



INSTITUTE OF DISTANCE EDUCATION **IDE**  
Rajiv Gandhi University



MAENG-503

# American Literature-I

MA ENGLISH

3rd Semester

Rajiv Gandhi University

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# American Literature I

MAENG503  
III SEMESTER



**RAJIV GANDHI UNIVERSITY**

Arunachal Pradesh, INDIA - 791 112

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#### Author

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## About the University

Rajiv Gandhi University (formerly Arunachal University) is a premier institution for higher education in the state of Arunachal Pradesh and has completed twenty-five years of its existence. Late Smt. Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India, laid the foundation stone of the university on 4th February, 1984 at Rono Hills, where the present campus is located.

Ever since its inception, the university has been trying to achieve excellence and fulfill the objectives as envisaged in the University Act. The university received academic recognition under Section 2(f) from the University Grants Commission on 28th March, 1985 and started functioning from 1st April, 1985. It got financial recognition under section 12-B of the UGC on 25th March, 1994. Since then Rajiv Gandhi University, (then Arunachal University) has carved a niche for itself in the educational scenario of the country following its selection as a University with potential for excellence by a high-level expert committee of the University Grants Commission from among universities in India.

The University was converted into a Central University with effect from 9th April, 2007 as per notification of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India.

The University is located atop Rono Hills on a picturesque tableland of 302 acres overlooking the river Dikrong. It is 6.5 km from the National Highway 52-A and 25 km from Itanagar, the State capital. The campus is linked with the National Highway by the Dikrong bridge.

The teaching and research programmes of the University are designed with a view to play a positive role in the socio-economic and cultural development of the State. The University offers Undergraduate, Post-graduate, M.Phil and Ph.D. programmes. The Department of Education also offers the B.Ed. programme.

There are fifteen colleges affiliated to the University. The University has been extending educational facilities to students from the neighbouring states, particularly Assam. The strength of students in different departments of the University and in affiliated colleges has been steadily increasing.

The faculty members have been actively engaged in research activities with financial support from UGC and other funding agencies. Since inception, a number of proposals on research projects have been sanctioned by various funding agencies to the University. Various departments have organized numerous seminars, workshops and conferences. Many faculty members have participated in national and international conferences and seminars held within the country and abroad. Eminent scholars and distinguished personalities have visited the University and delivered lectures on various disciplines.

The academic year 2000-2001 was a year of consolidation for the University. The switch over from the annual to the semester system took off smoothly and the performance of the students registered a marked improvement. Various syllabi designed by Boards of Post-graduate Studies (BPGS) have been implemented. VSAT facility installed by the ERNET India, New Delhi under the UGC-Infonet program, provides Internet access.

In spite of infrastructural constraints, the University has been maintaining its academic excellence. The University has strictly adhered to the academic calendar, conducted the examinations and declared the results on time. The students from the University have found placements not only in State and Central Government Services, but also in various institutions, industries and organizations. Many students have emerged successful in the National Eligibility Test (NET).

Since inception, the University has made significant progress in teaching, research, innovations in curriculum development and developing infrastructure.

## About IDE

The formal system of higher education in our country is facing the problems of access, limitation of seats, lack of facilities and infrastructure. Academicians from various disciplines opine that it is learning which is more important and not the channel of education. The education through distance mode is an alternative mode of imparting instruction to overcome the problems of access, infrastructure and socio-economic barriers. This will meet the demand for qualitative higher education of millions of people who cannot get admission in the regular system and wish to pursue their education. It also helps interested employed and unemployed men and women to continue with their higher education. Distance education is a distinct approach to impart education to learners who remained away in the space and/or time from the teachers and teaching institutions on account of economic, social and other considerations. Our main aim is to provide higher education opportunities to those who are unable to join regular academic and vocational education programmes in the affiliated colleges of the University and make higher education reach to the doorsteps in rural and geographically remote areas of Arunachal Pradesh in particular and North-eastern part of India in general. In 2008, the Centre for Distance Education has been renamed as "Institute of Distance Education (IDE)."

Continuing the endeavor to expand the learning opportunities for distant learners, IDE has introduced Post Graduate Courses in 5 subjects (Education, English, Hindi, History and Political Science) from the Academic Session 2013-14.

The Institute of Distance Education is housed in the Physical Sciences Faculty Building (first floor) next to the University Library. The University campus is 6 kms from NERIST point on National Highway 52A. The University buses ply to NERIST point regularly.

### **Outstanding Features of Institute of Distance Education:**

(i) At Par with Regular Mode

Eligibility requirements, curricular content, mode of examination and the award of degrees are on par with the colleges affiliated to the Rajiv Gandhi University and the Department(s) of the University.

(ii) Self-Instructional Study Material (SISM)

The students are provided SISM prepared by the Institute and approved by Distance Education Council (DEC), New Delhi. This will be provided at the time of admission at the IDE or its Study Centres. SISM is provided only in English except Hindi subject.

(iii) Contact and Counselling Programme (CCP)

The course curriculum of every programme involves counselling in the form of personal contact programme of duration of approximately 7-15 days. The CCP shall not be compulsory for BA. However for professional courses and MA the attendance in CCP will be mandatory.

(iv) Field Training and Project

For professional course(s) there shall be provision of field training and project writing in the concerned subject.

(v) Medium of Instruction and Examination

The medium of instruction and examination will be English for all the subjects except for those subjects where the learners will need to write in the respective languages.

(vi) Subject/Counselling Coordinators

For developing study material, the IDE appoints subject coordinators from within and outside the University. In order to run the PCCP effectively Counselling Coordinators are engaged from the Departments of the University, The Counselling-Coordinators do necessary coordination for involving resource persons in contact and counselling programme and assignment evaluation. The learners can also contact them for clarifying their difficulties in then respective subjects.

# SYLLABI-BOOK MAPPING TABLE

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## Syllabi

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**UNIT I: History of American Literature I**

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**UNIT II: Aristotle**

*Poetics*

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**UNIT III: Walt Whitman**

*Songs of Myself (1-10)*

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**UNIT IV: William and Mckey**

*The Widows Lament & Revelation* by William Carlos Williams

*The White Fiends* by Claude Mckey

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**UNIT V: Langston Hughes**

*I Too Sing for America, The Negro of the Rivers, The Poetry of the Negro*

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# UNIT 1 AMERICAN LITERATURE: BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

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*American Literature:  
Background and History*

## NOTES

### Structure

- 1.0 Introduction
- 1.1 Unit Objectives
- 1.2 Review of American Literature
  - 1.2.1 The Colonial Experience
  - 1.2.2 Towards a National Literature
  - 1.2.3 Emergence of Literary Nationalism
  - 1.2.4 Knickerbocker Writers
  - 1.2.5 Writer of the Old South
- 1.3 Realism and Regionalism
- 1.4 Naturalism, Determinism and Dime Novels
- 1.5 Emergence of Modernism (1914-1945)
- 1.6 Literature from 1945 to the Present Day
  - 1.6.1 Poetry
  - 1.6.2 Drama
  - 1.6.3 Fiction
- 1.7 Summary
- 1.8 Key Terms
- 1.9 Answers to 'Check Your Progress'
- 1.10 Questions and Exercises
- 1.11 Further Reading

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

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American literature is the body of written works produced in English language in the United States and its preceding colonies. Earlier in history, America was a series of British colonies located on the eastern coast of the present-day United States. As a result, its literary tradition begins as linked to the broader tradition of English literature. However, it is now considered to be a separate course and tradition because of its exceptional American characteristics and extensiveness of its production.

Early American literature was mainly focused on the New England colonies. The revolutionary period of the era comprised the political writings by the Founding Fathers of the United States, Samuel Adams and Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Paine, an English and American political activist, philosopher and political theorist. An eminent American writer of the post-war period was Thomas Jefferson, another American Founding Father, who was noted for his work, *United States Declaration of Independence*. The nation's first novels were published in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Several new literary figures emerged following the War of 1812, who expressed a strong aspiration to produce uniquely American literature and culture. Some of these eminent figures included American authors Edgar Allan Poe and Washington Irving.

A religious and philosophical movement was started in 1836 by American essayist, lecturer and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), which came to be known as

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Transcendentalism. During this period, American author and transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) wrote the book, *Walden*, also known as *Life in the Woods*, which insists on resistance to the dictates of organized society. The political revolution surrounding abolitionism, a historical movement, encouraged the writings of William Lloyd Garrison and Harriet Beecher Stowe in her renowned *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. A masterpiece produced in this period was American novelist and short story writer Nathaniel Hawthorne's (1804–1864) *The Scarlet Letter*, which is a novel about adultery.

The two most prominent poets of the nineteenth century America was Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) and Walt Whitman (1819–1892). It was in the early-to-mid-twentieth century when American poetry reached its zenith with notable writers including T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, E. E. Cummings and Ezra Pound.

Disillusionment was expressed in the writings of American authors following World War I. American author and journalist Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961) was known for his works, *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*. He received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954. Another American writer William Faulkner (1897–1962) is noted for novels like *The Sound and the Fury*. It was only in the 1920s and 1930s when American drama achieved the international position. This was possible with the works of Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize winner Eugene O'Neill. In the middle of the twentieth century, American drama was dominated by the work of playwrights Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, as well as by the maturation of the America musical theatre.

From the end of World War II to, approximately, the late 1960s and early 1970s, the publication of some of the most popular works in American history, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, was noteworthy. From the early 1970s to the present day, the most important literary movement has been postmodernism and the maturing of literature by ethnic minority writers.

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### 1.1 UNIT OBJECTIVES

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

- Prepare a critical review of American literature
- Discuss the importance of realism and regionalism
- Explain naturalism and determinism in American writing
- Paraphrase the dime novel
- Identify the tenets of modern literature
- Describe American literature from 1945 to the present day

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### 1.2 REVIEW OF AMERICAN LITERATURE

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The journey to the creation of the United States of America was a slow and gradual one. The cultural history of the next several generations is essentially a story of adaptation, as important ideas and material forms were modified under the pressure of America's different conditions. Both English and Colonial languages made extensive use of Latin and the philosophy, history and literature of Greece and Rome. The Ciceronian and Romish rhetoric inclusive of oratorical performances of the kind seen in English poet John Milton's *Prohusions* was also used to a great extent.



## 1.2.1 The Colonial Experience

It cannot be denied that during the first century of the English Settlement, most of the literary achievements were made by the Puritans, who were a group of English Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They were the most literate of the English colonists and were committed. The leaders of Massachusetts Bay Colony founded the Harvard College in 1636 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The first printing press was also established in Harvard in 1639. Puritans, along with the English Church under the Stuarts, wanted to build the Bible Commonwealth in the New World. They never wanted to be delinked from their English homeland.

The principal leader of Massachusetts was John Winthrop, who was also a wealthy English Puritan lawyer. He preached a sermon in 1630 emphasizing 'A Model of Christian Charity'. He said: 'For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause him to withdraw his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world.' The immigrants to Massachusetts brought their culture with them. Except in the matter of Church government, they wanted to continue with their native culture.

Generally speaking, the Puritans and the Yankees were the two halves of New England. The Puritans contributed by creating a rugged idealism of the English Reformation, while the Yankees were a product of native conditions created by practical economics. Puritan immigrants were the children of two different centuries. From the sixteenth century, they got their theology and from the seventeenth century, they got their politics with the result that an older absolutist dogma came down to the people with a later democratic concept of the state and society. Calvinism was discovered to be the enemy of democracy and liberalism was rejected.

The English as well as the colonists shared the experience and myth of the English Reformation, considering England as an elected nation: the Virgin Queen as the great deliverer of Protestant England from Spain and Bloody Mary; the providential miracles of the Armada and Guy Fawkes Day; and the apocalyptic events of Civil War, Regicide and rule by the Puritans Saints.

They also shared the great literary embodiments of that myth, which included the following:

- John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*
- William Shakespeare's history plays
- Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*
- John Milton's *Paradise Lost*
- John Bunyan's *Pilgrims Progress*
- Vernacular Bible

The reciprocal acts of preaching and hearing were indispensable elements in the life of the Puritan congregation. The sermon that the Puritans delivered can be regarded as the first substantial literary genre produced in the English speaking New World. They insisted on simple language and plain style. The unceasing concern with salvation earned the Puritans a reputation for moral vigour. It also made them record their spiritual experience and the results of their investigations. These men and women engaged in searching inquiries into the state of their souls. This, in turn allowed, the American culture to experience a pre-occupation with the self. This further gave birth to, what we

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know today as diaries. The first and the second generations especially produced many diaries and everyone became the authors of their own biographies. The genres of biography and autobiography during the colonial period embraced all writings about the self as a subject. However, it should be remembered that many were less interested in remaining true to factual details than in the more didactic emphasis of establishing accounts in a religious and spiritual traditional. *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover* by Richard Beale Davis, a leading scholar of early Southern literature, may be regarded as an eminent representative of autobiographies in the eighteenth century.

Thomas Shepard was the most prominent of the Puritans to have left a journal and autobiography. Shepard's life was very eventful and his dispute with Archbishop Laud and the rest of the anti-Puritan religious establishment in England is significant.

In his autobiography, Shepard wrote one of the most famous lines of literary excellence in his ship episode where he recalls how he was saved by God. In a particular passage, he says, '... the cable was let out so far that a little rope held the cable, and the cable the little anchor, and the little anchor the great ship in this great storm.' Besides, Shepard also started a journal, which was meant to satisfy the spiritual aspirants.

Michael Wigglesworth, the author of *The Day of Doom*, was the voice of the Puritans. Wigglesworth's diary is impressive for his sheer spiritual tenacity. He is dimensional but his follower Samuel Sewall is more impressive and convincing even to the modern reader. Sewall adheres strictly to the chronological order and his representations are more modern and authentic. His diary reveals a man trying, sometimes comically, sometimes with dignity, to sustain the plainer ideals of his father's, while becoming an eighteenth century gentleman without any planning or direction. Sewall was more commercial and was an elected official, i.e., the Chief Judge of Massachusetts Superior Court. He was also the classmate of the poet Edward Taylor and developed a lifelong interest in books and learning. He also presided over many theological debates, and with an unbiased mind, he was ready for any rational compromise. This made him different from the other puritans of his period.

Among his works, his confessions are famous as it chronicles the guilt for having handed down death sentences in the Salem witch trials of 1662. He is also noted for his work, *The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial*, the first anti-slavery tract published in New England in 1700. Later, this became the first anti-slavery tract to be printed in New England. His argument in this is based on appeals to common sense and natural law. His statement, 'Liberty is in real value next unto Life: None ought to part with it themselves, or deprive others of it, but upon the most mature Consideration', is very convincing. Much of his tract is given over to a reputation of the so-called biblical defence of slavery. These acts of Sewall made him very prominent. His diary was published a century after his death. Sewall with the attitudes of an inquisitive, secular, attentive man of the world reveals a different aspect of his character. His recollections are honest and his diary contains stories about murderers, his own courtships and his weaknesses, vigour and confessions of his hasty judgments.

William Bradford was one of the first historians of the New England. He started writing *Of Plymouth Plantation* in 1630 and continued to work on it for twenty years. It is the single most complete authority for the story of the pilgrims and the early years of the colony they founded. In one of the passages, Bradford says:

'But here I cannot but stay and make a pause, and stand half amazed at this poor people's present condition; and so I think will the reader, too, when he well considers the same... It is recorded in Scripture as a mercy to the Apostle and his shipwrecked

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company, that the barbarians showed them no small kindness in refreshing them, but these savage barbarians, when they met with them (as after will appear) were readier to fill their sides full of arrows than otherwise.... Besides, what could they see but a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men—and what multitudes there might be of them they knew not.... It is true, indeed, the affections and love of their brethren at Leyden was cordial and entire towards them, but they had little power to help them or themselves; and how the case stood between them and the merchants at their coming away hath already been declared. What could now sustain them but the Spirit of God and His grace?

In this well-known passage, Bradford renders the pilgrim's first encounter with the wilderness that was to be their new home. The biblical references link the pilgrim to heroes of the Old and New Testaments: Moses and St. Paul. *Of Plymouth Plantation* is not merely history but a religious epic. Bradford justifies God's selection of the pilgrims and their migration to the new land. Many historians followed Bradford.

Another leading figure in the colonial Massachusetts was Edward Johnson. His book entitled the *Wonder-Working Providence of Sion's Savior in New England* is both a history and early literature of New England. Johnson repeatedly invokes biblical precedents. For example, the harassment of the Saints by King Charles I is presented like the pursuit of David by Saul (Biblical account). Puritan leaders fashioned themselves like Moses (the Hebrew prophet who led the Israelites out of Egypt and delivered the Law during their years of wandering in the wilderness) and Aaron (an older brother of Moses and a prophet to God) and the journey was compared to the Exodus. New England itself was thought to be Moses, leading the new nation of Israel out of the Babylon of Old World corruption. With him, we find history conjoined with literature.

*The Sovereignty and Goodness of God*, together with the *Faithfulness of His Promises*, written by Mary Rowlandson, a colonial American woman, is an account of her painful days in captivity and how piety and faith have saved her. This account is more like a novel and attracted readers for three centuries. Her allegory of presenting God in human form attracted many. Rowlandson uses biblical citations to comment on each episode. In the end, she compares herself to David, graceful for the scourge of her afflictions, and then to Moses whose exodus anticipated her own.

The most ambitious of the early writers is Cotton Mather, a socially and politically influential New England Puritan minister, who published *Magnalia Christi Americana* in 1702. This book is an encyclopaedic history of New England in seven volumes. *Magnalia* is as much an elegy as it is history. He wished, 'Whether New England may live anywhere else or not, it must live in our history.' Mather belongs to the third generation of puritans. As the grandson of John Cotton and Richard Mather, two of the leading ministers of the colony, and matched by his own gifts, his contribution to the literature is significant. He was enrolled in Harvard before his twelfth birthday. His service to the slaves, by opening a school for them, has been of great significance. In addition to his career as a man of letters, he participated in the debates on witchcraft and smallpox vaccination. He published over 400 separate books, tracts and pamphlets—some theological and some on natural science and politics. The book *Memorable Providences* (1689), relating to witchcraft and possessions, attracted the attention of almost all in Massachusetts and gave a new dimension to the social evil, conditioned by the religious thoughts of the day. According to this, the spiritual world was understood to be invisible but real and its agents could intrude upon earthly affairs at any moment. However, the trials in Salem had affected his health.

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He concentrated more on publishing. Several biographies that Mather included in the *Magnalia* serve both to epitomize the exceptional legacy of the ancestors and to counterpart the gloomy aspects of present decline. Mather's history helped men and women of the eighteenth century to find 'the Graves of their Dead Fathers' and recall their heroic ancestors. Mather saw Bradford as the Moses that people needed in a wilderness. Bradford learnt Hebrew so that he could 'see with his own eyes the ancient oracles of God in their native beauty'. He was glorified by Mather in his writings as a man of mythic proportions.

The population of America grew, and by 1720, it was quarter of a million. The country still remained agrarian but the cities were growing. New York, Boston and Philadelphia were getting gradually more and more populated. Charleston and New Port were the famous sea ports. Religion remained prominent in the rhetoric of America's public life but the contest for colonial leadership and ultimately for national sovereignty shifted to the secular arena of politics. Mather Cotton's *Bonifacius: An Essay Upon the Good* (1710) predicted the future of New England and was received well by the public. The book influenced even Benjamin Franklin. The Puritans substantially contributed to the creation of New England. In literature, the poems of early American poets Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor were popular. Moreover, John Cotton's preface to the *Bay Psalm Book* justified poetry as an aid to religious practice. The validity of poetry rests on its accuracy as a record of scriptural language.

Jonathan Edwards, a Christian preacher, philosopher, and theologian, was the last but the greatest of the royal line of Puritan mystics. American literary historian and scholar Vernon Louis Parrington points out in his book *Liberalism, Puritanism, and the Colonial Mind: Main Currents in American Thought* that Edwards was conscious of the divine life flowing through and around him, making him one with Godhood. He wanted to build an order of his own, justifying his mysticism by a metaphysical idealism. Parrington further stated, 'There are inconsistencies in his thought as there were in his pastoral life. As the defender of the traditional theology, setting his face against the developing experience of his generation and as a rigid disciplinarian, reverting to the older Separatist's conception of a church of the elect and rejecting the "whole way of covenant" of his grandfather Stoddard, he may perhaps appear in the light of a reactionary. But as an expounder of philosophic idealism, he was looking forward to Emerson. As the advocate of the new revivalist methods, exalting the experience of conversion as the central fact of Christian life and assisting the forces that were drawing the Church and State apart, he was a pronounced revolutionist, the schismatic leader of the New Lights and the father of later congregationalism.'

An interesting phase in the early history of Edward can be seen in the transition from religious mysticism to philosophic idealism. The premeditated weakness of Edward's position remained in his belief of the divine power as a cardinal postulate. His work *On the Freedom of the Will* (1754) was his most significant contribution to theology. It was also the last important defence of the conservatism that was suffocating the intellectual life of New England. The keynote of the argument is 'will is subject to desire, and desire follows what seems to us good.' Edward was progressing along the path of transcendentalism, rediscovering the doctrine of inner light. He believed that the Holy Spirit 'acts in the mind of a saint as an in-dwelling vital principle'. He was ready for a compromise with the Quaker doctrine. With Edward's logic of the just God and his way of dealing with people, he became a popular preacher. His sermons were remarkable.

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Peter J. Conn, in his book *Literature in America: An Illustrated History*, states that examples of poetry were created by the in almost all the traditional genres. However, this was not allowed in drama which was prohibited by the same iconoclasm that led to the destruction of shattered stained glass and disfigured statues in the Old English Churches. Satire, epic, love poems and lyric were received well. With the first generation, elegies were popular as they were famous for directing emotions into consoling patterns. The elegies enrolled the deceased man or woman in the company of departed saints and it thereby attracted consolation out of sorrow. Elegies were regarded as the verse counterparts of funeral sermons. Next to elegies, biographies were received well as they built strong providential links between the individuals and the community.

One cannot forget the unfortunate and inhuman acts for which Anne Hutchinson, a Puritan spiritual adviser, was a victim. She was accused by the General Court for propagating ideas that were considered both heretical and seditious. She represented a species of antinomian rebellion against religious and civil order in the eyes of the authorities. The prosecution at her trial was conducted by Winthrop, who was serving as a deputy governor at that time. Winthrop was supported by John Cotton who had been Hutchinson's religious mentor in England. She fought her case with remarkable scholarship and vociferous courage. In Winthrop's words, even though she was 'a woman of ready wit and bold spirit', she was finally convicted and banished from Massachusetts.

Anne Bradstreet was another notable figure of the era. She was the most prominent of early English poets of North America and first female writer in the British North American colonies. Her volumes called Bradstreet's Poetry (*The Tenth Muse, Lately Sprung Up in America*) were generally appreciated. However, Bradstreet was criticized for her writing mainly because of her gender. Her anger towards this kind of criticism is evident in the following lines of her work, *Prologue* of the first poem in *The Tenth Muse*:

*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.*

Through these lines, we get a sense that New England could not accept her fully. The most impressive of the poems in *The Tenth Muse* is 'a series of "quaternions" sequence of pentameter couplets devoted respectively to the four elements, the four humours, the four ages and the four seasons' (Peter Conn). Her poems show variety such as, pastoral, domestic and literary. However, most of her poems are documents of her inner debate where she made extensive use of simile. For example, a cropped flower is a conventional figure for the death of a child.

Edward Taylor was another eminent figure of the period who was known as a colonial American poet, pastor and physician. As a young man, he graduated from Harvard and took up a career as a school teacher. Unwilling to accept the demand to subscribe to the act of uniformity, he resigned his job and with his commitment towards Puritans, he started writing poems, which included *God's Determinations Touching His Elects* and the *Elects Combat in Their Conversion*. However, the tones of the poems varied ranging from its translation of the Creator into a colonial carpenter, temptation, spiritual struggle and personified abstractions, such as justice and mercy. His *Preparatory*

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*Meditations* show his commitment to the Bible and Christianity. Taken as a whole, these poems are the most remarkable verse sequences in American literature. His poems show many characteristics of metaphysical poetry as well. Taylor has also written some social satires.

When New England was able to get over the 'Puritan fever', it had turned to landscape and nature. Nature's appeal was both sensuous and spiritual. The literature of exploration and travel became a substantial genre. American naturalist William Bartram was noted for his evocation of the River Mississippi, which he saw for the first time in August 1777. His evocation of the river flowing through Louisiana exemplifies the distinctive mixture of science and mysticism, which further highlight the constituents of American imagination:

*The depth of the river here, even in this season, at its lowest ebb, is astonishing, not less than forty fathoms; and the width about a mile or somewhat less: but it is not expansion of surface alone that strikes us with ideas of magnificence; the altitude and theatrical accents of its...banks, the steady course of the might flood, the trees, high forests, even every particular object, as well as societies, bear the stamp of superiority and excellence; all unite or combine in exhibiting a prospect of the grand sublime.*

Moreover, the Americans, by the mid eighteenth century, tried to establish a political identity and a cultural achievement, which would correspond with the 'grand sublime' of the New World geography that was mapped by Bartram and others. It was Benjamin Franklin who took the task to promote the finer arts and improve the common standard of knowledge.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Who dominated the first century of the English settlement?
2. Who was the first historian of New England?

### 1.2.2 Towards a National Literature

Franklin was the first American to answer the New World's needs to ascertain its cultural value. He is spoken of as the man who 'snatched the lightning from the sky and the scepter from the tyrant'. He was the link between America's past and future. Though a plebian in an aristocratic age, he was a 'true wit and a philosopher rich in learning, charming manners, ripe in the wisdom of the world, resourceful in dealing with men and events'. His parents were also English dissenters. Franklin was very much a product of the world of the new character. He epitomized the younger generation. His is a journey from ordinary beginnings to brilliant success. Employed as an editor of a newspaper the *New England Courant*, he published *Dogood Papers*, which was a series of essays in the style of the *Spectator*. The titles of the *Dogood Papers* suggest their range from 'freedom of thought' to 'drunkenness' to 'pride and hoop petticoats'. He makes use of 'double rimes such as power, flower; quiver, shiver; grieve us, leave us; expeditions, physicians; fatigue him, intrigue him' and many more.

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Franklin first entered politics as a member of the popular party. A bitter election went against him and he lost his seat in the Assembly. Subsequently, he was chosen as the Colonial Agent to England. Soon he became the spokesman of the colonial cause. Franklin was a man of divided loyalties. He loved and respected his old home, and though the idea of American Separation was repugnant, he yielded to the will of the people. Franklin wrote his autobiography in 1771. Franklin demonstrated the rational and scientific temperaments which were also shared, to some extent, by several writers and politicians of the period who shaped America's fortune in the late eighteenth century. Besides Franklin, some of the eminent figures who proclaimed the principles of the Age of Reason included writers such as Diderot, Voltaire, Jefferson and Hume.

From 1760s onward, literary and cultural aspirations were linked to the revolution of politics. Thomas Paine, who came to Philadelphia at Franklin's invitations, shared the views of Franklin but not without a vote of dissent. Poetry was also pressed into the service of nationalism. Franklin was the first American to abandon the traditional mercantile school before other America thinkers abandoned it. He was the first to accept the school of laissez faire. He also entered the field of economics.

Hugh Henry Brackenridge was another well-known figure of the period. He was American writer, lawyer, judge and Pennsylvania Supreme Court justice. Brackenridge, along with American poet Philip Freneau, wrote a prophetic poem entitled *The Rising Glory of America*.

Freneau also wrote *To the Memory of the Brave Americans* in 1781 and also elaborated Paine's rights of man. The democratic principles of Paine guaranteed the impending happiness of America. The men and women of letters such as John, Abigail Adams, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, memorialize a dangerous and pivotal period in history. As professor emeritus at New York University Kenneth Silverman wrote:

'The time from the first Puritans and Mather to the Revolutionary generation and Franklin, thus not only covers the complex transition from Puritans piety, idealism, and provincialism to the more secular, utilitarian, and cosmopolitan values of American Enlightenment. It also marks the establishment of two enduring visions of America that have often competed for authority.'

Thomas Jefferson who descended from aristocratic Virginia families emerged as one of the new nation's most articulate democratic voices. He drafted the *Declaration of Independence*. The Declaration validated the independence of the United States by listing colonial complaints against King George III, and by emphasizing specific natural and legal rights, including a right of revolution. The opening of the United States *Declaration of Independence* states as follows:

'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. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.'

The above passage came to represent a moral standard to which the United States should strive. Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth President of the United States, promoted this view and considered the Declaration to be the foundation of his political philosophy. He asserted that the Declaration is a statement of principles through which the United States Constitution should be interpreted.

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There are several causes of the American Revolution. In the beginning, it was a clash between colonial self-government and absentee paternalism. Then it developed into an open challenge of the monarchical principle. It was very slow in the beginning. Once it precipitated, it was clear that the imperial centralization was encroaching upon the local rights. As a result, the liberal impulses in the background of the American minds assumed a militant form. There were three groups – the merchant group, the aristocratic group as well as the planner group. The merchant group supported liberalism only to the extent that liberalism meant profit. The aristocratic group could not tolerate outside dictation in their normal life. The planner group was republican in temperament and wanted their class to enjoy freedom at any cost.

Now Jefferson became the spokesman of the new order at a time of transition from a dependent monarchical state to an independent republican state. In his first inaugural address given at the Capitol Building, Washington, DC, while defining a laissez-faire government, he pleaded for:

‘A wise and frugal government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned. This is the sum of good government, and this is necessary to close the circle of our felicities.’

To all who profess faith in the democratic ideal, Jefferson is a perennial inspiration. In *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*, Houston A. Baker says, ‘Of all the genres of the literature of the revolution, the richest and most appalling—as well as the simplest and least assuming—is the personal narrative. Written by authors who range from Old World aristocrats to Yankee farmers’ sons, the accounts of individual experience in the turmoil of the Revolution rival the political pamphlets in mass and provide the essential corrective to their abstract representation of the conflict.’

