

18K4E08--LITERATURE AND ENVIRONMENT**UNIT I - POETRY (DETAILED)**

- 1.Wendell Berry – Testament
- 2.James Weldon Johnson - Lift Every Voice and Sing.
- 3.Joy Harjo - A Map to the Next World.

POETRY (NON-DETAILED)

- 4.Mary Oliver - At Black River.
- 5.Akananuru :Mullai - 274.
(The hero speaks to the charioteer)
My soft - miened wife, young and chaste,
Is adorned with the fragrant Mullai blossom
She is now in a lovely village
Amidst a woodland, cool and fragrant;
The rainy season sets in at mid night
The clouds rumble shaking as it were
The entire firmament
And pour a main to the great grief of serpents.
At this hour a shepherd makes fire
with his churning sticks
And lights a small torch to guard safely
His fold of sheep of quivering heads;
He stands all alone his shoulders a sling wrought of strong cords,
Which contains a pot and a piece of leather;
One side of his body is drenched
By the tiny and innumerable rain – drops
The whistling sounds
which he makes flexing his tongue
Pass rushing the air
And cause a fox that goes
In quest of frisking lambs,
To take to its heels
Into the short and thorny bushes! --- Itaikkatanar

UNIT II – PROSE

- 1.Amitav Ghosh - The Great Derangement climatic change and the Unthinkable - Part II History (page - 117 - 155)
- 2.Greg Garrard - Eco criticism - Chapter I Beginnings : Pollutions (Page No.1-15)
- 3.Henry David Thoreau - “The Ponds” from Walden; or, Life in the Woods.

1. Doris Lessing - Play with a Tiger

1. Wendell Berry – Testament

Poet, novelist, and environmentalist Wendell Berry lives in Port Royal, Kentucky near his birthplace, where he has maintained a farm for over 40 years. Mistrustful of technology, he holds deep reverence for the land and is a staunch defender of agrarian values. He is the author of over 50 books of poetry, fiction, and essays. His poetry celebrates the holiness of life and everyday miracles often taken for granted. In 2016, Berry was awarded the Ivan Sandrof Lifetime Achievement Award by the National Books Critics Circle. In 2010, Barack Obama awarded him with the National Humanities Medal. Berry's other honors include the T.S. Eliot Prize, the Aiken Taylor Award for poetry, the John Hay Award of the Orion Society, and the Richard C. Holbrooke Distinguished Achievement Award of the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. Berry's poetry collections include *This Day: Collected & New Sabbath Poems* (2014), *Given* (2005), *A Timbered Choir: The Sabbath Poems 1979-1997*, *Entries: Poems* (1994), *Traveling at Home* (1989), *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (1988), *Collected Poems 1957-1982* (1985), *Clearing* (1977), *There Is Singing Around Me* (1976), and *The Broken Ground* (1964).

Critics and scholars have acknowledged Wendell Berry as a master of many literary genres, but whether he is writing poetry, fiction, or essays, his message is essentially the same: humans must learn to live in harmony with the natural rhythms of the earth or perish. His book *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture* (1977), which analyzes the many failures of modern, mechanized life, is one of the key texts of the environmental movement. Berry has criticized environmentalists as well as those involved with big businesses and land development. In his opinion, many environmentalists place too much emphasis on wild lands without acknowledging the importance of agriculture to our society. Berry strongly believes that small-scale farming is essential to healthy local economies, and that strong local economies are essential to the survival of the species and the wellbeing of the planet. In an interview with *New Perspectives Quarterly* editor Marilyn Berlin Snell, Berry explained: "Today, local economies are being destroyed by the 'pluralistic,' displaced, global economy, which has no respect for what works in a locality. The global economy is built on the principle that one place can be exploited, even destroyed, for the sake of another place."

Testament by Wendell Berry

1.

Dear relatives and friends, when my last breath
 Grows large and free in air, don't call it death --
 A word to enrich the undertaker and inspire
 His surly art of imitating life; conspire
 Against him.
 Say that my body cannot now
 Be improved upon; it has no fault to show
 To the sly cosmetician.
 Say that my flesh
 Has a perfect compliance with the grass

Truer than any it could have striven for.

3

You will recognize the earth in me, as before
I wished to know it in myself: my earth
That has been my care and faithful charge from birth,
And toward which all my sorrows were surely bound,
And all my hopes.

Say that I have found
A good solution, and am on my way
To the roots.
And say I have left my native clay
At last, to be a traveler; that too will be so.

Traveler to where? Say you don't know.

2.

But do not let your ignorance
Of my spirit's whereabouts dismay
You, or overwhelm your thoughts.

Be careful not to say

Anything too final.
Whatever
Is unsure is possible, and life is bigger
Than flesh.
Beyond reach of thought
Let imagination figure

Your hope.
That will be generous
To me and to yourselves.
Why settle
For some know-it-all's despair
When the dead may dance to the fiddle

Hereafter, for all anybody knows?
And remember that the Heavenly soil
Need not be too rich to please
One who was happy in Port Royal.

I may be already heading back,
A new and better man, toward
That town.
The thought's unreasonable,
But so is life, thank the Lord!

3.

4

So treat me, even dead,
As a man who has a place
To go, and something to do.

Don't muck up my face

With wax and powder and rouge
As one would prettify
An unalterable fact
To give bitterness the lie.

Admit the native earth
My body is and will be,
Admit its freedom and
Its changeability.

Dress me in the clothes
I wore in the day's round.

Lay me in a wooden box.

Put the box in the ground.

4.

Beneath this stone a Berry is planted
In his home land, as he wanted.

He has come to the gathering of his kin,
Among whom some were worthy men,

Farmers mostly, who lived by hand,
But one was a cobbler from Ireland,

Another played the eternal fool
By riding on a circus mule

To be remembered in grateful laughter
Longer than the rest.
After

Doing that they had to do
They are at ease here.
Let all of you

Who yet for pain find force and voice
Look on their peace, and rejoice.

5

Lift Every Voice and Sing

BY JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

A group of young men in Jacksonville, Florida, arranged to celebrate Lincoln's birthday in 1900. My brother, J. Rosamond Johnson, and I decided to write a song to be sung at the exercises. I wrote the words and he wrote the music. Our New York publisher, Edward B. Marks, made mimeographed copies for us, and the song was taught to and sung by a chorus of five hundred colored school children. Shortly afterwards my brother and I moved away from Jacksonville to New York, and the song passed out of our minds. But the school children of Jacksonville kept singing it; they went off to other schools and sang it; they became teachers and taught it to other children. Within twenty years it was being sung over the South and in some other parts of the country. Today the song, popularly known as the Negro National Hymn, is quite generally used. The lines of this song repay me in an elation, almost of exquisite anguish, whenever I hear them sung by Negro children.

Lift every voice and sing

Till earth and heaven ring,

Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;

Let our rejoicing rise

High as the listening skies,

Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,

Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.

Facing the rising sun of our new day begun,

Let us march on till victory is won.

Stony the road we trod,

Bitter the chastening rod,

Felt in the days when hope unborn had died;

Yet with a steady beat,

Have not our weary feet

6

Come to the place for which our fathers sighed?

We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,

We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,

Out from the gloomy past,

Till now we stand at last

Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.

God of our weary years,

God of our silent tears,

Thou who hast brought us thus far on the way;

Thou who hast by Thy might

Led us into the light,

Keep us forever in the path, we pray.

Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee,

Lest, our hearts drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee;

Shadowed beneath Thy hand,

May we forever stand.

True to our God,

True to our native land.

