



'THE NIGHT TRAIN AT DEOLI' BY RUSKIN BOND

: UNIT STRUCTURE :

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall

- Understand the plot of the story '*The Night Train at Deoli*'
- Describe Ruskin Bond's setting
- Analyze the prose style of Ruskin Bond

After completing the unit, you should be able to

- Summarize the story '*The Night Train at Deoli*'
- Identify the theme of '*The Night Train at Deoli*'

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Ruskin Bond is known for his stories from hills and valleys. His first novel *The Room on the Roof* was first written when he was merely 17 years old and won John Llewellyn Rhys memorial prize. His stories feature themes such as love, multidimensional aspects of the Indian society, beauty of nature. One would find Bond's love of humanity while reading his stories. Often he visited his grandmother in Dehradun, which influenced many of his stories wherein we get to take a train journeys through beautiful forests, hills, and mysterious incidents. Many of these would find places in short stories like 'The Woman on Platform 8,' '*The Night Train at Deoli*,' 'Time Stops at Shamli,' 'The Tiger in the Tunnel,' and 'The Eyes Have It All,' among others. The present story too is a little piece of from that treasure of his railway journey to Dehradun.

6.2 TEXT: '*THE NIGHT TRAIN AT DEOLI*'

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When I was at college, I used to spend my summer vacations in Dehra, at my grandmother's place. I would leave the plains early in May and return late in July. Deoli was a small station about thirty miles from Dehra; it marked the beginning of the heavy jungles of the Indian Terai.

The train would reach Deoli at about five in the morning, when the station would be dimly lit with electric bulbs and oil-lamps, and the jungle across the railway tracks would just be visible in the faint light of dawn. Deoli had only lone platform, an office for the stationmaster and a waiting room. The platform boasted a tea stall, a fruit vendor, and a few stray dogs; not much else, because the train stopped there for only ten minutes before rushing on into the forests.

Why it stopped at Deoli. I don't know. Nothing ever happened there. Nobody got off the train and nobody got in. There were never any coolies on the platform. But the train would halt there a full ten minutes, and then a bell would sound, the guard would blow his whistle, and presently Deoli would be left behind and forgotten.

I used to wonder what happened in Deoli, behind the station walls. I always felt sorry for that lonely little platform, and for the place, that nobody wanted to visit. I decided that one day I would get off the train at Deoli, and spend the day there, just to please the town.

I was eighteen, visiting my grandmother, and the night train stopped at Deoli. A girl came down the platform, selling baskets.

It was a cold morning and the girl had a shawl thrown across her shoulders. Her feet were bare and her clothes were old, but she was a young girl, walking gracefully and with dignity.

When she came to my window, she stopped. She saw that I was looking at her intently, but at first, she pretended not to notice. She had a pale skin, set off by shiny black hair, and dark, troubled eyes. And then those eyes, searching and eloquent, met mine.

She stood by my window for some time and neither of us said anything. But when she moved on, I found myself leaving my seat and going to the carriage door, and stood waiting on the platform, looking the other way. I walked across to the tea stall. A kettle was boiling over on a small fire, but the owner of the stall was busy serving tea somewhere on the train. The girl followed me behind the stall.

'Do you want to buy a basket?' she asked.

'They are very strong, made of the finest cane ...'

'No,' I said, 'I don't want a basket.'

We stood looking at each other for what seemed a very long time, and she said, 'Are you sure you don't want a basket?'

'All right, give me one,' I said, and I took the one on top and gave her a rupee, hardly daring to touch her fingers. As she was about to speak, the guard blew his whistle; she said something, but it was lost in the clanging of the bell and the hissing of the engine. I had to run back to my compartment. The carriage shuddered and jolted forward.

I watched her as the platform slipped away. She was alone on the platform and she did not move, but she was looking at me and smiling. I watched her until the signalbox came in the way, and then the jungle hid the station, but I could still see her standing there alone . . .

I sat up awake for the rest of the journey. I could not rid my mind of the picture of the girl’s face and her dark, smoldering eyes.

But when I reached Dehra the incident became blurred and distant, for there were other things to occupy my mind. It was only when I was making the return journey, two months later, that I remembered the girl.

I was looking out for her as the train drew into the station, and I felt an unexpected thrill when I saw her walking up the platform. I sprang off the footboard and waved to her.

