

UNIT – 2

THE SWAN SONG

Anton Chekhov

Structure

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2.0 Introducing the Author

Anton Chekhov (1860–1904) was a prolific writer from Russia who is recognized as a master of the modern short story and a leading playwright of the late 19th and early 20th century.

Chekhov, who wrote many of his greatest works from the 1890s through the last few years of his life, revealed a profound understanding of human nature and the ways in which ordinary events can carry deeper meaning. In his plays of these years, Chekhov concentrated primarily on mood and characters, showing that they could be more important than the plots. Not much seems to happen to his lonely, often desperate characters, but their inner conflicts take on great significance. Their stories are very specific, painting a picture of pre-revolutionary Russian society, yet timeless. His plays are still staged worldwide, and his overall body of work influenced important writers of an array of genres, including James Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, Tennessee Williams and Henry Miller.

This one act play of Chekhov “The Swansong” is a swan-song for the central character- Svetlovidov and represents his last performance on the stage. Following a benefit evening in his honor, unbeknownst to everyone, the comic actor Svetlovidov falls asleep in a drunken blur. When he awakens, the theater is dark and empty. He falls quickly into saddened monologue on his past achievements and present failures as an actor where no one really loves him.

It depicts his loneliness and despair in spite of having achieved lot of success in his long acting career.

2.1 Unit Objective

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the nuances of one act play.
- Appreciate the keen observations of human vanities and weaknesses.
- Understand the world of art and theatre and the loneliness involved with it.

2.2 The Play

THE SWAN SONG

CHARACTERS

VASILY SVIETLOVIDOFF, a comedian, 68 years old

NIKITA IVANITCH, a prompter, an old man

2.2.1 *The scene is laid on the stage of a country theatre, at night, after the play. To the right a row of rough, unpainted doors leading into the dressing-rooms. To the left and in the background the stage is encumbered with all sorts of rubbish. In the middle of the stage is an overturned stool.*

SVIETLOVIDOFF. *(With a candle in his hand, comes out of a dressing-room and laughs)* Well, well, this is funny! Here's a good joke! I fell asleep in my dressing-room when the play was over, and there I was calmly snoring after everybody else had left the theatre. Ah! I'm a foolish old man, a poor old dodderer! I have been drinking again, and so I fell asleep in there, sitting up. That was clever! Good for you, old boy! *(Calls)* Yegorka! Petrushka! Where the devil are you? Petrushka! The scoundrels must be asleep, and an earthquake wouldn't wake them now! Yegorka! *(Picks up the stool, sits down, and puts the candle on the Floor)* Not a sound! Only echos answer me. I gave Yegorka and Petrushka each a tip to-day, and now they have disappeared without leaving a trace behind them. The rascals have gone off and have probably locked up the theatre. *(Turns his head about)* I'm drunk! Ugh! The play to-night was for my benefit, and it is disgusting to think how much beer and wine I have poured down my throat in honour of the occasion. Gracious! My body is burning all over, and I feel as if I had twenty tongues in my mouth. It is horrid! Idiotic! This poor old sinner is drunk again, and doesn't even know what he has been celebrating! Ugh! My head is splitting, I am shivering all over, and I feel as dark and cold inside as a cellar! Even if I don't mind ruining my health, I ought at least to remember my age, old idiot that I am! Yes, my old age! It's no use! I can play the fool, and brag, and pretend to be young, but my life is really over now, I kiss my hand to the sixty-eight years that have gone by; I'll never see them again! I have drained the bottle, only a few little drops are left at the bottom, nothing but the dregs. Yes, yes, that's the case, Vasili, old boy. The time has come for you to rehearse the part of a mummy, whether you like it or not. Death is on its way to you. *(Stares ahead of him)* It is strange, though, that I have been on the stage now for forty-five years, and this is the first time I have seen a theatre at night, after the lights have been put out. The first time. *(Walks up to the foot-lights)* How dark it is! I can't see a thing. Oh, yes, I can just make out the prompter's box, and his desk; the rest is in pitch darkness, a black, bottomless pit, like a grave, in which death itself might be hiding.... Brr.... How cold it is! The wind blows out of the empty theatre as though out of a stone flue. What a place for ghosts! The shivers are running up and down my back. *(Calls)* Yegorka! Petrushka! Where are you both? What on earth makes me think of such gruesome things here? I must give up drinking; I'm an old man, I shan't live much longer. At sixty-eight people go to church and prepare for death, but here I am--heavens! A profane old drunkard in this fool's dress--I'm simply not fit to look at. I must go and change it at once.... This is a dreadful place, I should die of fright sitting here all night. *(Goes toward his dressing-room; at the same time NIKITA IVANITCH in a long white coat comes out of the dressing-room at the farthest end of the stage. SVIETLOVIDOFF sees IVANITCH--shrieks with terror and steps back)* Who are you? What? What do you want? *(Stamps*