James Weldon Johnson (June 17, 1871 – June 26, 1938) was an American author, educator, lawyer, diplomat, songwriter, and civil rights activist. Johnson is widely celebrated for his leadership of the NAACP, where he began working in 1917. In 1920 he was the first African American to be chosen as executive secretary of the organization, effectively the operating officer. He served in that position from 1920 to 1930. Johnson established his reputation as a writer, and was known during the Harlem Renaissance for his poems, novels, and anthologies collecting both poems and spirituals of black culture. He was appointed under President Theodore Roosevelt as US consul in Venezuela and Nicaragua for most of the period from 1906 to 1913. In 1934 he became the first African-American professor to be hired at New York University. Later in life he served as a professor of creative literature and writing at

Fisk University, a historically black university. The air inside the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum is electric with collective black joy. It is Sunday, August 20, 1972, the afternoon of the storied [Wattstax concert](#), a seven-year community commemoration following the 1965 Watts neighborhood uprising against police brutality and systemic discrimination. Attendees laugh, joke and jostle through the stadium's classically domed entryways, some with \$1 tickets in hand, others admitted for free depending on what they can afford. By the time everyone [is seated](#), more than 112,000 spectators, most of them African American Los Angeleans—dancing teenagers, multi-generational families, gang members, blue-collar workers anticipating a day of fun before the start of a new work week—people the rows with a range of brown complexions. It is reportedly the [largest gathering](#) of African Americans since the 1963 March on Washington and even before the music performances begin, it is living art. On the stage, erected in the center of the field just hours after a home game between the Los Angeles Rams and the Oakland Raiders the night before, Rev. Jesse Jackson ignites the crowd with his signature call-and-response recitation of [“I Am Somebody.”](#) By its final lines, thousands of fists are raised in the air in a solidarity salute to black power. Jackson capitalizes on the euphoria of the moment to take the people even higher: “Sister Kim Weston,” he [announces](#), “The Black National Anthem.”

Weston clutches the microphone, her cappuccino-colored skin glazed by the midday sunlight. If anyone in the house has never heard “Lift Every Voice and Sing”—affectionately referred to as “the Black National Anthem”—hers is the perfect introduction to it. The notes [purr from her throat](#), vibrating with pride and sincerity, and she holds them unrushed to compel her audience to soak in the hymn's distinguished place of honor in the black musical canon, the African American [story set to song](#).

Lift every voice and sing
 Till earth and heaven ring,
 Ring with the harmonies of Liberty;
 Let our rejoicing rise
 High as the listening skies,
 Let it resound loud as the rolling sea.

In an inherent Africanism, Weston extends an invitation for the community to join her as she soars to the chorus. “Won't you sing it with me everybody?” she asks. Having memorized the entire hymn from its repeated incorporation into church services or school assemblies or performances led by youth choir directors, the crowd responds as an ensemble of tens of thousands of voices, stumbling and mumbling over some parts, their fists still raised emphatically in the sky.

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us,
 Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us,
 Facing the rising sun of our new day begun
Let us march on till victory is won.

Rev. Jesse Jackson ignites the crowd with his signature call-and-response recitation of “I Am Somebody,” before introducing “Sister Kim Weston” and the “Black National Anthem.” (Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images). “Lift Every Voice and Sing” sets an atmosphere of reverence and gratitude—for the American journey of black people, for the selfless sacrifices of the ancestors, for an inheritance of indomitability and resilience—and on the Wattstax stage, the hymn elevates the celebration of black pride.

“It’s one of the highlights of my life,” says Weston, reached recently at her home in Detroit. Reflecting on the song’s powerful resonance, she says: “I’ve been singing ‘Lift Every Voice and Sing’ since I was five years old. I learned it in kindergarten—we sang it every day. So that performance was a beautiful moment of solidarity.” This year, the NFL announced that “Lift Every Voice and Sing” will be played or performed in the first week of the season, an acknowledgement of the explosive social unrest and racial injustices that have recently reawakened the American conscience. Just two years ago, team owners [banned](#) Colin Kaepernick and other players from silently protesting the same crimes against black humanity by taking a knee during the “Star-Spangled Banner.” Weston believes the gesture indicates progress.

“You know what? I sang ‘Lift Every Voice and Sing’ at the first inauguration of President G. W. Bush,” Weston says. “I think that that’s the same thing he was doing, showing the black community that there is some concern. What do they call that, an olive branch?” The Wattstax performance, says Kim Weston “was one of the highlights of my life.” (YouTube)

In 1900, [James Weldon Johnson](#) composed the poem that would become the hymn that, in the 1920s, would be [adopted](#) by the NAACP as the official Negro National Anthem. A prototypical renaissance man, Johnson was among the first black attorneys to be admitted to the Florida bar, at the same time he was serving as principal of the segregated Stanton School in Jacksonville, Florida, his alma mater and the institution where his mother became the city’s first black public-school teacher.

Tasked with saying a few words to kick off a celebration of Abraham Lincoln’s birthday, Johnson opted to display another one of his many gifts by writing a poem instead of a standard, more easily forgettable speech. He wrestled with perfecting the verses, and his equally talented brother J. Rosamond Johnson, a classically trained composer, suggested setting them to music. A chorus of 500 students sang their new hymn at the event.

When the two brothers [relocated](#) to New York to write Broadway tunes—yet another professional pivot in Johnson’s illustrious career—“Lift Every Voice and Sing” continued to catch on and resonate in black communities nationwide, particularly following an endorsement by the influential Booker T. Washington. Millions more have sung it since.

“The school children of Jacksonville kept singing it, they went off to other schools and sang it, they became teachers and taught it to other children. Within twenty years, it was being sung over the South and in some other parts of the country,” Johnson [wrote](#) in 1935. “Today the song, popularly known as the Negro National Hymn, is quite generally used. The lines of this song repay me in elation, almost of

exquisite anguish, whenever I hear them sung by Negro children." James Weldon Johnson sat for German artist Winold Reiss (above, c. 1920), who famously memorialized W.E.B. DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston and other luminaries from the Harlem Renaissance. (NPG) Sometime in the 1920s, Johnson [sat](#) for German artist Winold Reiss, who [famously memorialized](#) W.E.B. DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston and other luminaries from the Harlem Renaissance. The drawing is held in the collections of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery as a tribute to Johnson's diversely distinguished life and career. After writing the Black National Anthem, he was appointed United States consul first to Venezuela, then Nicaragua by the Roosevelt administration. He went on to serve as field secretary for the NAACP, opening branches and enlisting members, until he was promoted to chief operating officer, a position that allowed him to outline and implement foundational strategies that incrementally combatted racism, lynching and segregation and contributed to the eventual death of Jim Crow laws.

The prestige of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" has become part of its legacy, not just for its distinguished lyrics but for the way it makes people feel. It inspired legendary artist Augusta Savage [to create](#) her 16-foot sculpture [Lift Every Voice and Sing \(The Harp\)](#) for the 1939 New York World's Fair. Black servicemen on the frontlines of World War II sang it together, as have civil rights demonstrators in every decade, [most recently](#) on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial following the murder of George Floyd. President Obama joined the chorus of celebrity guests performing it at a White House civil rights concert. Beyoncé included it in her stunning [Coachella performance](#) in 2018, introducing it to a global audience who may not have known it before. It's been recorded by Weston, Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, and across all genres—jazz, classical, gospel, opera and R&B.