The prime desire and object of Jefferson’s life was to preserve the government in America from such degradation and to keep the natural resources open to all. Such an effort was doomed to fail in the presence of imperious forces that shape a society. Among the greatest thinkers of the constitutional period, Jefferson remains by far the most vital and suggestive, the one to whom later generations may return most hopefully.

Americans came to believe that the development of their country had reached a point where it would be hampered by further overseas regulation; that America must be free to exploit her resources to her exclusive advantage and that such economic freedom would be possible only with political independence. By far the most important consequence of the Revolution was the striking down of this mounting of aristocratic spirit that was making rapid headway with the increase of wealth. A middle class America was to rise on the ruins of colonial aristocracy. The middle class was free to create a civilization on its own ideals. New capitalism lay on the horizon of the republic: America. The middle class was eager to speed up its development. Americanism superseded colonialism, and with new loyalty, there developed a conception of federal sovereignty, overriding all local authorities, checking the movement of particularism and binding the separate commonwealth in a consolidating union.

### 1.2.3 Emergence of Literary Nationalism

After the success of American Revolution, America came out of the British colonial control and became an independent nation. As a newly formed independent nation, Americans had a deep sense of novelty. They felt themselves to be men and women of



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a new world and considered themselves to be a new race of men. They also believed that their sources can be traced back to biblical stories and accounts. St. Jean De Crevecoeur in the letter 'What is an American' from his book *Letters from an American Farmer* defines an American based on similar ideas. He describes America as a new found nation, a New World, and an ideal place of peace and plenty. He considers America to be a modern nation inhabited by free farmers, who work and live together under the leadership of a mild government. As the American society developed, the idea of democracy, the foundation on which the nation was built, strengthened, making America one of the most celebrated democracy of the world. People of America contributed their share in the process of nation building, believing in American ideals and dreams. Literature too played its role in this process and celebrated the American idea of democracy and its idealistic vistas.

Fisher Ames, a Massachusetts conservation farmer, wrote in 1800 that 'what ranks' America 'is to maintain in the world for genius and literary attainments.' He further wrote: 'whether in point of intellect we are equal to Europeans, or only a race of degenerate creoles; whether our artists and authors have already performed much and promise everything, whether the muses like the nightingales, are too delicate to cross the salt water or sicken and mope without song if they do, are themes upon which we Americans are privileged to be eloquent and loud.'

Many artists and literary nationalists were determined in their belief that the superior position of the New World promises and ensures superiority in art and literature. However, there were also those who opposed this view and this opposition persisted that they should continue with the tradition of the old world, i.e., the European tradition in the arts and literature.

In the late eighteenth century, a group of poets and essayists became famous as Connecticut Wits. These literary figures were enthusiastic and energetic about their nationalistic fervour. Some of the prominent names of this group are Timothy Dwight, Lamuel Hopkins and John Trumbull. In addition of writing satires, epics, mock epics and elegies, they also wrote hymns about the landscape of the new world. In spite of their nationalistic fervour and belief in the superiority of the literature of new world, one can easily sense the presence of the European models in their writings.

Joel Barlow was another prominent member of the group, who was also the youngest amongst them. He was a Yale graduate and had served in the American Army. He advocated the idea of classless society in his essay *Advice to the Privileged Orders* (1792). This essay heavily influenced Thomas Paine, an English and American political activist, philosopher, political theorist and revolutionary. Barlow favoured the French Revolution, and believed that the revolution was for the benefit and advantages of the people, for the revolution had people at its core. It was initiated by the people, and also carried on and conducted by them. In composing his literary works, Barlow borrowed his subjects from the politics of the time, and to give it life or to make it alive, he blended it with the active life of the society. His poem *The Hasty Pudding*, published in 1790, is usually considered to be his best work. The poem adopts mock-epic style, and celebrates the simple American lifestyle marked by the hasty pudding. The subject and the theme of the poem put the New World and the Old World in opposing and contrasting position.

Timothy Dwight, one of the members of the group, praised America in heroic couples and asked the Americans not to embark on foreign travel. He did not see Europe in positive light and considered it a foul harlot, and believed that the pleasures of Europe are linked with 'Circe's Sensual Bowl'. He warned the American of the danger of

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falling to these mythical snares, for it will 'with eye estranged, from Columbia turn/Her Youth, her innocence and beauty scorn'. He also was opposed to the idea of going to Europe for education, and considered such an ambition as extremely fatal.

The first play of any significance to have been written and professionally staged in America was written by Royall Tyler's *The Contrast*. The play was a comedy. Noah Webster, another significant literary figure of early America, held the belief that Europe has become old and is ridden with folly, corruption and tyranny. His view regarding America, the new world, was full of hope. He also warned against adopting the measure of the old world. He said: 'For America in her infancy to adopt the present maxims of the old would be to stamp the wrinkles of decrepit age upon the bloom of youth and to plant the seeds of decay in a vigorous — a durable and stately edifice can never be erected upon the mouldering pillars of antiquity.' The Americans felt a strong need to create their history; to accomplish this task, they turned to the biblical stories, classical myths, and ancient heroes of Greek and Rome.

John Trumbull, a member of Connecticut wits and a painter by profession, was a painter historian of American war of independence. In glorifying the American Revolution and American Independence, he went as far as to say that American independence is 'the noblest series of actions which have ever presented themselves in the history of man'. He firmly believed that the episodes of the American war of independence that he described as a painter historian, held the foundation of the free government, the one that will strive to achieve both national and individual happiness. Trumbull desired to contribute in the formation of American national identity through his paintings. The attempts made by these nationalist literary and artistic figures transformed the strands of history into the web of legend.

In 1807, Joel Barlow came up with *Columbiad*. *Columbiad* is a long narrative poem, written in heroic couplet. The work is of some significance, and was regarded by both Barlow and his contemporary as his best and most significant work. This epic poem celebrated the idea of love for national liberty, and attempted to show that all good morals, good government and permanent peace must be founded on the republican principle. The poem narrates the tales of Columbus, who while sitting in a Spanish prison converses with an angel, and it is through this dialogue between Columbus and angel, the whole history of North and South America is recounted. The poem also talks about the America's war of independence and then culminates in the post-revolutionary glorious future of America. The poem continued to be seen as a national epic for few years, and for some time was compared with the Homer, Virgil and Milton, but later it was dismissed as a failure. The myth of Columbus that Barlow created with his poem was later reinforced and surpassed by Timothy Wright, who called the new nation Columbia. It is, thus, apparent that Columbus continued to be the both central and recurring figure in the American imagination.

After the American independence, the idea of storytelling was still something that was not widely encouraged, and the reason behind this lack of enthusiasm for the art of storytelling was the residual of early puritanism. However, later the 'cultures of western frontier, southern plantation and northern commerce offered a fertile ground for nurturing 'fictional art'. The early American novels often deviates from the European tradition of novel writing, but such deviations are not artistically significant, for they deviate only for the sake of deviation, while offering nothing new or significant.

Susanna Haswell Rowson, an early American novelist, gained fame and recognition for her *Charlotte Temple* and *A Tale of Truth*. Hannah Foster was another novelist

who gained some fame for her *Coquette*. *Couquette* is an epistolary novel that contains seventy-four letters. These novels belong to the romance and adventure genre. The plots are mechanical, while the language is at best theatrical. They offer nothing significant, and their importance is limited to being the novels written during early periods of post American War of Independence.

Some of the other women novelists worth mentioning are Catherine Sedgwick, Susan Warner and Anna Bartlett Warner. They also contributed to an extent in the history of American novel. Charles Brockden Brown was a novelist and a historian of early American nationalist period. Many consider him to be the most important American novelist of the period. He was deeply interested in the ideas of somnambulism and psychic abnormality. His works often contain dark themes, which not only reflect the influence of earlier works of Godwin and Walpole, but also anticipate later works of Edgar Allan Poe. He often used styles and forms of Gothic novel, already established as a genre in Europe. Many critics acknowledge Brown's place in American literary canon, and consider him to have precedence over figures like Hawthorne and Melville. This acknowledgement affirms Brown's place at the head of the American romantic tradition. Brown's novels drew heavily from the models popularized by Imlay, and to an extent, can be considered as refuting the Jacobean principles. It is important to notice at this point that the early American fictions refuted the utopian and Jacobean ideals, and fashioned itself along the ideas established and popularized by Brackenridge and Tyle. Given the various ideas that converge in the works of Charles Brockden Brown, it would not be an exaggeration to call him a hybrid novelist, whose works used the ideas and themes of writers of both America and Europe. His works are usually categorized as the earliest fictions of America.

During this time in the southern part of America, a new genre of fiction emerged. The novels written in this genre usually took place on the southern plantations, and therefore, the genre is called the plantation novels. The central theme that became the subject of these novels was brutality and atrocities of slavery, and day dreams of the benefaction of loyalty amongst both white and black population. *Swallow Barn* is usually considered to be the first novel in the genre. It was written by the novelist Pendleton Kennedy. Another novel of the genre that became a huge success was *Uncle Tom's Cabin* written by Harriet Beecher Stowe. The success of Beecher's novel ensued surge of southern propaganda.

The three generations between the American independence and American civil war was a very crucial period in American history, for in this period, America expanded its geographical boundaries at a great speed. America was seen around the world as a nation of opportunities and means. People, from across the world, but mainly from Europe during this period migrated in a huge number. Every decade during this period saw the rise in population by almost three times the original. The population rise was also accompanied by the high birth rate and blooming trade and commerce. The increasing and flourishing commerce created the need for a better transportation system.

In 1791, the first Turnpike was constructed between Philadelphia and Lancaster. Innovations in water transport system also supported the trade and commerce. Flat boats, keelboats and packed boats were used to compete with the road transports. Soon the railroad was set up, which became the fastest mode of transportation until the invention of airways. The establishment of railroad soon became both the cause and the symbol of industrial dominance in North America. The two decades of financial crisis between 1837 and 1857 caused a major setback in banking and finance. The result was devastating.

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The small investors almost vanished from market. This also caused a major shift in the national interest. Earlier, it was governed by a sense of mission for creating national identity and history, and now it became the calculation of profit and loss. America began to consider commerce as 'the most sublime gift of heaven, wherewith to harmonize and enlarge society'.

Peter Conn writes: 'Visitors and natives alike remarked on the distinctive tone of American life tone that might be called moralizing utilitarianism. Philistinism conspired with dour piety in demanding an art and literature that would put themselves at the service of patriotism or moral uplift.'

The shock of Sydney Smith is apparent in his 1818 Edinburgh review:

'Literature the Americans have none – no native literature we mean. It is all imported. They had Franklin, indeed and may afford to live for half a century on his fame. There is, or was, a Mr Dwight who wrote some poems and his baptismal name was Timothy. There is also a small account of Virginia by Jefferwson and an epic by Joel Barlow – and some pieces of pleasantry by Mr Irving. However, why should the Americans write books, when a six weeks' passage brings them in our own tongue, our sense, science and genius, in bales and hogsheads?'

### 1.2.4 Knickerbocker Writers

Knickerbocker writers were a group of writers who were active literary figures in the first half of nineteenth century in and around New York. The name Knickerbocker came from Washington Irving's *Knickerbocker's History of New York* (1809). The allegiance of the group was more regional than national. They sought to establish New York as the cultural and artistic centre of the nation, along with promoting American culture. Apart from Irving, other notable members of the group included novelist J. K. Paulding, James Fenimore Cooper and William Cullen Bryant. Some abolitionist and woman-suffrage activists were also associated with the group. Some notable names are Lydia M. Child, G. C. Verplanck, Clement Moore and Bayard Taylor. A monthly literary magazine called *Knickerbocker Magazine*, which was not the official magazine of the group, published the works of the writers associated with the group.

Washington Irving, who was the most notable writer of the group, was also amongst the first American writers to be internationally recognized. Born in the New York City, he was the youngest of the elven children. He studied law and often wrote for *Morning Chronicle*. In 1807, Irving began publishing a periodical called *Salmagundi*. His *Knickerbocker History of New York* was a phenomenal success. The book derived its name from the narrator Diedrich Knickerbocker. After his visit to England, he published a collection of tales and sketches called *Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon*. This book also included famous stories of *Rip Van Winkle* and the *Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. *Brace Bridge Hall* was another collection of tales that he published. It was also received well by critics and readers.

### 1.2.5 Writer of the Old South

Before the Civil War, only a handful of writers from the South made themselves noticed. The culture of American South did not support or encourage the emergence of literature, and yet the Southerners were very much convinced that the South had a 'slumbering genius' that only needed to be awakened. Before the Civil War, only one writer of great genius emerged from the old South. Edgar Allan Poe is now considered to be the father of detective fiction and a pioneer in American romantic and gothic tradition. Poe was a

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poet, a short story writer and an essayist. His ideas and theory of short story was appreciated by figures like Baudelaire. An Old South magazine called the *Southern Literary Messenger* became the centre of Southern literary activities. The significance of this magazine to an extent is because of its association with Poe, who published his stories in the magazine regularly between 1835 and 1837. A shift from the cultural makeup of North can be sensed in the writings published in the magazine during this period. The southerners did not take the contribution of the North in great esteem and respect, and as a result, they fought back in an attempt to establish their own literary identity.

During the period of American Revolution and the early days of post-war America, the myth of a separate Southern Country dominated by the class of planters was boiling under the surface. It was from this myth in making, the idea or the figure of chevalier 'Southern Gentlemen' rose to retort the image of the money making Yankee of the North. In 1820, after the Missouri compromise, a division of Free states and Slave states emerged as the abolitionist movement gained pace and became vociferous in the North. The Southerners felt the necessity of creating their own literary defence against the literary advancements of the North. The two most important literary figures to emerge from the Old South are Edgar Allan Poe and William Gilmore Simons. Both the writers made extensive use of southern landscape and characters, which renders their work an exclusive southern characteristic. Poe greatly desired to become a genuine professional, to an extent, because of the literary situation of the South. Poe felt the need of a professional man of letters in not only South or North or in America but also in the entire world. Unlike Poe, many of the writers in the South were focused regionally. Such writers, who wrote about regional themes and subjects followed the following four basic forms:

- a. Nature lyrics on the Southern landscape;
- b. Framed sketches and collection of backwoods character types;
- c. Episodic novels or linked sketches using the model of the epic historical romance; and
- d. The description of idyllic life of plantation in the romantic and satiric narrations.

The southern writers were heavily influenced by the eighteenth century British poets and the first generation of romantic poets. For this very reason, many of the poets from the South began imitating the British Tradition of poetry.

In Europe, Edgar Allan Poe became a cult figure of the nineteenth century. His unyielding aesthetic commitment was praised and idolized and his poverty and early death mystified and glamorized. French symbolist poets like Baudelaire and Mallarme translated works of Poe in French out of sheer respect for him. Later in the twentieth century, T. S. Eliot called Poe's intellect as a highly gifted young person.

Poe was born in Boston. His parents died when he was still a young child. After the death of his parents, he was raised by John Allan, a Richmond merchant. Poe took Allan's name as his middle name. In 1826, he enrolled into the University of Virginia and began following his literary career. In 1827, he published his first book called *Tamerland and other Poems*. In 1831, he published poems during his short stay in New York. His first published story was *MS found in a Bottle* and was published in 1833. The story became very popular and was well received. He soon became the editor of *Southern Literary Messenger*. In 1838, Poe published *The Narrative of Arthur Gurdon Pym*. From 1839 to 1840, he worked as an editor of *Gentleman's Magazine*. He authored

various short stories, including his famous *Black Cat*, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, *The Purloined Letter*, etc. Poe became famous and gained wide recognition from his poem *The Raven* and his lecture on the poetic form *The Philosophy of Composition*.

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### Early National Period

The period between 1775 and 1828 is also known as the Early National Period. This period of national fervour culminated with the triumph of Jacksonian democracy in 1828. It is also marked with the emergence of imaginative literature rich in nationalistic sentiments, including the first comedy to be staged in America, Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* (1787), one of the first American novel, William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), and the establishment of the first American Magazine, *The North American Review* in 1815. It was during this period that Washington Irving became internationally famous through his stories and essay. This period also saw Charles Brockden Brown's Gothic novels modelled on the Gothic literary tradition of Europe. James Fenimore Cooper, the first major American novelist, became popular and gained well deserved attention. The poetry of Edgar Allan Poe and William Cullen Bryant that was comparatively independent of the European models also appeared during this period. The first slave narrative appeared in 1760. Soon a long series of narratives and autobiographies written by the black slaves, who had escaped from the plantations or had been freed, emerged. Most of these narratives saw the print between 1830 and 1865, including the famous Frederick Douglass' *The Life of Frederick Douglass*, published in 1845, and Harriet Jacobs' *The Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1861.

### The Romantic Period

The American Romantic Period is often identified as the period between 1828 and 1865. This period is sometimes also known as the age of American Renaissance, gaining the name from the similar title of F. O. Matthiessen's influential book published in 1941 about the great writers of the age: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Quite often, this period between the Jacksonian era and the Civil War is also known as the age of Transcendentalism, after the name of the literary and philosophical movement initiated and carried on by Emerson in New England. During this period, original and influential works were produced in almost every literary genre except drama, which have not been exceeded by the later writers in American history.

Writers like Thoreau, Emerson and Margaret Fuller influenced and forged the ideas and ideals for later American writers. They gave literary aims for the later writers to strive for. This period also saw writers like William Cullen Bryant, Washington Irving and James Fenimore Cooper; novels and short stories of Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, Harriet Beecher Stowe and William Gilmore Sims; poetry of John Greenleaf, Emerson, Whittier, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Poe and Walt Whitman, the most celebrated of all American poets. The African-American literature saw women poets like Frances Ellen and Watkins Harper, and the African American novel *Clotel*, published in 1853 by William Wells Brown and *Our Nig*, published in 1859 by Harriet E. Wilson.

### American Realism

The period between 1865 and 1900 is also known as the Realistic period in American Literary history. After the devastation caused by the Civil War, the reconstruction of the nation began. This period was marked by heavy industrialization and urbanization, which

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changed American perspective of itself and also the literary scene of the nation. The Realistic period is called so because of the works of writers like Mark Twain, William Dean Howells and Henry James, along with John W. DeForest, Harold Frederic and the black novelist Charles. These writers produced works that stood in sharp contrast with the romance novels and poems of the writers of the Romantic period like Poe, Hawthorne and Melville. Many realistic writers of this period based their novels in the regional setting. Mark Twain is the prime example of such writing who always based his novels on the region of Mississippi River. Other writers were Bret Harte, who based his works in California, Sarah Orne Jewett in Maine, Mary Wilkins Freeman in Massachusetts and George W. Cable and Kate Chopin in Louisiana.

Chopin later gained wide recognition as the early figure in the history of feminism. Whitman remained active as a poet till the end of the century, and was joined by Emily Dickenson, though he remained unaware of it, for only even of Dickenson's poem were published in her lifetime. Dickenson is now considered to be amongst the most distinctive and prominent American poets. Sidney Lanier experimented with versification of the musical meter, African-American writer Paul Laurence Dunbar produced novels and poems, and Stephen Crane composed poems in free verse that anticipated the later experiments of Ezra Pound and the Imagist poets. Crane also published short stories and short novels that paved the ground for the two literary modes—naturalism and impressionism.

### **The Naturalistic Period**

The Naturalistic period in American literary history spans years from 1900 to 1914, in spite of the fact that realist writers like Twain and Howells were still active. The period is so called because of the powerful works produced by writers like Jack London, Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser, whose characters are usually victims of both their instinctual drives and external sociological forces.

### **Transformation of American Literary Culture**

The writings of American realistic period greatly differed from the pre-Civil War writing of the Romantic period. In order to understand this deviation from the pre to post Civil War American writing, one must undergo a closer analysis of the authors who shaped and influenced the writings of the respective periods and also of the way in which the literature was changing as a cultural institution. Literature of the time was closely linked with the lives of the American, for America was still a nation in making and literature played a crucial role in the process by establishing ideas and ideals, evoking nationalistic sentiments, establishing national dreams and aims. America, still a nation of farmers, had by the arrival of American romanticism also become a nation of avid readers. With the rapid increase in the publishing houses and literary magazines accompanied by the rise in reading interests amongst the general public, it ensured a promising future of American literature. It should be noted, though that severe geographical and economical limitations marked these publishing houses and literary periodicals, and therefore, usually they had a short life span.

Great writers of extraordinary genius like Hawthorne and Melville realized the promising aspect of the job before them, but they were also aware of the great difficulty that the job offered. According to Richard H. Brodhead: 'The minute circulation achieved for Hawthorne's *Twice-told Tales* (1837), Poe's *Tales of Grotesque and Arabesque* (1839) and Thoreau's *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack rivers* (1849) illustrate

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the fact that American writing of early nineteenth century is virtually undistributed literature.' Poetry of Whitman and Dickenson were still unheard of. It was the period when America was hastening with her new formed cultural history. A sudden change that occurred in the literary history around 1850 is worth noticing. Novels by Susan Warner (*The Wide Wide World*), Maria Cummins (*The Lamp lighter*) and Mrs. Southworth (*Retribution*) achieved sales that were unheard of. The sales of these novels, usually classified as domestic or sentimental genre that exceeded anything written by Hawthorne, Melville or Thoreau. The success of these novels is usually attributed to their being both agents and products of the emerging culture.

The phenomenal success of the novels of domestic genres during 1850s was largely due to the fact that these novels spoke directly to the new emerging middle class culture of family life and domestic propriety. Novels soon became the only source of entertainment for this new emerging culture. Writers like Mrs. Southworth, Caroline Lee Hentz and Mary Jane Holmes were widely read by women during their time of domestic leisure. The popularity of novels further increased with the establishment of Penny Press in 1850s. The newspaper in an attempt to benefit from the rising popularity of the novels began publishing novels instead of news. Between 1860 and 1865, around five million Beadle novels were purchased by the audience with lower level of leisure and literacy like youth and factory workers. Such developments created the low literate audience for the consumption of such novels. However, this development was not the only one happening in the American literary scene. The same decade also witnessed the formation of another literary circle, one that preferred or supported high literature.

A good account of this literary development, the prominent literary figure involved in it, and the way in which it influenced those who were associated with it can be seen in William Dean Howells's essay *My First Visit to New England* (1894) that was later collected in the volume called *Literarily Friend and Acquaintance* (1900). In this essay, Howells remembers his arrival as a young and aspiring writer at Boston, the place that was home of greater literary figures like James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Nathaniel Hawthorne. Howells's account of Boston does not only present Boston as a place where great writers lived, but also as a place where a new and unique kind of value was bestowed upon the writers. Howells recalls that the Boston he visited was a place that not only fashioned the high literary culture of America but also was its centre. The literary figures active in Boston acted as a promoter and custodian of high literature. They were liked and enjoyed by the literary elite and people with a taste for high literature. This group of writers had a secular outlook, with no involvement in the urgencies of religious righteousness, which was still a common necessity in the various parts of the America. These writers were cosmopolitan in their makeup and they were concerned about the idea of high art and letters. They looked upon the European cultural world as an extension of their own. They attempted to find and locate that elemental value in arts that no longer was possible to find in the religion. With the belief that the foundation of the civilization is based on the concern for such values, they took it on themselves to impose these values on the rest of society.

In these writers, custodians and promoters of high art, literature and culture, America during the mid-nineteenth century had a group that was characteristically marked by its concern for literature as supreme value, and also with the sense to impose this concern on other groups with different values than their own. Working with such an idea in mind, the members of this group in 1860s and also in later decades used various powerful existing institutions for the purpose of administering literacy and also created new institutions of extreme power to support their cause. They began indulging in the



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administration of libraries, where through the control of the reading habits of the less literate class, they began forming and fashioning their taste. They also moved into American schools and universities, where they attained the position of professors of literature. In American schools, the reading of classical American literature became compulsory. In the period in which magazines were the most popular mode of literary encounter, editorial control of the prominent magazines also became one of their agenda.

By keeping literary institutions under their control, they succeeded in creating what can be called the most coherent national literary culture, the likes of which was not seen before and has not been seen since then. As they created this national literary culture, they also forged a never seen before kind of environment for the authors and writers to work in. This new environment enabled almost all the writers of the post-Civil War era to support themselves financially by publishing the journals of the new cultural establishment and artistically by indulging in the new forged artistic and cultural values. Many of the figures who were then recognized and considered as important men of letters are now only known as tools for administering the high literary culture. Some names that come to the mind are novelist and editor Thomas Bailey Aldrich and Charles Dudley Warner. It should be noted that Howells too was a product of this literary cultural establishment. The first prestigious position that Howells found was as the editor of *Atlantic*. The novels he wrote were first serialized in the *Atlantic*, and then in *The Century* and *Harper's*. It was the editor's study column of the *Harper's* that conducted his campaign for realism. Moreover, the Howellian idea of realism itself has deep mark of these cultural and literary arrangements.

Another product of this literary cultural manifestation was Henry James. Though he was not as interested as Howells in the administrative side of literary creation (and for this very reason he never became an editor), he too published almost all his works in the *Atlantic*. At one hand looking from a specific perspective, he himself created his supporting artistic creed, while on the other, he derived his support from the established literary and artistic culture of 1860s, 70s and 80s. Henry James's idea of art and literature brought in an ethical aspect to the established literary culture, which sought to highlight the supreme good in the aesthetic creation, and firmly believed in the artistic imagination for its civilizing powers.

It must be noted that James and Howells were not the only two prominent writers to have come out of and gained support from this literary establishment. George Washington Cable, who in novels like *Grandissimes* (1880) attempted to capture the Creole culture, was another such writer. He published his works in *The Century*. Writers like Sarah Orne Jewett and Constance Fenimore also published their works in the quality periodical that these gentry established, literary culture produced, and identified with their culture and ideas. It clearly shows that in the post-Civil War period, when the women writers started stepping beyond the image of a writer of domestic and sentimental novels in an attempt to assert themselves as the writers of high literature, the gentry-established literary culture offered them full support in their assertion.

American realism that rose and developed in the Post-Civil War period also came from this culture of high literature. The fact that the three major text of American realism—Twain's *Adventure of Huckleberry Finn*, James' *The Bostonians* and Howells' *The Rise of Silas Lapham*—were all serialized in *The Century*, a major periodical representing the high literary culture of the period, further affirms the idea. Regionalism, one of the most dominant literary forms of post war period that had its background in the migration from the old agrarian culture to the more urban location, was also given impetus by the cultural establishment of the high literature.

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If in one way, the establishment of high literary culture functioned as an imperialistic force that coerced the masses to follow the cultural and literary ambition and aspirations of the elite class, in another it also offered a safe environment for the serious art to develop and thrive and also offered enough security for the artists to function and indulge in their aesthetic imagination. It was highly successful in performing both these functions in the post-Civil War period. However, while this system was at the peak of its power, its dominance was beginning to be challenged. While it did some good in terms of protecting artists and popularizing high arts and creating tastes in literature, the complete history of this system is also the history of its later suppression.

The important question that presents itself at this point is what caused this suppression. To answer the question, we must go back in time a little. From the very beginning of this establishment, the reasons of its suppression were already there. In 1860, when Howells first arrived in Boston as a young and aspiring writer, with his eyes laden with dreams and hopes, there were two important developments taking place. As Howells notes in his *My First visit to New England*, his intention was to meet the literary gentry of the time, but his sponsor wanted him to get acquainted with the New England Mills and its new manufacturing processes. Howells saw New England as a cultural landscape, but he reminds us that over the hill was another landscape, not cultural but industrial. This little detail suggests that the development of high literary culture in 1850s and its eventual spread was contemporaneous to the development of capitalist and industrial establishment that was soon going to transform every aspect of American life as was known.

As the establishment of high literary culture influenced and took over the American life of letters, the other establishment influenced and took over the economic life of America. The development of this economic aspect of American life had a direct effect on the American literary history, for in the late nineteenth century, this economic and industrial growth started to assemble its own tools for the literary production that would give rise to a different literary culture and rival the high literary culture already established and developing. This intrusion of the industrial growth is most apparent in the magazine production. The 'quality' or literary magazines of the period by mid 1880s had achieved a respectable circulation of one or two hundred thousand. However, by the end of the decade, a new kind of magazine appeared on the scene. Soon the magazines of this new kind achieved the circulation of somewhat three or four times more than the circulation of the quality magazines. Some examples of this new kind would be: *Ladies Home Journal*, *Munsey's* *McClure's Magazines* and *Cosmopolitan*. These magazines were much cheaper in price than the literary magazines, and the reason that they could be cheaper was that they financed themselves in various different ways. They did not use subscription fee to support the magazine, but instead they dropped the fees and, thus, attained a great circulation, and then based on their reach, they sold spaces to the advertisers and built their financial base by using the revenue thus generated.

This rise and development of this new kind of magazine not only transformed the price but also the entire relation between the magazine production and the economic scene. They were no longer the modes of literary presentation, but had become tools for marketing, the source of both verbal and visual mass entertainment, and the instrument which helped the capitalist manufacturers in not only creating but also controlling the market for their commodities. In the name of verbal entertainment, these magazines were also pushing the readers in the world of created needs through advertisements. Soon the commercial world began to encroach on the world of high literature. After

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Howell resigned from *Harper's, Cosmopolitan* managed to hire him for their editorial staff. As the advance of these new publications increased, they began to challenge the most cherished power of the established high literary culture, which was to control the reading habit of the populace. The growing anxiety towards the popular print media can be clearly felt in the American literary writings of 1880s. In Howells' *A Modern Instance* (1882), the advertising brand of journalism is associated with the decline of the traditional community values, and in Henry James' *The Bostonians* (1885), the popular media is linked with an assault on the privacy.

When looked from the perspective of the older cultural values, the new culture brought by the popular print media surely seem like an enemy, but when looked from a perspective distanced from the older cultural values, they do not appear to be the one that destroyed or demolished the older establishment of high art, but the agents that gave rise to a new kind of culture. This new kind of culture was not a literary culture established by the gentry, instead it was a consumer culture established and fuelled by popular print and advertisements. By the arrival of the last decade of the century, the older literary established had become narrowly elitist and reactionary, except in the instances where it successfully adapted the methods of its commercially successful rivals. However, it is interesting to note that the new arrived commercial and consumer culture enforced by the magazines full of eye catching advertisements also created a space, like its predecessor, for the new writers to work in.

