

# Tutorial letter 501/3/2018

## Foundations in English Literary Studies ENG1501

Semesters 1 & 2

Department of English Studies

**IMPORTANT INFORMATION:**

This tutorial letter contains important information  
about your module.

BAR CODE

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## **NOTE**

You will find a number of tables and boxes in this guide. These contain important information about literary studies, including the right terms to use when writing about literature and some background information. Make sure you read these boxes carefully and take note of the information they contain. There are also a number of writing activities (usually under the title “Exercise”) in the guide. Please complete them, either in this guide, in a journal that you have bought for your study notes, or on your computer or tablet. Writing is an essential part of successful English Studies.

# SECTION 1

## READING POETRY

*By Fetson Kalua and Deirdre Byrne*

### A GUIDE TO THIS SECTION

This section contains the following items:

- Some discussion of poetry in general;
- Detailed study notes on ten poems from *Seasons Come to Pass*;
- Definitions of terms that are often used in the study of poetry (these appear in boxes throughout the text);
- Some final advice about writing about poetry.

In this section we are going to explore the study of poetry by means of a close reading of **ten** poems from your prescribed book. These are not the only poems to be studied in this module, though: we have chosen them as examples of the methods we want you to use in reading and studying poetry. As a rule, you will need to study approximately **twenty-five** poems for this module. A list of all twenty-five poems, including the ones we have analysed for you in this guide, will be sent to you in good time.

### Study programme

Activity	Time spent (approximately)
Reading the poems	2 hours
Reading this study note and making notes of important points	6 hours
Completing activities in the study guide	8 hours
Preparatory writing for your assignment on poetry	2 hours
Drafting and revising your assignment	6 hours

### What is poetry?

This question has intrigued many people over many centuries and continues to provoke varied and interesting answers, so let's think about it before we begin exploring specific poems.

**Exercise**

Fill in the following table before you start studying this section.

**Poetry is ...**

**I like poetry because ...**

**I dislike poetry because ...**

Now mark each of the following statements as true or false, depending on what you believe. Please be as honest as you can, since that will help you to see what you really think about poetry and to raise your awareness of this form of literature. Remember that nobody needs to see your answers and that there are no “right” or “wrong” answers: at this stage we are merely investigating what you think and believe about poetry.

1 STATEMENT	2 True/False (beginning of the module)	3 True/False (end of the module)
Poetry is the opposite of prose.		
Poetry is difficult to read.		
A poem must rhyme.		
Poetry uses language in a different way from the way we usually use it.		
I have read a lot of poetry.		
Poetry is outdated and belongs only to the past.		
Poetry has nothing to do with ordinary life.		
Poetry belongs to the upper circles of educated and sophisticated people, and not to ordinary people.		
All poems are less than a page in length.		
The best subjects for poetry are life, death, love or nature.		

Please keep your answers to these statements in a safe place. We will return to them later in this study unit. For now, though, please remember that I told you there were no right or wrong answers to the statements above. At this stage we are investigating what **you** think, feel and believe about poetry. We can, however, note that:

- Poetry is not the most popular cultural form. Most people would rather read a novel than a poem (although poems are usually shorter than novels).
- Although poetry is taught in high schools and is part of the South African matric syllabus for English, most learners do not have much exposure to poetry at all and read only ten or fifteen poems in their Grade 12 year of schooling. Most of these learners will not choose to read poetry in their post-school lives.

From these facts, we can gather that poetry is not a popular choice of reading material for the general population of South Africa. Nevertheless, it is compulsory for you to read and study poetry in your first-year English module on “Foundations in English Literary Studies” because:

- Most poems are short, so we can study the creative possibilities of the English language in a condensed form.
- Poets usually use several different creative strategies in each poem, including **sound-effects** such as rhyme, rhythm and repetition, and **imagery** (pictures in words), so reading and studying poetry can give us insight into the way language is used for creative purposes.
- Poetry often offers us a condensed piece of text in which we can explore how poets choose to use certain words and images to achieve particular effects and how successful this is (we would write about how **effective** the poem is as a whole).
- Poetry is a form of communication, and it must communicate effectively with its reader/s. When we take time to understand how the poet has used language – in ways that are strange and unusual, compared to our everyday conversations and writing – we can see not only **what** poets are trying to say, but also **how** they use language to say it. The aim of this section is for you to find out how poetry uses language in fresh, original, strange and “different” ways in order to communicate with its readers.

**Let’s begin** ...with our first poem. Here it is:

### **To His Coy Mistress**

**Andrew Marvell (1621-1678)**

Had we but world enough, and time,

This coyness, Lady, were no crime.

We would sit down, and think which way

To walk, and pass our long love’s day.

Thou by the Indian Ganges’ side 5

Shouldst rubies find; I by the tide

Of Humber would complain. I would

Love you ten years before the Flood;

And you should, if you please, refuse

Till the conversion of the Jews. 10



And now, like amorous birds of prey,  
Rather at once our time devour,  
Than languish in his slow-chapped\* power. 40

Let us roll all our strength, and all  
Our sweetness, up into one ball:  
And tear our pleasures with rough strife  
Thorough\* the iron gates of life:  
Thus, though we cannot make our sun 45  
Stand still, yet we will make him run.

\*glew – glow

\*slow-chapped – slowly devouring

\*thorough – through

We will begin by exploring the language used in this poem, and this will be a consistent focus throughout this section on poetry. The companion module to this one, ENG1502 (Foundations in Applied English Language Studies), will show you how to explore language in use and in the context of various interactions. Poetry uses language in specific ways. I'm sure you would never speak or write in the way this poem is written. This point is also a useful place to begin working towards an understanding of the poem. What is the difference between the way language is used in this poem and the normal or usual use of language?

You probably realised that this poem does not use modern English. Even if the date of Andrew Marvell's life had not been given as 1621-1678, words such as "shouldst", "thine", "yonder" and "thy" alert the reader immediately to the fact that an older version of English is being used in this poem than the one we are used to encountering and using every day. Some words in the poem are still used in English, but not in the way they are used in this poem.

For example, a modern lover would be very unlikely to call his beloved "Lady", as the speaker does in this poem (line 2). Marvell uses the article "an" in "An hundred years", but this expression is no longer used in twenty-first century English. A final example is the word "thorough", which means "through" in line 44 of the poem, but which we use today to mean "careful" or "extensive". All these usages should have alerted you to the fact that "To His Coy Mistress" does not exactly use English as we use it today.

The layout of the poem is also unfamiliar. We note that the words of the sentence do not go all the way to the right-hand margin of the page as they do when we are writing prose (this is the definition of prose: words that extend from the left to the right margin and then continue on the next line). This fact, which we use intuitively to distinguish poetry from prose, turns out to be interesting when we consider it more closely, especially in relation to this poem. The length of the lines – the fact that they are all relatively short – is what makes the poet able to use rhyme.

Take a moment to explore the rhymes used in “To His Coy Mistress”. Write down the final words of each line. Begin with the following pairs: time / crime; way / day; side / tide; and so on. What do you notice about these rhymes?

I’m sure you will notice that each line rhymes with the one that follows it. Lines which rhyme in pairs are called *heroic couplets*. The important question to ask now is, what is the effect of each line rhyming with the next one? The answer is that the rhymes **emphasise** or strengthen certain words. Words that rhyme are brought closer to each other in order to bring their connection to the reader’s attention: time and crime, for example. (In fact, we discover, later in the poem, that the speaker is accusing his mistress [or girlfriend] of a love “crime” of wasting too much time before agreeing to make love with him.)

Another unusual feature of the language used in this poem is that the poet has divided it into three sections: lines 1-20; lines 21-32; and lines 33-46. This reminds us of the way prose is often divided into paragraphs and might remind us, too, that each paragraph usually expresses one idea. Perhaps we could try looking at this poem to see whether this is true.

Lines 1-20 describe a certain way for the speaker to love his mistress (or girlfriend). He is imagining how things “would” be if he had his way, not how things really are for the two lovers. She would “find rubies” (line 6) by the banks of the Indian Ganges (the Ganges is a major river in India) and he would “complain” (line 7) about her absence on the banks of the Humber (in the North of England). They would have plenty of space to enjoy themselves and to walk around at their leisure while deciding “how to pass our long love’s day” (line 4). If this were true, how would the speaker choose to pass the time? Give some examples from the poem.

You probably noticed that the speaker immediately turns to his mistress’s body. He mentions a number of body parts (her eyes, her forehead and her breasts) and says that he wants to appreciate and enjoy each of them for a long period of time (such as a hundred years, two hundred years, or thirty thousand years (lines 13-16)). This tells us three things about the speaker and his poem. In the first place, he is concerned about bodily, corporeal and (we can assume) sexual matters. (Indeed, this turns out to be the poem’s focus.) And in the second place, he is clearly not writing about reality or anything that would actually take place. Finally, the theme of time is important and we have the sense of the speaker dealing with huge tracts of time – centuries, ages, epochs.

The images used in this section of the poem are important. For example, the speaker uses the image of “My vegetable love” in line 11. This is a very unusual image as we do not generally think of love and vegetables together. How can the speaker’s love be like a vegetable? On the one hand, vegetables (like love) are nourishing.

But another, maybe more fruitful answer lies in the speed of growth: both his love and the vegetable would, in the ideal world the speaker describes in the first section of the poem, grow slowly and spread over centuries until they become enormous and cover huge areas: the many kilometres between the Humber river in North England and the Ganges River in India would be as nothing.

What, then, are the characteristics of the kind of love the speaker is describing in the first section of the poem? Write down at least **five** qualities of this kind of love in the space below.

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Some of the qualities you might have listed are: detailed, reverent, respectful, slow, adoring, gradual. (It would help to provide quotations from the first section of the poem to support each of these qualities.)

In the second section of the poem, the speaker immediately introduces a contrasting point of view. The word “But” in line 21 tells us that the speaker is going to offer a different viewpoint. It turns out, in an extremely famous metaphor, that “at my back I always hear / Time’s wingèd chariot hurrying near” (lines 21-22). The “wingèd chariot” carries connotations of speed and rush; and, together with the words “Time” and “hurrying”, conjures up an image of rapid movement. The speaker is being chased by the chariot “at [his] back” and, therefore, he cannot love his mistress in the way he has described in the first section. What are the reasons for this?

**Exercise**

Explore the way the speaker uses images of death and the grave to explain what will happen to him and his mistress when they have both died.

Then, on the lines below, write a description of what, according to the speaker, will happen to them in the centuries to come beyond death.

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In these lines (21-32) the speaker uses words to paint a picture of a vastly different space than the one he evoked in the first section of the poem. This one is bare, barren and lifeless. The only living things appear to be the worms which “try / Thy long-preserved virginity” (line 28). This is the “quaint honour” that the speaker mentions in the following line. Stop and think about

this for a moment, bearing in mind that “To his Coy Mistress” was written long before the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In this context, how does the woman’s virginity appear to you? The speaker sees it as “quaint”, which means endearing but not exactly what he regards as appropriate.

At this point we are beginning to glimpse what the speaker of the poem is driving at, through the use of words such as “virginity”, “honour” and “lust”. He makes it explicit in the final section of the poem, where he concludes his argument. Note that Marvell has constructed his poem carefully, in order to make a rational argument: the first section of the poem describes his wish for the relationship between himself and his beloved to be a certain way (we know this because of the word “would” and its relationship to the conditional mode in English).

The second section describes why this cannot be the case – because of the “but” and the fact that Time is rushing by. The logical and inevitable result of Time’s passing is, naturally, death, and the speaker says that there will be no “embracing” in that area (“The grave’s a fine and private place / But none, I think, do there embrace” (lines 31-32)). This is the point the speaker has been trying to reach, and he delivers it with a humorous flourish, by tentatively saying “I think”, when we all know that it is impossible to make love in a coffin.

Having given all the evidence for the argument, the speaker makes his concluding appeal, which he begins with the words “Now, therefore” in line 33.

“Therefore”, like some other words, such as “but”, “thus” and “so”, is a logical marker, which indicates to the reader that a strong line of argument has led up to this point. (Remember to use these words in your essays as markers to show the reader that you have good reasons for your point of view.)

**Exercise**

What is the speaker asking for? Read the final section of the poem carefully and write your answer on the lines below.

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If you said that the speaker is asking his beloved to make love with him, you would have been correct. It turns out that the whole poem is an elaborate act of persuading a woman to sleep with a man. She does not wish to do so (that is why she is described as “Coy” in the title) and the speaker has to persuade her. He uses many strategies to do this, including the emotive language of flattery in the first section of the poem and the equally emotive horrors of death and decay in the second, together with strong arguments and apparently irresistible logic to convince her of the folly of postponing their physical pleasure.

### Some extra points of interest

There are two interesting aspects of this poem, which you might enjoy knowing about. In the first place, Marvell is writing within the tradition of **courtly love** and is writing against it, to a certain extent. The **courtly love tradition** was a tradition within poetry where male poets wrote ardent love poems addressed to women, often naming the women as their inspiration for battle, leadership or politics. These love poems usually used exaggerated terms to praise the women to whom they were addressed – in the same way as the speaker in “To His Coy Mistress” claims that he would spend “an age at least to every part” of his beloved’s body and being. (Edmund Spenser’s sonnet, “Ye tradeful merchants”, is usually mentioned as an example of a poem that expresses the courtly love tradition.)

Some of Shakespeare’s sonnets, such as “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun,” mock or **subvert** the exaggerated praise that formed part of the courtly love tradition.) The second interesting feature of “To His Coy Mistress” is that the speaker calls on the idea of *carpe diem*, or “seize the day”, to persuade his mistress to have sex with him. *Carpe diem* is the idea that, as time is passing rapidly, and will never return, we should take every opportunity that presents itself to us.<sup>1</sup> This idea is based on the notion that it is good to indulge the senses, for example by making love or eating chocolate cake. It is not difficult to see that this is not always true.

### To conclude

“To His Coy Mistress” uses language in an unusual way to express a fairly basic argument: that a woman should not hesitate to make love with her male partner. The speaker is obviously male, and expresses his point of view with great force and care. The three sections of the poem are carefully designed to persuade the woman to give in to the man’s suit, and make love with him. This is not at all the kind of subject we usually think of as best suited for poetry – but “To His Coy Mistress” is one of the best-known and often-quoted poems in the history of English Literature. This points to the fact that poetry can be about almost anything: it does not have to be only about the subjects we think about as “poetic”, such as love, flowers, sunsets and the like.

If you go back a page or so, you will find a reference to Shakespearean sonnets. If you did not understand what we meant by the word “sonnet”, do not worry. We are now going to explore the sonnet form through a detailed examination of three well-known sonnets in English poetry:

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<sup>1</sup> *Carpe diem* was a well-known theme in Medieval and Renaissance literature, and it was common for people to put a picture of a skull on display in their homes as a constant reminder of mortality. The importance of death and the afterlife was frequently invoked as a reason for following Christian principles.

John Milton’s “On His Blindness” (written in the 1600s), William Shakespeare’s “Let Me Not to the Marriage of True Minds” (written in the 1500s) and John Keats’s “When I have Fears that I May Cease to Be” (written in the 1800s).

**On His Blindness**

**John Milton (1608-1674)**

When I consider how my light is spent,  
 Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,  
 And that one talent which is death to hide  
 Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent  
 To serve therewith\* my Maker, and present 5  
 My true account, lest He returning chide;  
 ‘Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?’  
 I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent  
 That murmur, soon replies, ‘God doth not need  
 Either man’s work or his own gifts. Who best 10  
 Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state  
 Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed  
 And post o’er land and ocean without rest;  
 They also serve who only stand and wait.

\**therewith* – with that

To begin with, it seems quite clear that the speaker is in a crisis or difficult situation. Answer the following questions to help you explore this problem.

1. What crisis is he facing?

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2. Why is it so difficult for him to accept the predicament in which he finds himself?

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John Milton's poem is a good example of a Petrarchan sonnet. This is to say that both its form and structure conform to the traditional Petrarchan convention of fourteen lines, as well as having a typically Petrarchan rhyme scheme of *abba abba cde cde*. Shakespeare and some of his contemporaries would adopt, and even slightly adapt, this verse form more than two hundred years later, although the sonnet's running feature (of the standard fourteen lines) remained unchanged. While dealing with the subject of love, say by exploring the virtues of the poet's mistress, Shakespeare and other sonneteers ranged more widely and thus wrote about topics that touched on and relate to human existence in general, hence the frequency in their poetry of motifs such as humour, sickness, love, death, and so forth. In addition, Shakespeare and some of his contemporaries adapted and modified the sonnet's form and structure by doing away with the Petrarchan divisions based on the octave and the sestet. Instead, they introduced their own distinctive divisions, namely three quatrains and, crucially, the rhyming couplet – the last two lines of the sonnet. It is important to note that, when it came to writing sonnets, some sonneteers, notably John Donne, decided to retain the Petrarchan convention.

The poem is autobiographical in that it represents the poet's life experiences – Milton began to lose his sight in 1644, and by 1652 he was completely blind. The poem is divided into an octave (the first eight lines) and a sestet (the last six lines). The meaning of the poem follows this division. In the first eight lines, the speaker, Milton himself, questions how he can serve God by writing poetry if he is blind.

The first lines: "When I consider how my light is spent / Ere half my days" are paradoxical: he spends his days ("light") writing poetry but now, before half his of life is over, his light, or eyesight, is "spent", in the sense of being used up or exhausted. Lines 3 to 6 are an allusion to the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-30). In this parable, the master of three servants goes away on a journey but, before leaving, he gives them each some money – coins called talents – and tells them to use the money wisely. On his return he rewards the first two servants who have put their coins to good use and doubled their money. The third servant, however, buries his talent and presents the master with this one talent on his return. His master punishes him for his laziness and casts him out into the darkness.

**Exercise**

Answer the following questions to help you understand how Milton has used the parable in his poem:

1. What do you think the word "talent" means in the context of the poem?

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2. Do you think the meaning of the word “talent” is the same in modern times? Give reasons.

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3. Describe the kind of talent that Milton has been given by God and what he feels about his talent.

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4. What do you think is the significance of the parable of the talents in the poem?

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Milton’s reference to talents **alludes**, or **refers**, to Christ’s parable. In the parable the word “talent” is the name of a coin, but the word takes the more modern meaning, in this poem, of gifts or special abilities we are blessed with. Milton has been given a gift, a talent, for writing poetry, just as the servants were given coins. If Milton “hides” or buries this gift, as the third servant buried the coin he was given, it would be tantamount to Milton’s death – a spiritual death in that he would be unable to serve God – just as, in the parable, hiding the coin spelled almost literal death for the servant, who was cast out by his master. Milton feels he will be called to account for his use (or failure to use) of his gift, just as the servant was called to account for the fact that he had not made his money grow like the other servants had.

Milton compares himself with this servant – his own talent, that is, his gift for writing poetry – is “lodged” with him, “useless” as he is blind and cannot write, even though he is “more bent”, more determined than ever to serve God with this talent.

He wishes to present a good “account” to God, to show, as the two servants in the parable did, that he has used his gifts wisely and to the glory of God, in order to avoid being chided, or scolded and cast out into the darkness. But how? Milton boldly asks foolishly (or “fondly”), “Does God expect service (“day-labour”) from His subjects, while at the same time denying them light (sight)”?

## Some literary terms

**Personification:** This means giving inanimate (lifeless) objects human qualities. For example, in the sentence, *Her dress danced in the wind*, the word **danced** is an example of personification.

**Oxymoron:** a poetic arrangement of words to create a paradoxical expression, which combines two terms, which in everyday use, are opposites. For example, in the sentence, *It was a **bittersweet** farewell party*, the word **bittersweet** is an oxymoron.

**Pun:** a play on words that may sound the same but which are very different in meaning.

In the sestet, Patience (the capital letter indicates that Milton personifies this virtue) answers Milton's question, or perhaps simply shows him that the question is badly framed. This virtue called Patience reminds him that God does not need anything from mankind – He is sufficient unto himself – “Who best / bear his mild yoke, they serve him best” (lines 8-9). God's will is represented by the image of the yoke, used to harness the ox to the plough, and is a symbol of submission.

### Exercise

1. At this point, the speaker uses various images to illustrate God's will. List the images and explain what they mean.

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2. Identify the poet's use of puns in the poem and explain how they work.

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God is a mighty presence and has thousands who travel the earth doing His bidding – He does not need any special efforts from Milton. Simply by submitting to God's will, Milton is serving him – and the poem ends on this note: “They also serve who only stand and wait” (this line has been used to justify passivity, of course), while at the same time pointing to the kind of meekness (alluded to in Christian teaching) which is said to be a good thing. For example, we are told in the Bible that the meek shall inherit the earth.

In this poem, Milton uses a pun to put across an idea. For example, “light”, understood literally, means the light of day – Milton has spent his days up to now serving God by making use of his gift for writing poetry. But now his light (eyesight) has been used up and “spent”. So, in fact, there is a play on the meaning of both “light” and “spent”. The significance is that Milton questions how he can serve God without light – both daylight to see by and eyesight to see with.

“Mild yoke” is an oxymoron, a figure of speech by which an expression, usually two words, produces an incongruous, seemingly self-contradictory effect, as in “cruel kindness”, “bittersweet”, or “to make haste slowly”.

In this poem, “yoke” suggests submission, hardship, but God’s control is “mild”, or loving and gentle. God controls his servants with kindness, so Milton suggests.

**Exercise**

List words or expressions in English which can be described as oxymorons (you can draw on your own general knowledge of English to answer this question. A good way to begin is to put together two opposites, as Shakespeare does in *Romeo and Juliet* when he speaks of “loving hate”).

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Note that there is a dramatic shift between the two sections of the poem. In the octave, Milton’s tone is questioning, even peevish and annoyed, as he wonders how he can be expected to serve God if God removes his ability, his tools as it were, to do so. In the sestet, though, his patience is restored by the words of the personified virtue (Patience). The tone in the last six lines is one of acceptance and resignation to his plight. The poem ends on a more optimistic note, though; he realises that he too has a role to play and he too can serve God, even if it is in a less obvious and active way than he did before. Simply accepting his lot is in fact to serve God.

**Exercise**

Do you find John Milton’s argument (in the above poem) convincing? Give reasons from your own life experience.

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## Let Me Not to the Marriage of True Minds

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

Let me not to the marriage of true minds

Admit impediments. Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds,

Or bends with the remover to remove.

O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark 5

That looks on tempests and is never shaken;

It is the star to every wand'ring bark,\*

Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.\*

Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks

Within his bending sickle's\* compass come; 10

Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,

But bears it out even to the edge of doom.