Though Johnson's lyricism references key symbols from black history and culture—the "bright star" alludes to the North Star that guided men and women fleeing from enslavement to freedom, for example—he never draws an explicit connection to race. That means the anthem isn't proprietary or exclusive to black people, says [Tim Askew](#), professor of English and humanities at Clark Atlanta University and author of *Cultural Hegemony and African American Patriotism: An Analysis of the Song 'Lift Every Voice and Sing.'*

The hymn inspired the legendary artist Augusta Savage to create her 16-foot sculpture Lift Every Voice and Sing (The Harp) for the 1939 New York World's Fair. (Sherman Oaks Antique Mall/Getty Images) "A Black National Anthem is amazing. It is. But the song is an anthem of universal uplift. It's a song that speaks to every group that struggles. When you think of the words "lift every voice," of course as a black person, I see the struggles of black people. But I also see the struggles of Native Americans. I see the struggles of Chinese Americans. I see the struggles of women. I see the struggles of gays and lesbians. I see the struggles of Jews. I see the struggles of the human condition. And I have to talk about that," says Askew, who has had an academic love affair with the hymn for nearly 40 years. "Lift Every Voice and Sing" has been sung by Mormons, Southern white folks and congregations around the world, appearing in more than 30 church hymnals. Rabbi Stephen Wise of the Free Synagogue in

New York wrote to the Johnson brothers in 1928, calling the hymn the “noblest anthem I have ever heard.” That, says Askew, is a testament to the song’s universal magnetism beyond the defining lines of

race and religion. “The greatest compliment to James Weldon Johnson and his brother, these two black men, and to black people in general, is that something that comes from our experience became global. People around the world are hearing it and relating to it and responding to it,” says Askew. Scholars, particularly [Wendell Whalum](#) at Morehouse College, have dissected the emotional progression through the three stanzas of “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” from praise (see words like “rejoicing,” “faith” and “victory”) to lament (see “chastening rod,” “blood of the slaughtered,” “gloomy past”) to prayer (see “keep us forever in the path, we pray”). During a community sing-along at a Black Lives Matter protest in West Orange, New Jersey, this summer, the 1900 hymn “Lift Every Voice” rang out. (Elsa/Getty Images)

Equal parts honoring the painful past and articulating optimism for the future, the hymn may be Johnson’s most well-known contribution because its lyrics remain relevant to where we are as a country in any era, says [Dwandalyn Reece](#), curator of music and performing arts at the Smithsonian’s [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#). “Johnson speaks to a larger trajectory that really shapes us all. The struggle we’re seeing today is not just between black and white, it’s for all people. We need everyone to stand up and speak out and get engaged in really changing society.” As essential as Johnson’s genius poeticism, she adds, is brother Rosamond’s genius composition. “We always talk about the lyrics but I think the music is just as important—the majestic sound, the steadfastness, the sturdy beat. You get to these highs where you just want to sing at your loudest and assert who you are. There’s a tremendous amount of power when the lyrics and music are married together,” says Reece. “For me, it’s always kind of uplifting, particularly in a moment of despair or a moment of remembering why you’re here, what got you here and the possibility that you want to imagine for yourself.” That aspiration and hopefulness was in the faces of the thousands of people saluting their people—and themselves—at Wattstax as Kim Weston delivered what may have been the most notable performance of “Lift Every Voice and Sing” until that time and arguably of all time, certainly the first to resuscitate its widespread popularity. Jesse Jackson was so passionate about reinvigorating interest in the Black National Anthem, he reportedly elevated Weston’s arrangement as the gold standard and encouraged local radio stations to play it. Should a song that threads the black experience be communal domain? Is it separatist in a country that has never been invested in unity? A champion for the history and culture of African Americans, Johnson himself [identified](#) “Lift Every Voice and Sing” as the Negro National Hymn, honored that it resonated so deeply among the people he committed his life to loving and lifting. But it’s possible he recognized its ability to rally and unify others too.

“Johnson was the epitome of class and excellence, a global person, but as a well-informed citizen even

back in his day, he knew that this song was larger than us. He knew it had international appeal because people around the globe were asking him if they could sing the song,” says Askew, himself passionate about the hymn’s mass appeal. “I mean, this song went everywhere because he went everywhere. It doesn't diminish black folks because we deserve to sing a song that speaks to our experiences, but it just joins other people in a human struggle. We have to think of ourselves in a global sense.”

Joy Harjo’s poems are filled with so many images and passages that let’s one ponder and think about the complexity of the work. She is able to balance contemporary American life and ancient tribal truths magnificently. She is able to brilliantly attach the reader to the character. In “A Map to the Next World”, one knows that the poem is most probably addressed to a younger member of her [family](#), a young daughter, or a grand daughter, in fact. But one feels that Harjo is personally talking to you – we are put in the shoes of a member of a kin. In this poem (A Map to the Next World) one can see how the idea of survival is central to the individual and the Native Americans as a people. And the way she addresses this survival is by emphasizing the importance of memory (a very central theme in Native American [culture](#)) – how one should not forget one’s heritage. And she writes: “Keep track of the errors of our forgetfulness; a fog steals our children while we sleep”. She asks her readers to remember their heritage and find solace in it – to “Remember the hole of our shame marking the act of abandoning our tribal grounds”. The poem promotes an awareness and understanding of the strength of memory – a latch on the value on the powers of memory that all Native American cultures have. Moreover, one can see how survival and continuance are very strong bases for this poem. According to Harjo, in this world, one can easily forget about one’s heritage. “What I am telling you is real, and is printed in a warning on the map. Our forgetfulness stalks us, walks the earth behind us, leaving a trail of paper diapers, needles and wasted blood.” Harjo emphasizes the function of courage in the entire scheme of things, for keeping one’s spirit honest and vital. There seems to be a sense of loss of land, love, innocence and heritage that escalates within. She discusses the importance of courage by alluding to many Native American spiritual tremors – “The place of entry is the sea of your mother’s blood, your father’s small death as he longs to know himself in another.” There has to be an understanding of the past for one to be able to move forward. This discipline is central to many Native American cultures. In this case, Harjo alludes to her mother’s heritage (her blood), and how her father was lost in a sea of identities. “There is no exit.”, she says. One must have courage to survive. One must have courage to go on. One must have courage to be as tenacious as to venture out alone – to be able to trust oneself. “The map can be interpreted through the wall of the intestine – a spiral on the road of knowledge.” Coursing through survival and courage, Harjo moves in out of the realms of dream and reality. She focuses on both hope and despair, and survival and extinction at the same time. By showcasing these diverse strands of life, she is able to bring a harmonious balanced experience to the reader in the context of cultural allusions. “You will travel through the membrane of death, smell cooking from the encampment where our relatives make a fest of fresh deer meat and corn soup, in the Milky Way.” In this passage, she focuses on the point that to survive this world, one must not forget. To go through life and remember, one must travel the way our forefathers did. “Through the membrane of death” reminds one of the cultural belief in reincarnation – that through dying, one is born. “Encampment ... fresh deer meat” both paint the picture of a Native American village dinner – together around a fire, feasting on the day’s hunt.

This melding of dream visions, [memories](#), myths and history promotes a centeredness in deep reverence for the natural world (a very Native American ideology), where one should find solace in one’s own

heritage and mythology. But Harjo does not necessarily talk about her own heritage (Cherokee) alone, but includes other Native American tribal traditions.

There are snippets of other traditions which she brings in as a way to universalize experiences. In a way, she is striving to resolve polarities to bring the world into a balance through the awareness of the unspoken superiority one feels as a bearer of ancient culture. All one has to do is remember – “They have never left us; we abandoned them for [science](#)”.

