COURSE CODE: MAEGD 304

COURSE NAME: AMERICAN LITERATURE

CENTRE FOR DISTANCE AND ONLINE EDUCATION
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY

MASTER OF ARTS

ENGLISH

BLOCK III

Tezpur University
Centre for Distance and Online Education
Napaam, Sonitpur, Assam - 784028

www.tezu.ernet.in/tu_codl

Vision

To grow to be a leading centre for human resource development through distance, open and universal learning system.

Mission

To provide quality higher education at door step through barrier-less, flexible and open learning mode in conformity with national priority and societal need.

Objective

- **To offer degree, diploma, certificate level programme of study through distance learning in various emerging subjects across the disciplines.**
- **To offer job oriented and vocational programmes in flexible terms in the line of the national and regional level demand of manpower.**
- **To offer various programmes under lifelong learning contributing to the local and regional level requirements and as per the need of the society at large.**
- **To undertake various research and academic activities for furtherance of distance education in the region.**
- **To contribute to conserve and promote cultural heritage, literature, traditional knowledge and environment conducting short programmes, workshops, seminars and research in interdisciplinary field.**

MAEGD 304: American Literature I

CONTRIBUTOR

Smriti Deori	Assistant Professor, Dept. of English, Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya Adarsh Mahavidyalaya, Amijonga, Goalpara
Priyanka Saha	Research Scholar, Dept. of English & Foreign Languages, Tezpur University

EDITORS

Prof. Kalidas Misra	Professor (Retd.), Sambalpur University, Odisha.
Dr. Suchibrata Goswami	Assistant Professor, Centre for Open and Distance Learning, Tezpur University

Published by **The Director** on behalf of the Centre for Distance and Online Education, Tezpur University, Assam.

BLOCK III

MODULE V: LEADING AMERICAN POETS

UNIT 11: WALT WHITMAN: "SONG OF MYSELF" (1-7)

WHITMAN'S SONG OF AMERICA; CATALOGUES; POETICS FOR DEMOCRACY

UNIT 12: EMILY DICKINSON: "I TASTE A LIQUOR NEVER BREWED," "BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH," "I DWELL IN POSSIBILITY," "AFTER GREAT PAIN A FORMAL FEELING COMES," "I HEARD A FLY BUZZ"

DICKINSON AS POET; STUDY OF THEMES; A FEMALE VOICE IN NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

UNIT 13: ROBERT FROST: "OUT, OUT," "ONCE BY THE PACIFIC," "THE GIFT OUTRIGHT," "BIRCHES", "HOME BURIAL"

LANGSTON HUGHES: "THEME FOR ENGLISH B", "I TOO", "BALLAD OF THE LANDLORD", "THE NEGRO SINGS OF RIVERS", POETRY OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE;

FROST AS A MODERN POET; FROST AND NEW ENGLAND; STUDY OF THEMES.

HUGHES AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN IMAGINATION; TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

MODULE VI: ARTHUR MILLER: *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

UNIT 14: MYTH IN AMERICAN DRAMA: CRITIQUE OF THE MYTH OF SUCCESS, FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIP IN *DEATH OF A SALESMAN, DEATH OF A SALESMAN* AS AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

TABLE OF CONTENT

BLOCK INTRODUCTION	**1-3**
MODULE V: LEADING AMERICAN POETS	
UNIT 11: WALT WHITMAN: "SONG OF MYSELF"	**4-16**
11.0 Introduction: American Poetry 11.1 Learning Objectives 11.2 Walt Whitman: Life and Works 11.3 Reading *'Song of Myself'* 11.3.1 *Song of Myself* as "Song of America" 11.3.2 Whitman's "Catalogues" 11.2.4 *Song of Myself* as "Poetics for democracy" 11.4 Major Themes 11.5 Style/Form/Symbols 11.6 Summing Up 11.7 Assessment Questions 11.8 References and Recommended Readings	
UNIT 12: EMILY DICKINSON: "I TASTE A LIQUOR NEVER BREWED," "BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH," "I DWELL IN POSSIBILITY," "AFTER GREAT PAIN A FORMAL FEELING COMES," "I HEARD A FLY BUZZ"	**17-28**
12.0 Introduction 12.1 Learning Objectives 12.2 Emily Dickinson: Life and Works 12.3 Detail Reading Dickinson's Poems 12.3.1 'I taste a liquor never brewed'	

12.3.2 'Because I could not stop for Death' 12.3.3 'I dwell in possibility' 12.3.4 'After great pain a formal feeling comes' 12.3.5 'I heard a fly buzz' 12.4 Major Themes in Dickinson poems 12.5 Style /Form/Symbols 12.6 Dickinson as Poet: A female voice in nineteenth century American poetry 12.7 Summing Up 12.8 Assessment Questions 12.9 References and Recommended Readings	
UNIT 13: ROBERT FROST AND LANGSTON HUGHES	**29-50**
13.0 Introduction 13.1 Learning Objectives 13.2 Robert Frost: Life and Works 13.3 Reading Frost' poems 13.3.1 'Out, out' 13.3.2 'Once by the Pacific' 13.3.3 'The Gift Outright' 13.3.4 'Birches' 13.3.5 'Home Burial' 13.4 Major Themes in Frost' poems 13.5 Style/form/symbol 13.6 Frost as a modern poet 13.7 Frost and New England 13.8 Langston Hughes**:** Life and Works 13.9 Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance 13.10 Hughes and the African American imagination	

13.11 Reading Hughes' poems
13.11.1 'Theme for English B'
13.11.2 'I too'
13.11.3 'Ballad of the Landlord'
13.11.4 'The Negro sings of Rivers'
13.12 Major Themes in Hughes' poems
13.13 Style /Form/Symbols
13.14 Summing Up
13.15 Assessment Questions
13.16 References and Recommended Readings

MODULE VI: ARTHUR MILLER: *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

UNIT 14: *DEATH OF A SALESMAN* AS AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY: MYTH IN AMERICAN DRAMA **52-70**

14.0 Introduction
14.1 Learning Objectives
14.2 A brief history of American Drama
14.3 Arthur Miller: Life and Works
14.4 Reading the Play *Death of a Salesman*
14.5 *Death of a Salesman*: A Critique of the Myth of Success
14.5.1 Myths in America
14.5.2 Myth in American Drama
14.5.3 Myth of success or The American Dream
14.5.4 *Death of a Salesman* and the Myth of Success
14.6 Father Son Relationship in *Death of a Salesman*
14.7 *Death of a Salesman* as an American tragedy
14.7.1 Tragedy
14.7.2 *Death of a Salesman*: Tragedy of the common man
14.8 Summing Up

14.9 Assessment Questions 14.10 References and Recommended Readings	

****

COURSE INTRODUCTION

BLOCK III

In **Block III** we have included few major voices in American poetry right from Whitman to Hughes, Emily Dickinson being an important female voice. Apart from the poets a major dramatist of this period Arthur Miller is also discussed in this Block.

Module V: Leading American Poets consists of poems by Whitman, Dickinson, Frost and Langston Hughes offer a representative selection of American poetry. ***Unit 11: Walt Whitman: "Song of Myself" (1-7)*** will emphasis on Whitman's "Song of Myself" which is about the individual soul fusing with the Divine Soul, as the Walt persona tries to understand itself in terms of its reactions to external stimuli which in turn tap the unconscious depths of his personality. What emerges is a composite American self which claims or defines an American identity distinct from anything European or un-American.

Unit 12: Emily Dickinson offers to discuss Emily Dickinson's poetry a distinct female voice trying to carve a space for itself amongst dominant male voices like Emerson, Whitman, Hawthorne, Melville and Thoreau, to name a few. Select poems of the poet will enable you to understand the distinctiveness of Dickinson as a poet.

Unit 13: Robert Frost and Langston Hughes will focus on two of the most popular voices of American poetry Robert Frost and Hughes. Frost' poetry lends what has come to be known as a typical New England voice as his poetry features the life of rural people. He shows that a life of the imagination is possible for common, down-to-earth people as they note the otherness of things in their everyday lives. Langston Hughes brings us the voice of the African-American community from the Harlem Renaissance of the nineteen twenties. His poetry demands cultural recognition for the African Americans as well as their acceptance in America as the 'darker brother.'

Module VI: Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* deals with the drama *Death of a Salesman.* ***Unit 14*** brings out the tragedy of the common man caught up in the pressures of the American Dream of success. Willy Loman, a salesman, kills himself to leave behind for his family, the sum guaranteed by his insurance policy. As in his *All My Sons*, Miller offers a stinging critique of the American Myth of Success which can be achieved at the cost of the sacrifice of one's essential humanity.

****

MODULE V: LEADING AMERICAN POETS

UNIT 11: WALT WHITMAN: "SONG OF MYSELF" (1-7)

UNIT STRUCTURE

11.0 Introduction: American Poetry

11.1 Learning Objectives

11.2 Walt Whitman: Life and Works

11.3 Reading *'Song of Myself'*

11.3.1 *Song of Myself* as "Song of America"

11.3.2 Whitman's "Catalogues"

11.2.4 *Song of Myself* as "Poetics for democracy"

11.4 Major Themes

11.5 Style/Form/Symbols

11.6 Summing Up

11.7 Assessment Questions

11.8 References and Recommended Readings

11.0 INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN POETRY

American poetry started off with undeniable English influences. Some of the earliest known poets of the New World are Anne Bradstreet, Michael Wigglesworth, Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards etc. The nineteenth century, however, saw the emergence of a distinctive American idiom. It was the period of the "American Renaissance" as F. O. Matthiessen would call it in 1941. Poets such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Thoreau, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson began changing and shaping the course of American poetry. The twentieth century carried on the legacy of its predecessors. Poets like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot responded to the modern condition with a new dense and complex poetics, and steered not just American but European poetry into a new direction. Other notable poets whose contributions cannot be ignored include Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Hilda Doolittle, E. E. Cummings, and Hart Crane. With the Harlem Renaissance, African American poets also started

gaining attention. The 1930s saw the group of poets known as the Objectivists which included Louis Zukofsky, Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, and Lorine Niedecker.

Following World War II, new groups of poets emerged—the Confessional poets, the Beat poets, the Black Mountain poets, the Deep Image poets, the Small Press poets, and the New York School. Since the 1970s, there has been a growth of interest in poetry by African Americans. Notable poets include Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou, Ishmael Reed, Nikki Giovanni, and Detrick Hughes.

Contemporary American poetry continues to grow with the emergence of groups such as the Language School, the Neoformalists, and independent voices such as Robert Peters, Robert Pinsky, J. S. Shipman etc.

11.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

This unit will introduce you to representative poems of four important American poets, namely, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost and Langston Hughes. After reading this unit you will be able to:

- have a general overview of the history of American poetry
- acquaint yourself with the life and works of all four poets
- read critically the selected poems
- analyze the persistent thematic concerns and stylistic features of the prescribed poems
- have an understanding of the socio-cultural and political background which shaped these poets and their work
- see how these poets shaped American poetry and freed it from the constraints of European influences.

11.2 WALT WHITMAN: LIFE AND WORKS

Walt Whitman was born on the 31st of May, 1819 to Walter Whitman, a carpenter, and Louisa Van Velsor. Born to a family with an unstable economic status, he had little opportunity to educate himself formally. At the young age of eleven, he had to leave his formal schooling and search for means to contribute

to his family income. His father, however, was an avid reader and the exposure to intellectual life at home made it possible for him to continue an informal education. He found work as a printer's apprentice and later went on to publish his own newspaper, *Long Islander* in 1838.During his lifetime, Whitman engaged himself in numerous vocations—printer, schoolteacher, reporter, editor. He even worked as a clerk in Washington, DC at the time of the Civil War.

LET US STOP AND THINK

Though the Civil War affected Whitman's optimistic transcendentalist spirit, it ultimately served to strengthen his sense of identification with America and fellow Americans. In Washington, he visited hospitals and attended the injured, calling himself a "wound-dresser." In addition to offering modest gifts to the wounded soldiers, he lent them a listening ear. His notebook from the period of the Civil War bears the name of "Walt Whitman, Soldiers' Missionary."

In shifting between works, it was inevitable that he had to shift places. This left him with a larger mindset and a broader worldview. His poems draw inspiration from these travels across places. His first hand experiencing of the buying and selling of slaves in New Orleans where he had gone to take up a job at *The Crescent* endowed him with new perspectives to life which are reflected in his poems. Though his best-known poems came at a much later age, Whitman started writing poetry right from a very young age. While working under Alden Spooner, the editor of the weekly newspaper, *Long Island Star*, he started honing his literary skills. He became a regular visitor of the local library, attended theatre performances and published some of his earliest poems, though anonymously, in the *New York Mirror*. He continued working for various newspapers and contributed freelance fiction and poetry off and on. It is believed that Whitman in his life "may have begun to question his own sexual identity" (Killingsworth 7). His biographers hint at a disturbing love affair that he had with a man in the

late 1850s. While the identity of that man is not clear, one name frequently suggested is Fred Vaughan, an omnibus driver with whom Whitman was on friendly terms.