When she saw me, she smiled. She was pleased that I remembered her. I was pleased that, she remembered me. We were both pleased, and it was almost like a meeting of old friends.

She did not go down the length of the train selling baskets, but came straight to the tea stall; her dark eyes were suddenly filled with light. We said nothing for some time but we couldn’t have been more eloquent.

I felt the impulse to put her on the train there and then, and take her away with me; I could not bear the thought of having to watch her recede into the distance of Deoli station. I took the baskets from her hand and put them down on the ground. She put out her hand for one of them, but I caught her hand and held it.

‘I have to go to Delhi,’ I said.

She nodded. ‘I do not have to go anywhere.’

The guard blew his whistle for the train to leave and how I hated the guard for doing that.

‘I will come again,’ I said. ‘Will you be here?’

She nodded again, and, as she nodded, the bell clanged and the train slid forward. I had to wrench my hand away from the girl and run for the moving train.

This time I did not forget her. She was with me for the remainder of the journey, and for long after. All that year she was a bright, living thing. And when the college term finished I packed in haste and left for Dehra earlier than usual. My grandmother would be pleased at my eagerness to see her.

I was nervous and anxious as the train drew into Deoli, because I was wondering what I should say to the girl and what I should do. I was determined that I wouldn’t stand helplessly before her, hardly able to speak or do anything about my feelings.

The train came to Deoli, and I looked up and down the platform, but I could not see the girl anywhere.

I opened the door and stepped off the footboard. I was deeply disappointed, and overcome by a sense of foreboding. I felt I had to do something, and so I ran up to the station-master and said, ‘Do you know the girl who used to sell baskets here?’

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‘No, I don’t,’ said the station-master. ‘And you’d better get on the train if you don’t want to be left behind.’

But I paced up and down the platform, and stared over the railings at the station yard; all I saw was a mango tree and a dusty road leading into the jungle. Where did the road go? The train was moving out of the station, and I had to run up the platform and jump for the door of my compartment. Then, as the train gathered speed and rushed through the forests, I sat brooding in front of the window.

What could I do about finding a girl I had seen only twice, who had hardly spoken to me, and about whom I knew nothing — absolutely nothing — but for whom I felt a tenderness and responsibility that I had never felt before?

My grandmother was not pleased with my visit after all, because I didn’t stay at her place more than a couple of weeks. I felt restless and ill-at-ease. So I took the train back to the plains, meaning to ask further questions of the station-master at Deoli.

But at Deoli there was a new station-master. The previous man had been transferred to another post within the past week. The new man didn’t know anything about the girl who sold baskets. I found the owner of the tea stall, a small, shriveled-up man, wearing greasy clothes, and asked him if he knew anything about the girl with the baskets.

‘Yes, there was such a girl here, I remember quite well,’ he said. ‘But she has stopped coming now.’

‘Why?’ I asked. ‘What happened to her?’

‘How should I know?’ said the man. ‘She was nothing to me.’

And once again I had to run for the train.

As Deoli platform receded, I decided that one day I would have to break journey there, spend a day in the town, make enquiries, and find the girl who had stolen my heart with nothing but a look from her dark, impatient eyes.

With this thought I consoled myself throughout my last term in college. I went to Dehra again in the summer and when, in the early hours of the morning, the night train drew into Deoli station, I looked up and down the platform for signs of the girl, knowing, I wouldn’t find her but hoping just the same.

Somehow, I couldn’t bring myself to break journey at Deoli and spend a day there. (If it was all fiction or a film, I reflected, I would have got down and cleaned up the mystery and reached a suitable ending for the whole thing). I think I was afraid to do this. I was afraid of discovering what really happened to the girl. Perhaps she was no longer in Deoli, perhaps she was married, perhaps she had fallen ill . . .

In the last few years I have passed through Deoli many times, and I always look out of the carriage window, half expecting to see the same unchanged face smiling up at me. I wonder what happens in Deoli, behind the station walls. But I will never break my journey there. It may spoil my game. I prefer to keep hoping and dreaming, and looking out of the window up and down that lonely platform, waiting for the girl with the baskets.