If this be error and upon me proved,

I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

\* *bark – ship*

\* *Reference to the measurements of a ship, in particular the height of the mast.*

\* *Curved knife used for harvesting or cutting crops.*

## Introduction to the Shakespearean/Elizabethan sonnet

The poem above is a Shakespearean or Elizabethan sonnet. You will recall how, when we looked at John Milton's sonnet, "On His Blindness", we observed the way in which his Petrarchan sonnet is divided into an octave (the first eight lines), and a sestet (the last six lines), with the ideas in the poem following that division. Just like Petrarchan sonnets, Shakespeare's sonnets were also written in fourteen lines. But unlike Petrarchan sonnets, the fourteen lines in a Shakespearean/Elizabethan sonnet are broken down into three sections called **quatrains**, each comprising four lines, followed by the final component of the sonnet, which is called the **rhyming couplet**. This final division has two lines, which rhyme. Usually the poet allows the theme of the poem to develop progressively, building it up through each of the quatrains, until the highest point is reached, or, (in some cases) a contrasting point is expressed in the rhyming couplet. Love is often seen as the dominant and overarching theme in

Shakespearean/Elizabethan sonnets, but other subjects, such as sickness or death, are also tackled.

**Sound effects in poetry**

Poetry is meant to be read aloud. For this reason, poets often use carefully chosen sound-effects, such as alliteration, assonance and rhyme. Here are some definitions of these terms.

**Alliteration** – the deliberate repetition of consonants at the beginning of words that are placed close together (for example, the river raged).

**Assonance** – similarity in the vowel sounds of words that are close together (for example, **born** and **warm**). Note that the spelling does not have to be the same for the words to rhyme.

**Rhyme** - the repetition of the same or similar sounds at the end of lines, either in pairs or in more complicated patterns.

**Exercise**

1. Now see if you can work out the rhyme scheme of the sonnet, “Let me not to the marriage of true minds”. Use a different letter for each sound at the end of a line. So, for example, you would represent the sound of “minds” at the end of the first line by *a*.

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2. List what the poet mentions are the possible barriers (impediments) to love.

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3. Identify the use of personification in the poem and explain how this powerful poetic device contributes to the overall understanding of the poem.

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If you came up with abab cdcd efef gg as the rhyming scheme for the above poem, then you are right. “Let me not to the Marriage of True Minds” is held together by the cohesive devices of alliteration and assonance, just as (if not more than) it is by the rhyme scheme.

The poet’s use of personification (writing about Love and Time as though they had human qualities) gives the sonnet great power, thereby contributing to a greater understanding of its theme.

**Exercise**

In the course of the poem, the speaker demonstrates that love is important in our understanding of time. Briefly explain how he does this.

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The overall meaning of the poem (also called the **theme**) is certainly the speaker’s strong resolve to love in the face of difficulties. Note how the poet/speaker uses a tone of confidence, certainty and self-belief throughout the poem to put across his message. For example, take note of the following expressions: “Let me not ...”, “Love is not ...”, “Or bends with the remover ...”, “O, no! it is ...”, “Love alters not ...”, “If this be error ... / ... no man ever loved”. This passionate and self-assured tone permeates the whole sonnet. The tone helps us to realize that the speaker completely believes that love is the only eternal and indomitable force that overcomes and overwhelms all barriers, and that good and wholesome love is the key to overcoming mortality — the inevitability of death. But these general remarks about the poem seem more like conclusions than “working analyses”. Let’s work towards a clear understanding of how this general idea is communicated by answering the questions that follow.

**Exercise**

1. Throughout the poem, the speaker lists many obstacles to love. List them and explain the ways in which they are barriers to love.

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Some of the difficulties or obstacles pointed out in the poem are found in terms such as “remove”, “impediments”, “tempests”, and “doom”. The speaker expresses his firm resolve or determination to love.

2. Make a list of the nautical images that are used in the poem to suggest a sea journey.

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You would have mentioned images of sea journeys, storms, navigation by stars, the effective use of the word “compass”, and so forth. The speaker uses a metaphor when he likens the constancy of love to “an ever fix’d mark” and “a star to every wand’ring bark”, both suggesting the idea of the compass and its significance in showing directions during navigation.

The speaker goes on to demonstrate the relationship between love and time, insisting that “Love’s not Time’s fool”, that love never bends with time (line 4); though the bending of Time’s sickle destroys youth it cannot alter love (line 10). In other words, the greatest impediment for love is time, but the speaker maintains that love is not inferior to Time. In short, the poem seeks to resist or fight love’s enemy — time — which is ultimately the enemy of life itself as the force of ageing, of falling off (out!) of love and the bringer (ultimately) of death. The speaker makes it clear that he is aware of such “impediments” that could stand in the way of love, that could cause love to “alter”, but that he himself cannot allow such a thought to cross his mind because of his total conviction and understanding that love is unconditional, pure and complete and transcends time and, perhaps, even death. This conviction is expressed in his use of the first person singular pronouns – “me” (line 1) and “I” (line 14).

According to the speaker, true love does not change, even if there may be reasons for doing so, it remains ever and unwaveringly constant.

It is now time to focus on the rhyming couplet. In Shakespearean sonnets, in particular, the rhyming couplet has a special function of wrapping up the argument (or line of reasoning) presented in the poem. In this case, the speaker’s declaration, “Love is not love ... the edge of doom” is further confirmed in the rhyming couplet (the last two lines of the poem). Here, the idea of genuine love is placed in context – the relation of the poet himself to true love. He says: “If this be error and upon me proved / I never writ nor no man ever loved”.

We can rewrite these two lines informally as follows: If my claims or utterances can be “tested” and it can be demonstrated that I’m mistaken, then, **either** I haven’t written any work (presumably this poem and other works) **and** neither I nor any other man has ever fallen in love. In this context, the writer seems to suggest that he must be right since he has written and has loved someone before.

## Two important terms

**Irony:** the technique of implying exactly the opposite of what is being said. In other words, the meaning of something differs from what it appears to be.

**Paradox (or ambivalence):** a contradiction in terms; words with an implication that is opposite to their meaning.

Considering what the speaker says in the three quatrains, the rhyming couplet might be seen as ironical or paradoxical, especially given the speaker's keen awareness that time is, in fact, the enemy of love. A highly critical reader will read irony into the couplet – the kind of reader who is perhaps prepared to embrace the contrasting views of the poet or speaker, particularly considering the views and arguments about love expressed in the three quatrains.

### When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be

John Keats (1795–1821)

When I have fears that I may cease to be  
Before my pen has glean'd\* my teeming brain,  
Before high piled books, in charactry,\*  
Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain;  
When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,

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Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,  
And think that I may never live to trace  
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;  
And when I feel, fair, creature of an hour,  
That I shall never look upon thee more,  
Never have relish in the faery\* power  
Of unreflecting love; – then on the shore  
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think  
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

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- \* *harvested*
- \* *letters of the alphabet*
- \* *storehouses*
- \* *magic*

### **Exercise**

Look at the title of the poem and reflect on the word “cease” and the phrase “to be”.

1. What ideas do these conjure up in your mind? (Use your dictionary to help you.)

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2. Notice how Keats’s first line of his poem echoes Milton’s first line of his sonnet – repeating the “When I ....” opening words. What does this tell you about the writing of sonnets?

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3. What “fears” does the speaker mention in the poem?

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4. What metaphor does the poet use to describe the writing process in the first quatrain?

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John Keats’s poem possesses the characteristics of an Elizabethan sonnet. Like “Let me not to the Marriage of True Minds”, its rhyme scheme is abab cdcd efef gg. The speaker says that the thought of dying young terrifies him. This fear is caused by the fact that he has not fulfilled himself through writing poetry, something for which he has natural talent.

The historical background to this poem is that the Romantic poet, John Keats, experienced all manner of affliction in his life, including the death of family members who succumbed to tuberculosis (known as “consumption” in the nineteenth century). At that time, TB was fatal. He, too, later developed the symptoms of this disease and died at only 24 years. In the sonnet, Keats reflects on, identifies with and tackles the emotion of fear, which is fuelled by the thought of dying before his time.

In the first quatrain, the speaker’s brain is literally “teeming” with ideas that he wants “penned” or written down. Keats’s fear of death is expressed through his use of a powerful image (a picture in words) in line 2, where he likens writing poetry to harvesting grain, with the pen as the

main instrument for carrying out such a process: "Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain". In the following line, books are compared to "garners" or granaries, buildings where grain is stored after harvest. We gather that he wants to harvest the fruit of his mind (grain) before he dies.

**Exercise**

Look at the second quatrain and answer the following questions:

1. When the speaker looks up into the sky, he sees stars and clouds in the night. What do you think these symbolise?

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In the second quatrain, Keats goes on to reflect on the possible consequences of his untimely death by using personification. When he looks at the shining, starry night, he is reminded of "symbols of high romance" (line 6) whose "shadows" he may not "trace" if he were to die young. "High romance" here suggests abstract or philosophical ideas about the meaning of life, in this case associated with the stars. The speaker says that he thinks it possible to find meaning in life or existence through the attainment of great achievements that philosophers have talked about down the centuries as being associated with the stars.

In the last quatrain, Keats addresses someone, possibly his beloved. The person is described as the "fair creature of an hour" (line 9). His fear of death leads him to realize that he may never experience and enjoy the "faery power / Of unreflecting love" (lines 11-12), as his beloved exists for only an hour, which is not a very long time. The use of the word "faery" (for fairy) is both old and odd to describe the ephemeral nature of romance and, by extension, life.

The speaker is suggesting here that if life is that transitory, then he may not live through the sumptuous moments offered by romantic love, which he could experience with his beloved.

**Exercise**

Consider the rhyming couplet (the last two lines of the poem) and answer the following questions:

1. What emotions is the poet expressing in these lines?

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2. What conclusions does he come to and why?

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If the quatrains provided the speaker with high ideals about things – such as the meaning of life — then the rhyming couplet is a far cry from this thinking. This is because the poet comes to the awareness that he is “alone” in this world, and that fame is a short-lived thing for him to bother about. His long quest for the meaning of life (which he thought he would find in knowledge, fame and love) seems a forlorn hope, something inconsequential, since “love and fame to nothingness do sink” (line 14).

At this point, not only does this realisation seem to dispel Keats’s fear of death, but it also seems to make him come to terms with the idea of dying, and see it as a natural thing. The speaker experiences various emotions in the rhyming couplet, including loneliness, despair, nihilism (the sense that life is meaningless), and a sense of resignation in the face of the inescapable impermanence of life.

## **Dover Beach**

**Matthew Arnold (1822-1888)**

The sea is calm tonight.

The tide is full, the moon lies fair

Upon the straits;\* — on the French coast the light

Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,

Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay. 5

Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!

Only, from the long line of spray

Where the sea meets the moon-blanch’d\* land,

Listen! you hear the grating roar

Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling, 10

At their return, up the high strand,  
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,  
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring  
The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles\* long ago 15  
Heard it on the Aegean,\* and it brought  
Into his mind the turbid\* ebb and flow  
Of human misery; we  
Find also in the sound a thought,  
Hearing it by this distant northern sea. 20

#### The Sea of Faith

Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore  
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.  
But now I only hear  
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar, 25  
Retreating, to the breath  
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear  
And naked shingles of the world.  
Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another! for the world, which seems 30  
To lie before us like a land of dreams,  
So various, so beautiful, so new,  
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,  
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;  
And we are here as on a darkling plain 35  
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,  
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

- \**straits* – narrow channel of water
- \**blanch'd* – whitened
- \**Sophocles* – classical Greek author of tragic dramas; much admired by Arnold
- \**the Aegean* – part of the Mediterranean Sea between Greece and Turkey
- \**turbid* – muddy
- \**girdle* – belt
- \**shingles* – pebble beaches

This poem, like “To His Coy Mistress”, also uses language in unusual ways to make its point. Look, for example, at the first and last lines. The first line reads “The sea is calm tonight” but the last line reads “Where ignorant armies clash by night”. What is the difference in meaning between these two lines? Obviously something has changed dramatically between the first line and the last: in the rest of this section, we are going to explore what it is.

What is the poem about? Take a few minutes to read it aloud and then try to write **a single sentence** that begins “‘Dover Beach’ is about ...”. You will notice that it is not as easy to say what “Dover Beach” is about as it is to pin down what a news report, for example, is about. If you do not understand exactly what the poem is saying, though, **do not panic**. Re-read it and look for something you understand. We could begin, for example, by looking more closely at who is present in the poem.

### **Exercise**

Who are the speakers in the imaginary conversation that takes place in “Dover Beach”? Look for clues in the poem and then write your answer on the lines below.

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You probably noticed the speaker addressing someone in lines 6, 9 and 29. In line 6 he says “Come to the window”, which implies that he is with someone; in line 9 he tells this person to “Listen” and in line 29 he calls his companion “love”. It is only at this point, then, that we actually find out who is present in the poem: it seems (though we cannot be absolutely sure) that it is a man and his female partner. This changes our interpretation of the poem slightly as we realize that we are “eavesdropping” on a moment of intimacy between lovers.

For the rest of this discussion, I am going to explore a single image from the poem – the image of the sea – and see where it leads us. In the first few lines of the poem, the speaker draws a picture of himself and a loved one standing at a window looking out over the sea. As the poem progresses, it becomes clear that this is not just any sea, but the sea that lies between England

and France (Dover lies opposite the French city of Calais, at the narrowest point of the English Channel that separates the two countries). The speaker and his companion, then, are looking over the sea at another country.

In the first stanza, the sea is “calm” and peaceful, and the speaker creates a beautiful image of tranquillity with the moonlit bay spread out before him. Things can never remain like this, though, and so, by the end of the first stanza, the speaker has introduced a completely different note: the “eternal note of sadness” (line 14) that comes from the pebbles that the waves throw continuously up the beach in a “grating roar” (line 9). At this stage, in the first stanza, I think you will agree that the sea in the poem is a real sea, with waves, sand and fish. In the second stanza, though, it is not quite the same sea: here the speaker mentions “Sophocles” and “the Aegean”, referring back through history to the 5th century BCE — a time that nobody who would ever read this poem could remember. At this point we notice that the sea is more than a literal one: the speaker is beginning to write about it as a remembered body of water. Later in the poem it will become more symbolic of emotion and human conditions. At this point the sea was also heard by Sophocles, who was reminded by it of “the turbid ebb and flow / Of human misery” (lines 17-18). It is important to note that the sea, by itself, cannot sound like “human misery” at all. This meaning has been added by the speaker, and even attributed to Sophocles.

In the next stanza, the sea changes once again: this time it is “the Sea of Faith” (line 21).

### **Exercise**

Take a minute to think about what this **metaphor** means to you and write down all the meanings you can think of in the space below:

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#### **Metaphor and simile**

A **metaphor**, such as “the Sea of Faith”, is a comparison between two things. Here the speaker in “Dover Beach” compares the levels of faith in the world to a sea. But he does not use the words “like” or “as” in order to create the comparison. If he had, for example written “faith is **like** a sea”, this would have been a **simile**. He simply says that there is a “Sea of Faith” that is waning as human history goes on. **Metaphor** is a part of our daily life and use of language, but it is used most creatively in poetry.

## Historical context

The idea of the “Sea of Faith” is important here. “Dover Beach” was written during the Victorian Era, when Queen Victoria was on the throne of England (remember that Queen Victoria reigned from 1837-1901). During the Victorian Era there was a loss of some people’s faith in God and in the Christian religion, largely due to the fact that science made major advances, including Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, which discredited the idea of God having created the whole world as recounted in the Bible. When the speaker in “Dover Beach” says that “the Sea of Faith” is withdrawing and retreating, he is referring to the loss of faith in God, but also, more generally, to a loss of faith in life in general. As people lost faith in God during the Victorian Era, according to Arnold, there was an increasing sense of pessimism in people’s lives. The image of the sea covers several ideas: first is the quality of ebbing and flowing with the tide, as the water rises and falls twice a day. (Explore the poem to find images of the tide rising and falling, and think about how the levels of people’s faith and misery have been rising and falling throughout history.) The second idea is expressed in lines 14, 17 and 25, and is related to the sound made by the sea retreating down the beach with what the speaker calls “a grating roar”.

To him, it sounds sad: it reminds him of “the eternal note of sadness” and “the turbid ebb and flow / of human misery”, and it is “melancholy”. In these images, though, the speaker has not found these emotions in the sound of the sea retreating down the beach: they have been **projected** onto the sound of the sea.

In the fourth stanza (or “paragraph” of poetry), in lines 29-37, the speaker explains his view of the world and of life in general. Look at the images used in this stanza and fill in the table explaining the connotations of each one.

### Connotations and denotations

**Connotations** are the meanings associated with a word or phrase, beyond its direct or literal meaning (**denotation**). For example, we know that the word “rose” has a certain meaning: it refers to, or *denotes*, a kind of flower. The fact that a rose is associated with love is part of its *connotation*, rather than part of its direct meaning. In studying poetry, we are often more concerned with connotation than denotation.

Image in stanza 4	Literal meaning (denotation)	Figurative meanings (connotation)
land of dreams		
a darkling plain		
confused alarms of struggle and flight		
ignorant armies		
clash by night		

You will probably agree that the image of life, and of the world, that is created in this stanza is not optimistic. Arnold contrasts two things. One is the view that we have of life and the world as “a land of dreams, / So various, so beautiful, so new” (lines 31-32). Let’s take a minute to consider this image. What would you imagine in a “land of dreams”? Wouldn’t you imagine a realm where all your wishes could be fulfilled? Would it not also be “various” (that is, containing many different things), “beautiful” and “new” (that is, not worn out)? In these two lines, Arnold sums up all the hopes and wishes that people have in relation to their experiences of the world.

Our hopes and wishes, though, do not come true, because the speaker dashes them all in the next two lines, when he says that the world “Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain” (lines 33-34).

Look at all the negative expressions in these two lines – each positive feature of life (such as joy, love, light and so on) is negated one by one, until the reader feels crushed by the weight of all the things that are **not** provided by the world.

Instead of our wishes coming true (Arnold says), we are “here as on a darkling plain”. “Darkling” is an unusual word and one that we do not usually use. It means “becoming darker” or “associated with the dark”. Take a minute to visualise this image. The speaker says that “we” (that is, human beings) “are here **as** on a darkling plain” (the word “as” signals the fact that this is a **simile** or comparison between two things). “Here” means “in the world”, and the picture that is created is of an empty, flat, dark, uninhabited space (the darkling plain). The last two lines of the poem use the sense of hearing rather than sight to create the impression of confusion and the noise of battle, which you probably noticed in the image of “ignorant armies”.

“Dover Beach” is not a cheerful poem. Rather, it uses a number of images and figurative uses of language to evoke (that is, to make the reader feel and understand) a growing sense of disillusionment and despair.

### **Exercise**

What is the one thing that, according to the speaker, remains to be believed in the face of global confusion and loss of faith? Write your answer in the space below:

Finally, let us look at how the poem is written. I am sure you noticed immediately that its lines do not rhyme in a regular scheme as they do in some of the other poems we have examined so far. In the first stanza the final words of the lines are: “to-night”, “fair”, “light”, “stand”, “bay”, “night-air” and so on. Some of these lines rhyme with each other (such as “fair” and “night-air”) but some do not.

In the same way, you might notice that the lines in “Dover Beach” are of different lengths, with some much longer than others. This means that “Dover Beach” is written in a less regular format than we are used to; it is, in fact, in **free verse**. Matthew Arnold wrote during the Victorian Era (1837-1901) in a time when there was more freedom of experimentation with poetic form than there was in Shakespeare’s time and this might help to explain why his poem is less regular than many earlier poems.

The effect of free verse — as opposed to more regular poetic forms such as the sonnet or the heroic couplet — is to make the poetry **sound like** normal, natural conversation between two people. It is not really normal conversation, though: when people speak naturally, there are all kinds of interruptions in their speech, such as “um” and “you know” and even “like”, which are completely absent from this poem. So the poet is actually working hard to make his poetry sound as though it is being spoken naturally. (If you are in doubt about this, make a list of the contrasting words that appear in the poem, such as “calm” and “war”, “cadence” and “clash”). Overall, the speaker evokes a scene of order in the first three stanzas, but this is overthrown by an idea of chaos and disorder in the final stanza when he begins to speak about war and the destruction it brings in its wake.

**Please refer to page 134 in *Seasons come to Pass* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Moffett 2013) and read the poem “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost (1874–1963).**

### **Exercise**

“The Road Not Taken” contains a single, central image that conveys its main idea. What is this image? Write your answer in the space below.

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I am sure you noticed that the poem uses the image (or picture in words) of a person standing at a fork in the path and deciding to take one path rather than another. The poem deals with the process used by the speaker to make a choice between the two paths that lie in front of him. It is important, though, that the poem is called “The Road Not Taken” (not, say, “The Road I Chose”). By using this title, the poet draws the reader’s attention to the poem’s focus on the choice that was **not** made, rather than the choice that **was**.

The path that was not chosen, ironically, becomes the more attractive one, and the one that occupies the speaker’s thoughts much more than the path that he did choose. (The poem would be vastly different if it were entitled “The Road Taken” instead of “Not Taken”.)

Compare this imaginary situation with your own life experience. Have you ever made a choice between two things that, like the two paths in the poem, appear much the same? If you have, did you find yourself wondering what would have happened if you had chosen differently?

What, though, is the point of writing an entire poem about choosing between two paths in a wood? Why should we, as readers, care about this at all? In fact, the poem deals with a choice on the **literal** level of coming to a fork in the road. What could this suggest on the **figurative** level (that is, what are the symbolic and metaphoric meanings of this situation)? The path is clearly much more than a specific route through a particular wood – it is a **metaphor** for a **life choice** made by the speaker. In line 19 in the final stanza of the poem, the speaker tells us

what choice he made; as a result he found himself on a life path that was not popular or chosen by many people (what words in the poem suggest this?). Line 20 suggests that this was a life-changing decision. How could this decision have changed his life? Write your answer in the space below.

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“The Road Not Taken” is an example of a poet using a fairly simple image (the picture of someone making a choice between two paths in a wood) to mean something much broader: the choice between two options in life. By using this image, the poem explores the way humans make decisions like this (and, often, cannot say what made them choose as they did) and then wonder what might have happened if they had chosen differently.

To round off our discussion, we are going to explore **how** the poem is written (its **form**). What we call “rhyme” is a quality of the words at the end of lines of poetry. When these words sound the same, we say that the poem rhymes. “The Road Not Taken” is a rhyming poem: the poet has created stanzas of five lines each where the first, third and fourth lines all rhyme, and the second and fifth lines rhyme with each other. This is not a regular or recognised poetic form with a name such as a ballad, limerick or sonnet, but Frost uses it to great effect in this poem.