During the last decades of his life, Whitman remained largely depressed due to the death of his mother and his own ailments. He moved to his brother's place, Camden, New Jersey in 1873 and it was here that he took his last breath in 1892. Several health factors combined to make his last days utterly painful. Official reports cited the cause of his death as "pleurisy of the left side, consumption of the right lung, general miliary tuberculosis, and parenchymatous nephritis" (Reynolds, 588).

"The central event of Walt Whitman's life, literally and figuratively, was the publication *of Leaves of Grass*…Whitman identified himself completely with *Leaves of Grass*" (Killingsworth 1).The first edition of the book came out in 1855; but Whitman continued to revise and expand it till the end of his life. The book went through six more editions, culminating only with the Deathbed edition of 1891-92. The 1855 version contained twelve poems, all untitled at the time, and a Preface concerning his principles of poetic creation. The poems included some of his most famous pieces like 'Song of Myself,' 'I Sing the Body Electric,' and 'The Sleepers,'— as they were to be titled in subsequent editions.

The 1856 version of *Leaves of Grass* contained thirty two poems. The third edition added 146 more poems; it also included two new groups of poems—the "Calamus" poems celebrating same sex love and "Enfans d Adam" celebrating the relationship between members of the opposite sex.

The Civil War had a great impact on Whitman as is evident from his war poems. He once commented that the war "was not a quadrille in a ball-room…it was about nine hundred and ninety nine parts diarrhea to one part glory" (Killingsworth 9). *Drum-Taps,* an anthology of his poems concerning the war, was published in 1865. An expanded sequel came up in 1866 after the assassination of Lincoln. It was, however, finally incorporated into *Leaves of Grass* as a cluster. The poems included such popular pieces as "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed," and "O Captain! My Captain!" *Democratic Vistas*

(1871) laments the blatant industrialism and the materialistic outlook that followed the Civil War. *Memoranda During the War* (1875), and *Specimen Days and Collect* (1882) contains his prose reflections on the war and his Civil War journalism. *November Boughs*, a collection of prose and poetry, came up in 1888. Apart from his prose and poetry, Whitman also wrote a novel on temperance, *Franklin Evans, or the Inebriate*, which was published in 1842.

11.3 READING 'SONG OF MYSELF'

'Song of Myself,' one of the most famous of Whitman's poems, was included in the 1855 first edition of *Leaves of Grass* without a title. Like most of his works it was extensively revised over the years with the final version coming out in 1881. Prior to the 1881 version, the poem became titled as 'Poem of Walt Whitman, an American' in the 1856 edition and in the 1860, 1867, and 1871 editions simply 'Walt Whitman.' The fifty-two sections of the poem show Whitman trying to come up with an American epic. The "Song" in 'Song of Myself' is actually the song of America. The poem begins in medias res, and loosely follows the pattern of a quest narrative. In conformity with the epic tradition, the poem depicts a journey, albeit a spiritual journey—from ignorance to self knowledge. This self knowledge is sought to be attained by forging an identity with the elements of the outside world.

In **Section I,** the Walt persona roots himself firmly on American soil and establishes the primacy of nature. The speaker sets himself against the larger canvas of the universe and tries to imagine himself as an integral part of it. While human institutions, "creeds and schools" are not "forgotten", he asserts that his source of inspiration is "Nature without check with original energy." What we need to pay attention to is the use of the "I" and "you." The "you" could either refer to the ego or the reader. In this first section itself, Whitman gives us his epic symbol—"a spear of summer grass." To him "grass" represents democracy and uniformity. It is egalitarian, common, low, yet at the same time green and hence representative of life.

In **section II,** there is a distinction built up between the human world of "Houses and rooms" and the pure world of nature. Houses and rooms are full of

alluring fragrances i.e. influences but the Walt persona would not be lured by them. Instead he would partake of the purity of "the atmosphere" which is "odorless." The speaker is not completely hostile to the "perfumes" but is firm in his insistence that he would learn from nature first.

The speaker looks forward to the prospect of revelling in the beauties of nature, free of all external influences, "undisguised and naked." It fills him with such positive vibe that he acquires shamanic qualities and starts chanting. The energy comes out in a series of catalogues. There is a spirited celebration of nature—the speaker imaginatively muses on the numerous ways in which nature manifests itself. There is a hint of sexuality in this section as indicated by the sense of touch that is evoked by "A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms." The poet's leveling gaze leaves out nothing. In fact by taking in everything in his purview, he shows how he would sing America. It is amidst nature that one could unravel the truth, "the meaning of all poems." The Walt persona does not exhort readers to trust what he says. Rather he asks them to experience things first hand.

Section III begins with a rejection of all notions of past and future. What is emphasized upon is the present moment, the "now."

The Walt persona openly speaks of the "procreant urge" that animates all beings. For life to breed, sexual vitality is essential; only by the merging of "opposite equals" can life continue. To him, there is no use shying away from this truth that is self-evident, "sure as the most certain sure." In his radical celebration of physicality, Whitman can be seen as the forerunner of Freud.

The poet of the body and the soul comes across glaringly in this section. The body and the soul are seen as complimentary, at par with each other. Communication of two souls becomes possible through the merging of bodies. There is also a hint of homosexuality when the speaker mentions the "hugging and loving bedfellow."

In **Section IV,** the Walt persona continues taking in everything with his all inclusive gaze. Although the speaker records everything that he notices and

identifies with in the series of catalogues, he does not halt anywhere. To him identification and identity are two separate things. The search for identity is on; he moves from one influence to another, in the process encompassing everything. Here, the poet makes a distinction between an active "I" and a passive "Me Myself." For Whitman, the Self can be known only when the split between the "I" and the "Me myself" of the human personality is filled up. Beyond the active "I" which participates in the daily affairs of the world, there is the "Me myself"—passively observant. Only when an identity is forged between the "I" and the "Me myself", the body and the soul, can the search for Self be possible.

In **section V,** that forging of identity takes place. The "soul fleshes itself into personality and the body awakens to the soul" (Gelpi 180). The union of body and soul results in the "knit of identity." This union is described in terms of a sexual encounter. You would notice that the bearded body is in the woman's position, but is possessed by a passion matching that of the body it mates.

The knit of identity allows the poet to reach a moment of divine communion in an epiphanic vision. It allows him to diffuse through all creation.

In **Section VI,** there is a child-self born of the knit of identity. In section I itself Whitman introduces a blade of grass as his epic symbol. Here asked by the child-self, he is able to present 'grass' as an embodiment of many things. He sees the grass as a summing up of the whole cycle of life, death, and rebirth. It is the symbol of individuality, divinity, reproduction, democracy, death and of the new forms of afterlife.

Whitman here presents the idea of death as a transit point and not an end. Death only opens new doors, gives access to another world.

Section VII continues with the idea that "it is just as lucky to die" as "to be born." The Walt persona embraces all; the Self expands to identify with the whole of the universe. He is the democratic bard, "the mate and companion of people." Like all creation, he is immortal—he would die to be born again.

The Walt persona admits his androgyny—in accepting the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' in him he can partake of the fullness of human experience. He is representative of all humans at all levels of life—children, the aged, male, female.

11.3.1 Song of Myself as "Song of America"

Whitman's foremost concern was to represent through his poems the nation itself—America with all its struggles of definition. Hence his themes comprise of all the processes that came to shape and define America: urbanization, industrialization, westward expansion, war, conflicts over race, gender, culture and sex. The fifty-two sections of the poem show Whitman trying to come up with an American epic. The "Song" in 'Song of Myself' is actually the song of America.

Whitman wished to be the "bard" of America, the representative American poet. An admirer of Ralph Waldo Emerson, he was fired with a similar passion of equipping American literature with a characteristically American voice and identity. And in doing this, he included everything in his purview, irrespective of such notions as high and low, new and old. According to Whitman, the American "bard is to be commensurate with the people…He incarnates its geography" ("Preface"). Thus, the poet, as Whitman understood it, has to be endowed with an all-inclusive gaze—representing America in its entirety, leaving no aspect of the nation unsung of. This is evident from the fact that he uses "grass" as his epic symbol. The grass, as we discussed in our reading of 'Song of Myself,' is representative of the common man, of democracy. To him, the root democratic experience consists in experiencing the physicality of human life. As the poet of the body and the soul, Whitman celebrates the physical body and the common mass, the "grass" that had hitherto been ignored.

The poet, while accepting that "the expression of the American poet is to be transcendent and new," (Preface) does not deny the importance of archaic or foreign influences on American writing. To him, since America is "the race of races," it must be open to such influences without letting them affect its own uniqueness. The American poet must be 'possessed' by poetry; words should

flow from him with a prophetic zeal. Whitman's poet is seer and soothsayer alike. These views are in conformity with the way Whitman saw himself—as one entrusted with the task of defining the American epic. The American epic would reject the third person royal or warrior hero of the conventional epic in favour of the poet who presents himself as a representative, democratic man in the course of the poem. And though the poet is at the centre, the spiritual journey he undertakes embodies the journey of the nation itself. Whitman "offered himself—and has ultimately been accepted—as the nation's Homer, Virgil and Milton, singing the song of the nation as a song of a particular self" (Ruland 167).

11.3.2 Whitman's "Catalogues"

While reading "Song of Myself," you must have noted Whitman's use of catalogues. According to Edward Dowden,

No single person is the subject of Whitman's song, or can be; the individual suggests a group, and the group a multitude, each unit of which is as interesting as every other unit, and possesses equal claims to recognition. Hence the recurring tendency of his poems to become catalogues of persons and things.

The catalogues thus are an expression of the poet's transcendental spirit. In section ii, the prospect of revelling in the beauties of nature feels him with such positive vibe that he acquires shamanic qualities and starts chanting. The energy comes out in the series of catalogues. As they show, the Walt persona's levelling gaze leaves out nothing. In fact by taking in everything in his purview, Whitman shows how he would sing America. If "Song of Myself" records Whitman's journey from being a passive individual to one with self-knowledge, the catalogues control the readers' participation in this journey.

11.3.3 Song of Myself as "Poetics for democracy"

Critics comment that the catalogues are extensions of the poet's democratic spirit. In the series of catalogues, the Walt persona records everyone and everything that he notices and identifies with. He is the democratic bard, "the mate and companion of people." Indeed, as discussed earlier, his epic symbol, a

spear of grass, is representative of democracy. It is common, egalitarian, low; yet at the same time it is green and stands for life and vitality. As the democratic bard, he cannot leave out the common mass, the grass of America. Whitman's poem is a celebration of the democratic ideals on which America as a nation was emerging.

11.4 MAJOR THEMES

Individual

The transcendentalist insistence on individualism is evident in Whitman's works. While he identifies himself with all the elements of the external world—as the Walt persona repeatedly claims in 'Song of Myself'—the identification is achieved not at the cost of negating the individual self. The "I" of the poem is capable of forging identifications without affecting his personal identity or that of others. In the course of the poem, he becomes many people— the "hounded slave," a grieving wife, a lonely woman, an "old artillerist"—and yet is able to retain the identity of "Walt Whitman…of Manhattan the son." There is also the emphasis upon self reliance. In Section II of 'Song of Myself' the Walt persona is insistent that his words are not blindly believed, rather he wants each person to rely on his or her own experiences in arriving at the truth. What the poet emphasizes upon is a "dialectical relationship" (Gray 234) between the self and the universe at large which would allow a sense of community to persist while maintaining individualities.

Whitman's poem "was a natural product of the individualism and self-reliance celebrated by transcendentalism" (Ruland 139). While talking of the transcendent Self, it is important that we take note of the poet's celebration of his "transcontinental self" (Ruland 187) as well. The frontier myth was important to Whitman as to any other American. He sought to merge his Self with an expanding nation—expanding both in geographical and industrial terms. Like all Americans, he believed that the westward movement of the nation was one towards happiness and fulfillment.

Nature/Religious/Mysticism

A reading of 'Song of Myself' must already have acquainted you with the importance of 'nature' in Whitman's poetry. He repeatedly asserts its role as an integral and inexorable part of human life. Indeed in Whitman, humanity is seen as "continuous with nature" (Killingsworth 20). The Walt persona's coming to contact with the natural world makes him imbibe nature's energy and sets off the first series of catalogues. This preoccupation with nature is in conformity with transcendentalist beliefs. Transcendentalism preached that nature constituted a part of divinity and it recognized the relationship between man and every element of nature. 'Song of Myself' treats nature not as "a site that offered relief from the stress and intensity of the materialist city, a more innocent and largely lost environment… [it] treats the natural world as the body of the earth, an eroticized material entity with a character that alternately entices and resists the poet's curious questions and probing" (Killingsworth 19-20). The Walt persona's relationship with the world of nature is above all mystical; he aims to achieve a transcendent union with that world.

11.5 STYLE/FORM/SYMBOLS

Free verse:

With his *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman initiated a profound shift in American poetry. His use of free verse has become characteristic of him. He replaced conventional meters by introducing long lines that swung about as freely as his thoughts, and repeating words and phrases to arrive at a complex of meanings. He used everyday language without sacrificing metaphorical expressions. *Leaves of Grass* challenges the divide between prose and poetry. The 1855Preface is poetical enough to be incorporated into the poem, "By Blue Ontario's Shore" in the 1856 edition. On a close reading of 'Song of Myself,' we would see Whitman challenging traditional notions of prose and poetry—stanza breaks are determined by shifts in topic, perspective or voice as in prose paragraphs.