I never break my journey at Deoli, but I pass through as often as I can.
(From *The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories* by Ruskin Bond)

‘THE NIGHT TRAIN AT
DEOLI’ BY RUSKIN
BOND

6.3 ANALYSIS OF ‘THE NIGHT TRAIN AT DEOLI’

6.3.1 Plot

In this short story, Ruskin Bond portrays his experience amid one of his train adventures to Dehra as an eighteen-year-old. He discloses to us that he used to spend his vacations every late spring in his grandmother’s place in Dehra and needed to pass a little lonely station, Deoli in the midst of the forests in train. This station seems strange to him as nobody boarded on or off the train there and nothing happened there. He asks why the train stopped there for ten minutes normally without reason and feels sorry for the lonely station.

On one such adventure, the author happens to see a pale-looking young lady selling baskets. She seems, by all accounts, to be poor, however with grace and dignity. Her gleaming dark hair and dull, troubled eyes attracts the author. The young lady offers to sell baskets to him. He at first does not purchase and later when she demands, happens to get one with a little faltering, challenging not to touch her fingers. Then two simply look at each another for a long while, just as the seed of affection is planted in their hearts. He longs to see her, her looking and articulate eyes, again on his return journey. The meeting breaks the boredom of his journey and gets a feeling of connection and duty towards the young lady.

The second time he sees her, both of them feel happy to see each other, their smiling faces were giving a testimony to it. It looked like two very old and bosom friends were meeting. Silence rules and expresses more than words. He has a craving for taking her with him yet does not do as such. He reveals to her that he needs to go to Delhi and she answers saying she need not go anyplace, maybe communicating her helplessness. The two separate reluctantly as the train leaves the station, with the desire for meeting once more. The author spends the rest of the journey and quite a while later reasoning about her.

The following summer, not long after his college term completes, he hurries to go to Dehra, anxious to meet the young girl, his grandma being an excuse. This time she is not to be seen at the Deoli station however he sits there for quite a while. This profoundly disillusioned him and a feeling of separation beats him. On his way back to Delhi, he again holds up restlessly to see her, yet it finishes futile. On enquiry, he comes to realize that the young lady has stopped coming, and no one knows about her whereabouts. Indeed, he needs to keep running for the train and perpetually leave the station. He chooses that once he would break his journey there, go in the town, make enquiries and discover the young lady who had stolen his heart.

The next year in summer, he again strolls up and down the station wanting to see the girl, but some way or another, cannot force himself to break his journey to search for her. He is by all accounts afraid of finding about her, fearing about anything shocking that could have come to pass for her and wants to retain his sweet recollections of her and not spoil with awful occasions. The writer also proposes to his readers that he would not like to extend himself like a legend of a

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motion picture where the hero would meet his sweetheart experiencing all hardships and prevail upon her. He likes to continue hoping and dreaming, waiting for the girl.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: 1

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS IN MAXIMUM 75 WORDS EACH.

1. Describe the Deoli station in your words:
2. Why was the author going to Dehra? Whom did he meet at Deoli station?
3. How did the author and the young girl feel during the second meeting?

6.3.2 Setting

The entire story takes place on the lonely station of Deoli. The narrator is 18 years old with a girl is of similar age, which tells us the entire story is about the possibility of a relationship. The very beginning of the story presents a very vivid picture of the station. For example, the author says

“Deoli had only lone platform, an office for the stationmaster and a waiting room. The platform boasted a tea stall, a fruit vendor, and a few stray dogs; not much else, because the train stopped there for only ten minutes before rushing on into the forests. Why it stopped at Deoli? I don’t know. Nothing ever happened there. Nobody got off the train and nobody got in. There were never any coolies on the platform. But the train would halt there a full ten minutes, and then a bell would sound, the guard would blow his whistle, and presently Deoli would be left behind and forgotten.”

Such a setting allows can only allow a few characters to enter the story. Therefore, station provides an opportunity to the author to talk to the young girl selling baskets hold her hand in the second meeting. The time is also important; as the story says it is a nighttime when most of people are found to be at their homes, which allow a delicate feeling like love between the young lovers can flourish. Thus, Deoli station then becomes a symbol of the author’s most memorable experience in his life. The forest in the background also suggests that the characters are closer to nature and therefore closer to love.