**Exercise**

Take a moment now to write down the rhymes at the end of each line in stanzas 1, 2, 3 and 4 of the poem in the space below:

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We do not usually use rhyme either when we speak or when we write. So what are these sound-effects for? I will try to answer the question by looking at the rhymes in the first stanza. All these words contain long vowel sounds, which are drawn out and have the effect of drawing out the reader’s attention, making the action of the poem appear longer. The effect would have been different if the poet had used shorter vowel sounds, such as those in “pat” or “cut”. It would also have been different if he had used words with more syllables, such as “establishment”. By using short words, most of them with only one syllable each, the poet is making use of simple terms and concepts to get his message across. (Try this yourself:

deliberately try to use short words when you speak or write in an informal context. Explore how this feels and what the effect is on your reader or audience.)

But what is the poem “about” and how does exploring the rhymes help us to arrive at an understanding of its meaning? (A more abstract version of this question would ask whether the formal aspects of a poem, such as rhyme and the shape of the stanzas, have any impact at all on the meaning.)

Refer to your answers in the exercise above. You will notice immediately that the rhyming words are short (most of them are only one syllable long). This use of simple and short words is the trademark of Robert Frost’s poetry, which is famous for using simple language and words to express complex emotions and experiences. By choosing certain words to rhyme, Frost has placed them in relationships with each other, so each of the rhyming groups listed above is somehow connected: for example, the group of words from Stanza 3 are connected because, on that particular day, the speaker found himself in a place where two paths were before him (what does the last word of line 13 suggest?). What does the rhyme scheme between lines 12 and 15 in this stanza suggest? When we compare the meaning of the last words of lines 13 and 14 we can see how the speaker is suggesting that the clearest route is to go forward by one of the two paths, while going back to take the other path would be unlikely, as implied by the implication of darkness in line 12. As it turns out, the speaker knows that he will not go back to that same spot in the wood and then take the other path: what words in the poem tell us this? We might say something like the following:

The speaker says that he chose one of the paths and followed it, imagining that he would come back to the other one at a later stage.

He knew, though, that his chosen path would lead him on to other paths, and so would lead him very far away from the original spot where he made a choice. So he knew that he would probably never return and therefore would probably never get a chance to follow the other path.

Above, I have rewritten the lines from “The Road Not Taken” in my own words in order to understand better what they mean. This is known as paraphrase. It can be useful when you are trying to understand a complex or difficult text, but you must be sure that you do not over-use it, and especially that you do not use it in your essays without providing a reference to the text you are paraphrasing. This would make you guilty of plagiarism.

**Please refer to page 200 in *Seasons come to Pass 3<sup>rd</sup>* ed. (Moffett 2013) and read the poem “Still I rise” by Maya Angelou (1928–2004).**

### **Some more poetic terms explained**

Tone is the emotion, feeling or emotional resonance of the poem or an image in it. “Tone” is also used to refer to the attitude of the speaker. Tone is an important marker of a person’s mood (for example, angry, hopeful, sympathetic or impatient). Through a close reading of a poem, you will be able to establish the tone by examining the poet’s choice of words.

Diction: this word means “the choice and use of words and phrases to express meaning”. It refers, thus, to the way a poet chooses words and places them in the lines of poetry to create a certain meaning or effect.

Synonym: two words or phrases that mean the same. For example, synonyms of the word angry are annoyed, furious, irritated, and so forth.

We are going to apply these concepts to our reading of “Still I Rise”.

### **Exercise**

Go over the poem once and write “True” or “False” next to each of the statements below. Give reasons for your answers.

1. The following words and phrases are the possible synonyms for the first word in the title of the poem “Still I rise”: yet, in spite of, notwithstanding, nevertheless.
2. The poem is written in an informal, conversational style.
3. The poem has a rhyme scheme.
4. The tone of the speaker in the poem is one of anger and defiance.
5. The overall meaning of the poem is the speaker’s indomitable urge to speak out against injustice.

### **Historical context**

At this point you should know that Maya Angelou was one of the most important and well-known black African American writers of her generation. In most of her works, which span more than three decades, Angelou deals with the enslavement of the black people over the centuries, the kind of frustration, anger and resentment a history of slavery has caused among the black population, and their determined efforts to fight this oppression with a view to bringing about their emancipation.

Maya Angelou’s poem, “Still I Rise” was written against the backdrop of invasive racism, racial segregation and prejudice in America during the 1950s and 1960s. The poem represents the writer’s angry protest against racial discrimination. The speaker in the poem speaks out against the racial prejudice and intolerance that she sees around her before making an appeal for black pride and dignity. In fact, the anger galvanises and strengthens her determination to rise and defeat all forms of discrimination based on race.

The first place to begin working towards an understanding of the poem is with the title: “Still I Rise”. Certain titles (such as this one) simply state and make clear the theme of the poem. Notice, for instance, how many times the exact words of the title are repeated throughout the poem. How does this relate to what we have just said about the main idea of Angelou’s poem? Apart from creating an atmosphere, as well as enabling the harmony of rhyme scheme, the

effect of this repetition is its overall contribution to the theme of the poem – the poet’s resolve, expressed at the end of each stanza, to overcome her oppression. This repetition becomes even more resonant at the end of the poem, where the title is again repeated three times.

The tone of the poem is one of anger and open defiance. Throughout the poem, the speaker addresses people whom one could describe as white supremacists (people who believe they are better than others because they are white). These people have caused all kinds of suffering to the speaker: identify and quote examples of this in lines 1–2, line 3, line 21, line 22, and line 23. The speaker here refers not only to the ills of slavery which dehumanised the black race, but also to the climate of the 1950s and 1960s in America, when black people were still treated as second-class citizens. The speaker’s fuming and defiant tone is further accentuated through her expressive use of questions, to which suggested answers are given. For example, the speaker’s boldness is quite evident in questions such as those in line 5, line 17 and line 25. Notice how comical some of the answers are – they all express the speaker’s courage and daring. The same is true when the speaker expresses her dogged determination, as in the question in line 14.

### **Exercise**

Use the space below to list examples of the kind of language used throughout the poem, in particular the speaker’s use of those words or expressions that refer to slavery and discrimination.

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Finally, you should focus your attention on the speaker’s use of poetic devices such as similes, metaphors and personification and how these contribute to the overall theme of the poem. **Metaphor, simile** and **personification** are called “figures of speech” or “figurative language” to convey their difference from literal language.

Identify and explore the meaning of examples of poetic devices in the following lines:

- Line 4 (simile)
- Lines 6–7 (simile)
- Lines 9–12 (simile)
- Line 15 (simile)
- Line 19 (simile)
- Line 27 (simile)
- Line 21 (metaphor)

- Line 22 (metaphor)
- Line 23 (metaphor)
- Line 34 (metaphor)
- Line 40 (metaphor)

The effectiveness of the figurative language in each of the above instances is the extent to which it contributes to the overall meaning of the poem, given the context in which each of the examples above is used.

**Exercise**

In the space below, describe how each of the above poetic devices extends, expands and creates ideas that the poet is trying to convey to the reader.

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To conclude, explain in your own words what it is that Maya Angelou says she will achieve through her activism as a writer.

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**Please refer to page 231 in *Seasons come to Pass* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Moffett 2013) and read the poem “In Exile” by Arthur Nortje (1942–1970).**

We will begin our interpretation by thinking about the title of the poem: “In Exile”. This is often helpful because, as Moffet says, “Some titles ... contain essential additional information that illuminates the poem that follows” (2013: 18–19). The title can help to evoke, in the reader’s mind, the mood or atmosphere of the poem.

**Exercise**

In the spaces provided below, briefly answer the following questions:

1. What does the word “exile” suggest?

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2. What sort of feelings would you expect someone in exile to experience?

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The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines the word *exile* as “a situation in which you are forced to leave your country and live in another country, especially for political reasons” (2003: 638). The idea of exile, then, necessarily involves or entails a condition of separation from one’s land, home or people. So what do we make of the entire title of the poem, “In exile”? Even though the meaning of the preposition **in**, (in “In Exile”) has a range of meanings, depending on its **context**, it seems quite obvious that the context here is close to the following range of meanings: **inside, during, for the period of**, to mention only a few.

**What’s all the fuss about context?**

The *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines the **context** (of a word) as follows: “the words that come just before and after a word or sentence and that help you to understand its meaning” (2003: 396). For example, consider this sentence. *When Jane found out that she had passed her examination, she went mad with joy.* For the reader to infer or work out the meaning of the word “mad”, s/he will need to understand the context in which it has been used. The context is provided by the phrases “had passed her examination” and “joy”. From this then, the reader knows that the word “mad” in this context has nothing to do with foolishness, but rather means excited, very happy, overjoyed or delighted.

The background to this poem is fairly straightforward. The time is the 1960s, during the height of apartheid in South Africa. The speaker in the poem has fled the land of his birth and now lives abroad, in a foreign land. In short, he is in exile. Having lived in this unnamed country for some time, the speaker is beginning to feel a longing to return. In other words, the poem revolves around the poet’s desire to go back home, and we learn about his feelings through his attempts to remember his homeland. Thus memory is central in the poem. But then, as he tries to convey these feelings of possible homecoming through memory, he is also intensely aware of the harsh reality associated with going back to a place (South Africa) where one’s colour predicts one’s

future (identify the phrase that indicates this in line 17). Compare his dream expressed in line 14, evoked by his efforts to find comfort in memory, with the implications of his words in lines 7–8. Thus, as the speaker moves between the present (of living in exile) and the past (defined by his reflections on memories of his home country), the sense of estrangement from both exile and home is deepened, rather than diminished.

In the spaces below, explain what each of the following lines means in the historical context of apartheid.

Line 11 (last three words)

Line 12

Lines 13–14

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As I mentioned above, the speaker is thinking about home and the possibility of a homecoming. In stanzas 1 to 4, the speaker’s memories of his time in South Africa keep flooding back. These memories are triggered by what he observes in a moment of intense reflection while living in exile. To that end, the poet uses many verbs throughout this poem to emphasise the intensity of the action which he sees around him, and which acts as a prompt to his memories (of home) that keep welling up.

**Exercise**

Write a list of all the verbs in the poem.

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What effect do these verbs have on the speaker? Give reasons for your answer.

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In the first four stanzas, the poet employs many images that point to the speaker's deep yearning to return to his homeland. Try to identify these. All suggest the positive and uplifting role of memory in bringing about comfort. The image in lines 13–14 implies that ideas about the final return can be entertained.

A point of disharmony is, however, placed side by side with the image of paradise. This is expressed in lines 7–8. Here the tone of the poem shifts considerably.

Memory or remembering is no longer seen as being always a good thing; memory, according to the poet, can be damaging. Explain what ideas and feelings are evoked by the image in these lines.

In the last two stanzas, the speaker's hope of a homecoming is killed off altogether by the facts of how complex the situation is in his home country. Identify the images that convey this sense of resignation. Look at line 18 and lines 23–24 in particular.

**Exercise**

Fill in the table below giving the literal and figurative meanings of the above images.

Line 18	<b>Literal meaning:</b>	<b>Figurative meaning:</b>
Lines 23–24 ( <b>two images here</b> )	<b>Literal meaning: (Image 1)</b>	<b>Figurative meaning:</b>
	<b>Literal meaning: (Image 2)</b>	<b>Figurative meaning:</b>

While in the first four stanzas the speaker has the leisure to entertain all kinds of nostalgic emotions of desire for return, the last two stanzas present the speaker with a reality check: a moment when he must think seriously about his true situation, instead of trying to live in a dream world where everything is perfect. Introduced by the conjunction “but”, the speaker “comes down to earth” in the knowledge of what he expresses in line 17. In short, the speaker cannot fulfil this deep, nostalgic desire to return home. So he reminds himself in line 18 that he might as well obliterate any memories of return because going home is so unrealistic that it is not worth thinking about.

**Exercise**

The speaker continues to reflect in lines 19–20 on what he would do were he to return. In other words, his thinking about return is as good as a person who, as we say, “builds castles in the air” – a complete daydreamer. In the lines below, explain what other meanings these lines have.

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The last stanza is a fitting conclusion to the poem: the speaker states that longing for a homecoming is not dangerous. Discuss how the images in the last two lines of the poem suggest this and that all the speaker’s hopes of a homecoming are vain, and hence the yearning to return is again hidden.

**Exercise**

Through reading the poem, we have come to see that the speaker is ambivalent (or in two minds) towards both home and exile. Briefly explain this ambivalence in the space below.

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Please refer to page 216 in *Seasons come to Pass* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Moffett 2013) and read the poem “The Child who was Shot Dead by Soldiers at Nyanga” by Ingrid Jonker (1933–1965).

This is one of South Africa’s most famous poems and is often read at public gatherings or assemblies. The poet, Ingrid Jonker, wrote mainly in Afrikaans, but this poem was written in English. She committed suicide by drowning at the age of 32. Her life story is presented in the 2011 film *Black Butterflies*.

### Exercise

What seems unusual to you about the way the poem uses language? Write your first thoughts in the space below.

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You might have noticed that the speaker **repeats** certain words and phrases throughout the poem. This feature of the poem is similar to “Still I Rise”, where the phrase in the title almost forms a chorus. In this poem, the first two words of the title are repeated throughout. The phrase appears twice in the first stanza; it begins each of the poem’s stanzas; and it appears five times in the fourth stanza. There are other repeated words and phrases in the poem.

Why does the poet repeat certain words in the poem? Is it because she thinks her readers are not intelligent enough to understand what she means the first time, or is it because she cannot find words to say what she means? The answer is neither of these options. The effect of the repetition is to drive the poem home into the memories of its audience (the people who hear it spoken). As we know, people will remember a word, phrase or line that is repeated much more than if it is said only once. For this reason, you **must** read “The Child who was Shot Dead by Soldiers at Nyanga” aloud in a bold tone (try doing this to your family members and see how they respond). Only by doing this will you fully appreciate the effect of the repetition of particular words and phrases in the poem.

Who, or what, would you say, is the main presence in the poem? Is this person or thing actually present (there can be such a thing as an “absent presence”)? Surely the fact that the first two words of the title are repeated so many times in the poem means that the child who was shot dead is the main presence in the poem; it dominates the entire text. We cannot read the poem without encountering this child. The fact of the child’s death, as we learn from the title, is brought home to us again and again throughout the poem.

**Exercise**

How can a dead child, whose name is not even given in the poem, be so important? Write your answer in the space below.

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When we use someone's name (if, for example, the poet had used the dead child's name in the poem), we make our words individual to that person or child. But when we speak generally about "a child", our words resonate further afield and apply to all children or to the state of childhood. This is what Ingrid Jonker has done in this poem. This child is a symbol of all the innocent children who were killed by soldiers under Apartheid in South Africa for no other reason than that he behaved (line 20) as any child has the right to do as part of childhood exploration and joy in being a child. The child did not know that violent events were taking place in the place where he played, and did not know that he belonged to the wrong racial group to be in that place, and so he died.

"The Child who Was Shot Dead by Soldiers at Nyanga" draws on a fairly common idea – that violence within a country destroys innocent members of society, such as women and children and, in this way, damages the country and its future severely. This idea is often used, for example, in magazines such as *Time* and *National Geographic* when they publish photographs of children as victims of war and violence. At the same time, poets always have to put their ideas (even if these are not completely original) to fresh use. How does Jonker make the idea of the innocent child/victim fresh and new in her poem?

We are going to explore one single instance in which the poet re-uses the idea of an innocent child who has become a victim of violence that did not concern him. Consider the third stanza.

Does this mean that the child has miraculously survived being shot (as the poem's title says), or does it mean that the speaker is mistaken about the child's condition? Neither of these is true. In fact, the child is – physically and medically – dead, but he is not spiritually or poetically dead at all. There are two reasons for this. One is the poem we are reading and studying, which makes sure that the child is not forgotten. The other reason is that his death has inspired others to take up the cause of freedom and given new energy to the struggle against apartheid.

In effect, the child lives on through the poem as a reminder of the senselessness of racial violence that killed him. Furthermore, the speaker tells us in the final lines of the poem that the child has grown up (line 21). In fact, he has done more than this: explain the meaning of the image in line 22 in this regard.

**Exercise**

The final line of the poem provides the punch-line: bearing this in mind, how does the poem’s final line offer hope for South Africa’s future?

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It is worthwhile, here, to explore what the speaker has **not** done in this poem, which, as we now see, is a protest poem against Apartheid. She has not tried to elicit sentimental sympathy for the child for being killed (as one might have expected in a poem that is so clearly anti-violence). In fact, she has not mentioned race, racism or racial conflict in her poem at all. Rather, she has written as though everyone who reads the poem will know exactly which child she means. But, as we have seen, the child has come to symbolise much more than just a single dead infant.

**Exercise**

Let us explore the effect of the image in the second last line of the poem. Identify the metaphor (explain what is being compared to what) and explain the **connotations** of the **sixth** word in this line. Write them in the space below.

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Now that we have explored how the poem uses the image of the child’s death, you should be able to see why this poem is so often read aloud at important public meetings.

**Exercise**

In the space below, write a paragraph (about 10 lines) explaining why this poem “works” as a protest poem.

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What you have just done in the space above is to write about why the poem is **effective**. This is an important part of poetry analysis as it focuses on how poets make poetry work and how poetry affects the reader.

Please refer to page 239 in *Seasons come to Pass* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Moffett 2013) and read the poem “Alexandra”<sup>2</sup> by Wally Mongane Serote (1944– ).

The historical origin of the township of Alexandra during the era of apartheid was the policy of forced removals, which made it a law that blacks could be removed from areas that had been designated as “white”. This helped the Nationalist government to control and monitor the movement of black people and ensure that they only had access to the poorer areas of land in South Africa.

Wally Mongane Serote’s poem is written in free verse, meaning it does not have any regular rhyme scheme. The other interesting characteristic of this poem is that it is written using the first person pronoun *I*. In fact, from using the singular form of the pronoun in the first stanza, the speaker changes to the plural form in the second stanza before going back to the singular form in the third stanza. What could his reasons be for doing this?

### **Exercise**

In the space below, write down at least two reasons why the poet has done this.

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This poem is about the speaker’s experience of growing up in the township of Alexandra, South Africa, at the height of apartheid. Alexandra can therefore be seen as the main influence deciding his fate, just like a child’s biological mother.

In the third stanza the poet uses an image that suggests the umbilical cord that ties one to a place, as it does to a maternal source of identity, and life itself. Can you identify this?

The speaker uses personification by likening Alexandra township to a mother. In the first stanza the poet creates a warm tone by the use of particular adjectives. Can you identify these? These words evoke the positive characteristics and caring nature often associated with mothers in their relationship with their children.

In the second and third stanzas, the speaker provides a description of the unique and irrevocable bond that exists between him and his mother. Identify the phrases in line 7, line 8 and line 11 that demonstrate this special relationship.

The tone begins to change towards the end of the third stanza. The question posed in line 22 evokes negative and hurt-filled emotions, including those of sadness and total frustration. How

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<sup>2</sup> Under Apartheid this was a Black township outside Johannesburg. It is still a fairly poor area.

are these emotions further expressed in stanza four? Identify the imagery and discuss the emotions they evoke.

**Exercise**

What was the result for the speaker of his “mother’s” peculiar behaviour (lines 34-35)?

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We have not given you much help in interpreting “Alexandra” at all, because it is the last poem to be analysed in this study note. We hope that, by now, you have learned how to read and interpret poetry for yourself and you will be able to fill in the table below without too much confusion.

Phrase from the poem	Question	Answer
Line 28	How does the speaker feel at this point?	
Line 30	What has made the speaker feel like this?	
Repetition of the title (throughout the poem)	What is the effect of repeating this word so many times?	
Line 19	How does this remind the reader of the traditional role of a mother? How is it different?	
Line 40	What is the literal meaning of this phrase? What does it mean figuratively?	
Line 41	Why is this a good ending for the poem?	

**Final note**

In this section we have drawn your attention to various possibilities for exploring and appreciating poetry. We have pointed out, for example, the centrality of tradition and conventions in the sonnets. In some instances, we have also discussed the need for understanding the poet’s historical context. We have highlighted the significance of imagery or poetic devices, as well as other sound-effects such as rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, and so forth. Finally, we’ve underscored the relevance and significance of tone and diction in poetry

interpretation. When you write about poetry in assignments and the examination, we expect you

- To write about the poem's main idea (the overall meaning of the poem);
- To support your claims about what the poem means and how it conveys meaning by referring to the poet's choice of words and phrases;
- To quote from the poem correctly, giving line numbers for each of your quotations;
- To write a systematic discussion of the poem, where your ideas are linked in coherent paragraphs and where you provide an introduction and a conclusion. **But note that this does not apply to an examination question which has been broken down into component parts;**
- To use the English language as correctly as possible throughout the essay. This means that you should revise and correct your work before submitting it;

In the case of an assignment, please ensure that you provide a bibliography of the works you quoted in your essay. **This requirement does not apply in the examination. \**

**Finally**, please return to the table you filled in at the beginning of this section, where you had to mark various statements relating to poetry as true or false (depending on what you thought). Write "true" or "false" depending on what you now believe to be true. I offer a few comments on each of the statements:

1. **Poetry is the opposite of prose.** This is clearly not true. Poetry uses the same language as prose (English, for example) and the same techniques to refer to reality. But poetry uses lines in a different way from prose, since the lines in poetry do not go all the way across the page, while in prose, they run on to the next line of print.
2. **Poetry is difficult to read.** Some poetry certainly is difficult to read. Other poems are easier. Some poems may be difficult for you on one day, and easier on the next. This statement is highly subjective: that is, its truth will depend on the individual and how he or she feels at the time. Hopefully, this chapter has helped you to feel more confident about your reading of poetry.
3. **A poem must rhyme.** This is clearly not true. Some poems rhyme and others do not. This does not make those that do not rhyme any less "poetic" than those that do.
4. **Poetry uses language in a different way from the way we usually use it.** This is certainly true of most poetry, although it is nearly impossible to define exactly what the difference is. One way of putting it is that the language of poetry is more condensed and contains more meaning than the language we use every day. Another way to express it is to say that poetic language draws the reader's attention. How would you explain the difference between language in poetry and in everyday use?
5. **I have read a lot of poetry.** This may or may not be true for you generally, and the answers will differ from person to person, but now that you've finished working through this section, you have definitely read more poetry than you had before!

6. **Poetry is outdated and belongs only to the past.** This is not true at all. Contemporary music uses poetry (the lyrics of a well-written song will certainly classify as poetry); political gatherings often use poetry to greet important guests or to praise public figures; and there are other contemporary uses of poetry as well.
7. **Poetry has nothing to do with ordinary life.** It is true that poetry seems to be removed from everyday existence because of its unusual way of using language.

On the other hand, poetry deals with the same issues we confront on a daily basis, such as the household chores and the meaning of life.

8. **Poetry belongs to the upper circles of educated and sophisticated people, and not to ordinary people.** As we mentioned, poetry is found in public gatherings, newspapers and on billboards, where it can be read by ordinary people every day. This shows that poetry is not restricted to the “upper circles” at all.
9. **All poems are less than a page in length.** This is certainly not true. John Milton’s epic poem, *Paradise Lost*, is over 200 pages long and is by no means the longest poem ever written. A poem can be any length – as long or as short as the poet needs it to be.
10. **The best subjects for poetry are life, death, love or nature.** This is not true either. Poetry can deal with any topic at all: it is not the topic but the way the poet writes about it that makes the poem effective or not.