The case of Theodore Dreiser illustrates this point further. Dreiser, who was a generation younger than Howells, first aspired to become a writer not because of the influence of the literary circle of Boston like Howells, but because of the popular newspapers of Chicago. He wrote and contributed advertising-centred magazines. He even worked with fashion-centred magazine as a managing editor. It should be understood that the literary writings of Dreiser were not completely the product of the literary culture that he worked out, any more than the works of James and Howells, and his works have a strong touch of its cultural origin. A book like *Sister Carrie* is not associated with tradition of high literary cultural; instead it is associated with the concerns of the magazines of 1890s—the deep awareness of the desires caused by the commodities and consumerism.

There is no doubt that Dreiser represents the close connection with the popular and mass media, but at the same time, he also represents the new literary training that was made possible because of the emergence of the consumer media. Many writers of Dreiser's generation can be grouped in one category not because of their belief in the creed of high literature, but because of the fact that all these writers wrote out of similar literary cultural situation. Some examples would be Stephen Crane, Frank Norris and Upton Sinclair. The works of these writers are also marked by the commercialized form of media.

To say that towards the end of the nineteenth century, the older cultural scene of high literature was replaced by the consumerist and commercialized mass media would not be the complete story, for towards the end of the century several parallel literary worlds emerged. It would not be an exaggeration to say that a diversification occurred in the American literary scene by the end of the nineteenth century. The gentry based establishment of high literary culture towards the end of the century tried to regain its control over the literary scene of the nation by institutionalizing the fact that the authors produced by their culture are America's greatest. It was also an attempt to exclude the writers of mass media generation from the literary realm.

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A portion of an older literary establishment entered once again into the literary scene, but this time with adopting the commercial attitude of their rivals. This change in their attitude towards the literary exclusiveness by making them less committed to it. The difference between high and popular literature became less prominent and zealous. Soon there was a growing audience for African American writers, even amongst the white population. Charles W. Chesnutt was the first black literary writer to find readers amongst the white population. The decade which gave popular advertisement based magazines also gave a new kind of magazine, the prime example of which would be *The Chap-Book*. It was expensively printed art magazine, which did not contain any advertisement and was virtually indifferent to idea of circulation. It contained works that were only interesting to those with the knowledge of such works. The company behind *The Chap-Book* introduced various foreign writers to the American literary scene. They were the first American publishers to publish works of Shaw, Ibsen and French symbolists. They also published Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Henry James' *What Maisie Knew*. This was an emergence of a new and unique kind of publishing institution in American literary history, and it must be seen as an agency with a certain idea of culture and which attempted to create a group of audience for this very idea of culture.

One thing was common to all the literary cultures that emerged towards the end of the century. None of them was able to gain the cultural power required to support the new kind of authorship that it enabled. In spite of gaining a mainstream publisher, the works of Chesnutt failed to gain wide enough audience. The literary scene had enough transformed for Chopin to find a publisher for her novel *The Awakening*, but yet not enough for the novel to find enough readers. Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* met with the similar fate. Both Chopin and Dreiser left writing after the failure of their respective novels. Dreiser while he gave up authorship, earned his living from the popular magazines but did not find any support for his literary career in these magazines:

The American writers of the end of nineteenth century relived the situation that was faced by earliest American writers. However, their attempt and effort to create a new kind of authorship later determined America's literary future.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

3. What was the philosophy of the New World?
4. Who was the first to be identified as a Knickerbocker writer in America?

## 1.3 REALISM AND REGIONALISM

The difference between realism and regionalism is difficult to ascertain. One way to look at realism is as the response to growing inclination towards capital, transformation of raw material into consumer products, replacement of old agrarian values by more urban ones and a shift from private experience to public property. However, the problem with this view of realism is that it presents urban city as one of the various regions within the network of growing modernization enriched and enchanted by industrial growth and establishment of railroads and telegraph wires.

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To define realism in another way would be to say that realism was a reaction against romanticism to capture the life of ordinary people and events in the changing America of the second half of the nineteenth century. The realist writers did not wish to escape from the life of the ordinary like the romantics; instead they embraced it. Their intention and aim was to depict the life as it was during the time, devoid of any subjective colour or prejudice. In such writing, characters became more important than plot. Regionalism, on the other hand, was an attempt to capture the essence of various regions of the nation that was so rapidly changing. A fear was prevalent amongst many that soon local traditions and folkways would vanish amongst the growing standardization and urbanization because of industrial revolution. As a response to this awareness, many realistic writers set their plot in the various local regions of America in an attempt to capture the local colour of the region before it was lost forever. In these writings, they portrayed the stark realities of everyday life, growing plight of the poor and the vanishing traditions and values.

However, to understand realism and regionalism, we must not rely on mere definitions of the terms. It is important that we analyse it through the literary examples of the respective movements. In the nineteenth century, various changes in the society and politics were caused by the effects of both the Civil War and the American westward expansion. The artists, active in the nation at that time, did not find romanticism as adequate enough to capture the sentiments and concerns of the time, for example the struggle of the working class and the rise of the middle class, and as a result, they turned to something new, something different to comment on these changing attitudes. This something new was realism and regionalism. The writers of the age tried to capture the national transformation, the effects of which could also be felt in various regions, through their depiction of an unbiased and unprejudiced account of everyday life, especially of new middle class and urban poor. Two prime examples of regionalism would be Mark Twain's *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn* and Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, and a brilliant example of the use of realism is Henry James' *Daisy Miller: A Study*. The employment of regionalism and realism bring the characters and setting of the stories to life and allows the readers to completely immerse in them.

Both Kate Chopin and Mark Twain successfully captured the essence of the regions in which they set their stories. Usually, regionalism focuses on unique and specific features of a region and attempts to capture its local colour and essence by accurately portraying its dialect, customs, traditions, topography, history and characters. It focuses on both formal and informal attitudes of people of the region towards each other and also towards their society as a whole. In such novels, the role of the narrator is of specific importance, for he/she is not simply a narrator but also a translator, whose job is to make the reader understand the region and its various aspects. In *The Adventure of Huckleberry Finn*, Twain expertly uses regionalism to bring the readers to the heart of American west in the nineteenth century. He tells his reader at the very beginning of the book: 'In this book, a number of dialects are used, to wit: the Missouri negro dialect, the extremist form of the backwoods South-Western dialects; the ordinary "Pike-Country" dialect; and four modified varieties of this last.' The use of vernacular and not the standard language, grammatical mistakes, incoherent sentences and words that cannot be found in the dictionary are some of the major composition of the language used by Huck Finn, both the narrator and protagonist of the novel. This allows the reader to feel the character in the way as if he were right next to him. It also gives the reader an understanding of the region to which the character belongs. The local stories that are

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told throughout the novels also offer a rich description of the region in which the characters of the novel live.

Another important aspect of Twain's *Huck Finn* is the role played by the Mississippi River in the story. Rather than simply being a natural landscape and setting for the story, it functions as a major character in the novel, especially because of the way in which it affects both Huck and Jim in their journey to their freedom. The river also brings the attention of the readers to other aspects of regionalism. One of the prime focuses of a regionalist work is on the region and not on the plot. There are a number of instances when Huck indulges in a detailed description of the river and landscape around him: 'The river looked miles and miles across. The moon was so bright I could a counted the drift logs that went a slipping along, black and still, hundreds of yards out from shore.' These descriptions do not help the plot in any way, but the description enhances the portrayal of the region and invites the reader to participate in the actual journey undertaken by Huck and Jim. These descriptions can also be seen as digressions from the plot, and such digressions are important in the regionalist works of fiction for they allow a better representation of regional culture.

Another such deviation from the plot takes place when Huck spends considerable time in giving a detailed account of Jim's superstition. Though these descriptions cannot be dismissed completely as digressions, for they do have a part to play in the plot, but they definitely are not the most crucial aspects of the plot. However, such detailed description of superstitions, like 'Miss Watson's nigger, Jim, had a hair-ball as big as your fist, which had been took out of the fourth stomach of an ox, and he used to do magic with it,' allows the reader to have a better understanding of the beliefs and attitudes of the people of the region.

Another important aspect of regionalism is the narrator's function as a translator. In Twain's novel, *Huck*, the narrator, also functions as a translator for the readers, for he explains events and his experience to the reader. He offers explanatory accounts of the actions of various characters. For example, while explaining the widow's action, he says: 'The widow cried over me, and called me a poor lost lamb, and she called me a lot of other names, too, but she never meant no harm by it.' The regionalist works also tend to have a sense of sympathy for local values as against the national. In this sense, the novel criticizes the widow for trying to change the uniqueness of Huck into something standard.

Another excellent example of regional fiction is Chopin's *The Awakening*. However, Chopin's employment of regionalism in her novel is slightly different from Twain's use of regionalism. Twain intends to glorify and celebrate the region he sets his stories in. However, Chopin's use of regionalism intends to criticize the region in which her story is set. Nevertheless, in spite of the difference in intention, Chopin's depictions of the region adhere to almost same set of guidelines and regional characteristics that Twain uses in his fiction. The setting of Chopin's novel is the Creole society in Louisiana. While Twain's characters were middle and lower class people, Chopin's characters belong to high class. The use of vernacular is plenty in the novel. Through the other use of regionalist techniques, Chopin introduces the reader to the social norms and system of the particular class of the Southern region. Interestingly, the protagonist of the novel, Edna Pontellier, does not belong to the region in which the novel is set, and, therefore, becomes an effective tool in the hands of Chopin to rebel against the social norms and structure of the region. Edna is portrayed as an outsider, but her being an outsider offers

a very explanatory glimpse into the inside culture and customs of Creole life. The narrator writes that Edna 'was not thoroughly at home in the society of Creoles. They all knew each other, and felt like one large family'. Edna's observes the Creole people: 'A characteristic which distinguished them and which impressed Mrs. Pontellier most forcibly was their entire absence of prudery. Their freedom of expression was at first incomprehensible to her, though she had no difficulty in reconciling it with a lofty chastity which in the Creole woman seems to be inborn and unmistakable.'

The best of use regionalism in Chopin's fiction is when she critically presents the social rules and roles, most specifically in the socially assumed and acknowledged role of a mother-woman. Chopin writes: 'The mother-women seemed to prevail that summer at Grand Isle. They were women who idealized their children, worshipped their husbands, and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as ministering angels.' This description manifests in the characters of Adèle Ratignolle. Adèle is a perfect example of who a Creole wife is supposed to be. She is opposite of Edna. She completely conforms to the socially accepted role of a woman as a wife and mother. She worships her husband and is always on her toe to complete her domestic responsibilities. And in doing so, she is accepted as a perfect Creole woman by the society. Chopin brings the Creole society to life through the dialects and interaction of various characters within the community.

Let us now turn to Henry James famous novella, *Daisy Miller: A Study* to study and analyse a realistic work of fiction. A work of regionalism is also a work of realism, for both depicts the objective view of everyday life of the ordinary. The only difference lies in the fact that a regionalist fiction focuses on capturing the locality and colour of a specific region, while a work of realist fiction attempts to capture the life itself. Like the regionalist works, the realist works also digress from the plot, but unlike the former, the later digresses to study the depths of the characters in an attempt to seize the essence of life as it is lived in the real time. Realism grew as a reaction against the romanticism and this reaction remains visible in the work of realist fiction. The writers of this genre do not intend to hide unpleasant through their flight in the imaginative stories; instead they intend to portray the harshness of everyday reality, the problems and the struggle to live. By remaining true to the techniques of realistic fiction, Henry James creates highly believable characters in his novella *Daisy Miller: A Study*. What makes Daisy so real is the flaws she has as a character. In his depiction of Daisy, James never offers a critical or biased description of her character, even though she may seem to be against the accepted social or traditional norms. Her traits are a radical for her time, but she retains those characteristics and remains true to who she is. As opposed to idealized and exaggerated characters of romantic fiction, Daisy is an imperfect and flawed character which makes it difficult for her to be accepted by the society. Winterbourne and his aunt describe her as 'Crude', 'Dreadful', 'ignorant' and 'vulgar'. Many of her actions, like walking with two men in public, are considered as scandalous, but they are true to her character as a flirt. Later when Winterbourne asks her to leave, for he is afraid that she might catch Roman fever, true to her character, she barks back at him: 'I don't care whether I have Roman fever or not!' The consequence of this refusal is her death. The novel does not seek to resolve everything by providing a pleasant ending to the story. The death of the heroic protagonist of the novel furthers the realist aspect of the novel.

Both realism and regionalism emerged in the later part of the nineteenth century after the Civil War as a reaction against the romanticism that has dominated the American literary landscape in the first half of the nineteenth century. The writers of realism and

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regionalism thought that romanticism was inadequate in capturing the changing attitudes and sentiments of the nation. Realism first developed in the French aesthetic theory in the mid nineteenth century. The French literature of the period sought to depict the banalities of everyday experience, instead of an idealized and romanticized version of life. The French writers who excelled in the realist mode of fiction are Stendhal, Honore de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert. In England, realism reached in through the works of George Eliot, and in America, William Dean Howells was the first to use realist techniques in his fiction. Some other American writers of the genre are Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, John Steinbeck, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Upton Sinclair, Edith Wharton and Henry James.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

5. State the French aesthetic theory of realism.
6. Briefly describe the essence of realism as expressed by Whitman, Hawthorne, Stowe and Melville.

## 1.4 NATURALISM, DETERMINISM AND DIME NOVELS

Naturalism was a literary movement that began during the second last decade of the nineteenth century out of realism as its extreme form and suggested that the human character cannot escape from being shaped by the social conditions, environment and heredity. Naturalism was not as organized as romanticism or realism and attempted to take realism to its extreme by depicting everyday experiences and reality. Like many other literary movements, it also began in France. The proponents of Naturalism were heavily influenced by the ideas of Charles Darwin. They believed that social forces play a great role in determining one's character. The difference between realism and naturalism lies in the fact that realism only attempted to depict the life as it is, while naturalism tries to scientifically analyse the forces at work behind the everyday reality of life. The naturalist writers study human life and characters with the similar detached objectivity of a scientist who studies his subject. Emile Zola, to whom the sources of naturalism can be traced in 1868, said regarding his novel: 'I chose characters completely dominated by their nerves and their blood, deprived of freewill, pushed to each action of their lives by the fatality of their flesh.' Zola said that one can study human characters by studying their relationship with their surroundings, without attempting to moralize their nature.

The naturalist writers thought that by studying human characters objectively, they can understand the laws behind the forces that govern human action. They presented characters as the subject of their passion and instinct and also of the various social forces. Zola coined the term to give an impression to his readers that something new and modern was awaiting them in his fiction. George Becker famously described naturalism as the 'pessimistic naturalistic determinism'. The 'pessimistic determinism' is often associated with naturalism but replacing determinism with another would be gross generalization. The characters of the naturalist fiction have little free will and, most of the time, their actions and felling are determined by the forces beyond their control. Donald Pizer in his *Realism and Naturalism in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction* offers the following definition:



'[T]he naturalistic novel usually contains two tensions or contradictions, and . . . the two in conjunction comprise both an interpretation of experience and a particular aesthetic recreation of experience. In other words, the two constitute the theme and form of the naturalistic novel. The first tension is that between the subject matter of the naturalistic novel and the concept of man which emerges from this subject matter. The naturalist populates his novel primarily from the lower middle class or the lower class. . . . His fictional world is that of the commonplace and unheroic in which life would seem to be chiefly the dull round of daily existence, as we ourselves usually conceive of our lives. However, the naturalist discovers in this world those qualities of man usually associated with the heroic or adventurous, such as acts of violence and passion which involve sexual adventure or bodily strength and which culminate in desperate moments and violent death. A naturalistic novel is thus an extension of realism only in the sense that both modes often deal with the local and contemporary. The naturalist, however, discovers in this material the extraordinary and excessive in human nature.

The second tension involves the theme of the naturalistic novel. The naturalist often describes his characters as though they are conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, instinct or chance. However, he also suggests a compensating humanistic value in his characters or their fates which affirms the significance of the individual and of his life. The tension here is that between the naturalist's desire to represent in fiction the new, discomfiting truths which he has found in the ideas and life of his late nineteenth-century world and also his desire to find some meaning in experience which reasserts the validity of the human enterprise.'

Many writers in America towards the end of the nineteenth century began to show their inclination towards naturalism. Some aspects of this tradition of writing became visible in the works of Hamlin Garland who was harsher than Howells in detailing farmer's struggle and more open in dealing with subjects like sex. Henry James once wrote of Garland that he was: 'a case of saturation so precious as to have almost the value of genius.' By this remark, James meant that Garland devoted himself to the accurate depiction of one particular area, and for which he is also sometimes said to be regionalist. In his famous collection of essays *Crumbling Idols*, Garland said that 'provincialism is not bar to a national literature.' He further added, 'each locality should produce its own literary record, each special phase of life utter his own voice'. He has often been called a realist as well. However, he termed himself as a veritist. He defined the veritist as a writer who 'sees life in terms of what might be, as well as in terms of what is'. However, nevertheless his novels like *Main-Travelled Roads* (1891) and *Rose of Dutcher's Coolly* (1895) and his essay collection *Crumbling Idols* (1894) proved significant in the development of the naturalist movement in America.

As naturalism developed in America, many writers became avowed followers of French naturalism, led by Zola. For example, Theodore Dreiser dealt with subjects that he thought was too daring for the early realists to deal with. Like Dreiser, Frank Norris, Stephen Crane and Jack London were also naturalists. This meant that they adopted to scientific and a darker form of realism in which human agency or free will had little place, and where human actions and sentiments were determined by forces, both social and biological, beyond man's control.

In Norris's 1901 novel *The Octopus*, the central character Presley says: 'Men were nothings, mere animalcules, mere ephemerides that fluttered and fell and were forgotten between dawn and dusk'. He adds: 'FORCE only existed - FORCE that brought men into the world, FORCE that crowded them out of it to make way for the

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succeeding generation.' The writers of the naturalist fiction overturned the idea of individual freedom and heroism that Americans so celebrated. Humans were now nothing more than tiny specks on the vast natural landscape filled with mountains and oceans, governed what by what Norris called 'the vast rhythms of the seasons' and 'the eternal symphony of reproduction'. A similar view is put rather brutally by one of the characters of Jack London's novel *The Sea Wolf* (1904). He claims that life is 'unmoral': 'It is like a yeast, a ferment, a thing that moves and may move for a minute, an hour, a year, or a hundred years, but that in the end will cease to move. The big eat the little that they may continue to move, the strong eat the weak that they may retain their strength. The lucky eat the most and move the longest, that is all.'

Dreiser believed that men's action were nothing more than 'chemical compulsions', and that is why his characters fails to direct their own action and instead are subject to forces beyond their reach. He also held that 'the race was to swift and the battle to the strong,' and depicted the defeat and destruction of his characters at the hands of stronger opponents. Some of his major works are *Sister Carrie* (1900), *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911), *The Financier* (1912), *The Titan* (1914) and—much later—*An American Tragedy* (1925). Unlike the French naturalists, Dreiser was not very conscious towards the use of style and symbolism in his work. However, other American naturalists like Frank Norris and Stephen Crane paid much attention to such matters. In some of his short stories and in short novels, like *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) and *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), Crane appeared to be an impressionist who presented an idea of man overwhelmed by circumstance and environment. Impressed with Norris's 'aptitude for making phrases—sparks that cast a momentary gleam upon whole phases of life—Crane too came up with phrases, scenes and whole narrative that cast gleams in such novels as *McTeague* (1899), *The Octopus* (1901) and *The Pit* (1903). Both Norris and Crane died before they could completely develop their abilities as a writer, but the experiments they did in fiction indeed helped in the further development of twentieth century novels.

### Dime novels

Dime novels were a kind of inexpensive melodramatic adventure novels, with often western themes, popular in America from 1860 to 1915, and were published usually with paperback. The first Dime novel appeared in 1860 when Ann S. Stephens published *Beadles Dime Novels* No. 1, 'Malaeska, the India Wife of the White Hunter'. After the success of the first novel, the market soon flooded with numerous dime or half dime novels. The first publisher to issue cheap paper backed novels in series was Irvin Beadle. Though the term 'dime novels' seems to denote the price at which such novels were sold, in fact the term has little to do with the price. It was a term used for any 'sensational detective' or 'blood and thunder' novel sold in the form of pamphlet.

Erasmus Beadle gained much success in publishing various dime novels and popular songbooks featuring heroes like Nick Carter and Deadwood Dick. Dime novels published by him monopolized the market of popular literature for almost the second half of the nineteenth century. Mostly these novels used subjects like historical frontier of Ohio, New York and Kentucky, gold mining in the west, stories of sea, tales of revolutionary wars and colonial wars. From 1870s to 1890s, stories of city street boys who made their way up in the society also became a very popular subject of the dime novels.

E. Z. C. Judson was one of the most famous writers of the dime novels, who wrote under the penname Ned Buntline. Critics of the dime novels called them immoral, perhaps because of the violent themes of the novel. However, the novels in general

attempted to reinforce conventional values like American nationalism, patriotism, self-reliance, etc. By the early twentieth century, the dime novels were taken over and replaced by the emergence of pulp magazines.

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7. What was literary naturalism associated with in its early years?
8. Identify the phrase with which literary naturalism was associated.
9. Define dime novel.

## 1.5 EMERGENCE OF MODERNISM (1914-1945)

The dawn of the twentieth century gave a refreshing start to American politics and philosophy. It also brought about a number of experimental movements in arts and literature. Various movements like cubism, fauvism, vorticism, constructivism, Dadaism and futurism competed to influence the artistic and cultural landscape of Europe and America the most. Some of these movements were part of modernism itself. In simple terms, modernism can be defined as a philosophical and artistic movement that gained impetus in the first half of the nineteenth century around the First World War with a transformative effect on every aspect of the western society. Though modernism originated in Europe, American played an important part in the development of modernism in general and literary modernism in particular. Some of the crucial American literary figures active in the development of modernism as a literary movement are Gertrude Stein in Paris, Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot in England, and Margaret Anderson and Harriet Monroe, editor of poetry magazine, in Chicago.

Modernism developed both as a reaction to the traditional practices of art and literature, and as a way to grapple with the fragmentation and disillusionment created by the war in the early years of the century. The modernist writers derided sentimentality, emotional prose and decorative adjectives. Pound and Eliot demanded a revolutionary change in literary taste. Pound became the most prominent patron of modernism. He promoted and campaigned for writers who met his demands of authenticity and contempt for the accepted notions and tradition. Soon he took Yeats, Joyce, Frost, Marianna Moore Hemingway, sculpture Gaudier Brzeska and composer George Antheil under his wings and the rest is history.

Ezra Pound, who was the champion of the modernist cause, brought out an anthology called *Des Imagist*, in which poems of writers like H. D., William Carlos Williams, F. S. Flint and Amy Lowell were included. Pound famously decreed 'make it new', but both he and Eliot saw innovation as being based in the reconstruction of the past. They looked at several traditions to locate meaning and order to reconstruct it as something new. They were aware of being radically modern, but they also felt alienated from the modern scene. Their attempts for innovation were an effort to save the elite culture of the past against the meaningless of the present. The first great work that can be called an example of American modernism is Eliot's *Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, which appeared in 1915. In the poem, a suffocating sense of sexual panic haunts Prufrock, whose awareness of his own moral and emotional emptiness is what redeems his purposeless life.

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The development in industrial and technological advancement of nineteenth century also aided in the rise of modernism. In his book, *The condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey defines modernism as 'the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is the one-half art, the other being the eternal and the immutable'. It is interesting to know that this definition comes from Baudelaire's essay, *The Painter of Modern Life*. Harvey highlights the 'paradoxical unity' of this definition. The modernist movement of America conveyed a rigid and short-lived aspect of both cultural and political turmoil. Most of the writers who became modernist writers had already published their works before the beginning of the war in 1914. In this sense, modernism becomes a pre-war movement. However, a movement like modernism required 'the desperate convulsion of the great struggle, the crashing of regimes it precipitated, to give [it] the radical political dimension it had hitherto lacked'.

In general, modernism grew out of the ideas and philosophy of Enlightenment, but it was the premise on which modernism developed that made it reject its ties with any historical trend or movement or philosophy. Harvey says that 'modernity can have no respect even for its own past...', and that the only way modernism can find itself to be meaningful is by adopting the meaning materialized within the vortex of change. The basic idea of the Enlightenment philosophers was to work 'freely and creatively for the pursuit of human emancipation and enrichment of daily life'. The modernists during the early phase of the movement adopted this optimistic ideal of the Enlightenment, like the progressive attitude, break from the past, adoption of what seems fleeting and is transitory in nature, and the idea of innovation in change. However, as the war progressed, it scared these optimistic ideals of the early modernists.

As the socialist governments emerged in various nations out of the shadows of war, modernism became very cautious of the 'relation between means and ends'. With its principle of rejecting the history and the past, it developed the idea of 'creative destruction', which simply suggests that the old must be abandoned or destroyed if something innovative or new has to be created. The idea of 'creative destruction', or at least a major part of it, was first reflected in the cubist movement of early twentieth century. Breaking ties with the past made the modernists adopt modern technology in their writings and arts. They began to see language as a mechanism designed to perform human communication. They embraced and were influenced by many contemporary advances in technology, medicine and psychology, and philosophy. Theories of Sigmund Freud and Ernst Mach greatly influenced early literature of modernist period.

As modernism developed as a movement, art and literature became the part of established elite and modernism began to be institutionalized, a situation from which it initially intended to break away. Modernism slowly transformed into what it derided—an institutionalized movement that instead of embracing the transitory nature of the art and literature started to form rigid rules and principles. It was this transformation that made modernism lose its revolutionary appeal. Within such a context in the 1960s, anti-modernistic views began to develop that became the harbinger of postmodernism in America.

Modernism in America addressed a wide range of topics and issues like race, gender roles, sexuality, consciousness, and most importantly the idea of unconscious. In America, modernism reached at its peak between 1920s and 1940s. Some of the most celebrated American modernist writers include Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Scott Fitzgerald and Walt Whitman. Though Whitman is considered as a romantic poet, but at times he is also regarded as the pioneer of the modernism in America.

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After the First World War, psychological war wound became quite a common phenomenon, and is well reflected in the literature of the time. Many American and English writers explored the wounds left on the people's psyche by the war. The beginning of 1930s saw a huge economic crisis in America, the influence of which can also be seen in American modernist writings, such as *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. Another issue that the modernist American writings dealt with is the loss of self and need to define oneself. As urbanization and industrialization grew, the workers faded into the background of the city life stuffed with chaotic industries and machineries. The workers of this period felt an immense requirement to define themselves as human and not just another peg in the vast machine structure. Writers active within the framework of American modernism echoed this idea of building of the self, a theme which has been very well illustrated in Fitzgerald's masterpiece *The Great Gatsby*.

Another important theme modernist writers emphasized the most was madness and the ways in which it manifests. Some of the brilliant examples of this theme in American writing are Eugene O'Neill's play *The Emperor Jones*, Faulkner's *That Evening Sun* and Hemingway's *The Battler*. Though all these themes may appear to be pessimistic and depressing, they were the reality of first half of the twentieth century, which was scarred by the devastation of two most destructive wars of human history. Nevertheless, these themes and depressing aspects of modernism caused new hope and aspirations to arise, and soon a search began for a new and fresh beginning not only for the people, but also for the characters in modernist American fiction.

Another important aspect of modernism was the changes it brought in the perceived gender roles, especially the assumed roles of women in society. Many of the modernist literature documents mirrors the change in the assumed gender role in the social context. Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* deals with the themes like gender interaction in a mundane social situation.

Another important aspect of American modernism was the relationship between the two races, black and white. Many American writers and novels dealt with the tension or the gap between what was an assumed situation of the two races in context of each other and the reality in which they lived with prejudices and biases. Most of American modernist writers like Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Faulkner, Hemingway and O'Neill explored the race relation in their writings. Many of the modernist fictions continued to show blacks as a stereotypes dangerous, uneducated and uncivilized. However, some stories, like Hemingway's *The Battler* turned these stereotypes upside down by portraying a black African-American character as kind, calculated and polite, and who is noticeable since his first appearance in the story because of his good manners and carefully selected words.

While talking about the American modernism in literature, it is important to mention the contribution of the African-American writers, for they not only contributed to literature but also did much to elevate the self-esteem of the African Americans. Poets like Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes composed poems with folk orientations. They celebrated an optimistic view of the life in spite of the hardship that pervaded African-Americans' life in early twentieth century America. These poems offer a deep insight into the cultural identity and folk tradition of African Americans. Even white writers like Toomer and Faulkner also explored themes of cultural insight and folklore in their respective novels, *Blood-Burning Blood* and *That Evening Sun*.

After the First World War, a group of American thinkers and writers known as the Lost Generation became synonymous with the idea of modernism. After the first

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war ended, many American writers started living abroad in order to pursue their creative goals. Among these were writer and intellectual Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, and the famous painter Waldo Pierce. The term Lost Generation reflects the spiritual and existential hangover left by the destructions caused by the four years of cruel and devastating war. In this wake of chaos, the artists of Lost Generation attempted to find some meaning in the world. One way to do this for these artists and writers was to look inside and capture the ways in which consciousness works, which was also a signature characteristic of the modernism as a literary movement. Hemingway tried to achieve this by abandoning the stylistic and ornamental language.

Hemingway's novels are blunt in style and contain simple and straightforward sentence structure with any hidden meanings. However, his bluntness and simple sentence structure are not without irony, for the characters in his novels always have hidden motives and agendas which become the guiding force for their actions. Like the other prominent modernist of the time, the figures associated with the Lost Generation abandoned the idea that it is possible to completely know anything. Reality, for them, became relative and conditional. The only truth was the transient nature of the world. The First World War had already showed them that the world, the outside reality is not governed by any guiding spirit.

