



Block

1

JAMES F. COOPER: THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS

Block Introduction	
UNIT 1	
The Beginnings	5
UNIT 2	
The Man, The Milieu, And The Moment	13
UNIT 3	
<i>The Last of the Mohicans</i> : An Analysis	25
UNIT 4	
Perspectives on the Novel-I	39
UNIT 5	
Perspectives on the Novel-II	48

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COURSE INTRODUCTION

Thirty years ago this course would not have been written. If it had, it would have needed to begin on a defensive and apologetic note. In the 19th century American fiction produced its full share of 'Classics': Melville's *Moby Dick*, Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and so forth. In the 20th Century, American novelists began to receive international recognition: the award of Nobel Prize to Sinclair Lewis in 1930 is an obvious example. Even in America itself intellectuals-let alone general readers - often approached their literature in a shame faced or indifferent spirit. Outside America, the lack of respect for American fiction was even more striking. Sydney Smith's famous gibe ('In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American Book?') still echoed in English ears: and it was not uncommon to hear otherwise well-read men confess to an ignorance of Hawthorne or Melville without embarrassment.

Today, of course, the situation is very different. Most major American novels are widely available in cheaply priced editions and their study is assumed to be a natural part of the average American student's liberal education. On the scholarly level, the study of American Literature has assumed the proportions of a minor industry; it has traced a familiar success story from ASRC grants to Fulbright fellowships in India.

Moreover, many of the standard generalizations about the distinctive qualities of American fiction remain true. Early American novels, the products of primitive and recently established communities, tended to concentrate on abstract issues rather than those nuances of social structure which tend to obsess the English novelist. In formal terms this led to a love of symbolism and allegory instead of a detailed fidelity to life's surface. This habit also created a preference for lonely, grand and unsociable heroes which has survived into current American fiction. When later American novelists turned towards realism, they often did so with a gritty inelegance that can, in English eyes, seem either engagingly frank or disconcertingly uncertain.

A few words about the organisation of the course. It is designed to be used in two ways. It may be read as a continuous whole by the student interested in the history of American fiction. But the individual blocks can also be treated as self-contained units by the reader in search of information about a specific writer or book.

The main objective of this course on the American Novel is to expose the students to the major novelists in American Literature through a study of the representative novels. While no selection of titles could please everyone, we believe that the novels chosen for this course will challenge the intelligent students to make their own rich and varied reading program. Here are the masterpiece and the milestones, the seed books, the novels from which have sprung new ideas and new novels:

Block 1	The Last of the Mohicans
Block 2	Sister Carrie
Block 3	The Great Gatsby
Block 4	Light in August
Block 5	Black Spring
Block 6	Catcher in the Rye
Block 7	Floating Opera
Block 8	A House Made of Dawn
Block 9	The Color Purple

I hope you will read and enjoy the novels as well as the blocks on them.

Good luck to you!

BLOCK INTRODUCTION

All of us are creatures of Nature. The great American experiment, starting with Columbus' discovery of the New World, is original and inventive. Its aspiration is in planting a new humanity with a new culture, ethos and spirit. Thus, Cooper's world, taking its origin in the nineteenth century adolescent America, defines its social relations. His social novels and lyrical poems of scintillating beauty and of luxuriant natural life are also wonderful allegories of purity and holiness.

In these five units, you will study Cooper's frontier imagination as it was shaped by the cultural, religious, philosophical and social -and to some extent even political- conditions of his age.

As you enter Cooper's "romances of the forest", from the outer rim of the conditions of the age and characteristics of the nineteenth century American novel (with himself being the first complete American novelist) you will be truly filled with a host of complex feelings of - wonder, fear, a feeling of unimaginable ghastliness and savagery and yet a sheer lyrical strain of pulsating rhythms of Nature's beauty.

I am sure, you will enjoy the novel as well as the company of its chief protagonist, the Leather stocking hero, Natty Bumppo, who symbolizes our desire for retreat into our inner recesses of piety. He is the optimistic vision of our human race.

I wish you good luck!

UNIT 1 THE BEGINNINGS

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 The Defining Focus of the American Character
 - 1.1.1 The Moral, Religious, and Philosophical Aspects
 - 1.1.2 American Philosophy in the 19th Century
- 1.1 Main characteristics of the 19th Century Novel
- 1.2 Themes and Patterns of the 19th Century Novel
- 1.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.4 Questions
- 1.5 Suggested Reading

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we study the creative matrix of the nineteenth century novel in its moral, religious, philosophical and cultural conditions, which shaped the American novel of that time. The rallying point of the adolescent American character then was the energetic faith in the American experiment in sanctioning and achieving individual liberty.

1.1 AMERICAN CHARACTER OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

For Taine, a literary text is created out of the union of the "race, moment and milieu." This is all the more true in a new nation and newer form of creative expression, where literature seeks to represent a reality which never believes in realising itself into a settled monolith. As ceaseless innovation to achieve its own a promise of New World of hope of human beings, its creative expression seeks a distinct identity and spirit. It seeks to be independent but not isolated. Its aim is to be a path-finder, to define the perfect ways of society, politics and governance, culture and philosophy.

Starting its long, unending journey from its Puritanical moorings, its journey is purposefully unsettled. It desires its continuous energy out of this restless quest for being something innovative and leading the world by its ideals. Quite rightly, Commanger describes the American character as "always the product of an interplay of inheritance and environment". It is this complex and inalienable relationship of its inheritance from the British and European, going back to the roots of the ancient Greece and Rome that is the shaping (not petrifying) influence on its psyche. As it derived its basic institutions of State, Church and Family, which define their fundamental values, the influence of the environment was decisive. Its rich social, geographical diversity in a synthesis with its vast sense of space, invitation to mobility, the atmosphere of independence and encouragement to opportunity and optinities – all created a firm stamp of new ways of thinking and redefining man's genius. Out of this vast sense of rich reservoir of almost eternal source of nature's wealth, inspired by a will to venture, define the fundamental trait of the American character namely, the optimism, as a way of thinking and feeling and living and achieving together.

Out of this of enterprising sense of optimism arose the American idea of progress. As programmes was not abstraction, in itself, but a common place of experience to

the American he saw it daily in the transformation of wilderness into a farm land, in the growth of villages into cities, in the steady rise of community and nation to wealth and power. As he planned ambitiously with a doubtless spirit of endeavour, he passionately believed that nothing was beyond his power and always aimed and reached triumphant goals. For him, as for the Europeans (from where he had taken the tradition) past was not historical, as for him, what mattered most was his living and endeavouring in the future. As this constructive optimism was realised as a sense of power of vast reserves of energy, with spacious trees, his imagination roamed a continent. His very folklore was on a large-scale, with such empire builders so closely approximated to folklore, such as Paul Bunyans and Mike Finks. It is easy to confuse real and legendary characters, such as Daniel Boone (on whom Cooper might have modelled his Natty Bumppo), David Crockett and Sam Houston. They belong to mythology and history, alike. Because his imagination was constantly challenged by the realities of geography and history, he was receptive to large plans and heroic speculations.

As his endeavour was practical, his culture, too, was material. He took contest for granted and preached the gospel of hard work and regarded rootlessness to any particular place not a vice. He liked wealth, without being ostentatious. Whatever promised to increase wealth was regarded as good and he was tolerant of the exploitation of natural resources and manifestation of the cult of industrialism. This sense of venturing in achieving greater material worth made him intensely practical in all matters. He was endlessly ingenious and resourceful, he was always ready to improvise new tools or techniques to meet new urgencies. An innovator to the core, he borrowed readily from Indian or immigrant and naturalised what he borrowed. He improved instinctively and constantly tried improvements, without any respect for custom. He was the happiest when he could find a mechanical solution to his problems.

Mere theories and speculations disturbed him and he avoided abstruse philosophies of government. No philosophy not grounded in practical wisdom and true common sense appealed to him. If any, "instrumentalism" is one philosophy that is always native to his instinct.

