
Unit-2 □ Joseph Conrad: The Lagoon Somerset Maugham: The Lotus Eater

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3.2.0 Introduction

In this Unit you will be acquainted in brief with the genre of the Short Story and then it will be followed up with two modern specimens by remarkable 20th century exponents of the genre. If you look at your syllabus analytically, you will see that

while all other forms of literature have existed since fairly long, the short story is a relatively later development. This is not to say that as a prose genre, it is a kind of ‘little sister of the novel’. In fact, history says that many fiction writers have begun their literary careers with the short story, for it imbues them with the sense of unity that is so much the essence of fictional art. The Unit will in course, acquaint you with the aspects one needs to keep in mind when reading a short story.

3.2.1 The Short Story: Evolution as a Genre

In searching the origins of stories, classical history would take us back to the very beginnings of civilization – to Hesiod, who showed how the founding myths were invented to explain the existence of the world and how it came to be peopled by human beings. Renaissance understandings of the European tradition would take us back to Boccaccio’s *Decameron* or to Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, while Oriental history would talk of the Persian queen Scheherazade’s stories to King Shahryar. Besides, there are tales from the *Panchatantra*, *Aesop’s Fables* and of course the *Bible* – that great storehouse of lore. Thus across cultures, the story telling instinct is an old one.

But when we are looking specifically at the Short Story as a genre, we are actually trying to locate a movement from the spoken word to the written in the course of its shaping up. The task of definitively ascertaining who wrote and published the first truly modern short story is however a difficult one. This is because, as we said earlier, the cultural history of the published short story is relatively recent; in fact, it is only a few decades longer than that of cinematography. It had always existed in an informal, oral tradition, but never found a real publishing forum until the rise of mass middle class literacy in the West in the 19th century. This in turn provided a market for magazines and periodicals which gave the short fiction autonomy of space. The ready reception of the new form proved that readers had for long been in search of a medium that could express small but by no means insignificant aspects of their lives at the ‘turn of a screw’. On the part of the writers too, it was a worthwhile discovery that they now had a powerful literary tool on their hands. As proof that the story telling and receiving ability had always been inherent in the human imagination, Boyd mentions the classic and timeless short stories that Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe and Ivan Turgenev were writing in the early

to mid-19th century. By the end of this era the form had been nearly perfected by the Russian master story teller Anton Chekhov.

Unlike other literary types, it is not quite possible to outline an explicitly British history of the short story. This is because though Walter Scott's story 'The Two Drovers' published in *Chronicles of the Canongate* in 1827 has been widely accepted as the beginnings of the literary canon and it did inspire the likes of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy, it was followed up more in other lands like France, Russia and of course America. In France the art of the short story was firmly established in 1829-31 with the magazine publication of a dozen *contes* by Merimee, Balzac and Gautier. Experimental works like the pastoral freshness of Daudet, the meticulous objectivity of Flaubert or the naturalism of Maupassant however took some more time to mature. In Russia too, the beginnings of imaginative work in short prose fiction was done by Pushkin and then followed up by Gogol and Turgenev. In contrast with this, after the beginnings by Scott, the short story hardly had much following in Britain all along the mid-19th century when the novel was in its heyday. All the great story writers we have had around this time were thus non – British, like Flaubert and Maupassant, Melville, Poe and Chekhov. In fact it was in reading Hawthorne that Poe came up with his famous definition of a short story as a narrative that "can be read at one sitting." Clearly Poe was focussing on the singularity of effect and that basically remains the hallmark of a gutsy short story. It was only with Robert Louis Stevenson in the 1880's that Britain took to writing short stories seriously and consistently. We come across a long list of writers like Herbert George Wells (1866-1946), Arnold Bennet (1867-1931), the American born Henry James (1843-1916) and of course, Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936).

The Short Story:

Exponents outside Britain

France:

Honore de Balzac, 1799 – 1850

Prosper Merimee, 1803 – 1870

Theophile Gautier, 1811 – 1872

Gustave Falubert, 1821 – 1880

Alphonse Daudet, 1840 – 1897

Guy de Maupassant, 1850 – 1893

Russia:

Alexander Pushkin, 1799 – 1837

Nikolai Gogol, 1809 – 1852

Ivan Turgenev, 1818 – 1883

America:

James Fennimore Cooper, 1789 - 1851

Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1804 – 1864

Edgar Allan Poe, 1809 - 1849

The credit for making a cult of the short story must however go to Anton Chekov who did away with manipulative plot structures, abandoned any judgmental stand on characters and sought neither climaxes nor neat narrative resolutions to his stories. A Chekov short story would therefore just be out there in the middle, standing out as a neat piece of realistic life. Most short story writing in the 20th century has been Chekhovian, or inspired by Chekov. James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield or Raymond Carver — all owe their debt to him.

From the end of the 20th century however, a tonal shift is again evident – if the pre-Chekov models were ‘event-plot’ stories (to borrow the term from William Gerhardie) and the Chekhovian ones were ontological (presenting life in its bare essentials stripped of compulsions of plot or propriety); then the modernist short story is often baffling in its range. In it we find the use of techniques like the ‘suppressed narrative’ (where the meaning to be discovered lies beneath the apparently simple text), the poetic/mythic (where the story comes close to lyric poetry and thus becomes difficult to understand) and the biographical (where stories tend to deal with factuality or even become non-fictional in intent). There could be endless such categories and this only goes on to prove that the short story is indeed a dynamic form.

Coming to the present context, we shall now try to place Joseph Conrad as a writer in perspective and then follow it up with a detailed reading of your syllabised text.

3.2.2 Joseph Conrad: A Literary Bio-brief

You will be surprised to know that for someone who wrote not less than sixteen novels individually (apart from the ones he wrote collaboratively, besides his unfinished work) and numerous short stories in English, Joseph Conrad was born far away from England, in one of the Ukrainian province of Poland. He was born Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski in 1857 to Apollo Korzeniowski and Ewa Bobrowska, and it is important that his father was a writer, translator, political activist, and would-be revolutionary. Poland was then under Russian Tsarist rule, and Conrad’s father was exiled in Northern Russia where he died when Joseph was barely twelve years old. He thus had a chequered childhood, being brought up by an uncle, and having a great desire to be a seaman right from his teens.

Never a great student at school, the only subject that seemed to interest the young

Joseph was Geography. Without even completing secondary school, at sixteen he was sent to Marseilles in France for a career at sea. But by then, he was well read in Polish Romantic literature; knew a fair degree of French, German, Latin and Greek; and had a working knowledge of History, Geography and even Physics. Having spent nearly four years on French ships, Conrad joined the British merchant marine where he grew in rank from crew member to captain. He became a naturalised British citizen in 1886.

It is his long career as a sea voyager that forms the basis of most of the fictional work of Joseph Conrad. This is evident right from his first novel *Almayer's Folly*, which has an authentic Malayan setting. Michael Thorpe, the editor of *Modern Prose*, rightly extols Conrad as “a teller of exciting stories whose appeal was enhanced by the exotic and romantic settings of his Malayan tales”, of which “The Lagoon” is a very early example. However, we also need to keep in mind that to pin down Conrad as just a teller of stories of maritime adventure would be a gross misjudgment of his potential. To look beyond his Malayan experiences, one has to see his depictions of Africa in *An Outpost of Progress* and *Heart of Darkness* for instance, both novels that show a conflict between the Eurocentric world and their colonial dominions. In his own words in the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Conrad aspired “by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel... before all, to make you *see*. That – and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your desserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm – all you demand – and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask.”

In 1896, he finally gave up his maritime career, settled in London and lived a quiet but industrious life that was devoted to writing out of his greatly active previous life. Conrad breathed his last on 3rd August 1924 and was interred at the Canterbury Cemetery, where his grave stone was adorned with befitting words from Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*:

Sleep after toyle, port after stormie seas,
Ease after warre, death after life, doth greatly please.

For those of you who are interested to know more about the life, works and controversies that surround Joseph Conrad, the following link could be useful:

<https://www.biography.com/people/joseph-conrad-9255343>

3.2.3 “The Lagoon”: Text with Publication Details and Glossary

As a short story, “The Lagoon”, which is one of Conrad’s earliest works, combines elements of realistic history, the spirit of adventure, the vital human emotions of passion and remorse, and of course an intense romanticism. It was written by Conrad in 1896 and first published in *Cornhill Magazine* in 1897. The story was later collected in *Tales of Unrest* which appeared in 1898. Conrad in fact claims it to be his first short story. It is Conrad’s shortest composition involving five thousand seven hundred words. Broadly, the setting of the story is in an Indonesian rain-forest and the major characters present are Arsat, a young Malay; his wife, Diamelen; and the White Man who weaves the narrative thread. The absent presence of Arsat’s brother, who gave his life for the sake of Arsat and his love forms an important backdrop of the story.

The Lagoon

The white man, leaning with both arms over the roof of the little house in the stern of the boat, said to the steersman—

‘We will pass the night in Arsat’s clearing. It is late.’

The Malay only grunted, and went on looking fixedly at the river. The white man rested his chin on his crossed arms and gazed at the wake of the boat. At the end of the straight avenue of forests cut by the intense glitter of the river, the sun appeared unclouded and dazzling, poised low over the water that shone smoothly like a band of metal. The forests, somber and dull, stood motionless and silent on each side of the broad stream. At the foot of big, towering trees, trunkless nipa palms rose from the mud of the bank, in bunches of leaves enormous and heavy, that hung unstirring over the brown swirl of eddies. In the stillness of the air every tree, every leaf, every bough, every tendril of creeper and every petal of minute blossoms seemed to have been bewitched into an immobility perfect and final. Nothing moved on the river but the eight paddles that rose flashing regularly, dipped together with a single splash; while the steersman swept right and left with a periodic and sudden flourish of his blade describing a glinting semicircle above his head. The churned up water frothed alongside with a confused murmur. And the white man’s canoe, advancing up stream in the short-lived disturbance of its own making, seemed to enter the portals of a land from which the very memory of motion had for ever departed.

The white man, turning his back upon the setting sun, looked along the empty and broad expanse of the sea-reach. For the last three miles of its course the wandering, hesitating river, as if enticed irresistibly by the freedom of an open horizon, flows straight into the sea, flows straight to the east - to the east that harbours both light and darkness. Astern of the boat the repeated call of some bird, a cry discordant and feeble, skipped along over the smooth water and lost itself, before it could reach the other shore, in the breathless silence of the world.

The steersman dug his paddle into the stream, and held hard with stiffened arms, his body thrown forward. The water gurgled aloud; and suddenly the long straight reach seemed to pivot on its center, the forests swung in a semicircle, and the slanting beams of sunset touched the broadside of the canoe with a fiery glow, throwing the slender and distorted shadows of its crew upon the streaked glitter of the river. The white man turned to look ahead. The course of the boat had been altered at right-angles to the stream, and the carved dragon-head of its prow was pointing now at a gap in the fringing bushes of the bank. It glided through, brushing the overhanging twigs, and disappeared from the river like some slim and amphibious creature leaving the water for its lair in the forests.

The narrow creek was like a ditch: tortuous, fabulously deep; filled with gloom under the thin strip of pure and shining blue of the heaven. Immense trees soared up, invisible behind the festooned draperies of creepers. Here and there, near the glistening blackness of the water, a twisted root of some tall tree showed amongst the tracery of small ferns, black and dull, writhing and motionless, like an arrested snake. The short words of the paddlers reverberated loudly between the thick and somber walls of vegetation. Darkness oozed out from between the trees, through the tangled maze of the creepers, from behind the great fantastic and unstirring leaves; the darkness, mysterious and invincible; the darkness scented and poisonous of impenetrable forests.

The men poled in the shoaling water. The creek broadened, opening out into a wide sweep of a stagnant lagoon. The forests receded from the marshy bank, leaving a level strip of bright-green, reedy grass to frame the reflected blueness of the sky. A fleecy pink cloud drifted high above, trailing the delicate coloring of its image under the floating leaves and the silvery blossoms of the lotus. A little house, perched on high piles, appeared black in the distance. Near it, two tall nibong palms, that seemed to have come out of the forests in the background, leaned slightly

over the ragged roof, with a suggestion of sad tenderness and care in the droop of their leafy and soaring heads.

The steersman, pointing with his paddle, said, 'Arsat is there. I see his canoe fast between the piles.'

The polers ran along the sides of the boat glancing over their shoulders at the end of the day's journey. They would have preferred to spend the night somewhere else than on this lagoon of weird aspect and ghostly reputation. Moreover, they disliked Arsat, first as a stranger, and also because he who repairs a ruined house, and dwells in it, proclaims that he is not afraid to live amongst the spirits that haunt the places abandoned by mankind. Such a man can disturb the course of fate by glances or words; while his familiar ghosts are not easy to propitiate by casual wayfarers upon whom they long to wreak the malice of their human master. White men care not for such things, being unbelievers and in league with the Father of Evil, who leads them unharmed through the invisible dangers of this world. To the warnings of the righteous they oppose an offensive pretence of disbelief. What is there to be done?

So they thought, throwing their weight on the end of their long poles. The big canoe glided on swiftly, noiselessly and smoothly, towards Arsat's clearing, till, in a great rattling of poles thrown down, and the loud murmurs of 'Allah be praised!' it came with a gentle knock against the crooked piles below the house.

The boatmen with uplifted faces shouted discordantly, 'Arsat! O Arsat!' Nobody came. The white man began to climb the rude ladder giving access to the bamboo platform before the house. The juragan of the boat said sulkily, 'We will cook in the sampan, and sleep on the water.'

'Pass my blankets and the basket,' said the white man curtly.

He knelt on the edge of the platform to receive the bundle. Then the boat shoved off, and the white man, standing up, confronted Arsat, who had come out through the low door of his hut. He was a man young, powerful, with a broad chest and muscular arms. He had nothing on but his sarong. His head was bare. His big, soft eyes stared eagerly at the white man, but his voice and demeanor were composed as he asked, without any words of greeting—

'Have you medicine, Tuan?'