The novel as a genre saw a huge transformation because of the self-conscious and reflective impulses of modernism. A new type of narration was introduced to the novel and it soon changed every single aspect of the novel as a genre. The omniscient narrator which was so characteristic of the previous century novels was replaced by the unreliable narrator, stressing the idea that it is impossible to know anything completely and truly. The emergence of unreliable narrator compelled the readers to question even the most basic and fundamental assumptions regarding the way a novel should and must operate. Capturing the workings of mind and consciousness became a new technique at the hands of geniuses like Joyce and Woolf. Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), one of the most celebrated modernist text, is a supreme example of the narrative technique which became famous as the stream of consciousness, and which attempts to capture the fleeting nature of human mind. Instead of capturing the outside world, the great modernist writers attempted to capture the inner complexity and intricacies of human consciousness. It was also the time of Psychoanalytical theories of Sigmund Freud, in which he questioned the autonomy of human consciousness. The amalgamation of these two intellectual forces forever changed the fundamental understanding of people regarding reality and truth.

Another defining characteristic of modernist literature was experimentation with the genre and form. The prime example of the manifestation of this urge for experimentation is T. S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (1922). Many critics consider this poem as the most suitable example of modernist poetry. The poem is full of references, which even the most well-read readers found frustrating. The poem is not an attempt to escape from the shocking reality of the world; instead it exposes these realities and darkness. The poem engages with the idea of self and inwardness and exposes moral and spiritual barrenness of modern life, and presents reality in the state of flux.

The alienation and cynical perspective that became so characteristic of modernism could persist for long. By the middle of the twentieth century, many voices and idea began to emerge that challenged the basic views of modernism. After the Second World War, the democratic ideals emerged as a winner over fascism of Germany and Italy. For the first time in a long period, there was a sense of hope and optimism. The elitism of

modernism began to fade and commercialized and popular literature began to be appreciated. The audiences who indulged in such literature were not shunned and looked at with contempt. Moreover, the ideas and principles that later came to be known as postmodernism started to emerge. However, this does not mean that the effects of modernism completely disappeared, for modernism as a movement and the intellectuals and writers associated with it changed the basic understanding of truth and reality, and changed it for good.

## NOTES

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

10. What were the different movements that came to define the modern age?
11. In this age, what was the common feeling among American writers?

## 1.6 LITERATURE FROM 1945 TO THE PRESENT DAY

In this section, we will discuss the emergence and significance of poetry from 1945 to the present day.

### 1.6.1 Poetry

By the end of the Second World War, T. S. Eliot emerged as a literary dictator. According to Peter Conn, there was no sense of equality in the modernist canon of 1958. By this time, it had become a hierarchical structure with Eliot enjoying the top most position of extreme power and eminence. The theoretical foundations of modernism as a movement were explored by John Crowe Ransom in *Poetry* and Allen Tate in *Tension in Poetry*. By the end of the first decade of the second half of the twentieth century, the *New Criticism* under the leadership of Eliot had forged a kind of hegemony that dictated the standards for most of the Academic and literary sections of America.

Poets such as John Berryman, Randal Farrell, Robert Lowell, Theodore Roethke, Karl Shapiro and Schwartz emerged as the prominent poets in the middle of the twentieth century. Robert Lowell termed his school of poetry as confessional school of poetry. The third generation of American poets of twentieth century include James Merrill, W. I. Merwin, Adrianna Rich, Peter Viereck and Richard Wilbur. New Criticism used *The Kenyon Review* and the *Sewanee Review* as its weapon to enforce and maintain its hegemony. Charles Olson used Projective Verse to make his contribution in the poetry of the age. The emergence of beat generation of poetry began with the publication of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. Drugs and other experience of extreme nature became common amongst the poets and artists of this generation who sought to transcend the ordinary experiences into visual consciousness. The beat poets were anti traditional poets who experimented with the combination of mystical with political and psychological aspect of human consciousness. Unlike the beat poets, confessional poetry had a great and influencing impact on the poetry of the time. Women poets welcomed this school of poetry, for it gave them an adequate medium to record their personal experiences with artistic candour.

Another school of poetry that flourished in America was the Black Mountain Poets. The poets associated with this group criticized the western tradition of art as a

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form of mimesis. The poets of New York School, which include John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara and James Schuyler were most self-conscious and t programmatic poets of the period. The counter-culture prominent in 1970s and '80s continued with some of these trends of poetry.

### 1.6.2 Drama

The most 1.7.2 Dramafamous and prominent practitioner of American drama at the beginning of the twentieth century was Eugene O'Neill. Playwrights such as Philip Barry, S. N. Behrman, Rachael Gothers, George Kelly and Robert Sherwood followed O'Neill's brand of theatre. The next prominent playwright to emerge was Tennessee Williams. Some of his famous plays include *The Glass Menagerie* and *The Street Car Named Desire*. These plays when staged revolutionized the American drama. Williams retired after his last play *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*. The third crucial figure to emerge in American theatre in the twentieth century was Arthur Miller. His powerful plays with traditional narrative themes did in the middle of the twentieth century what O'Neill's plays did at the beginning. Miller wrote twenty plays, amongst which *All My Sons*, *Death of a Salesman* and the *Crucible* are considered to be his best. Amongst women playwrights, the most recognized names are Beth Henley, Tina Howe, Marsha Norman and Adele Shank.

In the second half of the twentieth century, a large number of playwrights emerged as great talents, but this period has a less number of memorable plays. As the African Americans entered the American theatre, the subjects and themes of theatre became more versatile and diverse and, therefore, classification of any kind is almost impossible during this period of American theatre. One of the most prominent and powerful African-American playwright to emerge during this period was Amiri Baraka. His play *Dutchman* is considered to be violent and yet a powerful play.

With other post war literary genres, the theatre shared a sense of alienation and internal division, which unfortunately had become a reality of the late twentieth century. *The American Dream*, *The Zoo Story* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* by Edward Albee successfully captured the American domestic and national scene on the stage. A number of women playwrights also emerged in the American theatre partly because of their talent as playwrights and partly because of the amalgamation of art and ideology that has revolutionized the idea of self-definition across the minority groups in the American society. This also resulted in various minority groups such as Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Indians and homosexuals, reinforcing their demand for equality thorough the engagement of theatre with its audience.

### 1.6.3 Fiction

In his *A Gathering of Fugitives* (1956), Lionel Trilling comments: 'The novelist, in his ideal character, is the artist who is consumed by the desire to know how things really are; who has entered into an elaborate romance with actuality. He is the artist of the conditioned, of the impingement of things upon spirit and of spirit upon things and the success of his enterprise depends as much upon his awareness of things as upon his awareness of spirit.' In his *An End of Innocence* (1955), Lesli Fielder writes, 'Even now, the writers of many other countries begin to stand to their own past in a relation as uneasy as our and in our novel they find raised nakedly at last the question that underlay the experimentation of the twenties, the social consciousness of the thirties, the search for formal security of the forties. Can the lonely individual, unsustained by tradition in an



atomized society, achieve a poetry adult and complicated enough to be the consciousness of its age? To have posed that question for the world is the achievement of the American novel at the moment.'

These observations can fiction as a basic guide for us to study the American fiction after the end of the Second World War. Jean Paul Sartre, the famous French philosopher of the mid twentieth century, rightly assessed that the 'Empire of signs is prose'. It is true that the First World War caused a crisis of language. Sartre observed that the Second World War revolutionized it. The modernism of the first half of the century had successfully challenged literary tradition of realism and had attempted to capture the chaotic essence of the world after the first war. In France, Sartre along with Albert Camus attempted to take the novel towards the existential reality. In Britain, F. R. Leavis in his *The Great Tradition* (1948) offered the insight that social and moral realism has always been the central lineage of English novels. A similar sentiment was conveyed by Lionel Trilling's influential essay *The Liberal Inauguration* (1955). In the post second world war period, the novel emerged as a quest for reality. It is important to keep in mind that Richard Chase's *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957) and Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) claimed the lack of tradition in the American novel.

By the time the third generation of American writers appeared in 1950s, older writers like Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos and Steinbeck had already established an experimental tradition of American fiction. Some of the important writers of this period in American fiction are Vladimir Nabokov (he had migrated to America in 1940), Robert Penn Warren, Bernard Malamud, Saul Bellow, Mary McCarthy, Norman Miller, John Updike, John Barth, J. D. Salinger and Cynthia Ozick. The themes of the work that these writers produced had a sense of disorientation towards the society. Their distance from rigid social structures and their metaphysical concern for this distance made them categorize this brand of fiction as post-modernist.

Arthur M. Schlesinger, in his *Vital Centre* writes: 'Today, finally and tardily, the skeptical insights are in process of restoration to the liberal mind. The psychology of Freud has renewed the intellectuals' belief in the dark, slumbering forces of the will. The Theology of Barth and Niebuhr has given a new power to old and chastening truths of Christianity. More than anything else, the raise of Hitler and Stalin has revealed in terms no one deny the awful reality of human impulses toward aggrandizement and destruction.'

A historical tension is apparent in the American fiction produced between the end of the second war and second decade of the second half of the century. In this tension, one can see opposite claims of resistance and engagement, accommodation and alienation, isolated self and social system, and an attempt to make existential sense of one's life against process of history. The American novels that appeared after 1945 was remarkably different from the novels that preceded the Second World War in the sense that the former completely abandoned the large mythical landscapes and pastoral description, which were still powerfully present in the American fictions of modernism. Bellow in his first novel *Dangling Man* (1944) narrates the story of a man with no aim, who is awaits his induction in the army. His other novels more or less deal with the similar themes.

The American writers who appeared next on American literary scene like John Cheever, John Updike, Mary McCarthy and Alison Lurie attempted to restore the tradition that realism had earlier abandoned. In 1960s, a group of writers emerged who were known as 'The Silent Generation'. The well-known writers of this group include John Barth, Richard Brautigan, Robert Coover and Ishmael Reed.

## NOTES

## NOTES

Many of the memorable novels of the second half of the twentieth century have been written by the writers belonging to the minority or ethnic group. This period is also notable for a wide range of talented African-American writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin and Richard Wright.

There is no doubt that the contemporary literary scene of America includes writers from various race, ethnic groups and religions. The diversity of it offers a possibility of the expansion of such lists and categorization, but only time will tell which of the writers who are active today will emerge to be the major literary figures in the American literary cannon.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

12. Name the figures who dominated poetry and drama during the mid-twentieth century?
13. During this period, what was unique about American fiction?
14. What were the American writers of the 1960s known as?

### ACTIVITY

Read the poetry of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. You may compare your notes and ideas with your colleagues.

### DID YOU KNOW

Toni Morrison, the most recent American recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, writing in a distinctive lyrical prose style, published her controversial debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, to widespread critical acclaim in 1970. Coming on the heels of the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1965, the novel, widely studied in American schools, includes an elaborate description of incestuous rape and explores the conventions of beauty established by a historically racist society, painting a portrait of a self-immolating black family in search of beauty in whiteness.

## 1.8 SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt that:

- The New World was colonized in the 1500s by the English, French and Spanish.
- The age of exploration opened new avenues and Europeans in large number settled in America.
- It cannot be denied that during the first-century of English Settlement, most of the literary achievements were from the Puritans. They were the most literate of the English Colonists and were committed.

## NOTES

- Generally speaking, the Puritans and the Yankees were the two halves of the New England.
- The Puritans were a contribution of the Old World created by the rugged idealism of the English Reformation; while the Yankees were a product of native conditions created by practical economics. Puritans immigrants were the children of two different centuries.
- The journey to creating American was a slow and gradual one. The cultural history of the next several generations is essentially a story of adaptation, as imported ideas and material forms were altered under the pressure of America's different conditions.
- From 1760s onward, literary and cultural aspirations were linked to the revolution of politics.
- Poetry was also pressed into the service of nationalism. Franklin was the first American to abandon the traditional mercantile school before other American thinkers abandoned it. He was the first to accept the school of laissez faire.
- After the American Revolution, America emerged as a new nation from its colonial status.
- Among the literary nationalists in the late eighteenth century, we have the poets and essayists known as Connecticut Wits.
- In the three generation from independence to the civil war, America expanded its geographical boundaries at a breathtaking rate.
- The period from 1775–1828 was known as the Early National Period ending with the triumph of Jacksonian democracy in 1828, which signalled the emergence of a national imaginative literature.
- The period from 1828–1865 is often identified as the Romantic Period in America. This period is sometimes also known as the American Renaissance.
- Through the period of 1865–1914, the bloody Civil War was followed by a burgeoning industrialism and urbanization in the north that profoundly altered the American sense of itself and also American literary modes. The period from 1865–1900 is often known as the Realistic Period.
- America's increasing economic and technological expansion necessitated a continual broadening and intensifying of contacts with the world culture and with movements of thoughts that were initiated and developed elsewhere.
- It is very difficult to separate realism and regionalism.
- According to French aesthetic theory, realism designated as an art based on accurate, unromanticized observation of life and nature.
- Realism as understood from the works of Whitman, Hawthorne, Stowe and Melville adds a democratic openness in subject matter and style that breaks down rigid hierarchies even as it may indulge in imaginative disorder or utopian fantasy in order to probe the limits of a prevailing social and political reality.
- Whatever be our definition of realism, it does have an anthropological dimension in which new regions are opened to fictional or journalistic exploration and analysis.
- American literary naturalism was associated with continental licentiousness and impiety and was regarded as a literature foreign to American values and interests.

## NOTES

- The first dime novel was written by Ann S. Stephens, named *The Indian Wife of the White Hunter* (1860).
- The spirit of renewal that breathed through American politics and philosophy in the early twentieth century and influenced literature and the other arts as well.
- Cubism, fauvism, vorticism, constructivism and futurism competed with each other.
- Modernism constituted a concentrated attack on received artistic traditions. It had its origin in Europe. However, Americans played decisive roles as well.
- The era between the two world wars, marked also by the trauma of the great economic depression beginning in 1929, was that of the emergence of what is known as Modern Literature.
- T. S. Eliot became one of the most important literary figures in the world from 1945.
- Twentieth Century Drama had Eugene O'Neill as its pioneer.
- The War of 1914 precipitated a crisis of language.
- According to Sartre, the war of 1940 had revolutionized it. Half a century of modernism had challenged the tradition of literary realism and spoken of a crisis of the word.

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### 1.9 KEY TERMS

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- **Scourge:** It means to blight.
- **Exodus:** It means mass departure.
- **Rhetoric:** It means style of oratory.
- **Elegy:** It means a poem of serious reflection, especially a lament for the deceased.
- **Heretical:** It means profane.
- **Seditious:** It means subversive.
- **Antinomian:** It is a belief that Christians are released by grace from the obligation of observing the moral law.
- **Muckracking:** It refers to the search and exposure of misconduct in public life.
- **Knickerbocker:** It refers to an obsolete term for New Yorkers.
- **Avant-garde:** It refers to new (often experimental) ideas in art and literature (now extended to fashion and lifestyle).

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### 1.10 ANSWERS TO 'CHECK YOUR PROGRESS'

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1. During the first-century of English Settlement, most of the literary achievements were from the Puritans.
2. William Bradford was the first historian of the New England.
3. The New World offers images of peace and plenty. America was to be a modern society, a nation of yeomen farmers bonded together by the silken bond of a mild government.

## NOTES

4. Washington Irving was the first Knickerbocker writer in America to earn an international reputation.
5. The French aesthetic theory of realism designated an art based on accurate and unromanticized observation of life and nature.
6. Realism as understood from the works of Whitman, Hawthorne, Stowe and Melville adds a democratic openness in subject matter and style that breaks down rigid hierarchies even as it may indulge in imaginative disorder or utopian fantasy in order to probe the limits of a prevailing social and political reality.
7. American literary naturalism in its early years was associated with continental licentiousness and impiety and was regarded as a literature foreign to American values and interests.
8. Literary naturalism has been narrowly identified with the phrase 'pessimistic determinism'.
9. Dime novels were a kind of inexpensive melodramatic adventure novels, with often western themes, popular in America from 1860 to 1915, and were published usually with paperback.
10. The different movements that came to define the modern age include cubism, fauvism, vorticism, constructivism and futurism.
11. Many prominent American writers of the decade following the end of World War I, disillusioned by their war experiences, were alienated by what they perceived as the crassness of American culture and its puritanical repressions.
12. T. S. Eliot dominated poetry while Eugene O'Neill dominated drama in the twentieth century.
13. The American fiction of this period from the end of the war to 1960s showed a sense of distinctive historical tension, in which the contrary claims of opposition and engagement, alienation and accommodation, an isolated self and a massed social system and a comically absurd individual struggling to make existential sense of an anarchic and terrible process of history. The American novel that developed after 1945 was in many ways different from the work of its immediate predecessors in its breakaway from the large mythic landscapes and pastoralizing tendencies that had much power even in the novel of American modernism.
14. The American writers of the 1960s were known as 'The Silent Generation'.

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## 1.11 QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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### Short-Answer Questions

1. Write a short note on the meaning of the New World.
2. Who were the Knickerbocker writers in America in the early days?
3. Briefly describe the concept of the Dime novel.
4. Name the important literary figures of modernism.
5. Identify the distinct features of a novel in the modern era.

## NOTES

### Long-Answer Questions

1. Write an overview of the colonial experience and the early days of the New English settlement.
2. Give a critical analysis of the meaning and significance of realism in America.
3. Discuss the emergence of modernism in literature.
4. Highlight T. S. Eliot's contribution to Modern literature.
5. Discuss the contributions of O'Neill and Williams to the American stage.

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### 1.12 FURTHER READING

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Hacker, L. M., Helene S Zahler ed. *The Shaping of American Tradition*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1947.

Bigsby, C. W. E. *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama* (2 vols.). New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Modern Critical Views: Robert Frost*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.

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# UNIT 2 POETRY BY WALT WHITMAN AND ROBERT FROST

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## NOTES

### Structure

- 2.0 Introduction
- 2.1 Unit Objectives
- 2.2 Walt Whitman: A Brief Biographical Sketch
- 2.3 Critical Appreciation of Song of Myself
  - 2.3.1 Song of Myself 1
  - 2.3.2 Song of Myself 5
  - 2.3.3 Song of Myself 6
  - 2.3.4 Song of Myself 20
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  - 2.3.6 Song of Myself 32
  - 2.3.7 Song of Myself 50
  - 2.3.8 Song of Myself 52
- 2.4 Introduction to Robert Frost
  - 2.4.1 Personal life
  - 2.4.2 Life and Works of Robert Frost
  - 2.4.3 Frost's Contribution to American Poetry
- 2.5 Mending Wall: Text and Analysis
- 2.6 The Road Not Taken: Text and Analysis
- 2.7 After Apple-Picking: Text and Analysis
- 2.8 Summary
- 2.9 Key Terms
- 2.10 Answers to 'Check Your Progress'
- 2.11 Questions and Exercises
- 2.12 Further Reading

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## 2.0 INTRODUCTION

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Walt Whitman and Robert Frost can be considered poets of the people who developed their verse with the intention of making it accessible to a vast audience. Both Whitman and Frost also studied different facets of nature in their poetry. The major difference in the traditions of the two poets is the way they perceived the world. Whitman was a celebratory poet who praised himself, America and all of life. In contrast, Frost believed that life was a tragedy and adopted a philosophical stance in his poetry. His pessimistic outlook clashes with Whitman's optimistic attitude.

*Song of Myself* is considered to be one of Walt Whitman's most popular works. It is a part of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* comprising twelve original pieces by the poet, published in 1855. After its first publication, this ninety-five page long work was revised by Whitman. The final version is supposedly the one created by him in 1881. This was when the collection got its present name of *Song of Myself*. Before this, the collection was titled *Poem of Walt Whitman, An American*. In a couple of editions (1871, 1861 and 1860), it was even titled *Walt Whitman*.

*Song of Myself* is a blend of poetic meditations, sermons as well as biography. The poet uses commentary and symbolism to present issues of importance. The poem

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does not consist of lists. It comprises vignettes where Whitman's thoughts are displayed through scenes that are short, accurate and precise.

The change in the title of the poem gives us an insight into the personality of Walt Whitman. This piece of writing seems to suggest that as an individual, Whitman melted and merged into the abstract 'Myself'. The poem tries to explore the interaction between people. He begins with the argument that 'what I assume you shall assume'. By saying so, the poet tries to establish that he encompasses the universe and is an indistinguishable part of it.

The poem seems to follow the pattern of a quest. He tells the readers:

*Missing me one place search another,*

*I stop somewhere waiting for you.*

Robert Frost was the most popular American poet of the twentieth century. He holds a unique position in American literature as he stands at the crossroads of nineteenth-century American poetry and modernism. His verse suggests a unique mix of many nineteenth-century tendencies and traditions and modernist tendencies of his twentieth-century contemporaries.

In this unit, we will discuss the life, contributions and important works of Walt Whitman and Robert Frost. The unit will also critically analyse the prescribed poetries of the poets.

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## 2.1 UNIT OBJECTIVES

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

- Explain the important aspects of Walt Whitman biography
- Identify the important works of Whitman
- Describe the life and works of Robert Frost
- Critically analyse the prescribed poetries of Whitman and Frost

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## 2.2 WALT WHITMAN: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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Walt Whitman was born in 1819 in Long Island. Although he was trained to be a printer in his formative years, he became a teacher. Finally, he took up journalism and became an editor. However, his radical views brought him lots of negative popularity and made him unsuccessful. After travelling to the South in 1848, he discovered the varied hues of his country and began writing poetry on his return to New York.

In 1855, he published by himself the first edition of his poetry collection, *Leaves of Grass*. It had only twelve poems at that time. This volume did not get the attention he expected. However, he did get congratulated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American essayist, lecturer and poet, who wrote him a letter offering his greetings at the beginning of a 'great career'. Soon after, Whitman published another edition of *Leaves of Grass*. This time, he added about twenty poems and also included the letter from Emerson. In 1860, Whitman came up with another edition, somewhat larger, comprising some 156 poems, brought out by a trade publisher.





Walt Whitman

## NOTES

### Some interesting facts about *Leaves of Grass*

- *Leaves of Grass* plays a prominent role in the AMC TV series *Breaking Bad*. For example, episode 5.8—titled ‘Gliding Over All’ after poem 271 in the book—pulls together many of the series’ references to *Leaves of Grass*, including the fact, noted in episode 4.4, ‘Bullet Points’ and made more salient in ‘Gliding Over All’, that the main character, Walter White, shares Walt Whitman’s initials. Numerous reviewers have analysed and discussed the various connections among Walt Whitman/*Leaves of Grass*’ ‘Gliding Over All’, the character Walter White, and the show *Breaking Bad*.
- A 2010 comedy film starring Edward Norton takes its title from the book.
- *Leaves of Grass* is cited in the film *With Honors* starring Joe Pesci, Brandon Fraser and Patrick Dempsey.
- *Leaves of Grass* is cited in the film *Reds* starring Warren Beatty, Diane Keaton and Jack Nicholson. In an important scene in the film, John Reed (the real-life revolutionary), played by Beatty, discovers a love letter between his wife, Louise Bryant (Keaton), and the playwright Eugene O’Neill (Nicholson), inserted in the Whitman poem. The fight that ensues leads to their separation.
- *Leaves of Grass* is mentioned in the film *Howl* starring James Franco, Todd Rotondi and Jon Prescott.
- *Leaves of Grass* is mentioned in the film *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love*, starring Laurel Holloman and Nicole Ari Parker.
- *Leaves of Grass* plays a major role in the John Green novel *Paper Towns*.
- The song Another Try by America mentions *Leaves of Grass*.
- President Bill Clinton gave copies of *Leaves of Grass* to both Hillary Clinton and Monica Lewinsky.
- Verses from *Leaves of Grass* are quoted in Counterparts’ song Carpe Diem on the 2010 album *Prophets*.
- The 1989 film *Dead Poets Society* makes repeated references to the poem *O Captain! My Captain!* from *Leaves of Grass*, along with other references to Whitman himself.

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### Important works of Whitman

- **Franklin Evans (1842):** *Franklin Evans or The Inebriate: A Tale of the Times*, the only novel ever written by Walt Whitman, is the rag-to-riches story of Franklin Evans. Franklin Evans starts as an innocent young man, leaving Long Island to come to New York City to avail the opportunities offered by the city and to improve his life. Being young and naïve, he is easily influenced by someone whom he befriended (Colby) and eventually becomes a drunkard. He tries many times to abstain from alcohol but does not succeed until after the death of his two wives. Franklin Evans takes you through a journey of a young man living and learning through his mistakes, picking up life lessons along the way.
- **Leaves of Grass (1855):** *Leaves of Grass* is a poetry collection by Walt Whitman. Though the first edition was published in 1855, Whitman spent his entire life writing *Leaves of Grass*, revising it in several editions until his death. Among the poems in the collection are: *Song of Myself*, *I Sing the Body Electric*, *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking*, and in later editions, Whitman's elegy to the assassinated President Abraham Lincoln, *When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd*.
- **Drum-Taps (1865):** Whitman's *Drum-Taps* is a collection of poetry, which is a sequence of forty-three poems about the Civil War and stands as the finest war poetry written by an American. Within the first group of poems, Whitman expresses both exuberance and doubts in regard to the imminent conflict. Both Lincoln and Whitman had a like-minded philosophy that the sole objective of the war was to preserve the 'more perfect union'. Lincoln often expressed this belief and stated that the issue of slavery should be and only would be addressed if it contributed to this preservation. Poems in this first section, such as *First O Songs for a Prelude*, demonstrate this vociferous Unionist pride. Besides this poem, others like it, such as *Song of the Banner at Daybreak*, serve as a rally cry for the Northern population. These poems also reveal Whitman's belief that this war is a good event for America's principles. He deems that these principles could be taken for granted and would eventually be declined without any disagreement and threat to society. Nevertheless, Whitman also knew that war brings distress along with it. He conveys this through the poem *The Centenarian's Story*. In this poem, a veteran, belonging to the campaign of Washington's Revolutionary War, remembers a helper from the Civil War, who was an epitome of bravery and heroism. The veteran admires watching such men willingly taking charge of dangerous situations and also remembers watching the slaughter of a large section of this mass.
- **Memoranda During the War (1875):** This work is considered within the historical framework of several nursing narratives that flourished during the Civil War. However, although the *Memoranda* is like an autobiographical writing about the war, it is not completely a nursing narrative as it also focuses on the other facets of the war. In this work, Whitman stated that 'the real war will never get into the books'. He urged his readers to 'think how much, and of importance, will be—how much civic and military, has already been—buried in the grave, in eternal darkness'.
- **Specimen Days (1882):** The book *Specimen Days* was first published in a volume named *Specimen Days & Collect* by Rees Welsh and Company in Philadelphia. The book, written in 1881, was significantly taken from essays, notes and sketches, as written by the author in various stages of his life during the Civil War. It strongly resembles a conventional autobiography ever published by Whitman. The book is a major source of information about the poet's experiences in the Civil War.

- **Democratic Vistas (1871):** *Democratic Vistas* is an important work of Whitman which focuses on his comparative politics and the letters written by him. The work demonstrates the poet's discouragement at what he saw in America. He strongly criticizes the values, culture and American politics, which was partially the result of the cynicism that existed after the Civil War. In his work, Whitman criticizes *Shooting Niagara—and After* by Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle and other literary works. He also remarks on the Industrial Revolution and the prototypes of Modernism, which opted for rationality and restraint instead of feelings and emotions.

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At the beginning of the Civil War, Whitman voluntarily served as a nurse in army hospitals. He even wrote dispatches as a correspondent for the *New York Times*. During this period, he wrote poetry inspired by the war. It was published in 1865 as *Drum-Taps*, which was then included in the 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. *Sequel* was another war-related volume, which included poems about Lincoln's murder.

Whitman's wartime work led him to a job as a clerk with the United States Department of the Interior, but he soon lost the job when his supervisor learned that he was the creative mind behind *Leaves of Grass*. When the Reconstruction era failed, he ended up writing the best known of his prose works, *Democratic Vistas*. This work was an argument in favour of maintaining democratic ideals. After another set of prose, there came a further expanded version of *Leaves of Grass* in 1881.

Whitman's health had begun deteriorating in the mid-1870s, and by 1891, it was known to everyone that it was a losing battle for him. Therefore, he prepared the *Deathbed* edition of *Leaves of Grass*, comprising two appendices of old-age poems along with a review essay wherein he attempts a justification of his life and works. This edition appeared in 1892, the same year in which he died.

During his life, Whitman witnessed the Civil War and saw how the US emerged as a commercial and political power. He was witness to the peak time of slavery as well as its abolition. Therefore, his poetry is centred on democratic ideas as well as ideas of equality and brotherhood. Realizing America's new-found strong position in the world, Walt Whitman attempted to develop poetry that was typically American and unique so that it reduced the load of its predecessors.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. When was Walt Whitman born? When did he publish the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*?
2. Identify the themes covered in his poetry.

## 2.3 CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF SONG OF MYSELF

### 2.3.1 *Song of Myself 1*

The collection of poems, *Leaves of Grass*, has never stopped puzzling readers and critics. It enthralls, inspires and also poses many questions. The symbolism and imagery

in the poem have led critics to try and find out how they reflect Walt Whitman's life. It was believed that Whitman had expressed and explored various aspects of his personality in the poem.

## NOTES

I

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,  
And what I assume you shall assume,  
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

*I loafe and invite my soul,  
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass.*

*My tongue, every atom of my blood, form'd from this soil, this air,  
Born here of parents born here from parents the same,  
and their parents the same,  
I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,  
Hoping to cease not till death.*

*Creeds and schools in abeyance,  
Retiring back a while sufficed at what they are, but never forgotten,  
I harbor for good or bad, I permit to speak at every hazard,  
Nature without check with original energy.*

### Explanation

The poet celebrates his own self in this poem. Whatever he says he will do in the poem, is what he actually does. Whitman not only celebrates himself but also humanity.

He guides the readers through the poem, giving them instructions. The reader is expected to believe all that the poet believes, and at a different level, the reader is expected to assume whatever role the poet wishes. To the purpose of celebration, the poet does not withhold; he even offers his smallest bodily denomination, 'every atom' to the reader and mankind. The poem has the soul of the poet or speaker. The poet and the soul are treated as two separate entities.