his foot) Who are you?

Explanation:

Svetlovidov, an old stage actor drunkenly enters the stage of a darkened and deserted theatre. For the first time, he has drunk heavily and fallen asleep in the dressing room of the theatre. His body is burning all over and he feels as if his life is over now. He has drunk to forget the emptiness, meaninglessness and bitter experiences of life, forgetting that being 68 years old, he can no longer afford to drink so much with such feeble health. The audience and the other artists have already left the stage and gone home. Svetlovidov comes upstage, for the first time during night in his 45 years long career as a stage artist, and begins to lament over his past and present miserable condition. His life at present is like a “bottomless pit” and like a grave where death awaits him. Nikita, a prompter, comes out of the dressing room at the farthest end of the stage and the old man shrieks with horror, taking him to be a ghost like thing, and hence steps back.

Check Your Progress

1. **Who is Svetlovidov and why is he on the stage?**
2. **What is Svetlovidov’s condition of mind and health?**

2.2.2 IVANITCH. It is I, sir.

SVIETLOVIDOFF. Who are you?

IVANITCH. (*Comes slowly toward him*) It is I, sir, the prompter, Nikita Ivanitch. It is I, master, it is I!

SVIETLOVIDOFF. (*Sinks helplessly onto the stool, breathes heavily and trembles violently*) Heavens! Who are you? It is you . . . you Nikitushka? What . . . what are you doing here?

IVANITCH. I spend my nights here in the dressing-rooms. Only please be good enough not to tell Alexi Fomitch, sir. I have nowhere else to spend the night; indeed, I haven’t.

SVIETLOVIDOFF. Ah! It is you, Nikitushka, is it? Just think, the audience called me out sixteen times; they brought me three wreathes and lots of other things, too; they were all wild with enthusiasm, and yet not a soul came when it was all over to wake the poor, drunken old man and take him home. And I am an old man, Nikitushka! I am sixty-eight years old, and I am ill. I haven’t the heart left to go on. (*Falls on IVANITCH’S neck and weeps*) Don’t go away, Nikitushka; I am old and helpless, and I feel it is time for me to die. Oh, it is dreadful, dreadful!

IVANITCH. (*Tenderly and respectfully*) Dear master! it is time for you to go home, sir!

SVIETLOVIDOFF. I won’t go home; I have no home--none! none!--none!

IVANITCH. Oh, dear! Have you forgotten where you live?

SVIETLOVIDOFF. I won’t go there. I won’t! I am all alone there. I have nobody, Nikitushka! No wife--no children. I am like the wind blowing across the lonely fields. I shall die, and no one will remember me. It is awful to be alone--no one to cheer me, no one to caress me, no one to help me to bed when I am drunk. Whom do I belong to? Who needs me? Who loves me? Not a soul, Nikitushka.

IVANITCH. (*Weeping*) Your audience loves you, master.

SVIETLOVIDOFF. My audience has gone home. They are all asleep, and have forgotten their old clown. No, nobody needs me, nobody loves me; I have no wife, no children.

IVANITCH. Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Don't be so unhappy about it.