1.1.1 The Moral, Religious, and Philosophical Aspects

His religion, with its Calvinistic roots, too, was practical. He was religious, without being devout. Instead of a faith in the doctrine of salvation by grace, he naturally believed in the doctrine of salvation by work. He did not believe in the Devil. The most significant aspects of his two most original religions – Mormonism and Christian Science were the practical ones. In politics, too, he profoundly mistrusted the abstract and doctrinaire. Without believing in the exactions of any political philosophy, he formed his own mature and unfailing political judgement by common sense. His cultural attitudes were also based on their practical compulsion and useful value.

To him, as wilderness was the true paradise, he proclaimed his moral superiority through it. This assumption of superiority was accompanied by a sense of destiny and mission. Pioneering in spirit and adventurous in action, with a will to succeed, American character had an endless inclination to experiment, in all forms of human endeavour. As America itself was an experiment in the history of man's civilization, he was a self-reliant man, who continuously "made" the American mind.

These qualities of the American character are sufficiently formed and enriched during the literature, thinking and culture of the nineteenth century. Its four important qualities are: (1) faith in progress; (2) validity of democracy; (3) a sense of equality everywhere in all aspects and walks of life, and (4) the ultimate triumph of right over wrong.

Through out the nineteenth century, the sense of equality permeated American's life and thought. His conduct and work and play, his language and literature, his religion and politics and it essentially conditioned and defined all aspects of his life. Equality was all pervasive, in politics, society, cultural and psychological life. There was a quest for economic equality in the sense that there was the absence of class distinctions, though not the triumph over them. Wherever men and women met, they met on the basis of equality. Leadership fluctuated and was dictated by the situation itself rather than by antecedent social position. As education reflected the social values, the public school was the great leveller. The sense of ingenuity and physical prowess were the distinct qualities of success. This sense of equality introduced an ease and sincerity into social relationships. Love as a form of companionship penetrated the class barriers. Talent also brought many opportunities for individual performance. Due to this sense of equality, the poor did not feel the burden of inequality. Few outward signs of rank were tolerated. This sense of equality was also manifested more clearly in the American manners. Americans conducted themselves pretty much as their kindly and genuine instincts dictated. Their manners were flexible and appeared to be not so rigid or punctilious. In the political life, this spirit of equality, not simply as a democratic principle, but a sort of collective sharing of power and responsibility was prominent. Not much significance was added to the role and might of the military in society, except in times of war.

He was apparently careless about his work and his trade and preferring to have machines work for him. He regarded with equanimity, the decline of the inherited traditions of craftsmanship. He was careless also of class, rank and prerogatives of others as well as of his own. He took little pride in a finished job, prizing versatility above thoroughness. Though the world's most successful farmer, his cultivation was not intensive. The Americans had two schools of thought, namely transcendentalism and pragmatism. They rarely stayed at a single place. With abundant faith in the next generation, an American never leaves behind anything for the future. It was easier then to cultivate in the new soil and explore new investments than continue with the old traditions and practices.

The American attitude towards authority, rules and regulations was not significant. A paradox exists when he had no great respect for when rules, he, nevertheless, praised his Constitution and government for his greatness. By the twin causes of his confidence in the superiority of his constitutional authority and prosperity, they tended to be lenient towards dissent and non-conformity. He knew that America was founded in dissent. Individualism, a prime quality of the American character, also was based on non-conformity. Nature, too, conspired with history to justify heterodoxy. In the nineteenth century, non-conformity was indulged out of good nature rather than respect for the principle. His sense of discipline was imposed by circumstances than by the state.

However, for all his individualism, he was much given to cooperative undertakings. They waited on the interest of the individual of the group and they discovered that men could come together and make a church and their churches were voluntary organizations. They found that men could come together and make a state and the constitutional convention was their most original political contribution. Though he did not always observe the morals of the Puritans, he accepted without question the moral standards of the Puritans. White women were safe anywhere. Chastity was taken for granted before and fidelity after marriage. This is obvious in the portrayal of Alice and Cora in *The Last of the Mohicans*. The social position of women was an elevated one. They were treated with honour and given many opportunities in their intellectual development. In all matters of the church and the school, women took the lead. They not only controlled education and religion, they largely dictated the standards of literature and art. While his sentimentalism was deep and spontaneous the American was closer to the French man than to that of the German. He was sentimental about Nature in her grander aspects and liked rhetoric in his orators (as we find it in Natty Bumppo). He thought the whole history of his country was

romantic and heroic. Instead of revelling in the anachronistic history of the past European feudal castles and knights, he romanticized his own history of the Pilgrim and the Puritan, the Indian, whom he fought, the cowboy, the miner and the trapper. As he was always victorious, he variously mythicised in sentiment and romance all the vanquished. Imagination and enthusiasm, combined with sentiment characterized his sentiment. Humour, which was as pervasive as unfailing optimism, was a national trait. As it existed universally in the American mind, its practitioner brought rare delight and unique character to the American imagination. Humour thus, in its myriad manifestations, such as that of the yankees, Negroes and cowboys all had their special dialects. From Benjamin Franklin to Mark Twain, it was fundamentally outrageous. It celebrated the grotesque and the ludicrous with unruffled gravity. In a way, Nature in American humour displaced society in the British sort of humour.

1.1.2 American Philosophy in the XIX Century

American philosophy of the XIX Century was like its American character of the century, "an amalgam of inheritance and experience". As Puritanism, rationalism and idealism, were the three major sources of American philosophy, each was naturalized, without the sectarian denominations and Puritanism permeated the secular thought. The enlightenment, too, unlike in Europe could perform the task of illumination without war or revolution. In America, as the opposites could fuse themselves; "its alchemy was tranquil and pervasive". The American had found felicity in the New World, and his philosophy justified a genial view of Providence and Nature, a romantic concept of man and a healthy interpretation of history. As he cultivated the spirit of individualism, there was enough room for experimentation and creative use of his free will. As he was practical, his philosophy, too, served utilitarian purposes. His imagination depended in his free will. Philosophy was an active instrument and a provocation as well as a rationalization and a rule. He accepted ideas without rigorous inquiry into their validity by innovatively synthesizing the philosophical ideas of the past from the English, French, German and even Indian source. He could evolve his own system, most suited to his pragmatic needs, based on his common sense. Yet, inspite of the disinterest in formal philosophy or indulge in metaphysical speculation, they formulated with enough conviction and unanimity, a common view of the cosmic processes and their significance to man. Acknowledging their belief in the binding force a moral law, they formed their institutions.

American thought, which was essential to its American character, was based on the unfailing sense of optimism with the sense of spacious universe with confidence in the infinite possibilities of human development and with reverence for a righteous God and a just moral code. Believing in immutable laws, governing the universe, yet still leaving enough possibility for the operation of free will, they were confident that their reason was able to competent to observe these laws and will was strong enough to observe them. They believed secular law to be but a transcription of the Law of Nature and Nature's God and accorded it appropriate respect. Fully acknowledging the supremacy and sovereign efficacy of the Higher Law, they held human institutions valid only when in conformity to it. They worshipped a God, who was just but benevolent and who "delighted in the happiness of man here and his greater happiness hereafter". They revelled in a nature that was exacting but beneficent and found its generosity a sure sign of providential sanction of grace.

It is, indeed, a fact of vital significance that, though they did not acquiesce in the doctrine of man's original depravity and man's insignificance inspite of their fundamental faith in the supremacy and power of God. On the contrary, they continued their faith in man's capacity for qualities of divinity in his action and capability for infinite moral improvement, and was destined, ultimately, for perfection. Although sin and Devil persisted in confessions of faith, both were banished from the popular consciousness. American held all the men to be equal in God's sanction of grace. As he combined the political idea of democracy and the moral and religious aspect of brotherhood of mass, they practised the values of liberty

in all their social order and law and commonwealth. As they passionately believed and practised freedom of each individual, without pride in their individual excellence, but with a deep sense of gratitude to God. Self-reliance in their own fundamental capacities, became a sort of impelling drive to all their thoughts and actions. Thus, individualism became Americanism. To this extent, as the rich and spacious continent dazzled but not confounded their imagination, their conquest of it inspired in them a sense of limitless power. For us, these ideals of Nature and religion form the central tenets of the behaviour of Cooper's Leatherstocking hero, Natty Bumppo, the man "without a cross". Like the true, American, he recognized the sovereignty of the conscience. Temperate and democratic, Natto Bumppo followed the majority verdict.

