

PREFACE

In a bid to standardize higher education in the country, the University Grants Commission (UGC) has introduced Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) based on five types of courses viz. *core, generic, discipline specific, elective, ability and skill enhancement* for graduate students of all programmes at Honours level. This brings in the semester pattern which finds efficacy in sync with credit system, credit transfer, comprehensive continuous assessments and a graded pattern of evaluation. The objective is to offer learners ample flexibility to choose from a wide gamut of courses, as also to provide them lateral mobility between various educational institutions in the country where they can carry their acquired credits. I am happy to note that the University has been recently accredited by National Assessment and Accreditation Council of India (NAAC) with grade “A”.

UGC (Open and Distance Learning Programmes and Online Programmes) Regulations, 2020 have mandated compliance with CBCS for U.G programmes for all the HEIs in this mode. Welcoming this paradigm shift in higher education, Netaji Subhas Open University (NSOU) has resolved to adopt CBCS from the academic session 2021-22 at the Under Graduate Degree Programme level. The present syllabus, framed in the spirit of syllabi recommended by UGC, lays due stress on all aspects envisaged in the curricular framework of the apex body on higher education. It will be imparted to learners over the six semesters of the Programme.

Self-Learning Materials (SLMs) are the mainstay of Student Support Services (SSS) of an Open University. From a logistic point of view, NSOU has embarked upon CBCS presently with SLMs in English / Bengali. Eventually, the English version SLMs will be translated into Bengali too, for the benefit of learners. As always, all of our teaching faculties contributed in this process. In addition to this, we have also requisitioned the services of best academics in each domain in preparation of the new SLMs. I am sure they will be of commendable academic support. We look forward to proactive feedback from all stakeholders who will participate in the teaching-learning based on these study materials. It has been a very challenging task well executed by the teaches, officers & staff of the University, and I heartily congratulate all concerned in the preparation of these SLMs.

I wish you all a grand success.

Professor (Dr.) Ranjan Chakrabarti
Vice-Chancellor

NETAJI SUBHAS OPEN UNIVERSITY

Under Graduate Degree Programme

Choice Based Credit System (CBCS)

Subject : Honours in English (HEG)

Course Code : CC-EG-10

Course Title : American Literature

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**Netaji Subhas
Open University**

**Subject :
Honours in English (HEG)**

UNDER GRADUATE DEGREE PROGRAMME

Choice Based Credit System (CBCS)

Course Code : CC-EG-10

Course Title : American Literature

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MODULE -1
**The Makings of America – Society, Culture &
Literature**

Unit 1 □ Puritanism

Structure

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1.1 Objectives

This Unit, dealing with the beginning of the history of American literature has been written to acquaint learners with the origins of the canon; to explain the religious philosophy of Puritanism from which background the literature sprang and to locate the writings of the period in the socio-historical context to which they belonged.

1.2 Introduction

Puritanism as a Christian Protestant denomination grew in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in England in reaction to the influence of the Roman Catholic faith on the Church of England. The Anglican Church first separated from Catholicism in 1534 but when Queen Mary ascended the throne in 1553 she reverted it to Catholicism. During the reign of Mary many Puritans faced hostility and exile. The threat of banishment and the increasing prevalence of Calvinism—which provided support for their viewpoint—further strengthened Puritan beliefs. In 1558 when Queen Elizabeth ascended the throne she re-emphasized the separation of the Church from Catholicism. However, the Puritans were not satisfied with what they perceived to be the limited implications of this pro-Protestant stance and pressed for reforms. When their demands were not met the group rebelled and, as a result, its members were prosecuted for refusing to abide by laws that required specific religious practices. This factor, among others contributed to the outbreak of the English Civil War between the **Parliamentarians** and the **Royalists**, who fought in part over religious freedom in 1642.

The English Puritans were made up of various dissenting Protestant groups which were accommodated within the larger denominational rubric. Differences between these groups, notwithstanding, they commonly called for a greater purity of worship and doctrine. They believed in the absolute authenticity and authority of the Bible which they considered to be divinely inspired. A set of beliefs called the Covenant Theology was an important aspect of Puritan belief. This mainly consisted of the influential theories of **John Calvin** and **Heinrich Bullinger** which dealt with the disobedience of Adam and Eve which had violated the covenant that God had made with them of eternal life in return for complete obedience; their fall from grace and the consequent introduction of “original sin” corrupting human nature, the latter eligible for redemption only through their penitential recognition of the sacrifice of Christ.

The sermon was central to Puritan piety even as its practitioners believed in two sacraments namely, baptism and the Lord’s Supper or communion. They emphasized sanctity, simplicity

ad total acceptance of Biblical tenets in individual, family and social life, focusing on the moral education and improvement of man to the detriment of the pleasure yielding activities and faculties such as cultural expression, aesthetic appreciation or social relaxation regarding such attitudes as sensual indulgences and frivolous extravagances. The Puritans encouraged direct personal religious experience, sincere moral conduct, an earnest work ethic and functional worship services. Puritans sought to change the structure, worship methods and other ceremonies of the church in a bid to simplify liturgical practices. Some of the major disputes between the **Puritans** and the **Anglican Church** were, for instance over whether priests should wear vestments (clerical clothing) and the need for a church hierarchy (of bishops, archbishops, etc.). The Puritans firmly believed that priests were not required to wear vestments and that episcopacy should be replaced with a committee of elders making for a more egalitarian distribution of responsibility within the ecclesiastical structure. Further, the Puritans advocated the need for priests to indefatigably spread the word of God as a measure of their committed evangelism. They also wanted broader lifestyle changes in England to align with their strong moral beliefs. The Puritans were influenced by Calvinism and adopted its beliefs in predestination and the intrinsically sinful nature of man.

Puritanism as an ideological position became pronounced in the 1630s with the success of the Puritans in the earlier phase of the **English Civil War**. However, with the Restoration and the subsequent hounding of some of the important leaders of the **Puritan Movement** most were compelled to flee England. Many of them sought refuge in Holland and America where they were sympathetically received. While several among the exiles continued their religious education in Holland most the American émigrés concentrated on establishing fledgling colonies on the new soil which they called “plantations” as in nurseries of the Puritan doctrine.

The colonization of the eastern seaboard of America in the early 17th century was as much the end of a long process as the beginning of a new chapter in history. The voyages of Columbus, as you know, followed soon afterward by those of **Amerigo Vespucci** and lesser-known explorers from Spain, France, Holland and Portugal defined the trajectories of rival imperialisms. The Spaniards had established the settlement of St Augustine in 1565; a small group of Englishmen, at the behest of Walter Raleigh, had tried to found a colony on Roanoke Island off the coast of North Carolina in 1594; an outpost had briefly been set up on the Maine coast in 1607; **Captain John Smith** in 1614 had surveyed and mapped the entire New England coastline.

The waves of English immigration which brought the Pilgrim Fathers, among others, to the shores of America in the first half of the 17th century have become the defining displacement of the era, creating as they did a dedicated diaspora on alien shores and generating, in the

process, a dialogue of discovery typically expressed in the journals, accounts and diaries of the first colonials. The concepts of flight and dream were as effective for these pioneers as they were for the later generations of immigrants, impelling them beyond latitudinal limits to a near-mythical map whose boundaries they expected to shape. The awareness of the sheer space that was newly available and the wonder at the beauty and rich diversity of the landscape that captured the imagination of the primary planters remain in the literature to this day.

Between 1607 with the establishment of Virginia (named after the virgin Queen, Elizabeth I of England) the first English colony on American soil and 1682, which saw the addition of Pennsylvania, the last, there were no less than ten colonies of English blood and speech. They are in the order of their establishment, Plymouth, New Hampshire, Massachusetts Bay, Maryland, Connecticut, Rhode Island, North Carolina, New York, New Jersey, and South Carolina. The first writers were, therefore, immigrants who negotiated the new land and the life it offered with a primarily English sensibility and cultural apprehension. This first tract of the pre-national literature may be said to be both of English and American origin in which English agency and American environment came together to give rise to a body of writings that was of a historical, religious and descriptive nature.

1.3 The Establishment of the First English Colony at Virginia

In 1607 a company of enterprising Englishmen, empowered with a royal patent left for the eastern shores of America and established in Virginia the first successful colony on American soil. Captain John Smith, the leader of the group, was the writer of the first book in American literature. He wrote three books of which the first, *A True Relation of Virginia* was, as Tyler maintains “not a literary effort” but “a budget of information for the people at home, and especially the stockholders of the Virginia Stock Exchange.”

Most notable among the other early writers of Virginia were George Percy of Northumberland whose *Discourse of the Plantation of the Southern Colony of Virginia by the English* provides a history of the colony from its departure out of England down to the year 1607. **William Strachey’s ‘A true Reportory of the Wrack and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates, KT’ was published in July 1610.** Gates had set sail for Virginia from England with a fleet of nine ships and five hundred emigrants. In a terrible tempest that subsequently broke out Gates’ ship was driven ashore on one of the Bermudas and the few passengers who survived the wreck managed to voyage to Jamestown. Strachey gives an account of this in his little book on the calamity and the emigrants’ experience of it.

'Good News from Virginia' published by Alexander Whitaker in 1613 cast in the mould of a hortatory sermon was composed for the enlightenment of people in England and consequently describes the country, the climate, the Indians, and the pioneers' grappling with the daunting conditions of immigrant life. The other notable examples of literature produced during this period in Virginia are John Pory's sketches of pioneer life along the **James River** and **George Sandys' translation of Ovid's 'Metamorphosis'**.

These writings, perceptively described by Tyler as having "some noteworthy value as literature, and some real significance in the literary unfolding of the American mind..." are historically important in terms of their positioning at the very beginning of the American literary articulation and their consequent value as record and document rather than as a noteworthy example of literary expression.

The Restoration in England did not bide well for Virginia as the navigation acts passed by Charles II's Parliament went against the commercial and agricultural interest of Virginia. The parliamentary and legal injustices that were meted out to Virginia between 1660 and 1676 under Charles II caused widespread resentment in the colony. Moreover the vast tracts of land that were granted by the English sovereign to his favourites aggravated the situation.

An Indian massacre in the spring of 1676 caused panic among the populace and the people prevailed on the royal governor Sir William Berkeley to restore order in the colony. An alternative centre of authority complicated matters when a number of the inhabitants turned to Nathaniel Bacon to provide leadership during this crisis. Berkeley and Bacon became opponents and the split leadership exacerbated an already difficult situation, the instability at the top becoming a liability in the face of the Indian challenge. The anonymous manuscripts of the period relating to the massacre and the rebellion constitute documents of historical and sociological importance affording, as they do a glimpse of some of the most disturbing events of the time.

The intellectual condition of Virginia was further compromised by the religious intolerance practiced by a section of its inhabitants. Quakers, Baptists, Presbyterians and all those who dissented from the Episcopal Church were discriminated against and were fined for detected trespasses. The feudalistic tilt in social relations along with the narrow sectarian emphasis in matters of religion militated against the growth of a socio-cultural atmosphere in which literature could take root. Hence the first colonial period in Virginia saw the sparse offshoots of a limited literary consciousness struggling to emerge and survive in an inhospitable and largely uncongenial atmosphere.

1.4 The Establishment of the Puritan Colonies at New England

Barely thirteen years after the establishment of the colony in Virginia, four hundred miles to the north of the continent, in that climatically bleaker region of what came to be patriotically christened as New England American civilization planted its second outpost. The first Puritan colony was founded in Plymouth, Massachusetts by the “pilgrims” who arrived at Cape Cod in 1620 on the *Mayflower*. The next one was set up at Salem in 1628. The more stable and enduring Massachusetts Bay Colony was established in and around Boston in 1630 by the company that came over on the *Arbella* under the leadership of John Winthrop. In the course of time New England expanded from Massachusetts into Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Maine. These communities grew from the hundred or so persons who came aboard the *Mayflower*, and the 600-odd who crossed the Atlantic a decade later on the fleet whose flagship was the *Arbella*. By 1640 some twenty thousand Puritans were spread across the landscape.

Additional colonies sprang up in the wake of Virginia and Massachusetts. In 1634, Maryland, founded as a refuge for Catholics, was carved out of northern Virginia. Thirty years later, New Netherland was wrested from the Dutch by the English and renamed New York: in the same year New Jersey came into existence through a grant from the Duke of York. Pennsylvania was born in 1681 when Charles II ceded a large tract of land to the elder Penn for a debt that he owed the latter.

The social structure of New England was one of concentration while that of Virginia was that of dispersion. In New England families settled down in close proximity to each other, thus forming neighborhoods while in Virginia, each settler, in imitation of the English lord, occupied vast tracts of land thereby giving rise to geographical and social isolation. This distance, in sharp contrast to personal community enjoyed by the New England settlers, hindered the growth of public and civic institutions, which depend on and in turn foster a sense of kinship and belonging between the social groups.

The popular notion of the Puritans as pioneers may be ascribed to the fact that they dominate the written records of the time. In the first colonial period generally regarded as the years between 1607 and 1676, a considerable body of writing emanated from New England, recording the colonials’ negotiation of the new land. There were the historical writers, namely William Bradford, John Winthrop, Nathaniel Morton and Edward Johnson; the theological ones, prominent among who were Thomas Hooker, John Cotton and Cotton Mather; the descriptive writers and poets such as Anne Bradstreet. “The one grand distinction between the English colonists in New England and nearly all other colonists in

America” maintains Moses Coit Tyler “was this, that while the latter came here chiefly for some material benefit, the former came chiefly for an ideal benefit. In its inception New England was not an agricultural community, nor a manufacturing community, nor a trading community: it was a thinking community.”

“The New England Puritan’s difference from the Anglican or Catholic in worship and polity dictated differences in literary theory. His literal attitude to the Bible left little excuse for any religious art not somehow justified by its text; and the ardor of his Protestantism led him to reject anything traditionally associated with the Church of Rome... The Puritan usually rejected imagery which served merely to delight, accepting only that which seemed to him to make the truth more easily understood, and preferring that which he could find in the Bible.” (Literary History of the United States 56-58).

1.5 The Historical Writers of New England

The first important prose writings in America were historical in nature documenting the origin of the colonies in clear and logical language. The adoption of genre was dictated by the topical need for documentation. Secular administrators of the new colony such as William Bradford and John Winthrop were, at the same time Puritan leaders who merged their religious beliefs with their civic impetus thereby creating in effect what may be described as theocracies. Edward Johnson and Nathaniel Morton were less important in the general scheme of things but they too, contributed to the corpus of historical writings that marked intellectual endeavour in the colony.

Factual in its orientation as historical writing necessarily is, in the Puritan Age it was frequently characterized by a sense of wonder at the deliverance of man by God. Positive developments, even everyday ones were viewed as reprieves and called for thankfulness on the part of the recipients.

“Puritan narratives defined a shape for the writing of America, but they also questioned how and whether language could reveal the extraordinary experience. As a result, from the very beginning America became a testing place of language and narrative, a place of search for providential meanings and hidden revelations, part of a lasting endeavor to discover the intended nature and purpose of the New World.” (Ruland and Bradbury 4)

1.5.1 William Bradford (1590-1657)

The writings of William Bradford and John Winthrop may be regarded as a prototype of this early immigrant canon. The tradition that they initiated accommodates various disciplines and interests and essentially reflects the Calvinist origins of American Protestantism. Bradford

of the *Mayflower* and Plymouth Rock, regarded as the father of American history, provides in his *History of Plymouth Plantation* the earliest documentation of this colonial period. Bradford's *History*, left in manuscript had been used by his nephew Nathaniel Morton for his book *New England's Memorial* after which several writers used it as source-material. It disappeared during the British occupation of Boston and was given up for lost till it surfaced in 1855 in the Fulham Library in London.

Bradford's *History* in its minute and painstaking observation of fact and detail remains a faithful chronicle of day-to-day life as it was lived in the colony at Plymouth. During the period of the voyage history was recorded almost as soon as it was made but upon the completion of the same and with the first sowings of the Puritan plantation at Plymouth the entries became less frequent and the observations were largely limited to the more significant of the happenings in the life of the infant colony. This is to be expected in the light of Bradford's growing involvement in the administration of the colony, an exercise that claimed his time and attention to a large extent.

The exodus of the English Puritans to America has traditionally been likened to the flight of the Israelites to the Promised Land. Like the patriarchs of the Old Testament, William Bradford describes the "choosing" of His people, their exile and wanderings. Inscribed in this primordial parallel are the echoes of previous passages and peregrinations, namely those undertaken by the apostles and missionaries of the early Christian Church, men who braved the rigours of strange, often inhospitable, climates and customs to spread their faith across countries. The immigrants from England who, in many cases, had left behind ancestral estates, and embarked on a similar project, that of carrying 'European civilization and Christianity to the New World' may, in all justice, be compared to those first missionaries and their rites of passage to the ancient apostolic destinations.

That the patriarchs themselves had a notion of this historic affiliation becomes evident from Bradford's spontaneous identification of the hardships suffered by him and his people with those endured by St Paul. In recalling the plight of the travellers on at last reaching Cape Cod, he observes: "It is recorded in the Scripture as a mercy to the Apostle and his shipwrecked company that the barbarians showed them no small kindness in refreshing them, but these savage barbarians, when they met with them, were readier to fill their sides full of arrows than otherwise."

1.5.2 John Winthrop (1588-1649)

John Winthrop led the fleet that carried the 600-odd pilgrims across the Atlantic in 1630. He wrote and delivered the lay sermon that became *A Model of Christian Charity* either before the 1630 crossing to North America or while en route. It described methods to keep the Puritan society morally intact and strong in faith, as well as the challenges that lay

ahead for them in the New World. He used the phrase “city upon a hill” (derived from the Bible’s Sermon on the Mount) to see the colonists’ project as part of a special pact with God to create a holy community according to his wish. Winthrop urged his fellow colonists to “bear one another’s burdens” and to view themselves as a “Body of Christ, knit together by Love.” The last mentioned dictum is an aspect of Pauline theology which understands Christian fellowship as a holistic, organic and indivisible manifestation of Christ.

One of the founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Winthrop, with characteristic scrupulousness, went on to record the minutiae of that migration in his *Journal*. His narrative provides, not only a record of the day-to-day life as it was lived in the colony, but also the workings of the Puritan mind in its negotiation of a changed geographical, historical, social and civil reality on an alien continent. John Winthrop’s *Journal* which developed into *The History of New England* was begun in 1630 and was added to for the next twenty years till a few weeks before the author’s death in 1649. The first two notebooks were published in 1790 by Noah Webster. The third notebook was long thought lost but was recovered in 1816, and the complete journals were published in 1825 and 1826 by James Savage as *The History of New England from 1630–1649. By John Winthrop, Esq. First Governor of the Colony of the Massachusetts Bay. From his Original Manuscripts*. Winthrop seeks to register in plain and unadorned prose, through a balanced and dispassionate manner, the events, both momentous and mundane that unfolded in the life of the colony at Massachusetts Bay.

Winthrop’s earliest publication was probably *The Humble Request of His Majesties Loyal Subjects* (London, 1630), which defended the emigrants’ geographical separation from England and reaffirmed their loyalty to the Crown and Church of England. While living in England, he contributed pieces to a private religious journal intermittently between 1607 and 1637 using almost a confessional tone, rather different in voice and style from the *Journal*. Later in his life, he wrote *A Short Story of the rise, reign, and ruine of the Antinomians, Familists and Libertines, that Infected the Churches of New England* which described the Antinomian controversy surrounding Anne Hutchinson and others in 1636 and 1637. The work was first published in London in 1644.

Like William Bradford Winthrop was a Puritan patriarch and administrator who was intricately caught up in the issues of the day, guiding the fledgling community according to the strict mores of his particular sectarian belief. Though conservative in his views he managed to maintain a balance between the extreme rigidity of Thomas Dudlow and the flexibility of Roger Williams.

1.5.3 Edward Johnson (1598-1672)

Edward Johnson, of humbler stock, yet attained prominence in the governments of

Massachusetts Bay. In 1640 he founded the community at Waburn, Massachusetts. He provides his epic account of the trials and tribulations of the Puritan experiment in holy living in the western world in his work *A History of New England* (1653), better known as *The Wonder-Working Providence of Sion's Savior in New England*.

1.5.4 Nathaniel Morton (1613-1685)

Born in England in 1613 Nathaniel came with his father's family to Plymouth in 1623. In 1645 he was elected secretary of Plymouth Colony and occupied that office till he died in 1685. He published in 1669 *New England's Memorial* based largely on Bradford's *History* and Winslow's *Journal*. It enjoyed fame and a readership till the discovery and publication of Bradford's *History*.

1.6 Common Features in the Puritan Mediation of History in New England

These writers, not literary in the usual sense and mainly occupied with subduing a wilderness, building homes and creating the instruments of government and law, were yet the progenitors of a vigorous prose tradition, foreshadowing interesting developments in later writings, and constituting in embryonic form some of the legal and political manifestos of the American system. **The Mayflower Compact** is important as an early American covenant instituting civil government by common consent with reference to the common good. The *Compact with the Indians* was the first American treaty with the Wamponaug people and was faithfully kept for 54 years until 1675 when Metacomet began those savage attacks known as King Philip's War and included the Deerfield Massacre. The Narragansett challenge incidentally was an episode that Longfellow had used dramatically in *The Courtship of Miles Standish*.

Though a significant amount of this pre-national literature was produced, it has been argued that it was not in any sense of the term 'American' literature for it did not arise out of an imaginative engagement with America itself – as a society or culture – for America so understood, had not yet been constituted. Which brings one to the paradox that literature existed in America before America existed, a paradox captured by Robert Frost in all its perplexities in his poem *The Gift Outright*.

*The land was ours before we were the land's.
She was our land more than a hundred years
Before we were her people.*

In another interesting twist to the conceptualization of America it is felt that even before the continent was discovered by Columbus America existed as a figment of the European imagination, which had long believed in the existence of a fabulous landmass in the west awaiting discovery and exploration.

With the New England Puritans however, this myth took on a Biblical dimension. Even before they had arrived in the New World, they had tended to see the nature and purpose of human life in the light of God's plan and promises. The religious and nationalistic imperatives of the colonists' endeavour are clear from their avowal that they had begun the voyage across the Atlantic "for the glory of God and the advancement of the Christian faith" and for the honor of their "king and country". The genesis of such thinking may be traced to the two great European theologians of the previous century — Martin Luther and John Calvin. The Puritans derived the Lutheran idea that men are essentially wicked and God all-powerful with the corollary that no human action is capable of attaining spiritual redemption. It was Calvin, however, who was more crucial to the development of Puritan thought and his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, first published in 1536, was the major text from which the founding fathers drew doctrinal guidance.

Early New England writers operate within the Calvinist theoretical framework, having derived their vision and moral bearings from the attitudes contained therein. Bradford, in his *Of Plymouth Plantation*, presents the Puritan immigration experiment as part of a "great design", and Winthrop, in his sermon aboard the *Arbella*, emphasized the need to nurture the potential colony as "a model of Christian charity" on the Calvinist assumption that any deviation from it would spell doom. In chapter 32 of his narrative, where Bradford describes the breaking out of wickedness amongst the people, he does so with a typically Calvinistic understanding of human nature. He says: "I say it justly may be marveled at and cause us to fear and tremble at the consideration of our corrupt natures, which are so hardly bridled, subdued and mortified; nay, cannot by any other means but the powerful grace of God's spirit."

Bradford and Winthrop were governors of the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies respectively for repeated terms and were admirably suited for, and indeed did combine most effectively the roles of spiritual and secular leader, guiding their flock to the hallowed pastures, exhorting them to exemplary action, setting the moral pace as it were and, at the same time, administering justice and laying the foundations of a civil society. In their combination of the two roles both men demonstrate an affinity with the biblical archetype Moses who was spiritual leader, lawgiver and chronicler of Israelite history.

There is a constant striving in both men to discharge their sacred and secular offices with the utmost sincerity. Winthrop, in his *Model of Christian Charity*, describes his dual

concern thus: “For the work we have in hand, it is by mutual consent, through a special overruling providence and a more than an ordinary approbation of the churches of Christ, to seek out a place of cohabitation and consorts, under a due form of government both civil and ecclesiastical.” In like manner, Bradford, while recounting the first marriage solemnized by him in Plymouth recognizes the civil as well as the sacramental nature of the contract describing the same as being: “a civil thing upon which many questions about inheritances do depend with other things most proper to their cognizance and most consonant to the Scriptures...”

However, the civil was more often than not subsumed within the sacred in a way that is perhaps possible only in a theocratic society. The Puritans with Calvinist leanings who formed the core of the New England clergy subscribed to the view that the church is the state, and should enjoy primacy in all areas of human life. Not unexpectedly then the New England scheme of justice was a product of theology rather than of jurisprudence. The social intercourse enjoyed by these people along with the sartorial habits sported by them was likewise tempered by a Puritan narrowness of belief and outlook.

A belief in prayer and providence runs through the entire corpus of writings heightening its affinities with biblical prose. In a scenario where every act of survival was construed as a miracle, and every tribulation overcome a sign of divine sanction and blessing, providence appears as an agency of affirmation. The literalness and logic with which the New England Puritans approached everything were applied particularly to prayer and providence, clear from their belief that God was always near at hand, and more than willing to interpose in their smallest affairs. In the words of Ruland and Bradbury, Bradford and Winthrop’s writings “is the stuff of millenial epic, but it is epic without known outcome.” (From Puritanism to Postmodernism 11)

1.7 Literary Style of the New England Historians

Bradford renders his account in “the plaine style”, with singular regard unto the simple truth in all things”. Not only are the boundaries between personal testimony and objective history considerably blurred in Bradford’s *History* the constant need to adjust to the changing parameters of pioneer life imbues the narrative with shifts in tone and tempo. Eventually his history takes the shape of a jeremiad, a fundamental Puritan articulation that assesses the gap between professed intention and final accomplishment and calls for a return to the original vision, chronicling in the process, the hardships encountered along the way.

Though for the most part these writers used plain language and a simple style to “justify the ways of God to man”, they did take recourse to the occasional metaphor for greater

impact. The vivid biblical imagery finds its most frequent and forceful expression in the metaphor of “the city on the hill”. This “city on the hill”, of course, is the visible body of Christ or the New Jerusalem; a model community of Christians expected to act as a beacon to the rest. Winthrop’s reminder to his flock, “for we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us”, finds corroboration in chapter 32 of Bradford’s narrative where he refers to his people as those who had been “brought into the light, and set in the plain field, or rather on a hill, made conspicuous to the view of all”.

Unlike the elegant, often ornamental prose styles of Catholic or Anglican writers the ‘plaine style’ of the Puritan historians was language that was “resacralized by its own congregation, shaped by specific theological, social and political assumptions.” (From Puritanism 15). The prose of this period, therefore, is both a history and story of the epic struggle of people consecrated to a vision, a rhetoric of range yet restraint that rates even as it narrates the experience of early colonial life.

1.8 Descriptive Writing of the Puritan Period

1.8.1 Francis Higginson

Francis Higginson, a minister of the Church of England who reached Salem in June 1629 as a religious teacher had maintained a journal of his voyage across the Atlantic and of his observations on his new environment. The contents of this work were compressed into a slim volume called ‘New England’s Plantation’. In this book both the voyage and the new country are described through the fresh perceptions of the emigrant who is eager to taste the adventures and novelties of scene and custom that necessarily await him. The first glimpse of the New England coast is thus conveyed: “Now, what with fine woods and green trees by land, and these yellow flowers painting the sea, made us all desirous to see our new paradise of New England, whence we saw such fore-running signals of fertility afar off.” (Higginson 164).

The idealizing thrust of Higginson’s survey is clear from his praise for the land and its natural bounty, the physical proportions of the Indians, and most of all for the opportunities for “preaching and diligent catechizing” that it afforded.

1.8.2 William Woods

The publication of *New England’s Prospect* by William Wood in 1634 is yet another specimen of descriptive literature of the period. Divided into two parts the book sets out to describe the landscape and topography, the seasons, its flora and fauna and the suitability

of the English physiognomy to the climate and soil of the place. In the second part Wood dwells extensively on the Indian tribes of New England documenting their habitat and habits, their customs, livelihoods, moral attributes and predilections.

1.9 The Theological Writers of the Colonial Period

As history, theology and political governance have been inseparable in the Puritan ethics and outlook the historical writers of the fledgling colonies invariably used the themes and forms of Protestant, specifically Calvinist beliefs to express their views. They drew their images and allusions from the same source to illustrate their point. Despite their religious orientation the Pilgrim Fathers were primarily colonists and administrators, and to a large extent, they directed their energies to that end. The theological writers of New England who have gone down in history as the progenitors of a particular tradition of religious prose are Thomas Hooker, Thomas Shepard and John Cotton during the first colonial period and Cotton Mather in the second colonial era.

1.9.1 Thomas Hooker (1586-1647)

Thomas Hooker was a brilliant preacher in London. Later he became religious lecturer and assistant minister in Chelmsford. His non-conformist views earned him the wrath of Archbishop Laud who effectively put an end to all the avenues open to him for preaching in England, as a result of which Hooker had to flee to Holland where he spent two or three years preaching in Delft and Rotterdam. From Holland Hooker made his way in 1633 to the Puritan colony at Massachusetts Bay in New England where he spent the last fourteen years of his life. He preached in the church at Cambridge for three years after which he led his flock of a hundred families or so to Connecticut where he, along with his devoted followers, helped to build the town of Hartford and found the community there.

During this last phase of his life Hooker poured forth his genius in a succession of religious treatises, which at once established his reputation as a major voice in Puritan literature. The twenty-three titles to his credit were without exception on religious subjects. In common with the prevailing Puritan temper and their literary tendencies Hooker filled his works with Scriptural quotations and allusions, and subjected his work to minute divisions, sub-divisions and classifications. The conviction of tone and the force and vigour of his argument may be seen in the following extract: "There must be subjection or else confusion. Will you outbrave the Almighty to his face, and will you dare damnation... As proud as you have been crushed and humbled. Where are all those Nimrods and Pharaohs and all those haughty monarchs of the world? The Lord hath thrown them flat upon their backs, and they are in hell this day".

1.9.2 Thomas Shepard (1605-49)

Thomas Shepard arrived in New England in 1635 and took charge of the church in Cambridge. Possessed of a powerful intellect and devotion to his vocation, Shepard achieved fame as a writer and pulpit orator. Shepard's works honoured by a modern edition (Boston, 1853) draw for its core message on the Calvinist belief in the fallen and depraved condition of man, the wrath of God and the promise of redemption through man's repentant humility and divine forgiveness.

A couple of brief extracts from some of his writings may serve to exemplify both his theological theme and literary style. "We are all in Adam as a whole country in a parliament man; the whole country doth what he doth". (Works of Thomas Shepard 1.24); "Every natural man and woman is born full of sin, as full as a toad is of poison, as full as ever his skin can hold; mind, will, eyes, mouth, every limb of his body, and every piece of his soul, is full of sin; their hearts are bundles of sin". (Ibid.28)

1.9.3 John Cotton (1584-1652)

John Cotton was hounded by the supporters of Archbishop Laud from England for his non-conformist views. Cotton arrived in Boston in 1633. He gradually became one of the most powerful leaders of the theocratic community of New England. Cotton's contribution to the Psalter that came to be popularly called *The Bay Psalm Book* is invaluable.

The individualistic streak in the American psyche is seen in the wish of the Puritan leaders to have a Book of Psalms that was at once more literal and Calvinist in its orientation than the several English translations that were available at the time. Accordingly, a project was initiated by the learned divines of the time to bring forth a translation of the scriptural Psalms that would be suited to the particular needs of the colonies, and more in keeping with the beliefs of the colonial citizens.

Eminent theologians such as Richard Mather, John Wilson, Nathaniel Ward, Thomas Shepard and John Cotton among several others set about the task of diligently translating the Psalms. A collective venture, undertaken in the best spirit of community service this endeavour left little scope for individual claims to authorship except for the instance of John Cotton who was credited with the translation of Psalm 23, and with the composition of the Preface to *The Bay Psalm Book*. A Puritan manifesto in miniature on style and intent the last paragraph of the Preface virtually approximates the status of a classic in its condensed articulation of its avowed objective, namely the achievement of literal accuracy rather than pleasing sweetness of style.

"If therefore the verses are not always so smooth and elegant as some may desire or expect: let them consider that God's altar needs not our polishing...for we have respected

rather a plain translation, than to smooth our verses with the sweetness of any paraphrase, and so have attended conscience rather than elegance, fidelity rather than poetry, in translating the Hebrew words into English meter..." (Colonial and Federal 223)

There are numerous titles to Cotton's credit but in the words of Tyler his place in early American literary history bears no proportion to his place in the early religious and political history of the country.

1.9.4 Richard Mather

Richard Mather, sire of the Mather dynasty contributed sermons, a catechism, letters on church administration and some of the translations in *The Bay Psalm Book* along with various other documents.

1.9.5 Increase Mather (1639-1723)

The son of Richard Mather, Increase Mather had almost a hundred titles to his credit. The one book however that stands out is known by a name not given to it by its author. Called *Remarkable Providences* it is a work that was begun in England and Ireland in 1658 and took shape as a compilation of testimonies of Puritan priests about providential interventions in their lives. Discontinued for some time, the work found its way into New York and fortuitously fell in the hands of Increase Mather who developed the project in the new settlement and saw it to its completion. Sound in conception and scientific in implementation *Remarkable Providences* lacked the critical scrutiny that needs to be applied to personal recollections.

1.9.6 Cotton Mather (1663-1728)

Increase Mather's son Cotton Mather, born in 1663 in Boston followed in the professional footsteps of his father and grandfather. Prodigiously talented, Cotton Mather developed into a scholar and preacher of extraordinary repute. Of the 444 items that Cotton Mather published during his lifetime several are important from a historical point of view. The more important ones among his writings are: *The Wonders of the Invisible World; Magnalia Christi Americana: Manuducterio Ministerium;* and *The Negro Christianized.*

The one book by Cotton Mather which established him as a major writer on theological themes, and which to some extent ensured his name for posterity is *Magnalia Christi Americana or The Ecclesiastical History of New England from its First Planting (1702)*. The first book of this mammoth literary enterprise is a history of the settlement of New England; the second deals with the lives of the governors and magistrates; the third dwells on the lives of sixty renowned priests of the Puritan churches of New England; the fifth is devoted to an evocation of "the faith and order of the churches"; the sixth presents remarkable cases of divine intervention in human lives while the seventh provides an

account of the “afflictive disturbances” which the churches of New England have suffered from their various adversaries ranging from ‘the Devil’ to sectarian enemies to the Indians.

1.10 Poetry of The Puritan Period

1.10.1 Michael Wigglesworth (1631-1705)

Michael Wigglesworth’s poem ‘The Day of Doom’ (1662) as the title suggests was an exercise in righteousness completely in agreement with the religious tenets of contemporary New England. Consisting of 224 eight-line stanzas of doctrinal observations in a rousing ballad meter the poem acquired an astonishing popularity in its day. Dealing with the Calvinist themes of depravity, damnation and deliverance the poem not only provides a key to the Puritan mentality but also illustrates the ‘plaine style’ of the historians that was perhaps unconsciously adopted by some of the poets, as well.

1.10.2 Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672)

Born in England, Anne Bradstreet was the daughter of Thomas Dudley, the steward of the Earl of Lincoln. Anne who grew up in an elegant and erudite atmosphere acquired a learning that was unusual for a woman of her time. Her first volume of poems was published in England in 1650 under a very long title not of her own choosing - ‘The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung up in America... by a Gentlewoman of those Parts’. The poems were interesting reflections not only on the moral ideas held by her but also on some of the emerging scientific theories of the day.

Anne Bradstreet’s poems were surprisingly well received by contemporary New England society given the orthodox tilt of the patriarchal dispensation at the helm. They were actually given a second edition that was brought out in Boston in 1687 under a considerably abbreviated title. The new poems that were added to the original ones in this second edition have, with their depth of feeling and complexity of tone, contributed to the lasting reputation of this pioneering poet who, in some measure, resembled and anticipated another New England woman poet, namely Emily Dickinson who was to appear on the scene two hundred years later.

Anne Bradstreet articulates in her poetry the problems of the woman writer who has to reconcile her several roles, balancing domestic duties and literary interests, negotiate the world of professional writing, traditionally regarded as a male preserve, and redefine her image and status in the context of her identity as both woman and poet. She wrote on personal matters such as her relationship with her husband, the duties of family life, the experience of childbirth, a devastating house fire and other subjects even as she dwelt on general topics such as the challenges before the contemporary woman poet.

Throughout her life Bradstreet was concerned with the themes of sin and redemption, physical and emotional frailty, and death and immortality. In her earliest extant poem “*Upon a Fit of Sickness, Anno 1632*” Bradstreet is concerned with the typical Puritan themes of the brevity and instability of life, the certainty of death and a belief in spiritual salvation. In the poem “For Deliverance from a Fever” Bradstreet describes with great accuracy the physical discomfort brought on by a fever and ends the same with the typical Puritan gratitude to God for his mercies.

Several of Bradstreet’s poems reflect her struggle to accept the adversities of the Puritan colony, contrasting earthly losses with the eternal rewards of the virtuous. In one poem, for instance, she writes of an actual event: when the family house burned down. In another, she expresses thoughts of her own possible death as she prepares to give birth to one of her children. Anne Bradstreet contrasts the transitory nature of earthly possessions with eternal treasures and seems to see her trials as lessons from God.

As a younger poet, Bradstreet, deeply influenced by the poet **Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas**, wrote five quaternions, epic poems of four parts each that explore the diverse yet complementary nature of their subject. Her four quaternions were “**Seasons,**” “**Elements,**” “**Humours,**” and “**Ages**”. The first two quaternions were more successful. These long poems helped Bradstreet to systematize and integrate the knowledge that she had acquired in the Earl of Lincoln’s household, and were, on the whole useful in the development of her craftsmanship as a poet.

Much of Bradstreet’s poetry stemmed from her observation of the world around her, as she focused on its day-to-day aspects along with the larger religious and social issues that constituted the discourse of the times. Bradstreet’s poetry was considered by Cotton Mather, “a monument to her memory beyond the stateliest marble.” Long considered primarily of historical interest, Bradstreet won critical acceptance in the 20th century as a writer of enduring verse, particularly for her sequence of religious poems “*Contemplations*,” which was written for her family and not published until the mid-19th century.

From *Prologue* (Stanzas 1 and 5)

*To sing of wars, of captains, and of kings
Of cities founded, commonwealths begun,
For my mean pen are too superior things;
Or how they all, or each, their dates have run;
Let poets and historians set these forth;
My obscure lines shall not so dim their worth.*

*I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
Who says my hand a needle better fits;
A poet's pen all scorn I should thus wrong,
For such despite they cast on female wits.
If what I do prove well, it won't advance;
They'll say it's stol'n, or else it was by chance.*
From *Contemplations* (Stanzas 30 and 33)
*And yet this sinful creature, frail and vain,
This lump of wretchedness, of sin and sorrow,
This weather-beaten vessel wracked with pain,
Joys not in hope of an eternal morrow;
Nor all his losses, crosses and vexations,
In weight, in frequency and long duration,
Can make him deeply groan for that divine translation.
O Time, the fatal wrack of mortal things,
That draws oblivion's curtains over kings,
Their sumptuous monuments, men know them not,
Their names without a record are forgot,
Their pats, their ports, their pomp's all laid in th' dust,
Nor wit, nor gold nor buildings 'scape time's rust;
But he whose name is graved in the white stone
Shall last and shine when all of these are gone.*

“The Prologue,” found in Bradstreet’s first collection of poetry *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America* in 1650 is not only a signature poem, in that it highlights some of the typical concerns of her age and work and is written in her trademark style combining observation, wit, argument and irony it enjoys a historical and geographical context that extends and enriches its meaning.

Bradstreet launches into her subject with a clear understanding of its scope and a remarkable control over the materials of her craft. She begins with a traditional gendering of heroic events, figures, developments and enterprises as being the prerogatives of men in terms of both engagement and literary reflection. At the outset she declares her inability to write about (“sing”) such momentous events as wars, the founding of cities and Commonwealths

and of captains and kings as these are too “superior” for her “mean pen” which is better suited for the expression of mundane matters. According to her the description/celebration of the mentioned epochal enterprises are best left to the historians and poets, the implicit assumption being that these professional experts are male. She, in fact, goes a step further maintaining that an attempt on her part to write about these great events would actually diminish their value (“dim their worth”) setting up thereby a conflict between the historic import of the events referred to and her inadequate verse (“obscure lines”). The expression “obscure lines” gathers in its synecdochal thrust the entire sweep of her literary expression even as it derives directly from a sense of the gendered self as marginal, even anonymous. The concluding couplet of the first stanza draws attention to the public office of the Historian and Poet who are sanctioned by society to “set forth” the grand achievements of the human race in verse of appropriate gravity.

In the following stanzas Bradstreet moves from a comparison between the legendary Huguenot (French Protestant) poet and doctor of law Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas whom she greatly admired and herself through a sense of personal inadequacy and perceived weakness to the age-old gendering of occupations that is evident in social perceptions across centuries around the globe though, of course, she locates it primarily in a purely American colonial context within a narrowly Puritan culture. The poet contends that gender discrimination had existed from the Greek classical age to the present times.

In the eighth and final stanza the poet uses the imagery of pursuit describing the quills of the male poets as predatory birds that soar in the skies in search of prey, that is, the poetic product which when captured wins them praise. Continuing in this vein of humility, some may contend irony, Bradstreet maintains that if the male poets deign to look at her “lowly lines” she would merely ask for recognition commensurate with her station and ability. The wreath she asks for need not be of “bay” or laurel leaves, the evergreen foliage that was entwined into a crown and placed on the heads of champions in the ancient Olympic Games. She merely asks to be crowned with wreaths made out of thyme or parsley leaves, common household herbs, in keeping with the humble domestic status of the woman.

1.10.3 Edward Taylor (1645-1729)

Edward Taylor was educated in Leicestershire, England where he was born, probably in 1645. He arrived in Boston in 1668 with the aim of acquiring a university education, as British universities were not hospitable to Puritan scholars at the time. He studied in Harvard, graduating from it in 1671 and in Massachusetts started on a dual career as pastor and physician devotedly looking after the needs of his flock for the rest of his life.

When **Thomas H. Johnson** published selections from Taylor’s poems more than two hundred years after his death the fusion of an intensely Puritan outlook and a subtly wrought

Metaphysical sensibility became apparent. Themes of devotional piety were mediated in Taylor's poetry through complexities of tone, meter and imagery and a rhetorical fervour that made it significantly different from any comparable poetic expression in colonial America at the time.

Taylor began writing *Preparatory Meditations* in 1682, a series of more than two hundred poems, divided into two groups. Qualitatively uneven and occasionally repetitive, these poems are yet a window to an extraordinary synthesis of sensibilities that characterized Taylor's best work. The main theme of the 49 poems of the first series is love – the love of God and Christ for man (especially shown through Christ's sacrifice on the cross) and man's reciprocal adoration. The *Preparatory Meditations*, on the whole, deal with the typical Puritan engagement with Scriptural truths, repudiations of ideas not in conformity with the prevailing doctrine (Congregationalist, in this case), and the poet's ecstatic belief in the thorough humanity and perfect divinity of Christ.

Metaphysical in stylistic mediation, these poems are deeply influenced by the poetry of John Donne and George Herbert in their ingenious mingling of wit and emotion. The more surreal among the poems may be traced to Richard Crashaw or John Cleveland. Taylor betrays in his combination of the common and the celestial or the expression of abstruse turns of thought through humble images of the loom and farm his debt to the English Metaphysical imagination and stylistic expression. Another strain clearly discernible in Taylor's poetry is the "plaine style" preached by the New England historians reflective of the spartan discipline advocated by Petrus Ramus, the 16th century rhetorician. In such an unadorned distillation of words Taylor, perhaps, anticipates Emerson's belief in the palpable connection between words and things. At his ornate, however, Taylor was not averse to using the rhythms of the King James' version of the English Bible.

The following excerpts from Taylor's poems may give one an idea of his themes and styles:

Meditation One (Last Stanza)

*Oh! That my love might overflow my heart,
To fire the same with love: for love I would.
But oh! my straitened breast! My lifeless spark!
My fireless flame! What chilly love and cold!
In measure small, in manner chilly, see!
Lord, blow the coal! Thy love inflame in me!*

Meditation Six

Am I thy gold? Or perse, Lord, for Thy wealth;

*Whether in mine or mint refined for Thee?
 I'm counted so, but count me o'er Thyself,
 Lest gold washed face, and brass in heart I be.
 I fear my touchstone touches when I try
 Me, and my counted gold too overly.
 Am I new minted by Thy stamp indeed?
 Mine eyes are dim; I cannot clearly see.
 Be thou my spectacles that I may read
 Thy image and inscriptin stamped on me.
 If Thy bright image do upon me stand,
 I am a golden angel in Thy hand.
 Lord, make my soul Thy plate; Thine image bright
 Within the circle of the same enfoil.
 And on its brims in golden letters write
 Thy superscription in an holy style.
 Then I shall be Thy money, Thou my hoard:
 Let me Thy angel be, be Thou my Lord.*

(angel: English gold coin)

In the last stanza of “Meditation 1” the poet, in a striking fusion of metaphor and feeling likens his heart to a fireplace, cold and lifeless till God blows its “coal” to engender the flame of love in it. The entire poem depends for its effect on the interpenetration of the two images of “heart” and “hearth” in a creative discharge of symbolic meaning.

“Meditation 6,” is similarly a play on the word ‘gold’ constituting the very material of the poet’s self, whether refined in “mine or mint,” for God’s currency that circulates in the world. Yet, his greed for his own money (“counted gold”) comes into conflict with the divine “wealth” that he is supposed to be as he fears his touchstone will discover and reveal a “brass” heart beneath a “gold washed face” in the manner of alloyed, not pure gold coins. The line “Lest gold washed face, and brass in heart I be” reminds one of the ‘brazen serpent’ of the Bible, referring to the inherent evil in man.

Developing the conceit of the gold coin in “Meditation 6,” Taylor invests it with a further layer of complexity decrying the dimness of his vision which prevents him from reading God’s new stamp on him and asking the latter to be his “spectacles” that he may read the

“image and inscription” engraved on him and recognize himself to be “a golden angel” in his hand. The human being, even when newly minted in God’s image fails to perceive the divinity present in him, and needs God’s vision (“spectacles”) to read his innate Godlike quality. If he discovers God’s image on him, aided by divine help he will realize that he is “a golden angel” in the latter’s hand, an “angel” because of God’s transforming touch and also, in the contemporary sense of an “angel” meaning a gold coin. In a subtle allusion to the royal stamp with which all gilded coins used to be inscribed the poet wittily interposes the idea of the sovereignty of God in the heart of the devout believer who like a gold coin bears the stamp of his lord or king.

“Meditation 6” continues with the same imagery shifting to that of the “plate” reflecting the divine image within its circle and its “superscription” etched in “golden letters” on its rim before returning to the notion of money cleverly effecting its division between man and God by affirming:

Then I shall be Thy money, Thou my hoard:

Let me Thy angel be, be Thou my Lord,

thereby describing how they will enrich each other – God through the pure devotion and obedience offered by man and the latter through God’s presence in him. The rhetorical play on “money” is metrically reinforced through the use of the rhymes “hoard” and “lord.” The poem is an excellent example of Taylor’s typical theme and style where the witty play on words is but the product of an organic process of poetic creation beginning in complex thought that seeks to discharge its meaning through allusion, irony, inversion and paradox.

The crossing of Puritan priorities with aesthetic ambiguities certainly inflected Taylor’s voice and tone with multivalencies of mood and meaning. In the perceptive analysis of Gross and Stern, Taylor “combined the intense sincerity of a William Bradford with the aspiring exaltation of a Jonathan Edwards, merging his fire and humility in the intricate style of the English Metaphysicals.” (Colonial and Federal 259).

Taylor’s position in the literary tradition of America is important in that it betokens a heralding of the torn, troubled and questing metaphysics that came to affect a strain of the American imaginative expression. His passionate questioning, his troubled negotiation of the contradictions within the Puritan fold and its doctrinal tenets and heresies along with his fine speculative distinctions bequeath to American poetry at the beginning of the tradition the semantics of a spiritual search which haunts its evolution down the ages. Ruland and Bradbury explain it thus: “Taylor’s poems pass beyond literary artifice to become emblems of transcendent relationships, beyond allegory into the moral, psychological intensity that comes to characterize so much of the richest American writing, from Emerson, Hawthorne

and Melville through Emily Dickinson and Henry James to William Faulkner.” (Ruland and Bradbury 26)

1.11 Summing Up

The Puritan diaspora by virtue of its sectarian motivations sought to exist within a limited geographical and ideological compass, excluding in the process elements both from within itself and the unexplored mass of the continent that could, in all likelihood, have contributed to its growth. While Anne Hutchinson earned the wrath of the orthodox ministers of the church for her critical thinking and dissenting views, a preacher such as Roger Williams with his progressive sympathies naturally could not be accommodated within the Puritan theological framework. The great wilderness beyond the plantations was viewed, for the most part, with suspicion by the settlers who tended to regard it as a source of both known and unknown dangers and therefore, best left unexplored.

The spiritual orientation of the Puritan mind with its tendency to read prophetic meanings in every manifestation of nature, and the phenomenal world in general, anticipated the transcendentalism of a later epoch of American writing. However, the lack of sensitivity to the beauty of nature, the rigidly moral outlook, the unimaginative temper of mind and the exclusionary attitude with the consequent propensity for monologic discourse disqualified the Puritan experiment in New England from engaging in heterogeneous and hybrid exercises that could have contributed to a dynamic cultural exchange.

The limitations of the Puritan literary contribution, notwithstanding, it as to be conceded that the Providential world-view afforded by the same, along with the belief in renewal and redemption associated with the momentous migration that brought this forth in the first place imbued American literature, as a whole with patterns and paradigms that certainly owe much to this primary perception. “Puritanism may have set certain limits on the American imagination; it was also one of its essential roots.” (From *Puritanism* 32)

Recent analyses of the origins of literature in America have challenged the traditional notion of the Puritans being the founders of culture in the country, embracing a more holistic view which attributes due importance to the other influences that inevitably inspired and shaped it. *A History of American Puritan Literature* edited by Kristina Bross is an example of this kind of scholarship positing a fresh enquiry into the area and advancing interesting theories of influence and assimilation. The contentions in her book revolve around the view that Puritan literature cannot be regarded in isolation but must be read in conjunction with Native American cultural expressions, as also those of Britain, Europe, North America, the Caribbean and other literary traditions that spanned the globe.

1.12 Comprehension Exercises

Essay Type Questions :

1. Write a brief note on the main tenets of Puritanism.
2. Examine the moral, political and literary significance of the New England historians.
3. Would you agree with the view that the “cosmic, transcendental and providential vision” of the New England theological writers “lingers yet in American culture?”

Medium-length Questions :

1. Trace the mingling of Puritan and Metaphysical elements in the poetry of Edward Taylor.
2. Comment on the contribution of Anne Bradstreet to the poetry of America.
3. Comment briefly on the contribution of Thomas Hooker to American theological prose.
4. Examine the importance of *The Bay Psalm Book*.

Short Questions :

1. Mention two descriptive writers of the Puritan Period along with any one of their works.
2. What kind of language did the New England historians use in their writings?
3. Mention two important differences between the New England colony and that of Virginia.

1.13 Suggested Reading

1. Stern, Milton R. and Seymour L. Gross ed *Colonial and Federal, to 1800*, Light and Life Publishers, New Delhi, 1975.
2. Ruland, Richard and Bradbury, Malcolm ed *From Puritanism to Postmodernism, A History of American Literature*, Penguin Books, New York, 1991.
3. Tylor Moses Coit, *A History of American Literature, 1607-1765*, Collier Books, New York, 1962.
4. Spiller, Robert Ernest, *Literary History of America*, Collier Macmillan Ltd, 1964.

Unit 2 □ The Frontier Movement

Structure

- 2.1 Objectives**
- 2.2 Introduction**
- 2.3 Frederic Jackson Turner and His Frontier Thesis**
- 2.4 The First Frontier**
- 2.5 The Second Frontier**
- 2.6 Characteristics of the First Two Frontiers**
- 2.7 The Last Frontier**
- 2.8 The End of the Frontier**
- 2.9 Frontier in American Mindset**
- 2.10 Summing Up**
- 2.11 Comprehension Exercises**
- 2.12 Suggested Reading**

2.1 Objectives

The objectives of the present unit are to provide an overview of the Frontier in American history. Frederic Jackson Turner and his Frontier Thesis are discussed with a short overview of the frontiers in different time periods. The characteristics of the frontiers are explained as well as the long lasting influence of the frontiers in American mindset and literature is discussed at the end.

2.2 Introduction

In the history of the United States the 'frontier' refers to the area of White settlement along the vast western part of the land. The existence of such a region has always been an important factor in the history of a country as it involves a conflict between the settlers and the indigenous inhabitants of the land and the ultimate resolution regarding this. The result of the conflict, however, is the expansion of the frontier region often at the expense of the original inhabitants. Such is the case of America as well as of

South Africa. However, as is evident, the frontier also means a receding border, a wilderness still to be explored, as white communities continued to expand the settlement. You may touch upon these points.

It is to be noted here that by ‘White settlement,’ the European colonisers are referred. Historically, the settlement started in the seventeenth century and continued through the nineteenth century until no new land was left for new occupation. Geographically, as rich as America is, the frontier begins at the coastal region of the Atlantic Ocean in the seventeenth century. As mentioned, it continued till the nineteenth century, and the frontier region expanded up to the Far West (sometimes referred to as the Old West or Wild West). In fact, the conflict as mentioned above involved the friction between the European colonisers’ way of life and the existing patterns of life in the untamed wilderness of the land. Due to this fact the frontier in American history has been one of the most profound topics in terms of importance as well as argument. It should be mentioned here that the concept of the frontier has evolved with the passage of time. Big rivers like the Mississippi or big deserts were considered frontier as the colonisers proceeded. From the idea of a line of demarcation that is used to mark a sharp boundary between the White civilisation and the savage wilderness, the meaning of the frontier has come to be the zone of interaction through both friction and exchange between different cultural mores. Hence the frontier has transcended from the conceptualisation of the static to the dynamic. Thus, the frontier has its metaphorical meaning as well; it is also a state of mind, a mind-set that evidently lasts till date.

To the early European colonisers the frontier is realised as a region or land beyond the settlement. However, to the later generation(s) it posed as a challenge and remained so for a long period. In 1845, the New York editor John L. O’Sullivan coined a term, “manifest destiny,” in order to explain the concept and excellence of the geographical expansion of the United States over the American continent. O’Sullivan writes about the “. . . manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence” (quoted in Matterson, p. 132). It is important to note that this is a significant suggestion to the idea that the history of the United States along with its geographical expansion is actually ‘destiny’ governed by God’s Providence—pointing towards the annexation of various states in the North America as historical inevitability. The later generations made their efforts to overcome the challenges of the frontier in order to fulfil the ‘manifest destiny’ of the United States. At the end of the nineteenth century, especially in the year of 1890, the census report of the United States stated that there was no more land to occupy afresh and that the settlement would not find any more frontier line. This points towards the close of the frontier. Nonetheless, the concept of the frontier is repeatedly invoked culturally and it remained as one of the key concepts to know and understand the American past.

2.3 Frederic Jackson Turner and His Frontier Thesis

In 1893, United States historian **Frederic Jackson Turner** (1861-1932) formulated a thesis regarding the significance of the frontier where he stressed the role of the western frontier in American history. Published one year later, i.e. in 1894, Turner's study titled "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" immediately became profoundly important in order to understand the nature of the frontier. Since its first publication it has been repeatedly anthologised and reprinted many a time. In 1920, Turner himself included this as the first chapter of his very influential book *The Frontier in American History*. Turner makes a distinction between the concepts of the European frontier and its American counterpart. Whereas the European frontier connotes not more than a political demarcation on geographical land, Turner argued in his thesis, the American frontier is more of a process—an intercultural exchange between the Native Indians and the White settlers. At this point it needs to be mentioned that in case of America, the *frontier* and the *West* gradually became similar in meaning despite the fact that the settlement of the colonisers was of any direction—northward or southward, or at times, even eastward within the land. As late as the end of the nineteenth century, American history, according to Turner, was the history of the White European colonisation towards the Old West. What describes the American development, hence, is the advance of the colonisers towards the West, the gradual recession of the hitherto existing free land. The natural result for this could be seen in the rise and development of the representative governments, the gradual development of the primitive mores of life towards industrial society, with a proper division of labour. However, along with them there are other attributes. The course of expansion involved a recurrence of the course of evolution. The advancement towards the Old West was not only along a single line, but it involved a process of assimilation of the primitive conditions in the new advancement of the region. On the frontier, according to Turner's thesis, the social and cultural development of America faced continuous beginning. The prevalent and very common American character is formed out of this flexibility, this fluidity in life, the hopes garnered and anticipations pulled together of a new life westward, and the continuous amalgamation of the simple primitive ways of life and new opportunities. The Old West or the Great West is thus more important in the history of the United States than the foothills of the Appalachian Mountains or the Atlantic coast where the settlers set their feet for the first time.

It is interesting to know how the European pattern of life entered the land after the European colonisers set their foot on a hitherto virgin land, how it is met with the indigenous life already existing there, and how America contributed to the evolution of the settlers' way

of life. In short, how Americanisation took place along the frontier line is the crux of the matter. At the very beginning the savage wild bends the colonisers to its own ways. The first settlers had to strip off the cloak of their civilised nations and had to wear the hunter's attire. Following the Indian ways and trails they had to plant corn using the primitive tools of the Indians. They had to follow the Indian trails in order to fit themselves in the new environment which was, at the beginning, too strong for them. In order to survive, in order to avoid perishing, the colonisers were compelled to shed their civilised ways and had to adopt the crude archaic ways of living on the virgin land. Nevertheless, the settlers also exerted their presence on the wild and in a slow but steady pace they transformed the savage wilderness—it resulted ultimately in the formation of a new character—the *American*. By the end of the seventeenth century the tide water region of the Atlantic coast was the demarcation of the frontier; it proceeded farther in the eighteenth century and by the first quarter of the nineteenth century it reached up to the Mississippi River; from there to California by the middle of the nineteenth century; and, finally, by the end of the nineteenth century the Rocky Mountains area denoted the frontier.

According to Turner, the frontier development is of cyclic nature. Its beginning is with the Indians and their occupation of hunting. However, the savage mores of life came in contact with the pioneers of civilisation, and as a natural consequence, the savagery underwent a cohesion or decay. This allowed a scope for a ranch life which again paved the path for the exploitation of the virgin land. The cultivation of wheat and corn started and it led to the closely crowded farms. The development of the city and the manufacturing units like the factories came later. Be that as it may, there lies the distinction between the huntingman's frontier and the rancher's frontier, the farmer's frontier, and the trader's frontier.

2.4 The First Frontier

The first frontier, the American colonies along the coast of the Atlantic showed a gradual shift from the European ways. The conquest of the savage wild was important as that was the first step towards the discovery and crossing of the land; moreover, it was also the first attempt to become American. The colonies did not firmly establish yet; the zeal to explore the West was renewed and adventurous settlers moved farther towards the Great West. The dissatisfaction and the restlessness that they bore in their heart regarding the existing centres pushed them farther into the back country. This made way for a friction between them and the Native Indians. The long established mores of the Indian life came in direct contact with that of the colonisers, the result of which manifested in different ways. At times coexistence was seen; but in most of the cases they faced a strong resistance. At times they

left the ground and moved backward for security; but, in fact, most of the times, they had zeal enough to fight and remove the natives. Before 1776, i.e. before the American Revolution, the first frontiers were able to demarcate a new West that included the upper region of New England, the valley along the Mohawk, and the Pennsylvania valley. It also included the valleys of the American south. In 1763, the Royal Proclamation of 1763 was issued by King George III of England. This has put limitations upon farther expansion towards the Old West. However, a few settlers have already crossed the mountains. On the other hand, according to the dictates of the Peace of Paris (1783), the newly independent United States gained the large regions along the east of the River Mississippi as Britain had to surrender the said land.

As the hunting ground was gradually reducing, the Native Indian tribes created a resistance to the encroachment of the White settlers in the northwest region of the land. They have gathered themselves under the Northwest Indian Confederation and posed a strong resistance. In 1791, the American military expedition that was sent to pacify the tension of the territory first faced an opposition and then a subsequent a stupendous defeat in the hands of the Northwest Indian Federation. However, in 1794, the Confederation was crushed at the Battle of Fallen Timbers. The huge victory for the settlers came through the hands of the **General Anthony Wayne** who was deployed by the first President of the United States, **George Washington**. This is, however, not to be forgotten that first frontier differed from the original colonies. The first frontiers had already started to impose the social and economic patterns of the previous order; also, the class distinction was followed like that of the Europeans. It was, as a matter of fact, an agricultural society in its primitive form. There existed poverty and lack of social acquisition. The settlers' population gradually increased and they did spread along the frontier (/West), and as a result of this friction took place over taxes and democratic ideals, internal improvements and issues related to religious missions.

2.5 The Second Frontier

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, precisely in 1800, Kentucky and Tennessee were included to the United States as two separate states; later, Ohio followed suit. This second great westward motion, the second frontier pushed the colonisers more into the continent. The geographical area of the United States nearly doubled in 1803 when it acquired the territory of Louisiana—the Louisiana Purchase by the United States from **the French First Republic**. After the **War of 1812**, fought between the United States of America and its native allies and the United Kingdom and its allies in the British North

America, a great migration followed westward. Arguably the greatest pan-Indian military force was assembled in North America under the leadership of the Shawnees Chief Tecumseh, who tried to unite Indian tribes against the increasing white settlement. In 1813, in the Battle of the Thames, Tecumseh died. But it only pointed towards the end of the 'confederacy.' No matter what, Britain surrendered its remaining lands following the Treaty of Ghent (1814). The vast land then remained for exploration anew and subsequent exploitation. With the passage of time, within two and a half decades, the colonisers explored new places—they spread to the south, to the Gulf of Mexico and to the Mississippi River, ousting the Native Americans. They formed a kingdom of cotton that spread along Michigan, Wisconsin, Indiana and Illinois, and along the Lakes Superior, Michigan, Huron, Erie and Ontario. Carrying wheat and corn along the trail was a very common thing. From Kentucky and Tennessee the second frontier spread towards the Mississippi River and crossed it. The settlers reached the great bend of the Missouri, thus paving the way for the traders and trappers to make their journey towards farther West.

2.6 Characteristics of the First Two Frontiers

It is quite evident that the first two frontiers were mainly agricultural in character. It is not that lumbering and mining were not there. Lumbering and mining took place where timber and minerals were found, but the primary advancement was that of the farmers. The traders and the trappers worked towards a goal of opening the trails for the farmers and thus no notable change in the wilderness was noticed. In 1836, **John Mason Peck**, an American Baptist missionary to the western frontier, wrote *A New Guide for Emigrants to the West*. In the "Introduction," he talks of the frontiers and says,

These States have been unparalleled in their growth, both in the increase of population and property, and in the advance of intellectual and moral improvement. Such an extent of forest was never before cleared,—such a vast field of prairie was never before subdued and cultivated by the hand of man, in the same short period of time. Cities, and towns, and villages, and counties, and States never before rushed into existence, and made such giant strides, as upon this field.

Peck also talks of the three "classes like the waves" of frontier migration—" . . . in all the western settlements, three classes, like the waves of the ocean, have rolled one after the other." According to Peck's observation, the first was the pioneer, "who depends for the subsistence of his family chiefly upon the natural growth of vegetation, called the "range," and the proceeds of hunting." This pioneer clears a small patch of land off its vegetation and builds a cabin for himself. He lived on the natural growth of the vegetation and on

hunting. The second group of settlers attempted a more civilised way of life. Peck observes that this second class did “purchase the lands, add “field to field,” clear out the roads, throw rough bridges over the streams, put up hewn log houses, with glass windows, and brick or stone chimneys, occasionally plant orchards, build mills, school houses, court houses . . .” In short, the second class attempted a more static and civilised existence. The final settlers were the “men of capital and enterprise.” They were “ready to sell out, and take the advantage of the rise of property,—push farther into the interior, and become himself.” With bricks and stones were built their houses, and they accumulated more and more agricultural surplus for the purpose of trade and looked for markets to sell them. These settlers brought the communities to their mature status. Their small village gradually turned into “a spacious town or city,” and the luxuries like “silks, leghorns, crapes, and all the refinements” were seen. They established the towns with their newspapers, their stores for the manufactured goods for sale, and their politicians.

2.7 The Last Frontier

Beginning around the 1840s and continued until the 1890s and beyond, the third and final frontier advanced towards the farthest part of the Old West until they reached the coast of the Pacific Ocean. The remaining reaches of the continent were covered and these last settlers also looked and marched back to the reach that they had already passed. Known in general as the trans-Mississippi frontier, the last advancement was different from the previous experiences. The new frontier was more varied in terms of colour and wilderness. There were prairie lands but beyond them lay the vast dry plains with a little trees, occasional bush like shrubs and grass. In that region there was scarcity of rainfall as well. The usual methods that have been applied hitherto for agriculture were not possible there. However, the grasses grew there were good for the cattle, especially for the bison. Naturally, there was seen a rise of cattlemen and cowboys with their large and picturesque ranch houses.

However, beyond the plains was the large stretch of the Rocky Mountains. The geographical position of the Rocky Mountains was important as it had inland basins as huge as an eastern state of the country. These inland basins were filled with mineral riches and needed to be mined with an immense collective effort. The mining frontier came to its fullest here. Both California and Oregon were on the Pacific coast. There were mines, and with mining developed trade and business. Nevertheless, reaching the last part of the huge continent, the westward journey came to an end. The settlers could not but look back to the inside of the continent that they already travelled.

The last frontier, as is evident, was different from the previous ones. The distance on the plains and the physical difficulty in the mountains were beyond any individual attempt of solution. The community life, thus, becomes very important here. Government endorsement, community action, group efforts, and outside (sometimes foreign) capital were needed in order to fulfil the necessary projects be it irrigation planning or the building of transcontinental railroads, the development of the mines or the passage of the timber and mineral resources. However, optimism, abundance and progress—all these the colonisers have ever dreamed of the frontiers came to an end with the end of the physical frontier.

2.8 The End of the Frontier

The beginning of the twentieth century saw the disappearance of the frontiers from the map of North America (the United States). There were nevertheless scattered areas to be settled. The settlement became easier with the revolution in communication. The transcontinental railroads and the inter-continental railroads made this communication easier. Albeit the physical frontier came to an end with no place on the Old West remaining unexplored, the influence of the frontier remained upon American history and culture. The American ideals of individualism, abundance, freedom, courage, and the zeal for exploration are still reminded by the frontier movement in American history.

2.9 Frontier in American Mindset

In his book *The Epic of America* (1931), **James Truslow Adams** comments on the early days of the American Dream and attributes the Dream to the wild frontier. Adams mentions that the two very important influences in American life are religion and the frontier and these two were made in the formative years of the American past—in time of the first frontiers, when among the settlers a vision of the wonder was the major aspect. Gradually from a limited and intolerant spiritual life the frontiersmen formed the right combination of necessary qualities to win over the wilderness. This made a permanent impression in the American mind that they could conquer not only the rest of the land, but the world itself. As a corollary to this belief, came another faith that the way they lived and solved their problems are the *only* ones worth having. Adams writes, “The American doctrine had developed, through the long training of the common man in local politics, that anyone could do anything” (). The frontier was crucial in lulling this spirit of *can-do*. The American character was developed due to this freedom to act and the faith which says that everyone could be in the land and anything could be done in the land without hindrance. Unfortunately,

the unhindered access to the boundless resources actually led to fierce competition; and, when all the lands were settled and resources distributed, the same *can-do* spirit needed to look elsewhere for its practice of the faith. The space exploration of the United States when they competed with the Soviet since the 1950s till the 1990s, and the Vietnam War that lasted through the 1960s and 1970s could be interpreted in the same way as a reflexion of the frontier mindset of the Americans.

A number of literature was devoted to the description of the frontiers—the exploration followed by settlement and exploration, the competition and the gradual loss of virtue, and the image of taming the wild often recur in oral tradition, fiction, country ballads, poetry, theatre, television, radio, and even in video games. The tough and courageous agricultural man who turned into an adventurer and a hero features in many a novel dealing with the Wild West. The image of ‘the cowboy’ with his exceptional calibre of shooting with a pistol is one of the most loved images of the frontier in popular culture. In 1940, Walter Van Tilburg Clark published *The Ox-Bow Incident*. Set in 1885, the historic past of the American frontier, it tells the gory story of mob violence on the western frontier; leaving aside any scope of melodrama, this novel describes the lynching of three innocent men. As if taking the cue from Clark’s novel, **Cormac MacCarthy** published *Blood Meridian* (1985) which also challenges the moral ideas of the frontier. Set in the 1850s, this blood-clad story describes the bounty-hunters along the Texas-Mexico border. The protagonist seems to have no higher purpose than to follow mindless bloodshed as he joins the team of the bounty-hunters and leaves a trail of blood along the Prairies. Both these novels challenge the black-and-white concepts of right and wrong as propounded by the Western stereotypes. The cowboys are not always representations of the moral right, and what meet the eye may have various shades which the uncritical eye does not suspect.

2.10 Summing Up

The frontier movement in American history is probably the most important phenomenon in shaping the American mind and character. We have put emphasis upon the concept of the receding border and the interactive zones at the borders. Since the interaction that involved opposition and competition among the native inhabitants and the White colonisers made a lasting impact on the modern American mind, the history of the first frontiers and their characteristics are discussed. The discussion on the last frontier and the end of the frontier is added with the frontier in American mindset and we also discussed in short how this mindset is reflected in literature.

2.11 Comprehension Exercises

Essay Type Questions :

1. Discuss the historical context of the first two frontiers along with their characteristics.
2. What do you think is the most important aspect of the frontier in shaping the American character historically from the beginning till the end of frontier? Give reasons for your answer.
3. Describe the concept of the frontier along with its historical context and discuss in brief the frontier in American mindset.
4. Discuss the importance of the frontier thesis in its historical context and its formulation of the American character.

Medium-length Questions :

1. Write a short note about the end of the frontier.
2. What is the frontier thesis? Discuss in brief.
3. What is frontier in American history?

Short Questions :

1. Who formulated the frontier thesis? How is it important?
2. What was the nature of the first frontier in America?
3. What was Northwest Indian Confederation?
4. Who was Tecumseh? Why is he important?

2.12 Suggested Reading

1. Gray, Richard. *A History of American Literature*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2012.
2. Matterson, Stephen. *American Literature: The Essential Glossary*. London: Arnold, 2003.
3. Peck, J. M. *A New Guide for Emigrants to the West*. Project Gutenberg Ebook [Release Date: December 3, 2008 (EBook #27394)].
4. Ruland, Richard and Malcolm Bradbury. *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*. New York: Penguin, 1992.
5. Rudolph, E. L. "The Frontier in American Literature." Jstor, [<https://www.jstor.org/stable/41155004>]

Unit 3 □ The American Dream

Structure

- 3.1 Objectives
- 3.2 Introduction
- 3.3 Historical Context of the American Dream
- 3.4 American Dream in the Nineteenth Century
- 3.5 American Dream in the Twentieth Century
- 3.6 Characteristics of the American Dream
- 3.7 The Meaning of ‘Success’ and the American Dream
- 3.8 American Dream in Literature
- 3.9 Summing Up
- 3.10 Comprehension Exercises
- 3.11 Suggested Reading

3.1 Objectives

The objectives of the present Unit are to provide a concise overview of the American Dream. The historical background of the Dream and how the concept has been evolved with the passage of time are discussed; and, the characteristics of the Dream and the factors that made influence on the conception of the Dream are explained. Finally, a brief discussion of the American Dream in literature is added.

3.2 Introduction

The American Dream is the distinctive spirit of the nation of the United States and it is probably the primary ideological means with which the Americans define as well as distinguish themselves from any other nation in the world. In a broader sense the American Dream encompasses the Puritan belief, the third United States President Thomas Jefferson’s ideals of an open society, the Protestant faiths in work, a belief in financial opportunism propounded by the American polymath **Benjamin Franklin**, and the idea of self-reliance as propounded by the American philosopher **Ralph Waldo Emerson**. In short, the ideals of democratic rights, the ideals of liberty and social equality, and financial opportunity for going up the

social ladder in order to earn prosperity and success—all these are the major aspects of the American Dream. The idea that in a society where there is almost no barriers, an individual with an individual's family and children may move upward through hard work, and the nation that paves the way for the individual's social mobility—are the crux of the concept of the American Dream.

So, in a sense, the American Dream is a concept that talks of a society—it is an ideal or a vision for a society that allows and, in a way, enables its individuals for the much desired upward social mobility. It lulls the individual's zeal to progress and develop his potential irrespective of his origins or social background.

3.3 Historical Context of the American Dream

The term 'American Dream' came into existence in the third decade of the twentieth century and the historian James Truslow Adams is credited with the popularization of the term. In 1931, in *The Epic of America*, John T. Adams wrote that the American Dream “lured tens of millions of all nations to our shores in the past century has not been a dream of merely material plenty, though that has doubtless counted heavily” (quoted in Matterson, 10). In fact, Adams attributes more to it. According to Adams, it is a ‘dream’ of growing to the fullest as human being (man and woman alike) in a society where barriers are not erected in front of them to hinder the growth. This, to Adam's opinion, is the difference between the older civilisations and the new nation of the United States. Irrespective of the social class or the circumstances of one's birth, life in the society should be richer and fuller for everyone.

As a matter of fact, the roots of the American Dream can be traced back in the United States Declaration of Independence, adopted on the 4th of July, 1776. The Declaration of Independence proclaims: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” This document, composed by the founding fathers of America, shows two important aspects which shaped the classical (traditional) concept of the American Dream—the idea of equality in society; and, the right of every individual to “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” The United States Constitution is the legal document—can be taken as the manifesto nonetheless—to delineate how the government should operate. The Constitution, it is interesting to note, reiterates the above mentioned ideals in its Preamble to secure the concept of liberty to the Americans down the ages.

In *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation* (1995), Jennifer L. Hochschild writes:

The idea of the American dream has been attached to everything from religious freedom to a home in the suburbs, and it has inspired emotions ranging from deep satisfaction to disillusioned fury. . . . a new world where anything can happen and good things might. (15)

Hochschild categorically identifies four tenets of the American Dream: every individual's equal participation in society; every individual's having anticipation of success; success through one's own hard work and will; and, failure to achieve success as one's lack of hard work and lack of talent.

With the passage of time, however, the meaning of the American Dream underwent notable change—with personal aspects is added global vision. The origin of the Dream can be found in the frontier mindset of the Americans who believed that beyond the explored land where settlement is already done remain *better* place and that might be beyond the Wild West. The change of meaning of the American Dream can be noticed in its concept before and after the American Independence—though central to the concept was always the belief in freedom and happiness in individual as well as social life.

3.4 American Dream in the Nineteenth Century

The idea and meaning of the American Dream were influenced by the mass emigration in the nineteenth century. The German Revolutions of 1848-1849 was a crucial factor behind this mass emigration. The German Revolution occurred due to dissatisfaction with the existing traditional and mainly autocratic political structure. A large number of the well-educated Germans fled the 1848 Revolution. These highly-educated people who ran to the United States were fascinated by the actual application of democratic ideals and economic freedom in society. They were also drawn to the fact that in America, class system was not like the old class systems of the European standard; rather, in the new land, class never dictated the achievement and success of an individual in society. As early as in 1851, F. W. Bogen in *The German in America*, writes:

However different may be the reasons which induce Germans to leave their fatherland and come to America, yet they all agree in one with—to live here free and happy. And indeed perhaps no country in the world offers such various opportunities to facilitate the accomplishment of this purpose as the United States of America. (7, emphasis added).

Historically for various reasons *The German in America* is an important text. It not only served as a manual as its subtitle shows—*Advice and Instruction for German Emigrants in the United States of America*; the book is of tremendous importance in order to understand the cultural context of the times. Bogen writes:

A great blessing meets the German emigrant the moment he steps upon these shores: He comes into a free country; free from the oppression of despotism, free from privileged orders and monopolies, free from the pressure of intolerable taxes and imposts, free from constraints in matters of belief and conscience.(7)

The “free country” that is free from all that Bogen notes, is a “blessing” for the emigrants as no unnecessary hindrances are there. Like dreams realised in actuality, every person is free to travel and settle anywhere he pleases—“No passport is demanded, no police mingles in his affairs and hinders his movements” (7). In front of the emigrant lies the huge land, “exhaustless in its resources, with its fruitful soil, its productive mines, its immense products, both of the vegetable and animal kingdom, a portion of which he has never before seen” (7-8). To the emigrants, thus, America presented a land of dreams.

The discovery of gold in the nineteenth century is another factor for shaping the American Dream. On January 24, 1848, gold was found by James Wilson Marshall at the Sutter’s Mill in Coloma, California. The news spread and thousands of people rushed towards California from the rest of the United States and even from abroad. These people came with a belief that their fortune may change overnight and some of them actually met with success. Be that as it may, most of the people were unsuccessful and many of them became quite bankrupt spending all their families’ savings to fetch nothing. But the success of a few, who became rich in a matter of days, became legendary. The American Dream here mingles with the financial success on individual level. The change of meaning is fantastically captured by H. W. Brands in his book, *The Age of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the New American Dream*. Brands writes:

The old American dream, the dream inherited from ten generations of ancestors, was the dream of the Puritans, of Benjamin Franklin’s Poor Richard, of Thomas Jefferson’s yeoman farmers: of men and women content to accumulate their modest fortunes a little at a time, year by year by year. The new dream was the dream of instant wealth, won in a twinkling by audacity and good luck. (465, emphasis added)

Brands also reminds that this “**new dream—the dream of El Dorado**” had its precedent in American history. The adventurous people of the Virginia Company, in search of gold, made its expedition in the seventeenth century on the James River. They met with no

success and as no gold appeared in the rivers that flowed to the Atlantic, the colonists took a separate pattern that was more pedestrian and better suited to the steady toil that facilitated success in a society that is predominantly agricultural which “formed the archetype of the original American character” (465). Though it has changed with the passage of time, with the change in governments, with the change in economic situations of the country, the concept of the American Dream in terms of the achievement of personal success still remains as a motivating factor for the Americans.

Historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, which was advanced in 1893, first as a paper titled, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” propounded the idea of American democracy and American Dream as the offshoots of the frontier movement. The process of the moving frontier line(s) and the primary result of it, i.e. the American democratic ideals along with equalitarianism and lack of interest in aristocratic class and hierarchical structure defined the American Dream according to Turner. His emphasis on the importance of the frontier is one crucial component behind the shaping of the American Dream.

3.5 American Dream in the Twentieth Century

In the twentieth century the term ‘American Dream’ eventually became more popular. Behind the popularisation, James Truslow Adams’ book *The Epic of America* (published in 1931) played a vital role. In his book, Adams pointed out the evolution of the American Dream over time; he also noted that how difficult it is for the European aristocracy to understand the value of American Dream, and how it attracts so many immigrants to the United States. Adams maintained that the American Dream is not a dream of automobiles and technological advances in America, neither is it of the high wages accumulated; but, the American Dream is actually a dream of a social system in which an individual may achieve all she or he is capable of attaining. Moreover, irrespective of their class, origin or position in the social ladder, they would be recognised by others in the society. It is a dream difficult to understand or to interpret by a European upper class citizen. The American Dream that has lured a huge number of people from other nations and drew them to the shores of America was not only a dream of material affluence but much more than that. It is a dream of being able to grow to the fullest stature as an individual, never hampered by any barriers, and unhindered by the social orders.

In 1963, **Martin Luther King Jr.** connected the **Civil Rights Movement** and the American Dream in a broader sense; he interpreted it in the African-American quest for the American Dream. In the “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” Martin Luther King Jr. wrote,

“We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our demands” (26). He continues describing the nonviolent methods (mainly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi’s nonviolence movement in India) to achieve the desired social rights for the African-Americans; and, alluding to the idea of freedom as attached to the original idea of the American Dream, Martin Luther King Jr. writes:

. . . when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. (28-29)

In fact, not only in the above “Letter,” but in his other speeches and writings he repeatedly invoked the ideals of democracy and freedom that the Constitution of the United States promises every citizen irrespective of the colour of their skin or the background they belong to. In his most famous “I Have a Dream” speech, Martin Luther King Jr. invoked the same idea of freedom that defines the American Dream:

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.”

. . .

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. (emphasis added)

Like the Civil Rights Movement, several other political movements such as the movement for the rights of women to vote was also flourished in the 1960s and it was also formed and shaped by the essence of the American Dream.

3.6 Characteristics of the American Dream

The American nation was a natural setting that carefully lulled the ideology of individualism as more than any other country in world, America recognised itself as a nation of opportunity. Wealth and social position were organised in a different way than they were in Europe and immigrants came to the nation in order to escape the European class-barrier. As the frontier lured the people seeking a new chance, the American Dream flourished over time.

We have seen that the roots of the American Dream might be found in the colonial period of the nation's history, but it is in the nineteenth century industrialisation era that the concept of separated social mobility came into dominance. It is during this era America attempted to the fullest to convince its characteristics of openness and classlessness. The militant class consciousness that could be found in the old European social order was to be faced with the open nature of the American Dream. The workers as well as the factory owners, the poor as well as the rich—to all the Americans the American Dream presented a common vision. Rather than attempting to change or uproot the existing system, any dissatisfaction regarding one's position would inspire one to change one's position within the system itself.

Nonetheless, the concept of the American Dream made American nation of exceptional ideologies regarding freedom, individual fulfilment and classlessness. Three distinct factors have worked together to provide the American Dream its character; and these three factors are also crucial to explain the exceptionalism that American nation boasts to possess. These factors are—the concept and process of the frontier, the geographical as well as the social mobility; and the affluence or wealth that an average American worker enjoys in general. The frontier was looked as a geographical movement towards the achievement of the ideas of the American Dream. The more of the Wild West was 'discovered' and settlement was done, the faith in individual as well as collective success was enhanced and it reflected in the laws and rules in those colonised spaces. However, the geographical movement was to end one day owing to the vast yet limited physical landscape. The geographical wanderings then were replaced by the social mobility upwards. In other words, the chance to move towards the Old West was replaced by the opportunity to move upwards in the social ladder. Lastly, many historians have suggested that after the World War II, the American workers' affluence defined the concept of the American Dream in terms of economic success and classlessness.

It would not be out of context to mention here what the English philosopher John Locke once said of America. In the *Second Treatise of Government*, Locke writes, "In the beginning all the world was America" (29). Locke's remark at once evokes the idea of infinite possibility and limitless resources—the ideas related to the American Dream.

Interestingly, this idea is entangled with a desire to have a home in the suburbs as well as having religious freedom (see Hochschild). Locke's sentence evokes a fantasy, it talks of a land where anything is possible and good things would prevail. Bearing almost a similar idea, millions of immigrants have set their feet on the land and whereas many of them met with huge success and some with moderate success, a large number was disillusioned as well.

3.7 The Meaning of 'Success' and the American Dream

Generally speaking, by 'success' we formulate high income, respectable and prestigious occupations, and economic security; that is to say, our idea regarding success, in most cases, spin around the material wellbeing ourselves. However, this material accomplishment is *one* of the many aspects of success as success could also mean one's ability to say freely what one wants, to do freely what one wants to do, or as a matter of fact, to form a world which would be a just place for all and everyone. So, an understanding of success involves an idea of measurement as well as that of content. Again, the measurement of success could be in three different ways—first, success can be absolute; second, success can be relative; and last, success can be competitive (see Hochschild). However, achieving success in any form is one important ideology of the American Dream. Also, the questions that could be raised here regarding the person who are eligible for pursuing the Dream, or why the pursuit is worthy could be answered in simple terms. Any person, irrespective of her/his social or economic background may pursue the Dream; and, as the United States Declaration of Independence proclaims, "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" are man's right, the pursuit of success is also an important tenet of the American Dream. Since this pursuit of success is granted and achieving success in any form is sanctioned, in many cases success through any means is bound to happen. This actually corrupts the pursuer of the Dream. As success becomes the most important thing to achieve for him oftentimes he deviates from the paths of virtue and the American Dream is thus misinterpreted in many a case.

3.8 American Dream in Literature

As early as Benjamin Franklin and as late as Tony Morrison, writers down the ages have used the American Dream in their writings. The list includes **Mark Twain, Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hunter S. Thompson, Theodore Dreiser, Edward Albee, John Steinbeck, Arthur Miller, Langston Hughes** and many others. Also, in the writings, mainly in fictions of the Asian-American writers, American Dream has its recurrent presence.

Fiction has been a tool to explain and interpret the tenets of the American Dream not only to show the ideals that govern the Dream but the failure of the Dream as well. In **F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925)**, the author ridicules and critically evaluates the materialistic outlook towards society that is devoid of virtue. The protagonist Jay Gatsby's belief that money can re-produce anything and everything, that it can even bring back the past, is Fitzgerald's interpretation of the corruption of the **American Dream in the 1920s**. **Sinclair Lewis' novel *Babbitt* (1922)** also satirises the materialist outlook of the society. In *Of Mice and Men* (1937), the two protagonists' dream of a piece of land and a ranch life there is crushed and the author John Steinbeck shows that the Dream can be pursued by anyone, but probably not everyone can achieve it.

3.9 Summing Up

The American Dream is a gamut of certain ideological beliefs—freedoms in various sectors of life which shape an individual to pursue happiness through success. However, success or happiness are mostly relative and the meaning of them vary from one person to another. Also, the meaning of the Dream took various shapes with the passage of times and with the changes of various sociological factors. The central meaning of the Dream, however, remains the same—the idea of freedom and the idea of success irrespective of one's background.

To conclude it can be said that the Dream is a concept that could be interpreted by the Americans in different ways. It is up to each of them to look at the Dream from their own perspective keeping in mind that America provides the opportunity and the social situation to pursue the Dream freely.

3.10 Comprehension Exercises

Essay Type Questions :

1. How would you define the concept of the American Dream in terms of its changing meanings over time?
2. Critically evaluate the historical context for the shaping of the American Dream.
3. Do you think there had been huge change in the conception of the American Dream in the 19th and the 20th century? Give reasons for your answer.

Medium-length Questions :

1. Write in short about the American Dream and the idea of 'success.'

2. Discuss in brief some of the characteristics of the American Dream.
3. How political movements of the 20th century America used the concept of the American Dream?

Short Questions :

1. Cite an example of the corruption of the American Dream as used in literature.
2. What idea of the American Dream is invoked by Martin Luther King Jr. in his speech, "I Have a Dream?"
3. Who is associated with the frontier thesis? How is it important to understand the American Dream?

3.11 Suggested Reading

1. Bogen, F. W. *The German in America, Or Advice and Instruction for German Emigrants in the United States of America, also, a Reader for Beginners in the English and German Languages*. 1851. Forgotten Books, 2019.
2. Brands, H. W. *The Age of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the New American Dream*. New York: Anchor Books, 2002.
3. Gray, Richard. *A History of American Literature*. Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 2012.
4. Hochschild, Jennifer L. *Facing Up to the American Dream: Race, Class, and the Soul of the Nation*. Princeton, New jersey: Princeton UP, 1995.
5. King Jr., Martin Luther. *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. 1964. UK: Penguin, 2018.
6. —. "I Have a Dream." <<https://www.npr.org/2010/01/18/122701268/i-have-a-dream-speech-in-its-entirety>>
7. Locke, John. *Second Treatise of Government*. Edited by C. B. MacPherson. 1690. Hackett, 1980.
8. Matterson, Stephen. *American Literature: The Essential Glossary*. London: Arnold, 2003.
9. Ruland, Richard and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*, Penguin, New York, 1992.
10. The United States Declaration of Independence. <<https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration>>

Unit 4 □ American Multiculturalism

Structure

- 4.1 Objectives
- 4.2 Multiculturalism in America: Towards a Definition
- 4.3 Multiculturalism and the American Constitution
- 4.4 Multiculturalism and Diasporas
- 4.5 Multiculturalism and the Question of Identity: An Overview
- 4.6 Multicultural Literatures in America
 - 4.6.1 African-American Literature
 - 4.6.2 Asian-American Literature
 - 4.6.3 Native American Literature
 - 4.6.4 Chicano/a Literature
- 4.7 Summing Up
- 4.8 Comprehension Exercises
- 4.9 Suggested Reading

4.1 Objectives

The objectives of this Unit are to provide a definition of the term ‘**Multiculturalism,**’ trace its genesis, development and application in American literature and examine its linkages to migration, **diasporas** and formation of identity.

4.2 Multiculturalism in America: Towards a Definition

Attempting a definition of multiculturalism in the American context is fraught with geopolitical, cultural and historical contentions. The concept of multiculturalism inheres within it a principle of heterogeneity, diversity and pluralism that radically destabilizes and disrupts essentialized practices of understanding, thinking and writing about the world around us. In this unit, we will reflect on the histories, cultural trajectories and theories related to multiculturalism in American literature.

Bethany P. Bryson, in *Making Multiculturalism: Boundaries and Meanings in U.S.*

English Departments, identifies a curricular shift in American educational institutions towards multiculturalism in the 1980s and 1990s as an attempt to “socialize children and young adults into a more diverse world by exposing them to a broader sampling of literary works.” (Bryson 1) This curricular trajectory in the U.S. schools and universities, then, also points towards a significant push for a more inclusive, experiential culture of teaching-learning. It also indicates the need for institutional acknowledgement of America’s racial, ethnic and cultural diversities by expanding the worldviews and societal exposure of the predominantly white U.S. reading public. This, Bryson claims, could be ideally effectuated by establishing literary “contact zones”, so to speak, between “white America” and the multiplicity of cultures, communities and lives that exist beyond it but forms an equally indelible part of America’s historical and national identity. (Bryson)

The term ‘multiculturalism’ originated as a response to increasing racial, ethnic, cultural and religious diversification in western European countries in the twentieth century. This was a direct consequence of different interlocked strands of histories: the rise of industry, the establishment of global networks of modern transportation and trade, post-war immigration and the entrance of erstwhile colonies in world politics, leading to cultural exchanges and migration. Multiculturalism as a concept, therefore, must be understood in context of and in opposition to the notions of a singular, homogeneous national and cultural identity, as prevalent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Questions around assimilation, politics of identity and the majority-minority dichotomies, therefore, are of central concern in any discussion on multiculturalism. In the next section, we will focus on the history and the current trajectories of multiculturalism in America.

4.3 Multiculturalism and the American Constitution

As a concept, multiculturalism is fraught with contested meanings and implications. Canadian theorist **Augie Fleras** defines multiculturalism as “**a set of principles, policies, and practices for accommodating diversity as a legitimate and integral component of society.**” (Charlton and Baker 26) To put it simply, multiculturalism is the presence of cultural diversity and pluralism in a society. Perhaps a few common and culturally available metaphors, used to connote multiculturalism, can be examined to understand its evolving significations. Certain tropes come to mind when one speaks of American multiculturalism as a phenomenon, such as “melting pot” and more positive metaphors like “salad bowl” (which has been in currency since the 1970s). These terms offer us an interesting avenue to further our inquiry into the history, politics and trajectories of multiculturalism in the United States. The theory of the “melting pot” is indicative of an assimilative prerogative,

which envisions an eventual “melting” or coalescing of different cultures into the mainstream white American culture. The “salad bowl”, as a metaphor and a concept, embraces a more accommodative and inclusive approach towards cultural diversity. It aims to preserve the heterogeneity of various indigenous and immigrant communities and does not enforce a principle of enforced integration and cultural homogenization. Canadian multicultural discourses, for instance, often eschew the trope of ‘melting pot’, coined by J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), in favor of the terms like “mosaic” (introduced in Kate Foster’s 1926 book *Our Canadian Mosaic*) which has more pluralist and inclusive implications. (Sielke 49)

According to Parekh, the political structure of the modern state necessitates an amalgamation of multiple institutions and their different functions within one territorial and political site. The state must protect its territorial sovereignty, establish and effectively operate the state machineries, build a solid economic base to support its institutions, while creating a thriving national culture that imparts a sense of “collective identity” to its citizens. (Parekh 193) However, a state, as a multicultural space, must accomplish all of the aforementioned tasks without erasing the individual cultural identities and histories of its diverse, multi-religious and multi-ethnic citizens and communities.

This idea has posed certain problems for critics who have argued that with the rise of multiculturalism the role of the State has become defunct. This, however, is patently untrue, as the State serves the vital function of maintaining a democratic political structure, where the rule of law and an ordered system of governance prevails. It also ensures equal rights for all its citizens, protects their freedoms and grants them civil and political agency, while maintaining its territorial integrity through an exercise of its military power. (Parekh 194) Parekh’s conceptualization of a modern state, thus, deviates from the traditional theories of the state and envisions a multicultural “community of communities, each enjoying different degrees of autonomy, but all held together by shared legal and political bonds.” (ibid)

Immigration has, historically, been an important part of nation-building in America, yet it often has been a process of both integration and exclusion. In 1896, the US Supreme Court legislated and enshrined the principle of racial segregation in the *Plessy vs Ferguson* case which fueled decades of anti-black sentiment and court rulings, limiting the freedoms and agency of black people in America. They were consequently forced to inhabit separate spaces and cultural spheres, which were rife with inequities and injustices. Centuries of oppression, enslavement and disenfranchisement would ultimately culminate in the Civil Rights Movement and the African American struggle to earn equal socio-political freedoms and rights, same as white Americans. (Sielke 50) The American society, therefore, is

massively impacted by its problematic history of race relations, racial injustice and the trauma of slavery.

The conceptualization of a multiculturalist American society in the 20th century can be understood largely as a reaction to these complex histories. It developed out of the cultural ferment of the 1950s and '60s, as a result of post-war immigration, massive and widespread social unrest, reform movements and activism, wherein new and previously invisibilized histories of trauma began to be recovered, reclaimed and acknowledged. However, as Sielke points out, these animated discourses about US multiculturalism in the 1960s and 1970s, nevertheless, envisioned an eventual assimilation of racial minorities into the white American society. They predicted a gradual movement away from cultural peripheries to the mainstream, which did not take into account the deliberate cultural erasure and the invisible violence that such assimilative processes entail. However, the imagined future of social integration necessitated a degree of assimilation. And this was a central source of contention in the political debates and discourses on multiculturalism.

In spite of the ubiquity of the term, there is no fixed, unitary definition of multiculturalism. Critics, who occupy different positions on the political spectrum, often target specific versions of multiculturalism, identifying and branding them as detrimental to social unification and cohesion in the times of foreign threat. Or, they point to instances of violence and disruption in certain subcultures as proof of failed integration in American society. (Volkh) Unlike Canada and Australia, multiculturalism has never been formalized as an official national policy in America. (Kurien) Nevertheless, as Eugene Volkh points out in an article in the *Washington Post*, the US Constitution enshrines a vibrant vision of multiculturalism that is significantly different from the one presented by the detractors, which is manifested in four specific ways:

1. The federal structure of America presupposes a cooperative and participatory engagement between different states that can exercise considerable political and legislative autonomy, while protecting and maintaining their own significantly diverse cultures. However, conversely, the Civil War can be seen as a direct consequence of federalism, since the Constitution allowed certain states to manufacture support for and legally sustain slavery, even as other states chose to abolish and dismantle this dehumanizing practice. The post-war constitutional amendments testify to the attempts to create more homogeneous laws addressing the issue of slavery and voting rights. And while criticisms against multiculturalism are still rife, most political advocates continue to uphold the principles of federalism, the rights of states to formulate laws that reflect their diverse cultural values. (Volkh)
2. **The Bill of Rights** and the First Amendment guarantee certain fundamental and

inalienable rights to all American citizens, including religious freedom. The right to practice all religions freely, thus, is constitutionally protected, which simultaneously mandates religious tolerance. This has enabled citizens to escape religious persecution and prejudice, and to establish different faith-based multicultural communities and vibrant subcultures. On the other hand, such constitutional protections have also enabled various religious groups to misappropriate and weaponize the First Amendment to justify anti-LGBTQ+ and anti-abortion agendas for decades, even lobbying for and successfully passing state-specific laws to enforce the same in many cases.

3. **Freedom of Speech and economic freedom** are two other constitutional mandates which have been instrumental in promoting multiculturalism in America. By safeguarding the rights of free movement and property rights, the Constitution fosters immigrant cultures, allows people to form their own linguistic communities and grants them new pathways for economic growth. Immigrants can also constitutionally lobby for legal changes to benefit their communities in America and affect foreign policy in regards to their parent countries. (Volokh)
4. A set of laws passed by the Supreme Court of the United States in the 1920s removed specific restrictions on child-rearing, thereby granting immigrant parents the right to disseminate their languages and cultures to their children. Another major legal milestone that solidified the principle of multiculturalism in America was the *Meyer v. Nebraska* case of 1923 that abolished a parochial law banning private schools from giving foreign language education to students. Parental rights, while not absolute, are crucial in the sustenance and generational continuance of minority cultures and subcultures. (Volokh)

4.4 Multiculturalism and Diasporas in America

Multiculturalism as a phenomenon seeks to widen the scope of a nation's composite cultures. A multicultural society is characterized by a diverse population that reflects this primary principle of pluralism. Diasporas are products of globalization and they intrinsically embody the essence of multiculturalism. Diasporas can be defined as transnational migrant communities who are territorially shifted from the countries of their origin but still retain shared ethnic, religious, national and cultural values, stemming from their homelands. With the rise of cutting-edge digital, telecommunication and transportation technologies, ideas around borders and mobility have rapidly evolved. Additionally, the proliferation of transnational political and social networks, aided by social media in recent times, has

redefined and reshaped cultural identities. In our discussion, these complex dynamics must be understood vis-à-vis the politics of multiculturalism in America.

Multicultural policies are frequently instituted by countries to meet certain specific socio-political goals - to “improve race relations, promote affirmative action, mitigate communal conflict, recognize difference, encourage good citizenship, support national cohesion, foster social integration and enjoin cultural assimilation.” (Karim 267) It may be argued that sociocultural as well as political representation and heterogeneity are key in sustaining a multicultural society. One of the most powerful forms of multicultural representation can be found in the rich body of diasporic writings, which occupy a prominent place in the literary landscape of America. You will learn more about multicultural writings in **Section 1.6.5**.

Diasporic experiences embody the lived realities that frame the urgent and on-going shift in our understanding of multiculturalism, as we broaden its scope to include politics of identity, mobility and displacement, as well as the psychological, socioeconomic and political processes that are interwoven in the same. The encounters between the cultures of the homeland and the host nation can be viewed as critical transit zones where a multitude of sociocultural transactions and exchanges take place. To understand the intersections and overlaps between multiculturalism and diasporas, one must understand the former as an ideological or policy-driven process that seeks to institutionalize cultural diversity, wherein specific rights and freedoms are granted to immigrant communities in order to enable their integration, while protecting their unique cultures and group identities. As mentioned earlier, the primary aim of multiculturalism is to encourage and mobilize cultural interactions and the mutual enrichment of different communities.

However, such exchanges involve complex processes fraught with political tension. As Prema Kurien has significantly pointed out, in her study on the Hindu-American diaspora, an undeniable contradiction lies at the heart of American policies vis-à-vis the position of diasporic communities in the US. While aiming to promote and preserve multiculturalism, these policies, as they stand today, merely re-entrenches immigrants in their ancestral cultures and homelands, actively hindering processes of integration and assimilation. (Kurien 362) Kurien’s statement points to the problematic negotiation between dual or split identities that immigrants and minorities often struggle with - the persistent conflict between their ethnic or cultural identities and a fixed, essentialized national identity. **Homi Bhabha, his book *The Location of Culture* (1994), has pointed at the formation of new identities for minority and diasporic communities at the margins (where they are relegated) that disrupt and destabilize exclusionary definitions of the nation as well as the practices and policies of multiculturalism.** The issue of identity and multiculturalism will be discussed in the next section.

4.5 Multiculturalism and the Question of Identity: An Overview

The construction of cultural identities in a multicultural space is necessarily a labile and unstable process. Melanie Pooch points out the inadequacies of a static political or national identity and goes on to reaffirm **James Clifford's claim (1988) that "identity is conceived not as a boundary to be maintained but as a nexus of relations and transactions actively engaging a subject."** (Quoted in Pooch, 37) Clifford's statement replaces the notion of such fixity (when it comes to questions of identity) with ideas of fluidity and instability, inherent in an individual's multifarious affiliations which, in turn, can generate a multitude of diverse identities. In American political vocabulary, the term "diversity" occupies a sacrosanct position. It basically describes a society or a social structure in terms of cultural variety and the concomitant presence of an assortment of different cultural perspectives. (Pooch 38)

As colonies began to secure their independence, the colonized bodies politic were confronted with a conscious sense of Otherness or alterity, characterized by the development of split or double identities. The concept of 'diversity' often connects to a host of related terms that have proliferated in literary and cultural studies since the latter half of the twentieth century, such as 'hybridity', 'liminality', 'diaspora', 'transculturalism' and 'multiculturalism' - all linked, in varying degrees, to the processes of postcolonial identity formation. Following Bhikhu Parekh's critical reformulation of orthodox multiculturalism in 2000, we can identify and catalogue a few essential ideas central to sustaining and configuring multiculturalism: pluralism, collective and equal rights, intercultural discourse and linkages, and the "inescapability and desirability of cultural diversity". (Parekh 338) Bhabha offers us a key theory that urgently underscores the formation of postcolonial identity - a concept of hybridity, produced from conditions of colonial inequities and violence. Drawing inspiration from Russian linguist and philosopher **Mikhail Bakhtin**, **Bhabha** creates the conceptual framework of the "**third space**" - an in-between space that accommodates and displays the "interdependence and mutual constructions" between the identities of the colonizer and the colonized. Hybridity, in the context of colonial and postcolonial societies, can be understood as cultural exchanges that emanate from the ambiguous *third space*. It can also refer to the intermixing of the different, and even disparate, cultures and subjectivities of the colonizer and the colonized, thus dismantling the notions of cultural 'purity' or the hegemony of dominant groups.

The demography of America consists of massively diverse, multi-ethnic, immigrant communities. In the last few decades, migration and labor flow across the globe has increased exponentially. Consequently, multiculturalism in America is inextricably connected

to questions of identity and citizenship. It may be seen as a response against and a rejection of Western universalism. It signals a comprehensive overhauling of prevalent ideas surrounding identity formation in postmodern American culture. The political debates on multiculturalism are heavily preoccupied with minority rights, representation and the protection of cultural identities and autonomy. Charles Taylor famously refers to this range of demands as the “politics of recognition” (1994) - which critically informs all discourses on American multiculturalism. Multiculturalism also allows oppressed, peripheral and minority groups to vocalize themselves, narrate their experiences and trauma and enables them to assert their subjectivity, personhood and identity. (Agger 72)

4.6 Multicultural Literatures in America

Multicultural literature constitutes the works produced by multicultural minorities in America, i.e. American citizens who are immigrants or descendants of immigrants, people of color and Native Americans. More than five centuries of immigration has solidified America’s reputation as the Land of Immigrants, where people - from different races, ethnicities, languages and cultures - arrive in pursuit of economic, social and religious liberties. The further removal of restrictive US policies on immigration in the 1960s prepared the ground for a vigorous outpouring of multicultural writings in the next couple of decades. The American literary landscape was transformed into a fertile site of cultural ferment. Multicultural narratives in America today consist of a wide range of texts, spanning across political, socioeconomic, ethnic and racial divides. The rise of diasporic, indigenous and minority literatures in the last quarter of the twentieth century has also contributed to the creation of an embattled but vibrant cultural space consisting of an extraordinary body of verse, fiction, theatre, music, art and cinema.

Diasporic writings, in particular, archive and record the hardships, loneliness and agony of displacement. They simultaneously mourn the loss of homeland even as their protagonists rise to confront the challenges of transculturation and assimilation. This complex interplay of hope and anxiety can, perhaps, be best exemplified in a poem written by unknown Chinese immigrant and carved into the walls of the Angel Island Immigrant station, located near San Francisco, possibly in the early twentieth century:

*“The west wind ruffles
my thin gauze clothing.
On the hill sits a tall
building with a room of*

*wooden planks.
I wish I could travel
on a cloud far away,
reunite with my wife and
son.”*

The wistful desire to return to a homeland, now lost, reverberates with a sense of deep spiritual isolation and anguish. Much of diasporic and immigrant narratives are characterized by such emotional depth and vibrancy, further enriched by the inflections and idioms of their native languages. Diasporic writings embody the precocities that are inherent in such straddling of cultures, the slippages that inform such literary exercises. They are redolent with an implicit sense of isolation, a generational legacy of loss that persists in cultural and collective memory, even as the authors attempt to reconstruct and negotiate their split identities. Likewise, African American narratives testify to the evolution of black creativity from centuries of trauma and racial injustice. They attempt to negotiate with complex strands of the nation's political and cultural past that spans across the histories of institutionalized slavery, Civil War, segregation, the jazz age, the Harlem Renaissance, the civil rights movement to popular rap culture and Hip Hop fiction. In the following segments, you will learn more about the multicultural communities of America, their cultures, histories and literatures. We will focus particularly on the second half of the 20th century, a critical period in the history of multicultural literature.

4.6.1 African-American Literature

African American literature engages broadly with the generational trauma and experiences of black Americans, framed by the cultural, economic, spiritual and intellectual traditions of the African diasporas of North America, Europe, Brazil, the Caribbean and Latin America. African American scholarship attempts, for the most part, to examine the reality of racial and structural inequities while simultaneously interrogating the idea of race as a social construct. In this context, W.E.B DuBois' claim that "the problem of the [twentieth] century is the problem of the color line" remains particularly relevant. (Marabel) Marabel goes on to expand the scope of Dubois' view, extending it to the twenty-first century, where he identifies a new challenge. This is posed by the promises and demands of multiculturalism. What remains to be seen is if the American society, remarks Marabel, can be accommodative and inclusive of the numerous communities of color and their unique talents, histories and experiences within its democratic fold.

The historical trajectory of African American communities in North America, in some ways, is similar to that of numerous oppressed diasporic groups in other parts of the world. Like

many diasporic groups, in fact, they were also forcibly removed from their countries of origins to serve their colonial masters and the Empire, in the wake of the onset of the European colonialism in the sixteenth century. In this context, the continuing surge of immigration from previously colonized nations indicates that even today immigrants are forced to leave their homelands (haunted, as they are, by their histories of colonial occupation, and affected by poverty and political collapse) in search for better economic opportunities and resources. Thus, it can be asserted that the multitudes of crises that often compel immigrants to uproot themselves and seek opportunities on the shores of their erstwhile colonizers are, more often than not, manufactured by colonial European powers who occupied and exploited these nations for centuries.

African American literature has significant overlaps with postcolonial studies, which can provide critical and penetrating insights into the background and contexts of its development. To understand the literature produced by historically oppressed minorities, such as African Americans or Native Americans, one must first acknowledge, address and negotiate with the politics of marginality that inform their lives and experiences. Within the ambit of postcolonial studies, critics and theorists tend to examine black American narratives as an archive of testimonies, recording the experiences of one of the largest diasporas in the world. (Ashcroft et al. 5)

In the initial phase of development, African American studies and narratives were dominated by Afrocentric perspectives of sub-Saharan African societies from where people were kidnapped, stolen and enslaved by European colonizers and traders centuries ago. They were bought, sold and trafficked across the ocean into Europe and the Americas through the sprawling networks of the infamous transatlantic slave trade. This history of dehumanization continues to leave its traumatic imprints on the collective consciousness and the cultural traditions of African American communities. The institutionalization of slavery and slave trade had its roots in the wider networks of European imperialism. These interlaced histories of violence have played a crucial role in shaping African American culture.

Equally important and powerful are creative articulations and narratives of black identity that germinated out of the struggles for self-determination that inevitably accompany cultures of oppressions, as demonstrated by the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s. Literature about and by racial and ethnic minorities offer alternative insights as well as counter-narratives that demonstrate the gaps and fissures in the dominant middle-class values and traditions of white Americans. They expose the unequal structures of power and power relations that continue to impinge upon the lives of Black Americans, replicate historical inequities and sustain injustices. Thus, the civil rights movements and the black power movement, in conjunction with the modern independence

movements in different parts of Africa, were instrumental in shaping African American literature and culture. (Ashcroft et al. 5)

James Baldwin's writings critically and unflinchingly engaged with politics of race, themes of homosexuality, racial violence and discrimination. His novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) is a semi-autobiographical *bildungsroman* about a young black teenage boy growing up in 1930s Harlem. Gwendolyn Brooks became the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1950, for her 1945 volume *Annie Allen*. She was the first black woman to be inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1976. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* was published in 1952, which explored themes of racial discrimination, black identity, Marxism and social unrest, and won the National Book Award in 1953. The 1970s witnessed large-scale mainstreaming of black art and literature in the United States, leading to more exposure, acceptance and appreciation of African American writers. Writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and James Emanuel were particularly influential as African American literature evolved and matured. James Emanuel's ground-breaking volume *Dark Symphony: Negro Literature in America*, jointly edited with Theodore Gross, became the first collection of writings by black authors in America to be brought out by a major publisher. Other influential literary voices of the time were Gayl Jones, Ishmael Reed, Jamaica Kincaid, Randall Kenan, and John Edgar Wideman. Black poets such as Maya Angelou gained prominence in the mainstream culture of America. Angelou, in fact, was invited to read a poem at Bill Clinton's inauguration. Poet Rita Dove won a Pulitzer Prize and served as Poet Laureate of the United States from 1993 to 1995, and Cyrus Cassells's *Soul Make a Path through Shouting* received a Pulitzer Prize nomination in 1994. (Wikipedia)

4.6.2 Asian-American Literature

The term 'Asian American' first gained currency after the civil rights movement, and it enabled Asian immigrants to carve out their own socio-cultural niche in the multicultural landscape of America, to allow cultural and legal representation, and articulate their collective identity. The term broadly includes people of East Asian, South Asian and Southeast Asian descent, who are residents and citizens of America. An examination of Asian-American literature can provide interesting glimpses into and valuable perspectives on multiculturalism in America. These narratives shed critical light on the labor and capital flows in American society, the position and role of Asian Americans within the socioeconomic and cultural matrices of America. They can confront and address negative and racist stereotypes such as "unassimilable aliens", 'modern high tech coolies', while at the same time critically engage with the myth of the "model minority" and discourses on immigrant "success stories". Narratives by Asian Americans explore the material circumstances that determine the wide range of experiences that shape immigrant lives. (Chae, *Preface*, x)

As Chae points out, the myth of the ‘model minority’ derives in part from a complex network of power relations that often conceals structural inequalities. The media-driven ‘success stories’ of Asian Americans are often weaponized to denigrate other minority groups such as African Americans and Chicanos. However, the economic shift in the Asian American community occurs after the Immigration act of 1965, which was a result of American stakes in politics and territorial conflicts in Asian countries like Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines, China and Japan. This led to a tenfold increase in immigration from Asian countries between 1965 and 1981 (with the exception of Japan). Asian countries like Japan and India were also sources of skilled labor for the US markets. However, Asian Americans are constantly besieged with pervasive problems such as wage gaps, limited opportunities, and racial and economic discrimination, leading to the stereotype of ‘coolies’ or ‘coolies’ which is indicative of their persistent economic exploitation in the free market capitalist space. (Chae 26-28)

An early narrative such as Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950) perpetuates the “model minority” myth, where “success” is presented as a product and reward of assimilation. In the 1960s, the novel was criticized for downplaying and invisibilizing the realities of racial vitriol and discrimination faced by Asian American communities. A significant number of Asian American writers were also preoccupied with the immigrant’s perpetual struggle to retain their ethnic and cultural identities within American society. Chinese-American author **Maxine Hong Kingston’s** *Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980) formulated a unique style which incorporated Chinese folklore narrative tradition with a semi-autobiographical rendering of complex family histories. Themes of generational gaps and differences also feature prominently in many Asian American narratives such as Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club* (1989), which portrays the conflicted relationships between Chinese immigrant mothers and their American (ized) daughters. But though Tan is a highly lauded and popular author, she has received considerable criticism about her problematic and, at times, inaccurate portrayal of Chinese culture and replication of harmful stereotypes. Korean American writer Chang-rae Lee’s works also document generation conflicts and differences and explores themes of family, the politics of cultural assimilation and political awakening in *Native Speaker* (1995) and *A Gesture Life* (1999). Indian-American author Bharati Mukherjee explores the hardships, trauma and violence that accompany cultural dislocation in her work *Jasmine* (1989). Some of her notable works are *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988) *Desirable Daughters* (2002) and *The Tree Bride* (2004).

4.6.3 Native American Literature

Native Americans are the indigenous people of America. There are currently three hundred and twenty-six American Indian Reservations in the US, shared among five hundred and

seventy-four tribes. While technically these tribes may not be classified as diasporas as their members comprise the original inhabitants of the American continents their elimination/eradication from the mainstream expression and subsequent rehabilitation allies their condition somewhat with those of settlers (forced or voluntary) hailing from others lands. Gerald Vizenor, in his book *Manifest Manners: Post Indian Warriors of Survivance* (1994), has vocally criticized the 19th century romanticism around the idea of 'Manifest Destiny', implicating it in the Native American genocide and predatory hijacking of tribal land and resources by white settlers. The infamous Trail of Tears is one of the instances of federally sanctioned forced displacement of tens of thousands of Native people between 1830 and 1850 from their tribal, ancestral territories, laid out across the South-eastern states of Georgia, Alabama, North Carolina and Florida. The tribes were forced out of their homelands and had to undertake a precarious journey, spanning hundreds of miles, on foot beyond the Mississippi river to designated 'reservations'. Colonial projects to 'civilize' Native Americans were undertaken and the vibrant indigenous cultures and spiritual traditions were violently erased, through the imposition of white culture and Christianity on Native people. The imperialist idea of 'manifest destiny' was replaced and repackaged into the new concept of 'Manifest Manners' in the 20th century, which has resulted in the erasure and demonization of tribal cultures. This has been effectuated through the peddling of manufactured myths and negative representations of American Indians. (Shackleton 70) Thus, any examination of the history of Native American culture and literature requires a simultaneous inquiry into the traumatizing impact of European colonialism on indigenous identities and communities.

In the 1960s, a number of initiatives were undertaken to preserve and revive the rich indigenous cultural heritage which had suffered persistent historical onslaught and was almost wiped out by white European and American domination. The Red Power movement of the late 1960s, for instance, led to an assertion of indigenous identity, cultural agency and autonomy. The militant siege and indigenous civil rights movement at Wounded Knee, South Dakota in the months of February and March in 1973 laid bare the pervasive anxiety about cultural erasure that plagued American Indians communities. Native American literature incorporates narratives derived from collective memories of trauma and navigates the histories dispossession and dislocation of the Native people of America, spanning centuries of settler colonialism and cultural oppression. Within the multicultural literary space, works by indigenous authors register the conflicts and tensions between native and non-native cultures, while addressing the past and present impact of the nation's colonial history on Native Americans. In traditional native literature, myth, folklore and poetry were often woven together to create vibrant performative cultures that also functioned as significant and powerful repositories of tribal histories.

The rise of Native American studies in the 1960s and '70s was propelled by significant publications by indigenous authors, such as Vine Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969) and Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1971). N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, in particular, is of monumental importance in mainstreaming Native American writings in the literary landscape of America. Momaday's novel won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 and thrust Native American writers into the cultural limelight, convincing American publishers about the cultural, literary and commercial value of indigenous literature. Over the next three decades, works such as James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974) and *Fools Crow* (1986), Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), and *The Antelope Wife* (1998) became vital testaments to the collective cultural exploration of indigenous identity and consciousness within the broader scope of American society.

The 1970s saw a significant rise in the publication of Native American anthologies and translations. There was, consequently, a proliferation of collected and edited volumes of oral poetry, songs and other narrative to meet a growing market for contemporary works by indigenous authors. These works would go on to greatly enrich and expand the scope of Native American literature in the coming decades. Publications such as Duane Niatum's 1975 edited anthology *Carriers of the Dream Wheel: Contemporary Native American Poetry*, and Kenneth Rosen's *The Man to Send Rain Clouds: Contemporary Stories by American Indians* (1974) and *Voices of the Rainbow: Contemporary Poetry by American Indians* (1975) were influential publications of the time. (Peterson 1) By 1999, Native American literature had become mainstream and gained considerable cultural visibility and prominence. Sherman Alexie, for instance, is one of the most popular and significant Native American writers of the late 20th and 21st century. You will learn more about Alexie in **Module 3 Unit 5**. Contemporary Native American poetry and prose can be viewed as powerful testimonies of the on-going socioeconomic and cultural hardships of Native people, struggling with poverty, lack of social mobility and access, and sustained marginalization.

4.6.4 Chicano/a Literature

The term "Chicano", according to Raymond Paredes, refers to "people of Mexican ancestry who have resided permanently in America for an extended period of time. Chicanos can be native-born citizens or Mexican-born immigrants who have adapted to life in the United States." (Paredes) Since the word 'Chicano' is masculine, to avoid any gendered implications, we will refer to the literature of these communities as 'Chicano/a literature'. Chicano/a literature gained visibility and prominence in the 1960s and the 1970s and was directly catalyzed by the sociocultural momentum generated by the political movements for Chicano/a political, civil and property rights, and cultural and ethnic self-assertion. Felipe D. Ortego

y Gasca coined the term ‘**Chicano Renaissance**’ to refer to the birth and maturation of Chicano/a literature.

The Chicano movement consisted of numerous layers of political activism around issues of cultural pride, land and labor reforms, educational policies and political inclusion. The history of the Chicano movement dates back to the US-Mexico War which culminated in Mexico surrendering its northern territories to the US in 1848, as per the clauses of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. Over the years, the Mexican residents of these integrated US regions were stripped of land, labor and civil rights by white Americans. However, by the 1960s, there was a gradual but distinct demographic shift, as a tide of immigration from Mexico (caused by the Mexican Revolution as well as a surge in labor migration after the Second World War) led to a rapid rise in the number of Mexican settlers and residents. The Immigration Act of 1965 further mobilized waves of immigration from Asia and Latin America, by ending the national immigration quotas. The growing Mexican American population in the US now began to exercise their collective identity and cultural consciousness, while also engaging in large-scale participation in political activism and reform movements in the 1960s. (Cutler 7)

Chicano/a literature has shared affiliations with other forms of multicultural narratives such as Native American, Asian American and African American literatures. Chicano/a literature is concerned with narrativizing their conflict-ridden lives in the American southwest, their attempts to preserve their cultural heritage and to assert an autonomous identity within the multicultural landscape of America. As in the case of the previous categories of multicultural writings, explored in the earlier sections, Chicano/a narratives also evince a strong anti-assimilationist imperative. The activists of the Chicano Movement exposed the hollowness of the assimilation project and criticized the rampant racial discrimination against Mexican Americans. The question of Chicano/a identity and subjectivity is brilliantly navigated in Rudolfo Anaya’s *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), which combines mythic and folkloric elements to weave hypnotic narratives. Similarly, Tomás Rivera’s 1971 novel . . . *y no se lo tragó la tierra* (*and the Earth Did Not Devour Him*, 1971), published in Spanish, captures the lives of migrant farm laborers. The text is interwoven with dense strands of familiar Mexican legends and tales, evoking themes of family legacy, dignity and honor. Playwright Luis Valdez was another significant contributor to Chicano/a literature, known for his plays like *Zoot Suit* (1981) and movies such as *La Bamba* (1987). Luis Leal offers an interesting historiography of Chicano/a writers, segmenting it into three generational phases: the migrant generation (1900-1930s), the Mexican American generation (1930-1960) and the Chicano movement of the 1960s. All these periods are connected to a host of related socio-political movements such as the struggle for civil rights, anti-war activism and feminist movement.

Gloria Anzaldua is one of the most prominent Chicana writers as well as a celebrated Latinx philosopher and Chicana feminist. She has authored and edited several critical philosophical and feminist texts such as *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), *Making Face, Making Soul/Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color* (1990), and *The Bridge We call Home: Radical Visions for Transforming* (2002).

4.7 Summing Up

Multiculturalism can be understood in terms of cultural diversity and pluralism. While countries like Australia and Canada have enshrined multiculturalism as part of their official policies, America lacks a specific policy-based approach to multiculturalism. However, the US constitution has provisions that enable the creation and sustenance of a multicultural society in America.

Different indigenous and immigrant communities in America have contributed to the country's vibrant culture of pluralism and diversity. However, the issue has frequently been a source of political controversy and ferment. This can be seen in the actions of right-wing conservative leaders and activists, who are vocally against 'uncontrolled' immigration. There is collective display of white anxiety at the demographic shift from the white American majority, leading to xenophobic and minority-phobic rhetoric and policies as well as the worrisome emergence of far-right neo-Nazi groups in the political culture of the US. The last two presidential election campaign cycles in the United States, for instance, have exhibited violent anti-immigrant sentiments among certain segments of the American population.

Multicultural literature exhibits a constant thematic contention and negotiation with the politics of assimilation and cultural homogenization. Terms like the 'melting pot' and the 'salad bowl' illustrate two distinct approaches towards multiculturalism in America. The term 'melting pot' is associated with early notions of American multiculturalism, which envisions a gradual 'melting away' of immigrant, indigenous and non-white cultures and their eventual assimilation into the American mainstream. The idea is based on the principle of cultural erasure and homogenization. The second metaphor of the 'salad bowl' is more inclusive and accommodative of the cultural distinctiveness and autonomy of immigrant culture. It preserves the heterogeneity and sanctity of the cultures and identities of the multicultural bodies politic, and denotes a more nuanced approach to American multiculturalism.

Diasporas are migrant communities who leave the countries of their origin and inhabit different host nations, but still retain shared ethnic, religious, national and cultural values,

stemming from their homelands. Diasporic experiences are intertwined with complex politics of identity, mobility and displacement, as well as various psychological, socio-economic and political processes that accompany territorial and cultural dislocation. The encounters between the cultures of the homeland and the host nation can be seen as sites of sociocultural transactions and exchanges.

Questions of identity are central to discourses on multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is a total rejection of essentialist notions of identity and Western universalist ideas of identity formation. A multicultural society incentivizes its citizens to respect and protect the autonomy, agency and subjectivity of culturally diverse communities.

Multicultural writings can establish powerful sites of intercultural engagement. They can function as literary “contact zones” and promote understanding between different communities and cultures, engender mutual respect and social cohesion. These diverse bodies of literature can allow oppressed minority groups to voice their resistance, archive their histories, narrate their experiences and trauma, and help them explore their personhood and identity.

4.8 Comprehension Exercises

Essay Type Questions :

1. What is multiculturalism? Comment on some of the sociopolitical aspects of American multiculturalism.
2. Comment on the complex role of the United States Constitution in sustaining multiculturalism in American society.
3. Critically comment on the different bodies of multicultural literature in America with proper examples.

Medium-length Questions :

1. “Multiculturalism in America is inextricably connected to questions of identity.” Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Define the term ‘diaspora’. How have diasporas contributed to fostering multiculturalism in America?

Short Question :

1. What is cultural assimilation? Explain the terms “melting pot” and “salad bowl” in the context of American multiculturalism.
2. Briefly comment on any one of the following: i) Asian American literature ii) African American literature iii) Native American literature iv) Chicano literature.

4.9 Suggested Reading

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MODULE -2
Early Representative Non-Fictional Prose

Unit 5 □ Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson

Structure

- 5.1 Objectives**
- 5.2 Introduction**
- 5.3 Ralph Waldo Emerson**
- 5.4 Henry David Thoreau**
- 5.5 Emerson and Thoreau as Transcendentalists**
- 5.6 Friendship between Emerson and Thoreau**
- 5.7 Analysis of important works (Works of Emerson & Thoreau in separate sections)**
- 5.8 Contributions and Legacy**
- 5.9 Summing up**
- 5.10 Comprehension Exercises**
- 5.11 Suggested Reading**

5.1 Objectives

- To study the life and works of Ralph Waldo Emerson and understand his contributions as a pioneer of the Transcendentalist Movement.
- To study the pervasive influence of Henry David Thoreau and his works as an example of moral heroism and the continuing search for a spiritual dimension in American life.
- To evaluate the contributions of Emerson and Thoreau to New England Transcendentalism and the way in which it evolved as a religious, philosophical, and literary movement.
- To examine the camaraderie between Thoreau and Emerson and the impact it had on their moral and intellectual deliberations.

5.2 Introduction

“Be yourself; no base imitator of another, but your best self. There is something which you can do better than another. Listen to the inward voice and bravely obey that. Do the things at which you are great, not what you were never made for”
(Ralph Waldo Emerson)

In this world where we are all on a quest for our true and best selves, transcendentalism seems more relevant than ever. But originally, transcendentalism was a philosophical movement and it had developed in the late 1820s and 1830s primarily in New England. The central belief of the movement was in the innate goodness of people and nature, and while society and its institutions have corrupted the integrity of the individual, people can still however find their best selves when they become self-reliant and attain independence. The three main characteristics of transcendentalism are Non-Conformity, Spirituality and Simplicity. Simple Living furthers the goal of approaching life as it unfolds on an everyday basis and not to ask more but do more for each living being.

It teaches one to be satisfied with their lives and surroundings. Non-conformity trains an individual not to subjugate to the herd mentality that prompts almost all humans to ruination. We shall now discuss the pioneers of this movement. The person who led this movement was an American essayist, Ralph Waldo Emerson. His life and works will be discussed in detail in the next section. American naturalist and essayist, Henry David Thoreau was also a leading transcendentalist and his contributions, along with his friendship with Emerson, have also been discussed below.

5.3 Ralph Waldo Emerson

Ralph Waldo Emerson (May 25, 1803 – April 27, 1882 went by his middle name Waldo. He was an American essayist, lecturer, philosopher, abolitionist, and poet who led the transcendentalist movement of the mid-19th century. He was seen as a pioneer of individualism and a critic of the existing challenges of society, and his ideology was propagated through a substantial number of published essays and more than 1,500 lectures across the United States.

Emerson gradually deviated from the existing religious and social beliefs of his contemporaries, formulating and expressing the philosophy of transcendentalism in his 1836 essay *Nature*. Following this work, he delivered a speech entitled “**The American Scholar**” in 1837, which Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. considered to be America’s “intellectual Declaration of Independence.”

A lot of Emerson's essays were written as lectures first and then revised later for print. His first two collections of essays, *Essays: First Series (1841)* and *Essays: Second Series (1844)*, represent the core of his thinking. They include the well-known essays "Reliance", "The Poet", and "Experience." Together with *Nature*, these essays made the decade from the mid-1830s to the mid-1840s Emerson's most fertile period. Emerson wrote on many subjects, never adopting fixed philosophical principles, but developing certain ideas such as individuality, freedom, the ability for mankind to realize almost anything, and the relationship between the soul and the surrounding world. Emerson's "nature" was more philosophical than naturalistic: "*Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul.*" Emerson is one of several figures who "took a more pantheist approach by rejecting views of God as separate from the world."

He remains a pioneer of the American Romantic Movement. His works have influenced the thinkers, writers and poets that looked up to him and his doctrines. "*In all my lectures,*" he wrote, "*I have taught one doctrine, namely, the infinitude of the private man.*" Emerson is also well known as a mentor and friend of Henry David Thoreau, a fellow transcendentalist. When scholars discuss the limitations of Emerson's writing about the East, they often refer to the essay "*Plato; or the Philosopher,*" published in *Representative Men* in 1850. In that volume, Emerson argues that the Greek philosopher brought Unity and Variety today, the two cardinal components of philosophy. The tendency to "dwell in the conception of the fundamental Unity" is chiefly an Eastern characteristic as pointed out by Emerson, while the impulse toward variety is a Western one. Emerson appreciated Plato for what he perhaps valued in himself as well—an ability to synchronise the best aspects of unity and variety and East and West with detail and abundance. However, Emerson's conceptualization of the East in his essay (*Plato*) poses problems that are significant to take notice of.

As per the opinions and observations of scholars, Emerson claims to speak about Asia but he seems to have India in mind (since India is the country with the institution of the caste system). It is a muddling of distinctions that suggests Emerson was unconcerned about the vital differences among the cultures of Asia and the Middle East. Emerson also abstains from political or economic comparisons in favour of intellectual ones. He supported the notion that the East was an abstract idea for him. He didn't think of it as a place inhabited by people in actuality. Also, even though Emerson offers a balanced view of an East that loves "infinity" and a West that takes joy in "boundaries," his expressions and usages indicate that he was in favour of Europe over Asia, which has "immovable institutions" and "deaf, unimplorable, immense fate."

“Brahma” is a filtered output of Emerson’s extensive readings of Hindu literature and sacred texts. He read everything from the *Baghavad Gita* to the *Katha Upanishad*. There is a line in *Brahma* which goes like this: “I am the doubter and the doubt.”

This line portrays his belief in the unity of all things as well as his belief that all existence and action result from a singular force. His own personal philosophy is expressed in the following lines, which deserve a position in the memory of every American: “*Life is too short to waste*

*In critic peep or cynic bark,
Quarrel or reprimand:
'Twill soon be dark.”*

Brahma had actually inspired many parodies in the *Atlantic* and its paradoxical style proved to be too much for many American readers who objected to its obscurities.

Emerson had said to his daughter that one did not need to adopt a Hindu perspective to understand the poem. One could easily substitute “Jehovah” for “Brahma,” and yet one would not lose the sense of the verse.

Emerson decided to leave for Europe in 1846-1848, sailing to Britain to deliver lectures, which received rave reviews. After returning, he published *Representative Men*, an analysis of six great figures and their roles: Plato the philosopher, Swedenborg the mystic, Montaigne the sceptic, Shakespeare the poet, Napoleon the man of the world, and Goethe the writer. He suggested that each man was representative of his time and of the potential of all peoples.

In 1858 Emerson published an essay, *Persian Poetry*, in the *Atlantic*. As a way of introducing American readers to unorthodox poetic tradition, Emerson drew parallels between Persian poetry and Homeric epics, English ballads, and the works of William Shakespeare. He also noted that the legends of Persian mythology could sometimes be found in the Hebrew Bible. As part of his exposition, Emerson included his own English translations of the poets **Hafez, Saadi, Khayyam, and Enweri**, by way of the German translations of Persian poetry by Baron von Hammer-Purgstall. Emerson had no competence in any Asian or Middle Eastern language, and he never read a non-Western text in its original language. But Emerson had been translating von Hammer’s German texts in his journals since 1846.

Emerson was not unaffected by the growing disagreements in national politics in the 1860s. The decade saw him strengthen an already potent and vocal support of North American 19th-century anti-enslavement activism, an idea that clearly fit in well with his emphasis on the dignity of the individual and human equality. Even in 1845 he had already refused to give a lecture in New Bedford because the congregation refused membership to Black

people, and by the 1860s, with the Civil War looming, Emerson took up a strong stance. Denouncing Daniel Webster's unionist position and fiercely opposing the Fugitive Slave Act, Emerson called for the immediate emancipation of the enslaved people. When John Brown led the raid on Harper's Ferry, Emerson welcomed him at his house; when Brown was hanged for treason, Emerson helped raise money for his family.

Society and Solitude (1870) was the last book that he published on his own; the rest relied on help from his children and friends, including Parnassus, an anthology of poetry from writers as varied as Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Julia Caroline Dorr, Henry David Thoreau, and Jones Very, among others. As he grew older, Emerson's health and mental acuity began to decline rapidly. In 1872, after his Concord home was badly damaged by fire, his friend Russell Lowell and others raised \$17,000 to repair the house and send him on vacation. However, the trauma added to his intellectual decline. He began to suffer from memory problems, unable to recall names or the words for even common objects. By 1879, Emerson stopped appearing publicly, too embarrassed and frustrated by his memory difficulties.

By the end of his life, Emerson produced at least 64 translations, totalling more than 700 lines of Persian verse, many of which can be found in "Orientalist," a notebook he began to keep in the 1850s. On April 21, 1882, Emerson was diagnosed with pneumonia. He died six days later in Concord on April 27, 1882 at the age of 78. He was buried at Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, close to the graves of his dear friends and many great figures of American literature.

Emerson was seen as an icon and his works were canonical. But the radical power of his views was less appreciated. Emerson's unique writing style was well received in academic circles. Moreover, his themes of hard work, the dignity of the individual, and faith arguably form the backbone of the cultural understanding of the American Dream, and continue to influence American culture even today.

5.4 Henry David Thoreau

Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) was an American philosopher, poet, and environmental scientist whose major work, *Walden*, draws upon each of these identities in meditating on the concrete problems of living in the world as a human being. He sought to revive a conception of philosophy as a way of life, not only a mode of reflective thought and discourse. Thoreau's work was informed by an eclectic variety of sources. He was well-versed in classical Greek and Roman philosophy, ranging from the pre-Socratics through the Hellenistic schools, and was also an avid student of the ancient scriptures and wisdom

literature of various Asian traditions. He was familiar with modern philosophy ranging from Descartes, Locke and the Cambridge Platonists through Emerson, Coleridge, and the German Idealists, all of whom are influential on Thoreau's philosophy. He discussed his own scientific findings with leading naturalists of the day, and read the latest work of Humboldt and Darwin with interest and admiration. His philosophical explorations of self and world led him to develop an epistemology of embodied perception and a non-dualistic account of mental and material life. In addition to his focus on ethics in an existential spirit, Thoreau also makes unique contributions to ontology, the philosophy of science, and radical political thought. Although his political essays have become justly famous, his works on natural science were not even published until the late twentieth century, and they help to give us a more complete picture of him as a thinker. Among the texts he left unfinished was a set of manuscript volumes filled with information on Native American religion and culture. Thoreau's work anticipates certain later developments in pragmatism, phenomenology, and environmental philosophy, and poses a perennially valuable challenge to our conception of the methods and intentions of philosophy itself. Henry David Thoreau is recognized as an important contributor to the American literary and philosophical movement known as New England transcendentalism. His essays, books, and poems weave together two central themes over the course of his intellectual career: nature and the conduct of life. The continuing importance of these two themes is well illustrated by the fact that the last two essays Thoreau published during his lifetime were "The Last Days of John Brown" and "The Succession of Forest Trees" (both in 1860). In his moral and political work Thoreau aligned himself with the post-Socratic schools of Greek philosophy—in particular, the Cynics and Stoics—that used philosophy as a means of addressing ordinary human experience. His naturalistic writing integrated straightforward observation and cataloguing with transcendentalist interpretations of nature and the wilderness. In many of his works Thoreau brought these interpretations of nature to bear on how people live or ought to live. Thoreau's importance as a philosophical writer was little appreciated during his lifetime, but his two most noted works, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854) and *Civil Disobedience* (1849), gradually developed a following, and by the latter half of the 20th century, had become classic texts in American thought. Not only have these texts been used widely to address issues in political philosophy, moral theory, and, more recently, environmentalism, but they have also been of central importance to those who see philosophy as an engagement with ordinary experience and not as an abstract deductive exercise. In this vein, Thoreau's work has been recognized as having foreshadowed central insights of later philosophical movements such as existentialism and pragmatism.

Midway in his Walden sojourn Thoreau had spent a night in jail. On an evening in July 1846, he encountered Sam Staples, the constable and tax gatherer. Staples asked him

amiably to pay his poll tax, which Thoreau had omitted paying for several years. He declined, and Staples locked him up. The next morning a still-unidentified lady, perhaps his aunt, Maria, paid the tax. Thoreau reluctantly emerged, did an errand, and then went to collect huckleberries. A single night, he decided, was enough to make his point that he could not support a government that endorsed slavery and waged an imperialist war against Mexico. His defense of the private, individual conscience against the expediency of the majority found expression in his most famous essay, *Civil Disobedience*, which was first published in May 1849 under the title *Resistance to Civil Government*. The essay received little attention until the 20th century, when it found an eager audience with the American civil rights movement.

Toward the end of his life Thoreau's naturalistic interests took a more scientific turn; he pursued a close examination of local fauna and kept detailed records of his observations. Nevertheless, he kept one eye on the moral and political developments of his time, often expressing his positions with rhetorical fire as in his *A Plea for Captain John Brown* (1860). He achieved an elegant integration of his naturalism and his moral interests in several late essays that were published posthumously, among them *Walking and Wild Apples* (both in 1862).

Thoreau's life, so fully expressed in his writing, has had a pervasive influence because it was an example of moral heroism and an example of the continuing search for a spiritual dimension in American life.

5.5 Emerson and Thoreau as Transcendentalists

The philosophy of transcendentalism had actually originated in Unitarianism. In the early 19th century, the predominant religious movement in Boston was Unitarianism. Unitarianism happened to be a liberal Christian sect that prioritised rationality, reason, and intellectualism. The principles of Unitarianism were particularly popular at Harvard.

The transcendentalists founded the Transcendental Club. It was situated in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1836. The founding members included mostly Unitarian clergy and Boston-area intellectuals. These individuals did not reject Unitarianism but were on a quest for a more spiritual experience to balance out the importance ascribed to authentic reason. The very word transcendentalism refers to a spirituality that transcends the realm of rationality and the material world. Transcendentalism as a philosophical, social, and literary force profoundly influenced 19th-century America, and its legacy endures to this day. It stressed on divinity in nature along with the worth of the individual and intuition. Belief in a guiding spirituality which transcends sensory experience was also one of the principles. The

movement's most influential personality, Emerson along with Henry David Thoreau, his most influential disciple, shaped and activated the potent views and principles that were situated at the core of this movement.

New England Transcendentalism was a religious, philosophical, and literary movement. It had started to branch itself out in New England in the 1830s. It extended into the 1840s and 1850s.

Transcendentalism flourished in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts, and, by virtue of Emerson's presence, in nearby Concord as well. Emerson moved to Concord in 1834. In 1835, he had also purchased a house on the Cambridge Turnpike. His essay *Nature* was an exposition of the primary ideas of Transcendentalism. The essay was published but anonymously the following year in 1836. The publication of the essay insinuated a period of serious intellectual effervescence and literary pursuit.

Although it was based in part on ancient ideas which included the philosophy of Plato, for instance, Transcendentalism was in many ways a far-reaching and impactful movement, threatening to mainstream religion. There were many people that opposed Transcendentalism strongly. One of its most reactionary critics was a professor of Harvard called Andrews Norton. Norton had attacked Emerson's *Divinity School Address* in 1838 and he had even gone on to produce a piece titled *Discourse on the Latest Form of Infidelity* in 1839. (The "latest form of infidelity" which Norton had referred to was actually Transcendentalism.)

Although Emerson, Amos Bronson Alcott, and many of the other Transcendentalists lived to their old age in the 1880s and even after that, by about 1860 the vigour, intent and sincerity that had earlier characterized Transcendentalism as a remarkable movement had thawed. For several reasons, Transcendentalism is not simple to define. Transcendentalism encompassed complex philosophical and religious ideas. Its doctrines were tinged with mysticism. Moreover, distinct differences of focus and interpretation persisted among the Transcendentalists; these differences further initiated and complicated assumptions about the movement in entirety.

Henry David Thoreau himself pointed out the difficulty of understanding Transcendentalism in his well-known journal entry for March 5, 1853:

The secretary of the Association for the Advancement of Science requests me . . . to fill the blank against certain questions, among which the most important one was what branch of science I was especially interested in . . . I felt that it would be to make myself the laughing-stock of the scientific community to describe to them that branch of science which specially interests me, inasmuch as they do not believe in a science which deals with the higher law. So, I was obliged to speak to their condition

and describe to them that poor part of me which alone they can understand. The fact is I am a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot. Now that I think of it, I should have told them at once that I was a transcendentalist. That would have been the shortest way of telling them that they would not understand my explanations. (<https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/t/thoreau-emerson-and-transcendentalism/what-is-transcendentalism/introduction>)

The transcendentalists functioned from the beginning with the sense that the society around them was seriously inadequate. Emerson had called them in *The American Scholar* a mass of bugs or spawn, slavedrivers of themselves, is what Thoreau says of people in his work, *Walden*. As the nineteenth century came to its mid-point, the discontent of the transcendentalists with society was concentrated on policies and actions of the government of the United States: the treatment of the Native Americans, the war with Mexico, and, most importantly, the continuing and increasing practice of slavery.

Emerson wrote a letter to President Martin van Buren in 1836. It comprised an early expression of his despair at actions of his country, specifically, the ethnic cleansing of American land east of the Mississippi was discussed. The 16,000 Cherokees lived in modern-day Kentucky and Tennessee, and in parts of the Carolinas, Georgia, and Virginia. They were one of the more assimilated tribes, whose members owned property, used plows and spinning wheels, and even owned slaves. Wealthy Cherokees sent their children to elite institutions. The Cherokee chief refused to sign a “removal” agreement with the government of Andrew Jackson, but the government found a minority faction to agree to move to territories west of the Mississippi. Despite the ruling by the Supreme Court under Chief Justice John Marshall that the Cherokee Nation’s sovereignty had been violated, Jackson’s policies continued to take effect. In 1838, President Van Buren, Jackson’s former Vice-President and approved successor, ordered the U. S. Army into the Cherokee Nation, where they rounded up as many remaining members of the tribe as they could and marched them west and across the Mississippi. Thousands of people died along the way. In his letter to the President, Emerson calls this a crime. He protested that it deprived the Cherokees of a country.

Emerson was the editor of the **Transcendental periodical**, *The Dial*, which was important among the Transcendentalists. In addition to Emerson and Thoreau, there were others involved in the movement. Chief among them were Amos Bronson Alcott (philosopher, educator, and Concordian); Margaret Fuller (early feminist, author, and lecturer; one of the editors of *The Dial*); James Freeman Clarke (Unitarian minister, author, and editor); Theodore Parker (Unitarian minister and abolitionist); Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (teacher and educational reformer, writer, editor, and social reformer; one of the publishers of *The Dial*);

George Ripley (Unitarian minister, editor, and founder of the Brook Farm community); Orestes Brownson (editor, reviewer, and contributor of essays to *The Christian Examiner* and to his own *Boston Quarterly Review*); William Henry Channing (Unitarian minister and editor of the *Western Messenger* and other journals); Christopher Pearse Cranch (Unitarian minister, editor of the *Western Messenger*, poet, and artist); Convers Francis (Unitarian minister, biographer of John Eliot, and historian of Watertown); William Henry Furness (Unitarian minister, theologian, and author); Frederic Henry Hedge (Unitarian minister, scholar, author, editor, lecturer, and professor of ecclesiastical history and of German at Harvard); and Jones Very (poet, tutor in Greek at Harvard, and, after he proclaimed himself the second coming of Christ, a resident at McLean's Asylum). These individuals, all of whom devoted serious thought to the major concepts of Transcendentalism, were educated, intellectual people.

5.6 Friendship between Emerson and Thoreau

According to their biographers, the two met in 1837, introduced by Emerson's sister-in-law, Lucy Brown. Emerson, then 34 years old, had already written one of the founding documents of the intellectual independence of the United States, "The American Scholar." Thoreau at the time was a young man, 20 years old, of a clear contemplative spirit, and sensitive to the most subtle nuances of existence. Emerson began to admire him for that very vocation.

Initially, the bond between them was intellectual. The difference in age prevented neither from recognizing in the other those points common to their ways of thinking and experiencing reality. If anything, as he was older, Emerson exercised a kind of implicit tutelage and, in some cases, material support. He allowed the young Thoreau to read his library of books and, years later, to live in the cabin on a lot in the woods near Walden Pond in Massachusetts.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were both preoccupied with the topic of friendship. In many cases, it is hard to differentiate between the two men's ideas. Yet while Emerson writes explicitly of Thoreau, Thoreau mostly alludes to Emerson only through abstract expressions about friendship; direct references are rare. In *Solid Seasons*, Jeffrey S. Cramer explores the deep friendship between the two literary titans.

Biographers of 19th-century personalities have a rich storehouse of commonplace material that modern-day biographers may lack, in the form of letters and paper journals. In fact, "Thoreau's journal contains around two million words; Emerson's over three million." Indeed, Emerson's question to Thoreau if he kept a journal prompted Thoreau to begin

keeping one. This is just one example of the profound influence that Emerson had not only on Thoreau's writing but also on his everyday habits.

"Friendship is evanescent in every man's experience, and remembered like heat lightning in past summers. Fair and flitting like a summer cloud, —there is always some vapor in the air, no matter how long the drought, there are even April showers." Thoreau wrote. "Surely from time to time, for its vestiges never depart, it floats through our atmosphere. It takes place, like vegetation in so many materials, because there is such a law, but always without permanent form, though ancient and familiar as the sun and moon, and as sure to come again."

One of the most common misreading of Thoreau is that he was a misanthrope who fled from society to nature out of spite for everything human. But what Cramer reveals is a person intensely aware of how he was perceived and how his own intensity burned others: "I lose my friends," Thoreau wrote in 1851, "by my own ill treatment, and ill valuing of them, prophaning of them, cheapening of them." Friendship, for Thoreau, was strenuous, a "conjunction of souls," a "glowing furnace in which all impurities are consumed," a process that refined each person into the absolute best version of himself.

Cramer speculates that "perhaps Emerson avoided the despair that Thoreau felt because each of Emerson's acquaintances contributed only one part of the whole that made up his family of friends." Thoreau seems to concur about the way that friendships can expand our world, even if his was smaller than Emerson's: "Nothing makes the earth so spacious as to have friends at a distance; they make the latitudes and longitudes." Thinking of the friends I have met around the world does indeed make the world not only spacious, but closer, knowing I have kindred spirits from Latin America to Eastern Europe. (Sources : <https://www.faena.com/aleph/in-love-there-are-no-mistakes-lessons-from-the-friendship-of-emerson-and-thoreau> and <https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2020/01/01/review-remarkable-friendship-emerson-and-thoreau>)

5.7 Analysis of important works (Works of Emerson & Thoreau in separate sections)

Emerson's Works

Nature (1836) expresses Emerson's belief that each individual must develop a personal understanding of the universe. Emerson makes clear in the Introduction that men should break away from reliance on second-hand information, upon the wisdom of the past, upon inherited and institutionalized knowledge:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?

According to Emerson, people in the past had an intimate and immediate relationship with God and nature, and arrived at their own understanding of the universe. All the basic elements that they required to do so exist at every moment in time. Emerson continues in the Introduction, “The sun shines to-day also. There is more wool and flax in the fields. There are new lands, new men, new thoughts. Let us demand our own works and laws and worship.”

Emerson’s rejection of received wisdom is reinforced by his repeated references throughout *Nature* to perception of familiar things, to seeing things anew. For Emerson (and for Thoreau as well), each moment provides an opportunity to learn from nature and to approach an understanding of universal order through it. The importance of the present moment, of spontaneous and dynamic interactions with the universe, of the possibilities of the here and now, render past observations and schemes irrelevant. Emerson focuses on the accessibility of the laws of the universe to every individual through a combination of nature and his own inner processes. In “Language,” for example, he states that the relation between spirit and matter “is not fancied by some poet, but stands in the will of God, and so is free to be known by all men.” In his discussion of “intellectual science” in “Idealism,” he writes that “all men are capable of being raised by piety or by passion” into higher realms of thought. And at the end of the essay, in “Prospects,” he exhorts, “Know then, that the world exists for you. For you is the phenomenon perfect.” Each man is capable of using the natural world to achieve spiritual understanding. Just as men in the past explored universal relations for themselves, so may each of us, great and small, in the present: “All that Adam had, all that Caesar could, you have and can do.” (Source: <https://emersoncentral.com/texts/nature-addresses-lectures/nature2/introduction/>)

In Emerson’s essay entitled *Self-Reliance* (1841), he talks about self-sufficiency. He further goes on to explain how a person gets the freedom he requires to find one’s best self and acquire one’s actual independence. Emerson always believed that individualism along with the personal responsibility to fulfil roles and realize one’s goals without the pressure of society and the principle of non-conformity were essential to a society for progress and prosperity.

Divinity School Address (1838): Emerson delivered the Divinity Address to the graduating class of Harvard Divinity School by invitation on July 15, 1838. Emerson had been a

Unitarian minister but in his address to the public, he spoke on the topic of transcendentalism and its benefits. It was published in August 1838 for the first time by James Munroe. Emerson concentrates on the reality of the present moment and describes the abundance of nature in high summer and acknowledges the glory of this world. Man under the summer stars is like a young child and the world is his toy. But Emerson quickly turns away from the material and takes up universal laws that limit the significance of nature's beauty and prompt questions about the world and its order.

Concord Hymn (1838): Emerson performed this poem in Concord, Massachusetts, when a monument to the Battle of Concord received its dedication. This piece was first printed as a broadside for the monument's dedication and then later appeared within Emerson's collection, *Poems*, in December of 1848. The poem begins with the speaker stating that farmers have gathered at a "rude bridge" on the bank of a river. They have come together in preparation for a battle that they know is coming. The next lines of the poem make clear that it is time for a change. The residents of the Colonies have had enough, and are ready to fight, hand-to-hand, if necessary, for what they want.

In the last two stanzas of the poem, the speaker describes the dedication of the monument for which the poem was written. He asks God to spare the statue from any of the damages "Time" or "Nature" could inflict upon it as the generations to come to need to understand its importance.

Essays: First Series (1841): The focus of this series is on transcendental thinking and the transcendentalist movement. *Self-reliance* which has been briefly discussed above is a part of the series.

The Over-Soul (1841): In this essay about the human soul, the author wrote, "That which we are, we shall teach, not voluntarily, but involuntarily. Thoughts come into our minds by avenues which we never left open, and thoughts go out of our minds through avenues which we never voluntarily opened." The Over-Soul is the ninth essay in the 1841 edition of Emerson's *Essays* and it remains one of the best sources of information about his faith. In it, he outlines his belief in a God who resides in each of us and whom we can communicate with, without membership in a church or the help of a church official. This essay begins with two poetic epigraphs. The first is from English philosopher Henry More's "Psychozoia, or, the Life of Soul" (1647). More believes that moral ideas are innate in us. When we are born, we possess already the moral character that shapes our actions for the rest of our lives. Today, this idea is generally dismissed as too simplistic, for More does not consider what impact a person's environment and upbringing have on behaviour.

Emerson chose this selection from More's poem because it addresses directly the soul that each of us has, plus the soul of God that encompasses all of ours. According to

More, our souls — the many — partake of God’s soul, what Emerson calls “the eternal One.”

Essays: Second Series (1844): Following up his first collection of essays, this book furthers Emerson’s work as a transcendental writer and thinker.

Uriel (1847): This poem is about Uriel, an archangel in Christianity. The poem, describing the “lapse” of Uriel, is regarded as a “poetic summary of many strains of thought in Emerson’s early philosophy”.

“Once, among the Pleiades walking, Said overheard the young gods talking; And the treason, too long pent, to his ears was evident. The young deities discussed Laws of form, and metre just, Orb, quintessence, and sunbeams.”

The leader of the speculating young is Uriel, who with “low tones” and “piercing eye” preaches against the presence of lines in nature, thus introducing the idea of progress and the eternal return. A shudder runs through the sky at these words, and “all slid to confusion”.

Steven E. Whicher has speculated that the poem is autobiographical, inspired by Emerson’s shock at the unfavourable reception of the “**Divinity School Address**”.

F. O. Matthiessen focused instead on the philosophical content of the poem, arguing that “the conflict between the angel-doctrine of ‘line’ and Uriel’s doctrine of ‘round’ is identical to the antithesis of ‘Understanding’ and ‘Reason’ which, under different aspects, was the burden of most of Emerson’s early essays”.

English Traits (1856): This collection of essays reflects on Emerson’s trips to Europe and England. He gave a character analysis of a people from which he himself stemmed.

Brahma (1857): This poem broke conventional poetry forms of the time by using an utterance as its basis. *Brahma* by Ralph Waldo Emerson was written in 1856 and is a four stanza poem that is separated into sets of four lines, known as quatrains. The lines follow a specific rhyme scheme that conforms to the pattern of ABAB CDCD, and so on, changing end sounds as Emerson saw fit.

Repetition is one of the most important techniques used in *Brahma*. It can be seen through the use and reuse of words such as “slay” in the first stanza, as well as general use of alliteration. It occurs when words are used in succession, or at least appear close together, and begin with the same letter. For example, “Shadow,” “sunlight” and “same” in the second stanza and “doubter” and “doubt” in the third.

The Conduct of Life (1860): This collection contains nine poems and nine essays. All of them concentrate on the theme “How shall I live?” Each of the nine essays are preceded by a poem. These nine essays are largely based on lectures Emerson delivered. One was for a young, mercantile audience in the lyceums of the Midwestern boomtowns of the 1850s.

As *The Conduct of Life* is, in parts, thematically structured around life issues (e.g., 'Power', 'Wealth'), it has been discussed as participating "in the aspirations of the contemporary conduct-of-life literature" while opening up possibilities of gender fluidity. Also, despite the stronger reconciliation between self and society compared to Emerson's previous, more individualistic works, *The Conduct of Life* is in no way a one-sided affirmation of American society, especially 19th century capitalism. Rather, it can be seen as a holistic attempt to develop "principles for a good, natural, adequate conduct of life." As the dialectic approach of these essays often fails to come to tangible conclusions, critics like Ellen Vellela have described the whole book as weakly structured and repetitive. Others argue that "rather than trying to dissolve the ambiguous tension of Emerson's texts, the different arguments should be valued as a part of a dialectic that productively captures the friction of opposing poles." In this way, "the workings of Emerson (...), as well as his aphoristic, succinct expressiveness could be characterized as Emersonian inceptions: getting us to start thinking, planting thoughts." Still others found an overarching unity of design to transcend the fragmentation of Emerson's individual essays within the volume as a whole. [24] More recent readings see Emerson as constructing an "ebb and flow within *The Conduct of Life*" that hints at transitionality as the "final reality of appearances."

Henry David Thoreau

Walden details Thoreau's experiences over the course of two years, two months, and two days in a cabin he built near Walden Pond amidst woodland owned by his friend and mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson, near Concord, Massachusetts.

Thoreau makes precise scientific observations of nature as well as metaphorical and poetic uses of natural phenomena. He identifies many plants and animals by both their popular and scientific names, records in detail the colour and clarity of different bodies of water, precisely dates and describes the freezing and thawing of the pond, and recounts his experiments to measure the depth and shape of the bottom of the supposedly "bottomless" Walden Pond.

A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers is the story of a boat trip. It was from Concord, Massachusetts to Concord, New Hampshire, and back, that Thoreau took with his brother John in 1839. John died of tetanus in 1842 and Thoreau wrote the book, in part, as a tribute to him. While the book may appear to be a travel journal, broken up into chapters for each day, it wasn't just that. The actual trip took two weeks and while given passages are a literal description of the journey which includes the journey down the Concord River to the Middlesex Canal, to the Merrimack River, and back, much of the text is in the form of digressions by the author on varied subjects such as religion, poetry, and history. Thoreau connects these topics to his own life experiences, often in the context

of the rapid changes taking place in his native New England during the Industrial Revolution, changes that Thoreau often laments.

On the duty of Civil Disobedience or Civil Disobedience was first published in 1849. Thoreau argues that individuals should not permit governments to withdraw or deteriorate their consciences and that they have a duty to avoid such acquiescence to enable the government to make them agents of injustice.

Slavery in Massachusetts is an 1854 essay by Thoreau. It was adapted from a speech he gave at an anti-slavery rally at Framingham, Massachusetts. He had delivered the speech on July 4, 1854, after the re-enslavement in Boston, Massachusetts of the fugitive slave Anthony Burns.

In May 1862, *The Atlantic* published *Walking* which was one of his most famous essays. This was a month after his death from tuberculosis which rejected the virtues of immersing oneself in nature and lamented the unavoidable infringement of private ownership upon the wilderness.