Explanation:

Svetlovidov feels he is an old man now and is helpless and unwanted. He also feels that death is gradually approaching him now and may snatch his life any moment. Nikita, the prompter, shows deep sympathy and respect to the old man. Such a great artist, who is deeply admired by the public during his performances, tragically has no home, family, relatives and not a soul on earth to take care of him. He has given more than 45 years of his life to the stage performing so well all through but life has nothing meaningful to return to him at the fag end of his journey where he is left all alone. His remarks that "I am old and helpless" represent his frustration, emptiness, despair and failure in life. Svetlovidov is now in the swan song stage of his life and art, which frightens him to the core. He feels that his audience have forgotten him when he needed them most and nobody loves him or cares for him.

Check Your Progress

- 1. What is Nikita's attitude towards Svetlovidov?**
- 2. What does Svetlovidov's remark "I am old and helpless"- indicate?**

2.2.3 SVIETLOVIDOFF. But I am a man, I am still alive. Warm, red blood is tingling in my veins, the blood of noble ancestors. I am an aristocrat, Nikitushka; I served in the army, in the artillery, before I fell as low as this, and what a fine young chap I was! Handsome, daring, eager! Where has it all gone? What has become of those old days? There's the pit that has swallowed them all! I remember it all now. Forty-five years of my life lie buried there, and what a life, Nikitushka! I can see it as clearly as I see your face: the ecstasy of youth, faith, passion, the love of women--women, Nikitushka!

IVANITCH. It is time you went to sleep, sir.

SVIETLOVIDOFF. When I first went on the stage, in the first glow of passionate youth, I remember a woman loved me for my acting. She was beautiful, graceful as a poplar, young, innocent, pure, and radiant as a summer dawn. Her smile could charm away the darkest night. I remember, I stood before her once, as I am now standing before you. She had never seemed so lovely to me as she did then, and she spoke to me so with her eyes--such a look! I shall never forget it, no, not even in the grave; so tender, so soft, so deep, so bright and young! Enraptured, intoxicated, I fell on my knees before her, I begged for my happiness, and she said: "Give up the stage!" Give up the stage! Do you understand? She could love an actor, but marry him--never! I was acting that day, I remember--I had a foolish, clown's part, and as I acted, I felt my eyes being opened; I saw that the worship of the art I had held so sacred was a delusion and an empty dream; that I was a slave, a fool, the plaything of the idleness of strangers. I understood my audience at last, and since that day I have not believed in their applause, or in their wreathes, or in their enthusiasm. Yes, Nikitushka! The people applaud me, they buy my photograph, but I am a stranger to them. They don't know me, I am as the dirt beneath their feet. They are willing enough to meet me . . . but allow a daughter or a sister to marry me, an outcast, never! I have no faith in them, [sinks onto the stool] no faith in them.

IVANITCH. Oh, sir! you look dreadfully pale, you frighten me to death! Come, go home, have mercy on me!

SVIETLOVIDOFF. I saw through it all that day, and the knowledge was dearly bought. Nikitushka! After that . . . when that girl . . . well, I began to wander aimlessly about, living from day to day without looking ahead. I took the parts of buffoons and low comedians, letting my mind go to wreck. Ah! but I was a great artist once, till little by little I threw away my talents, played the motley fool, lost my looks, lost the power of expressing myself, and became in the end a Merry Andrew instead of a man. I have been swallowed up in that great black pit. I never felt it before, but to-night, when I woke up, I looked back, and there behind me lay sixty-eight years. I have just found out what it is to be old! It is all over . . . (sobs) . . . all over.

IVANITCH. There, there, dear master! Be quiet . . . gracious! (*Calls*)

Petrushka! Yegorka!

Explanation:

Svetlovidov recalls with pride the fact of his belonging to an aristocratic family, the good old days when served in the army as a young, handsome, daring man. He recalls a marriage proposal he once made to a beautiful woman who though loved him with her heart, yet was not ready to marry him unless he gave up his acting career. She could love an actor, but not marry him and that was something that opened his eyes. His art that he had held so sacred was merely ‘a delusion and an empty dream.’ That his audience could applaud and appreciate him but could not take him as one of their own; that he was ‘a stranger’ to them. From then on, he did not have any faith in his audience and has been moving on aimlessly. He laments the direction his life has taken and feels that he has been swallowed up ‘in that great black pit’ of ruin and disaster.