In their literary imagination, this spirit of liberty and quest for individual perfection, morally and materially, centrally defined the consciousness of their heroes and heroines. All of them (at least upto the XIX Century) were rural heroes, as their imagination was formed by country living. His poetry, and mythology were formed by country living. No novel of city life caught the imagination of those writers. As in Cooper's pastoral images, the country folk eulogised the felicities of the farm and considered the farmer the beloved of God. As Natty Bumppo so institently declares to Harward. "Lord, Major, I should be but a poor scholar for one who had studied so long in the wilderness, did not I know how to set forth the movements and nature' of such a beast." (p.303). They read books and psalms in the wild nature. Poets and composers of songs at that time delighted themselves in the simple and inostensible objects of nature, the meditative joy of the country-side and the love of the past. As their qualities of primieval innocence and pristine purity were reflected in the childhood or adolescent dreams, boyhood was glorified as an important form of exploring human conscioussness. No other literature has exploited the myths and dreams of the adolescent psyche. Natty Bumppo's pristine purity and innocence, even Uncas' pure mind and David's and Alice's and Cora's sentiments - all carry the authentic spontaneity of the childhood feelings. Everywhere, those characters lived in the pastoral or rural ambience. In contrast to this, the urban milieu provided the opposite set of values of a corrupt mind. Everybody, like Uncas, had a high sense of honour. He was brave and stood up for himself, fought for his rights and fought fairly, himself. Throughout the whole of these trying moments, Uncas has alone preserved his serenity. He looked on the preparations with a steady eye, and when the tormentoos came to seize him, he met him with a firm and upright attitude. He was gregarious, loyal to his companions and rarely cherished enmities and chivalrous toward women, Respective towards the grown-ups, he was thoughtless rather than unkind. Gifted with a lively imagination, he lived in a world (like Natty Bumppo) of the Indians, cowboys and pirates. Like Natty Bumppo, he was superstitious but not religious. Fair in his dealings with others, he scorned every form of meanness. He was simple and democratic, without knowing the distinctions of class or colour and resented snobbery. He made friends readily with the poor and the shiftless and he was uncomfortable with wealth. Every one about him worked hard and he took upon himself a heavy burden of chores and did them with varying desires of faithfulness. He lived close to nature. He believed in a world of his own. He was a part of the work around. Cooper's Leatherstocking hero immortalizes all these qualities.

For the American character of the nineteenth century, history was a story and romance, a record of battles of deeds and daring as in Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. They were designed to point a moral and adorn a tale, and even if the tale was exotic, the moral was always relevant to the American experience. Perhaps, an important trait of the American character was its great patriotism for education. The leader in schools inculcated the value of patriotism, industry, obedience to parents the virtue of work. They taught that life was real and earnest. They promised that right would triumph in the end. It represented at its best, "the Arcadian simplicity". In the nineteenth centu., it was closer to the Calvinism of the seventeenth century and sustained most American in the XIX Century. However, after this century of "Arcadian simplicity" and Nature, pristine purity, the life in the next century, celebrated business rather than adventure.

1.2 MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE 19TH CENTURY NOVEL

These qualities of the nineteenth century American life, in its complex impact of tradition and environment, moral, religious, philosophical and expansionist purposes are sufficiently reflected in the novel form, in the writings of at least three major novelists, namely Washington Irving, Edgar Allen Poe, James Fennimore Cooper, Melville and Hawthorne.

There may be two important concerns for the novelists of the nineteenth century American, in an interrelated manner. The main concern of these writers is to portray the individual's relationship with his society. If in writers like Cooper and Mark Twain, this many-sided relationship of the individual to his society was portrayed directly, by dealing with his morals by signifying characters like the Leatherstocking hero (in Cooper's novels) as the edifice morality in life; Melville and Hawthorne, by romanticizing the mysterious and mythicizing the reality, dealt with the contemporary social reality, indirectly. In any case, man *vis-a-vis* his society is the core concern of the nineteenth century American novelist. Also, as the American novel is different in its very definition, by its historical reasons of the formation of the American character, its definitions of the novelistic form varies with that of a European connotation of a novel. For, if the nineteenth century European novel described a settled social reality, with its main concern for the class conflict in a bourgeois milieu, the 19th Century American novel, by its reasons of historically evolving of a new society had to deal with a still forming society. It was the land of social experimentation "in exploring" the bases of moral values in individual's relationship with his society. In this sense, according to Lionell Trilling, "the American writers of the genius have not turned their minds to society". Further, he says that, the American novelists at that time sought only "a tangential" relationship to society. The real basis of the novel has never existed in America because, there was no tension between a middle class and the aristocracy.

In any case, the main purpose of the American novel in the 19th century was to describe the complex of ideas and ideals which defined the beginnings of the great American experiment in the New World, with its own kind of religion, culture and compulsions of environment and history. If the 19th century English novel stressed the impact of society on the individual in Dickens and George Eliot, in the American novel of the same time, it was defining an individual, with his staunch commitment to (more than anything else), his authentic and unmistakable stamp of individualism. So, for the American mind, the insistence on the individual as the only proper unit of a social definition and the idea that society was "an invention" of civilization, so that one could destroy it by simply wishing it away" was an important idea. For, in the American mind, of the 19th century, in place of an European concept of class-laden, society, we have, the experience of community life. This is an unstated ideal. It is an aspect of individual freedom without degenerating into selfishness and irresponsibility. It creates a set of values for relationship between individuals in forming a morally viable social living, without the threats of greed, acquisitiveness and cruelty. This idea of natural sentiment of piety in moral values in human relationships is best expressed in the writings of Jhon Winthrop, who says that we should always keep "before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body". This idea of community living in the 19th Century reflected the original settlement of the Christian ideas, which inspired the initial Puritan pilgrims. It was the religious fervour, which formed the quintessential spirit of describing an individual as part of a selfless community life. Thus, as in Cooper's frontier imagination, the wilderness is an image of ideal relationship of man. In a near pastoral situation, through the figure of Daniel Boone and his Western myth. Here, the main purpose is to reconcile the individual freedom.

(such as that of Natty Bumppo), with the social life, without loss of his moral, spiritual and emotional needs.

However, this idea of the individual and his community life in a continuum was modified with the intervention of the economic forces. According to Crevecoeur, the individual and social progress in the new nation, without the exploiting institutions of monarchy or a corrupt church or selfish nobility, was not possible, in material terms, for generating more wealth, merely by practising the romantic values of piety and simplicity of the frontier. He, therefore, saw the nineteenth century individual, essentially in economic terms by sharing the enlightened view (as also expressed by Benjamin Franklin), that "human character is environmentally decided". He showed a consistent belief in the virtues of expanding civilization. The new democracy would assure "the rewards of industry" and "his labour is founded on the basis of nature". For him, the sea had no "romantic" or metaphysical association. It was only a setting for the fishing industry and for trade. Ralph Gabriel also corroborating with this view, believed that individualism was the most dominant force behind the developments of the nineteenth century society and literature. These contending economic forces in the lives of the individuals led to the breaking down of social institutions, leading to a new way of comprehending the individual and his relationship with his society. Thus, it was realized that more individualism in creating an atomistic society of isolated human beings without concern for the collective moral and social purpose became another concern in the nineteenth century novel in America, apart from the already existing romantic (and social) tradition of Cooper. In the writings of the elder Henry James, there was an effort at relating the metaphysical to the social aspect of life. He believed that the universal brotherhood and the destruction of selfhood were the important qualities of the nineteenth century imagination.