All these sentences are designed to make you think about what you believe poetry is and how it works. Most of what we believe is not based on fact or experience, but on assumptions. In this section, we hope we have challenged some of your assumptions about poetry and helped you to understand it better.

## **SECTION 2**

### ***The Catcher in the Rye* (J.D. Salinger)**

**by Ruth Scheepers**

<b>A GUIDE TO THIS NOTE</b>
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This section contains the following things:

- A study programme to enable you to study *The Catcher in the Rye*;
- A discussion of the history and context in which *The Catcher in the Rye* was written;
- Some notes about language, style, form and genre in *The Catcher in the Rye*;
- A detailed discussion of each section of *The Catcher in the Rye*;
- A list of sources for you to consult if you want to learn more about *The Catcher in the Rye*.

**PLEASE NOTE:** All page references in the novel are to the 1994 and 2010 Penguin editions, in that order. These are indicated in the text in brackets with the page number in the 1994 edition first, and the page number in the 2010 edition second: (p. xx [1994]; xx [2010]).

#### **Study programme**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Time spent (approximately)</b>
Reading the novel	4 hours
Reading this study note and making notes of important points	4 hours
Completing activities in the study guide	8 hours
Preparatory writing for your assignment on <i>The Catcher in the Rye</i>	2 hours
Drafting and revising your assignment	6 hours

## Some historical background

J(erome) D(avid) Salinger was born in New York on 1 January 1919, into a well-to-do businessman's family.

He attended a private school and a military academy and though his own experiences no doubt influenced his description of Holden Caulfield's school encounters in the novel, his own school days appear to have been generally happier.

His first short story was published in 1940. From this point on his writing was regularly featured in "prestigious" journals such as the *Saturday Evening Post*. In 1941 he had a story accepted by *The New Yorker*, which was regarded as the most significant publisher of fiction at the time. He was 22.

This story, "Slight Rebellion off Madison", describes the antics of a character, Holden Caulfield, who, home from school for the Christmas holidays, goes on a date with his girlfriend Sally. The story is in some ways a precursor of *The Catcher in the Rye* as many of its events reoccur in the later novel. The significant difference is that in this story Salinger uses an omniscient third person narrator, while in the novel he shifts to using the first person narrative, the voice, idiosyncratic and quirky, of Holden Caulfield himself.

### Omniscient (third-person) narrator

The voice that tells the story in a work of fiction is the **narrator**. This might (or might not) be the voice of one of the characters. Most often, the narrator uses one of two **pronouns** to tell the story: "I" or "he/she/it". If the narrator uses "I", we say the narrative is told in the **first person**. If "he/she/it" is used, we say it is a **third-person narrative**. An **omniscient** narrator is one who (pretends that he or she) knows everything about the world of the narrative, including the thoughts and feelings of all the characters.

Unfortunately, publication of this story was interrupted by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour and America's subsequent entry into World War II in December 1941. The story was eventually published in December 1946, by which time Salinger had made several references to Holden Caulfield in stories published in other magazines.

The war brought great changes, both to American life in general and to Salinger's life in particular. He was called up to the armed forces ("drafted", in American parlance) in 1942, and transferred to England in 1944 in preparation for D-day. According to his daughter, Margaret, the war had a traumatic effect on Salinger, which we can see reflected in, among other aspects of the novel, Holden's vehement anti-war feelings. During the war, Salinger kept up his writing and assembled a cast of characters that he developed across his fiction and through whom he represented himself (Graham 2007: 4). *The Catcher in the Rye* was published in July 1951, and

although Salinger has published five novellas and 30 short stories, it is on this novel that his reputation mainly rests.

Although *The Catcher in the Rye* was met with great acclaim, remaining on the *New York Times*' best-seller list for almost six months, Salinger struggled to complete the novel, calling himself "a dash man, and not a miler" (Hamilton, 1998: 94, in Graham, 2007: 6), and it took him 10 years to complete.

### **The social and cultural context of the novel: post-war America**

Although *Catcher* is understood to be a novel that captures the unease of American society in the 1950s and articulates the emerging phenomenon of adolescent identity, the novel is in many ways a product of the 1940s.

(Graham 2007: 7)

The novel is set in 1949 and draws particularly on Salinger's earlier short story, "Slight rebellion off Madison". Great changes were occurring in American society and culture: US participation in World War II ended the Great Depression. The atomic bomb had forced the Japanese to surrender, but spelled the beginning of a new age. Note Holden Caulfield's anti-war feelings and preoccupation with death and suicide (for example, on p. 127; 152) throughout the novel – try to trace these through the text. As Graham (2007: 8) remarks, Holden's "hatred of 'phonies' can be related to the ethos of post-war America which was preoccupied with matters of secrecy and security" (Graham 2007: 8).

From 1951 onwards, America engaged in the Cold War, an ideological conflict based on American hostility to Communism which was the very antithesis of capitalism. The American fear of Communism was encapsulated in the McCarthy "witch hunts", which saw anyone suspected of Communist activities or opinions persecuted, jailed or even killed.

*The Catcher in the Rye* caused a stir when it was published mainly because it portrays a "rebel against the status quo" (Graham 2007: 9). In the

*Think about Sally's responses to Holden's urge to escape. Sally accepts that "gender not talent" (Halberstam, 1993: 589 in Graham 2007: 10) is the required qualification for a career, while he rejects the "passive acceptance of social norms in women and men" (Graham 2007: 10).*

1940s and 1950s American society became conservative in its attitudes and reaction to the fears aroused by the Cold War. This conservatism went hand in hand with an economic boom, which especially favoured white middle-class Americans. The focus fell on the nuclear, all-American family – father the bread-winner, mother raising the children at home. Women were actively discouraged from following careers. Real women, it was implied, stayed at home, raised their children and consumed goods. Working women were blamed for raising

delinquents.

But not all women felt as Sally (p. 119–120; 143–144) does.

Second-wave feminism arose in the revolutionary period of the 1960s and 1970s, but writers like Sylvia Plath and Betty Friedan presaged these feelings in their challenge of the inflexible gender roles of the post-war period.

Men were also pressured to conform, to marry and father children and to have a steady career. Marriage was as important for men as it was for women as it fitted with the norms of sexual identity as well as those of values and ambition. Note Holden's words on p. 119–120;143–144.

What does this suggest about his attitudes to society's expectations? Whyte, in his book *The Organization Man* (1956), notes that the ultimate goal is "belongingness, a concept entirely antithetical to individualism" (1956: 7, in Graham, 2007:12). Consider Holden's conflict of wanting to belong (to those he loves in particular) but his rejection of conformity (expressed in his wearing of the red hunting cap).

Conformity was also encouraged through popular culture. The novel is set before television had become the powerful force it was to become in the fifties. The main form of mass entertainment was the cinema. Holden reveals ambivalence towards films: he regards them as fake, but they are intensely influential in his life. Find quotations in the novel which support this.

In the 1950s cinema centred on the rise of the teenager, both in content and with regard to audience. The period saw the advent of the phenomenon of the "teen-ager" as it was spelt initially. As Graham (2007: 13) puts it:

The fact that teen-agers/adolescents had been excluded from the armed forces during the war, and that post-war prosperity allowed young people to have spending power [gave rise to a] peer-group culture, in which people looked to each other (rather than parents) for advice on how to live.

### **Exercise**

Trace the *motif* (an important and sometimes recurring image in a literary text) of the cinema in the novel. Comment on Holden's attitude and comments on movies in general, as well as on particular movies he watches, and explain what these reveal about his character.

When *The Catcher in the Rye* was published in 1951 it became an instant best-seller. But it was atypical. In that year, the most popular novels were all based on the war – James Jones's *From Here to Eternity*, Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny* and *The Cruel Sea* by Nicholas Monsarrat. Books like these praised the courage of soldiers and were concerned with questions of honour, discipline and military life.

Holden's anti-war feelings (for example, p. 127; 152) are in stark contrast to these values. His attitude prefigures (or looks forward to) protests against war in the US in the 1960s and 1970s.

Holden's willingness to confront taboo subjects and the novel's social criticism offers post-war America an unexpected image of itself (Graham 2007: 17).

### **Language, style and form**

As you know from your studies in ENG1502 (Foundations in Applied English Language Studies), language is not a neutral window onto the world or mirror of it. Rather, authors, poets and dramatists make choices when they place certain words, phrases or expressions on their pages, in order to achieve certain effects. This is true of all literary texts and it is part of your work as a student to pay attention to how language works to achieve these effects.

An *allusion* is something that is said or written that refers to or mentions another person or subject in an indirect way.

*The Catcher in the Rye* is typical of Salinger's style in that it is colloquial, humorous and intimate (Graham 2007: 19). Features of his writing are an *idiosyncratic* use of dialogue – some of this novel is almost stream-of-consciousness, with Holden's thoughts running on in a seemingly random manner from one subject to the next. He has peculiar mannerisms which make his speech *idiosyncratic* (distinctive, peculiar to him, almost eccentric at times).

*Stream of consciousness* writing tries to imitate the flow of thoughts and feelings within a character's mind and emotions.

The whole text is dominated by the use of dialogue. The setting is secondary and not always described in detail. Salinger uses *italics* to echo the spoken word in his writing, and accent and dialect are used to indicate class status. (*Italics* - printed in or using letters that slope to the right. Use italics for book titles when you write on a computer. They are also used for emphasis.) Although Holden uses the slang of the day and swears a great deal, like most adolescents, his speech is generally standard English, if American. The working class people he meets, on the other hand, reveal their social status through their dialect.

### **Exercise**

Find examples of the way dialect is used in the novel to reveal social class and status (think about the cab driver and the prostitute, for instance). Comment on how effective this is.

*Intertextuality* is also a feature of Salinger's writing. In this novel there are many examples of direct references and *allusions* to other literary texts. These help to throw further light on the themes and issues in the novel.

### **Exercise**

Find as many references and allusions to other texts as you can and comment on their significance in *The Catcher in the Rye*.

Salinger often sums up characters in one pithy statement. These images or phrases, or even habits or peculiarities, are repeated and become *emblematic* of the character.

### **Exercise**

Find examples of this in the text – think about characters such as Stradlater, Ackley and Ernest Morrow. What images or phrases or habits become emblematic of Holden, do you think?

Humour is a crucial aspect of Salinger's writing. Characters are not always amusing in themselves, but the images and the language rather than the content are what amuse the reader.

### **Exercise**

Find some examples of humour in *The Catcher in the Rye* and comment on its purpose and effect in the novel.

### **Narration and point of view**

Salinger uses a first-person narrator in this novel.

Conventionally, the use of the first-person narrator creates a close bond between reader and narrator and great potential for intimate engagement with the main protagonist. If, however, the narrator is not telling the truth, it is difficult for the reader to judge what is happening in the text.

(Graham 2007: 20)

It is very important to Holden that he should not be seen as disingenuous by the reader and so he constantly tries to prove his credibility. Note how often he uses the word "really", sometimes even italicising it to add extra veracity to his narrative.

In his conversation with Mrs Morrow on the train he says about himself that he really likes to embellish and tell stories, (p. 50; 61): some editions italicise only the "real" in "really", adding extra conviction to the words – he is really, really telling the truth! Find other examples of expressions he uses to emphasise his sincerity.

As Nadel (2008: 56) puts it: “These signifiers, along with those which emphasize the intensity of an experience (e.g. ‘boy!’) or the speaker’s desire for clarity (e.g. ‘I mean ...’) make Caulfield’s speech one which asserts its own veracity more than once for every page of narration.”

Another of his idiosyncrasies is the use of exaggeration, for instance when Holden reveals that his parents would be very upset if they discovered that he had disclosed personal information about them (p. 1; 1) and when he confesses that he tends to tell lies and is very good at doing so (p. 14; 17). In fact, Holden may be regarded as an unreliable narrator, often inaccurate in his judgements of both himself and others in the novel. His narrative is also a mass of contradictions – he claims to be an atheist and that most of the religious people he has come across are frauds, and yet he has a preoccupation with religion and is surprisingly well informed about it.

### Exercise

Find more examples of Holden’s “unreliability” in the novel. Consider the incident in which he meets the three women in the hotel nightclub (p. 63; 75–6), for instance.

How do they react to him? What does he make of them and their opinions? Also think about his reactions to Sally on p. 112–121; 134–145. Think about the inconsistency between his perceptions of others and how others react to him.

### Genre

*The Catcher in the Rye* could be called a “coming-of-age” novel. The main character, Holden Caulfield, is moving from a state of “innocence” (in childhood, adolescence) to one of “experience” (in adulthood).

The term *Bildungsroman* denotes a novel of all-round self-development. My definition of *Bildungsroman* is a distilled version of the one offered by Marianne Hirsch in “The Novel of Formation as Genre”:

1. A *Bildungsroman* is, most generally, the story of a single individual's growth and development within the context of a defined social order. The growth process, at its roots a quest story, has been described as both "an apprenticeship to life" and a "search for meaningful existence within society."

*Or to put it another way:*

A *Bildungsroman* is a novel which is an account of the youthful development of a hero. It describes the processes by which maturity is achieved through the various ups and downs of life. The dissonances and conflicts appear as the necessary growth points through which the individual must pass on his way to maturity and harmony. Charles Dickens's novel *David Copperfield* belongs to this genre. The novel follows the emotional, moral and spiritual growth of the hero at different stages of his life, and his defining in relation to the other characters.  
<http://www.thesionline.com/intl/thesis.jsp?id=20550>

*Intertextuality* is the relationship that exists between different texts, especially literary texts, or the reference in one text to others.

2. To spur the hero or heroine on to their journey, some form of loss or discontent must jar them at an early stage away from the home or family setting.
3. The process of maturity is long, arduous, and gradual, consisting of repeated clashes between the protagonist's needs and desires and the views and judgments enforced by an unbending social order.
4. Eventually, the spirit and values of the social order become manifest in the protagonist, who is then accommodated into society. The novel ends with an assessment by the protagonist of himself and his new place in that society.

*Flashback* - a scene or event from the past that appears in a narrative out of chronological order, to fill in information or explain something in the present.

## **The novel**

This novel covers three days in the life of Holden Caulfield and is told as a flashback as he looks back on his experiences six months after the event.

### ***The novel can be divided into four sections:***

Section 1: Saturday afternoon and evening, at Pencey Prep, Holden's school (Chapters 1–7)

Section 2: Saturday night, Edmont Hotel, Manhattan (Chapters 8–14)

Section 3: Sunday, wandering about the city (Chapters 15-20)

Section 4: Sunday night, Holden and Phoebe in the family apartment; early hours of Monday morning, Holden's visit to Mr Antonini; Monday afternoon, Phoebe at the carousel (Chapters 21–25)

Chapter 26 brings the reader back to the starting point of the novel, six months after the events of the main narrative.

### **Saturday afternoon and evening, at Pencey Prep, Holden's school (Chapters 1-7)**

The first chapter of the novel introduces many of the central themes and sets the tone of the novel through the use of the intimate first-person narrative. Holden Caulfield's unique voice comes through from the outset, and in the reader being addressed as "you", it seems we are being taken into his confidence.

*Genre* - one of the categories, based on form, style, or subject matter, into which artistic works of all kinds can be divided. For example, the detective novel is a genre.

The first paragraph of the novel is important in many ways. Holden dismisses Charles Dickens's novel *David Copperfield*, yet there are similarities between the two stories. Dickens's novel has been seen as the archetypal *Bildungsroman*, chronicling the development of the main character from boyhood to maturity. In these kinds of narratives, typically, the "hero" suffers a loss, which leads to a journey in which he faces various difficult encounters. These experiences change him and he ends by reflecting on his situation in the present (Graham 2007:32–33).

You should read the first two pages of the novel again and think about how this frames the rest of Holden's narrative.

While Holden seems sceptical of the autobiographical textual form, he does in fact relate a story. However, he does not abide by the "rules" of autobiography, which dictate that the character generally tells his or her life story. On the first page of the novel, several important details are revealed: Holden is in some sort of rest home or *sanatorium*, and he is in California — on the other side of the continent from where the action of the novel plays out — indicating to the reader that in fact the narrative is a series of *flashbacks*. On the first page, Holden mentions the people who feature least in the narrative — his parents and his older brother, D.B. This story is told from the perspective of a child or adolescent, and adults are often on the periphery, or seen as disappointing, even corrupt or not to be trusted. At the beginning of the first chapter (p. 1; 1–2) Holden makes the first of many references to the movies: he equates films with betrayal and prostitution. This is one of the many examples of Holden's unreliability as a narrator.

For instance, though Holden claims to hate the movies; he in fact loves them, and uses them as a constant frame of reference. He acts out movie roles on several occasions in the novel, and he uses them to express his own feelings and goes to see them often — "even when he believes that they will be unsatisfactory" (Nadel 2008: 60).

### **Exercise**

The early chapters raise the issue of Holden's hatred of all the things he sees as false and insincere. (Can you identify which word he uses throughout the novel to capture this idea?) In the first section this is expressed in his disgust for his schoolmates and also for various authority figures. These early chapters also establish Holden's disaffection with school and his hostile attitude to his schoolmates in particular and to people in general. Read the first three chapters again and identify instances in which Holden reveals his apparent contempt for insincerity.

**Suicide** is a theme that can be traced through the whole novel. The first mention of suicide occurs in chapter 1. In this chapter it also becomes clear to the reader that Holden is isolated, different from the rest, and a rebel.

## Exercise

What elements of this chapter emphasise Holden's view of himself as a *misfit* who is *different* from his peers?

Holden's visit to Mr Spencer in chapter 2 underlines his fear of death and growing old. We are given a first glimpse of the contradictions that are Holden Caulfield – he is six foot plus, he has some grey hair and is often mistaken for someone much older, but at heart he is still immature and childlike in many ways. The mention of *Beowulf* implies that Holden's wanderings around Manhattan once he has left Pencey are a kind of quest – one in which he is searching for a place where he feels safe and secure as well as for answers to questions that are troubling him. Among these questions is his sense of the unfairness of people dying young, such as Allie and James Castle.

*As Graham (2007: 40) puts it, the "impact of Allie's death on Holden is one of the central issues of the novel". Keeping in mind Holden's description of his actions (p. 34; 40) and reading between the lines of remarks he makes in reference to his state of mind, comment on the truth of this statement.*

*Comment on the interaction between Holden and Ackley in chapter 3.*

*How does Holden try to assert his dominance over Ackley? You should also think about not only how Ackley is described, but more importantly what this description tells us about Holden.*

### Exercise

*Holden's sense of loss and his fear of it are made clear in this first chapter. Find evidence to prove this statement.*

### Exercise

In chapter 3, Holden notes that he has taken a book out of the library and has an affinity for a number of authors. Why might these be significant?

Holden mentions several specific books here:

*Out of Africa* – Isak Dinesen

Ring Lardner – *The Portable Ring Lardner*, a collection of stories by the American humourist (1885–1933)

*The Return of the Native* – Thomas Hardy (the heroine's name is Eustacia Vye)

*Of Human Bondage* – Somerset Maugham (a semi-autobiographical *Bildungsroman* about the difficulties of coming to terms with adult sexuality. Holden rejects this book, underlining his own isolation and sense of confusion, particularly about sexual matters.)

In chapter 4 we learn more about Holden's roommate, Stradlater. Holden is critical of Stradlater for a number of reasons (p. 23; 28). Holden's reaction to the news that Stradlater has a date with Jane Gallagher is worth noting. Read chapter 4 and consider *what* Holden says and how this description enriches our understanding of him.

See also the subsequent section where Holden discusses how he used to play checkers with Jane, and specifically the way in which she treated and ordered the pieces (p. 27; 33).

In comparison to his feelings about Stradlater, Holden appears to have strong feelings, even idealistic ones, about Jane. Read this chapter carefully and explore this. Consider, too, how Jane is a motif that runs throughout the novel. In this chapter, our first encounter with her is through Holden's memories of her (how does he remember her?).

Although Holden says that he hates the movies, he knows a lot about them and he uses them to cope with his emotions, and in Chapter 5 he asks Brossard and Ackley to go into town and see a movie with him. While waiting for Ackley to get ready, Holden starts to make a snowball from the snow collected on his windowsill (p. 32; 38).

Holden values the qualities of innocence and purity, the innocence of childhood, and hates these qualities to be spoiled and defiled: the snow is pure and white, suggesting innocence. The car looks immaculate under its mantle of snow, as does the fire hydrant, and he does not want to spoil or deface this. The fact that he does not throw the snowball is "an attempt to preserve innocence" (Graham 2007: 39).

Isak Dinesen was the pseudonym of Danish writer Baroness Karen Christence Blixen-Finecke. Her 1937 novel, *Out of Africa*, was based on her experiences on a coffee plantation in British East Africa (now Kenya).

Holden decides to ignore the topic Stradlater has given him, and instead writes about Allie's baseball mitt (p. 33–34; 39–41). This evokes memories of Allie and reveals Holden's feelings for his brother.

This part of the chapter is significant in that it introduces important features of Holden's story – his grief at Allie's death, his reactions to it and his inability to come to terms with this death. The episode also raises the spectre of death and dying, and reveals something of Holden's obsession with death. Holden's account of Allie draws the reader in as a confidant by speaking to the reader directly. In this way, the relationship between Holden and his brother is opened up to the reader in a very intimate way.

### **Exercise**

How does Holden retell his behaviour on hearing the news of Allie's death? What does this show about his personality?

The mitt (or glove) is a catcher's mitt for baseball, and this brings to mind the title of the novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*. Holden, as the novel reveals, tries to save those he loves (such as Phoebe and Jane) from being damaged by life. He was unable to save Allie from death, and probably cannot save Jane from being defiled, as he sees it, by Stradlater. "For Holden, physical intimacy signals a loss of innocence and entry into the adult world, which he associates with corruption" (Graham 2007: 41). Stradlater, through his rejection of the essay about Allie's glove (p. 36; 43) and his behaviour with Jane and the suggestion that they have had sex, to which Holden rather crudely alludes (p. 37; 45), defiles the memory of both Allie and Jane.

(Image of catcher's mitt retrieved from <http://www.clipart.com> [accessed 15 June 2009])

### **Exercise**

The final chapter of this first section of the novel is dominated by despair and thoughts of death. The notion of suicide resurfaces when Holden wishes that he was dead, considers killing himself by jumping out of the window and admits his feelings of sadness and loneliness (p. 42; 50–51). This is an important and recurring aspect of Holden's narrative: what does it suggest to the reader?



