kept afloat, wandering from Natchez to New Orleans, from Mobile to Montgomery, from Macon Jacksonville, from Birmingham to Chattanooga, from Nashville to Louisville, from Memphis to Little Rock — labouring in the sawmills, in the **turpentine camps**, on the road jobs; working for men who did not care if we lived or died, but who did not want their business enterprises to suffer for lack of labour. During the first decade of the twentieth century more than one and three-quarter millions of us abandoned the plantations upon which we had been born; more than a million of us roamed the states of the South and the remainder of us drifted north.

Our women fared easier than we men during the early days of freedom; on the whole their relationship to the world was more stable than ours. Their authority was supreme in most of our families in as much as many of them had worked in

the ‘Big Houses’ of the Lords of the Land and had learned manners, had been taught to cook, sew, and nurse. During slave days they did not always belong to us, for the Lords of the Land often took them for their pleasure. When a gang of us was sold from one plantation to another, our wives would sometimes be kept by the Lords of the Land and we men would have to mate with whatever slave girl we chanced upon. Because of their enforced intimacy with the Lords of the Land, many of our women, after they were too old to work, were allowed to remain in the slave cabins to tend generations of black children. They enjoyed a status denied us men, being called ‘Mammy’, and through the years they became symbols of motherhood, retaining in their withered bodies the burden of our folk wisdom, reigning as arbiters in our domestic affairs until we men were freed and had moved to cities where cash-paying jobs enabled us to become the heads of our own families.

The economic and political power of the South is not held in our hands; we do not own banks, iron and steel mills, railroads, office buildings, ships, wharves, or power plants. There are some few of us who operate small grocery stores, barber shops, **rooming houses**, burial societies, and undertaking establishments. But none of us owns any of the basic industries that shape the course of the South, such as mining, **lumber**, textiles, oil, transportation, or electric power. So, in the early spring, when the rains have ceased and the ground is ready for plowing, we present ourselves to the Lords of the Land and ask to make a crop. We sign a contract – usually our contracts are oral – which allows us to keep one-half of the harvest after all debts are paid. If we have worked upon these plantations before, we are legally bound to plant, tend, and harvest another crop. If we should escape to the city to avoid paying our mounting debts, White policemen track us down and ship us back to the plantation.

The Lords of the Land assign us ten or fifteen acres of soil already bled of its fertility through generations of abuse. They advance us one mule, one plow, seed, tools, fertilizer, clothing, and **sorghum** molasses. If we have been lucky the year before maybe we have saved a few dollars to tide us through the **fall** months, but spring finds us begging an ‘advance credit’ from the Lords of the Land.

From now on the laws of Queen Cotton rule our lives. (Contrary to popular assumption, cotton is a queen, not a king. Kings are dictatorial; cotton is not only dictatorial but self-destructive, an imperious woman in the throes of constant childbirth, a woman who is driven by her greedy passion to bear endless bales of cotton, though she well knows that she will die if she continues to give birth to her fleecy children!) If we Black folk had only to work to feed the Lords of the Land, to supply delicacies for their tables – as did the slaves of old for their masters – our degradation upon the plantations would not have been the harshest form of human servitude the world has ever known. But we had to raise cotton to clothe the world; cotton meant money, and money meant power and authority and prestige. To plant vegetables for our tables was often forbidden, for raising a garden narrowed the area to be planted in cotton. The world demanded cotton, and the Lords of the Land ordered more acres to be planted – planted right up to our doorsteps! – and the ritual of Queen Cotton became brutal and bloody.

4.2.2 Glossary

fiat: an order or decree, it means ‘let it be done’

statutes: written laws of a legislative body

cliffs: steep rugged side of rocks on a coast

swampy: spongy land filled with water

honey-suckle: a climbing plant with sweet smelling yellow, pink, or white flowers in the shape of long narrow tubes

ginned: to separate cotton from its seeds by use of a machine called a gin

yam: a variety of sweet potato

a first day stillness: as quiet as if it were the first day of creation

sharecropping: a tenancy system by which the tenant pays a part of his crop as rent

turpentine camps: Labour camps for producing turpentine oil from trees. This oil is used for cleaning and for making a strong smelling, colourless liquid thinner for paint.

rooming houses: a building where rooms are rented, usually unfurnished

lumber: trade in wood

sorgham: a cereal plant known as Indian millet, a variety of jowar

fall: autumn is called fall in the U.S.A.