5.8 Contributions and Legacy

The bulk of Emerson's work consists of essays, made up in large part from lectures. In 1841 he published a volume, known as *Essays, First Series*, and in 1844, another volume, called *Essays, Second Series* (both of which have been mentioned above). Other volumes followed from time to time, such as *Miscellanies* (1849), *Representative Men* (1850), *English Traits* (1856), *The Conduct of Life* (1860), *Society and Solitude* (1870). While the First Series of these Essays is the most popular, one may find profitable reading and even inspiring passages scattered through almost all of his works, which continued to appear for more than forty years. One reads his *Essays, First Series*, we find that the volume is composed of short essays on such subjects as *History*, *Self-Reliance*, *Friendship*, *Heroism*, and the *Over-Soul*. If we choose to read *Self-Reliance*, one of his most typical essays, we shall find that the sentences, or the clauses which take the place of sentences, are short, vigorous, and intended to reach the attention through the ear. For instance, he says in this essay: —"*There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion.*"

Emerson's reputation and influence have been enormous. Unlike his contemporary and friend Thoreau, Emerson was acknowledged during his own time as a major thinker and author and as the central proponent of Transcendental philosophy. Because Emerson's efforts straddled a number of disciplines — among them literature, philosophy, theology,

psychology, education, and social commentary — critics and scholars have been anything but unified in assessing the nature of his most important contributions to American thought and letters. Emerson's writings are so encompassing that they have permitted a wide variety of approaches to their study and understanding. To a large degree, particular reviewers and scholars have expressed the concerns of their own major areas of interest in examining Emerson's work. But if Emerson's importance has been widely recognized, few commentators have accepted all aspects of his work as valid, and some — even those who admit his tremendous appeal — have denied that he was a great writer of prose or poetry. Nevertheless, the vast body of literature about Emerson attests to his influence.

Henry David Thoreau is best known for his magnum opus *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (1854); second to this in popularity is his essay, *Resistance to Civil Government* (1849), which was later republished posthumously as *Civil Disobedience* (1866), all of which has been discussed briefly in the sections above. His fame largely rests on his role as a literary figure exploring the wilds of the natural world, not as a philosopher.

Thoreau gravitated toward Stoic philosophy, Hindu and Buddhist insights, and European idealism and romanticism; he was an eclectic thinker weaving together various philosophies to formulate his own unique strain of American thought.

(Source: <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/t/thoreau-emerson-and-transcendentalism/ralph-waldo-emerson/emersons-reputation-and-influence>)

5.9 Summing up

- In New England, a new philosophical movement developed. It started in the 1830s and went on into the 1840s as well. The founders and practitioners advocated the personal realization and knowledge of God and an individual's insight and discovery of self. This movement focussed on embracing nature and deviating from materialism.
- A group of New England socialists, authors, philosophers and politicians started the Transcendental Club. It was called the Hedge Club because the members met when Frederick Henry Hedge was visiting from Maine. The club was a meeting place for young thinkers. The club had no official meetings after 1840 but continued to correspond through correspondence.
- They believed that society was enmeshed in corruption and that was corrupting people along with the institutions of society. Transcendentalism was founded on the principle of the inherent goodness of individuals and the emphasis on self-reliance and independence.

- Emerson and Thoreau, along with other Transcendentalists believed that God dwells among his creations. They revered the natural world and considered Nature as equivalent to God. Insight, experience and logic were important and one should seek themselves in their own spiritual awareness, not in mainstream religion and its dictates.
- Non-conformity and growth of the individual were key principles of this movement.
- In 1840, the Transcendental Club came to its close. But the movement continued into the 1850s but it had started to fade out much earlier.
- Emerson's *Nature* was like a manifesto of transcendentalism.
- Thoreau was like a junior in his equation with Emerson who was like his mentor. Soon, they became good friends and continued to influence each other, a lot of which is reflected in their works as well.
- For ten years, they spent a lot of time workshopping and exchanging ideas.
- Their beautiful relationship lasted till Thoreau's death at the age of forty-four.

5.10 Comprehension Exercises

Essay Type Questions :

1. Discuss the significance of the writings of Emerson and Thoreau.
2. Compare and contrast Emerson's and Thoreau's attitudes toward society as expressed in their lives and writings
3. Discuss Thoreau's thoughts on poetry and writing.
4. Discuss Thoreau and Emerson's works very briefly with special reference to *Nature* and *Walden*.

Medium-length Questions :

1. Discuss any one work of Emerson briefly to highlight how he upheld the fundamental truth of transcendentalism.
2. Discuss very briefly how *Walden* represents Thoreau's role as a naturalist and is an "experiment in transcendental pastoralism".
3. What is the main idea of Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*?
4. Write a short note on Emerson's *Brahma*.
5. Discuss briefly why *Uriel* is a "poetic summary of many strains of thought in Emerson's early philosophy".

6. “It can be seen as a holistic attempt to develop principles for a good, natural, adequate conduct of life.”

Name the text that is being referred to in the above excerpt and discuss the contents very briefly.

Short Questions :

1. “He gravitated toward Stoic philosophy, Hindu and Buddhist insights, and European idealism and romanticism; he was an eclectic thinker weaving together various philosophies to formulate his own unique strain of American thought.” Who is being referred to?
2. Name the 1854 essay by Thoreau based on a speech he gave at an anti-slavery rally at Framingham, Massachusetts on July 4 of that year.
3. “This collection of essays reflects on Emerson’s trips to Europe and England. He gave a character analysis of a people from which he himself stemmed.” Mention the work that is being spoken of.
4. “...our souls — the many — partake of God’s soul”—What does Emerson call “the soul” and mention the work in which he does so.

5.11 Suggested Reading

1. Cramer Jeffrey, 2019, *The Friendship of Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson*
2. Emerson Waldo, Thoreau David and Barnett Russ, 1992, *Thoreau and Emerson: Nature and Spirit*
<https://emersoncentral.com/>
<https://poets.org/poet/ralph-waldo-emerson>
<https://www.ralphwaldoemersonhouse.org/>
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/emerson/>
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/thoreau/>
<https://www.theschooloflife.com/article/henry-david-thoreau/>
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-David-Thoreau>

Unit 6 □ Abraham Lincoln – *The Gettysburg Address*

Structure

- 6.1 Objectives
- 6.2 Introduction
- 6.3 Abraham Lincoln
- 6.4 Battle of Gettysburg
- 6.5 Explanation of *The Gettysburg Address*
- 6.6 Central idea of *The Gettysburg Address*
- 6.7 Rhetorical devices in *The Gettysburg Address*
- 6.8 Abraham Lincoln as an orator
- 6.9 Summing Up
- 6.10 Comprehension Exercises
- 6.11 Suggested Reading

6.1 Objectives

- To understand the background of The Battle of Gettysburg
- To understand and evaluate the context, contents and significance of *The Gettysburg Address*
- To identify Lincoln as an impactful orator and his contribution towards making *The Gettysburg Address* an iconic speech in world history.

6.2 Introduction

Let us first know a little about The Battle of Gettysburg as the speech was delivered at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery at Gettysburg in Pennsylvania. It is discussed in detail below in a separate section but for now let us trace its beginning. America was, at that point of time, in the midst of a civil war. And then, from July 1 to July 3, 1863, the Union and Confederate forces fought in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The Battle of Gettysburg was a very aggressive confrontation and it happened to interrupt Robert E. Lee's invasion of the North, reason why it was a turning point in the Civil War.

Soon after, more than 7,500 soldiers, which was more than thrice the population of Gettysburg, were lying dead on the battlefield itself. Authorities decided to turn a section of the battleground into a national cemetery in order to honour the martyrs.

The revered orator and politician Edward Everett was invited to speak at the dedication ceremony. It was only natural that a charismatic speaker like him would be the first-choice to deliver a speech at such a ceremony given the occasion and the history behind it. But almost as an afterthought, President Lincoln was also invited to offer a few thoughts of his own after Everett's speech. On November 19, after Everett's speech, President Lincoln started his Gettysburg Address and went on to inspire everyone present. Everett's speech was a two-hour long one while Lincoln's lasted less than two minutes. The stated purpose of Abraham Lincoln's speech, of course, was to dedicate a plot of land that would go on to become Soldier's National Cemetery. But at the same time, Lincoln intended to inspire the people to carry on the fight with an indomitable spirit that was characteristic of him.

Lincoln furthers the importance of the battle beyond the borders of the United States and in spite of not being the featured speaker of the day, he went on to deliver a speech that no one has forgotten till date. The Gettysburg address extends for only 272 words and didn't go on for even two minutes but his speech about the survival of a nation and a democracy that was of the people, for the people and by the people converted this a historic speech that is unforgettable and oft quoted everywhere.

Irrespective of the brevity, ever since this speech was delivered, it has come to be recognised as one of the most impactful speeches in the English language and, in fact, one of the most important expressions of freedom and liberty in any language. In fact, Everett immediately afterwards wrote to Lincoln saying "*I wish that I could flatter myself that I had come as near to the central idea of the occasion in two hours as you did in two minutes.*"

6.3 Abraham Lincoln

Before we start discussing The Gettysburg Address in further detail, we need to know a little about Abraham Lincoln. We are all aware of the fact that he was the 16th President of the United States, and a person who, not for once, failed to inspire people. But his was also a life of struggle and took a lot of resolve and perseverance to get to the pinnacle of success, respect and authority. He was also an extremely witty man who enjoyed a good laugh every now and then. While prefacing a discussing on the draft of the Emancipation Proclamation, he was reading aloud from a humourist's writing much to the disapproval of the members of his cabinet. He asked them as to why they don't laugh, speaking of himself, he said, the "fearful strain" that he remained in throughout the day, he would die if he forgot

to laugh. David Locke, a journalist from Ohio compared Lincoln's humour to a "gushing spring" rushing out from a rock. But when the destiny of his nation was experiencing a bumpy ride, his intelligence, foresight and oratory abilities came to the forefront so as to enable him to inspire those around and the habit of his story-telling which was part of his nature made him a stronger person with more empathy and the ability to reach out to the common man.

"Mr. Lincoln has a very tall and thin figure with an intellectual face showing a searching mind and a cool judgement." [Boston (Massachusetts) Daily Advertiser, September 14, 1848)

Born into poverty in a log cabin in Kentucky, Abraham Lincoln and was raised on the frontier, primarily in Indiana. He had said that character is like a tree and reputation like a shadow and that was very true of the great man himself as well. He was self-educated without any mainstream training. But he later became a lawyer. He was also a Whig Party leader, Illinois state legislator, and U.S. Congressman from Illinois. In 1849, he started his law practice all over again but he was annoyed by the opening of additional lands to slavery as a result of the Kansas–Nebraska Act of 1854. He went back into politics in 1854, he went on to become a leader in the new Republican Party, and he achieved a national audience in the 1858 Senate campaign debates against Stephen Douglas. Lincoln contested for President in 1860, sweeping the North to attain victory. Southern states started to withdraw from the Union as Pro-slavery elements in the South assessed his election as a threat to slavery.

During this time the newly formed Confederate States of America began seizing federal military bases in the south. Just over one month after Lincoln assumed the presidency, the Confederate States attacked Fort Sumter, a U.S. fort in South Carolina. After the assault, Lincoln mobilized forces to suppress the rebellion and restore the Union.

Lincoln, a moderate Republican, had to navigate a disputable scope of factions with friends and opposition members from both the Democratic and Republican parties. His allies, the War Democrats and the Radical Republicans, demanded harsh treatment of the Southern Confederates. Anti-war Democrats (called "Copperheads") despised Lincoln and irreconcilable pro-Confederate elements conspired to assassinate him. He managed the factions by exploiting their mutual enmity and carefully distributing political patronage and of course by engaging the American people with his charisma. His Gettysburg Address appealed to nationalistic sentiments. It was the best example of egalitarian views and reflected the spirit that was mandatory at that point. Lincoln closely administered the strategy and tactics in the war effort which included the selection of generals, and implemented a naval blockade of the South's trade. He suspended habeas corpus in Maryland, and he

prevented British intervention by defusing the Trent Affair. In 1863 he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which declared the slaves in the states “in rebellion” to be free. It also directed the Army and Navy to “recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons” and to receive them “into the armed service of the United States.” Lincoln also pressured border states to outlaw slavery, and he promoted the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which upon its authorization abolished slavery.

As a speaker, Lincoln was par excellence. As published in Galena (Illinois) North-Western Gazette, July 1856, his manners were “neither fanciful nor rhetorical but logical.” It was further stated that that his thoughts were strong and he was a “close reasoner” who had the quality of lucidity. He was that person who always ensured that there was clarity in everything that she said.

6.4 Battle of Gettysburg

Key points

Date: July 1, 1863 - July 3, 1863

Context: American Civil War

Place: Gettysburg Harrisburg United States

Participants: Confederate States of America United States

Important Individuals: Jubal A. Early Robert E. Lee James Longstreet George G. Meade Daniel Edgar Sickles

Background

The Civil War is at the heart of America’s historical consciousness. While the Revolution of 1776-1783 led to the creation of the United States, the Civil War of 1861-1865 was instrumental in determining what kind of nation it would become. The war resolved a couple of foundational queries left unresolved by the revolution. One was whether the United States was to be a fathomable confederation of sovereign states or an indivisible nation with a sovereign national government; and whether this nation, created from a declaration that all men were created with an equal right to liberty, would continue to exist as the largest slaveholding country in the world. The Northern victory in the war preserved the United States as one nation and ended the institution of slavery that had divided the country from its beginning. But these achievements came by a cost. More than 625,000 lives were lost. This number is equivalent to nearly as many American soldiers as had died in all the other wars in which this country has fought altogether. The American Civil War was the deadliest conflict in the Western world between the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the

beginning of World War I in 1914. The Civil War started because of unresolvable dispute between the free and slave states over the power of the national government to prohibit slavery in the territories that had not yet become states. When Abraham Lincoln won election in 1860 as the first Republican president on a platform promising to keep slavery out of the territories, seven slave states in the deep South withdrew and formed a new nation, the Confederate States of America. The incoming administration of Abraham Lincoln and most of the Northern people refused to accept the legitimacy of this withdrawal. They feared that it would discredit democracy and create a deadly precedent that would eventually fragment the no-longer United States into several small, quarrelling nations.

The Battle of Gettysburg marked the turning point of the Civil War. The estimated casualties reached 50,000. It was a three-day engagement and was the bloodiest battle of the entire conflict.

There was a distinct background to the battle. On June 3, soon after his celebrated victory over Major General Joseph Hooker at the Battle of Chancellorsville, General Robert E. Lee led his soldiers north in his second invasion of enemy territory. The 75,000-soldier Army of Northern Virginia was in great spirits. In addition to seeking fresh supplies, the depleted soldiers looked forward to taking food from the bountiful fields in Pennsylvania farm country.

Hooker also headed north but was disinterested in engaging with Lee directly after the Union's humiliating defeat at Chancellorsville. This evasiveness is of increasing concern to President Abraham Lincoln. Hooker was ultimately relieved of command in late June. His successor, Major General George Gordon Meade, continued to move the 90,000-man Army of the Potomac northward, following orders to keep his army between Lee and Washington, Meade was ready to defend the routes to the nation's capital, if that was required, but he also followed Lee.

On June 15, three corps of Lee's army crossed the Potomac, and by June 28 they reached the Susquehanna River in Pennsylvania. While Lee lost precious time awaiting intelligence on Union troop positions from his errant cavalry commander, General Jeb Stuart, a spy informed him that Meade was actually very close. Taking advantage of major local roads, which conveniently converged at the county seat, Lee ordered his troops to Gettysburg.

Course of the Battle

July 1. On that day in the morning, a Confederate division under Major General Henry Heth marches toward Gettysburg to seize supplies. In an unplanned operation, they confronted the Union cavalry. Brigadier General John Buford delayed the Confederate advance until the infantry of the Union I and XI Corps reached. Reynolds who was leading the Corps, was killed in action. Soon Confederate reinforcements under generals A.P.

Hill and Richard Ewell reached the scene. By late afternoon, the wool-clad troops were fighting in the heat. Thirty thousand Confederates overwhelmed 20,000 Federals, who went on to fall back through Gettysburg and fortify Cemetery Hill south of town.

July 2. On the second day of battle, the Union started by defending a range of hills and ridges to the South of Gettysburg. Later that afternoon Lee initiated a serious attack commanded by Lieut. General James Longstreet on the left flank of the Union. Fierce fighting continued as Longstreet's men closed in on the Union position. Although the Confederates secured ground on both ends of their line, the Union defenders held strong positions at the end of the day.

July 3. Believing his enemy to be weakened, Lee sought to make the most of the previous day's gains with rejuvenated attacks on the Union line. Heavy fighting started on Culp's Hill and the Union troops tried to regain the ground they had lost the day before. Cavalry battles flared to the east and south but the main event was a sensational infantry attack by 12,500 Confederates commanded by Longstreet. The Virginia infantry division of Brigadier General George E. Pickett comprised about half of the attacking force. Pickett, ordered by Lee to advance his division toward the enemy through a mile of unprotected farmland, replies, "General, I have no division," but the order stands. During Pickett's Charge, as it is famously known, only one Confederate brigade had reached the top of the ridge—afterwards the very same place was referred to as the High Watermark of the Confederacy. This daring strategy ultimately proves a disastrous sacrifice for the Confederates because casualties had started to approach 60 percent. Challenged by the Union rifle and firing artillery, the Confederates started retreating. Lee withdrew his army from Gettysburg late on the rainy afternoon of July 4 and went back to Virginia with men wasted by the trauma of the battle and the entire number reduced to a small figure.

Consequence of the battle

Almost 51,000 soldiers from both armies were either killed or wounded. Some were even captured or missing in this three-day deadly battle. The massacre was overwhelming. The victory of the Union anchored Abraham Lincoln's hopes of ending the war. Lee was running South and then Lincoln expected that Meade would block the Confederate troops and force them to surrender. However, Meade had no design on those lines. Lee's escape was affected by flooding on the Potomac. In spite of that, Meade does not pursue them. When Lincoln found out about this opportunity that he missed on July 12, he rued it. After several months, in November 1863, a portion of the Gettysburg battlefield becomes a final resting place for the Union dead. President Abraham Lincoln took the opportunity at the dedication ceremony at the Gettysburg's Soldiers' National Cemetery to honour the fallen and reiterate the significance of the war in his historic address.

6.5 Explanation of *The Gettysburg Address*

Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Score, as we know stands for 20. Therefore, four scores indicate 80 years. He says that four scores (eighty years) and another seven years (making it a total of 87 years) ago the forefathers of the nation had conceived a new nation dedicated to the welfare of mankind and its respectful acceptance of everyone as equal. By saying this, Lincoln was alluding to the Declaration of Independence which was signed 87 years before the year in which he was delivering his Gettysburg Address (1863). The signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 ensured that a new nation with an invincible spirit was indeed born and it shall thereafter stand for the principles of man and ensure liberty and equality for all. By saying “all men are created equal”, he was quoting from the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation, so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

One has to remember that in the year 1776 the United States was in a nascent stage with a very new political philosophy, entirely different from what it evolved into later. One of the reasons why it was called the “Great Experiment” was because it was an entry into completely new arenas and it was a matter of conjecture as to what would become of such a nation or rather an “experiment”. It was a challenge for the nation to see whether after being founded on the principles that ideally should endure as they prioritise humankind above all i.e., liberty and equality. Therefore, Lincoln says that the cemetery was a portion of that very field that was a witness to the confrontation that put the country’s principles and spirit to test and by being the “resting place” for those who sacrificed their lives for the nation, not only was it a gesture of honouring their fight but always keeping their struggle in public memory and urging the common man of the country to take their fight forward.

But, in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate — we cannot consecrate — we cannot hallow — this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did

here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us — that from these honoured dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion — that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain — that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom — and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

The excerpt above which is also the concluding part of Lincoln's speech suggests that they cannot possibly consecrate a ground by observing a dedication ceremony and acknowledging the martyrs with mere words. The struggle and sacrifice of the courageous ones have already consecrated the ground as it was a portion of the very ground they fought on. The place can only be truly honoured by taking the legacy of their indomitable spirit forward. The words said at the ceremony are mere words that might not be remembered with the magnitude that a future citizen will acknowledge and remember what the martyrs did for the country. Lincoln suggests that instead of merely being present as spectators who have come to honour the dead soldiers, may it be a gesture of resolve by the people, a plea to take the unfinished work forward. The death of the soldiers should not go in vain, he says. Lincoln suggests that this should be a call to action to ensure that the work put in by the martyrs is truly honoured by the actions of the next generation.

6.6 Central idea of *The Gettysburg Address*

Abraham Lincoln was a man of restraint, foresight, humour and an inherent aura of respectful authority. Once, he was deliberately sent a slow horse on his way to a rival's function. He still managed to reach the venue on time and later asked the liveryman whether this horse was reserved for funerals. The liveryman said no to which he heaved a sigh of relief as otherwise the corpses would never be in time for resurrection. The reason for quoting this anecdote here is to suggest that Abraham Lincoln used his oratory skills to be watchful, reticent and yet forthcoming and firm in terms of expressing himself and mobilising people to positive action.

In this speech too he was doing precisely that, using his oratory skills to convince the people and remind them that it's mandatory for them to act to the requirement of the occasion rather than just being present at the dedication ceremony of the cemetery. The central idea of his speech was to inspire people to finish the unfinished work of the martyrs to ensure that the dead have not died in vain. It was for the people to pledge that this nation

under the guidance of God shall indeed rise again despite all the setbacks and for that to be accomplished, the people have to respond actively.

6.7 Rhetorical devices in *The Gettysburg Address*

One rhetorical device used by Lincoln in *The Gettysburg Address* is **allusion**. He alludes to the Declaration of Independence of 1776 in his speech. Another rhetorical device he uses is **pathos** and that is primarily to arrest the sentiments of the citizens and to convince them that the dedication ceremony is not just to honour the dead but a call to action. He says that the world might not remember the words being spoken that day but the world cannot forget the contribution of the soldiers. Lincoln repeats the word “we” several times which initiates a pattern of **anaphora**. Repeating this word has more of a significance than one can imagine. In the middle of a civil war, it is important for people to identify themselves not as individuals but a nation, each being part of a whole, a unified force. He also uses “we cannot” repetitively to reiterate all the things that they couldn’t afford to do at that stage. Using multiple verbs to express the same ideas is another rhetorical device called **disjunction**. The speech having mentioned a specific place and being located in a specific place and time includes the application of **Kairos**. Lincoln redefines the space by saying that the cemetery was located on a portion of the very ground the soldiers had fought on. So, they had by means of their noble sacrifice, consecrated the ground already and it was now up to the people to truly honour them by taking their unfinished tasks forward and realizing the dreams of the nation. He applies **ethos** when he emphasises on the values of equality and liberty as stated in the Declaration of Independence. Dedicating the idea of the nation to a specific postulation also includes **logos** as a rhetorical device. Instances of **alliteration** can also be found. “Our poor power to add or detract”, “new nation”, “our fathers brought forth” are all instances of alliteration in *The Gettysburg Address*. Some instances of **parallelism** include “a new nation, that nation, any nation” and “that nation, that war, that field, that nation”, among others.

6.8 Abraham Lincoln as an Orator

An essential part of Abraham Lincoln’s political career was his competence of public speaking. His debates with Stephen Douglas made him a national figure. His speeches as president, particularly the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address, helped shape the understanding of Americans regarding their country and these instances paved a path toward reconciliation after the Civil War. Whether using humour, lawyer-like reason,

or a Biblically-inspired prose that could border on poetry as well, he was the nation's most eloquent president.

Lincoln's success as an orator stemmed not from his voice, demeanour or delivery, or even his presence, but from his words and his ideas. He put into powerful language the nub of the matter in the controversy over slavery and secession in his own time, and the core meaning for all time of this nation itself as "this last best hope of earth." Such great and moving subjects produce many great and moving speeches than discussions of tax cuts and tariffs. (Source: Ted Sorensen)

Lincoln's now iconic opening is a little more specific than the standard "once upon a time," but regardless of his exact wording, these first words signal to the audience that there's a narrative coming. The source of this study in persuasion is quoted below.

There are many studies that attest to the power of story. For example, Deborah Small at the University of Pennsylvania created two different versions of a marketing pamphlet designed to raise money for a charity. One version was laden with statistical data about the problems facing children in Africa, and the other featured a story about Rokia, an impoverished girl in the area. Participants were given just one of the two pamphlets to evaluate and they were also given five one-dollar bills to donate as much or as little as they would like to a charity that promised to help those children in Africa. Those who had received the statistics-laden pamphlet donated an average of \$1.43, but those who had received the story pamphlet donated nearly double, an average of \$2.38. The bottom-line is relatability and a story of real life changes a lot about a speech.

Although he had to go back eighty-seven years, Lincoln eventually found something that his entire audience could agree on. Words like "liberty" and phrases like "all men are created equal" are pulled directly from a document that Americans – then and now — revere like no other, the Declaration of Independence. To nod your head in agreement at those words is a near compulsion. It is crucial to get people to say "yes" to little things if you want them to say "yes" to bigger things later. So, one must start by acknowledging their agreements. This speech stands as a case study of what a persuasive and impactful speech should be like.

(Source: <https://hbr.org/2015/04/why-the-gettysburg-address-is-still-a-great-case-study-in-persuasion>)

6.9 Summing Up

- The Battle of Gettysburg was fought from July 1 to July 3 in the year 1863 in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. It marked a victory for the Union and a crushing loss for the Confederates. Meade was criticised for not pursuing the enemy after the Battle

of Gettysburg. However, many lives were lost on both sides. While the Union lost almost 23,000 soldiers, the Confederates lost 28,000 soldiers. The tactical skills of the Union gave them an edge and they went on to win what was one of the deadliest encounters during the civil war in America.

- The Civil war in America had started two years before The Battle of Gettysburg. And the final victory of the Union in 1865 was characterised by the victory in the Battle of Gettysburg; it was a turning point.
- At the dedication of the Soldiers' National cemetery, Lincoln delivered the historic Gettysburg Address. It was not even supposed to be the primary speech of the day but it successfully reawakened the spirit of the Americans to work towards the new dawn of their nation, "the birth of new freedom".
- After Everett's lengthy address that went on for almost two hours, Lincoln delivered his Gettysburg Address that lasted about two minutes.
- However, this brief speech goes down in history as unforgettable in inspiring the people of the nation to carry forward the task left unfinished by the noble martyrs who had sacrificed their lives for the nation.
- Lincoln was known for his oratory skills and therefore despite not being the principal speaker of the ceremony, his speech of 272 words has been recorded in history as one of the finest instances of English oratory. And it came at a time, when the nation troubled by Civil war, needed to be reminded that just being present at the dedication ceremony of the cemetery wasn't enough, the citizens had to respond actively to the need of the hour, and he did precisely that.

6.10 Comprehension Exercises

Essay Type Questions :

1. Discuss the significance of the Gettysburg Address along with a brief introduction of the background.
2. Discuss the main message and key points of The Gettysburg Address elaborately.
3. Write a comprehensive note on Abraham Lincoln as an orator and how and why The Gettysburg Address is a historic speech.

Medium-length Questions :

1. Discuss the allusion in the Gettysburg Address.
2. Discuss briefly how anaphora is employed in the Gettysburg address.

3. Mention the main crux of Lincoln's speech with specific reference to any three key points.

Short Questions :

1. When and where was the Battle of Gettysburg fought?
2. When was the Gettysburg Address delivered?
3. What was the venue and occasion for the deliverance of The Gettysburg Address?

6.11 Suggested Reading

Lincoln Abraham, McCurdy Michael, Wills Gary, 1995, The Gettysburg Address

<https://mannerofspeaking.org/2010/11/19/the-gettysburg-address-an-analysis/>

<https://www.ukessays.com/essays/english-language/gettysburg-address-analysis-9590.php>

<https://hbr.org/2015/04/why-the-gettysburg-address-is-still-a-great-case-study-in-persuasion>

<https://www.businessinsider.com/retraction-gettysburg-address-criticism-2013-11?IR=T>

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/27795309>

<https://papersowl.com/examples/hilary-palmer-literature-review-of-the-gettysburg-address/>

MODULE -3
American Poetry

Unit 7 □ A Brief History of American Poetry

Structure

- 7.1 Objectives**
- 7.2 Introduction**
- 7.3 American Poetry in the 17th Century**
- 7.4 American Poetry in the 18th Century**
- 7.5 American Poetry in the 19th Century**
- 7.6 American Poetry in the 20th Century**
- 7.7 Mid-Twentieth Century American Poetry**
- 7.8 American Protest Poetry**
- 7.9 American Feminist Poetry**
- 7.10 Native American Poetry**
- 7.11 Contemporary American Poetry**
- 7.12 Summing Up**
- 7.13 Comprehension Exercises**
- 7.14 Suggested Reading**

7.1 Objectives

The objectives of the present Unit are to provide a concise overview of American poetry; to delineate the historical, social and cultural background from the 17th to the early 21st centuries which shaped the direction of this tradition; and finally to exemplify the chief traits of this evolving genre through references to selected poets and poems.

7.2 Introduction

Poetry over the last four centuries in what is now the United States has moved in interesting directions. From finding a voice (or several voices) and establishing a tradition that continues from settler to sovereign contexts, to reclaiming its European roots while eventually returning to a recognizably vernacular viewpoint, American poetry may be said to have traversed a

long road, embracing diverse accents along the way. While these different voices include the ethnic accents of Native American, African American and various European and Asian immigrant communities, along with those of sexual and other minorities, the term ‘vernacular’ invites a reconsideration beyond its straightforward lexical brief, accommodating as it does, contextual complexities that are as perplexing as they are intriguing. While here it is taken to mean the evolving poetry of the White diaspora on the North American landmass as distinct from the parent Anglo/European culture whence it sprang it has to be borne in mind that this population was necessarily made up of immigrants acting on an existing “vernacular” or indigenous culture and idiom already in use among the native inhabitants.

The earliest European trajectories of immigration brought the Pilgrim Fathers and others, such as the Dutch, Spaniards and Portuguese who established their settlements in various parts of the American landmass, notably the eastern coast. The later immigrants from Europe and Asia in the 19th and 20th centuries, too, contributed to the demographic mosaic of the nation which took shape over the years.

The term ‘**American Poetry**’ is a comprehensive rubric encompassing more than four centuries of poetic engagement and expression evolving through transitions of territorial taxonomy, fraught racial relationships and a developing consensus on the nature of the emerging nation. The poetry of this lengthy chronological span necessarily ranges from the Puritan articulations of poets such as Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor through the Enlightenment expressions of a Philip Freneau to the expansive Emersonian Romanticism of Walt Whitman and the elliptical, condensed lines of the reclusive Emily Dickinson. From there it extends the native line of exploration through the poetic ground broken by Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens in the twentieth century, assimilating the influences of European Modernism in the output of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot before diverging significantly to the hybrid rhythms representative of the Beat generation, the feminist/confessional verse of the Robert Lowell school, explored here through the expressions of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, the protest poetry of the African American poets of the 1960s such as Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Amiri Baraka and others, and the voices of Native American poets such as the Chickasaw Linda Hogan, the Cherokee Diane Glancy, the Spokane Couer Sherman Alexie and Allison Hedge-Coke of European and indigenous ancestry.

Influences and resistances, divergences and convergences, and idealization and interrogation inevitably informed the experience of this evolving nation state as it underwent varied and trying experiences. Beginning with the founding of the colonies on American soil, through the War of Independence (waged against imperial Britain), the subsequent transition from colonial to sovereign status, the Civil War, Reconstruction, the two World Wars, the Cold

War, and the Vietnam War to its contemporary response to global terrorism, one sees the mutating political entity attempting, all the while, to delineate an identity (multifarious as it necessarily is), forge a trajectory and shape an aesthetics that may be regarded as indubitably its own.

7.3 American Poetry in the 17th Century

The first colonial period in the history of American literature did not really lend itself to expressions in the imaginative genres, such as poetry. The Puritan diaspora, by virtue of its narrow sectarian beliefs sought to exist within a limited geographical and ideological compass excluding, in the process elements both from within itself and the unexplored mass of the continent that could, in all likelihood, have contributed to its growth.

It was primarily an age of historical and ecclesiastical writing dominated by the first historians and religious thinkers of the nation. Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor, two examples of the true poetic spirit typify in their own way, the poetry that came to be composed in the 17th century by the earliest English colonists on American soil.

Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672), born in England was the daughter of Thomas Dudley, the steward of the Earl of Lincoln. Her first volume of poems was published in England in 1650 under the title –*The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung up in America...by a Gentlewoman of those Parts*. The poems were topical and at the same time universal reflecting, as they did on some of the moral and scientific ideas of the day even as they engaged with the eternal themes of loss, uncertainty, human relationships and mortality.

As a younger poet, Bradstreet, deeply influenced by the poet Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas, wrote five quaternions, epic poems of four parts each that explore the diverse yet complementary nature of their subject. Her four quaternions were “Seasons,” “Elements,” “Humours,” and “Ages.” Bradstreet’s themes are those of moral transgression and salvation, different kinds of weakness, death and immortality. Much of Bradstreet’s poetry issued out of her observation of her surroundings, as she took in both the immediate and the distant along with the immanent and the transcendent..

Edward Taylor (1642-1729) was a poet, pastor and physician born in Leicestershire, England, probably in 1642, and educated there. When Thomas H. Johnson published a selection of Taylor’s poems in *The New England Quarterly* more than two hundred years after his death, the fusion of a Puritan outlook and a Metaphysical sensibility became apparent. Themes of devotional piety were mediated in Taylor’s poetry through complexities of tone, metre and imagery, along with a rhetorical fervour that made it significantly different from any comparable poetic expression in colonial America at the time.

Such was the impact of this volume that Taylor's biographer Norman S. Grabo noted that its appearance established him "almost at once and without quibble as not only America's finest colonial poet but as one of the most striking writers in the whole range of American literature." The mingling of Puritan principles with aesthetic ambiguities certainly inflected Taylor's voice and tone with ambivalences of mood and meaning. In an age dominated by a literal interpretation of the Bible and its mechanical application to daily realities Taylor's verse is not only profound in the depth of its feeling but also, surprisingly sophisticated in its vision and articulation. In the perceptive analysis of Gross and Stern, Taylor "combined the intense sincerity of a William Bradford with the aspiring exaltation of a Jonathan Edwards, merging his fire and humility in the intricate style of the English Metaphysical." (Gross and Stern 259).

Taylor began writing *Preparatory Meditations* in 1682, a series of more than two hundred poems, divided into two groups. Qualitatively uneven and occasionally repetitive, these poems are yet a window to an extraordinary synthesis of sensibilities that characterized Taylor's best work. The main theme of the 49 poems of the first series is love – the love of God and Christ for man (especially shown through Christ's sacrifice on the cross) and man's reciprocal adoration.

Metaphysical in stylistic mediation, these poems are deeply influenced by the poetry of John Donne and George Herbert in their ingenious mingling of wit and emotion. The more abstract among the poems may be traced to Richard Crashaw or John Cleveland. Taylor betrays in his combination of the common and the celestial or the expression of abstruse turns of thought through humble images of the loom and farms his debt to the English Metaphysical imagination and stylistic expression. Another strain clearly discernible in Taylor's poetry is the "plaine style" preached by the New England historians reflective of the spartan discipline advocated by Petrus Ramus, the 16th century rhetorician. In a sense, Emerson's belief in a tangible link between words and things finds reflection in Taylor's distillation of effects.

Taylor's position in the literary tradition of America is important in that it betokens a heralding of the torn, troubled and questing metaphysics that came to affect a strain of the American imaginative expression. His passionate questioning, his troubled negotiation of the contradictions within the Puritan fold and its doctrinal tenets along with his fine speculative distinctions bequeath to American poetry at the beginning of the tradition the semantics of a spiritual search which haunts its evolution down the ages. Ruland and Bradbury explain it thus: "Taylor's poems pass beyond literary artifice to become emblems of transcendent relationships, beyond allegory into the moral, psychological intensity that comes to characterize so much of the richest American writing, from

Emerson, Hawthorne and Melville through Emily Dickinson and Henry James to William Faulkner.” (Ruland and Bradbury 26)

7.4 American Poetry in the 18th Century

The Reformation world of Aristotle and Thomas More yielded to the rational and empirical values of a different physics and metaphysics. The foundation of the Royal Society in London in 1662 with its espousal of the ideas of **John Locke, Isaac Newton and Edmund Burke** introduced notions that would deeply influence the intellectual stirrings in the emerging nation. Theological imperatives began to be broadened by secular concerns, and moral zeal by commercial interests. The literal dimension of the Puritan mind began to be gradually informed by a pragmatist ethics imbibed both from the mother-country England as from its own struggle to come to terms with a changing order.

Being an age of enlightenment, awakening and reason in Europe as in America, prose – ethnographic, expeditionary, ecclesiastic, philosophical, political, journalistic and scientific – came to dominate the literary expression of the time. **William Byrd II, J. Hector St. Jean de Crevecoeur, Samuel Sewall, Jonathan Edwards, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay and James Madison** were prominent amongst the prose writers of the day.

Poetry had, for the most part, been eclipsed in this vibrant conversation between prose-writers of different hues and genres as they debated the issues of vital importance at the time, and laid the moral and ideological foundations of the young nation struggling to find an identity and voice.

The poets of this period tended to look for direction to their British counterparts. **Mather Byles**, a leading poet of the age turned to England for inspiration denouncing dullness in a recognizably derivative manner in his poem “Bombastic and Grubstreet Style: A Satire” (1745). If Byles turned to Alexander Pope for poetic direction **Nathaniel Evans** sought inspiration from Milton, and the 18th century transitional poets such as Gray, Cowley and Goldsmith.

An important theme, that of nation-building began to inform the poetic expression of eighteenth century America.. “Poem . . . On the Rising Glory of America” written jointly by Hugh Henry Brackenridge and Philip Freneau bears testimony to this patriotic tendency.

Around this time a group of poets experiencing the turmoil of transition and sensing the imminent birth of the republic began to reflect the promise of a new dawn in their poetry. John Trumbull, Timothy Dwight, Joel Barlow and David Humphrys of Yale, later christened

the 'Connecticut Wits' helped usher in an age which trembled on the brink of possibilities. They satirized the outmoded curriculum and the socio-political climate of the mid 1780s.

John Trumbull (1750-1831) wrote a number of poems of which "The Progress of Dulnes" (1773) was the most notable specimen. **Timothy Dwight** (1752-1817) contributed several poems of which "Greenfield Hill" is remembered. **Joel Barlow** (1754-1812) wrote the long poem "The Hasty Pudding." Mostly derivative in theme and style these poems occupy "a transitional and peripheral place in American literary history, and are remembered not so much for the virtues of their own works as for their joint value as representatives of the early stirrings of national literary consciousness." (Stern and Gross 517).

In this scenario, largely barren in terms of true poetic expression, two poets hold their own and stand out in the comparative originality and freshness of their vision, and for trying to strike an authentic American note, derived as their literary expressions were. These two poets were Phyllis Wheatley and Philip Freneau who, despite their respective limitations did succeed in keeping the embers of imagination alive on the declining hearth of poetry in 18th century America.

The eighteenth century in America saw the development of the secular and scientific spirit and a practical mercantile outlook. It was, of course, to be replaced in its turn by the spirit of Romanticism that was to affect the literary sensibility in the changing cycles of temper and taste. In the words of Stern and Gross, "One thing stands out clearly: American literature is a rebellious and iconoclastic body of art. The Puritan rebelled against the Anglican, the deist against the Puritan, the Romantic against aspects of deism, the naturalist against aspects of romanticism, the symbolist against aspects of naturalism." (Stern and Gross, General Introduction: *The American Romantics, American Literature Survey*)

In poetry the change from Puritanism to Deism may be seen in the works of the 18th century poets who, in their lifetime, saw the transition of the colony from political subjugation to new-found sovereignty. This change in status was, not unnaturally accompanied by a broadening of outlook and sympathy, an engagement with political, social and civic concerns and a consciousness of literary expression that marked its growing distance from that of the previous age.

Phyllis Wheatley and Philip Freneau, two representative poets of the period were as different from each other as it was possible to be. Wheatley was an African (from Senegal) who, as a child had been sold into slavery to a wealthy Boston household, and with the encouragement of the family had become one of the foremost poetic voices in America in the second half of the 18th century. Freneau, closely associated with the revolutionary effort, had several occupations, from sailing and journalism to imaginative writing. If Wheatley, in her use of Biblical themes and classical devices looked back to previous ages Freneau,

in his evocation of nature and the occasional expression of a morbid sensibility anticipated the fevered Romanticism of Edgar Allen Poe.

Some of Wheatley's poems were on Christian themes, others on classical subjects, several were on the African ritual of sun worship, a number of them were in the form of tribute to famous personalities of the time and quite a few of them were elegies. Thus, it is clear that while Wheatley's poetry dealt with Biblical, classical and African themes it also responded with liveliness and vigour to the contemporary situation. In 1768, for instance, she wrote a poem, "To the King's Most Excellent Majesty" in which she praised King George III for repealing the Stamp Act. She turned to an espousal of colonial themes, with the struggle for independence gaining ground in the American colonies.

Philip Freneau (1752 – 1832) of Huguenot stock was born in New York. Freneau was the first American poet of note to have been born on American soil. Phyllis Wheatley had been born in Senegal and Edward Taylor and Anne Bradstreet before him in England. Poet, nationalist, activist, sailor and newspaper editor, Freneau was a versatile man with a range of interests. He was sometimes called 'the poet of the American Revolution.'

Freneau's striking poems such as "**The House of Night: A Vision**", (1799); "**The Vanity of Existence**," "**The Wild Honey Suckle**," (1786); and "**On the Religion of Nature**" (1815) remain some of his best works. "The House of Night" was one of the first Romantic poems written and published in America. The Gothic elements, most notably the dark imagery and an atmosphere of doom in it prefigured the poetry of Edgar Allen Poe. The Romantic lyric, "The Wild Honey Suckle" has Transcendentalist qualities while poems such as "The Indian Burying Ground" and "Noble Savage" are tinged with a raw and elemental quality.

Though Freneau was the first true poet of American origin living and writing in the newly-created nation his historic position at the beginning of a tradition was largely ignored. The relative obscurity of Freneau and his poetry may be attributed to the negative image of the poet propagated by his political opponents and detractors who painted him as an aggressive journalist and poet of inferior verse.

"**The House of Night**", published in the August, 1779 issue of the *United States Magazine*, made an immediate and favourable impact on readers, striking an original note in terms of mood and atmosphere being a precursor of the Gothic strain in its peculiarly American manifestation.

Phyllis Wheatley and Philip Freneau were two rather different poets who shared an age registering its conditions in their respective styles. If Wheatley wrote from the points of view of race and gender reinforcing, for the most part the convictions of colonial America with

regard to both the positions Freneau who lived well into the nineteenth century showed the way in Romantic sensibility. Both are important poets bequeathing to the tradition a historic legacy in the infancy of its career.

7.5 American Poetry in the 19th Century

William Cullen Bryant (1794-1878) who wrote about the ‘great outdoors’ was probably one of the earliest writers who helped develop the American myth of the wilderness, including frontier, forest, rivers and retreats which constituted the stretching hinterlands of a vast country. This fascination for the outdoors is evident in writers from James Fenimore Cooper, Mark Twain, Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne to William Faulkner and Ernest Hemingway who have drawn upon the nourishing plenitude of this rich source, in part, agrarian, riparian and wild.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807 – 1882), John Greenleaf Whittier (1807 - 1892), James Russell Lowell (1819-1891) and Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. (1841-1935) were some of the other important poets of the period who formed a group called the Fireside Poets focusing on poetry that dealt with American myths, culture and society in traditional structure and style, thereby fulfilling a contemporary need to create and curate a body of work reflecting the emerging ethos of the newly formed nation.

The other noteworthy poets of this period include **Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 – 1882), Edgar Allen Poe (1809 – 1849), Henry David Thoreau (1817 – 1862), Sidney Lanier (1842 – 1881) and James Whitcomb Riley (1849 – 1916)**. These poets, without exception, are characterized by their search for a distinct American voice, using to that end, the native topography, customs and beliefs to forge an authentic vernacular idiom. “The Song of Hiawatha” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow is a case in point where the poet uses indigenous (Native American) tales collected by the scholar Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, an American geographer and ethnographer to express the uniqueness of the American experience.

Meanwhile, another noticeable development in nineteenth century poetry was that associated with the philosophical school of Transcendentalism. Led mainly by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, Transcendentalism was a New England variant of English Romanticism with an 18th century focus on character building believing, as it did in self-reliance, honesty and positivity. Alongside this school of poetry one sees the emergence of a dark, brooding, mysterious and morbid sensibility, best exemplified in the works of Edgar Allen Poe, whose poem “The Raven” captured not only the American but also the European imagination, having been translated into several languages.

It was not till the emergence of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, however, that the elements of a recognizably “established” and typically American voice could be discerned in the poetry of the nation, one which struck a national chord. While Whitman often drew for his metrical cadences on the rhythms in the King James’ Version of the *Bible* Dickinson’s condensed and cryptic utterances may be traced to the Protestant hymns. Dissimilar as these two poets were in their respective poetic styles they were yet united in their shared literary debt to Emerson as also in the independence of their visions. Moreover, they left behind a couple of distinctly American poetic idioms, namely the free metric and emotional range of Whitman and the cryptic ellipses of Dickinson.

These legacies were adopted, adapted and resisted with varying degrees of success by their immediate contemporaries such as Edwin Arlington Robinson and Stephen Crane, and also by later poets such as Robert Frost and Carl Sandburg.

Edgar Allen Poe (1809 – 1849)

Poe was a poet, short story writer, critic and editor who was influenced in his youth by the English Romantic poets, John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley and George Gordon Byron. He came to express an extreme version of their Romantic sensibility and themes, particularly the Gothic elements. Poe’s reliance on the subjective, the subconscious and the surreal while reminiscent of the strain introduced in American poetry by Philip Freneau, is essentially an individualistic exploration of the different, the strange, even the ‘unnatural.’ Poe’s dislike of didacticism and his belief in the ‘art for art’s sake’ theory as expressed in his essay “The Poetic Principle” further testifies to his Romantic leanings. His fantastical imagination, melancholy, even morbid explorations of nature, and raw creative energy along with his hypnotic use of language, rhythm and spectacular imagery mark him out as a Gothic writer with a deep Romantic core.

Poe’s poetry was a major influence on the French Symbolist poets of the late 19th century who, in turn influenced Modernist aesthetics in America and England. Poe’s path-breaking use of sensory detail and masterly evocation of mood and atmosphere left their mark on later writers who took him as an exemplar.

Walt Whitman (1819 – 1892)

Historically positioned in the transition between Transcendentalism and Realism, Whitman was able to incorporate elements of both literary movements in his poetry. Whitman was a prominent persona in the national discourse composing a resonant poetry with expansive echoes.

His “**Leaves of Grass**” published in 1855, (a veritable American classic) for instance is, after the manner of Emerson, a celebration of nature and philosophy even as it frankly

delights in the physical and material world. **“Passage to India”** first appeared in a publication containing the title poem, a few poems issued in *Leaves of Grass* and a number of new poems. It was subsequently included in a supplement to the fifth edition of *Leaves of Grass* in 1871.

“When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” is, as is well known, Whitman’s famous elegiac tribute to President Abraham Lincoln in the aftermath of the latter’s assassination. First published in the autumn of 1865, “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d” - along with 42 other poems from *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel to Drum-Taps*—was absorbed into *Leaves of Grass* beginning with the fourth edition, published in 1867. A first person monologue written in free verse the poem is an elegy which uses the devices of narrative poetry. **“O Captain! My Captain!”** an extended metaphor poem of the American Civil War, is another tribute by Whitman to Abraham Lincoln who was assassinated.

Emily Dickinson (1830 – 1886) was a transitional figure in whom 19th century Romanticism is seen to give way to the ambiguities and subtleties of 20th century Modernism. Only ten of Dickinson’s poems had been published in her lifetime, and the rest, close to 1800 were published in 1890. In the *Preface* to this edition T.W. Higginson commented that Dickinson’s utterances were “like poetry torn up by the roots, with rain and dew and earth still clinging to them.” She won recognition posthumously in the 1920s before the definitive edition brought out by T.H. Johnson in 1955 established her credentials as a truly remarkable voice in the rich and varied poetic accents of the nation.

Written in deceptively simple language Dickinson’s poems are cryptic, elliptical philosophical abstractions which are highly symbolic and ingeniously witty. It was Dickinson’s uncompromising intellectual honesty which prevented her from glossing magisterially over eternal questions such as those pertaining to God, death and the afterlife to which human beings have no answer. Instead of assuming an easy, oracular stance the poet explored a plethora of perspectives which tempt one to make a choice but she rarely did, allowing the competing positions to develop into paradoxes.

“Of all poets writing in English in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,” argues Harold Bloom, “I judge Emily Dickinson to present us with the most authentic cognitive difficulties.”(Bloom 1). The poet’s personal uncertainties regarding the nature and apprehension of truth often leads to the fine existential ironies that characterize her best work and which challenge the readers’ mental efforts of knowing, reasoning or understanding the same. By constantly redistributing the focus and shifting the balance of meaning in the poems Dickinson negotiates a tightrope between hypotheses, swinging from one end to the other, thus keeping the intellectual impetus forever in motion.

7.6 American Poetry in the 20th Century

In the twentieth century the literary scene in the United States was beset with several tendencies, not necessarily harmonious or complementary. With the unfolding of the Modernist narrative, in part a philosophic and aesthetic reaction to the sweeping changes in the world as seen in decolonization, the First World War, a rejection of the Enlightenment ethos, rapid industrialization, the consciousness of racism and gender discrimination along with the advances in science and technology, several American poets and writers such as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein became exemplars of the movement in Europe.

Eliot and Pound became influential with their advocacy of ‘**the mythical method,**’ **allegory, intertextuality, allusiveness, verbal economy and ellipsis, irony, ambivalence** and the interdependence of the arts. As a reaction to this, American poets and writers sought to express their national experience of modernity through experiments in language and form that represented their own encounter as distinct from the European formulation. William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens and Marianne Moore were among the leading figures in the delineation of a native Modernism that was suited more closely to the tone, temper and exigencies of the new nation.

William Carlos Williams, for instance, became openly disapproving of what he considered Eliot’s esoteric style with its allusions and interpolations of foreign languages preferring instead an art oriented in local immediacy and a colloquial idiom. For Wallace Stevens the “supreme fiction” is the idea that is so irrevocably right in its time and space as to be real. Marianne Moore’s unusual method of composition privileging the stanza as the unit of composition with the number of syllables in it determining, to a large extent the metrical effects, along with precision and wit speaks of her innovativeness as a Modernist poet.

In the 1930s the Objectivist Poets, namely Louis Zukofsky, William Carlos Williams, Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen and Carl Rakosi along with the British poet Basil Bunting represented **the second generation of Modernist poets** in America who came to be influenced by Imagism, favouring free verse and a pithy style. Clarity of vision and sincerity of approach were two prized aims of the Objectivist Poets.

Wallace Stevens, born on October 2, 1879 in Reading, Pennsylvania was a very significant vice in the poetic discourse around this time. Stevens’ first volume of poetry, *Harmonium* was published in 1923. In 1933 that he published his second collection of poetry, namely *Ideas of Order*. “The Idea of Order in Key West,” conceivably one of the most important poems in Stevens’ canon examines how the creative artist as maker imposes order on the context and materials of his art.

The fusion of artist and art, and the organizing power of the former described in these lines are climactically enunciated through the observers who “Knew that there never was a world for her/ Except the one she sang and, singing, made.”

Stevens published the volume *The Man with the Blue Guitar, and Other Poems* in 1937 and *Parts of a World* in 1942. *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, first published in 1942, and subsequently included in the 1947 collection *Transport to Summer* comprises a prologue, three sections and a coda. In keeping with Stevens’ preoccupation with philosophical and aesthetic notions it is a query of, as well as a commentary on the nature of poetry. It tries to be what it describes, thus becoming a meta-poem illustrating the very points that it seeks to define.

In 1950 Stevens published his last new collection of poetry *The Auroras of Autumn* which extends the theme of his previous collection, refining his ideas on the role of the imagination in the creative process. It includes “The Auroras of Autumn,” “The Ultimate Poem is Abstract” and “Bouquet of Roses in Sunlight.”

Around this time Stevens published a volume *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination* which, as a prose counterpart to his poetry expresses his ideas on the aesthetics of form. In 1951 Stevens was awarded the National Book Award for *The Auroras of Autumn* and in 1955 the Pulitzer Prize and another National Book Award for his publication of *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. This last volume put together nearly all his published poems except for the ones in *Owl’s Clover* besides carrying an additional section entitled ‘The Rock.’ This section contained some of his subtlest and most thought provoking poems, such as “The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain,” “A Quiet Normal Life,” “Final Soliloquy of the Interior Paramour,” “The Rock” and “Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself.”

Robert Frost (1874 – 1963), another iconic American poet, was born in 1874 to a New England family in San Francisco. His first book *A Boy’s Will* was published in 1913 while *North of Boston* which established him as a poet came out the following year. Responding as he did to the landscape of rural New England in its different seasons and settings, Frost showed a remarkable sensitivity to nature that was Romantic in the English Wordsworthian sense even as it betrayed traces of Emerson’s Transcendentalist belief in a pragmatic oneness between self and the world, a sensibility that was further shaped by the empirical and outcome-driven influence of William James’ Pragmatist theories.

To Frost’s Romantic, Emersonian and Pragmatist inclinations may be added his Modernist leanings. It is true, he was not a thorough Modernist like William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens or Marianne Moore but there are elements in his poetry such as a multiplicity of sense, a discord between the outward placidity of a natural scene and the inner turmoil at

its core, along with the complication of voices which invest his work with an ambivalence difficult to ignore.

The tonalities of the spoken voice, frequently dialectical in its thrust, the adoption of multiple perspectives and the practical wisdom of speakers in rural settings are often the stylistic devices that are used by Frost to mediate his themes which sometimes begin with simple natural observations and develop into philosophical speculation on self, human nature and the world at large. Poems such as “Mending Wall,” “After Apple Picking,” “Home Burial,” “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” “Birches” and “The Road Not Taken” are dramatic lyrics which exemplify these traits.

7.7 Mid-Twentieth Century American Poetry

The middle decades of the twentieth century in the United States saw the emergence of several strains of poetry. Wallace Stevens was a leading figure who had an influence on numerous poets. There were poets such as Karl Shapiro, Randall Jarrell and James Dickey who had seen active service in World War II and wrote from personal experience. The so-called Confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, under the influence of John Berryman and Robert Lowell explored and expressed their experiences with careful attention to style. By contrast the Beat poets such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Amiri Baraka and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, among others, spoke out for artistic freedom of expression, evincing a deep impatience with traditional beliefs and institutions, experimenting with form and opting to use a raw style of composition.

The Black Mountain poets from Black Mountain College such as Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, Ed Dorn, Paul Blackburn and others, under the leadership of Charles Olson, propagated a breath based technique, emphasizing a poetics which merges life, utterance and thought.

The poetry belonging to the San Francisco Renaissance was led by Kenneth Rexroth and Madeline Gleason. The Small Press poets sought to invigorate the existing traditions by publishing the promising, often exciting works of emerging practitioners. The Los Angeles poets such as Leland Kickman, Harry Northup, Michael C. Ford and Kate Braverman among others were chiefly lyric poets who sang subjectively of life and its attendant experiences.

The East Coast had its New York School of poets comprising Frank O’Hara, James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, Ted Berrigan and others, guided by John Ashberry who preferred to use a richly resonant though common language abjuring an elaborate or

artificial style, and frequently drawing inspiration from Surrealism and other avant-garde art movements of the time.

Among the Confessional poets were Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton who could be both expressive and enigmatic as they processed their life events into their poetry.

Sylvia Plath who was one of the important poetic voices of this period was born on October 27, 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts to immigrant parents with Austrian descent on her mother's side, and a German one on the father's. The death of Plath's father Otto Plath on November 5, 1940, (a few days after her eighth birthday) of diabetes related complications proved to be a harrowing and traumatic experience for the young Sylvia who returned repeatedly in her work to this devastating event. On February 11, 1963 Plath was found dead of carbon monoxide poisoning with her head in the gas oven at her home.

Plath's poetry typically deals with betrayal, grief, loneliness, male oppression and death. In poems such as "Ariel," "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" she uses a confessional tone which expresses her deepest emotions even as she uses distancing references of historical and mythical figures through which she modulates her autobiographical angst. In poems like "Tulips," "The Applicant" and "Mad Girl's Love Song" she adopts a persona through the speaker who spontaneously expresses the nuances of her predicament.

Plath's language, evocative and lyrical, as critics have shown can also be artful in its deployment of effects. The passionate lyrical tone is often countered by a dramatic mode which makes for aesthetic modulation of personal feelings. Her imagery is striking and vivid and her symbols, drawn from a variety of sources, along with the use of vivid conversational accents impart the complexity associated with modern poetry to her work.

Anne Sexton was born on November 9, 1928 in Newton, Massachusetts to Mary Gray Staples and Ralph Churchill Harvey. She was encouraged in her career by the poet W.D. Snodgrass, some of whose poems proved to be inspirational for her. Having located a mentor figure in Snodgrass Sexton gave a free rein to her need to write openly about subjects not traditionally expressed in literature at the time. Maxine Cumin says that Sexton wrote frankly about taboo topics such as menstruation, abortion, incest, adultery and drug addiction at a time when none of these were considered suitable topics for poetry. This has probably earned Sexton the label of the 'confessional' poet who delved deep into her psyche and expressed her inmost thoughts and emotions.

Though generally perceived as a confessional poet Sexton's work gradually moved beyond the personal into a wider realm. Her volume *Transformations*, for instance, reinterprets *Grimm's Fairy Tales* enabling her to distance her voice through an allegorical framework. Some of her better-known poems are "A Curse Against Elegies"; "Again and Again

and Again”; “Cinderella,” “The Ambition Bird”; “Wanting to Die”; “More than Myself”; “The Fury of Sunsets”; “Her Kind”; “Barefoot”, “Red Roses”, “After Auschwitz” and “45 Mercy Street.” Her themes include spiritual quest, human relationships, revision or elimination of myths and aspects of inheritance among others. The stylistic devices used by her are irony, satire, understatement and allusion.

Sexton died on October 4, 1974 at Weston, Massachusetts committing suicide through asphyxiation by carbon monoxide poisoning at the age of forty-five.

Marianne Moore (1887-1972); **E. E. Cummings** (1894-1962); **Elizabeth Bishop** (1911-1979) and several others who belonged to this period wrote a chiseled and spare poetry that was marked by sophistication.

7.8 American Protest Poetry

African-American Protest Poetry

Protest is intrinsic to the American ethos having contributed, in no small measure to the very creation of the nation, if we trace the inception of American nationhood to the great Puritan migrations of the early 17th century. The Pilgrim Fathers who crossed the Atlantic aboard the *Mayflower* and the *Arbella*, and founded the first English Puritan colonies on American soil had done so out of a sense of rebellion both against the Roman Catholicization of the church in England, as also the political administration which could not provide them refuge from religious persecution.

From the Negro spirituals and slave songs of the 17th and 18th centuries to the earliest expressions of racial injustice in the 19th century one sees an unfolding of the Black quest for freedom and identity. **George Moses Horton** (1797-1883?), **Frances E.W. Harper** (1825-1911), **James Madison Bell** (1826-1902), **Paul Laurence Dunbar** (1872 – 1906) and **James M. Whitfield** (1823-1878) were some of the 19th century poets whose poetry showed the first stirrings of resistance in African American consciousness and creativity.

It was the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s which gave the African American racial resistance its special focus. W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Arna Bontemps and Sterling Brown, among others, were some of the seminal poets in the community who contributed to a creative colloquium exploring the cultural conundrum in contemporary America. Arising from various imperatives, some of which tended towards mutual contradiction, the positions adopted by these poets withal,

strove to articulate the anguished apprehension of racial discrimination and the attendant responses to the same.

Since the literary movement of Black protest poetry, like any comparable movement may not be regarded as a homogenous, monolithic project expressing a unified world-view, the African American articulation in this regard too, may be understood for its internal differences vis-à-vis its understanding of the shared heritage and the subsequent cultural and aesthetic mediation of the same. While W.E.B. DuBois, for instance, argued that Black writers and artists needed to prove themselves to the White community (thereby perhaps inadvertently legitimizing the notion of White cultural superiority) Alain Locke, Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, among others claimed an indigenous cultural ancestry and sought to use the linguistic and literary resources of their race for an authentic expression of their vision. The differences in rationale, method and practice notwithstanding, the discourse on black poetics of the time sought a return to roots, the development of an individual voice (as distinct from the White mainstream articulation) and the reclamation of identity.

The Harlem Renaissance was influenced by a movement called *Negritude* which represents the discovery of black values and the Negro's awareness of his situation. Langston Hughes in his influential essay "The Black Artist and the Racial Mountain" maintains it is essential for Blacks to emerge from White stereotypes of worth and beauty and discover their own when they can confidently assert, "I am a Negro—and beautiful!" Hughes and Cullen along with a number of the Harlem poets saw *Negritude* as an awakening of a race consciousness and cultural empowerment. Cullen's poems "Heritage" and "Dark Tower" and Hughes' "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," among others examine African roots, intertwining the same with the hybrid aspect of African American life. In Cullen's poem "Heritage," for instance, the speaker, "like a soul gone mad with pain" negotiates his dual and hyphenated identity as an African-American. In his poem "From the Dark Tower" however, Cullen has moved from anthropological angst to sociological sapience when he passionately proclaims:

Langston Hughes' "Negro," in keeping with this awakened consciousness of a distinct African heritage was proud of his racial inheritance, aware of the injustices meted out to his people and rebelled against the system that had been crushing him and his forefathers since the time they had been brought as slaves to America. His Negro knew rivers since the dawn of civilization, as he so poignantly expresses in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," tracing his ancestry from the ancient cultures of Mesopotamia and Egypt right up to his freed status in mid-19th century America when Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. Hughes' Negro in his poem, "I Too Sing America"

implies first they have to be included in the racial discourse as fellow human beings, before they can hope for equality and after that pre-eminence, if at all they may aspire to this last category. Hughes' Negro is the "darker brother," sent to eat in the kitchen when company comes, but who too, celebrates America and prophesies that soon he will be at that table from where he is currently debarred. It is precisely this vision of 'being at the table,' of being accepted and respected in the banquet of human relations that Hughes raises in his famous poem "Harlem: A Dream Deferred." Like the two poems previously referred to, this one, too is a heightened haiku of the heart where the poet deplores the failure of the American Dream.

The very word "protest" used to describe the poetry of black writers struggling for recognition, definition and equality incidentally, came to be regarded as a problematic in the 1960s. Baraka put the debate in perspective, explaining, "It was simply to continue the tales about our own lives." His signature poem S.O.S. hailed by contemporary black poets such as Yusef Komunyakaa, Terrance Hayes and others, could well be regarded as an anthem for the "Black Lives Matter" movement currently going on.

The Poem "S.O.S." is an expression of the pan-Africanism that came to represent an aspect of the Civil Rights Movement in America, and more than the stridency and exigency, it is the breadth of the call (in today's pop parlance the "shout out") that impresses. This clarion call, this messianic message to all his race brothers to "come in," to be included and belong, to stand up and be counted and to sit at the table – is it not one of the central songs of all Black poetry, whether we regard it as the poetry of test or that of protest?

'Beat' Poetry

The postwar decades in America were characterized in some of its cultural quarters by a strident rejection of most received values. The social, cultural and political atmosphere of protest found a poetic outlet in the expressions of the Beat poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gary Snyder who broke free of social, sexual and aesthetic taboos to mint a new idiom of protest and search. Allen Ginsberg was the high priest of the Beat cult and sought to mediate the reality of that situation in a language at once vibrant and trenchant.

The word 'beat' resonates with several meanings. The poets bearing this label represented the 'beaten' or subjugated segments of the population; their poetry typically sought an alliance with the beat or rhythm of jazz, the marginalized music of the less understood. Also 'beat,' with its link to beatitude seemed to hold out hope for pilgrims looking for salvation. According to Parini and Miller (*Columbia History of American Literature*)

'beatness' to Ginsberg was "looking at society from the underside, beyond society's conception of good and evil."

7.9 American Feminist Poetry

Feminism in American poetry appeared since the inception of the colonies. Anne Bradstreet was the first woman poet of the New World to write poetry on nascent Feminist themes. Phyllis Wheatley who was the first Black person to publish poetry in the American colony became "a spokeswoman for the cause of American independence and abolition of slavery." (Seidler xvi). In 19th century writing alongside such prominent male poets as Walt Whitman and Edgar Allen Poe Emily Dickinson was a respected presence striking an individualistic chord in her poetry. Reclusive as Dickinson was she yet re-gendered female space within the prevailing Puritan patriarchal structure, often writing through powerful female voices. In the early 20th century Alice Moore Dunbar Nelson was an important literary foremother for Black women writers. Some of the other Feminist poets and writers of this era were Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Alice Duer Miller, the latter mocking the anti-suffragists in her verses.

Feminist poetry in post-1960 America represented divergent trends with poets frequently having links to particular movements rather than being identifiable as a school in themselves. Denis Levertov, for instance, was influenced by the Black Mountain School of poets. Muriel Rukeyser's political militancy and espousal of a frank female sexuality brought her close to Adrienne Rich who came to be influenced by her. They bonded particularly over their similar positions on the Vietnam War. Adrienne Rich, with over six decades of public engagement as a woman poet became one of the seminal figures of the movement, hybrid and scattered as it was. Audre Lorde's poetry shows a deep sensitivity to the need for a humanistic ethics that would address racism, sexism and other social evils concurrently.

Feminist poetry in America, as elsewhere was naturally not a uniform and unvarying project but was informed with differences in tone, texture and registers occasioned by regional imperatives, ideological leanings and racial and sexual orientations, among other factors. From the sometimes searching, at times exulting explorations of Sylvia Plath, unabashedly confessional or guardedly private; the frank celebration of female sexuality of Kathy Acker; the awareness of gaps and losses in Lyn Hejinian; the soaring, searing notes of Maya Angelou calling for recognition and equality to the politically wrought subtleties and stridencies of Adrienne Rich, modern American poetry is rife with the taut tonalities of diverse Feminist articulations.

A new consciousness of inherent differences and overlaps in women's conditions and inequalities across the world necessitated a fresh look at the perceptual paradigms of the movement and the theoretical framework of Intersectionality was born in the 1990s. This made the movement more inclusive and culture specific, expanding in its scope to accommodate diverse strands of the ideology according to racial, cultural, social and economic contexts within the overall fabric of canonic expression, resisting hegemonic imprints.

7.10 Native American Poetry

Native American poetry encompasses a vast range of authors from among tribes stretching across the Americas. The themes of these poets typically have to do with a reverence for nature and a sense of spirituality, along with a consciousness of their plight of dispossession and deprivation. Oral traditions being strong in Native American culture the devices of speech necessarily characterize the literary expression of this people. Not unnaturally then, verbal elements such as songs, chants, prayers, anecdotes and oral narratives are part and parcel of this tradition of poetry which wells spontaneously from its hybrid and ancient sources.

Some of the important voices in this canon include those of N. Scott Momaday from the Kiowa Nation whose collections of poetry include *In the Bear's House*, *In the Presence of the Sun: Stories and Poems, 1961-1991*, and *The Gourd Dancer*; Sherman Alexie, from the Spokane Couer d'Alene tribe, Joy Harjo, from Muskogee Nation who was the first Native American Poet Laureate of the United States, Allison Adelle Hedge Coke of European and indigenous ancestry whose *Dog Road Woman* won the American Book Award; Linda K. Hogan, the Chickasaw poet, novelist, playwright and academic; Alexander Lawrence Posey who, descended of Irish, Scot and Creek blood, identified with his Creek heritage and published the first Native American daily newspaper; Lance Henson, the Cheyenne poet; Joan Naviyuk Kane, the Inupiaq poet; Alex Jacobs, the Ahkwesase Mohawk poet and artist; and Nora Naranjo Morse, from the Santa Clare Pueblo Tribe famed for her poetry and pottery.

Then there are Leslie Marmon Silko of Laguna Pueblo descent; Carol Lee Sanchez who is a poet, lecturer, activist and artist; Cheryl Savageau a poet of Abenaki descent and Simon J. Ortiz, of the Pueblo Acoma tribe known for his environmentally conscious poetry. These poets represent the second wave the poems published in the aftermath of the Indian Self Determination and Educational Assistance Act of 1975.

There are also the most recent ones such as Denise Sweet, the Anishinaabe poet; Laura

Tohe from Wisconsin; Gerald Robert Vizenor, belonging to the Minnesota Tribe and Luci Tapahonso, the first Poet Laureate of the Navajo Nation. There are, of course many other voices, such as Phillip Carroll Morgan, Sara marie Ortiz, dg nanouk okpit, Sherwin Bitsui and others, perhaps as perceptive and eloquent as the ones mentioned but not being accommodated here due to constraints of space.

7.11 Contemporary American Poetry

How does one define the “contemporary poetry” of the United States, or for that matter, any other region in the world? Chronological brackets such as these, belying their usefulness for convenient schematization, invariably pose problems for the literary historian, and more so, when the same is applied to an age that is perplexingly close to the present times. Political, social, aesthetic and other factors which usually determine the criteria for historical classification of literary ages may be considered in this case, as well.

In an interview given to Thea Lenarduzzi in fivebooks.com on “Contemporary American Literature” Stephanie Burt, maintains that the turning points encapsulating the so-called contemporary age may be accommodated between the mid 1980s and 2015. She declines to locate it at the start of the millennium maintaining, “the feel of US poetry in the new millennium didn’t change suddenly in the way that I think it did change suddenly in the early 1980s and again in the mid-2010s.”

Contemporary poetry in the United States is necessarily as diverse as the people and their literary backgrounds, practices and relationships. Voices emanated from the edges of discourses, the interstices in cultures, the shifts in sensibilities and the friction between ethnicities to create a poetry of both wonder and despair. These voices sometimes challenged the dominant perspectives and critiqued the canons in a counter-narrative that spoke in numerous tongues, tones and truths, and withal enriched a resonant conversation, at once voluntary and self-reflexive.

Born in 1943 in New York City **Louise Gluck**, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2020 “for her unmistakable poetic voice that with austere beauty makes individual existence universal.” Even before this recognition came her way Gluck was considered by many to be one of the foremost poets in America. **Kay Ryan**, born in California in 1945 has several volumes of poetry including *Say Uncle* (2000), *Niagara River* (2005) and *Flamingo Watching* (2006) to her credit. Her 2010 book *The Best of It: New and Selected Poems* won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. **Carolyn Forché**, born in 1950 in Michigan is an educator, activist and poet who, in bringing together the political and the personal in her poetry coined the term “poetry of witness.”

Born in 1952 **Rita Dove** was the first African American to have been appointed Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress from 1993-95. She was the second African American to receive the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. She also served as the Poet Laureate of Virginia from 2004-2006. **Yusef Komunyakaa**, born in Louisiana is one of the important poets who published several volumes of poetry. *Dien Cai Dau* (1988) which dealt with his experiences in the Vietnam War is widely regarded as one of the best poetical expressions on the same. He won the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for *Neon Vernacular: New & Selected Poems 1977-1989* in which he writes of the American South, race relations in the United States and war in South-east Asia using the African American musical forms of jazz and the blues.

Claudia Rankine, Natasha Trethewey, Charles Simic, Gregory Pardlo, Ricky Laurentiis, Terrance Hayes and Tracy K. Smith are all award-winning poets who have contributed to the present poetic discourse. **Jane Hirschfield, Eileen Myles, Cathy Park Hong, Anna Journey, Julia Alvarez, and Deborah Landau** write poetry located at the intersections of cultures, communities and societies.

Brian Turner is an Army veteran of the second Iraq War and he provides an insight into the struggles of the soldiers despatched to foreign theatres of action. The works of **Angel Nafis, Beth Ann Fennelly and Paisley Rekdal** deal primarily with the themes of race, identity, womanhood, sexuality and mythology. **Jericho Brown** in *The New Testament* examines race and sexuality through the lens of Biblical stories. **Marie Howe** is best known for her poetry dealing with the AIDS crisis. **Danez Smith** is a Black, queer, HIV-positive poet and performer from Minnesota.

Aracelis Girmay, Saeed Jones, Naomi Shahab Nye and Ocean Vuong, poised on the fault-lines of races, cultures and sensibilities often reflect demographic patterns and regional affiliations in their poetry.

In this mosaic of voices, often cutting across each other, certain patterns emerge – the Black poets, the women poets, the Black women poets, the mixed-race ones, the war poets, the Feminist poets and the sexual minority ones, among others – with the categories intermingling at times, as in the case of Angel Nafis who is a Black woman Feminist poet or Yusef Komunyakaa who is Black and a Vietnam War veteran, at once distancing and fusing these two aspects of his identity in interesting configurations. Naomi Shahab Nye, with her mixed race descent and advocacy of the Arab American view is, at the same time, a recognized chronicler of the American Southwest. The categories not only collide and coalesce but also simultaneously accommodate preclusions and distinctions within its larger rubric. Contemporary war poetry, for instance, deals with the Vietnam War as well as the Arab American military tensions as has been documented by the poets mentioned above.

It is precisely this assumption of multiple identities by poets which often makes it difficult to slot them in exclusive categories.

To the congruence of White, Black, and European and South-East Asian immigrant voices may be added that of the Native American. With its hundreds of tribes, the indigenous people of the Americas have varied ethnic allegiances contributing, in no small measure to the mesmeric concatenations of poetic utterance. N Scott Momaday, born in 1934 is a Kiowa novelist, short story writer, essayist and poet whose novel *House Made of Dawn* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1969. Joy Harjo, born in 1951 is a renowned performer and writer of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation who is serving her second term as the 23rd Poet Laureate of the United States.

Some of the recurrent themes in contemporary poetry seem to be an awareness of racial difference and tension (in most of the Black, indigenous and mixed-race poets), the negotiation of divergent cultures as found in Julia Alvarez and Naomi Shahab Nye; political and military tensions exemplified in the Vietnam War and the Middle Eastern question seen in Yusef Komunyakaa (Vietnam War), Brian Turner (Second Iraq War) and Naomi Shahab Nye (Arab-American conflicts); the AIDS crisis with its attendant problems in D. A. Powell, Marie Howe and Danez Smith; gay preoccupations as evident in Danez Smith; and female desire and sexuality in Deborah Landau, Paisley Rekdal and Beth Ann Fennelly.

7.12 Summing Up

While American poetry in colonial times was certainly less vibrant and more derivative than it came to be in later eras it did plough the earth and turn the soil for successful plantings in subsequent seasons, not to mention the significant, if not substantial crops that it reaped during its own harvests. The nation-forming impetus (both in terms of constitution and consolidation) seen to be at work since the middle of the 18th century till practically the end of the following one with the War of Independence, the Civil War, Emancipation and Reconstruction, among other developments, led to the emergence of a unified political entity which came to exert an increasing influence on the world stage. The poetry during this time, not unnaturally, reflected the concatenations of both conflict and consensus, and engagement and withdrawal, a case in point being Whitman's rousing rhetoric which stood at variance from and complemented Dickinson's resonant resistances.

Geographical and historical transfer, involving the movement of people within and into America described trajectories that often undercut and overlapped each other in interesting geometries of expansion and constriction. The freedom of four million enslaved Americans brought about by Emancipation reorganized the social, economic and cultural structure of

the nation in the second half of the 19th century even as the project of the Western Frontier extended the internally available habitable terrain, occasioning migrations of considerable magnitude bound for the West, though naturally not without conflict with the indigenous populations.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, therefore, poetry in America sought to capture the delight and devastation of such poignant, often painful uprooting, upheaval and rehabilitation. Uncompromising in its search for truth – recognizing the latter in categories ranging from Dickinson’s “superb surprise” through Stevens’ “sudden rightnesses” and Frost’s “wisdom” to Ginsberg’s “magic lines,” American poetry has walked the course, and is now intent on exploring further terrains.

7.13 Comprehension Exercises

Essay Type Questions :

1. Give an account of poetry in 17th century America.
2. How did the 18th century poets help shape the tradition in its infancy?
3. Critically discuss the roles of the different schools of poetry in the first half of the 19th century.
4. How did Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson contribute to, and develop the formation of a distinct “American” voice in the national tradition of poetry?
5. Write an essay on the American Modernist poets.

Medium-length Questions :

1. Examine briefly the change from Puritan to Enlightenment ethos in American society and culture.
2. Write a brief essay on the Confessional Poets and their poetry.
3. Discuss the politics of protest in African-American poetry.
4. Briefly comment on the contribution of Native American poets to American poetry.
5. What are the main thematic interests and overlaps in contemporary American poetry?

Short Questions

1. What do you understand by ‘Beat’ poetry? Name the important Beat poets.
2. Write a short note on Feminist poetry in America.
3. What kind of a poem is “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d”? By whom is it written, and in whose memory?

4. Which poet is generally regarded to have struck the first Romantic note on American soil? Name any two of his poems, mentioning their chief characteristics.
5. Mention any two characteristics of Robert Frost's poetry.

7.14 Suggested Reading

1. Paul, Ajanta, *American Poetry: Colonial to Contemporary*, Kolkata, Avenel Press, 2021.
2. Ruland, Richard and Malcolm Bradbury, *From Puritanism to Postmodernism: A History of American Literature*, Penguin, New York, 1991.
3. Stern, Milton R., and Seymour L. Gross, eds. *American Literature Survey: Colonial and Federal to 1800*. New York: Viking, 1975.
4. Stern, Milton R., and Seymour L. Gross, eds., *American Literature Survey: The American Romantics*, General Introduction, New York: Viking, 1975.

Unit 8 □ Anne Bradstreet – ‘The Prologue’

Structure

- 8.1 Objectives**
- 8.2 Introduction**
- 8.3 Anne Bradstreet’s Life**
- 8.4 Anne Bradstreet’s Works**
- 8.5 Selected Texts**
- 8.6 Major themes in Anne Bradstreet’s Poetry**
 - 8.6.1 Role of women**
 - 8.6.2 Mortality**
 - 8.6.3 Ideological tensions**
- 8.7 Structure and Style of Bradstreet’s Poetry**
- 8.8 Summing Up**
- 8.9 Comprehension Exercises**
- 8.10 Suggested Reading**

8.1 Objectives

The objectives of this unit is to introduce learners to the poetry of the Puritan Period in America; to assess the significance of the work of a major poet such as Anne Bradstreet; to examine the tensions and contradictions in the work of the said poet and to especially evaluate her literary contribution against the background of the Puritan ethos.