These lines display Whitman's love for democracy. In fact, he believes in the power of an individual. He also expresses his desire not only to celebrate his life and his own self but mankind as well. At the same time, the poet talks about equality, a basic principle of democracy. He emphasizes on the fact that we all belong to the same democratic society and that is what brings us closer to each other. In other words, Whitman through his poetry, attempts to unite people in art. Whitman does not wish to alienate himself from the rest; he believes in growing up together. He observes the summer grass in leisure, which inspires him to mull over some remarkable facts of his own life.

Furthermore, he brings out the details about his origin, his very conception. The poet certainly has an unwavering belief in patriotism as he feels that he owes a lot to his motherland. He refers to his ancestors who originally belonged to America. He hopes to remain lively and energetic till his last breath. He believes in the revival and regeneration of antiquated ideas and invokes the forces of nature. Finally, he highlights the power of speech that would enable him to move to achieve higher goals in life.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

3. 'I celebrate myself . . . original energy'. What do these lines exhibit?
4. What according to Whitman brings us closer to each other?

## NOTES

### 2.3.2 Song of Myself 5

*I believe in you my soul, the other I am must not abase itself to you,  
And you must not be abased to the other.*

*Loafe with me on the grass, loose the stop from your throat,  
Not words, not music or rhyme I want, not custom or lecture, not even the best,  
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valvèd voice.*

*I mind how once we lay such a transparent summer morning,  
How you settled your head athwart my hips and gently turn'd over upon me,  
And parted the shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged  
your tongue to my bare-stript heart,  
And reach'd till you felt my beard, and reach'd till you held my feet.*

*Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and knowledge  
that pass all the argument of the earth,  
And I know that the hand of God is the promise of my own,  
And I know that the spirit of God is the brother of my own,  
And that all the men ever born are also my brothers,  
and the women my sisters and lovers,  
And that a kelson of the creation is love,  
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,  
And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,  
And mossy scabs of the worm fence, heap'd stones, elder,  
mullein and poke-weed.*

### Explanation

The poet introduces the reader to his companion, that is, the soul. The faith in his soul does not waver and encapsulates his innermost desires and instincts. He believes that the spirit should be lifted and not be allowed to degenerate. He invites his soul to spend time with him in the literal and symbolic sense. His latent instincts are represented by his soul. His interaction with the soul brings him a lot of pleasure. This communion with the soul is figurative, and reveals the poet's erotic fantasies as well as narcissism. The oneness with the soul is symbolic of his yearning for eternal peace and joy. The imagery used here is not only concrete but also explicit as the poet refers to the 'soulful' kiss that he is entirely overwhelmed by. The kiss provides him a lot of satisfaction.

Here, it is worthwhile to note that pantheism is the religious belief that God manifests himself in everything in nature and in the universe. In these lines, Whitman expresses

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the same philosophy. He believes that God is present everywhere and that his presence can be felt everywhere. Once again, he refers to the other members of society as his brothers and sisters. Love, Whitman feels, is the essential force behind everything and it is love alone which leads to creation. He refers to the bounty of nature, the plethora of natural objects as well as creatures that are ubiquitous by their presence.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

5. What gives the poet immense pleasure?
6. Who is the companion the poet refers to?

#### 2.3.3 *Song of Myself 6*

*A child said What is the grass? fetching it to me with full hands;  
How could I answer the child? I do not know what it is any more than he.*

*I guess it must be the flag of my disposition, out of  
hopeful green stuff woven.*

*Or I guess it is the handkerchief of the Lord,*

*A scented gift and remembrancer designedly dropt,*

*Bearing the owner's name someway in the corners, that we may  
see and remark, and say Whose?*

*Or I guess the grass is itself a child, the produced babe of the vegetation.*

*Or I guess it is a uniform hieroglyphic,*

*And it means, Sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow zones,*

*Growing among black folks as among white,*

*Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff, I give them the same,  
I receive them the same.*

*And now it seems to me the beautiful uncut hair of graves.*

*Tenderly will I use you curling grass,*

*It may be you transpire from the breasts of young men,*

*It may be if I had known them I would have loved them,*

*It may be you are from old people, or from offspring taken  
soon out of their mothers' laps,*

*And here you are the mothers' laps.*

*This grass is very dark to be from the white heads of old mothers,*

*Darker than the colorless beards of old men,*

*Dark to come from under the faint red roofs of mouths.*

*O I perceive after all so many uttering tongues,  
And I perceive they do not come from the roofs of mouths for nothing.*

*I wish I could translate the hints about the dead young men and women,  
And the hints about old men and mothers, and the offspring  
taken soon out of their laps.*

*What do you think has become of the young and old men?  
And what do you think has become of the women and children?*

*They are alive and well somewhere,  
The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,  
And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,  
And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.*

*All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,  
And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier.*

### **Explanation**

A simple blade of grass which may bear no significance for many is an important source of life for the poet. He, however, finds it difficult to describe it even to a child. He describes it as a manifestation of God's sublime creation, which reminds us of His greatness and superiority. On another level, the poet compares the blade of grass to an offspring of vegetation which is not only essential but organic. The grass, which is available everywhere and is the same irrespective of where it grows, symbolizes equality of people and things.

The poet implies the ephemeral nature of human life by comparing it with 'uncut hair of grass'. It covers the bodies which have been buried for ages. Destruction is inevitable. Hence, as things perish, the soil absorbs it easily and gets covered by grass. Whitman fondly remembers the people whom he loved and the ones whom he had known for a long time. He feels that the grass is coming from the old or from the infants who, unfortunately, died soon after their birth. It might belong to old men and women and might have its roots in the mouth of the deceased. The grass itself is a powerful utterance of nature; a manifestation of its uniqueness. He wishes to be able to unravel the mystery behind the death of all these people though it is going to be a futile attempt. He has absolutely no idea about what has become of all of them. Perhaps they still have the remaining part of their existence which still permeates nature. The sprouting of a small blade of grass is symbolic of the immutability of the human soul as it is firmly believed that the soul actually never dies.

Death is not the end; it is the beginning. The cycle of death and regeneration continues and is perennial.

### **NOTES**

## NOTES

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

7. What does the poet have to say about death?
8. What does the poet try to convey through a blade of grass?

#### 2.3.4 *Song of Myself 20*

*Who goes there? hankering, gross, mystical, nude;  
How is it I extract strength from the beef I eat?*

*What is a man anyhow? what am I? what are you?*

*All I mark as my own you shall offset it with your own,  
Else it were time lost listening to me.*

*I do not snivel that snivel the world over,  
That months are vacuums and the ground but wallow and filth.*

*Whimpering and truckling fold with powders for invalids,  
conformity goes to the fourth-remov'd,  
I wear my hat as I please indoors or out.*

*Why should I pray? why should I venerate and be ceremonious?*

*Having pried through the strata, analyzed to a hair, counsel'd  
with doctors and calculated close,  
I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones.*

*In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barley-corn less,  
And the good or bad I say of myself I say of them.*

*I know I am solid and sound,  
To me the converging objects of the universe perpetually flow,  
All are written to me, and I must get what the writing means.*

*I know I am deathless,*



*I know this orbit of mine cannot be swept by a carpenter's compass,  
I know I shall not pass like a child's carlacue cut with a burnt stick at night.*

Poetry by Walt Whitman  
and Robert Frost

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*I know I am august,  
I do not trouble my spirit to vindicate itself or be understood,  
I see that the elementary laws never apologize,  
(I reckon I behave no prouder than the level I plant my house by, after all.)*

*I exist as I am, that is enough,  
If no other in the world be aware I sit content,  
And if each and all be aware I sit content.*

*One world is aware and by far the largest to me, and that is myself,  
And whether I come to my own to-day or in ten thousand or ten million years,  
I can cheerfully take it now, or with equal cheerfulness I can wait.*

*My foothold is tenon'd and mortis'd in granite,  
I laugh at what you call dissolution,  
And I know the amplitude of time.*

### Explanation

Whitman is perplexed by life's complex mysteries. He goes on searching for solutions to these mysteries. This search is endless. His question 'Who goes there?' sets the tone of the section. He wants to know who has intruded upon his privacy and who has overwhelmed him with his presence. He questions his own existence. He wishes to involve others in his quest, in the ongoing turmoil which seems to be overpowering him. He does not complain about things which make others upset. He is not necessarily troubled by the mundane and declining nature of life (something which troubles others so easily). Without following conventional ideas, he tries to think differently, in a non-conformist way; in other words, in a completely different manner. He is in love with himself and has no faith in antiquities. He follows his will and acts accordingly. In love with himself, he prefers to 'stick to his own bones' and believes that he can see his reflection in others.

His belief in himself does not waver. He keenly observes the ways of the world, the ever growing nature, and feels that everything has a message for him. He feels that he is 'deathless', that energy cannot be destroyed, and it permeates nature and our surroundings. He believes that he cannot be moved by any external power. It is a potent statement to implicate the power of an individual in a democratic set up as democracy celebrates the power of the self.

He believes that he is self-efficient, self-made, and it is almost impossible to destroy his latent powers and energy. He does not trouble his soul anymore and sets it free. He has no qualms about the ways he acts; he does things exactly the way he likes.

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He is content with his present state of being whether others are aware of this fact or not. More than the outer world, it is the inner world which appeals to him and which actually matters to him. His interaction with his innermost being is of paramount importance than anything else. He loves to be with himself and can do so forever. He jumps at every single opportunity to be with himself. He is not at all disturbed by the thought of death and mocks at the very idea of 'dissolution' as it would never take place. He is aware of the great extent of time and does not suffer from any anxieties or worries.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

9. What makes him casual towards death and bereft of all worries?
10. What makes him deathless?

#### 2.3.5 Song of Myself 21

*I am the poet of the Body and I am the poet of the Soul,  
The pleasures of heaven are with me and the pains of hell are with me,  
The first I graft and increase upon myself, the latter I translate  
into a new tongue.*

*I am the poet of the woman the same as the man,  
And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man,  
And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men.*

*I chant the chant of dilation or pride,  
We have had ducking and deprecating about enough,  
I show that size is only development.*

*Have you outstript the rest? are you the President?  
It is a trifle, they will more than arrive there every one, and still pass on.*

*I am he that walks with the tender and growing night,  
I call to the earth and sea half-held by the night.*

*Press close bare-bosom'd night—press close magnetic nourishing night!  
Night of south winds—night of the large few stars!  
Still nodding night—mad naked summer night.*

*Smile O voluptuous cool-breath'd earth!*

*Earth of the slumbering and liquid trees!*  
*Earth of departed sunset—earth of the mountains misty-topt!*  
*Earth of the vitreous pour of the full moon just tinged with blue!*  
*Earth of shine and dark mottling the tide of the river!*  
*Earth of the limpid gray of clouds brighter and clearer for my sake!*  
*Far-swooping elbow'd earth—rich apple-blossom'd earth!*  
*Smile, for your lover comes.*

*Prodigal, you have given me love—therefore I to you give love!*  
*O unspeakable passionate love.*

## NOTES

### Explanation

According to Whitman, the body and soul complement each other. They cannot be separated from each other as the bond is very strong. He proclaims that he is a poet of the body and the soul. Just as he receives the pleasures of life, he receives the pain in the same spirit. He celebrates joy and uses pain as an instrument to express himself. He also talks about gender equality as he does not dissociate women from men. He pays tribute to women by addressing them as the creators, the source of life itself. He is open in his outlook and has no inhibitions about feeling proud. He does not believe in cut-throat competition. According to him, there is enough space for everyone. The poet invokes nature in these lines and refers to the earth and sea, powerful winds and the stars. Earth has been described as 'voluptuous' and 'cool-breathed'. It has trees which have woody dreams, tranquil sunsets, snow-clad mountains, moon-lit nights, tidal waves and the shining sky. The earth is fertile and productive, and he describes himself as her affectionate lover who is ready to embrace her.

The poet further delineates the passionate relationship between himself and the earth, and the very thought of this silent love energizes him.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

11. Why does the poet consider himself a poet of the body and soul?
12. How does he pay tribute to women?

### 2.3.6 Song of Myself 32

*I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid and self-contain'd,  
I stand and look at them long and long.*

*They do not sweat and whine about their condition,  
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,  
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,  
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of owning things,*

*Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands of years ago,  
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.*

## NOTES

*So they show their relations to me and I accept them,  
They bring me tokens of myself, they evince them plainly in their possession.*

*I wonder where they get those tokens,  
Did I pass that way huge times ago and negligently drop them?*

*Myself moving forward then and now and forever,  
Gathering and showing more always and with velocity,  
Infinite and omnigenous, and the like of these among them,  
Not too exclusive toward the reachers of my remembrancers,  
Picking out here one that I love, and now go with him on brotherly terms.*

*A gigantic beauty of a stallion, fresh and responsive to my caresses,  
Head high in the forehead, wide between the ears,  
Limbs glossy and supple, tail dusting the ground,  
Eyes full of sparkling wickedness, ears finely cut, flexibly moving.  
His nostrils dilate as my heels embrace him,  
His well-built limbs tremble with pleasure as we race around and return.*

*I but use you a minute, then I resign you, stallion,  
Why do I need your paces when I myself out-gallop them?  
Even as I stand or sit passing faster than you.*

### Explanation

In this section, Whitman moves to the animals who look docile and content; he observes them affectionately. Unlike human beings, they never complain about their present and are not troubled by the traditional concepts of sin and punishment. In many ways, these innocent animals are better than human beings as they do not preach to him. They all are equal and treat the other as the same. They are not ambitious and they are content with their lives. The poet has the ability to see the signs of his own existence in these animals. He loves to be in the lap of nature and her beautiful creations. Then, he steps forward and showers his affection on these innocent animals. They are all loveable and venerable to him.

Eventually, he admires the fascinating beauty of a stallion that reciprocates his tender feelings for him. He highlights the physical characteristics of the horse.

Ultimately, he realizes he can move on without the horse as he himself is capable of going further and finally leaves the horse. To put it in a nutshell, Whitman attacks the orthodox Christian beliefs in this section.

Poetry by Walt Whitman  
and Robert Frost

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

13. What makes animals content in *Song of Myself*: verse 32?
14. How does the poet attack Christian beliefs?

### NOTES

#### 2.3.7 *Song of Myself* 50

*There is that in me—I do not know what it is—but I know it is in me.*

*Wrench'd and sweaty—calm and cool then my body becomes,  
I sleep—I sleep long.*

*I do not know it—it is without name—it is a word unsaid,  
It is not in any dictionary, utterance, symbol.*

*Something it swings on more than the earth I swing on,  
To it the creation is the friend whose embracing awakes me.*

*Perhaps I might tell more. Outlines! I plead for my brothers and sisters.*

*Do you see O my brothers and sisters?*

*It is not chaos or death—it is form, union, plan—it is eternal  
life—it is Happiness.*

#### Explanation

In these lines, Whitman refers to his approaching death. Here, sleep is equated with death. The poet experiences death as his body becomes 'cool and calm'. Whitman is not bothered by the 'end'. The thought of death does not disturb him at all. Death is symbolic of eternal peace and enjoyment. He invokes his fellowmen and asks them to listen to his emotional appeal. There is no ultimate death and commotion in the world. Everything is linked; the union of all things results in eternal bliss.

In brief, Whitman is commenting on the metaphysical and is making an association with mysticism in this section of the poem.

#### 2.3.8 *Song of Myself* 52

*The spotted hawk swoops by and accuses me, he complains of  
my gab and my loitering.*

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*I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable,  
I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world.*

*The last scud of day holds back for me,  
It flings my likeness after the rest and true as any on the shadow'd wilds,  
It coaxes me to the vapor and the dusk.*

*I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,  
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.*

*I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,  
If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.*

*You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,  
But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,  
And filter and fibre your blood.*

*Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,  
Missing me one place search another,  
I stop somewhere waiting for you.*

### Explanation

In this section, Whitman tries to overwhelm the word by comparing himself to a hawk which can neither be tamed nor controlled. Being energetic and resourceful, he does not want to sit idle. Instead, he wants to get into action. He is invigorated and driven by the urge to show his immense power and strength of character. Though he is longing to go back to his roots—the quintessential grass—one can find him growing underneath the grass once again. He tries to highlight the vitality and the resourcefulness of the grass. He clearly indicates his impending death, which he realizes is inevitable. He urges readers to look for a new Whitman.

In these lines, he refers to the 'uncut hair' imagery. Earlier, he was looking for dead men and women. Now, he himself is lying buried under the grass. He urges readers to look for his roots under the grass which would mark a new beginning.

## 2.4 INTRODUCTION TO ROBERT FROST

Robert Frost is a well-known name not only in America but in world literature. His poetry is still quoted widely across all genres and all over the world. His immense popularity and the range and depth of his literary achievements make his critics agree that he was one of the greatest modern American poets.

### 2.4.1 Personal life

Robert Lee Frost was born in San Francisco, California to William Prescott Frost Jr., a journalist with political aspirations, and Isabelle Moodie, a teacher and poet of Scottish descent. His father occasionally showed violent behaviour, which developed a lifelong unease in Frost towards violent and destructive impulses.

Robert Frost's personal life was astounded by grief and loss. His father died of tuberculosis in 1885, when Frost was only eleven years old, leaving the family with just eight dollars. Frost's mother died of cancer in 1900. In 1920, Frost had to admit his younger sister Jeanie to a mental hospital, where she died nine years later. Frost's family had a long association with mental illness. Both he and his mother suffered from depression, while his wife Elinor also experienced bouts of depression. His daughter Irma was committed to a mental hospital in 1947.

Elinor and Robert Frost had six children: son Elliot (1896–1904, died of cholera); daughter Lesley Frost Ballantine (1899–1983); son Carol (1902–1940, committed suicide); daughter Irma (1903–1967, admitted to mental hospital in 1947); daughter Marjorie (1905–1934, died as a result of puerperal fever after childbirth); and daughter Elinor Bettina (died just three days after her birth in 1907). Frost's wife, who suffered from heart problems throughout her life, developed breast cancer in 1937 and died of heart failure in 1938. Robert Frost died of a heart attack on 29 January 1963 in Boston. He was survived by his two daughters Lesley and Irma.



Robert Frost

### 2.4.2 Life and Works of Robert Frost

Frost was introduced to poetry through his mother, and at a very young age, he became acquainted with the Romantic poets as well as New England poets, such as Emerson. His mother also introduced him to organized Christian religion.

After his father's death, the family returned to New England. Frost finished high school (studying classics) from Lawrence, Massachusetts, as the class valedictorian. Three years later, he married his classmate and fellow valedictorian Eleanor White.

Frost studied for a short time at Dartmouth College, taught in schools and later enrolled as a special student at Harvard where he was influenced by American philosopher

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and psychologist William James and George Santayana, a philosopher, essayist, poet and novelist. He took courses in English, philosophy and classics. From Harvard, he entered a completely different world.

His grandfather bequeathed him a farm in New Hampshire and Frost, where his wife and his four children endured years of hardship. While he was struggling with depression and thoughts of suicide, Frost was also composing poetry and establishing a close link with nature. In the years 1906–07, he wrote many of the poems that would later appear in *North of Boston* and *Mountain Interval* (1916). In 1909, Frost left the farm to teach in New Hampshire. From there, he sold his farm and moved to England in 1912 because he was unable to find publishers for his work.

Within a month of his arrival in England, he was able to publish his poems and *North of Boston* won praise from American poet and critic Ezra Pound for Frost's work. Within two years, his volumes had appeared in America and he won a number of honours, including election to the National Institute of Arts and Letters.

### 2.4.3 Frost's Contribution to American Poetry

Frost returned to New England in 1915 and started teaching in Amherst College two years later. English short-story writer, poet and novelist Rudyard Kipling had already pointed out that Frost's language sounded strange to English readers. Many other critics suggested that Frost's poetry sounded unfamiliar, even to Americans outside New England. Frost found this strangeness of language as an advantage—he realized that his language had the 'freshness of a stranger' and that strangeness in language or metaphor is intrinsic to poetry.

Frost inherited the technique of using the ordinary to suggest something other than itself from a variety of sources: the Bible, classics, the poetry of Wordsworth and New England writers such as Thoreau or Emerson. He admired Emerson's use of simple words and expressions to suggest something that had profound meanings. He merged the use of New England vocabulary and turns of phrase with the classical pastoral tradition and the Romantic tradition of poetry about nature.

While a poet such as Wallace Stevens was drawn to the fine arts or music as a source of influence, Frost was more attracted towards science and philosophy. He felt that poets should try to establish a link between sound, sense and emotion. Metre was considered to be important as well. He was a master in the use of a number of verse forms, such as the blank verse, sonnet, rhymed couplets and rhyming quatrains. For him, drama was also important to make writing exciting and interesting. However, he believed that the effect of poetry should be carefully controlled in order to avoid excesses. He believed that the charm of the poem was in its beauty and in its slow, dignified exploration of reality, a momentary relief from confusion. For him, a poem was an affirmative entity that emanated from belief—the belief in God, in the poet's own self, in art, in culture or in the country.

All his important poems were written before 1930. While his first love was always poetry, he also took time to teach and to recite his poems in public. His longest association was with Amherst College (1917–20, 1923–38, 1949), though he also spent time at Dartmouth, Michigan and Harvard. He was a very popular teacher. He helped establish the famous Bread Loaf School of English in Middlebury College, Vermont.

He won four Pulitzer prizes before the publication of two ambitious works of drama, *A Masque of Reason* (1945) and *A Masque of Mercy* (1947). His last work



was *In the Clearing* (1962). He won many honours, including honorary degrees from Oxford and Cambridge universities in 1957. He was invited to read a poem at President John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1961, where he recited *The Gift Outright* from memory.

Robert Frost is considered to be the quintessential New England poet. His poems are spare, meditative and have a close affinity with nature, something he shares with the Romantic poet Wordsworth. Often, ordinary natural objects suggest something greater in his poems. He plays around with metre in order to capture the easy rhythms of the speaking voice. His poems flow like a good conversation—smoothly and coherently.

Poetry by Walt Whitman  
and Robert Frost

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### Important works of Frost

#### Poetry collections

- *A Boy's Will* (David Nutt 1913; Holt, 1915)
- *North of Boston* (David Nutt, 1914; Holt, 1914)
  - *Mending Wall*
  - *Birches*
- *Mountain Interval* (Holt, 1916)
  - *The Road Not Taken*
- *Selected Poems* (Holt, 1923)

Includes poems from first three volumes and the poem *The Runaway*

- *New Hampshire* (Holt, 1923; Grant Richards, 1924)
- *Several Short Poems* (Holt, 1924)
- *Selected Poems* (Holt, 1928)
- *West-Running Brook* (Holt, 1928, 1929)
- *The Lovely Shall Be Choosers, The Poetry Quartos*, printed and illustrated by Paul Johnston (Random House, 1929)
- *Collected Poems of Robert Frost* (Holt, 1930; Longmans, Green, 1930)
- *The Lone Striker* (Knopf, 1933)
- *Selected Poems: Third Edition* (Holt, 1934)
- *Three Poems* (Baker Library, Dartmouth College, 1935)
- *The Gold Hesperidee* (Bibliophile Press, 1935)
- *From Snow to Snow* (Holt, 1936)
- *A Further Range* (Holt, 1936; Cape, 1937)
- *Collected Poems of Robert Frost* (Holt, 1939; Longmans, Green, 1939)
- *A Witness Tree* (Holt, 1942; Cape, 1943)
  - *The Silken Tent*
- *Come In, and Other Poems* (1943)
- *Steeple Bush* (Holt, 1947)
- *Complete Poems of Robert Frost, 1949* (Holt, 1949; Cape, 1951)
- *Hard Not To Be King* (House of Books, 1951)
- *Aforesaid* (Holt, 1954)
- *A Remembrance Collection of New Poems* (Holt, 1959)
- *You Come Too* (Holt, 1959; Bodley Head, 1964)

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- *In the Clearing* (Holt Rinehart & Winston, 1962)
- *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (New York, 1969)
- *A Further Range* (published as *Further Range* in 1926, as *New Poems* by Holt, 1936; Cape, 1937)
- *What Fifty Said*
- *Fire And Ice*
- *A Drumlin Woodchuck*

### Plays

- *A Way Out: A One Act Play* (Harbor Press, 1929)
- *The Cow's in the Corn: A One Act Irish Play in Rhyme* (Slide Mountain Press, 1929)
- *A Masque of Reason* (Holt, 1945)
- *A Masque of Mercy* (Holt, 1947)

### Prose books

- *The Letters of Robert Frost to Louis Untermeyer* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963; Cape, 1964)
- *Robert Frost and John Bartlett: The Record of a Friendship* by Margaret Bartlett Anderson (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963)
- *Selected Letters of Robert Frost* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964)
- *Interviews with Robert Frost* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966; Cape, 1967)
- *Family Letters of Robert and Elinor Frost* (State University of New York Press, 1972)
- *Robert Frost and Sidney Cox: Forty Years of Friendship* (University Press of New England, 1981)
- *The Notebooks of Robert Frost* edited by Robert Faggen (Harvard University Press, January 2007)

### Omnibus volumes

- *Collected Poems, Prose and Plays* (Richard Poirier, ed.) (Library of America, 1995)

### Spoken word

- *Robert Frost Reads His Poetry*, Caedmon Records, 1957

Source: Wikipedia

## 2.5 MENDING WALL: TEXT AND ANALYSIS

### Complete Text

*Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,  
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;  
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.  
The work of hunters is another thing:*

*I have come after them and made repair  
Where they have left not one stone on stone,  
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,  
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,  
No one has seen them made or heard them made,*

10

*But at spring mending-time we find them there.  
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;  
And on a day we meet to walk the line  
And set the wall between us once again.  
We keep the wall between us as we go,*

15

*To each the boulders that have fallen to each.  
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls  
We have to use a spell to make them balance:  
'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'  
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.*

20

*Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,  
One on a side. It comes to little more:  
He is all pine and I am apple-orchard.  
My apple trees will never get across  
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.*

25

*He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'  
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder  
If I could put a notion in his head:  
'Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it  
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.*

30

*Before I built a wall I'd ask to know  
What I was walling in or walling out,  
And to whom I was like to give offence.  
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,  
That wants it down!' I could say 'Elves' to him,*

35

*But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather  
He said it for himself. I see him there,  
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top*

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*In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.  
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,*

## NOTES

*Not of woods only and the shade of trees.  
He will not go behind his father's saying,  
And he likes having thought of it so well  
He says again, 'Good fences make good neighbors.'*

### Summary

A stone wall separates the speaker's property from that of his neighbour. There are a number of small animals that make holes beneath the wall to go across. In spring, the two neighbours meet to walk the length of the wall and jointly make repairs wherever there is a hole. There is a portion of the wall where there are only trees in the backyard. The speaker sees no reason for the wall to be kept there—there are no cows or other livestock to be contained, just apple and pine trees. He does not believe in walls for the sake of walls. The neighbour resorts to an old adage: 'Good fences make good neighbours.'

The speaker remains unconvinced and mischievously presses the neighbour to look beyond the folly of such reasoning. He pleads that he will never breach the sanctity of the wall and will not cause any harm to anyone across the wall. His neighbour is not swayed. Then the speaker jokes that his apple trees will never get across and eat the cones under his pines. However, the neighbour continues to work silently and simply repeats the adage: 'Good fences make good neighbours.'

### Commentary and analysis

The poem opens with the narrator reviewing the wall as he walks along the wall with his neighbour to see the damages to the wall over the years. He laments the hand of nature (*Something there is that doesn't love a wall*), as it works on the wall and tears down some boulders. He also rues the hunters (*The work of hunters is another thing*) and other unknown animals, who insidiously make holes under the fence.

Here is the first contrast of the poem: between acts of animals and humans, and the acts of nature. However, both seem to be conspiring against neighbours, *The gaps I mean, No one has seen them made or heard them made, But at spring mending-time we find them there.*

This annual wall-mending is almost like a ritual, enacted out of habit rather than need. Both neighbours meet on the prescribed date at the suggestion of the narrator himself (though he appears to be against the entire idea of mending the wall and even questions the existence of the wall between two good neighbours) and work together diligently to find out the cracks, close all gaps and fix all the missing boulders of the wall.

Here is the second contrast of opinion about the relevance and validity of the wall between two good neighbours. The narrator feels like pointing out to his neighbour that *Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.* At the same time, it is the narrator himself who unfailingly fixes up the date of their annual wall-mending, which suggests that the narrator himself somehow feels the need of the wall, or at least wall mending for him is like an 'outdoor game' or a sociable act between two good neighbours.

The neighbours persist and fix the wall wherever needed. What is remarkable here is the friendliness between the neighbour as they do not fret over the unnecessary work, but take it rather sportingly (*just another kind of outdoor game*), and enjoy working with each other. Despite all this good civility, the narrator does not stop from criticizing his neighbour, cajoling him to do away with the walls (*My apple trees will never get across And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him*).

But despite this verbal duel, both sincerely continue their work of mending the wall and finish it until late in the evening.

The poem uses the wall between the neighbours as a metaphor for the walls that exist in society—between the rich and poor, between religions, societies and nations. The poet questions the need for such walls, but at the same time, justifies the effort in mending and maintaining these walls.

Wall-building is an ancient and enduring enterprise that marks the beginning of human civilization. They have served their purpose since ancient times and continue to do so in modern times. Figuratively, rules and laws are also walls that protect the rights of property of the individual. Justice is the process of wall-mending that defines and protects individual rights and prevents encroachment or infringement of personal rights. The ritual of wall maintenance highlights the dual and complementary nature of human society, as by insisting on wall mending, the neighbour protects his own right to property and, at the same time, guarantees the same to the narrator. This is perhaps the reason why the narrator, while running the entire exercise of wall-mending, still participates wilfully in the act of wall maintenance.

This wall-mending also has an element of community benefit: by participating together in the exercise, the neighbours interact with each other and build mutual trust and goodwill, which would have otherwise been difficult in lonely rural settings. Perhaps the narrator does believe that good fences make good neighbours—for it keeps them happily engaged in their annual ritual of wall-mending.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

15. In the poem *Mending Wall*, how does the narrator try to convince his neighbour about the futility of the wall?
16. What are the two contrasts that you notice in the poem *Mending Wall*?
17. Do you believe in the adage that 'Good fences make good neighbours'?