My young woman of chaste and
delicate nature who wears *mullai*
flowers, lives in a sweet town in the forest,
where dark skies roar loudly distressing
snakes, clouds have spread in the sky
in this season in the middle of the night,
a cattle herder with his sturdy pot hanger,
pots and leather bed-roll lights a fire
using a kindling stick to protect his herds
of sheep with shaking heads, whistles loudly
folding his lips as he stands alone,
his legs placed on a planted stick, and young
leaping goats that fear the small eying foxes
in the path run in fear between
thorn bushes, in the cool fragrant forest.

12

It is midnight raining with thunders. The shepherd is standing alone guarding his cattle. A small fire-lamp, milk-pot, pot-hook made in rope, leather-umbrella covering his back-side, wetting body by snow lash on other-side and a stilt are his wealth for his life-hood. He makes a whistle in his mouth putting his folding index finger in his lips. On hearing the sound the foxes come to steal young sheep flow away through the thorn bush in forest.

She, my lover lives in such a pastoral land. She is a girl of chastity with clamoring beauty, the hero says.

MARY OLIVER'S AT BLACK RIVER

ALL DAY

ITS DARK, SLICK BRONZE SOAKS

IN A MOSSY PLACE,

ITS TEETH,

A MULTITUDE

SET

FOR THE COMEDY

THAT NEVER COMES-

ITS TAIL

KNOBBED AND SHINY,

AND WITH A HEAVY-WEIGHT'S PUNCH

PACKED AROUND THE BONE.

13

IN BEAUTIFUL FLORIDA

HE IS KING

OF HIS OWN PART

OF THE BLACK RIVER,

AND FROM HIS NAP

HE WILL WAKE

INTO THE WARM DARKNESS

TO BOOM, AND THRUST FORWARD,

PARALYZING

THE SWIFT, THIN- WAISTED FISH,

OR THE BIRD

IN ITS FRILLED, WHITE GOWN,

THAT HAS DIPPED DOWN

FROM THE HEAVEN OF LEAVES

ONE LAST TIME,

TO DRINK.

1.Amitav Ghosh - The Great Derangement climatic change and the Unthinkable - Analysis

The book is composed of three parts: Part I, titled Stories, Part II, History, and Part III, Politics.^[2] The first part--Stories--explores why the modern novel struggles as an art form to describe and grapple with the concept of climate change. To understand this shortcoming, Ghosh highlights the role of the uncanny.

In the second section--History--Ghosh highlights the role of [colonialism](#) in the climate crisis. With examples ranging from Miami to Mumbai to New York, Ghosh explores why urban planning deviated and deviates from the indigenous multigenerational knowledge that compelled cultures to build away from the ocean. In the final section--Politics--Ghosh notes that activists who single out [capitalism](#) as the systemic driver of climate change miss an important element: [imperialism](#). Ghosh describes how writers and artists increased their engagement with political movements at the same time as industrial activities

14

intensified. Ghosh ties these three sections together with a comparison between the [Paris agreement](#) and [Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical on climate change](#).^[3]

Reviews

In his review for *The Guardian*, Pankaj Mishra says, "How such 'progress' changes the global environment is revealed, along with other true faces of easternisation, by Ghosh in his short but broad-ranging and consistently stimulating indictment of our era of the 'great derangement'". Though Mishra notes that "Ghosh's account of literary omissions can occasionally feel selective....He doesn't linger long enough on the technical difficulties of incorporating climate change into artistic practice, or whether many novelists haven't already described its consequences, such as civil war and ethnic cleansing," he describes "his indictment of a complacent avant gardism in the arts [as] original and subtle."^[4]

In a review for the *Journal of International Affairs*, Astha Ummat gives a strong positive review for *The Great Derangement*, noting that Ghosh "supplements his thoughts with hard facts and figures" and "maintains the fine balance between technical complexities of the science of climate change and how climate change can in fact also be seen as a crisis of culture." Further, Ummat finds very strong Ghosh's criticism of the 'Politics of Sincerity,' a type of [skeptical](#) criticism based on individual lifestyle choices in the face of systemic problems.^[3]

Thinking the "unthinkable" would seem to present an impossible task, particularly when that unthinkable thing is the unfolding environmental disaster of climate change. In *The Great Derangement*, however, Amitav Ghosh—acclaimed Indian novelist and sometime professor at institutions like Queens College and Harvard—has generated an illuminating, occasionally startling method of pursuing this task: by reading climate change through the lens of fiction itself. If novelists have largely failed to treat climate change as a central figure in their books, Ghosh wonders, what characteristics of this unprecedented crisis—and its deep roots in industrialization, colonialism, and globalization—are to blame?

Ghosh divides *The Great Derangement* into three parts: "Stories," "History," and "Politics." Spanning fully half of the text, "Stories" employs historical anecdotes and scenes from Ghosh's own novels to situate us in the affective and geographical spaces of the "[Anthropocene](#)." A central challenge of the Anthropocene, Ghosh rightly points out, pivots on the riddle of recognition: how can we learn to recognize that different forms of disaster (from a freak tornado in Delhi to an especially deep drought in the Sierra Nevada) are manifestations of our deranged relationship with the natural environment? In a novel, such recognition is especially difficult to animate because it too easily looks credulous and fantastical—climate change, in short, requires an imposition of improbable events on an otherwise

realistic narrative. Daringly, Ghosh tethers the two issues, suggesting that mainstream Western fiction has been constitutionally incapable of addressing climate change precisely as the [Great Acceleration](#) gained momentum. As literary tastes and scientific understanding shifted toward singular, “modern” narratives; as the agency of nonhumans became less apparent on the page; and as genre fiction (science fiction, horror, fantasy) was relegated to the seedy edges of the fictional world, the Anthropocene began to present weather events of such improbability that mainstream novelists were not equipped to write them.

15

Even the new genre of “cli-fi” persistently situates itself in a disastrous future—and the Anthropocene, Ghosh insists, “also includes the recent past, and, most significantly, the present.” Perhaps, he suggests, only “new, hybrid forms” that change “the act of reading itself” will be equal to the challenges of our new age.

While Ghosh has a lively touch with the collusions and conspiracies of culture, politics, and imagination that have forged the ongoing path into the Anthropocene, stretches of *The Great Derangement* (primarily in “Stories”) recall a slalom course with missing gates. Recognition sets the stage for discussions of probability and regularity; theories of geological gradualism versus catastrophism; narratives of the everyday; the (non)aesthetics of oil versus coal; and more. And though Ghosh swerves confidently from concept to concept, he’s navigating a route that’s not entirely visible to the reader. On one page, an abstract term is explained in the endnotes; on another, a jargony phrase like “bare life” is left to shiver nakedly in its air quotes—awkward evidence of theoretical endowment. Mightn’t it be useful to name Giorgio Agamben, if not fully gloss his idea, for those who manage to pick up on this allusion to *Homo Sacer*? In another instance, Ghosh references Timothy Morton’s concept of “hyperobjects” to explain weather’s “ever-firmer adherence to our lives.” But what is a hyperobject? (Hint: Styrofoam counts as one.) We’re never told, and there’s no elaboration in the endnotes.