Imagery:

While reading the poem prescribed for you, you must have noted Whitman's use of imagery. He uses a language that appeals to all our senses. In Section II, he evokes a sense of touch ("A few light kisses, a few embraces, a reaching around of arms."), a sense of sight ("The play of shine and shade on the trees"); there is an appeal to the auditory sense as well when the Walt persona mentions being delighted by the "full-noon trill" of a bird. 'Song of Myself' also makes use of metaphorical images. Most evident and important is the figurative use of "grass" as a symbol of democracy and vitality. "Houses and rooms' symbolize civilization, and "perfumes" signify the alluring influences. Finally, if we speak in broader terms, the poem itself is symbolic of the spiritual odyssey of the poet in which the reader also participates. To quote Richard Gray, "The poem is transmuted, in effect, into an open field, a process—a journey that the reader is required to take on his or her own terms" (Gray 236).

11.6 SUMMING UP

"Song of Myself" shows Whitman in his most essential self: he is America. It is an example of how he tries to be the representative American poet by capturing the length and breadth of New England in his poetry. Whitman gave America its own epic—an epic that celebrated the nation itself. Just like America kept progressing and expanding, he kept revising and expanding his work throughout his life. His poem, much like his nation, is best understood as a 'process.'

11.7 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Comment on Whitman's use of "grass" in "Song of Myself."
2. Give a critical assessment of "Song of Myself" in the light of Whitman's aim to be the representative American poet.
3. How does Whitman differentiate between the "I" and the "Me myself" in "Song of Myself?"

4. Did you come across any radical issue in “Song of Myself”?

5. Critically examine Whitman’s treatment of ‘nature’ in “Song of Myself.”

11.8 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

Gelpi, Albert. *The Tenth Muse: The Psyche of the American Poet*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.

Killingsworth, Jimmy M. *The Cambridge Introduction to Walt Whitman*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007.

Gray, Richard. *A History of American Literature*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2004.

Ruland, Richard and Malcolm Bradbury. *From Puritanism to Post Modernism: A History of American Literature*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.

Reynolds, David S. *Walt Whitman’s America: A Cultural Biography*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

Pearce, Roy Harvey, ed. *Whitman: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1962.

Greenspan, Ezra, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Walt Whitman*. New York: Cambridege UP, 1995

****

UNIT 12: EMILY DICKINSON: *"I TASTE A LIQUOR NEVER BREWED," "BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH," "I DWELL IN POSSIBILITY," "AFTER GREAT PAIN A FORMAL FEELING COMES," "I HEARD A FLY BUZZ"*

UNIT STRUCTURE

12.0 Introduction

12.1 Learning Objectives

12.2 Emily Dickinson: Life and Works

12.3 Detail Reading Dickinson's Poems

- 12.3.1 'I taste a liquor never brewed'
- 12.3.2 'Because I could not stop for Death'
- 12.3.3 'I dwell in possibility'
- 12.3.4 'After great pain a formal feeling comes'
- 12.3.5 'I heard a fly buzz'

12.4 Major Themes in Dickinson poems

12.5 Style /Form/Symbols

12.6 Dickinson as Poet: A female voice in nineteenth century American poetry

12.7 Summing Up

12.8 Assessment Questions

12.9 References and Recommended Readings

12.0 INTRODUCTION

This unit would introduce you to another major voice in 19th century American poetry, this time a female one. If Whitman was the representative American poet, Emily Dickinson is the female American bard.

12.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

A reading of this unit would make you familiar with the 'unconventional' poetry and poetics of Emily Dickinson and provide you with the critical tools needed to appreciate her poems.

12.2 EMILY DICKINSON: LIFE AND WORKS

Along with Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson is regarded as the greatest poet the nineteenth century produced. Dickinson was born on the 10th of December, 1830 to Edward Dickinson, a lawyer, and Emily Norcross Dickinson. The affluence of the family, as she well realized, provided her with the leisure necessary to write poetry. As Aife Murray in "Architecture of the Unseen" argues, the family's financial stability and the comforts it afforded—including that of the human "architectures" of service—evoked different attitudes in Dickinson and shaped her sensibility (Smith 11). Moreover, the family's ability to partake of the emerging technologies of the nineteenth century enabled the poet to incorporate the material world into her poetry.

Dickinson's formal schooling took place at Amherst Academy. It was here that she was acquainted with the world of science. The school was associated with Amherst College and offered lessons in botany, chemistry, philosophy, geology, astronomy, mathematics, history etc. This education would reflect later in her poetry. However, Dickinson never found in herself a willing adherent to the school's insistence on conventional religious beliefs. The president of Amherst College, Edward Hitchcock, insisted that the radical ideas that shook religious faith in Sir Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (1830-1833) could be explained by the intervention of a divine being.

During her seven years stay at Amherst Academy, she built intimate friendships with Abiah Root, Abby Wood, and Emily Fowler— relations that would prove significant in the development of her poetic abilities. Amherst also introduced her to Leonard Humphrey, whom Dickinson calls her first "Master." His sudden death in 1850 evoked sentiments that clearly reflect her poetic inclinations. She wrote to Abiah Root that the only tribute she could offer him

was her tears that expressed her grief and she would rather adorn them than wiping them away.

Dickinson left the academy at the age of fifteen to pursue higher education at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. She, however, had only a brief stay of one year there. The end of her formal education meant that she had to participate in domestic duties—and that in turn meant involving herself in social niceties which she hated above all. Meanwhile, her brother Austin Dickinson married Susan Gilbert who was to have a powerful influence on the poet. She found in Gilbert a 'sister' and an important reader of her works. She sent the latter more than 270 of her poems.

Emily Dickinson died in Amherst in the year 1886. Her shying away from social gatherings has earned her the title of "recluse", led to speculations on her private life and has thereby turned her life to a "myth." As Martha Nell Smith and Mary Loeffelholz in their introduction to the *Blackwell Companion to Emily Dickinson* says, "Emily Dickinson is an author about whom almost every casual reader of American literature knows something—if only the biographical myth of a woman in white, self-secluded in her father's house, pouring out many hundreds of unpublished poems, probably driven by demons of love and loss"(Smith 1).

In this brief discussion, we have touched upon only the most important aspects of her life. You might find it interesting to explore more of this 'enigmatic' poet.

Except a few, the vast majority of Dickinson's poems remained unpublished in her lifetime. After her death, family members discovered her hand-sewn fascicles containing about 1800 poems. In 1890, Mabel Loomis Todd and Higginson published a selection of her poems. In 1955 a complete volume of her poems came out, but editorial changes remained. Dickinson's poems, in their unedited versions, became accessible to general readers only in 1998 when R. W. Franklin's volume was published. Some of her most important poems have been prescribed in your syllabus.

Moreover, while talking of her works, one cannot ignore the letters that Emily Dickinson wrote to her correspondents. These letters reveal the preoccupations, the principles that shaped her poems.

12.3 DETAILED READING OF DICKINSON'S POEMS

12.3.1 READING "AFTER GREAT PAIN, A FORMAL FEELING COMES"

In this poem, Dickinson talks about the numbness consequent upon "great pain"—a numbness that is essential to survive the trauma that caused the pain. To describe this emotional deadness, the poet resorts to the oxymoronic "a formal feeling." You would have noticed the way she continually brings in inorganic materials to evoke the sense of numbness—"Wooden way," "Quartz contentment," "Hour of Lead." A feeling of detachment and emotional disintegration is achieved by the personification of different parts of a human being—Nerves, the Heart, the Feet—vital parts of a living, feeling being carrying out their own necessary functions, but oblivious of each other. The "stiff Heart" no longer feels "great pain;" the "Feet" are equally indifferent, bothering in the least regarding the medium they find themselves in. Critics have commented that this disintegration verges on a spiritual death. Charles R. Anderson, for instance, says that the three stanzas of the poem "faintly shadow forth three stages of a familiar ceremony: the formal service, the tread of pall bearers, and the final lowering into a grave."

The sense of stiffness is amplified by the image of "A Quartz contentment like a stone" Dickinson's Amherst pedigree might have acquainted her with "quartz"—an ideal metaphor to depict crystallized feelings or what can be called 'non feeling.' "Quarts contentment" suggests numbness, albeit numbness that is content in its state. The poet develops upon this paradoxical idea in a later poem, "How happy is the little stone." The stone is happy precisely because it is not endowed with the capacity to feel.

"Hours of Lead" also brings in the notion of the speaker verging on the brinks of a spiritual death. She affirms that the time would be "Remembered, if outlived," but the way of remembering— as a person dying in a snowdrift experiences the gradual losing of consciousness—suggests the contrary, the improbability of outliving (Leiter).

As we know, however, Emily Dickinson did survive whatever personal circumstances might have influenced the composition of the poem. And indeed, her personal experiences are largely irrelevant to comprehending the poem. The poet, here, gives expression to the "formal feeling" that might come after different kinds of "great pain." As Robert Weisbuch comments, her poems "say precisely nothing about Dickinson's unique experience. But they do afford an extraordinary comfort precisely because different people can bring their trouble to them. The poems in this sense are an autobiography not of Dickinson, but of the reader" (Grabher 217).

12.3.2 READING 'I HEARD A FLY BUZZ, WHEN I DIED'

The poem invites readers to experience a deathbed scene through the eyes of the very person who has died. There is no mention of the temporal or spatial location of the speaker. The poem is Dickinson's attempt to imagine, via the poetic process, the visions that might come to a person at the moment of dying. What makes the poem ambiguous is that the poet gives no hint of any transcendent vision usually believed to be perceived by a dying person.

In the first stanza, the "Buzz" of the "Fly" is heard against the "Stillness of the Room;" and this stillness is compared with the stillness "Between the Heaves of Storm." The comparison suggests that something significant is going to happen. And it is not hard to surmise that the significant occurrence would be that of dying.

In the second stanza, Dickinson resorts to disembodied images to evoke a sense of alienation. While it is clear that the speaker is talking about the people standing round the deathbed, we are never given a whole person. Instead what we have are "Eyes around" and "Breaths." The last lines of the stanza refer to the

religious expectation of those standing by that the dying speaker would catch a glimpse of God, "the King." But the possibility of a divine apparition is cut short by the appearance of the trivial fly. Stanza three continues with images of disembodiment—the speaker signs away an "Assignable potion" of herself. As is usual in Dickinson, her use of fractured grammar also contributes in creating a sense of detachment and disintegration. In the final stanza, the poet merges visual and aural sensations to imagine what the dying person perceives. As the speaker's eyes fail her, the "Windows" of the room also darken.

The poem can be seen as an ironic inversion of the notion of death as transcendence. Despite its triviality, the fly is a symbol of life and hence worth clinging to till the end.

12.3.3 READING 'I DWELL IN POSSIBILITY'

Here, Dickinson contrasts the "House of Prose" with the "House of Possibility"—the metaphor she comes up with to denote her life in poetry. She prefers the latter to the former, and though it is a house too and in that way a bounded space, it offers unbounded freedom—"More numerous of Windows—/ Superior—for Doors."

In Stanza two, the House of Possibility merges with the grandiose world of nature. It has as many "Chambers as the Cedars"—an image that has parallels with the scriptural verse, "The trees of the Lord are full of sap: the cedars of Lebanon which He hath planted" (Psalms 104:16). The sap filled Cedars are a symbol of vigour and vivacity and these qualities Dickinson claims for her House. It would be obvious to you that God's praise which the second half of the verse suggests is missing in the poet. She leaves aside the aura of divinity and instead builds a theology of her own.

In the following stanza we have a paradox. Notwithstanding all its doors and windows, the House of Possibility is "Impregnable of eye—" suggesting its inaccessibility to ordinary vision. But it opens out again at the end of the stanza with the picture of an "everlasting roof," "The Gambrels of the Sky." This inconsistency of imagery is typical of Dickinson.

The final stanza reassures readers that the House does not imprison or isolate her; she does have "visitors." These visitors are her inspiration, helping her out in the creative process of liberation that she engages in. For all its celebration of the poetic process, there is a note of humility in the last two lines in which the speaker describes her vocation as "The Spreading wide my narrow Hands/To Gather Paradise." The poem is an affirmation of the immense joy that Dickinson derives from poetic creation.

12.3.4 READING 'I TASTE A LIQUOR NEVER BREWED'

Though relatively simple, the poem like the majority of Dickinson's works leaves room for multiple interpretations. There are differences of opinion as regarding the reason behind the speaker's exultation—the summer season or the joys of poetic creation.

That the speaker exults in nature, there is no doubt. The "air," the "Dew," the "endless summer days," all serve to indicate her celebration of nature. Yet the intoxicant itself—the "Liquor" is not a product of that nature. It comes from "Tankards scooped in Pearl" and that can be possible only in the imagination.