## 2.6 THE ROAD NOT TAKEN: TEXT AND ANALYSIS

### Complete Text

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth;*

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*Then took the other, as just as fair,  
And having perhaps the better claim  
Because it was grassy and wanted wear,  
Though as for that the passing there  
Had worn them really about the same.*

10

*And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no step had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way  
I doubted if I should ever come back.*

15

*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

20

### Summary

The narrator stands in the woods, considering a divide in the road. He stands there considering the dilemma which road to take, and laments that he cannot take both. The narrator looks far into both roads, trying to visually measure their length and finds them to be nearly the same. He then tries to see which road looks more worn (meaning, which has been used more by travellers before him). Here again, he finds that both roads look equally worn.

What confounds the narrator's choice is the fact that, that morning, both ways were equally overlaid with green, un-trodden leaves, making the choice even more difficult. The narrator finally chooses one, consoling himself that he will take the other some other day, though he clearly knows that one road leads to another and he will continue on his chosen path and never be able to take the other road.

The narrator says that someday in a distant future, he would reminisce about this day that say with a sigh that two roads diverged in the woods and he took the less travelled one—and that made all the difference.

### Commentary and analysis

*The Road Not Taken* is among the most popular, most quoted, most interpreted, misinterpreted and re-interpreted, and yet the most often misunderstood poems in the literary canon. Generations of carefree readers have been fed on the moral of the poem, usually found at the end in stories and prose, in the last three lines of the poem: *Two roads diverged in a wood and I, I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.*

The very idea of taking a road less travelled is so non-conformist, so romantic that it has almost become a cliché, a rather overused one. It has so often been used in the media for many different stories and references that anybody who has ever come

across this cliché, and has read this poem, immediately forms the opinion that the narrator took the road less travelled which somehow made a great difference in his life.

However, one may want to read the poem beyond its explicit romanticism. To this purpose, let us read it again with passion or imagination, but with simple and accurate interpretation of words, phrases and expressions.

The first stanza simply states the narrator's dilemma: that he is standing at crossroads in the woods with two divergent roads. The narrator states, *I could not travel both And be one traveller*, suggesting that he realizes the fate of choosing one of the roads. He realizes that by travelling both roads, he cannot remain one traveller (each path will have its bearing on the narrator's life, adding to his experiences, and thereby, making him a different person altogether). Therefore, he stands there contemplating and analysing the possible consequences of taking the first road (*long I stood And looked down one as far as I could To where it bent in the undergrowth*).

In the second stanza, he looks down the other road with a tinge of hope, as if trying to find a clue that could help him make a better choice (*Then took the other, as just as fair And having perhaps the better claim Because it was grassy and wanted wear*). However, the optimism wanes off soon as the narrator realizes that both roads were equally worn, suggesting that both roads nearly looked the same and perhaps had been travelled equally by the travellers before him (*Though as for that the passing there had worn them really about the same*).

The third stanza again begins with a hope, *And both that morning equally lay In leaves no step had trodden black* stating that on that particular day, both the roads were covered with fresh green leaves with no footsteps on them. This is a metaphoric expression that suggests that each day marks a new beginning, and one must start afresh without any overhang of previous experiences. So, ultimately, the narrator makes a choice to leave the first one and take the other one, fully knowing that once he makes that choice, he would never be able to make a comeback; never be able to retrace his steps and go back to the first road (*Oh, I kept the first for another day! Yet knowing how way leads on to way I doubted if I should ever come back*).

This stanza highlights the quandary that we all face, when we have to take tough decisions in life. Whether these decisions relate to our academics, career, profession or our personal life, there comes a time in everybody's life where we have to take firm decisions. We all know that once the decision is taken, we cannot make a comeback and face the fate of such decisions later in life.

The fourth and last stanza of the poem is the most cryptic and most vehemently debated. The narrator says that sometime in a distant future, he would say it *with a sigh* that *Two roads diverged in a wood and I, I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference*. Most cursory readers believe that the narrator took a bold step and took the road *less traveled by* and that made a great difference to his life.

However, as we have seen in earlier paragraphs, there were no indications that either of the road was *less traveled by*; both were *about the same*.

Here is a great paradox in the words of the narrator. He admits that sometime in a distant future, he would say it *with a sigh*, but a sigh can be both a sign of relief and a sign of remorse. The sigh can also be a sign of guilt—that the narrator will be telling his story in the future with a twist that he took the road less travelled and that it has made all the difference.

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The narrator also says that it made all the difference, not really a happy, positive difference. So the popular perception that the narrator took the road less travelled and that made a great difference to his life is a mistaken statement, which we read objectively. All he states is a truism of human life: that he took a decision, a bold and firm decision, fully knowing that he cannot retreat any time in the future. Whether or not the decision is positive or negative is not specified. It is entirely hypothetical and there is really no definite way of knowing what difference any other decision could have made to his life as he did not take that decision.

Finally, perhaps the most quoted expression about the road *the one less traveled by* is at best a leverage that the narrator wants to use sometime in the distant future to justify his decision. In case he gets to his destination (read, success in life) through his chosen path, the narrator can state with a sigh of relief that he took the road less travelled, and make his claim to glory. However, if he fails to reach his destination (read, fails to achieve success in life) through his chosen path, he can (again) state with a sigh of remorse this time that he took the bold decision to take the road less travelled, and survived condemnation.

This ironic twist is also evident in the choice of title of the poem, which is not *The Road Less Traveled* but *The Road Not Taken*. While the narrator is convinced that he would somehow explain his predicament to the future generations, his own mind still delves on *the road not taken*. His mind cannot overlook the possibility of what can be expected at the end of the other path. This is typical of a soul-searching man who cannot but think of the full possibilities of the decisions taken and the subsequent pros and cons.

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

18. Why is the narrator standing at the fork in the road and what is he thinking?
19. What signs does the narrator look for to decide which road to take?
20. How does the title of the poem *The Road Not Taken* add to the irony in the poem?

## 2.7 AFTER APPLE-PICKING: TEXT AND ANALYSIS

### Complete Text

*My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree  
Toward heaven still,  
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill  
Beside it, and there may be two or three  
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.*

*But I am done with apple-picking now.  
Essence of winter sleep is on the night,  
The scent of apples: I am drowsing off.*



*I cannot rub the strangeness from my sight  
I got from looking through a pane of glass* 10

*I skimmed this morning from the drinking trough  
And held against the world of hoary grass,  
It melted, and I let it fall and break.  
But I was well  
Upon my way to sleep before it fell,* 15

*And I could tell  
What form my dreaming was about to take.  
Magnified apples appear and disappear,  
Stem end and blossom end,  
And every fleck of russet showing clear.* 20

*My instep arch not only keeps the ache,  
It keeps the pressure of a ladder-round.  
I feel the ladder sway as the boughs bend.  
And I keep hearing from the cellar bin  
The rumbling sound* 25

*Of load on load of apples coming in.  
For I have had too much  
Of apple-picking: I am overtired  
Of the great harvest I myself desired.  
There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,* 30

*Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.  
For all  
That struck the earth,  
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,  
Went surely to the cider-apple heap* 35

*As of no worth.  
One can see what will trouble  
This sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.  
Were he not gone,  
The woodchuck could say whether it's like his* 40

*Long sleep, as I describe its coming on,  
Or just some human sleep.*

### Summary

This poem is about a hard day's work in the life of an apple orchard owner. The narrator describes how his ladder is still resting against an apple tree, even though he is finished with a long day of apple-picking. The narrator is tired and drowsy on a winter day and keeps flitting in and out of his reveries and dreams. Even in his dreams, he sees large-

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sized apples and other cores related with his act of apple-picking. The narrator appears satisfied with his large harvest of apple and seems to go back to sleep contented. The narrator wonders whether this sleep is like a woodchuck hibernation (during the long period of winter), or is it simply some human sleep (which will last only for a few hours).

### Commentary and analysis

The narrator says that his ladder is still standing at the side of the tree, as if pointing towards heavens, and there is still an empty barrel that is yet unfilled with picked apples. He says that he might also have missed one or two apples here or there on the bough. But he is now tired. The intoxicating essence of ripe apples, exhaustion of the day and the general drowsiness of winters is upon the narrator. He says he is dozing off.

The next lines are from his dream. He says that he is still not able to rub off from his eyes the strangeness of what he saw in his dream. He dreamt that he washed a glass pane in water in the trough and put it on the grass. Surprisingly, the glass melted, so the narrator allowed it to fall through and crash into pieces. However, the narrator says, that he was on his way to sleep before it fell.

Time warps such as these are natural when a person is dreaming. At one point, you see that you are doing something, when you realize that this has already happened in the past, or perhaps an event that occurred in the past may be fresh in your memory and you dream of doing it again.

The narrator again seems to know (appears to be in a conscious state, though he is not) what kind of dream is going to follow. He says that large apples are appearing and disappearing, rotating slightly and its reddish-brown skin is very clear and smooth. He seems to be holding one such large apple in his hands. Meanwhile, his hands ache and he is finding it very difficult to balance himself on the ladder while holding such a large apple in his arms.

The narrator hears a lot of noise coming from the cellar as if apples are tumbling down the cellar. The narrator says that all such dreams are occurring because he has done excessive apple-picking and is now exhausted. The paradox presented here is that, while the poet himself was looking forward to such an abundance, he has grown tired of reaping its harvests. The poet takes sensual joy in describing the plenitude of the fruits. The imagery is robust and overtly appealing to the senses.

The apples are clean even though they fall. However, since there is already abundance and the ground is strewn with apples, even the ones that fall do not get soiled. In other words, the apples are still valuable and a source of great pleasure.

The narrator says that he knows what is again going to disturb his sleep, whatever kind of sleep it is. He refers to the woodchuck, saying that if they had not already gone all into hibernation, they would have certainly explained whether it was somewhat their kind of sleep or it was just human sleep.

The reference to the woodchuck adds a mysterious meaning to the end of the poem, and to the entire poem for that matter. The woodchucks go into hibernation in winters and theirs is a very deep sleep, lasting nearly three months. However, since humans do not hibernate, the narrator could possibly be hinting here at death, which is a deep sleep and where no dreams disturb you ever. Also, the narrator seems to be dozing off after a hard day's work, after harvesting the best crop he has probably ever had, and he is contented with it. All these hints could be suggesting that the narrator is satisfied with his life's work, hardships and achievements, and now wants to go into deep sleep. The dream of putting the glass sheet on the grass, and it falling through and crashing into

pieces could be another hint, suggesting at the lowering of coffin into the ground and the pane signifying the shattering of life.

Poetry by Walt Whitman  
and Robert Frost

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

21. Write the summary of the poem *After Apple-Picking* in your own words.
22. Why does the narrator think that all his dreams are of apples only?

### NOTES

### ACTIVITY

Read other American poets like Maya Angelou and Ralph Angel and discuss your observations with your colleagues.

### DID YOU KNOW

When Walt Whitman was seventeen year old, he turned to teaching. His first job was in a one-room schoolhouse in Long Island. Whitman continued to teach for another five years, when in 1841, he set his sights on journalism. He started a weekly paper called the *Long-Islander*, and later returned to *New York City*, where he continued his newspaper career. In 1846, he became the editor of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, a prominent newspaper.

## 2.8 SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt that:

- *Song of Myself* is a well-known work of Whitman and was one of the original twelve pieces in the 1855 first edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Like most of the other poems, it, too, was revised extensively, reaching its final stage in 1881.
- *Song of Myself* is a sprawling combination of biography, sermon and poetic meditation.
- Whitman's grand poem is, in its way, an American epic. Beginning *in medias res*—in the middle of the poet's life—it loosely follows a quest pattern.
- All the poems of Robert Frost seem to have a few common threads: they all are based on rural life and they have close association with nature. His poems are deep and always have some explanations hidden carefully in the beautiful craftsmanship of words. His poems are meditative that allow you to read them, re-read them and then ponder over them.
- There is also some autobiographical content in all the poems of Frost. He talks about the villages and the woods, the dark, winter nights, deep snow and death. However, very often, there is an equal amount of hope, of renewed life, or good deeds, joy and happiness of a pleasurable life which are interwoven in his poems.

## NOTES

- Overall, Frost's poems call out to the deep emotions inside the reader's mind, cajoling them and challenging them to find the same resonance in his words.

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### 2.9 KEY TERMS

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- **Vignettes:** It is a running ornament or design placed before a title page or at the end of a chapter.
- **Plethora:** It means excess or abundance.
- **Sublime:** It refers to something impressive and of very high spiritual or moral worth.
- **Omnigenous:** It refers to something which comprises all kinds/varieties.
- **Quintessential:** It represents the most perfect or typical example of a quality or class.
- **Valedictorian:** It refers to a student with the highest academic rank in a class who delivers the valedictory at graduation.
- **Bequeath:** It means to leave or give (personal property) by will.
- **Foreboding:** It is a sense of impending evil or misfortune.
- **Insidiously:** It means working or spreading harmfully in a subtle or stealthy manner.
- **Duel:** It means a prearranged, formal combat between two persons, usually fought to settle a point of honour (not to be confused with dual; meaning double).
- **Infringement:** It means a violation, as of a law, regulation, or agreement; a breach.
- **Cliché:** It refers to a trite or overused expression or idea.
- **Tinge:** It means to apply a trace of colour to; a slight added element, property, or influence.
- **Quandary:** It refers to a state of uncertainty or perplexity.
- **Predicament:** It is a situation, especially an unpleasant, troublesome one, which is morally perplexing.
- **Woodchuck:** It refers to a common burrowing rodent of northern and eastern North America, having a short-legged, heavy-set body and grizzled brownish fur; also called groundhog or whistle pig

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### 2.10 ANSWERS TO 'CHECK YOUR PROGRESS'

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1. Walt Whitman was born in Long Island in 1819. He published the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* on his own in 1855.
2. Whitman's poetry revolved around ideas related to democracy, equality and brotherhood.
3. In these lines, the poet celebrates the self. These lines also reflect Whitman's love for democracy. He also talks about his own origin, his ancestors, the forces of nature and the power of speech that will eventually lead him up the ladder of life.

4. Walt Whitman feels that the fact that all of us belong to the same democratic society makes us equal and closer to each other.
5. The poet enjoys the encounter with his soul. He uses the imagery of the 'soulful' kiss which gives him immense pleasure.
6. The poet refers to the soul as his companion. He has complete faith in the soul, which embodies his innermost desires and instincts.
7. According to the poet, death is not the end like everybody would think. It is the beginning. The cycle of death and regeneration is a continual process.
8. The blade of grass, according to Whitman, is the same anywhere, irrespective of where it grows. This symbolizes equality of people and things.
9. The poet is in love with himself and is happy spending maximum time with his own self. He is not worried about death or 'dissolution' because he is sure that it will not come. He feels that the extent of time is really great and is therefore, not bothered about the end.
10. The poet says he is 'deathless' because he believes in himself and is sure that no external power can disturb him. Here, he implies that the strength of a person in a democracy cannot be underestimated. He feels that he is suffused with nature's energy. It is energy that exists in everything around him and cannot be destroyed.
11. Whitman feels that the body and the soul are strongly bonded together. They complement each other and cannot be separated, which is why he is a poet of the body as well as the soul.
12. Whitman pays a tribute to women in general calling them creators of the human life. He holds them responsible for the very origin of life. He does not dissociate them from men.
13. Unlike human beings, the poet feels that the animals are always content because the future does not bother them, they have no complaints against the present and the concepts of sin and punishment do not bother them either. They are all the same, equal and unambitious and treat each other in the same way.
14. Whitman uses the imagery of a beautiful stallion, which arrests his attention but finally he discovers that he is able to move on without the horse. He realizes that he does not really need the horse. He uses this imagery to attack the orthodox Christian beliefs.
15. The speaker sees no reason for the wall to be kept there—there are no cows or other livestock to be contained; just apple and pine trees. He does not believe in walls for the sake of walls. The neighbour resorts to an old adage: 'Good fences make good neighbours.'
16. The first contrast of the poem is between the acts of animals and humans, and the acts of nature. Both seem to be conspiring against the neighbours. The second contrast of opinion about the relevance and validity of the wall between two good neighbours. While the narrator insists on the irrelevance of the wall, he himself fixes the annual day for wall-fixing.
17. Wall-building is an ancient and enduring enterprise that marks the beginning of human civilization. Rules and laws are also walls that protect the rights of property of the individual. Justice is the process of wall-mending that defines and protects individual rights and prevents encroachment or infringement of personal rights.

## NOTES

## NOTES

Walls are necessary to protect an individual's right to property and, at the same time, guarantee the same to the others.

18. The narrator stands in the woods, considering a fork in the road, and trying to decide which road to take, and laments that he cannot take both. What confounds the narrator's choice is the fact that, that morning, both ways were equally overlaid with green, un-trodden leaves, making the choice even more difficult.
19. The narrator looks far into both roads, trying to visually measure their length and finds them to be nearly the same. He then tries to see which road looks more worn out. Here again he finds that both roads look equally used.
20. The irony in the choice of the title of the poem is that it is not *The Road Less Traveled* but *The Road Not Taken*. While the narrator is convinced that he would somehow explain his predicament to the future generations, his own mind is still on 'the road not taken'. His mind is still on what might have lied at the end of the other path. This is a typical reaction of a soul-searching man who continuously weighs his pros and cons, of the decisions taken and those not taken, and their real or probable repercussions.
21. The poem *After Apple-Picking* is about a hard day's work in the life of an apple orchard owner. The narrator is tired and drowsy on a winter day and keeps flitting in and out of his dreams. Even in his dreams, he sees large-sized apples and other cores related with his act of apple-picking. The narrator appears satisfied with his large harvest of apple and seems to go back to sleep contented. The narrator wonders whether this sleep is like hibernation or is it simply some human sleep.
22. The narrator says that all dreams are related to apples because he has done a lot of apple-picking and is now over-tired. He himself desired for such a bumper crop and now he is tired of harvesting it. As he dozed off in the middle of his apple-picking day, he is getting such dreams.

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## 2.11 QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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### Short-Answer Questions

1. What does Whitman say about the body and soul?
2. Is the poet patriotic? How does he show it?
3. How does Walt Whitman celebrate himself in *Song of Myself 1*?
4. In Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*, discuss the significance of the road less travelled.
5. Highlight the significance of sleep in Frost's *After Apple-Picking*.

### Long-Answer Questions

1. Explain Whitman's Songs as a celebration of the self and humanity.
2. Highlight the centrality of the soul in Whitman's poetry. Comment on its immutability.
3. What is Whitman's view of democracy? Elucidate.
4. Critically analyse Robert Frost's *The Road Not Taken*.

5. Do you think the reference to the woodchuck in the poem *After Apple-Picking* refers to the idea of death? Exemplify.

Poetry by Walt Whitman  
and Robert Frost

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## 2.12 FURTHER READING

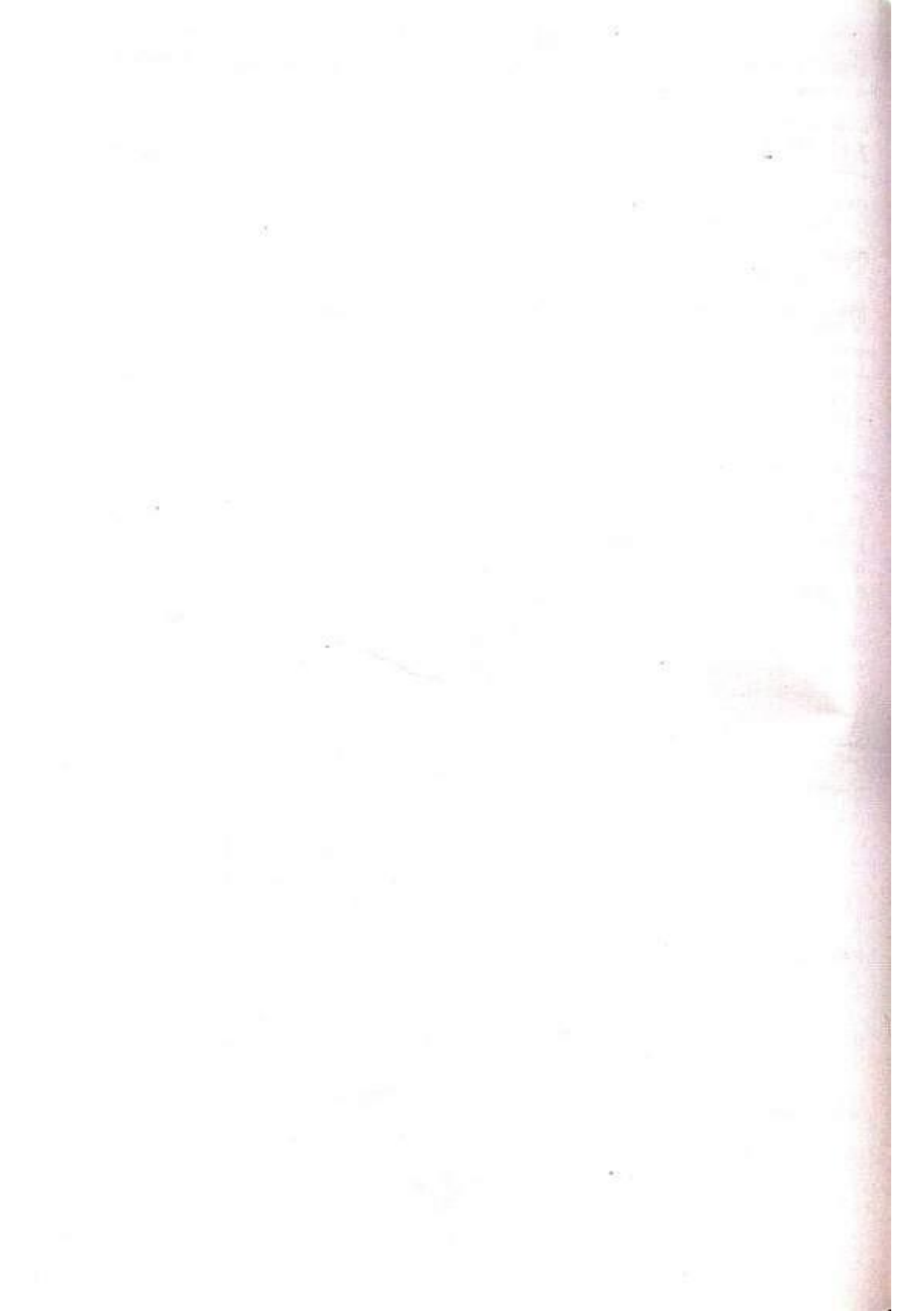
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## NOTES





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# UNIT 3 WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS, LANGSTON HUGHES AND CLAUDE MCKAY

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*William Carlos Williams,  
Langston Hughes and  
Claude McKay*

## NOTES

### Structure

- 3.0 Introduction
- 3.1 Unit Objectives
- 3.2 William Carlos Williams: A Brief Biographical Sketch and Poems
  - 3.2.1 Revelation: Summary and Analysis
  - 3.2.2 The Widow's Lament in Springtime: Summary and Analysis
  - 3.2.3 A Negro Woman: Summary and Analysis
- 3.3 Langston Hughes: A Biographical Note and Poems
  - 3.3.1 I, Too, Sing America: Summary and Analysis
  - 3.3.2 The Negro Speaks of Rivers: Summary and Analysis
- 3.4 Claude McKay: A Biographical Note
  - 3.4.1 To the White Fiends: Summary and Analysis
- 3.5 Summary
- 3.6 Key Terms
- 3.7 Answers to 'Check Your Progress'
- 3.8 Questions and Exercises
- 3.9 Further Reading

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## 3.0 INTRODUCTION

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American poet William Carlos Williams was closely associated with modernism and imagism. He was also a pediatrician and a general practitioner of medicine, having graduated from the University of Pennsylvania School Of Medicine. However, during his lifetime, he excelled in both these occupations.

His most notable contribution to American literature was his willingness to be a counselor for the young and upcoming poets. Although great poets like Eliot and Pound might have been more appreciated during their lifetime, yet various important poets in the generations that followed were either personally tutored by Williams or accepted Williams as a big influence on their works. He had a particularly significant influence on various American literary movements of the 1950s: the San Francisco Renaissance, poets of the Beat Generation, the Black Mountain School and the New York School. He personally mentored American poet Theodore Roethke. Second generation American modernist poet Charles Olson was also guided by him. American poets Robert Creeley and Denise Levertov were also associated with the Black Mountain School. They also studied under Williams.

Williams had a friendly relationship with Kenneth Rexroth, the founder of the San Francisco Renaissance. One of the lectures which Williams gave at Reed College was formative in inspiring three other significant members of that Renaissance: Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen and Lew Welch. As a mentor, one of Carlos' most dynamic relationships was with fellow New Jerseyite Allen Ginsberg. The latter claimed that Williams effectively 'freed his poetic voice'.

## NOTES

As a matter of fact, several letters of Ginsberg was included by Williams in his poem *Paterson*. He has admitted that the fifth section of this poem was inspired by one of these letters. Williams also wrote the introductions for the books produced by Ginsberg, one of them being the 1956 collection of poetry titled *Howl*. He also extended his support to unfamiliar poets, including Communist American poet Harold Harwell Lewis. Williams strongly believed that Lewis was the poet of the common people. He paid more attention on the interaction of expression and form.

James Mercer Langston Hughes was a well-known American poet, novelist, social activist, columnist and playwright. He was among the pioneers to introduce jazz poetry, the then-new literary art form. Hughes was famous as a leader of the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural movement that traversed the 1920s. Hughes's signature poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* was first published in 1921 in *The Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP). This poem was later collected in his first book of poetry *The Weary Blues* (1926). He published his first novel *Not Without Laughter* in 1930. His first collection of short stories was published in 1934 with *The Ways of White Folks*.

Hughes, along with his contemporaries, criticized the men known as the midwives of the Harlem Renaissance for being excessively obliging and adapting eurocentric values and culture in order to achieve social equality. Hughes' works mostly depicted the 'low-life' and the real lives of the working-class blacks in the lower social-economic sections of America. He strongly criticized the divisions and prejudices based on skin colour within the black community. He quoted: 'My seeking has been to explain and illuminate the Negro condition in America and obliquely that of all human kind.'

He emphasized the theme of 'black is beautiful' as he studied the black human condition in different complexities. Besides poetry, Hughes also wrote short stories, novels, plays, essays, operas and works for children.

Claude McKay was a Jamaican-American writer and poet. Like Hughes, he was also an eminent figure in the Harlem Renaissance. He authored four novels comprising *Home to Harlem* (1928), *Banjo* (1929), *Banana Bottom* (1933) and a manuscript called *Amiable With Big Teeth: A Novel of the Love Affair Between the Communists and the Poor Black Sheep of Harlem* (1941; this work has not been published yet).

He also wrote collections of poetry, a collection of short stories including *Gingertown* (1932), two autobiographical books, titled *A Long Way from Home* (1937) and *My Green Hills of Jamaica* (published posthumously), and a non-fiction, socio-historical treatise entitled *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940). Moreover, *Harlem Shadows*, his 1922 collection of poetries, was published during the Harlem Renaissance, while his *Selected Poems* was published in 1953, after his death.

In his early life, he was attracted to communism strongly. However, he gradually became disillusioned with communism and started writing negatively about it by mid-1930s. McKay became an American citizen in 1940. He was conferred the national poet by the government of Jamaica in 1977.

In this unit, you will be introduced to the life and works of William Carlos Williams, Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, their contributions to American poetry and their personal life events that shaped their poetry.

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### 3.1 UNIT OBJECTIVES

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William Carlos Williams,  
Langston Hughes and  
Claude McKay

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

- Discuss the poetic impulse of William Carlos Williams
- Explain the prescribed poetry of Langston Hughes
- Paraphrase the meaning of Claude McKay's poem: *The White Fiends*

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### 3.2 WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS: A BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH AND POEMS

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William Carlos Williams was born in 1883 in Rutherford, New Jersey, where he received his primary and secondary education till 1897. After this, he went to a school near Geneva and later went to the Lycée Condorcet School in Paris. He joined the Horace Mann High School after returning to New York. He attended the medical school of the University of Pennsylvania in 1902 and completed his graduation from here in 1906.

His first book, *Poems*, was published in 1909. He married Florence Herman in 1912 after returning from Germany. In the following year, his second book of poems, *The Tempers*, was published (1913).



William Carlos Williams

Although Williams prospered in his literary career, his main occupation was as a doctor. His work includes novels, plays, short stories, poems, autobiography, critical essays, translations and different types of correspondence. His friends mostly comprised poets, writers and artists, including the poets Marianne and Moore Wallace Stevens, and the modern painters Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp. Williams was also a part of the Imagist movement. However, his views soon started differing from his poetic contemporaries, including T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Later, he travelled all over United States and delivered lectures and poetry readings.

During World War I (1914–1918), Williams supported the avant-garde members including Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia and Man Ray. In 1915, he was closely associated with 'The Others', a group of New York writers and artists. This group was started by Alfred Kreymborg, an American poet and novelist, and Man Ray, an American modernist artist. It included eminent figures like Wallace Stevens, Walter Conrad Arensberg, Marianne Moore, Mina Loy, among others. Carlos association with this

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group made him an important member of the early modernist movement in America. These engagements further associated Carlos with the Dadaist movement, which was an artistic and literary movement of the European avant-garde in the early twentieth century.

Williams strongly criticized the works of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, particularly for their use of insinuations to foreign languages and classical sources. He preferred to take his themes from what he termed as 'the local'. Williams' *Paterson*, a modernist epic collage of place, gives an explanation of history, people and the quintessence of *Paterson*. In this, he examined the role of the poet in the American society. His poetic method is summarized in his quote 'No ideas but in things', which is from his poem *A Sort of a Song* and in *Paterson*. He believes that poets should focus on the world as it is rather than pondering on traditional poetic forms and unnecessary literary references.

During his lifetime, Carlos did not receive much recognition from Britain as in the United States. In 1963, the poet died at the age of seventy-nine, after suffering from several health problems. He had always protested against the influence of English on American poetry. A few days after his death, a British publisher declared that he would be publishing his poems soon.