8.2 Introduction

It is clear from our earlier reading that poetry was not a typical or favoured mode of literary expression, historical and ecclesiastical writing having gained preeminence in that sphere. The pioneers who were busy subduing a wilderness and planting their fledgling colonies were far more occupied with administrative, judicial and religious concerns, and dealing, on a day to day basis with the exigencies of civic governance. There were the Native Americans to contend with, mutinies in the rank and file of the white

settlers, administrative and judicial decisions to be taken, not to mention the nurturing of the Protestant ethos in the new colony.

The poetry of the period was typified by the expressions of a poet such as Michael Wigglesworth whose rousing poem “**The Day of Doom**” (1662) on the Calvinist theme of original sin was extremely well received in its day. Popular because of its treatment of contemporary enthusiasms, this poem, however lost its importance in later times. The poetry of Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor, on the other hand, being subtle, complex, and inspired by the English Metaphysical poets had not only topical relevance but has retained its significance to this day.

8.3 Anne Bradstreet’s Life

Born to a wealthy and cultured Puritan family in Northampton, England in 1612, Anne Bradstreet was inclined towards scholarship since her youth. She was the daughter of Thomas Dudley the steward of the Earl of Lincoln. Consequently, Anne who grew up in an elegant and erudite atmosphere and acquired a learning that was unusual for a woman of her time. Married at the age of sixteen, Anne migrated with her parents and young family at the time of the founding of Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. They were part of the Puritan émigrés aboard the *Arbella* under the leadership of John Winthrop.

A mother of eight children and the wife and daughter of public officials in New England, Bradstreet wrote poetry in addition to her other duties. In her youth she was especially influenced by the works of Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas but her later writings develop into her unique style of poetry which centers on her role as a mother, her struggles with the sufferings of life, and her Puritan faith.

Her first volume of poems was published in England in 1650 under a very long title not of her own choosing - ‘*The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung up in America... by a Gentlewoman of those Parts*’. The publication of this work made Bradstreet the first female poet to have been published in England as well as the New World. The poems were interesting reflections not only on the moral ideas held by her but also on some of the emerging scientific theories and social practices of the day. A second edition was brought out with a few additional poems and the approval of Bradstreet. A third edition was published posthumously with more additions and finally, a fourth one in 1867 containing several unpublished works. This edition came to be known as the Andover Collection. Her later poetry not published in her lifetime and shared with family and friends were more personal and mature in note and far more original.

Repeated uprooting's within New England informed the life of the Bradstreet family in the colony as its members shifted to different locations several times. From Salem they moved to Charlestown, then to Newtown (later called Cambridge), then to Ipswich, and finally to Andover in 1645. The tuberculosis that Anne came to be afflicted with had taken a toll on her health. However, the unkindest cut perhaps was the fire which ravaged the family home of the Bradstreets in North Andover reducing them to homelessness and penury. The poet composed the poem *Verses Upon the Burning of Our House* in memory of this terrible misfortune in their lives. Anne Bradstreet died on September 16, 1672 in North Andover, Massachusetts at the age of 60 of tuberculosis.

8.4 Anne Bradstreet's Works

Before the Birth of One of Her Children

A Dialogue between Old England and New

A Letter to Her Husband, Absent upon Public Employment

For Deliverance From A Fever

Deliverance from Another Sore Fit

Contemplations (poem)

In Honour of that High and Mighty Princess, Queen Elizabeth

In Reference to her Children, 23 June 1659

The Author to Her Book

The Flesh and the Spirit

The Four Ages of Man (quatrain)

Four Seasons of the Year (quatrain)

Four Elements (quatrain)

Of The Four Ages of Man (quatrain)

The Four Monarchies (quatrain)

The Prologue

To Her Father with Some Verses

To My Dear and Loving Husband

Upon a Fit of Sickness, Anno 1632 Aetatis Suae, 19

Upon My Son Samuel His Going For England, November 6, 1657

Upon Some Distemper of Body

Verses upon the Burning of our House

The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America (1650) and, from the Manuscripts. Meditations Divine and Morall, Letters, and Occasional Poems, Facsimile ed., 1965, Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, ISBN 978-0-8201-1006-6.

An Exact Epitome of the Three First Monarchies (1650) (a.k.a. Exact Epitome of the Four Monarchies)

8.5 Selected Texts

i) "Upon a Fit of Sickness, Anno. 1632"

*O Bubble blast, how long can'st last?
That always art a breaking,
No sooner blown, but dead and gone,
Ev'n as a word that's speaking.
O whil'st I live, this grace me give,
I dng good may be,
Then death's arrest I shall count best,
because it's thy decree.*

ii) "Before the Birth of One of Her Children"

*All things within this fading world hath end,
Adversity doth still our joys attend;
No ties so strong, no friends so dear and sweet,
But with death's parting blow are sure to meet.
The sentence past is most irrevocable,
A common thing, yet oh, inevitable.
How soon, my Dear, death may my steps attend,
How soon't may be thy lot to lose thy friend,
We both are ignorant, yet love bids me
These farewell lines to recommend to thee,
That when the knot's untied that made us one,
I may seem thine, who in effect am none.
And if I see not half my days that's due,
What nature would, God grant to yours and you;
The many faults that well you know I have*

*Let be interred in my oblivious grave;
If any worth or virtue were in me,
Let that live freshly in thy memory
And when thou feel'st no grief, as I no harmes,
Yet love thy dead, who long lay in thine arms,
And when thy loss shall be repaid with gains
Look to my little babes, my dear remains.
And if thou love thyself, or loved'st me,
These O protect from stepdame's injury.
And if chance to thine eyes shall bring this verse,
With some sad sighs honor my absent hearse;
And kiss this paper for thy dear love's sake,
Who with salt tears this last farewell did take*

iii) "A Letter to her Husband"

*My head, my heart, mine eyes, my life, nay, more,
My joy, my magazine of earthly store,
If two be one, as surely thou and I,
How stayest thou there, whilst I at Ipswich lie?
So many steps, head from the heart to sever,
If but a neck, soon should we be together.
I like the Earth this season, mourn in black,
My Sun is gone so far in's zodiac,
Whom whilst I 'joyed, nor storms, nor frost I felt,
His warmth such frigid colds did cause to melt.
My chilled limbs now numbed lie forlorn;
Return; return, sweet Sol, from Capricorn;
In this dead time, alas, what can I more
Than view those fruits which through thy heat I bore?
Which sweet contentment yield me for a space,
True living pictures of their father's face.
O strange effect! now thou art southward gone,
I weary grow the tedious day so long;*

*But when thou northward to me shalt return,
I wish my Sun may never set, but burn
Within the Cancer of my glowing breast,
The welcome house of him my dearest guest.
Where ever, ever stay, and go not thence,
Till nature's sad decree shall call thee hence;
Flesh of thy flesh, bone of thy bone,
I here, thou there, yet but both one.*

iv) **“To My Dear and Loving Husband (1678)”**

*If ever two were one, then surely we.
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee;
If ever wife was happy in a man,
Compare with me ye women if you can.
I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold,
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
My love is such that rivers cannot quench,
Nor ought but love from thee give recompense.
Thy love is such I can no way repay;
The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.
Then while we live, in love let's so persevere,
That when we live no more we may live ever.*

v) **From “Prologue” (Stanzas 1 and 5)**

1. *To sing of wars, of captains, and of kings
Of cities founded, commonwealths begun,
For my mean pen are too superior things;
Or how they all, or each, their dates have run;
Let poets and historians set these forth;
My obscure lines shall not so dim their worth.*
2. *I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
Who says my hand a needle better fits;
A poet's pen all scorn I should thus wrong,
For such despite they cast on female wits.*

*If what I do prove well, it won't advance;
They'll say its stol'n, or else it was by chance.*

vi) From “**Contemplations**”

(Stanzas 1-3)

1. *Sometime now past in the Autumnal Tide,
When Phoebus wanted but one hour to bed,
The trees all richly clad, yet void of pride,
Were gilded o're by his rich golden head.
Their leaves and fruits seem'd painted but was true
Of green, of red, of yellow, mixed hew,
Rapt were my senses at this delectable view.*
2. *I wist not what to wish, yet sure thought I,
If so much excellence abide below,
How excellent is he that dwells on high?
Whose power and beauty by his works we know.
Sure he is goodness, wisdom, glory, light,
That hath this under world so richly dight.
More Heaven than Earth was here, no winter and no night.*
3. *Then on a stately Oak I cast mine Eye,
Whose ruffling top the Clouds seem'd to aspire;
How long since thou wast in thine Infancy?
Thy strength and stature, more thy years admire,
Hath hundred winters past since thou wast born?
Or thousand since thou brakest thy shell of horn,
If so, all these as nought, Eternity doth scorn.*

(Stanzas 30 and 33)

30. *And yet this sinful creature, frail and vain,
This lump of wretchedness, of sin and sorrow,
This weather-beaten vessel wracked with pain,
Joys not in hope of an eternal morrow;
Nor all his losses, crosses and vexations,
In weight, in frequency and long duration,
Can make him deeply groan for that divine translation.*

33. *O Time, the fatal wrack of mortal things,
That draws oblivion's curtains over kings,
Their sumptuous monuments, men know them not,
Their names without a record are forgot,
Their pats, their ports, their pomp's all laid in th' dust,
Nor wit, nor gold nor buildings 'scape time's rust;
But he whose name is graved in the white stone
Shall last and shine when all of these are gone.*

vii) *Verses upon the Burning of our House (1666)*

*In silent night when rest I took,
For sorrow near I did not look,
I waken'd was with thund'ring noise
And piteous shrieks of dreadful voice.
That fearful sound of "fire" and "fire,"
Let no man know is my Desire.
I starting up, the light did spy,
And to my God my heart did cry
To straighten me in my Distress
And not to leave me succourless.
Then coming out, behold a space
The flame consume my dwelling place.
And when I could no longer look,
I blest his grace that gave and took,
That laid my goods now in the dust.
Yea, so it was, and so 'twas just.
It was his own; it was not mine.
Far be it that I should repine,
He might of all justly bereft
But yet sufficient for us left.
When by the Ruins oft I past
My sorrowing eyes aside did cast
And here and there the places spy*

*Where oft I sate and long did lie,
Here stood that Trunk, and there that chest,
There lay that store I counted best,
My pleasant things in ashes lie
And them behold no more shall I.
Under the roof no guest shall sit,
Nor at thy Table eat a bit.
No pleasant talk shall 'ere be told
Nor things recounted done of old.
No Candle 'ere shall shine in Thee,
Nor bridegroom's voice ere heard shall bee.
In silence ever shalt thou lie.
Adieu, Adieu, All's Vanity.
Then straight I 'gin my heart to chide:
And did thy wealth on earth abide,
Didst fix thy hope on mouldring dust,
The arm of flesh didst make thy trust?
Raise up thy thoughts above the sky
That dunghill mists away may fly.
Thou hast a house on high erect
Fram'd by that mighty Architect,
With glory richly furnished
Stands permanent, though this be fled.
It's purchased and paid for too
By him who hath enough to do.
A price so vast as is unknown,
Yet by his gift is made thine own.
There's wealth enough; I need no more.
Farewell, my pelf; farewell, my store.
The world no longer let me love;
My hope and Treasure lies above.*

8.6 Major themes in Anne Bradstreet's Poetry

Anne Bradstreet's poems were surprisingly well received by contemporary New England society given the orthodox tilt of the patriarchal dispensation at the helm. They were actually given a second edition that was brought out in Boston in 1687 under a considerably abbreviated title. The new poems that were added to the original ones in this second edition have, with their depth of feeling and complexity of tone, contributed to the lasting reputation of this pioneering poet who, in some measure, resembled and anticipated another New England woman poet, namely Emily Dickinson who was to appear on the scene 200 years later.

Throughout her life Bradstreet was concerned with the topics of sin and redemption, physical and emotional frailty, death and immortality. In her earliest extant poem "*Upon a Fit of Sickness, Anno 1632*" Bradstreet is concerned with the typical Puritan themes of the brevity and uncertainty of life, the certainty of death and a belief in spiritual salvation. In the poem "For Deliverance from A Fever" Bradstreet describes with great accuracy the physical discomfort brought on by a fever and ends the same with the typical Puritan gratitude to God for his mercies.

*"Praise to my Lord, I say,
Who hath redeemed my soul from pit,
Praises to Him for aye."*

Most of the poems included in Anne Bradstreet's first collection, *The Tenth Muse* (1650), were quite conventional in style and form, and dealt with history, society and politics. In one poem, for instance, Anne Bradstreet wrote of the 1642 uprising of Puritans led by Cromwell. In another, she praises the accomplishments of Queen Elizabeth.

Her style and form became less conventional, and instead, she wrote more personally and directly — of her own experiences, of religion, of daily life, of her thoughts, of the New England landscape.

As in the other types of literary expression of the Puritan Period Anne Bradstreet turned instinctively to God for deliverance in times of distress and tribulation.

*"And to my God my heart did cry
To straighten me in my Distress
And not to leave me succourless."*

Several of her poems reflect her struggle to accept the adversity of the Puritan colony, contrasting earthly losses with the eternal rewards of the good. In one poem, for instance,

she writes of an actual event: when the family's house burned down. In another, she writes of her thoughts of her own possible death as she approaches the birth of one of her children. Anne Bradstreet contrasts the transitory nature of earthly treasure with eternal treasures and seems to see these trials as lessons from God.

As a younger poet, Bradstreet wrote five quaternions, epic poems of four parts each that explore the diverse yet complementary natures of their subject. Her four quaternions were "Seasons," "Elements," "Humours," and "Ages". The first two quaternions were more successful. These long poems helped Bradstreet to systematize and integrate the knowledge that she had acquired in the Earl of Lincoln's household, and were, on the whole useful in the development of her craftsmanship as a poet.

Much of Bradstreet's poetry stemmed from her observation of the world around her, as she focused on its day-to-day aspects along with the larger religious and social issues that constituted the discourse of the times. Bradstreet's poetry was considered by Cotton Mather "a monument to her memory beyond the stateliest marble." Long considered primarily of historical interest, she won critical acceptance in the 20th century as a writer of enduring verse, particularly for her sequence of religious poems "Contemplations", which was written for her family and not published until the mid-19th century. Bradstreet's work was deeply influenced by the poet Guillaume de Salluste Du Bartas, who was favored by 17th-century readers.

Nearly a century later, Martha Wadsworth Brewster, a notable 18th-century American poet and writer, in her principal work, *Poems on Diverse Subjects*, was influenced and pays homage to Bradstreet's verse.

An example of this is in her poem "In Honour of that High and Mighty Princess Queen Elizabeth of Happy Memory", in which she praises Queen Elizabeth as proof that the common perceptions men held about women were wrong. She tends to focus on Elizabeth's ability to excel in more masculine areas, such as war, as we see in the lines below."

8.6.1 Role of women

Marriage played a large role in the lives of Puritan women. In Bradstreet's poem, "To My Dear And Loving Husband" where she reveals that she is one with her husband:

"If ever two were one, then surely we."

In "A Letter to her Husband" the same idea is expressed:

"If two be one, as surely thou and I,

How stayest thou there, whilst I at Ipswich lie?"

She evaluates their love through the imagery of material wealth ("whole mines of gold" and "all the riches that the East doth hold") and the terminology of accounts – 'recompense';

“repay”; “reward” and “manifold” *To My Dear and Loving Husband*. In her poem “A Letter to my Husband” she speaks about the loss of her husband when he is gone.

“I like the earth this season morn in black, my sun is gone.” Here Anne is expressing her feelings of missing her husband when he is away.

The Puritans believed in the divine sanction of marriage which according to them bestowed sanctity on the institution that went beyond the understanding of it as a mere social contract with its mundane obligations. Bradstreet’s Puritan ethics, her love for her husband and her devotion to her poetry come together in shaping her outlook on life. In her poem *“Before the Birth of One of Her Children”*, Bradstreet acknowledges God’s gift of marriage. In the lines, “And if I see not half my days that’s due, what nature would, God grant to yours, and you,” Bradstreet is saying that if she was to die soon, what would God give her husband. She could be referring to him possibly remarrying after she dies. Another line shows that she believes that it is possible for her husband to remarry. By using the lines, “These O protect from stepdame’s injury”,^[6] Bradstreet is calling for her children to be protected from the abuse of a future step mother. The fact that Bradstreet believes that God will grant her husband a new wife if she dies shows how much Puritan women believed in marriage and how God provided them with this gift. Through these reflections she betrays an uncanny prescience about her husband’s status in the event of her death for, he does indeed remarry after her death.

In the poem “Letter to Her Husband, Absent upon Public Employment,” Bradstreet states how keenly she feels her husband’s absence when he is away on official duties and how happy she feels upon his return. In Bradstreet’s poems, it can be assumed she truly loved her husband and missed him when he was away from her and the family. Bradstreet’s sense of loneliness in the absence of her husband is quite unmixed with the popular feminine resentment of the greater importance accorded to men at the time but is a simple case of her feeling of loss.

The contemporary gendering of social functions is clearly seen in Bradstreet’s poetry. The primary roles of women in Puritan society were to be good wives and mothers, and cater to the needs of the family in such capacities. Women were expected to sew, cook, clean and perform all the other chores associated with a domestic routine. They were expected to raise children in the Puritan tradition inculcating the associated moral values in them. In all they were expected to be sober, earnest, industrious and virtuous, in keeping with the qualities enjoined on them in the Bible.

Several of Bradstreet’s works also show that the role of Puritan woman was for them to take care of their children. Various works of Bradstreet is dedicated to her own children. In works such as “Before the Birth of One of Her Children” and “In Reference to Her

Children”, Bradstreet shows the great love that she has for her children, both unborn and born. In Puritan society, children were considered to be gifts from God, and consequently they were cherished.

The role of women is a common subject in Bradstreet’s poems. Living in a Puritan society during the 1600s, Bradstreet did not subscribe to the patriarchal view that women were inferior to men. Women were expected to spend all their time cooking, cleaning, taking care of their children, and attending to their husband’s every need. In her poem “In Honour of that High and Mighty Princess Queen Elizabeth of Happy Memory,” Bradstreet questions this belief.

“Now say, have women worth? or have they none? Or had they some, but with our queen is’t gone? Nay Masculines, you have thus text us long, But she, though dead, will vindicate our wrong, Let such as say our Sex is void of Reason, Know tis a Slander now, but once was Treason.”

Anne Bradstreet articulates in her poetry the problems of the woman writer who has to reconcile her several roles, balancing domestic duties and literary interests, negotiate the world of professional writing, traditionally regarded as a male preserve, and redefine her image and status in the context of her identity as both woman and poet. In the selected stanzas of ‘Prologue’, for instance Bradstreet ironically deprecates her knowledge of the world and her eligibility to write about lofty things these generally being regarded as the preserve of her male contemporaries. In the same text she speaks about the reception of her work, as well, maintaining that men consider her more fit to attend to domestic duties rather than undertake literary labours, and if her poetry turns out to be good her male colleagues and reviewers dismiss the same citing plagiarism on her part.

*“I am obnoxious to each carping tongue
Who says my hand a needle better fits,
A poet’s pen all scorn I should thus wrong.
For such despite they cast on female wits:
If what I do prove well, it won’t advance,
They’ll say it’s stol’n, or else it was by chance.”*

8.6.2 Mortality

Another recurring subject in Bradstreet’s work is mortality. She is always conscious of the passage of time nurtured, no doubt on the prevailing Elizabethan sense of the flux and mutability of life. In many of her works, Bradstreet writes about her death and how it will affect her children and others in her life. The recurrence of this mortality theme has been viewed by some as autobiographical in an age when life expectancy was not, indeed high.

In a very private sense, in work not intended for the public, she was referring to her own medical problems and her belief that she would die sooner than expected. In addition to the illnesses suffered by her (smallpox and partial paralysis), Bradstreet and her family dealt with a devastating house fire that left them homeless and penurious. She hoped her children would think of her fondly and honor her memory in her poem, "Before the Birth of One of Her Children":

"If any worth or virtue were in me,
Let that live freshly in thy memory."

Bradstreet is also known for using her poetry as a means to question her own Puritan beliefs; her doubt concerning God's mercy and her struggles to continue to place her faith in him are exemplified in such poems as "Verses upon the Burning of our House" and "In Memory of My Dear Grandchild". Her works demonstrate a conflict that many Puritans would not have felt comfortable discussing, let alone writing about.

8.6.3 Ideological tensions

Bradstreet challenged Puritan beliefs by announcing her complete infatuation with her husband, Simon Bradstreet. In Puritan society it was considered improper to glorify romantic love. In "To My Dear and Loving Husband," Bradstreet confesses her undying love for Simon saying "Thy love is such I can no way repay,/The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray." Her deep passions can be found again in "A Letter to Her Husband, Absent upon Public Employment." Her openly expressed affections for her husband help readers to understand Bradstreet's frankness and non-reluctance to take on the establishment at a time when women had to perforce submit to the dictates of patriarchy. Puritans believed that this kind of intense love for a human being would only cause a person to stray further from God. Anne Bradstreet wrote in a different format than most other writers of her time. This mainly is due to the fact that she expressed her feelings spontaneously without considering its engagement with the reader.

"To my faults that well you know I have let be interred in my oblivious grave;/ if any worth of virtue were in me, let that live freshly in thy memory". She expresses the feeling she has of wanting her children to remember her in a good light.

Bradstreet often used a sarcastic tone in her poetry. In the first stanza of "The Prologue" she claims "for my mean pen are too superior things" referring to society's belief that she is unfit to write about important events such as wars and the founding of cities because she is a woman. In stanza five Bradstreet continues to use irony by stating "who says my hand a needle better fits". This is another example of her sarcastic tone because society during this time expected women to perform household chores rather than write poetry.

Although Anne Bradstreet endured many hardships in life, her poems are usually written in a hopeful and positive tone. Throughout her poem In “Memory of My Dear Grandchild Simon Bradstreet,” she mentions that even though she has lost her grandson in this world, she will one day be reunited with him in Heaven. In “Upon the Burning of Our House,” Bradstreet describes her house in flames but selflessly declares “there’s wealth enough, I need no more.” Although Bradstreet lost many of her close relatives and material possessions she kept a positive attitude and remained strong through her faith in God.

8.7 Structure and Style of Bradstreet’s Poetry

In her first book Bradstreet’s style and form were conventional as she wrote on historical, political and sociological topics. Her tone matured in her later poetry where she wrote more personally and directly of her immediate experiences in the Puritan landscape of New England. Sometimes, a fine rhythm informs her poetry as in stanza 33 of “Contemplations” which, swayed by the momentum of the emotion expressed seems to dictate a corresponding onrush of words, making for a perfect fusion of theme and style. Bradstreet’s poetry is, perhaps, inevitably influenced by the complex style of the English Metaphysical poets and their ingenious use of imagery. As is clear from the poems selected for inclusion in this Unit there is a considerable use of metaphor, personification, alliteration and rhetorical question. She is not averse to using satire which is seen in several of her poems, most notably in “The Prologue” where she directs it against the patriarchal values of the time:

If what I do prove well, it won’t advance;

They’ll say its stol’n, or else it was by chance.

The vocabulary and rhythm of the stanzas from “Contemplations” are reminiscent of Shakespeare’s sonnets which deal with similar themes. The iambic pentameter lines used in the poem express the rhythm of emotion which drives the argument in the stanzas. The following lines from Stanza 33 illustrate the point.

Their pats, their ports, their pomp’s all laid in th’ dust,

Nor wit, nor gold nor buildings ‘scape time’s rust;

The iambic tetrameter lines in a poem such as “Verses upon the Burning of our House (1666)”, are equally eloquent in expressing the grief that the poet feels at such devastating loss.

I starting up, the light did spy,

And to my God my heart did cry

*To straighten me in my Distress
And not to leave me succourless.*

Bradstreet often resorts to allegory to cloak her intense fears and passions. In the poem “For Deliverance from Fever”, for instance, she uses malaise as a metaphor for the spiritual anguish that rages in her mind.

*Beclouded was my soul with fear
Of Thy displeasure sore,
Nor could I read my evidence
Which oft I read before.
“Hide not Thy Face from me!” I cried,
“From burnings keep my soul.”*

Not only allegory, it is interesting to note the use of direct speech in her poetry which introduces a dramatic element, at once imploring and urgent. The ending of the same poem illustrates an aspect of the discourse of deliverance that was common in the age when the Puritan colonists gave thanks to God not only for the daily miracles but also for the resolution of the metaphysical anguish experienced by the human supplicant.

*o, praises to my mighty God,
Praise to my Lord, I say,
Who hath redeemed my soul from pit,
Praises to Him for aye.*

A pioneering poet in the infancy of the nation with a psyche shaped by both the Old and New Worlds, Bradstreet defined, and in a sense, redefined the prevailing temper of the times with the addition of the woman’s perspective in a canon largely, if not exclusively patriarchal. The “anxiety of authorship” traditionally felt by a secular woman writer assumes a more complex and intense form in the works of Anne Bradstreet. “Here, the woman writer’s doubt and guilt infected question “Can I create?” becomes “Should I dare to try?” observes Roberta Gupta in her essay “Anxiety of Authorship and Self Civil War in Anne Bradstreet’s Poetry” (Kentucky Review, 1983, 43). Gupta goes on to assert that Bradstreet owed a debt to her human “master”, Du Bartas in her youth along with that to her divine mentor, namely the Judeo-Christian God worshipped by the Puritans. This constant consciousness of inadvertent temerity in the face of the overwhelming Puritan tenet of obedience to God bred in Bradstreet’s poetry subtleties of sophistry that lent an interesting dimension to her work. It is important to note, however, that even as Bradstreet absorbed the literary influences on her she was able to develop a distinct style and leave her mark

on the poetry of the Puritan Period paving the way for later generations to build on that legacy.

8.8 Summing Up

Anne Bradstreet was a poet who was, perhaps fortuitously, associated with two continents—Europe and North America; two countries: England and colonial America (the United States of America was yet to be born); and two cultures: the Old World, decadent English culture and that of the New World, yet to come into its own as a sovereign nation and imbued with less rigid rules. She was rooted in her Puritan upbringing in England which she retained even after her entry into America even as she augured the modern. She combined the domestic and the professional spheres challenging, in the process the ingrained gender stereotypes that so influenced the contemporary mindset. And, in so doing, she emerged as a woman of mettle, a path breaker and a worthy forerunner of the poets who would earn a place in the literary canons of the nation.

8.9 Comprehension Exercises

Essay Type Questions :

1. Critically discuss Anne Bradstreet's contribution to American poetry of the Puritan Period.
2. Comment on the themes in Bradstreet's poetry.
3. Would you consider Anne Bradstreet to be a major poet? Give reasons for your view.

Medium-length Questions :

1. Examine the literary influences on Bradstreet's poetry.
2. Which features of the Old and New Worlds do you find in Bradstreet's poems?
3. Write a brief note on the structure and style of Anne Bradstreet's poetry.

Short Questions :

1. Which poet was Bradstreet most influenced by in her youth? Name the poems that she wrote under this influence.
2. Give an example of the type of satire that Bradstreet used (from any one of her poems).
3. Name any two types of metre used by Bradstreet with illustrative examples from her poems.

8.10 Suggested Reading

1. Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).
2. David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).
3. Robert Daly, "God's Altar: The World and the Flesh," *Puritan Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).
4. Richardson, Robert D., Jr. "“Men can doe best, and women know it well”: *Anne Bradstreet* and Feminist Aesthetics." *Kentucky Philological Review* 2 (1987): 21-29.
5. Anne Bradstreet | Poetry Foundation
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org> › Poets

Unit 9 □ Walt Whitman: O Captain! My Captain!

Structure

- 9.1 Introduction and Objectives
- 9.2 The life and works of Walt Whitman
- 9.3 American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln's Death and the Birth of Whitman's Most Popular Poem "O Captain! My Captain!"
- 9.4 Substance of the poem
- 9.5 Analysis and discussion of the poem
- 9.6 Structure and form of the poem
- 9.7 Word meanings and references
- 9.8 Summing up
- 9.9 Comprehension Exercises
- 9.10 Suggested Readings

9.1 Introduction and Objectives

In this unit we shall learn about one of the most celebrated American poets of all time, Walt Whitman, and his widely read and anthologized poem "O Captain! My Captain!" Though this poem is neither couched in Whitman's signature *vers libre* or free verse nor does it reflect the famed poet's aesthetic acumen to its fullest satisfaction, it was an instant success for its regular, well-recognized and conventional metrical pattern and application of the popular metaphor of sea captain to mourn the assassination of the 16th American President Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865). Whitman's reputation which was at that time a bit at stake for various reasons, received an immediate boost after its publication. Only three months after its first appearance in the *Saturday Press*, Boston *Commonwealth* wrote, "this displaced and slighted poet has written the most touching dirge for Abraham Lincoln of all that have appeared." However, its popularity did not simply end there, but much to the chagrin of Whitman himself, has travelled across ages and places to be one of the most read and quoted poems all over the world even today. Here in the following sub-units we shall spend some more time over these and other necessary details pertaining to the poet and the poem with the aim of a satisfactory learning outcome.

9.2 The life and works of Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman along with Emily Dickinson is considered the most prominent poetic figures emerging from the nineteenth century cultural and literary matrices of America. However, their poems differ significantly from each other both from the perspective of approach and form. In comparison to the more private Dickinson, Whitman is more public. Instead of being an apotheosis of absolute solipsistic individuality, Whitman is more comfortable in locating his individual self in the ongoing socio-political scenario. Ezra Pound's observation of Walt Whitman's essential true self is worth mentioning here— "He is America. His crudity is an exceeding great stench, but it is America. He is the hollow place in the rock that echoes with time." Notwithstanding Pound's sarcastic take on his "crudity" which Whitman himself was never afraid of being associated with, the identification of him with America was something that rather Whitman always wanted to achieve as an representative American in his writings.

The second of the nine children of the working class parents Walter and Louisa Van Velsor Whitman, Walt Whitman (May 31, 1819- March 26, 1892) did not have much of formal education and was largely self-taught. Growing up on Long Island and Brooklyn, he began to learn about the printer's trade only at the age of twelve. It is during these days that he came in touch with literary pieces by great masters such as Homer, Dante and Shakespeare which played a major role in shaping his literary aspirations in future. He founded a weekly newspaper, *The Long-Islander* and later edited a number of Brooklyn and New York papers beginning from 1841. During the late 1840s he started writing poems after his initial hiccup with the dismal sentimental fiction *Franklin Evans; or, The Inebriate* (1842). He published some of the poems in 1850 before finally embarking on his radically innovative autobiographical poetic journey with the publication of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* (1855) containing twelve poems in free verse. Free verse is a verse technique that does not follow any strict and regular metrical pattern. In this verse form, though the lines are usually short like traditional verses, they may be of varying lengths either lacking any rhyme or making use of it only sparingly. Whitman cannot be credited with the invention of this free verse and there were many previous references of it being used by many other poets. However, it is in the hands of Whitman that this verse form reached the panache of perfection. To the American readers who had so far been only accustomed to regular metrical patterns with rhymes, Whitman's poems, founded on raw experiments and resembling the free individual voice came as a shock. Added to this free-flowing style, an exaltation of human body and sexual love subjected this anthology initially to a lot of severe criticisms. But it is the same free style and exaltation of self that Ralph Waldo Emerson found most

promising and path-breaking and he showered praise on Whitman in a personal letter to him in the following way—

I am not blind to the worth of the wonderful gift of LEAVES OF GRASS. I find it the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom that America has yet contributed. I am very happy in reading it, as great power makes us happy.... I give you joy of your free and brave thought. I have great joy in it. I find incomparable things said incomparably well, as they must be. I find the courage of treatment which so delights us, and which large perception only can inspire.

I greet you at the beginning of a great career, which yet must have had a long foreground somewhere, for such a start. I rubbed my eyes a little, to see if this sunbeam were no illusion; but the solid sense of the book is a sober certainty. It has the best merits, namely, of fortifying and encouraging.

Whitman, who was already much proficient and experienced in publishing and marketing of books, took no time to publish this letter with a view to drawing more people's attention to his work. With Emerson thus exuberantly acknowledging in Whitman the fresh air of free spirit celebrating America, a quick second edition of the book in the following year was inevitable. More editions and revisions followed until the poet's death in 1892. Whitman took thirty-six years to write down the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, and took another thirty-seven years to revise, rearrange, and polish it to his contentment instead of publishing any new anthology of poems.

During the Civil War, Whitman used to spend his spare time visiting the wounded and dying soldiers in the Washington hospitals. With this first-hand experience of the war front and its devastating effect on both the Union and the Confederate soldiers, he published a collection of War poems in 1865 titled *Drum-Taps*. However, American President Abraham Lincoln's sudden assassination in April in the same year prompted him to write down some more poems including four elegiac poems on the death of this great leader in the *Sequel to Drum-Taps*. Among these elegiac poems were the finest tribute to the president, "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd" and the most popular "O Captain! My Captain!"

In 1873 Whitman suffered a stroke and became partially paralyzed. He then moved to Camden to stay with his brother until the publication of his 1882 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. This edition provided him enough money and he bought a simple two-storeyed house in Camden. He lived there until his death in 1892 working on the deathbed edition of *Leaves of Grass* and the final volume of his poems and prose, *Good-Bye My Fancy*.

9.3 American Civil War, Abraham Lincoln's Death and the Birth of Whitman's Most Popular Poem "O Captain! My Captain!"

The bloodiest of war that American people have ever gone through is the Civil War. This war resulted from sectional differences between the people of Northern and Southern states of America and some long-unresolved issues like slavery and states' rights. The election of the anti-slavery Republican, Abraham Lincoln, as the president of America in 1860 even without a single Southern electoral vote jeopardized all the hopes of the Southern slave States to expand slavery to Western territories. This prompted these seven states to secede and form a new nation, the Confederate States of America. However, the newly elected Republican administration and most of the Northern people did not approve of this secession and also feared that such move might ultimately inspire further fragmentations turning United States of America into several small quarrelling countries. All these events eventually led to the Civil War that lasted for four long years and cost nearly 6,25,000 lives. The war ended with the Lincoln-led Northern states securing victory over the Southern states and settling all the unsolved disputes relating either to slavery or to the status of United States as one nation. But before the people of America could even properly celebrate the end of this war, Lincoln was shot dead at Ford's Theatre in Washington on the night of 14 April, 1865, reeling the entire nation under the wave of an unforeseen shock.

Abraham Lincoln and his ideas had a very lasting impression on Whitman. He too like Lincoln wanted an abolition of slavery of the black people, although his constant opposition of the extension of slavery was not guided by any concern for the black slaves. He was rather more worried about the white labourers whose economic opportunities he felt would be threatened unless slavery is altogether abolished. However, Whitman nurtured such an admiration for Lincoln and his able leadership that at one point he even went on to say, "After my dear, dear mother, I guess Lincoln gets almost nearer me than anybody else" (*With Walt Whitman in Camden* by Horace Traubel, Vol. 1, p. 38). So there can be no doubt that Lincoln's sudden assassination would have a great impact on Whitman. During the time Lincoln was shot dead, Whitman's Civil War poetry collection *Drum-Taps* was going through the final stages of publication and some copies had already been distributed. Prompted by Lincoln's death, Whitman put its further distribution on hold in order to include some dedicatory poems expressing his deep respect for the departing soul of the President in it before its final publication. With this plan in mind, he began working intently

on a *Sequel to Drum-Taps* which included one of his highly acclaimed “When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom’d,” and his most popular of all poems, “O Captain! My Captain!” This sequel with eighteen new poems was bound together with the previously printed pages of *Drum-Taps* before the final publication in October the same year. However the copies were not ready for distribution until December and in the meantime Whitman published “O Captain! My Captain!” in *The Saturday Press* on November 4, 1865.

Despite being one of the most quoted poems ever written, “O Captain! My Captain!” is often criticized for being entrapped in un-Whitman like metrical triteness and an ingenuous allegorical representation of popular emotion. Whitman’s profuse sense of loss, almost akin to a mass agony at the death of Lincoln notwithstanding, behind this poem’s conventional form and structure, there might be working an able publisher’s farsightedness in reaping the best out of the time. For a few months during that time, his reputation was a bit on the wane. In June 1865, he was fired from his job with the Indian Bureau as his boss James Harlan suddenly came upon his marked-up copy of *Leaves of Grass* and found it indecent. When the timing of the publication of “O Captain! My Captain” is juxtaposed with that of the controversy surrounding *Leaves of Grass*, it is not difficult to understand why Whitman made a deliberate and conscious attempt to appeal to the popular sense of aesthetics and emotion by writing this poem in a traditional style— especially as a pre-drafted copy of the same in free verse was already available in the Library of Congress. Thus, Whitman’s sudden shift of gear to the popular poetic craftsmanship in this poem is very often attributed to his struggle to redeem his ebbing reputation, and attract a wider readership towards his poetry.

9.5 Analysis and discussion of the poem

This is an elegy where in the first stanza the poet speaker addresses the dead captain of a ship in an impassioned manner, while trying all the time to convey to him the message that their vessel is about to reach its final destination after voyaging across a tumultuous sea.

The port, and the jubilant people eagerly waiting to welcome and celebrate the return of the ship, are now only at a visible distance. But the speaker mourns that only the captain is no more alive to enjoy the ship’s successful arrival at the end of a harrowing trip. The poet-speaker also talks about the ringing sound of the church bells floating away from the land in the first stanza and urges the captain to wake up to the same sound at the beginning of the second stanza. Shifting a bit from his personal response to this gruesome deathly scene, the speaker here rather informs how a great number of people have thronged the bank with flags, flowers and bouquets to give a grand welcome to the victorious captain. They are shouting his name and running here and there only to have a glimpse of their dear captain. But the captain’s lifeless body— lying flat on the deck, with the speaker gently

holding his head— is unable to respond to this cheering crowd. However the speaker is still unable to accept the captain's death and tries to pass this incident as a mere nightmare. Pitted against all the preparations and arrangements of a grand welcome scene, the captain's sudden and unexpected departure becomes all the more unbearable. In the third stanza, the tone is again personal. Here after the momentous stupor occasioned by such a huge loss, the speaker tries to get back to the harsh reality of the still and cold body of the deceased captain. Though the ship is at last safely anchored after achieving its desired object, it has lost its captain. Thus the poem ends with a deep note of sadness at the irreparable loss occasioned by the captain's death.

This poem is written in the form of an extended metaphor to mourn the sudden assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Despite becoming a piece of immediate mass attention, it does not boast at all of the poetics Whitman had been practising for the last ten years. Right from the title, the poem rather takes resort to a very popular and common ship metaphor where the ship is America, the turbulent sea is the American Civil War and the fallen captain is Abraham Lincoln. The imagery of the sea initiated with the title is carried forward through the entire poem with references such as “port,” “deck,” “keel,” “anchor” etc. During the Nineteenth century when naval technology was not as well-equipped and advanced as it is today, any voyage to the sea was nothing less than risking the life. So when Whitman used the metaphor of a “fearful trip,” the common people of contemporary America could easily relate it to the Civil War claiming lakhs of casualties. But now as the War had successfully been restrained under the able guidance of Lincoln and the entire country was basking in the glory of this hard-earned victory, the news of the very leader's sudden death came as a severe blow, so much so that immediately after this horrible incident, the scene of joy drastically changed to a scene of mourning. This juxtaposition of celebration for the end of war on the one hand and the grieving nation on the other has been succinctly epitomized through the image of the dead captain just when the ship was about to reach the port after its fretful journey on the sea. The fellow sailor or the poet speaker's frantic attempts at stirring the captain out of his eternal sleep represents the bewilderment the news of Lincoln's death shrouded all the people with. Here the personal pain as suffered by the poet himself resonates through the millions of hearts, as the common “captain” metaphor with a rather conventional metrical form employed in this poem immediately and unfailingly strikes the same chord of anguish in all. The contrastive visual images of the cheering people still unaware of the fatal news, and the pale, blood-oozing dead body of the captain lying motionless on the deck, intensify the complete unpreparedness of the common people—amidst all the arrangements of merriment— to ever imagine such a dreadful event. As if to wake the people from their illusory euphoric state to this latest ghastly development, the

poet takes resort to two such words as “grim” and “daring” to describe the ship. It is “grim” because it has in its dock the body of the captain, “daring” because of its unflinching approach towards the tough journey on the sea. With the news of Lincoln’s death, the jocund mood of the people at the “daring” win in the Civil War received a sudden jerk and the entire scenario turned “grim” all of a sudden. In contrast to the auditory images such as the hue and cry of the people and the pealing of the church bell and trilling of the bugle, all announcing the restoration of normalcy at the end of the Civil War, Lincoln’s silence—even after repeated passionate addresses made to him—echoes futilely in the abysmal void.

The poem which is uniformly divided in three stanzas, bewails the death of the captain by desperately addressing his lifeless body almost in an attempt to resurrect it. The first two stanzas with the apostrophic call to the captain reflect this urge. The same urge gets transformed to an unbearable, almost unutterable pain when at the beginning of the third stanza the speaker feels that in no way can the captain be brought back to life, since it is beyond any human capacity to keep the pulse throbbing once one is dead. In the penultimate line of the second stanza what the speaker wishes to pass on as some nightmare, proves to be more excruciating in its effect when he becomes increasingly exasperated for being unable to make the captain answer to his repetitive calls. Here at this point the speaker even addresses his dear captain as his “father,” as if Lincoln’s death is not merely a general loss, but a personal loss as well. When no such attempt proves effective in rejuvenating the dead captain, the speaker treads with a heavy heart among all the preparations and arrangements of celebration commemorating the victory in the Civil War, since the very torchbearer of peace and prosperity to America is shot dead.

9.6 Structure and form of the poem

The poem has three eight line stanzas each rhyming AABBCDED. The first quatrain of each stanza contains bigger lines whereas the last quatrain has lines almost half the length of the lines of the previous quatrain. And if the lines of this last quatrain are read taking two lines together, they also seem to rhyme. While the first quatrain provides us with the necessary description of the general ambience of happiness and enjoyment, the second quatrain with shorter lines seems to cut it short with a rather reflective and grieving tone at Lincoln’s death. Mostly written in iambic metre, this poem tries to match the beat resembling that of a song. Its use of alliteration (as in “for you the flag is flung”) and sometimes the repetition of certain words in close proximity (as in the very phrase “O Captain! my Captain!”) create an effect of an army marching forward as if in response either to the end of the Civil War or to pay homage to the befallen leader. The lines rhyme,

but often they rhyme imperfectly, as in “bells” and “trills” or in “a-crowding” and “turning.” This technique is called “slant rhyme” or “half rhyme” which has been here purposefully incorporated to reflect the sudden cause of pain at the death of Lincoln turning all the arrangements of celebration both incomplete and ineffective. The repetitive use of the phrase “fallen cold and dead” at the end of each stanza here functions as a refrain and further enhances the continuous attempt of the poet speaker to resuscitate the captain or Lincoln from his lifeless state and its utter ineffectuality.

Whitman here consciously avoids sticking to his usual free verse technique— and focuses rather on the popular metrical pattern, so that it can resonate with the public emotion at the sudden loss of the saviour of the country, and so that it may produce an easy and effective influence on the popular psyche.

9.7 Word meanings and references

Captain	: The naval officer in charge of a ship. Here it figuratively refers to Abraham Lincoln, the 16th American President and one of the most popular leaders of America.
Fearful	: Causing fear or dread
Fearful trip	: A voyage or journey to the turbulent sea. Here it refers to the American Civil War (1861-65).
Ship	: A large boat that carries people or goods by sea. Here it figuratively refers to America.
Weather'd	: (weathered) Experienced, faced, or withstood with courage
Rack	: Bad weather, extreme pain or anguish
Prize	: Award. Here it refers to the victory won in the American Civil War.
Sought	: (Past Participle form of the verb “seek”) Looked for, wanted to obtain
Port	: A town or city with a harbour, especially one where ships load and unload goods.
Bells	: Church bells
People	: People ready with all the arrangements to celebrate the safe return of the ship.
Exulting	: Expressing great excitement and happiness
Eyes	: Eyes of the people waiting on the land

Steady	: Securely in position
Keel	: The long piece of wood or steel along the bottom of a ship, on which the frame is built, and which sometimes sticks out below the bottom and helps to keep it in a vertical position in the water.
Vessel	: The ship
Grim	: Uninviting or formidable in manner of appearance
Daring	: Showing courage
Deck	: The floor of a ship
Red	: Refers to the red colour of blood
Cold	: Lacking warmth. Cold because of death.
Flung	: Thrown with force
Bugle	: A musical instrument like a small trumpet, used generally in the army for giving signals
Trills	: Sounds with alternate half note above or below
Bouquet	: A bunch of flowers arranged in an attractive way
Ribbon'd wreath	: An arrangement of flowers, leaves and ribbons, especially in the shape of a circle
Shore	: Coast, land along the edge of the sea
A-crowding	: Thronged with people
Swaying	: Moving slowly from side to side
Mass	: People
Eager	: Showing keen interest
Beneath	: Under
Pale	: Bloodless, colourless
Still	: Motionless, lifeless
Pulse	: The rhythmic contraction and expansion of arteries
Anchor'd	: Fixed firmly and stably
Safe and sound	: Safely, free from any danger
Victor	: Winner, a combatant who is able to defeat rivals
Voyage	: A journey by water
Mournful	: Filled with or evoking sadness
Tread	: Walk in heavy steps

9.8 Summing up

In this unit we learnt about Walt Whitman's widely read poem "O Captain! My captain!." Though occasioned by the sudden demise of America's one of the most popular leaders, Abraham Lincoln, this poem seems aptly to tune in to the unmistakable note of emotion of any nation or group grieving for the loss of its leader. In a major shift from Whitman's experimentation with free verse, this poem rather depends on the conventional poetics of a fixed metrical pattern, with the easily identifiable sea metaphors embedded in it.

Here Lincoln has been represented as the captain of a victorious ship after a difficult journey through the sea. However, just when everyone is ready with all the arrangements to welcome the captain for his unparalleled leadership, the news of his sudden death brings everything to a standstill. Utterly stupefied at such an unexpected and adverse incident when everyone is least prepared for it, the fellow sailor makes repeated attempts to call the dead captain back to life, and wishes that it was a mere bad dream. But his desperate call fails to reach the ears of the captain and eventually with a heavy heart, the speaker has to acknowledge that the captain will never be alive again to receive the greetings from the rejoicing populace waiting eagerly to only have a glimpse of him. With the publication of this poem, it immediately transforms to almost attaining the popularity of the national song of a grieving nation. Despite lacking the Whitman-like poetical expertise—because of the spontaneous and sincere expression of emotion in lines and rhythm that all can easily relate to—this poem becomes an instant success among the readers. Ever since, this poem has been being relied upon all over the world to give vent to the feeling of loss at any such leader's death.

9.9 Comprehension Exercises

Essay Type Questions :

1. Comment on Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!" as an occasional poem.
Or,
Write down how a specific historical event led to the writing of the poem "O Captain! My Captain!"
2. Critically analyse "O Captain! My Captain!" as an elegy.
3. Show how by making use of an extended metaphor Whitman has successfully conveyed his idea in the poem "O Captain! My Captain!"

Medium-length Questions :

1. Comment on the structure and form of the poem "O Captain! My Captain!"
2. Analyse the use of different images in the poem.

Short Questions :

Explain with reference to the context—

1. “The ship has weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won”
2. “While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring”
3. “It is some dream that on the deck,
You’ve fallen cold and dead.”
4. “My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will”
5. “Exult O shores, and ring O bells
But I with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.”

9.10 Suggested Readings

1. Allen, Gay Wilson. *Walt Whitman Handbook*. Packard and Company, 1946.
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Unit 10 □ Langston Hughes “Let America be America Again” and Allen Ginsberg “September on Jessore Road”

Structure

- 10.1. Introduction—Langston Hughes
- 10.2 The Harlem Renaissance
- 10.3 Textual analysis of poem “Let America be America Again”
- 10.4 Comprehension Exercises
- 10.5 Works cited and suggested Reading
- 10.6 Introduction— Allen Ginsberg
- 10.7 Textual Analysis of poem “September on Jessore Road”
- 10.8 Comprehension Exercises
- 10.9 Suggested Reading

10.1 Introduction—Langston Hughes

Langston Hughes (1902-1967)

Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper, in *The Columbia Companion to the Twentieth-Century American short story*, writes of Langston Hughes’s life and works that: Langston Hughes is widely regarded as one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century. (301) James Mercer Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1902 in Joplin, Missouri. His parents had divorced and his father settled in Mexico while Hughes went to live with his grandmother in Kansas. Hughes’s mother kindled his interest in theatre and literature while his classmates at school, some of whose parents were European immigrants, exposed him to left-wing periodicals, European philosophy and short fiction. Hughes lived with his father for a brief period in Mexico. In her article on Langston Hughes, Kimberly Lamm mentions how his “lyrics celebrate and document 20th century African-American life”. (226) Hughes’s composition during his journey to Mexico, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, was published in W.E. B. DuBois’s journal *The Crisis* and it marked the beginning of his remarkable literary career. He moved to New York in 1920 and studied for a year at Columbia University before leaving to travel, working as a merchant sailor along the coast of Africa

and also in a restaurant in Paris. Langston Hughes is famously associated with the Harlem Renaissance. He has written in several genres—dramas, comedies, musicals, opera librettos, newspaper columns, essays, magazine articles, poetry, novels, short stories, histories, biographies, autobiography and translations; editing anthologies on various subjects like folklore etc. Hughes was recognised as a poet early in life and he won many literary competitions sponsored by the NAACP (the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) and the National Urban League. “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921) is one of Hughes’s finest poems and according to Arnold Rampersad, is a deeply affirmative poem and one in which the creativity of Langston Hughes was ‘created’. The poem is developed through repetitions and a refrain. “The Weary Blues” (1925) describes the emotional effect of hearing a blues musician play on Lenox Avenue in Harlem. The poem enacts the slow cadence of the blues and “the musician’s song and the poet’s lyric become one.” (227) Eleven of his poems were published in Alain Locke’s anthology *The New Negro* (1925) As Harper states “His distinctive use of black idiom and jazz rhythms in the volumes *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927) brought him literary fame such as ‘the bard of Harlem’ and ‘the Negro Poet Laureate’.” (301) He also published “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” in 1926, a kind of manifesto cum essay where Langston Hughes insisted that artists must neither be ‘servants to outside approval’ nor uncritically accept white Western culture as the norm. Hughes’s talent and productivity were consistently acknowledged with awards. Kimberly Lamm mentions that “The Weary Blues” won the first prize in poetry in *Opportunity* magazine’s literary contest. Hughes graduated from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania in 1929.

He visited countries like Cuba, Haiti, the Soviet Union, China and Japan and participated in radical politics, even covering the Spanish Civil War for a paper. In the 1930s the Scottsboro Trial and Spanish Civil war influenced changes in Hughes’s writing style. “Good Morning Revolution” (1932) is full of Marxist ideals. “Goodbye Christ” is “perhaps Hughes’s most controversial poem”. (227) *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, an innovative and powerful work, was published in 1951. Hughes was asked to testify before Senator Joseph McCarthy’s committee against subversive activities in 1953. (people were questioned regarding their political affiliations) *Montage* showcased Hughes’s knowledge of modernist, and imagist poetry. The poems’ style includes ‘sharp call and response skills’, witty rhymes, rhythms punctuated with ‘the bitterness of unrealized dreams’, differentiated voices and are “embedded in a specific place and time”. (Lamm, 227) Harper writes, “Hughes’s nomadic travels, his race, his profound sense of social justice, and his extraordinary literary versatility flavoured all his writing.” (Harper, 301) He chose to stay in Harlem, “establishing a home among the black masses rather than in the affluent suburbs.” (301) Hughes’s voice is described by Lamm as “familiar, direct and appealing” with his poetry “committed to

expanding poetry's capacity to promote racial justice" (Lamm, 226) and communicating "with people left to the margins of literary and political representation." (226) Kimberly Lamm concludes, "Deliberately accessible but deceptively simple, Hughes's work reveals the complexities particular to composing a life within the socioeconomic frames of racism and insists upon the importance of African Americans' contributions to and participation in American literature, art and history". (227) Judy Massey Dozier writes of his verse, "Hughes treats themes of black pride, black unity, racial violence, black poverty, black womanhood, African heritage and integration. He also transcribed blues, jazz and gospel into poetic verse." (203)

10.2 The Harlem Renaissance

Judy Massey Dozier in her article on "The Harlem Renaissance (1919-1934)" writes about how between the years 1919 and 1934 African-American artists gathered in New York City, specifically at Harlem. Alain Locke called it a 'New Negro Movement' in 1925. The Harlem Renaissance was one of the most prolific periods of African-American writing. Popular poets included Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Arna Bontemps, Anne Spencer, Gwendolyn Bennett, Helene Johnson, Angelina Weld Grimke, and James Weldon Johnson. Fiction writers included Zora Neale Hurston, Rudolph Fisher, Jessie Redmond Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Wallace Thurman. Many poets of this era also wrote fiction. The Harlem Renaissance also produced the works of many brilliantly talented dancers, musicians, visual artists and photographers. "A variety of styles and literary devices, including dialect, strict standard English, high and low culture, parody, irony and satire, fill the pages of Harlem Renaissance writings, creating a window into the rich diversity of perspectives alive in African-American communities." (202)

10.3 Textual analysis of poem "Let America be America Again"

Jean Wagner (*Black poets of the United States: From Pauline Lawrence Dunbar to Langston Hughes*, University of Illinois Press, 1973, p.451) writes that "Let America be America Again" is a poem written in 1935 by Langston Hughes. It was originally published in the July 1936 issue of *Esquire Magazine* and later republished in the 1937 issue of *Kansas Magazine*. The poem was revised and included in a small collection of Langston Hughes poems entitled *A New Song*, published by the International Workers Order in 1938.

The first line of the poem taken on its own does not make much sense unless it is

read along with the second line and then it gets transformed into an epigrammatic statement culminating in the hopefulness of the final lines of the poem. “Let America be America again. / Let it be the dream it used to be.” (1-2) Hughes forcefully pronounces that the America of the present is not the America of dreams, the country that pioneers were glad to discover, a home for ‘free’ men, one that embodied the aspirations laid down by the founding fathers in *The Declaration of Independence* or *The Emancipation Proclamation*. Line 5 “(America never was America to me.)” states in parentheses, almost as if in a confessional aside, that the poet has yet to discover the America, representative of and symbolising freedom. If America is meant to radiate positive qualities, then Hughes confesses that as a black man living in America he hasn’t yet found America living up to its stature.

The sixth and seventh lines begin with “Let...” almost said in a tone of prayer and desire for the future. The poet hopes that America should be a country of dream fulfilment, a “great strong land of love” (7), a place neither ruled by conniving kings nor tyrants (the line uses inversion, changing the syntactical order for poetic purposes), where subordinates are not destroyed by those superior to them. Once again the poet states this kind of idealistic America doesn’t yet exist for him, subtly referring to the inequality and injustice men like him face. “(It never was America to me.)” (10) In line 11 Hughes uses apostrophe and personification to hope that his country America is indeed a land of Liberty (there is an allusion to the Statue of Liberty). The phrase “no false patriotic wreath” indicates that patriots sacrificed their lives for liberty and America should ensure freedom for all instead of propagating double standards. Lines 13-14: “But opportunity is real, and life is free, / Equality is in the air we breathe.” is a grand statement that all Americans hope to realise. Hughes once again undercuts these grand declarations in the following lines: “(There’s never been equality for me, / Nor freedom in this ‘homeland of the free.’)” The poet is deprived of equal rights and freedom despite being an American citizen.

In lines 17 and 18 the listener or audience enquire about the identity of the man who has been claiming to be deprived. The voice asks, “*Say, who are you that mumbles in the dark? / And who are you that draws your veil across the stars?*” The poet’s complaint appears feeble and the weak protest is muffled in darkness. For the blacks there is no glimmer of the shining stars. The identity of the speaker is gradually revealed. Although using the first person singular pronoun “I” the identities of this “I” are multiple: the ‘poor white’ (lower class, economically weak), the negro descended from slaves, the native American driven away from his territory, the hopeful immigrant discovering the same old hierarchical power struggles in the new country and those desperately fighting for survival (“dog eat dog”).

Lines 25-30 try to identify the speaker as an ambitious young man who soon gets entangled in the 'chain' of greed and materialism. The verb "grab" holds our attention as it conveys greed eloquently. Among the different voices, the farmer and industrial worker (labourer) are included. In lines 32-38 the focus is on the 'Negro' (regarded as the 'servant' of everybody); he is a humble yet 'hungry' person as his dreams have been continually bartered away despite the efforts of the pioneers. "Yet I'm the one who dreamt our basic dream/ In the Old World while still a serf of kings, / Who dreamt a dream so strong, so brave, so true," (39-42) The speaker is also the person who dreamt of freedom and equality even before he came to America, hoping to escape feudalism and religious persecution. The dream is daring as it went against established convention and authority and helped to shape America. The poet then refers to the different migrants who came for various reasons across the ocean, from various countries and continents to America—to make a "homeland of the free" (lines 45-50 speak of Ireland, England, Poland, and Africa (the 'dark' continent). They all seem to aspire for freedom and equal treatment.

Line 51 is uttered almost in a tone of bewilderment "The Free?" as the poet wonders who can be described as truly free in America. Definitely not the African-Americans and he is one of them. It is not those people accepting relief, or those shot when going on a strike. There are two instances of anaphora in this stanza— "the millions", and "And all the". The price paid by those formerly hasn't made the marginalized people's dreams come true; their hopes, songs, banners (protest marches and movements) have also resulted in nothing joyous "Except the dream that's almost dead today." (60) Lines 51-60 are cynical from disillusionment.

Line 61 repeats the desire of the poet and his tone changes: This time "Let America be America again" is almost a wish and a blessing that America of the future should strive for true equality (lines 62-68). The emphasis on "every" person and "ME" stands out pointing out how the poet wants an end to discrimination if an ideal American dream is to be attained. Line 69 "Call me any ugly name you choose" refers to the history of conflict and racism in America. Line 70 is a metaphor "steel of freedom" refers to the sharpness of a bright knife and line 71 a simile comparing oppressors and men in power to 'leeches' sucking blood. The poet contrasts the people fighting injustice with those who perpetuate inequality in these two images. The poet is determined to realize his dream of making America an equal opportunity country and an ideal place to live in. He unites himself in feeling with all similarly oppressed people in America and together they should take a collective oath to make America achieve the founding fathers' dream. "America never was America to me, /And yet I swear this oath—/America will be!" (76-78) Hughes's dream anticipates the "I have a dream" of Martin Luther King Jr. a few decades later. Lines

79-85 end on a note of patriotic hope and a fervent desire to purify corruption (alluding to American politics and crime) Note the consonance of the letter 'r' in "the rack and ruin" of "our gangster death", "rape and rot of graft". "We, the people, must redeem" reminding us not only of the democratic nature of the American constitution but that it is the responsibility of all the Americans to restore the natural beauty of America to her pristine state ("great green states" sounds almost Edenic) "And make America again!" (85) The poem concludes that is the task of those who have been denied equal opportunity to rebuild a fairer America.

10.4 Comprehension Exercises

1. What is the significance of Langston Hughes's poem "Let America be America again"?
2. What does "pioneer on the plain" refer to?
3. Who says "America was never America to me"? Why does he say so?
4. What is the meaning of wreath? Who is a tyrant?
5. Name some of the personas of "I".
6. Name some of the countries from which people migrated and came to America.
7. What oath does the poet swear?
8. Who must make America again?

10.5 Works cited and suggested Reading

1. Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper, "Langston Hughes" in *The Columbia Companion to the Twentieth-Century American Short Story*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2000. 300-304
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4. Langston Hughes, "Let America be America Again" from *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. Copyright © 1995 by Langston Hughes. Reprinted by permission of Harold Ober Associates, Inc. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/147907/let-america-be-america-again>, accessed on 25 April 2020

5. Jean Wagner, *Black poets of the United States: From Pauline Lawrence Dunbar to Langston Hughes*, University of Illinois Press, Illinois. 1973

10.6 Introduction— Allen Ginsberg

A.Mary Murphy writes that Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) is “the one person in American poetry whose name belongs alongside the prominent and influential writers of almost every mid-20th century literary movement, including beat poetry, confessional poetry, the San Francisco Renaissance, and even the New York school”. (181) However, he is most well-known as the central figure among the Beats, living and working with Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, Peter Orlovsky and William S. Burroughs. Ginsberg’s controversial poem *Howl* (1956) was involved in a famous obscenity trial that “secured its place, and its poet’s place, in literary history”. (182) *Kaddish* (1961) was heavily influenced by his mother’s mental instability. Ginsberg was born in 1926 in Newark, New Jersey, to Marxist parents. His father was a published and anthologized poet. Ginsberg’s childhood also “predisposed his development as a man of extraordinary tolerance and exploration because of his mother’s mental instability and his parents’ openness to new and liberal ideas.” (182) Ginsberg graduated from Columbia University in 1949 and returned as a visiting professor for 1986-87. He was distinguished professor at Brooklyn College, the City University of New York, and co-founded with Anne Waldman the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute, in Boulder, Colorado.

The activist-experimenter Ginsberg received many prestigious awards and honours in his life. A.Mary Murphy declares that, “Ginsberg was fixed as gay Marxist Buddhist Jew, visionary political poet, and activist. His writing and his life clearly proclaim and embrace each and all aspects of these aspects of his self.” (182) Murphy states that Ginsberg incorporated the ‘pacing and language of common speech’ as advocated by Williams and Pound into contemporary verse, he followed Whitman in his experimentation with line length; and his poetic constructions were influenced by Buddhism and Blake. “For Ginsberg poetry became a physical undertaking, as well as an emotional, intellectual, and spiritual one; the presentation and reception of the work requires all facets of the human in the same way that production of the work does.” (183) Ginsberg’s poetry involves body, mind and spirit. “The result is a poetry that possesses not only wildness in its all-inclusive scope but also a control in its dependence on conscious attention to rhythm and image.” (183) Ginsberg travelled continuously giving readings and recording stylistically diverse performances, from Blake to punk, both in recital and songs. Ginsberg’s graphic sexual references may be regarded as obscene but Ginsberg’s compositions are not meant for

a conventional or decorous audience. His “America” (1956) was influenced by Dadaism consisting of one-liners in different voices. One of the voices loves its country but is at the same time angry and disappointed with it. Communism, capitalism and racism are some of the issues dealt with. Each American is America and each person is responsible “for what America does inside and outside its borders.” (183) Ginsberg was noted for his frankness and honesty and his entire adult life was engaged in advocacy. As Barry Miles has said, his “greatness as a writer is partly the result of the enlargement of sympathy that he demands for society’s victims”. (Barry Miles, *Ginsberg: A Biography*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 1989, 533)

10.7 Textual Analysis of poem “September on Jessore Road”

Murphy declares that Ginsberg’s poetry was strongly influenced by the American style of Modernism (pioneered by William Carlos Williams), Romanticism (specifically William Blake and John Keats), the beat and cadence of jazz (specifically that of bop musicians such as Charlie Parker), and his Kagyu Buddhist practice and Jewish background. I.J. Shuchi and A.B.M Shafiqul Islam’s article describe how in this poem, “Ginsberg traded the sprawling Whitmanesque style of rhymed couplets, lilting stanzas, and organized meter with a view to using them in music not in poetry.” (see works cited for details) Ginsberg intended the poem to be a ‘mantric’ lamentation rhymed for vocal chant to western chords. “September on Jessore Road” consists of 38 stanzas. The stanzas and lines are almost consistently the same with a few exceptions. The closest stanza types of this poem are heroic couplets. The poem has 152 lines. Ginsberg mostly uses the end rhyme; the rhyme scheme is *aabb* with a few variations. The musicality of the language is enhanced through imageries, metaphors and similes. His use of figurative language also conveys sarcasm and mockery leading to an overall satirical tone. The immediate context of Ginsberg’s poem is the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971 and Ginsberg’s visit to the actual site on Jessore road, accompanied by the Bengali poet Sunil Gangopadhyay (mentioned as ‘Sunil’ in the poem). Mohd. M. Islam’s article says that the war lasted for the duration of nine months and took the lives of 3 million people from Bangladesh and brought intolerable miseries and sufferings in its wake. Jessore road is a 108 kilometres long road connecting Bangladesh and India and it forms the setting of the poem with East Pakistan refugees fleeing war time atrocities and seeking shelter desperately in another country. The people of East Pakistan (modern Bangladesh) had been resisting cultural erasure at the hands of West Pakistan (modern Pakistan). The road also symbolises the temporary nature of life in the face of the horrifying reality of war. The trauma of the victims as they are denied the very basic necessities of life and face non-cooperation is visualised in the poem with great force and clarity.

Lines 1 to 4 set the note for the poem with their incantatory beat of the words “millions of” throbbing like an angry tattoo throughout the poem. They refer to the mass scale destruction of human life and loss of human potential, almost deliberately, as the survivors are neglected through political manoeuvrings. The nine months of suffering is begun in the long and despairing trudge from East Pakistan through flooded roads in torrential monsoon as described in the image of “millions of babies watching the skies”. Ginsberg is pointing out the pathos of expectation as well as lack of a redeemer. Suffering malnutrition, emaciated, with protuberant eyes the children live in makeshift bamboo huts with no access to basic hygiene facilities. “Noplace to shit but sand channel ruts” is representative of Ginsberg’s honesty and brutal candour.

Lines 5 to 16 again reiterate the words “millions of” It is a figure in rhetoric called anaphora or epanophora. Using the family as a basic unit, Ginsberg portrays the hopelessness of the situation and the inability of families to stay together peacefully, only united in their misery. Their sufferings (‘rain’, ‘pain’, ‘woe’, ‘nowhere to go’, ‘dying for bread’, ‘lamenting the dead’, ‘homeless and sad’, ‘silently mad’, ‘walk in the mud’, ‘wash in the flood’, ‘vomit & groan’, ‘hopeless alone’) are enumerated as each separate relation (‘fathers’, ‘mothers’, ‘brothers’, ‘sisters’, ‘aunts’, ‘uncles’, ‘grandfather’, ‘grandmother’, ‘daughters’) is indicated in successive lines, problems and lives multiplied in ‘millions’. Tragically ‘millions’ is not a hyperbole or exaggeration but a statistical fact of war. ‘Girls’ are particularly vulnerable during war and migration. Ultimately the essence of these human beings are their ‘souls’ which are now ‘homeless’ on Jessore road under a ‘grey sun’. The image of the pale and bleak sunlight in monsoon is another reminder, like Wilfred Owen’s use of the sun in his war poems as incapable of giving warmth or life or succour, pointing out the irony of the human condition.

Lines 17 to 28 point out the mass exodus of millions of war victims who are escaping from Bangladesh and striving to reach a better life in Calcutta (now Kolkata). In line 21 we find the first mention of the month ‘September’ that is present in the title: “Taxi September along Jessore Road”. The graphic images of ‘oxcart skeletons’ culminate in ‘starving black angels in human disguise’ (28). The lines almost run on, as Ginsberg describes the facilities (‘charcoal load’, ‘dung cakes’, ‘plastic roof huts’) and succeeds in ironically implying the lack. The ‘starving angels’ are children, or “stunted boys big heads don’t talk/ look bony skulls & silent round eyes“(26-7) The staccato rhythm approximates the hunger and gradual shrinking of growth.

Lines 29 to 48: The following lines indicate Ginsberg moving through the settlements as he observes the pain and starvation due to insufficient rations and funds. One mother ‘squats weeping’ and “pain makes Mother Maya cry” (40) There is actual

mention of a particular Bengali name 'Maya' (which is rather suggestive as it translates into 'illusion'). In a simile that almost mocks 'elderly nuns' in prayer, the 'thin legs' and 'small bodied hands' of the children are symbolical of the past five months spent in expectation. Parts of the body substituting for the entire human being is a figure of speech called synecdoche. The father shrugs helplessly in front of his fate. Cooking pots remain empty but the helpless father is unable to provide 'vegetables' as he lacks a job. In another thatched hut rice rations, lentils once a week and milkpowder is provided but the insufficient rice only lasts for four days. In line 44 'warweary infants meek' is a transformed Blakean phrase. Lines 47-8 bring out another cruel reality when children, after starving for three days, eat and then vomit the food as their stomachs cannot digest their hurried attempts to fill it.

Line 49 shows Ginsberg meeting another pleading mother at Jessore Road, her husband is waiting at the door of the camp office for a new identity card as the previous one is torn innocently by the baby while playing. She hopes Ginsberg as a foreigner will be able to help them in their plight. "Innocent baby play our death curse" (56) Without an identity card they will not get access to the meagre rations. **Lines 57-75** depict thousands of hungry children massing in front of the bread distribution centre and playing joyful tricks on the two adult policemen who stand guard (with whistles and bamboo sticks for discipline—to 'whack' them in line). The 'skinny runt' and 'two brothers' are some of the children making the guards chase them in rage. As the announcement is made "No more bread today" the children scream "Hooray!" and rush to convey the message to their families ('tents where elders wait') without realizing its ironic implications. **Lines 65-67** have strong resonances of Blake's poetry, particularly *Songs of Innocence*. **Lines 75-84** lists the diseases (malnutrition and dysentery are foremost; rheumatic fever, gastroenteritis, blood poisoning) as a result of the insanitary conditions and appalling lack of sustenance: "Painful baby, sick shit he has got" (76) The newborn infants are described as 'monkeysized'. **Lines 85 to 88** repeats what Ginsberg views from a rickshaw, overcrowded shelters for starving families; flimsy protection against the rains.

Lines 89-90 begins dramatically: "Border trucks flooded, food cant get past, / American Angel machine please come fast!" This soon changes into an indictment of the American involvement and their role in such international crises and wars. With potent irony, Ginsberg queries the absence of America where it is most needed; the US air force, the armies and navy are involved either in smuggling drugs, or bombing Laos, napalming Vietnam instead of providing medicines and relief for the needy countries. 'Ambassador Bunker' is "machinegunning children at play" (92) points out how billions of dollars or the 'Armies of gold' waste valuable resources in a play of power politics. He questions the work of US

AID, an international NGO, as they fail to come to the rescue of the pitiful refugees who are fleeing for their lives.

Lines 101 onwards Ginsberg raises a series of questions designed to move the collective conscience of humanity and specifically the conscience of Americans. “Whom shall we pray to for rice and for care? / Who can bring bread to this shit flood foul’d lair?” (105-106) There are still millions of children suffering. **Lines 109-112 and 116** begin with the anaphora “Ring”. Reminiscent of Tennyson’s famous lines “Ring out...” in his elegy *In Memoriam*, Ginsberg almost dings the situation into his listeners as he repeats the need for awakening the human conscience, if necessary electrocuting it into an active state! The Socialist activist in Ginsberg asks this powerful question “What are our souls that we have lost care?” (115) **Lines 117-120** again return to the Jessore Road scene of misery.

In the next lines Ginsberg questions his capacity as an American to help these needy refugees. He turns to the Calcutta poet and his friend Sunil Ganguly to ask for his advice. “What shall I do Sunil Poet I asked?” (122) Will monetary donation make a difference? **Lines 123-132** talks about the privileged status of America and how the Americans can afford to waste money and Earth’s precious resources increasing pollution worldwide even as millions remain starving and in need of America’s help.

In **lines 133-136** Ginsberg directly addresses Americans as he asks them to help and not remain detached observers of harsh reality on the other side of television sets (the people on Jessore road appear as ‘phantoms’ on TV). The remaining lines of the poem are a series of questions beginning with “How many” in increasingly anguished tones prior to emotional explosion. The style reminds us of the ‘question and answer’ style that we find in Blake’s poems. Ginsberg is scathing as he asks how many millions of children must continue to die before American mothers respond to the “Great Lord’s” appeal for helping the starving children in Bangladesh. Why would American men, “good fathers”, pay tax to raise armies that boasted about the children that had been killed. (140) How many souls walk through Maya in pain/ How many babes in illusory pain?” (142-143) refer to the illusory state of worldliness as described in Hindu philosophy and scriptures. **Lines 139 to 152** again refers to the different sufferings of families on Jessore road, almost cyclically returning to the scenes of sorrow and futility with which the poem had opened. The final four **lines 153-156** are the poet’s reply to the questions that millions must suffer and remain homeless even as those who can, fail to take action. *September on Jessore Road* was performed to music by Bob Dylan, George Harrison and Pt. Ravi Shankar.

10.8 Comprehension Exercises

1. What incident is Allan Ginsberg's "September on Jessore Road" based upon?
2. Describe some of the scenes that Ginsberg witnessed when he went to Jessore road.
3. What is Beat poetry?
4. Where is Jessore road located?
5. Which country is criticised in the poem? Quote a line as proof.
6. What mathematical numbers are mentioned in connection with those suffering?
7. Give an example of anaphora and a simile from the poem.
8. Which year is mentioned in the poem as the year in which Jessore road was filled with refugees?
9. Mention 2 diseases contracted by the unfortunate dwellers on Jessore road.

10.9 Suggested Reading

1. A. Mary Murphy, "Allen Ginsberg", in *Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, ed. Burt Kimmelman, Facts on File, Inc., NY, 2005. 181-183
2. Israt Jahan Shuchi and A B M Shafiqul Islam, "Reading Allen Ginsberg's *September on Jessore Road*: An Attempt to Ruminare over the Horrific Reminiscences of the Liberation War of Bangladesh". *Advances in Language and Literary Studies* 10 (1): 41-46, ISSN 2203-4714.
3. Mohd. Mohiul Islam, "September on Jessore Road: A Museum of Sufferings", *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, Volume 21, Issue 4, Ver. II (Apr. 2016) PP 28-32, e-ISSN: 2279-0837, p-ISSN: 2279-0845. Accessed on 25 May, 2020
4. *September On Jessore Road* by Allen Ginsberg. <https://www.poemhunter.com/poem/september-on-jessore-road/> accessed on 16 July 2022

Unit 11 □ Sylvia Plath’s “Lady Lazarus”

Structure

- 11.1 Objectives.**
- 11.2 Introduction – Mid-Twentieth Century American Poetry**
- 11.3 The Life and Work of Sylvia Plath**
- 11.4 Text of Sylvia Plath’s poem “Lady Lazarus”**
- 11.5 “Lady Lazarus” – Thematic Interpretations**
- 11.6 Theoretical/Ideological Approaches**
- 11.7 Structure and Style of the poem “Lady Lazarus”**
- 11.8 Letters, Journals and Film related to Sylvia Plath**
- 11.9 Summing Up**
- 11.10 Comprehension Exercises**
- 11.11 Suggested Reading**

11.1 Objectives

The objectives of this unit is to familiarize learners with the poetry of Sylvia Plath by placing her against the specific background of her age; by studying the influences which shaped her poetry; by discussing her affiliations with various schools of poetry and examining the subject and style of her literary articulation.

11.2 Introduction – Mid-Twentieth Century American Poetry

In order to understand the poetry of Sylvia Plath you will need an acquaintance with the intellectual and cultural background of the times. In the United States the middle decades of the twentieth century saw the emergence of several strains of poetry. Wallace Stevens was a leading figure who had an influence on several poets. There were the poets such as Karl Shapiro, Randall Jarrell, and James Dickey who had seen active service in World War II and wrote from their personal experiences. The so-called Confessional poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton under the influence of John Berryman and Robert Lowell explored and expressed their experiences in a carefully crafted style. By contrast the Beat

poets such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Amiri Baraka and Lawrence Ferlinghetti among others spearheaded a revolution for artistic freedom of expression, expressing a deep impatience with traditional beliefs and institutions, experimenting with form, and opting to use a raw style of composition.

Another school of poets, namely, the Black Mountain poets, operating from Black Mountain College introduced certain innovations. Some of these poets such as Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, Ed Dorn, Paul Blackburn and others under the leadership of Charles Olson propagated a poetic form based on the line which in turn was based on breath thereby emphasizing a poetics which merges life, utterance and thought. Olson further advocated the adherence to a style of writing that depended for its effect on a lateral and linear continuity of thought and ideas.

The poetry belonging to the San Francisco Renaissance was led by Kenneth Rexroth and Madeline Gleason. The Small Press poets surfaced in the San Francisco Bay area publishing the work of new poets in low-budget periodicals in a bid to infuse new blood into the worn traditions. Then there were the Los Angeles poets such as Leland Kickman, Harry Northup, Michael C. Ford, Kate Braverman among others. They were mostly lyric poets drawing on their own experiences.

While the West Coast had its movements the East Coast, never to lag behind had the New York School of poets. Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, Barbara Guest, Ted Berrigan and others under the leadership of John Ashbery were some of the main figures of this group who strove to express the experience of everyday life in a spontaneous and commonly used language abstaining from an elaborate or artificial style. Often seen as a reaction to Confessionalist poetry the work of this group of poets drew inspiration from Surrealism and the avant-garde art movements.

You have by now, I trust received a fair idea of the different schools of poetry that flourished in the United States during the middle of the twentieth century.

11.3 The Life and Work of Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath was born on October 27, 1932 in Boston, Massachusetts to immigrant parents with Austrian descent on her mother's side, and a German one on the father's. After Plath's brother Warren was born in 1935 the family moved from Jamaica Plain to Winthrop where her mother Aurelia had grown up, and where her maternal grandparents lived. Though the debate is on as to how far biographical factors may be considered in a poet's artistic evolution it is a fact that Plath's childhood years in Point Shirley, the Winthrop home of her grandparents find interesting mentions in her work.

The death of Plath's father Otto Plath on November 5, 1940, (a few days after her eighth birthday) of diabetes related complications proved to be a harrowing and traumatic experience for the young Sylvia who returned repeatedly in her work to this devastating event. Plath graduated from Bradford Senior High school in 1950 and thereafter attended Smith College where she excelled academically being awarded the position of a guest editor in **Mademoiselle Magazine** which caused her to spend a month in New York City. Frustrated early in this stint Plath used some of the events of this summer in her novel *The Bell Jar*.

You may be interested to learn that the first medically recorded suicide attempt by Plath was in August 1953 from which she recovered through treatment and therapy, returned to college, submitted her thesis, and graduated from Smith with the highest honours. Plath proceeded to Newnham College in Cambridge University, England on a Fulbright scholarship where she continued to write poetry. Plath first met Ted Hughes in February 1956 at a party in Cambridge. Already struck by his poetry she was drawn to the poet and the man, and the two of them began spending much time together and were married on June 16, 1956 within months of their first meeting.