'No,' said the visitor in a startled tone. 'No. Why? Is there sickness in the house?'

'Enter and see,' replied Arsat, in the same calm manner, and turning short round, passed again through the small doorway. The white man, dropping his bundles, followed.

In the dim light of the dwelling he made out on a couch of bamboos a woman stretched on her back under a broad sheet of red cotton cloth. She lay still, as if dead; but her big eyes, wide open, glittered in the gloom, staring upwards at the slender rafters, motionless and unseeing. She was in a high fever, and evidently unconscious. Her cheeks were sunk slightly, her lips were partly open, and on the young face there was the ominous and fixed expression - the absorbed, contemplating expression of the unconscious who are going to die. The two men stood looking down at her in silence.

'Has she been long ill?' asked the traveler.

'I have not slept for five nights,' answered the Malay, in a deliberate tone. 'At first she heard voices calling her from the water and struggled against me who held her. But since the sun of to-day rose she hears nothing - she hears not me. She sees nothing. She sees not me - me!'

He remained silent for a minute, then asked softly—

'Tuan, will she die?'

'I fear so,' said the white man sorrowfully. He had known Arsat years ago, in a far country in times of trouble and danger, when no friendship is to be despised. And since his Malay friend had come unexpectedly to dwell in the hut on the lagoon with a strange woman, he had slept many times there, in his journeys up or down the river. He liked the man who knew how to keep faith in council and how to fight without fear by the side of his white friend. He liked him - not so much perhaps as a man likes his favorite dog - but still he liked him well enough to help and ask no questions, to think sometimes vaguely and hazily in the midst of his own pursuits, about the lonely man and the long-haired woman with audacious face and triumphant eyes, who lived together hidden by the forests - alone and feared.

The white man came out of the hut in time to see the enormous conflagration of sunset put out by the swift and stealthy shadows that, rising like a black and

impalpable vapor above the tree-tops, spread over the heaven, extinguishing the crimson glow of floating clouds and the red brilliance of departing daylight. In a few moments all the stars came out above the intense blackness of the earth, and the great lagoon gleaming suddenly with reflected lights resembled an oval patch of night-sky flung down into the hopeless and abysmal night of the wilderness. The white man had some supper out of the basket, then collecting a few sticks that lay about the platform, made up a small fire, not for warmth, but for the sake of the smoke, which would keep off the mosquitos. He wrapped himself in his blankets and sat with his back against the reed wall of the house, smoking thoughtfully.

Arsat came through the doorway with noiseless steps and squatted down by the fire. The white man moved his outstretched legs a little.

'She breathes,' said Arsat in a low voice, anticipating the expected question. 'She breathes and burns as if with a great fire. She speaks not; she hears not - and burns!'

He paused for a moment, then asked in a quiet, incurious tone—

'Tuan ... will she die?'

The white man moved his shoulders uneasily, and muttered in a hesitating manner—

'If such is her fate.'

'No, Tuan,' said Arsat calmly. 'If such is my fate. I hear, I see, I wait. I remember ... Tuan, do you remember the old days? Do you remember my brother?'

'Yes,' said the white man. The Malay rose suddenly and went in. The other, sitting still outside, could hear the voice in the hut. Arsat said: 'Hear me! Speak!' His words were succeeded by a complete silence. 'O! Diamelen!' he cried suddenly. After that cry there was a deep sigh. Arsat came out and sank down again in his old place.

They sat in silence before the fire. There was no sound within the house, there was no sound near them; but far away on the lagoon they could hear the voices of the boatmen ringing fitful and distinct on the calm water. The fire in the bows of the sampan shone faintly in the distance with a hazy red glow. Then it died out. The voices ceased. The land and the water slept invisible, unstirring and mute. It was as though there had been nothing left in the world but the glitter of stars streaming, ceaseless and vain, through the black stillness of the night.

The white man gazed straight before him into the darkness with wide-open eyes. The fear and fascination, the inspiration and the wonder of death - of death near, unavoidable and unseen, soothed the unrest of his race and stirred the most indistinct, the most intimate of his thoughts. The ever-ready suspicion of evil, the gnawing suspicion that lurks in our hearts, flowed out into the stillness round him - into the stillness profound and dumb, and made it appear untrustworthy and infamous, like the placid and impenetrable mask of an unjustifiable violence. In that fleeting and powerful disturbance of his being the earth enfolded in the starlight peace became a shadowy country of inhuman strife, a battle-field of phantoms terrible and charming, august or ignoble, struggling ardently for the possession of our helpless hearts. An unquiet and mysterious country of inextinguishable desires and fears.

A plaintive murmur rose in the night; a murmur saddening and startling, as if the great solitudes of surrounding woods had tried to whisper into his ear the wisdom of their immense and lofty indifference. Sounds hesitating and vague floated in the air round him, shaped themselves slowly into words; and at last flowed on gently in a murmuring stream of soft and monotonous sentences. He stirred like a man waking up and changed his position slightly. Arsat, motionless and shadowy, sitting with bowed head under the stars, was speaking in a low and dreamy tone.

'... for where can we lay down the heaviness of our trouble but in a friend's heart? A man must speak of war and of love. You, Tuan, know what war is, and you have seen me in time of danger seek death as other men seek life! A writing may be lost; a lie may be written; but what the eye has seen is truth and remains in the mind!'

'I remember,' said the white man quietly. Arsat went on with mournful composure.

'Therefore I shall speak to you of love. Speak in the night. Speak before both night and love are gone - and the eye of day looks upon my sorrow and my shame; upon my blackened face; upon my burnt-up heart.'

A sigh, short and faint, marked an almost imperceptible pause, and then his words flowed on, without a stir, without a gesture.

'After the time of trouble and war was over and you went away from my

country in the pursuit of your desires, which we, men of the islands, cannot understand, I and my brother became again, as we had been before, the sword-bearers of the Ruler. You know we were men of family, belonging to a ruling race, and more fit than any to carry on our right shoulder the emblem of power. And in the time of prosperity Si Dendring showed us favour, as we, in time of sorrow, had showed to him the faithfulness of our courage. It was a time of peace. A time of deer-hunts and cock-fights; of idle talks and foolish squabbles between men whose bellies are full and weapons are rusty. But the sower watched the young rice-shoots grow up without fear, and the traders came and went, departed lean and returned fat into the river of peace. They brought news too. Brought lies and truth mixed together, so that no man knew when to rejoice and when to be sorry. We heard from them about you also. They had seen you here and had seen you there. And I was glad to hear, for I remembered the stirring times, and I always remembered you, Tuan, till the time came when my eyes could see nothing in the past, because they had looked upon the one who is dying there - in the house.'

He stopped to exclaim in an intense whisper, 'O Mara bahia! O Calamity!' then went on speaking a little louder.

'There's no worse enemy and no better friend than a brother, Tuan, for one brother knows another, and in perfect knowledge is strength for good or evil. I loved my brother. I went to him and told him that I could see nothing but one face, hear nothing but one voice. He told me: "Open your heart so that she can see what is in it - and wait. Patience is wisdom. Inchi Midah may die or our Ruler may throw off his fear of a woman!" ... I waited! ... You remember the lady with the veiled face, Tuan, and the fear of our Ruler before her cunning and temper. And if she wanted her servant, what could I do? But I fed the hunger of my heart on short glances and stealthy words. I loitered on the path to the bath-houses in the daytime, and when the sun had fallen behind the forest I crept along the jasmine hedges of the women's courtyard. Unseeing, we spoke to one another through the scent of flowers, through the veil of leaves, through the blades of long grass that stood still before our lips: so great was our prudence, so faint was the murmur of our great longing. The time passed swiftly ... and there were whispers amongst women - and our enemies watched - my brother was gloomy, and I began to think of killing and of a fierce death. ... We are of a people who take what they want - like you whites. There is a time when a man should forget loyalty and respect. Might and authority are given to rulers, but to all men is given love and strength and courage. My brother

said, "You shall take her from their midst. We are two who are like one." And I answered, "Let it be soon, for I find no warmth in sunlight that does not shine upon her." Our time came when the Ruler and all the great people went to the mouth of the river to fish by torchlight. There were hundreds of boats, and on the white sand, between the water and the forests, dwellings of leaves were built for the households of the Rajahs. The smoke of cooking-fires was like a blue mist of the evening, and many voices rang in it joyfully. While they were making the boats ready to beat up the fish, my brother came to me and said, "To-night!" I made ready my weapons, and when the time came our canoe took its place in the circle of boats carrying the torches. The lights blazed on the water, but behind the boats there was darkness. When the shouting began and the excitement made them like mad we dropped out. The water swallowed our fire, and we floated back to the shore that was dark with only here and there the glimmer of embers. We could hear the talk of slavegirls amongst the sheds. Then we found a place deserted and silent. We waited there. She came. She came running along the shore, rapid and leaving no trace, like a leaf driven by the wind into the sea. My brother said gloomily, "Go and take her; carry her into our boat." I lifted her in my arms. She panted. Her heart was beating against my breast. I said, "I take you from those people. You came to the cry of my heart, but my arms take you into my boat against the will of the great!" "It is right," said my brother. "We are men who take what we want and can hold it against many. We should have taken her in daylight." I said, "Let us be off;" for since she was in my boat I began to think of our Ruler's many men. "Yes. Let us be off," said my brother. "We are cast out and this boat is our country now - and the sea is our refuge." He lingered with his foot on the shore, and I entreated him to hasten, for I remembered the strokes of her heart against my breast and thought that two men cannot withstand a hundred. We left, paddling downstream close to the bank; and as we passed by the creek where they were fishing, the great shouting had ceased, but the murmur of voices was loud like the humming of insects flying at noonday. The boats floated, clustered together, in the red light of torches, under a black roof of smoke; and men talked of their sport. Men that boasted, and praised, and jeered - men that would have been our friends in the morning, but on that night were already our enemies. We paddled swiftly past. We had no more friends in the country of our birth. She sat in the middle of the canoe with covered face; silent as she is now; unseeing as she is now - and I had no regret at what I was leaving because I could hear her breathing close to me - as I can hear her now.'

He paused, listened with his ear turned to the doorway, then shook his head and went on.

'My brother wanted to shout the cry of challenge - one cry only - to let the people know we were freeborn robbers that trusted our arms and the great sea. And again I begged him in the name of our love to be silent. Could I not hear her breathing close to me? I knew the pursuit would come quick enough. My brother loved me. He dipped his paddle without a splash. He only said, "There is half a man in you now - the other half is in that woman. I can wait. When you are a whole man again, you will come back with me here to shout defiance. We are sons of the same mother." I made no answer. All my strength and all my spirit were in my hands that held the paddle - for I longed to be with her in a safe place beyond the reach of men's anger and of women's spite. My love was so great, that I thought it could guide me to a country where death was unknown, if I could only escape from Inchi Midah's spite and from our Ruler's sword. We paddled with fury, breathing through our teeth. The blades bit deep into the smooth water. We passed out of the river; we flew in clear channels amongst the shallows. We skirted the black coast; we skirted the sand beaches where the sea speaks in whispers to the land; and the gleam of white sand flashed back past our boat, so swiftly she ran upon the water. We spoke not. Only once I said, "Sleep, Diamelen, for soon you may want all your strength." I heard the sweetness of her voice, but I never turned my head. The sun rose and still we went on. Water fell from my face like rain from a cloud. We flew in the light and heat. I never looked back, but I knew that my brother's eyes, behind me, were looking steadily ahead, for the boat went as straight as a bushman's dart, when it leaves the end of the sumpitan. There was no better paddler, no better steersman than my brother. Many times, together, we had won races in that canoe. But we never had put out our strength as we did then - then, when for the last time we paddled together! There was no braver or stronger man in our country than my brother. I could not spare the strength to turn my head and look at him, but every moment I heard the hiss of his breath getting louder behind me. Still he did not speak. The sun was high. The heat clung to my back like a flame of fire. My ribs were ready to burst, but I could no longer get enough air into my chest. And then I felt I must cry out with my last breath, "Let us rest!" "Good!" he answered; and his voice was firm. He was strong. He was brave. He knew not fear and no fatigue ... My brother!'

A rumor powerful and gentle, a rumor vast and faint; the rumor of trembling leaves, of stirring boughs, ran through the tangled depths of the forests, ran over the starry smoothness of the lagoon, and the water between the piles lapped the slimy timber once with a sudden splash. A breath of warm air touched the two men's faces and passed on with a mournful sound - a breath loud and short like an uneasy sigh of the dreaming earth.

Arsat went on in an even, low voice.