Some of the most important works of Williams are as follows:

- *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1920)
- *Spring and All* (1923)
- *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (1962)
- *Paterson* (1963)
- *Imaginations* (1970)

In his book of poetry, *Spring and All*, the poem *The Red Wheelbarrow* is the most anthologized work, which is considered as an example of the principles and styles followed by the Imagist movement. However, by the time this poem was published, Carlos had rejected the Imagist movement and became strongly associated with the American Modernist movement in literature. He perceived his project of poetry is completely American. He made every possible effort to renovate language through the use of creative idioms, which developed out of the social and cultural heterogeneity of America. Nevertheless, he also tried his best to do away with the worn-out language of the British and European culture.

Williams also attempted to create a completely new form of American poetry wherein the subject matter focused on the day-to-day events in lives of the common masses. Carlos did not use the traditional metre in most of his poems. One of his unique creations was his collection of poems in his book *Journey to Love*, which he dedicated to his wife. The poem *Shadows* in this collection has the following famous lines:

*Shadows cast by the street light  
under the stars,  
the head is tilted back,  
the long shadow of the legs  
presumes a world taken for granted  
on which the cricket trills*

We can see that the pauses in this poem attempt to find a natural break spoken in the American idiom. This also reflects the rhythms available with 'jazz sounds that also touch upon Sapphic harmony'. Carlos also experimented with different types of lines, which enabled him to finally discover the 'stepped triadic line', which means a long line divided into three segments. This form is evident in his work in *Paterson* and in poems *To Elsie* and the *Ivy Crown*. Williams' another objective was to represent the truly American rhythm, as opposed to the European tradition, which is present in commonplace American language, although unnoticed. He also worked with modifications on free-form styles, which is evident in his famous poem *Asphodel, That Greeny Flower*. This poem is a distinguished example of the 'triadic line'.

American literary critic Christopher Benfey commented the thematic objective of Williams' poetry. He said: 'Early and late, Williams held the conviction that poetry was in his friend Kenneth Burke's phrase, "equipment for living", a necessary guide amid the bewilderments of life. The American ground was wild and new, a place where a blooming foreigner needed all the help he could get. Poems were as essential to a full life as physical health or the love of men and women.'

According to modern liberals, Carlos was associated with liberal democratic issues. However, his publications in more politically radical journals show that his inclination was more towards the left than the world 'liberal' refers to. Carlos believed himself to be a socialist and an opponent of capitalism. He published another poem *The Yachts* in 1935, which indicated 'the rich elite as parasites and the masses as striving for revolution'. In another book of poetry, *The Wedge*, published in 1944, he asserts that socialism is an unavoidable development of the future and as a requisite for the correct proliferation of true art. Another publication *The Pink Church* (1949) discussed the human body, which was, however, mistaken to be highly pro-communist.

In 1952-53, Carlos lost his consultancy with the library of Congress due to the anti-communist movement. As a result of this incident, he was affected with clinical depression.

#### Important works of William Carlos Williams

##### Poetry collections

- *Poems* (1909)
- *The Tempers* (1913)
- *Al Que Quiere!* (1917)
- *Sour Grapes* (1921)
- *Spring and All* (1923)
- *Go Go* (1923)
- *The Cod Head* (1932)
- *Collected Poems, 1921-1931* (1934)
- *An Early Martyr and Other Poems* (1935)
- *Adam & Eve & The City* (1936)
- *The Complete Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, 1906-1938* (1938)
- *The Broken Span* (1941)
- *The Wedge* (1944)
- *Paterson* Book I (1946); Book II (1948); Book III (1949); Book IV (1951); Book V (1958)
- *Clouds, Aigeltinger, Russia* (1948)
- *The Collected Later Poems* (1950; rev. ed. 1963)
- *Collected Earlier Poems* (1951; rev. ed., 1966)

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- *The Desert Music and Other Poems* (1954)
- *Journey to Love* (1955)
- *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (1962)
- *Paterson* (Books I–V in one volume, (1963)
- *Imaginations* (1970)
- *Collected Poems: Volume 1, 1909–1939* (1988)
- *Collected Poems: Volume 2, 1939–1962* (1989)
- *Early Poems* (1997)
- *By Word of Mouth: Poems from the Spanish, 1916–1959* New Directions Publishing (September 2011)

### Prose books

- *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1920) — Prose-poem improvisations
- *The Great American Novel* (1923) — A novel
- *Spring and All* (1923) — A hybrid of prose and verse
- *In the American Grain* (1925), 1967, repr. New Directions 2004 — Prose on historical figures and events
- *A Voyage to Paganry* (1928) — An autobiographical travelogue in the form of a novel
- *Novelette and Other Prose* (1932)
- *The Knife of the Times, and Other Stories* (1932)
- *White Mule* (1937) — A novel
- *Life along the Passaic River* (1938) — Short stories
- *In the Money* (1940) — Sequel to *White Mule*
- *Make Light of It: Collected Stories* (1950)
- *Autobiography* (1951) W. W. Norton & Co. (1 February 1967)
- *The Build-Up* (1952) — Completes the Stecher trilogy begun with *White Mule*
- *Selected Essays* (1954)
- *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams* (1957)
- *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet* (1958)
- *Yes, Mrs. Williams: A Personal Record of My Mother* (1959)
- *The Farmers' Daughters: Collected Stories* (1961)
- *Imaginations* (1970) — A collection of five previously published early works
- *The Embodiment of Knowledge* (1974) - Philosophical and critical notes and essays
- *Interviews With William Carlos Williams: Speaking Straight Ahead* (1976)
- *A Recognizable Image: William Carlos Williams on Art and Artists* (1978)
- *Pound/Williams: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams* (1996)
- *The Collected Stories of William Carlos Williams* (1996)
- *The Letters of Denise Levertov and William Carlos Williams* (1998)
- *William Carlos Williams and Charles Tomlinson: A Transatlantic Connection* (1998)
- *The Humane Particulars: The Collected Letters of William Carlos Williams and Kenneth Burke* (2004)

### Drama

- *Many Loves and Other Plays: The Collected Plays of William Carlos Williams* (1962)

Source: Wikipedia.

### 3.2.1 Revelation: Summary and Analysis

#### Text

*I awoke happy, the house  
Was strange, voices*

*Were across a gap  
Through which a girl  
Came and paused,  
Reaching out to me—*

*Then I remembered  
What I had dreamed—  
A girl  
One whom I knew well  
Leaned on the door of my car  
And stroked my hand—  
I shall pass her on the street  
We shall say trivial things  
To each other  
But I shall never cease  
To search her eyes  
For that quiet look—*

*William Carlos Williams,  
Langston Hughes and  
Claude McKay*

## NOTES

### Summary

In the *Revelation*, Carlos established himself as the best line-breaker of his time. It meant that he had a highly polished and sensitive sense for judging which word should end a line and how the syntax should turn against the flow of lines. This skill shapes free verse and gives it the 'organic form'. This poem can be characterized as one of the poems whereby Williams is able to fix the atmosphere of a moment. The poem starts with the narrator awakening from sleep. He is still nurturing the memories of a dream. The form of the poem clearly substantiates the poet's belief that new verse structures and rhythms are needed to embody the individual experience and specifically of a 'moment'. It is a sort of verse vignette, a kind of piece which Hemmingway wrote in prose as inter-chapters in his work *In Our Time*. The lines and sentences are in the staccato form. It also reminds us of the medieval dream poem, very much in vogue during the times of Geoffrey Chaucer, the greatest English poet of the Middle Age. Williams himself said: 'The poem being an object... it must be the purpose of the poet to make of his words a new form: it must be the purpose of the poet to make of his words a new form: to invent, that is, an object consonant with his day.' In the present case, the definition of the poem appears to hold good. In case of Williams, verse does not follow the preconceived rules.

At the same time, it is not, in the real sense of the word, to be 'free' either. In fact, it is to obey, in its language and rhythm, the exigencies of the particular occasion. Particularly in this poem, it is brief but the similes are unified; it is like all of reality melts together in those sort of moments.

### Commentary and analysis

Words are often futile to feelings; so much can be behind them that very often we cannot fathom the reality that lies beneath strong emotions. The poem persuades us to

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go back to a time when our focus was narrowed on just one person. It is being thought that we belong to an age where this reference will make sense. A reader can only find the basic rhythm by taking note of the poet's deliberate notation of syllable count, poetic feel and accent, as it does in the poem, *Revelation*.

If we analyse the poem line by line, we can observe certain basics hidden in the meditative pause in the middle, and at the end of the first line, the delicate, monosyllabic tread of the second, and the echoing effect of the word 'voices'. All these help to capture the sense of mystery and lost bearings, which majority of us experience when drowsy. In lines 3 and 4, the convoluted syntax, a sort of clumsy rhythm represents the narrator's struggling attempts to remember his 'revelation'—the girl just dreamed about. She still appears to be present in the room when he wakes up. In lines 5 and 6, the 'revelation' returns to the narrator for a moment. As it takes place, the lines assume a kind of stillness or breathless wonder and are left unfinished. It is very much like an unconsummated desire. The lines 7 to 12 possess the broad memory of the dream, which comes back just as a memory now. It is not a moment of transcendent vision. In line 9, the pause which makes us linger over the word 'girl' is intentionally used to enable us to discover in it an excitement and sense of possibility which it does not generally have. As a poet, Carlos tried to revitalize simple words like this one, and hence, avoided what Wordsworth had disparagingly termed as 'poetic diction'.

In lines 11 and 12, the stress on 'leaned' and 'stroked' recaptures the girl's movement. Further, the reference to 'my car' gives an indication about how far this dream is from the conventional poetic dream, and how close it is to the dream of the common man. In lines 13 to 18, the poet comes back to the waking world. Nonetheless, he does it with the intention of finding in it the strange beauty of his dream. So the poem turns out to be at once an affirmation as well as demonstration of the belief that only in ordinary, everyday kind of experience can the 'absolutes' be explored. As Williams himself said, 'This is the poet's business. Not to talk in vague categories but to write particularly, as a physician works upon a patient, upon the thing before him, in the particular to discover the universal.' Coming from a practicing doctor, we understand what force this formulation possesses in the context of Williams's own poetry.

In the monotonous rhythm of lines 13 and 14, 'other' prepares us for the clinching affirmation of the last three lines. It is characteristic of Williams to cling (as he does in lines 16 to 18) to the specific. The larger, universal meaning of the poem never gets separated from the specific moment. It leaves off on a note of expectancy, with the poem, grammatically speaking, still unfinished. The poet's objective was to capture the movement of things, as well as their individuality. We can say that 'living' rather than 'life' was his absolute. That is why Williams always attempted to impart to his work a sense of possibility, to leave it open as though it could continue to change like the world it imitated. Here again, Williams's poem comes out to be a verse counterpart of Hemingway's open-ended short stories, which the publishers, to begin with, always found 'unfinished' and asked for the 'rest'.

### 3.2.2 *The Widow's Lament in Springtime: Summary and Analysis*

#### Text

*Sorrow is my own yard  
where the new grass  
flames as it has flamed*



often before, but not  
with the cold fire  
that closes round me this year.

Thirty-five years  
I lived with my husband.  
The plum tree is white today  
with masses of flowers.

Masses of flowers  
load the cherry branches  
and color some bushes  
yellow and some red,  
but the grief in my heart  
is stronger than they,  
for though they were my joy  
formerly, today I notice them  
and turn away forgetting.

Today my son told me  
that in the meadows,  
at the edge of the heavy woods  
in the distance, he saw  
trees of white flowers.  
I feel that I would like  
to go there  
and fall into those flowers  
and sink into the marsh near them.

William Carlos Williams,  
Langston Hughes and  
Claude McKay

## NOTES

### Summary

The poem, *The Widow's Lament in Springtime* by William Carlos Williams, describes the misery of a woman who has been widowed.

The poet has successfully blended nature's beauty with the gloom that pervades human life. The poet is greatly inspired by nature. He attempts to establish a connection between the widow's grief and the beauty of nature. Even while he talks of a sad incident, he chooses to associate it with the best season of the year, that is, spring.

The woman cannot help comparing the spring season of the year that has gone by with the spring season of the present year. The two are so different. Last year, she had enjoyed the season with her husband who was alive. This year, however, the same elements of nature that appeared beautiful last year, take on a totally different meaning.

The spring season is different from other seasons. It is associated with good things. Spring is associated with warmth that is essential for life to go on easily. It is associated with greenery, colour and fruits which are symbols of life, joy and fertility. It is considered a season of rebirth; a season when diseases are at a minimum.

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The poet, however, has given a totally different meaning to this season of rebirth. Instead of linking it to joy, hope and positivity, he chooses to associate it with the grief that has taken hold of the woman. He associates the season with the loneliness, sorrow, frustration, negativity, pessimism and a sense of vacuum or emptiness that has engulfed the woman. He feels that the colours of spring cannot diminish the sorrow in her heart which is stronger than all the sweetness that the season is associated with.

### Commentary and analysis

Through the poem *The Widow's Lament in Springtime*, William Carlos Williams uses twenty-eight lines of free verse to express the sadness that dwells in the heart of a woman who has lost her husband.

The sight of the spring flowers and the growing plants around her reminds her of the emptiness in her life that has come about due to the death of her husband. This pastoral elegy uses the images of nature to draw our attention to the sorrow experienced by a person who loses a loved one to death.

The poem revolves around the central character of a woman who finds herself overwhelmed with sorrow due to her husband's death. She is unable to come to terms with the loss. The association of all the beautiful things of spring with death makes the readers forget the beauty of the season. Instead, the readers are forced to focus on the woman's loss, on death and heartache. The widow herself is unable to appreciate the beauty of the season. She does not notice the beauty around her. She can only think about what she has lost. Everything around her makes her grieve for her dead companion.

The imagery created by the poet is rather vivid. He describes the colours of spring, the flowers, the cherry trees and the green bushes. The readers are able to visualize the beauty of the season in lines 11–14.

The effect of the poem increases manifold just because it is set against the backdrop of the spring season. Spring brings to the mind images of flowers in full bloom, warm weather, joy, and of course rebirth. However, in stark contrast, the woman who has lost her husband associates this beautiful season with sorrow. However, she does not deny that the season had brought her pleasure in the past as is clear by lines 15–19.

The power of the poem cannot be denied. The poet manages to allude to the readers' experience of sorrow and not the widow's. She merely reflects the loss that most readers can understand but only relate to in shadow.

The widow is unable to confront the beauty of the spring season because it only gives her pain. She finds herself thinking about the absence of her husband. This confrontation culminates in the experience of the overwhelming whiteness of the blossoming trees. The blossoms are so white that the whiteness makes one want to merge with it and lose oneself in it.

According to Pulitzer Prize-winning American journalist and author James E. Breslin, 'Crowds are white, the sea is dark: immersion in either gives relief, a union with One, but halts the cyclic process of renewal.' The world is way beyond us for its structure to affect our souls. A silence finally sets in which, if represented materially, is like a cold wall that cannot be destroyed; a wall that goes into the infinity. Therefore, white affects human psyche as absolute silence. White is like a pause that is capable of bringing about a temporary break in what is otherwise melodious music. It conveys a sense of nothingness.

The protagonist of the poem is not the poet but the widow. Her soliloquy familiarizes the readers with what is going on in her mind. The conflict between the bright colours of

spring and the drabness of her life is quite strongly portrayed albeit overshadowed by the flaming 'cold fire'. The enclosure of this very 'cold fire' foreshadows the 'white' conclusion. A conclusion that is full of whiteness, emotional as well as physical.

The protagonist (widow) attempts to express herself through short, restricted sentences. However, her emotions appear to burst through, not once or twice but thrice.

It first breaks through in the initial metaphor, then again with more force in the middle of the poem and finally through a surge of feeling in the concluding sentence.

The usage of simple vocabulary only makes the piece more poignant. It shows how distraught and inarticulate the widow is. The simple 'Thirty five years/ I lived with my husband', is quite a stark statement and is no doubt a very genuine one that comes straight from the heart.

The use of 'formerly' and 'before' in contrast with 'this year' and 'today' drives home the point that the widow's loss is not a very old one. It is quite recent.

The poem is very complex, in terms of structure. The poet has successfully played with both emotional as well as descriptive statements. The two are juxtaposed and serve as figurative expression. Following the first metaphor, personal narrative becomes more prominent than factual description. The climax is undoubtedly reached when the white flowers are associated with the wish to die. This is the final result of sorrow.

### 3.2.3 A Negro Woman: Summary and Analysis

#### Text

*carrying a bunch of marigolds  
wrapped  
in an old newspaper:  
She carries them upright,  
bareheaded,  
the bulk  
of her thighs  
causing her to waddle  
as she walks  
looking into  
the store window which she passes  
on her way.  
What is she  
but an ambassador  
from another world  
a world of pretty marigolds  
of two shades  
which she announces  
not knowing what she does*

*William Carlos Williams,  
Langston Hughes and  
Claude McKay*

#### NOTES

## NOTES

other  
than walk the streets  
holding the flowers upright  
as a torch  
so early in the morning.

### Summary

Carlos Williams' poem *A Negro Woman* portrays a black woman carrying flowers from one place to another early in the morning. She represents various good qualities, like strength (represented by the manner of her walking), care and love (symbolized by the way she takes care of the marigolds), and power (indicated by Williams' use of the term 'ambassador'). Holding the flowers upright as a torch appears to compare her status to the Statue of Liberty, symbolizing freedom. The poet is trying to prove that this woman's ability to simply carry flowers from one place to another makes her possess various other good qualities. When Carlos writes that she is looking at the store window, it may mean that she wants to be able to go inside, even though segregation on the basis of race was a basic issue during that time. The poet wants the readers to get into her psyche and have an inclination about her urge to go into the store, or even getting a job there. It is very hard to find out which of these she is wanting more. However, she still shows her pride and strength once she passes the store. It gives her even more power. The readers can visualize that the way this poem is written, it represents the manner of her walking, side to side waddling with the bulk of her thighs. This sort of swaying motion appears to be evident in this poem.

### Commentary and analysis

There was a time when people brought (actually bought) from Africa and kept as slaves for domestic, industrial or agricultural work were derogatorily termed 'niggers'. A more formal and racial expression was 'Negroes'. However, there was an assertion of human and civil rights during the twentieth century. Consequently, these people came to be termed as 'black Americans', but were still kept as a separate community of the 'others', and not accepted as equal to the 'more equal' white Americans. Presently, they have secured more rights and maintain their self-respect as 'Afro-Americans'. So we can see that the terminology has been changing with more and more acceptance of these people as a part of the mainstream American society. Nonetheless, socially and psychologically, the distance still persists between the two communities, although officially there is no 'discrimination' against the people of African origin. This poem belongs to the early decades of the twentieth century. At that time, these people were called 'Negroes'. It is interesting to observe how Williams, as a white American poet, views a black woman.

It is ironical that Carlos' poetical theory to concentrate on the object as a specific reality in time and space as well as his limitations as a white American to possess any interest in the personal life of a Negro woman stops him from going beyond the mere physical description of the woman. As we can see, the woman described in the poem is not different from a non-living object—a tree or a stone. Still certain items or gestures in the description give a clue to the white man's stereotype attitude to the Negro woman. For instance, consider the lines 'the bulk/ of her thighs/ causing her to waddle/ as she walks'. Here, the characteristic image of the Negro woman, her excessive fat in

comparison to the white woman's slimness, surfaces in the poem which is common in the white American literature. A certain sense of superiority is implied here by the poet about the white artist or man who concentrates on nothing else but the thighs of the Negro woman. What about her face, eyes, her emotions and sentiments? In the modern-day criticism in which all types of deconstructive stances are being taken, the poet ends up ignoring the 'other', or the life and society in general. It reveals or betrays the artist's racial, cultural and gender biases. Here, it is racial.

Also important in Williams's description of the Negro woman is the glance the woman throws in the lines next to the ones mentioned above: 'looking into/ the store window which she passes/ on her way.' Here, the Negro woman's 'looking into the store window' expresses a good deal about her social and cultural deprivations. She is not among the privileged ones who can just walk into the store and buy whatever they like. She is among those unprivileged who can only 'look into the stores' from outside, for they are not rich enough to afford buying anything from the 'store', which in itself is a symbol of a class. Nor is she, perhaps, as a Negro woman entitled to enter such stores where only the Whites do shopping. The 'look' here is a hungry look, a metaphor for deprivation. She does not belong to the world of stores; she is an outsider, racially, economically, socially and culturally. The binary of 'we' and 'they' is operational here. The poet, of course, being a part of the privileged community would not have much concern about the inequality and injustice implied in the power structure. Or even if he does, the poem refuses to reveal any indication to that effect.

In fact, the woman's 'otherness', and the poet's smugness come out all the more clearly and directly in the subsequent lines. Here, the associations of the Negro woman with the 'other' world as its ambassador, the world of flowers, seem positive, not negative. The world of nature and fragrance, as against the world of stores, does give the woman a privilege of a different sort, a nature's privilege. However, we can see how the emphasis is on the other world as such, not so much on the woman representing it. Her link with this world is no more than that of a flower vase or a cart carrying fruits or flowers. The comparison of the flowers held in her hand to a torch may suggest her being a torch-bearer for the change that would flow from the other world. Here, we as readers face the difficulty of knowing what precisely the poet is trying to convey through these metaphors. The difficulty arises from Williams's philosophy of poetry which refuses to go beyond the word 'painting'. Some subtle suggestions that might slip from the concrete description, too, are not very eloquent. We have to rest content with talking about the various possibilities that seem to be there in these suggestions. It is owing to this rock-like nature of Williams' poem that he is considered a poet of mute pictures, not a poet of ideas. Whatever, we might work out in the name of interpretation of a poem, it comes out more of a superimposition than deciding of the mute picture. The pictures he draws are so solid that they refuse to yield to any 'solution' we choose to dissolve the solid in.

William Carlos Williams,  
Langston Hughes and  
Claude McKay

## NOTES

### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. How was William Carlos Williams's writing different from other American poets?
2. Write a short note on *The Widow's Lament in Springtime*.
3. What is the central theme of the poem *A Negro Woman*?

### 3.3 LANGSTON HUGHES: A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE AND POEMS

#### NOTES

The Harlem Renaissance was a black cultural movement that was prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s. It was also called the 'New Negro Movement'. Though the movement was initially confined to the Harlem neighbourhood in New York, many black writers from the Caribbean and African colonies were also subsequently influenced by it.

James Langston Hughes was amongst the greatest poets of the Renaissance. At a time when segregation was widespread and the black community was still considered a second rate, he was one who was unabashedly proud of his colour and his culture, a trait which is reflected in a majority of his poems. In this unit, we will be taking a brief look at the poet as one of the most significant African-American figures in literature. We will also be analysing eleven of his best and most influential works of poetry.

#### **Brief biographical sketch of James Langston Hughes**

James Langston Hughes was born on 1 February 1902, in Joplin, Missouri. His parents separated when he was still a small child, and his father moved across the border to Mexico. He lived with his grandmother till he was thirteen. Later, he moved to Lincoln, Illinois, to live with his mother and his stepfather. Their family was to finally settle down in Cleveland, Ohio. It was in Lincoln, Illinois, that James Langston Hughes started writing poetry. After graduation, he lived in Mexico for a year and he spend another year at Columbia University. In this period, Langston Hughes held odd jobs, such as a cook and a busboy, among others, and later travelled to Europe and Africa plying his trade in the seas. He moved to Washington, DC in November 1924. His first book of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, was published in 1926. In 1929, he finished his college education at Lincoln University, Pennsylvania.



Langston Hughes

Hughes was influenced by African-American poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, American writer Carl Sandburg and Walt Whitman. He is particularly famous for his

perceptive, effervescent portrayals of the lives of black people in America. Though he is remembered as a poet, he was not a one-trick pony, and successfully dabbled in short stories and plays. He was deep into jazz music and that can be clearly felt in some of his works, most notably in *Montage of a Dream Deferred*. Langston Hughes' contribution was significant in shaping the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Unlike other prominent black poets of that period, Hughes wrote about everything affecting blacks in America. He did not hold back from penning down his own experiences. His stories and poems reflect black culture, including their suffering, their love of music, laughter, etc.

Langston Hughes suffered from prostate cancer. He died on 22 May 1967, in New York. Subsequently, his residence at 20 East 127th Street in Harlem, New York City, has been renamed 'Langston Hughes Place'.

Apart from poetry, Hughes wrote eleven plays and several other works of prose, including the popular 'Simple' books—*Simple Speaks His Mind*, *Simple Stakes a Claim*, *Simple Takes a Wife* and *Simple's Uncle Sam*. His autobiography, *The Big Sea*, is also a much acclaimed work.

William Carlos Williams,  
Langston Hughes and  
Claude McKay

## NOTES

### Important works of Langston Hughes

#### Poetry collections

- *The Weary Blues*, Knopf, 1926
- *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, Knopf, 1927
- *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations*, 1931
- *Dear Lovely Death*, 1931
- *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, Knopf, 1932
- *Scottsboro Limited: Four Poems and a Play*, Golden Stair Press, New York, 1932
- *Let America Be America Again*, 1938
- *Shakespeare in Harlem*, Knopf, 1942
- *Freedom's Plow*, 1943
- *Fields of Wonder*, Knopf, 1947
- *One-Way Ticket*, 1949
- *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, Holt, 1951
- *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*, 1958
- *Ask Your Mama: 12 Moods for Jazz*, Hill & Wang, 1961
- *The Panther and the Lash: Poems of Our Times*, 1967
- *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, Knopf, 1994

#### Novels and short story collections

- *Not Without Laughter*, Knopf, 1930
- *The Ways of White Folks*, Knopf, 1934
- *Simple Speaks His Mind*, 1950
- *Laughing to Keep from Crying*, Holt, 1952
- *Simple Takes a Wife*, 1953
- *Sweet Flypaper of Life*, photographs by Roy DeCarava, 1955
- *Tambourines to Glory*, 1958
- *The Best of Simple*, 1961
- *Simple's Uncle Sam*, 1965

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- *Something in Common and Other Stories*, Hill & Wang, 1963
- *Short Stories of Langston Hughes*, Hill & Wang, 1996

### Non-fiction books

- *The Big Sea*, New York: Knopf, 1940
- *Famous American Negroes*, 1954
- *I Wonder as I Wander*, New York: Rinehart & Co., 1956
- *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America*, with Milton Meltzer, 1956
- *Famous Negro Heroes of America*, 1958
- *Fight for Freedom: The Story of the NAACP*, 1962

### Major plays

- *Mule Bone*, with Zora Neale Hurston, 1931
- *Mulatto*, 1935 (renamed *The Barrier*, an opera, in 1950)
- *Troubled Island*, with William Grant Still, 1936
- *Little Ham*, 1936
- *Emperor of Haiti*, 1936
- *Don't You Want to be Free?* 1938
- *Street Scene*, contributed lyrics, 1947
- *Tambourines to glory*, 1956
- *Simply Heavenly*, 1957
- *Black Nativity*, 1961
- *Five Plays by Langston Hughes*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963
- *Jericho-Jim Crow*, 1964

### Books for children

- *Popo and Fifina*, with Arna Bontemps, 1932
- *The First Book of the Negroes*, 1952
- *The First Book of Jazz*, 1954
- *Marian Anderson: Famous Concert Singer*, with Steven C. Tracy, 1954
- *The First Book of Rhythms*, 1954
- *The First Book of the West Indies*, 1956
- *First Book of Africa*, 1964
- *Black Misery*, illustrated by Arouni, 1969, reprinted by Oxford University Press, 1994

Source: Wikipedia

### 3.3.1 *I, Too, Sing America*: Summary and Analysis

#### Text

*I, too, sing America.  
I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,*



And grow strong.  
Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
'Eat in the kitchen,'  
Then.  
Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed—  
I, too, am America.

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### Summary

In *I, Too, Sing America*, the speaker starts by claiming that he too 'sing(s) America'; in other words, he too sings the national anthem of the country just like any other citizen. The words 'the darker brother' (line two), refers to the colour of his skin. He later makes reference to how he is ordered to 'to eat in the kitchen/ when company comes' (lines three and four), clearly indicating that he is a black slave working for a white master. The oppression, however, does not seem to make him weak; in fact, it makes him laugh.

Then the speaker dreams of a future where he is no longer ordered to go to the kitchen, and where he would be on equal terms with the rest. They (possibly referring to the white majority) will eventually see how beautiful he is and be ashamed of what they had done to him in the past. The poet concludes the poem by asserting that he is just as American as everyone else.

### Commentary and analysis

At the time of writing *I, Too, Sing America* (1932), African Americans were not accepted as being equal to the white populace. The oppression in fact gained embarrassing proportions: blacks were killed violently and, in many places, not allowed to use the same facility as the whites. The division between whites and blacks were clear and as wide as ever before. In essence, America was then still a racially discriminatory society that had racist laws.

Langston Hughes took the medium of poetry to speak against these ills, as is evident in *I, Too, Sing America*. The first line of the poem clearly indicates one thing—the servant (speaker of the poem) may not be white but he sings the National Anthem in the same way as the white folks do. Thus, he is an American.

The poem shows how the servant is blatantly disrespected and how he is sent away every time visitors come to the house. He is ordered to eat in the kitchen as he does not belong to the same class as the visitors or the owner. However, this treatment does not seem to bother the speaker too much; in fact, he finds humour in it, as evidenced by line five: 'But I laugh'.

to American sociologist and civil rights activist, W. E. B. Du Bois, the poet uses the river to symbolize the source of life. *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* traces the movement of African Americans from the Euphrates and Nile rivers in Africa to the Mississippi river in the United States.

William Carlos Williams,  
Langston Hughes and  
Claude McKay

### Commentary and analysis

Hughes subtly condemns slavery and racism through the refrain: 'My soul has grown deep like the rivers'. The first appearance of this line in the poem (line four) is preceded by the speaker's declaration that he has seen rivers 'ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins' (lines two and three). The second and the last time the line appears in the poem (line thirteen) takes place immediately after the poet refers to Mississippi, New Orleans and Abraham Lincoln. This time, the poet suggests that he is not the same person who 'bathed in the Euphrates' and 'built [his] hut near the Congo' but he is worse off now. Today, he is a black man who has had his share of slavery and pain and carries the scars of those experiences with him. Of course, when he talks about himself, he is referring to the entire black race in America.