Check Your Progress

1. **What do you know about Svetlovidov’s past life?**
2. **What is it that Svetlovidov so deeply regrets now and why?**

2.2.4 SVIETLOVIDOFF. But what a genius I was! You cannot imagine what power I had, what eloquence; how graceful I was, how tender; how many strings (*beats his breast*) quivered in this breast! It chokes me to think of it! Listen now, wait, let me catch my breath, there; now listen to this:

“The shade of bloody Ivan now returning
 Fans through my lips rebellion to a flame,
 I am the dead Dimitri! In the burning
 Boris shall perish on the throne I claim.
 Enough! The heir of Czars shall not be seen
 Kneeling to yonder haughty Polish Queen!”*

*From “Boris Godunoff,” by Pushkin. (*translator’s note*) Is that bad, eh? (*Quickly*) Wait, now, here’s something from King Lear. The sky is black, see? Rain is pouring down, thunder roars, lightning--zzz

zzz zzz--splits the whole sky, and then, listen:

“Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!

You cataracts and hurricanoes spout

Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!

You sulphurous thought-executing fires

Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts

Singe my white head! And thou, all shaking thunder,

Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world!

Crack nature's moulds, all germons spill at once

That make ungrateful man!”

(Impatiently) Now, the part of the fool. *(Stamps his foot)* Come take the fool's part! Be quick, I can't wait!

IVANITCH. *(Takes the part of the fool)*

“O, Nuncle, court holy-water in a dry house is better than this rain-water out o' door. Good Nuncle, in; ask thy daughter's blessing: here's a night pities neither wise men nor fools.”

SVIETLOVIDOFF.

“Rumble thy bellyful! spit, fire! spout, rain!

Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters;

I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness;

I never gave you kingdom, call'd you children.”

Ah! there is strength, there is talent for you! I'm a great artist! Now, then, here's something else of the same kind, to bring back my youth to me. For instance, take this, from Hamlet, I'll begin . . . Let me see, how does it go? Oh, yes, this is it. *(Takes the part of Hamlet)*

“O! the recorders, let me see one.--To withdraw with you. Why do you go about to recover the wind of me, as if you would drive me into a toil?”

Explanation: He recalls the time when he was a genius and enjoyed tremendous powers. It chokes him to think of those good old days when his heart used to beat for beloved's love and care. In his drunken state, he recalls lines from various plays by Pushkin and Shakespeare which indicate his forlorn, pitiable and depressive state of mind. But the youth and charm, once passed, can't be regained. The realization comes a bit too late when he is too old and helpless to reverse the sorry state of affairs. Like Shakespeare's 'Fool', he is wise enough to recognize which way the wind blows and admits that though he had been a great artist, he, presently, is too tired and lonely.

Check Your Progress:

1. **What is it that chokes Svetlovidov?**
2. **Why does Svetlovidov recall from Shakespeare's play 'Hamlet' and 'King Lear'?**

2.2.5 IVANITCH. "O, my lord, if my duty be too bold, my love is too unmannerly."

SVIETLOVIDOFF. "I do not well understand that. Will you play upon this pipe?"

IVANITCH. "My lord, I cannot."

SVIETLOVIDOFF. "I pray you."

IVANITCH. "Believe me, I cannot."

SVIETLOVIDOFF. "I do beseech you."

IVANITCH. "I know no touch of it, my lord."

SVIETLOVIDOFF. "'Tis as easy as lying: govern these vantages with your finger and thumb, give it breath with your mouth, and it will discourse most eloquent music. Look you, these are the stops."

IVANITCH. "But these I cannot command to any utterance of harmony: I have not the skill."