The couple moved to the United States where Plath taught for a while at Smith giving up her job to work as a receptionist and taking creative writing seminars given by Robert Lowell in the evening. During this period she came into contact with Anne Sexton and other writers who encouraged her to write from experience as also to express herself as a woman. In search of new experiences the couple travelled across Canada and the United States staying for a while at the Yaddo artists' colony at Saratoga Springs before moving back to the United Kingdom in 1959, and taking up residence in London.

The year 1960 heralded births for the Plaths, first that of their daughter Frieda, and then of Sylvia's first poetry collection *The Colossus*. In August 1961 Plath completed her novel *The Bell Jar*, and soon after the family moved to North Tawton in Devon. In January 1962 the couple's son Nicholas was born. In September 1962 the couple separated after Plath discovered in July that Hughes was having an affair with Assia Wevill, their friend and tenant. Plath returned with her children to a rented flat in London in December 1962 in the throes of a creative flood which had begun in October and continued till the end of her life. In this extraordinary period of literary creativity Plath came to write the majority of the poems on which her fame primarily rests today, and twenty-six of which are published in her posthumous collection *Ariel*.

In the bitterly cold winter of 1962-63 Plath probably went through one of the bleakest periods in her personal life suffering emotional rejection and critical indifference coupled with the rigours of caring single-handedly for her two infants. On February 11, 1963 Plath was found dead of carbon monoxide poisoning with her head in the gas oven at her home.

11.4 Text of Sylvia Plath's poem "Lady Lazarus"

*I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it—
A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot
A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.
Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?—
The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.
Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me
And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.
This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.
What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see
Them unwrap me hand and foot—
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies
These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,*

*Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.
The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut
As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.
Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.
I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.
It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
It's the theatrical
Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:
'A miracle!'
That knocks me out.
There is a charge
For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart—
It really goes.
And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood
Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.
I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby*

*That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.
Ash, ash—
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—
A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.
Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.
Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.*

11.5 “Lady Lazarus” – Thematic Interpretations

‘Lady Lazarus’ written in the same thirtieth birthday month that Plath wrote ‘Ariel’ and ‘Daddy’, contained in her posthumous collection *Ariel*, and generally regarded as one of her ‘Holocaust’ poems along with ‘Daddy’ and ‘Mary’s Song’ is an anthology piece which disturbs, shocks, lulls, teases and provokes the reader into reactions which, as you will soon realize, are both passionately and cleverly manipulated by the poet/speaker. Written, as we have seen in 1962 and published in 1965 the poem is an important one in Plath’s canon. The title is an allusion to Lazarus, the Biblical character whom Jesus raised from the dead.

Beginning with a bald, matter-of-fact statement “I have done it again” the speaker draws attention to her suicide attempts, once in every decade, the first which was an ‘accident’, the second from which she was ‘rescued’, and the third one being the present instance which occasioned the poem. In the next three tercets, you will notice she develops the theme of Nazi persecution and atrocities perpetrated on the Jews during World War II.

As Plath’s father was of German descent and her mother possibly part Jew the racial polarization in the family was sought to be addressed through the Nazi imagery. Also, the victim-aggressor syndrome implicit in the larger historical and political ideology and practice of Nazism, and in her own perceived relationship with her father Otto Plath gains a

particular focus in these stanzas. You may be surprised, even shocked to learn that the references to “lampshades”, “paperweights” and “linen” comment on the sadistic medical experiments carried out by Nazi doctors on Jews as also the Nazi’s use of the bodies of Jews to make lampshades and other artifacts in one of the most grotesque violations of human rights in all history.

The napkin when peeled in the fourth stanza will reveal to her enemies, (in this case her rescuers) her nose, eyes and full set of teeth, along with her “sour breath” which will proclaim her failed suicide bid. As she revives from the suicide bid her ghoulish appearance too will change, the flesh growing on her again, and turning her once again into a smiling thirty year old woman. The line “And like the cat I have nine times to die,” emphasizes the failed suicide bids and the speaker’s return to life from near-death. In an inversion of the conventional scale of values the recoveries from the suicide bids are regarded as ‘failures’ while the attempts are considered to be ‘achievements’.

You will surely notice when the speaker interjects, “What a trash/To annihilate each decade” her tone is full of self-deprecating irony. “The peanut-crunching crowd” in stanza eight is the public who “shoves’ and jostles to get a better view of a spectacle, in this case the person rescued from a suicide bid. The imagery of unwrapping her “hand and foot” is linked to the notion of peeling mentioned earlier in the poem, and also in other poems such as ‘Ariel’. “The big strip tease” refers not only to the lurid curiosity of the onlookers who voyeuristically view the rescued person’s body, mind and past but try to peer into her very essence, as it were, disrobing the outer layers which had hidden her till then. The speaker’s disapproving stand, notwithstanding there is a suggestion here that the crowd, at least shows an interest in the suicide survivor unlike the Germans in Nazi Germany who were indifferent to the plight of the Holocaust victims.

The imagery of dismemberment in the references to hands, knees, skin and bones mentioned in stanza eleven brings a depersonalized touch to the account even as together they are used to account for the totality and consistency of the person: “Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.” In stanzas twelve, thirteen and fourteen, you will find that the speaker recounts the first two suicide attempts, one in each decade. The first time, at age ten was an “accident”; the second one a more deliberate and determined one: “To last it out and not come back at all.”

The fossilization that attends the process of pearls forming from oysters is suggested in stanza fourteen interestingly undercutting the whole idea through the introduction of “worms” that had had to be peeled off like pearls thereby maintaining that the precious change in self, envisaged by dying was not achieved. In this regard Christina Britzolakis observes: “The metaphor of the seashell converts the female body into a hardened, dead and inorganic

object, but at the same time nostalgically recalls the maternal fecundity of the sea.” She further relates how the refrain, ‘Those are pearls that were his eyes’ in T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, is “associated with the drowned Phoenician sailor, implicit victim of witch-like, neurotic, or soul-destroying female figures, such as Madame Sosostriis and Cleopatra”.

“Dying

Is an art, like everything else,

I do it exceptionally well.”

The well-known fifteenth stanza extends the attitude of self-parody and hyperbole. The intense and private act of taking one’s own life is contrasted with the discovery of the saved suicide in “the theatrical comeback in broad day/To the same place, the same face, the same brute/Amused shout/’ A miracle!’ Speaking exaggeratedly about herself: that she’s a “walking miracle”, that she has “nine times to die” and that “dying is an art” that she does “exceptionally well” is actually an ironic device used by her to camouflage her insecurities.

The voyeuristic peering and the sense of a theatrical spectacle are effortlessly merged into the imagery of the remains of Holocaust victims, and eventually with the relics of saints: “scars”, “beating of my heart”, a “word”, “touch”, a “bit of blood”, and “a piece of my hair or my clothes”, for which those interested will have to pay a “charge”, sometimes, “a very large charge.” As observed by Arthur Oberg, “Sylvia Plath borrowed from a sideshow or vaudeville world the respect for virtuosity which the performer must acquire, for which the audience pays and never stops paying.”

Jon Rosenblatt explains that the Lady’s identity is defined through four basic image sequences. At the beginning she is identified with fabric or material, “lampshade, linen, napkin”; in the middle she is associated with parts of the human body, namely, knees, skin, bones, and hair; then she is objectified as “gold, ash, a cake of soap” till finally she is resurrected as a red haired demon. Each of these states, as Rosenblatt points out is connected to an observer figure through direct address. The first state is addressed to an unnamed “enemy”; the second to the “gentlemen and ladies”; the third to “Herr Doktor” and the fourth to Herr God and Herr Lucifer. Unable to reconcile the warring selves within her Lady Lazarus is in danger of disintegrating into her multiple constituent elements or personalities. For the peanut crunching crowd the speaker is a strip tease; for the medical analysts she is a wonder and her unexpected preservation from death is amazing; for the religious devotees she is a miracle whose hair, tooth and clothes are prized as relics while for Herr Doktor she is a Jew whose body is to be burned.

Lady Lazarus’ repeated attempts to commit suicide are, in a sense, efforts at rebirth. The second time she “rocked shut/ As a seashell/ And they had to call and call.” The third time

she emerged from her “cave” like the Biblical Lazarus from his cave-like tomb. The enemy is linked to a German male authority figure, perhaps a scholar like her father Otto Plath (Herr Doktor). The personal and historical imaginations merging in the reference to Herr Doktor become cosmic in its scope through the allusions to Herr God and Herr Lucifer. The speaker is thus Plath the victim, forced to suffer the loss of her father at a tender age; she is also (by extension) the Jewish target of Nazi persecution; the ordinary human being subjected to God, the great authority figure whose justice is often questioned and of course to Satan the undisputed perpetrator of all types of oppression. In speaking out against Herr Doktor, Herr God and Herr Lucifer the speaker articulates her anger at patriarchy which has a stranglehold on all spheres of life and activity according to her.

The “opus”, the “valuable” and the “pure gold baby” mentioned in the twenty-third stanza, you will realize, stand for the concrete outcome sought by Nazi bigots and other authority figures who subject others to torture. The “pure gold baby” which “melts to a shriek” as she turns and burns recalls the Holocaust victims consigned to gas ovens during the height of Nazi terror and oppression, a victim figure with whom Plath identifies consistently in the poem.

Even as the macabre images of retrieving valuables from Jewish corpses gather force in the lines: “You poke and stir/Flesh, bone, there is nothing there” but for a wedding ring or a gold filling the dramatic rebirth achieved by the speaker is enacted.

*“Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air”.*

Burnt to ash by Herr Doktor Lady Lazarus rises, Phoenix-like and also like the Biblical Lazarus. However, she returns not in corporeal form but as pure spirit. The figure of Lady Lazarus with her striking hair at the end of the poem echoes Coleridge’s description of the possessed poet in ‘Kubla Khan’: ‘And all should cry Beware! Beware! His flashing eyes, his floating hair!’ While the poet in ‘Kubla Khan’ is in the throes of artistic creation the speaker in Plath’s poem achieves a dramatic rebirth and return in both physical and artistic terms. The ending, however, has been generally criticized for what has been seen as exhibitionism and a false bravado as the speaker has not been able to transcend the patriarchal limitations that continue to keep her constrained.

In ‘Lady Lazarus’ Plath presents the speaker as a woman who engages in “The big strip tease” uncovering herself for the gratification of “the peanut-crunching crowd”. The poem ‘Purdah’ along with your text ‘Lady Lazarus’ present disrobing as a gesture of power and assertion, a notion that Plath had already addressed in ‘A Birthday Present’. In the poem ‘Ariel’, too, as you have noticed there is a reference to “peeling off” suggesting an uncovering of the inner self.

Critics have felt that through the metaphor of the “strip tease” the so-called power of the act of display has been played down as it is a gesture of seduction reducing the speaker to a performer and an object of the male ‘gaze’. However, it is possible that the female speaker wants to shame her male viewers and voyeurs into an acknowledgement of their exploitation of her, and womankind in general, and exert her power through this enforced admission.

11.6 Theoretical/Ideological Approaches

There are several theoretical praxes through which the poem “Lady Lazarus” may be assessed. It transcends ideological boundaries in an interesting overlap of modes. It is, for instance, a Confessional poem even as it is a Feminist one exploring different perspectives of the speaker’s dilemma according to the slant of the discourse adopted. In the same way it is a meta-poem, addressing the anxieties of the poet with regard to the process of aesthetic creation.

‘Lady Lazarus’ as a Confessional poem :

Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton and W.D. Snodgrass, in the mid-1960s pioneered a type of confessional poetry that left a lasting impact on subsequent articulations in the genre. The frank emotional outpouring and the uninhibited expression of the deepest personal vulnerabilities vis-à-vis the poet-speaker’s problematic relationship with Nazism and the Holocaust places the poem in the confessional mould which typically tapped into the inmost drives, frustrations and despair of the speaker.

‘Lady Lazarus’ as a Feminist poem :

The poem, on one level may be read as a feminist one dealing with the woman’s struggle for personal agency and artistic independence in a male-dominated society. While the speaker is conscious of the usurpation of her creative powers by an overriding male figure she concedes that he will eventually be defeated by her rebirth when she will “eat men like air.”

‘Lady Lazarus’ as an Aesthetic Allegory :

The poem is, also a comment on the relationship between the artist and society, and that between creativity and consumption. The “crowd” as dispassionate members of the reading public consumes the poet/suicide that is anatomically differentiated into her body parts, and voyeuristically devoured for the titillation she provides in this capacity. Lady Lazarus therefore has to kill herself to regain and reclaim her wholeness as a human being, woman and poet/artist. She succeeds in escaping commoditization in life through the rebirths affected via her

suicide attempts, and after death (when Herr Doktor will turn her remains into artefacts) through her phoenix-like resurrection into an avenging deity who devours men.

11.7 Structure and Style of the poem “Lady Lazarus”

“Lady Lazarus” is a dramatic monologue consisting of twenty-eight stanzas of three lines each. A confessional poem written in a conversational tone, at times it approximates the tonalities of direct speech as for example in the lines:

*I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby
That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.*

The coexistence of the lyrical and the dramatic imbues the verse with rhetorical tensions which considerably enrich the poem.

Repetitions such as the expressions “I do it so it feels...” in tercet 16, “It’s easy enough to do it” in tercet 17,” the word “so” in tercet 22, the phrase “I am” in tercet 23 or the word “beware” in tercet 27 introduce the qualities of a hypnotic chant in the poem wringing the maximum effect from apparently ordinary English words.

The lyrical qualities of the middle stanzas, especially the image of the speaker rocking shut like a seashell are offset by the use of commonplace words describing gross activities in lines such as the following ones:

*Ash, ash—
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—*

The imagery which has been seen to have been organized around the themes of the Holocaust, death and resurrection is, for the most part arresting. The title itself referring to the raising of the dead Lazarus by Christ sets the tone of rebirth which is reinforced through subsequent survivals of suicide bids. Each rescue signifies a revival when the speaker is given a new lease on life. This imagery reaches a climax at the end of the poem with its iconic affiliation with the phoenix, the mythical bird which rose from the ashes:

*Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.*

The so called Holocaust imagery may be traced to the lampshades and paperweights made from the corporeal remains of the Jews killed in the gas ovens and concentration camps:

*A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot
A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.*

The imagery of the theatre, too, is found in the poem investing it with the trope of illusion and reality which informs the core consciousness of the speaker in an intimate way. The reference to “the big striptease” drives home this point even as the “charge” expected from viewers underscores the commercial nature of the transaction. The speaker’s attempts at suicide take on the aspect of performances, an “art” which is executed by her in a consummate way, as she says:

*Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.*

This imagery of theatrical performance is dispersed through the next four tercets in an interesting diffusion of effects.

*I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.
It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
It's the theatrical
Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:
'A miracle!'*

The rhymes in the poem modulate the sounds to manipulate the sense. In the second and third tercets the para rhymes “skin,” “fine” and “linen” ironically drive home the grotesque connections between skin and fine linen in the Nazi context. From tercet 13 to tercet 17 there is an interesting play on words through variations of rhymes for the word “all.” There are half rhymes, slant rhymes and para rhymes of “all” such as “call,” “real,” “well,” “hell,” “theatrical” and “pearls” which succeed in conjuring up a gamut of scenarios, situations and

emotions. A similar concatenation of effects may be seen at the end of the poem with the rough rhymes of “stir,” “there,” “Herr,” “beware,” “hair” and “air,” all conspiring to warn of the enemy, namely father/dictator/oppressor and declare his impending defeat at the hands of the resurrected female nemesis.

The exploitation of the multiple meanings of words is another stylistic technique used by Plath to good effect in her poems. In the poem under discussion she uses the word “charge” in tercets 19 and 20 to simultaneously denote a number of things. The word, for one means the rush of onlookers pressing forward to take a look at the suicide survivor. The word also means a fee that may be charged for the privilege of being allowed to see such a spectacle. In a less obvious but equally plausible sense the word may be found to carry connotations of a sexual thrill experienced either by the survivor or the voyeur, or both.

The intuitive, almost uncanny use of words, images and rhymes in the poem contributes to an overall effect of precision and resonance which helps the speaker express her point of view, namely that she will triumph over the social death of persona and identity induced by patriarchy when she is reborn as a fiery enemy and destroyer of those same debilitating human institutions.

11.8 Letters, Journals and Film related to Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath’s letters, selected and edited by her mother Aurelia Plath were published in 1975 under the title *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*. Plath had kept a diary from the age of 11 till her death. Her adult diaries starting from her first year in Smith College in 1950 were published in 1982 as *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. This volume was edited by Frances McCullough with Ted Hughes as the Consulting Editor. In the same year Smith College acquired Plath’s remaining papers and journals. Hughes sealed two of her journals till 2013, the fiftieth anniversary of Plath’s death. Wishing to bring out a fuller version of Plath’s diaries Hughes initiated work on them, passing on the project to his two children by Sylvia who, in turn passed it on to Karen V. Kukil who finished editing it in December 1999, and it was published by Anchor Books in 2000.

A film called *Sylvia* was made in 2003 on the poet’s life. Plath was portrayed by Gwyneth Paltrow in the film.

Plath’s daughter Frieda Hughes was annoyed and upset with the film as she felt that it was an intrusion of privacy holding up her parents’ lives for public scrutiny.

She even published a poem on the issue in *Tatler*.

*“Now they want to make a film
On anybody lacking the ability
To imagine the body, head in oven,
Orphaning children
[...] they think
I should give them my mother’s words
To fill the mouth of their monster,
Their Sylvia Suicide Doll.”*

11.9 Summing Up

“Lady Lazarus” and “Daddy”, I am sure you have gathered by now, belong to what is known as Plath’s Holocaust poems expressing her identification of personal pain with, and through the historical framework of Nazi torture of Jews during the Second World War.

As you have seen the poet reaches out to a wide variety of sources and experiences through numerous images and references which are biblical, mythical and historical in an attempt to locate her own situation and emotions in a larger context. It is to be hoped that the objectives outlined at the outset have been achieved, and you have obtained a fairly clear understanding of Sylvia Plath and her poetry, specially the poem in your syllabus.

You will, of course, need to supplement the basic understanding thus achieved by reading up several other poems by Plath, and some of the critical material suggested in the following sections.

11.10 Comprehension Exercises

Essay Type Questions :

1. Discuss “Lady Lazarus” as a Holocaust poem.
2. Comment on the confessional elements in the poem “Lady Lazarus.”
3. Critically discuss the poem in the light of its title.
4. How does the woman’s perspective adopted in the poem influence its meaning?
5. Explain how the structure, style and imagery of the poem contribute to its overall effect?

Medium-length Questions :

1. Which are the four main image sequences in the poem?

2. Who are the 'observer' figures to whom the four states of the speaker are related?
3. Comment briefly on the voyeuristic elements in the poem.
4. Select two allusions in the poem and explain their significance in the larger context.
5. Write a short note on the ending of the poem.

Short Questions :

1. Who is "Herr Doktor"?
2. Which poem should be read as a companion piece of "Lady Lazarus"?
3. Explain the symbol of "ashes" at the end of the poem.
4. What is meant by the "big strip tease"?
5. What does the speaker in the poem have a "call" for?

11.11 Suggested Reading

1. Alexander, Paul. (1991). *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath*. New York, NY: Da Capo Press
2. Butscher, Edward. (2003). *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*. Tucson, Ariz: Schaffner Press.
3. Wagner-Martin, Linda (Ed). (1988). *Sylvia Plath (Critical Heritage)*. London: Rutledge

Unit 12 □ Sherman Alexie: Crow Testament

Structure

- 12.1 Objectives**
- 12.2 Introduction**
- 12.3 An Introduction to Native American Poetry: A Brief Overview**
- 12.4 Sherman Alexie: A Critical Biography**
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- 12.10 Suggested Reading**

12.1 Objectives

The objectives of this unit are to introduce the Native American poet Sherman Alexie to learners making them aware of his historical, social and cultural background before apprising them of the features of his poetry with particular reference to the poem “Crow Testament.”

12.2 Introduction

Sherman Alexie is certainly one of the most lauded names among Native American writers of the twenty first century, in addition to being a skilled performer, a well-known stand-up comedian, film producer and scriptwriter. His literary works - ranging from novellas to poetry - present the ongoing negotiations between different strands of traumatic indigenous histories, spanning centuries of settler colonialism, dispossession and dislocation of the Native people of America. Such complex literary mediations are inextricably connected to Alexie’s heritage and his conflicted sense of place and identity in the political and cultural landscape of modern America. A controversial figure in many ways, Alexie, with his characteristic candor, has remarked: “I’ve come to the realization that many people have been reading literary fiction for the same reason they read mainstream fiction. For

entertainment and a form of escape. I don't want to write books that provide people with that. I want books that challenge, anger, and possibly offend." (Cline)

An indelible sense of alienation and despair pervades Alexie's writings, interspersed with powerful and vocal critique of the sustained erasure of America's indigenous past and the invisibilization of tribal identities, cultures, spaces and communities. Alexie constantly navigates the interstices of native and non-native cultures, while addressing the past and present consequences of the nation's colonial history on American Indians (a term Alexie prefers over 'Native American') in his fascinating, diverse and intensely readable narratives, which are infused with his characteristic blend of humor and pathos. Thus, to read poems like "Evolution", "An Unauthorized Autobiography of Me" and "Crow Testament" is to unearth these racially charged histories, to reformulate politics of indigenous personhood vis-a-vis notions of nationhood and to acknowledge the cultural burdens of trauma and violence that continue to plague the lives and lived experiences of Native Americans. In the following section, you will learn more about Native American literature in general, which will help you understand Sherman Alexie's life and poetry in context of the complex history and politics which inform the works produced by indigenous writers.

12.3 An Introduction to Native American Poetry: A Brief Overview

The origin of contemporary Native American poetry is rooted in the historical traditions of indigenous oral literature and histories. The vibrant cultures of tribal ritual chants, performative poetry and storytelling have enriched and inspired the modern oeuvres of Native literature. Alexie's poetry is, undoubtedly, an affirmation of native identities and ways of life, and his works are concerned with the dualism inherent in his native and mainstream literary engagements. While John Newton in his essay, entitled "Sherman Alexie's Autoethnography", has identified in Alexie's refusal to acknowledge the debts to native oral traditions an attempt at distancing himself from the authors Native American Renaissance, the writer himself has publicly proclaimed his intention to investigate and indict through his poetry the ruinous impact colonization on indigenous people and cultures. (Newton 414)

In traditional native cultures, myth, folklore and poetry were often woven together to create vibrant performative literatures that also functioned as significant and powerful repositories of tribal histories. In his *Introduction to Native American Poetry* (2006), George W. Cronyn writes:

"Poetic art in America, at the time when it began to be overlaid by European Culture, had reached a mark close to that of the Greeks at the beginning of the Homeric era. The lyric

was well-developed, the epic was nascent and the drama was still in the Satyrus stage of development, a rude dance ritual about an altar or a sacrificial fire.” (Introduction, xiii)

Native poetry had, according to Cronyn, prior to European intervention, already attained maturity, while other art forms like drama or epic were still in relatively nascent stages. All of these art forms were, to some degree, birthed out of music and they were often accompanied by ritualized dance or similar rhythmic, collective bodily movements. (Cronyn, ‘Introduction’, xiii) Native oral narratives evince a collective and powerful celebration of the metaphysical connections between humans and nature. In *Interpreting the Indian: Twentieth Century Poets and the Native American* (1983), Michael Castro remarks that “a desire for fuller spiritual awareness, including intimacy with the spirit of the land” is a central theme in Native American poetry. Native oral literature functioned, not only as lyrical repositories of indigenous histories, but also as interfaces where the vital connections between the world of plants and animals, winds, rivers and mountains, and that of humans could be demonstrated. The lives and spirits of the “first people of America” were inextricably tied to the rhythms of the earth. (MacKay) Another remarkable feature of early native poetry is a deep concern with ancestral knowledge, rituals and legacy. In fact, native tribes believed in forging spiritual and extrasensory connections with their dead ancestors, who are often depicted through various zoomorphic forms in early native literature, such as ravens, coyotes, wolves and mountain lions. (MacKay)

The 1960s and '70s saw a resurgence of Native American studies, accompanied by numerous publications by indigenous authors such as Vine Deloria's *Custer Died for Your Sins* (1969) and Dee Brown's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* (1971). Perhaps the most iconic publication of the time was N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 and brought into cultural prominence Native American writers and their literature. Over the next three decades, works such as James Welch's *Winter in the Blood* (1974) and *Fools Crow* (1986), Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977), and Louise Erdrich's *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), and *The Antelope Wife* (1998) became significant cultural markers of the ongoing exploration of Native American identity and consciousness within the American literary landscape.

The 1970s saw a proliferation in anthologies and translations of oral poetry, songs and other narratives as well as a fresh influx of contemporary works by American Indian authors which would go on to define the trajectory of Native American literature for the next decade or so. A few significant volumes are Duane Niatum's 1975 edited anthology *Carriers of the Dream Wheel: Contemporary Native American Poetry*, and Kenneth Rosen's *The Man to Send Rain Clouds: Contemporary Stories by American Indians* (1974) and *Voices of the Rainbow: Contemporary Poetry by American Indians* (1975).

(Peterson 1) By 1999, Native American literature was becoming increasingly visible in mainstream cultural spaces, and new debates around its persistent preoccupation with questions of identity and history gained traction. In *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions*, Robert Allen Warrior exhorted native writers to learn from their own tribal roots and reclaim their “intellectual sovereignty”, instead of compulsively focusing on the politics surrounding essentialist ideas of ‘nativeness’, authenticity and identity. (Peterson 3)

As indicated earlier, Momaday’s cultural prominence had solidified his reputation and position as the ‘representative’ voice of Native Americans in the 1970s and ‘80s. However, five decades later, as Leon Lewis argues in *Sherman Alexie: Critical Insights*, it is undoubtedly Sherman Alexie who now occupies the same role - that of a cultural representative or ‘spokesperson’ for the Native American communities. Even beyond the mainstream American literary cosmos, Alexie’s TV appearances in famous primetime shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *The Colbert Report*, his ventures in filmmaking (and his considerable success in Hollywood), his oratorical brilliance in stand-up tours and slam poetry performances have granted him immense cultural visibility and power. (Lewis) His celebrity status has predictably attracted various criticisms and negative responses, but it is undeniable that Alexie’s literary reputation is definitely well-deserved. His creative repertoire is as vast as it is diverse, ranging from poetry, stories and novels to essays, meta-autobiographical fragments, lyrics and screenplays. A critical biographical sketch of Alexie’s life and works is provided in the following section.

12.4 Sherman Alexie: A Critical Biography

Sherman Joseph Alexie Jr. was born on October 7, 1966, in Wellpinit, a small town on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Northeastern Washington, to a Salish Indian family. His father belonged to the Coeur d’Alene tribe and his mother was Spokane. Alexie was introduced to the culture of Spokane spiritualism as a young boy by his maternal grandfather. Having suffered from congenital hydrocephalus, which led to multiple complications after his birth, his childhood was afflicted with ailments and seizures. The enforced isolation and interiority created an intense fascination with books and stories in young Alexie. His early childhood, by his own account, was incredibly dull and quite “miserable”. His father’s alcoholism and frequent disappearances left his mother to support a family of six children on a single, limited income. She sold hand-sewn quilts and worked as a clerk at Wellpinit Trading Post to earn a living.

Alexie underwent brain surgery as an infant, but his congenital hydrocephalus had left him

with an engorged head and a propensity for bed-wetting. He was often bullied by the other children on the reservation, who mockingly dubbed him “the globe”. Alexie found peace in books and the Wellpinit School Library became his sanctuary. By the time he was twelve, Alexie had read every single book in the library. (Cline 198) His considerable intellectual acumen made him exceptionally suited for scholarly pursuits. His mother believed that a mainstream American education and a proficiency in English would benefit Alexie in the future. So after attending tribal school till the end of eighth grade, he transferred to Reardan, an off-reservation and all-white school, where he soon became distinguished for his academic excellence. Since he was educated in mostly white institutions, Alexie’s knowledge of the Spokane language is limited. Though he initially felt like an outsider at Reardan, he soon became an honor student, a member of the basketball and the debate teams and was elected the class president. Alexie would go on to record his experiences at Reardan in his acclaimed young adult novel *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), which earned him a National Book Award.

Alexie attended Gonzaga University in Spokane between 1985 and 1987, but soon his regular and excessive consumption of alcohol began to take a toll on his health and his academic performance. However, after a fateful encounter with an armed man who robbed him at gunpoint while he was inebriated, Alexie gave up alcohol. (Cline 198) He enrolled and later graduated from Washington State University in 1991 with a B.A degree, where he attended a poetry course which would go on to have a significant impact on his creative and poetic career. Alexie’s first volume of poetry, entitled *I Would Steal Horses*, was published in 1992. The same year saw the publication of his experimental work *The Business of Fancydancing*, written in both prose and verse. In 1993, Alexie published two more volumes of poetry - *First Indian on the Moon* and *Old Shirts & New Skins*. Alexie’s *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, a collection of short fiction, was also published in the same year, and was awarded the PEN/Hemingway Award for Best First Book of Fiction.

In 1995, Alexie published his first novel *Reservation Blues*, where he transforms a fictional encounter between Robert Johnson, the iconic American Blues musician, and Big Mom, a character inspired by his grandmother, into an unflinching and compelling documentation of the pain and precariousities of life on American Indian reservations. In 1996, he published two works - a volume of poetry called *The Summer of Black Widows* and *Indian Killer*, a thriller novel about a serial killer who targets and kills white men in Seattle.

After 1996, Alexie adapted one of his short stories from his collection *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* into the script for *Smoke Signals*, which, as Lynn Cline remarks, “was billed as the first Indian-produced, Indian-directed, Indian-acted, and Indian-

written feature film”. (201) It was screened at the 1998 Sundance Festival, where it won the audience choice award for most popular film. In 2000, Alexie’s *One Stick Song*, a collection of poems and stories, was published by Hanging Loose Press. In 2003, Alexie wrote the screenplay for and directed *The Business of Fancydancing*. He had initially also intended to adapt *Indian Killer* for the screen but ultimately abandoned the idea and returned to writing fiction.

Notable among Alexie’s recent works is *The Toughest Indian in the World*, a collection of short stories, published in 2019, which interrogates into the conflicts between the demands of the urban and consumerist American society and Native lives on and off the reservation. His characters are American Indians who inhabit predominantly urban spaces and work in their professional capacities as lawyers and writers, disrupting and discarding the negative stereotype of the poor, illiterate and alcoholic Native Americans. Alexie says, “I’ve been reading recent Indian literature, and little of it is about urban Indians, despite the fact that most of us Indian writers are urban Indians now. I also wanted to get away from the model of the dysfunctional Indian.” (Cline 201) He is currently working on his third novel, *Red World*. Though most of his family members continue to live on the reservation, Alexie currently lives in Seattle with his wife Diane, and his son, Joseph.

12.5 Text of “Crow Testament” by Sherman Alexie

1

*Cain lifts Crow, that heavy black bird
and strikes down Abel.*

*Damn, says Crow, I guess
this is just the beginning.*

2

*The white man, disguised
as a falcon, swoops in
and yet again steals a salmon
from Crow’s talons.*

*Damn, says Crow, if I could swim
I would have fled this country years ago.*

3

*The Crow God as depicted
in all of the reliable Crow bibles
looks exactly like a Crow.*

*Damn, says Crow, this makes it
so much easier to worship myself.*

4

*Among the ashes of Jericho,
Crow sacrifices his firstborn son.*

*Damn, says Crow, a million nests
are soaked with blood.*

5

*When Crows fight Crows
the sky fills with beaks and talons.*

Damn, says Crow, it's raining feathers.

6

*Crow flies around the reservation
and collects empty beer bottles*

*but they are so heavy
he can only carry one at a time.*

*So, one by one, he returns them
but gets only five cents a bottle.*

*Damn, says Crow, redemption
is not easy.*

7

*Crow rides a pale horse
into a crowded powwow
but none of the Indian panic.*

*Damn, says Crow, I guess
they already live near the end of the world.*

12.6 “Crow Testament”: Detailed Summary and Analysis

Alexie’s poem “Crow Testament” first appeared in his volume *One Stick Song* (2000), published by Hanging Loose Press, alongside other powerful pieces such as “An Unauthorized Autobiography of Me”, “Why Indian Men Fall in Love with White Women”, “The Theology of Cockroaches” and “Sugar Town”. The poem, like most of Alexie’s works, is burdened with the legacy of centuries of oppression, his language infused with vibrant idioms and

imagery derived from indigenous spiritual cultures and mythologies. Although Alexie grew up Catholic and is, by his own admission, heavily influenced by his Christian faith, he utilizes a plethora of Native symbols and images in “Crow Testament” that appear to dismiss the monolithism of Christian faith and reorient it to accommodate the vocabulary of a tribal spirituality. His poetic ‘testament’ is essentially both a reconfiguration and a rewriting of the Old and New Testaments - a reclamation of invisibilized and forgotten ancestral memories, an undoing of centuries of whitewashing and an indictment of the history of the New World, which was established by white Christian settlers on stolen land, soaked with the blood of indigenous people.

The poem is divided into seven short and irregular segments or sections. The first segment of the poem consists of five lines that establish the ‘Crow’ as a central figure and metaphor in the poem, emplaced within a network of specifically biblical language. The first line of the poem - “Cain lifts Crow, that heavy black bird/ and strikes down Abel” - teems with an incipient, yet tangible, sense of fear and violence. This incipient feeling of impending terror is further intensified in the next two lines: “Damn, says Crow,/ I guess this is just the beginning.” The use of capitalization in the word ‘Crow’ is critical, as it hints, not only at the use of personification as a rhetorical tool in the poem, but also at the transformation of the bird into a representative symbol for all Native American people. The first section ends with an ominous and foreboding prediction: “I guess this is just beginning.” Alexie directly connects the genocide of indigenous people with the biblical narrative of Cain and Abel from the Book of Genesis (4.1-16), a legacy of fratricide, bloodshed and corruption that is already predicated in the ‘white man’s religion’.

This is borne out in the second segment: “The white man, disguised as a falcon, swoops in/ and yet again steals a salmon/ from Crow’s talons.” These lines starkly demonstrate the predatory greed and the unquenchable territorial lust of the white settlers and Pilgrim-fathers. The hijacking of the land and resources of the Native people by the white colonists, occupies a significant but shameful chapter of the history of the American colonies, and Alexie reanimates and invokes that ignominious past, through a language that is distinctly inflected with images and sounds of native languages. The ‘white man’ metamorphoses into an avaricious and acquisitive ‘falcon’ who snatches the salmon - the primary source of trading and income in the Spokane Reservation town of Wellpinit where Alexie grew up - from the hands of the ‘Crow’, who serves as an embodiment of all Native Americans. The concluding lines of the segment evoke the endless terror and sense of entrapment that plague indigenous communities and evince a concomitant desire for escape (both from a racial marginalized existence and the confines of reservation lands): “Damn, says Crow, if I could swim/ I would have fled this country years ago.”

The opening lines of the third section is a powerful indictment of the self-reflexive construction of divinity within the biblical paradigm: “The Crow God as depicted/ in all of the reliable Crow bibles/ looks exactly like a Crow.” This is clearly both a reference to and an inversion of the Old Testament doctrine of the creation of man in the image of God, found in the Book of Genesis (5:2): “When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God.” Alexie implicates this biblical idea of the creation of white Man in the image of God as a direct impetus behind European colonial enterprises, which were fueled by and often legitimized through a pseudo-religious rhetoric of the racial, civilizational and spiritual superiority of white Europeans. This inherent hubris of white Christian colonists is evident in the subtle vein of mockery that underlies the concluding lines of the section: “Damn, says Crow, this makes it/ so much easier to worship myself.”

Alexie frames his poem as an allegorical narrative of the colonization of indigenous people by white settlers, placed within a network of biblical allusions and images. The irregular pattern of the lines and the brevity of the terse and unadorned language engender a sense of apathy and loss. There is an odd musicality in Alexie’s poetry, understated yet resonant. The first two lines of the fourth section are a concentrated expression of a primal and ancestral grief that is not individual but collective, and historical in its evocation: “Among the ashes of Jericho,/ Crow sacrifices his firstborn son.” The Crow’s reenactment of the ritual sacrifice of his ‘first born son’ and of the specifically biblical allusion to the Battle of Jericho (*Joshua* 6:1-27) may be seen as an extension of the erasure of tribal spiritual heritage and the enforced imposition of Christianity on Native communities. The Battle of Jericho ended with the Israelites occupying the city of Jericho and slaughtering the residents. Similarly, Crow’s descendants are left with nothing but the ‘ashes’ of their ancestral land, now colonized and stolen by the White Man, following a series of devastating wars. The exact scale of the genocide of indigenous people and the magnitude of the theft of their lands by colonists has often been downplayed in official histories. Alexie’s poem confronts and addresses the mass extermination of Native people, conveniently forgotten in whitewashed histories, in the following lines: “Damn, says Crow, a million nests/ are soaked with blood.”

The theme of conflict intensifies and erupts in the controlled violence of the fifth section, shortest among the seven segments, composed of three lines:

*“When Crows fight Crows
the sky fills with beaks and talons.*

Damn, says Crow, it’s raining feathers.”

The brevity is telling. It communicates, through truncated, irregular lines, the tragic histories of native tribes who collaborated with different factions of the European colonizers (as in

the case of Pequot War or the French Iroquois War of the mid-17th century) and turned on other tribes - of 'crows' cannibalizing and killing their own. They appear to have been infected with the vicious legacy of violence and the greed of their colonizers: "the sky fills with beaks and talons." The concluding line of the stanza speaks of the futility of inter-tribe conflicts and animosity, often politically manufactured and catalyzed by colonial settlers for personal gain, and the irredeemable loss of numerous indigenous lives. The senseless slaughter of the fallen tribes is memorialized in the last line: "Damn, says the Crow, it's raining feathers."

The sixth section is the longest in the poem, consisting of eight lines, and it presents a bleak portrait of abject poverty in the Native American communities which is a direct consequence of centuries of sustained socioeconomic deprivation and the depletion of basic resources. Crow is now seen flying around the reservation, gathering empty beer bottles for recycling, only to earn a pittance, barely enough to survive on. But the work is too strenuous for the weakened Crow, who can only carry one bottle at a time. He is further weighed down by his own alcoholism and addiction, an affliction that has historically plagued Native American communities, symbolized by the 'heavy' beer bottles. The reservation is represented in terms of territorial barrenness and economic stagnation. The last lines of the segment are saturated with a sense of exhaustion and hopelessness: "Damn, says Crow, redemption/ is not easy."

The last, climactic section of the poem is steeped in biblical and historical allusion: "Crow rides a pale horse/ into a crowded powwow/ but none of the Indian panic." The complex matrix of biblical analogies and images in the poem reaches its climax, with a reference to the Revelations. Ultimately, Crow is reconfigured into a manifestation of Death, the Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse. And like the biblical Horseman, he also rides on a pale horse as he enters a crowded powwow - a celebratory congregation of Native tribes. But his entrance elicits neither panic, nor chaos. They greet Crow, now the harbinger of Death, with stoic calm and resignation. Their destinies had been decided at the very outset of the poem, when their sacred homelands were transgressed and violated by the brethren of Cain - the white settlers - who brought disease, violence and death. The concluding lines of the poem exude a sense of finality and futility: "Damn, says Crow, I guess/ they already live near the end of the world."

12.7 "Crow Testament": Symbols, Images and Themes

Alexie uses a multitude of narrative strategies and rhetorical tools in "Crow Testament" to recreate a fragment of lost and repressed indigenous history, to revitalize collective cultural

memories and testify to the historical trauma of the Native Americans, existing on the fringes of white America. Symbols and images play a vital role in Alexie's poetic historiography. In this section, we will focus on some of the major symbols, images and the dominant themes found in the poem.

Crow: It is quite obvious from the outset that Crow is the most significant symbol in the poem. The capitalization of the initial letter indicates that Crow is a personification - a symbol - of the collective Native American psyche and consciousness. The word 'Crow', therefore, stands on its own, and is even used in plural - "Crows fight Crows", which indicates that Crow is a representation of both the individual and the collective. The crow is a revered and powerful indigenous deity in certain American Indian tribes, such as the Crow Tribe of Montana, and it has immense symbolic value in their spiritual cultures. While, in Christian mythology, crows are seen as vile, selfish and as portends of evil, many indigenous cultures regard the Crow, variously, as an oracle, a sacred vessel of divine law, as a guide to the spirit world and as a symbol of the eternal cycle of life and death.

Falcon: The symbol of the Falcon plays a pivotal role within the dense network of imagery that operates in the narrative of "Crow Testament". The balance of the poem hinges upon the Crow- Falcon binary. The remnants of ancient Mississippian culture can still be found Native American tribes like the Creek, Choctaw, Cherokee, Seminole and Chickasaw, where the image of the Falcon is commonly associated with a spirit deity inhabiting the 'Upper World', alongside the sun, the moon and the stars. The Falcon can traverse the two realms - heaven and earth - and is believed to be a messenger of the gods. In Alexie's poem, Falcon is a representation of the white settlers and symbolizes the predatory greed of the colonists, who stole "a salmon /from Crow's talons." It is not a coincidence that in tribal ritual dances and songs, the falcon is often associated with warriors - with power and honor in battle. The Falcon, in "Crow Testament," however, is stripped of any divine prowess or glory. It is characterized by a vicious and violent greed, and heralds' only war, destruction and death.

Salmon: In "Crow Testament", the salmon serves as a source of sustenance, nourishment and survival. The use of salmon as an image is also indicative of the socioeconomic grid of trade and commerce that exists in the reservation. Alexie himself belongs to the Spokane tribe, where the salmon has historically been a staple in Salish food cultures and trade. The stealing of the salmon "from Crow's talons" by the Falcon, thus, becomes a metaphor for the theft of Native land and resources by white colonists, as mentioned in the earlier section.

The Reservation: Reservations are federally recognized territories in the United States of America, allocated to Native American Nations. There are currently three hundred and

twenty-six American Indian Reservations in the US, shared among five hundred and seventy-four tribes. Alexie, as discussed in **Section 3.15.3**, grew up in a small town (of about 1000 people) on the Spokane Indian territory and often uses his own experiences of the reservation life as fodder and inspiration for his creative exercises. The spatial setting of the reservation is a recurrent motif in his works. The narrative of 'Crow Testament' locates the reservation as a potent site of Native American history and trauma, while offering vivid, fragmentary glimpses into the stark realities of reservation life - the cultural trauma, poverty, inequities and addiction. The last line of the poem, Alexie talks about Native Americans living "near the end of the world", emphasizing their economic, social and psychological marginality. Reservations, therefore, appear in Alexie's narratives as peripheral sites, as perpetual transit zones between life and death.

Cain and Abel: Like many of his novels and poems, Alexie's 'Crow Testament' is imbued with religious and biblical analogies and metaphors. The story of the two doomed brothers is recounted in *Genesis* (4:1-16). Cain and Abel are the twin sons of Adam and Eve. Cain, the eldest brother and a farmer, begins to resent Abel, a shepherd, who had earned God's favor. Driven by grief, jealousy and rage, Cain murders Abel. As a consequence, he is penalized, prohibited from working on the ground and is banished by God. Cain, now a fugitive, begins to fear that he will be murdered while he is in exile. God, then, grants him protection and promises sevenfold divine retribution, should Cain be slain. However, Alexie's poem, despite its biblical symbolism, is noticeably devoid of any scope for divine grace or redemption: "Damn, says Crow, redemption is not easy." The allegorical reference to Cain and Abel in the first segment of the poem establishes the interlocked themes of fratricide and slaughter, of colonial violence and indigenous dispossession, which are developed and navigated through a series of related biblical metaphors and images in the course of the next six segments.

Jericho: The reference to the battle of Jericho in the poem is derived from *Joshua* (6:1-27), the sixth book of the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament, which narrates the story of Israel's conquest of Canaan. The epic battle ensued when the Israelites, led by Joshua, marched for six days and on the seventh they sounded the ram's horns and Jericho fell to the victorious Israelites. What followed was an indiscriminate mass slaughter of men, women, children and even cattle, sanctioned by "God's law". Alexie's reference to the battle of Jericho and the violence that erupted in the aftermath fall of Jericho. It can be seen as a parallel for the genocide of Native American tribes by white Christian settlers: "Damn, says Crow, a million nests/ are soaked with blood". It demonstrates, with sharp irony, how white European colonists invaded, violated and destroyed Native cultures, lives and lands, while glorifying their 'superior' religion and forcibly imposing the same on Native tribes, stripping them of their vibrant spiritual cultures.

The Pale Horse: In the Bible, the Pale Horse serves as an apocalyptic symbol and is a personification of Death. The image is derived from the Book of Revelations, the last book of the *New Testament*. The Revelations describe the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse - Conquest, War, Famine and Death, who ride on White, Red, Black and Pale horses respectively. In the final segment of Alexie's poem, Crow rides into a powwow (a festive or celebratory gathering of Native American tribes) on a pale horse, signaling an apocalyptic vision of doom. This is a culmination of the theme of violence and death, initiated with the reference to Cain and Abel in the opening lines of the poem. And yet, Crow's portentous arrival is greeted by "the Indian[s]" with a calm resignation. This final poetic moment is steeped in poignancy and is indicative of the exhaustion, futility and hopelessness that pervades the Native American consciousness and psyche.

Colonial Conflict and Violence in "Crow Testament": Gerald Vizenor, in his book *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (1994), has claimed that the imperialist and romanticized idea of 'Manifest Destiny', which fueled the Native American genocide and predatory territorial expansion by white settlers in the 19th century, has been rebranded into 'Manifest Manners' in the 20th century, resulting in a concerted effort to erase and demonize tribal cultures through the manufacturing of false myths and negative representations of American Indians. (Shackleton 70) To interrogate into the history of Native American culture and art is to simultaneously confront and grapple with the traumatizing impact of colonialism on indigenous lives and past.

The text of 'Crow Testament' is circumscribed by multiple thematic frameworks, the most prominent of these being the theme of the impact of colonial conflict and violence on indigenous lives. Alexie's narrative navigates the hidden lacunae of American history, charting through loaded symbolic language the violence and conflict that accompanied the establishment of the New World by the European colonists and the effects of the colonial past that continues to impact Native American communities even today. The theme of conflict in the poem is not merely external or historical, but also cultural and psychological. The poem adopts a linear narration, where a temporally shifting account of the historical conflict is superimposed on the thoughts and actions of the Crow, who serves a central symbolic function in the text. The narrative is riddled with conflict and the poem is communicated through a unique idiom of grief, as the Crow witnesses and engages in an endless cycle of violence. Alexie's portrayal of violence in the poem is not limited to historical and political violence, but also deals with economic and psychosocial violence.

Alexie's poetry is also inscribed with the conflicts and, simultaneously, the uneasy exchanges between native and non-native cultures. Sherman Alexie is known for his ironic, apathetic, enraged and anguished testimonies of the violent impact of colonialism and neocolonialism

on indigenous cultures, spaces, identities and bodies. Robin Riley Fast has noted that for Native Americans, “American history, past and present, conspires to make the whole continent a borderland.” (508) This creates a persistent and collective preoccupation with ‘borders’ and with spatial and cultural boundaries in the Native American consciousness. Consequently, politico-cultural tensions between native and non-native languages and faiths, between ancestral and colonial spaces and cultures figure prominently in the literature produced by indigenous writers. (Fast 508) To situate Native American literature within the ambit and scope of postcolonial studies is to disinter histories of dispossession, displacement and erasure of indigenous communities at the hands of white settlers and colonizers. It is to acknowledge and engage with Native literatures of resistance that display a combination of “mimicry”, “hybridity” (Bhabha) and estrangement which decenters and disrupts the dominant discursive strategies of the colonizers. (Allen 61)

“Crow Testament” as a Narrative of Trauma: Like most of Alexie’s works, “Crow Testament” is preoccupied with both individual and intergenerational traumas, born of sustained exploitation, exclusion and marginalization. Yet, he manages to deliver his commentaries on the racial violence and colonial injustice perpetrated against native people with a peculiar brand of irony, pathos and wry humor. He is not interested in exploring a ‘sacred’ tribal, ancestral past, but in exposing and addressing centuries of inequities and injustices, festering discontent and disillusionment in indigenous communities.

In “Crow Testament” Alexie creates an imaginative testimony of trauma that unearths and incorporates historical accounts of colonial conflict, without delving into an account of his tribe’s spiritual traditions and cultures. It must be noted that Alexie’s relationship with his own tribal heritage is distinctly complicated. He, instead, transforms his poetic narrative into an incisive record of the lives of Native people in postmodern America and grants his readers penetrating insights into the Native American consciousness. His works exhume and exhibit the hidden, torturous realities of Native American lives and they constantly illustrate the perennial socio-economic and psychological struggles that American Indians undergo in white America. He documents, in painstaking detail and with an unapologetic candor, the hopes, desires, anxieties and disappointments of native communities. Alexie, through his writings, attempts to expose the fetid stagnancy of reservation life and the lack of socio-economic resources that continue to stunt the minds, dreams and ambitions of the Native people who inhabit the infertile tracts of reservation lands.

Much of Alexie’s narratives are entrenched within a fixed geographical space - the Spokane Indian Reservation where he grew up - and his works predominantly feature American Indian characters. In “Crow Testament”, we encounter a similar spatial setting. Despite what may seem to be the obvious limitations of his restricted spatial setting, he navigates

broader issues and enduring themes surrounding reservation life and experiences with admirable ease and dexterity. Like Faulkner, his works are imbued with an autobiographical imperative. Alexie has remarked, “Every theme, every story, every tragedy that exists in literature takes place in my little community. Hamlet takes place on my reservation daily. King Lear takes place on my reservation daily. It’s a powerful place. I’m never going to run out of stories.” (Grassian 6) And embedded within the fabric of Alexie’s narratives are the residues of colonial trauma, starkly realistic portrayal of psychosocial decay (poverty, violence, depression, suicide, alcoholism, drug addiction etc.) in Native American communities and an unabashed poetics of resistance.

12.8 Summing Up

- Sherman Alexie’s poetic voice signals a new direction in Native American literature, where he moves away from the stereotypical portrayal of Native American tribal life and ritualism and, instead, highlights the immediate and exigent crises facing indigenous communities.
- Many of Alexie’s works testify to the cultural and economic injustices that affect Native American communities, but he is not interested in simply presenting one-dimensional portraits of American Indians as perpetual victims. Instead, he creates complex characters who inhabit competitive socioeconomic spaces, often highlighting their struggles to adapt and survive poverty in inhospitable settings.
- That is not to say that he dismisses the impact of colonial dispossession and oppression of indigenous people. On the contrary, his works are nuanced and realistic depictions of the struggles of Native American in modern white America often take on a tone of wry and ironic humor.
- ‘Crow Testament’ is a poetic historiography and a narrative of trauma - a tale, spanning centuries of colonial oppression and dispossession, condensed into the sparse text of the poem. It is a vivid portrayal of the hardships suffered by Native Americans, in the past and the present.
- Alexie’s works record, with remarkable empathy, the ongoing socioeconomic and political struggles of Native peoples to survive in white American society. “Crow Testament” grants a voice to the disenfranchised and disillusioned Native communities that exist on the margins.
- Alexie’s poem is a reclamation of a forgotten history and of erased cultural memory, because reparative justice can only be achieved through an acknowledgement and

a collective reckoning of the injustices and the trauma inflicted on the indigenous population by white settlers and colonists.

12.9 Comprehension Exercises

Essay Type Questions :

1. Sherman Alexie's 'Crow Testament' documents the socio-economic and cultural hardships historically endured by Native American people in white America. - Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Critically analyze Sherman Alexie's 'Crow Testament' as a narrative of postcolonial trauma.
3. Comment on Alexie's use of imagery in 'Crow Testament'.

Medium-length Questions :

1. Analyze the theme of colonial violence in 'Crow Testament'.
2. Comment on the significance of the title of 'Crow Testament'.

Short Questions :

1. Comment on the figures of Crow and Falcon in 'Crow Testament'.
 2. Critically examine the poetic structure and style of 'Crow Testament'.
 3. Comment on the significance of biblical symbolism in 'Crow Testament'.
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12.10 Suggested Reading

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MODULE -4
The American Novel

Unit 13 □ A Survey of Major Trends

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13.12 Suggested Reading

13.1 Objectives

To learn and be aware of the origin, growth and diverse forms of the novel in America.

13.2 Study Guide

In this unit we will make a survey of the history of the novel in America, look at the development of the genre in different ages, and briefly study some important novelists and their seminal works.

13.3 Introduction

The novel in America did not emerge before the end of the 18th century, firstly, because of the Puritan distrust of fictional representations; secondly, the absence of leisure as well as a moneyed and leisured middleclass readership; thirdly, owing to the availability and the dominance of English novels and European works in translation in the colonies; lastly, the America society was not consolidated and homogenous enough to support fictional narratives. The novel as a genre emerged from a combination of cultural, religious, philosophical and socioeconomic factors, especially with the rise of the middle-class, in England. Professor Ashok Sengupta points out in the chapter titled “From the Early Narratives to the Colonial Era” in his book *A Short History of American Literature* (2017), co-authored with Krishna Sen, that the American novel was both indebted and very different from works in Europe and England; while English novels began with disunity and social conflict, and end with a restoration of order, often a comic resolution, the protagonist in the American fiction

is generally in conflict with society, involving spiritual and metaphysical questions, which create a rift between the two, resolution comes with an affirmation of one's individual identity and value system, and are inclined towards a tragic turn. The English novel was a development of an established society, whereas, the American society was unsettled, constantly growing, changing, venturing forth into new territories and yet to be established. The novel in English society emerged with the emergence of the new middle class and therefore often recorded class conflicts, while in America, the White settler society itself was new and trying to establish itself, its morality and its character through the novel.

When the first immigrants arrived in America, they encountered a vast and very sparsely inhabited land mass, unlike their crowded countries of origin. For many it was literally like arriving at the Promised Land with an abundance of natural resources for the taking. Because the territory and its population were unknown it also provided great romantic possibilities. Those who came to make America their new home could not only discover the place and its potential but also rediscover themselves and fulfil their dreams. Therefore, rather than the usual and the mundane, the supernatural and the archetypal characters became a part of their new narratives. They were witnessing history in the making, first hand, and there was great struggle and strife in establishing their outposts in the ever-receding frontier. This history was represented and recorded as romances and given a mythical status by the American authors.

As Maria Karafilis indicates in her essay titled "The American Novel: Beginnings Through the American Renaissance" in *A companion to The American Novel* (2012) America was emerging as a sociocultural as well as political entity in the 18th and 19th centuries, thus, its people were attempting to define themselves and their new nation at the time. The novel seemed like the ideal genre to exercise and record this process of becoming. She alludes to Mikhail Bakhtin's essay "Epic and Novel" where the author has defined novel as dominant when literature is caught up in the process of becoming, because it is the only genre which continues to develop, change and adapt, evolving with contemporary reality. Both the novel as a new genre and America as a new nation were in the making, therefore, seemed inter-dependent and appropriate for each other. She also points out the democratic nature of the genre with its multiple plotlines and voices, varied characters, temporalities and histories that made it popular with the Americans.

13.4 Beginning of the Novel in America

William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy; or, The Triumph of Nature* (1789) is credited as the first American novel; it is a sentimental romance written in the epistolary

form. It advocates moral education of women to resist seduction and giving into one's passion to avoid unpleasant consequences. Even then, in America, as was during the rise of the novel in England, a large percentage of the reading public comprised women; and women were also the authors of the two bestselling novels of the time, they are: Susannah Hanswell Rowson's *Charlotte* (1794) and Hannah Webster Forster's *The Coquette* (1797), both are sentimental romances. There were also political allegories and satirical novels like Francis Hopkinson's *A Pretty Story* (1774), Jeremy Belknap's *The Foresters* (1792), Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry* (1792-1815).

Charles Brockden Brown (1770-1810) was the first professional American novelist and among these pioneers of the genre. He was influenced by radical philosophers like William Godwin and wanted to write philosophical novels. He published six novels taking his themes from contemporary America, celebrating social reform and freedom. His notable works are *Wieland* (1798), *Ormond* (1799), *Arthur Mervyn* (1799, 1800) and *Edgar Huntly*. He wrote in the Gothic tradition, portraying the mysterious and the dark, exploring the tensions between desire and fear, psychological anxieties as well as instabilities, which were later developed by Edgar Allan Poe and by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

13.5 Main novelists of 19th Century

13.5.1 First half of the 19th century: The American Romance

Richard Chase in his *The American Novel and its Tradition* (1957) has stated that since the earliest days the American novel in its most original and characteristic form has worked on its destiny and defines itself by incorporating an element of romance, which has led him to propose that it has differed from its English origins by its perpetual reassessment and reconstruction of romance within the novel form. According to him the beauty and force of the American novel is in keeping the disunities intact, but not in unifying them and putting them into an order as seen in the English novel. He further added that the American novel is essentially freer, more daring, and brilliant, and that which contrasts inclusiveness and moral equability of the English counterpart; and that the element of romance is more noticeable in the American novel than in the English. Quoting Thoreau, he accepts that the imagination has a place for wildness as for the more solid and domesticated virtues. The word romance signifies not only the obvious picturesqueness and the heroic but also a freedom from the ordinary requirements like verisimilitude, development and continuity in the novel, but a tendency towards melodramatic actions and pastoral idylls present in the American novel; a formal abstractedness on one hand and a tendency to plunge into the underside of consciousness, a willingness to abandon moral questions or to ignore the

spectacle of man in society, or to consider these things only indirectly or abstractly, summarised Chase.

American authors, as per Chase, have elevated the romance beyond the escapism and fantasy it is associated with. In the freedom of romance, they have found virtues of the mind like rapidity, irony, abstraction and profundity, making romance suitable for intellectual and moral ideas. The American novelists, Chase states, have used romance to introduce into the novel the narrow profundity of New England Puritanism, the sceptical, rationalistic spirit of the Enlightenment, and the imaginative freedom of the Transcendentalism; creating an original form of literature for the nation.

In the American literary imagination not the novel form (in the English literary context) but the romantic form is the dominant. The main difference in the two forms is in their attitude towards reality: the novel renders reality closely and comprehensively, where character is more important than action and plot, with plausible events and a historical purpose, that of the middle class. The romance on the other hand follows its distant medieval origins, prefers action over character, and action is freer. It is between the actual and the fantastic.

American fiction has poetic qualities. Romance novels inherit the epic, based in the past, or history, they have larger than life characters, themes of general consequence rather than individual, the unusual and not the ordinary, long journeys and great ordeals. Romance treats history specially, taking the form of legend and characters given superhuman dimensions, with a penchant for the marvellous and the sensational.

13.5.1.1 James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) was the first American novelist to achieve international popularity and acclaim. He took the romantic love of nature and man and created the myth of the frontier with his *Leatherstocking Tales*, a series of five novels: *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840) and *The Deerslayer* (1841), set in the 18th century, with the Anglo American protagonist Natty Bumppo, a frontiersman, also known as a Leatherstocking, and a Deerslayer by the native Americans, along with the Mohican chief Chingachgook, and his son Uncas, the last of their tribe. Cooper's depiction of the Frontier was inspired by his hometown, Cooperstown, named after his illustrious father. The major issues that Cooper dealt with are the clash between the Edenic world and individual optimism, and the national sin against the Native Americans and the conflict over possession of land. The Leatherstocking tales deal with the natives and their struggles with the white immigrants and their extermination at the hand of the Europeans with firepower.

In *The Last of the Mohicans*, Chingachgook bemoans the fact that the fate of the Indians has been sealed by the technological superiority of the white man and the inequality of the contest between the bullet and the arrow. He also reflects that all of his family is now in

the land of the departed, and there will be no more of his blood as his son Uncas is the last of the Mohicans. The white couple Duncan Haywood and Alice Munro, in their union are the founding parents of the American Race in the Continent, and in keeping with the tradition of the romance, they do not remain individuals but gather larger meaning and come to represent larger themes and issues of national importance. *The Last of the Mohicans* is considered as the first American Classic.

Cooper was able to successfully transform autobiography into myth by tracing the epical westward movement of the immigrants. With his works he was able to define the terms of this myth and explore its contradictions. He initiated the tradition of the American novel of transfiguring history into myth which became definitive not only of the novel but also of the nation.

13.5.1.2 Washington Irving (1783-1859), was an intellectual, poet, dramatist, short story writer and a novelist; the first American classical author whose works found their way into the curriculum and the libraries in his own lifetime. He was a diplomat who travelled extensively. His first published work *Salmagundi* (1807-8), a collection of comic and satirical essays, was inspired by the works of Addison and Goldsmith. His reputation was established with his comic history of New York City and his involvement in the writers' association the Knickerbocker School. His immigration to England in 1815 brought him close to the Romantic writers like Walter Scott and Thomas Campbell. During this time, he wrote the series of stories and sketches in *The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent* (1819, 1820) and *Bracebridge Hall* (1822); among these, two short stories "Rip Van Winkle" and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" are notable for their contribution to the American short story. He travelled to Germany in pursuit of his interest in German Romanticism and wrote *Tales of a Traveller* (1824).

He spent around three years in Spain on a diplomatic mission, studied Spanish histories and produced five novels during his stay. *A History of the life and Voyage of Christopher Columbus* (1828), *A Chronicle of the Conquest of Granada* (1829) and *Voyages and Discoveries of the companions of Columbus* (1831) and a famous volume of stories and sketches called *The Alhambra* (1832) and *The Legends of the Conquest of Spain*. In his description of Columbus and his expeditions he painted Columbus as a hero, a larger than life superhuman character, before whom the local population put up futile resistance, but was always conquered by the hero. He was an excellent prose stylist of the American Romance, admired by Coleridge, Scott and Byron, and worshipped by Hawthorne who carried the historical romance forward.

13.5.1.3 Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), is recognised as one of the most significant influences in shaping American fiction as the author of the classic *The Scarlet Letter*

(1850). He also wrote some of the best short stories. He was a friend of Herman Melville and shared his pessimistic view of the human condition. He was aware that his Puritan ancestors would not have approved of his becoming an author. In *The Scarlet Letter* we see a blend of history, allegory and romance. It is a faithful recreation of the country's Puritan past and included deviations that gave it ironical and complex implications. In a Puritan society, with clear dos and don'ts, deviants are punished severely; where Hester Prynne, the protagonist is brought to public platform and decorated with the letter A, that stands for adulteress, but she wears it proudly. Hawthorne brings out the cruelty of the Puritans over people who did not follow the creed fanatically. Pearl, her baby is precious to Hester, and she chooses not to reveal the name of the father despite the dire consequences that await her. Hester is a heroic character, whose bold defiance of social norms and courage help her expose the hypocrisy of her community. One of her adjudicators, Arthur Dimmesdale is the father of her child, but he is not brave enough to own up to his complicity in the entire episode, while he has been appointed to extract a confession from her. Ironically, the pious adjudicator is the sinner. They meet secretly and Hester proposes that they leave the country and go somewhere where they can start afresh. His guilt causes his health to fail, and to his demise after a confession. Hawthorne shows the internal struggle of both the characters in the work.

While Dimmesdale is unable to rise to the occasion, Hester is, against the oppressive social norms. She goes on living with the mark A on her. But slowly with her perseverance and her conduct, the A begins to stand for angelic instead of adulteress. She is able to direct her community in a different direction that with compassion and love a sinner can be pardoned. Hester is a very bold portrayal of a woman by the author in a Puritanical society. Hester's private life is converted into a public spectacle, while she is forced to stand on the scaffold, she compares her American life to her earlier English life, where religion was not so strong, the liberality of established English society is contrasted with the prejudices of the unsettled American community. The author poses a philosophical question about the nature of sin, the puritanical view is contrasted with the personal perception of sin, the personal and individual view is given more weightage over the ritualised and institutionalised opinion.

13.5.1.4 Herman Melville (1819-91), wrote the epical *Moby Dick; or, The Whale* (1851) inspired by the whaling industry in Chicago, where several thousands were involved, and the many wrecks and misadventures on such whaling expeditions. Economic hardships and the early demise of his father drove Melville to work different jobs before taking up sailing which provided him firsthand experience of whaling. During his voyages he also abandoned ship and lived among primitive tribes in the valley of Typees. His creativity was

the result of the experiences he had had at sea. He began with fictionalised narratives of his adventures and travels, his visits to far off places and the corruption of those Edenic communities by the coming of outsiders. Though he described *Moby Dick* as a romance, the novel is now considered a nineteenth century classic – a national epic, which the author attained by amalgamation of American moral idealism and individual values with the European traditional heroic literature. It is about a sea captain, Ahab, who relentlessly seeks vengeance against a great white whale and loses his ship, its crew and his life in the process. The author uses biblical names which are full of allusions. Ahab is obsessed with the whale and believes by defeating it he can win back his dignity. The whale is an archetypal adversary, supernatural, larger than life, with which the man is in strife, fighting a heroic battle with a tremendous force of nature, which for the most part of the novel though absent and abstract is alive in the mind of the captain. Despite the great value that is attached to the novel today, during Melville's time it was not so well appreciated.

13.5.1.5 Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) was the author of the bestselling sentimental novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1851-52). Uncle Tom is the exemplary slave who endures torture but does not reveal the whereabouts for his runaway companions; George and Eliza Harris who find refuge in a community managed by a nurturing matriarch. It also has the new blood, Shelby, the enlightened son of the old slave owner, who frees all slaves in his plantation and vows to work towards abolition of slavery. Stowe uses both sentimentalism and theological reasoning to argue against the institution of slavery, and does so by using allegory, and other forms of narration like slave narratives. As a white woman, Stowe was challenging the norm established by the white patriarchs of the country. It had a huge impact on the tradition, and she is often credited, even by the likes of Abraham Lincoln for bringing about the Civil War and the abolition of slavery. After the staging of the novel in the form of a play in England the 2nd Reform Bill was introduced. It was a revolutionary piece of work.

13.5.1.6 Mark Twain (1835-1910) grew up on the banks of the great Mississippi river and his experiences became the subject matter of his novels. The river stood for freedom in the author's imagination. Both his most popular works, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) have young boys, Tom and his friend Huck playing along the Mississippi river, whose lives receive a treatment by their maker which has been termed as comic realism. Tom Sawyer, about the coming of age of the boy with the help of his encounters with adults, is much lighter in treatment, about simple youthful innocence and joy; while Huck Finn's story is more serious as it includes the themes of corrupting and binding effects of civilization, slavery and freedom.

Tired of the efforts of his aunt to educate him Huck runs away and takes refuge in an island. There he befriends Nigger Jim, a slave who is hiding there to escape capture and persecution. In 1850 a law had come into force that prevented individuals from helping runaway slaves, nonetheless we see a companionship developing between Huck and Jim, and Jackson island transforms into a microcosm that manifests the spirit of America, of freedom and peaceful coexistence of disparate races. But the idyllic world comes to an end and soon its citizens are forced to return to civilization and face the consequences of their actions. For this twist in the tale Twain was severely criticized by D H Lawrence, who judged it as failure of courage on the part of the author for forcibly changing the organic direction of the story and robbing the youth as well as the black man of their freedom.

13.5.2 The second half of the 19th century

The first half of the 19th century was dominated by historical romances, while in the second half we have works which deal with realism and naturalism. Naturalism dominated American literature for a long period. There are two groups of writers writing in this tradition, the first group consisted of Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane and Frank Norris, who were influential from the mid-eighties to the closing years of the century. The second group consisted of Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, John Steinbeck, Sinclair Lewis, Upton Sinclair and Sherwood Anderson.

13.5.2.1 William Dean Howells (1837-1920) was the theoretician who proposed the theory of realism, of how it is an inversion of romanticism, where the novelist wants to narrate the usual and the everyday life and not the supernatural and the unusual. In his *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885) Howells confides the secret to wealth and industrialization in America through the rags to riches story of Silas Lapham. The “rise” is ironical, as, though the protagonist rises in society, he falls morally owing to his corrupt practices to become rich.

13.5.2.2 Stephen Crane (1871- 1900) wrote both short stories and novel, struggled with poverty and died of consumption. He wrote in the realist tradition, including both naturalism and impressionism in his works. *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) is about the Civil war of 1865 between the Liberal North and the Conservative South over the issue of slavery. The protagonist Henry Fleming has a romantic notion of war, but when the time comes, instead of rising to the occasion he flees the battlefield. Ashamed of his cowardice he longs for a red badge, or a battle wound to establish his bravery. Crane wanted to show that the circumstances and the environment in which one grows up is instrumental in character building, and one is not free to do what one desires. Naturalism was influenced by the philosophies of Spencer, Huxley and Darwin, the evolutionary theories of the age, of struggle for existence and survival of the fittest, and its first practitioners were Balzac,

Stendhal and Zola, in France. Along with Howells, Frank Norris was also a practitioner of naturalism.

4.13.5.2.3. Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945) was a journalist, playwright, poet, short story writer, who also produced travelogues, anthropological works and periodicals. His novels studied the nature of individuals, man woman relationship and conflicts between classes. *An American Tragedy* (1925), inspired by a real-life crime, where a man drowned his pregnant girlfriend as he considered her an obstacle to his success, was produced by the author after extensive field work and research of the original event. He presents the life of his protagonist in a manner that problematizes the clear division between personal aspirations and social constraints, material and the spiritual, bringing out the moral failure of the American society and nation.

13.6 The 20th century

4.13.6.1 Modernist fiction

Modernism emerged at the turn of the century and continued through the two World Wars, and dealt with conflicting tendencies in philosophy and art, relation between beauty, art and the artist, high and popular art and culture, a break from the past and an active pursuit of an alternative and experimentation in art and literature. It witnessed the advent and growing dominance of visual culture in the form of cinema and other visual media.

13.6.1.1 Henry James (1843-1916) was a prolific writer, who wrote essays, short stories, novels, plays, criticism and literary theory. He is not only a major American novelist but one of the foremost authors of literature in English, who paved the way for modernism. He believed in the deficiency of an individual perspective, and used a technique called central consciousness. He was also of the opinion that all information in the plot should be realistically available to the characters in it. He lived in England and Europe and repeatedly explored the difference between what he considered the innocent American and the corrupt European. He also depicted the struggle of a creative individual in one's negotiation of one's artistic nature and the demands of the real world.

The Portrait of a Lady (1881), considered one of his best works is about a young American woman Isabel Archer whose story is narrated from different perspectives. She is a woman who wants to exercise her free will and freedom of choice and must pay the price and bear the consequences for her actions. In spite of being wooed by two good men she ends up marrying the wrong man, Gilbert Osmond, because she goes by his outward European refinement. But gradually discovers the cold and calculative nature of her husband, the loss of her freedom, her husband's affair and illegitimate child. The focus is both on the

sensibility, the private lives of the characters as well as the reality of their beings, with details from their lived experiences. James has been criticized for the pessimistic end to this work, and it has been pointed out that he inherited his negative opinion of women from his authoritarian father. Nonetheless, this novel remains one of the most popular novels in the language.

13.6.1.2 The Lost Generation

This term is used for the authors who came into prominence after the First World War; the term was coined by the elderly novelist and poet Gertrude Stein, and popularised by Ernest Hemingway. The other authors whose works are included in this group were Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos and William Faulkner. These were young American authors who lived in Paris as expatriates, many of whom had witnessed the war at first hand and developed a deep sense of disenchantment, which earned the name “lost” for them.

13.6.1.3 F. Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) is a major novelist of the last century and the best representative of the 1920s America, capturing the mood and spirit of the times accurately. He was also a playwright, screenwriter, essayist and poet, who published many volumes of short stories. One of his most celebrated works is *The Great Gatsby (1925)*, where Gatsby is great precisely for his affluence, not because of his moral superiority in any way. He embodies the American dream fulfilled, with his great wealth earned by unethical means, the post war obsession with financial success. The novel exposes the illusive and shallow nature of the American dream, the excesses and flamboyance of the Jazz age, an immoral and hollow New York society preoccupied with money and social position, and careless and hedonistic characters, narrated from the perspective of a third person minor character. It is presented through the image of the bleak and sterile valley of ashes overlooked by the hovering eyes of an unknown entity, perhaps God who sees but does nothing. The rootlessness and corruption of the generation is ironically presented through the theme of old-world romance, innocence, love and dream. His other important novels are *This Side of Paradise*, *The Beautiful and the Damned* and *Tender is the Night*.

13.6.1.4 Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) was a fellow expatriate in Paris, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature, published ten novels, twenty volumes of nonfiction and more than a hundred short stories. His style is marked by control, verbal economy and precision. He witnessed the war as an ambulance man. He travelled extensively and had a very active and adventurous life which is often reflected through hunting, boxing and bull-fighting activities in his works. Some of his celebrated novels are *The Sun Also Rises (1926)*, *A Farewell to Arms (1929)*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940)* and the novella *The Old Man and the Sea (1952)*.

His heroes live by a code and excel under pressure, they are physically or metaphorically wounded and represent the lost generation; his stories are associated with the iceberg theory, which implies that they contain greater and deeper meaning which may not be evident at first glance. *The Old Man and the Sea* is often considered as an allegory of an individual's ability to struggle against all odds and survive. Santiago, the old man in the novella is one such hero, who shines under pressure, is very skilled, at one with nature, is noble and admires his adversaries and puts up a great fight knowing too well that on one level he is going to lose the game. The reader gets an image of a Christ like figure in the depiction and suffering of Santiago and his fortitude.

13.6.1.5 John Dos Passos (1896-1970) is another novelist of the lost generation, who also witnessed the war from his position in the ambulance corps. His works critique capitalism and perceive the city as a machine. In his famous *U.S.A trilogy* consisting of *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *Nineteen Nineteen* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936), he presents a nightmare vision of human existence. It is a modernist epic with a historical approach and providing a panoramic vision of the country and its corrupt practices, written by an author from a radical Marxist point of view. The stories are presented as news reels, the biographies and Camera Eyes – which help him to narrate objectively, with commentaries facts and stream of consciousness flow of the novelist's perception. Not only does he indict capitalism but also judges communism for its betrayal. He looks at these systems as attacks on individuals that aim to dehumanise them and rob them of their freedom

13.6.1.6 William Faulkner (1897-1962) is another important 20th century novelist, Nobel laureate and two times Pulitzer Prize winner, who was in the Royal Canadian Air Force towards the end of World War I. He was a regional author, who wrote about the Mississippi and the American South, with a universal appeal. He experimented with the narrative technique to evoke the movement from past to present and interior monologue, and invented the Yoknapatawpha County introduced by Sartoris (1929), to reconstruct and represent the racial past of the antebellum South; his aim was to explore the human heart in conflict with itself. His *Light in August* (1932), set against the Great Depression and recording considerable racial violence, is about two different characters: pregnant Lena Grove and foundling Joe Christmas. Joe Christmas threatens the structure of the society with his ambiguous racial identity. Though it is unknown to both Joe and the Jefferson community, it is suspected that Joe is a mulatto, which means he is not of pure but mixed racial origins. Joe struggles throughout his life for acceptance and a place in society, he also reacts violently and commits crimes but is brutally mutilated and killed in an act of vindication by the white community of Jefferson. His *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) another great and complex work that won him the Nobel is about three different families and a character

Thomas Sutpen; narrated by three different characters along with the authorial narrative voice, who remember the story differently and give separate interpretations of characters and events, often filling up their narratives with imagined bits.

13.6.1.7 John Steinbeck (1902-68), another Nobel laureate from the country was a naturalistic writer, who was interested in scientific determinism and a biological explanation of human behaviour and nature. He was influenced by the works of marine biologist Edward F Ricketts. He too like the afore-mentioned novelist popularised his native region of central California. In 1929 the Great Depression began with the stock market crash of Wall Street, it lasted for the next 10 years and it was the worst economic downturn of the industrial economy when farming, banks and industries all collapsed leading to mass unemployment. *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Steinbeck's masterpiece, is a protest novel and a sociopolitical critique of the Depression, from the perspective of migratory farmers who are on the move looking for livelihood, but what they find are empty promises and hopelessness. This work caused intense reaction among the readers, both in support and against. Those in favour dubbed this work as "The Uncle Tom's Cabin of the Depression." His critics have accused him of reducing human beings to animals, because of his interest in marine biology, with too much emphasis on survival of the fittest and the rejection of outsiders – just like the migrant farmers are looked down upon as intruders.

13.6.1.8 Henry Miller (1891-1880) is another important author of the 30s who reflected the Depression and the socio-political and economic chaos of the time. He also wrote about sex candidly and in minute details. These books were written and published in France, as they were sexually explicit, they were published in the US only in 1960s, when there were trials for obscenity and the books had to be passed as non-obscene by a court of law. He was an iconoclast who believed in attacking traditions which he did with his Tropics trilogy, and other novels. **The Tropic of Cancer (1934)** is an important piece of work of the century. In it the author deals with the human condition and experiments with the novel; it is fictional as well as semi-autobiographical describing the author's life as an artist in France, he also uses the stream of consciousness technique in the work. After World War II he returned to his home country and used surrealism as his vehicle of expression. Not only did he continue writing but also painted and produced works in water colours

13.6.1.9 Saul Bellow (1915-2005) was a Canadian American author, who also won the Pulitzer and the Nobel and is the only author to have won the National Book Award for Fiction three times. Bellow wrote after World War II with a modernist approach, when modernism was becoming unpopular, and recorded the despair of living in the post war era. The moral and intellectual sensitivity of his characters is continuously frustrated by the chaos

around them; they exhibit both the flaws and the strengths of post war Western civilization, they are absurd, alienated and marginalized. Augie March is one such portrait who comes of age, growing up during the Depression years in his picaresque narrative *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953). Saul Bellows belonged to the small but powerful and influential group of Jewish American writers, many of whom are Nobel laureates like Isaac Bashevis, Czeslaw Miloz and Joseph Brodsky.