The poem is something of a historical account of where the black Americans came from, and it shows them to possess power and ability. *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* touches upon various places and times where the Negroes have established themselves. Here, Hughes manages to make a strong point. He establishes the black race in the same footing as the Caucasian race, especially with regard to history.

The poet has also successfully uses the metaphor of the river to put his point across. Historically, it well known that civilizations have been built near rivers, and many communities even today are tied historically and sentimentally to rivers. Thus, by joining rivers and the Negro race and highlighting their respective contributions to the development of history, Hughes points out the importance of his community to the world.

*The Negro Speaks of Rivers* as such highlights the equality of the Negro race with respect to other races and how it has contributed to history. The final line 'My soul has grown deep like the rivers' is perhaps the most powerful in the poem. Open to many interpretations, the most obvious one is that the poet is trying to point out how his race, over time, has managed to fashion itself a place in history, the same way rivers, over millions of years, have helped form soil, rocks and mountains.

Indeed, the poet in *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* successfully tells of how Negroes over generations have shown that they are not inferior to any other race and have a lot more to offer still.

### NOTES

#### CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

4. What is the dream of the speaker in the poem *I, too, Sing America*?
5. What does the river symbolize in *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*?

### 3.4 CLAUDE MCKAY: A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Claude McKay played a key role during Harlem Renaissance which was a literary movement of the 1920s. His poetry touches a variety of subjects such as vernacular verse celebrating peasant life in Jamaica to fairly militant poems challenging white authority

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in America; from generally straightforward tales of black life in both Jamaica and America to more philosophically ambitious fiction addressing instinctual and intellectual duality. This, according to McKay, was central to the black individual's efforts to cope in a racist society. Visible across all his writing is the disdain he has towards racism and bigotry.

Professor emeritus of African and African-American Studies Arthur D. Drayton has said in his essay, *Claude McKay's Human Pity*, 'McKay does not seek to hide his bitterness. But having preserved his vision as poet and his status as a human being, he can transcend bitterness. In seeing . . . the significance of the Negro for mankind as a whole, he is at once protesting as a Negro and uttering a cry for the race of mankind as a member of that race. His human pity was the foundation that made all this possible.'



Claude McKay

Claude McKay, christened as Festus Claudius McKay, was born in 1889 in Sunny Ville, Jamaica. He was born to peasant farmers who infused in him a huge sense of his African heritage as well as racial pride. English poetry became his literary interests early in life. Guided and supported by an English neighbour (Walter Jekyll) and his own brother (school teacher Uriah Theophilus McKay), McKay made a study of the British masters, such as Alexander Pope and John Milton. He even studied the Romantics and philosophers from Europe, like Arthur Schopenhauer. At that time, Jekyll was performing the task of translating the works of Arthur Schopenhauer into English from German. Jekyll gave McKay the advice to pen verses in the Jamaican dialect and not mimic the English poets.

When he was seventeen, McKay left Sunny Ville for Brown's Town to become a woodworker apprentice. After a brief stay there, he headed to Kingston to become a constable. McKay both encountered and experienced rampant racism in Kingston. This was possibly his first experience with racism. Mostly blacks lived in Sunny Ville, while in Kingston, the population was mostly of whites, and blacks here were looked down upon as being inferior and fit only for menial tasks. The city disgusted McKay because of its bigotry. He was back in Sunny Ville in less than one year.

Even when away from home on his apprenticeship and constable's job, McKay did not stop his poetry writing. On his return to Sunny Ville, with encouragement from Jekyll, he had his verses published in 1912 in London. It came out as a collection titled *Songs of Jamaica and Constab Ballads*. The two collections display totally opposing

aspects of life of blacks in Jamaica. In the volume *Songs of Jamaica*, a picture of peasant life is displayed, which is near celebratory, and the poems it contains touch upon subjects like McKay's mother's peaceful demise and the ties that the black people have with the Jamaican land. In the volume *Constab Ballads*, there is a bleak representation of the plight faced by the Jamaican blacks and many of its poems openly criticize the life in urban Kingston.

William Carlos Williams,  
Langston Hughes and  
Claude McKay

## NOTES

Scholar of African-American literature and a professor of English at Columbia University Robert Bone in *The Negro Novel in America* has made note of the reverse sentiments seen in the two volumes. He also asserts that both volumes have a share sense of directness and also a candour that is much refreshing. He has written: 'These first two volumes are already marked by a sharpness of vision, an inborn realism, and a freshness which provides a pleasing contrast with the conventionality which, at this time, prevails among the black poets of the United States.'

McKay got both a stipend and an award for the collection *Songs of Jamaica* given by the Jamaican Institute of Arts and Sciences. He used this money to go to America. He landed in South Carolina in 1912. From there, he headed to Alabama where he joined the Tuskegee Institute and spent about two months studying there. Then he took a transfer to Kansas State College. McKay left for New York City in 1914 where he took up menial jobs. New York City, too, was a city rampant with racism and McKay did not escape it, and he was compelled by that racism to carry on with his poetry writing.

McKay adopted the name Eli Edwards to publish two poems in 1917. These were published in the periodical *Seven Arts*. Literary critic Frank Hattis discovered the verses and then printed some of McKay's other poetry in the publication *Pearson's Magazine*. One of the famous poems of McKay's that belongs to this time is *To the White Fiends*, in which the racists and white oppressors are thrown an acerbic challenge. American writer Max Eastman was befriended by McKay some years later. *Liberator* magazine's editor, Max Eastman was a communist sympathizer. He had McKay's poems published in his magazine, one of which was *If We Must Die*, an inspirational poem defending the rights of the blacks and threatening to counter abuse and prejudice with retaliation.

*Like men we'll face the murderous, cowardly pack,  
Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!*

Writing about *If We Must Die* in *Black Poets of the United States*, French scholar of African American poets Jean Wagner expresses that it rises above all race specifics and is extensively 'prized as an inspiration to persecuted people throughout the world'. Wagner has written, 'Along with the will to resistance of black Americans that it expresses, it voices also the will of oppressed people of every age who, whatever their race and wherever their region, are fighting with their backs against the wall to win their freedom'.

After *If We Must Die* was published, McKay began a period of work and travelled abroad for two years. He spent some duration of 1919 in Belgium and Holland, from where he travelled to London and spent time working on the periodical *Workers' Dreadnought*. Another and the third collection of verses was published by McKay in 1920. It was titled *Spring in New Hampshire*, which contained the notable poem *Harlem Shadows*. This poem brought out the predicament of the black prostitutes living in the urban environment which was extremely degrading and, in a broader sense, representing

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the plight and degradation of the black race. Later, this poem was used by McKay as the title of his next collections.

In 1921, McKay went back to the United States where he devoted his time to social causes. In the following year, McKay formed a collection of writings from his previous volumes and from his publications in periodicals and published it under the title *Harlem Shadows*. Contained in this collection are some of those poems of McKay which have been instrumental in making him an acclaimed component of the Harlem Renaissance. McKay made full use of his acclaim to work with redoubled effort towards the cause of the labourers and blacks. Towards this end, he associated himself with the Universal Negro Improvement Association and also wrote a number of articles that went into *Negro World*, their publication. He once again went off to the Soviet Union where he had gone before with Eastman. There he participated as an attendee in the Fourth Congress of the Communist Party.

In time, McKay visited Paris. There he acquired an acute respiratory infection. He took up assignments as an artist's model to support himself. Due to the respiratory infection, he had to be hospitalized. Once he recovered, he again set out on his journeys. Over the following decades, McKay travelled across Europe and various parts of northern Africa. During this period, he published a collection of short stories and three novels. Published in 1928, *Home to Harlem* was the first of the novels and is considered to be his most recognized one. The novel is about Jake, a black soldier, who suddenly goes to his home in Harlem, deserting his military duties. Jake is representative of, though in a majorly overt manner, the individual's instinctual nature. He manages to find his happiness with Felicia, one who was at a past date a prostitute; this was due to his nature of being true to the self. Another character in the novel, Ray displays a behaviour exact opposite to that of Jake. Ray aspires to be a writer and carries the burden of despair. His bleak attitude is the result of the intellectualized perspective he has of life, and this very perspective finally drives him to return home to Haiti from the racist and alien America.

Robert Bone has written in *The Negro Novel in America* that both Jake and Ray, one instinctual the other intellectual, 'represent different ways of rebelling against Western civilization'. However, he went on to say that McKay's depiction of the relations that his protagonists had in white society were not successfully articulated. Writing about *Home to Harlem*, he says that it was 'unable to develop its primary conflict' and it, therefore, 'bogs down in the secondary contrast between Jake and Ray'. In the novel, there is even an elaborate depiction of the darker aspects of urban life of the blacks, including the gamblers and prostitutes. Literary author and critic Alan L. McLeod in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* has applauded for McKay for having designed 'a work of vivid social realism'. Yet, according to McLeod, it appears that McKay himself 'stressed that he aimed at emotional realism—he wanted to highlight his characters' feelings rather than their social circumstances'. Readers prized and black leaders condemned McKay's depiction of 'unsavory aspects of New York black life'.

*Home to Harlem* was applauded as the first novel from a black author to be commercially very successful. It was a very popular novel, which depicted some extremely harrowing, sordid sights of ghetto life. On the tail of *Home to Harlem*, McKay published *Banjo: A Story without a Plot*. Banjo, the black protagonist of this novel, is a vagabond who resided in Marseilles, a French port. Banjo lives an instinctual life much like Jake (from *Home to Harlem*) did, but he is portrayed to be sharp, witty and enterprising than Jake. *Home to Harlem*'s intellectual Ray is also seen in *Banjo: A Story without a Plot*. He is facing the same fate as most artists who were a struggling face, forced to resort

to conventional employment to support themselves due to the adverse social circumstances. The novel depicts Ray and Banjo both being disturbed and dissatisfied with the restricted roles that they have to play in the white society. By the time the novel concludes, both Ray and Banjo are set to leave Marseilles.

The commercial success and acclaim that *Home to Harlem* had received did not come to *Banjo*. Yet it did go a long way to give McKay a confirmed status of a provocative and serious artist. McLeod has pronounced, 'It was apparent to critics that McKay's imagination had been somewhat strained and that the novel was essentially an autobiographical exercise'. It has been seen by commentators that a common thread runs through the two novels *Banjo* and *Home to Harlem* in the form of the character portrayed by Ray, who, much like the author, leads a travelling life and also admires the beauty of the bodies of young men. Patti Cappel Swartz has sought to find indications of McKay's sexuality in his fictional writings, and based on a dream sequence of *Home to Harlem*. The fact that 'for Ray, the bonds with men will always supersede those with women,' as is shown in the conclusion of *Banjo*, Swartz opines, 'Like McKay, Ray is not the marrying kind, but rather the vagabond who must always travel on'.

McKay, in *Banana Bottom*, his third novel, provides readers a more insightful study of the main theme which is the quest of a black person in a society of whites for cultural identity. In this novel, Bitia, a Jamaican peasant girl, and her experiences are depicted. Bitia, after being subjected to the horror of rape, gets adopted by white missionaries who expose her to the British educational system and organized Christianity, thus attempting to compel her to adopt their cultural values. They end up bungling it all horribly by trying to get Bitia married to a would-be minister, who turns out to be aberrant sexually, and this leads to the fleeing of Bitia from the society of the whites. Finally, Bitia weds Jubban, a drayman, and they provide their child an environment which is Jamaican and idealized peasant. McLeod remarked, 'Bitia has pride in blackness, is free of hypocrisy, and is independent and discerning in her values. Praise for *Banana Bottom* has been unanimous.'

According to critics, most skilful delineation by McKay of the predicament of a black individual in white society is depicted in *Banana Bottom*. When the book got first published in 1933, no one paid much attention to its thematic worth. Most praise went to the author's mastery of melodrama and exceptional evocation of the Jamaican tropics. The years that followed made people believe that it was the finest fiction that Kay had ever written and it was acknowledged as being the culmination of Kay's attempt to express the unease and tension he himself felt.

In the last few years that McKay spent abroad, the fiction he wrote which was of worth noting was a short story collection with twelve stories, *Gingertown*. While six stories centred on the life in Harlem and displayed the preoccupation that McKay had with humiliation and exploitation of the blacks, the others six are located in North Africa and Jamaica. After being in North Africa for some time, McKay went back to the United States in the mid-1930s. On return to Harlem, McKay started upon *A Long Way from Home*, an autobiographical writing. It depicts the problems that he himself had to deal with in a white society. However, as an autobiography of McKay, the book is unreliable. As has been shown by McLeod, in the book, McKay has said he was not a member of the communist party. Yet, in the book *A Long Way from Home*, the author depicts the long-held belief that American blacks must come together and participate in the struggle against oppression, segregation and colonialism.

William Carlos Williams,  
Langston Hughes and  
Claude McKay

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Catholicism had become a keen interest for Kay towards the close of the 1930s. Through Ellen Tarry, an African-American author of literature for children and young adults, Kay participated actively in the activities of Harlem's Friendship House. Kay's collection of essays entitled *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* is the result of his unusual religious interest and the experiences he had at the Friendship House. The essays provide a description of Harlem's black community of the 1920s and 1930s. This collection did not do well with the reading public. People seemed to be tired of writings about and by blacks. According to a more recent evaluation by critic McLeod, 'The book has been superseded by many more scholarly studies, yet it retains value as a re-examination of Harlem by one who had established a necessary critical distance.' During this time, Kay's reputation was on the decline. As a result, he relocated to Chicago where he joined a Catholic organization as a teacher. By the end of 1940s, Kay's health deteriorated and he faced various health troubles. He passed away in 1948 May due to a heart failure.

After his death, the little reputation that he had had during his list day also declined and his critics dismissed him as shallow and conventional. Of late, McKay has regained reputation as someone who was intensely committed to making known the predicament faced by the blacks, and today he is acclaimed as having devoted all his life and art to the cause of social protest. To quote literary critic Robert A. Smith's, *Claude McKay: An Essay in Criticism*: 'Although he was frequently concerned with the race problem, his style is basically lucid. One feels disinclined to believe that the medium which he chose was too small, or too large for his message. He has been heard.' Despite the fact that McKay spent most of his life outside of Harlem, he is considered to be an important part of the Harlem Renaissance. McKay has a large fan following among readers of gay and lesbian literature and commonwealth literature. The essay by McLeod in *Dictionary of Literary Biography* concludes with: 'That he was able to capture a universality of sentiment in 'If We Must Die' has been fully demonstrated; that he was able to show new directions for the black novel is now acknowledged; and that he is rightly regarded as one of the harbingers of (if not one of the participants in) the Harlem Renaissance is undisputed.'

### Important works of Claude McKay

#### Poetry

- *Songs of Jamaica* (1912)
- *Constab Ballads* (1912)
- *Spring in New Hampshire and Other Poems* (1920)
- *Harlem Shadows* (1922)
- *The Selected Poems of Claude McKay* (1953)

#### Fiction

- *Home to Harlem* (1928)
- *Banjo* (1929)
- *Banana Bottom* (1933)
- *Gingertown* (1932)

#### Non-fiction

- *A Long Way from Home* (1937)
- *My Green Hills of Jamaica* (1979)
- *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* (1940)

Source: Wikipedia

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### 3.4.1 *To the White Fiends: Summary and Analysis*

#### Text

*Think you I am not fiend and savage too?  
Think you I could not arm me with a gun  
And shoot down ten of you for every one  
Of my black brothers murdered, burnt by you?  
Be not deceived, for every deed you do  
I could match—out-match: am I not Afric's son,  
Black of that black land where black deeds are done?  
But the Almighty from the darkness drew  
My soul and said: Even thou shalt be a light  
Awhile to burn on the benighted earth,  
Thy dusky face I set among the white  
For thee to prove thyself of higher worth;  
Before the world is swallowed up in night,  
To show thy little lamp: go forth, go forth!*

#### Summary

Right from the beginning of the poem, starting from the title itself, *To the White Fiends*, we see a focus of the poet on racial tensions. This tells us implicitly that the narrator of the poem will not be a white individual. In line 4, it becomes explicitly clear that the narrator is black when he clarifies that they are black, shown by the familial 'black brothers'. Again, in line 6, this is clarified through the indication of their being 'Africa's son'. As the focus of the title is *To the White Fiends*, it becomes clear that the narrator is suggesting that the targets of the poem are the fiendish whites and not every white. Then on, the narrator goes on to clarify the reason for these specific whites being fiends—their actions are fiendish, for example, in line 4, 'murdered, burnt by you'.

#### Commentary and analysis

The poem *To the White Fiends* written by Claude McKay has a narrator who employs the sonnet form for posing a challenge to the racial stereotypes. Rather than using violence to fight the situation, poetry is used by the narrator for displaying and dispersing the anger which is, no doubt, overwhelming the poet. By having selected to employ poetry rather than violence, all racist perceptions have been reversed by the narrator.

The poet has employed the iambic pentameter's metrical pattern and also a sonnet's structure to provide an elegance and rhythm to the voice of the narrator of the poem. Mostly, the pattern of the rhyme scheme of the poem is ABBAABBA CDCDCD, and this provides a smoothly inter line flow to the poem. The poet has employed slant rhyme in the final two lines of the sonnet. In the first stanza, the poet has expressed emotions that are strongly negative, and in the second stanza, the tone shifts gears to become positive.



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In the first line of the poem, the title is further expanded and emphasized by repetition of the word 'fiend'. A possibility is stressed upon by the narrator that blacks and racist whites could both be just as fiendish and savage. This possibility is addressed through: 'Think you I am not fiend and savage, too?' In this line, it is clearly visible that the narrator throws a challenge to the beliefs of the white racist that the blacks can be equally savages and fiends. Despite the fact that line 2 repeats the beginning of the line, there is no forcing of realization of equality by the narrator. Contrary to this, it expresses the intensity of anger felt on count of the racism practiced by the whites.

The first stanza's tone is aggressive and clearly brings out that there can be retaliation to the savage and fiendish behaviour of the whites. In line 2, 'arm me with a gun,' the narrator says that if a gun is given to them, they will strike back. The racist whites' acts of violence on the blacks depict possible retaliation through the words 'And shoot down ten of you for everyone/ Of my black brothers murdered, burnt by you?' The use of 'burnt' and 'murdered' in context of the 'black brothers' provides a context to the poem which is historical of the times of racial oppression and slavery. When looked at in this historical context, it becomes more evident why the narrator has such an angry and aggressive personality.

In the two lines, 5 and 6, deception is address. The words 'Be not deceived' are a warning for the reader. The narrator is specifically warning the reader to be cautious when he judges a black person. It will surprise them when they equal or surpass all murderous actions performed by the whites. This is expressed in the lines 5 and 6 'for every deed you do/ I could match-outmatch'. The employing of a caesura between 'match' and 'outmatch' in the form of a dash lays stress on the assertion made by the narrator. The five lines (2 through 6) contemplate the fears that the white racist have and these are depicted by explaining how, if he so desires, the narrator could turn 'savage'. There is more entertaining of the fears in line 7 through the reinforcement of the perception of the racists of blacks being 'savages' and 'fiends' through the modification of what the blackness means.

The seventh line looks at 'black' not referring to the colour of the skin but to evil. When the narrator claims in line 6 of being 'Africa's son', he becomes the black people's spokesperson. Then in line 7, it is brought out that since the blacks come from a place of evil action, they must be feared: 'Black of that black land where black deeds are done'. Here, the narrator is also mocking the perceptions of the white racists—if true evil lurks within the black people, then racist whites need to be so scared of the blacks that they should not oppress them. Herein, we find a reference of the retaliation threat which was thrown in line 2, line 3 and line 6. Despite the fact that the basic theme of the first stanza is retaliation, anger and aggression, there is a shift in tone to positive in the second stanza.

Line 8 has the use of the word 'but' which is the point of moving from the first stanza's aggressive and violent tone. According to the narrator, though they hold all capacity for violence, it is a thing that they shall not indulge in as the narrator has been inspired by God or 'the Almighty' to stay away from it. Lines 8 and 9 carry the words, 'But the Almighty from the darkness drew/ My soul', which depict this thought. The implication of the word 'darkness' is violence, which was the threat wielded in the poem's opening stanza. The inspiration gained from God by the narrator also aids him to realize the reason blacks live among white racism and oppression.

Interpreting the words of line 9 'Even thou shalt be a light', it appears that God shows even the narrator could become a guiding source. Use of 'light' shows the narrator

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to be guidance. With the narrator openly rejecting violence in line 8, it is implied that those who are staying in the 'darkness' are the white people. In line 4, the use of the words 'my black brothers murdered, burnt by you' depicts that it is the white racists who resort to violent acts, and it is the choice of the black narrator to not resort to violence. Line 10 again works to support this, and this contains the equating of the narrator to a candle, by the use of the words 'awhile to burn'. This is just the opposite of the violence that the narrator had so vehemently threatened of performing in the opening stanza. Through this metaphor, it has been brought out that the narrator could become a guide for the corrupt world or the words or the narrator, 'benighted earth'.

Line 11 and 12 form an enjambment which provides an explanation of the reason for God, the 'I,' deciding that the narrator, who is depicted using 'thy dusky face' has to exist in the midst of white oppression, as shown in the words of line 11 'set among the white'. The reason is that the narrator has to let the racist whites realize that black people do not conform to racial stereotypes. According to line 12, due to the fact that the God choose the narrator to 'prove thyself of higher worth', there is a deconstruction of colour associations, providing positive associations with 'dusky' rather than negative associations as done traditionally. The 'higher worth' of the narrator is to be the emissary in a world which is also inhabited by the oppressing whites. Line 9 carries the word 'light', which is a reference to the narrator's role of emissary. In this line, it is explained by God that the narrator could be a guiding source. The choice made by the narrator to go along with the purpose defined by God rather than give in to violence is clearly indicative of being in contradiction to the perceptions of the white racist which the opening stanza had addressed—depicting the blacks as 'savage' or 'fiend'. It is also noted by the narrator that the actions a person chooses are more important than the colour of the person's skin.

Stanza 2 has a very Christian illusion which is depicted by the use of archaic forms of second-person possessives and personal pronouns mostly used in the Bible and also the use of white verses black and dark verses light. This allusion of Christianity is a suggestion that the God is the same for both the whites and the blacks. If they worship the same God, then there is a questioning by the narrator of the soundness of what the white racists claim of regarding the blacks—that they are savages.

There is a warning given by the narrator in the poem's closing lines, 13 and 14. A sense of urgency is created with the phrasing of the last two lines as imperative. Line 13 says 'Before the world is swallowed up in the night' implying that it is a must for the narrator to play the role of a guide so that the world can be saved from total and complete corruption. In line 14, a sense of urgency is achieved by introducing a slant rhyme, which is a deviation from the existing end-rhyme scheme of the poem. According to line 12, the narrator is urged by God to put forth the 'higher worth' as a beacon, 'show thy little lamp'. The dual role of the narrator is to be a guide as well as to lead; this is evidenced in the words of line 14 'go forth, go forth!'

The sonnet is employed by the narrator for expressing anger and is also an evidence of the fact that even the blacks can be as educated and literate as whites. By employing various literary techniques like tone anaphora and rhetorical figures, the poet has created a questioning, challenging and aggressive piece of poetry. In this, the existence and nature of violence stemming from racism is addressed and the path that can be followed to enlighten the world. The poem lends a sense of urgency and urges the reader to be one with the narrator in challenging racist perceptions.

## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

6. What are the concerns that are expressed in the poetry of Claude McKay?
7. Name McKay's first novel.
8. Comment on the form of the poem *To The White Fiends*.
9. Give the rhyme scheme of the poem *To The White Fiends*.
10. State the significance of the two closing lines of the poem *To The White Fiends*.

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### ACTIVITY

Read the novel *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell and record your observations of the characters who appear at the marginal level.

### DID YOU KNOW

For nearly the first half of the twentieth century, from about 1915 to 1955, jazz was the dominant form of popular dance music in the United States. It was more than just music; at the height of its influence, jazz was a cultural movement, particularly influencing the young in dress, language and attitude. Historically, jazz was largely the creation of black Americans as they have figured disproportionately among the major innovators of this musical expression.

## 3.5 SUMMARY

In this unit, you have learnt that:

- William Carlos Williams was closely associated with modernism and imagism. His most notable contribution to the American literature was his willingness to be a counselor for the young and upcoming poets.
- Although Eliot and Pound might have been more appreciated during their life time, yet various important poets in the generations that followed were either personally tutored by Williams or accepted Williams as a big influence on their works.
- Carlos' main collections comprise *Kora in Hell* (1920), *Spring and All* (1923), *Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems* (1962), *Paterson* (1963) and *Imaginations* (1970). *The Red Wheelbarrow* is his most anthologized poem. It is considered as an example of the Imagist movement's style and principles. Nonetheless, Carlos, like his associate Ezra Pound, had long ago rejected the Imagist movement by the time this poem was published as part of *Spring and All*.
- With *Revelation*, Carlos established himself as the best line-breaker of his time. It meant that he had a highly polished and sensitive sense for judging which word should end a line and how the syntax should turn against the flow of lines.

- For Williams, as well as for Keats, the essential experience is contact, the bridging of the gap between the perceiving subject and the perceived moment or object.
- The Harlem Renaissance was a black cultural movement that was prevalent in the 1920s and 1930s. It was also called the New Negro Movement. Though the movement was initially confined to the Harlem neighbourhood in New York, many black writers from the Caribbean and African colonies were also subsequently influenced by it.
- Hughes was influenced by Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Carl Sandburg and Walt Whitman.
- He is particularly famous for his perceptive, effervescent portrayals of the lives of black people in America.
- Though he is remembered as a poet, he was not a one-trick pony, and successfully dabbled in short stories and plays. He was deep into jazz music and that can be clearly felt in some of his works.
- Claude McKay's poetry touches a variety of subjects such as vernacular verse celebrating peasant life in Jamaica to fairly militant poems challenging white authority in America; from generally straightforward tales of black life in both Jamaica and America to more philosophically ambitious fiction addressing instinctual and intellectual duality.
- McKay adopted the name Eli Edwards to publish two poems in 1917. These were published in the periodical *Seven Arts*.
- Despite the fact that McKay spent most of his life outside of Harlem, he is considered to be an important part of the Harlem Renaissance.

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### 3.6 KEY TERMS

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- **Staccato:** This refers to a musical term where each sound or note is sharply detached or separated from the others:
- **Jazz music:** Jazz is a music genre that originated at the beginning of the twentieth century, arguably earlier, within the African-American communities of the Southern United States.
- **Harlem Renaissance:** This refers to what was called in the '20s as the New Negro Movement and was largely a cultural movement.
- **Racism:** This refers to the belief that all races have certain inherent characteristics that set them apart from others, thereby making them more or less desirable.
- **Bigotry:** This refers to a kind of intolerance that can be seen in the behaviour of some individuals against others.
- **Commonwealth literature:** The Commonwealth of Nations, also known as the Commonwealth or the British Commonwealth, has manifested a distinctive literary development, marked by its cultural and historical diversity.
- **Line break:** A line break in poetry is the termination of the line of a poem and the beginning of a new line; within the standard conventions of Western literature, this is usually but not always at the left margin.
- **Enjambment:** This refers to the continuation of sentence without a pause beyond the end of a line or a stanza.

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### 3.7 ANSWERS TO 'CHECK YOUR PROGRESS'

1. Williams tried hard to invent a completely fresh form—an American form of poetry—with its subject matter focused on everyday circumstances of life and the lives of masses.
2. *The Widow's Lament in Springtime* revolves around the central character of a woman who finds herself overwhelmed with sorrow due to her husband's death. She is unable to come to terms with the loss. The association of all the beautiful things of spring with death makes the readers forget the beauty of the season.
3. Race and the prejudice against the blacks is the central theme of the poem *A Negro Woman*. The poem portrays a black woman carrying flowers from one place to another early in the morning.
4. In the poem *I, Too, Sing America*, the speaker dreams of a future where he is no longer ordered to go to the kitchen, and where he would be on equal terms with the rest.
5. In the poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*, the poet uses the river to symbolize the source of life.
6. Racism and bigotry are McKay's primary concern in his poetry.
7. *Home to Harlem* was McKay's first novel.
8. The poem *To the White Fiends* written by Claude McKay has a narrator who employs the sonnet form for posing a challenge to the racial stereotypes. Rather than using violence to fight the situation, poetry is used by the narrator for displaying and dispersing the anger which is, no doubt, overwhelming the poet.
9. The pattern of the rhyme scheme of the poem is ABBAABBA CDCDCD and this provides to the poem a smoothly inter line flow.
10. There is a warning given by God in the poem's closing lines, 13 and 14. A sense of urgency is created with the phrasing of the last two lines as imperative.

### 3.8 QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

#### Short-Answer Questions

1. Comment on the significance of *Revelation* as an example of a line breaker.
2. What was the main philosophical concern of William Carlos Williams?
3. What is the central concern of the poem *The Widows Lament in Springtime*?
4. Highlight the importance of 'I' in the poem *I, Too, Sing America*.
5. Give a synopsis of Claude McKay's *To The White Fiends*.

#### Long-Answer Questions

1. 'Words are often futile to feelings.' This has often been the governing philosophy of William Carlos William's writing. Do you agree? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Comment on Williams' use of syntax in the poem *Revelation*.
3. Highlight the tension of the poem *The Widows Lament in Springtime*.

4. Critically analyse the predicament of the negro woman in the poem *A Negro Woman*.
5. Write a detailed analysis of speaker in the poem *I, Too, Sing America*.

*William Carlos Williams,  
Langston Hughes and  
Claude McKay*

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### 3.9 FURTHER READING

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Rono Hills, Arunachal Pradesh

Contact us:



+91-98638 68890



Ide Rgu



Ide Rgu



helpdesk.ide@rgu.ac.in