Thus, the nineteenth century American novel essentially dramatized the aspirations of the individual in relation to his society first in the agrarian conditions, then in the realms of emerging economic forces. Finally, the aspect of relating man's social life to the larger metaphysical concerns proved another important dimension. In any case, it was the essential portrayal of the individual in his various levels and forms of relationship with his society that was the main concern of the nineteenth century American novel.

1.3 THEMES AND PATTERNS

Novelists of the 19th Century American may be considered at one level, as "social visionaries." American novel of the 19th century, though gained its inspiration in its form from the contemporary British novel, is nevertheless, greatly different from it. If the British novelists of the mid-nineteenth century, like Dickens, Disraeli and Gaskell, wrote with a reformative zeal, the American novelists of that period did not have any such interest in reforming the society. On the other hand, they mostly employed their moral energy in portraying evil within man's social environment when they were bedevilled by such moral issues in society, as slavery the race question, child labour and democratic equality. Perhaps, because of the compulsive individual liberty, which is part of the American experiment, these novelists' concern for the collective social welfare was not of the same kind, as for example in Dickens. The American novelist's imagination worked for creating ideal social communities. Based on individual liberty, they visualized perfect images of society, making these works appear more as visionary than reformative in their purpose. Children or the adolescent dreams of perfection is an important quality of the American fiction of this period. They served as tools for the novelist's dispassionate moral and social commentators. They acted as a means of satire or irony. Mark Twain uses children extensively for the purpose of social criticism. Unlike Dickens, the American novelist makes his child heroes, or heroes with the purity of mind, to reject the society for its evil, to create their own world of purity, as Huck in Mark Twain's

novels and Natty Bumppo in Leatherstocking tales. The heroes of the American fiction of that time affirmed the vitality of the American myth in the pre-Civil war period, in which the individual freedom was unfettered by social restrictions. As society does not impinge on the individual liberty, it does not find any definable place in the American novel, unlike in the English novel, and this is perhaps, the main distinction between the English and American novel of the 19th century. As organized society does not play any important role in the American novels, the heroes, too, engage in social conflict, only in pursuit of their ideal relationship or in passionate struggles with the existing social order. In the process, they turn away from it. It also means that the American fictional hero, instead of reforming society, by rejecting it, explores his metaphysical relations elsewhere as in Melville, to some extent. Thus, the American fictional hero is concerned with the exploration of essentially social themes at personal and metaphysical levels, making the American novel different from its source, that is, the English novel. Truly, thus, the American novel of the nineteenth century continued to reflect the ideal of the individual liberty to achieve near perfection, which is part of the larger American experiment in the New World. Its protagonist, a torch bearer for human progress, carries this light of civilization, in his innocence, naivete, dreams and conflicts of conscience, for ever. He continues his role as a passionate chronicler of this American experiment with unflagging involvement and commitment, to make the novel of the nineteenth century a part of the cultural and metaphysical history of this vibrant nation.

1.4 LET US SUM UP

Thus, we have discussed in this Unit, the main cultural, religious and other experiences, which shaped the nineteenth century American imagination. Evolving itself with the clear mandate for all-round autonomy for achieving the national spirit, it generally outgrew its original (mostly Puritanical) purposes in literature. It is now in its own self, not so European, or English. It is quintessentially American. This spirit of the American character is most evocatively rendered in the portrayal of the American protagonist, in Cooper's Leatherstocking tales, Melville's cosmic imagination and Mark Twain's portrayal of Huck and Hawthorne's exploration of the romance of the mystery. Thus, in the next Unit, we will further explore the characteristically romantic spirit of the 19th century in its myth and symbol, and revivifying images of the American dream of the past and its vision of the future, as conceived at that time.

1.5 QUESTIONS

- 1 Discuss the qualities of the American character of the 19th century.
- 2 What are the moral, religious ideas defining the American mind of the nineteenth century.
- 3 Discuss the characteristics of the 19th century American novel.
- 4 Discuss the main themes of the 19th century American novel, vis-à-vis those of the 19th century British novel.

1.6 SUGGESTED READING

H.S. Commanger *The American Mind*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950.

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UNIT 2 THE MAN, THE MILIEU, AND THE MOMENT

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Qualities of Self-trust and Expansion
- 2.2 Romanticism in the 19th Century America
- 2.3 Romance in the 19th Century American Novel
- 2.4 Novel Vs Romance
- 2.5 Washington Irving, and Edgar Allen Poe
 - 2.5.1 Washington Irving (1783-1859)
 - 2.5.2 Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849)
- 2.6 Life and Works of James F. Cooper
- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Questions
- 2.9 Suggested Reading

2.0 OBJECTIVES

Here, let us study the development of the Romanticism of the nineteenth century America, by virtue of its self-trust as a new nation on the throes of an experiment and multifarious expansion. Though it took its inspiration from the European Romanticism, it redefined the spirit of the Romantic according to its demands of an emerging past. For America, Romance is synonymous with its social, political and cultural perfection of the new country. To the same extent, its narrative form, essentially closer to the Romantic form than to the novel form, is enriched by the nineteenth century masters, namely, Irving, Cooper, Melville and Hawthorne. Finally, in this Unit, we study the literary ambience of the early nineteenth century in the writings of Irving, Poe and Cooper.

2.1 QUALITIES OF SELF-TRUST AND EXPANSION

The literary mind of the 19th century American novel was shaped by two experiences : intense self-trust and a sense of vast expansion in all forms, geographic, economic and cultural aspects. Self-trust in the capabilities of the people themselves became the spirit of nationalism. Born in the political and philosophical debate of the eighteenth century Europe, the doctrine became a self-conscious demand for native arts, customs and a native language. Now, as the frontier moved towards the Pacific, geography gave nationalism a new context. The impact of a new world, with its tremendous resources and its frontier gave a fresh incisiveness and strength to nationalism. With the disappearance of the division of opinion in the later 18th century between monarchists and republicans, the feeling of the success of the Republicanism became prevalent. The Americans came to believe that, their republic was neither the mirage nor the chaos that the European reactionaries had anticipated. It became a practical concern. Out of the older concepts of natural law and natural rights, American liberals developed the new doctrine of popular sovereignty. The honest concern of the American people for the welfare of all mankind gave them a certain dignity. Expansion, which was the result of self-trust of the people in themselves, wrote its own history. In the years from the Revolution to 1820, there was a multiplicity of the land area and population. Americans were the masters of three million square miles of land. The nation was still predominantly agrarian, inspite the tendencies of growth of industry and capitalism. Though there were deep

and wide cleavages between aristocracy and democracy, it gave a new voice to the poor, as a result of the triumph of the Jacksonianism.

2.2 ROMANTICISM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY AMERICA

Romanticism in America took shape out of these twin qualities of self-trust and expansion. For, self-trust and expansion led to the importance of optimism not only as a religious cult, but also as a way of thinking and living. Individualism is also another quality, making individual achieve perfection and greater productivity in all forms and fronts of human activity; Liberty in thinking and action is the main quality of individualism. Hence, these qualities of optimism, individual liberty and a ceaseless desire for man's progress and perfection in all walks of life form the main qualities of Romanticism in literature in America

In Europe, the romantic spirit gradually strengthened from the middle of the 19th Century, in particular, in Germany France and England. It may not be any organized, system of thought, as it is a particular attitude defining man's aspirations, his understanding of nature and society. It took imaginative roots in writers such as Wordsworth, Keats and Coleridge, even before it expressed itself in the New World. Revolting against the neo-classical spirit of the earlier century, Romanticism preferred freedom to formalism in all walks of life and worshipped individualism as a cult. They displaced authority with the liberty of the individual. Man is mostly capable of self-reliant action and thinking. He exalted the imagination above either rationalism or strict adherence to factual apprehension of reality. By rejecting the validity of material knowledge, he enthroned intuition as the most valuable form of understanding man's true self. The Romantics gave credence to faith, than to mere reason. Romanticism emphasised the importance of the sub-conscious as demonstrated in Emerson's institutionalism and in the portrayal of the abnormal psychology by Poe and Hawthorne.