SVIETLOVIDOFF. "Why, look you, how unworthy a thing you make of me. You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. S'blood! Do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me!" (*laughs and clasps*) Bravo! Encore! Bravo! Where the devil is there any old age in that? I'm not old, that is all nonsense, a torrent of strength rushes over me; this is life, freshness, youth! Old age and genius can't exist together. You seem to be struck dumb, Nikitushka. Wait a second, let me come to my senses again. Oh! Good Lord! Now then, listen! Did you ever hear such tenderness, such music? Sh! Softly;

"The moon had set. There was not any light,
Save of the lonely legion'd watch-stars pale
In outer air, and what by fits made bright
Hot oleanders in a rosy vale
Searched by the lamping fly, whose little spark
Went in and out, like passion's bashful hope."

(*The noise of opening doors is heard*) What's that?

IVANITCH. There are Petrushka and Yegorka coming back. Yes, you have genius, genius, my master.

SVIETLOVIDOFF. (*Calls, turning toward the noise*) Come here to me, boys! (*To IVANITCH*) Let us go and get dressed. I'm not old! All that is foolishness, nonsense! (*laughs gaily*) What are you crying for? You poor old granny, you, what's the matter now? This won't do! There, there, this won't do at all! Come, come, old man, don't stare so! What makes you stare like that? There, there! (*Embraces him in*

tears) Don't cry! Where there is art and genius there can never be such things as old age or loneliness or sickness . . . and death itself is half . . . (*Weeps*) No, no, Nikitushka! It is all over for us now! What sort of a genius am I? I'm like a squeezed lemon, a cracked bottle, and you--you are the old rat of the theatre . . . a prompter! Come on! (*They go*) I'm no genius, I'm only fit to be in the suite of Fortinbras, and even for that I am too old.... Yes.... Do you remember those lines from Othello, Nikitushka?

“Farewell the tranquil mind! Farewell content!

Farewell the plumed troops and the big wars

That make ambition virtue! O farewell!

Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trump,

The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife,

The royal banner, and all quality,

Pride, pomp and circumstance of glorious war!”

IVANITCH. Oh! You're a genius, a genius!

SVIETLOVIDOFF. And again this:

“Away! the moor is dark beneath the moon,

Rapid clouds have drunk the last pale beam of even:

Away! the gathering winds will call the darkness soon,

And profoundest midnight shroud the serene lights of heaven.”

They go out together, the curtain falls slowly.

Explanation:

Svetlovidov asks Nikita to play some musical notes on pipe so as to soothe his trampled soul, which Nikita, is unable to do since he lacks musical skills. Svetlovidov is pained to realize that his life has been reduced to a mere playboy who could provide enjoyment to a large audience but could not gain their love and trust. In a last minute attempt to defy old age and devaluation of his art, he iterates that art and genius can never be wiped away by old age or any other factor, including death itself. As compared to transitory life, art is something more permanent in nature. The play ends with Svetlovidov recalling a few lines from Othello bidding farewell to all pride, glory, ambition, pomp and show. The lines denote his complete surrender to old age and all that it brings along in its lap. He realizes the absurdity of life and the world and consoles himself by talking about the universal strength and death-defying power of art. His triumph over his grief is an indication of the triumph of art over personal sorrows. In the end, Nikita cries bitterly though at the empty claim of Svetlovidov for victory of art over life because he understands the absurdity of life.

Check Your Progress:

1. Why does Svetlovidov ask Nikita to play on pipe?
2. What does the ending of the play indicate?

2.3 Summary

The swan song is the last thing produced or performed by an artist for the public. This one act play of Chekhov is a swan-song for the central character- Svetlovidov. The play is a powerful character study of a stage actor, Svetlovidov, who has been in the theatre for more than thirty years. This play represents his last performance on the stage. He has achieved a lot of success in his long acting career and has mastered great skills but is still leading a lonely, unmarried and pitiable life. His words “I am helpless” best represent his despair and failure.