6.3.3 Theme

The story is about how life is a constant river that never stops or waits for anyone. After the second meeting with the girl, the author tries to search her again and makes several attempts to find her. However, for some unknown reasons, the author could never meet that girl gain. Interestingly, the author is a much mature as a person as he says that if he were a fictional character of a novel or a film, he would have found her out anyhow. But he confesses that he was afraid of finding out the true reason for the sudden disappearance of the girl which might destroy the whole romantic experience. Thus, like a real world not sticking to something or someone and letting go them seem to be the major theme of the story. There are things in life, which are better kept as mystery or imagination because unfolding them might not be as good as we probably think of them. For example, what would have happened if the author had gone to the town and found that the girl got

married to someone else! Naturally, it would have made him sad. The story also indicates to the idea of brevity in love. Genuine happiness in love is its brevity because we see in the story that author meets the girl only twice and both of them feel great joy. The third and the most appealing theme is positive thinking. At the end of the story, the author says, "I prefer to keep hoping and dreaming, and looking out of the window up and down that lonely platform, waiting for the girl with the baskets." No matter what we lose, it is important to hope that we may get it again and keep looking for it.

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CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: 2

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS IN ONE SENTENCE EACH.

1. Which two qualities of the girl does the author appreciate?
2. What is the major theme of the story?
3. What does the author wants to do instead of find the girl?

6.3.4 Prose Style

When we read the story '*The Night Train at Deoli*', we find why Ruskin Bond is the most loved storyteller of all. His prose is lucid and terse. He makes his prose look more elegant by not stretching it too much and by delegating only the required portion to the dialogues and description. Throughout the story, we find very simple and succinct description to make the readers visualize the setting of the event. There are hardly a few dialogues that take place between the characters. As the form of the short story does not allow very vast span to the writers, the writers has to be concise and yet deliver the best. Since Ruskin Bond writes about nature and ordinary people around, it is very important to use the prose that suits the need. Therefore, we find great simplicity and engagement in his style. In the story, we can see that he is writing such as way as if the incident is really happening in front of us. Most of his stories have first person narrative technique making the readers empathize with the characters and the story.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: 3

FILL IN THE BLANKS WITH PROPER ANSWERS GIVEN IN THE BRACKETS.

[searching, occurring, scope, simple and concise, indicates]

1. The prose style Ruskin Bond is _____ and _____.
2. The form of the short story does not allow very vast _____ to the writers.
3. We can see that he is writing such as way as if the incident is really _____ in front of us.
4. No matter what we lose, it is important to hope that we may get it again and keep _____ for it.
5. The forest in the background also _____ that the characters are closer to nature and therefore closer to love.

6.4 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, you have learnt

- How story *The Night Train at Deoli* is written using very elegant prose style
- Ruskin Bond's style of plot construction
- The theme of the story

6.5 KEY WORDS

1. Plains -a large area of flat land with few trees.
2. Boast -Bragging, saying more than what it is
3. Halt-Stop
4. Intently- Attentively
5. Pretend-Acting
6. Eloquent-Expressive
7. Jolt-Push
8. Shudder-Shake/Tremble
9. Smoldering-Blazing
10. Sprang off-Jumped off
11. Wrench-Pull
12. Remainder-Rest of
13. Determined-Firm
14. Foreboding-Apprehension
15. Paced up-Speed up
16. Brooding-Dark
17. Tenderness-Affection
18. Ill-at-ease-Not very comfortable
19. shriveled-up – Old and withered
20. Break journey-Stop at a place while travelling for a purpose

6.6 BOOKS SUGGESTED

- 1) *The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories* by Ruskin Bond
- 2) *The Room on the Roof* by Ruskin Bond

ANSWERS

‘THE NIGHT TRAIN AT DEOLI’ BY RUSKIN BOND

Check Your Progress 1

1. Students will write in their own words.
2. The author used to go to Dehra which was his grandmother’s place to spend his vacations in every May. When the train halted at the Deoli station, a young girl came to the author to sell baskets.
3. When they met again, they felt happy to see each other, their smiling faces were giving a testimony to it. It looked like two very old and bosom friends were meeting. They could not speak anything. The author wanted to take her with him but did not do so. He tells his plan to go to Delhi and she said she didn’t need to go anyplace. Then they separated.

Check Your Progress 2

1. The author appreciates girl’s grace and dignity.
2. The major theme of the story is to let go things and people.
3. Instead of finding the girl, the author wants to keep hoping, dreaming and waiting for the girl.

Check Your Progress 3

1. Simple and concise
2. Scope
3. Occurring
4. Searching
5. Indicates