Near the very end of the chapter (p. 45–46; 55) Holden talks about how he is depressed by packing up his belongings. He notes how he feels sad when he receives a gift. This paragraph is important, as it tells us a good deal about Holden's state of mind and his relationship with his parents, as well as his own sense of self. Read it carefully and explore what it reveals about him.

As Holden leaves the school, he slips and almost hurts himself (p. 46; 56). This introduces the theme of falling that runs through the narrative: references to jumping from windows, the suicide

of James Castle, dreams of saving children from falling, the carousel. There are also other examples of his clumsiness caused by his anxiety and where his body language tells the reader a great deal about his state of mind. Find these examples and discuss what they tell us about Holden.

### **Saturday night, Edmont Hotel, Manhattan (Chapters 8–14)**

This section (starting with chapter 8) introduces us to Holden’s preoccupation with gender roles, relationships and sexuality. His conflicted and double-sided view of the movies reappears: he realises that they project an exaggerated, false representation of reality and relationships (consider his description of the kind of men and women who inhabit the stories he reads in magazines, and by extension, the movies) and yet he is clearly hugely influenced by films.

His meeting with Mrs Morrow in this chapter underlines his essential ambivalence towards women. He doesn’t want to be like Stradlater, whom he despises, and he feels awkward about the attraction he feels for Mrs Morrow, and yet he also seems to see women as endearingly inept and impractical, for example when she leaves her bag in the aisle where everyone will trip over it. There is also an amusing misunderstanding here. He is attracted to her sexually, and suggests a drink, noting his height and grey hair as signs of his (apparent) maturity, while she refers to him throughout the chapter in the way one would speak to a child and questions whether he should be smoking and drinking! Holden’s stories about Mrs Morrow’s son are amusing but remind us of his hatred of fakes and dissemblers, his own unreliability as a narrator, his lack of a sense of self and even his desperation – he will do anything to make a connection, even if it means telling outright lies!

#### **Exercise**

The description of Ernest Morrow is another example of how Salinger uses one particular detail to describe a character – in this case, hurting people by smacking their behinds with an old, damp towel (p. 50; 61). Can you find other examples of this technique in the novel?

*Ambivalence* –the presence of two opposing ideas, attitudes, or emotions at the same time; a feeling of uncertainty about something due to a mental conflict

From Chapter 9 onwards (until the return to the starting point of California in the last chapter) the events unfold in Manhattan (a borough, or municipality, of New York City).

In this chapter Holden voices his concerns about the ducks in Central Park –asking the taxi driver whether he knows where they go to when the pond freezes over.

Do you think these concerns have something to do with Holden’s own anxieties about loss – specifically death and dying? The ducks represent absence: Allie’s death has so traumatised Holden “that he sees inexplicable loss everywhere” (Graham 2007: 45).

The Edmont Hotel is a place where Holden knows he is unlikely to bump into anyone he knows – on the wrong side of Central Park and a distance from his parents' apartment. We are made subtly aware throughout the novel, through the references to private schools, Holden's suitcases, his parents' apartment on the (richer) Upper East Side of Manhattan and money in general, that he comes from a wealthy and privileged background.

Holden refers to the hotel being filled with perverted people (p. 55; 66–67). Here he sees the underbelly of society and “he is both repelled and fascinated by what he sees” (Graham 2007:45). Holden regards sex as something imposed on a woman by a man. As Graham (2007:45) notes, one must remember that Holden is “a product of the repressive post-war era in America, when sexual desire was considered unspeakable and clear information about sex was rare”. He does not understand sex, but he is intensely curious about it.

In his loneliness, Holden thinks about calling up his sister (Phoebe), but decides against it for fear of alerting his parents to his whereabouts. This leads him to reflect deeply on his relationship with Phoebe, and by extension, with Allie.

### ***Exercise***

Read the passage in which Holden discusses changing his shirt and later, going down to the lobby (p. 60–62; 72–74). What does this passage reveal about Holden and his relationship with his siblings? Why do Phoebe's openness and displays of affection alarm Holden?

The three women Holden meets in the hotel nightclub highlight the theme of class difference and social privilege. Their names suggest their working-class origins. Holden is mocking and disparaging of them, showing his innate (if unconscious) snobbery, and like Stradlater, whom he despises, he reveals that for him, too, appearances count more than personality. Again in this episode we are made aware of his lack of insight into his own nature and state of mind. He does not pick up the import of the women's remarks about his age or the references to his father.

### **Exercise**

Chapter 11 is central to the whole novel. Holden's memories of Jane reveal much about his attitude to women and sexual matters. Read the chapter carefully and write notes on what it tells you about Holden, his attitude to Jane in particular and women in general, his state of mind, and any other ideas that strike you as important. Here are a few pointers:

- Holden remarks that it is not necessary to be overly sexual whilst interacting with a girl (p. 69; 83). Does this indicate that, unlike Stradlater and Ed Banksy, he has a desire for a more meaningful relationship with a girl?
- The symbol of hands occurs here too. Trace this symbol and its significance through the novel. Here they are nurturing and comforting as Holden remembers holding Jane's hands, her hand on his neck, giving him a feeling of happiness (p. 72; 86–87). Mr Antolini's hands are at first comforting but become more threatening; Allie's baseball catcher's mitt reveals Holden's desire to save the innocence of the children he knows.
- Racial tensions and hierarchy – the unconscious stereotyping and prejudices that Holden expresses unwittingly in his descriptions of black people.

*Hands are a recurring motif in the novel, both caring and nurturing and protective (Jane's hand on his neck at the movies, Mr Antolini's hand, although this is an ambivalent and troubling scene) and violent (Holden breaking his hand by smashing the windowpane). Find other examples in the novel.*

Chapter 12 revives many of Holden's thoughts – his hatred of corruption, his ambivalence about the movies and writers and his dislike of performers like the pianist Ernie. He is acutely aware of the phoniness of those around him: the Yale type telling his date about a student's suicide while at the same time surreptitiously touching her under the table (p. 78; 93) and then meeting the pretentious Lillian, who was clearly only interested in D.B. and not Holden. He observes that Ernie is a very good pianist but that he is a snob who makes a pretence of humility by bowing to his audience (p. 77; 91)

Holden returns to the subject of the ducks, to the eventual fury of the cab driver. This reminds us of his preoccupation with death and the inexplicable way that some things (and people, Allie in particular) do, simply, die.

## **Exercise**

Holden's behaviour continues to grow increasingly erratic and odd. With this in mind, read Chapter 13 and 14 carefully and discuss the incident with the prostitute and the pimp.

What does it reveal about Holden's state of mind? What themes does it develop? Some points you might consider are:

- Holden falls over his suitcase as he hurries to open the door to the prostitute (p. 84–85; 102) – another example of his clumsiness and also a reference again to the theme of falling. Also, Holden reverts to lying and exaggeration again to avoid having to actually commit to having sex – note the reference he makes to having had an operation (p. 87; 105).
- The prostitute, Sunny, says she comes from Hollywood, reminding us of how Holden feels about the movies and of his opinion that his brother is prostituting his craft by writing film scripts (p. 1; 2). Sunny says that Holden reminds her of an actor, although she can't remember his name (p. 87; 105).
- Read the passage on pages 89–90; 107–109, in which Holden undresses and gets into bed, commenting later on the insincerity of people when they converse with others. Explore the way this passage represents Holden's ideas and feelings about religion (both religion and schools create social barriers as far as Holden is concerned).
- The fight with Maurice is also significant. Again, Holden reverts to acting out a scene from an imaginary movie to deal with a difficult situation.

Refer to other examples of this behaviour. What does this behaviour reveal about Holden? Consider why he seriously believes that the movies can ruin individuals (p. 94; 113).

- Also note Holden's talk of suicide. These words are an allusion to Holden's later mentions of James Castle and the circumstances of this boy's death and develop the theme of death and dying that pervades the narrative. He says he felt like committing suicide by leaping out of the window but did not do so for fear that he would not be covered up after landing on the ground, thereby providing a spectacle for ignorant and insensitive people (p. 94; 113).
- Throughout the novel Holden shows an unwillingness to expose himself to a stranger's gaze. Find the word he uses for people who stare at others inquisitively. Think about other examples of where he has revealed this reluctance to expose himself. All these are ruses to deflect attention from his state of mind, from what is really troubling him.

## Sunday, wandering about the city (Chapters 15–20)

### Exercise

“This chapter [Chapter 15] begins a section of the novel in which Holden seems increasingly anxious and his attempts to make meaningful connections with other people become ever more desperate” (Graham 2007: 54).

Keep this statement in mind as you carefully read the next six chapters. Here are some points for you to consider:

- In Chapter 15, Holden decides to take a cab outside the hotel, but at first he is not sure where he wants to go (p. 96; 116). So he goes to Grand Central Station. Why do you think he makes this choice? (The station suggests people in flux, on their way from here to there, no permanence, no arrival or having to face the reality of life.)
- The sight of the nuns and his help with their cheap suitcases sets him reminiscing, this time about Dick Slagle and his cheap suitcases, a reminder of the class consciousness of Pencey and Holden’s own background. Consider, too, his references to his father’s wealth (p. 97-98; 117-118). It is clear from these details that Holden has never really had to think about money or about where it comes from, but that he is intensely aware of the trappings of wealth and social privilege, even though he pretends contempt for them. He feels sorry for the nuns and their obvious lack of money, but his attempts at chivalry and sophistication also sink to the bathetic when he blows smoke into their faces! Consider, too, his diatribe about Catholics (p. 101-102; 121-122). Is this significant?
- In his conversation with the nuns he refers to books he has read. What is the significance of these titles?

Greenwich Village (often simply called "the Village"), is a largely residential neighborhood on the west side of [Lower Manhattan](#) in [New York City](#). A large majority of the district is home to [upper middle class](#) families. Greenwich Village, however, was known in the late 19th – earlier to mid 20th centuries as the [bohemian](#) capital and the birthplace of the [Beat movement](#).  
[wikipedia.org/wiki/Greenwich\\_Village](http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Greenwich_Village)

Holden goes in search of a record for his sister (p. 103–104; 124). In his description of the singer, Estelle Fletcher, he uses racial stereotypes and makes black people sound sexier than they possibly are. The fact that a white girl would have made the song sound more wholesome but that the coloured singer sounded sexier suggests that the white girl is seen as innocent and childlike, while the black singer is regarded as more sexual. This was a common racial prejudice

at the time – although Holden is cynical and questioning of everything he sees as the status quo, he is still prone to clichéd attitudes to racial identity.

Holden passes a couple with a child (p. 104; 124-5). Note his description of the couple and his social comment – despite criticising others for snobbery, Holden again expresses his prejudices and unwittingly underlines his own privileged background. The little boy with the couple is singing a (misquoted) line from an old song based on a poem by Scottish poet Robert Burns (1759–1796):

### **Coming Through the Rye**

Coming thro' the rye, poor body,  
    Coming thro' the rye,  
She draiglet a' her petticoatie  
    Coming thro' the rye.  
O, Jenny's a' wat, poor body;  
    Jenny's seldom dry;  
She draiglet a' her petticoatie  
    Coming thro' the rye.

Gin a body meet a body  
    Coming thro' the rye,  
Gin a body kiss a body -  
    Need a body cry?

Gin a body meet a body  
    Coming thro' the glen,  
Gin a body kiss a body -  
    Need the warld ken?

The title of the novel is taken from this poem. Holden either hears incorrectly, or the boy has got the words wrong, but whatever the case, this misquote actually removes the sexual connotations from the poem. The reference to catching bodies in the poem reminds us of the motif of falling which runs throughout the narrative, and the poem seems to sum up Holden's deepest desire – to save those he loves, specifically Phoebe but children in general, the innocent, and by extension, himself, from death and defilement (for instance, he longs to save Jane from being sexually corrupted by Stradlater).

Holden buys tickets for a Broadway show starring a famous acting couple, The Lunts. The mention of this celebrity couple and of Laurence Olivier may be a subtle reference to homosexuality, (find the word Holden uses to refer to such people). Both Alfred Lunt and Laurence Olivier were suspected of homosexuality – but we must remember the oppressive nature of post-war American society and the mystery and prejudice attached to this, which fascinates Holden. In those days, any proof of homosexual activities would have ended an actor's career.

**Exercise**

Holden decides to go in search of his sister and on the advice of the little girl in the park (mistaken though it is), he heads for the museum. Read the whole passage on Holden's feelings about the museum carefully (p. 108–110; 129–131) and comment on the significance of his feelings.

Why do you think he resists entering the museum at the last moment? For Holden, change means loss (Graham 2007: 57). In the end he does not go in – is he afraid that the museum may, after all, have changed too?

Holden's date with Sally Hayes develops themes that are now familiar. His concerns with falseness and sincerity (or the absence thereof) are expressed in his remarks about the actors (Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne) (p. 113–114; 135–136). These thoughts continue to preoccupy Holden as he watches Sally's behaviour with the young man she recognises during the interval. This falseness persists when they decide to go ice-skating, purely, Holden cynically believes, because Sally wants to show off her legs and behind in her skating skirts (p. 116; 139).

Holden's behaviour is becoming more and more inappropriate – his voice rises, he suggests a mad plan to run away with Sally, back to the simple life, and when she rejects this idea and tries to bring him back down to earth, the scene culminates in Holden's insulting Sally (p. 120; 144).

**Exercise**

Read the section from page 117; 140 to the end of the chapter. Consider what this passage tells us about Holden's state of mind at this point in the narrative. What fears does it raise? At the ice rink, he makes another reference to people who have nothing to do other than watch skaters falling on the ice (p. 116; 139). Think about the theme of "falling", and Holden's unwillingness to be watched, or recognised, and his many disguises or pretences (find occasions when he has tried to disguise himself and his actions – either literally or figuratively – elsewhere in the narrative). To which other memory in the novel is the reference to suicide an allusion? Find other occasions when he has expressed similar fears and comment on these.

Holden's state of mind at this point in the narrative is also evident when he tells Sally that he is in a bad way (p. 118; 142) and when he thinks to himself that he is a lunatic (p. 121; 145). Is he becoming more aware of his own imminent breakdown? He *is* in a bad state and we see in the last few chapters how he spirals down into deep depression, ending finally in a sanatorium, from where he is in fact telling this story.

After another failed attempt to phone Jane (p. 123; 147) Holden decides to call up Carl Luce. To kill time he goes into Radio City and catches the stage show between movies. This leads to a memory of going to the Christmas show as a child.

The kettle drummer is another symbol of constancy, something that could be relied upon to be the same year after year. His memories are tinged with his adolescent cynicism, but amid the phoniness the drummer stands out as something reliable and pure. Holden imagines that Jesus

would have liked this drummer, even if he would have disapproved of the other aspects of the show (p. 124; 149). The film he then watches does nothing to improve his mood or relieve his cynicism either, being clichéd and predictable.

What really seals his dark mood and confirms his low opinion of most of humankind, however, is the mean behaviour of the woman sitting next to him. Despite crying all the way through the film, this woman reacts dismissively when her son asks to go to the bathroom, highlighting her insincerity, Holden believes (p. 126; 151).

Page 127; 152 refers to more books and poets. These allusions reflect many of the preoccupations of the novel, not least the criticism of American society and anti-war feelings. Holden's comments about war would have been construed as "anti-American" at the time of writing and remind us of the anti-war counter-culture that arose over later conflicts such as the Vietnam War, and which extend even to the present day in reactions to the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and America's role here (Graham 2007: 62).

Holden's drink with Carl Luce reawakens his concerns about his own sexuality and sex in general. Holden succeeds in annoying Luce with his childish behaviour (p. 130; 155–6). We see, however, that Luce is the ultimate fake, his sophistication thinly masking a superficial and arrogant nature. In contrast, Holden makes some telling remarks about his own ideas about sex, explaining that he cannot become physically involved with a girl he does not like a lot (p. 133; 159). This reveals a surprising maturity in stark contrast with the likes of Luce, Stradlater and Ackley.

Finally, very drunk indeed, Holden telephones Sally in an attempt to apologise for being so rude to her. He becomes more and more depressed and admits to feeling lonely (p. 138; 164–5).

He goes in search of the ducks, but by now he is so drunk that it takes him a long time to find the pond. Something terrible happens – he drops Phoebe's record and it breaks into a dozen pieces. He picks up the bits, even though they are useless now. His thoughts turn to his childhood, Allie and death. His references to Allie in his grave (p. 139–140; 166–7) reveal that for Holden, Allie is not really dead at all: he thinks of him constantly, talks to him whenever he is in a crisis and is clearly still grieving deeply for his brother. This grief sets him apart from others, even from readers of the novel. This can be seen when he comments that the reader does not know Allie and thus cannot understand what he means (p. 140; 168).

His thoughts then turn to actually being dead himself, and the pain this would cause Phoebe (and, by implication, his mother) so he decides to go home before he dies out there of pneumonia. There is a strong sense of relief in his last words in chapter 20, when he finally decides to go home. This brings us to the turning point in the novel.

**Sunday night, Holden and Phoebe in the family apartment; early hours of Monday morning, Holden's visit to Mr Antolini; Monday afternoon, Phoebe at the carousel (Chapters 21–25)**

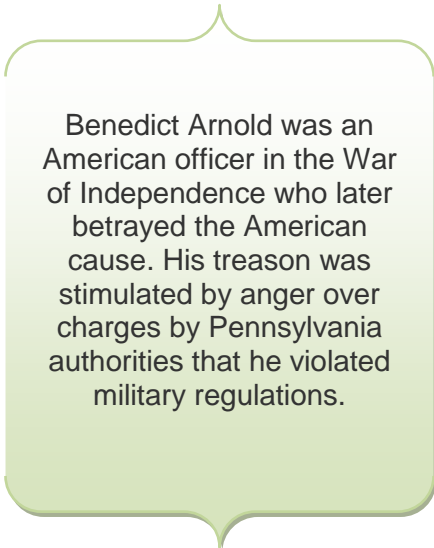
Chapter 26 brings the reader back to the starting point of the novel, six months after the events of the main narrative.

The last section of the novel is its climax. It ends with Holden's experience of insight at the carousel and takes us back to the starting point of the novel, the sanatorium in California. Throughout this section we see Holden's behaviour spiralling down into a breakdown. His conversations with Phoebe dominate the first three chapters. Phoebe is playing Benedict Arnold in the school play. Arnold "is an emblem of unreliability and betrayal, like other authority figures in the novel" (Graham 2007: 66).

### **Exercise**

Read pages 151 to 154; 180 to 184 carefully. Holden tries to explain to Phoebe why he hated Pencey so much. (Can you explain what he objected to in his old school? Consider the other boys' behaviour.) What sort of qualities is the school breeding in young men, do you think?

Phoebe challenges Holden to mention one thing he likes a lot. He is hard pressed in his depression to name anything and can think instead only about the nuns and James Castle. Read the passage on p. 153–154; 183–184 which describes James Castle's suicide. There have been references to this suicide throughout the novel. Why do you think this memory is particularly important?



Benedict Arnold was an American officer in the War of Independence who later betrayed the American cause. His treason was stimulated by anger over charges by Pennsylvania authorities that he violated military regulations.

In the end, Holden can only think of Allie as something he likes a lot. This infuriates Phoebe, who insists that this should not count as Allie is dead. But for Holden, Allie is not really dead at all, as we have seen. He is still grieving and for him; his dead brother has become more alive than the living.

The chapter ends on a sombre note:

Read from line 30 on page 155 to line 12 on page 156 (1994) or lines 4-28 on page 186 (2010).

Several important issues are raised here, not least the idea of falling (and death) which pervades the novel. Holden wants to “catch” the children, or prevent them from falling in the first place – he wishes to preserve the innocence of childhood, represented physically by Phoebe but also implicitly by his own childhood.

As we have seen throughout the narrative, he is frightened of growing old, of crossing the divide into adulthood, with all its attendant responsibilities and challenges, not least of which are relationships and sex. Falling also reminds us of Mr Antolini and his role in James Castle’s death, and the fact that Holden regards him as a surrogate big brother – a caring, reliable and nurturing figure. This accounts for his last desperate cry for help when he calls up Mr Antolini in the dead of night.

Holden escapes detection when his parents come home, but it is clear that at this point he really wants to be found. His despair is tangible: Read lines 32-36 on page 161 and lines 15-18 on page 162; lines 26-30 on page 193 and lines 16-20 on page 194.

*Tangible* - able to be touched or perceived through the sense of touch

There are both resignation and exhaustion in these words – Holden is at the end of his strength, worn out by the last three days, both physically and emotionally. He longs for the solace of home but has become so alienated that it is impossible for him simply to face his parents.

*Think about why James Castle jumped out of the window; reflect on the fact that Mr Antolini was the only one to approach him and that it was he who picked him up; he was wearing Holden’s sweater.*

Instead, he escapes down the stairs, falling over the garbage bins on his way down, yet another hint of his approaching breakdown and his preoccupation with death and falling.

Holden is warmly welcomed when he arrives at the Antolini’s apartment. Mr Antolini clearly feels genuine concern for Holden – he mentions that he has had lunch earlier with Holden’s father, which underlines his connection to Holden’s family. He is perceptive enough to see that Holden is on the brink of a disaster (p. 168; 201). His words are significant in the light of what happens next and what we have seen of Holden’s increasingly desperate behaviour.

The fact that he predicts that Holden is heading for a fall is significant too, reminding us of several of the novel's preoccupations – death, mental breakdown and Holden's desire to "catch" and preserve the innocence of childhood.

Mr Antolini, like Phoebe, questions Holden about school. He is interested in Holden's prowess in English in particular – there are numerous references and allusions in the novel that suggest that this is where Holden excels. (Try to make a list of these references.) Consider Holden's description of the course that he fails (p. 165–166; 197–198). Just as in his description to Phoebe of Pencey pupils' behaviour, this description tells the reader a good deal about the sort of values schools like this instil in young men.

### **Exercise**

Mr Antolini is clearly concerned about Holden and his overwrought state, and tries to talk what he regards as sense into him – for him, "falling" in this context means social failure.

Read this passage (from last line on p. 168 to second last line on p. 169; from line 9 on p. 202 to line 15 on p. 203) carefully and take note of all the references to falling and death.

Unwittingly, Mr Antolini has hit on Holden's exact preoccupations – he has had a sensation of falling, and has experienced falls in several ways, throughout the narrative, and they are all symbols of the emotional fall he is hurtling towards. In the last sentence, Holden mentions feeling tired of all this, indicating that his grief has become a deep, disabling depression. Mr Antolini is right to fear the worst.

Despite Mr Antolini's care and insight into Holden's state of mind, and in contrast to his seemingly bohemian lifestyle and unconventional ideas, the import of his monologue is as conservative as Mr Spencer's: he believes that education will provide the answers Holden is searching for, and his solution is that he should get back to school and apply himself to his studies (p. 170; 204).