4.2.3 Discussion

The extract from Richard Wright's book *Twelve Million Black Voices* is an account of the life of Blacks in America. It tells us about

- i) the occupation available to Blacks (paragraphs 5, 15, 19 and 21),
- ii) the conduct of Whites towards Blacks (paragraphs 3, 4 and 13).
- iii) social status of Blacks (paragraphs 3, 12 and 14).
- iv) historical account of events (paragraphs 15, 16 and 17), and
- v) lives of Black women (paragraph 18).

Richard Wright uses several techniques to tell us about the miseries of the Blacks. One way is substantiation by quoting figures. Refer to para 5 where Black occupations are mentioned. What is the proportion of the Black population involved in the cultivation of land?

When the writer states that one half of the Black population is involved in tilling the soil he is elaborating the central thesis that Black men lived a life of misery; the jobs available to them were limited. In para 14, Wright classifies the population of America into three categories - landlords, industrialists and workers. He mentions that the landless Blacks were 4,000,000 and in para 15 he repeats '4,000,000 of us Black folk'.

In para 5 the author states that the tillers are also sharecroppers. Sharecropping (if you consult the glossary) is an agreement between the landowner and the tiller according to which the tiller gives part of the harvest as rent to the landowner. While enumerating the reasons why sharecropping favoured the Whites, Wright resorts to first person narrative. His tone by which we mean the writer's attitude: angry, melancholy, cheerful, is controlled. He gives objective facts such as: the contracts were oral. Secondly the Blacks were legally bound to plant, tend and

harvest the land they had tilled before and in case they ran away to avoid paying the debts, White policemen tracked them down and sent them back to the place of work. Finally, the lands given to them for raising crops were inarable having been tilled bare of fertility. Also the tools given for ploughing proved inadequate. As a result they were left with no choice but to borrow money from the landlords and this had to be repaid in the form of crops.

He makes precise, convincing statements. The inhuman treatment of Blacks comes out more prominently through the rational and quiet manner of the sentences proceeding one after another, with no outraged comment. The intention is to make us think about the poor Blacks. Are they treated better than animals? If we look for clues, we find that statements such as 'We present' are ironic in tone. The tone, without being aggressive, suggests that all is not well as 'White policemen track us down and ship us back to the plantations'.

Read para 21 dealing with life on the cotton plantation. The writer personifies cotton referring to it as 'Queen'. This reference is of crucial importance to an understanding of the sordid life of Blacks on plantations. The paragraph focuses on the point of view of the subscriber. It is for us to consider the 'truth' underneath the overstatement. Answer the following question relating to the passage to enable you to examine it more closely.

Why does the author call the ritual of Queen Cotton brutal and bloody?

If you have understood the metaphorical expression in the passage, you will find the reasons. Cotton grows fast and in abundance. Hence tending cotton calls for constant and hard work. It is more difficult to grow cotton than to grow fruits and vegetables. As a result of growing cotton the Blacks were denied their share of fruits and vegetables. Moreover, raising cotton was more profitable for the white landowners as it also had an international market. It increased their money power to oppress the poor Blacks further. The ritual of Queen Cotton that demanded of the Blacks hard labour with no hope in return thus, proved brutal and bloody. Queen Cotton is like a demanding goddess who would have nothing less than a sacrifice of blood and sweat. Hence the use of the word 'ritual'.

The writer's point of view towards his subject – an attitude, a slant which makes the treatment of the subject his own is to be seen in the manner in which Wright establishes the ritual of Queen Cotton in our imagination. Instead of expressing his sympathy with the Blacks directly or treating the subject from the Blacks' own perspective or from the shocked or 'superior' and condescending writer's, he selects facts as examples, and orders his material by using metaphorical expressions, words and phrases.