'We ran our canoe on the white beach of a little bay close to a long tongue of land that seemed to bar our road; a long wooded cape going far into the sea. My brother knew that place. Beyond the cape a river has its entrance. Through the jungle of that land there is a narrow path. We made a fire and cooked rice. Then we slept on the soft sand in the shade of our canoe, while she watched. No sooner had I closed my eyes than I heard her cry of alarm. We leaped up. The sun was halfway down the sky already, and coming in sight in the opening of the bay we saw a prau manned by many paddlers. We knew it at once; it was one of our Rajah's praus. They were watching the shore, and saw us. They beat the gong, and turned the head of the prau into the bay. I felt my heart become weak within my breast. Diamelen sat on the sand and covered her face. There was no escape by sea. My brother laughed. He had the gun you had given him, Tuan, before you went away, but there was only a handful of powder. He spoke to me quickly: "Run with her along the path. I shall keep them back, for they have no firearms, and landing in the face of a man with a gun is certain death for some. Run with her. On the other side of that wood there is a fisherman's house - and a canoe. When I have fired all the shots I will follow. I am a great runner, and before they can come up we shall be gone. I will hold out as long as I can, for she is but a woman - that can neither run nor fight, but she has your heart in her weak hands." He dropped behind the canoe. The prau was coming. She and I ran, and as we rushed along the path I heard shots. My brother fired - once - twice - and the booming of the gong ceased. There was silence behind us. That neck of land is narrow. Before I heard my brother fire the third shot I saw the shelving shore, and I saw the water again: the mouth of a broad river. We crossed a grassy glade. We ran down to the water. I saw a low hut above the black mud, and a small canoe hauled up. I heard another shot behind me. I thought, "That is his last charge." We rushed down to the canoe; a man came running from the hut, but I leaped on him, and we rolled together in the mud. Then I got up, and he lay still at my feet. I don't know whether I had

killed him or not. I and Diamelen pushed the canoe afloat. I heard yells behind me, and I saw my brother run across the glade. Many men were bounding after him. I took her in my arms and threw her into the boat, then leaped in myself. When I looked back I saw that my brother had fallen. He fell and was up again, but the men were closing round him. He shouted, "I am coming!" The men were close to him. I looked. Many men. Then I looked at her. Tuan, I pushed the canoe! I pushed it into deep water. She was kneeling forward looking at me, and I said, "Take your paddle," while I struck the water with mine. Tuan, I heard him cry. I heard him cry my name twice; and I heard voices shouting, "Kill! Strike!" I never turned back. I heard him calling my name again with a great shriek, as when life is going out together with the voice - and I never turned my head. My own name! ... My brother! Three times he called - but I was not afraid of life. Was she not there in that canoe? And could I not with her find a country where death is forgotten - where death is unknown?"

The white man sat up. Arsat rose and stood, an indistinct and silent figure above the dying embers of the fire. Over the lagoon a mist drifting and low had crept, erasing slowly the glittering images of the stars. And now a great expanse of white vapor covered the land: flowed cold and gray in the darkness, eddied in noiseless whirls round the tree-trunks and about the platform of the house, which seemed to float upon a restless and impalpable illusion of a sea; seemed the only thing surviving the destruction of the world by that undulating and voiceless phantom of a flood. Only far away the tops of the trees stood outlined on the twinkle of heaven, like a somber and forbidding shore - a coast deceptive, pitiless and black.

Arsat's voice vibrated loudly in the profound peace.

'I had her there! I had her! To get her I would have faced all mankind. But I had her - and—'

His words went out ringing into the empty distances. He paused, and seemed to listen to them dying away very far - beyond help and beyond recall. Then he said quietly—

'Tuan, I loved my brother.'

A breath of wind made him shiver. High above his head, high above the silent sea of mist the drooping leaves of the palms rattled together with a mournful and expiring sound. The white man stretched his legs. His chin rested on his chest, and he murmured sadly without lifting his head—

'We all love our brothers.'

Arsat burst out with an intense whispering violence—

'What did I care who died? I wanted peace in my own heart.'

He seemed to hear a stir in the house - listened - then stepped in noiselessly. The white man stood up. A breeze was coming in fitful puffs. The stars shone paler as if they had retreated into the frozen depths of immense space. After a chill gust of wind there were a few seconds of perfect calm and absolute silence. Then from behind the black and wavy line of the forests a column of golden light shot up into the heavens and spread over the semicircle of the eastern horizon. The sun had risen. The mist lifted, broke into drifting patches, vanished into thin flying wreaths; and the unveiled lagoon lay, polished and black, in the heavy shadows at the foot of the wall of trees. A white eagle rose over it with a slanting and ponderous flight, reached the clear sunshine and appeared dazzlingly brilliant for a moment, then soaring higher, became a dark and motionless speck before it vanished into the blue as if it had left the earth for ever. The white man, standing gazing upwards before the doorway, heard in the hut a confused and broken murmur of distracted words ending with a loud groan. Suddenly Arsat stumbled out with outstretched hands, shivered, and stood still for some time with fixed eyes. Then he said—

'She burns no more.'

Before his face the sun showed its edge above the tree-tops, rising steadily. The breeze freshened; a great brilliance burst upon the lagoon, sparkled on the rippling water. The forests came out of the clear shadows of the morning, became distinct, as if they had rushed nearer - to stop short in a great stir of leaves, of nodding boughs, of swaying branches. In the merciless sunshine the whisper of unconscious life grew louder, speaking in an incomprehensible voice round the dumb darkness of that human sorrow. Arsat's eyes wandered slowly, then stared at the rising sun.

'I can see nothing,' he said half aloud to himself.

'There is nothing,' said the white man, moving to the edge of the platform and waving his hand to his boat. A shout came faintly over the lagoon and the sampan began to glide towards the abode of the friend of ghosts.

'If you want to come with me, I will wait all the morning,' said the white man, looking away upon the water.

'No, Juan,' said Arsat softly. 'I shall not eat or sleep in this house, but I must first see my road. Now I can see nothing - see nothing! There is no light and no peace in the world; but there is death - death for many. We were sons of the same mother - and I left him in the midst of enemies; but I am going back now.'

He drew a long breath and went on in a dreamy tone.

'In a little while I shall see clear enough to strike - to strike. But she has died, and ... now ... darkness.'

He flung his arms wide open, let them fall along his body, then stood still with unmoved face and stony eyes, staring at the sun. The white man got down into his canoe. The polers ran smartly along the sides of the boat, looking over their shoulders at the beginning of a weary journey. High in the stern, his head muffled up in white rags, the juragan sat moody, letting his paddle trail in the water. The white man, leaning with both arms over the grass roof of the little cabin, looked back at the shining ripple of the boat's wake. Before the sampan passed out of the lagoon into the creek he lifted his eyes. Arsat had not moved. In the searching clearness of crude sunshine, he was still standing before the house, he was still looking through the great light of a cloudless day into the hopeless darkness of the world.

3.2.4 Glossary and Annotations

Clearing: An open space in a forest where there are no trees.

Malay: Native of the Malay peninsula in Southeast Asia.

Poised: To grunt means to make short low sound in the throat (especially to show that you are in pain).

Somber: Dark, sad.

Nipa: Palm trees of Asia with leaves that can be used to make a roof. Palm trees of Asia with leaves that can be used to make a roof.

Eddies: Circular movement of air or water.

Bewitched: Under magic spells.

Paddles: A short pole with a wide part at one or both ends that you use for moving a small boat.

Churned-up: Milky, cloudy.

Frothed: If water froths, a mass of small bubbles appears on the surface.

Portals: Doors, gateways.
Expanse: Area, vastness.
Enticed: Charmed.
Astern: At the back.
Discordant: Inharmonious.
Gurgled: Bubbled, sloshed.
Pivot: To streak means to turn, to spin around.
Slanting: Diagonal.
Streaked: Marked, splashed.
Prow: Pointed front part of a boat.
Lair: Den, whole, nest.
Tortuous: Winding, twisted.
Creepers: Climbing plant.
Oozed out: Came out of.
Maze: labyrinth.
Invincible: Unconquerable.
Fleecy: Like a wool coat of a sheep.
Propitiate: Appease.
Wayfarers: A person who travels from one place to another (usually on foot).
Juragan: Captain, master.
Sampan: Small flat-bottomed boat with a cabin.
Rafters: sloping pieces of wood that support a roof.
Conflagration: Fire, blaze.
Impalpable: Non-existent, shadowy.
Vapour: Mist, fog.
Abysmal: Dreadful, appalling.
Squatted: Crouched.
Fitful: Broken; disturbed.
August: Noble, worthy of respect.
Ignoble: Shameful, dishonourable.

Plaintive: Sad, melancholic, mournful.

Imperceptible: Unnoticeable, invisible.

Loitered: Waited.

Rajahs: Malayan chiefs.

Embers: A piece of wood that is not burning but is still red and hot after the fire has died.

Entreated: Ask, beg, implore.

Skirted: Go around; avoid.

Sumpitan: Malayan blowgun which discharges poisonous darts.

Slimy: Greasy.

Cape: Peninsula.

Prau: Swift Malayan boat.

Shelving: Deserted.

Undulating: Surging, rising and falling.

Rippling: Waving, wrinkling.

3.2.5 Discussion and Analysis

➤ **SETTING:**

If you go by historical details of the background, chronologically the text can be located somewhere at the end of the 19th century and after the Malay kingdoms of Wajo, Soping, Boni, and Si Dendring had fought extensive wars over who should succeed as Rajah of Si Dendring. The story widely addresses the colonised South Asia by the Europeans. However, Conrad's presentation covers diverse aspects of the European mindset, an instance of which you will have found in his presentation of the White Man in this story.

From the very names of characters and outlines of places described, you can get a feel that Conrad's "The Lagoon" has a setting that can broadly be located somewhere in Southeast Asia. More particular details if probed, will place the tale on the Malay Peninsula or in the Malay Archipelago, on a river that flows eastward to the ocean. Like alternating camera angles as you see in films, the river then passes through a creek which flows inland through the dense forest and finally the action settles on a small house in a lagoon.

But you must remember that an understanding of “The Lagoon” would hardly be complete merely by identifying the geographical locale. Notice how adroitly Conrad weaves human emotions that are perfectly analogous to the natural setting that he describes. The exuberant sensuous imagery - the strange tropical setting, the mystery of elements, light and darkness- Joseph Conrad, in his short-story “The Lagoon” describes and transmits impressionistically, the dramatic story of a man surprised by his own act of cowardice, a man divided between loyalty to his own blood and the object of his love interest. The question therefore is, why does Conrad meticulously weave such a setting?

As you must have read and found in the story above, this man, Arsat is pervaded by a blockaded feeling towards himself because he had failed to act when the occasion demanded a stern decision making of him. In choosing to run away with his beloved, leaving his own flesh and blood brother at the hands of the enemy, he had missed the chance to rightful action. Yet what was rightful from one perspective would have cost him the loss of his love for a lifetime. In escaping with his love Diamelen, to live in the “shadows of the lagoon”, Arsat, has had to undergo great psychological torment both at the moment and ever after in life. - his own psychological, subconscious guilty conscience. It is to embody this torment which gains a cosmic nature in the story that Conrad makes a very deliberate use of the setting. Notice the very opening lines of the story which start with an intense description of nature, pervaded by motionlessness; yet the calm that is inscribed is not one of tranquillity. The impression is of a waterscape that has its own spell, as if frozen in time and out of the world:

At the end of the straight avenue of forests cut by the intense glitter of the river, the sun appeared unclouded and dazzling, poised low over the water that shone smoothly like a band of metal. The forests, somber and dull, stood motionless and silent on each side of the broad stream. At the foot of big, towering trees, trunkless nipa palms rose from the mud of the bank, in bunches of leaves enormous and heavy, that hung unstirring over the brown swirl of eddies. In the stillness of the air every tree, every leaf, every bough, every tendril of creeper and every petal of minute blossoms seemed to have been bewitched into an immobility perfect and final.

The riverine setting thus is the most compulsive aspect about “The Lagoon”. The play of light and darkness, caused by the thick growth of trees and the intermittent

rays of the sun glistening on the waters becomes a wonderful metaphor of alternating mental states and levels of consciousness. As the story advances, you realize that this eerie silence is not just an external description of the setting; it comes to encompass the life of Arsat who has had to choose this out of the world place to both nurture his dear got love, and also undergo his penance for what he looks upon as an act of filial betrayal. Notice also how the white man, arriving in a canoe at Arsat's clearing, is symbolically a figure from the outside world and from a different faith, who looks upon Arsat in a way that is different from the perception of the Malay and the other steersmen who perceive Arsat not as one of them. Notice that the place where Arsat lives is not even a proper house or hut, the white man calls it 'clearing', which would mean just an open space in the forest without trees. This differential is also brought out by Conrad by suggesting a ripple that disturbs the apparent calm of the setting:

Nothing moved on the river but the eight paddles that rose flashing regularly, dipped together with a single splash; while the steersman swept right and left with a periodic and sudden flourish of his blade describing a glinting semi-circle above his head. The churned up water frothed alongside with a confused murmur. And the white man's canoe, advancing up stream in the short-lived disturbance of its own making, seemed to enter the portals of a land from which the very memory of motion had for ever departed.

In "The Lagoon", however, the journey occurs but the trouble is that nobody is either 'really' dead or living, only absent, away from life and action. Below the level of setting, the writer is concerned with mental processes and the dramatic experience of a human being, Arsat. Contrasted with all this dark imagery we have 'glimpses' of light - ..."the thin strip of pure and shining blue of the heaven" - because nature is free to watch impassively, the torments that assault mankind. The creek widens, the forest recedes as soon as the white man's canoe reaches the 'lagoon'. The exotic, remote setting, the superabundant imagery is basic to convey the atmosphere for this story of isolation and failure.

Activity for the Learner

The text of the story is pervaded by such instances of the physical setting becoming metaphorical of the human condition presented. In fact, the very title is significant in this regard. Identify and explain such signification with help from your counselor. Apply the Victorian cultural critic John Ruskin's term Pathetic Fallacy to explain this aspect of Conrad's story. You could also study such descriptive instances in other works of fiction by Conrad.

➤ **CHARACTERS:**

The White Man

At the very beginning of the story we find the white man as a traveller on the boat to Arsat's clearing. He is a wanderer who "looked along the empty and broad expanse of the sea-reach". The story starts and ends with him. He is a European who serves as the witness to Arsat's tragedy. The White Man or Tuan is the prototype of the cross cultural male connection. He is the patient listener who helps the story to be told and thereby becomes integral in the process of storytelling. The story started with the White Man entering Arsat's dwelling, going through the narration of love, betrayal, remorse and death and then moving out the next morning. He rarely retorts to the narration and is found to be emotionless in his reaction. He never consoled Arsat. Probably he accepted his tumultuous fate and tragedy. The next morning he boarded his sampan and moved out of the lagoon. Though he invited Arsat to come on board but he never insisted. He is more of a recorder or observer of emotional stances and also seems rather detached from the world of action. He witnessed the death but remained passive and unaffected. He seems to be performing the role of the chorus of the Greek tragedy. His distanced remarks against Arsat's narration make him the symbolic chorus.