At the close of this chapter, though, rather than providing a sanctuary for Holden, Mr Antolini's inappropriate advances send him fleeing in panic. The shock (and perhaps the confirmation of an unspoken suspicion) that Mr Antolini is homosexual, as well as the horrifying possibility that *he, Holden*, may perhaps also be homosexual, sends him reeling from the apartment. We are reminded of the incident with Carl Luce and Holden's mention of Luce's warning, which he only half believed, that young boys can turn into homosexuals overnight: his fears about sex and sexual encounters resurface. This is another instance, too, of Holden being let down and betrayed by the adults in his life. His reference to previous sexual encounters of this type (last paragraph of chapter 24, both editions) reminds us of the theme in the novel that sex corrupts the innocence of childhood.

In the final ten chapters of the novel we have seen an escalation in Holden's frenetic and almost insane behaviour. He becomes drunk and out of control physically, but is also emotionally out of control. His drunkenness is just a symptom of his underlying despair and the fact that he is on the brink of a breakdown. Notice how many times he refers to himself as going mad. These are prophetic words in the light of what happens to him – he is not mad, but his mental state is unstable.

It is significant, too, that both the male figures Holden turns to at this point of crisis, Carl Luce and Mr Antolini, are sexually ambivalent and let him down. The encounters with these men raise Holden's own fears about and preoccupations with his own sexuality

The second-last chapter of the novel presents the climax of the novel – the highest point of Holden's crisis, and its resolution. He reaches his lowest ebb – he has nowhere to turn and ends up spending an uncomfortable and miserable night in the waiting room at Grand Central Station. He observes that this is the worst depression that he has ever experienced (p.175; 209). He is confused and begins to think that despite his behaviour, Mr Antolini has always been very good to him, and he remembers that it was Mr Antolini who picked up James Castle after he had jumped from the window. This redeems him somewhat in Holden's eyes, and for a moment he considers returning to the teacher's home. There are many references to falling in the novel and they come to a head in a strange and frightening experience.

While walking along Fifth Avenue, he is overwhelmed by a peculiar sensation. Each time he reaches the end of a block and steps off the curb, he feels as if he may not reach the other side of the street. He fears that he will keep going down and nobody will ever see him again. He is clearly terrified by this episode and it is only through talking to his dead brother, Allie, that he can keep walking (p.178; 212-213).

His fantasies of escape, echoing the fantasy he tried to share with Sally earlier in the weekend, suggest that he wants to withdraw – not to remove himself entirely from society, but to live on the margins, the periphery, and be able simply to observe, not engage.

### **Exercise**

Look at Holden's wish to be deaf and mute and living in isolation, and his desire that it always be bright and cheerful (p.179; 214). What does all this suggest about his state of mind and his feelings about his life and the society he is part of?

Reflect, too, on the fact that although this fantasy is essentially unconventional, marriage is very much part of it. Holden imagines having children, but hiding them and keeping them safe (p.179; 214).

*Holden makes several references in the novel to wanting to be alone, isolated, to escape. Identify as many of these as you can. Why does he feel this way?*

This reminds us of the title, and of how Holden longs to save the children and preserve their innocence. This desire is expressed again when Holden sees the swear word written on the wall at Phoebe's school and becomes extremely agitated (p.181; 216).

This episode reminds us of the comfort Holden finds in things that do not change, like the school and the museum, but this sense of safety is shattered by the defacement of the school walls. But this experience brings with it, too, the realisation that he cannot protect the children from the world and its dangers. He is depressed by this thought and by his powerlessness to save them, to be the "catcher" of the title. He is scared to rub the swear word off the wall in case a teacher discovers him and blames him for the graffiti (p. 181; 216). And when he sees yet another expletive, this time scratched into the plaster, he realises that the situation is hopeless as he cannot remove every swear word in the world (p. 182; 217).

*Is it significant, do you think, that Holden's thoughts turn to death at this moment?*

In the museum, a place of safety and security where he sees two little boys in search of the mummies – a reminder of himself and Allie perhaps? – he comes across yet another swear word and understands that it is impossible to find an idyllic place because it does not exist (p.183; 219).

His words in this particular scene could be interpreted as expressing his intense disillusion, his despair and his imminent breakdown. He passes out at this point (why?).

The final episode with Phoebe and her suitcase marks a new maturity in Holden – he has to take charge, and symbolically removes his red hunting cap as a sign that he will not leave. As he watches Phoebe on the carousel, he muses that one should refrain from attempting to prevent a child from grasping new experiences (p.190; 227). He realises that his overwhelming need to protect Phoebe and children like her is misplaced; they have to learn about life's dangers for themselves. This can sometimes be a painful process, but it is an essential one (Graham 2007: 76). But lest we forget his age and his state of mind, the last paragraph of this chapter makes it clear that he is still a troubled adolescent and far from adulthood. Even though he is happy watching Phoebe, he also feels like crying (p.191; 229).

This paragraph also re-connects us with Holden (his connection with the reader was disrupted by his accusation earlier on that we could not empathise with his sense of loss about Allie). The circular movement of Phoebe on the carousel suggests, perhaps, a resolution because he realises that, though she may move away from him metaphorically, Phoebe will always return – he is growing up but this does not mean he will have to lose her. This is also a reminder of the loss of Allie – although he is physically gone, he is still with Holden in spirit.

An *epilogue* is a short chapter or section at the end of a literary work, sometimes detailing the fate of its characters.

The last chapter serves as an epilogue – the reader is returned to the starting point of the novel, the sanatorium where Holden is recuperating from his breakdown. Graham (2007: 77) notes that Salinger “subverts the *Bildungsroman* by resisting closure”.

The conventional *Bildungsroman* ends on a positive note, by resolving the trials the hero has endured. This novel ends on an uncertain note, giving the reader pause for thought after the fairly optimistic mood of the previous chapter. It would seem that Holden’s future is still not clear to him: when D.B. asks him about how he feels about the story that he had just related, Holden does not have an answer. It seems that telling the story may not, in fact, have helped Holden to work things out.

He even expresses some regret at having told his story at all. Relating it has not helped him, but has instead revived all sorts of feelings in Holden. His advice to the reader is not to tell anyone anything because, once one does, one starts missing everyone (p. 192; 230). In other words, it is not a cathartic experience to share your feelings with everyone.

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## SECTION 3

### *The Road to Mecca: Athol Fugard*

By Deirdre Byrne

#### A GUIDE TO THIS SECTION

This section contains the following:

- A study programme to enable you to study *The Road to Mecca*;
- A discussion of the history and context of *The Road to Mecca*;
- A discussion of some features you should look out for when you are studying *The Road to Mecca*;
- A guide to writing essays on the play.

**PLEASE NOTE: All page references are to the 1992 Faber and Faber edition of the play.**

#### Study programme

Activity	Time spent (approximately)
Reading the play	2-3 hours
Reading this study note and making notes of important points	6 hours
Completing activities in the study guide	8 hours
Preparatory writing for your assignment on <i>The Road to Mecca</i>	2 hours
Drafting and revising your assignment	6 hours

As a first step, you should **read the play (at least twice)**. If you don't understand it the first time, read it through again. The study of English and English literature is all about reading. You will not achieve anything in English Studies without reading. It is always a good idea to read your prescribed books more than once. Aim to read them twice each before you write exams.

### **Exercise**

Answer the following questions, based on your reading of *The Road to Mecca*.

1. How many characters are there in the play?
2. Who is the most important character? Why do you say this?
3. How do the other characters relate to the main character?
4. Does the play have a "happy ending"? Why do you think this?
5. What general, human issues is the play "about"? (**Note:** do not answer this question by explaining what happens in the play. Try to identify the **theme** or main idea of the play instead.)

Your answers to the questions above will give you a starting point for your study of *The Road to Mecca*. Keep them handy as you work through this section. We are going to explore several important themes and aspects of *The Road to Mecca*. They are: the characters; symbols; Fugard's representation of the position of women; and the role of art.

### **Introduction: the play and the film**

*The Road to Mecca*, by Athol Fugard, is a playscript. This means that it belongs to the dramatic genre, similar to Shakespeare's plays, such as *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth* and *The Merchant of Venice*, which you may have read at school.

Plays are meant to be performed, which means that *The Road to Mecca* is written with the intention of appearing on a stage. The play is only fully realised when it is performed; until then, it is only a script. It is likely that *The Road to Mecca* does not look like other books you have read. This is because it belongs to a different **genre**, or type, of literature, with its own special features. It does not, for example, contain any descriptions of places or people. All the action takes place via spoken words, (or dialogue) with characters' names attached to them and stage directions to indicate what the scene is supposed to look like, including the movement of actors, characters, and the setting (whether the action takes place inside a building or outside).

## Genres and their subdivisions

We generally think of literary texts in three **genres** (pronounced *dzahn-rΘ*): prose, poetry and drama (or plays). Each of these **genres** looks different on the printed page and uses specific subdivisions to mark the end of each section and the beginning of the next.

**Prose** (whether fiction or non-fiction) uses **chapters** to divide sections of the text from one another.

**Poetry** uses **stanzas**. A stanza is a paragraph in verse.

**Drama** uses **Acts** for major divisions. Acts may be divided into **scenes**, so that the location of the action can change from one scene to another in the same Act.

It is important to use the right words (**terminology**) when you write about genres and their subdivisions

As a Unisa student, you probably do not have the capacity to put on a performance of *The Road to Mecca*, so you will have to imagine how it would look on a stage. An assignment might ask you to stage the play in your imagination: where would you place the furniture? How would you light the scene? What tone of voice would you want the actors to use at each point in the performance? Questions like these will help you to bring the play to life in your own mind. There is also a film of *The Road to Mecca*, which will deepen your understanding of the play.

### ***The Road to Mecca* as a film**

*The Road to Mecca* was filmed in 1992, as one of the first South African films for an international market, with Peter Goldsmit as Director and author Athol Fugard as Producer. The renowned South African actress, Yvonne Bryceland, played Helen Martins and American actor, Kathy Bates, played Elsa Barlow. The playwright, Athol Fugard, played Marius Byleveld. The film was a great success and brought South African drama and film to the attention of international audiences.

You may watch the film, which is available from specialist DVD outlets, as a way of enriching your reading of *The Road to Mecca*, but you should always remember that you are studying the text, not the film version of the play. There are many ways to perform each scene, and if you were directing it, you might not arrange the characters or the stage in the same way as it is done in the film.

When you read *The Road to Mecca* you will notice that the book contains some textual items before the playscript begins. There is “A Note on Miss Helen” by Athol Fugard, the author, and then there is a list of Characters. This list of characters is also, sometimes, called “Dramatis Personae”, which is Latin for “persons in the drama”. The list contains only three names: “Miss Helen”, “Elsa” and “Marius Byleveld”. This tells the reader that this is not a play in which crowds of people appear; the interactions in the play are limited to those taking place between only three people. We can expect, then, that the interactions will be fairly intense.

### Terms used in studying drama

All plays contain similar features: the **dramatis personae**, the **stage directions** and the **words** (or **dialogue**).

The **dramatis personae** is the list of characters in the play.

The **stage directions** tell the director and actors what is happening on the stage at any point in the play: they give instructions such as who is coming onto the stage, who is moving across the stage and who is leaving it, as well as the way characters should say their lines.

The **dialogue** refers to the words spoken by the characters in the play.

*The Road to Mecca* is divided into two Acts. The first Act begins with Elsa Barlow’s arrival at Helen Martins’s home in Nieu Bethesda. The conversation introduces the audience to the problems that the two women are facing.

The second Act introduces a third character – Marius Byleveld, the “dominee” or priest of the local church. The conversation between Helen, Elsa and Marius takes up the whole of Act 2 and brings some resolution to the problems that were raised in Act 1.

Act 2 is different from Act 1, although they take place in the same location (or **setting**) because there is an extra character. This changes the tone and content of the conversation between Helen and Elsa, and pushes Helen to make an important decision about her life.

### The characters

Of the three characters in *The Road to Mecca*, one is based on a real person and the other two are **fictional** (that is, invented by the playwright Athol Fugard). Fugard tells us in “A Note on Miss Helen” at the beginning of the play that Helen Martins had one very significant friendship with a young social worker from Cape Town. Elsa Barlow is based on this person, whose real name is not given in the play. Marius Byleveld, the **dominee** or priest of the local church, is there because a little town such as Nieu Bethesda would, naturally, have had a church and a

priest. As we shall see, though, the play takes us far beyond the social roles of the characters in their community, and into their personal struggles and relationships.

### Helen Martins (“Miss Helen”)

Helen Martins, who was known as “Miss Helen”, lived from 1897 to 1976 and provided the inspiration for the character of Helen in *The Road to Mecca*. Helen Martins was born in the closing years of the nineteenth century, and grew up in the early part of the twentieth century, when there were strict expectations of all members of society (but particularly for women, as we shall see later).

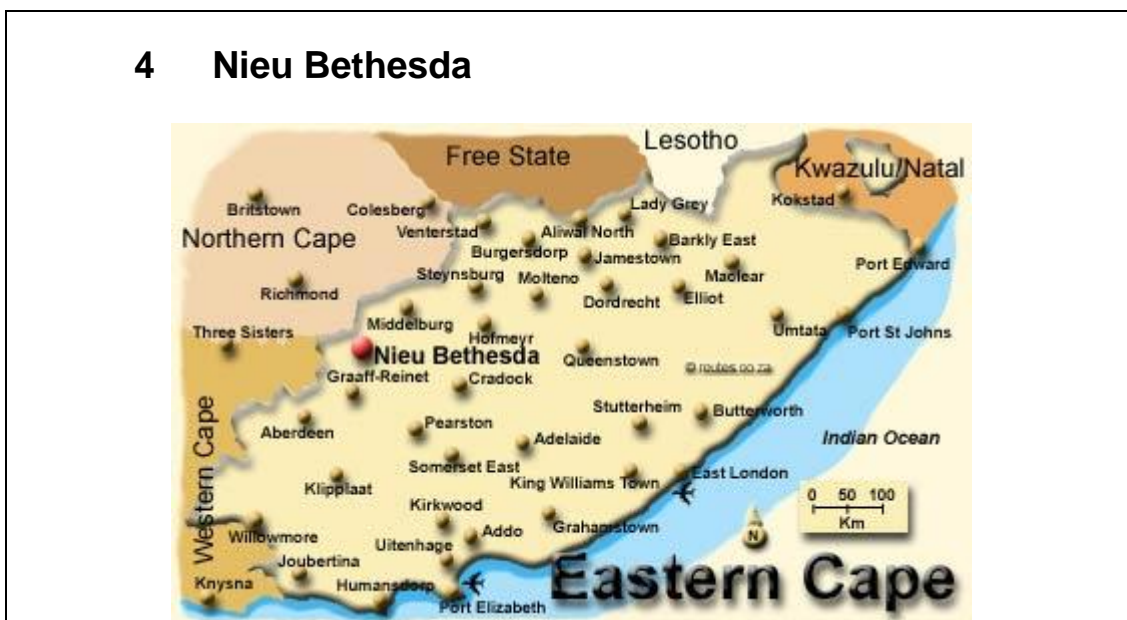
As Helen Martins is one of South Africa’s most famous artists, her life story is well-known, and you can read it yourself on the following website:

<http://www.owlhouse.co.za/helen.html>

The important events in Helen Martins’s life, as far as *The Road to Mecca* is concerned, are her divorce from her husband and her return to Nieu Bethesda in the 1930s to care for her ill mother. Her mother died in 1941 and she was left alone.

### Where is Nieu Bethesda?

The map of the Western part of the Eastern Cape, below, shows the location of Nieu Bethesda, the village where Helen Martins created her art.



Map of the Eastern Cape showing the location of Nieu Bethesda  
(<http://www.routes.co.za/ec/nieubethesda/index.html>, accessed 26 January 2010)

Nieu Bethesda is a little town, as Elsa says in *The Road to Mecca*, approximately 12 hours' drive from Cape Town. It is situated in the Karoo, which is a region of semi-desert that stretches across the Western Cape, the Eastern Cape and the Northern Cape provinces in South Africa. Remarkably for a town in a semi-desert, though, Nieu Bethesda has a plentiful supply of water, so that the land in the area is fertile and produces many crops. It is, therefore, a farming community, where values and norms are conservative. Most people know each other and strangers are few. (At the time Helen Martins lived in Nieu Bethesda, it did not have electricity or running water. Helen, therefore, used lamps and candles at night.)

Nieu Bethesda became famous after Helen Martins's death because of her art. A small but active community of artists live there now amongst the regular inhabitants.

After the death of Martins's mother, she inherited a small house in the village. The Karoo desert is very dry all year round, cold in winter and hot in summer. Houses in the village were small, with low roofs. "The Owl House", as Helen Martins's house has become known, is typical of the architecture of the town. From the outside, the house looks exactly like any other house in an arid area. It is only when one enters it that one sees the extraordinary transformation that she brought about inside it. Look at the following picture of the interior of the house and of the yard, which Helen called "the Camel Yard":



Helen's bedroom at the Owl House. Image used with permission from the Owl House Foundation (<http://www.owlhouse.co.za/images/1-bedroom.jpg>, accessed 4 February 2010).



Sculptures in the “Camel Yard”. Image used with permission from the Owl House Foundation (<http://www.owlhouse.co.za/images/shepard.jpg>, accessed 4 February 2010).



Sculpture of a woman pouring water in the “Camel Yard”. Image used with permission from the Owl House Foundation (<http://www.owlhouse.co.za/images/water-c3.gif>, accessed 4 February 2010).

**Exercise**

Now take a few minutes to write about these pictures. Answer the following questions in separate paragraphs:

1. What is your first response to the pictures of Helen Martins's art that you have just seen? For example, do you find it attractive, strange, ugly or does it arouse some other feeling? Why?
2. What do you think about the woman who made these art works? What kind of person could she have been?
3. Are there religious symbols among Helen's art works? If so, what religion do they remind you of?

According to Helen Martins's biography, she was ill one night and watched the moon shining through her window. That night, she thought that her life had become drab and grey, and she decided that she would change it by bringing light into her environment. From that one moment of self-reflection sprang the entire transformation of the Owl House.

Helen Martins's life and art provided the inspiration for Athol Fugard to write *The Road to Mecca*. But you should not confuse the character of "Miss Helen" in *The Road to Mecca* with the real Helen Martins. For example, the real Helen Martins and her husband were divorced after only a few years of marriage, while Fugard makes his Helen the widow of a man called "Stefanus". The marriage between Helen and Stefanus, which took place many years before the action of *The Road to Mecca*, gives Helen the opportunity to reflect on what really matters in her life and whether marriage (which was expected of women in small villages) provided her with real fulfilment. In addition, Helen Martins did not make all her own sculptures: she designed and only possibly made some of them. She employed two "Coloured" men, Piet van der Merwe and Koos Malgas, to build, cement and decorate the figures and animals in her "Camel Yard" and around her house. These men are now honoured as artists in their own right, but they do not appear in *The Road to Mecca*, where Helen describes building her own figures and animals. Finally, Fugard has invented all her words in the play, and the two other characters, Elsa and Marius, are also invented.

**Elsa Barlow**

Athol Fugard writes in an interview with Gitta Honegger (which appears before the play text in the prescribed edition of *The Road to Mecca*) that Helen had one important friendship in the last years of her life, with a young social worker (Fugard 2003: n.p.). Elsa Barlow is based on this young social worker who meant so much to Helen Martins in her later life.

Fugard has changed the details, though: he has invented the young woman's name and her profession (she is not a social worker, but a school-teacher in the play) and he has invented all her circumstances as well.

The play opens with Elsa's arrival at Miss Helen's house in Nieu Bethesda. She has just driven for twelve hours from Cape Town to Nieu Bethesda, and she appears to be tired from her journey as well as somewhat irritable. One of the first things she tells Helen, rather strangely, is that she gave a lift to a young woman and her baby on the road between Cape Town and Cradock (a village in the Western Cape). This nameless young woman, whom Elsa describes as "African" (that is, black), is extremely important, although we find out only later why she disturbs Elsa so much.

### **Exercise**

Now that you have read the play, answer the following questions:

1. What kind of person is Elsa? Which adjectives (describing words) would you use to describe her personality? You may use as many as you wish.
2. What are Elsa's life problems?
3. Why has she come to visit Helen?
4. What is her role in Helen's life?
5. What does Helen mean to her?

As Elsa slowly explains her personal problems to Helen, we realise that she is a single woman who has been having a relationship with a married man (we might call this an "affair") and has fallen pregnant. She had an abortion to do away with the foetus and is deeply scarred by the experience. This helps to explain why she is so upset by the plight of the African woman and her baby on the road, although her reaction (p. 77) is extreme.

### **Exercise**

Read page 77 again and write a paragraph explaining why Elsa screams after she has dropped the young woman and her baby on the road. (**Note:** Elsa's feelings about this encounter are complex. You will have to make a few guesses about what she is feeling.)

Elsa and Helen have a deep and special friendship (p. 18). Despite the differences between their ages, occupations and cultural backgrounds (Elsa is English-speaking while Helen is rooted in Afrikaans culture), they discuss — and disagree about — a wide range of private and political matters.

Helen and Elsa agree that the essence of their friendship, the thing that makes it special, is "trust". Read their discussion of trust in Act 1, pp. 31–32, and think about whether you agree. For Helen and Elsa, the fact that they can trust each other means that they can let their defences down, show their faults and vulnerabilities, and be truly themselves with each other.

And that, Fugard suggests in *The Road to Mecca*, is the only way a relationship between two people (whether they are partners, parents, children or friends) can mean anything. It also refers to the Introduction to *The Road to Mecca*, where Fugard writes that this is the first time he has ever written about a friendship between two women, although he is famous for including intense interactions between men in his plays.

**Exercise**

Because Elsa and Helen can share anything with each other, they are also able to challenge each other. Based on your reading of the play, write a paragraph on the ways Elsa and Helen challenge each other. The following questions will help you to focus your writing:

What is Elsa's challenge to Helen?  
How does Helen challenge Elsa in return?

The play ends on a note of hope. As the two women prepare for bed, Elsa offers Helen a Valium (a chemical tranquilliser or sedative). The final line is spoken by Elsa (p. 79).

**Exercise**

What does Elsa mean in this last line? (**Hint:** If you are in doubt, go back to Act 1 and look again at the two women's discussion of trust on pp. 31-32).

This line means that, after all the problems and difficulties they have dealt with during the evening, they are still able to take comfort in their friendship.

**Something to think about**

It is sometimes said that there is a "sisterhood of women", based on their common experience of oppression by men and bearing children, and that women can understand one another because they share the same condition of living in a society that is dominated by men. Do you think that Elsa and Helen share a "sisterly" experience of being dominated and/or oppressed by men? Does this give them a common ground of understanding? Or is their friendship based on other aspects of their experiences?