In order to describe the conduct of Whites towards Blacks, refer to paragraphs 3,4 and 13. There were arbitrary official orders or fiats and laws against the Blacks. The parameters of Black existence are defined in para 3.

Wright further tells us the extent of the damage slavery had done to the Blacks by stating: 'our personalities are still numb from its long shocks.' 'To be numb is to be powerless to feel or act. Slavery had reduced their power to react even in the wake of injustice and gross inequality.

Paragraphs 15,16 and 17 are an account of events that shaped the lives of Blacks in the United States. These events provide continuity and cohesion to the text.

One is the Emancipation Proclamation by which all slaves in the Southern States at war with the Union were declared free. Some of the consequences of the Emancipation measures were:

- i) some of them became sharecroppers;
- ii) others moved aimlessly to taste the newly-given freedom;
- iii) there were some who had no feelings for the community or home, and hence felt no sense of belonging to any one place;
- iv) some picked up odd jobs in saw mills, turpentine camps and roadsides;
- v) more than a million roamed in the South, the rest moved towards the North to give up working on plantations;

In these events we see a mature mind recreating and interpreting the 'lived' and 'felt' experiences of the Blacks. The social reality of Black life in spite of the historical events remained unchanged. It is counterpointed with the Black sense of an ampler world. The events unfold a hidden meaning: there is danger in keeping illusions. The undercurrents of the writer's intentions lie beneath the smooth quiet movement of the narrative.

Now refer to para 18. In what ways did Black women live a better life than their male counterparts?

The author has restated Black misery by citing the example of Black women.

They were respected in their families as they had learnt to cook, sew and rear children by working in the houses of the Whites. Then, as they had been used for sexual pleasures by White men, they were allowed to stay in the servant chambers as a compensation even after they had grown old. As the Whites were favourably inclined towards them (as compared to Black men) and as Black men being slaves were not earning enough, Black women exercised complete authority in family matters.

4.2.4 Style

We shall now examine the style of writing and the devices the author has used to convey his meaning effectively.

The title 'Twelve Million Black Voices' is just not an account of the life of Blacks in America. The word 'Black' seen figuratively also expresses despair, a gloomy, dismal, sullen state of mind on account of unrelieved suffering. There are words, phrases and sentences that illustrate the significance of the title. The harsh attitude of White men is like rocky boundaries and steep cliffs. Blacks cannot express their feelings, emotions and thoughts for 'our personalities are still numb from shocks of slavery'. In a land of plenty and beauty, 'time slips past us remorselessly, and it is hard to tell of the iron that lies beneath the surface of our quiet, dull days'. Blacks live in 'unpainted wooden shacks and sit casually and insecurely upon the red clay.' The harsh realities of the lives of Blacks are summed up in the words 'black voices'.

Read paragraphs 1, 2 and 3 where the author uses a metaphorical expression when he says that the term Black is like an island. Bring out the significance of the metaphor and how it illustrates the author's point of view.

The metaphor 'island' is able to explain an abstract concept in the author's mind which is stated at the beginning of the passage where the term Black is defined in an unusual manner. It is a 'psychological island'. What is meant is that the Black is isolated like an island in the middle of the sea of white faces. Just as the sea exercises control over the conditions existing on the island, White men exercise control over the Blacks. The image of an island is an extended one. The unrelenting harsh attitude of the Whites is compared to the rocky boundaries of the island. The hopes and aspirations of the Blacks are like waves that dash against the rocks producing no effect.

Read paragraphs 6,7,8,9 and 10. There is the description of landscape and seasons. The description acts as a scenic backdrop providing a contrast between the bounties of nature on the one hand and the cruelty reigning supreme in human hearts.

How has the fertility of the land been suggested?

The red, black and brown clay are types of soil conducive to vegetation. The fresh and hungry smells can come only from healthy, exuberant trees. Palm trees and pine trees and swampy delta exist where rainfall is heavy and the land is fertile.

The author brings out the beauty of landscape and seasons with the help of word pictures. Can you list some of them? (you could refer to paragraphs 6,7 and 8).