Its view of nature as a symbol of primieval innocence and man and woman as the symbols of originally divine Adam and Eve and nature as an eternal source of moral and spiritual wisdom and a symbol of Beauty and Truth, as in the poetry of Wordsworth, Bryant or Longfellow significantly defined the new imaginative traditions of the nineteenth century America. Curiosity as a way of exploring the unknown and the mysterious inspired the imagination of Coleridge and Poe, if only, medievalism inspired the poetic imagination of Keats and Lowell.

Humanitarianism is one important quality of Romanticism. By romanticizing the "common man", it led to an age of reform movements. It developed a fundamental enthusiasm for the primitive – for the ancient ballads, epics and folk literature and glorifying the image of Rousseau's "noble savage". In particular, it led to create humour and burlesque in the American imagination. Romanticism produced a luxuriant new literature in every country with the recurrent qualities of opulence and freedom, devotion to individualism, a reliance upon man's good nature and "natural man" and abiding faith in the boundless resources of the human spirit and imagination.

These romantic instincts of rebellion against the established order and an endlessly optimistic vision of man's capabilities for perfection took their origin from the American and French Revolutions. The period of Cooper, Bryant and Irving was one of ceaseless optimism in man's capacities for good nature and excellence. The buoyant American nation, soon after independence, created its freedom of spirit over and over again, in two diplomatic victories over the French, in leading the world against the Barbary pirates in resisting British pretensions by war in 1812 and in

announcing its western hegemony by the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. Internally, it expanded the American dominion from the North-West Territory to Oregon, from Louisiana to the Rockies, through the South-West from Texas to California, by the Mexican war. This geographical expansion propelled the romantic imagination of writers like Cooper, Irving and Bryant, in describing the world of expansion, as a form of nation's progress and human perfection in the New World. Natty Bumppo and the world of the savages in Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* lived the spirit of romantic adventure, and innocence in their purest form. However, as if mere robust optimism might not solve some of the problems, the spirit of questioning romanticism found its first great American representatives in writers, like Poe and Hawthorne. They sought the reality of man in the hidden recesses of the mind and spirit and probed their obscure sources of behaviour and moral judgement. Like Keats and Coleridge, Poe embodied his revelations in aesthetic symbolism, except in his detective and science tales. In contrast, Hawthorne, by employing a penetrating sense of history, found his symbolism in man's conflict with the vestiges of the past, indelibly fixed in his moral nature and his social environment. Poe, by his symbolic idealism, to an advanced degree, became the inspiration of the French symbolists. Melville, like Hawthorne was obsessed by the enigma of evil, by drawing symbols from land and sea for his exploration into the heart of the universe.

However, the ideas of self-trust and expansion, leading to widespread production of wealth created its own set of problems in the 19th Century, in the form of an increasing territory, population and industrial activity. During the thirty years before the Civil War, the population increased from thirteen to thirty million Americans. Although nearly half of America's population pushed beyond the Alleghenies by 1840, there were already at that time, increasing concentrations in eastern urban and industrial centres, where recent migrants accounted for about 12% of the nation. The remarkable development of industry and financial institutions was accompanied by economic crisis and a kind of poverty that was unknown to the younger agrarian America. Even the frontier was not without its problems of endless labour and limited educational opportunities. If the election of Jefferson in 1800 is regarded as breaking the authority of the rich, well-known and the "able", the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828 with a direct mandate from the common people is a significant event in the history of the nation. His election signalled the increasing determination of these masses to be heard in the national government. To this extent, Cooper's acceptance of the Jacksonian form of ideology, differs from his father's belief in the righteousness of aristocracy of the Federalists, expresses the changing will of the nation. For these masses, the problem of Negro slavery was a threat to the enterprise of the free man. Also, the spirit of expansion of the frontier and the moral abhorrence, which impelled the North, was influential in precipitating the Civil War.

A widespread respect for the common man and a belief in his capacities was reflected in all the writers. Bryant, who espoused the human and civil rights, supported the nascent labour movement and many other reforms, gradually opposed the extension of slavery. Hawthorne and Melville regarded the improvement of society as indispensable for the spirit of mankind. In this century, after Cooper, Irving and Poe, the transcendentalists, supported various reforms, in particular, the abolition of slavery. This reforming spirit infused the writings of such New England thinkers and writers as Longfellow, Lowell and Holmes. New reform movements and organizations flourished at that time, in the 19th Century. Well-directed groups tried to improve the standards of criminology and provide rehabilitation instead of punishment. The American Temperance Society was founded in 1846. The women's rights movement drew such strong leaders on Margaret Fuller. The first women's Congress was held at New York in 1845. It called for equality with men in educational opportunities and employment, in marriage and property ownership. They campaigned for factory reforms affecting women and child workers, especially in the New England cotton mills.

In religion, the unitarian church in the early 19th and late 18th centuries was based on the idea of Enlightenment of man. It was formed by optimistic men. In the name of reason and common sense, they rejected the Puritan notion of the innate depravity of man. As found in Natty Bumppo in *The Last of the Mohicans*, they created a theology based on man's innate goodness and his spiritual freedom in a universe presided over by a benevolent God.

2.3 ROMANCE IN THE 19th CENTURY AMERICAN NOVEL

The American novel has a unique quality in its tenor and purpose, from that of the English novel. As it has to represent a complex reality of an unsettled or settling order, in the 19th Century, its main quality may be described as "contradictions and representing extreme ranges of experience", ranging from melodramatic actions to pastoral idyls. If, in contrast, the English novel, comparatively speaking, had centrality and equality of judgement, in the American novel, there was "a profound poetry of disorder", consisting of oddity, distortion of personality, dislocations of normal life and malignancy of motive. Though the English novelist has not been always strictly tragic or Christian, often it has been comic of a superior variety, approaching tragedy. Usually, it has been realistic or even "naturalistic". In contrast, the American novel, without being stirred by the possibility of catharsis or incarnation has been inspired by the aesthetic possibilities of expressing the radical forms of alienation, contradictions and disorder. According to Richard Chase, the American novel is a development of the English traditions, at least upto 1880 or 1890. If the high purpose of the English novel is bringing order to disorder, the American novel, according to D.H. Lawrence (in his *Studies in Classical American Literature*) is always committed "to explore rather than to appropriate and civilize" the unexplored yet important territories of human life in the New World. Its aim is "to discover a new place and a new state of mind", making it more profound than the English novel. It, in the processes, "carves out experience brilliant and highly wrought fragments rather than massive unities". According to Allen Tate, there is "a complexity of feeling" in the American novel. For sometime, "the states of feeling and the language" in which they are caught are sometimes very intricate in the American novels. Bewley explains the reasons of this tension in his essay called, "Fennimore Cooper and the Ecomic Age" in his book *Eccentricity of Design*. According to him, this tension in Cooper, Hawthorne and James, was due to "the struggle to close the split in American experience". This split was between Europe and America, liberalism and reaction, aggressive economics and benevolent wealth. To this extent, according to Bewley, the best American novelists like Faulkner, Milville, Cooper and Hawthorne, achieved "their energy and their force from the perception and acceptance not of unities but of radical disunities". However, according to Richard Chase, the beauty and force of the American novel is in keeping the disunities intact, but not in unifying them into some sort of an order, as in the English novel. In any case, these contradictions of beliefs, which have energised the American imagination in the novel form, can be traced to three facts: first, there is the solitary position in which man has been placed in this country by Puritanism and later by the frontier conditions, like Natty Bumppo living in his morally secluded conditions of pure existence in the frontier; second, the American puritanism with its New England's excessive concern with morality, seems more interested in the melodrama of the eternal struggle of good and evil; third, the conflict in the American arises because of the American's dual allegiance to the old world and the New World.