The inconsistencies in Ghosh’s otherwise important incorporation of critical theory serve to point up the dilemma of audience. Whom does Ghosh wish to address: his illustrious blurbers—Elizabeth Kolbert, Naomi Klein, Naomi Oreskes, Roy Scranton, Agamben himself? Perhaps, in homage to the book’s origin as a series of lectures, he’s writing for a virtual conference hall of scholars in the environmental humanities and sciences. Or perhaps he’s after a cross section of the highly educated public, who might come for Ghosh’s narrative eloquence and stay for the mental can-opener effect of his theoretical claims. Ultimately, I would wager he’s attempting to do all three, and it’s a task he doesn’t quite pull off. Academics are apt to leave hungry, while nonspecialists may feel glutted with the peculiar indigestibility of scholarly lingo.

Despite its flaws, *The Great Derangement* sparkles with insight. In “Histories,” Ghosh develops a fascinating “genealogy of the carbon economy” that extends research in postcolonialism, environmental justice, and modernity while swerving smartly from accepted wisdom. Distinguishing his approach from Klein—author of the widely acclaimed *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*—Ghosh argues that it is not capitalism per se but rather the unequal operations of empire that have driven our global dysfunction. Contrary to conventional histories of fossil fuel development that locate its birthplace

16

in nineteenth-century Pennsylvania, Ghosh finds coal use in China in the eleventh century and oil development in Burma as early as the eighteenth century. He then traces the uptake of carbon-based technology into the British colonial economy, where it became—as an effect of history being written by the conquerors—a “Western” commodity. While steam power initially thrived in the Bombay shipyards, for example, it simply “could not take hold in India,” since the “appetites of the British economy needed to be fed by large quantities of raw materials, produced by solar-based methods of agriculture. . . . In other words, the emerging fossil-fuel economies of the West required that people elsewhere be prevented from developing coal-based energy systems of their own.”

That “carbon emissions were, from very early on, closely co-related to power” is not necessarily “unacknowledged” in contemporary environmental thought. But Ghosh’s brilliance is in his clear-eyed reappraisal of this basic equation. Sketching Asia’s role as a “horror-struck simpleton” that was duped into believing the sales pitch for a carbon-centric modernity—e.g., that all would benefit, rather than the wealthy and powerful minority—Ghosh poses an arresting proposition. “Could it be the case that imperialism actually delayed the onset of climate crisis by retarding the expansion of Asian and African economies?” Ah, the painful efficacy of what-ifs! Which is morally superior—an equal pace of economic development for all countries or the long-term retardation of carbon emissions? Rather than pick a side, Ghosh suggests that treating the problem as a simple binary is already a sign of our “derangement”: it reinforces how “our lives and our choices are enframed in a pattern of history that seems to leave us nowhere to turn but toward our self-annihilation.”

How, then, can we escape this pattern? In his final section, “Politics,” Ghosh parallels the enduring ideology of capitalist growth with the unsettlingly similar literary impulse to pursue the next avant-garde. These cultural trends, Ghosh suggests—which are compounded by the “politics of sincerity” and the “politics of self-definition,” both individualizing impulses susceptible to co-optation by climate change deniers—have snarled our capacity for collectivity. Put simply, we have lost the language of authentic solidarity. In a compelling, teacherly move, Ghosh concludes by comparing the text of the 2015 Paris

Agreement with *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis's encyclical letter. Where the Paris Agreement is mired in corporate terminology, veiled militarism, and rhetorical half measures, *Laudato Si'* highlights, simply and lucidly, the connection between social and environmental justice. The Pope's words, moreover, reflect an "acceptance of limits and limitations," a posture that is "intimately related to the idea of the sacred" and thus veers defiantly from the violent thrust of empire and capitalism. For Ghosh, it is not the language of politics but the language of religion that reveals a way toward thinking the unthinkable. In this sense,

17

perhaps his "new forms" of fiction may also be forms of moral storytelling: retrograde writing that takes the grim present as seriously—and as compassionately—as the frightening future.

Greg Garrard's Ecocriticism- Pollution- Analysis

Ecocriticism is a modern trend in literary criticism which evaluates literary texts using an ecological yardstick. It is a relook at the proverbial relationship between nature and literature that has undergone a major transformation in the twentieth and twenty first centuries. The man-nature relationship has become a complex one and hence the portrayal of this relationship in the literary texts involves the cultural and political paradigms of the present day human society. In this scenario ecocriticism ought to analyse the cultural and literary aspects of the factors that cause an environmental apocalypse.

Ecocriticism is an analysis of how the depiction of nature, human culture and the political agenda that shape the literary texts can be moulded to find a relevant solution to the emerging environmental catastrophe. This form of literary criticism is inter-disciplinary in nature. It employs principles from various discipline like history, psychology, philosophy, ethics and ecology to comprehend the nature-literature relationship. This emerging culture of environmental concern that focuses on literature and environment is a developing field of ecological criticism.

The term 'ecocriticism' is coined by William Ruekert in 1978 to address issues related to landscape and environment, which were never concerns of literary critics earlier. Greg Garrard, in his book 'Ecocriticism', quotes Cheryl Glotfelty's definition of this new idiom, which appeared in the 'Introduction' to 'The Ecocritical Reader':

" [It is] the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of the modes of production and economic class to its reading of texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies." (Garrard,2004: 13)

Another important work in the field, 'Ecocriticism: Creating Self and Place in Environmental and American Indian Literatures', ecocritic Donelle Dreese mentions a few issues that are part of the usual concerns of ecocriticism:

" . . . how nature is presented, when it is represented, how the environmental crisis has influenced literature, and how the concepts of the environment have evolved through the centuries." (Dreese, 2002: 1)

The processes and products of human culture have a great significance in ecocriticism. The culture – nature dichotomy and the interaction between the two are the two major concerns of this branch of criticism. This is because ecological problems are considered as a major byproduct of the cultural and social issues. Hence ecocritical studies may include cultural studies involving analysis of TV, films, art, scientific writings, conservation and preservation moves like National Park Systems along with wilderness narratives and depictions of nature. According to Greg Garrard,

“ . . . environmental problems require analysis in cultural as well as in scientific terms, because they are the outcome of an interaction between ecological knowledge of nature and its cultural inflections. This will involve interdisciplinary scholarship that draws on literary and cultural theory, philosophy, sociology, psychology and environmental philosophy as well as ecology.” (Garrard, 2004:14)

The Ecocritical Mode of Enquiry

The interdisciplinary world of ecocriticism examines the vital link between literature and the physical environment, thus providing a richer understanding of the interplay of language and environment in literature. A mere analysis of nature portrayals in literature is not the aim of ecocriticism. It analyses and understands the natural world, which itself is a complex and extraordinary text. This enables an ecocritic to advocate a cultural change in the human society by inculcating a more bio-centric world view which will prompt man to envision a global community that includes non-human and the physical environment.

In order to prevent ecocriticism from being a mere branch of literary criticism, ecocritics provide a broad cultural base for ecocritical mode of enquiry. Greg Garrard quotes the views of Richard Kerridge from his book, ‘Writing the Environment’, which emphasise the potential of ecocriticism to explore the cultural implications of any analysis of the literature about environment:

“ The ecocritic wants to track environmental ideas and representations wherever they appear to see more clearly a debate which seems to be taking place, often part concealed in a great many cultural places. Most of all, ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as a response to environmental crisis.” (Garrard, 2004: 4)

Ecocritics may not succeed in suggesting remedies for the ecological problems but they can create an increased awareness among people about the need for a change in their perception of the environment. This is the ultimate goal of an ecocritic. For instance, the over – population and the resultant pollution of the planet is a cultural and social issue rather than a mere ecological problem, yet a major concern of ecocritics.