In stanza three, the speaker asserts that she would continue to intoxicate herself all "the more." She even surpasses the bee, thus transgressing natural limits. The invocation of seraphs and saints in the final stanza serves her purpose of asserting that she would go on drinking forever. The exaggeration, the near boastful tone is balanced by the stanza's comic spirit.

12.3.5 READING 'BECAUSE I COULD NOT STOP FOR DEATH'

The poem shows Dickinson exploring one of her most significant themes: death and immortality. The poem has been interpreted variously—some see it as an expression of the soul's eternity, while others as an ultimate doubting of the presence of an afterlife. In the poem, transition from life to death is presented as a process of conscious leave-taking. The speaker is neither frightened nor charmed by the gentleman—"Death." She does not even have the time to "stop" for him; it is he who takes initiative and halts for her. But once Death stops for

her, there is no resistance on her part. Indeed the act of carrying her away is presented as one befitting a gentleman—and one that reciprocates similar courtesy.

By putting away her labour and leisure, she puts away her life. The journey itself attracts her attention and she reports it in scrupulous details. Stanza three with its detailed accounts shows the activities of the earthly world beyond which she is being taken. As critics have commented, these activities could also indicate the temporal divisions of life—childhood, adulthood, and old age.

By the fourth stanza, however, a note of uneasiness creeps in. The warmth of the sun is no longer there and the speaker feels increasingly cold, suggesting her vulnerability. She is inadequately dressed in "Gossamer" and a "Tippet" and the coldness she feels perhaps presages the chill of the grave.

In stanza five, the "House that seemed/ A Swelling in the Ground— " is probably the speaker's grave. The pausing before the tomb gives a sense of the suspension of time. As you would have noticed, the stanza suggests a sort of familiarity with eternity. The speaker suddenly is in an altogether different plane of time, where centuries seem shorter than the day of her death. She seems to be implying that life is fuller than eternity—eternity has no end but it is ultimately devoid of any essence.

The beauty of the poem lies in its leaving the end open.

12.4 MAJOR THEMES IN DICKINSON'S POEMS

While Dickinson wrote more than a thousand poems, her themes are limited. Variety results from her giving different renderings to them. A reading of the poems prescribed for you must already have given you some idea. In the present section, let's try to sum up her themes.

Death

Though Dickinson kept herself aloof from what she came to view as dogmatic religion, religious thoughts and ideas were important to her. They provided the

framework in which to analyze life and death. Her poems like "Because I could not stop for Death," "I heard a Fly buzz, when I Died" clearly reveal the delight she took in contrasting the earthly with the heavenly, daily existence with a transcendent reality. As critics have commented, part of her power consists in the way she renders this "familiar" duality "unfamiliar." Douglas Anderson in "Presence and Place in Emily Dickinson's Poetry" comments that her poetic creations "do not cry out for commentary. Their exuberance and iconoclasm are delightful in part because they are reassuringly familiar assertions of the availability of a higher life, in comparison with which ordinary social existence seems trivial" (Bloom 22).

Dickinson's poetic personae show the courage to explore the experiential reality of death itself. Her poems repeatedly deal with the question of how it might feel like to die. In "Because I could not Stop for Death," for instance, 'death' is personified as a gentleman serving the end of immortality, and with whom the speaker accepts a date. And as we have seen, the poet does not offer solutions nor does she expect readers to engage in any intellectual process—rather the idea of immortality is contrasted with the fact of physical decay.

God

Her preoccupation with the idea of immortality makes her conjure different images of Heaven—a "small town," "the fair schoolroom in the sky,"—but more often than not it is her own backyard with its earthly blessings of love and nature. These conflicting emotions also show in the way she presents her relationship with God—she cajoles and challenges him, pleads with him and reproaches him. God's Heaven inspired in her contrasting feelings of longing and desire, and of fear and doubt. As many critics have noted it is this contrast that gives her "religious" poetry its power.

Self

Another preoccupation with Dickinson was what she called the self's "undiscovered continent." She came out with various names for "the hidden corridors" of the inner life—spirit, consciousness, soul, mind, self. Poems like "I

dwell in Possibility" show the soul of the poet nurturing itself on the ecstasy of poetic creation. Dwelling in Possibility is a declaration of the soul's independence from any authoritative agency—even God. As her poems declare, writing poetry, to her, is an act of liberation.

12.5 STYLE/FORM/SYMBOLS

Emily Dickinson created a style of her own. If her thoughts are dazzling, she has an equally bewildering style. Dickinson changes her stance from poem to poem and even within a single poem which is why even sophisticated readers find it difficult to understand her. The contrasting personae that we come across in her poems are a reflection of her multifaceted personality. "Dickinson's work mimics the contradictions of consciousness itself—particularly a probing, profound, and volatile consciousness such as her own" (Leiter X).

Moreover, you must have noticed that her poems break all conventions. Instead of mourning the absence of a female literary tradition, she sets out to create one by subverting established conventions and principles. Unconventional punctuation, discrepancies of capitalization (you must have noticed that she capitalizes words even when it is not necessary to do so according to grammatical rules), slant rhymes, irregular rhythms, absence of titles—these are all a part of her poetics. While these might seem to you to be 'grammatical mistakes' as they did to earlier critics, lthey are actually conscious strategies by which she arrives at interesting shades of meaning. She makes use of dashes not only to fragment language, but "for pacing, and thereby creates ambiguity and multiplicity" (Ruland 175).

Dickinson keeps the form of her poems simple. She adopts the hymn form and adheres to its rhythms and patterns. The alternating four beat and three beat lines are brief—brevity which is reinforced by the highly condensed syntax of the poems.

12.6 DICKINSON AS POET: A FEMALE VOICE IN NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICAN POETRY

As a reading of her poems might have suggested to you, Dickinson was ahead of her times. Coming out of the narrow confines to which women of her generation were destined, she wrote poetry that transcends the constraints of femininity. Dickinson's poems show her trying to carve out her identity as woman and woman-poet. As you must have noted, rather than the themes it is the point of view that matters more in her poems. Conventional themes—life, death, immortality, poetry, nature—take on an unconventional turn in her poems and are often left as ambiguous subjects with no definite end. In one of her letters, Dickinson wrote, "My business is circumference." The circumference was that of her isolated self; a lonely prison-house from within the constraints of which she sought to feel, explore and communicate what was possible. As someone trapped within the circumference of her own body, her poems portray the world as is acceptable to her own individual self (Gray).

Dickinson's struggles with existence leaves her with different stands—that of the believer, the doubter, the lover, the loser and so on. By now you must have already been acquainted with the paradoxical, sometimes oxymoronic ideas in her poems. Each stand reveals a distinctively female imagination at work.

12.7 SUMMING UP

As scholars comment Emily Dickinson wrote in a manner which was unprecedented. Emily Dickinson helped lend a female voice to American literature. She created her own distinctive style, violating all established traditions. She, however, did not succinctly define her version of the poet. At the heart of her poems, there always remains a paradox.

12.8 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Critically examine Dickinson's idea of 'death' from your reading of "Because I could not stop for Death," and "I heard a Fly buzz, when I Died."

2. What is the significance of the term “A Quartz contentment?”

3. How does Dickinson express her ecstasy in “I dwell in Possibility?” What do you think is the significance of the term “Possibility?”

4. Comment on Dickinson’s ‘unconventional’ style.

12.9 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

Leiter, Sharon. *Emily Dickinson: A Literary Reference to her Life and Work*. New York: Facts on File, 2007.

Smith, Martha Nell, and Mary Loeffelholz, eds. *A Companion to Emily Dickinson*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008.

Murrey, Aife. “Architectures of the Unseen.” Smith and Loeffelholz. 11-36.

Weisbuch, Robert. “Prisming Dickinson; or, Gathering Paradise by Letting Go.” Ed. Gudrun Grabher, et al. *The Emily Dickinson Handbook*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.

Anderson, Douglas. “Presence and Place in Emily Dickinson’s Poetry.” ed. Harold Bloom. *Emily Dickinson*. New York: Bloom’s Literary Criticism, 2009. 21-38.

Farr, Judith, ed. *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 1996.

Donoghue, Denis. *Emily Dickinson*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969.

****

UNIT 13: ROBERT FROST: "OUT, OUT," "ONCE BY THE PACIFIC," "THE GIFT OUTRIGHT," "BIRCHES", "HOME BURIAL"

LANGSTON HUGHES: "THEME FOR ENGLISH B", "I TOO", "BALLAD OF THE LANDLORD", "THE NEGRO SINGS OF RIVERS"

INTRODUCTION

13.0 Introduction

13.1 Learning Objectives

13.2 Robert Frost: Life and Works

13.3 Reading Frost' poems

13.3.1 'Out, out'

13.3.2 'Once by the Pacific'

13.3.3 'The Gift Outright'

13.3.4 'Birches'

13.3.5 'Home Burial'

13.4 Major Themes in Frost' poems

13.5 Frost as a modern poet

13.6 Frost and New England

13.7 Langston Hughes**:** Life and Works

13.8 Poetry of the Harlem Renaissance

13.9 Hughes and the African American imagination

13.10 Reading Hughes' poems

13.10.1 'Theme for English B'

13.10.2 'I too'

13.10.3 'Ballad of the Landlord'

13.10.4 'The Negro sings of Rivers'

13.11 Major Themes in Hughes' poems

13.12 Style /Form/Symbols

13.13 Summing Up

13.14 Assessment Questions

13.15 References and Recommended Readings

13.0 INTRODUCTION

This unit would introduce you to two of the important poets of modern American Robert Frost and Langston Hughes. In reading them you would also get a glimpse of 20th century American poetry. While Robert Frost is considered as a pioneer of modern poetry in America, in poems of Langston Hughes we see the experience of an African American, mostly called 'negro' experience during and after Harlem Renaissance.

13.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

A reading of this unit would help you to

- acquaint yourself with the life and works of Robert Frost and Langston Hughes
- have an understanding of the socio-cultural and political background which shaped these poets and their work
- read critically the selected poems of both the poets
- analyze the persistent thematic concerns and stylistic features of the prescribed poems
- see how these poets shaped American poetry and freed it from the constraints of European influences.
- judge their place in modern American poetry.

13.2 ROBERT FROST: LIFE AND WORKS

Robert Frost was born in San Francisco on March 26, 1874. His parents were William Prescott Frost Jr. and Isabella Moodie. His father died from tuberculosis when he was eleven years old and this compelled the family to move to Lawrence, Massachusetts. The move was a journey back to origins because Frost's ancestors had lived there. Lawrence proved a fertile ground for nurturing his poetic abilities. Within the next five years he had made the decision to be a poet.

He joined Lawrence High School and during his stay there developed a keen interest in reading and writing poetry. In 1892, he graduated from Lawrence as class poet. Two years later, in 1894, his first poem, "My Butterfly" was published by the New York Independent which marked his entry as a professional poet. The next year he married Elinor Miriam White who proved a major source of inspiration until her death in 1938.

The following eight years were not happy ones for Frost; he managed to publish only thirteen more poems. In order to earn an income he engaged himself in different occupations—teacher, cobbler, editor of the *Lawrence Sentinel*. After being rejected by numerous publishers in America, he finally shifted to England in 1912 along with his family. It was in England that he first established himself as a poet. He came into contact with Ezra Pound who contributed in promoting and publishing his works.

When in 1915 he returned to America, his status as a major literary figure had been fully grounded. Magazines and periodicals that had once denied him now wanted to publish his works. *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* published a review of *A Boy's Will* by Pound which said that the book "has the tang of the New Hampshire Woods and it has just this utter sincerity." Although he was never associated with any literary movement, the imagists helped in promoting his reputation in America.

Frost died in Boston on January 29, 1965. By the time of his death, he was America's one of the greatest poets. John F. Kennedy once remarked that, "He has bequeathed his nation a body of imperishable verse from which Americans will forever gain joy and understanding" (Woolley and Peters).

Frost's first major works, *A Boy's Will* (1913) and *North of Boston* (1914) were published in England. These volumes show his love for New England themes and scenes. In America, several other volumes came out. *Mountain Interval* (1916) shows him writing short pieces with a dramatic quality. According to the Boston Transcript, in this book "Mr. Frost takes the lyricism of *A Boy's Will* and plays a deeper music and a more intricate variety of experience." *New Hampshire* (1924) won for him his first Pulitzer Prize. Here Frost displays a new found willingness to speak of himself and his art. The famous "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is included in this volume. *West Running Brooks* (1928), his fifth volume of poems, consists of six sections of which the title poem takes an entire one. *A Further Range* (1936), won him another Pulitzer. It is divided into two groups of poems, "Taken Doubly" and "Taken Singly." Other volumes of Frost include *A Witness Tree in Books* (1942) and *In the Clearing* (1962).

13.3 READING FROST'S POEMS

13.3.1 READING 'ONCE BY THE PACIFIC'

The poem is an excellent example of how nature can be a frightening presence in Frost. Nature can put up a hostile stance at any time, and the resulting collapse may not be simply a physical or geographical one for which protective mechanisms can be made available. The designs of nature are inscrutable to men.