2.4 NOVEL VS ROMANCE

As in the American literary imagination, romantic form, not the novel form (as understood in the English literary context) is the mainstay, it is useful if we

distinguish between the romance and novel, as two literary forms. The main difference, perhaps, arises with regard to their attitude to reality. The novel renders reality closely and in comprehensive detail. It takes a group of people and describes their existence in the novel. We see these people in their real complexity of temperament and motive. They are in good relation to nature, to each other, to their social class, to their own past. Character is more important than action and plot. The events portrayed are plausible. In its historical presentation and purposes, the novel served the interest and aspirations of the vibrant middle-class.

By contrast, the romance, following its distantly medieval origins, renders reality in lesser plenitude. It tends to prefer action to character, and action will be freer in a romance than in a novel. At least, this is true in Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. The romance can flourish without much of an inter-relationship between characters. These mostly two-dimensional characters, as "good" or "bad" types of the human nature, will hardly be related to each other or to the past. They will be shown in ideal relation among themselves. Each character "symbolises" an idea. In the American romance, unlike in the English novels, classes do not so much signify any identity, according to a class. To a significant degree, characters become somewhat abstract and ideal and merely functional in their relationship to plot. Being less committed to the immediate compulsions of a tangible historical reality, the romance may take the form of the mythical, allegorical and symbolic forms.

Historically, in the course of its development, the American novel achieved a sort of an imaginative hybrid, between the novel form and the romance. Though the greatest American fiction has tended towards the romance than the greatest European fiction, the American novel is part of the great European tradition of the novel, as the American romances are adaptations of the traditional novelistic procedures to the American cultural conditions and new aesthetic aspirations. It is interesting to realize that though both *Moby Dick* and *The Bithedale Romance* begin as novels, they become romances. This drift from the novel form to a genuine romance is more discernible in the imagination of Cooper. Cooper's first work, *Precaution* was a novel of manners, somewhat in the style of Jane Austen. Then he wrote *The Spy* in which he followed Scott. Here, he put his characters in the borderline without the institutions and manners of society. He presented only a general picture of the society. Thus, he moved away from the novel form proper to a step towards the successful mythic qualities of the Leather-stocking tales. Thus, we see in his imagination, the main drift in American fiction towards the romances, away from the novelistic tradition. Thus, although Cooper gave an unmistakable American tone to romance, he continued to be, in many ways, a disciple of Scott.

Also, the modern Romance is the substitute for the ancient epic. Though the form is changed, the matter is very much the same. Even as it differs from the English novel, it appears closer to the epic and drama. The romance has loftier origin than the novel, as it approximates the poem. The standards of romance are those of the epic. It invests individuals with an absorbing interest. It requires the same unities of plan, of purpose and harmony of parts. It seeks for its adventures among the wild and wonderful. It grasps at the possible and placing a human agent in hitherto untried situations, it exercises its ingenuity in extricating him from them, while describing his feelings and his fortunes in the process.

American fiction has been notable for its poetic quality. It is the poetry of romance. Many American novels, according to Richard Chase, remind us of "epics, large and small". *Moby Dick*, *Huck Finn* and *As I Lay Dying* belong to this quality of writing. In any case, on the whole, American fiction has approximated the poetry of idyl and of melodrama more often than of an epic. As in the case of Cooper, when a writer calls his work a romance, it only means that he wishes to claim a certain amplitude, both in its fashion and material. The romance presents truth, under no restrictions, except according to the writer's choice of circumstances. According to Hawthorne, the American author has to choose "a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land," where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, as in the

1.2 MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE 19TH CENTURY NOVEL

These qualities of the nineteenth century American life, in its complex impact of tradition and environment, moral, religious, philosophical and expansionist purposes are sufficiently reflected in the novel form, in the writings of at least three major novelists, namely Washington Irving, Edgar Allen Poe, James Fennimore Cooper, Melville and Hawthorne.

There may be two important concerns for the novelists of the nineteenth century American, in an interrelated manner. The main concern of these writers is to portray the individual's relationship with his society. If in writers like Cooper and Mark Twain, this many-sided relationship of the individual to his society was portrayed directly, by dealing with his morals by signifying characters like the Leatherstocking hero (in Cooper's novels) as the edifice morality in life; Melville and Hawthorne, by romanticizing the mysterious and mythicizing the reality, dealt with the contemporary social reality, indirectly. In any case, man *vis-a-vis* his society is the core concern of the nineteenth century American novelist. Also, as the American novel is different in its very definition, by its historical reasons of the formation of the American character, its definitions of the novelistic form varies with that of a European connotation of a novel. For, if the nineteenth century European novel described a settled social reality, with its main concern for the class conflict in a bourgeois milieu, the 19th Century American novel, by its reasons of historically evolving of a new society had to deal with a still forming society. It was the land of social experimentation "in exploring" the bases of moral values in individual's relationship with his society. In this sense, according to Lionell Trilling, "the American writers of the genius have not turned their minds to society". Further, he says that, the American novelists at that time sought only "a tangential" relationship to society. The real basis of the novel has never existed in America because, there was no tension between a middle class and the aristocracy.

In any case, the main purpose of the American novel in the 19th century was to describe the complex of ideas and ideals which defined the beginnings of the great American experiment in the New World, with its own kind of religion, culture and compulsions of environment and history. If the 19th century English novel stressed the impact of society on the individual in Dickens and George Eliot, in the American novel of the same time, it was defining an individual, with his staunch commitment to (more than anything else), his authentic and unmistakable stamp of individualism. So, for the American mind, the insistence on the individual as the only proper unit of a social definition and the idea that society was "an invention" of civilization, so that one could destroy it by simply wishing it away" was an important idea. For, in the American mind, of the 19th century, in place of an European concept of class-laden, society, we have, the experience of community life. This is an unstated ideal. It is an aspect of individual freedom without degenerating into selfishness and irresponsibility. It creates a set of values for relationship between individuals in forming a morally viable social living, without the threats of greed, acquisitiveness and cruelty. This idea of natural sentiment of piety in moral values in human relationships is best expressed in the writings of Jhon Winthrop, who says that we should always keep "before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body". This idea of community living in the 19th Century reflected the original settlement of the Christian ideas; which inspired the initial Puritan pilgrims. It was the religious fervour, which formed the quintessential spirit of describing an individual as part of a selfless community life. Thus, as in Cooper's frontier imagination, the wilderness is an image of ideal relationship of man in a near pastoral situation, through the figure of Daniel Boone and his Western myth. Here, the main purpose is to reconcile the individual freedom.

New York society and its frivolities. He then wrote *A History of New York by Diedrich Knicker Broker* (1809), a rollocking burlesque of a current history of the early Dutch settlers and this became a classic of humour. The origin of this book resembles that of Fielding's, "Joseph Andrews" and Dickens's "Pickwick Papers". Assuming throughout the characters of Diedrich Knickerbocker, an eccentric, old bachelor who typifies the decaying Dutch families of New York, Irving mingles with many actual facts of colonial history. The fun of this book lies in frequent and imperceptible of the sense and non-sense. The temper of this work is freshly American. The style is rather like that of Goldsmith. His traditional eighteenth century style was meant both for England and America.

