

**Course: English General / Generic**

**Sem – 1, CC- 1**

**Study Material on ‘The Ox’ by H. E. Bates**

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Discussion on the theme and title of Bate’s story “The Ox”.

The title of the short story is usually pregnant with significance. The craft is first illustrated by the apt choice of the title, for ‘embryonic idea’ of the story is encapsulated in the title which consists of a phrase or two to three words. Brevity being the soul of the art of the short story writing, the title is the first index of the writer’s craftsmanship. The title of the short story is a foretaste of the ‘message’ contained in the story itself. The title also acts as the metaphor to the writer who builds up his or her story, after peeling off the layers of meaning inherent in the title. The great master in the art of short story is also famous for the use of suggestive titles.

The title of the H.E. Bate’s short story ‘The Ox’ is a fine example of what is known as ‘the art of suggestion’. He aims to present the bare essentials of action and dialogue, leaving the reader to form his own responses. The title ‘The Ox’ illustrates not only the qualities of Bate’s style and his attitude but also a characteristic theme—‘an obsession with pain. Pain stretched to breaking point, pain prolonged beyond all seeming endurance’ – yet not by any means, beyond all seeming endurance’ – yet not by any means, beyond the bounds of possibility. One of H.E.Bate’s great strengths is to show a mainly and unsentimental pity for those that suffer alone.

“The Ox” is really the story of Mrs. Thurlow who suffers discomfort towards the limits of endurance and bears hers discomfort in addition to her existence using the fortitude of the ox. Several times Mrs. Thurlow continues to be in comparison for an ox. Mrs. Thurlow is a versatile woman. At half-past seven everyday she pushed her great rusty bicycle lower down the hill and

at six every evening she pushed it back, loaded with gray bundles of washing, oilcans, sacks, cabbages, old newspapers. She never rode the bicycle but always dragged it. Her relationship to it was that of a beast to cart. She was the ox tugging the trolley. Slopping along its side, her flat heavy feet was pounding shatteringly along under mud-stained skirt. Her face and the body ugly with lumpy angles of bones, she was just like an animal of burden.

Mrs. Thurlow is represented as a work machine. All day long she laboured for several people, washing and cleaning. She never went beyond her regular boundary. Even at home she had no respite from work. In the field, Mrs. Thurlow pinned up her skirt so that it struck out behind her like a thick stiff tail making her look like bony ox. She did washing from five to six in the morning, and again from seven to nine in the evening. She worked by candlelight. At eleven she went to bed. She fell asleep almost at once, but throughout the night her mind seemed to work on. She even dreamt of pushing her bicycle and cleaning. In a word, the burden of work, the labour and suffering had all become a part and parcel of her existence. Mrs. Thurlow transformed herself as it were into an allegorical figure of endurance.

Mrs. Thurlow endured not only the pain of work but also the pain of her family life. For fifteen years she had hoarded the scrubbing and washing to save fifty four pounds for her two sons under a mattress. Her husband stole this after committing a murder. With the loss of money her dream of providing better future for her sons is also lost. She had sent away her sons to her brother's house in order to save them from stigma but they refused to leave their affluent uncle's home. This blow was proverbially the last straw on the camel's back. Mrs. Thurlow's predicament became more painful when the tyres of her bicycle got punctured.

The theme of 'pain beyond measure' is adequately represented in 'The Ox'. It is a tale of women's pain and suffering, resulting from ceaseless work and a series of misfortunes. But she proved that she had built up a kind of resistance which enabled her to ward off one calamity after another. She faced these with an 'Ox' like tenacity and passivity. Hence it shows the significance and appropriateness of the title "The Ox".