In the poem, a normal Pacific storm instigates an apocalyptic vision in the speaker. He watches from the cliff top the waves crashing against the shore and this makes him imagine a more overtly terrifying scene. He is reduced to a frightened little child crying out against "a night of dark intent." His imagination demonizes the world and he sees the storm as presaging the coming of

Doomsday. Overwhelmed by natural forces beyond control, he becomes desperate and fearful.

The sense of terror, however, is intimated as much by some unnameable thing inside as by the external environment. If you read the poem carefully, you would notice that it has parallels with Yeats' "The Second Coming," though it is more secular in context. The speaker imagines nature turning into a destroyer, into the mythical Kalki. In front of a hostile nature, the walls that have so far provided a sense of security would no longer persist.

In Frost's nature, as we have discussed earlier, man is an unwelcome intruder. There is no desire to merge or unite with nature. Rather the emphasis is on surviving nature's "rage." The world which Frost portrays is one where sublimity is fostered by both beauty and terror in equal proportion.

13.3.2 READING 'BIRCHES'

The poem, one of Frost's most frequently anthologized poems, offers scope for multiple interpretations. The poem's principal image is that of a boy swinging birches. It is around this image that the poem revolves. Observing the snow laden branches of a birch tree, the poet's imagination starts working. Even though he knows that the branches are bent under the weight of snow and not through some boy's swinging, his imaginative faculty conjures up an alternative reality. The snow as it lands softly on the ground resembles, for the poet, crushed glass fallen directly from the dome of heaven.

Such imaginative musings trigger a journey down memory lane. The speaker remembers how he used to swing on the branches of the birch tree and how that was a source of entertainment. It is his own experience, therefore, that makes him imagine little boys doing the same task and deriving the same pleasure in the present too. To the mature poet, however, swinging also brings in a sexual connotation suggesting more mature pleasures.

Even as he is aware of the reality, the speaker hopes to find some sense of relief from the birches. He would like to climb to the top of the tree as an escape from reality. But he asserts and reasserts that he would swing down again. The relief he seeks is a temporary one. Notwithstanding all its anxieties, the earth is still the best place to live. The speaker thus is far from seeking permanent escape, i.e. death. The swinging up and down the birch tree stands for the swings in life or even in the mood of a person. He seeks nothing beyond a brief escape.

13.3.3 READING 'HOME BURIAL'

The poem concerns itself with a husband and wife who have lost their first-born. However, the "Burial" of the title is not simply the burial of a child; it is also the burial of a relationship. It is about how a marriage starts shattering because each fails to understand the other. The husband wants his wife to talk herself out of the grief; while the wife blames him for what she considers as his indifference. As each accuses the other of caring too little or too much, the relationship suffers.

In the poem, the wife cannot come out of the grief of her child's death. She keeps looking at his grave from her bedroom window. And this does not allow her to forget the day her husband dug the grave. As she can see nothing other than the child's grave, her perspectives are limited and her understanding of life controlled by thoughts of death. Her failure to construct effective barriers between the present and her memories leaves her at the mercy of the image of the stains on her husband's shoes. On the other hand, the husband's ability to retreat into language helps him overcome his grief and saves him from the constant experiencing of the child's death.

In "Home Burial", the wife seems to seeking some kind of masochistic compensation for her child's death. She has convinced herself that mutual understanding was no longer possible, and having done so, she seeks final isolation. Although she threatens to leave the house, there is no escape from her self-built cage of grief.

13.3.4 READING 'THE GIFT OUTRIGHT'

The poem expresses Frost's love for America. It was originally included in *A Witness Tree* and is best remembered for having been recited by the poet in the inaugural ceremony of President John F. Kennedy in January 1961. Due to the stormy weather, Frost could not read out the prepared work and had to depend on his memory. In doing so, he gave the poem a new life and reputation. The poem is a summary statement on the emergence of America as a nation, its past and present, and most importantly, on the prospect of its becoming a power to reckon with.

The poem begins with a reference to the early settlers of pre-colonial America. In the absence of a formal constitution, they did not yet belong to the nation. But with the adoption of a national constitution, the people became 'Americans' in the true sense of the term. The Gift Outright is Frost's homage to the immense sacrifices that went into the making of the nation. Merely living in a bounded geographical territory does not make the people members of one nation, there must be a sense of unity, of an imagined fraternity.

In exploring its histories, Frost goes back to the nascent American nation and shows how the mythologies of the nation were fundamental in giving shape to the unrealized dream of a greater America. The history of the nation has not always been a pleasant one. The early settlers held on to their old beliefs and customs and considered them to be more important than the nation itself. This was not conducive to the development of the nation.

But the nation did develop. People of different communities and nationalities together contributed to the making of the dream American nation. Wars originally fought over racial, communal, or territorial issues, nevertheless, had their own roles to play in the consolidation of America. Overcoming all conflicts, the people finally became Americans in the truest sense of the term, confirming their loyalties to a land which in most cases was not theirs originally.

Frost affirms the positive value of the continuous westward expansion of the nation over the centuries. The movement, of course, did not go unchallenged, but the American people managed to keep extending the frontiers for more space, thereby contributing in the gradual expansion of the nation. This openness of the frontiers renders America a nation always in the making, and the dream America always real and alive. This is in contrast to Europe with its near static history.

"The Gift Outright" is Frost's tribute to America's past and his appeal to his fellow people to continue furthering the prospects of the nation.

13.3.5 READING 'OUT, OUT'

The poem, by presenting the tragic death of a boy while working alongside adults, demonstrates the darker side of life. You may have recognized that the title is a quotation from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in which the eponymous character ruminates on the futility of life.

The opening lines introduce a snarling, rattling "buzz saw." The personification of the saw—the way it is described as being engaged in its activities unmindful of the people around—evokes an ominous feeling. Our attention is then shifted to the people present though the tone of an ominous indifference is maintained. In a busy world they do not have the time to admire the "Five mountain ranges one beyond the other." But the mountain ranges are equally oblivious of the tragedy that occurs against their backdrop.

When the saw is next introduced to us it is in the same animalistic terms—it leaps at the boy's hand. The tragic note sets in with the boy's nervous realization of his condition. It is utter shock that makes the boy "laugh." The boy dies without having enjoyed even the "half hour" break that meant "so much" to him.

The boy's tragic death raises questions on the value of life itself. The elemental forces seem indifferent to human life which may end at the flicker of

a moment. It is easy to juxtapose the boy's desires—such as his desire to play—with that of the adult world, and then see him as the victim of a mechanical world that fails to realize that his childhood is being sacrificed. The last two lines also tend to be read as indicating the coldness of the adults. But the poem is not so much about the insensitivity of the adults as it is about the inevitability of death and the need to continue with the harsh realities of life. Life is harsh and perhaps purposeless, but one has to succumb to this reality and continue with the daily business of living.

13.4 MAJOR THEMES IN FROST'S POEMS

Nature

As with Emily Dickinson, Frost's themes are limited. His poems revolve round certain fixed ideas. Variety comes from working out the various implications of those ideas. Nature is one pertinent theme in Frost. His natural settings and the skill with which he describes them put him in the category of 'nature poets.' This makes it very convenient to associate him with the Romantics, especially Wordsworth. If you read his poems carefully, however, you would have noticed that the Wordsworthian nature is very different from the 'nature' as Frost understands it. To Wordsworth,

Nature is nurturer; it is his "friend, philosopher, and guide." There is no question of any formidable boundaries between the human world and the natural world. In Frost, nature takes on an indifferent, if not always, a violent stance. There are threatening implications beneath the surface simplicity of his poems. There is a boundary between the world of nature and the human world—and the crossing of that boundary is seen as trespassing, intruding upon someone else's territory. One can discern feelings of uneasiness, even of terror. Nature, in Frost, is never a benevolent presence, as is perhaps clear to you from your reading of "Once by the Pacific."

As we have mentioned earlier, his love for New England comes across powerfully in his writings. Frost felt that the rural world was representative of human life in general. And yet the implications go much beyond the rural sphere. Even by keeping himself limited in terms of both space and time, he manages to create a remarkable depth of reference. Though written on pastoral themes, his poems are meant for a well-educated urban readership.

Alienation/Loss/death

The passage of time is another thematic concern of Frost. This is evident from the ample presence of seasonal imagery in his poems. Though he is basically regarded as a 'winter' poet, each of the seasons has its place in his poetry: spring in "Mending Wall," summer in "The Oven Bird," autumn in "After Apple Picking," and winter in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." Seasons serve as metaphorical images to depict the transience of life.

This brings us to the question of death. In Frost, there is an inevitability to death—the only concern is how we respond to it. Often it is quite unequivocally the subject matter, as in "Out, Out;" other times it is implicit or indirectly stated, as in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

13.5 STYLE/FORM/SYMBOLS

In Frost, there is nothing self-consciously poetic. In fact, his efforts are directed at coming up with a 'poetic' language that sounded natural. To achieve this, he uses ordinary, everyday speech with its natural cadences. He was interested in working on what he called the "sound of sense" in poetry. He felt that part of an artist's duty was to restore to literature the "vocal gesture" that served to enhance meaning. Hence, in reading Frost you would rarely come across any complex use of diction and vocabulary. This does not, however, mean that he was not interested in form. His use of blank verse is an example of this.

Like Emily Dickinson, Frost prefers the synecdoche in poetry. The relatively simple images in his poems, on deeper probing, represent larger and more complex things. His language therefore, while being simple, is rich in metaphors. Metaphor, for him, is not simply the identification of similarities between things, but a medium for engaging in profounder thoughts. As he himself writes in his prose piece "The Constant Symbol," "Every poem is a new metaphor inside or it is nothing" (Shucard, et al. 44).

13.6 FROST AS A MODERN POET

Frost came to prominence at the height of the modernist movement. Yet while reading his poems, you must have recognised that he differs greatly from other modernist poets like T. S. Eliot. In a letter to his daughter Lesley, written in 1934, Frost mentions features of modernism that he had problems with: the preoccupation with 'imagism' which led to an undervaluation of rhythm and meter; the interest in disintegrated, fractured forms which he believed disturbed the organic unity of the poems; the modernist emphasis on self-referentiality; and the way modernist writings were filled with literary allusions which the common reader could not recognise.

For Frost, traditional forms and metres were important. He once said, "I had as soon write free verse as play tennis without a net." However, though Frost wrote within traditions, he showed the modernist zeal to freshen up the language of poetry. With Robert Frost, "the reader is confronted with poetry that negotiates between the solidity and the subversion of the moral self and poetic structure, the pursuit of form, discipline and the impulse towards fragmentation, doubt… [His] work with its intense seriousness of moral purpose and questioning, rather than collapsing traditional measures, shades into the old modes of writing just as much as into the new." Frank Lentricchia, in his book *Modernist Quartet*, calls Frost "the ordinary man's Modernist."

13.7 FROST AND NEW ENGLAND

Frost, though born in San Francisco, spent most of his life in New England, particularly New Hampshire. As such his poetry is characterised by the vocal habits, the country life of that region. The political environment, changes in season, the flora and fauna all make their way into Frost's poems. The poems often take readers to a mysterious and for the most part lost landscape. The twentieth century New England in which the poet lived and about which he wrote was no longer an idyllic place. Changes were taking place; farms which were an integral part of the New England landscape in popular imagination were declining. Many of Frost's poems bear witness to the pain, w sufferings, economic and racial tensions that gripped the region in the turn of the century.

13.8 LANGSTON HUGHES: LIFE AND WORKS

James Langston Hughes was bon to Carrie Langston Hughes and James Nathaniel Hughes February first 1902 in Joplin, Missouri. His maternal grandfather Charles Howard Langston had a taste for the literary and this was perhaps passed on to the family. Carrie Hughes also wrote poems.

After four years of marriage, frustrated by utter poverty and burdened with the task of supporting the child Hughes, his father left for Mexico, where he did gradually prosper. Carrie Hughes refused to go with him. But unable to find any job in Joplin, she had to move from city to city. She sometimes took Hughes with her but for the next nine years he had to live mostly with his maternal grandmother, Mary Leary Langston. She became a major source of inspiration in his life. As a child, Hughes was aware of the acute poverty in which he and his grandmother lived. However, Mary Leary's resourcefulness and patience during hard times taught him about dignity—her refusal to write to any relative for help or to earn money by domestic service instilled in him a sense of pride.

In 1907, Hughes went with his mother to a library in Topeka, where he fell in love with books. This passion for books would become a lifetime engagement. Following the death of his grandmother in 1915, he came to live with his mother who was now married to Homer Clark and then went on to live with his grandmother's friend, Auntie Reed. Here, Hughes was constantly urged to join the church. In spite of this he could never really become a devout Christian.

In 1921, Hughes enrolled at Columbia University but found the environment depressing and the programme unsatisfying. He preferred attending Broadway shows and lectures at the Rand School instead. Dissatisfied, he finally abandoned the course. Hughes engaged himself in various petty jobs in order to earn a living. He even worked as a crewman aboard the S. S. Malone and there got the chance to travel to West Africa and Europe. In Europe, he met Annie Marie Coussey, a British educated African girl and they soon became good friends. But she married Hugh Wooding and their relationship ended.