**Dominee Marius Byleveld**

Many of the villages in the Karoo desert were settled by Afrikaans-speaking people (originally from Holland or elsewhere in Europe). These settlers brought their religion with them and established churches in their new environments. Nieu Bethesda is one of these villages, where Marius Byleveld presides over the church (hence his title is "Pastor" or the Afrikaans word "Dominee"). Fugard does not say which church Marius represents (it may have been the Dutch Reformed Church). As an ordained minister of religion, Marius's job is to take care of everyone who attends his church. He is not only interested in their spiritual well-being and beliefs, but also in their life circumstances and whether they are living lives that are both good and happy.

People in small villages usually live there for many decades, so their priests have plenty of opportunity to get to know them, their families and their situations. The priest would often visit them, too, and often became a trusted friend of everyone in his parish.

Helen describes Marius as an old friend, but it is evident that her friendship with him is not as deep or profound as her friendship with Elsa. In fact, there is an unspoken conflict between

Marius and Helen over religious and artistic issues, although their conflict is expressed in polite terms and is not violent in any way.

### **Exercise**

Re-read Act 2 of *The Road to Mecca* now and answer the following questions:

1. What is the reason for Marius's visit? What does he want Helen to do?
2. Marius claims that he knows what is good for Helen and that is why he has come to visit her. Do you believe him? Why?
3. Elsa claims that Marius is in love with Helen (p. 74). Do you agree with her? Why?

Naturally, Marius believes in and serves the Christian religion, worshipping God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit within his church. We can assume that most of the people in the village belong to his church, too. Helen's statues of mermaids, owls and pilgrims on camels, on their way to Mecca, offend him because they refer to another religion or vision of life: they do not fit into his views of what widowed old ladies are supposed to do. Find what he says of Helen's statues on p. 67. What does he mean? Later Marius remembers how Helen missed church to make her first statue of an owl, and it is clear that he views the making of the statues as a kind of competition in Helen's mind and life with her faith in Christianity. To Elsa, though, the statues are an expression of something else: Helen's vision of life and her desire for beauty and light.

There are, therefore, three different views of Helen's art, which is at the centre of the play's development. We will explore Fugard's representation of art in *The Road to Mecca* later.

## Symbols and Symbolism in *The Road To Mecca*

### Symbols in art and literature

People often say that a certain image or object in a work of art (such as a painting, sculpture or a literary text) is a “symbol” of something else. But what is a symbol?

The *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* gives the following definition:

a person, an object, and event, etc., that represents a more general quality or situation: *White has always been a symbol of purity in Western cultures.*

A **symbol**, then, is an image or object that represents (or “stands for”) another quality or meaning.

Religions are particularly rich in symbols. Think, for example, of the meanings of the cross in Christianity, the lotus flower in Buddhism, or the mezuzah in Judaism. This may be because religion and spirituality deal with abstract and intangible things, such as love and faith; and people use concrete images to represent (or “stand for”) these qualities.

Literature uses symbols, too. The image of a red rose is usually used to represent romantic love, for example. As you read more literary texts, you will encounter many symbols.

### Some of the symbols in Helen Martins’s art

<b>Symbol</b>	<b>Some of its meanings</b>
The owl	This was Helen Martins’s personal <b>totem</b> animal (an animal that is a symbol of a particular quality). For her, the owl was a symbol of intuition, insight and wisdom (maybe because of its large eyes).
Mecca	Mecca, the capital of the Middle Eastern country of Saudi Arabia, is the holy city of the religion of Islam. To travel to Mecca is the high point, or goal, of a devout Muslim’s religious life. Mecca is, therefore, the symbol of a spiritual or personal goal.
Glass	Helen Martins used glass in her art because it reflects light. Her aim as an artist was to fill her living space, and her life, with light, which is a symbol of clarity and happiness.
Camels and their riders	As Mecca is situated in a desert country, pilgrims on their way to the holy city would often ride on camels (which are known as “ships of the desert” because of their ability to undertake long journeys across desert landscapes).

After looking at images of The Owl House, you may see a number of other symbols. It is important to realize that the meaning of symbols is not fixed in any rigid way: artists, such as Helen Martins, often use existing symbols in new ways. Thus, for example, *The Road to Mecca* refers to Mecca, the holy city of Islam, but nobody in the play actually travels to Saudi Arabia. Rather, Mecca represents a state of mind in which spiritual fulfilment and freedom have been reached.

## Religion and conflict

Human history is full of religious conflicts and even wars (think of the Crusades, or “wars of the cross”, which raged between 1096 and 1291 over control of the Holy Land around Jerusalem in modern-day Israel). Religion is one of the greatest spurs to disagreement and conflict because people feel strongly about it.

Helen Martins’s use of the word “Mecca” in *The Road to Mecca* is associated with Islam, not Christianity. Marius Byleveld is a Christian priest, or “dominee”.

In the twentieth century, during Helen Martins’s life, the village of Nieu Bethesda was part of the settlement of South Africa by Christians of European origins, belonging to various denominations, such as the Dutch Reformed Church. To them, the Christian religion was the only right way to live. The Church was the instrument of God’s will and the Bible was the ultimate authority.

By using *The Road to Mecca* as the title of his play, Fugard aligns himself with a different religion from Christianity – Islam. The holy symbol of Islam is not the cross, but the city of Mecca, where pilgrims travel as the culmination of their devotion to God.

### Pilgrimages

Throughout history, religious people have travelled to holy places. They do this to deepen their experience of God. These journeys are called **pilgrimages** and the people who undertake them are called **pilgrims**.

Examples of holy places that have been visited by pilgrims are: Canterbury in England (Geoffrey Chaucer’s famous poem, *The Canterbury Tales*, tells of a group of pilgrims and their stories); Lourdes in France (where the Virgin Mary is believed to have appeared); and Mecca in Saudi Arabia. Every adult Muslim must make a pilgrimage (or Hajj) to Mecca once in his or her lifetime to worship at the Holy Mosque in the city.

There is a clear conflict between Helen’s “Mecca” and the Christian faith of the Church Council of Nieu Bethesda, represented by Dominee Marius Byleveld, even though this is not spelled out in terms of faith, God or any spiritual concepts.

Marius, on behalf of the Church Council (who are probably very powerful in the village), wants Helen to move to a retirement home in the nearby town of Graaff-Reinet (about 60 km from Nieu Bethesda). Read Elsa’s description of this home in Act 1, p.40.

Helen does not want to move, though. She wants to stay in Nieu Bethesda, close to her “Mecca”. Part of her discussion with Elsa concerns whether she is able to look after her home and herself, and therefore keep her independence in her own home as an active artist (there would be no place for strange sculptures of camels and owls in the retirement home). There is, then, an **opposition**, or conflict, between what the (Christian) Church wants for Helen and what she wants for herself.

Throughout the play, Elsa and Helen talk a great deal about Mecca and its meaning for Helen. At their first meeting, Helen asks Elsa the way to Mecca and then proudly corrects her. This is very unusual behaviour for a woman in a tiny, Christian-dominated village in the Karoo: we would expect her, if she showed any religious belief at all, to be interested in the location of the nearest church.

### **Exercise**

Read Elsa’s words in Act 1, p. 33 (lines 2-16) in preparation for answering questions on this passage.

Now re-read the section of the play that deals with the idea of “Mecca” (Act 1, pages 33–36 and 47) and answer the questions below.

1. Is Helen’s Mecca the same as the holy city of Islam in Saudi Arabia? Why, or why not?
2. We know that Mecca is the goal of Islam’s most important and meaningful pilgrimage. In what way can Helen’s art be compared to a pilgrimage?
3. Helen creates her “Mecca” as a non-Christian holy site. Can you speculate about the values of Christianity that she might be rejecting in this action?

It should be clear from your exploration of the idea of “Mecca” in *The Road to Mecca* that Helen associates religious values with her art. It is worth considering whether Athol Fugard, in writing this play, is also encouraging readers and audiences to see art and creativity in the same way, as having spiritual overtones. Certainly, for Helen, “Mecca” is associated with the freedom to express herself and her inner vision. In the same way as the city of Mecca is the goal of the major spiritual pilgrimage of Islam (the Hajj), Helen’s “Mecca” is the goal of her journey as an artist. She might feel that she has reached Mecca when she has finished decorating her house with light and building sculptures in her yard. It is clear that, as long as Helen continues work on her “Mecca”, she will have a reason to live.

## **Women in *The Road To Mecca***

To state the obvious, Helen and Elsa are women. But this statement has some implications that are worth spelling out.

Helen Martins's life story tells how she married a young man called Johannes Pienaar, but did not remain married for long. It is important to remember that at the time of her girlhood, a woman's destiny was to marry and raise children (to a large extent, this is still true). By marrying in her early adulthood, Helen Martins was, therefore, living up to social expectations. But separating from her husband was not part of what was expected of a woman, and would have brought some degree of shame or notoriety upon her. Therefore, at the end of her marriage, Helen would have been seen as an unusual, slightly misdirected woman, who had strayed from the path that society laid down for her.

Her next act was to move to Nieu Bethesda to look after her ailing parents, which was perfectly acceptable for a dutiful daughter of her time.

Helen spent 17 years nursing her sick mother and she was nearly 50 when she found herself alone in a small village in the Karoo. Even in our time, this is not a promising situation for a single woman, and it was less promising in Helen's time. There was, presumably, a shortage of eligible men, so Helen Martins's marriage prospects were not very good.

And in the early part of the twentieth century, it was not socially appropriate for single, middle-aged women (Helen, by then, was in her late middle age) to take up a new career and manage it on their own. Helen Martins was, therefore, a very unusual woman, who did not conform to what society expected of her in any way. Once married, she did not devote herself to the care and nurturing of her husband or children (she did not have any children, in fact): and when alone, she did not do what many women of her age did, namely to sink peacefully into old age as a useful member of her community, perhaps as a helper in the local church. Instead, Helen began an activity that is usually considered as belonging to men only: making sculptures.

### **Exercise**

Write a paragraph about the ways in which Helen, in *The Road to Mecca*, does not conform to what is expected from women.

Now write another paragraph about how you imagine her community in Nieu Bethesda might have responded to her as a single woman in late middle age who was building sculptures in her yard of camels, pilgrims, owls and mermaids with cement, broken car headlights and bottles.

There are other women characters in *The Road to Mecca*, too, who come into conflict with social expectations for women: Elsa Barlow and Katrina, as well as the woman to whom Elsa gives a lift. We will explore these women's circumstances in some detail.

Katrina is Helen's part-time domestic helper. In Fugard's version, Katrina is also married to Koos Malgas (the real name of the man who, under Helen Martins's direction, built a great many

of the sculptures that decorate her yard). Elsa asks Helen about Katrina: read Helen's reply on p. 23.

The problems mentioned in these lines (alcohol, wife-beating, teenage pregnancy and the abuse of women) are common in poor communities across the globe. Unfortunately, they impact more heavily on women than they do on men, because women are child-bearers, their social role is to raise children, and they tend to be physically weaker than men.

We learn a few lines later that Katrina is seventeen years old, which is really very young for motherhood. By not believing that Katrina's child is also his, Koos is also accusing her of infidelity and giving himself a further reason to abuse his wife. Katrina's plight is the same as that of many black women who are married and pregnant at a young age and are then at the mercy of abusive husbands.

Elsa's response to her problems (find her words on p. 23) expresses a feminist attitude to the social problems that beset women, especially in poor communities where, unfortunately, they are frequently the victims of violence and abuse. It is likely that Athol Fugard shares Elsa's view of marriage, as it is a human rights approach to the problem of marital violence: but what does this mean for Helen's marriage?

As I mentioned earlier, Helen is depicted in *The Road to Mecca* as the widow of Stefanus. Read her conversation with Marius in Act 2 (p.71), where she describes her marriage.

The experience Helen describes in these lines is also common amongst women who marry and then discover that they do not share real love with their husbands. After Stefanus's funeral, Helen feels as though **she** is dead: as though her life is over and there is nothing meaningful in it any more. But she realises that her marriage was deathly and that, after Stefanus's death, she is free.

### **Exercise**

Write a paragraph in your writer's journal about the way/s in which women are not "free" in marriage.

It is beginning to appear that women's problems, as depicted in *The Road to Mecca*, are largely caused by men. This is certainly true of Katrina and Helen, as well as the woman to whom Elsa gives a lift on the road to Nieu Bethesda. But what about Elsa? She is a single woman living an independent life in a large city, and so we might assume that she is free to please herself.

### **Exercise**

Read the sections of *The Road to Mecca* in which Elsa describes her relationship with David (pp. 28–31 and 76). Then write two pages in which you answer the following questions:

1. What problem in Elsa's relationship with David led to their separation?
2. What were the consequences of the relationship?

3. How does Elsa feel?
4. How do you imagine David feels?
5. Who is to blame in the situation?
6. Finally, would you say that Elsa is as much the victim of a man as Katrina is?

**Marius** is a complex character. He is acting in all good faith, as a representative of the Church Council, when he visits Helen. But are his actions really aimed at increasing her happiness, as he believes they are? Or is he, like Stefanus, also guilty of trying to suppress Helen's creativity? If so, is he perhaps just like all the other men in the play – maybe well-intentioned, but in fact quite unaware of the needs and goals of the women around him? Or is this going too far? What do you think?

### **Art and freedom**

As you have no doubt realised by now, Helen Martins of Nieu Bethesda was an artist. Her transformation of her home and garden with countless sculptures and works of mosaic is now regarded as some of the finest art produced in South Africa. It is worthwhile, here, to look at a few more pictures of her home:



A window in the Owl House, decorated with suns made of ground glass. Image reproduced with permission from the Owl House Foundation (<http://www.owlhouse.co.za/images/suns.jpg>, accessed 26 January 2010).



One of the fantasy figures in the “Camel Yard”. Image reproduced with permission from the Owl House Foundation (<http://www.owlhouse.co.za/images/suns.jpg>, accessed 26 January 2010).

Helen Martins is known as a “visionary artist” because of the way she made her art in accordance with an inner vision of the final product. Read the passage in which Helen explains to Elsa how she works on pages 36-7.

Some artists take their inspiration from objects and the world around them. But the “pictures” Helen speaks of here are not images in the world around her, as you can see from the two previous images of the Owl House. Although some of them can be recognised as creatures or objects in the “real” world, many of them are fantasy creatures, made up of parts of real creatures, like the winged horse with an owl’s head in the picture above. These images come from Helen’s mind and imagination. She does not know where they come from: they appear to be “visions” from some source outside herself.

### **Exercise**

Re-read page 68 of *The Road to Mecca*. Then answer the following questions:

1. Why does Helen miss the church service?
2. What is Marius’s response to her absence from the church service?

When Helen had an image of her first owl sculpture, she went to work immediately in order to make the sculpture before the image faded. She had to make an important choice – would she go to church, and risk the image fading from her mind, or would she miss the church service and work on the owl? Helen chose to stay at home and make the owl she had seen in her imagination. By choosing to stay at home, though, she also chooses **not** to go to church, which means that she is not doing what is expected of her as a “good”, well-behaved, widow and member of her religious community.

As you now know, Helen’s art is not “good” or expected behaviour from a middle-aged woman in her position, who would have been expected to get involved in the life of the village by attending church. Can you think of other activities that would be expected from a woman of her age, alone in a small village?

### **Exercise**

In the table below, place a tick next to all the activities that you would expect a woman of Helen’s age to do and place a cross next to those activities that would **not** be expected. Give reasons, either from the play or from your own experience, in the final column of the table.

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Expected or not</b> <b>(√ or X)</b>	<b>Reason</b>
Attending church		
Taking care of her home		
Going out with single men		
Socialising with other villagers		
Making art		
Talking to people of other races		

Your table, once completed, should give you an indication of what the villagers expected of Helen after Stefanus's death. It should also indicate to you that there were clear notions about "good" behaviour for a widow.

She might have been expected to involve herself in "good works", such as helping the poor or visiting the sick – but she would certainly not have been expected to make art in her back yard or in her house.

In general, women are not expected to become artists as this conflicts with their social role as home-makers and the caregivers of children. Being an artist takes a woman's time away from such domestic activities.

#### **Differences between Helen Martins's life and *The Road to Mecca***

In real life, Helen Martins had the help of two men, Piet van der Merwe and Koos Malgas, in her artistic projects. Helen was not strong enough to undertake structural alterations to her house on her own, and Piet van der Merwe did these for her.

Koos Malgas was an unemployed sheep-shearer when he met Helen Martins. She employed him for twelve years and he did all the work involved in making her sculptures, including work with chicken wire, cement and glass. Some of these tasks were very arduous and would have been beyond the strength of an aging and physically small woman.

In order to work for and with Helen, both Piet van der Merwe and Koos Malgas had to understand what she wanted and what she was trying to do. In a way, they were the translators who took her ideas and made them into physical reality. Koos Malgas, who worked on all the statues in the Camel Yard and outside the front of the house, is now recognised as an artist in his own right because of his contribution to Helen's art.

In the play *The Road to Mecca*, Fugard has erased the roles of Piet van der Merwe and Koos Malgas. Instead, he has Helen making all her own art. Clearly, this simplifies the process considerably and makes her solely responsible for the vision and realisation of the art works that decorate her home. It also means that the whole burden of artistic creation rests on her – and, in turn, gives Marius more reason to be concerned about Helen's ability to cope with her own home on her own.

**Please do not** confuse Helen's life (which is a matter of history) with its representation in Fugard's play (which is a matter of imaginative and dramatic literature). Fugard changed the "facts", which makes his play less "true" than the historical facts of Helen Martins's life, but he did so for a reason and his play is more streamlined than it would have been if he had not simplified the facts.

Once Helen decides, on that first Sunday morning, not to go to church as expected, but to stay at home and make her first owl, it seems her path is set and she cannot stray from it. Several years later, Marius remarks on this (read his words at the bottom of page p. 68 to the top of p. 69).

Marius's words are a reproach. But what is he accusing Helen of?

### **Exercise**

In your journal, write a paragraph (about 15 lines) explaining what Helen has done "wrong" in Marius's eyes and what his view is of her statues.

Now read Elsa's comments on his speech, on p. 69 of your text, and write a paragraph answering the following questions:

1. According to Elsa, what motivates Marius's response to Helen's statues?
2. What is her view of them?
3. What is the difference between Elsa's and Marius's view of the statues?

Later on the same page, Marius explains: read what he says (p. 69).

This speech by Marius makes the real point of the argument between him and Elsa (and Helen, too) very clear. It is a question of freedom. Helen wants and needs the freedom to create what her imagination can envision: but to do that, she has to refuse to do what her community wants of her, namely conducting her life quietly and concerning herself with the activities and well-being of other villagers, and, of course, attending church. Her choice to pursue her art instead of doing what is expected of her by the society of the time is what offends Marius.

Marius's claim that Helen is not free is another clue to what is at stake in his conflict with her. In one sense, nobody could be more free than a single woman with no children in late middle age, since she has no responsibilities to anyone but herself. But, from Marius's point of view, she is not free because she has responsibilities to her community. Those responsibilities demand that she should conform to expectations and live a "good" life as befits a woman in her situation.

**Exercise**

*The Road to Mecca* puts forward three different views of Helen's art, each belonging to one of the characters. Copy the table below and fill in the details. Some ideas have been provided for you. Provide appropriate quotations where possible.

<b>Character</b>	<b><i>Their interpretation of Helen's art</i></b>
Helen	
Elsa	beautiful; surprising
Marius	dangerous

Your table should have included the ideas of a woman's art and freedom, as well as other images that Fugard uses to refer to Helen's art. It should be clear by now that Helen is a rebel against what her society expects of her, and that, by filling her house with ground glass and her yard with statues of pilgrims, camels, owls and mermaids, she was making a statement about artists' freedom to express their own personal vision. In this way, as both Elsa and Marius notice, she is a threat to the established norms of the village, which do not approve of the kind of art she makes.

## **Exercise**

Now write two paragraphs about your own opinion of Helen Martins's art. You may wish to consult the official website of the Owl House: or any other text concerning Helen Martins's life and art. Your paragraphs should:

- Say whether you like Helen Martins's art or not, and why.
- State your opinion of the meaning of Helen's art.
- Say what you think Helen's status as an artist should be.

## **Conclusion**

As I mentioned earlier, Helen Martins is now regarded as one of South Africa's foremost artists for her work on the Owl House. In her own lifetime, though, she was viewed with suspicion and her work was seen by many as dangerous and even inspired by evil forces.

Athol Fugard's play, *The Road to Mecca*, is partly an attempt to come to terms with Helen Martins's legacy. The evening he writes about in his play did not really happen, but it serves as a focus for exploring all the themes that surrounded Helen Martins in her life and art, and which we have been examining in this note. While Fugard uses a simple, conversational style of writing, the ideas and problems he explores in his play are anything but simple. Rather, they are complex notions of freedom, art and religion, as well as women's place in society. The assignment you will write on this play will ask you to explore these notions in more detail.

## SECTION 4

### *When Rain Clouds Gather* (Bessie Head)

by Fetson Kalua

#### A GUIDE TO THIS SECTION

This section contains the following:

- A study programme to enable you to study *When Rain Clouds Gather*
- A discussion of the history and context of *When Rain Clouds Gather*
- A discussion of the characters in *When Rain Clouds Gather*
- A guide to some essay topics.

**PLEASE NOTE: All page references are to the 2008 Heinemann African Writers Series edition.**

#### Study programme

Activity	Time spent (approximately)
Reading the novel	2–3 hours
Reading this section and making notes of important points	6 hours
Completing activities in the study guide	8 hours
Preparatory writing for your assignment on <i>When Rain Clouds Gather</i>	2 hours
Drafting and revising your assignment	6 hours

## About the author

Here is some background information you should know about Bessie Head, the author of *When Rain Clouds Gather*. This information will set you thinking, particularly with regard to the issues in the novel.

Bessie Head “was born of mixed parentage in Pietermaritzburg in 1937” (Mackenzie & Clayton 1989: 5). Her mother was a white woman and her father a black stableman. Because of the apartheid system and its discriminatory laws, Head’s grandmother arranged for her immediate adoption, so that at least two families (one white, the other Coloured) fostered the young Bessie Head before “she was placed in an Anglican mission orphanage in Durban” (Mackenzie & Clayton 1989: 5).

As a young adult, Bessie Head trained as a primary school teacher, enjoying a brief stint in the teaching profession before moving on to work as a journalist for *Drum* publications in Johannesburg and Cape Town. This was in the early 1960s, a time when she wrote her first novel entitled *The Cardinals*. Her contemporary journalists on *Drum* were writers who went on to become famous. According to Mackenzie and Clayton, in 1964 Bessie Head “left South Africa for Botswana to take up a teaching post there. She was refused a passport and had to leave South Africa on an exit permit, which prohibited re-entry into the country. She remained for a long time what she called ‘a stateless person’, and was only granted Botswana citizenship in 1979” (Mackenzie & Clayton 1989:6). It was in Botswana that Bessie Head established herself as a famous writer.