Conrad seems to create a contrast of characters between Arsat and the White Man. He appears to be a thwart to Arsat. With the death of Diamelen he remained unmoved. This shows that he is aware of the inevitable tragedy of human beings and has accepted it with dignity. You must take note of the fact that the white man's perception of Arsat is never narrowly Eurocentric; he views the suffering and torment of the latter as that of an individual *per se*. Arsat's process of realizing the conflict between his utopia and dystopia flows with the arrival of the white man to the lagoon. With the white man's presence, the complexity of the story in-between utopia and dystopia is revealed. Therefore, even though Conrad's short story does not create a direct utopian or dysoptian mood, Arsat's past and present with the process he undergoes makes such a reading possible. Thus, the aim of this study is to examine the blend of utopia and dystopia in the colonial framework of "The Lagoon". Starting with the comparison of what lagoon as a dwelling represents for Arsat and the white man, Arsat's realization process of his utopia's transformation into dystopia through the white man's arrival will be thoroughly observed.

At the very beginning of the story, Conrad focuses on the atmosphere rather than on the sequence of events. Even though the reader is made aware that there will be two main characters; the white man, titled as Tuan in advance, and Arsat, he leads the reader to focus on the atmosphere of the story. As the White Man and his companions arrive with their boat, he declares that they will pass the night at Arsat's dwelling, however the reader is not yet aware what kind of a dwelling it is. Eventually the atmosphere is described:

The forests, sombre and dull, stood motionless and silent on each side of the broad stream. At the foot of big, towering trees, trunkless nipa palms rose from the mud of the bank, in bunches of leaves enormous and heavy, that hung unstirring over the brown swirl of eddies. In the stillness of the air every tree, every leaf, every bough, every tendril of creeper and every petal of minute blossoms seemed to have been bewitched into an immobility perfect and final.

The white man embodies the generalization of binaries to the society which Arsat resists, nevertheless; there is no peace in the white man's world, as well. He has a prominent influence on Arsat's becoming aware of his own recurring dystopian life which is impossible to reverse. This similarity in both Arsat's and the white man's dystopian condition is revealed by the white man's own words responding to the remorse that Arsat has in his heart for his brother. "His chin rested on his chest, and [the white man] murmured sadly without lifting his head: "We all love our brothers". The agony and the empathy that the Whiteman feels in his heart as well as his dystopian perception from the very beginning of the story that he is well aware of this reality, nevertheless; it is through his arrival that Arsat reaches this awareness.

ARSAT

"The Lagoon" is the tragedy of the Malayan native named Arsat. Arsat is the disarming psychological revelation that inevitably elicits an implicit admission of a powerful validation of the East. He is the central figure of the story which deals with his tragic suffering from love and death. He lives on with a feeling of guilt, undergoes nemesis in the form of loss of love, and finally promises to bounce back.

To the native polers of the white man's canoe, the dark skinned Arsat is the embodiment of the 'Father of Evil'. The protagonist is presented in a mysterious way; the person lived in isolation in a disturbingly looking lagoon. He shared the

lagoon with his beloved Diamelen and maintained a distance with his native folks, the reasons behind which are adequately clear in the story. He was thought to be practicing evil spirit and hence the boatman of the White Man avoided staying in the lagoon. Conrad has given Arsat all the heroic characteristics of a South Asian native. He was brave, sincere, devoted and spontaneous. He was the saviour of his locality from foreign aggression. He was not only gallant but was a man of compassion, love and honesty.

In frenzy he fell in love with Diamelen who was a subordinate of the mistress of the ruling authority. Arsat had teamed up with his brother to run an elopement with Diamelen – an act of whose dire consequences the brothers were well aware. This brought in tragedy and doom for the hero. He had to compromise with the life of his brother who was caught up by the guards, and Arsat had to make a choice between standing by his brother and escaping with his love to be with Diamelen. He was not a purposive brother who played with the sentiments of his brother. Rather he loved him dearly. He was wont to stand by his brother, but failed in order to protect Diamelen, as he rightly defends himself when he says: “I wanted peace in my own heart”. He was mad about his brother but momentarily lost his rationale and ever since he has been repenting and groaning. His tragedy is multi-layered: he lost his brother, the thought of betrayal haunts him, he now loses his beloved for whom he disrupted his past existence and he lost his soul. He has nothing but to lament the cruel power of death as he sighs: “And could I not with her find a country where death is forgotten – where death is unknown”. In grandeur he isn’t challenging the conventional tragic hero but his life is anyone’s lament. His irreversible tragedy vibrates in the concluding words of the story – “He stood lonely in the searching sunshine, and he looked beyond the great light of a cloudless day into the darkness of a world of illusions”.

Arsat’s life, both in the account of the omniscient narrator and in his own recollections that form the story within the story, grows out of mysterious atmosphere of water, forest, darkness and mist. He lives in Nature with Nature and at the mercy of Nature without the benefit of medicine that may have saved Diamelen’s life. The hut he rebuilt on the lagoon is made of the reed that grows along the water edge. Every event of his exiled life is tinged by the natural sounds and colours of the eerie setting. Arsat’s journey from a make-believe world of passionate fulfillment to a forlorn state of disillusion reaches a watershed with the nightmarish end of Diamelen’s

life. For the rest of his life Arsat could well be living with the psychological consequences of turpitude. The ‘Father of Evil’ undergoes a transformation in the uplift promised by the realization of guilt and preparedness for penance. Perhaps this realization of guilt is the moment of enlightenment in Arsat’s life.

DIAMELEN

Diamelen was the choice and life of Arsat. She is also virtually the scapegoat of the tragedy. She is found to be trapped for five days and the last days of her life. She was a servant to one of the Raja’s women. She fled in a boat at night and travelled as far as she could with Arsat. Interestingly, the story does not give any details of the life of marital bliss of Arsat and Diamelen; it begins when she is in the throes of painful death – presumably from malarial fever, and it is only in Arsat’s recollection that the tale of their passionate escape is narrated. In the present of the story, we are told that she has had to suffer for five days before submitting herself in the hands of cold death.

In artistic terms, Diamelen is a pivotal non-participant in a story that revolves round her capture and possession. Her qualities imply nonexistence – she is silent, motionless, unseeing, unhearing because she has been defined by Arsat more as an object than a subject. In her wordlessness and powerlessness, Diamelen shares traits with Kurtz’s African mistress in Conrad’s famous novella *Heart of Darkness*, and as in that novel, here too the author makes eloquent use of silence in the figure of the female protagonist. Or should we at all call her protagonist! She lies on her deathbed as helplessly as when she sat in the canoe during her abduction. Arsat appears to be prepared for what he considers to be ‘his’ rather than Diamelen’s fate. Like an Eastern logician he is conscious of the allegorical role he has been playing by internalizing the history of his community. For him, objective reality exists insofar as it supplies the object of his love. Around Diamelen, Arsat’s fantasies take shape only to meet with final denial of will and dissolution of images.

Arsat’s Brother

Arsat’s brother is both straight-forward and composite. He is the positive and negative strength of Arsat. He is the muse of his brother’s decision to elope with Diamelen, and so he continued to protect his brother’s love at the cost of his own life. He jumped into the tragedy without thinking twice. He was adamant to bring happiness to his brother without estimating the consequences. He is the supporting

hero of this story. Arsat's brother has been presented as flawless in terms of love and compassion and the beauty of the human mind. He is the misfit in a society which failed to comprehend the free will of its best and passionate people, subduing them to the tyranny of an oppressive state force. His death signifies the loss of the ethos of an entire community of faithful, warrior people. It is just that his tragedy is irreversible, and that he is forbidden to stand by his brother and Diamelen.

SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

The Juragan: is the boatman of the white man's boat. His resentment at having to spend the night near Arsat's clearing makes evident the feelings of animosity that the local people bear towards Arsat. The latter is a rebel against accepted societal norms on the one hand, and his life as a recluse has identified him with powers of the dark on the other.

Rajah: is the ruler of the place where the story is set.

Inchi Midah: is the woman of the Malayan Rajah, and by Arsat's account, a cunning and dominating woman. Diamelen was her domestic, and later becomes the integral character of the story on whom the entire tragedy and complication in Arsat's life is based.

Rajah Warriors: are the people who pursued Arsat, Arsat's brother and Diamelen. It was in fending them in order to ensure a safe passage for Arsat and Diamelen that Arsat's brother lost his life.

➤ As a tale of Passion and Remorse

Joseph Conrad's short story "The Lagoon" is set in a typical Malayan environment, beset with mystery and eeriness. The place of action of the story is a lagoon, deemed ghostly and avoided by local inhabitants in fear. In such a setting, rather exotic one, Conrad sets the theme of his story, which is intimately related to human passion and frustration, human remorse and suffering.

As a short story, "The Lagoon" has a specific importance for its precisely pointed human theme which has a universal appeal. This theme is all of a human tragedy, built around three moral elements betrayal, remorse and retribution that follows the act of betrayal after the doer's deep remorse for his failing, in a setting somewhat uncanny.

Arsat's deep passion of love changed the course of his life. Even the story ends

with a stark note of tragedy, sin has its retribution. Arsat could not live in love, far from the valley of death. The nemesis visited him in the form of death and took away his love - Diamelen. His ingratitude as he feels, in the form of his faithlessness to his brother leading to desertion in the face of death, could not ensure peace and love for him. The grim illusions of the world were all too vivid to him - "He stood lonely in searching sunshine, and he looked beyond the great light of a cloudless day into the darkness of a world of illustrations."

The story of Arsat's life is deeply moving. It is made particularly so by the moral question involved here. The story suggests a moral dilemma - to choose between love and duty. Arsat was confronted with such a dilemma to run away with his lady love to a place of peace and safety, or to rush for his brother's help and die with him. That of course, would lead to dire consequences for Diamelen, though this thought is not seen to cross Arsat's mind. His passion for love and life was strong enough to lead him to forsake his duty to his dying brother and to run away with his Diamelen to a land, free from the threat of death. But the sense of moral default remained with him. He could not get peace in his mind. He could not live away death in the bosom of his love. The moral dilemma seems almost the nemesis in the poignant tragedy of Arsat, one who loved too well, longed passionately for his love and lost all with the sad remorse to pick him constantly for his act of betrayal.

Arsat's tragedy came inevitably. His tragedy was the frustration of his pining hope and piercing vision of love in the valley of life. Diamelen died and a note of deep despair echoed as Arsat exclaimed helplessly, 'She burns no more'. He could see nothing in the dumb darkness of his deep distress. Confronted with profound sorrow of life and the rude blow of death, he realized the utter vanity of his wishes and the hard truth of an illusory world - "There is no light and peace in this world: but there is death - death for many."

Though a short story and a rather long one at that, "The Lagoon" contains a precise theme of immense human interest. The theme of human aspiration and frustration, human hope and despair, constitutes a deep tragedy that has a universal appeal.

3.2.6 Symbolism and Imagery

"The Lagoon" abounds in symbols and imagery, which creates the ambience of the story that Conrad, aimed at. The weird setting, the dimness of essentials,

luminosity and obscurity makes the short-story impressive. The inner dilemma of the protagonist who ran towards his doom is invested with the feeling of his act of cowardice – a man who is ripped between his brother and beloved. Conrad artistically embedded his story with imagery and symbols which created the atmosphere of sombre silence and the stillness of the environment and further complicated the position of the protagonist by infusing agony, dejection, hopelessness and *hamartia*.

“The Lagoon” gets further complicated with the usage of story-within-the-story. Arsat’s anecdote of affection and brotherly disloyalty is outlined carefully by the observant and participant in the form of the White Man. The emotionless hearing of the White Man compared to the pain and trauma of Arsat symbolizes universal tragedy of the human society which is painted in the form of the lagoon which itself is a dominant image throughout the story which further symbolizing the tragic fate.

The setting of the lagoon is symbolic to the illusory nature in which human beings participate in the zone of the unknown. The setting unveils the devastating fate of mankind. The place is engrossed in sounds and darkness not treaded by the common, thereby acting as the symbolic gothic element in the story. The lagoon also acts as the symbol of malevolence, a harmful power, belligerent and yet vibrant. The tragic plot itself is symbolically paralleled by the mysterious setting of fate and destiny. The atmosphere is full of premonitions which get intensified by the immobility of the forest and water. The stillness is the symbolic artifact which parallels Arsat’s loneliness, tragic fate and loss of love. The image of darkness symbolizes the darkness of Arsat’s heart devoid of hope and aspiration towards life. The constant comparison between darkness and light is the reverberating echo of Arsat’s crying heart. The soaring eagle symbolizes the last journey of Diamelen as the soul leaves the body behind and transcends earthly pain and misery.

The characters in the story also perform a symbolic function. They in close coordination with the natural setting complement each other. Arsat symbolizes love and repentance. Diamelen represents rather the ideal of life to be pursued by human beings. The White Man is the symbolic chorus, scrutinizing, commenting and performing impassively.

A reader of “The Lagoon” will readily connect such passages with Conrad’s images of stars streaming “ceaseless and vain,” reflected in the lagoon, darkness “oozing” from between trees, writhing ten- drills, creepers and roots, and with the “world of illusions” mentioned in the final sentence of the tale. The writer conveys

that we are entering a region -Arsat's mind - where action has stopped: ... seemed to enter the portals of a land from which the very memory of motion had forever departed. The "river" is personified as: ... the wandering hesitating river, as if enticed irresistibly by the freedom of an open horizon flows straight to the east - to the east that harbors both light and darkness. The river, a way to reach his mind, his subconscious, hesitates and seeks a way out. The east, with its connotation of mystery and exoticism, is where one finds both/darkness of the subconscious life, of sin, and light for consciousness and reasoning. The mind longs for liberation from darkness but the journey continues, and in this gloomy setting we only hear: The repeated call of some bird, a cry discordant and feeble, skimmed along over the smooth water and lost itself.