He returned to the U.S. in 1924 and lived with his mother in Washington, D.C. in 1925, he managed to get appointed as a personal assistant to Carter G. Woodson at the Association for the Study of African American Life and History. But he soon left it because the work load there limited his time for writing. He then joined as a busboy at the Wardman Park Hotel and there became acquainted with the poet Vachel Lindsay. The encounter proved fruitful—Lindsay brought him into public attention. Hughes's earlier work had already been published in some magazines and he was about to compile his works into his first volume of poetry.

Intending to continue his formal education, he again enrolled in a university, this time the historically Black Lincoln University in Chester County, Pennsylvania. Having earned his B. A. degree in 1929, he returned to New York and mostly lived in Harlem for the rest of his life. Hughes died on 22nd May, 1967 at the age of 65.

Published in 1926, Hughes's first book of poetry was The Weary Blues. It contains his famous "The Negro Sings of Rivers," which we would read as we proceed. Besides poetry, he also tried his hand at writing novels and short stories. Other collections include A New Song (1938), *Shakespeare in Harlem* (1942), *Fields of Wonder* (1947), *One Way Ticket* (1949) etc. His first novel *Not Without Laughter* won the Harmon Gold Medal for literature in 1930. In 1934, his first collection of short stories, The Ways of White Folk came out. Hughes is also famous for having created the figure of Jesse B. Semple, popularly known as "Simple.

Hughes also wrote two autobiographies, The Big Sea and I Wonder as I wander. His Panther and the Lash was published posthumously in 1967.

13.9 POETRY OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

The publication of the *New Negro* in 1925 marked a landmark event for African Americans and African American literature. Its editor Alain Locke made sure that it included writings from across the African American community, irrespective of gender. Terming the 1920s as a "spiritual coming of age," he recognised the need to include a plethora of perspectives so as to chart this transformation. The 1920s, indeed, saw a marked increase in African American intellectual and literary activities, especially in Harlem. The migration of thousands of black people from the South to urban areas in many ways served as stimulus and helped mark a period in which black artists challenged white conventions and asserted their own identity.

Harlem Renaissance poets like Claude McKay, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Langston Hughes gave a new colour to African American poetry, in the process charting an identity that defied white stereotypes. Although fired by a similar passion, the poetry of the Harlem renaissance was not monolithic. It was inspired by different subjects and exhibited various forms. Poets like Claude McKay, while using European influences like the sonnet, infused them with

racial themes and radical thoughts. Others like Langston Hughes, whom you have read, consciously used black cultural forms like jazz and blues.

13.10 HUGHES AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN IMAGINATION

Langston Hughes was one of the most prominent poets associated with the Harlem Renaissance. Through his writings he sought to give shape to the multiple facets and cadences of Black life. His subjects are for the most part common black people, the socio-economically downtrodden. The black bourgeoisie when at all they appear in his poems are scorned and ridiculed. Indeed his poems and other works are embodiments of what captured the African American imagination—a strong desire to carving out a distinctive blacks 'self.'

In "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," Hughes writes, 'To my mind, it is the duty of the young Negro artist to change through the force of his art that old whispering "I want to be white" hidden in the aspirations of his people to "Why should I want to be white? I am a Negro—and beautiful." This however in no way means that he advocated a blind idealisation of black life. What he meant was the Negro artist while realising the shortcomings of his people must strive to uncover the strength and splendour of African American traditions. Hughes once said, 'Most of my poems are racial in theme…In many of them I try to grasp and hold some of the meanings and rhythms of jazz.' And by jazz he more often than not suggested black musical culture in general. It was a vast sea comprising of a variety of music—spirituals, gospel, blues and so on. The essence of his poems as like jazz lied in subverting dominant white structures.

13.11 READING HUGHES'S POEMS

13.11.1 READING BALLAD OF THE LANDLORD

The poem relates the plight of the African Americans in America. The speaker in the poem is denied even the most basic amenities of life. His "roof has sprung a leak", the steps are "broken down"—yet the white landlord remains indifferent to his complaints. Instead he threatens to get eviction orders, which

infuriates the speaker. The real tragedy of the situation is however that the tenant has to end up in jail for retorting back at the landlord.

He makes a federal case out of the petty challenge put up by the African American tenant. The white landlord well knows that the entire system would be in his favour. The police arrest the tenant without any enquiry into the situation; the press too maintains the same prejudiced stance—he is prejudged and condemned; the judge convicts him on totally baseless grounds.

The poem reveals the vulnerability of African Americans in racist America. The African American tenant is victimized by the prejudiced system. His effort to assert his most basic rights is challenged from all sides. His patience is stretched to the maximum and when he finally gives in to anger, he is convicted, while the landlord goes scot free.

The apparent humour with which the poem is narrated should not be mistaken for compliance. Rather it is a means to subvert the dominance of the whites. Langston Hughes suggests humour as a weapon to survive oppression in a racist nation.

13.11.2 READING 'THE NEGRO SINGS OF RIVERS'

The poem was composed when Hughes was merely seventeen years old. It is an affirmation of the rich cultural heritage of African Americans and of the continuity of the race over centuries. Like the rivers that have supported numerous civilizations, the African American is connected to all the major civilizations; he has survived the test of time. And despite his miserable conditions, he would survive oppression in America.

Like the unfathomable depths of the rivers, his soul has a depth of richness and mystery. His association with the major civilizations cannot be ignored. The African American man's contribution in the construction of such wonders as the Pyramids of Egypt cannot be denied. Hughes celebrates this rich history. His people have faced numerous oppressions but they have overcome them all and

would continue doing so. He describes the emancipation of African Americans from slavery in terms of the Mississippi transforming from mud to gold.

LET US STOP AND THINK

Millions of Africans were traded as slaves to America, as part of the Atlantic slave trade. Ships loaded with goods went from Europe to Africa; the goods were then exchanged for kidnapped or purchased Africans, who were transported across the Atlantic. These Africans were sold as slaves in the New World or traded for raw materials. The exchanged materials were finally transported back to Europe to complete the triangular trade. The stage when the enslaved Africans were shipped to America became known as the Middle Passage.

And just as the rivers would continue flowing forever, his people would continue to draw essence from them, in the process deepening their souls and deriving the strength to endure.

13.11.3 READING 'I, TOO'

The poem is an assertion of belongingness. The speaker knows that he and his fellow African Americans are a necessary part of the nation and hopes that one day this fact would be acknowledged by the white society as well. The speaker adopts a mocking but affirmative tone.

The beginning lines echo Whitman's 'Song of Myself.' Like him, the African American man too can become the bard of America, singing the glories of the nation and contributing to its culture. The speaker is well aware of racial discrimination—his saying that he is "the darker brother" is an ironic recognition of this fact. But he does not let the hypocrisies of a racist society dishearten him. Rather he continues the daily business of life with zest and vigor. As in "Ballad

of the Landlord", the African American man realizes the importance of humor, albeit an ironic one, in dealing with a prejudiced society.

He mockingly affirms that a day would come when there would be no discrimination on the basis of colour. African Americans would then be regarded as integral, inseparable parts of America. The white people who segregate and derogate them would realize their folly. The poem ends with a reinforcement of the affirmation with which it began. Hughes' speaker embodies America, but it is not the racist America he lives in. instead his is a nation which is gradually progressing towards equality.

13.11.4 THEME FOR ENGLISH B

The poem is a call to recognize the African American element in the larger American identity. The African American student of the poem realizes his 'odd' position in an otherwise all-White classroom. He emphasizes that he is "the only coloured student in my class." And his problems in claiming an identity is obvious—while he knows that he is an American, he is also aware that he is different from the White Americans.

That problem of identity manifests itself in the difficulty in deciding "what is true" for the African American speaker. He "feel(s) and see(s) and hear(s)" Harlem, but he hears New York too. Like the White Americans, he is a human being who likes to "eat, sleep, drink, and be in love," and experience and enjoy all that life has to offer. He goes on to suggest that colour is or ought not to be a determinant in judging whether he is like or unlike "other races."

The American identity includes in itself the African American component and one cannot ignore that. The speaker emphasizes that his White instructor might not like to identify with him just as he wouldn't always want to be a part of the White world. But each has to overcome the hesitation and recognize one another as constitutive of the larger American identity—which is above all questions of likes or dislikes. It is this point that the speaker argues for in his paper for English B.

13.12 MAJOR THEMES IN HUGHES'S POEMS

African American empowerment

While all of Langston Hughes's works are not identical, they are fired with the same zeal of presenting an empowering image of African American life. His literary efforts were directed towards giving legitimacy to the distinctive experiences of African American people, towards including African Americans in the American dream. He called upon his people to take pride in their racial origin, to celebrate it instead of being ashamed of it. As we have seen in "The Negro Sings of Rivers", his art focuses on the rich cultural heritage and diversity of the African American people.

A reading of his poems might also have made it clear to you that his focus is not the upper class Negro; rather he sings of and celebrates the experiences of the common African American as he continues to live in a racist society. He rejects pretentiousness— whether social or literary—that tends to glorify African American culture at the cost of an authentic representation.

Pan-American identity

It must have been obvious to you by now that Langston Hughes realized the socio-political aspect of art, recognized its importance as a means of change. But he could never come to believe that African American interests were opposed to the interests of 'mainstream' America. In Hughes's work and philosophy, there is no "We" and "They;" instead it is "all us." This is apparent in poems such as "I Too." His pursuit was not simply the satisfaction of personal or racial interests, but a sense of fulfilment and dignity for humanity as a whole. As R. Baxter Miller points out, he crafts through his poems the "noblest visions of what America could be."

13.13 STYLE/FORM/SYMBOLS

His style too reflects racial pride. You cannot ignore the significance of 'folk culture' in Hughes's aesthetics. He asserts in "The Negro Artist and the

Racial Mountain" that his admiration for the simplicity, vivacity, creativity, and unselfconsciousness of the "low-down folks" is immense. It is all these qualities that he tries to embody in his art. You would have noticed the spontaneous, effortless nature of his poetry. He makes use of the natural speech patterns and cadences of African American life and hence there is no prolixity in his works.

Along with the African American expression, Hughes also makes the most of African American musical forms—jazz, blues, spirituals, gospels, sermons, etc. To him, "The rhythm of life/ Is a jazz rhythm" ("Lenox Avenue: Midnight") Jazz, to the poet, is representative of African American music in general.

The American dream of success is a significant metaphor in his works. To the African American, the dream is not as much about success as it is about freedom and equality. His dream is a 'dream deferred,' but it has to be kept alive if hope for an egalitarian society is to come true. Hughes's dream is evident in the poems that we have read. For all the atrocities that his race has to suffer, there is still a note of hope that better days would come.

Another trademark of Hughes is the presence of humor in his works. Humor equips the African American with the means to survive the atrocities of a racist world. It is above all a form of resistance.

13.14 SUMMING UP

This unit has acquainted you with Frost. Robert Frost, writing in the early decades of the twentieth century, did not necessarily follow a modernist poetics. He stands at the junction of nineteenth century American poetry and twentieth century modernism. Langston Hughes represents the African American dimension of American literature. His poetry calls for recognition of African Americans as an undeniable part of America and American identity.

13.15 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. What role does 'nature' play in Frost's poetry?

2. “In Frost, there is an inevitability to death.” Illustrate in the light of your reading of his poems.

3. Examine Frost as a modern poet.

4. Examine Frost as a regional poet.

5. Do you think ‘race’ is a pertinent issue in Hughes’s poem? Explain.

6.What do you think “rivers” signify in “The Negro Sings of Rivers?” Illustrate.

7.Comment on Hughes’s use of humour.

13.16 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1991.

Cox, James M. *Robert Frost: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice Hall, 1962.

Jemie, Onwchekwa. *Langston Hughes: An Introduction to the Poetry*. New York: Columbia U.P., 1976.

Kennedy, John F. “Statement by the President on the Death of Robert Frost.” Ed. John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters. *The American Presidency Project*. http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9476 date of access: 3 Feb. 2016.

Little, Michael R. *Bloom’s How to Write about Robert Frost*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010.

Lynen, John F. *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1960.

Mahanta, Pona, et al., eds. *Poems Old and New*. Delhi: Macmillan Publishers, 2001.

O’Daniel, T. B., ed. *Langston Hughes, Black Genius: A Critical Evaluation*. New York: Morrow, 1971.

Oster, Judith. *Toward Robert Frost: The Reader and the Poet*.

Shucard, Alan, Fred Moramarco, and William Sullivan. *Modern American Poetry*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990.

Steven, Tracy C. ed. *A Historical Guide to Langston Hughes*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004.