After the personal tragedy due to the death of his fiancée, Matilda Hoffman, and personal responsibility because of domestic responsibility, he wrote his most famous work, *The Sketch Book*. It appeared serially in 1819-1820. This contains his best known stories, "Rip Van Winkle" and *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*". These collection of essays and short-stories written in a style like Goldsmith's. Its prose was hardly surpassed in the 19th Century England. This prose is of the balanced, cool and rhythmical sort. The story of Rip Van Winkle is a legend in various European forms. It combines in a peculiar manner, the fresh romantic feeling with traditional Augustan style. *Bracebridge Hall* followed in 1822. Then, he went to Germany in pursuit of an interest in German romanticism, when he wrote the *Tales of a Traveller* (1824) and other works. In these works, Irving excelled in the art of short-story. In collaboration with John Howard Payne, he wrote the social comedy called *Charles the Second; or The Merry Monarch*. From 1826 to 1829, he was in Spain on diplomatic business. His reading of the Spanish historical sources resulted in a number of important works: *A History of the life and voyage of Christopher Columbus* (1828), *A Chronicle of the Conquest of Granada* (1829) and *Voyages and Discoveries of the companions of Columbus* (1831) and a famous volume of stories and sketches called *The Alhambra* (1832) and *The Legends of the Conquest of Spain*. After seventeen years abroad, he returned with a desire to portray his own country again and such Western adventures as *A Tour of the Prairies* (1835), *Astoria* (1836) and *The Adventures of Captain Bonneville* are his other works. After refusing his nomination to Congress, or to become Van Buren's secretary of the navy, he wrote a good *Life of Oliver Goldsmith* (1840) and began the *Life of George Washington* (published 1855-1859), a standard work. From 1842 to 1845, he remodelled and revised his works, and the fifth and last volume of the latter appeared just before his death in 1859.

He was the first great prose stylist of American romanticism. He was urbane and worldly, yet humorous and gentle. His vast reading, following only the impulse of his own enthusiasms, resulted in a rich literary inheritance. He wrote for giving pleasure to a generation steeped in Puritanical didactic writings. He founded the extravagant American humour on which Mark Twain built up. He also started employing the urbane wit, which has survived in writers ranging from Holmes and Lowell to the *New Yorker* wits of the present century. In his *Sketch Books*, he wrote the first modern short-stories. He was among the first of the moderns to write good history and biography. He introduced the familiar essay to America. He restored the Gothic romances, which Poe infused with psychological intensity. The scope of the life and work was international and his well-known short-stories awakened an interest in the life of the American regions from the Hudson valley to the prairies of the West. His influence abroad as writer, visitor and diplomat was that of a gifted cultural ambassador. As thus, Washington Irving's achievement is multifaceted, we always remember him as the first true American writer of the 19th century to launch the growing gigantic edifice of the American imagination in letters.

2.5.2 Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849)

Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849) was born in Boston. His first five short stories, a part of the *Tales of the Folio Club*, was published by the *Philadelphia Saturday*. In 1833,

his first characteristic short-story combining pseudo-science and terror, won him prize. He settled down to his period of greatest accomplishment.

His works are directed towards universal human responses. He influenced the course of creative writing and criticism by emphasizing the art that appeals simultaneously to reason and to emotion by insisting that the work of art is not a fragment of the author's life nor an adjunct created in the cause of beauty. This creative act involves the concentration and unity together with the most scrupulous use of words. Poe took Coleridge as his inspiration in his search for a consistent theory of art. His literary symbolism took shape in France. His familiar legend is at variance with his actual personality. Finding himself in conflict with the prevailing spirit of his age, he took refuge in the Byronic myth of the lonely and misunderstood artist. Indeed, his neurotic personality sometimes resembled that of his own fictional characters.

2.6 LIFE AND WORKS OF JAMES F. COOPER

As we have seen in the last two Units, a literary text is a "product" of the race, milieu and moment, we are also familiar with the universal truth that a writer's life, his ambience and his particular attitude to life and creativity, do have a living continuum with his productions. It is well known that a writer and his personality, in some or degree other, shapes his creativity. A text written to some degree or the other, is, implicitly, a life lived. Therefore, let us now know James Fennimore Cooper's life, and its relationship with his creative canon.

Born into a family of English Quakers on September 15, 1789, at Ostego Hill, the brick mansion in Cooperstown, named after his inventive and patriarchal father, William Cooper, James Fennimore Cooper's formative influence in shaping his imaginative locale, Glimmerglass and his paternal image constitute the ineradicable influence. His father, William Cooper invented the Cooperstown on the shores of Ostego Lake at the source of Susquehanna River. He had a shaping influence in the destiny of Cooperstown, as a generous Christian gentleman, a sensible politician and a Federalist judge. He was, above all, a considerate patriarch. Cooperstown, accessible by river and lake, as it was strategically located, was the new village through which the newly arriving European immigrants passed. There was a sense of national destiny in the air of the place, which became, in due course, a microcosm of the American frontier, at the end of the eighteenth century. This feeling of the frontier life on the shores of Ostego Lake, in central New York, which was still a frontier territory, then. Though the power of the Iroquois conspiracy was broken by then, the wilderness was still to be conquered and civilization yet to be established. This yearning for the frontier and "romance of the forests" in his Leatherstocking tales, which found its perennial inspiration for his creative imagination, in his place of birth and childhood ambience of Cooper's town. For, what was Ostego Lake, became immortalized in its ever blissful idyllic setting in the picturesque lake of Glimmerglass Lake in *The Deerslayer*.

After his education in the preparatory school, where he was taught classics, in particular, Vergil's, his studies at Yale (which he entered in 1813) was a disaster, to say the least, though he was admired and even praised "as a fine sparkling beautiful boy of alluring person and interesting manners". His stay there ended on a sad note, with the wasting of his time and ample energies in the campus pranks, making his father send the young Cooper into the nautical experience, which, subsequently, became the core of his dream, imagination and experience, both as an individual and creative writer. Thus, along with his love of the "romance of the forests" in his Ostego Lake ambience, now his life-long exposure (either really or in its continuous association in his dreams) this sea experience became yet another inspiration for his sea tales. However, his sea experiences, in real life, in spite of his abundant, irrepressible, passionate zeal did not have a profound run. As he started his first sea

encounter on the *Stirling*, when he was hardly seventeen, gave him a ring side view of the risks and all its attendant problems of adapting to unpredictable climate, and ever unreliable humanity around him in the ship. Though the sea was his first love and deep passion, as he wrote home back in enjoyable detail, his sea experiences, to fulfil his deep yearning for voyaging to exotic lands did not become a real life possibility, though it inspired his poetic ventures to immortalize his longings in his fiction, as his European travel books abound with long description of those sea journeys with a near perfection of their technical nautical detail. To this extent, undoubtedly, his intimate knowledge of sea is far more than in the case of Sir Walter Scott. In the case of Cooper, the supposedly "American Scott", sea had a fascination and near empathy, later on. Cooper's love of the water was, in a way, primordial, in that, where he lived, as he failed in realizing his dream of the sea life, he chose to love close to the water, so that he could hear the clash of the waves and enjoy the serene, fresh breeze.

After his failure at Yale and near tragic failure of his circumstances to make him realize his passionate dream of the sea life, his career as a writer became not so much planned or a deeply felt aesthetic need, at the beginning. As he was without much of a substantive vocation (as there was not much need, with enough property inherited from his illustrious father and of his rich wife, Susan), he was reading some of the current English novels, in particular, those of Jane Austen. When he was reading some novels of Jane Austen, dealing with the sentimental side of life, he declared to his wife, in a fit of exasperation, that he would any way have written better; that was perhaps the fortuitous moment, when his own creative imagination was fired, with the supposed challenge of his wife to do better, if he could. Thus, a novelist was born and historically, if any, the first true, complete American novelist was born.