We can see an analogy with this trip along the river in "The Lagoon" with Classical mythology, where the river Styx separates the world of the living from the world of the dead. In "The Lagoon", however, the journey occurs but the trouble is that nobody is either "really" dead or living, only absent, away from life and action. Below the level of setting, the writer is concerned with mental processes and the dramatic experience of a human being, Arsat. Contrasted with all this dark imagery we have "glimpses" of light - ..."the thin strip of pure and shining blue of the heaven". We enter Arsat but through the white man "in the dim light of the dwelling". With this dim light imagery, the writer conveys that we are going to learn more about Arsat; that the shadows are letting in some light that clarifies how and why he went to live alone in that "ghostly" lagoon. In the hut, we watch Diamelen's death agony: her big eyes, wide open, glittered in the gloom staring upwards at the slender rafters, motionless and unseeing. Diamelen is unconscious and Arsat is in despair: She hears nothing - she hears not me. Arsat cannot live with the idea that Diamelen is abandoning him, and sense(see: eyes; hear: lips) imagery is repeated to show that, after she dies, only the conscious world will be left for him alone to face. And Arsat realizes this. Red and dark imagery - Life and Death - portrays, very dramatically, the parting daylight as Diamelen's parting from life:

The enormous conflagration of sunset put out by the swift *and* stealthy shadows, rising like a black and impalpable vapor above the tree-tops, spread over the heaven, extinguishing the crimson glow of floating clouds and the red brilliance of departing daylight.

3.2.7 Conrad's Narrative Style

Conrad believed that the short form of writing gives the writer to showcase his or her style and in his *Letters*, I Conrad wrote: "It takes a small-scale narrative (short-story) to show the master's hand". "The Lagoon" is narrated in the third-person which enables the narrator to interpret the minds of the characters dexterously. Conrad has skillfully manipulated the usage of imagery and symbolism to craft his story and give it the required dimension. The story within the story has been skillfully woven which creates the gloomy ambience and the dark environmental spirit of the setting. In one of the stories (the main narrative), the White Man is found in conversation with Arsat and in the framed narrative, he further becomes the audience to Arsat's narration of the story of love and deceitfulness.

As the story progresses we are introduced with long statements narrated by Arsat where he describes the death of his brother and Diamelen's escape from the clutches of the Rajah's men. Arsat is made to use first person narration and the turn taking between first and third person makes the story more appealing and provides wider angle to the narration. The third-person point of view enables the narrator to be an observer and report as the third party. The same order is followed in Arsat's narration as he reports to the white man and the reader. This created a connecting triumvirate among the reader, the white man and Arsat.

The narrative has been combined with the somber setting of the story while depicting Diamelen's death. By using the flashback technique, Conrad juxtaposes the elopement which finally led to the loss of Diamelen and initially to the death of Arsat's brother. The story reaches the climax when Arsat decides to avenge the loss of his family. The narrative style is descriptive in nature specially the description of the vibrant setting with all the visions and resonances of the jungle and river. In the narration of "The Lagoon", Conrad extensively uses imagery and symbolism to paint the setting and the characters through the suggestiveness of the words. This incorporation of images indicates that the foundation of actuality is unpredictable and the anxiety of it keeps fluctuating, compelled to never resurface. Truth is here problematised by misapprehensions and the narrative nullifies the stereotypical dictum of life and understanding.

In "The Lagoon" there are two distinct separate strands of narrative – the narrative of the main character Arsat is embedded in an external narrator's narrative.

The story can be divided into the external narrator's narrative, which begins and ends the story and Arsat's narrative. Conrad makes the external narrator's narrative give the description of the physical setting, and it is indeed less dynamic compared to the intensity of the protagonist's narration. This narrative relates to the journey of the white man up the creek to Arsat's clearing. The slowness of the journey is underscored by the detailed description of the scene. Conrad is also in no hurry to introduce us to Arsat, for even when the white man arrives at the clearing, Arsat does not appear immediately. When he emerges from his hut, he exchanges as few words as possible with the white man until he is about to tell his story which is said through Arsat's narration. The external narrator's narrative resumes on the completion of Arsat's story with a description of the coming of the dawn, Arsat's grief, and the departure of the white man.

The external narrator's narrative is most adjectivally dense. Conrad is creating a setting that holds and dominates the two characters and he does it by adding detail to detail in the form of optional adjectives, significant numbers of them occurring simultaneously. Conrad is concerned with fundamental immobility, and any movement – action or event – is no more than a ripple on the surface. Arsat is overcome by this immobility. There is a low frequency of action clauses where happenings are initiated by the volition of a human agent and a high frequency of event clauses, particularly of clauses relating physical events, where occurrences just happen.

Taking the story as a whole, the external narrator's narrative is much longer while the matrices of Arsat's narrative are dominant. The English spoken by the Malay is not affected by interferences from the grammatical structures of the Malay language, but an English as imagined by an Englishman ignorant of linguistics, language – teaching and Malay.

3.2.8 Significance of the Title

A 'stretch of salt water parted from the sea by the low sandbank' equates to the title of the story which is The Lagoon. The geographical location is common to the Asian region and aptly matching with the Malayan region. The title is appropriately rendered because the story is setting specific and the lagoon is just a symbolic representation of the proceedings of the plot of the story. The entire theme is set against a depressing, sluggish and bizarre looking lagoon which holds the tragedy of the characters.

The lagoon is the place where action is performed. It is the escape abode of Arsat and Diamelen. The lagoon accommodates the white man to start the story and the narrative thrives in the lagoon as the story is shared with the white Man. It is the opening and ending of the story encompassing the emotions, aspirations, sacrifice and love bearing the characters and humanity as a whole. The lagoon acts as the death fort for Diamelen and the tragedy and the sorrow are transferred onto Arsat who has nothing but to grieve his dual loss in the form of Diamelen and his brother. The background of the narrative and the point of action are both hosted in the lagoon.

The description of the lagoon which is characterized by darkness, somber mood, despair, repentance, frustration, illusory world and the vagueness of emotional existence aptly justify the title. The haunting nature of the place is representative of the ambitionless throttle of mankind. The lagoon and the hero of the story seem synonymous. The visual of the lagoon is the inner mind and conscience of Arsat. The lagoon is isolated and distant which again is symbolic of Arsat's personal loneliness and separation from population.

The lagoon also has symbolic suggestiveness to the interior structure of the characters' mind. The ecological images run according to human condition and a stark matured semblance is found in the portrayal of the emotions and the environment.

The word lagoon from the Spanish word 'laguna' means a 'stretch of salt water parted from the sea by the low sandbank'. It implies the enclosed sea water, within the ridge of some rock or sand. This is quite common in Asiatic countries and particularly in the Malayan region. The idea of the enclosure also metaphorically fits in to describe the hemmed in nature of the existence of Arsat in course of the story.

Conrad's story has the precise title 'The Lagoon'. This is mainly because of the Malayan setting of the story. The entire theme is set against a gloomy, stagnant and weird looking lagoon. The main event centres round this lagoon, for the hut of Arsat, hero of the story, is shown situated by its shallow side. The white man entered the lagoon to pass the night in Arsat's place and heard there the latter's story of love and repentance. The tragedy of the tale – Diamelen's death and Arsat's realization of the stark illusion of the world – was enacted on the lagoon. The very appearance of the lagoon – its gloom and ghostly aspect seems to be in keeping with the tragic theme of the story.

There is yet another point from which 'The Lagoon' seems appropriate as a title. The lagoon implies a detached stretch of water from the main. The hero of the story Arsat too led a detached isolated life in an old hut by the side of the lagoon. He wanted to live in love away from the main current of the world around him. The title of the story is related to the environment as well as the hero's life. It has in fact, a symbolic suggestiveness and well bears out the brooding, gloomy spirit of this tragic tale.

3.2.9 Comprehension Exercises

● **Long Answer Type Questions-20 Marks**

1. Analyze the character of Arsat. Is he the hero of the story?
2. Justify the title of the story.
3. Would you consider "The Lagoon" as a tale of passion and remorse? Discuss with close textual references.
4. Comment on Conrad's narrative technique in "The Lagoon".

● **Medium Length Answer Type Questions-12 Marks**

1. Trace the change in Arsat's character.
2. What role does the White Man perform in "The Lagoon"?
3. Discuss the imagery and symbolism used in "The Lagoon".
4. How does the setting of Conrad's story become an important thematic device?

● **Short Questions: 6 marks**

1. What are the points of view of view employed by Conrad in "The Lagoon"?
2. Briefly describe the scene of Arsat's escapade with Diamelen.
3. What is the reaction of the White Man's boatmen when they are forced to spend the night in the lagoon? Why?
4. How does Arsat's brother contribute to the development of the story.

3.2.10 Somerset Maugham: A Literary Bio-brief

William Somerset Maugham (1874-1965) was born in the British Embassy in Paris, on January 25, 1874. He was the sixth and youngest son of Robert Ormond Maugham and Edith Mary Snell. At the age of eight he lost his mother and at the age of ten he became an orphan. He was sent to England to live with his uncle, the Vicar of Whitstable. He received his education at King's School, Canterbury, and Heidelberg University. For next six years he studied medicine at St. Thomas Medical school in London, and qualified in 1897 as a doctor but abandoned medicine after the success of his first novels and plays. His first novel was *Liza of Lambeth* (1897). Soon he became a playwright and wrote successful plays like *A Man of Honour* (1903) and *To Sheppey* (1933). His autobiographical novel *Of Human Bondage* (1915) is considered by many to be his masterpiece. His other popular works include *Cakes and Ale*, *The Moon and Six Pence* and *Razor's Edge*. His philosophy of life as a resigned atheist is explained in *The Summing Up* (1938) and man's innate goodness and intelligence is reflected in *A Writer's Notebook* (1949).

In 1921 Maugham came out with the first collection of short stories—*The Trembling of a Leaf*. A number of Maugham's short stories have been filmed. *Quartet* (1948) consisted of four stories introduced by the author. His stories numbering over two hundred are the finest products of his inexhaustible traveller's mentality. As a traveller, he wrote, "I filled notebooks with descriptions of places and persons and the stories they suggested...I kept my eyes open for character, oddness, personality...I learnt very quick when a place promised me something and then I waited till I got it. Otherwise I passed on".

"The Lotus-Eater" is based on the legend of the lotos-eaters in Homer's *Odyssey*. Lotos is the Greek word for lotus. Lotos-eaters are those who lived in the lotos-land enjoying a life of indolent ease. Maugham's story is all about the life of Thomas Wilson whose impractical decision led to his tragic end. Wilson, a bank manager in London, lived in the drudgery of office work after the tragic death of his wife and daughter years back. On his chance visit to Capri, he got so enamored of the scenic beauty of the place that he decided to spend the rest of his life there. He left his job, sold his assets, and bought his annuity for twenty-five years. In this unit we are going to read about him.

The story in this unit is, interesting for its novelty of theme, peculiarity of the character of Wilson, for its symmetrical pattern, and for its dramatic end. It embodies a common mood and a common philosophy of life. It is a tragic tale of a man who makes a wrong choice for a life of ease and indolence in the beauties of nature strikes a common chord in the hearts of all.

3.2.11 The Text

Most people, the vast majority in fact, lead the lives that circumstances have thrust upon them, and though some repine, looking upon themselves as round pegs in square holes, and think that if things had been different they might have made a much better showing, the greater part accept their lot, if not with serenity, at all events with resignation. They are like train-cars travelling forever on the selfsame rails. They go backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, inevitably, till they can go no longer and then are sold as scrap-iron. It is not often that you find a man who has boldly taken the course of his life into his own hands. When you do, it is worth while having a good look at him.

That was why I was curious to meet Thomas Wilson. It was an interesting and a bold thing he had done. Of course the end was not yet and until the experiment was concluded it was impossible to call it successful. But from what I had heard it seemed he must be an odd sort of fellow and I thought I should like to know him. I had been told he was reserved, but I had a notion that with patience and tact I could persuade him to confide in me. I wanted to hear the facts from his own lips. People exaggerate, they love to romanticize, and I was quite prepared to discover that his story was not nearly so singular as I had been led to believe.

And this impression was confirmed when at last I made his acquaintance. It was on the Piazza in Capri, where I was spending the month of August at a friend's villa, and a little before sunset, when most of the inhabitants, native and foreign, gather together to chat with their friends in the cool of the evening. There is a terrace that overlooks the Bay of Naples, and when the sun sinks slowly into the sea the island of Ischia is silhouetted against a blaze of splendour. It is one of the most lovely sights in the world. I was standing there with my friend and host watching it, when suddenly he said:

"Look, there's Wilson."

"Where?"

"The man sitting on the parapet, with his back to us. He's got a blue shirt on."

I saw an undistinguished back and a small head of grey hair, short and rather thin.

"I wish he'd turn round," I said.

"He will presently."

"Ask him to come and have a drink with us at Morgano's."

"All right."

The instant of overwhelming beauty had passed and the sun, like the top of an orange, was dipping into a wine-red sea. We turned round and leaning our backs against the parapet looked at the people who were sauntering to and fro. They were all talking their heads off and the cheerful noise was exhilarating. Then the church bell, rather cracked, but with a fine resonant note, began to ring. The Piazza at Capri, with its clock tower over the footpath that leads up from the harbour, with the church up a flight of steps, is a perfect setting for an opera by Donizetti, and you felt that the voluble crowd might at any moment break out into a rattling chorus. It was charming and unreal.

I was so intent on the scene that I had not noticed Wilson get off the parapet and come towards us. As he passed us my friend stopped him.

"Hulloa, Wilson, I haven't seen you bathing the last few days."

"I've been bathing on the other side for a change."

My friend then introduced me. Wilson shook hands with me politely, but with indifference; a great many strangers come to Capri for a few days, or a few weeks; and I had no doubt he was constantly meeting people who came and went; and then my friend asked him to come along and have a drink with us.

"I was just going back to supper," he said.

"Can't it wait?" I asked.

"I suppose it can," he smiled.