Foundation of Ecocriticism

Certain ecophilosophies form the basis of ecocritical inquiry. According to Greg Garrard they are as follows:

- **Cornucopia:** The champions of this philosophy believe that most of the environmental dangers are illusory or exaggerated. Hence cornucopians are not environmentalists in a strict sense; anti-environmental industrials seem to sponsor them instead.

- **Shallow Environmentalism:** As a contrast to the cornucopians, shallow environmentalists highlight the environmental hazards such as global warming and pollution and considers it the responsibility of the government to find solutions to such issues as well as resource crunch. They may not be ready for any radical change in life style to improve the situation.
- **Deep Ecology:** Another ecophilosophy that inspires organisations such as Earth First!, Friends of Earth and Sea Shepherd is Deep Ecology. This philosophy has a wide range of influence even outside the academic field. Garrard considers Gary Snider as the “poet laureate” of deep ecology and Arne Naes as its philosophical guru. Deep ecologists attribute an intrinsic value to all human as well as non-human beings and projects the need for a sustainable way of life and a smaller population for the flourishing of the non-human population on the planet.

19

- **Ecofeminism:** While deep ecology emphasises the anthropocentric dualism of humans versus nature, ecofeminism accuses the androcentric dualism of man versus woman. The major premise of ecofeminism is the belief that women are closely associated with nature and imbued with qualities that may lead to a more rational and ecologically- safe treatment of the flora and fauna.
- **Social Ecology and Eco-Marxism :** Akin to ecofeminism another ecophilosophy that provides a foundation to ecocriticism is Social Ecology and Eco-Marxism. This philosophy projects “ systems of domination and exploitation of humans by other humans” as the root cause of environmental issues.
- **Heideggerian Ecophilosophy:** The views of the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976) has been an inspiration for many ecocritics. According to this philosophy, the surrounding world of a human being includes the flora and fauna and the role of the human beings is to let them disclose themselves in their own ways. Man is not viewed as the master of this world; he is just a guide for all that exists around him. The meaning of the world around finds expression through art, especially poetry. (Garrard, 2004: 16 – 32)

Environmental writing has become a vast and swift-growing field in the modern literary world. Ecocriticism has great significance as it enables a better understanding and appreciation of the unique vibrancy of the environmental literature. Hence, this study of the intimate link between word and world promises a new direction in literary criticism.

HENRY DAVID THOREAU’S WALDEN- POND ESSAY

When Thoreau has enough of town life, he spends his leisure time in the country. At times Thoreau takes a boat on the pond and plays his flute, and he goes fishing at midnight as well, drifting between waking and dreaming until he snaps awake when he feels a tug on his line. This fishing vignette allows Thoreau to segue into an extended meditation on the local Concord ponds, especially Walden.

Although Walden Pond itself is not particularly grand, Thoreau says, it is remarkably deep and pure. Depending on the point of view and the time of day, the water of the pond may appear blue, green, or totally transparent. It makes the body of the bather appear pure white, rather than yellowish as the river water does. Thoreau reports that Walden Pond is said by some to be bottomless. White stones surround the shore, allowing Thoreau to venture a wry etymology of its name (“walled-in”), and hills rise beyond. Other ponds, such as Flints’, have their distinctive qualities, and Thoreau’s emphasis is on their uniqueness rather than their generic similarities.

In exploring the outlying areas, Thoreau notes the well-worn paths of previous generations now long gone. He comments on the unpredictable fluctuations in the depth of the pond, and speculates on some

possible origins of the name Walden. Thoreau muses about how his fellow townsmen think the pond resulted from the sinking of a hill into the earth as punishment for Native American wrongdoing that took place there. He says that his “ancient settler” friend, referred to earlier in the work, claims to have dug the pond. Thoreau says that he does not object to these stories. He notices that the surrounding hills contain the same kind of stones that surround Walden’s walled-in shores. Animals found at the pond, including ducks, frogs, muskrats, minks, and turtles, all make an appearance in Thoreau’s account. Growing more mystical by the end of the chapter, Thoreau focuses on the serenity and peacefulness of the ponds in a way that suggests a higher meaning. He says that they are beyond human description or knowledge, and are “much more beautiful than our lives.”

Dorris Lessings Play with a Tiger

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

[Doris Lessing](#) was born Doris May Tayler, in Persia (later renamed as Iran) to English parents on October 22, 1919. Her family then moved to Southern Rhodesia (later renamed as Zimbabwe) in Southern Africa, in 1924. There, Lessing left school at the age of thirteen, began working at fifteen, and began a longtime involvement with Marxist politics. She was attracted to Marxism's focus on workers' rights. Further, in its Southern African form, Marxist politics was focused on the rights of blacks. The indigenous black populations in the region had been subjugated since the period of European colonialism. Lessing lived in Africa until she moved to London, England, in 1949.

Lessing arrived in London with a manuscript of a first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, which takes place in Zimbabwe and which made Lessing's name as a writer. She followed this first publication with three novels from what is, in total, a five-volume set entitled *The Children of Violence* series. Her next two novels were not parts of the series, and the sixth, *The Golden Notebook*, is the novel for which Lessing is most admired. It is revered as a classic of feminist writing and as a brilliant portrayal of social and political post-[World War II](#) English life. The novel also includes material that takes place in Africa, so that this novel, like so many of Lessing's works, contributes to the body of work by writers whose journalism and fiction explore and contest the inequalities that followed from European imperialism in Africa.

The fifth novel in Lessing's *The Children of Violence* series points towards the type of fiction she since has been most interested in, novels she calls "space fiction" but which are categorized in bookstores as [science fiction](#). The distinction, Lessing has said, is that [science fiction](#) is interested in technology, and she is interested in imagining utopian and other possible future societies.

Of the handful of plays Lessing has written, *Play with a Tiger* is most interesting for the way in which its themes and situations mirror many of those of the *Golden Notebook*. It attests to Lessing's perennial interest in gender and political questions in a modern world that has witnessed the [cold war](#) between capitalist and communist regimes and great changes in the relationship between men and women and in the nature of families. The play was first produced in London in 1962, the year it was also published.

Lessing has been nominated for and has won a number of literary prizes throughout her career, such as Spain's prestigious Prince of Asturias Prize for literature in 2001. In 1995, she received a [Los Angeles Times Book Prize](#) for an autobiographical book, *Under My Skin*, and an honorary degree from [Harvard University](#). In 1999, Queen [Elizabeth II](#) of England appointed Lessing a Companion of Honour.

PLOT SUMMARY

Act 1

Anna Freeman and Tom Lattimer are in the midst of a heated exchange. Tom is trying to find out why Anna has decided not to marry him. Anna avoids the subject. She responds to Tom's words by talking about something completely unrelated. For example, she mentions the man she sees standing in the street outside, the man who often stands there, apparently because he is in love with a woman who lives in a nearby apartment. Finally, however, Anna explains herself. She says that she cannot stand the idea of Tom having taken a job at a popular women's magazine. Tom accuses Anna of being a romantic, insisting that she will one day regret not having a regular job herself.

21

They hear a noise at the door, the voice of the woman from whom Anna rents rooms. The woman is Mary Jackson; she is calling her cat. She enters the room not knowing Tom is there to ask Anna if she wants to go out for a cup of coffee. She sees Tom and figures out what is going on. She is cavalier about the situation, asking Tom how it was he thought the two of them would ever get married.

They hear the doorbell ring. Mary exits and returns with the visitor. It is Harry Paine, one of Anna's friends. Harry has come for sympathy from Anna. He is married but has affairs. His latest girlfriend has left him; she is going to marry. He wants Anna to go with him for a few drinks so that he can pour his heart out. Anna refuses. He asks Mary to go instead, and Mary is very pleased.

