

Honors Literature – World History

TASK: Read the following text carefully, making all appropriate notations. Identify SOAPStone, DIDLS, PERSIAN, and other information as evidence of your research and analysis of the piece of literature. Answer the related questions on notebook paper or on this document. You may use this information for any written essay on the piece. See the text at the very bottom of these notes.

TASK: Comprehension Questions

1. Can you think of parallels in U.S. history or contemporary society to the situations and responses conveyed in these passages from recent postcolonial writings?
2. Do they suggest that it is possible to communicate even intimate feelings across cultures, or do you find them alien, different?
3. What other issues would you expect African, Middle Eastern, and Asian postcolonial artists to deal with in their work?

Cultural Creativity in the Emerging Nations: Some Literary Samples

Despite, or perhaps because of, political instability and chronic economic difficulties, postcolonial societies have generated a high level of artistic creativity over the past four or five decades. Nowhere has this creativity been more prominent and brilliant than in literary works for which African, Middle Eastern, and Asian writers have earned Nobel prizes and won a wide readership far beyond their own nations. The selections that follow are only a small sample of the vast and varied works of these talented writers, from poetry and drama to novels and short stories.

Many of these writers focus on the predicament of the Western-educated elites who dominate the new nations that emerged from the European colonial empires. In the following stanza from the poem "I Run Around with Them," Indonesian poet Chairil Anwar reflects on the lack of purpose and malaise he believed to be widespread among the children of these elite groups.

I run around with them, what else can I do, now—
 Changing my face at the edge of the street, I use their eyes
 And tag along to visit the fun house:
 These are the facts as I know them
 (A new American flic at the Capitol,
 The new songs they dance to).
 We go home: there's nothing doing
 Though this kind of Death is our neighbor, our friend, now.
 Hanging around at the corner, we wait for the city bus
 That glows night to day like a gold tooth;
 Lame, deformed, negative, we
 Lean our bony asses against lamp poles
 And jaw away the years.

In the next quotation, from the novel *No Longer at Ease*, widely read Nigerian author Chinua Achebe identifies another dilemma: the pull between Western culture and the ancient civilization of one's own land.

Nothing gave him greater pleasure than to find another Ibo-speaking student in a London bus. But when he had to speak in English with a

Nigerian student from another tribe he lowered his voice. It was humiliating to have to speak to one's countryman in a foreign language, especially in the presence of the proud owners of that language. They would naturally assume that one had no language of one's own. He wished they were here today to see. Let them come to Umuofia [the protagonist's home village] now and listen to the talk of men who made a great art of conversation. Let them come and see men and women and children who knew how to live, whose joy of life had not yet been killed by those who claimed to teach other nations how to live.

Like many of the more famous novelists of the emerging nations, V. S. Naipaul is an expatriate, born in the Caribbean and now living in rural England. In his moving and controversial account of his return to his Indian ancestral home, titled *An Area of Darkness*, Naipaul confronts the problem of massive poverty and the responses of foreigners and the Indian elite to it.

To see [India's] poverty is to make an observation of no value; a thousand newcomers to the country before you have seen and said as you. And not only newcomers. Our own sons and daughters, when they return from Europe and America, have spoken in your very words. Do not think that your anger and contempt are marks of your sensitivity. You might have seen more: the smiles on the faces of the begging children, that domestic group among the pavement sleepers waking in the cool Bombay morning, father, mother and baby in a trinity of love, so self-contained that they are as private as if walls had separated them from you: it is your gaze that violates them, your sense of outrage that outrages them. . . . It is your surprise, your anger that denies [them] humanity.

QUESTIONS Can you think of parallels in U.S. history or contemporary society to the situations and responses conveyed in these passages from recent postcolonial writings? Do they suggest that it is possible to communicate even intimate feelings across cultures, or do you find them alien, different? What other issues would you expect African, Middle Eastern, and Asian postcolonial artists to deal with in their work?