Though his teeth were not very good his smile was attractive. It was gentle and kindly. He was dressed in a blue cotton shirt and a pair of grey trousers, much

creased and none too clean, of a thin canvas, and on his feet he wore a pair of very old espadrilles. The get-up was picturesque, and very suitable to the place and the weather, but it did not at all go with his face. It was a lined, long face, deeply sunburned, thin-lipped, with small grey eyes rather close together and light, neat features. The grey hair was carefully brushed. It was not a plain face, indeed in his youth Wilson might have been good-looking, but a prim one. He wore the blue shirt, open at the neck, and the grey canvas trousers, not as though they belonged to him, but as though, shipwrecked in his pyjamas, he had been fitted out with odd garments by compassionate strangers. Notwithstanding this careless attire he looked like the manager of a branch office in an insurance company, who should by rights be wearing a black coat with pepper-and-salt trousers, a white collar, and an unobjectionable tie. I could very well see myself going to him to claim the insurance money when I had lost a watch, and being rather disconcerted while I answered the questions he put to me by his obvious impression, for all his politeness, that people who made such claims were either fools or knaves.

Moving off, we strolled across the Piazza and down the street till we came to Morgano's. We sat in the garden. Around us people were talking in Russian, German, Italian, and English. We ordered drinks. Donna Lucia, the host's wife, waddled up and in her low, sweet voice passed the time of day with us. Though middle-aged now and portly, she had still traces of the wonderful beauty that thirty years before had driven artists to paint so many bad portraits other. Her eyes, large and liquid, were the eyes of Hera and her smile was affectionate and gracious. We three gossiped for a while, for there is always a scandal of one sort or another in Capri to make a topic of conversation, but nothing was said of particular interest and in a little while Wilson got up and left us. Soon afterwards we strolled up to my friend's villa to dine. On the way he asked me what I had thought of Wilson.

"Nothing," I said. "I don't believe there's a word of truth in your story."

"Why not?"

"He isn't the sort of man to do that sort of thing."

"How does anyone know what anyone is capable of?"

"I should put him down as an absolutely normal man of business who's retired on a comfortable income from ill-edged securities, I think your story's just the ordinary Capri tittle- little."

“Have it your own way,” said my friend.

We were in the habit of bathing at a beach called the Baths of Tiberius. We took a fly down the road to a certain point and then wandered through lemon groves and vineyards, noisy with cicadas and heavy with the hot smell of the sun, till we came to the top of the cliff down which a steep winding path led to the sea. A day or two later, just before we got down my friend said:

“Oh, there’s Wilson back again.”

We scrunched over the beach, the only drawback to the bathing-place being that it was shingle and not sand, and as we came along Wilson saw us and waved. He was standing up, a pipe in his mouth, and he wore nothing but a pair of trunks. His body was dark brown, thin but not emaciated, and, considering his wrinkled face and grey hair, youthful. Hot from our walk, we undressed quickly and plunged at once into the water. Six feet from the shore it was thirty feet deep, but so clear that you could see the bottom. It was warm, yet invigorating.

When I got out Wilson was lying on his belly, with a towel under him reading a book. I lit a cigarette and went and sat down beside him.

“Had a nice swim?” he asked.

He put his pipe inside his book to mark the place and closing it put it down on the pebbles beside him. He was evidently willing to talk.

“Lovely,” I said. “It’s the best bathing in the world.”

“Of course people think those were the Baths of Tiberius.” He waved his hand towards a shapeless mass of masonry that stood half in the water and half out. “But that’s all rot. It was just one of his villas, you know.”

I did. But it is just as well to let people tell you things when they want to. It disposes them kindly towards you if you suffer them to impart information. Wilson gave a chuckle.

“Funny old fellow, Tiberius. Pity they’re saying now there’s not a word of truth in all those stories about him.”

He began to tell me all about Tiberius. Well, I had read my Suetonius too and I had read histories of the Early Roman Empire, so there was nothing very new to me in what he said. But I observed that he was not ill read. I remarked on it.

“Oh, well, when I settled down here I was naturally interested, and I have plenty of time for reading. When you live in a place like this, with all its associations, it seems to make history so actual. You might almost be living in historical times yourself.”

I should remark here that this was in 1913. The world was an easy, comfortable place and no one could have imagined that anything might happen seriously to disturb the serenity of existence.

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“Fifteen years.” He gave the blue and placid sea a glance, and a strangely tender smile hovered on his thin lips. “I fell in love with the place at first sight. You’ve heard, I dare say, of the mythical German who came here on the Naples boat just for lunch and a look at the Blue Grotto and stayed forty years; well, I can’t say I exactly did that, but it’s come to the same thing in the end. Only it won’t be forty years in my case. Twenty-five. Still, that’s better than a poke in the eye with a sharp stick.”

I waited for him to go on. For what he had just said looked indeed as though there might be something after all in the singular story I had heard. But at that moment my friend came dripping out of the water very proud of himself because he had swum a mile, and the conversation turned to other things.

After that I met Wilson several times, either in the Piazza or on the beach. He was amiable and polite. He was always pleased to have a talk and I found out that he not only knew every inch of the island but also the adjacent mainland. He had read a great deal on all sorts of subjects, but his speciality was the history of Rome and on this he was very well informed. He seemed to have little imagination and to be of no more than average intelligence. He laughed a good deal, but with restraint, and his sense of humour was tickled by simple jokes. A commonplace man. I did not forget the odd remark he had made during the first short dial we had had by ourselves, but he never so much as approached the topic again. One day on our return from the beach, dismissing the cab at the Piazza, my friend and I told the driver to be ready to take us up to Anacapri at five. We were going to climb Monte Solaro, dine at a tavern we favoured, and walk down in the moonlight, for it was full moon and the views by night were lovely. Wilson was standing by while we gave the cabman instructions, for we had given him a lift to save him the hot dusty walk, and more from politeness than for any other reason I asked him if he would care to join us.

"It's my party," I said.

"I'll come with pleasure," he answered.

*But when the time came to set out my friend was not feeling well, he thought he had slaved too long in the water, and would not face the long and tiring walk. So I went alone with Wilson. We climbed the mountain, admired the spacious view, and got back to the inn as night was falling, hot, hungry, and thirsty. We had ordered our dinner beforehand. The food was good, for Antonio was an excellent cook, and the wine came from his own vineyard. It was so light that you felt you could drink it like water and we finished the first bottle with our macaroni. By the time we had finished the second we felt that there was nothing much wrong with life. We sat in a little garden under a great vine laden with grapes. The air was exquisitely soft. The night was still and we were alone. The maid brought us *bel paese* cheese and a plate of figs. I ordered coffee and *strega*, which is the best liqueur they make in Italy. Wilson would not have a cigar, but lit his pipe.*

"We've got plenty of time before we need start," he said, "the moon won't be over the hill for another hour."

"Moon or no moon," I said briskly, "of course we've got plenty of time. That's one of the delights of Capri, that there's never any hurry."

"Leisure," he said. "If people only knew! It's the most priceless thing a man can have and they're such fools they don't even know it's something to aim at. Work? They work for work's sake. They haven't got the brains to realize that the only object of work is to obtain leisure."

Wine has the effect on some people of making them indulge in general reflections. These remarks were true, but no one could have claimed that they were original. I did not say anything, but struck a match to light my cigar.

"It was full moon the first time I came to Capri," he went on reflectively. "It might be the same moon as tonight."

"It was, you know," I smiled.

He grinned. The only light in the garden was what came from an oil lamp that hung over our heads. It had been scanty to eat by, but it was good now for confidences.

"I didn't mean that. I mean, it might be yesterday. Fifteen years it is, and when I look back it seems like a month. I'd never been to Italy before. I came for my

summer holiday. I went to Naples by boat from Marseilles and I had a look round, Pompeii, you know, and Paestum” and one or two places like that; then I came here for a week. I liked the look of the place right away, from the sea, I mean, as I watched it come closer and closer; and then when we got into the little boats from the steamer and landed at the quay, with all that crowd of jabbering people who wanted to take your luggage, and the hotel touts, and the tumbledown houses on the Marina and the walk up to the hotel, and dining on the terrace - well, it just got me. That’s the truth. I didn’t know if I was standing on my head or my heels. I’d never drunk Capri wine before, but I’d heard of it; I think I must have got a bit tight. I sat on that terrace after they’d all gone to bed and watched the moon over the sea, and there was Vesuvius with a great red plume of smoke rising up from it. Of course I know now that wine I drank was ink, Capri wine my eye, but I thought it all right then. But it wasn’t the wine that made me drunk, it was the shape of the island and those jabbering people, the moon and the sea and the oleander in the hotel garden. I’d never seen an oleander before.”

It was a long speech and it had made him thirsty. He took up his glass, but it was empty. I asked him if he would have another strega.

“It’s sickly stuff. Let’s have a bottle of wine. That’s sound, that is, pure juice of the grape and can’t hurt anyone.”

I ordered more wine, and when it came filled the glasses. He took a long drink and after a sigh of pleasure went on.

“Next day I found my way to the bathing-place we go to. Not bad bathing, I thought. Then I wandered about the island. As luck would have it, there was a festa up at the Punta di Timberio and I ran straight into the middle of it. An image of the Virgin and priests, acolytes swinging censers, and a whole crowd of jolly, laughing, excited people, a lot of them all dressed up. I ran across an Englishman there and asked him what it was all about. “Oh, it’s the feast of the Assumption,” he said,” at least that’s what the Catholic Church says it is, but that’s just their hanky-panky. It’s the festival of Venus. Pagan, you know. Aphrodite rising from the sea and all that.” It gave me quite a funny feeling to hear him. It seemed to take one a long way back, if you know what I mean. After that I went down one night to have a look at the Faraglioni by moonlight. If the fates had wanted me to go on being a bank manager they oughtn’t to have let me take that walk.”

“You were a bank manager, were you?” I asked.

I had been wrong about him, but not far wrong.

“Yes. I was manager of the Crawford Street branch of the York and City. It was convenient for me because I lived up Hendon way. I could get from door to door in thirty-seven minutes.”

He puffed at his pipe and relit it.

“That was my last night, that was. I’d got to be back at the bank on Monday morning. When I looked at those two great rocks sticking out of the water, with the moon above them, and all the little lights of the fishermen in their boats catching cuttlefish, all so peaceful and beautiful, I said to myself, well, after all, why should I go back? It wasn’t as if I had anyone dependent on me. My wife had died of bronchial pneumonia four years before and the kid went to live with her grandmother my wife’s mother. She was an old fool, she didn’t look after the kid properly and she got blood-poisoning, they amputated her leg, but they couldn’t save her and she died, poor little thing.”

“How terrible,” I said.

“Yes, I was cut up at the time, though of course not so much as if the kid had been living with me, but I dare say it was a mercy. Not much chance for a girl with only one leg. I was sorry about my wife too. We got on very well together. Though I don’t know if it would have continued. She was the sort of woman who was always bothering about what other people’d think. She didn’t like travelling. Eastbourne was her idea of a holiday. D’you know, I’d never crossed the Channel till after her death.”

“But I suppose you’ve got other relations, haven’t you?”

“None. I was an only child. My father had a brother, but he went to Australia before I was born. I don’t think anyone could easily be more alone in the world than I am. There wasn’t any reason I could see why I shouldn’t do exactly what I wanted. I was thirty-four at that time.”

He had told me he had been on the island for fifteen years. That would make him forty-nine. Just about the age I should have given him.

‘I’d been working since I was seventeen. All I had to look forward to was doing the same old thing day after day till I retired on my pension. I said to myself, is it worth it? What’s wrong with chucking it all up and spending the rest of my life down here? It was the most beautiful place I’d ever seen. But I’d had

a business training, I was cautious by nature. "No," I said, "I won't be carried away like this, I'll go tomorrow like I said I would and think it over. Perhaps when I get back to London I'll think quite differently." Damned fool, wasn't I? I lost a whole year that way.'

"You didn't change your mind, then?"

"You bet I didn't. All the time I was working I kept thinking of the bathing here and the vineyards and the walks over the hills and the moon and the sea, and the Piazza in the evening when everyone walks about for a bit of a chat after the day's work is over. There was only one thing that bothered me: I wasn't sure if I was justified in not working like everybody else did. Then I read a sort of history book, by a man called Marion Crawford it was, and there was a story about Sybaris and Crotona. There were two cities; and in Sybaris they just enjoyed life and had a good time, and in Crotona they were hardy and industrious and all that. And one day the men of Crotona came over and wiped Sybaris out, and then after a while a lot of other fellows came over from somewhere else and wiped Crotona out. Nothing remains of Sybaris, not a stone, and all that's left of Crotona is just one column. That settled the matter for me."

"Oh?"

"It came to the same in the end, didn't it? And when you look back now, who were the mugs?"

I did not reply and he went on.

"The money was rather a bother. The bank didn't pension one off till after thirty years' service, but if you retired before that they gave you a gratuity". With that and what I'd got for the sale of my house and the little I'd managed to save, I just hadn't enough to buy an annuity to last the rest of my life. It would have been silly to sacrifice everything so as to lead a pleasant life and not have a sufficient income to make it pleasant. I wanted to have a little place of my own, a servant to look after me, enough to buy tobacco, decent food, books now and then, and something over for emergencies. I knew pretty well how much I needed. I found I had just enough to buy an annuity for twenty-five years."

"You were thirty-five at the time?"

"Yes. It would carry me on till I was sixty. After all, no one can be certain of living longer than that, a lot of men die in their fifties, and by the time a man's sixty he's had the best of life."

"On the other hand no one can be sure of dying at sixty," I said.

"Well, I don't know. It depends on himself, doesn't it?"

"In your place I should have stayed on at the bank till I was entitled to my pension."