### Some useful definitions

**Novel:** Abrams defines a novel as “an extended narrative ... distinguished from a short story” (1957: 110). As an extended piece of narrative prose, a novel is made up or invented. This means that even though there might be points of similarity between the life of the author and the main character in her/his work, the events in the story are not factually or historically true.

**Autobiography:** In very simple terms, this term means writing about the self. Derived from Latin, the word “autobiography” can be broken down into three component parts, namely *auto* (self), *bio* (life), and *graph* (scribe or write).

## Now we will explore the novel as a genre:

As you learned in the previous section, a genre is an art **form** or a **literary type** of writing. Genres are literary forms, and the three main categories are poetry, drama and narrative (short story or novel). In this course we define the core or essence of the novel as narrative, which is a mode of story-telling involving a series of episodes/incidents/events/happenings that are held together by one **main character**, known as the **protagonist**.

We expect you to learn and apply the following terms when writing about prose fiction such as *When Rain Clouds Gather*.

### ***Some more literary terms***

**Setting:** this refers to the time and place in which the action of a story takes place. Thus the setting of a novel would require us to think about things such the social, historical and political background in which the story is placed. The setting of *When Rain Clouds Gather* is the village of Golema Mmidi in Botswana.

**Plot:** **plot** means the sequence or series of events as arranged and narrated by the author. What is important to note about **plot** is that, as you read the story, you should be on the lookout for the **tension** or **conflict** that often lies at the core of the story. This conflict is the force against which the main character is opposed, and which provides the starting point for the action. In other words, conflict in a story is what galvanises the main character into action.

**Character:** this word has two meanings.

- (i) **Character** refers to people or animals in the story. For example, the author of *Animal Farm* (a fable) decided to use humans and animals as his characters.
- (ii) The second meaning of **character** (in this particular sense also **characterisation**) relates to the nature, qualities, or characteristics of the people (the fictional characters) in the story. For any story to be credible, authors invest their characters with human qualities. This explains why we enjoy reading literature or fiction in general, because we identify or empathise with the characters, dislike or even loathe them.

**Theme:** the theme of a work is its main idea or message. A novel's theme can be stated directly (explicitly) or indirectly (say, through symbolism).

### ***Getting started***

Read the text (*When Rain Clouds Gather*) at least twice, the first time maybe cursorily, and the second time with concentration. As you read the book for the second time, jot down the main ideas.

Write notes (possibly in an A5 notebook, but also in your blog or electronic journal) on what happens in the novel, from the opening episode until the last, where possible, explain the reasons for what happens in each episode.

Formulate your own opinions about the text in order to develop your own responses, viewpoints and judgements.

Relate the text to your own experiences (think about the issues of exile, prejudice, race, xenophobia [fear of people from other cultures], as well as the situation of working on a farm, etc.).

**Exercise**

Having read the novel, answer each of the following questions very briefly (no more than three sentences per answer) to demonstrate your grasp of the literary terms as applied to *When Rain Clouds Gather*.

1. Briefly describe the setting of the novel.

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2. In three sentences, summarise its plot.

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3. List at least seven characters in the novel.

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4. Choose one of the characters (in Question 3) and describe his/her characteristics – both positive and negative.

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5. Write two to three sentences describing the main theme (or idea) of the novel.

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**The main characters in the novel**

*When Rain Clouds Gather* is the story of a young South African Zulu man and political prisoner called Makhaya, a name that refers to someone who stays at home, but in this case he does not live up to his name. He is frustrated with the unbearable conditions of apartheid and leaves South Africa for Botswana. After fleeing South Africa, Makhaya takes refuge in the community or village of Golema Mmidi. There he joins a group of refugees and exiles and becomes actively involved in the activities of an agricultural co-operative which is run by the local people and the refugees, the most influential one being Gilbert Balfour, who becomes Makhaya’s close friend. It is in this village of Golema Mmidi (which becomes his “home”) that Makhaya begins to get a sense of perspective and to achieve a measure of clarity on a range of issues, including power, race and oppression, which are the source of his inner turmoil and isolation.

Bessie Head portrays Makhaya as finding joy and fulfilment in the friendship with Gilbert, in his relationship with Paulina, to whom he proposes marriage at the end of the novel, as well as in the success of the co-operative’s farming activities, which transform the lives of both the refugees and the local people. In a sense, this success provides the healing process that Makhaya needs in order to forget the pain and inner turmoil engendered by apartheid. But his healing is fully realised, not only through his readiness to teach the women tobacco farming for a higher quality of life in the semi-desert conditions, but also in his lasting relationship with Paulina.

Now look back at the sketch of Bessie Head’s life under the heading “About the author” with which I began this note. We can see something of Bessie Head’s life in the complex character of Makhaya, who, on arriving in Botswana seething with turmoil, settles down to a life of healing and reflection. In other words, the novel may be read as an autobiography, because Bessie Head herself had a terrible relationship with South Africa, leaving the country in the 1960s to escape the constrictions and injustices of the apartheid system. She settled among refugees and exiles in the Botswana city of Francistown, where she seemed to have found a semblance of healing through the various personal relationships she cultivated within the refugee community. In this way it is easy to identify Makhaya with Bessie Head.

How are Bessie Head and Makhaya similar? Fill in the points of similarity.

The author Bessie Head was born in South Africa.	In the novel, Makhaya is born in South Africa.
Bessie Head left South Africa for Botswana.	Makhaya leaves South Africa for Botswana.

It is important to note that, in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Bessie Head is, in a way, fictionalising her life and writing her autobiography. While most autobiographies use the writer as the protagonist directly, this one is indirect.

The following pages in the novel provide some reflections by the main character about his personal turmoil and a deep sense of loneliness, and point to the connection between Makhaya and Bessie Head:

1. his reference to why he could not marry in South Africa (p. 11).
2. his reason for coming to Botswana (p. 12).
3. what he is seeking in Botswana (p.15)
4. what he calls himself, and the significance of the name (p. 133)
5. The treatment he received (p. 134) and his reasons for his hatred of whites (p. 139).

Such musings and moments of reflection suggest a link between Makhaya (the fictional character) and Bessie Head. But thanks to the community of Golema Mmidi, this Makhaya's pent-up anger and violence begins to change over time, being replaced with an overlay of feelings of kindness. Find the references in the novel to Makhaya's emotional turmoil, which leaves him susceptible to violence (see for instance, chapter 9).

From this point on, Makhaya is full of optimism as he begins to acknowledge and appreciate human relationships in all their varieties and complexities.

**Gilbert Balfour**, another character, is portrayed as a practical man with no pretensions, who is prepared to be of service to his fellow human beings. Fully aware of the needs of Golema Mmidi village, he seeks to initiate co-operative farming methods in the village, and the methods show immense potential for success. A committed optimist, he lives just like local people and ensures that, in this co-operative farming project, emphasis is placed on growing cash crops and sinking boreholes (to cope with the inevitable water shortages during spells of drought). He even marries a local woman by the name of Maria, Dinorego's daughter.

Another character you need to think about and pay attention to is **Chief Matenge**, who represents "Old Africa" at its worst – moral degeneration. Compare Chief Matenge with Paramount Chief Sekoto in the novel. Bessie Head presents Chief Matenge as a villain, a bad person, as he is openly corrupt and has a tendency to tribalism – characteristics that disrupt the harmony of the otherwise peaceful community. Traditional norms are being eroded by tribalism, with men making women pregnant but unable to care for the children who are born from such loveless liaisons, and thus leaving the lonely women saddled with all sorts of hardships as they raise the children alone. You will need to explain here why this social evil can be traced to tribalism.

### **Tribalism**

The word "tribalism" means the practice of advancing one's own tribe above others, or judging other people on the basis of their tribal origins. Explore *When Rain Clouds Gather* and find two examples of tribalism. Is this presented in the novel as good?

Yet another character who turns out to be very helpful to Makhaya is George Appleby-Smith – a white police officer (a special immigration officer) who secures permanent residence for Makhaya in Botswana. Like Gilbert and Makhaya, George is also an exile who is convinced about the certainty of self-government, and so he is always on the side of the oppressed.

Finally, there are other characters of note, such as old man Dinorego and old woman Mma-Millipede. Almost a godfather and spiritual leader of the community of Golema Mmidi, Dinorego leads Makhaya to his tiny village, while Mma-Millipede is a gracious woman (Dinorego's counterfoil) who gives peace to Makhaya's tortured and troubled soul and ensures that Paulina does not give him trouble.

### Chapter by chapter analysis

I will now provide an analysis of each chapter. At the end of each chapter's exploration, you will find questions to guide you to a clear understanding of the chapter I have just analysed. **Make sure you answer the questions in your own words.** My analysis is **not** a substitute for a careful reading and analysis of the text.

### CHAPTER 1

In this chapter, we are introduced to the main character in the novel. We learn he is a young man who has just been released from prison (p. 3) in South Africa, and is fleeing the country for Botswana. When we encounter this young man, named Makhaya, he is on the South African side of the border, where an old man is hiding him in a circular hut so that once darkness has set in the young man can sneak across the fence into neighbouring Botswana. After dusk, Makhaya successfully sprints across the border into Botswana and arrives at an old woman's house, where he stays the night. The following day he hitches a lift and arrives in the village of Golema Mmidi, which will be his new home for the foreseeable future.

### Questions

1. Explain what led up to Makhaya's flight from South Africa. You may make a list of phrases or quotations.

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2. Why does he cross the border into Botswana by jumping over the border fence?

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3. Name the village he arrives at and takes refuge in.

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4. Name the person who grants him asylum (a safe place to stay). What procedure is followed before he is granted asylum?

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## CHAPTER 2

We are introduced to several characters in this chapter. Old Dinorego is prepared to keep Makhaya in his house for some time (p. 18). We are also introduced to Paramount Chief Sekoto, who has appointed his brother, Chief Matenge, as the sub-chief and administrator of Golema Mmidi ward or village. Gilbert Balfour is yet another character we learn about in the chapter. He is a British agronomist who is in the village to advise the villagers on farming practices (p. 23). Other characters are Maria – Dinorego’s daughter – and Mma-Millipede.

### Questions

1. What is Chief Matenge, the village administrator, notorious for?

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2. How does Paramount Chief Sekoto help the cause for which Gilbert finds himself in the village of Golema Mmidi?

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3. Who introduces Makhaya to Gilbert?

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4. On p. 27, reference is made to Botswana as Utopia. Who says these words? Explain why he says them (you will need to include the meaning of “utopia” in your answer).

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### CHAPTER 3

At the end of Chapter 2, Makhaya agrees to join Gilbert on the co-operative project and in Chapter 3 we see him settling into his new employment. We learn about Gilbert's grand idea of agricultural co-operatives. This would involve changing the land tenure system in the village into a co-operative that would be similar to communal ownership of land.

#### ***Land tenure***

This idea is central to *When Rain Clouds Gather*. It means the system of ownership of land: whether it is owned by an individual or by more than one person, for example by a family or a co-operative group of farmers. The question of land ownership is central to African history and politics, especially as land was taken away from its rightful black owners by European colonisers.

#### **Questions**

1. Both Gilbert and Makhaya are educated young men. What makes them unique individuals, living in a village that is full of poor people?

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2. Describe the major projects that the two men get involved in and how the local people respond to their involvement.

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3. Explain why Chief Matenge wants Makhaya thrown out of the village.

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4. According to Gilbert and Makhaya, how would the people of the village benefit from the co-operatives?

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## CHAPTER 4

This chapter gives an insight into the life of Paramount Chief Sekoto, a man described as having a taste for the good life (p. 48). But, despite his flaws (and unlike his brother, Chief Matenge), Chief Sekoto is shown to be a man of great wisdom (as we see when Mma Baloi's case is brought before him).

### **Questions**

1. How does Chief Matenge plot to get rid of Makhaya? What is Paramount Chief Sekoto's response?

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2. How does George Appleby-Smith help Makhaya in view of Chief Matenge's scheming?

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## CHAPTER 5

In this chapter, we learn about the turbulence that is the inner life of Chief Matenge, and in particular the reasons for his hatred of Makhaya. Although he is a rich and educated man, with a number of possessions to enhance his image, Matenge is at heart a deeply evil man. His extreme dislike of Makhaya prompts him to plot against him by reporting him to George so that he can be deported. But, knowing Matenge, George arranges for Makhaya's permanent residence instead.

### **Questions**

1. Describe the events leading to the confrontation between Matenge and Makhaya.

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2. What ill fate befalls Matenge?

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**CHAPTER 6**

The chapter starts with a description of Paulina's background and her true nature. It also details Makhaya's views on oppression in Southern Africa, as well as Gilbert's ideas about progress.

**Questions**

1. Describe the character of Dinorego.

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2. Describe Makhaya's thoughts about Southern Africa and oppression. Quote from the text (pp. 81–92) to support your answer.

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3. Describe Gilbert's ideas about progress (these are described on p. 82–84).

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4. Whom does Gilbert marry and why?

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5. Explain the significance of Gilbert's quote from Kipling, especially with reference to Makhaya.

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**CHAPTER 7**

In this chapter, we are introduced to the character of Paulina Sebeso. She is trying to recover from her own trauma. For example, her husband committed suicide after being (falsely) accused of theft by his company. When Makhaya meets Paulina, she and her young daughter live in the village, while Isaac, her son, lives alone at the cattle post, looking after his mother's herd of cattle. But the most interesting events in this chapter are as follows: Mma-Millipede arranges a wedding party for Gilbert and Maria; Gilbert appoints Makhaya to give women instruction on the farm; and Mma-Millipede begins to think about Paulina – the only woman who could persuade

other women to attend lessons at the farm – as Makhaya’s possible soul mate, and eventually his wife.

**Question**

What characteristics does Paulina possess that make her suitable (in Mma-Millipede’s opinion) to be Makhaya’s future partner?

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**CHAPTER 8**

Makhaya organises the women into a tobacco-growing co-operative. As a result of working together on the farm, Paulina is drawn to Makhaya. Eventually the two strike up a friendly relationship.

**Questions**

1. Describe the kind of activities the women are involved in on the Turkish tobacco project.

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2. Describe how the community of Golema Mmidi benefits from the activities that Makhaya spearheads (pp. 118–119).

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**CHAPTER 9**

In this chapter (as elsewhere in the novel), Makhaya is thinking about his own transformation. Thus, in his reflections, he tries to resolve the pain and grief he has endured from the days of living in South Africa: read pages 127 to 131 and then discuss how he tries to do this

**Questions**

1. What aspects of life are covered in Makhaya’s reflections on pp. 139–142?

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2. Give the reasons for his admiration for Gilbert.

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3. Explain how Makhaya’s conversation with Mma-Millipede contributes to his healing.

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4. Explain why, for Makhaya, Golema Mmidi becomes the realisation of a dream.

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**CHAPTERS 10 AND 11**

Chapter 10 describes the positive developments taking place in the village of Golema Mmidi and the wrath this evokes from Chief Matenge. The chapter goes on to describe the crippling drought that has afflicted the land, leaving the soil bone-dry, the livestock dying off. The people too have suffered terribly. For example, in Chapter 11, Paulina, Makhaya and Gilbert arrive at her cattle post to check on Isaac (Paulina’s son), and find no signs of life (p. 170). Paulina’s herd of cattle has been wiped out, and, what is more, Isaac’s skeleton is all that is left of him (p. 170). Paulina’s child has died from malnutrition. From this point onwards, Makhaya decides to have a close romantic relationship with Paulina (p.171).

**Questions**

1. How do the developments in Golema Mmidi village affect Chief Matenge?

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2. Describe the consequences of the severe drought on the community of Golema Mmidi.

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3. What does Makhaya do with Isaac’s remains (p.170)? What do his actions show about his character?

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4. Comment on what you think Bessie Head means by the title of this novel: “When Rain Clouds Gather”, as suggested on p.177?

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## CHAPTER 12

We learn about two important developments in this chapter. The one is that the co-operative exercise is a success. For example, the experimental plot of tobacco is thriving, and Gilbert is now suggesting that the community should erect a twenty-mile fence to enclose a ranch or cattle holding ground. The other is the death of Chief Matenge (p. 187).

### Questions

1. How does Chief Matenge die?

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2. At the end of this novel, Chief Matenge is dead and yet the agricultural experiment seems a great success. What do you think Bessie Head is suggesting about the running of agricultural projects and villages in Botswana?

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The following section of this guide will discuss how Head makes use of symbolism and themes in her novel. It will also provide you with some sample questions that you could use as practice for the exam.

### Symbolism in *When Rain Clouds Gather*

The words of the title of the novel, which appear in Chapter 11, on page 177, are used in a most symbolic fashion. The words are spoken (as a metaphor) during a vigil at Makhaya and Paulina's home marking the passing of Paulina's child (Isaac) who has died from malnutrition alone at the cattle post. The old man rues the gravity of the drought, which has left almost everything lifeless, but Maria offers some hope: read her words on page 177.

The title *When Rain Clouds Gather* thus represents the basic goodness and graciousness of humankind which, in this novel, is reflected in the spirit of characters such as George, Gilbert, Dinorego and Mma-Millipede – all of whom have contributed immensely towards the common good in Golema Mmidi (through bringing about, for example, the healing of Makhaya's troubled soul, the healing at the funeral of Paulina's son and the working on co-operative farming projects to help the community achieve self-sufficiency in food supply, thereby remedying poverty and suffering). The title may also be seen to mean that, even when things look bleak and hopeless, there may still be hope if people continue with positive actions and relationships.

## The End of the Novel

The novel ends with the death of an oppressor, but the co-operative farm is still prospering.

On one level, it would seem that the book ends on an optimistic note in that the village does overcome forces of evil (represented by Chief Matenge) and embraces the idealism or utopia that Gilbert and Makhaya represent, which is probably close to Bessie Head's vision for many villages in Botswana. On another level, it is vitally important to ask ourselves whether or not the vision of a social order that Bessie Head is promoting here is innocent, naive, too simplistic, too abstract, and therefore unworkable.

What do you think? Could a village such as Golema Mmidi use co-operative farming to escape from poverty and drought? Or is Bessie Head being too optimistic here?

## A Summary of the Themes

1. The denunciation of oppression of all kinds. For example, Makhaya flees South Africa to escape white-on-black oppression. But then the situation he encounters in Golema Mmidi involves a black-on-black kind of oppression (brought about by Chief Matenge), lack of responsibility (Chief Sekoto) and corruption (Tsepe). *When Rain Clouds Gather* shows all these kinds of oppression as negative and to be avoided.
2. When we first encounter Makhaya in Chapter 1, his soul is tortured and in turmoil. But this state of affairs is gradually replaced by his attempt to achieve a sense of mental balance in the course of the novel, thanks to his meaningful friendships with people like Dinorego, Mma-Millipede, George, Gilbert, Paulina and Maria. We learn that the process of healing involves Makhaya working through his suffering by learning to trust and believe in these characters.
3. Having known poverty most of her life, and seeing it as a social problem, Head seems to have developed wide-ranging views on how this problem could be tackled, including her belief in a system of land ownership by the community, where communities can work together to improve their lives. Thus Bessie Head's use of the farm co-operative, for example, points to her vision of how to resolve social problems for the greater good and prosperity of the community.
4. Apart from Chief Matenge, Chief Sekoto and Joas Tsepe (all of whom, in various ways, represent power, oppression and corruption), the novel demonstrates how humanity can live in perfect harmony only if issues of skin colour, gender or place of origin do not blind one to human values such as compassion and working together. Thus there are good characters in the novel who provide healing to Makhaya. Take note of the following productive relationships:
  - i) George (a white man) is prepared to stick his neck out for Makhaya (who is a black exile) from beginning to end.

- ii) Gilbert (the white English agronomist) befriends Makhaya. Read Makhaya's thoughts on this, expressed in the second paragraph on p. 141.
- iii) Dinorego becomes Makhaya's surrogate father.
- iv) Mma-Millipede becomes Makhaya's surrogate mother.
- v) Gilbert marries Maria (a black Motswana woman, Dinorego's daughter).
- vi) Makhaya has a lasting and fulfilling relationship with Paulina (a black Motswana woman), to whom he eventually proposes marriage.

All the above characters (and the entire community of Golema Mmidi) show their willingness to cross the border between fixed tribal or cultural identities and to embrace a wider human identity. This kind of identity, defined by the brotherhood/sisterhood of humankind, remains Bessie Head's vision in most of her fiction.

### **Writing Exercise: Character Sketches**

This exercise is included for self-study and not submission. The exercise can be done in your journal, whether paper or electronic. The sketches will give you an idea of what kinds of questions your lecturers may ask you on this book. Write character sketches for the important characters in the novel. You will find quotations to support your sketches in three ways: by following the author's description of the character; through what the character does and thinks; and through what other characters in the novel say or think about the character.

Now write a character sketch of the following cast of characters we meet in *When Rain Clouds Gather*.

1. Makhaya
2. Dinorego
3. Mma-Millipede
4. George Appleby-Smith
5. Gilbert Balfour
6. Paulina Sebeso
7. Chief Matenge
8. Joas Tsepe
9. Chief Sekoto

## Possible Essay Questions

Test your knowledge of *When Rain Clouds Gather* by writing an essay on one of the topics below. These are included to give you an idea of what kinds of questions your lecturers may ask you to answer on this book. **Remember to answer these questions, like any essay questions, in well-constructed arguments written in paragraphs, and by referring closely to the novel to support your views.**

1. Choose one of the memorable characters in the novel and discuss the reasons why you find him/her unforgettable. (You may choose Makhaya, Gilbert, Matenge, Dinorego or Mma-Millipede).
2. Although it is Makhaya's suffering, trauma and healing that form the core of the novel, Bessie Head also brings to the fore other problems to do with colonial authorities, tribalism, greed and hate. Discuss.
3. Discuss the reasons for Makhaya's inner turmoil and sense of anger in the first part of the novel and how his arrival in Golema Mmidi provides the basis for healing.
4. Discuss the reasons why the people of Golema Mmidi stand up to Chief Matenge. What are the implications of Chief Matenge's death for tradition and oppression?
5. Describe the ending of this novel. How does it provide a suitable conclusion to the action of the book?
6. How does *When Rain Clouds Gather* demonstrate Bessie Head's vision of the possibility of how races might exist in harmony?
7. Discuss Bessie Head's representation of white people in the novel (George Appleby-Smith and Gilbert Balfour), contrasting this with the white people in South Africa, from where Makhaya has fled.
8. Writing in *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings*, Head has this to say about her fiction:

My work was always tentative because it was so completely new: it created new worlds out of nothing; it battled with problems of food production in a tough semi-desert land; it brought all kinds of people, both literate and semi-literate together, and it did not really qualify who was who – everyone had a place in my world. (1980: 28)

How do these statements apply to *When Rain Clouds Gather*?

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