****

MODULE VI: ARTHUR MILLER: *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

UNIT 14: *DEATH OF A SALESMAN* AS AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY: MYTH IN AMERICAN DRAMA

14.0 Introduction

14.1 Learning Objectives

14.2 A brief history of American Drama

14.3 Arthur Miller: Life and Works

14.4 Reading the Play *Death of a Salesman*

14.5 *Death of a Salesman*: A Critique of the Myth of Success

14.5.1 Myths in America

14.5.2 Myth in American Drama

14.5.3 Myth of success or The American Dream

14.5.4 *Death of a Salesman* and the Myth of Success

14.6 Father Son Relationship in *Death of a Salesman*

14.7 *Death of a Salesman* as an American tragedy

14.7.1 Tragedy

14.7.2 *Death of a Salesman*: Tragedy of the common man

14.8 Summing Up

14.9 Assessment Questions

14.10 References and Recommended Readings

14.0 INTRODUCTION

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is one of the most famous modern plays. In this play, Arthur Miller examines the theme of American Dream and its failure in case of Willy Loman, an ageing salesman. The play placed Arthur Miller along with the greatest playwrights of twentieth century America like Tennessee Williams and Eugene O' Neil. The play can be read as a tragedy of the common man. It also touches on the theme of human relationships.

In this play Arthur Miller shows Willy Loman, an ageing salesman being unable to come to terms with the changing world around him and meeting his tragedy. It reveals the hollow nature of the myth of success which guarantees success if one works hard enough.

14.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

The unit aims at making you familiar with Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. By the end of this unit, you will be able to:

- get a glimpse of Arthur Miller and his works
- know something about the play *Death of a Salesman*
- analyse the play as a critique of the myth of success
- understand the theme of father-son relationship in the play
- read *Death of a Salesman* as an American tragedy

14.2 A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN DRAMA

American drama can be said to have its beginning in the 19th century. Since then it has gone through several stages of development till to-day. The earliest plays were melodramatic. However, many such plays presented a clear contrast between good and evil. The evils of drink and the evils of slavery were two favorite themes. Plays dealing with social problems were also very popular. One of such plays was the adaptation of the famous novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe. A widely held belief during that time can throw much light on the power of drama as a means of social change. The novel as well as its dramatic version influenced public opinion so profoundly that people came to look upon the slavery prevalent in the South as a great blot that must be rooted out of public life, the north might never have gone to war if the novel and its dramatic presentation had not shaken the conscience of the people in the North. Minstrel shows were also popular. In these shows African – American music was used and white actors sang and danced: their faces were blackened by burned

cork. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, European influence on American drama was evident. This was in reaction to the excesses of melodrama. Realism that had been presented by a few European dramatists about three decades before caught the imagination of the dramatists as well as the playgoers. The dramatists who influenced American drama profoundly were Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg and Anton Chekhov. Ibsen, in his drama presented guilt, sexuality and mental illness; Strindberg presented characters with psychological complexities that had never been seen before on stage. Chekhov shifted attention to inner action and emotion of his character and happenings in everyday life.

LET US STOP AND THINK

PERIODS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF AMERICAN DRAMA: The development of American Drama, before the Civil War, can be divided into certain distinct periods. In 1774, the theatres were closed. This marks the first period. The production of *The Prince of Parthia* (1767) was the most important event of this period. The second period was from 1774 to 1787. The Revolutionary satirists belong to this period. The production of The Contract in 1787 marks the beginning of the third period. German and French influence is perceptible during this period. The fourth was from 1805 to 1825. Lots of native efforts were seen during this period but English and Continental influences were still very profound. The fifth period started in 1825 and went on till the outbreak of the Civil War.

The twentieth century began with realistic drama. This kind of realism emphasized upon the use of realistic, ordinary setting, ordinary people and everyday language or dialect. Such dramas presented the ordinary experiences of the American middle class people. Heroes and villains who were recognizable, made way for common people with their strengths and weaknesses.. Another element that added to the creation of realistic scenes on the stage was the use of electricity instead of gas light. Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953), Arthur Miller (1915-2005) and Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) were the great masters of American

realism in play in the early part of the twentieth century. Naturalism and Expressionism were two other trends that followed realism in American Drama. Naturalism views human beings as slaves of their environment, chance, condition, fate etc. Consequently, naturalism leads to pessimism and determinism. Expressionism was born in reaction to realism. Life was viewed as formless and full of uncertainties by this school. The realistic touches in setting were gone: they became imaginative.

Playwrights who carried expressionistic techniques to an extreme also came to be considered as writers of absurd plays. Such plays do not have a plot; their intention is not to tell a story but to convey certain ideas by using a pattern of images. Perhaps the most famous American play in this category is *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962) by Edward Albee.

Contemporary American Drama has faced many challenges but experiments in form and content has been going on. Other means of entertainment and amusement have posed threats to the theaters and it has also become quite risky to produce plays extravagantly. There have been many new and promising dramatists. Some of them are August Wilson (*Fences*, 1985; *The Piano Lesson*, 1987), Tony Kushner (*Angels in America*, 1993). Two of the most celebrated American dramatists made come back surprising readers and critics and spectators. They were Arthur Miller (*Broken Glass*, 1994) and Edward Albee (*Three Tall Women*, 1994)

14.3 ARTHUR MILLER: LIFE AND WORKS

Arthur Miller was born in Harlem, New York in 1915 into an affluent family whose fortune crashed with the Great Depression in 1929. He studied at the University of Michigan but he had to earn the money for university education by doing odd jobs like truck-driver, waiter, ware-house worker and newspaper man. He won many awards there. The university later conferred an honorary degree upon him in 1956. While in college, he wrote his first play *No Villain* and took courses with Professor Kenneth Rowe who was a highly admired teacher. He

taught students how to construct a play in order to achieve an intended effect. He moved back east to begin his career after he had been inspired by Professor Rowe's approach. His integrity as a conscious citizen was above board. He became a victim to witch-hunting for his political beliefs. Married four times, Miller's famous marriage was to the famous female actor Marilyn Monroe.

Arthur Miller is considered to be one of the greatest American dramatists along with Eugene O'Neil, Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams and Edward Albee. His reputation spread far beyond the frontiers of America. He was a prolific writer and wrote for the stage, the radio and the movie. Miller's major dramatic works include *All My Sons, Death of a Salesman, The Crucible, A View from the Bridge, The Misfits, After the Fall, Incident at Vichy* and *The Price*

His plays take place in familial settings but his reputation is more for his dealing with contemporary political and moral issues. Miller was critical of the American dream which was another name for the American ideal for prosperity. His view is that few can pursue the American dream without making dangerous moral compromise. He displayed keen social conscience in his early plays like *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and both the plays were received very well by the critics as well as the audience. In his later plays too he displayed the same conscience. *The Crucible* (1953) for example apparently dealt with the witch hunt in the colonial Salem but it implied a parallel with the congressional investigation into contemporary subversions. *A View from the Bridge* (1955) is a probing psychological tragedy. It questions the reasonableness of US immigration laws. *After the Fall* (1964) is thinly autobiographical. Miller's unhappy marriage to widely popular film actress Marilyn Monroe is portrayed in a disguise. It also offers a second, candid consideration of the congressional investigations where Miller was personally involved. *Incidents at Vichy* (1964) and *The Price* (1968) have the theme of universality of human responsibility and the guilt that often goes with success and survival.

14.4 READING THE PLAY *DEATH OF A SALESMAN*

Willy Loman is a salesman. He comes back home early from a trip to Brooklyn. But his trip has been unsuccessful. He has already lost his salary and works for commission only. He is 63 years old.

Biff, his son, also has come back home from the West where he worked for more than a decade on farms and ranches. He comes home to do something new and find a new direction. His father believes that he has lots of potential but his achievements have not been up to the mark. Biff tells his brother Happy that he has a sense of fulfillment when he works outdoor.

Willy is seen alone in the kitchen. Memories fill his mind. He remembers one occasion when he returned home from a trip for sales when his sons were small. He was their hero then. Charley is Willy's neighbor. He is a successful businessman. Bernard, Charley's son is a serious student. Willy contrasts himself and his sons to his neighbor and his son. He feels that the Lomans have more charisma which is essential for success in life. Willy admits that his commission is too low to cover the payment for all his bills. Linda, his wife, stands by him as he expresses self-doubt. As Linda assures him, he hears the laughter of the woman whom he met in Boston. She is his mistress.

Charley comes to visit Willy. They play cards. Suddenly Willy becomes aware of the presence of his elder brother who had made a fortune in Africa and Alaska after leaving home at the age of seventeen. He died recently.

Willy refuses Charley's offer of a job though he has been borrowing money regularly from him to meet the day to day expenses. Willy regretfully compares himself to his dead and very successful brother Ben, and their father who was no less adventurous and mysterious and who had left them quite early in their lives. Willy goes to watch the stars from his backyard.

Linda discusses the falling condition of Willy's mental health with their sons. They come to learn from her that their father has attempted suicide by both

crashing the car and by inhaling gas through a rubber hose on the heater. Biff is dismayed and decides not to leave home. He plans to start a sporting goods business with his brother by borrowing money from his former employer Bill Oliver. They think it will please their father. Willy is indeed thrilled to hear of the plan and he even gives Ben a few pieces of advice on how to ask for the loan. But he speaks incoherently.

On Linda's urging, Willy goes to visit Howard Wagner, his boss, with a view to asking for a job in the office in New York which would keep him close to his home. Willy goes with the confidence that he has been long enough with that company to ask for such a favor. In fact, Howard Wagner had not even been born when Willy joined the company. Howard's father was the boss then; he was very close to the father. However, Willy's hopes are belied. Howard turns down his request. Willy goes on pleading with Howard with more and more urgency. Consequently, Willy is suspended from work.

Willy goes to Charley's office to borrow money with all the feeling of humiliation in his mind. He meets Bernard there. Bernard is a successful lawyer now and a comparison between Bernard and Biff comes to Willy's mind. He finds that the best his son could ever do was to play football for his high school. Biff and Happy decide to meet their father over dinner at Frank Chop House. Biff tells his brother before the arrival of their father that he could not get a loan from Oliver. Instead he stole Oliver's pen. Happy advises his brother not to tell the truth lest he should lose all hope.

Willy comes and sits down at the table and soon declares that he has been fired from his job and so he needs some good news to take home for Linda. While Willy is overwhelmed by disturbing memories from the past and walks unsteadily to the washroom, Biff and Happy argue. On the other hand, Willy recalls something from the days when Biff was in high school and he failed in mathematics. He went to Boston to tell his father. However he got a shock when he discovered his father with The Woman. Willy who was the hero for his son

fell from the pedestal and Biff gave up his dreams of going to college. Biff and Happy leave the hotel with two call girls even as Willy is lost in his reverie

Biff and Happy return home without their father and faces Linda's wrath. Biff is ashamed. He looks for his father and finds him in the backyard trying to plant seeds at midnight: at the same time Willy keeps speaking to the ghost of his brother Ben. He tells the ghost about his plan to make his family richer by 20,000 dollars from life insurance money.

Biff declares that he cannot be dishonest to himself anymore and he is ready to face the reality that both he and Willy will never be great men. Willy too should accept the reality and stop pursuing his distorted version of the American Dream. As the argument comes to an end, Biff cannot resist himself and weeps. This makes Willy to be firmer in his decision to kill himself out of love for his family. He speeds away in a car and crashes himself to death.

Though Willy knew a lot of people, only Charley and Bernard besides Willy's family attend his funeral. Biff insists upon the fact that his father died for nothing. Charley contradicts and says that Willy was a salesman and a salesman has got to dream. Happy too supports Charley and says that his father did not die in vain. According to him Willy had a good dream and it was the only dream one could have---to come out number one. Linda says good bye to her husband and tells him that she has made the last payment on the house that very day. But there will be nobody home though they are free and clear.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is the name of Miller's first play?

---

2. Name two of Arthur Miller's famous plays.

---

3. Name three famous twentieth century American playwrights.

---

4. What is the theme of *Death of a Salesman*?

14.5 DEATH OF A SALESMAN: A CRITIQUE OF THE MYTH OF SUCCESS

14.5.1 Myths in America

American population is largely composed of Europeans that settled in the continent in the fifteenth century. These mostly consisted of Puritans. Early American culture, therefore, in large part consisted of European belief systems. At a later date, however, the Americans suffered from a sense of belatedness. Compared to British history of several centuries, America had only a history of two hundred years, not a substantial one to fall back on. Again, American literature, culture and art forms were still relying on models imported from Britain. Therefore, the Americans gave themselves myths of origin and other myths which would make up for the historical deficiency. These would also offer

a body of symbols and beliefs which would then shape the national ethos or identity of America.

14.5.2 Myths in American Drama

Myth forms an important part not just of American drama but of American literature as a whole. American culture itself is largely a product of these myths. The myth of the American Adam provided the impetus for the settlers to struggle and settle in a rocky terrain. Going by this myth, every American considers himself as Adam before the fall: innocent and hopeful who are to create an Eden out of the disruptive conditions in America. Similarly, there are other myths like Myth of the Old South, the myth of success or the American Dream which contribute largely to the psychological makeup of the American society. American drama especially of the twentieth century, frequently uses these myths in order to tap the psychological turmoil of an individual in a multicultural American environment. Playwrights like Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller frequently use myths in their plays.

14.5.3 Myth of Success or The American Dream

The myth of success or the American Dream refers to every American's dream of a better, richer and fuller life. The term was coined by James Truslow Adams, an American historian. The myth talks about how every American, is sure to achieve success with hard work. It therefore underlines the capitalist spirit of the American nation.