"I should have been forty-seven then. I shouldn't have been too old to enjoy my life here, I'm older than that now and I enjoy it as much as I ever did, but I should have been too old to experience the particular pleasure of a young man. You know, you can have just as good a time at fifty as you can at thirty, but it's not the same sort of good time. I wanted to live the perfect life while I still had the energy and the spirit to make the most of it. Twenty-five years seemed a long time to me, and twenty-five years of happiness seemed worth paying something pretty substantial for. I'd made up my mind to wait a year and I waited a year. Then I sent in my resignation and as soon as they paid me my gratuity I bought the annuity and came on here."

"An annuity for twenty-five years?"

"That's right."

"Have you never regretted?"

"Never. I've had my money's worth already. And I've got ten years more. Don't you think after twenty-five years of perfect happiness one ought to be satisfied to call it a day?"

"Perhaps."

He did not say in so many words what he would do then, but his intention was clear. It was pretty much the story my friend had told me, but it sounded different when I heard it from his own lips. I stole a glance at him. There was nothing about him that was not ordinary. No one, looking at that neat, prim face, could have thought him capable of an unconventional action. I did not blame him. It was his own life that he had arranged in this strange manner, and I did not see why he should not do what he liked with it. Still, I could not prevent the little shiver that ran down my spine.

"Getting chilly?" he smiled. "We might as well start walking down. The moon'll be up by now."

Before we parted Wilson asked me if I would like to go and see his house one day; and two or three days later, finding out where he lived, I strolled up to see him. It was a peasant's cottage, well away from the town, in a vineyard, with a view of the sea. By the side of the door grew a great oleander in full flower. There were only two small rooms, a tiny kitchen, and a lean-to in which firewood could be kept. The bedroom was furnished like a monk's cell, but the sitting-room, smelling agreeably of tobacco, was comfortable enough, with two large armchairs that he had brought from England, a large roll-top desk, a collage piano, and crowded bookshelves. On the walls were framed engravings of pictures by G. F. Walls and Lord Leighton. Wilson told me that the house belonged to the owner of the vineyard who lived in another collage higher up the hill, and his wife came in every day to do the rooms and the cooking. He had found the place on his first visit to Capri, and taking it on his return for good had been there ever since. Seeing the piano and music open on it, I asked him if he would play.

'I'm no good, you know, but I've always been fond of music and I get a lot of fun out of strumming.'

He sat down at the piano and played one of the movements from a Beethoven sonata. He did not play very well. I looked at his music, Schumann and Schubert, Beethoven, Bach, and Chopin. On the table on which he had his meals was a greasy pack of cards. I asked him if he played patience.

'A lot.'

From what I saw of him then and from what I heard from either people I made for myself what I think must have been a fairly accurate picture of the life he had led for the last Fifteen years. It was certainly a very harmless one. He bathed; he walked a great deal, and he seemed never to lose his sense of the beauty of the island which he knew so intimately; he played the piano and he played patience; he read. When he was asked to a party he went and, though a trifle dull, was agreeable. He was not affronted if he was neglected. He liked people, but with an aloofness that prevented intimacy. He lived thriftily, but with sufficient comfort. He never owed a penny. I imagine he had never been a man whom sex had greatly troubled, and if in his younger days he had had now and then a passing affair with a visitor to the island whose head was turned by the atmosphere, his emotion, while it lasted, remained, I am pretty sure, well under his control. I think he was

determined that nothing should interfere with his independence of spirit. His only passion was for the beauty of nature, and he sought felicity in the simple and natural things that life offers to everyone. You may say that it was a grossly selfish existence. It was. He was of no use to anybody, but on the other hand he did nobody any harm. His only object was his own happiness, and it looked as though he had attained it. Very few people know where to look for happiness; fewer still find it. I don't know whether he was a fool or a wise man. He was certainly a man who knew his own mind. The odd thing about him to me was that he was so immensely commonplace. I should never have given him a second thought but for what I knew, that on a certain day, ten years from then, unless a chance illness cut the thread before, he must deliberately take leave of the world he loved so well. I wondered whether it was the thought of this, never quite absent from his mind, that gave him the peculiar zest with which he enjoyed every moment of the day.

I should do him an injustice if I omitted to slate that he was not at all in the habit of talking about himself. I think the friend I was staying with was the only person in whom he had confided. I believe he only told me the story because he suspected I already knew it, and on the evening on which he told it me he had drunk a good deal of wine.

My visit drew to a close and I left the island. The year after, war broke out. A number of things happened to me, so that the course of my life was greatly altered, and it was thirteen years before I went to Capri again. My friend had been back sometime, but he was no longer so well off, and had moved into a house that had no room for me; so I was putting up at the hotel. He came to meet me at the boat and we dined together. During dinner I asked him where exactly his house was.

"You know it," he answered. "It's the little place Wilson had. I've built on a room and made it quite nice."

With so many other things to occupy my mind I had not given Wilson a thought for years; but now, with a little shock, I remembered. The ten years he had before him when I made his acquaintance must have elapsed long ago.

"Did he commit suicide as he said he would?"

"It's rather a grim story."

Wilson's plan was all right. There was only one flaw in it and this, I suppose, he could not have foreseen. It had never occurred to him that after twenty-five years

of complete happiness, in this quiet backwater, with nothing in the world to disturb his serenity, his character would gradually lose its strength. The will needs obstacles in order to exercise its power; when it is never thwarted, when no effort is needed to achieve one's desires, because one has placed one's desires only in the things that can be obtained by stretching out one's hand, the will grows impotent. If you walk on a level all the time the muscles you need to climb a mountain will atrophy. These observations are trite, but there they are. When Wilson's annuity expired he had no longer the resolution to make the end which was the price he had agreed to pay for that long period of happy tranquility. I do not think, as far as I could gather, both from what my friend told me and afterwards from others, that he wanted courage. It was just that he couldn't make up his mind. He put it off from day to day.

He had lived on the island for so long and had always settled his accounts so punctually that it was easy for him to get credit; never having borrowed money before, he found a number of people who were willing to lend him small sums when now he asked for them. He had paid his rent regularly for so many years that his landlord, whose wife Assunta still acted as his servant, was content to let things slide for several months. Everyone believed him when he said that a relative had died and that he was temporarily embarrassed because owing to legal formalities he could not for some time get the money that was due to him. He managed to hang on after this fashion for something over a year. Then he could get no more credit from the local tradesmen, and there was no one to lend him any more money. His landlord gave him notice to leave the house unless he paid up the arrears of rent before a certain date.

The day before this he went into his tiny bedroom, closed the door and the window, drew the curtain, and lit a brazier of charcoal. Next morning when Assunta came to make his breakfast she found him insensible but still alive. The room was draughty, and though he had done this and that to keep out the fresh air he had not done it very thoroughly. It almost looked as though at the last moment, and desperate though his situation was, he had suffered from a certain infirmity of purpose. Wilson was taken to the hospital, and though very ill for some time he at last recovered. But as a result either of the charcoal poisoning or of the shock he was no longer in complete possession of his faculties. He was not insane, at all events not insane enough to be put in an asylum, but he was quite obviously no longer in his right mind.

"I went to see him," said my friend. "I tried to get him to talk, but he kept looking at me in a funny sort of way, as though he couldn't quite make out where he'd seen me before. He looked rather awful lying there in bed, with a week's growth of grey beard on his chin; but except for that funny look in his eyes he seemed quite normal."

"What funny look in his eyes?"

"I don't know exactly how to describe it. Puzzled. It's an absurd comparison, but suppose you threw a stone up into the air and it didn't come down but just stayed there..."

"It would be rather bewildering," I smiled.

"Well, that's the sort of look he had."

It was difficult to know what to do with him. He had no money and no means of getting any. His effects were sold, but for too little to pay what he owed. He was English, and the Italian authorities did not wish to make themselves responsible for him. The British Consul in Naples had no funds to deal with the case. He could of course be sent back to England, but no one seemed to know what could be done with him when he got there. Then Assunta, the servant, said that he had been a good master and a good tenant, and as long as he had the money had paid his way; he could sleep in the woodshed in the cottage in which she and her husband lived, and he could share their meals. This was suggested to him. It was difficult to know whether he understood or not. When Assunta came to take him from the hospital he went with her without remark. He seemed to have no longer a will of his own. She had been keeping him now for two years.

"It's not very comfortable, you know," said my friend. "They've rigged him up a ramshackle bed and given him a couple of blankets, but there's no window, and it's icy cold in winter and like an oven in summer. And the food's pretty rough. You know how these peasants eat: macaroni on Sundays and meat once in a blue moon."

"What does he do with himself all the time?"

"He wanders about the hills. I've tried to see him two or three times, but it's no good; when he sees you coming he runs like a hare. Assunta comes down to have a chat with me now and then and I give her a bit of money so that she can buy him tobacco, but God knows if he ever gets it."

"Do they treat him all right?" I asked.

"I'm sure Assunta's kind enough. She treats him like a child. I'm afraid her husband's not very nice to him. He grudges the cost of his keep. I don't believe he's cruel or anything like that, but I think he's a bit sharp with him. He makes him fetch water and clean the cow-shed and that sort of thing."

"It sounds pretty rotten," I said.

"He brought it on himself. After all, he's only got what he deserved."

"I think on the whole we all get what we deserve," I said. "But that doesn't prevent its being rather horrible."

Two or three days later my friend and I were taking a walk. We were strolling along a narrow path through an olive grove.

"There's Wilson," said my friend suddenly. "Don't look, you'll only frighten him. Go straight on."

I walked with my eyes on the path, but out of the corners of them I saw a man hiding behind an olive tree. He did not move as we approached, but I felt that he was watching us. As soon as we had passed I heard a scamper. Wilson, like a hunted animal, had made for safety. That was the last I ever saw of him.

He died last year. He had endured that life for six years. He was found one morning on the mountainside lying quite peacefully as though he had died in his sleep. From where he lay he had been able to see those two great rocks called the Faraglioni which stand out of the sea. It was full moon and he must have gone to see them by moonlight. Perhaps he died of the beauty of that sight.

(Complete Short Stories of Somerset Maugham, Volume II. Doubleday & Company, 1952)

3.2.12 Glossary and Annotations

Round pegs in square: Person not fitted for their places

Piazza: Public square

Silhouetted : Appearance of person or thing as seen against light

Morgano's: Morgano is the owner of an inn. The place is named after its owner

Sauntering; Walking idly

Donizetti: Italian composer

Espadrilles: Light canvas shoe

Hera: Wife of Zeus, the God Heaven in Greek mythology

Gift-edged securities: Investments considered safe

Tiberius: Emperor Tiberius (14 A.D. to 37 A.D). Tiberius Gracchus Roman Tribune of the middle of the second century B.C.

Suetonius: historian

The early roman Empire; the Roman empire was established by Augustus Caesar after his victory in the Battle of Actium in 31 B.C. Then came Tiberius (14 A.D.—37 A.D.), Caligulada, Claudius, Nero (54-64 A.D.), the five Antomimes—mercus Aurelius (161-180 A.D).

Cicadas: Winged insects

Macaroni; Flour paste formed into long tubes

Bel paese cheese: Mild creamy Italian cheese

Marseilles: A town in France

Pompeii: A town in Italy, ruined by an eruption from Vesuvius

Paestun: A place in Italy

Quay: A place for loading and unloading vessels

Marina: Road along the sea-beach

Acolytes: Church Officers

Consers: Vessels for burning incense

Aphrodite: Greek goddess of love, fertility, beauty

Faraglioni: the two rocks of the name

Eastbourne: a sea-side resort in Sussex

Marian Crawford (1854-1909) : an Anglo-American historical novelist

Sybaris: A Greek city notorious for the pleasure-loving self-indulgence

Crotona: An Italian city of hard-working people

Mugs: Simpleton

Annuity: annual income from investments.

C. F. Watts and Lord Leighton: Watts (1817-1904) and Leighton (1830-96) were painters of Greek mythological subjects, whose works were much in vogue during the late Victorian period

Beethoven: A celebrated German composer

Sonata: Instrumental composition in three or four movements for a solo voice

Schumann: Robert Alexander Schumann (1810-56), a German composer

Schubert, Franz Peter (1797-1828): Austrian composer noted for lyrical melody

Bach: Johann Sebastian (1685-1750): German composer, supreme organist of the time

Chopin, Frederick Francois (1810-39): Polish composer, pianist

Chance cut the thread: Chance as fate cut the thread of life. The Greeks believed that life is spun out of thin thread

War broke out: It refers to World War 1 (1914-18). It was war between Germany and allied forces of England, Russia etc.

Atrophy: Waste away for lack of nourishment

Brazier: a pot for hot coal

You threw a stone up into air and it did not come down: Wilson's abnormal condition is compared to a stone thrown in the air and stuck there

The British Consul: British agent residing in Naples

Rigged him up: Provided him with

Scamper: quick run

Once in a blue moon: rarely

3.2.13 Discussion and Analysis

Maugham's story deals with a modern lotus eater, and his unusual choice to live in Capri in the midst of natural beauty with an annuity for twenty-five years. The author came to Capri near Naples and stayed with his friend. He heard of Thomas Wilson and was introduced to him once by his friend. Gradually, intimacy grew and

he came to know of his unusual, rather odd conduct of leaving his job and buying an annuity for twenty-five years in order to live in languorous ease in the midst of nature in Capri.

Wilson was a bank manager of the Crawford Street branch of the York and City and lived a dull humdrum life. His wife and daughter died early, and he lived a lonely life. He was sick and

“I think on the whole we get what we deserve, but that does not prevent its being rather horrible”.

tired of the conventional life of normal duties. His visit to Capri during a vacation was a turning point in his life. It completely changed his attitude and course of life. He was so mesmerized by the natural surrounds of Capri that he resolved to settle down there permanently. He resigned his post, collected all his assets and bought an annuity for twenty-five years. He began to live a carefree life in Capri. Leisure and complete freedom from cares and anxieties were the sole desires of his life. He had a modest peasant’s cottage in a vineyard with a view of the sea. His sitting room was comfortable with arm-chairs, piano and crowded book-shelves. He lived thriftily, but with sufficient comfort. He had nice food, smoked tobacco, read good books, and spent his time in playing on the piano, playing patience, reading books, viewing the beauty of nature. He sought felicity in the simple and natural things. Like the lotos-eaters, he wanted to rest from work and enjoy leisure with some common comforts.