You may have listed the following: the panoramic view of red and black and brown clay, rolling hills and swampy delta, apple buds laughing into blossom, honey-suckles creeping up the sides of houses, sunflowers nodding in the hot fields, bright leaves jutting from a million branches to form an awning that tries to shield and shade the earth. Nights are covered with canopies, sometimes blue and sometimes black canopies that sag low with ripe and nervous stars. The author has described the scene in such vivid detail that one can almost 'see' the stars and 'smell' the honeysuckle. But is the author's aim simply to communicate these sensations? As we know, the author's aim is to communicate the experience of the Blacks in America and by describing the plenty and prosperity of American soil, he only serves to highlight the exploited condition of the Blacks.

The use of literary devices serves to enrich the prose style of an author. Alliteration is a literary device which is the repetition of consonantal sounds in stressed syllables in a sequence of words. You must have observed the following:

Sweet scent: blazes and bleaches, sharp, straight, fluff and flounce; covered with canopies; and call and counter call of crickets.

Refer to para 10. There is use of such verbal phrases as suggest vigorous activity:

cane is **crushed**;

juice is **simmered** down into molasses;

yams are **grubbed** out of the clay;

hogs are **slaughtered** and **cured** in lingering smoke; and

corn is **husked** and **ground** into meal.

One effective device of communicating forcefully is to reiterate a word to claim and direct the reader’s attention. In paragraph 21 the word ‘cotton’ occurs nine times. In comparing cotton to a queen, the writer refers to cotton as queen in recognition of its importance because it demands a lot of tireless hard work from those who attend to it. Cotton is almost queen-like in subordinating all those who tend to its growth and harvest. It is also queen-like as it distributes money to those who own her – namely the Whites. The way the cotton plant grows unmindful of the bales of cotton that may crush the plant is like an imperious queen who is equally self-destructive.

In para 16 we find an example of the use of a simile:

The restlessness and movement of Blacks as a consequence of reconstructive measures is compared to the yawning and stretching of a kitten after a long sleep. Earlier we learnt that their personalities were numb under the shock of slavery. Till the time they were set free, they were, as if, sleeping like a kitten in a state of inertia and happy to stretch and yawn when woken up, oblivious of any demand of exacting action on them.

Check Your Progress 1

- i) A definition explains and clarifies the meaning of a word, phrase or concept. Do you find the term Black defined in an unusual manner? What literary devices does the writer use to support the extended definition?

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- ii) Pick out a few words and phrases from the passage which reveal the stiff, unrelenting and harsh attitude of Whites towards Blacks.

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- iii) To what extent does the use of literary devices such as metaphor, personification, repetition make the author’s assertion that the ritual of Queen Cotton is ‘brutal and bloody’ more effective ?

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4.3 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have discussed a passage of expository prose from the point of view of techniques of development and features of style. In the course of the discussion we have also studied the descriptive and narrative features of writing which act as tools of exposition. We have also seen the use of figurative language such as metaphor and simile which improve expression and convey the author's meaning in a more effective and forceful style.

4.4 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESSES

Check Your Progress 1

- i) The term Black is designated as a psychological island in the minds of both Whites and Blacks, (note the unusual analogy). The island is a metaphorical expression and the metaphor is an extended one. The Black is isolated like an island in the sea of White faces. Just as the sea exercises control over the island, White men exercise control over the Blacks. The unrelenting harsh attitude of the Whites is compared to the rocky boundaries of the island. The hopes and aspirations of the Blacks are like waves that dash against the rocks, producing no effect.
- ii) **Rocky** boundaries; **steep cliffs** of the island, personalities are still **numb** from its long shocks, time slips past us **remorselessly**, and it is hard to tell of the **iron** that lies beneath the surface of our **quiet, dull** days.
- iii) In comparing cotton to a queen, the writer refers to cotton as a queen in recognition of its importance because it demands a lot of tireless and hard work from those who tend to its growth and harvest. It is also queen-like as it distributes money to those who own her – namely the Whites. This repeated use of the metaphor of queen is also a personification that makes the author's assertion more effective. Personification as we know, involves giving human characteristics powers or feelings to objects or abstract qualities. As in a metaphor, a comparison is implied and the purpose of this is to make the description more vivid and concrete.