As Mary does, Harry tells Tom that Anna would never have married him. He tells Tom that Tom is turning into a conventional person. Tom responds by telling Harry that Harry has a similar job, that they are not so very different. This makes Harry stop making fun of Tom. The four then begin to speak of Dave Miller, a friend of Anna, whom Harry says Anna should marry instead of Tom. Anna says she never will and predicts that Dave, despite his apparent unconventionality, will end up like Harry—married and routinely cheating on his wife. Harry is angry at Anna's portrait of him.

While they are talking, the doorbell rings again. Mary exits to see who it is. With Mary gone, Tom uses Mary to scare Anna. He says that Anna is on her way to becoming Mary, an older lady obsessed with cats, because cats will be her only company if she continues to refuse marriage proposals. Anna insults Tom, in turn, to defend Mary. Her last word is that she would rather be lonely and true to herself than a compromiser like Tom.

Harry and Mary leave, and the person who rang the doorbell reaches Anna's room. It is [Janet Stevens](#), one of Dave Miller's casual girlfriends. Tom leaves.

With Tom gone, Janet explains why she has come. She is pregnant by Dave, having decided to trap him into marriage by not using [birth control](#). She has not seen him for days and is fearful that he may have left her for good. She knows that Dave is in love with Anna. She wants Anna to tell Dave about her situation. She leaves upset but glad about what she has done. She says it will be good for Dave to settle down.

Next, Dave arrives. Anna is by now deeply frustrated and upset. She has broken an engagement with a man she has been in love with. She is in love with Dave, and she knows that her relationship with Dave is bound to end as well. At first, Anna behaves coldly towards Dave, and he does not know why. Finally, she melts. They sit cross-legged on the carpet facing each other, as if to begin a ritual, and it is clear they have done this before. The lights dim and the walls of Anna's room fade away. The two seem to be floating in the midst of the great city of London.

Act 2

Anna and Dave are as they were at the end of act 1. Anna stands and becomes as she was when she was a child, mimicking her childhood Australian accent. She is speaking to her mother as she apparently did sometime in the past, declaring that she will never become like her mother: isolated, on a farm, tied to the home by endless duties.

Next Dave goes back into his past. He acts out a scene from his childhood on the streets of Chicago. He is with friends. They are pretending that they are depression-era gangsters. He recalls how he had strong political convictions even then, going through anarchist and socialist phases.

Dave next talks about how he once went to see a psychoanalyst. He begged the psychoanalyst to explain to him how to be content. The doctor tells him to marry and to have a couple children. Dave is both

22

scoffing and nervous as he tells the story, as if he is worried that the analyst is right in telling him to live and believe like most everybody else. Dave also explains how his parents were hardly present as he was growing up. They were both union organizers and often traveled.

They hear a commotion in the street. The women across the way are fighting, as Anna says they did the previous night. Anna and Dave speak anxiously about wanting a better world and wanting to be better people themselves. Anna says she once tried very hard to conjure a vision of herself as an entirely different person. What she saw was a tiger. She called the tiger to her, and it was purring. Then it slashed her and began to snarl. Next she heard its keepers calling and wheeling out its huge cage.

The phone rings, but Anna does not answer it. She tells Dave that his future might simply be marriage to a typical American girl. Anna announces that she is very tired of trying to be good.

Act 3

Anna turns on the light. The walls of the room return. She declares to Dave that her and Dave's relationship is over. Dave is frustrated. He tries to force Anna to interact with him. She repeats that their relationship is over. She says that they are not so very special, that they are merely egotists. She says that egotists are people for whom self-respect is more important than anything else, even other people. She belittles herself and Dave. They speak briefly of Anna's child. Dave asks what the child means to Anna. She says the child gives her hope in a better future.

Harry and Mary return; their drunken, boisterous voices are heard. There is the sense that Harry will spend the night with Mary. Mary enters but leaves shortly thereafter. Harry enters and says that Mary has fallen asleep. Anna tells Harry to go home to his wife, Helen, which angers Harry. The telephone rings. Harry is sure it is Tom. Anna repeats that Harry must go home to Helen. He does so.

Anna finally tells Dave about Janet's visit and her situation. Dave is not particularly shocked. He says that he will marry Janet if that is what she wants but that he will not really change. He accuses Anna of using Janet as an excuse to end their relationship.

The telephone rings. It is Janet. Dave consoles her. He hangs up. Dave and Anna look at each other. He leaves.

Anna begins to cry. She pours herself a drink. Mary comes in and takes the drink away from Anna. Anna says Dave has gone to get married. Mary says he was bound to. The play ends with the two women speaking about how Anna's boy will be coming home from boarding school soon. The walls of Anna's room once again dissolve. The curtain falls.

CHARACTERS

Anna Freeman

Anna Freeman is the main character of *Play with a Tiger*. Over the course of the play's action, she explains to her fiancé that she will not marry him, watches another man she is close to realize that he has been trapped into marriage, and interacts with a friend and with the woman from whom she is renting two rooms. Anna Freeman is an Australian woman who has lived in London long enough that she has lost her accent and speaks like any other middle-class Londoner. Her husband was killed in an unidentified war, perhaps [World War II](#), and she has a child from the marriage. She supports herself by writing reviews of books, and the like, on a freelance basis. Lessing's choice of surname for Anna is significant, as much is made of Anna being "free" in the play. Yet, freedom is not a blissful state for Anna. To be free in the play

23

means to be wholly independent of persons and institutions that conflict with one's ideals. Anna's ideals are that women should be considered the equals of men, that society should be less consumerist, and that governments should be more interested in equalizing society by improving the lot of the working classes. It is important to her not to take a regular job, as this would mean contributing to the strength of society as it stands. Thus, Anna is free at great emotional and financial cost, making very little money and remaining alienated from the mainstream of society. Anna's ideals also explain her decision not to marry. Her feeling is that the institution of marriage, as it stands in British society, does not work as well for women as it does for men. She believes that if she marries she will be compelled to fulfill a particular wifely role that will stifle her individuality. Her feelings that marriage will weaken her ability to live according to her principles are strengthened by the fact that her fiancé, who used to support himself as she does, has taken on a regular job. He is sick of his financially precarious existence, and Anna sees this as evidence that he is becoming a part of society's mainstream.

Mary Jackson

Mary Jackson owns the house in which Anna lives and rents rooms for herself and her child. She appears intermittently throughout the play. Like Anna, Mary is a widow with a child. She is about ten years older than Anna. In a way, she represents Anna ten years in the future. As such, she represents the difficulties of freedom, as Anna imagines freedom. Mary is lonely, craving male companionship but finding that men of her own age gravitate toward women much younger than themselves. She is intelligent and emotionally strong, but there is the sense that her circumstances are wearing her down. There is much discussion of her and her cat, as if she is on her way to becoming a doddering old lady who does little else but talk to animals. Tom uses Mary to scare Anna, to make her think that she will be ridiculous, and lonely, in ten years' time, when she is still unmarried and her child has gone off to college. At the end of the play, Anna and Mary stand together, as if to communicate that as long as women who refuse to compromise have each other, they will be able to withstand the difficulties of their circumstances.