13.6.2 Post Modern Fiction

After emerging as one of the superpowers post World War II, America was involved in the long Cold War with the erstwhile USSR and witnessed the war in Vietnam. The Cold War ended with the establishment of the USA as the leader of global economics and America's interference and world dominance. This dominance today is as much cultural as it is economic. While at the same time all was not well within the country; on the one hand the nation witnessed unprecedented technological advancement, on the other ethnic minorities were still struggling for civil rights. In this environment, Post-Modernist literature and art developed between the 1960s to 1980s. Jean Baudrillard, the French Philosopher observed that America now rejected old traditions and cultural norms in favour of the new paradigm it invented for itself through electronic media and technology. According to Professor Krishna Sen "American postmodernism invoked the new surreal hyperrealities of the electronic and social media to subvert established genres and norms...The postmodern violation of literary, social and sexual norms in terms of parody, profanity, paranoia, pastiche and *defamiliarization* had already been anticipated by the American modernists...These [Postmodern] writers engage in ...the overt dislocation of existing literary norms and forms – specifically the notion that art reflects "reality", the use of discontinuous narrative, and the displacement of genre differences and hierarchies (as between literature, history and science, or between high culture and popular culture). They produce sharply satirical, metafictional, multi-genre works that project a dysfunctional and dystopian America. (Sen, 202-3.)

13.6.2.1 Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) was a Russian immigrant who had to flee his native land for political reasons and became a citizen of America in 1945. He brought European modernism to the US. He was first a Russian novelist who began to write in English after learning the language. He was a trilingual writer, scholar, literary critic and translator and a lepidopterist. His concerns were the relationship among art, memory, and individual reality, and the meaningful connection that can be made among seemingly disparate strands. He was an author of enormous complexity.

Pale Fire (1962) and *Lolita* (1955) are considered his masterpieces. *Lolita*, his best known novel, is regarded as his love affair with the English language; it is a social satire,

a study of a bizarre love story and the psychology of sexual obsession. It is narrated as a confessional, a literary diary and a Romantic novel.

13.6.2.2 Thomas Pynchon (1937) credited with the creation of “epic modernism”, is another author of the dense and complex postmodernist novel, who trained to be an engineer before turning to history and literature. He writes in different genres and on various themes and subjects, like music, mathematics, science and history. He records the unsettling effect of technology and the ensuing paranoia of the individuals of his era. *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973) is his most important work, and an epic novel of the 20th century. Critics have called it an “**encyclopedic narrative**” because it successfully combines American, Western European, Russian, and African history; Western philosophy, physics, chemistry, musicology, theology, and linguistics, to name but a few of Pynchon’s fascinations.

13.7 The Novel of the American South

A distinct regional, southern literature emerged after the Civil War and failure of the Reconstruction in 1877. It would take the region another century to recover from the economic set back it had suffered, and the nostalgia of the Antebellum South would haunt the **Postbellum** period for long and efforts would be made to recreate the disappearing culture and romanticise and recapture the Antebellum charm and myth of the south. The authors who came into prominence in the postbellum period are George Washington Cable (1844-1925) with his fictional depiction of New Orleans, Kate Chopin (1851-1904) who about race and sexuality in Louisiana, William Faulkner and Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989). Other prominent novelists, especially women authors of this group were Ellen Glasgow (1873-1945) who is credited with the initiation of the movement called Southern Renaissance which helped in the development of other notable authors and poets of the South; Willa Cather (1873-1947), Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980), Eudora Welty (1909-2001), Carson McCullers (1917-67), Flannery O’Conner (1925-64) and Harper Lee (1926-2016) whose novel *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1960) is also a 20th century American Classic. Those authors of this region who focus on the irrational and the horrific have also been termed as authors of the sub-genre, Southern Gothic.

13.8 African American Fiction

African American novelist like Richard Wright (1908-1960) author and poet who looked at the vice of racism and its effects in 1920s; and Ralph Ellison (1914-1994), literary critic and scholar, best known for his American classic *Invisible Man* (1952) addressing social

and intellectual issues facing African Americans like black nationalism, Marxism and the black identity, reformist policies and individual identity are also Southern authors. African American literature is rich and varied with a long tradition of both oral and written forms. Other novelists of this race are Paule Marshall (1929-2019), whose *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) is considered the earliest Black feminist novel. Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison (1931-2019) with her novel about the interior lives of the African American women and their experiences is a literary giant dominating the last three decades of our time. Other important novelists are Alice Walker (1944), Gayle Jones (1949), Gloria Naylor (1950-2016), Octavia Butler (1947-2006), John Wideman (1941), Charles R Johnson (1948) and Ishmael Reed (1938).

13.9 Native American fiction

There were the traditional oral and later written works of fiction by Native American or indigenous peoples of the Americas. The first Native American novel was *The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta: The Celebrated California Bandit* (1854) recording the gold rush in the Cherokee territory in present day California by Cherokee John Rolling Ridge (1827-67). *Wynema: A Child of the Forest* (1891) was the first novel by a Native American woman novelist, S Alice Callahan (1864-94) The 20th century saw the production of quality Native American fiction in the works of Hum-ishu-ma (1884-1936), *Eogewea, the half – Blood* (1927), a Cherokee Indian, John Milton Oskison's (1874-1947) *Wild Harvest* (1925), *Black Jack Davey* (1926) and *Brothers Three* (1935); John Joseph Mathews' (1894-1979) *Sundown* (1934), D' Arcy McNickle's (1904-77) *The Surrounded* (1936). The more recent authors are Leslie Marmon Silko (1948), with her novel *Ceremony* (1977), James Welch's (1940-2003) *Winter in the Blood* (1974), *The Death of Jim Loney* (1979), and Gerald Vizenor's (1934) *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978). Navarre Scott Momaday (1934-) is a Kiowa novelist, short story writer, essayist, and poet. He received the Pulitzer Prize in 1969 for his novel *House Made of Dawn*. His works celebrate his indigenous oral and artistic traditions.

13.10 Summing Up

In this unit we have looked at a brief history and different trends and traditions of the American novel, like romance, naturalism, modernism and postmodernism, along with some of the authors who put the American novel on the literary map of the world, and their major works which are often grouped together and termed as the Great American Novel. We

also learnt that the great American novelists were men and women, Americans and immigrants, white as well as black, belonging to different social, religious and cultural backgrounds. Though the novel was a British import by the early colonists, we studied how it soon became the favourite genre of both the readers and the writers and evolved as a representative form for the nation, its struggles, its imagination and its diversity.

13.11 Comprehension Exercises

Essay-type Questions :

1. Write an essay on the beginning of the novel in America.
2. How is the Romance genre more suitable for the pioneering authors of American fiction?
3. Important authors of early 19th century. Discuss
4. Important authors of late 19th century. Discuss
5. Discuss the dominant trends in the 20th century American novel.

Medium-length Questions :

1. Write a brief note on the contribution of James Fenimore Cooper or Nathaniel Hawthorne to the American novel.
2. Write a note on Melville's novel *Moby Dick* justifying the claim that it is a classic.
3. Comment briefly on American novels dealing with or referring to slavery.
4. Discuss some of the innovations carried out by the Modernist novelists.
5. Examine the problems faced by the African American and the Native American writers.

Short Questions :

1. Name the main characters in *Leatherstocking Tales*.
2. Name the two best-known short stories by Washington Irving.
3. Mention any two characteristics of the American South and any two writers exemplifying the same.
4. Which writer is regarded as the creator of "epic modernism"? Mention any one of his novels.
5. Who coined the term "a lost generation"? Mention any two novelists who answer to this description.

13.12 Suggested Reading

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Unit 14 □ Ernest Hemingway – *The Old Man and the Sea*

Structure

- 14.1. Objectives**
- 14.2. Ernest Hemingway’s Life**
- 14.3. The Works of Ernest Hemingway**
- 14.4. The Genesis of the Novella *The Old Man and the Sea*.**
- 14.5 Plot Summary**
- 14.6 Thematic Approaches**
 - 14.6.1 The Different Layers of Symbolism in the Novella**
 - 14.6.1.1 Classical Symbolism**
 - 14.6.1.2 The Christian and Taoist Symbols**
 - 14.6.1.3 The Personal and Autobiographical Symbols**
 - 14.6.2 The Character of Santiago**
 - 14.6.3 The Role of Manolin**
- 14.7 Structure and Style**
- 14.8 Summing Up: Changing Trends in Criticism**
- 14.9 Comprehension Exercises**
- 14.10 Suggested Reading**

14.1 Objectives

The objective of this unit is to familiarize learners with the author Ernest Hemingway, his life, times, career and the background to his works along with a special emphasis on his novella *The Old Man and the Sea*.

14.2 Ernest Hemingway’s Life

You probably know from your earlier reading that Ernest Hemingway was an American novelist, short story writer and journalist. He was born on the 21st of July, 1899 and raised in Oak Park, Illinois. He was the second child of Dr. Clarence Edmund Hemingway and

Grace Hall Hemingway. As a child Ernest accompanied his family to vacations in upper Michigan, the natural scenery of which sometimes became the setting of some of his stories. After high school he served an apprenticeship with *The Kansas City Star* which, by his own admission taught him the basics of his writing style. He went on to serve in the First World War in the Italian front as an ambulance driver. He was wounded in Fossalta by a mortar burst and machine gun fire. He recovered at Milan in 1918 and returned to the United States the following year. Back home, Hemingway joined *The Toronto Star* as a foreign correspondent. The years 1920-23 saw the young journalist honing his reporting and writing skills at *The Toronto Star* and *The Star Weekly* where he served as reporter and war correspondent.

In 1921 Hemingway married Hadley Richardson and during the next four years he explored Europe as far east as Asia Minor before settling in Paris and becoming identified with the expatriate artists who had gathered on the left bank of the Seine during the inter-war years. In Paris Hemingway interacted with writers and artists such as James Joyce, Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein among the European and American expatriates who had gathered there, and was identified famously as a member of the “lost generation” of the inter-war period.

In 1927 Hemingway divorced Hadley and married Pauline Pfeiffer, an American journalist and the couple moved to Key West, Florida in 1929. Hemingway’s ‘macho’ image began to develop in the 1930s as he went big-game hunting in Africa, bullfighting in Spain and deep-sea fishing in Florida. A safari, undertaken by Hemingway in Africa, from December 1933 to February 1934 yielded *Green Hills of Africa*, Hemingway’s second experiment in non-fiction after *Death in the Afternoon* in 1932. Ideologically committed to the Loyalist cause in the Spanish Civil War, Hemingway became active in its support as he raised money for and awareness about it. In 1937 he went to Spain to cover the Spanish Civil War for the North American Newspaper Alliance (NANA), published the novel *To Have and Have Not*, and wrote the script for the documentary film *This Spanish Earth*.

In 1940 Hemingway divorced Pauline and married Martha Gellhorn, an American author, travel-writer and war correspondent and moved to Cuba. From 1942-45 Hemingway covered the European wars as newspaper and magazine correspondent. In 1946 he married author and journalist Mary Welsh.

During the years 1953-54 Hemingway undertook a second African safari and in 1954 he suffered a plane crash. Injured badly, he lived to read his own obituaries. Between the publication of *The Old Man and the Sea* in 1952 and his death in 1961 Hemingway did not submit any material for publication. Plagued by hypertension, depression, alcoholism and partial memory loss Hemingway spent a couple of spells in hospital. Two suicide bids in April 1961 necessitated hospitalization. Two months on, he was

released from hospital. A few days later, on 2 July 1961, Hemingway committed suicide by shooting himself with his shotgun.

14.3 The Works of Ernest Hemingway

Having shared some important details about Ernest Hemingway's life with you we shall now take a look at the literary works composed by our author. The year 1923 saw the publication of Hemingway's first work - *Three Stories and Ten Poems*, followed in 1924 by *in our time*, a slim volume of miniatures published in Paris. The miniatures, which developed into inter chapters between fourteen short stories, were published, together with the stories, as *In Our Time* in 1925. In 1926 Hemingway published his first novel *The Torrents of Spring*. The same year he published his next novel, *The Sun Also Rises*. In 1927 Hemingway published *Men Without Women*, a collection of fourteen short stories. In 1929 *A Farewell to Arms*, his first critically acclaimed and commercially successful novel based on his First World War experiences in the Italian front was published. The year 1936 saw the publication of his short stories *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* and *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*. In 1937 Hemingway visited Spain as the scriptwriter for the film *This Spanish Earth* on the Spanish Civil War. In 1937 he published the novel *To Have or Have Not*. In 1938 he published *The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories*. 1940 saw the publication of one of his most well-known novels, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* on the Spanish Civil War. After a gap of ten years, in 1950 Hemingway published his next novel, *Across the River and into the Trees*. In 1952 his novella *The Old Man and the Sea* was published to triumphant reception. In 1954 Hemingway was awarded the **Nobel Prize** for Literature. The year 1964 saw the publication of Hemingway's Parisian memoirs of the nineteen twenties, *A Moveable Feast*. *Islands in the Stream* published posthumously in 1970 is a novel in three sections revolving around the protagonist Thomas Hudson who grows as a character from a painter seeking peace to a man who suffers personal bereavement in the Second World War to a person intent on a mission. In 1986 the second of Hemingway's posthumously published novels, *The Garden of Eden* was printed.

14.4 The Genesis of the Novella *The Old Man and the Sea*

It is always interesting to learn about the process through which a creative work comes to be produced. With that point in mind we shall now consider the aesthetic motivations that inspired the writing of this renowned and impactful novella.

In April 1936 Hemingway published an essay called “On the Blue Water: A Gulf Stream Letter” in *Esquire Magazine*. The story foreshadowed the novella except for the ending which was different. In the *Esquire* story the old fisherman appeared “half-crazy from his loss” unlike Santiago who was “destroyed but not defeated.”

Hemingway had planned a tetralogy of short novels on the effects of the Second World War on the Gulf Stream and its inhabitants. The first three parts were published posthumously in 1971 as *Islands in the Stream*. The final section, that is the *Esquire Magazine* story, was worked on in 1951 and published as the novella *The Old Man and the Sea* in the September 1st, 1952 issue of *Life* magazine. It was later brought out by Scribner’s.

Carlos Gutierrez, the original First Mate of Hemingway’s boat *The Pilar* was, by the author’s own admission a source of inspiration for the protagonist of the novella. Hemingway had expressed his admiration for Gutierrez who had forty years of nautical experience behind him when Hemingway first met him, and who was a kind of mentor from whom the writer acknowledged he had learnt all there was to learn about fishing marlin. Carlos Fuentes who replaced Gutierrez was also a probable source of inspiration for the character of the old Cuban fisherman.

In a 1939 letter to his editor Maxwell Perkins Hemingway laid out the plot outline of *The Old Man and the Sea* and showed how Gutierrez’s assistance proved vital to the story’s creation and evolution:

One (story) about the old commercial fisherman who fought the swordfish all alone in his skiff for four days and four nights and the sharks finally eating it after he had it alongside and could not get it into the boat. That’s a wonderful story of the Cuban coast. I’m going out with old Carlos in his skiff so as to get it all right. Everything he does and everything he thinks in all that long fight with the boat out of sight of all the other boats, all alone on the sea. It’s a great story if I can get it right. One that would make the book.

This 26500 word novella won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the American Academy of Arts and Letters’ Award of Merit Medal for the Novel in 1953, and played an important part in Hemingway’s winning the 1954 Nobel Prize for Literature.

14.5 Plot Summary

Now that you have an idea of the factors that inspired *The Old Man and the Sea* you will probably be more enthusiastic about discovering the sequence of events that constitutes its main action.

The novella opens with the protagonist Santiago, an old and experienced Cuban fisherman having gone eighty-four days without a catch. He has been declared “*salao*,” the worst form of ‘unlucky’ by the local community of fishermen but is still valiantly trying his luck on the ocean. The boy Manolin who used to accompany him on his boat was forced by his father to leave him and go out instead with another fisherman who was perceived to be more successful. On the eighty-fifth day he leads his boat into the Gulf Stream where he hooks a giant marlin. For three days Santiago is locked in a combat with the massive marlin which tests his strength, endurance and experience. Eventually, exhausted and without proper resources or weapons the old man is able to overcome the fish in a rare show of skill, patience and knowledge. However, this victory is short-lived as sharks begin to appear, the *galano*, *mako*, *dentuso* and those of other varieties to stake their claim on his prized catch. Santiago kills some of them, drives away the others in a heroic demonstration of courage, resourcefulness and determination. In all his adventures Santiago misses the presence of the boy Manolin who was his pupil, surrogate son, helper, apprentice and lost youth all rolled into one. At the end of the novella the old fisherman returns to the shore with the skeleton of his great catch. This skeleton is so long that tourists are left wondering about the species it represents thereby suggesting that the captured marlin and with it the fishing prowess of Santiago have passed into popular local lore.

14.6 Thematic Approaches

There are several approaches that you may adopt to understand the text. These are different kinds of symbolism, characterization and human (and other) relationships among other facets.

14.6.1 The Different Layers of Symbolism in the Novella

Symbols, as you know are used by writers to enhance, through suggestion and indirect comparison the effectiveness of the original subjects, be they characters, actions or settings. Hemingway uses several types of symbolism to deepen the significance of his brief work.

14.6.1.1 Classical Symbolism - In Greek mythology the “old man of the sea” was any of several water-gods, generally Nereus or Proteus, but also Pontus, Glaucus and others. Thus, the title of the novella is intrinsically linked to the nature worship of ancient classical times.

In Homer’s *Odyssey* the old man of the sea is enormously wise and quintessentially protean. In the classical prototype the ‘old man’ is associated with, and is part of the sea whereas in Hemingway’s novella the ‘old man’ is pitted against the sea which ironically is both his ally and adversary.

Like the Homeric hero born to his destiny, Santiago felt he was “born” to be a fisherman. Again, like the Homeric hero Santiago was not unreflective in his heroism. It was his “choice to go out there and find him beyond all people.”

The arm-wrestling match or the “hand-game” is an equivalent of the athletic contests in the classical epics.

Santiago’s contest with the marlin is a duel between equals as in Homer’s epics.

The arming of the hero in *Iliad* is described four times. Hemingway describes the carrying of Santiago’s fishing equipment to the boat before he sets out on his voyage thrice in three pages, once again betraying the influence of the classical pattern in his work.

Santiago’s encounter with the sharks after his victory over the marlin recalls the battles over the body of the slain opponent in the classical epics.

The challenges, threats and vows of victory in classical epics are replicated in the novella in the rousing pronouncements issued by Santiago from time to time during his ordeal with the marlin and sharks.

Odysseus’ stoic endurance of pain is echoed by Santiago as is his refusal to yield to adversity.

14.6.1.2 The Christian and Taoist Symbols - Santiago’s name is derived from San Diego or St. James, one of the apostles of Christ.

Santiago’s love for all species of created beings is a fraternal ethic found in all religions, notably the Bible.

The wounds on Santiago’s palms during his struggle with the marlin are reminders of the stigmata on Christ’s palms, the wounds made by the nails driven into them in the process of crucifying him.

The sound “ay” - “There is no translation for this word...just a noise such as a man might make involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hand and into the wood,” - further links Santiago’s physical pain with Christ’s suffering on the cross.

When Santiago climbs the hill up to his shack, carrying the heavy mast on his shoulder the figure represented by him recalls Christ’s journey up the hill of Calvary prior to his crucifixion.

The final crucifixion image in the novella occurs at the end when Santiago falls asleep in a cruciform shape, “his arms straight out and the palms of his hands up.”

Santiago is lost at sea for three days and is “resurrected” on the third day conforming to the Christian pattern of crucifixion and resurrection. Christ was crucified on a Friday (Good Friday) and was resurrected on the following Sunday (Easter Sunday).

The Taoist pattern of cyclicity of experience may be seen in the waxing and waning of

Santiago's luck and professional achievements. His setting out for the sea and his return; his victory over the marlin and subsequent loss of the same to the sharks and the going away and promised return of Manolin are some of the smaller cycles of action within the novella.

The Taoist notion of emptying out the vessel is seen in Santiago's virtual fast. Just as the body is emptied out in preparation for spiritual attainment so also the old fisherman emptied his mind of all elements save his concentration on the act at hand.

The preparation and wait for enlightenment found in Taoist Buddhism is seen here albeit in a different context.

14.6.1.3 The Personal and Autobiographical Symbols - The long literary drought that followed Hemingway's publication of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* may be equated with Santiago's eighty-four days without a catch.

Santiago's decision to "go too far out" is a reflection of Hemingway's description of the writer in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech as one who is "driven far out past where he can go, out to where no one can help him."

The novella may be regarded as an aesthetic allegory in which the writer is the mariner, the critics and reviewers are the sharks and the two tourists at the end, the public.

14.6.2 The Character of Santiago

Having dealt with the various types of symbols that enrich the meaning of the work we shall now move on to a discussion of Santiago's character which is very important in the context of the novella.

You will be interested to learn that in Greek mythology the "Old Man of the Sea" was a primordial figure who was seen as any of several water gods, generally Nereus or Proteus, but also Pontus, Glaucus and others. In Homer's *Odyssey* Menelaus recounts to Telemachus his journey home and how he had to seek the advice of the "Old Man of the Sea." The Old Man can answer any question but capturing him is difficult as he changes from one form to another.

Santiago was 'of' the sea in the sense that it was his element and he represented its spirit. Yet paradoxically he was confronted by it and some of the species it harboured because of the imperatives that his profession enjoined on him. He was the intrepid explorer who rowed "too far out" testing the waters and his luck as he sought a prize catch. Santiago was an "ancient mariner" with vast expertise, skill, acumen and knowledge of fishing strategies and tactics that had contributed to his reputation as a master fisherman venerated by young disciples such as Manolin. At the beginning of the story it is precisely this reputation of his which is at stake as he had been unable to return with a catch for the last

eighty-four days. Thus, in a manner not unlike that of the Conradian hero Santiago has to redeem his lost honour before the novella ends.

Though Santiago shares resemblances with the two First Mates of Hemingway's boat *The Pilar* the author had categorically asserted that Santiago was "based on no one in particular," thereby quashing critical tendencies for biographical co-relation. If anything, Santiago falls into the general pattern of Hemingway's heroes who strive to excel in their chosen field and remain stoic in the face of adversity. "Keep your head clear and know how to suffer like a man," Santiago tells himself stoically at a time of intense suffering in the course of his battle against the marlin. The soldier, the bullfighter, the wild game hunter and others in Hemingway's fiction seek to escape death at any cost though many of them are in constant confrontation with the same. In learning to face death with courage, discipline and dignity these protagonists exemplify what has been described by the author as "grace under pressure."

Santiago's indomitable spirit exemplified in his assertion, "And a man may be destroyed but not defeated," perhaps best describes his attitude to life. He meant that a man may be physically and materially destroyed but if he has lived and worked with integrity and plied his craft according to its generic rules he will triumph as Santiago does when, at the end of the novella he returns to the shore with the skeleton of his prize catch. At the height of his struggle with the fish he vows, "But I will show him what a man can do and what a man endures."

Santiago is an example of the typical Hemingway hero whose preoccupation with precision, preparation and perfection helped him overcome the giant marlin "correctly" and kill it "cleanly" according to the rules of his professional etiquette. According to Santiago while it is good to be lucky it is better to be exact. "Then when luck comes you are ready," he explains. This further marks him out as the meticulous craftsman who combines the passion of the aficionado with the rigorous methodology of the professional.

Santiago's obsession with the achievement of excellence, perhaps, is his common link with many of the other protagonists in Hemingway's fiction. His role model is DiMaggio, the legendary baseball player, he dreams of lions, the king of beasts, he hooks and pulls in the largest of fish and he is acknowledged as unique and exceptional by his disciple Manolin.

A version of the Homeric hero, Santiago uses wiles to overcome his opponent, trying "not to think but only to endure." When it occurred to him that the great marlin could go deep down or even die he did not despair but in true Homeric fashion resolved: "But I'll do something. There are plenty of things I can do." Later he says, "I'll fight them till I die," again in the manner of Homer's heroes. Santiago prays, too like the Homeric heroes. He improvises his weapons in the course of his battle with the marlin and later, the sharks. Like

Odysseus fashions a stake from olive wood to attack the Cyclops Santiago, too uses a broken oar and tiller to club the sharks.

Santiago had become exhausted, thirsty and was suffering from raw hands and spots in his vision while locked in battle with the marlin, yet he persevered, paying attention to his craft and changing his technique according to the need of the situation. He improvised freely and frequently, as for example, when he used the sack to cover his back at night and to cushion the strain of the line on his shoulders, or when he made do with broken implements for weapons.

Within an hour of slaying his noble opponent in a “correct” manner Santiago was attacked by sharks. He was spent, alone and handicapped by his cramped hand. Yet he took his harpoon and hit the *dentuso* “with his blood-mushed hands driving a good harpoon with all his strength.” Next came the two *galanos*. He no longer had his harpoon, so he drove his knife into the slit-like eyes of the first one and repeatedly punched the blade into the second one. Between them they had taken away about a quarter of the marlin. When the single, shovel-nosed shark arrived he snapped his knife-blade in killing it. He had no weapons left to fight the sharks. Not one to give up, however, he calculated he had “two oars and the tiller and the short club” left to fend off attackers. The sheer pathos of Santiago’s plight and the magnitude of his heroism are apparent when he says, “But I am too old to club sharks to death. But I will try it as long as I have the oars, the short club and the tiller.”

When the pair of *galanos* came just before sunset Santiago used the club improvised from an oar handle to hit out at them. He managed to get them off the marlin. Alone, defenseless, far out in the ocean Santiago yet showed great fortitude in withstanding the shark attacks. His heroic resolution, “I’ll fight them till I die” shows his spirit in the face of the harshest adversity. And fight them he did. When the *galanos* came in a pack he “jerked the tiller free from the rudder and beat and chopped with it.” When he heard the tiller break he lunged at the shark with the splintered butt. After the attack by the *dentuso* Santiago cautions himself, “Don’t think, old man. Sail on this course and take it when it comes.” Thus, he allows a meditative bent of mind to balance the ongoing action with a spell of stasis.

As Santiago steered his skiff homewards he was “stiff and sore and his wounds and all the strained parts of his body hurt with the cold of the night.” After his midnight encounter with the pack of sharks he “knew he was beaten now and finally without remedy.” Yet, there are all the signs in the novella that suggest that Santiago had triumphed over his loss, pain and apparent failure. Resurrected after being lost at sea for three days, Santiago reached the shore, “shouldered the mast and started to climb.” The implicit analogy with Christ and

His transcendence of physical death drives home the nature of the spiritual victory that Santiago had scored, fishing correctly, winning conscientiously and honorably defending his prize from marauders by using every last ounce of strength as also stratagem known to him.

Santiago's legendary resourcefulness is an important aspect of his character. It is linked to his indomitable spirit which refuses to accept defeat. Santiago's optimism and determination, too serve him in good stead helping him to overcome difficulties with equanimity of outlook. His observation, "Every day is a new day," points in this direction. Just before overcoming his prey Santiago, brought low with opposition from the former yet resolves, "I'll try again." Almost on the brink of collapse with the repeated shark attacks he yet vows, "I'll fight them until I die."

Santiago's love and admiration for his prey complicate the hunter-hunted relationship investing it with nuances beyond the conventional classification of the respective roles. Time and again he emphasizes the nobility of the marlin while acknowledging its antagonistic position vis-à-vis the confrontation and combat. The monologue "'Fish,' he said, 'I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends,'" is one of several such ambiguous expressions in the work.

The comparison with Christ and his transcendence of physical death at the end reinforces the nature of Santiago's spiritual victory. His patient endurance of pain is found several times in the novella. Alone in his ordeal he "tried not to think but only to endure."

Santiago's heroic endeavour mediated through classical parallels and his spiritual redemption recuperated through Christian symbols and echoes recall, in their resilience and resurgence Diomedes' characterization of Nestor, "Thou, old man, art indomitable."

14.6.3 The Role of Manolin

You will probably agree that human relationships are of the utmost importance in a work of fiction. The relationship at the core of this novella, as you must have gathered by now is that between Santiago, the old Cuban fisherman and his protégé and disciple, the young Manolin.

The Santiago-Manolin relationship is one of mutual trust, respect and affection. It is a relationship between mentor and disciple; master and apprentice and father and son. This relationship is crucial to the initiation narrative or 'coming of age' story as *The Old Man and the Sea* is seen to be at one level. Manolin learns about the sea, the craft of fishing and all things nautical from Santiago just as Isaac McCaslin in William Faulkner's short stories such as "Delta Autumn" and "The Bear" learnt about the wilderness from Sam Fathers, the Native American elder.

In the beginning, Manolin is shown as a mere boy who had to perforce submit to parental

authority, and was forced to leave Santiago in favour of another fisherman who was considered more successful. "It was Papa made me leave. I am a boy and must obey him," Manolin offers by way of explanation. Thus, Manolin is, at this stage, shown as a victim of power, authority and conventional social attitudes. Yet, ironically Manolin looks after Santiago even as he recognizes his own limitations. He brings the old man his food, sees that he is warm, gets the bait and is quite the guardian when he tells Santiago, "You ought to go to bed now so that you will be fresh in the morning."

Often Santiago went without a meal but he was too proud to disclose the fact. Manolin, with a sensitivity beyond his years played along with the fiction of the "pot of yellow rice" and the casting net though he knew exactly when the latter had been sold to make ends meet. Manolin humours Santiago because he knew that the preservation of those illusions would help Santiago maintain his dignity and pride before him.

While Manolin looks after Santiago on land it is the other way round on the sea. The sea is Santiago's home where he is completely at home. Thus, their relationship is a constantly changing equation with role reversals according to the setting. Though Santiago is the acknowledged master he treats the boy as an equal. "You bought me a beer," he tells him. "You are already a man."

Though forbidden from going out in Santiago's boat Manolin continues to serve him in various ways. He sometimes asked Santiago in which direction he was headed the next day so that he too could be present there and come to his aid should such a situation arise. "I'll try to get him to work far out," he told Santiago. "Then if you hook something truly big we can come to your aid." He wished to get sardines as bait for Santiago. "If I cannot fish with you I would like to serve you in some way." Manolin did serve the old fisherman by carrying his fishing gear, buying him coffee and beer, bringing him his supper, by arranging the blanket around his shoulders and getting him fresh baits.

Most importantly Manolin believes in Santiago's prowess as a fisherman. Having been under Santiago's tutelage since the age of five, Manolin idolizes the old man, paying him the ultimate tribute: "There are many good fishermen, and some great ones. But there is only you."

While Manolin is present only in the frame narrative he haunts the main action through Santiago's repeated invocation of his name: "I wish the boy were here." While being towed out to sea by the great marlin, when his hand was cut by a sudden pull of the fish and when he was thoroughly exhausted during his long ordeal on the sea Santiago longed to have the boy beside him. He desired this not only because Manolin would have been able to help him in his hour of need but also because he wanted the boy to see his great feat and admire him for it. He says, "I wish I had the boy. To help me and to see this."

Santiago also wished for Manolin's presence because he was lonely and he wanted to share the rare experience of bringing in such a gigantic marlin with the boy, the person probably closest to him at the time.

By the end of the novella Manolin is shown to have grown up. Not caring about his family's wishes any longer he informs Santiago, "Now we fish together again." Manolin has become a man in the true sense not only because he shares a drink with his mentor or because he looks after him but because he has become capable of taking a decision concerning their lives, because of his will to continue to learn from Santiago, to shoulder his responsibilities and to plan for the future. Appropriately, Santiago gives Manolin the spear of the conquered marlin at the end in recognition of his true discipleship, his unswerving commitment, and his proven ability to carry forward the legacy of the outstanding performer.

Thus, it is seen that Manolin discharges several roles at once. He is Santiago's apprentice, helper, friend, comrade, spiritual son, his surrogate parent as also a reflection of his lost youth as held by several critics.

14.7 Structure and Style

With that we move on to a discussion of the structure and style that essentially characterize the novella.

A **frame narrative** encloses the main action in the novella highlighting Santiago's isolated ordeal on the sea, and helping readers to see it in perspective. This so called 'frame narrative' comprises the beginning and end of the novella and actions depicted in it take place on the land. Also, these sections are characterized by the presence of Manolin and references to a few other characters.

The main action that is Santiago's struggle with and eventual victory over the marlin followed by his conflict with the sharks takes place on the sea. It marks a tense preparation followed by a climax and an anti-climax. Santiago's victory over the marlin is a climax while his material defeat by the sharks is an anti-climax.

The construction of plot in a work of fiction was of great importance to Hemingway. "Prose is architecture, not interior decoration," he maintained privileging structural soundness of action over rhetorical flourishes. Such a view ensured fiction which is minimalist yet effective.

The "iceberg theory" of composition: Hemingway believed that "The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing." This dictum is

linked to the author's belief in the overall authenticity of presentation which can only grow out of a thorough knowledge of the subject at hand. Further, that the expressed and visible content is just a fraction of the entire work which is largely unsaid but implied through reference and reverberation.

According to Carlos Baker, one of his biographers, as a writer of short stories Hemingway had "learnt how to get most from the least, how to prune language and avoid waste motion, how to multiply intensities, and how to tell nothing but the truth in a way that allowed for telling more than the truth." It was through such an evocative exploitation of language that the writer was able to observe the Modernist poetics of purity evident in the fiction of James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield and others. The 'poetics of purity' so favoured by the Modernist writers was an important aesthetic in Hemingway's canon. Always distrustful of verbosity and rhetoric these authors were careful in their selection and sequencing of words so as to extract the maximum effect from the same. The same tendency is noticed in the American writer under discussion.

Jeffrey Meyers described Hemingway's straightforward prose and conventional narrative form as arising from his use of "declarative sentences and direct representations of the visible world." This accounts for the "telegraphic prose" style that was famously attributed to him. This factual and direct method is compounded by elements such as repetition. Repetitions, so favoured by Hemingway induce an incantatory quality reminiscent of Symbolist poetry. The sentence "I wish I had the boy," for instance is repeated in quick succession at a climactic moment in the action when he strives to establish his mastery over the gigantic marlin. Such a repetition creates a web of lamentation which ensnares the reader in its subtle echoes and expands the scope of the immediate situation through reverberation and resonance.

Hemingway, like the other Modernist writers favoured an organic use of images which were integral to the work, again an aspect of the structural and verbal economy practised by him. The imagery, drawn from his immediate life and surroundings strikes a true note depending for its effect on a factual rendering of the objective reality.

Santiago's internal monologues serve to expand the immediate context of the action through their engagement with either his inner life or with the past.

Hemingway's satisfaction with the prose that he had been able to achieve in *The Old Man and the Sea* is evident from the following comment made by him,

"This is the prose that I have been working for all my life and should read easily and simply and seem short and yet have all the dimensions of the visible world and the world of a man's spirit."

14.8 Summing Up: Changing Trends in Criticism

Having discussed most of the perspectives that you may use for a better understanding of the text it would perhaps be in order to make a note of the changing tastes and attitudes that have addressed *The Old Man and the Sea* over the years helping you to derive a comprehensive view of this seminal text.

To begin with, Humanistic critics such as Philip Young, Leo Gurko and Clinton S. Burhans in the 1950s took the view that Santiago was a simple man capable of decency, even heroism. Carlos Baker saw in Santiago an ‘ancient mariner’ – compassionate, courageous and fraternal – linking his suffering and pyrrhic victory to Christian martyrdom. Earl Rovit found a Jungian quest-initiation ritual in Santiago’s journey.

The novella, however, came under attack from the realistic critics from the mid-1950s. Robert P. Weeks even went to the extent of calling Hemingway’s style in it a “fakery”. His 1962 piece “Fakery in *The Old Man and the Sea*” presents his argument that the novel is a weak and unexpected divergence from the typical, realistic Hemingway (referring to the rest of Hemingway’s body of work as “earlier glories”). In juxtaposing this novel against Hemingway’s previous works, Weeks contends:

“The difference, however, in the effectiveness with which Hemingway employs this characteristic device in his best work and in *The Old Man and the Sea* is illuminating. The work of fiction in which Hemingway devoted the most attention to natural objects, *The Old Man and the Sea*, is pieced out with an extraordinary quantity of fakery, extraordinary because one would expect to find no inexactness, no romanticizing of natural objects in a writer who loathed W. H. Hudson, could not read Thoreau, deplored Melville’s rhetoric in *Moby Dick*, and who was himself criticized by other writers, notably Faulkner, for his devotion to the facts and his unwillingness to ‘invent’.”

The critic Claire Rosenfield finds folk and mythic resonances in the novella, linking Santiago’s encounter with the marlin to the tribal hero’s confrontation with a totemic animal.

Martin Swan’s Feminist reading of the novella in 1984 found misogyny in Hemingway’s treatment of the four female ‘characters’ in Santiago’s wife, the sea, the Portuguese vessel and the female tourist at the end of the story.

Carlos Baker published *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist* in 1952 which remained a standard point of reference for many though Martha Gellhorn and Mary Welsh, Hemingway’s third and fourth wife respectively did not agree with several of his observations. Philip Young’s biography of Hemingway titled *Hemingway: A Reconsideration* in 1952 is a widely acclaimed study of the author in question. Jeffrey Meyers’ *Hemingway: A*

Biography first published in 1982 draws on exclusive interviews and previously unavailable information.

14.9 Comprehension Exercises

Essay-type Questions :

1. Comment on the character of Santiago as one “who could be destroyed but not defeated.”
2. Examine the types of symbolism found in *The Old Man and the Sea*.
3. Critically discuss the role played by Manolin in the novella.
4. Write a brief essay on the structure and style used by Hemingway in *The Old Man and the Sea*.
5. Analyze Hemingway’s presentation of the sea in *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Medium-length Questions :

1. Write a short note on Santiago’s knowledge of the sea.
2. What is the importance of the hand-wrestling game?
3. Comment on the role of the frame narrative to the structural whole of the novella.
4. What is the significance of Santiago’s dreams of lions on the beaches of Africa?
5. Briefly discuss Santiago’s complex feelings for the marlin that he captures.

Short Questions :

1. Name the baseball player idolised by Santiago.
2. Mention the origin of Santiago’s name.
3. What were the names of the two First Mates of Hemingway’s boat *Pilar*?
4. What did Manolin receive from his mentor in recognition of his discipleship?
5. How many days had Santiago gone without a catch?

14.10 Suggested Reading

1. *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story*- Baker, Carlos, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969.
2. *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952.
3. *Hemingway: Seven Decades of Criticism*. Ed. Linda Wagner -Martin. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998.

4. *Hemingway: A Biography*. Meyers, Jeffrey, New York: Harpers, 1985.
5. *Santiago at the Plate: Baseball in 'The Old Man and the Sea.'* (protagonist of Ernest Hemingway's Novel), Plath, James, *The Hemingway Review*, Vol 16, Issue 1, Chestnut Hill College, 1996.
6. *Sea-Brothers: The Tradition of American Sea Fiction from Moby-Dick to the Present*, Bender, Bert, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988.

Unit 15 □ Toni Morrison – *Beloved*

Structure

- 15.1. Objectives**
- 15.2. Study Guide**
- 15.3. Toni Morrison:**
 - 15.3.1. Life and Career**
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- 15.4. Background to *Beloved***
 - 15.4.1 The Case of Margaret Garner**
 - 15.4.2 Chief Characters**
 - 15.4.3 Themes and Motifs**
 - 15.4.4 Symbols**
 - 15.4.5 Style**
- 15.5 Plot Summary**
- 15.6 Commentary**
- 15.7 Summing Up**
- 15.8 Comprehension Exercises**
- 15.9 Suggested Reading**

15.1 Objectives

Our objective is to learn about the author’s background and motivation behind the composition of this seminal work and to understand, appreciate and meditate on the form and the complex ideas and emotions associated with the African American experience of slavery represented in it.

15.2 Study Guide

This unit includes details on the life, works and influences working on the author. It briefly discusses the real-life incident that inspired the novel, the important characters in the work, themes, motifs and symbols included in it and the style used to compose it; followed by

a summary of the plot and commentary. It also contains some unit end questions that you are expected to answer upon reading the text along with this unit as well as a short bibliography.

15.3 Toni Morrison (February 18, 1931 – August 5, 2019)

15.3.1 Life and Career

“Who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality.”

Nobel citation

Born in Lorain, Ohio in the United States of America, Toni Morrison was the first African American woman, as well as the first woman of colour of any nationality to receive a Nobel Prize. She won the award for her contribution to literature in 1993. At birth her name was Chloe Ardelia Wofford, though she is known to the world as Toni Morrison. Toni was her nickname, and she had used it to sign the manuscript of her first novel before submitting it to the publisher, who was also an acquaintance; subsequently, to her surprise, *The Bluest Eye* appeared in 1970 with her nickname on it instead of the one she was given at birth, and thus she became popularly known as Toni Morrison.

She was the second of four children born to Ramah Willis Wofford and George Wofford. Both her parents worked several jobs, George was primarily a welder at the shipyard, and Ramah took up what work she could after taking care of her children and household. Both her parents' families had moved to the North from the South in search of better economic prospects and to avoid the racial persecution meted out in the South. Their families were part of the great exodus of the black populace from the southern states, where slavery was prevalent, to northern regions of the country that welcomed emancipation, in what is known as the Great Migration between 1916 to 1970.

Morrison spent a lot of time with her maternal grandparents as a child and they taught her to take pride in her ethnic and cultural heritage; which would have a formative influence on her as a person and an author. She also grew up in a home that was creatively and artistically stimulating. Her father was a great storyteller, who amused the household especially with his ghost stories, and her mother was a gifted singer who frequently sang at their church. Ramah Willis was also a proud woman who openly protested against segregation practiced in their society, George Wofford on the other hand was suspicious of the whites, having witnessed their atrocities earlier in his life. They were conscious parents who worked very hard to educate their children. Morrison inherited their racial and historical memory and was aware of her identity as an African American woman.

Because of her home environment Morrison already knew how to read when she was admitted to school and owing to her personality and intellect, she soon gained prominence among her mates. Not only did she perform exceptionally well, she was also often called upon by her teachers to help her weaker fellows with schoolwork. She was an avid reader and spent much time at the local library reading the classics. She worked on her high school publications, like the school newspaper and yearbooks and took interest in theatre. She pursued her interest in college at Howard University, Washington DC, where she joined the theatre group called the Howard University Players. Author Alain Locke, and poets Sterling Brown and Amiri Baraka were her contemporaries there. She graduated in 1953 with a BA in English and became the first one in her family to earn a college degree. Morrison went on to Ithaca, New York and received her MA from Cornell University in 1955.

Toni Morrison began her teaching career the same year at Texas Southern University, where she remained for two years before returning to Washington DC and taking up a position in her alma mater. It was in Howard University where she met Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect and the man she would marry. While she was a faculty, the students at the university were Andrew Young, who would go on to become a prominent activist, politician and diplomat; author Claude Brown and Stokely Carmichael, a socialist organiser in the Civil Rights Movement.

The Morrison's had two sons, but a rather unhappy marriage. Over the years the two failed to bridge their cultural gaps and decided to divorce in 1964. Harold went back to Jamaica while Toni returned to her parents' house briefly and took up an editing job at Random House in Syracuse, New York. She juggled her career and role as a single mother while simultaneously working on her first novel. Soon she became the first black woman senior editor at Random House and as a mentor and developer of black talent went on to nurture the careers of Angela Davis, Michelle Cliff, Henry Dumas, Mohammad Ali and Cade Bambara among others. She also resumed teaching in 1971, at the State University of New York, and in 1976 became a visiting faculty at the Yale University.

In 1989, continuing in her role as a pioneer, Toni Morrison became the first black woman to hold a chair at an Ivy League University, as the Robert E. Goheen Professor in the Council of Humanities at Princeton University. She took the institution a step forward by introducing the Atelier program into its curriculum. The program brought artists from different disciplines together, who in collaboration with the students would engage in creative enterprises on campus. The program was enriched by the presence of artists-in-residence like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Robert Danielpour, Yo Yo Ma, Marcia Tucci, Peter Sellers, Lars Jann and Roger Babb. She retired from the chair in 2006, after 17 years of service.

In the same year she served as the guest curator at an event called *The Foreigner's Home* at the Louvre in Paris.

15.3.2 A brief survey of Morrison's works

Morrison was asked in an interview whether her works were autobiographical in nature, to which she replied they were certainly the autobiography of a place, Ohio, but not herself. She felt her everyday life could hardly be appropriate for her writing. She further added that her Africanness was sort of overwritten by her formal American education, just like the stories of so many millions of black lives that were overwritten by the 'history' that was officially approved. But she drew on the stories that were told by her family, read slave narratives and was inspired by the works of Hawthorne and Faulkner. She decided if her people had the strength to endure the hardships of slavery, she too had the courage to dig deep into the tradition that she was born into. When she began to write, it helped her imagine and gave her the will to contemplate the lives of those who had suffered and were forgotten. Instead of hunting for facts, she drew inspiration from her subject matter and imagination; she did not want to write about what had happened but wanted to explore the inner lives of the people who had endured slavery. She frequently encouraged her students to delve into their creativity and avoid writing about themselves as well. She believed an author's job was to make the mundane seem mysterious and the strange seem familiar. Many critics have since credited her with the invention of a black aesthetic of remembering.

While working as an editor at Random House, Morrison realized that the black male authors did not represent the black women and their experiences adequately. The women characters in their works lacked a female voice; their voice was very male, speaking to other men and white readers, but not to Morrison. She wanted to hear a female voice that she could relate to, and thus decided to create her own. In an earlier interview in 1986 she stated that she was writing about and speaking to black women, not men like white female authors did; nor was she attacking the men like both black and white men did in their works. She may have wanted to speak to the women and about the women of colour, but today her voice is heard and cherished by all races and sexes. Along with a Nobel and a Pulitzer Prize she has received numerous other awards and accolades for her works.

Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, is about a black teenager Pecola, who has internalised the racism directed towards her and is convinced that she is ugly, hence not lovable. She belongs to a dysfunctional family, that of the Lovebreeds, who breed nothing but hatred for each other. Pecola yearns for blond hair and blue eyes, like the dolls little girls play with, believing they will make her beautiful and thus lovable. She is a pariah who is verbally, emotionally and physically abused by her family and community, raped by her own father and driven to madness after the death of her premature baby.

Sula, published in 1973, is about the friendship between two black women, Sula and Nel, a subject seldom represented or treated in a novel according to the author. The two characters are complementary to each other, Sula is adventurous, wild and free while her counterpart Nel is more submissive and conventional. Morrison explores their relationship with each other and with their community in this work, questioning the notions of good and evil, social norms and complex human relations.

Her third novel came out in 1977, *Song of Solomon* is about Macon Dead III or Milkman who belongs to the new urban black middle class and is the son of a slumlord. The author contrasts the urban Northern life with the old Southern culture. The novel takes the protagonist on a quest for his family's lost treasure, and in his endeavours to retrieve his family fortune, Milkman recovers his family history and rediscovers himself.

Tar Baby, 1981, is a love story between two disparate people of colour, Jadine and Son. The former a university graduate and a model with a rich white sponsor, and the latter a fugitive from the rural South. The two act as tar babies or traps for each other, one a cultural orphan and the other who romanticises his own rural black life. It ends with the characters ready to confront the contradictions laid bare by their romance and does not provide us with a resolution

The Beloved Trilogy consists of *Beloved* 1987, *Jazz* 1992 and *Paradise* 1998. *Beloved* is the story of a slave woman's fierce struggle for freedom, her love for her children and her effort to deal with her haunting past, at a time when her race was denied the right to selfhood; intended by the author to be read together with the other two, as they are conceptually connected by the search they undertake for the 'beloved', the inner self untouched and uncorrupted by the outside world. *Jazz* is about a love triangle during the Harlem renaissance and is narrated in a rhythmic language that recalls jazz while *Paradise* is about the denizens of an all-black town. She received the Pulitzer Prize for *Beloved* in 1988.

Love, 2003, is a nonlinear narrative about a dead hotel owner Bill Cosey and his relationship with several women. *A Mercy*, 2008, is a story of primitive America as well as of mothers and daughters and the true face of slavery in the country. *Home*, published in 2012, is about a young black Korean-War veteran Frank Money and his return to his own segregated country from an integrated Army. *God Help the Children*, 2015, is about Bride, a dark-complexioned child who is despised by her parents for her colour, who have internalized racism and the white gaze and look down upon themselves or look at themselves like the whites would.

Besides her novels, Morrison has also published her critical and nonfictional works, a libretto, two plays and short fictions, along with six works of children's literature in collaboration with her son Slade Morrison.

15.4 Background to *Beloved*

15.4.1 The Case of Margaret Garner

Slavery began in America in 1619, when it was a British colony and was legal through the centuries till 1865, brought about by the Emancipation Proclamation and the passage of the 13th Amendment, with the end of the Civil War. *Beloved* was inspired by the case of a slave woman called Margaret Garner. Margaret was a slave in Kentucky in the 1850s; she was the mother to three mulatto children, probably fathered by her owner, and a son through her marriage with Robert Garner, a slave from a neighbouring plantation. The Garner family succeeded in escaping to Cincinnati, Ohio, in January of 1856, but they were apprehended by slave catchers within a month. Robert Garner was successful in wounding the marshal with a gun in his bid to flee the law, while Margaret killed her two-year-old daughter with a butcher's knife, injured the others and had intended to put an end to her own life rather than surrendering to enslavement by her master again. The thought of lifelong slavery for her children was unacceptable to Margaret, as a woman and a mother she decided death was preferable to slavery. But she was recaptured and taken back to Kentucky and sold by her owner to a plantation in New Orleans where she died of typhoid in 1858.

Morrison had read about this case and decided to write a novel on the subject. But she did not want it to be a historical novel. Morrison was more interested in memory, and remembrance, or the act of revisiting the memory, and not to dwell too much on the hard facts but contemplate on why it appeared the way it did, remembering and recreating the past with a conscious effort in the present. That is why the past in the novel is not distant, abstract and intangible, but very much physically present in the person of Beloved.

Garner's actions also inspired other works of art, like the painting by Thomas Satterwhite Noble in 1867 called *The Modern Medea*. Take a look at the painting for the artist's rendition of the incident, the work is available online, and compare it to the one in the eighteenth chapter of the book by Morrison where, Sethe, the protagonist recalls the occasion that led to her drastic murder of her baby girl. Medea is a mythical character, who had murdered her children and this myth has inspired innumerable works of art, the best known among which is Euripides' tragedy *Medea*, where the mother, a powerful witch and a goddess, decides to kill her sons to spite her disloyal husband Jason, and takes them away with her so that even in death their bodies may not be defiled by the touch of their unworthy father. Perhaps Frances Harper's poem written in 1859 was the first work prompted by Garner's actions. Frances Harper was one of the first African American women to write and publish in the US, she was an abolitionist, a public speaker, a teacher

and a suffragist. In the *Slave Mother: A Tale of Ohio*, the poet portrays Margaret as a tragic heroine. Let us read the poem as an act of revisiting the time and the occasion that drove a mother to put an end to the lives of her children.

*I have but four, the treasures of my soul,
They lay like doves around my heart;
I tremble lest some cruel hand
Should tear my household wreaths apart.
My baby girl, with childish glance,
Looks curious in my anxious eye,
She little knows that for her sake
Deep shadows round my spirit lie.
My playful boys could I forget,
My home might seem a joyous spot,
But with their sunshine mirth I blend
The darkness of their future lot.
And thou my babe, my darling one,
My last, my loved, my precious child,
Oh! when I think upon thy doom
My heart grows faint and then throbs wild.
The Ohio's bridged and spanned with ice,
The northern star is shining bright,
I'll take the nestlings of my heart
And search for freedom by its light.
Winter and night were on the earth,
And feebly moaned the shivering trees,
A sigh of winter seemed to run
Through every murmur of the breeze.
She fled, and with her children all,
She reached the stream and crossed it o'er,
Bright visions of deliverance came
Like dreams of plenty to the poor.
Dreams! vain dreams, heroic mother,
Give all thy hopes and struggles o'er,
The pursuer is on thy track,
And the hunter at thy door.*

*Judea's refuge cities had power
To shelter, shield and save,
E'en Rome had altars, 'neath whose shade
Might crouch the wan and weary slave.*

*But Ohio had no sacred fane,
To human rights so consecrated,
Where thou may'st shield thy hapless ones
From their darkly gathering fate.*

*Then, said the mournful mother,
If Ohio cannot save,
I will do a deed for freedom,
Shalt find each child a grave.*

*I will save my precious children
From their darkly threatened doom,
I will hew their path to freedom
Through the portals of the tomb.*

*A moment in the sunlight,
She held a glimmering knife,
The next moment she had bathed it
In the crimson fount of life.*

*They snatched away the fatal knife,
Her boys shrieked wild with dread;
The baby girl was pale and cold,
They raised it up, the child was dead.*

*Sends this deed of fearful daring
Through my country's heart no thrill,
Do the icy hands of slavery
Every pure emotion chill?*

*Oh! if there is any honor,
Truth or justice in the land,
Will ye not, us men and Christians,
On the side of freedom stand?*

Notice how the poem ends with two questions, the poet asks why are her fellow countrymen not moved by this act – has slavery turned their heart so cold that they feel no emotions, and should they then not stand for human freedom and dignity to prevent such incidences

from occurring, is what the poet wants her readers to meditate upon and answer. By dwelling on the time spent by the mother watching her children growing up, playing in the sun, the poet points out how similar a slave mother is to any other mother elsewhere in the world. When she is pushed into a corner, she suddenly decides to prevent her children from entering the darkness and doom of slavery, and free them through death. *Beloved* is a longer, more detailed contemplation of what drove the mother to kill her children, and how she deals with her deeds eighteen years later.

15.4.2 Chief Characters

Sethe: She is the protagonist of the novel. Sethe escaped slavery eighteen years ago and has been living in Ohio with her mother-in-law and three children. When threatened by the prospect of recapture she attempted to kill her children and succeeded in terminating the life of one. She is haunted by her memories and deeds, but begins to heal when a former fellow slave, Paul D, from her Sweet Home Plantation arrives and she gets another shot at a normal family life.

Denver: She is the youngest child of Sethe, and the only one who still lives with her. Denver is eighteen, but unlike other girls her age she is withdrawn and quiet. The baby's ghost that haunts their house is her companion, and later she clings to *Beloved*. Denver matures in the course of the novel, becoming a responsible adult, who learns to see beyond the illusion of a lost sister, at the deplorable condition of their mother and takes action to deal with the situation.

Beloved: *Beloved* the woman who arrives at 124 Bluestone Road, she is identified by the characters in the novel as the ghost of the baby killed by Sethe. She lives with Sethe and Denver, sleeps with Paul D secretly, and demands all of Sethe's attention. She stands for the collective past of the African American folk.

Paul D: Old friend of Sethe from her time as a slave. Paul D fails to escape and is sold and suffers in the chain gang, he wanders many years before arriving at 124 Bluestone Road. He exorcises the baby's ghost and restores peace to the house temporarily and desires to set up home with Sethe but gives in to his lust for *Beloved*. Both Sethe and Paul D have to come to terms with their past before they can move forward.

Baby Suggs: She is the mother of Halle, Sethe's husband. 124 Bluestone Road is her house. Halle buys her freedom from Sweet Home and sets her up in Cincinnati. She is a spiritual leader of the black community until Sethe commits infanticide. After the incident she stops preaching in the woods, withdraws into her room and dies there contemplating upon colour.

15.4.3 Themes and Motifs

The first is the **destruction or loss of identity through slavery**. At the very outset Morrison recalls the sixty million or more who were lost to the Middle Passage or Slavery in America. They are the beloved, who will never be found because no one knows their names, no one will go looking for them, they are the disremembered and unaccounted for. Baby Suggs, Sethe, Paul D and Stamp Paid all struggle to forge an individual identity, often they do not know how, but try to distinguish themselves from their collective identity as slaves. **Collective consciousness and the Black experience** is the other theme that Morrison explores in this work, we have to remember while reading that she intended for us to imagine the dynamics between the slaves, their interior lives and choices, which were both shared as well as distinct. The **importance of community and solidarity** among the downtrodden, like their concerted effort to escape slavery, or coming together to exorcise the past, or gathering to listen to the preaching of Baby Suggs; is another important part of the black experience as recorded in the novel. The characters are haunted by the presence of the past in their lives, therefore, **redefining the past and reclaiming what was lost** is the exercise that Sethe, Paul D and in short, the entire race is tasked with in order to move forward from their experience of slavery. Morrison achieves it in the novel through re-membering the fragmented selves and re-memory. The characters contemplate **freedom and what price** they had to pay for it constantly. And especially the bond between **mothers and daughters and nurturing**; Morrison deliberately chose to dwell upon the most sacred relationship that is between a mother and her children to bring out the evil nature of slavery which made it impossible for mothers to love their children and children from receiving the nurturing care.

15.4.4 Symbols

There are numerous **water** images used throughout the work, the flow of water often brings change, Sethe escapes in a boat across the river, Paul D escapes the chain gang during a long rainstorm. Similarly, Denver comes into the world after a flow of amniotic fluid, and when Beloved arrives Sethe replicates the birthing process by losing her bladder control. **Trees** stand for comfort, healing and life in the novel. Denver has an “emerald closet” of boxwood trees where she retires and finds solace in her solitude. Amy Denver sublimates the gruesome scars on Sethe’s back by transforming the image into a beautiful “cockcherry tree”. However, trees also mask the darkness of the Sweet Home plantation and are the site where the slaves like Sixo are lynched.

The **colour red** recurs frequently in the narrative, with different meanings for different characters. The pool of red in 124 Bluestone Road recalls the red oily blood of the baby spilled by Sethe, while Amy Denver’s red velvet dress stands for hope during her escape.

The red rooster stands for manhood to Paul D while his red heart represents emotions. Over time, after enduring degrees of humiliation and torture Paul D decided to alienate himself from his emotions to prevent further psychological damage. By the time he arrives at 124 he believes that his heart is a **Tin Tobacco Box** which has completely rusted shut, meaning he is immune to pain as his heart is locked away safely. It takes semi-conscious sexual encounters with Beloved to force him to pry it open, perhaps like revisiting his past through dreams and nightmares. **Breast Milk** stands for motherhood and identity in the novel, Sethe is single-mindedly driven by her desire to get her breast milk to her baby, she believes it's her right and her duty to feed her child and not to deprive Beloved of it like she was deprived of her own mother's milk. Sethe endures every pain and humiliation but turns around and complains to Mrs Garner when her milk is forcefully taken from her, as her selfhood so closely attached to it

15.4.5 Style

Beloved is an evocative stream of consciousness novel, which means it is not narrated chronologically, but switches back and forth between the present of the novel, in 1873, and the past, in the 1850s, in the form of memories and flashbacks. Morrison does not trust one narrator to tell the tale but presents the story through the perspectives of several different characters and their accounts of the remembered and reconstructed past.

The author also uses magical realism, which blends contrasting components like the real and the fantastic in such a way that the magical elements do not seem forced or out of place but organically produced by the real, blurring the line between fantasy and realistic fiction. It is often used to describe what is otherwise inexplicable, sublimate pain into a beautiful experience and give voice to the voiceless. Every author uses it differently. Morrison uses it most elaborately in the form of *Beloved* or the personified past of slavery in the novel.

15.5 Plot Summary

The novel is divided into three sections with multiple perspectives in each, shifting frequently between the past and the present. Here is a linear synopsis of the text which does not in any way represent Morrison's art of storytelling and the beautiful narrative structure of the work in original. Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, has survived slavery, escaped it and has been living as a free person of colour for almost two decades with her eighteen-year-old daughter, Denver, at 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati, Ohio. Sethe was a slave in the 1850s at Sweet Home Plantation in Kentucky. After the Civil War, she and her husband decide to flee to his mother Baby Suggs at Cincinnati. They send away their three children ahead and decide to follow later. Sethe sets out heavily pregnant, alone and in severe pain

from the thrashing she had received from their owner the Schoolteacher. She has her fourth child on the way. Upon arrival she spends 28 blissful days of freedom with her children, when her owner catches up and comes to claim them back. Bewildered by fear and unwilling to condemn her children to a life of suffering and pain she decides to end their life along with her own. She succeeds in murdering her toddler “crawling already?” alone and is convicted for the crime. Upon release from prison she marks the grave of her child with a stone engraved with the single word “Beloved”, for which she pays with sex.

Sethe and her household is haunted by the angry ghost of the dead child for years. Unable to withstand its tantrums both her sons, Howard and Buglar, leave and Baby Suggs dies soon after. For years Sethe and Denver live with the ghost, isolated from the community, though Sethe does have a regular job. Paul D, a former slave from the same plantation arrives at her doorstep bringing with him the memories of their lives as slaves. He awakens desire in Sethe’s heart, chases the ghost out, settles down with the two, and they begin to live as one family. Until a stranger comes, who calls herself Beloved and becomes a guest at their home. Beloved becomes fast friends with Denver, who otherwise had no friends or company. She also spends as much time as possible with Sethe, while having sex with Paul D secretly, and slowly driving him out of the house.

Paul D notices how the entire town avoids Sethe and Denver, and then learns the cause. Stamp Paid, an old friend of Baby Sugg’s, informs him of the infanticide committed by Sethe so many years ago, and the presence of the ghost that haunts 124. Disgusted, Paul D moves out. Beloved demands more time and attention from Sethe than she can spare. When convinced that she is her lost child Sethe takes it upon herself to give her the love and attention which was cruelly denied in her infancy. She loses her job, becomes obsessed with nurturing Beloved, and soon turns into an infant-like version of herself. While Sethe is reduced, Beloved grows stronger, now pregnant, and has complete control over Sethe. Denver realizes they are starving, and that Beloved poses a threat to her mother. She goes out seeking help and work.

She soon secures a position with the Bodwins, and the tale of Sethe’s dead child coming back to punish and torture her as a grown woman spreads through the community, out of sympathy and sense of duty they leave provisions outside 124. One day, while waiting to be picked up for work, Denver notices the approach of some thirty black women, who are on a mission to rid the house of the malicious spirit. Mr Bodwin arrives at the same moment and in a fit of hysterical rage Sethe attacks him with an ice pick. Denver stops her, and Beloved vanishes.

Towards the end of the novel we encounter a far more confident Denver trying to adjust to her new life in the community, but a sick and bedridden Sethe. Paul D returns and

reminds Sethe that she has not yet lost the best part of herself, as Sethe believed her children were the best in her, but she herself is her best part, the one who has weathered the hardships and emerged victorious. Sethe wonders as the truth dawns upon her.

15.6 Commentary

Morrison dedicated this novel to the “Sixty million and more” African Americans who died as slaves, who are “disremembered and unaccounted for, . . . cannot be lost because no one is looking”. Elaine Showalter, in her book *A Jury of Her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx*, is of the opinion that Morrison was looking for what is most human and hopeful in the behaviour of an individual, especially under the brutal conditions created by slavery, and a refusal to admit to total victimization for her characters; instead they have been portrayed with interior lives and moral choices which have consequences that they suffer. Showalter further compares the American Jews to the African American slaves; she believes just like the former should revisit the history of the Holocaust and confront the entire range of behaviour of the Jews in Europe, in the same manner the latter should not only study the heroic fight that their ancestors put up against slavery, but also the everyday lives, the relationships, moral choices of those who bore the atrocities in silence. Morrison’s exercise was to reimagine and recover the interior lives of the slaves from their quiet and forgotten pasts.

Carmen Gillespie in her *Critical Companion to Toni Morrison* points out that the meaning of the novel is hidden in its title. She reads the title in three parts, *be* – as in being or quality of existence, *love* – both maternal as well as sexual, and *d* – as used to indicate the past tense, in case of the novel dealing with the past or coming to terms with it. Gillespie sees the novel as the story of being, of human beings who were dehumanised and fragmented, not allowed their basic rights, especially in the cases of Sethe and Paul D, as their lives are remembered in detail in the course of the work. Sethe is “allowed” to choose a husband from among Sweet Home men, and her informal marriage to Halle is approved by her masters. She is made to believe that she has rights and choices while in reality she does not. She spends six years married to Halle and begins to raise her children in the farm. But as soon as the old master Garner dies the illusion of her world shatters. The new owner, the Schoolteacher is cruel and treats them like animals, he is heard pointing out to his nephews how dissimilar slaves are to white men and how close in resemblance to farm animals. She is brutally whipped when she complains to old Mrs Garner about the schoolteacher’s henchmen forcefully taking her breast milk, as if from a cow. Sethe realizes that a slave is not considered a human being and thus runs away to be free. After experiencing

a month of freedom, and living and playing with her children, death becomes preferable to going back to slavery. Same goes for Paul D, he was given a gun and called a “nigger man” by his old master. But the Schoolteacher takes the gun away from him, chains him up and puts a bit in his mouth which makes him feel that the farm chicken has more dignity than him. Further, while in the chain gang he was tied up and pent up in an underground cell, in complete darkness. He believes locking up his heart and all his emotions like a tobacco tin is the only way to “be” or survive a life like his.

It was made impossible by slavery for those enslaved to live like human beings, therefore, they found it hard to express love as well. Sethe did not receive her mother’s nurturing affection. She only met her mother a few times, when her mother showed her a mark on her chest so that Sethe could identify her upon her death, which the little girl failed to understand at the time. Sethe is unable to be with her children when they are hurt, like Howard’s accident in the farm, or to provide the breast milk to her children in Cincinnati. Sethe’s love for her children culminates in a helpless effort to terminate their lives. Not having had a mother figure or a community to grow up with leaves the slaves unprepared to take up adult roles in life. The Paul brothers fulfill their sexual desire through bestiality, while Halle has Sethe, but Sixo is the only one who finds a woman, his “thirty-mile woman”, with whom he has a relationship. This was possible for Sixo because he had been free before, unlike Halle and the Pauls. Baby Suggs too had eight children from different fathers, but lost all of them, and soon realized her search for them was futile. Instead she became a mother figure to her black community and began to nurture it. It is Sethe’s guilt as an inadequate mother that makes her fall prey to Beloved; it is her guilt of not being able to protect and *love* her children that haunts her for two decades. It is the past or the *d* that keeps interfering with lives of the now emancipated slave. Paul D locks his past up in a heart turned to a rusted metal box, while Sethe turns away from hers. She has a terrible network of scarred tissues from the whipping she received, she has never seen it, though she says it grows like a tree on her back. Both Paul D and Sethe are forced to face the past when it is personified in Beloved. Her mother’s past prevents Denver from having a normal life in her community as she too bears the stigma attached to Sethe and their house.

Who is Beloved in the novel or what does she stand for? She is apparently a ghost, at least, that is what all the characters in the work believe her to be: the ghost of the unnamed baby girl who was “crawling already?” when Sethe cut her throat open with a saw. She is the only one, the author believes, who has the right to question Sethe or judge her. She may have come back to haunt her mother for cutting short her time on earth and to punish her for her action. When Sethe realizes that may be the case, she devotes all her time and

energy towards Beloved, to overcompensate for not having given her the childhood that she deserved. Or she may be a slave woman who has just arrived on a slave ship, escaped it and found her way to Sethe's doorsteps, as speculated by the author in several interviews. Or she may be any and every slave woman who was denied attention, love and a family, and has returned to claim them for herself from her community, or especially from a mother. Slaves were the property of their white owners; mothers did not have rights over their own bodies, let alone their children. Motherhood was impossible under the condition. Neither could they protect their children nor care for them long enough as they were sooner or later sold and separated. The woman may be a re-memory, a younger Sethe, as she too had lost her mother, who was hanged; and was mothered by her wet nurse Nan; Beloved may be Sethe's yearning for her own mother's love. Later in the novel Beloved becomes more like a mother as Sethe starts behaving like a child. Sethe needs to forgive her mother and herself for depriving a child of its mother's love.

Beloved is also the best part of the self. Sethe keeps calling her children her best part, the parts yet free, untouched by slavery. This self may also be the selfhood that a slave is robbed of. Sethe realizes she has not lost that part after all when Paul D reminds her that she herself is her best part. Until then, she is on a quest for that lost self, her beloved self, the loss that haunts her through two decades.

Beloved is the personification of the African American racial memory, an expression of their collective past, that is present as unfulfilled desires or yearnings for basic human requirements that they were denied. The Past is ever present, it haunts the freed slaves and prevents them from living a full life, because the intergenerational destruction caused by the experience of slavery scarred the race for generations to come. Snatched out of their own land, people and culture, driven to rigorous labour, brutally dehumanised, the inexplicable horror of the humiliation, deprivation and privation endured for centuries left phantoms behind in their consciousness that have to be dealt with and put to rest before they can move on. Beloved is that experience personified, that one can sit down and come to terms with and at last begin to heal.

15.7 Summing Up

- Toni Morrison chose to write about the inner lives of the former slaves of her race and explore the experiences of the long lost and forgotten millions from an imaginative point of view
- The novel was inspired by the case of Margaret Garner and her infanticide which took place in 1856, and the debilitating effect of slavery and racism.

- We discussed the major themes, motifs and recurring symbols used in the novel
- The work is written in the stream of consciousness mode and uses magical realism to deal with the African American experience with slavery.
- Morrison was attempting to look at the inner lives of the slaves not just from a historical point of view but more importantly from an imaginative approach.
- *Beloved* is the personification of the lives, hopes, dreams and desires of generations lost to slavery.

15.8 Comprehension Exercises

Essay-type Questions :

1. Why does Sethe attempt to murder her children, and how does she justify killing *Beloved*? How are her actions judged by the law and the community and by Paul D? Discuss.
2. How are family dynamics affected by slavery? What kind of relationship do slave parents have with their children and how is it affected by freedom?
3. Describe the master slave relationship as depicted in *Beloved* from a historical point of view.
4. Why is it necessary for people to heal spiritually, emotionally and physically in *Beloved*? Give some examples of healing from the text.
5. “For Morrison’s women, sexuality is the reward and burden of their gender.” Discuss.
6. Explore the relationship between *Beloved* and Denver. How does *Beloved* help Denver? How might the dynamic between the two represent the effect of the past on subsequent generations?

Medium-length Questions :

1. Discuss the major symbols in the novel *Beloved*.
2. Write a brief essay on some of the themes and motifs in the novel.
3. Examine Carmen Gillespie’s interpretation of the title of *Beloved*.
4. Comment briefly on *Beloved* as a memory novel.
5. Provide a summary of the plot of *Beloved*.
6. Briefly discuss the identity of *Beloved*.

Short Questions :

1. Name the classical tragedy in which the protagonist had murdered her children.
2. Name the real-life person on whom the character Sethe is based.
3. Who was Baby Suggs? What is her significance in the novel?
4. Name the estate where Sethe and Paul D had been slaves.
5. What was the shape of the scar on Sethe's back?

15.9 Suggested Reading

1. Andrews, William L. & McKay, Nellie Y., ed. *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.
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6. Lister, Rachel. *Reading Toni Morrison*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2009.
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MODULE -5
The Short Story

Unit 16 □ Edgar Allan Poe: The Purloined Letter

Structure

- 16.1 Introduction
- 16.2 Poe's writing and style
- 16.3 The Detective Story
- 16.4 "The Purloined Letter"
- 16.5 Characters
- 16.6 Comprehension Exercises
- 16.7 Suggested Reading

16.1 Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts on 7 October 1809. Poe is often associated with the South because he spent most of his first twenty years in and around Richmond, Virginia. In 1811 through a set of unfortunate circumstances Edgar became the foster child (he was never legally adopted) of John and Frances Valentine Allan, Richmond dwellers. Poe received private schooling and in 1815 travelled to Britain with the Allans. In 1826 Poe entered the University of Virginia where he did well in Classics and Modern Languages but he also accrued heavy gambling debts. His foster father refused to indulge him or pay the debts. He then enlisted in the US army under the name Edgar A. Perry. Poe later joined the military academy at West Point but was court-martialled and expelled. By then his foster father had remarried and had several children. Poe made his own way to New York where his grandmother lived with his aunt Maria Poe Clemm and her two children Henry and Virginia. The family was extremely poor. With no income or fame from his poetry, Poe in the early 1830s shifted his talent to the writing of fiction. Poe's tales were published and he entered several prize competitions sponsored by newspapers. However, Poe's brutal honesty and satirical critical reviews only earned him hostility from powerful literary establishments. He married Virginia Clemm in 1836 but lacking a stable income was forced to move to Philadelphia where he secured editorial work with *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*. Poe quarreled with Burton and joined *Graham's Magazine*. He increased the circulation of the magazine but his pay remained poor and Poe left. In January 1847 Virginia passed away due to tuberculosis. Poe's conflicts with other writers, his drinking habits, poverty despite publishing many works and the numerous deaths of beloved

people led to his rapid decline. In 1849 Poe reunited with his childhood sweetheart, the widowed Elmira Royster Shelton, and planned to marry her. On 27 September 1849 Poe disappeared and he was discovered in a Baltimore tavern on 3 October in a terrible condition. He died on 7 October 1849 in Washington Hospital. The precise cause of Poe's death has never been determined and the man who wrote mysteries left his brief life on earth in an equally mysterious manner.

16.2 Poe's writing and style

Edgar Allan Poe is commonly regarded as the father of detective fiction. Jeffrey Meyers in *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy* writes that W.H. Auden mentioned the three literary genres Poe had virtually invented—the story of horror, of detection and of science fiction: “His portraits of abnormal or self-destructive states contributed much to Dostoevski, his ratiocinating hero is the ancestor of Sherlock Holmes and his many successors, his tales of the future lead to H.G. Wells, his adventure stories to Jules Verne and Stevenson.” In fact, Poe's influence on European and American art has been extraordinarily wide. Poe had a short life and a limited number of finished works but he possessed great originality and imagination. His poems and literary theories influenced the French Symbolists and English Aesthetes. His concern with guilt, anxiety and the divided personality inspired Dostoevsky's great fiction. His pessimistic view of the human condition and fascination with death appealed to writers as diverse as Joseph Conrad and James Joyce. For close to 200 years Poe has provided images and memorable phrases that have permeated our culture. The critic Allen Tate talks about how a satirist and visionary of doom, Poe's bitterly disappointed and self-destructive life was a mark of the quintessentially modern writer. In his short and turbulent life Poe produced about one hundred poems and seventy stories. Neither Poe's mannered Latinate style nor his highly idiosyncratic content became a direct model for subsequent poetry or prose. Poe's works survive because “he has always appealed to basic human feelings and expressed universal themes common to all men in all languages: dreams, love, loss; grief, mourning, alienation; terror, revenge, murder, insanity, disease and death.”

A style usually associated with Edgar A. Poe is the “Gothic” or “Germanic” style. The term “Gothic” originated in a confluence of history and architecture. The Goths were a northern Germanic European people whose ways and beliefs differed largely from those of the Greco-Roman Classical civilisation further south. Originating in 18th Century England, Gothic Literature was an important and distinctive movement in literary history. Some distinguishing features of the Gothic style include gloomy settings like castles, dungeons, prisons and vaults; haunting figures, ghostly and slightly unreal; symbols and colors that

suggest the gory and supernatural. American Gothic works tended to transform European architecture into the American landscape for intriguing hauntings. The Gothic style of Poe's stories ties them all together, with their morbid, gory, suspense-filled plots and solitary, romantic settings, the colours black and red, and visual symbols like evil eyes and black cats, vaults and cellars. Poe incorporated psychology into the Gothic, making the supernatural more believable.

According to Benjamin F. Fisher because Poe was so steeped in the western literary tradition that much of his adult life was inextricably intertwined with the Anglo-American literary marketplace. Poe's life spanned the first half of the nineteenth century and during these years America went forward in the name of progress and democracy. Poe found neither platform appealing because he was wary of what progress meant. Strife over politics, slavery, industrial growth, education, economics, social life and relations with other nations were prevailing. Poe's reactions to such ferment surfaced in his reviews or were coded by satire in his fiction.

Like Charles Dickens in England, Poe may be one of the first American writers to use the city locale effectively. Poe used urban environs as centers of great interest to his characters and presumably to his readers. The vastness of cities made perfect settings for crime and mystery and Poe's handling of such effects contributes to the interest in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", "The Purloined Letter", "The City in the Sea", "The Man of the Crowd" and "The Assignment". Critics have established Poe's 'flaneur' characters firmly within urban contexts. (in French the word *flaneur* means "idler") The flaneur character allows writers like Poe to make deft transitions from panoramic to individual scenes, which in turn reflect the psychological makeup of the narrator (and perhaps other characters as well), thus preventing boredom. The onlooker enhances the visual element in a tale as he or she meditates over possibilities for meaning in what is beheld. The flaneur in "The Assignment" pictorializes urban scenes as do the narrators in "A Predicament", "The Purloined Letter", "William Wilson", "The Sphinx" and "The Cask of Amontillado". Poe's narrators, as Fisher says, seldom get beyond seeing what is immediately in front of them or what is tangible.

Medical science in Poe's era was just moving away from superstition and folksiness. Accounts of medical science and scientific explorations were eagerly read during Poe's lifetime. Poe's cryptographic writings display his familiarity with other technological matters. Ballistics are used to identify the murderer in "Thou Art the Man". "The Gold Bug," using Poe's knowledge of cryptography, won a \$100 prize from a newspaper and down the years proved to be his most popular story Architectural construction and home décor also appear in works like "Metzengerstein", "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", "The

Purloined Letter”, “The Fall of the House of Usher”, “The Pit and the Pendulum” and “The Black Cat”.

16.3 The Detective Story

In April 1841, *Graham's Magazine* published Poe's “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”. It was the first ever detective story to see print and it changed the course of world literature. It was the archetype for the modern detective story. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who in 1887 created Sherlock Holmes, the most famous detective in fiction, said that Poe “was the father of the detective tale, and covered its limits so completely that I fail to see how his followers can find any fresh ground which they can confidently call their own.” Three stories feature his amateur investigator C. Auguste Dupin, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Roget” (1842-43) and “The Purloined Letter” (1844). Benjamin F. Fisher writes that “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” capitalized on the establishment of police detection against which Poe pits a clever amateur sleuth. Some readers have attempted to distinguish Poe's detective or, as he preferred, ‘ratiocinative’ tales (‘ratiocination’ meaning the process of exact thinking) from his other fiction, contending that the five tales of detection, perhaps six if one includes “The Man of the Crowd” (1840) show a strong departure in method from the other fiction he published. The first detective tale “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) demonstrates how Poe transformed the Gothic story, with its hints of supernatural causes for the deaths of the L’Espanaye women, into the modern detective story. Poe often enjoyed introducing touches of ironic humour into his fiction. In the other Dupin tales “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt”, “The Purloined Letter” and “The Gold Bug” reasoning is used to arrive at solutions for all the mysteries. “The Gold Bug” embodies more of a supernatural aura than the two Dupin tales luring readers with its spooky Gothicism in a remote setting. “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt,” was based on an actual murder that occurred in 1841 in Manhattan. The third Dupin tale “The Purloined Letter” revolves around a contest of wits between Dupin and the Minister D- over the whereabouts of a stolen letter. In the Minister's and Dupin's struggle to possess the letter, the story brilliantly dramatizes the contest for narrative control that underpins detective fiction. Poe's parody of the detective story “Thou Art the Man” (1844) has been overshadowed by his other ratiocinative tales. The nameless narrator figure is present and it is the first crime story in which ballistics are used to identify a murderer. “The Man of the Crowd” (1840) is powerful psychological literature within its theme of mystery. The nameless narrator is an onlooker at urban scenes making him an excellent flaneur.