A wonderful, charming and rich woman falls in love with Svetlovidov when he is at the peak of his career. Svetlovidov also loves her and wants to marry her so as to enjoy a happy well settled life. However, she is ready to marry him only if he decides to quit the stage. She could love an actor but would not prefer to be an actor’s wife because acting, in her circle, is regarded as a profession of low social prestige. Her response represents the attitude of upper and middle class society of the then Russia, when stage actors were taken as nothing more than mere entertainers. They could be appreciated for their skillful performances but were not considered respectable enough for establishing intimate relationships.

In this one act play, Chekhov creates the enduring pictures of the absurdities of life and speech in the masterful portrayal of Svetlovidov. His appearance on the stage with empty theatre represents the final performance of his acting career. He says that society looks upon him as “plaything for other people’s pastime.” He realizes the absurdity of the world and consoles himself by talking about the universal strength and death-defying power of art and acting. He overcomes his grief which shows that art finally triumphs over personal tragedy. In the end of the play, Nikita cries bitterly at the empty and heart-felt claim of Svetlovidov because Nikita understands the absurdity both in his speech as well as in his life. Svetlovidov, being in the swan-song stage of his life and art, sorrowfully reflects upon his unremarkable career and doubts his talent and the choices he made. He remembers his past triumphs, his service in the army, his amazing youth and feels lonely, unloved and unappreciated. He laments the direction his life has taken and his declining health and talent. Finally, Svetlovidov admits that he is too old, tired, unhealthy and insignificant. He is like a melting icicle whose “song is sung.” The play ends with such a great actor’s acceptance of his old age, decline and absurdity of life.

2.4 Key Terms

Swansong: final gesture or performance given just before retirement or death

encumbered: restricted someone or something in such a way that their actions were hindered

dregs: remnants of a liquid left in a container

gruesome: causing repulsion or horror, extremely unpleasant and shocking

clown: joker, comedian, buffoon, jester

artillery: weapons like large guns for discharging missiles, the troops or the branch of an army concerned with the use and service of such weapons

ecstasy: a state of extreme happiness or delight

vantage: a place or position affording a good view of something

enraptured : Filled with great joy or delight

intoxicated: (of alcoholic drink or a drug) cause someone to lose control of their faculties or behavior

delusion: a belief in something that is not true, a false idea or belief held despite strong evidence against it

buffoons: a ridiculous but amusing person, a clown

wreck: destroy or severely damage

motley: the multicoloured costume of a jester , having elements of great variety or incongruity

eloquence: fluent or persuasive speaking or writing

rotundity: roundness of a three dimensional object

rumble: to make a series of long low sounds

beseech: request someone fervently or urgently to do something, beg

torrent: pouring or flowing fast, violently or heavily

fife: a small shrill flute used in military bands

2.5 Answers to Check Your Progress

1. Svetlovidov is an old stage actor who drunkenly enters the stage of a darkened and deserted theatre.
2. Svetlovidov is in a terrible condition with his body burning all over and his head splitting. At the age of 68 and having experienced so much pain and loss in his life, Svetlovidov is in utter despair and loneliness.
3. Nikita has deep sympathy and respect for the old man and his theatre skills.
4. His remarks represent his utter helplessness, frustration, emptiness, despair and failure in life. He regrets the fact that nobody needs him at this stage of life when he is so old and feeble.
5. Svetlovidov belonged to an aristocratic family and had served in the army as a young dashing courageous man.
6. Svetlovidov regrets his choice of being an actor because though people appreciate acting, they do not have respect for an actor and fail to consider him as one of their own. Nobody is willing to give one's daughter to an actor in marriage and he has to spend a lonely life.
7. Svetlovidov feels choked when he thinks of those good old days when his heart used to beat for a woman's love and care.
8. Svetlovidov recalls from Shakespeare's play in a drunken state of mind as to bring out close association of the ironies of his life with other great characters in literature like the heroes of Shakespeare's play who had to experience similar downfall in their lives.
9. Svetlovidov requests Nikita to play some musical notes on pipe so that his impatient soul could somehow be comforted.

10. The ending of the play indicates complete acceptance of the ways of life by Svetlovidov. He has no complaints against old age now, nor against the choices that he made in his life.