Tom Lattimer

Tom is the character with whom Anna is interacting at the beginning of *Play with a Tiger*. He appears only in act 1. He and Anna are discussing what was to have been their impending marriage and Anna's decision to break the engagement. Like Anna, Tom is highly principled. Also like Anna, his means of financial support are precarious. In fact, apparently motivating Anna's decision to break off their engagement is his recent decision to take on a regular job as business manager at a woman's magazine. There is the sense that he has taken this job partly in anticipation of his marriage so that the new household will be financially stable. Anna sees this as evidence of a change in Tom's character that does not bode well for her own future. She thinks that his decision to take the job is evidence that he is compromising his ideals, and she fears that in marrying him she will be drawn into a circle of

compromise. Although Tom manipulates Anna into thinking twice about breaking off their engagement by exploiting her fears of being alone, he remains a mostly sympathetic character. He is intelligent, treats Anna as a friend and an equal, wants her to change her mind, but does not humiliate himself in his attempts to convince her to do so. Further, he knows that she might still be seeing another man and is bitter, but not abusive. He insists that he is the better choice for her and that financial stability is something she should think about.

The Man

Throughout *Play with a Tiger*, Anna refers to a man who stands vigil in the street below, looking up longingly at the window of some women who live in an apartment across from Anna. According to Anna, the man is in love with one of the apartment's inhabitants.

24

Dave Miller

Dave Miller is a U.S. citizen in his early thirties temporarily in London. He is the child of two labor activists and is active in international socialist politics himself. He is a vivid character, energetic yet tortured by self-doubt. He arrives at Anna's house after Tom, Harry, and Mary have left and after [Janet Stevens](#) has visited Anna. He interacts with Anna after his arrival until nearly the end of the play. He and Anna are in love, even though their affair has been taking place with Anna still considering Tom as her primary partner. Dave encourages Anna to remain true to her ideals and not to marry Tom. His attitude about Tom might be motivated by possessive feelings, although he is supposedly above such sentiments. His attitude about Anna's potential marriage is also ironic, as he finds out over the course of the evening that he himself will be marrying shortly; one of his casual girlfriends, Janet Stevens, is five months pregnant. He cannot shame the woman and let her have an illegitimate child, and so he will do what he has said he never would, and what Anna should not, and that is marry a conventional person. To Dave, this marriage means that he will be Janet's husband in name, but not in spirit. Implicitly, he is claiming that his role will be, primarily, to provide financially for her and the child. He insists that Janet's pregnancy should have no effect on his and Anna's relationship. But for Anna, the event of Dave's marriage is the definitive end of their association. He will, after all, end up returning to the [United States](#), and she knows that she is unlikely ever to see him again. Thus, Dave is a character prone to self-deception; he is far less able than Anna to remain true to his ideals, but he seems to believe that he is doing so.

Harry Paine

Harry Paine is a man in his fifties who has a job similar to Tom's new one. He is married and has serial affairs. His wife, Helen, who is often referred to but never appears in the play, is ill and accepts his affairs, although they demoralize her. She accepts them in order to maintain the marriage. Much as Mary, as a character, functions to refer to Anna in the future, so Harry functions as a possible future version of Tom. In other words, Harry and Helen's marriage is what Anna fears hers and Tom's will become. Will Tom settle into his job and eventually come to take Anna for granted? Will he begin having affairs with younger women like Harry does? Will she accept these affairs as Harry's wife does out of fear of change? Mary and Anna pamper Harry. It is clear that they are in the habit of listening to his woes and making him feel better when one of his young women leaves him. Indeed, he visits Anna and Mary for sympathy because his latest affair has dissolved. Considering that Anna and Mary identify with Helen and all other women in her position, their attachment to Harry causes them emotional conflict. Anna's acceptance of Harry also demonstrates that her ability to avoid compromise is imperfect. She dislikes how married men in her society pursue affairs as a matter of course, yet Harry remains her close friend.

Helen Paine

Helen never appears in Lessing's play, but she is referred to often. She is Harry Paine's long-suffering wife, putting up with his infidelities because she cannot bear the thought of ending the marriage. She is ill, which makes Harry's infidelities seem crueler, yet he has no intention of changing his ways.

Janet Stevens

Janet Stevens is a young U.S. citizen in her twenties, who is a lover of Dave Miller. She knows Dave well enough to know that he is unlikely to marry her, and Dave has told her that he is in love with Anna. She becomes pregnant in order to force him to marry her. She arrives at Anna's home after Tom, Harry, and Mary have left and before Dave arrives. She has been unable to get in contact with Dave, and she knows that Dave, sooner or later, will see Anna again. She wants Anna to tell Dave that she is pregnant. She is somewhat ashamed of her dishonesty, but she is also defiant.

THEMES

25

Activism

Lessing's introductory comments on her play, addressed to potential directors, state that *Play with a Tiger* is "about the rootless, de-classed people who live in bed-sitting rooms or small flats or the cheaper hotel rooms." "Such people," she says, "are usually presented on the stage in a detailed squalor of realism which to my mind detracts from what is interesting about them." Of interest to Lessing in particular appears to be the way in which many of these persons choose their peripheral status in their pursuit of alternative social and political convictions. To be sure, Lessing's major characters in *Play with a Tiger* are, or until recently have been, committed political activists, wholly dedicated to their project of changing the world for the better. Their quick, complex speech is delivered with passion; their every act, every moment, is of the essence.

Anna, Dave, and Tom's desire to mold the world into the better one they envision involves their remaining peripheral to the mainstream, as to them all institutions and social practices as they stand perpetuate the tainted system they decry. Anna is just able to scrape together a living by freelance writing. Tom is perhaps finally giving up on his fight, as he has just accepted the offer of a regular job. Similarly, Dave calmly accepts the news that a casual girlfriend is pregnant, and he must marry her. His equanimity suggests that his having been trapped into marriage is not so unwelcome after all, that he is somehow relieved at having been put in the position of having to give up on being different. However, despite the changes of heart the play's principal men seem to be undergoing, it is understood that they are activists, committed to a vision of a changed and better world.

Freedom

To be free in Lessing's play means to be impervious to the traps of conventional society, to see that the truth lies in other ways of living. The value of this sort of freedom is seen in Lessing's contrast of Harry and Helen's conventional and problematic coupling and Anna and Dave's wholly passionate liaison. Harry betrays the spirit of his marriage as a matter of course; Helen remains married to him, but unhappily. Clearly, they are not really a couple, despite their married state. The intimacy, passion, and comradeship of Anna and Dave stand out by contrast (even as Dave appears to be preparing to give up on his convictions). The two are intellectual partners, eagerly challenging each other and mostly happily agreeing on their aims. They are a "new" couple, man and woman, equal and not focused on their own private comforts but on the good of all.

Yet, this sort of freedom takes its toll on its adherents. Anna and Dave suffer in their position on the fringes. They are lonely, as idealists of their ilk are few and far between. The smallness of their numbers means that they have to work for change particularly diligently. Thus they are drawn to what they imagine are the solaces of accepting things as they are, for example a less stressful life.

The specter haunting every fervent, radical political idealist is compromise. These persons believe a changed world will be a better one so that participating in societal institutions as they stand is torture tantamount to supporting them. Yet the changes they desire are for the future to deliver, and so the possibility of not having to compromise is nearly impossible. As Lessing's play shows, idealists can simply become weary with the effort of what Anna calls being "good." Tom has compromised his ideals by having accepted a job as business manager in a typical (as opposed to progressive) women's magazine, and Dave is on his way to becoming a husband and father in middle America. Tom is not particularly happy with himself, but he has arrived at the point where he can accuse Anna of being a hopeless romantic. In other words, he is suggesting that these radical views were appropriate in his youth but that greater wisdom, or greater age, entails "compromise."