Poe invented the detective story, a narrative whose primary interest, as A.E. Murch writes, “lies in the methodical discovery, by rational means, of the exact circumstances of a

mysterious event or series of events”. The story chronicles a search for explanation and solution and therefore according to critics such fiction typically unfolds as a kind of puzzle or game, a place of play and pleasure for both detective and reader. The popularity of the stories of Poe and his successors partly derive from this intense engagement with the text where, in the scrutinizing of evidence and the interpreting of clues, the reader becomes a detective and the detective a reader. A detective like Dupin also becomes an author who, figuratively writes the hidden story of the crime. Poe’s stories appear to construct the detective as a figure restoring law and order but they also critique that figure who subverts the opposition between detective and criminal and challenge the investigator’s objective viewpoint of the world. The textual imagery of the Dupin stories highlights the self-consciousness of the new genre—how its chronicle of detection is a story of reading and writing. A similar act of reading occurs in “The Purloined Letter” when the reader Dupin visits the Minister’s hotel wearing green spectacles, “under cover of which [he] cautiously and thoroughly surveyed the apartment.” Readers themselves often become implicit detectives as the narrator moves through a series of bewilderments, all holding puzzles for him and the reader which need to be clarified. In the end the reader probably surpasses the narrator who is not at all certain about what has transpired.

Detective Auguste Dupin is perhaps Poe’s most interesting character. He is a Frenchman with an analytical mind who loves to tackle problems with his superior intellect. He combines scientific logic with the artist’s leap of imagination. Dupin (like Poe) is raised in a rich family but has fallen on hard times. Dupin has a companion—like Sherlock Holmes’s Watson—who is slow-witted and needs to have everything explained. This of course shows us how brilliant Dupin is. He observes facts, analyses them and deduces their meaning. This was a recognisable, repeatable method that gave the detective the central role in the solution of crime whether in real life or in the detective fiction to come. The clues that puzzle the police are regarded otherwise by Dupin who discloses the solution. Many of the Dupin story elements would delight future fans of detective stories: the brilliant amateur detective, the clumsy cops, the naïve friend. Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, publicly acknowledged his immense debt to Poe. In *Memories and Adventures* (1924) Doyle wrote that “M. Dupin had from boyhood been one of my heroes” and Dupin was in fact the literary model for Holmes. Like Holmes, Dupin is “fond of enigmas, of conundrums, hieroglyphics, exhibiting in his solutions of each a degree of acumen which appears to the ordinary apprehension preternatural.” He also paid tribute to Poe in his fiction. The opening paragraph of “The Purloined Letter” had a powerful impact on Conan Doyle. The two friends are silently smoking pipes in Dupin’s study when the door is suddenly thrown open and the ignorant Prefect of police arrives to seek the detective’s help. Many of Doyle’s stories begin in a similar fashion. According to J. Meyers both Dupin and Holmes like to

recall their success in solving previous cases. Both are portrayed through the eyes of a dim but devoted friend, who (like the reader) remains in the dark until the final startling revelation. Both detectives reside with the narrator in seclusion and tend to venture outside after nightfall. Both are bachelors and casual dilettantes with erudite tastes and arcane learning. Both are experts in ciphers and much superior to the plodding police. Both indulge in abstract reflection before their logical analysis leads to a solution of the crime, exhibit virtuoso displays of knowledge, identify their reasoning intellect with that of the criminal, have uncanny powers of observation and can deduce occupations from physical appearance.

16.4 “The Purloined Letter”

“The Purloined Letter” is the third of Poe’s detective stories featuring the fictional C. Auguste Dupin. It first appeared in the literary annual *The Gift: A Christmas and New Year’s Present for 1845*, published in December 1844 in Philadelphia by Carey and Hart and was soon reprinted in numerous journals and newspapers. Poe earned \$12 for its first printing. In May 1844, just before its first publication, Poe wrote to James Russell Lowell that he considered “The Purloined Letter” perhaps “the best of [his] tales of ratiocination.” The story begins with a Latin epigraph *Nihil sapientiae odiosius acumine nimio* (**Nothing is more hateful to wisdom than excessive cleverness**) wrongly attributed by Poe to Seneca and is a comment on the villain’s cunning. During a stormy autumnal evening the unnamed narrator is smoking a pipe and meditating on some past cases solved by the famous Parisian amateur detective Auguste Dupin in the library when they are joined by the Prefect of the Parisian Police, a man known as G-. (Most names are not revealed in the story to maintain an air of secrecy) The Prefect has a case that he would like to discuss with Dupin. The Prefect explains that the case is very simple yet it is also very “odd”. A letter has been stolen (purloined) from the royal boudoir (inner apartments) by the unscrupulous Minister D-. It is said to contain compromising information regarding an unnamed royal lady and needs to be handled with secrecy. Minister D- saw the letter, stole it and substituted it with an unimportant letter. He has been blackmailing his royal victim for months. “Perhaps it is the very simplicity of the thing which puts you at fault,” said my friend. “What nonsense you do talk!” replied the Prefect, laughing heartily. “Perhaps the mystery is a little too plain,” said Dupin.

Two deductions are reached: that the contents of the letter have not been revealed and Minister D- still has the letter in his possession as the ability to produce the letter at a moment’s notice is almost as important as actual possession of the letter. The Prefect explains what has been done so far in the investigation, and Dupin comments on the

police's habitual thoroughness. The Prefect says they have searched the Minister's apartment, and this was conveniently done because of the Minister's frequent absence at night, his habitually drunk servants, and because the Prefect is in possession of a master set of keys for the city's properties. He has been engaged in a futile search for three months. The Prefect and his police detectives have searched the Minister's hotel where D— stays and conducted meticulous and rigorous searches. They checked behind the wallpaper and under the carpets. They have examined the tables and chairs with magnifying glasses, searched the papers, books in the library, the surroundings and two adjoining houses. They have even probed the cushions with needles but failed to discover the letter. They even used pickpockets to physically search the minister. When Dupin tells the Prefect that the minister is not a fool and must have anticipated these searches the Prefect of Police laughs mockingly and states that the Minister is almost a fool as he is a poet. The Prefect's idea of poetry being equal to foolishness bothers Dupin, whose intelligence is both poetic and mathematical, just like the Minister. This establishes the minister as a kind of double or metaphorical "twin" to Dupin. The Prefect is frustrated at his failure because his 'honour' is involved and a huge reward has been offered. Dupin asks the Prefect if he knows what he is seeking and the Prefect reads off a minute description of the letter which Dupin memorizes. Dupin's advice is to re-search the premises but the Prefect leaves.

A month later, the Prefect returns, having failed to find the missing letter. Dupin slyly suggests that the Prefect should seek his advice and mentions an anecdote regarding a physician called Abernathy and a miser. The Prefect is motivated to continue his fruitless search by the doubled reward money and he is ready to pay 50,000 francs to anyone who can help him. Dupin asks him to write out the cheque immediately. The Prefect is astonished but he writes the cheque and Dupin produces the letter! The narrator and the Prefect are stunned. The Prefect sees the letter is genuine and races off to deliver it to the owner. The narrator asks Dupin to explain how he found the letter. Dupin says the Paris police are competent but they have underestimated the minister. The Prefect mistakes the Minister D- for a fool, because he is a poet. To explain the minister's character Dupin explains how an eight-year-old boy made a small fortune from his friends at a game called "Odds and Evens". The boy was able to assess the intelligence of his opponents and play upon that to interpret their next move. Dupin compares the schoolboy to famous thinkers like Machiavelli. He explains that D- knew the police detectives would assume that he would have concealed the letter in an elaborate hiding place and thus hid it in plain sight. Dupin uses several comparisons to illustrate his 'ratiocination' or reasoning, displaying the vast range of his knowledge. He says the Prefect had made a mistake in logic, or assumed an 'undistributed middle' which is a syllogism with a part missing, therefore arrived at a false conclusion. He assumed all poets were fools. Dupin cites an old rule of logic: the fact that

all fools are poets doesn't necessarily prove that all poets are fools. Dupin himself claims to be a poet, he solves mysteries by using his intuition and imagination, not just relying on an analysis of facts. There are two brothers in Minister D-'s family according to the narrator, one famous for Poetry and the other for Differential Calculus. Dupin says Minister D- is both poet and mathematician. If he were only a mathematician, he wouldn't have been able to reason so well. The narrator of "The Purloined Letter" thinks this is a strange theory. It is completely contrary to popular opinion about mathematics. But Dupin responds with a French phrase about how inconsequential an idea's popularity is.

Dupin then uses logic to convince the narrator and the reader about how he had arrived at the correct solution, drawing upon linguistics, physics, metaphysics and puzzles to prove his points. He cites two examples: first, the principle of inertia and metaphysics. The second is a game where one player asks another player to find a name on a map, and the player chooses a difficult country name or some other broad term that is stretched across the map or placed high up on a sign. Most people expect that the many-lettered or obscure names will be most difficult to find but it is often the simplest answer that can be overlooked, just like the case of the purloined letter. Dupin understands many different kinds of people, to the extent that he seems to inhabit their minds. But his sympathies also allow him to see genius in unlikely places, the child for example. His unusual sensitivity and sympathy for other minds make him an intimidating character because he fills neither the role of detective nor the role of criminal, but is somewhere in between or both at once.

Dupin describes how he had visited the minister at his hotel. Complaining of weak eyes, he had worn a pair of green spectacles while he conversed with the minister (this was to disguise his eyes as he searched for the letter). In a cheap card rack hanging from a dirty blue ribbon just beneath the middle of the mantelpiece he noticed a half-torn letter with a black seal bearing the D- cipher and recognized it as the purloined letter. Striking up a conversation with D- about a subject in which the minister is interested, Dupin examined the letter more closely. Although it did not resemble the letter the Prefect had described (the writing was different and it was not sealed with the small and red seal of the ducal arms of the S— family), Dupin noticed that the paper was chafed as if the stiff paper was first rolled one way and then another. Dupin concluded that D- had written a new address on the reverse of the stolen one, re-folded it the opposite way and sealed it with his own seal. This obvious deception had fooled the police. It is humorous how Poe has contrasted the two searches—the police search and Dupin's, of the same apartment. The police searched for months on end while Dupin enters the room and within an hour or so spots the letter. This shows how akin Dupin's mind and the Minister D-'s mind is. It furthers the notion that they are doubles.

Dupin leaves a gold snuff box behind as an excuse to return the next day. Striking up the same conversation they had begun the previous day, the Minister is startled by a gunshot in the street. While he goes to investigate, Dupin switches D-'s letter for a duplicate. In other words, he re-purloined the letter. Dupin explains that the gunshot distraction had been arranged by him and that he left a duplicate letter to ensure that he did not raise the suspicions of the minister and thus could leave the hotel alive. As a loyal supporter of the royal lady (who was at Minister D-'s mercy for eighteen months) and as an act of revenge against the Minister (who had previously done an evil deed to Dupin in Vienna) Dupin hopes that D- will soon meet his downfall and destruction. He mentions how the "descent to Hell is easy" quoting Virgil's *Aeneid* to prove his point. The duplicate letter Dupin leaves for the Minister contains a clue implying that Dupin was the thief. "*Un dessein si funeste, S'il n'est digne d'Atrée, est digne de Thyeste*" (If such a sinister design or deadly plan isn't worthy of Atreus, it is worthy of Thyestes) referring to revenge between brothers. The quote is taken from the French playwright Prosper-Jolyot de Crébillon's *Atrée de Thyeste*.

16.5 Characters

The Narrator— is unnamed and a close friend of Auguste Dupin though the narrator does not possess Dupin's genius. He is introduced in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and shares Dupin's eccentric way of life, they go out strolling at night through the Paris streets. The narrator responds to Dupin's tricks and solutions with admiration, especially when Dupin seems to inhabit the narrator's own consciousness and knows exactly what he is thinking. He is the stereotype of the detective's assistant and acts as a kind of foil. He does not have an active role and appears in the narrative as more of a lens through which we can observe Dupin's investigative methods. Both Dupin and the narrator do not have a good opinion of the police.

Auguste Dupin —The story's protagonist Dupin is not a professional detective. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", Dupin takes up the case for amusement and refuses a financial reward. Initially the cases present Dupin as a detached and unbiased observer. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" the narrator describes Dupin belonging to an 'illustrious family' who had fallen into poverty and he leads a secluded life in Faubourg St Germain. But the reclusive Dupin is well-connected, knowing the Prefect of Police and famous criminals. Dupin emerges as a worldly detective who accepts money for solving a case and who is driven by a variety of motives like personal revenge or political preference. In "The Purloined Letter" Dupin undertakes the case for financial gain and personal revenge. Dupin's method is to solve the mystery by trying to identify with the workings of the criminal mind.

His highly creative, observant and analytical mind allows him to perceive where the police are going wrong, and stay one step ahead of the criminals. He has a strange sense of humor and very eccentric habits. He loves riddles, mathematics and poetry, and the Prefect mocks him for being a poet (despite the fact that the Prefect is hopeless to solve the cases without Dupin's aid). Dupin's analytical intelligence, as indicated when he turns off the light, is associated with darkness. He is not someone who necessarily follows straight reasoning. Dupin shows his creative intelligence by understanding and predicting the Prefect's behavior as well as the Minister's. Dupin refers to poetry, mathematics, mythology, philosophy and the details of geometry, so that the range of his knowledge seems vast. Dupin's understanding of the Minister's techniques shows that he understands the mind of a criminal, which gives him a certain intimidating power which he wields throughout the story. We are made aware that Dupin could probably quite easily commit some crimes himself. Dupin displays his skill in speech. He shows us how he is able to consider abstruse concepts and human observations at the same time, and perceive many dimensions and levels of meaning at once. Dupin reveals his ability to read the mysterious space of the city and can analyse the hearts of men. Dupin defeats the criminal, reducing him to a character inhabiting the detective's plot.

The Minister D- is the antagonist or villain, the cunning criminal who is both poet and mathematician. His dual sensibility allows him to completely baffle the Prefect and the police. He is similar to Dupin in many ways in the story. They both share the initial D, both are poets, authorial figures who can read circumstances and script the action. They both purloin the letter for a profit motive. The Minister and Dupin are equally matched and their battle of wits is threatened to end in stalemate. Dupin wins because of his moral strength. The Minister is "unprincipled" and a blackmailer who obtains power by exploiting the weakness of others. The Minister, who should be protecting the royal family, is exploiting them for his personal ends. The Minister D- and Dupin suggest a split personality, a *doppelganger* theme, if a bit more subtly than some of Poe's other stories.

The Prefect of the Police — is thorough but simple and unimaginative. He is in charge of the safety of the most important figures in the country but his diligent and uncreative approach to crime solving is the object of Dupin's ridicule. Though he is officially more important than Dupin he shows how the official protection of the city seems to be lacking. It is instead Dupin's genius that secretly keeps the peace. The Prefect is invested in his own importance, and desperately wishes to solve the case for the sake of his own reputation and monetary reward. He appears in both "The Murders of the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter". A representative of law and order, he is approached by the desperate royal personage and personally searches Minister D-'s apartment. The Prefect justifies

Dupin's criticism and the narrator's slightly mocking introductory description. The Prefect's idea of poetry being equal to foolishness is a significant misconception that bothers Dupin. The Prefect represents the ways of science and rationality and seems to think that complex mysteries must necessarily have complex solutions. Dupin takes a different approach to the truth, favouring a flexible, intuitive style of detection (he guesses the solution to the mystery before he's even heard the mystery).

16.6 Comprehension Exercises

Essay Type & Medium-length Questions :

1. Write a note on the character of the amateur detective C. Auguste Dupin in Poe's story "The Purloined Letter".
2. How does Edgar A. Poe present the law in "The Purloined Letter"? Answer with reference to the urban setting, the police, the detective and the criminal as presented in the story.
3. Edgar A. Poe is regarded as the father of detective fiction. Do you agree that Poe's "The Purloined Letter" is detective fiction? Substantiate your answer with proof from the text.
4. "The Purloined Letter" is a tale of 'ratiocination' emphasizing on the use of reasoning ability as well as intuitive imagination. Discuss.
5. Critically analyse the title of Edgar A. Poe's short story "The Purloined Letter".
6. Comment on the narrative style used by Edgar A. Poe in his story "The Purloined Letter".

Shorter Questions :

1. Why did the Prefect of the Parisian Police visit Dupin?
2. Describe briefly the search made by the Paris police to find the letter.
3. How did Dupin retrieve the purloined letter?
4. What does "purloined" mean? Whose letter was "purloined" and by whom?
5. Who is Machiavelli? Why does Dupin mention him?
6. Where did Dupin live? What was his occupation?
7. What previous cases of Dupin does the narrator mention at the beginning of the story?
8. Who are considered fools by the Prefect G-? Why does Dupin disagree?
9. Why did he leave a clue in the duplicate letter for the Minister D-? Where has the clue been taken from?

16.7 Suggested Reading

1. Marie Bonaparte. *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psychoanalytic Interpretation*. Foreword by Sigmund Freud. (1933). Trans. John Rodker. London, 1949
2. John Walsh. *Poe the Detective*. Rutgers's University Press, New Jersey, 1968.
3. Jeffrey Meyers. *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy*. Charles Scribner's Sons, Macmillan, New York, 1992.
4. Milton Meltzer. *Edgar Allan Poe: A Biography*. Twenty-First Century Books, Millbrook Press, Inc. Connecticut, 2003.
5. Harold Bloom, ed. *Edgar Allan Poe*. Chelsea House, 1999.
6. Gerald J. Kennedy, ed. *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*. Oxford, New York, 2001.
7. Charles E. May, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Twayne, New York, 1991.
8. Kenneth Silverman, *Edgar Allan Poe*. Harper, New York, 1991.
9. Benjamin F. Fisher. *The Cambridge Introduction to Edgar Allan Poe*. CUP, New York, 2008.
10. D. Ramakrishna. ed. *Perspectives on Poe*. APC publications, New Delhi, 1996.
11. Kevin J. Hayes, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*. CUP, UK, 2002.

Unit 17 □ Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Yellow Wallpaper

Structure

- 17.1 Objectives**
- 17.2 Introduction**
- 17.3 Women Writers and the Short Story in late 19th Century America: An Overview**
- 17.4 Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Life and Politics**
- 17.5 “The Yellow Wallpaper”: A Critical Summary**
- 17.6 Brief Notes on the Characters**
- 17.7 Images in “The Yellow Wallpaper”**
- 17.8 “The Yellow Wallpaper” as a Gothic Feminist Text**
- 17.9 *Écriture féminine* and the Politics of Language**
- 17.10 Summing Up**
- 17.11. Comprehension Exercises**
- 17.12 Suggested Reading**

17.1 Objectives

The objectives of this Unit is to familiarize the learner with some of the basic facts pertaining to the writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman, particularly her handling of the short story as seen in the prescribed text “The Yellow Wallpaper” and to encourage them to explore the same along the lines of Gothic Feminism and linguistic politics using character, structure and style to negotiate the mentioned critical theories.

17.2 Introduction

Published in 1892, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” has triggered numerous discourses and debates over the years. It remains central to Gilman’s oeuvre and occupies a prominent position in the history of the American short story, generating an extraordinary range of critical readings, while formulating a unique and explosive

idiom for the enunciation of the author's feminist politics. The text primarily seeks to unmask and challenge the heteropatriarchal biases in personal and public spheres of family, medicine and society. Not only does Gilman's short story disrupt entrenched and conventional notions pertaining to marriage, motherhood and family, but it also presents a deeply nuanced portrait of the psychotic female mind, maddened by sexual and intellectual repression. This enables the author to expose and indict the psychosocial burdens imposed on women by the traditional American familial structure of the 19th century.

The autobiographical elements in "The Yellow Wallpaper" indicate obvious experiential parallels and correspondences between the narrator of the story and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's own struggle with postpartum depression after the birth of her daughter Katherine and the debilitating impact of "rest cure" and enforced confinement on her psyche. In fact, the dissolution of Gilman's marriage and her subsequent divorce from her husband Charles Walter Stetson were evidently direct consequences of her refusal to submit to parochial medical injunctions which effectively sought to imprison her physically, intellectually and spiritually. "The Yellow Wallpaper", then, must be read both as an unflinching documentation of private grief and personal malaise as well as a powerful public critique of the patriarchal suppression of women's lives, desires and voices. You will read more about Gilman's life, literary works and politics in section 5.21.3 of this unit.

17.3 Women Writers and the Short Story in late 19th Century America: An Overview

In Unit 19 of this Module, you have already learned about the evolution and development of the short story in America. In this section, our reading will be specifically focused on the women writers of the genre, as we attempt to critically situate Charlotte Perkins Gilman and her writings within the rapidly evolving socio-historical context of late 19th century America. American writers such as **Kate Chopin (1850-1904)**, **Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935)**, **Edith Wharton (1862-1937)** and **Willa Cather (1873-1947)** among others significantly contributed to the maturation of the genre through their innovative, nuanced and prolific production of short fiction - both short stories and novellas. Short stories, in particular, attracted an increasing number of women practitioners in the late 19th century, whose works became vivid reflections of the gender and economic politics of post-Civil War, industrial America.

One of the most vital media for the dissemination of the short story were the magazines and periodicals, which, from the very beginning, had a largely female readership. The growth and popularization of magazine publication is of paramount importance in the

development of the short story as a genre and it has also significantly facilitated the rise of women short story writers. (Scofield 88) It is important to remember that in the 19th century, within the male-dominated literary landscape of America, women writers, in general, often faced epistemic and intellectual exclusion. They suffered the humiliation of being infantilized, stigmatized and dismissed as inconsequential. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, had infamously cast aspersions against “that d___ed mob of scribbling women”.

The explicit hostility in Hawthorne’s statement succinctly demonstrates the pervasive prejudice against women authors of the time. It is no wonder, therefore, that many gifted writers, such as Sarah Paton Willis (1811-1872) and African-American author Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897), chose to publish their works under pseudonyms (Willis wrote as Fanny Fern, while Jacobs adopted the nom de plume Linda Brent) to avoid public scrutiny and censure, and often dealt with crippling self-doubt and internalized fear of persecution throughout their career. (Howell 23) It would not be until the 1970s and 1980s that they would finally receive the critical attention they deserved, as the rise of Western academic disciplines such as gender and cultural studies would lead to the unearthing and recovery of the invisibilized lives and writings of these forgotten women writers of 19th century America.

As Elaine Showalter has remarked in an article entitled “Smoking Room” (1995), published in *The Times Literary Supplement*, “Women writers in the 1890s found the short story a suitable form for the new feminist themes of the decade: the exploration of female sexuality and fantasy, the development of a woman’s language, and the critique of male aestheticism.” (Beer 2) Thus, as the statement indicates, it was both the public feminist ethos and the personal imperative to develop a specifically “female” mode of writing - a language that can accommodate women’s experiences and voices - that propelled the popularity of the genre among women writers. It provided a powerful vehicle for women’s voices, allowing them to communicate and experiment with a diverse array of subjects, ranging from gothic horror to female sexuality, intellectual and gender politics, science and technology to psychophysical and venereal diseases.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman produced extensive and diverse literary output which included poems, essays, novels and short stories. She was a fearless critic of the unequal and unjust world that she lived in. In *The Livings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography* (1935) she has clarified and elaborated upon the purpose of her writing, and further recorded the vitriolic criticisms directed at her: “No one who sets out to make the world better should expect people to enjoy it, all history shows what happens to would-be improvers. . . . What I had to expect was mostly misunderstanding.” (74) Her primary intent, then, was to “make the world better”, even if it led to contentions and “misunderstandings” that would continue to plague her throughout her life. Her prose

fictions are, thus, also motivated by her dedication to service and organized around this curative and corrective principle, as is evident from her imaginative utopian novel *Herland* (1915) or her short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892). (Davis, “Introduction”, ix) The following section discusses her life and politics in greater detail.

17.4 Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Life and Politics

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was born Charlotte Anna Perkins on July 3, 1860 in Hartford, Connecticut. Her father, Frederic Beecher Perkins, boasted of an illustrious family lineage. He was the son of prominent theologian Lymer Beecher and the nephew of Henry Ward Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe (who was a famous abolitionist activist and the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*). Perkins was himself a notable scholar and was, for a time, in charge of the Boston Public Library and the San Francisco Public Library. However, despite his publicly professed beliefs regarding the sanctity of marriage and family, he abandoned his wife Mary A. Fitch, his son Thomas and infant Charlotte, soon after his daughter’s birth. He showed no further interest in his family nor did he offer any monetary help to his estranged wife. Mary Fitch took care of her young children alone, often struggling with acute poverty and regularly forced to change residences due to lack of funds. Despite Charlotte’s repeated attempts in her youth to build a relationship with her father, he remained disinterested and, as Ann J. Lane points out, “a remote and ungenerous figure in her life.” (Lane, xv-xvi)

Charlotte Perkins’ tumultuous and impoverished childhood caused her to frequently change schools which were detrimental to her early education. However, she managed to attend the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence from 1878 to 1883, often supplementing her family income by giving private painting lessons, selling paint and drawing sketches for advertisements. Deprived of affection, emotional sustenance and a nurturing environment at home, Charlotte Perkins sought solace in the strong friendships she formed with her classmates in Providence, like Martha Luther Lane with whom she shared a deep, intimate bond. At the age of 21, she met the young, handsome artist Charles Walter Stetson and, despite considerable misgivings and self-doubt, she agreed to marry him in 1884. Theirs was an unhappy marriage, doomed to failure. The birth of their daughter, Katherine Beecher Stetson, in particular, led to severe physical and psychological crisis in Charlotte, which further intensified their marital conflicts.

Already afflicted with postpartum depression and burdened by the demands of motherhood, Charlotte Stetson was forced into confinement and underwent “rest cure” under the strict supervision of her husband. The “rest cure” was developed by S. Weir Mitchell and gained

popularity as an effective treatment for hysteria and nervous ailments in the 1870s. Mitchell mainly recommended “extended bed rest as well as near-total isolation and inactivity” as part of its regimen. (Lane xvi) Additionally, Charlotte was also forbidden from engaging in intellectual exercises. Her husband, in consultation with Mitchell, put an embargo on writing and painting, and even curtailed her daily reading session to only two hours. Driven to desperation by these restrictions and the complete suspension of mental and physical activities, she left her husband’s home and sought refuge at her friend Grace Ellery Channing’s house in Pasadena, California. Later, she separated from her husband, who went on to marry Channing. The three would remain on amicable terms for the rest of their lives and take on joint responsibility for Charlotte’s daughter Katherine. (Lane xvii)

In California, Charlotte Perkins resided with her daughter and her mother, ran a boarding house, and devoted her time to serious literary pursuits. Inspired by the legacy of the paternal family, Perkins dedicated herself to the cause of women’s empowerment, economic justice and socialism. In 1892, Perkins published a fictionalized account of her own experiences in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and the following year saw the publication of her first book of poetry *In This Our World* (1893). In the same year she completed *Women and Economics*, which was published in 1898. She also began to gain considerable reputation and prestige as a lecturer and would often go on extended tours. At this time, Perkins faced heavy criticism from the press for what appeared to the public to be an unnecessary divorce, for maintaining a close relationship with both her ex-husband and his new wife (who, as has been pointed out earlier, was one of her closest friends) and, finally, for allowing her daughter to be raised by the couple. It was seen as an unforgivable trespass on the part of Perkins who had, in the eyes of society, failed to uphold her maternal duties. It is evident from her own writings that she struggled with her decision to surrender her daughter’s care to Stetson. But while she desired to be a better and more attentive caregiver to her daughter (unlike her own mother), she rightly feared that any attempt at conforming to the societal conventions of womanhood/motherhood would negatively impact her professional aspirations. (Beekman)

On 11 June, 1900, Perkins married George Houghton Gilman, a distant cousin, in whom she finally found “a caring companion” as well as an enthusiastic supporter of her career. (Kessler 35) The same year saw the publication of *Concerning Children* (1900), followed by *The Home: Its Works and Influences* in 1903 and *Human Work* in 1904. Her creative and critical outpouring continued. She began her own magazine, *The Forerunner* in 1909 and she ran it solely on her own until 1916. In 1911 her book *Man-Made World* was published, and her fascinating utopian novel *Herland* followed in 1915, along with several other publications which appeared in between. In 1923, Gilman published *His Religion and Hers*. She partially completed her autobiography, entitled *The Livings of Charlotte*

Perkins Gilman in 1925, which would be posthumously published in 1935. She continued to travel and lecture extensively, dealing with topical feminist and Marxist issues, such as economic injustice fostered by traditional gender roles, women's exploitation and subjugation in a masculinist society, and the invisible, unpaid labor extracted from mothers and wives. (Lane, xviii) [For a more detailed list of Gilman's major works, refer to section 5.21.10]

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was diagnosed with breast cancer in 1932. After George Gilman's death in 1934, she committed suicide in August 1935, by sheathing her face in a piece of cloth doused in chloroform. She fervently worked on the manuscript of her autobiography in the last months of her life, where she documents and defends her decision. Gilman also left behind a note where she claims that she consciously chose "chloroform over cancer." This final action affirms her lifelong faith in the necessity of euthanasia for terminally-ill patients. As Ann J. Lane writes, "Charlotte Perkins Gilman died in a manner that testified to the struggle and the triumph of her life. [...] it was an act of will, of rationality, of affirmation." (Lane xv)

17.5 "The Yellow Wallpaper": A Critical Summary

"The Yellow Wallpaper" remained out of print for almost five decades after its publication in 1892, before it was 'discovered' by Elaine Hedges and re-published by the Feminist Press in 1973. Prior to its feminist appropriation and interpretation by Hedges, Gilman's short story was mostly regarded as a tale of gothic horror. Gilman's text can be, thus, located and read within this intersection, which yields an interesting critical framework that combines gothic psychoaesthetics with feminist politics. The first-person female narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper", Jane, inducts the reader into a subliminal psychodrama that uses the manifest maladies of a diseased mind to reveal the harrowing and precarious realities of a patriarchal world that *haunts* the quotidian lives of women. Its dynamic narrative extends beyond the language of madness and hysteria to facilitate a self-reflexive retelling that vocally challenges masculine ownership over female voices and bodies, and enables the reclamation of female agency within male-dominated, inhospitable spaces.

The narrator of the story, possibly named Jane, begins on a deceptively benign note, exclaiming at the stroke of luck that has led to her husband, John, securing a country estate for the summer, despite their modest means: "It is very seldom that mere ordinary people like John and myself secure ancestral halls for the summer." By her own admission, the speaker is "sick" and, as is soon made evident, there is clearly a rehabilitative and recuperative intent behind the couple's sojourn in this "colonial mansion". The narrator's desire to inhabit a "haunted house" is humorously referred to in the initial lines of the text, but the expectation

of “romantic felicity” is quickly dismissed. However, as the story progresses, the setting teems with a suppressed yet urgent energy - a *queerness* - which threatens the placid, controlled and sanitized environment that the husband prefers and implicitly seeks to establish: “[...] there is something strange about the house. I can feel it.”

Her fanciful nature is contrasted with that of her “practical” husband, John, who is also a physician. His occupation is significant; it is suggestive of both the masculine appropriation of female bodies and the **medicalization/pathologization** of female desire. Despite the narrator’s insistence that she is ill, he refuses to believe her, minimizing and dismissing her concerns as irrational and baseless. He deploys the rational language of paternalistic reason and logic, effectively positioning his wife as the incoherent, unreasonable, hysterical and gendered ‘other’.

The narrator makes a startling admission - a confession embedded in the silent, secret pact between the author and her reader: “John is a physician, and perhaps - (I would not say it to a living soul, of course, but this is dead paper and a great relief to my mind) - perhaps that is one reason I do not get well faster.” The “dead paper” is clearly more receptive than the living yet distant husband, and it serves as a suitably cathartic vehicle for the narrator. Two distinct aspects of her relationship with her husband is revealed in this statement: firstly, the husband’s initial attitude towards her is discernibly more clinical than intimate (despite the narrator’s reference to his “love” for her or his occasional endearments); secondly, the narrator appears to harbor a degree of guilt and shame for her complex, and at times almost resentful, feelings towards him.

The room where the narrator is ‘confined’ was, she imagines, “a nursery first and then playroom and gymnasium, [...] for the windows are barred for little children, and there are rings and things in the walls.” The spatial arrangement visually evokes the image of a prison, highlighting the central theme of entrapment in the narrative. The wallpaper with its lurid color - an “unclean yellow” - and its flagrant patterns offend her artistic sensibilities and begin to torment her emotionally and psychologically. The first section of the story ends abruptly presumably with John’s arrival who “hates to have [her] write a word.”

Structured as fragments of the narrator’s private journal entries, the second section of the story begins by informing the readers of a temporal gap - two weeks of inactivity on the part of the narrator, who declares, she hasn’t “felt like writing before - since that day.” One may assume, then, that despite her earlier attempt to hide her writing, she must have been caught and chastised by John, possibly leading to marital strife. After briefly mentioning the mostly absent husband (who stays away “all days and even some nights when his cases are serious”) and his growing displeasure with her, she indicates that Jennie, her husband’s sister, is residing with them and currently taking care of her infant son. While she uses the

conventional expressions of doting fondness while referring to her child (“such a dear baby”), it is simultaneously underscored by an intense antipathy towards her own role as a mother, which has presumably led to her confinement in the remote estate: “And yet I *cannot* be with him, it makes me so nervous.” Additionally, it is now possible to deduce that the speaker’s nervous disorder has manifested postpartum.

As the narrative progresses and the narrator’s gradual alienation from her husband becomes conspicuous, she develops a compulsive fascination with the wallpaper. Disturbing patterns of thought emerge as the setting is increasingly gothicized and the narrator’s emotional and mental stability begins to fracture and devolve. Her husband’s constant cautionary rebukes have had an effect: she no longer writes: “I find I get pretty tired when I try.” John’s placatory promises of having “Cousin Henry and Julia” visit after her recovery is a weak attempt at distraction and soon the abhorred wallpaper commands her full attention: “There is a recurrent spot where the pattern lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down.” The spot on the paper - metamorphosing into a grotesque image of a severed head - invokes another form of “deadness”. The “dead” paper that she had previously used to relieve her loneliness is now replaced with a different kind of paper - the wallpaper - a palimpsest already inscribed with an underlying text, periodically appearing and disappearing (“you can only see it in certain lights”).

Her initial fears are summarily dismissed by John as “false and foolish fancy”, as he deploys a barrage of infantilizing rhetoric in response: “blessed little goose” and “my little girl”. What ensues is a terrifying psychodrama, where the narrator documents her own devolution into madness with rigorous and frightening accuracy. She witnesses something alien and subhuman - a thing of terror - birthed from the wallpaper, crawling and creeping around the room, invading her body and psyche: “It gets into my hair.” It is a woman, the narrator believes, who is trapped in the wallpaper, struggling to escape. She attempts to hide her obsession from John and Jennie, but fears that they are growing suspicious of her fixation. The woman/women in the wallpaper consumes the narrator’s mind. Though initially the narrator wanted to tie her up with a length of rope, she now struggles to free the imprisoned woman by tearing, gouging and scratching at the walls.

In the end, the narrator herself mutates into an extension of the woman in the yellow wallpaper, locks herself in, crawling around the room: “I suppose I shall have to get back behind the pattern when it comes night, and that is hard! It is so pleasant to be out in this great room and creep around as I please!” Having unlocked the door and confronted with the ghastly sight, the practical, sensible husband-physician collapses on the threshold (symbolising the fall of the patriarch and his dominance), so that she has “to creep over him every time.” The enforced passivity now gives way to a triumphant and terrifying female

agency. And it can be accessed only when the narrator rejects the patriarchal prerogatives of reason, sanity and order and embraces psychic freedom, even as she inexorably descends into madness.

17.6 Brief Notes on the Characters

The Narrator: The narrator, who remains unnamed through most of the narrative, is the protagonist of Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" and a white, middle-class woman. She is brought to a remote estate by her husband, John, who has leased the place for three months, to aid her recovery from some form of postpartum nervous condition. She is undergoing treatment under the care and scrutiny of her husband, who is also a physician. Throughout the text, the protagonist struggles to repress and efface her intellectual aspirations and desires to satisfy her husband, who forbids her from writing. Yet, it is significant that Gilman's narrative is structured as a series of journal entries by the protagonist. Despite her initial compliance, the story itself is constructed as a testament of the narrator's defiance of her husband's prohibitive injunction and surveillance. The issues of "writing" and "being" become entangled as the narrative progresses. When the narrator stops writing on "dead paper", she engages in a different, more surreptitious form of rebellion: a complex psychopathological self-projection onto the wallpaper, having discovered in its intricate, "arabesque" curves, a hidden language of resistance. The obvious parallels between Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* - the archetypal "mad woman in the attic" - and Gilman's protagonist are obvious and must be addressed. It is perhaps also not a coincidence that, like Bertha Mason - the narrator also, on one occasion, attempts to set fire to the house. Her descent into psychosis is accompanied by an **anthropomorphization** of the errant patterns on the yellow wallpaper - an emergence of the repressed unconscious - the grotesque, spectral "other" and her final assimilation with it.

John: John is the physician husband of the narrator. He represents the patriarchal order of speech and reason and is initially positioned in the narrative as a figure of paternalistic benevolence. He appears, at times, to be superficially fond of his wife and concerned for her well-being. Yet, there is something sinister in his restrictive attitude towards the narrator that is reminiscent of a benevolent jailer: "He is very careful and loving, and hardly lets me stir without special direction." Despite his remonstrations about her excitable nature, he fails to recognize that he himself is the most constant source of her anxiety and distress. Their relationship pivots around John's expectations, dictated by his traditional notions of womanhood and motherhood. The narrator writes, "It is so hard to talk with John about my case, because he is so wise, and because he loves me so." John's masculine/medical

“wisdom” and his condescending “love” for her continually divests her of her agency over her own body, leading him to isolate and imprison her in the remote colonial mansion. He continues to dismiss and invalidate the protagonist’s concerns regarding her own mental health, abusing his clinical authority. John is presented in the text as a conduit of repressive, patriarchal dominance that is ultimately threatened and, at least temporarily, dismantled in the startling and terrifying conclusion of the text.

Jennie: Jennie is John’s sister, who serves as the couple’s housekeeper and takes care of the narrator’s infant boy. Her character is not fully developed in the text and she functions in the narrative as the exemplar of the perfect domestic woman who has been firmly inducted into the norms and expectations of the patriarchal familial order. She is the normative foil as well as a docile vehicle for the masculine surveillance of the aberrant, non-normative woman.

Mary: She is mentioned by the narrator only once in passing. Mary is charged with the care of the protagonist’s child, while she is recuperating in seclusion. Possibly a reference to Jennie herself.

17.7 Images in “The Yellow Wallpaper”

The Yellow Wallpaper - As the title indicates, the most prominent and vital symbol in Gilman’s story is the yellow wallpaper, which in itself operates as a complex text encoded with a disruptive narrative of madness and unreason that directly challenges the masculine appropriation of language itself. The woman trapped in the wallpaper is a manifestation of the entrapment of female bodies and intellect within strictly controlled domestic spaces by patriarchal norms and social codes, which serve to denigrate and devalue women’s individuality. The color yellow is significant on several levels. Gilman’s uses a list of loaded epithets to describe it: “The color is repellent, almost revolting; a smoldering unclean yellow, strangely faded by the slow-turning sunlight. It is a dull yet lurid orange in some places, a sickly sulphur tint in others.” On the one hand, it conveys the sickly, jaundiced color associated with bodily decay. On the other hand, it is also bright and disorienting to vision, creating optical illusions and intensifying the narrator’s delirium and hallucinations. The protagonist’s response to the color is tangible, tactile; she can smell it - “a yellow smell” and see it hang over her bed at night. The association between the “foul” smell of yellow and death is inescapable. The wallpaper functions, for the most part, as an alternative reality that the protagonist ends up inhabiting, contrasting with the “dead paper” on which she had previously recorded her thoughts. Images of death and hanged women pervade the pattern of the wallpaper: “They get through, and then the pattern strangles them off and

turns them upside down, and makes their eyes white!” The women who try to escape the shackles of patriarchy, therefore, must be metaphorically killed off - violently hanged and sentenced to death. (Treichler 73) The wallpaper itself remains revolting, ambiguous and serves as a complex reminder of the ugliness in the narrator’s world. It is impossible to allocate any fixed meanings to it. It remains suspended within the framework of the narrative - fluidly shifting from room decor, to a prison, to a transgressive space of liberation and self-affirmation.

The Nursery: In *The Home* (1903), Gilman proposed an overhauling of the architecture of physical spaces, social and familial, to enable women to exist and survive in such hostile spaces. She envisioned, for instance, a kitchen-less house in a shared commune where duties of child rearing will be collectively shared. This would, she believed, liberate the woman from their socially mandated roles as wives, caregivers, nurturer - and free them from the parochial realms of the self-effaced and invisibilized “angel of the house”. The setting of the story is significant - it is a nursery in “a colonial mansion” with “ancestral halls”, located in a “hereditary estate”. The paternal prerogative is clear in the implication of masculine inheritance and transmission of property and social capital, as is the procreative imperative suggested by the nursery. The narrator appears to have been sent to an attic room - an erstwhile nursery, fallen into disrepair - where she is to stay for the rehabilitative period of “rest cure”. Her internment in a nursery further points to her sustained infantilization at the hands of her husband. She suffers from, we are told, “temporary nervous depression - a slight hysterical tendency”, possibly a postnatal psychopathology. For the narrator, the nursery room is at once a curative and a carceral setting. As mentioned in the previous section, the image of the woman trapped in the attic-nursery inevitably invites comparison with Bertha Mason in Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* - the archetypal “mad woman in the attic”. It is perhaps also not a coincidence that, like Bertha Mason - the narrator also, on one occasion, attempts to set fire to the house. The nursery - invested with the procreative burden imposed on the narrator, meant to force her into domestic bondage - is progressively defamiliarized and transforms into a space of self-determination, even as the protagonist’s mental stability continues to disintegrate.

Disease and Death: Images of disease and death pervade the narrative of “The Yellow Wallpaper”. The narrator of Gilman’s story is, as she informs her readers, “sick”. Interestingly, this “sickness” never really undergoes a strict diagnostic procedure, but is instead subsumed within the broad and somewhat vague category of, what were typically considered, “women’s diseases” in the 19th century - mainly referring to hysteria and “nervous depression”. (Treichler 61) Visually, the setting of the story is replete with reminders of putrescence and decay that invade the text and the protagonist’s life. The treatment prescribed for the

narrator's mysterious ailment is S. Weir Mitchell's "rest cure", wherein she must be confined in isolation and deprived of sensory and intellectual stimulation. John enforces the regimen, removing all but the most exiguous sources of stimuli from her vicinity, while deploying a crude, manual mechanism of surveillance through his sister Jennie. The narrator's implicit deathwish and her compulsive fascination with death and the paraphernalia of death is suggested by her obsession with "ghostliness" and the sense of wrongness that contaminates the house. Another curious indicator is in her description of the wallpaper: "...when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions." Further associations between the wallpaper and death continue to emerge in the narrator's imaginative identification of dead, severed heads within the sub-pattern. There is an odd, startling correspondence between life and death in Gilman's story. The "dead" paper is invested with the narrator's life as she continues to record her experience despite the masculine edict of silence. Deadness, paradoxically, transforms into a source of life, while the generation of life through biological procreation becomes implicated in the "death" of the narrator's freedom and agency. The inanimate wallpaper, as well, teems with life and urgency as the protagonist inscribes into its dead patterns a counter-narrative of dissent and resistance, deconstructing patriarchal myths of ideal femininity through the powerful evocation of the spectral woman in the wallpaper.

The Woman in the Wallpaper: The woman in the wallpaper is, undoubtedly the most complex and disorienting of images in the text. Her origin appears to be the narrator's own morbid imagination, and her actions physically enact the sense of entrapment and claustrophobia that afflicts her. She is undoubtedly "the narrator's double", as Gilbert and Gubar points out. (Gilbert and Gubar 91) She is generated, then, from the protagonist's interpretive and imaginative faculties, exercised during her "study" of the wallpaper. The women in the wallpaper, therefore, embody the precarities and pitfalls of traditional linguistic processes of meaning-making - her truncated and animal-like creeping suggesting an unfinished, distorted image of "femaleness" that is, as Toril Moi has pointed out in *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985), derived from and conditioned by patriarchal standards and norms. They are, perceptibly, the products of a twisted, tortured fantasy, with which the protagonist willingly supplants her own dreary reality. The narrator's bid for escape and self-assertion is effectuated through a series of gestures performed by the protagonist - from engaging in an almost anthropological mode of observation, to establishing an organic and visceral bond with the spectral figures in the wallpaper and finally, being unable to separate fiction from reality, *becoming* her.

17.8 “The Yellow Wallpaper” as a Gothic Feminist Text

The female gothic tradition in 19th century America differed significantly and qualitatively from the works of the male proponents of the genre. One of the primary aspects of this difference was a distinct departure from traditional notions of what constituted “horror”. They used common tropes and format of the ghost/horror stories to encode hidden and veiled meanings with seemingly familiar and domestic settings that, in turn, destabilize and overhaul male construction/interpretation of reality. Thus, the material and economic conditions of women that established the limits of Victorian womanhood were also important determinants of the modalities of such writing. This point to the irreconcilable contradictions that woman writers had to address and negotiate - the cultural blocks created to privilege men, while banishing women from the public sphere into the recesses of repressive domestic interiors.

Since its re-emergence as a feminist text in a single edition publication in 1973, “The Yellow Wallpaper” has generated overwhelming literary interest and critical insights. Elaine Showalter has enplaced the story in the gynocritical paradigm of “female writing” that underscores its role as a transgressive counter-discourse against essentialized ideas of Victorian femininity. (Robbins 242) The text is infused with Gilman’s own traumatic encounter with Mitchell’s contested “rest cure”. In “Why I wrote the Yellow Wallpaper”, Gilman addresses the issues of hysteria and feminist writing while expressing a desire to “save people from being driven crazy”. In her autobiography, she relates in grueling details her own ordeal during her treatment under the famous nerve specialist, Silas Weir Mitchell. She was “put to bed and kept there. I was fed, bathed, rubbed and responded with the vigorous body of twenty-six”, and after a month of treatment, she was advised to ‘live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child all the time. ...Have but two hours of intellectual life a day. Never touch a pen, brush or pencil as long as you live.’ (Robbins 245)

The gothic elements in “The Yellow Wallpaper” allow for a further examination of the exclusionary, gendered and highly injurious presumptions that regulated practices of women’s medical and psychiatric treatment in *fin de siècle* America. As Ruth Robbins has noted in her essay on “The Yellow Wallpaper”, upon its original publication in 1892, the story was read as a horror story and the reception was highly unfavorable. It distressed Gilman so much that she noted “I could not forgive myself if I made others as miserable as I made myself”. In fact, the proponents and the reading public of American gothic literature, initiated by Edgar Allan Poe, refused to include the story within the realm of gothic tradition because it did not follow the parameters and

conventions of the genre. They relegated it instead to the “tame space of domestic fiction”. It elicited disgust, rather than admiration, for violating the normative “limits of proper femininity.” (Robbins 243)

Having addressed the story’s contentious position vis-s-vis the 19th century gothic tradition, it is important to point out that the gothic elements in the text operate in tandem with its feminist politics, especially in its surreal blend of horror and political commentary. Structurally, the gothic setting of the text has a noticeable split: The daylight world of order, routine and sense, represented by the husband and his sister, and the subjective world of “nocturnal fantasy” inhabited by the wife, as she regresses into inner “psychic chaos”. (Johnson 523) Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their seminal work *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), quotes Virginia Woolf: “Before woman can write, declared Virginia Woolf, we must ‘kill’ the ‘angel of the house’.” (Gilbert and Gubar 17) Gilman’s text, therefore, can be read as an insidious murder - the killing off of the domesticated, subservient wife and mother - and the birth of a radically non-normative female selfhood or, to borrow Barbara Creed’s term, the *monstrous feminine*. It is an act of rage, of the reclamation of feminist poetics from the prescriptive and proscriptive codes of masculine language, as well as a redemptive rebirth of both the female artist (the narrator) and her fictive creations (the women in the wallpaper).

17.9 *Écriture féminine* and the Politics of Language

The term ‘*Écriture féminine*’, which literally translates to “feminine writing”, is coined by notable French feminist, **Helen Cixous**, in her seminal work *The Laugh of Medusa* (1976). The concept is derived from Lacan’s psychoanalytic theorizations on the symbolic order and on phallogentrism in language (the idea that social relations and systems of meanings are organized around the phallus, i.e., Lacan identifies the centrality of the masculine in the construction of social meanings, rituals and relations). Cixous posits that the feminine practice of writing cannot be “defined...theorized, enclosed or coded”, because the language itself is phallogentric and therefore implicated in the silencing and subverting of female voices and identities, by subsuming them within the masculine domain of “philosophico-theoretical domination”. (Cixous 253) Since language itself is constituted as male-centric, women are less anchored, less entrenched in the symbolic order, because they are, in Freudian psychoanalysis, defined by a “lack” - the lack of the phallus. In Western phallogentric culture and history, women have, therefore, always been occupants of the margins - the archetypal ‘Other’. Cixous further claims that ‘feminine writing’, or drawing

from Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism, "female writing" can be achieved only by "peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate." (Cixous 253)

The narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper", similarly, suffers under an embargo on language and on self-expression, imposed by her physician husband. The woman is subsumed within the phallogocentric medical discourse as the infantile, hysterical "other", while the husband (as well as the brother and the doctor) are positioned in the narrative as the primary extensions of the Lacanian "law of the Father". The male primacy over language is manifested in John's toxic exercise of power, under the guise of paternalistic benevolence. The narrator must write in secret and hide her journal every time her husband or his sister is in the vicinity. Unable to vocalize herself through writing, she channels her imagination and creative faculties towards the wallpaper. It seems initially to be an incomprehensible text, yet the narrator begins to "read" its complex hieroglyphics and patterns, constructing alternative meanings that exist beyond the realm and scope of masculine language. Denied the freedom to write, to create - she discovers hidden and chained figures inside the wall-paper - creeping women who scuttle around the room and the house. Her peripheralization and confinement in the nursery - which is turned into a **clinical panopticon** - ironically create the suitable conditions for the protagonist's later unraveling and her metaphorical escape from the ambit of male language. By rejecting the world of masculine censorship of female bodies and tongues, she embraces the alternative language of madness that is uncensored and unhindered by patriarchal laws of speech.

17.10 Summing Up

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is a semi-autobiographical short story, derived from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's own experiences with postnatal depression and "rest cure", and is structured as journal entries, wherein the protagonist records her own gradual regression into madness.

The text engages with complex ideas about gender disparity, medicalization and incarceration of female bodies under the guise of "treatment" and the politics of female writings. The story has distinct gothic elements and may be categorized as a gothic feminist text.

The central figure in the story, the narrator, carries the echoes of Charlotte Brontë's Bertha Mason (from *Jane Eyre*). She suffers from an undiagnosed psychopathology that ultimately leads to insanity. However, conventional notions of reason and madness is constantly challenged by the author, as her condition may be seen as the ultimate form of resistance and dissent against the curative yet repressive attempts of her husband.

Two models of surveillance can be identified in the story. One is deployed against the aberrant protagonist by the representatives of societal norms - John and Jennie. While the

other is a more bilateral model, wherein the narrator observes the spectral women in the wallpaper and, like Nietzsche's analogy of the abyss, they also "look back".

The text is powerful feminist indictment of the patriarchal order that has historically dominated women. It is a redemptive and retributive narrative that challenges masculine authority and reclaims female agency.

17.11 Comprehension Exercises

Long Questions :

1. Attempt a feminist reading of Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper".
2. Comment on Gilman's use of imagery in "The Yellow Wallpaper."
3. Gilbert and Gubar have claimed that in Gilman's story "the figure creeping through and behind the wallpaper is both the narrator and her double". Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.

Medium-length Questions :

1. To what extent is "The Yellow Wallpaper" a narrative about reclaiming agency and space for female writing? Discuss.
2. Critically comment on the narrator's relationship with her husband.
3. Critically examine the setting of "The Yellow Wallpaper."

Short Questions :

1. What are the author's views on "rest cure"? Discuss with reference to "The Yellow Wallpaper".
2. Discuss the role of Jeannie in Gilman's text.
3. Critically comment on the character of John.
4. Write a brief note on the significance of the title of "The Yellow Wallpaper".
5. Briefly discuss the ending of "The Yellow Wallpaper."

17.12 Suggested Reading

1. Mary Beekman. "Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935): Her life and work as a social scientist and feminist." *Webster.edu*, <http://faculty.webster.edu/woolfilm/gilman.html>. Accessed on 10 March 2019
2. Janet Beer. *Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton and Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Studies in Short Fiction*. London: Macmillan, 1997.

3. Cynthia J. Davis and Denise D. Knight, eds. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Her Contemporaries: Literary and Intellectual Contexts*. Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2004.
4. Greg Johnson. "Gilman's Gothic Allegory: Rage and Redemption in "The Yellow Wallpaper"." *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 26, no. 4, 1989, pp. 521-30.
5. Carol Farley Kessler. *Charlotte Perkins Gilman: Her progress toward Utopia with Selected Writings*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995.
6. Ann J. Lane ed. *The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader*. Virginia: The University Press of Virginia, 1999.
7. Martin Scofield. *The Cambridge Introduction to the American Short Story*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
8. Paula A. Treichler. "Escaping the Sentence: Diagnosis and Discourse in "The Yellow Wallpaper"." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 3, No. 1/2, Spring - Autumn 1984, pp. 61-77.
9. Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875-893.
10. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*.
11. Ruth Robbins. "Reading the Writing on the Wall: Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'," *Literary Feminisms*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000.

MODULE -6
American Drama

Unit 18 □ A Concise History of American Drama

Structure

- 18.1 Objectives
- 18.2 Introduction
- 18.3 The Early Days of American Drama
- 18.4 Eugene O'Neill
- 18.5 Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller
- 18.6 Edward Albee
- 18.7 Drama from 1960 to the Present
- 18.8 Sam Shepard and David Mamet
- 18.9 African-American Drama
- 18.10 Drama Based on Identity
- 18.11 Avant-Garde Theatre Groups
- 18.12 Summing Up
- 18.13 Comprehension Exercise
- 18.14 Suggested Reading

18.1 Objectives

The objectives of this Unit are to trace the development of American drama from its infancy to the present times with particular focus on the Expressionist, Absurd and Avant-Garde manifestations of the form; to examine the identity-related expressions of the same such as African-American Drama as also to consider the impact of concepts such as the 'American Dream' on the said genre.

18.2 Introduction

Critics like Susan Harris Smith have rued the fact that American drama does not receive as much critical attention as it should get. In her book *American Drama: The Bastard Art* Harris comments that American drama is "the canary in the mineshaft of American literary and cultural studies ... marginalized, excluded, or 'disciplined' in the culture in

general and the university in particular.” Thus, as students of American drama here, we are confronted by a relative academic lethargy in the study of drama that the country has produced, especially when we compare the massive critical investment that has gone into the study of American prose (fictional and non-fictional) and poetry.

Therefore we face the challenge of making sense of the incredible complexity and variety of American drama which is, compared to prose and poetry, a relatively younger form of literary expression. The problem is that – apart from some playwrights like Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller – critical study for American drama is comparatively difficult to come by.

Therefore in this unit, we are going to take a tour through, what we can call, ‘a brief history of American drama’. The drama has indeed exploded with full gusto in America in the twentieth century. But to say that is to erase the memories of pre-twentieth-century drama. So in this unit, we will have an overview of American drama in general with greater emphasis on the more important signposts along the way. This, we hope, will give you a grounding to study **Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller** in greater detail in the succeeding units. This unit plans to begin with a brief sketch of American drama in its nascent stage followed by more detailed studies of the varied kinds of drama in the twentieth century. In our study of twentieth-century American drama we will first study the three classical dramatists: O’Neill, Williams, and Miller separately. Following this, we will study different types of American drama in the twentieth century. They will form separate sub-units.

18.3 The Early Days of American Drama

American drama had a rather modest and relatively obscure origin. Before the first English colony was established in 1607 there were Spanish drama and Native American tribes performed theatrical events. English language drama took some time to take off. It may have begun with the first professional theatre with Lewis Hallam’s troupe in the 1750s. There was some drama in the nineteenth century. However, the greatest flowering of drama in America happened in the twentieth century. American drama transitioned from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century with vaudevilles (popular variety theatre involving skits, clowning, music, etc.) which were variety entertainments. Popular culture showed vital developments, especially in vaudeville. Minstrel shows, based on African-American music and folkways – performed by white characters using ‘blackface’ makeup – also developed original forms and expressions. These would contribute to the development of African-American theatre from the 1950s. Early twentieth-century American drama became

increasingly sophisticated with Ethel Barrymore and John Barrymore. From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century there also were revues consisting of mostly unconnected songs, sketches, comedy routines, and dancing girls.

From its early days in the eighteenth century, American drama imitated English and European drama that continued well into the twentieth century. Often, plays from England or translated from European languages dominated theatre seasons. An inadequate copyright law that failed to protect and promote American dramatists worked against the emergence of a genuinely original drama. The 'star system' in which actors and actresses, rather than the actual plays, were given most acclaim. It also worked towards the detriment of the production of original and quality plays. Americans flocked to see European actors who toured the theatres in the United States. Besides, imported drama enjoyed a higher status than indigenous productions. Drama in America therefore stuttered and fretted under foreign yolk.

During the nineteenth century, melodramas became very popular. Such plays were built around exemplary democratic figures. The century having seen the civil war fought for the abolition of slavery, clear contrasts between good and evil became popular in the national imagination. Drama was crafted along such clear politico-moral lines. Plays about social problems such as slavery drew large audiences; sometimes these plays were adaptations of novels like the hugely popular *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It was only in the twentieth century that serious attempts were made to bring aesthetic innovation and variety and depth of themes. Therefore it becomes imperative to turn our lengthy gaze now to the productive twentieth century.

18.4 Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953)

The first great American dramatist, O'Neill opened up American drama to make it for the first time a part of world drama. O'Neill drew a lot from European drama: realism from Anton Chekov, Henrik Ibsen, and August Strindberg and the expressionistic technique from German drama. In O'Neill, we see nineteenth-century themes and his early plays have 'slices of life'. The early O'Neill plays were pervaded by an elegiac mood.

Beginning with awkward melodramas about people and subjects like prostitutes, derelicts, lonely sailors, God's injustice to man, etc., O'Neill quickly matured into writing realistic-tragic plays. His most distinguished short plays include the four early sea plays, *Bound East for Cardiff* (1914), *In the Zone* (1917), *The Long Voyage Home* (1917), and *The Moon of the Caribbees* (1918). The first full-length play in which O'Neill successfully evoked the starkness and inevitability of Greek tragedy was *Desire Under the Elms*

(1924). It draws on Greek themes of incest, infanticide, and fateful retribution in the context of the conflicts in a rural New England family.

One of O'Neill's greatest masterpieces, *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), represents the playwright's most complete use of Greek forms, themes, and characters. Based on the *Oresteian* trilogy by Aeschylus, it is itself three plays in one. The play is contemporary as it is set in the New England of the Civil War period. Yet O'Neill has retained the forms and the conflicts of the Greek characters. *The Iceman Cometh* (written in 1939, first performed in 1946) is the most complex and perhaps the finest of O'Neill's plays. Laced with subtle religious symbolism, the play is a study of man's need to cling to his hope for a better life, even if he must delude himself to do so.

18.5 Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) and Arthur Miller (1915-2005)

You need to remember that American drama comes of age with the triad of O'Neill, Williams, and Miller. The plays of Williams and Miller are characterized by the fact that both explore the American identity in the context of a changing world order after the Second World War. Both gained prominence in the late 1940s. They responded to the social anxieties of the infamous McCarthy era. Their plays explored social issues like the human costs of postwar industrial capitalism. Primarily in content but also in form their work began to illustrate the contradictions of the American dream – late capitalism's ideological failures that left behind those betrayed by the promises of self-determination, wealth, and power. Both playwrights followed the conventions of domestic realism but freely utilized anti-realistic devices like expressionism.

The success of American playwrights is marked by successful runs of their plays at Broadway. Broadway refers to the professional theatres in Midtown Manhattan in New York City. Like O'Neill, Williams and Miller were immensely successful at Broadway. Williams is known for his plays *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Summer and Smoke* (1948), *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), *Camino Real* (1953), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Orpheus Descending* (1957), and *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958).

Williams' plays critique the superficiality of American capitalism which rewarded appearance over substance. He portrayed capitalism's ruthless obsession with competition and materialistic success at the expense of deeper emotional and artistic values that destroy the sensitive and the weak. Williams portrays capitalism as discarding human complexity, creating social outsiders who struggle to survive. Like Miller, Williams shows the innate contradiction of

American capitalism: it ignites people's dream of success and yet perverts the human self, robbing it of dignity. The American values of individualism and freedom – inherent in the national ethos of the American Dream – are seen in Williams' plays as essentially destructive, creating a culture of 'success' that simultaneously demands allegiance and conformity; those failing to do so remain social outsiders. This is where the tragedy of Williams' characters like Laura and Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* lie.

Whereas Williams' response to the questionable American Dream and its failure was largely apolitical, Miller's plays were politically confrontationist. Miller's plays are scathing attacks on the vapid cultural ethos of the American Dream. No wonder, he was dubbed a communist sympathizer by the draconian House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) headed by Senator Joseph McCarthy. Miller was subjected to persecution by the House. This communist-witch hunting was the inspiration behind Miller's partially fictionalized historical play *The Crucible* (1953) that was based on the infamous Salem witch trials between 1692 and 1693.

Among many plays, Miller is chiefly remembered for the three plays *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), and *A View from the Bridge* (1955). These plays dramatize the collapse of individual integrity under assault from the post-World War II socio-economic system in America. The selves of his ordinary protagonists, Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* and Eddie Carbone in *A View from the Bridge*, are under attack. The personal and public identities of his characters are challenged in this harsh society. The American Dream leaves his characters in ruins.

18.6 Edward Albee (1928-2016)

As we proceed beyond the three great playwrights discussed above, we will see how rich, varied, and complex American drama is. One playwright who is hard to categorize is Edward Albee. Martin Esslin in his path-breaking book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1962) put Albee's one-act play *The Zoo Story* (1959) in the category of 'absurd'. Set in New York City, the play can be called an 'American absurd play'. In this play, Albee attacked the very foundations of American idealism and optimism by showing the alienation of the outcast Jerry. His situation is absurd as he is unable to connect with other human beings or to find any sense of identity in the community. The play portrays the absurdity in American urban life by portraying the frustrations of human connection and communication. Though his other plays are not categorized as 'absurd', the concerns dramatized in *The Zoo Story* are revisited in these plays. *The American Dream* (1961) attacked the

hypocrisies of America's national identity embedded in the notions of progress and optimism. Albee explores in this play the American worship of the superficial and the empty. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962) is a critique of the American middle class and its definition of success.

18.7 Drama from 1960 to the Present

Here we will go through some of the other major developments in American drama from the 1960s. By the late 1950s and 1960s, anti-realistic theatre emerged in America. American drama started to question the conventional ideologies of realism to reveal the problematic constructions of identity and truth. This drama eschewed the reproduction of surface reality, distorting surfaces through stage settings and other theatrical devices. More often they rebel against realist attempts to order and represent the external world. Reality is seen as a subjective construct rather than objective truth and therefore relative. Truth is represented as politically motivated. Therefore realism becomes untenable. Drama in America has thus taken a decidedly postmodern turn.

Being in line with postmodern aesthetics, the narrative gets fragmented as opposed to seamless plots of earlier drama. Characters become deconstructed; the distinction between high culture and popular and mass culture gets blurred; performance becomes self-consciousness. Postmodern American drama destabilizes the illusion of fixed identity by blurring the boundaries between role-playing and ontological authenticity, acting and being.

But that is not to say that the playwrights have discarded realism altogether. Many of the features of realistic representation are employed to represent contemporary social and political concerns. But by-and-large American drama has become more experimental and avant-garde in style and politically radical in content. Besides Broadway, Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway theatres gained prominence. Experimental and radical plays that are not encouraged at Broadway play at Off-Broadway and Off-Off-Broadway theatres.

18.8 Sam Shepard (1943-2017) and David Mamet (1947-)

Two of the greatest exponents of this new kind of drama that you have just read about are Sam Shepard and David Mamet. Both their plays dramatise the instability of identity. Shepard's plays like *La Turista* (1967), *Action* (1975), *Buried Child* (1979), *True West* (1980) and the later *Simpatico* (1994) deal with the fragile boundaries of identity and the impossibility of locating an authentic self-outside the roles, masks, images, and performances. In doing so Shepard questions the very notion of an authentic American

identity. Mamet's most significant plays are *American Buffalo* (1976) and *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983). In these plays, Mamet shows how power is gained by commodifying the cultural illusions that sustain human society. This is fostered by contemporary capitalism which is an all-encompassing order from which nothing and nobody can escape.

In the plays of both playwrights, there is a self-conscious exploration of identity as performance. Both critique the American way of life as inauthentic due to the commodification of cultural narratives. Shepard and Mamet articulate America's central myths of patriarchal capitalism and explore their validity to challenge the hegemony of Anglo-patriarchal mythology, illustrating and exposing the power structures surrounding identity and social performance in America. The difference between Shepard and Mamet is that the former explores the America of the western desert while the latter the American urban jungle.

18.9 African-American Drama

The national ethos of the American dream, the seduction of success embedded in the ideology of Anglo-patriarchal capitalist culture, and the very foundation of the authentic American self are questioned by the African-American playwrights. Coming after a long history of slavery, oppression, persecution, marginalization, and indignity, African-American drama questions the nation itself as one belonging to whites and not blacks.

It took many decades of struggle for the blacks in America to get basic rights that whites took for granted. Inequality based on skin colour was a fundamental aspect of American life for several centuries. Protests against racial discrimination had started several years before, but in the 1950s it gained momentum owing to the Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King. The Movement wrested several constitutional and legal rights for the blacks. Several militant and radical developments took place within the black community. All these had a lasting impression on African-American drama.

The first African-American playwright was Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965). Her play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959) shows the disappointments of the national myth of success that never percolated down to the black community. As a social play, Hansberry's play questions Anglo-patriarchal values and marked the beginning of African-American drama in America. This is a conventional realistic play that intended to bring change in American society.

Perhaps the most significant African-American playwright is Imamu Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) (1934-2014). The originator of 'Revolutionary Theater' in African-American drama, Baraka played a major role in the Black Arts Movement, an artistic movement of the 1960s that focused on Black Nationalism and self-determination in promoting an art which would speak directly to and from the African-American experience. Baraka played an

instrumental role in founding the Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School in Harlem in 1964 and to the general promotion of African-American theatre in the USA. Baraka indicts Anglo-American patriarchal values and honestly exposes African-American identity as a mask, a performance that covers up hatred and anger. His most notable plays include *Dutchman* and *The Slave* (both 1964).

By far, the most commercially successful African-American playwright is August Wilson (1945- 2005). Writing in the realistic style, Wilson is not primarily political in the sense that he does not write to effect social change but to give white Americans a different perspective on black Americans. His plays like *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984) and *Fences* (1987), part of his famous series of plays called *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, project vicissitudes of African-American life in succeeding decades.

Following Lorraine Hansberry, several African-American female playwrights rose to prominence. Adrienne Kennedy (193 -) started writing in the 1960s and Ntozake Shange (1948-2018) in the 1970s unmasked racism and gender discrimination in the US. Kennedy's characters are mentally and emotionally torn between their real black selves and the glorious white selves that they imagine and desire. She focuses on the fragmentation of identity and identifications experienced by cultural 'others' like blacks. Her notable plays include *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1964), *A Rat's Mass* (1967), and *An Evening With Dead Essex* (1973). Kennedy influenced Shange in the latter's experimental work, a choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/ when the rainbow is emif* (1975). Shange emphasizes empowerment, self-determination, and individuality for black women.

Susan-Lori Parks (1963-) carried on the legacy and the revolutions of Kennedy and Shange. Parks' *The America Play* (1994) focuses on the history, particularly the founding mythologies of American history, and the Americans' sense of origins and meanings as 'The Great Hole of History'. The 'Hole' has a sense of absence and loss and a 'whole' as a coherent image of historical cohesiveness. *Topdog/Underdog* (2001) is a play about family identity and the struggles of African-American life. Parks shows history and identity do not necessarily belong to individuals and so they are not stable. Thereby, Parks questions from an African-American perspective the founding history and myths of the American nation.

18.10 Drama Based on Identity

As you can see from the discussions above, identity plays a very important role in American life and American drama. Other than African-American identity, there are several other identities, often overlapping, that are dramatized on the stage. Drama became a means of

greater visibility for disenfranchised and marginalized communities like women, gays and lesbians (LGBTQ), Asian-Americans, Chicanos, African-Americans, etc. The 1960s and 1970s marked the birth of honest and socially committed theatre in America. Thus playwrights were encouraged to explore issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

Playwrights like Maria Irene Fornes (1930-2018) and Lisa Loomer (1950-) represent the complex construction and social maintenance of female identity. They have an anti-realistic vision in their plays that distorts and moves past superficial appearance to access the truth about women beyond ordinary experience. Both show the connections among women that are not immediately apparent.

Fornes began her career in the 1960s and made her mark as an avant-garde Off-Off-Broadway playwright. An experimental and feminist playwright, Fornes shows in her plays the violent treatment of women across cultures, the role of power in romantic relationships, and the ways and means women adopt to cope and survive in a misogynistic society. Some of her major plays are *Fefu and her Friends* (1977), *Mud* (1983), *Sarita* (1984), and *Letters from Cuba* (2000).

Best known for her plays *The Waiting Room* (1994), *Expecting Isabel* (2000), and *Living Out* (2003), Loomer's plays portray the commonality of female experiences across history, race, nationality, and class. She portrays the oppression of women and women's compliance with social authority that enforces their oppression. In her attack on patriarchy, Loomer does not spare even women for their complicity in their historical oppression.

Tony Kushner (1956-) is renowned for his two-part seven-hour epic play about the AIDS epidemic in America during the reign of President Ronald Reagan that hit the gay community, *Angels in America*. The two parts are entitled *Millennium Approaches* (1992) and *Perestroika* (1993). Kushner explores the relationship between power and sexual identity in this play. Valorizing LGBTQ identities, the play de-moralises and de-politicises AIDS whereby Kushner intends to empower the gays. The play is a postmodern placement of the past in the present through the presence of McCarthyism in Ronald Reagan's Republican America. Like Miller, Kushner brings in McCarthyism that links the 1980s to the 1950s and thereby examines issues of power and exclusion in the history of America. The play also equates the Nazi Holocaust with the AIDS epidemic among the gays.

David Henry Hwang (1957-) is a Chinese-American who is renowned for his play *M. Butterfly* (1988). Hwang writes from the perspective of the cultural and political experiences of Asian-Americans in the USA. In this play, he explores issues of race, gender, and sexuality. The play intertwines the complex issues of gender roles and imperialism in Western and Eastern cultures. He presents the complexity of identity that explores the issue of power in relation to sexist and racist stereotypes the West has subjected the East to.

18.11 Avant-Garde Theatre Groups

We will conclude our brief survey of the history of American drama with the revolutionary theatre groups which have produced drama that is thematically and stylistically experimental and radical. These groups work with a spirit of collaboration, collective creation, and improvisation in which often an entire group conceives a theatre piece. These groups reject the distinctions of performer, director, designer, and playwright and their plays are anti-realistic as productions are presented in real-time and place. The plays of these groups are often off-proscenium, choosing any location as performance space: the streets, fields, warehouses, etc. Spectators and actors are encouraged to unite in the present to effect social change. These groups use unconventional techniques to move beyond the superficiality of realistic representation to access the more subtle and powerful effects of capitalism's social and economic pressures on American identity.

Founded in 1947 by Judith Malina and Julian Beck, the Living Theatre resurrected poetic language in theatre. The group intended to dissolve the boundaries between theatre and life and performer and audience to communicate feelings and ideas beyond the rational. Living Theatre endured poverty, imprisonment, deportation, and public skepticism in its mission to bring about spiritual, socio-economic, and political revolution. One of the pivotal productions of the Living Theatre was *The Connection* (1959) by Jack Gelber (1932-2003). The play was performed in a way whereby the line between fiction and reality was blurred by blurring the line between actor and character and breaking the fourth wall.

The Open Theatre was founded in 1963 by Joseph Chaikin who previously acted in Living Theatre. Open theatre proved to be one of the most influential experimental theatre groups in the USA. Its early productions included the first plays to deal with the Vietnam War: Jean-Claude Van Itallie's (1936-) play *American Hurrah* (1964), a trilogy of short plays, and Megan Terry's (1932-) *Viet Rock* (1966), the first rock musical. These plays were the first major dramatic expressions of the anti-war movement in the 1960s.

Peter Schumann founded the Bread and Puppet Theatre in New York City in 1962. The principal aim of this group was to protest the dehumanizing effects of a capitalist, urban society on individual identity. It was street theatre that did spontaneous performances in outdoor public spaces free of charge to take theatre to the average person. The name of this group derives from Schumann's premise that theatre is a basic necessity like bread.

The San Francisco Mime Troupe was founded in 1959. The objective of the troupe was to expose political oppression in the USA. Intending to promote social change, the Troupe's plays were political satires. Like Bread and Puppet Theatre it took its plays into public spaces like streets, parks, and workplaces. The Troupe's founder, R.G. Davis, popularised

the term ‘Guerilla Theatre’ because they did spontaneous and unexpected performances that were done illegally and required that the performers dismantle quickly.

Luiz Valdez was in the San Francisco Mime Troupe before he founded El Teatro Campesino in 1965 to address the concerns of the largely Chicano farmworkers and migrant labourers. Valdez presented skits against grape growers in Delano, California, on the picket line from where El Teatro had its beginning. Since many Chicano(a)s could not speak English Teatro’s plays attempted to convey situations without words. The actors wore masks to highlight the characteristics of stereotyped characters. The group drew from agitprop or Workers’ Theatre pieces in the tradition of the political theatre of the 1930s.

The legendary Richard Schechner founded the Environmental Theatre in 1967. The name derives from the fact that the group’s plays were performed in a real-world environment rather than a created one. The plays used their actual surroundings and the events shown in the plays occurred in real-time and place. Thus there was no separation between the real world and the created events. The main principle was that the performers and the spectators are part of the same environmental space.

Other major theatre groups include Ridiculous Theatre founded in 1969 by Charles Ludlam and Ontological-Hysteric Theater founded in 1968 by Richard Foreman. Ludlam’s group was involved in the production of queer theatre that was strikingly ironic. The group employed a playful style that openly resisted the conventional and formalised notions of ‘art’, preferring to instead reference popular culture alongside classical literary texts. Thus the group’s plays dissolved the boundaries between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture that is typical of postmodern aesthetics. Foreman’s objective was a representation of an image from an inner world in which his plays are immersions in the mysteries of the non-rational. It was ‘total theatre’ in the sense that there was a union of the elements of the performative, auditory, and visual arts, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and literature for a unique result. Director Robert Wilson’s theatre in the 1980s and 1990s too was highly innovative in style and direction with multimedia productions that transgressed the boundaries of genre, fusing the visual arts, music, dance, drama, and written text. Thus American drama has become increasingly experimental, blurring the boundaries between genres and artistic forms.

18.12 Summing Up

Now that we have come to the end of our study of American Drama it is time for us to recapitulate the mains points:

- There is very little drama worth mentioning until the end of the nineteenth century.

- The three great dramatists with whom American Drama came of age were Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller.
- O'Neill wrote melodramatic and realistic-tragic plays based on American characters and American ways of life. He was influenced by European drama.
- Williams and Miller showed the downside of American capitalism and that the American Dream, fostered by capitalism was the cause of pain and suffering.
- Edward Albee is perhaps the only 'absurd' playwright in America. In his plays Albee questioned the national identity and critiqued the nation's abiding philosophy, showing the emptiness in American that causes many people to be alienated.
- With the advent of the 1960s, American drama became more experimental in style and radical in theme. This was the beginning of avant-garde drama.
- Two of the greatest exponents of this new kind of drama were Sam Shepard and David Mamet.
- Drama based on identity became very important.
- Identities that were represented on stage were marginalised people like the African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Chicanos, the LGBTQ community and women.
- These dramas critiqued the Anglo-patriarchal values that were dominant in America.
- Besides individual playwrights, experimental theatre groups performed plays that were very radically thematically and stylistically.

18.13 Comprehension Exercise

Essay Type Questions :

1. Write a note on pre-twentieth-century American drama.
2. Assess Eugene O'Neill as a dramatist.
3. How did Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller contribute to the development of American drama?
4. How does the identity of African-Americans shape American drama?
5. Write a note on American drama based on marginalised identities.
6. Trace the development of avant-garde drama in America.

Medium-length Questions :

1. Compare and contrast Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller as dramatists.
2. Show how Edward Albee's plays are concerned with the American identity.

3. Write brief notes on Sam Shepard and David Mamet.
4. Assess the achievements of African-American female playwrights.
5. Write briefly on any two female American dramatists.
6. Explain the terms 'Broadway', 'Off-Broadway', and 'Off-Off-Broadway'.

Short Questions :

1. Write briefly about two major features of pre-twentieth-century American drama.
2. What is the contribution on Imamu Amiri Baraka to African-American drama?
3. Write briefly about August Wilson as a dramatist.
4. How have Tony Kushner and David Henry Hwang contributed to American drama?
5. What is El Teatro Campesino? What did it do?