14.5.4 *Death of a Salesman* and the Myth of Success

Death of a Salesman is a critique of the myth of success. Willy Loman, the protagonist of the play, is an ageing salesman who finds it difficult to travel for sales at this age. As his productivity has declined, his salary is also cut down by the company he works for. The play opens with the declining fortune of Willy. The exhausted salesman comes home from a trip which has been a total failure. He has not been able to make a single sale. Then he pleads with the boss for a

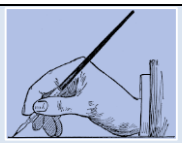
local posting as well as a higher salary. Instead of getting his plea fulfilled, he gets fired. Having no other option to make both ends meet, Willy decides to commit suicide, so that his family can benefit from the insurance money.

Miller here is questioning the very basis of the capitalist society which only values youthful vigour. The businesses in the capitalist society run on the principle of profit maximization. Anything which is not profitable or does not bring in material benefits is not valued. Such a society has no room for the poor, the destitute, the ageing and other vulnerable people. Willy Loman, who was once a successful salesman, is now old and has no place in the materialistic society. The play thus portrays a society which treats its people as goods and is ready to dispose them off, when they are no longer productive.

The myth of success which primarily takes into account the youth of the country also creates an anxiety of personality and likeability. Willy Loman's success in his early life is also due to the fact that he could convince people with his youthful looks and personality. He believes that Biff, who is a charming football player at school would be successful because of his "personal attractiveness" and because he is "well liked." Also he believes that his own personality would be enough to see him through his old age. This belief soon turns out to be a myth when neither he nor Biff is able to make it successful for a long time. Willy's affair with a woman is also the outcome of his belief, more than anything else. He seeks assurances of his youthful vigour from this woman and also from his family members. Miller here is critiquing the capitalist society's insistence on personality which drives a man insane.

Consumerism's notion of "the more, the merrier" is fallout of such a society. The insatiable thirst that consumerism brings fills the individuals mind with angst. If one cannot quench that thirst, one has a sense of unhappiness. In order to have what want wants, one must be able to earn much money. And that becomes the yardstick of success. In such a situation when a salesman like Willy cannot reach his professional target of sales figure, he feels to be doomed. The play is an indictment of such consumerist values.

Howard and Charley represent two different facets of the capitalist mind-set. Howard represents the hard-headed capitalist. According to him, there is no room for kindness, feeling or gratitude in business. Willy wants to impress him by saying that when Howard was born, his (Howard's) father came to him with the news and it was Wily who named him. For Howard such memories have nothing to do in a business deal. Willy has failed in his job as a salesman and he has to face the music. Charley, on the other hand really feels for Willy though the latter is jealous of Charley and even of his son. Charley has the magnanimity of offering Willy a job but it is Willy's false pride that leads him to refuse Charley's offer.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What is the Myth of Success or the American Dream?

---

2. Why is Willy Loman fired from his job?

---

3. What is the personal attractiveness that Willy talks about?

14.6 FATHER- SON RELATIONSHIP

Miller focuses on the father-son relationship in many of his plays, be it *All My Sons* or *Death of a Salesman*. The relationship between Willy and his son Biff forms an important issue in *Death of a Salesman.* Willy tries to realise his unfulfilled desires and aspirations through Biff. When the latter is unable to do so, conflict arises. Willy has high hopes of his son but fails to endow Biff with the necessary training and education required to be successful. The father is seen to ignore Biff's negligence of studies and his kleptomania. Willy constantly draws attention to how he is "well liked" and how his son too will make it as he is "well liked."

Biff catches Willy in a hotel room with a woman to whom the latter had gifted new stockings. This incident causes a serious rift between their relationship. It also leads Biff refusing to write his Mathematics examination. After this, Willy feels himself guilty of ruining his son's career. Hence he tries to compensate for that by committing suicide so that Biff benefits from the insurance money.

Willy's relationship with his younger son Happy is quite flimsy when seen in comparison with that of Biff. While Biff had always been the object of Willy's attentions, affection and frustrations, Happy was relatively ignored. This accounts for Happy's withdrawn attitude towards his father's plight. He neither feels responsible nor sympathetic towards any of his family members.

Biff again, is equally guilty of not being able to help his father in any way possible. However, his efforts are not adequate enough to offer some relief to his ageing father. Both Biff and Happy leave their father at the restaurant when they were supposed to understand his father and stand by him. With the death of Willy for his sons, one is made to question the father-son relationship in a capitalist American society which requires the price of one's life.

14.7 DEATH OF A SALESMAN AS AN AMERICAN TRAGEDY

14.7.1 Tragedy

Tragedy, as defined by Aristotle is "an imitation of an action that is serious, and of a certain magnitude, in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in the separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." Tragedy, according to Aristotle, achieves its grandeur only when the fall is of a great figure, of a king or a statesman. Therefore playwrights who produced tragedy for many centuries dealt with the fall of the person of a great stature. Classical playwrights like Sophocles, Euripedes, Aeschylus dealt with the tragic fall of a king from his stature. Even Shakespeare and Marlowe, two of the greatest playwrights, focused on the fall of kings and statesmen or other persons of high office. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* therefore marks a paradigm shift as it deals with the tragedy of a common man.

14.7.2 *Death of a Salesman*: A Common Man's Tragedy

Twentieth century literary scene saw the emergence of tragedy as a popular genre in drama. Playwrights like Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Eugene O'Neil tapped the predicament of people from different classes residing in the melting pot (America) and become pathetic figures when unable to catch up with the winds of social change.

Tragedy, Miller believes, arises out of man's compulsion to evaluate him justly. In the classical tragedy man is caught in a hostile cosmos and fights back with all his flaws and he perishes. The pity and terror arise out of this one-sided struggle. A common man of the modern age with extraordinary zeal for life may go to any extent to achieve his goal and in the process he may be caught in a situation that is controlled by a force with which he cannot grapple with and perishes. Thus a common man of to-day can rise to the stature of a tragic hero.

Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is a common man's tragedy. It portrays Willy Loman, a simple salesman being unable to come to terms with his changed circumstances. Miller has skilfully built upon the idea of the Aristotelian tragic

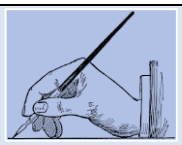
hero. Here Willy is presented as a hero whose flaw lies in his inability to face reality. He lives in a make belief world, converses with an imaginary Ben, and frequently goes back to a time when he was successful. Miller's hero, however, is a tragic hero with a difference. Unlike Shakespearian plays which deal with the fall of kings and noblemen, *Death of Salesman* shows a "Lo-man" or a common man at loggerheads with the present economic situation.

Willy's plight embodies the plight of thousands of travelling salesmen who lost their jobs following the great economic depression. What makes this play an American tragedy is the helplessness of the individual in the face of an unsympathetic society which has no room for the weak and old. Willy's salary is reduced owing to his reduced productivity at old age and thereafter he is fired. Thus, the play is also a tragic account of degradation of human values in a capitalist American setup. Willy's model is Dave Singleman, who was a successful salesman and whose funeral was attended by many of his customers. It is tragic however, that when Willy dies, none of his customers attend the funeral, as he is not as successful as Singleman. Willy is also wronged by his sons whose efforts are not good enough to support their ageing father. When Willy faces a psychological breakdown at the restaurant, both the sons leave him to his own. Miller is thus presenting the tragedy of human relationships wherein a father has to pay with his life for the security of his sons who care little about him.

Death of a Salesman underlines the plight of the American society at large in the 1940s. This is the time of large scale urbanisation and the movement of people from suburbs to cities. This led people to live in boxed in apartments, with no open space around them in this play too, we find that Willy is extremely irritated by the high rise apartments all around them. It makes him miss his old country house. The tragedy in part, is an outcome of the cluttered living conditions that an individual finds himself in the urban areas of America, which causes anxiety and depression. The flute music playing at the background is a reminder of the old world peace and harmony. Towards the end, when Willy has nothing to look

forward to, he wishes to plant seeds and grow something in his yard. This is an indication of his desperate attempts to get back to his country roots, escaping from a society which has miserably failed him.

Death of a Salesman is a modern American play. In modern literature the psychological aspects of the characters are prioritised over their physical and external happenings. In this play too, Miller focusses on the emotional and psychological workings of his protagonist Willy Loman. That the play was originally called *The Inside of his Head* is a testament to this fact. Willy's tragedy is in large part psychological. Sure, he has been fired and is unable to realise his dreams. But how he reacts to his failures forms the core of his tragedy. He fails to come to terms with the world around him and instead of facing it bravely, recoils back into his own shell. He finds solace in imagining his brother Ben calling out to him, laying out a model of his success. He thinks too highly of himself to accept any further advice from his friend Charley. He fails to remove his blinkers of the American dream to address the problem. When he does so, the reality for him is too hard to accept and he commits suicide.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. What are the names of Willy Loman's sons?

---

2. What kind of tragedy is the play *Death of a Salesman*?

---

3. What the social scenario in 1940s America?

14.8 SUMMING UP

Arthur Miller is one of most popular and critically acclaimed playwright of the twentieth century. Death of Salesman, his most famous play, is a critique of the American myth of success. The myth insists on hard work as the guarantor of success in America. But Miller in this play shows how there are other factors like personality and luck which lead to success. Willy Loman, an ageing salesman, is fired from his position due to his reduced productivity. This caused mental depression and he imagines conversations with people in his mind. His sons, Biff and Happy fail their father and leave him in lurch. With no other option, Willy Loman commits suicide so that his sons can benefit from the insurance money. Miller is thus critiquing the very basis of the capitalist set up which has no sympathy for the destitute and which takes away a person's sanity and causes degradation of human values.

14.9 ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. *Death of a Salesman* is based on the American dream. However, each character has his own version of the Dream. What are the ideas of the American dream held by Willy Loman and his two sons? How each of them tries to make the dream a reality?
2. Of all the characters in the play, which do you like most? What are Willy Loman's most notable character traits?
3. Do you like Willy as a character? Base your answer on words and actions of both Willy and the other characters in the play.
4. Do you think there is a hero as well as a villain in the play? Elaborate your answer.

5. What is your impression of the Woman? Does it affect your overall impression of Willy? What does she reveal about his character?
6. How does the conversation between Biff and Happy in Act I reveal the differences between their characters?
7. What is Willy's attitude towards his sons? What does this attitude speak about his character? How is this attitude expressed?
8. What are Willy's ideas about the business world? Are they realistic?
9. How does Miller provide information about character and setting as there is no narrator in the play?
10. Give a critical analysis of Linda's character explaining whether she can be considered as an individualized, multidimensional character or a stereotype of the long suffering wife?
11. Linda tells Willy (Act I), "Few men are idolized by their children the way you are". Comment on Linda's character in the light of this remark.
12. What is a requiem? What is the significance of the requiem in Death of a Salesman?
13. Discuss Death of a Salesman as an Expressionistic drama.
14. What are the major concerns of Arthur Miller's plays?
15. In what ways is *Death of a Salesman* a critique of the myth of success?
16. How does Arthur Miller discuss the degradation of values in the American society?
17. What kind of relationship does Willy Loman and his sons share?
18. How does *Death of a Salesman* differ from the classical notion of tragedy?
19. Discuss the ways in which Miller portrays the psychological conflict within Loman.

14.10 REFERENCES AND RECOMMENDED READINGS

Bierman, Judah, James Hart & Stanley Johnson, *The Dramatic Experience.* Prentice-Hall Inc: Englewood, 1958.

Bigsby, C.W.E. *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama.* (Vol. 2). Cambridge UP: Cambridge, 1984.

Hoffman, Daniel. Ed. *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*. Oxford University Press: 1981.

Ram Murthy, Dr. V. *American Expressionistic Drama*. Doaba House, Delhi, 1970

Kirszner, Laurie G & Stephen R Mandell. *Literature-Reading Reacting Writing*. Thomson/Wadsworth: United Kingdom, 2004

Lexicon Universal Encyclopaedia. Lexicon Publication Inc. New York, N.Y. 1989

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman*. Heinemann: Oxford, 1994

Porter, Thomas E. *Myth and Modern American Drama*. Kalyani Publishers: Ludhiana,1971

Wimsatt, William K, Jr. & Cleanth Brooks: *Literary Criticism-A Short History*. Oxford & Ibh Publishing Co. New Delhi 1974

E-resources

http://www.thedramateacher,com

http://www.deathofasalesman.com/re-49-nytimes3.htm

www.biography.com/people/arthur-miller

****

JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS

JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS

JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS

JOT DOWN IMPORTANT POINTS

The Centre for Distance and Online Education was established in 2011 with the aim of disseminating knowledge and imparting quality education through open and distance learning mode. The Centre offers various post-graduate, undergraduate, diploma and certificate programmes in emerging areas of science and technology, social sciences, management and humanities with flexible system to cater to the needs of the learners who otherwise cannot avail the regular mode of education. The basic focus of the centre is to prepare human resources of the region and the country by making them skilled and employable.

CENTRE FOR DISTANCE AND ONLINE EDUCATION
TEZPUR UNIVERSITY
(A Central University)
Tezpur, Assam - 784028
INDIA

Visit us at: www.tezu.ernet.in/tu_codl