2.6 Questions and Exercises: Short and Long Answer Questions

Short answer questions:

Q1. What is a swan song?

Ans: A swan song is the last thing produced or performed by an artist for the public.

Q2. How long has Svetlovidov been working on the stage?

Ans: Svetlovidov has been working in the theatre for the past 45 years.

Q3. Why could not Svetlovidov marry the girl of his choice?

Ans: Svetlovidov could not marry her because she wanted him to give up theatre which he could not do.

Q4. What is Svetlovidov's relationship with Nikita?

Ans: Svetlovidov is very friendly and intimate with Nikita, the prompter and it is Nikita who takes care of Svetlovidov when he is left all alone towards the end of the play.

Q5. How does Nikita console Svetlovidov at the end of the play?

Ans. Nikita tries to console Svetlovidov by reminding him of his genius in acting.

Long answer questions:

Q1. How does Svetlovidov feel as an old man and why does he feel so?

Ans. Svetlovidov, as an old man now, feels helpless and unwanted. He also feels that death is gradually approaching him now and may snatch his life any moment. Nikita, the prompter, shows deep sympathy and respect to the old man. Such a great artist, who is deeply admired by the public during his performances, tragically has no home, family, relatives and not a soul on earth to take care of him. He has given more than 45 years of his life to the stage performing so well all through but life has nothing meaningful to return to him at the fag end of his journey where he is left all alone. His remarks that "I am old and helpless" represent his frustration, emptiness, despair and failure in life. Svetlovidov is now in the swan song stage of his life which frightens him to the core. He feels that his audience have forgotten him when he needed them most and nobody loves him or cares for him.

Q2. Write a note on Svetlovidov's past life and his regrets in the present.

Ans. Svetlovidov recalls with pride the fact of his belonging to an aristocratic family, the good old days when served in the army as a young, handsome, daring man. He recalls a marriage proposal he once made to a beautiful woman who though loved him with her heart, yet was not ready to marry him unless he gave up his acting career. She could love an actor, but not marry him and that was something that opened his eyes. His art that he had held so sacred was merely 'a delusion and an empty dream.' That his audience could applaud and appreciate him but could

not take him as one of their own; that he was ‘a stranger’ to them. From then on, he did not have any faith in his audience and has been moving on aimlessly. He laments the direction his life has taken and feels that he has been swallowed up ‘in that great black pit’ of ruin and disaster.

Q3. Describe Svetlovidov’s last minute attempt to defy old age and attain victory over his grief.

Ans. Svetlovidov, towards the end of the play, asks Nikita to play some musical notes on pipe so as to soothe his trampled soul, which Nikita, is unable to do since he lacks musical skills. Svetlovidov is pained to realize that his life has been reduced to a mere playboy who could provide enjoyment to a large audience but could not gain their love and trust. In a last minute attempt to defy old age and devaluation of his art, he iterates that art and genius can never be wiped away by old age or any other factor, including death itself. As compared to transitory life, art is something more permanent in nature. The play ends with Svetlovidov recalling a few lines from Othello bidding farewell to all pride, glory, ambition, pomp and show. The lines denote his complete surrender to old age and all that it brings along in its lap. He realizes the absurdity of life and the world and consoles himself by talking about the universal strength and death-defying power of art. His triumph over his grief is an indication of the triumph of art over personal sorrows. In the end, Nikita cries bitterly though at the empty claim of Svetlovidov for victory of art over life because he understands the absurdity of life.

2.7 Language Practice

a. Write down synonyms of the following words.

Stranger : unacquainted

Haughty: arrogant

Radiant: glowing

Ecstatic: elated, delighted

Brag: boast of

b. Write down antonyms of the following words.

Bold: timid, coward

Dawn: dusk

Eloquent: inarticulate

Glorious: inglorious

Genius: idiot, imbecile

c. Change the following words into adverbs

i. **Anger** : Angrily

ii. **Terrible**: terribly

iii. **Quick** : quickly

iv. **Strike** : strikingly

v. **Strange**: strangely