18.14 Suggested Reading

1. Bigsby, C.W.E. *Modern American Drama, 1945 – 2000*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
2. Bloom, Harold. *Modern American Drama*. Chelsea House Publishers, 2005.
3. Bryer, Jackson R. and Mary C. Hartig. *The Facts on File Companion to American Drama*. Infobase Publishing, 2010.
4. Richards, Jeffrey H. and Heather S. Nathans. *The Oxford Handbook of American Drama*. Oxford University Press, 2014.
5. Saddik, Annette J. *Contemporary American Drama*. Edinburgh University Press, 2007.
6. Smith, Susan Harris. *American Drama: The Bastard Art*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Unit 19 □ Tennessee Williams: *The Glass Menagerie*

Structure

- 19.1 Objectives**
- 19.2 Introduction**
- 19.3 Tennessee Williams: A Short Biography**
- 19.4 Tennessee Williams: The Playwright**
- 19.5 The Glass Menagerie: The Story**
- 19.6 About the Play**
- 19.7 Characters**
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- 19.9 The Motifs**
- 19.10 Stylistic Features**
- 19.11 Summing Up**
- 19.12 Comprehension Exercises**
- 19.13 Suggested Reading**

19.1 Objectives

This Unit intends to acquaint you with Tennessee Williams, one of the great American dramatists of the twentieth century. It seeks to do this through his representative play *The Glass Menagerie* which is a moving account of American family and social life in the twentieth century. It aims to explain the dramatist's insight into human relations through a discussion of characters, themes, motifs and stylistic features.

19.2 Introduction

You have already been introduced to the American playwright Tennessee Williams in Module 6 Unit 22. Read the relevant section again before you get further in this unit. Tennessee Williams is considered to be among the greatest American playwrights and one of the three classical American playwrights, along with Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller, who brought international attention on American drama. The play we are going to study in

this unit – *The Glass Menagerie* – is one of the finest and most important plays written by Williams. In this unit, we will study the various aspects of the play: the characters, themes, motifs, and stylistic features.

19.3 Tennessee Williams: A Short Biography

Tennessee Williams (1911 – 1983) was born Thomas Lanier Williams in Columbus, Mississippi, the United States of America. Tom was a shy, hesitant, reclusive, and bookish boy. It was later living in Clarksdale, Mississippi, that Williams' intelligence shone in the classroom. Williams' career as a professional writer began at the age of sixteen in 1927. He wrote his first play *Beauty is the Word* in 1930 while studying journalism at the University of Missouri in Columbia. In 1932 Williams went to live in St. Louis, Missouri and worked at the International Shoe Company there for three years, writing poems and short stories at night. Suffering from the rigours of the monotonous work at the warehouse Williams had a breakdown for which he stopped work and moved to live with his grandparents at Memphis, Tennessee. Here he met their neighbour who was the director of a small informal theatre group. This chance meeting ignited in him the obsession to write plays that lived through his life. Williams' biographer Lyle Leverich puts it aptly in the book *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*: "Tennessee Williams was, first to last, our foremost poet-playwright. He gave up only when death intervened." Williams took a course in playwriting at the University of Iowa which sharpened him as a playwright.

19.4 Tennessee Williams: The Playwright

Tennessee Williams started writing plays when he was nineteen years old. After his first play in 1930, he went on to write *Hot Milk at Three in the Morning* the following fall, a play about an angry young man trapped in a marriage with an infant child and a sick wife. Some years later, he would rewrite it as *Moony's Kid Don't Cry* (1936). In 1936 Williams wrote *The Magic Tower*, a play about a young couple who decide to live in isolation to preserve the romantic quality of their marriage to discover after a year that the thrill is gone. It brought Williams to the notice of Willard Holland, the director of the theatre company called the Mummers. Williams' wrote *Candles to the Sun* for the Mummers that premiered in 1937. It was Williams' first full-length play, a Marxist melodrama set in the Alabama coalfields and featuring strong female characters who are the wives and widows of the miners. Williams' second full-length play, *Fugitive Kind*, was produced by the Mummers

the same year and was a critical failure. Set in a St. Louis flophouse, the play depicted the social ills of the depression.

While studying at the University of Iowa, Williams wrote *Spring Storm* (1938). It is about four unmarried young people in their twenties, living in a Mississippi Delta town in 1937, whose romantic lives intertwine, crossing over class boundaries and cultural taboos. This is the first play in which one can hear the authentic voice of Tennessee Williams. Williams' next full-length play, *Not About Nightingales* (1938), was inspired by a sensational news story that year describing an incident in a Pennsylvania prison in which striking inmates were killed. It depicts the misery of people caged like animals and determined to escape. This was the play in which Williams for the first time abandoned sentimentalism. Gradually he turned into the poet-playwright of the dispossessed people but concentrating more on forlorn, abandoned individuals rather than groups like hobos, miners, and prisoners.

In 1939 Williams went to New York and saw Broadway plays. He wrote the full-length play *Battle of Angels* (1940), which never reached Broadway but would later be rewritten as the famous *Orpheus Descending*. His first Broadway play was *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) which has been acclaimed as a masterpiece. It is memory play written in the realistic mode with expressionistic undertones. Set in the backdrop of the misery of the Depression and economic misery of America, it is a play about sadness, guilt, and love. Following this, Williams wrote eleven plays over seventeen years. These plays include classics like *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). Both plays received the Pulitzer Prize. This string of notable dramatic work ends with *The Night of the Iguana* (1961). In this phase, he also wrote *Summer and Smoke* (1948), *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), *Camino Real* (1953), and *Orpheus Descending* (1957).

19.5 The Glass Menagerie: The Story

We will now concentrate on *The Glass Menagerie* specifically. The action is presented as a reminiscence of Tom Wingfield, a merchant seaman during the Second World War. Tom remembers his home life at a dingy apartment in St. Louis, Missouri some years ago. He tells us that his mother Amanda Wingfield was deserted by her husband, Tom's father, many years ago. The action goes into a flashback in which we see that Amanda keeps the house for Tom and her gawky and crippled twenty-four-year-old daughter Laura. Amanda likes to live in a dream world in which she imagines a past in which she was wooed by a rich plantation owner in Southern USA.

Though a survivor and a pragmatist, Amanda dreams of the comforts and luxuries of life she once was fated to have but never had. She is furious with her daughter when she

discovers that Laura has dropped out of secretarial school where she was doing a secretarial course. She is worried about her daughter's future as, instead of trying to find a husband, Laura spends most of her time tending her menagerie of glass animals.

Tom works in a shoe warehouse and writes poems. He dreams of becoming a poet and is frustrated by the banality of his life. Bored with his life, Tom finds escape by going to the movies, even at all hours of the night. He has a row with his domineering mother in which some of the glass animals are broken. But Tom agrees to see whether he can get at the warehouse a suitable boy to bring home for Laura.

Tom one day brings a 'gentleman caller', Jim O'Connor for Laura. Amanda is excited and dresses in a girlish fashion. Laura, an introvert who has a congenital fear of the outside world, is horrified to recognize Jim as the boy on whom she had a crush in high school. But Jim normalizes the situation. They share some moments of intimacy, and even dance together and kiss that causes a glass unicorn's horn to get broken off. Eventually, Jim confesses to Laura that he is already engaged. Laura's hopes of getting the 'gentleman caller' as a husband are dashed. Tom is unable to handle the pressure of life at home and abandons his family, like his father, and goes to the sea. But he cannot forget his unfortunate sister.

19.6 About the Play

Tennessee Williams' personal life and experiences have been the direct subject matter for his dramas. He uses his experiences to universalize them through the means of the stage. This is the case with *The Glass Menagerie*. The play is a bitter-sweet recollection of Williams' own youth. His own experiences at the shoe company and his relationship with his sister have formed two vital ingredients in the play. The poet Tom, his frustrations of work, and his love for his sister Laura can be related to Williams' own life. Remember Tennessee Williams' actual name was Thomas. Thus, *The Glass Menagerie*, to a large extent was biographical.

Rose, Williams' elder sister was the model for Laura Wingfield. Rose began to cease to develop as a person and failed to cross over the barrier from childhood to adulthood as is shown in Laura. She, like Laura, began to live in her own world of glass ornaments. Eventually, she had to be placed in an institution. The description of Laura's room is also a description of his sister's room. Laura's desire to lose herself from the world was a characteristic of Williams' own sister. And both were seen by Williams as shy, quiet, and reclusive, but lovely girls who were not able to cope with the modern world. Williams had used his early life in most of his plays: his favourite setting is Southern America, with

Southern characters. In *Laura and Amanda*, we find very close echoes to Williams' own mother and sister. In *Tom Wingfield*, we see the personal struggles and aspirations of the writer himself.

The Glass Menagerie may be classified as a tragedy based on a family drama. The play is laden with pathos and the action leads to the destruction of the struggling Wingfield family. This story is narrated by Tom as he remembers the past. Thus, this is a memory play. The tone of the play is tragic, bleak, and sometimes sardonic.

The setting of the play is "an alley in St. Louis." The time is the present, around the mid-1940s when the play was written and first produced. From this present, Tom looks back to the past when he lived with his mother and sister. Thus the time is "now and the past." The play is narrated by Tom Wingfield and so the action plays in his memory. Therefore the play goes beyond the conventions of stage realism and employs expressionistic and unconventional techniques. Tom is a homodiegetic narrator who both narrates and participates in the play. The point of view of the older Tom is reflective. The younger Tom is impulsive and angry. The action sometimes consists of events that Tom does not witness; at these points, the play goes beyond simply describing events from Tom's own memory. The scenes of dialogue in *The Glass Menagerie* are generally naturalistic. But Williams makes use of the narrator's recollections and reflections, mimed action, cutaway sets, atmospheric music, lighting, and the symbolism of the fragile glass animals, reflecting the theme of illusion and reality in the dreams and aspirations of the family.

Tom remembers that, in their own ways, each of the Wingfields struggled against the hopelessness that threatened their lives. Tom's fear of working in a dead-end job for decades drove him to work hard creating poetry, which he found more fulfilling. He also went to the movies which were modes of escape from life's drudgeries. Amanda's disappointment at the fading of her glory motivated her attempts to make her daughter, Laura, more popular and social. Laura's extreme fear of seeing Jim O'Connor revealed her underlying concern about her physical appearance and about her inability to integrate herself successfully into society.

19.7 Characters

1. Amanda Wingfield

Amanda is Laura and Tom's mother. She is a proud, vivacious woman. The abiding feature of her character is that she clings fervently to memories of a vanished, genteel past. She is simultaneously admirable, charming, pitiable, and laughable. If

there is a signature character type that marks Tennessee Williams' dramatic work, it is undeniably that of the faded Southern belle that Amanda is a representative of. Typical of a Tennessee Williams faded belle, Amanda belongs to a prominent Southern family, has received a traditional upbringing, and has suffered a reversal of economic and social fortune. Like other Southern faded belles, Amanda has a hard time coming to terms with her new status in society, and indeed, with modern society in general, which disregards the social distinctions that such belles were taught to value. Their relationships with men and their families are turbulent, and they staunchly defend the values of their past. So, like the other Southern belles Williams portrays, Amanda's clinging to genteel manners in very ungentle surroundings appears both tragic and comic and sometimes grotesque.

Amanda is the play's most extroverted and theatrical character. Her nagging of Tom and her refusal to see Laura for who she really is are certainly reprehensible. These arise from her inability to adjust to the world that she simply does not belong to. But Amanda also reveals a willingness to sacrifice for her loved ones that is in many ways unparalleled in the play. She subjects herself to the humiliating drudgery of newspaper subscription sales to enhance Laura's marriage prospects, without ever uttering a word of complaint. Thus, Amanda is not an evil character but a deeply flawed woman.

Like her children, Amanda withdraws from reality into fantasy. She lives in a world that fluctuates between illusion and reality. When it is convenient to her, she simply closes her eyes to the brutal, realistic world. She uses various escape routes to endure her present position in life. When life in this tenement world becomes unbearable, she recalls the days of her youth when she lived at Blue Mountain and had seventeen gentlemen callers in one Sunday afternoon.

Amanda is full of paradoxes: she wants only the best for her children, but then she fails to understand that what they most want is quite different from what she wants for them. She does gear her whole life towards their happiness because she does not want them to make the same mistakes that she made. And yet, in devoting herself to them, she has made herself overbearing and nagging.

2. Laura Wingfield

Laura has a bad leg, on which she has to wear a brace, and walks with a limp. She has magnified this limp until it has affected her entire personality. She is painfully shy, has largely withdrawn from the outside world, and devotes herself to old phonograph records and her collection of glass figurines. Her shyness is emphasized even more by being contrasted with Amanda's forceful and almost brutal nature.

Laura's oversensitive nature makes her think that everyone notices her limp; it becomes for her a huge stumbling block to normal living. She cannot get over it and into the real world. Her inability to overcome this defect causes her to withdraw into her world of illusion. The limp then becomes symbolic of Laura's fragile inner nature. She is so nervous that she cannot even attend business school without becoming violently sick. She is frightened and nervous when Tom and Amanda quarrel. She possesses a glass menagerie which she cares for with great tenderness. She has withdrawn from the world, from what is real into what is make-believe.

The physically and emotionally crippled Laura is the only character in the play who never does anything to hurt anyone else. Despite the weight of her own problems, she displays a pure compassion. She sheds tears over Tom's unhappiness. This stands in stark contrast to the selfishness and grudging sacrifices that characterize the Wingfield household.

Laura is the axis around which the plot turns. All the prominent symbols in the play like the blue roses, the glass unicorn, and the entire glass menagerie in some sense represent her. She is as rare and peculiar as a blue rose or a unicorn, and she is as delicate as a glass figurine. Other characters seem to assume that, like a piece of transparent glass, which is colourless until light shines upon it, Laura can take on whatever colour they wish for her. Thus, Amanda uses the contrast between herself and Laura to emphasize the glamour of her own youth and to fuel her hope of recreating that youth through Laura. Both Tom and Jim see Laura as an exotic creature, completely and rather quaintly foreign to the rest of the world. Yet Laura's crush on the high school hero, Jim, is a rather ordinary schoolgirl sentiment. A girl as fragile as Laura could hardly handle the days she spends walking the streets in the cold to avoid going to typing class. Through actions like these, Laura repeatedly displays a will of her own that defies others' perceptions of her, and this repeatedly goes unacknowledged.

3. Tom Wingfield

Tom is an aspiring poet. He works at a shoe warehouse to support his family. He is frustrated by the boredom and numbing routine of his job and escapes from it through movies, literature, and alcohol. Tom is the potentially creative character caught in a conventional and materialistic world from which there presumably is no escape for him.

Tom has his own independent world composed of those things he considered important – his poetry, his dreams, his freedom, his adventure, and his illusions. All these things are in direct opposition to his mother's world. His conflict is between

his world and the real world. He is a realist enough to recognize his sister's plight. He knows that his mother's dreams of gentlemen callers are false. He recognizes that he has no future with the warehouse and he knows that he has to act without pity or else be destroyed. He is thus forced to leave his mother and sister. Without abandoning his family he feels he would be destroyed and consumed by their worlds of illusion, deception, and withdrawal.

Tom has a double role in *The Glass Menagerie*. As a narrator he recollects the past events the play dramatises; as a character, he acts within those recollections. This underlines the play's tension between objectively presented dramatic truth and truth distorted by memory. Unlike the other characters, Tom sometimes addresses the audience directly as he is the narrator, seeking to provide a more detached explanation and assessment of what has been happening onstage. But at the same time, he demonstrates real and sometimes juvenile emotions as he takes part in the play's action as a character. This shows that the nature of recollection is itself problematic: memory often involves confronting a past in which one was less virtuous than one is now.

As a character, Tom is full of contradictions. On the one hand, he reads literature, writes poetry, and dreams of escape, adventure, and higher things of life. On the other hand, he seems inextricably bound to the squalid, petty world of the Wingfield household, suffering from and giving vent to frustrations. He reads D. H. Lawrence and follows political developments in Europe, but the content of his intellectual life is otherwise hard to discern. We have no idea of Tom's opinion on Lawrence, nor do we have any indication of what Tom's poetry is about. All we learn is what he thinks about his mother, his sister, and his warehouse job, precisely the things from which he wants to escape.

Tom's attitude towards Amanda and Laura has puzzled critics. Even though he cares for them, he is frequently indifferent and even cruel towards them. His speech at the close of the play demonstrates his strong feelings for Laura. But he cruelly deserts her and Amanda, and not once in the course of the play does he behave kindly or lovingly towards Laura, not even when he knocks down her glass menagerie.

For years, Tom had sought escape from Amanda's nagging inquisition and commands by attending movies almost nightly. This was his search for adventure. But he was soon to realise that he was watching adventure rather than living it. He realized, also, that the movies and drinking were only momentary psychological escapes. He used movies as a type of adventure to compensate for his own dull life and to

escape from the nagging reminders of his everyday life. He feels he needs to escape from Amanda's domineering instructions as to how to eat, when to eat, what to eat, how to quit smoking, how to improve himself, what to read, and so forth. When she begins confiscating the books which he had brought home, his life becomes almost unbearable.

Finally, when Tom tries to make his mother see that he is different from her, that he is not an exact reproduction of her own ideas, Amanda rejects the things which Tom stands for. Tom contended that "man is by instinct" a lover, a hunter, and a fighter. These are qualities which Amanda's husband possessed that brought misery to the Wingfield family. Amanda refuses to recognize these qualities as decent. Therefore, Tom can recognize his instinctual drives only by leaving home. Tom's rejection of his family is not a selfish, egocentric escape. Instead, Tom recognizes that he must escape to save himself. It is a means of self-preservation. He knows that if he stays, he will be destroyed as a man and as an artist. But as man and artist, and as a sensitive individual, he has never been able to forget his life and especially the delicate charm and loveliness of his sister. Thus, Tom remains the most contradictory character in the play.

4. Jim O'Connor

Jim is an old acquaintance of Tom and Laura. He was a popular athlete in high school and is now a shipping clerk at the shoe warehouse in which Tom works. He is unwaveringly devoted to goals of professional achievement and ideals of personal success. In the character descriptions preceding the play, Jim is described as a "nice, ordinary, young man." He is the emissary from the world of normality.

Jim plays an important role in the climax of the play. Tom tells Amanda that the long-awaited gentleman caller is soon to come. Tom refers to Jim as a plain person, someone over whom there is no need to make a fuss. Jim earns slightly more than does Tom and can in no way be compared to the magnificent gentlemen callers that Amanda used to have. His plainness is seen in his every action. He is interested in sports and does not understand Tom's more illusory ambitions to escape from the warehouse. His conversation shows him to be quite ordinary and plain. Thus, while Jim is the long-awaited gentleman caller, he is not a prize except in Laura's mind.

The ordinariness of Jim's character seems to come to life in his conversation with Laura. But it is contact with the ordinary that Laura needs. Thus it is not surprising that the ordinary seems to Laura to be the essence of magnificence. And since

Laura had known Jim in high school when he was the all-American boy, she could never bring herself to look on him now in any way other than exceptional. He is the one boy in her life that she has had a crush on. He is her ideal.

In the candlelight conversation with Laura, Jim becomes so wrapped up in reliving his own past that he seems once again to think that he is the high school hero who swept the girls off their feet. He becomes so engrossed in the past that he not only breaks Laura's favourite piece of glass, but he also breaks Laura's dreams and hopes. He fails to see what emotions he is building up in Laura. His most accurate description of himself is when he refers to himself as a "stumblejohn".

19.8 The Themes

On a careful reading of *The Glass Menagerie*, several themes will emerge that we will now turn to. Though presented separately, you must remember that they are overlapping themes.

1. The Difficulty of Accepting Reality

Amanda, Tom, and Laura all struggle with the difficulty in accepting and relating to reality. Perhaps Tom and Laura's father abandoned the family also because of this difficulty. Tom tells us, "He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances." Each member of the Wingfield family is unable to overcome this difficulty, and each, as a result, withdraws into a private world of illusion where he or she finds the comfort and meaning that the real world does not seem to offer. So Amanda has the fantasy of the past when she had gentlemen callers; Laura has her glass menagerie, and Tom takes solace in poetry and movies and then runs away like his father.

Of the three Wingfields, Laura has by far the weakest grasp on reality. The private world in which she lives is populated by glass animals. These are objects that, like Laura's inner life, are incredibly fanciful and delicate.

Unlike his sister, Tom is capable of functioning in the real world, as we see in his having a job and talking to strangers. But, in the end, he has no more motivation than Laura to pursue professional success, romantic relationships, or even ordinary friendships, and he prefers to retreat into the fantasies provided by literature and movies and the stupor provided by drunkenness.

Amanda's relationship to reality is the most complicated in the play. Unlike her children, she advocates real-world values and longs for social and financial success. Yet her attachment to these values is exactly what prevents her from perceiving several truths about her life. She cannot accept that she is or should be anything

other than the pampered belle she was brought up to be in the South, that Laura is peculiar, that Tom is not a budding businessman, and that she might be in some ways responsible for the sorrows and flaws of her children. Amanda's retreat into illusion is in many ways more pathetic than her children's because it is not a willful imaginative construction but a wistful distortion of reality.

Although the Wingfields are distinguished and bound together by the weak relationships they maintain with reality, the illusions to which they succumb are not merely familial quirks. The outside world is just as susceptible to illusion as the Wingfields. The young people at the Paradise Dance Hall waltz under the short-lived illusion created by a glass ball – another version of Laura's glass animals. Tom tells Jim that the other viewers at the movies he attends are substituting on-screen adventure for real-life adventure, finding fulfilment in illusion rather than real life. Even Jim, who represents the "world of reality," is banking his future on public speaking and the television and radio industries – all of which are means for the creation of illusions and the persuasion of others that these illusions are true.

2. Abandonment

The plot of *The Glass Menagerie* is structured around a series of abandonments. Tom and Laura's father's desertion of his family determines their life situation; Jim's desertion of Laura is the centre of the play's dramatic action; and Tom's abandonment of his family gives him the distance that allows him to shape their story into a narrative. Each of these acts of desertion proves devastating for those left behind. At the same time, these acts are the necessary conditions for, and a natural result of, inevitable progress. Abandonment is associated with the march of technological progress and the achievements of the modern world. Wingfield, who worked for the telephone company, left his family because he "fell in love with [the] long distances" that the telephone brought into people's consciousness. It is impossible to imagine that Jim, who puts his faith in the future of radio and television, would tie himself to the sealed, static world of Laura who lives only amongst lifeless glass animals. Tom sees his departure as essential to the pursuit of "adventure," his taste for which is whetted by the movies he attends nightly. Only Amanda and Laura, who are devoted to archaic values and old memories and not affected by technological progress, will presumably never assume the role of abandoner and are doomed to be repeatedly abandoned.

3. The Impossibility of True Escape

As Brenda A. Murphy says in the book *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama* edited by David Krasner, "The theme of escape pervades the

play [*The Glass Menagerie*].” At the beginning of Scene Four, Tom regales Laura with an account of a magic show in which the magician managed to escape from a nailed-up coffin. Tom views his life with his family and at the warehouse as a kind of coffin – cramped, suffocating, and morbid – in which he is unfairly confined. The promise of escape, represented by Tom’s missing father, the Merchant Marine Service, and the fire escape outside the apartment, haunts Tom from the beginning of the play, and in the end, he does choose to free himself from the confinement of his life.

The play takes an ambiguous attitude towards the moral implications and even the effectiveness of Tom’s escape. As an able-bodied young man, he is locked into his life not by exterior factors but by emotional ones – by his loyalty to and possibly even love for Laura and Amanda. Escape for Tom means the suppression and denial of these emotions in himself, and it means doing great harm to his mother and sister. The magician is able to emerge from his coffin without upsetting a single nail, but the human nails that bind Tom to his home will certainly be upset by his departure. One cannot say for certain that leaving home even means true escape for Tom. As far as he might wander from home, something still “pursue[s]” him. Like a jailbreak, Tom’s escape leads him not to freedom but the life of a fugitive imprisoned in his memory.

Williams’ characters believe they can escape through their illusions. But they pay heavy prices for their flight. They get lonely as does Tom. Flight, ironically, is painful. The hard reality of life is too unbearable for them. That is why Laura runs away from her secretarial course, much to the chagrin of her mother. The characters refuse to fit into society’s plans and thereby effectively end up being lonely.

4. The Unrelenting Power of Memory

At the beginning of *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom tells us the play is a memory play. The style and content of the play are shaped and inspired by memory. As Tom himself states clearly, the play’s lack of realism, its high drama, its overblown and too-perfect symbolism, and even its frequent use of music are all due to its origins in memory. As a play drawn from memory, however, it is a product of real experience and hence does not need to drape itself in the conventions of realism to seem real. The creator can cloak his or her true story in unlimited layers of melodrama and metaphors.

The story that the play tells us is told because of the inflexible grip it has on the narrator’s memory. Thus, the fact that the play exists at all is a testament to the power that memory can exert on people’s lives and consciousness. Indeed, Williams

writes in the Production Notes that “nostalgia ... is the first condition of the play.” The narrator, Tom, is not the only character haunted by his memories. Amanda too lives in constant pursuit of her bygone youth, and old records from her childhood are almost as important to Laura as her glass animals. For these characters, memory is a crippling force that prevents them from finding happiness in the present or the offerings of the future. But it is also the vital force for Tom, prompting him to the act of creation that culminates in the achievement of the play.

5. The Complexity of Time

The importance of time in *The Glass Menagerie* is highlighted by the device of frame narration. Tom narrates the events of the past. This introduces the different scales of time and several dramatic ironies. Amanda in the present exists on the margins of society, surviving by pandering to those whose support she needs. She takes the humiliating job of selling newspaper subscriptions for a living. This is contrasted to a past that she fondly remembers in which she was at the centre of attention. Laura willfully withdraws into the child-like world of her menagerie. It is sadly ironic as it is a denial of her maturity. Even her “gentleman caller” is momentarily forced to confront the discrepancy between the promise of his high school years and the reality of his present life. His past is recalled by the photograph in a school yearbook. In contrast, he is merely a clerk at the shoe warehouse Tom also works in. Time has broken these people as their fantasies and dreams are denied by the prosaic facts of economic necessity and natural processes.

Laura seeks to escape from this by withdrawing into the timeless world of the imagined and Amanda by retreating into a refashioned past. Only Tom seems to have escaped these ironies. But he has had to pay a price, the price of abandoning those whose lives he had shared. But he has no more escaped that past than have his family. That is why he summons this world into existence as the past continues to exert its power, as the guilt engendered by his abandonment. This guilt of the past pulls him back to those whose sacrifice he had believed to be the necessary price of his freedom. He has exacted the terrible price, but he has not attained the freedom he had aspired for.

6. The Changing Society

In *The Glass Menagerie* Williams shows a world “sick with neon”. It is a society which is based on “Knowledge! ... Money! ... Power!” as Jim O’Connor puts it. The Wingfield family struggles to cope with this world. Amanda, Tom, and Laura seek a world that is either gone or is impossible to attain. Thus the Southern setting in this play, as with many of the other plays of Williams, suggests a culture which

is lost in the past, no longer traceable or recoverable in the present. The South is the mythic setting that does not exist in the present and will never be realised in the future. Modernity has destroyed private illusions and dreams. Public values are measured in terms of money and that has corrupted style and morality. Times have changed. Only in art perhaps that the inexorable march towards the extinction of the mythic past can be momentarily halted. But memory can be recollected only in fragments, partially invented, partially recalled. Thus, memory becomes unreliable as elaborate fictions of the past become the pathetic coping mechanism for Amanda.

7. The Unreliability of Language

In *The Glass Menagerie* Williams has distinguished between the constant flow of chatter from Amanda, a neurotic flood of language with which she seeks to still her fears, and the reticence and finally the silence of her daughter, Laura. In some ways, speech is suspect in the play. The gentleman caller, who disappoints Laura's hope of another life, is learning the art of public speaking, hoping that this will open up a clear path to power. He believes that language will give him control over a life that otherwise seems to be slipping away from him. Thus language is seen as a tool of self-mobilization. However, there is little suggestion in the play that Jim will be able to wield language for his own upward mobility. In a play in which the characters are hopelessly out of sync with one another, the only true moment of contact comes at the end of the play when the final scene between mother and daughter is played out as "through soundproof glass." Her speech stilled, Amanda suddenly has a "dignity and tragic beauty." Her daughter smiles a reply, her stuttering uncertainties calmed. Only the narrator, the poet who summons up this scene, retains access to words, all too aware of their falsity and cruelty.

19.9 The Motifs

Williams has employed several devices and symbols that serve as motifs that highlight the themes and meaning of the play.

1. The Glass Menagerie

As the title of the play informs us, the glass menagerie, or collection of animals, is the play's central symbol. Laura's collection of glass animal figurines represents several facets of her personality. Like the figurines, Laura is delicate, fragile, fanciful, and somehow old-fashioned. Glass is transparent, but, when light is shone upon it, refracts an entire rainbow of colours. Similarly, Laura, though quiet and bland around strangers, is a source of strange, multifaceted delight to those who choose

to look at her in the right light. The menagerie also represents the imaginative world to which Laura devotes herself, a world that is colourful and enticing but based on fragile illusions.

2. The Glass Unicorn

The glass unicorn in Laura's collection represents her peculiarity. As Jim points out, unicorns are "extinct" in modern times and are lonesome as a result of being different from other horses. Laura too is lonely, unusual, and ill-adapted to existence in the world in which she lives. The fate of the unicorn is also a smaller-scale version of Laura's fate in Scene Seven. When Jim dances with and then kisses Laura, the unicorn's horn breaks off, and it becomes just another horse. Jim's advances endow Laura with normalcy, making her seem more like just another girl, but the violence with which this normalcy is thrust upon her means that Laura cannot become normal without being shattered. Eventually, Laura gives Jim the unicorn as a "souvenir." Without its horn, the unicorn is more appropriate for him than for her, and the broken figurine represents all that he has taken from her and destroyed in her.

3. Blue Roses

Like the glass unicorn, "Blue Roses," Jim's high school nickname for Laura, symbolises Laura's unusualness. Yet she is beautiful and alluring. The name is also associated with Laura's attraction to Jim and the joy that his kind treatment brings her. At high school, Jim gave Laura this name because he had misheard the disease Laura was afflicted with – "pleurosis." It signifies the transformation of the diseased into the beautiful. Furthermore, it recalls Williams' sister, Rose, on whom the character of Laura is based.

4. The Fire Escape

Leading out of the Wingfields' apartment is a fire escape with a landing. The fire escape represents exactly what its name implies: an escape from the fires of frustration and dysfunction that rage in the Wingfield household. Laura slips on the fire escape in Scene Four, highlighting her inability to escape from her situation. Tom, on the other hand, frequently steps out onto the landing to smoke, anticipating his eventual getaway.

19.10 Stylistic Features

Like the other plays of Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* is not a naturalistic play. The lives of his characters are shaped by determinisms that the characters resist, and the dreams and

illusions with which they do so are not primarily produced by the physical environment or heredity. In his study of the play in the book *Modern American Drama* edited by Harold Bloom, C.W.E. Bigsby comments that “His [Williams’] characters ... give birth astride the grave and try to make sense of their abandonment.” But, as Bigsby adds, his “characters resist with the only weapons they possess – their imaginations.” Williams’ sense of doom is romantic – filled with romance, nostalgia, dream, and desire. On one side is America’s hard-edged reality, the reality of the American Dream and its failure; on the other is the romantic vision of Williams’ characters. This is the drama of the Wingfields. Amid their failures and dull lives, Amanda has her nostalgia of the past as a sought after Southern belle, Tom has his poetry and movies, and Laura has her glass animals. These two axes require two modes of stylistic representation – naturalism and expressionism.

Theatrically, Williams has dissolved the surface of naturalism whose propositions he denied. What he has created is plastic theatre, fluid, evanescent, and undefined. His style of theatre is an equivalent to that resistance to the given which characterizes his protagonists. Thus the set of *The Glass Menagerie* is to indicate those “vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centres” and which deny a “fundamentally enslaved section of American society ... fluidity and differentiation.” That set does not suggest a social reality that can be modified by political action or radical reform. It is the context for a play that shows the desperate strategies developed by those whose options have run out.

In Tom’s abandoning his family and becoming isolated to become a poet, Williams shows the degree to which art could be said to serve the self, the extent to which the artist removes himself outside the normal processes of social life. Williams’ characters inhabit a linguistic universe which privileges the prosaic, the literal, the unambiguous; but they speak another language. They claim the right to detach words from their literal meanings. They deal in ambivalence, the poetic, the allusive, and the metaphorical. Thus they transcend the natural. Therefore Williams has incorporated elements of plastic theatre that goes beyond the naturalism of social theatre.

Williams’ characters, like Laura, opt out of the great American commercial enterprise. They resist being fit to other people’s plots. They are the lonesome losers. This is theatrically reflected. Sets dissolve, time is made to reverse itself, and stage lighting softens the hard edges of naturalism. The transforming imaginations of his characters find representation in a theatrical style which makes its assertions about the values of both the real and the fictive. Music, for instance, is used often in *The Glass Menagerie*, both to emphasize themes and to enhance the drama. Sometimes the music is extradiegetic – coming from outside the play, not from within it – and though the audience can hear it the characters cannot. For example,

a musical piece entitled 'The Glass Menagerie', written specifically for the play by the composer Paul Bowles, plays when Laura's character or her glass collection comes to the forefront of the action. This piece makes its first appearance at the end of Scene One when Laura notes that Amanda is afraid that her daughter will end up an old maid. Other times, the music comes from inside the diegetic space of the play, that is, it is a part of the action, and the characters can hear it. Examples of this are the music that wafts up from the Paradise Dance Hall and the music Laura plays on her record player. Both the extradiegetic and the diegetic music often provide commentary on what is going on in the play. For example, the Paradise Dance Hall plays a piece entitled 'The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise' while Tom is talking about the approach of World War II.

One of the play's most unique stylistic features is the use of an onstage screen on which words and images relevant to the action are projected. Sometimes the screen is used to emphasize the importance of something referred to by the characters, as when an image of blue roses appears in Scene Two. Sometimes it refers to something from a character's past or fantasy, as when the image of Amanda as a young girl appears in Scene Six.

In framing the action with commentary by Tom, Williams introduces the aesthetic of the 'memory play': "Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic." The play dramatizes Tom's subjective memory of the past. Therefore it is freed from the illusion of objectivity implied by theatrical realism and "can be presented with unusual freedom of convention." With scenic designer Jo Mielziner, Williams found a way to represent the drawing of the audience into Tom's memory scenically by having his opening monologue to the audience delivered in front of a brick wall, which then became transparent, so that the audience could see Amanda and Laura through the wall, and then slowly ascended so that there was no fourth wall between the audience and the characters. The wall was brought down again at the end of the play, becoming blank again when the inside went dark on Tom's final line, "Blow out your candles, Laura – and so goodbye." Thus his theatrical idiom in the play, expressed by its stylistic features, is an expression of the subjective vision of hard reality that he represents on the stage.

19.11 Summing Up

By now we have had a fair idea about the play *The Glass Menagerie*. You must have understood that the play is about an ordinary family living in a city tenement and struggling to cope with the reality of America of the 1940s. The Wingfield family is trapped in this life from which they try to escape in ways that are non-realistic. Tennessee Williams has created a moving play through complex characters and woven into the play several themes

like the desire for escape and abandonment of loved ones, characters caught in time warps, memory and time, and the problems of language, in a society that is fast changing. The playwright has therefore employed in this play theatre techniques that go beyond naturalism.

19.12 Comprehension Exercises

Essay Type Questions :

1. Critically discuss Williams' art of characterization in *The Glass Menagerie*?
2. What are the major themes that Williams deals with in *The Glass Menagerie*?
3. How does Williams interweave reality and illusion in *The Glass Menagerie*?
4. What are the major motifs in *The Glass Menagerie*? What is the significance of these motifs?
5. Critically comment on the stylistic features Williams has employed in *The Glass Menagerie*.
6. What is the significance of the title 'The Glass Menagerie'?

Medium-length Questions :

1. What role does Tom play in *The Glass Menagerie*?
2. Sketch the complexities in the character of Amanda.
3. How does Williams sketch the character of Laura?
4. Write a note on the major symbols in the play.
5. Discuss *The Glass Menagerie* as a play that combines realistic and non-realistic elements.

Short Questions :

1. Show how Tom the narrator and Tom the character are different.
2. Underline two contrasting features in Amanda's character.
3. Point out two major features in the character of Laura.
4. Show how Laura and Jim are incompatible as husband and wife.
5. Show two ways in which the characters are influenced by technological progress.
6. What is the role of Southern America in the life of Amanda?
7. Show two ways Williams has used music in *The Glass Menagerie*.
8. Point out two features of plastic theatre in *The Glass Menagerie*.
9. What is the purpose of the fire escape?
10. What symbolic significance does the breaking of the glass unicorn have?

19.13 Suggested Reading

1. Bloom, Harold (ed.). *Tennessee Williams*. Chelsea House Publishers, 2003.
2. Bloom, Harold (ed.). *Tennessee Williams's The Glass Menagerie*. Chelsea House Publishers, 2007.
3. Bloom, Harold (ed.). *Tennessee Williams*. Infobase Publishing, 2007.
4. Heintzleman, Greta and Alycia Smith-Howard. *Critical Companion to Tennessee Williams: A Literary Reference to his Life and Work*. Facts on File Inc., 2005.
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7. Roudané, Michael C. *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.
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Unit 20 □ Arthur Miller: *A View from the Bridge*

Structure

- 20.1 Objectives**
- 20.2 Introduction**
- 20.3 Arthur Miller: A Short Biography**
- 20.4 Arthur Miller: The Playwright**
- 20.5 A View from the Bridge: The Story**
- 20.6 About the Play**
- 20.7 Characters**
- 20.8 The Themes**
- 20.9 The Motifs**
- 20.10 As a Tragedy**
- 20.11 Summing Up**
- 20.12 Comprehension Exercises**
- 20.13 Suggested Reading**

20.1 Objectives

The objectives of this Unit is to take off from the two preceding Units in which you have been provided with an overview of American drama followed by a discussion on one of Tennessee Williams' seminal plays. This Unit seeks to extend your knowledge by further acquainting you with the dramatic contribution of another contemporary playwright namely Arthur Miller whose sympathetic portrayals of less-fortunate people in various trying situations has struck a chord with readers and theatre-goers. It further aims to enhance your knowledge about American society and dramatic art through its examination of the themes of individual-community relations and illicit desire in a tragedy about an ordinary man explored in the play *A View from the Bridge*.

20.2 Introduction

Along with Tennessee Williams, you have got a glimpse of another outstanding playwright and Williams' contemporary, Arthur Miller, in Module 6 Unit 22. Read that section again and then read this Unit. Here you will study one of Miller's most important plays *A View from the Bridge*. In this unit, you will study the various aspects of the play: the characters, themes, motifs, and the play as a tragedy. There will be a section devoted to a set of questions of varying length: long answer, middle-length answers, and short answer type. In the end, you will get a reading list for you to refer to for further study on the play.

20.3 Arthur Miller: A Short Biography

Arthur Asher Miller (1915 – 2005) was born into a Jewish-American family in New York City. He was born into financially comfortable circumstances. But, when Miller was a boy, his father failed in his garment business and the family got into financial constraints. This was the time when the Great Depression in American economy had started that shaped his ideology. He turned away from the glitter of American capitalism in favour of socialism and harboured life-long sympathy for the more unfortunate people in the American society who were victims of circumstances beyond their control. On entering the University of Michigan in 1934, Miller wrote his first play. After graduating from the university with a degree in English, Miller briefly worked for the Federal Theatre Project. Miller's first New York play, *The Man Who Had All the Luck* (1944), was both a critical and commercial failure. After that, he wrote a novel. He was on the verge of giving up writing plays when he decided to give playwriting a last shot. He came up with *All My Sons* (1947) which brought him success. Thereafter, Miller had a long and illustrious career as a playwright.

20.4 Arthur Miller: The Playwright

Arthur Miller first tasted success on stage with his play *All My Sons*. It is a postwar drama about the individual's responsibility towards the common good of society in the context of moral laxity and corruption that man falls into to make money. The play got Miller his first New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. *Death of a Salesman* (1949) was more successful than the previous one. For this play, he won the Tony Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and another New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. *Death of a Salesman* brought Miller the reputation of being a formidable playwright. The play is about a salesman who harbours

the illusion of success for himself and his sons through his entire life but eventually fails to attain any semblance of success and consequently commits suicide.

***The Crucible* (1953)** is a fictionalized history play set during the 1692 Salem witch trials in Massachusetts. The witch-hunting at Salem was seen by Miller as analogous to the communist witch-hunting by the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) under the leadership of Senator Joseph McCarthy. Miller himself was subject to communist persecution and was asked to name communist sympathizers in America. *The Crucible* is a powerful piece of human drama. *A View from the Bridge* (1956) won Miller another New York Drama Critics' Circle Award. Set at the Brooklyn waterfront, this play shows the tragedy of a common man in the context of illegal immigration of Italians in America. In this play, Miller brought the issue of naming names that he himself faced from the HUAC. The play was originally written as a one-act play, *A View from a Bridge*, and produced along with another one-act play, *A Memory of Two Mondays*, set in a Manhattan warehouse. *A Memory* is also a tragedy.

In 1961 Miller wrote the screenplay for a movie, *The Misfits*, based on a story he had written. His play *After the Fall* (1964) portrays a man between his second and third marriages. In this play Miller shows that a man is not the product of his past but of the choices he makes in the present based on the experiences of his past. The same year came another play by Miller, *Incident at Vichy* (1964) that presents the conflict between Jews and the Nazis. *The Price* (1968) is about the conflict and resentment between two brothers as they come to terms with their father's death and the respective choices they make. Miller's next two plays, *The Creation of the World and Other Business* (1972) and *The American Clock* (1980), failed. Miller later found greater success in London than in New York as with *The Archbishop's Ceiling* (1986), produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company, the two one-acts, *I Can't Remember Anything* and *Clara*, collected as *Danger: Memory!* (1987), and *The Ride down Mount Morgan* (1991).

***Broken Glass* (1994)** deals with the toll that social injustice takes on an individual. The play shows the Nazi persecution of Jews. *Mr. Peters' Connection* (2000) is set in an abandoned nightclub and mixes fantasy with confession. *Resurrection Blues* (2002) takes place in a fictional South American country, where injustice causes maldistribution of wealth. Miller is known for having created 'modern tragedy' and has written essays in which he has theorized on and justified modern tragedy of the common man. C.W.E. Bigsby in his book *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama: Volume Two* has said that Miller "touched a nerve of the [American] national consciousness" by "engag[ing] the anxieties and fears, the myths

and dreams, of a people desperate to believe in a freedom for which they see ever less evidence.” Though Miller’s plays are American in theme, they have been well received in other countries as well.

20.5 A View from the Bridge: The Story

After two brief introductory sections on Arthur Miller, it is time for us to study the play *A View from the Bridge* in greater detail. Eddie Carbone, a forty-year-old longshoreman, lives with his wife Beatrice and his pretty, orphaned niece, daughter of Beatrice’s sister, Catherine. They live in an apartment overlooking Brooklyn Bridge. Catherine is a teenager who has learned stenography and wishes to take up a stenographer’s job. Eddie, her uncle, gives permission reluctantly. Eddie becomes unnecessarily edgy about Catherine when two illegal Italian immigrants, cousins of Beatrice, Marco and Rodolpho come to live in their apartment.

Marco is serious-minded, intent on finding a job so that he can regularly send remittances to his family in Sicily. Rodolpho is good looking, blond that is unusual for a Sicilian, and light-headed. Catherine is attracted to Rodolpho, and Eddie, jealous about their growing romantic relationship tries to be an impediment by implying that Rodolpho is homosexual and that he wants to marry Catherine to obtain an American passport. Eddie catches Rodolpho emerging from Catherine’s bedroom and orders him to leave the house. Catherine insists on leaving the house with Rodolpho which prompts Eddie to call the Immigration Bureau to get the two brothers arrested. This is a breach of the Italian code of honour.

Marco spits at Eddie and denounces him. When Marco is allowed to get out of jail on bail to attend the wedding of Rodolpho and Catherine, Eddie, who is now shunned by his neighbours, threatens him with a knife. They fight in front of Eddie’s family and the neighbours and Eddie is killed. The lawyer Alfieri, Eddie’s neighbour who has commented on the events of the play throughout the play, cannot help admiring Eddie’s passion.

20.6 About the Play

After the brief outline of the story of the play, some aspects of the play need to be highlighted. Miller wrote *A View from the Bridge* originally as a one-act play, much of it written in free verse. Later he expanded it into a full-length, two-act play in prose. In the Introduction to the second version Miller comments on the source of the play, “I had known the story of *A View from the Bridge* for a long time. A water-front worker who had known Eddie’s prototype told it to me.” In his autobiography *Timebends*, Miller tells

us of his interest in the Brooklyn waterfront and his relationship with Vincent James 'Vinny' Longhi. Longhi and Longhi's friend, Mitch Berenson sought Miller's help to publicise and keep alive the work of Pete Panto, a young longshoreman who had earned a gangland execution for attempting to foment a revolt against the union leadership of Joseph Ryan, the corrupt and Mafia-affiliated head of the International Longshoremen's Association. With Longhi and Berenson as his guides, Miller entered the dark, dangerous, corrupt world of Red Hook, the largely Italian, Brooklyn waterfront neighbourhood. From this experience and from a Longhi anecdote the story and atmosphere of *A View from the Bridge* were born. Miller also undertook a trip to Italy from which comes the description of life in Sicily as narrated by the Marco and Rodolpho.

In transforming the verse play into a prose play, Miller mostly switched the same words from the verse form to the prose form. But he changed many of the speeches of Alfieri to give them a more down-to-earth feel. The two-act prose version mostly sticks to the plot of the original, though some aspects of the original were dropped like the two children of Eddie and many of the poetic images. In the second version, Miller emphasises certain aspects that were missing in the original like Eddie's impotence with his wife Beatrice and the Carbones' interactions with their neighbors. The transformation from the shorter play to the longer was a major shift in the meaning of the play. The original had a universal-mythic quality that became more realistic with emphasis on social and psychological realism in the second version. That is why in the revised version Eddie dies in the arms of Beatrice whereas in the original he dies in the arms of Catherine, kissing her. The second version is a more polished work in which Miller gave greater importance to the female characters and made Eddie more sympathetic.

The play is set underneath the Brooklyn Bridge at Brooklyn, New York City, in the 1950s. The neighborhood portrayed in the play is that of Italian-Americans. The set highlights the fact that it is an ordinary people's neighborhood. The play represents Miller's attempt to recapture the power and spirit of Greek tragedy in a modern setting. It dramatizes the destruction of a man obsessively, and inappropriately, in love with his niece, Catherine. Like Willy Loman from *Death of a Salesman*, Eddie is self-delusional, but, as the chorus-equivalent Alfieri says, Eddie's total, if misguided, commitment to his incestuous feelings for his niece raises him above "all my sensible clients." Alfieri is the homodiegetic narrator of the play, narrating the story and also participating in the action as a character. He serves the purpose equivalent to the chorus in Greek tragedies. He narrates and comments on the actions and behaviour of Eddie like the chorus in Greek tragedy. He also reflects the morals of his society.

20.7 Characters

1. Eddie Carbone

Eddie Carbone is a forty-year-old longshoreman working on the Brooklyn docks. Married to Beatrice, he and his wife took in their niece Catherine after she was orphaned. Eddie is driven by forces entirely internal. He is inflexible and refuses to set himself aside from his chosen course though it leads him to destruction. Eddie dies insisting that he has done nothing wrong, even though his inappropriate desires for his niece and his betrayal of his wife's cousins to the Immigration Bureau are apparent to all. Eddie is so obdurate that he refuses to see things from others' perspectives. Such a refusal is not enough to save him, though it does make him more sympathetic. He intends to save Catherine from Rodolpho which is praiseworthy but stupid because she is not in danger from Rodolpho. Eddie is driven more by his passion for Catherine than by true concern for her. Eddie's strong headedness leads to his own demise. He knows that informing is wrong, and he knows that his love for Catherine is wrong, yet he cannot help himself.

Eddie is overprotective of Catherine. He would like her to remain a beautiful, innocent Madonna who is pure and untouched, but her emergence into womanhood is something that he cannot prevent. This makes him insecure. He has problems with Catherine wearing short skirts and going out to work. He intends to keep her a child so that he can free himself of his sexual attraction towards her. He is shy with Catherine; his guilt grows as he gets increasingly petulant, develops his resentment as a result, but never consciously admits to his feelings for her.

Eddie casts doubts on Rodolpho's manhood. He plays up the homosexual stereotype by mocking Rodolpho's singing, cooking, and dressmaking skills. This is because he has to feel secure in the face of the threat he perceives from Rodolpho. As he tries to convince others, it seems more and more clear that he is just trying to convince himself. His charges against Rodolpho are baseless and Alfieri tells him so. But he clings on to them. His charge that Rodolpho is courting Catherine for a green card is potentially more convincing and even makes Catherine wonder, but it is just another excuse to avoid the real issue: his attraction for the girl. He offers Catherine more freedom towards the end in the hopes that he can persuade her not to leave, but he has left it too late. His guilt at his betrayal of Beatrice's cousins and his failure to hold onto Catherine lead him to face Marco in what is a virtual act of suicide. Much of the power of Eddie as a tragic figure is that, unlike a Shakespearean hero, he is neither a reflective nor an articulate character. He does not quite understand

what is happening to him, nor is quite capable of expressing himself clearly. Incapable of speaking openly about sexuality he is nonetheless tormented by his failed masculinity, his impotence in the marriage bed. He is beset by incestuous passion, a love that dare not speak its name, a love he cannot and dare not recognise or realise. Beatrice intuitively senses what is happening to Eddie. Alfieri and the audience understand it more clearly. He is suffering from an incestuous desire. But Eddie's ignorance or willed ignorance creates dramatic irony and complexity that is central to the tragic richness of the play. This makes Eddie a tragic protagonist.

2. Beatrice Carbone

Beatrice is a good woman, and she has been very patient with her husband, Eddie. She tries to keep the peace at home and often acts as a buffer between Eddie and Catherine. She is sympathetic towards both Eddie and Catherine. Beatrice is a compassionate woman. She helps people without a thought. So she looks after her niece Catherine as her daughter and takes in her immigrant cousins. She is upset at her husband's lack of sexual attention. She sees the cause and even confronts him with it: "You want somethin' else, Eddie, and you can never have her." She wants Eddie back, yet she will not throw Catherine out. She is fair to both sides as she loves both. She talks to Catherine and tries to make her niece see the effect she is having on Eddie, warning her to think more carefully about how she acts. She even refuses to wholly blame Eddie for what happens, accepting partial responsibility herself, defending him against Catherine's scorn: "Whatever happened we all done it."

3. Catherine

Catherine's mother was Beatrice's sister. When she died, Beatrice and Eddie brought their niece to live with them. Catherine seems naive and initially responds to events very childishly. This is an aspect of her character that Eddie encourages as in some ways he would like to keep her a child and so unobtainable both for himself and others. He likes to think of her as a Madonna, inviolate and untouchable. Yet, she tells Rodolpho that she knows more than they think.

Though a sweet and soft girl, Catherine can be rebellious as when she insists on wearing high heels and short skirts despite Eddie's opposition. Catherine is ready to grow, but she is too timid to assert herself fully. Catherine loves Eddie but gradually distances herself from him in the face of her growing love for Rodolpho and Eddie's opposition to this relationship. On witnessing Eddie's violent and abusive reaction on his finding Catherine and Rodolpho together in a room, she breaks away entirely, reacting with both fear and disgust. By the end, she is calling him a

“rat”, but she still cares enough to try to prevent his conflict with Marco. Thus Catherine changes and grows as a character.

4. Marco

Marco is the older of the brothers and the more serious and cautious. He keeps the younger and more excitable Rodolpho under control. He understands the predicament they are in as illegal immigrants in America and fully understands they have to live and work in America surreptitiously to support his impoverished family in Sicily, Italy. Marco's values are graven on stone. For him, the honour of himself and his family comes before anything else. Marco is politely formal and carefully observes everything; he dislikes imposing on others and is very concerned about not appearing ungrateful in any way. There is a palpable strength in Marco despite his quietness, and he is not a man to cross though he is a quiet man. Seeing how Eddie tries to belittle his brother, Marco calmly defends Rodolpho, warning Eddie off with the minimum of fuss. His ability to lift the chair when Eddie cannot prepares us for who will win their final conflict. Marco's dignity and sense of honour are evidently at stake owing to Eddie's “snitching”, and his condemnation of Eddie is incontestable.

5. Rodolpho

Rodolpho is a contrast to his brother Marco. He is a blond while his brother is dark-haired. Marco is quiet but Rodolpho is voluble and fun-loving. He is a chatterbox full of jokes, dreams, and stories, and readily sings when requested. He has come to the United States to experience everything that he can. He sings the latest songs and buys the latest shoes and the flashiest jacket. He wants to stay as he has no responsibilities back in Italy. He is naively excited by the possibilities on offer in the United States. He has come to America with shallow ideas of the American Dream of material success. Catherine is instantly attracted to his lightness of spirit, emblematised in his hair colour, and friendly nature. But his motives in courting Catherine are suspect as he raises the idea of marriage pretty quickly in their relationship. Eddie's suspicion may not be false after all – he wants to marry Catherine to get American citizenship.

However, like Catherine, Rodolpho also grows in the course of the play. As the play progresses we see a serious side to him. It reminds us of his brother and suggests a possibility of his growth. He faces Catherine's suspicions with quiet dignity and maturely forgives Eddie, even accepting some blame for the way things turn out and quietly asking for pardon. He never returns Eddie's hostility towards him with counter-hostility.

6. Louis, Mike, and Tony

They are Eddie's friends and neighbours and represent the local opinion. They work beside him at the docks and pitch coins or bowl with him in their leisure time. These men begin as close friends of Eddie, admiring him for helping his wife's relatives. Their lives are dominated by the macho bravado that defines their community, the Italian-Americans. So they side with Eddie against Rodolpho as Eddie points out his effeminacy. Yet they have a growing respect for Marco. They turn completely against Eddie, however, as soon as they learn of his betrayal of the two illegal immigrants that violates the code of trust of the Italians. They literally turn their backs on him as he tries to talk to them. They serve as the chorus as in Greek tragedy – a group of minor characters who lead the audience by their reactions to events.

7. Alfieri

Alfieri is an Italian-American lawyer who has set up office in the Red Hook area in Brooklyn. He lives a mundane life dealing with the petty legal squabbles of the neighbourhood. It is he to whom Eddie goes for legal advice on how to get rid of Rodolpho. It is again Alfieri who deals with getting the brothers out on bail after they have been arrested. Born in Italy, he came to America when he was twenty-five when gangsters like Al Capone still ruled the streets. But the times have changed. Alfieri has seen violence in the area lessen over the years, but now in his fifties, he feels a little bored with the banality of his life. He tells us the story of Eddie as a kind of confession of his attraction to a darker, more dangerous kind of existence that he dare not live but can admire in another.

Alfieri is the observer and commentator on the play's action. He directly addresses the audience as a kind of chorus figure. He is only marginally involved in the events, and it is his view that we get as he stands on a metaphorical bridge between the characters and the audience. As a lawyer, he appears to represent the legal system in the play, which we realise has little influence on the events that unfold. As a man, in contrast to the neighbours, Alfieri shows sympathy for Eddie's downfall and offers a more balanced view of the action. It is Alfieri who invests Eddie's story with its mythic resonance despite the play being realistic. He gets Marco out of jail even while knowing that Marco was after Eddie's blood and does nothing to prevent their final confrontation.

20.8 The Themes

1. The Guilt of Breaking Community Law

In *A View from the Bridge*, Miller has portrayed a close-knit community of Italian-Americans in Brooklyn. From the setting, we understand that this is a community of ordinary people in which an ordinary man like Eddie Carbone lives. He lives in a small apartment that is part of a tenement building in which other hardworking longshoremen live. These men work and play together, and go bowling after a hard day's work on the docks. This is a community in which everyone seems to know one another's business, and they are happy to have it that way. In the midst of this community, Eddie stands out owing to his guilty secret. It is so secret that he keeps the truth even from himself. He has an improper desire for his niece. He tells the Immigration Bureau about his wife's relatives, illegal immigrants from Sicily in Italy, so that they will return the relatives to their country. He does this to prevent Rodolpho from taking Catherine from him. He refuses to accept responsibility for his actions. He keeps justifying his irrational efforts of breaking their relationship. This secret guilt drives him towards self-destruction at the hands of Marco.

Eddie understands his responsibilities towards the immigrants as per the community law. But he goes against them because he persuades himself to believe that he is protecting Catherine from Rodolpho who wants to marry her only to get American citizenship. He is, however, unable to convince anybody about his belief and is even told by Alfieri that by no law can he prevent their marriage. He is left with no option but to "snitch". Eddie is driven by his guilt-ridden desire to violate the law of the community and so is guilty of betrayal. Earlier in the play, the family talked about the infamous teenager Vinny Bolzano from the same community who had "snitched ... on his uncle." He was beaten and publicly shamed by his father and brothers for that transgression. Bolzano's story foreshadows what Eddie does later. So he too is shamed by Marco by first spitting on him and then shaming him publicly. Catherine despises him and calls him a "rat". And when Eddie tells Marco, "I want my name," Marco cannot do so as Eddie has violated the law of the Italian community. Like Bolzano, Eddie is publicly shamed. That leads Eddie into the pointless conflict that leads to his death. In a sense, Eddie causes his own death by refusing to accept responsibility for what he has done. His first unspoken and unacknowledged guilt prompts him to commit the second guilt that leads to his death.

2. The Individual Shapes His Destiny

A View from the Bridge shows a clear influence of Greek tragedy. Like Greek tragedies, Miller's play hinges on the issue of fate. Eddie is fated to die, partly because of who he is and partly because of the world in which he lives. As hinted in Alfieri's commentary, Eddie inevitably rushes towards his doom and there is little that can be done to save him. In a sense Eddie's doom is preordained. This is not because destiny is directed by the gods as the ancient Greeks believed, but because people's characters influence in determining their fates. Eddie's character shapes his destiny. Eddie has to pay for his moral transgressions and he cannot get Marco to back down. So Eddie must die a traitor's death. Eddie is, in this sense, responsible for his own destiny as he refuses to accept his incestuous desire for Catherine that makes him violate the law of the community. Failure, in Miller's eyes, therefore rests on the individual's inability to accept his responsibilities and connection to fellow human beings. However, the social system cannot be wholly absolved as a factor in shaping human destiny. It is the moral code of conduct in Eddie's community that he violates that takes him headlong to his death.

3. The Complex Notions of Law and Justice

An important theme in the play is the issue of law and justice. Miller makes a distinction between law and justice – the two are not the same here. Alfieri represents the law, not justice. He tells us of many who were “justly shot by unjust men.” Thus, as Alfieri tells us, the notorious gangster and crime boss, Frankie Yale, “was cut precisely in half by a machine gun on the corner of Union Street, two blocks away.” It was justice delivered by rival gangsters who themselves were violators of the law. Miller, therefore, insists that there is a moral law that does operate successfully and that judges both our individual and our collective actions. This is where thrived the mafia boss Al Capone who, as Carthage challenged the might and rule of law of Rome, challenged the rule of law of mighty America. Thus the law of the land is often shown to be ineffective in Miller's plays, having no power to make the guilty pay for their crimes or to protect the ordinary individual. But, as Alfieri says further, things have settled down in Brooklyn now and the rule of law has been established. That is why, he says, “I no longer keep a pistol in my filing cabinet.” Justice, therefore, is expected to flow from codified law, not from gang wars.

Thus law and justice are complex notions in the play as they have more than one side. But once in a while transgression of law takes place even today in Brooklyn. In Eddie's case, it comes in the form of a community law, not constitutional. Miller sees such a law as fundamental to the growth and development of American culture

and democracy, for without this, we are protected insufficiently against chaos and evil. That is why, as Alfieri tells us, while the institutionalised law can do nothing to restrict or aid Eddie seriously, he pays a heavy price for breaking certain moral restrictions. Eddie's case depicts the chasm between legality and morality because he does nothing illegal. Rather, legally, he is right in informing the Immigration Bureau about illegal immigrants, even when their need to make money is as great as that of Marco who has to finance his impoverished family in Sicily. But the law sometimes is inadequate to gratify an individual. Eddie is worried about whether or not Rodolpho is taking advantage of his niece to get a passport. But legally he cannot prevent Rodolpho from marrying Catherine that frustrates him. To protect his niece, therefore, he takes recourse to one provision of law that he still has access to. In informing about his wife's cousins, Eddie does nothing illegal. However, neither Eddie's lust for Catherine nor his betrayal of Rodolpho and Marco can be defended morally, and for these, he must pay. That is justice. So, first he pays with the loss of his name, and because he will not accept this punishment, he pays with the loss of his life.

4. The Irrational Human Animal

The relationship between Eddie and Catherine lends itself to a psychoanalytical interpretation, as it offers an interesting twist on the classic oedipal complex. Miller mostly keeps their relationship ambiguous. Although there is much evidence in the play that Catherine has stronger feelings for her uncle than may be proper, the focus is on Eddie and his feelings for his niece. The usual oedipal complex has the child desiring the parent or parent figure, and that figure neither reciprocates these feelings nor often even notices them. But in *A View from the Bridge*, it becomes clear that Eddie fiercely desires Catherine, and it is the failure to repress this desire fully that forces him to go so strongly against society's rules and betray the immigrant cousins. His unruly desire for his niece is the fatal flaw in his character that brings about his demise; just like the Greek hero Oedipus, he pays a heavy price for the disruption that his actions bring to his community.

From Eddie's first entrance, we are aware that there is something strained in his relationship with his niece. He is unusually shy and at times awkward with her, especially when she shows affection and behaves in an unwittingly seductive way before him. He is also over-possessive, not wanting her to draw the attention of other males. He rebukes her for the way she walks, the clothes she wears, even for a friendly wave to his friend Louis; he would like to keep her isolated from the rest of the world so that he might have her all to himself. Miller's stage directions

help us to understand that something is wrong with Eddie's reactions, such as the way in which he becomes "strangely nervous" and "somehow sickened" on hearing of Catherine's intention to get a job, and he is "strangely and quickly resentful" of his wife's efforts to make Catherine independent. Eddie does not want Catherine to grow up and escape his influence. Beatrice has noticed how Eddie treats her niece and is annoyed and jealous, but Eddie refuses to recognise any implications behind his treatment of Catherine, seeing it as paternal caution rather than sexual jealousy.

All through the play, Eddie refuses to acknowledge how he feels for Catherine because he knows that such feelings are wrong. He calls her "Madonna" and through this designation keeps her pure and free from association with others, yet also unattainable even to him. But Eddie is so besotted with Catherine that he has not been able to have sex with his wife for the past three months. When Beatrice and Alfieri imply that his feelings for Catherine are too strong, he responds with angry denial. However, the night that he comes home drunk, his guard is down, and in the passionate kiss that he gives his niece, we recognise his true feelings for her. He endlessly tries to justify his distrust of Rodolpho by insisting that the boy is a homosexual and is only dating Catherine to get a passport, but his distrust is only created by Catherine's evident liking for Rodolpho. When Beatrice finally blurts out the truth, "You want somethin' else, Eddie, and you can never have her!" Eddie is shocked and horrified. It is shortly after this that he confronts Marco in his virtual act of suicide as if death were now his only escape from the truth that he has tried so hard to avoid.

5. **Illicit Sexual Desire**

The relationship between Eddie and Catherine offers an interesting twist on the classic oedipal complex, and so lends itself to a psychoanalytical interpretation. There is much evidence in the play that Catherine has strong feelings for her uncle. But the focus is on Eddie's feelings for his niece. The oedipal complex has the child desiring the parent or parent figure, and that figure neither reciprocates these feelings nor often even notices them. But in *A View from the Bridge*, it is the reverse. Eddie is the adoptive parent of Catherine. He and his wife Beatrice had adopted Catherine as a child when her mother died. Eddie cares for Catherine like a father. He repeatedly mentions Catherine's mother but never utters anything on her father that implies he is fully the father-substitute. He loves her and is protective of her like a real father. This is precisely where his problem lies, however. He is over-protective about Catherine and his care seems to transgress the borderline of parental love.

It becomes clear that Eddie desires Catherine. He fails to repress this desire fully that forces him to go strongly against society's rules and betray the immigrant cousins. His unruly desire for his niece, incestuous by its very nature, is the fatal flaw in his character that brings about his demise. Just like the Greek hero, Oedipus who killed his father and married his mother, Eddie, in a way, betrays his own community for his incestuous desire for his adopted daughter and pays a heavy price for the disruption that his actions bring to his family and community.

From Eddie's first entrance, we are aware that there is something strained and strange in his relationship with his niece. He is unusually shy and at times awkward with her. He is also over-possessive, not wanting her to draw the attention of other males. He rebukes her for the way she walks, the short skirt she wears, and even for a friendly wave to his friend Louis. He resents her taking a job at a plumbing company "over Nostrand Avenue ... by the Navy Yard." He does not want her to take the job because, as he says, "I don't like that neighborhood over there." he would like to keep her isolated from the rest of the world. He tells her, "You're getting to be a big girl now, you gotta keep yourself more, you can't be so friendly, kid." Ostensibly, he wants to protect her. But soon we start to doubt his motives – he might desire to have her all to himself. Miller's stage directions help us to understand that something is wrong with Eddie's reactions, such as the way in which he becomes "strangely nervous" and "somehow sickened" on hearing of Catherine's intention to get a job and "strangely and quickly resentful" of his wife's efforts to make Catherine independent. Eddie refuses to recognise, even to himself, any implications of sexual jealousy. He wants everybody to believe he is a protective parent.

All through the play, Eddie refuses to acknowledge how he feels for Catherine because he knows that such feelings are wrong. He calls her "Madonna" and through this designation keeps her pure. Yet this makes Catherine unattainable even to him. But Eddie is so besotted with Catherine that he has not been able to sleep with his wife for the past three months. When Beatrice and Alfieri imply that his feelings for Catherine are too strong, he responds with angry denial. However, the night that he comes home drunk, his guard is down, and in the passionate kiss that he gives his niece, he reveals his true feelings for her. He continuously justifies his distrust of Rodolpho by insisting that the boy is a homosexual and is only dating Catherine to get a passport. He even kisses Rodolpho to prove the latter's homosexuality. But he cannot wean Catherine away from him.

20.9 The Motifs

Let us now turn to the motifs in the play. A motif is an element in a literary work that has thematic significance. It can be an incident, an image, a symbol, an idea, or a character-type. Miller has employed some important motifs that express the themes and meaning of the play.

1. The Brooklyn Bridge

The Brooklyn Bridge resonates with meaning in *A View from the Bridge*. It lends itself to the title. It becomes for Miller a symbol of a span and connection between disparate civilizations. Stretching from ethnic Brooklyn neighborhoods filled with labourers, immigrants, and the children of those immigrants to the cosmopolitan, urbane, Manhattan area settled by New York's original Dutch colonists, the bridge serves as the point of origin for America's connection to the outside world. It stretches from a Brooklyn of social taboos and family and clan allegiances with unwritten communal laws imported from the Old Country to Manhattan's City Hall and courts which stand for social contract in the New World, regulated by codified laws and government institutions. The bridge thus symbolises the bridge between disparate, contrasting cultures that is anthropomorphised in the on-stage figure of the immigrant lawyer Alfieri who practices in Red Hook and tries to explain American legal statutes to men like Eddie Carbone who are reared in the traditions of Sicilian family and communal loyalties, imperatives, and taboos. Alfieri bridges two phases of history – the America where existed tribal means of dispensing justice in the form of gang wars and shootouts and the more sedate America today where the codified law is in operation and the gun is no longer needed.

The bridge is an emblem of Eddie's efforts to bridge and accommodate disparate psychological feelings. He wrestles tragically with very ambivalent feelings and desires. On the one hand, he harbours strong, appropriate, and protective paternal feelings towards Catherine. On the other hand, those feelings threaten to spill over into taboo sexual desire. Eddie is torn between the two. Miller makes this powerfully clear when he shows Eddie's pleasure as Catherine lights his cigar. This is an action of warm and innocent affection between niece and uncle, but of course, it is also one laden with blatant sexual undertones. The cigar is a phallic symbol signifying male virility. But because he is sexually ambivalent, Eddie sexually withdraws from his wife with whom he has not had sex in three months. Eddie does not understand that the cessation of conjugal relations with

his wife is related to his illicit erotic desire for his niece. So, metaphorically, he is trapped on the bridge with nowhere to go.

2. The Madonna Figure

Christians, especially Roman Catholics, call Mother Mary 'Madonna' and deeply revere her in that figure. She is the virgin mother of Jesus Christ and so symbolises a morally pure and chaste woman. It derives from a combination of two Italian words, 'ma' meaning 'my' and 'donna' meaning 'lady'. Thus 'Madonna' is also a respectable way of saying 'my lady'. Eddie constantly calls Catherine "Madonna" that therefore implies a respectable way of addressing her and is a way of sublimating the figure of his niece. However, ironically, calling Catherine "Madonna" is a form of self-sublimation for Eddie who is too afraid to confront his own forbidden desire for her.

Eddie constructs the fiction that Catherine is a virginal Madonna figure. This he does to project her as a mere child in need of his protection. The irony is, he himself believes in this fiction. That is why he objects to her short dress, the way she walks which he calls "wavy", her waving at Louis, and even her taking up a job. He has problems with the neighborhood men ogling her. He is over-protective like a deeply concerned parent. That is why he has a piece of advice for Catherine, "Believe me, Katie, the less you trust, the less you be sorry."

On the surface, this looks normal parental attitude. But deep down, it is fraught with illicit desire. Eddie desperately tries to cover his incestuous drive but fails. This complex attitude comes out when he tells Catherine admiringly, "With your hair that way you look like a Madonna, you know that?" As the play proceeds, the real implication of calling her "Madonna" comes to light. That is why he is enraged when he discovers a post-coital Catherine and Rodolpho. Until this point in the play, Eddie has suppressed his erotic desire for his niece, sublimating his passion into the acceptable behaviour of a concerned parent. Catherine acknowledges the sexual rite of passage she has just undergone, "Eddie, I'm not gonna be a baby anymore!" This ignites Eddie's suppressed desire and his jealousy and anger well up. So "He reaches out suddenly, draws her to him, and as she strives to free herself he kisses her on the mouth." He replaces his usual avuncular kiss with the taboo kiss of an incestuous lover, throwing Catherine's lost virginity in her face by a symbolic act of forceful deflowering.

3. The "Name" of Eddie

This implies the good name, the honour, of a man who is disgraced in his community by informing the Immigration Bureau about the two illegal immigrants from Italy, his

wife's cousins, Marco and Rodolpho. Eddie is caught in ambivalent and complex emotional coordinates. He is unable to extricate himself from the intersection of contradictory passions and motives that he himself does not realise fully. He is the bridge between conscious and unconscious acts, between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Thus Eddie is a bundle of mixed motives and drives. His act of naming names is also morally ambivalent. It is morally acceptable, even desirable, according to the written laws of the country; but it is seen as a betrayal of two members of the community and so a moral infringement of the communal and unwritten law.

Thus his act remains morally ambivalent though in the eyes of his own community he has committed a heinous crime. Eddie knows he has lost his honour, his "name," in his community. He wants his community to believe that he had acted out of a genuine sense of concern for his ward. But nobody believes him. He desperately tries to come out of the status of a pariah by proving Rodolpho a homosexual who has no genuine feelings and intentions about Catherine and that he sees her as merely a ticket to American citizenship. That is why he screams, "I want my name, Marco." Instead of getting his name, he gets the knife that stabs him. As he "falls to his knees before Marco," "The two women support him for a moment, calling his name again and again." Eddie's real name is called out repeatedly, but he does not get back his "name" in the sense of 'honour' that he craves for in his final moments. This is because he is never fully aware of who he is, what motivates him, or what his name should be. In "keening" "Eddie," the women are no more able than Miller's protagonist himself to give a name to him and to his mixture of feelings and drives he embodies.

20.10 As a Tragedy

Miller's imagination was drawn to the Greek theatre, and so he had a penchant for creating tragedies. In the real-life stories that Miller used as his sources, there was a tragic potential. As he wrote in his notebook, "The secret of the Greek drama is the vendetta, the family ties incomprehensible to Englishmen and Americans. But not to Jews. Much that has been interpreted in lofty terms, fate, religion, etc., is only blood and the tribal survival within the family. Red Hook is full of Greek tragedies." Thirty years later he would describe its theme in other terms, locating it against a deepening sense of alienation and anomie: "The much celebrated 'end of ideology,' which some influential ex-Marxists were elaborating, seemed to me to dissolve the very notion of

human destiny. At bottom, people were left to their loneliness, each to himself and for himself, and this compounded the sadness of life ...”

Miller was concerned with the disjunction between desire and fulfillment. This disjunction for him was the irony which he shows in his plays. It is not simply a matter generated by the discrepancies of class or those derived from a desire to read meaning and significance into an existence blankly resistant to interpretation and signification. This disjunction for him was also the disruptive gap between word and act. It implied for him that motives remain opaque even to the individual concerned. But, in the end, Miller’s main concern, here as elsewhere, is to recuperate meaning by offering the tragic consolation of interpretation and signification.

An image which recurs in Miller’s autobiography is that of a bridge across which an anonymous stream of traffic sweeps by “endlessly” and “blind”. At a time when, as he says, “a perpetual night of confusion was descending,” it became an image of the disregard both of the individual and the underlying structure of human experience. Miller’s theatre has been principally concerned with the restoration to the individual a significance quite apart from his social role. This underlines his conviction that personal responsibility remains an unavoidable reality that shapes an individual’s destiny. Public morality, in Miller’s view, stems from private decisions. Eddie Carbone suffers from a fatal illusion about his position in his family and community and thus becomes a perversely compelling figure. This qualifies *A View from the Bridge* as a tragedy quite akin to Greek tragedy. Eddie shares with Oedipus, for example, an obsession that leads him towards self-destruction. Like Greek tragic heroes, Eddie comes to the edge of a kind of madness and is tempted by the sin against nature as with Oedipus, Orestes, and Medea.

What is compelling about Eddie Carbone is his total commitment to a single vision, no matter how tainted that vision may be. As Miller himself has said, “however one might dislike this man, who does all sorts of fearful things, he possesses and exemplifies the wondrous and humane fact that he, too, can be driven to what, in the last analysis, is a sacrifice of himself for his conception, however misguided, of right, dignity and justice.” The figure of the lawyer Alfieri is an equivalent to the chorus in Greek tragedies, commenting on the action but unable to change it. Like the chorus, he advises on good sense which the headstrong Eddie refuses to abide by. Eddie compels attention by the totality of his commitment, his willingness to sacrifice everything to sustain his conception of himself. He tries to gain back his “name” and the knife fight with Marco offers a solution – a form of suicide – to a crisis which could not have been evaded. What, however, Eddie lacks is any sense of tragic self-awareness. What brings Eddie down is primarily the natural order of things and secondarily a social code.

20.11 Summing Up

It is now time for us to conclude. To sum up, *A View from the Bridge* is a tragedy about an ordinary man, an Italian-American longshoreman in Brooklyn, who cannot reconcile his contradictory feelings and motives and so transgresses the moral code of conduct in his community. In writing this play, Miller has created several strong characters that you read about earlier. Besides, there are some important themes that the play deals with like the guilt of breaking the community law, the moral guilt of incestuous desire, the individual shaping his destiny, the irrational nature of human beings, and the complex nature of the notions of law and justice. This unit also tells you of three important motifs that pervade the play: the Brooklyn Bridge that lends the play its title, Catherine as the Madonna-figure, and the honour of a man that Eddie calls his “name”. Finally, you had a section on the play as a tragedy. Now go through the questions below and try answering them.

20.12 Comprehension Exercises

Essay Type Questions :

1. Critically discuss Miller’s art of characterisation in *A View from the Bridge*.
2. What are the major themes that Miller deals with in *A View from the Bridge*? Discuss.
3. What are the major motifs in *A View from the Bridge*? What is the significance of these motifs?
4. Why would you consider *A View from the Bridge* a tragedy? Discuss critically.
5. Do you think Eddie Carbone is a tragic hero? Argue critically.
6. Trace the complex attitudes, feelings, and motives that drive Eddie to his death.
7. Discuss critically the significance of the title of the play *A View from the Bridge*.

Medium-length Questions :

1. Write a note on the relationship between Eddie and Catherine. What is problematic in this relationship?
2. Discuss Eddie’s relationship with his wife Beatrice.
3. Do you think the setting of the play is significant? Discuss.
4. How has Miller portrayed the character of Beatrice?
5. What idea do you form about Marco and Rodolpho?
6. What role does Alfieri play?

Short Questions :

1. What idea of the post-war economic condition of Italy do you form from the play *A View from the Bridge*?
2. What are the two pictures of America Alfieri draws in his first monologue?
3. What purpose do Louis, Mike, and Tony serve in the play?
4. Point out two instances of Eddie's disapproval of Catherine's ways.
5. How does Eddie lose his "name" in his community?
6. Who was Vinny Bolzano? Why is he referred to in the play?
7. Show two ways in which Eddie tries to break up the relationship between Catherine and Rodolpho.
8. Give two reasons why you think society plays an important role in *A View from the Bridge*.
9. Mention two things that the 'bridge' in the title bridges.

20.13 Suggested Reading

1. Abbotson, Susan C.W. *Students Companion to Arthur Miller*. Greenwood Press, 2000.
2. Abbotson, Susan C.W. *Critical Companion to Arthur Miller: A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*. Infobase Publishing, 2007.
3. Bigsby, C.W.E. *Modern American Drama: 1945 – 2000*. Cambridge University Press, 2004.
4. Bigsby, Christopher (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.
5. Bloom, Harold (ed.). *Arthur Miller*. Chelsea House Publishers, 1987.
6. Bryer, Jackson R. and Mary C. Hartig. *The Facts on File Companion to American Drama*. Infobase Publishing, 2010.
7. Corrigan, Robert (ed.). *Arthur Miller: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Prentice-Hall, 1969.
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