His tragedy came after twenty-five years. He had no income. He could not bring himself to commit suicide as he had professed earlier. He spent some days on loans which were granted to him because of his honest living there for twenty-five years. He could hang on this way for something over a year. Then he could get no credit: his landlord gave him notice to leave the house. He made a vain attempt to kill himself. He was ill and after his recovery, he became insane. His servant Assunta gave him shelter and food. However, it was a ramshackle shelter and very meager food. Assunta’s husband resented the cost of his keeping. He made a vain attempt to commit suicide by lighting a brazier of charcoal in a closed room. He became ill, and after his recovery became insane. Neither the Italian authorities nor the British consul at Naples agreed to deal with his case. Wilson went about the hills. The writer went to Capri again after ten years found him hiding behind an olive tree. He behaved like a hunted animal. After six years of this abject miserable living, he died. He was found one morning on the mountain side. He went there at night perhaps to see the moon-lit beauty of the mountains. “Perhaps he died of the beauty of that sight”, there are the author’s last words on Wilson.

Thomas Wilson in Maugham's "The Lotus Eater" is not a tragic character in this sense. He deserved his sufferings and humiliations for the odd choice he made. These sufferings were foreseen: he himself visualized them. He bought an annuity for twenty-five years for enjoying life and leisure in the midst of nature in Capri. The thought of the future after the expiry of the annuity haunted him, but he smothered it in zest with which he enjoyed every minute of his day. The misery and humiliations were inevitable for him for the odd choice he made. He deserved all these things. He had to pay the penalty for this unwise choice by these sufferings. His choice was unwise from the worldly standpoint, but he made the choice out of his zest of life and passion for nature.

His intense zest for life, outweighed the worldly considerations and he made an utterly unwise choice without thinking for the future. He chose what he thought conducive to his happiness. He did not like to live like common men in a commonplace humdrum manner.

Let us now quickly go through the events of this exceptional story:

- The author hears about Thomas Wilson:
Most people live a conventional life. However, there are people who chose sometimes choose unusual ways of life. Wilson was one such person. The writer heard of him, but wanted to hear the facts of his life from his own mouth.
- The author meets Wilson:
The opportunity came to the writer when he went to Capri in Naples and made acquaintance with Wilson at Piazza. Wilson was sitting on a parapet. The author's friend introduced Wilson to him. Wilson was reserved, but polite. A few days later, the author and his friend saw Wilson again during the bath. On another occasion, the author asked Wilson to join him and his friend at Anacapri where they would climb Monte Solaro, dine at a tavern and walk down in the moonlight.
- Wilson told his story:
The author's friend fell ill on the day of their journey to Anacapri. The author went with Wilson. They enjoyed the day together by climbing the mountain, admiring the mesmerizing natural scenery and enjoying the drink. They drank wine. Under the influence of wine, Wilson related the story of

his life. Wilson came to Capri fifteen years ago. He was a bank manager. His life was normal and routine bound. His wife and daughter were dead. He lived a lonely life. He was thirty-four at that time. He decided to resign. He bought an annuity for twenty-five years and came to settle here. He however did not regret his decision. He had spent fifteen years of perfect happiness and had ten years more. He had his money's worth.

- The author visited Wilson's house:

While they parted, Wilson invited the author to visit his house. It was a peasant's cottage in a vineyard with a view of the sea. There were two small rooms, a small kitchen and a lean-to for keeping firewood. The sitting room was equipped with comfortable arm-chairs, piano and crowded book-shelves.

- Wilson faces the ultimate tragedy:

The author left the place. The World War started and the author had various preoccupations. He again visited Capri thirteen years after. He put up in a hotel. His friend came to see him. He told him that he was now staying in the little cottage where Wilson lived. The author was reminded of Wilson and his life. From his friend he came to know the grim end of Wilson's life.

- Wilson's death:

The author felt that Wilson got what he deserved. But Wilson's life was horrible. He met Wilson while he and his friend were strolling along a narrow path. But he hid behind an olive tree. He watched them, but could not face them. After enduring this miserable existence for six years, he died. He was found one morning on the mountain side lying peacefully. Probably he went to his favourite spot at night to enjoy the moonlit beauty of the mountains one last time.

3.2.14 Symbolism and Imagery

“The Lotus Eater” is a symbolic short story. Symbolism refers to the use of symbols to represent ideas or facts. The predominant symbols used in “The Lotus Eater” are those of the moon and moonlight, which may symbolize calmness, tranquility, peacefulness. From a distance the moon looks beautiful but in reality it is quite harsh. The moon also symbolizes irrationality (lunar – lunacy).

“On my last night, I went for a walk to see the Bay of Naples **by moonlight**. It was a **full moon** that night – the same as it is now. And it was on that **walk in the moonlight** that I made my decision.”

“It had been a **full moon** the night before. Wilson had **died in the moonlight**.”

Through the use of symbolism, Maugham makes use of imagery whose application is not fantastical or far-fetched but can be easily related to the mundane. The imagery of the lotus-eater which continues throughout the length of the story, symbolically represents uniquely leading one’s life in a social set-up and fulfilling purposes which are uncommon interests to the common man.

There are various related imageries to explain the difficulties and adversities life tests one with. “He has grey hair and his face was burnt brown by the sun.” In the same strain, human relationships and ties are weighed against circumstances. “My wife had died of bronchial pneumonia four years before and the kid went to live with her grandmother my wife’s mother. She was an old fool, she didn’t look after the kid properly and she got blood-poisoning, they amputated her leg, but they couldn’t save her and she died, poor little thing.”

Different aspects of the human life test the strength of the human mind starts failing in the face of circumstances. Different aspects of the human life test the strength of relationships and that of human mind—— not only material, but also the emotional and the religious. The difference of purpose and the strength of Wilson’s intentions are tested by time. Wilson is more occupied with the sublime and forgets the practical aspects of life. According to Wilson true satisfaction can be obtained only when it springs forth from the essential self. The short story is a dark depiction of the condition of a man who was oblivious of the needs of daily life. His failure to understand the life, hardships and disillusionment during his course of journey of life make him the modern Lotus Eater.

Activity for the Learner

With help from your counselor, carefully study the images of an idyllic life of langour that Maugham uses in the story. Town-country binary, good food, wine, music for example, are some of these. Examine how they all combine in Wilson to give a picture of a life that is highly unrealistic by conventional standards.

3.2.15 Maugham's Narrative Style

Maugham is a great short story writer. He has written a good number of stories which have tremendous appeal to the modern readers. His manner was based on the nineteenth century French writer, Maupassant. Verisimilitude and a detached and straightforward narrative method are his distinguishing characteristics. According to him the bare narrative is as important as the telling of the story. He tells his story in a direct straightforward manner. His narrative is brisk and smooth without being obscured by abstruse and confused prose style.

“The Lotus-Eater” has an easy and smooth narrative style. The narrative flows in a limpid manner holding the reader's attention to the end. The author begins with a general remark that most people like to go the conventional way. But there are men who make unusual bold choices and thus leave an impact on our minds. Then he speaks of Thomas Wilson and his desire to meet him. The author does not state his unusual life all at once. He reveals it in course of the narrative, thus keeping the readers curious and eager. He tells how he meets and strikes up an acquaintance with Wilson on the Piazza in Capri. He describes the man, his appearance and his dress. He meets occasionally and then invites him to a party at Anacapri. There Wilson tells his own life and his choice of settling in Capri in the lush natural beauty. Captivated by the natural beauty of the place, he gave up his job, collected his assets and bought an annuity for twenty-five years. He would live there in indolent enjoyment of the place for twenty-five years. He had already spent fifteen years and he has another ten years to go. He has no care for what will happen to him after the expiry of the annuity. He is a commonplace man intent on his happiness. But the author is interested in him because of his fate after ten years. He may deliberately take leave of the world. Thus the author keeps the readers interested in the fate of the man.

The end of the story is thus full of surprise and suspense. Wilson could not commit suicide. He lived a miserable life, but retained his lively interest in Nature till the end. He died while enjoying the moon-lit mountains at night.

The easy and straightforward narrative is helped on by the simple unobtrusive prose style. His prose is conversational and colloquial. It is unlike the prose of Conrad which is confused and obscure or the prose of James Joyce which is steeped in mysticism and symbolism. It is a matter-of fact prose enlivened now and then by flashes of imagination and humour. In the description of natural beauty, he shows imagination, but he controls his emotions and exuberance. “There is a terrace that

overlook the Bay of Naples, and when the sun sinks slowly into the sea of Ischia is silhouetted against a blaze of splendor”. Describing the man, he remarks, “Notwithstanding this careless attire he looked like the manager of a branch office in an insurance company”. His prose is, however, marked by clichés like ‘once in a blue moon’, ‘round pegs in square holes’, ‘call it a day’, etc. Inventive writers like Joyce and Conrad would avoid these clichés and make their prose more evocative and suggestive through symbols and images. Maugham’s similes are often very commonplace. “They are like tram cars travelling for ever on the self same rails.”

It is, however, his brisk narrative style and simple unobtrusive prose that make for the popularity of Maugham’s stories with the modern readers.

3.2.16 Significance of the Title

Homer in his *Odyssey* gives a description of the Lotos Land. It is a land of sensuous and indolent enjoyment. Lotos is the Greek word for lotus. Lotos-eaters are those who lived in the lotos-land enjoying a life of indolent ease. They ate a flowery food and lived a life of dreamy languorous ease. There is a reference to it in Book IX of Homer’s *Odyssey*. At the end of the Trojan War Ulysses, King of Ithaca wandered through the seas with his mariners in the course of their homeward journey. On the tenth day he got at the land of the lotos-eaters. The passage in Homer runs thus: “But on the tenth day we set foot on the land of lotos-eaters who ate a flowery food. So we stepped ashore and drew water, and straight-way my company took their mid-day meal by the swift ships. Now when we had tasted meat and drink I sent forth certain of my company to go and make search what manner of men they were, who live upon the earth by bread and I chose out two of my fellows and send a third with them as herald. Then straightway they went and mixed with the men of the lotos-eaters, and so it was that the lotos-eaters devised not death for our fellows but gave them fruit of the lotos to eat. Now, whosoever of them did eat the honey-sweet fruit of lotos, had no more wish to bring tidings not to come back, but there he chose to abide with the lotos-eating men, ever feeding on the lotos and forgetful of their homeward way”.

Maugham’s story deals with a modern lotus eater. His lotus land is Capri. Thomas Wilson came to Capri during one of his summer holidays and was captivated by the beauty of its mountains, seas and surroundings. He bathed in the sea, joined the festivals there, wandered about the island enjoying the beauty of moon-lit mountains. The charms of the island possessed his mind and he resolved to settle

there. He was only thirty-five, a widower who had lost his only daughter. He lived a lonely humdrum life. The bounties of Nature enchanted him and he yielded to its fascinations. He resigned his job, collected his assets and bought an annuity for twenty-five years. He made an unusual choice. He came to Capri, took a small smug peasant's cottage and began to live there in indolent enjoyment of the beauties and pleasures of life there. He did not care what would happen to him when the annuity expired about twenty-five years. He led a carefree indolent comfortable life for twenty-five years. Like the mariners of Ulysses, he had eaten the fruit of the lotus-land of Capri and was drugged into complete forgetfulness about the future. He lived in the present with his indolence, pleasures and comforts in the blissful world of Nature. He had a sad and tragic end. But the author is concerned with his life of ease and languor which he preferred to a life of dull drudgery, and this preference links him with the lotus-eaters. The story is reminiscent of Tennyson's Choric Song—"The Lotus-Eaters".

3.2.17 Comprehension Exercises

● Long Answer Type Questions-20 Marks

1. How does Somerset Maugham weave myth and contemporaneity in his short story *The Lotus-Eater*?
2. How would you assess the character of Wilson in *The Lotus Eater* in the light of the story of his life and his observations on leisure?
3. Show how Somerset Maugham makes use of narrative art to highlight the theme of pastoralism that changes the life of an otherwise urban man.

● Medium Length Answer Type Questions-12 Marks

1. What is the significance of the title of the short story *The Lotus Eater*?
2. "I don't know whether he was a fool or a wise man". Estimate the character of Thomas Wilson in the light of this observation.
3. What impact does the concluding line of Somerset Maugham's short story *The Lotus Eater* leave on you as a reader?

● Short Questions: 6 marks

1. Why was the persona of the narrator so curious to meet Thomas Wilson?
2. How long had Wilson survive after his annuity ran out?

3. What does Maugham say about the vast majority of people? To what are they compared?
4. In which year did the author meet Thomas Wilson? How was the world at that time?

3.2.18 Summing Up

From your reading of these two short stories, you should be in a position to think about:

- The emergence and maturity of the short story as a genre
- The importance of narrative modes and character construction in building up climactic situations
- The range and variety of concerns that can be addressed within a short space of narrative length
- The significance of beginnings and endings, which are remarkably different from those of the genre of the novel.

3.2.19 Activity for the Learner

With help from your counselor, try and read other stories by these writers as also translations of other European writers mentioned at the outset. For your own interest, you could try reading short stories in your mother tongue and in other Indian vernaculars that are widely translated into English. On such reading, you should be in a position to make comparative studies as to how short stories can capture the essence of lived lives and different cultures.

3.2.20 Comprehensive Reading List

Lawrence Graver. *Conrad's Short Fiction*. University of California Press, 1971.

Amar Acheraiou. *Joseph Conrad and the Reader: Questioning Modern Theories of Narrative and Readership*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

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Robert L Calder. "W. Somerset Maugham". In Beum, Robert. *Modern British Essayists*. Detroit: Gale Research. . 1990.

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Frederic Raphael. *Somerset Maugham and His World*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd. 1976.

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