James Fennimore Cooper, after Washington Irving, assumed "an almost giant stature" in the early part of 19th century. He triumphed in his interpretation of romantic and realistic life on the frontiers and in the sea and in his attitude towards the development of democracy and of the meaning of America. He was a man of action, for whom the literary career as the pioneering American novelist was superficially an accident. Genius was "mainly an affair of energy" in him. He wrote passionately and with a clear purpose and mission. He wrote his convictions concerning his era and the new instruments of culture in pamphlet, history and novel. Though not properly a "literary" sport, according to Spiller, et al., he was "Agamemnon at a desk". Yet, his genius left some thirty novels, several enduring volumes of social criticism and a few immortal characters like Natty Bumppo and Uncas. He is, of all his many-sided achievements, a social critic and a believer in the democratic functioning. He is "a golden story-teller, the creator of our Arabian nights of the frontier". After his unsuccessful novel *Precaution* (1820), modelled upon Jane Austen or Mrs. Opic, he dealt with three types of American subjects in his imagination. They are: The Revolution, The Frontier and The Sea. His creative canon beginning with *Precaution* in 1820 and ending in 1850 with *The Ways of the Hour* can be divided into three phases, at least chronologically. (1) the first period includes his venture into fiction in his thirty-first year and his sudden triumph in his historical novel of the revolution. *The Spy* and *Lions Lincoln* (which is not much of a success) belong to this phase; (2) the second period includes his journey to Europe (1826-1833), beginning with *Prairie* in 1827 and ending with *The Deerslayer* (1841). This is Cooper's richest and most varied performance as during this period, his creative work includes his social criticism, his romances of Europe and three Leatherstocking tales; In the third period, which equates with the last decade of his life, he wrote on the familiar theme. However, to focus particularly on the history of writing of his Leatherstocking Tales, these five novels of this series namely, *The Pioneers*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *The Prairie*, *The Pathfinder* and *The Deerslayer* were written over a period of eighteen years and their chronology with reference to the prolonged life story of the Leatherstocking is at variance with the order of composition and publication. In any case, the three connate experiences of the

Revolution, the Frontier and the sea "crossed and recrossed" one another in these and other tales and through them came out "the fire of Cooper's criticism of America".

For Cooper, literature, apart from being intense romantic experience of rich fantasy and a sense of wonder and mystery, is also primarily a means for his convictions about America. His belief in the moral quality of liberty, his nationalism, his notion that native human character received its most valid self-expression in America and the relation of all these ideas to the natural world of the forest and sea form the core of his ideas in his imagination. Thus, we may discern in his writings America in the early stages of introspection and self-evaluation. His creative imagination reflects America's optimism and fatalism of the frontier, the growth of class-consciousness, the beginnings of imperialism, and the stubborn resistance of the class-consciousness. He hoped to resolve these elements into some kind of unity through his writings. In spite of the outright refusal of Mark Twain for his "literary offences", Cooper stands with Dumas and Scott as "one of the great romancers of all time". Thackeray paid rich tribute to his heroes;

Leatherstocking, Uncas, Haraheart, Tom Coffin are quite the equals of Scott's men; ... He ranks with Uncle Toby, Sir Roger de Coverley, Falstaff heroic figures, all - American or British, and the artist has deserved well of his country who devised them.

In this context, we should remember that Cooper cherished an unconscious allegiance to the traditions of English fiction. Though he was moved by the philosophical idea of Shakespeare or touched by Scott, he was more interested in "the power of the well told story". As Cooper, by reading and temperament, acquired a devotion to the important 19th century literary form, namely, the narrative, he drew his literary inspiration from the English novel. He admired the basic quality of the English novel, for its realistic action, characterization, luxurious description, comfortable narrative endings, and communication of social ideas by all these artistic processes. As his great contribution is the theme of the frontier, he adapted the English novel form for his own purpose of sometimes romanticising the reality, as in his *Leatherstocking Tales*.

His Literary Career:

Cooper, first unsuccessful novel, *Precaution* (1820), perhaps, modelled on the English fictional tradition of Jane Austen, deals with the complicated story of domestic manners. The central issue in this novel is the care parents should take to insure the proper marriage of their daughters. Here, Cooper clearly reveals his interest in the social themes and his insistence upon the application of the moral principle as a guide to action. As this is clearly the work of an intelligent, amateur writer, the critical reception was not all too encouraging. His second work *The Spy* (1822) firmly established his literary career. Beginning with *The Spy*, Cooper started using the material for the American scene, in his succeeding novels also. Here the physical environment defines the central conflict and sets the moral and ethical one that dominates the book. The neutral ground between the British and American outposts is a moral wasteland, where conflicting principles are at war and the only law is might. The positive value in the book is Harvey Birch, the double agent. As a spy, whose true motives must always be concealed, he shares the ambiguity that pervades the neutral ground, where he lives. He is superior to the other inhabitants as he seeks no personal gain. From the war he loses all his possessions to the greedy skimmers. As the novel is a thrilling tale of adventure, it derives its truth from the dense reality of the natural setting, the relation of the characters to that setting and a physical action that also has a consistent moral significance. *The Pioneers* (1820), draws its fundamental meaning from the description of the society it portrays and the relation of that society to the American wilderness, that must be invaded and destroyed if civilization is to spread across the continent. Setting the scene at Ostego Lake in 1793-94, Cooper describes a society just past the frontier stage. The return of

the lost heir Oliver Effingham to claim the inheritance that he mistakenly believes Judge Temple has wrongfully appropriated is the theme of the novel. More important, however, in the book is the conflict between Judge Temple and Natty Bumppo, the Leatherstocking hero. This conflict arising from the realities of the physical environment poses a true moral problem for the judge; but it also suggests an important theme about the westward march of American civilization. Of his own freewill, the Leatherstocking leaves the settlement and disappears into the woods. He has gone "far towards the setting sun" ... the foremost in that band of pioneers who are opening the way for the march of the nation across the continent". But his flight merely begins the cycle anew. He, therefore, becomes inevitable heralds the civilization he most wants to avoid.

In *The Pilot* (1824) the physical environment is again of the utmost importance. It deals with the times of revolution and place is the coast of England, where two American men-of-war are cruising in preparation for a raid on the island. The plan is to capture hostages to insure good treatment of American prisoners. According to Spiller *et al.*, Cooper's sea novels have "more authenticity than those of the Frontier". Here, John Paul Jones, without a country becomes a tragic hero; he achieves "a Byronic ghost, a man with secret sorrows, darkened brow, mysterious devotions and almost comic mannerisms." *Lionel Lincoln* (1825) his next novel, criticized for its "pompous dullness" and preposterous melodrama", describes the situation against the background of Boston on the eve of Revolution. In *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), Cooper's second of the five *Leatherstocking Tales*, acknowledged to be his masterpiece, we have not only a glimpse of the wilderness, but "we live there." *The Prairie* (1827), with the peace of Nature instilling our spirits and mind, tells us an adventurous tale. Here, we have Cooper's powerful conception of the immigrant family of Ishamel and Esther Bush and their sons. As in the previous books, the relation of man to Nature is fundamental to the tale, but the landscape is described as even more vast and sublime in many ways. This novel directly complements *The Last of the Mohicans* in its portrayal of the spirit of Nature and man's relation to it.

During this period, although Cooper wrote ten more novels, all those works except *The Pathfinder* (1840) and *The Deerslayer* (1841) were not of particular interest for their artistic quality. About 1840, he reached the peak of his activity in his power of his craftsmanship. His last pair of *The Leatherstocking Tales*, *The Pathfinder* and *Deerslayer* (1841) complete Cooper's search and advocacy of the true American morals: social, economic and political issues the setting them against the spirit of frontier. If the frontier is the objective correlative of pure Christian values, in their essence, *The Pathfinder*, continuing the theme of purity and relevance of the wilderness to the American manners, focusses on the social problems. Though the same characters of Natty Bumppo (here he is the Pathfinder) and Chingchgoork reappear, this novel tells us more about American democracy. In a more powerful way, his *Deerslayer*, the last of the "romances of the forest", though the first in the chronology of the hero's life, contrasts the pristine purity of Nature's spirit with the corrupting mind of the European villains, Jom and Hurry Harry. Here, Hetty, Tom's daughter and *Deerslayer* reiterate the values of higher good, as done by Hawk-eye in *The Last of the Mohicans*. The purer self between the two is represented by *Deerslayer*, who is portrayed as the "embodied conscience for America". Like Natty Bumppo, he sees the moral values in the American landscape.

Thus, with *The Pathfinder* and *The Deerslayer* Cooper's work has made a full circle. *The Deerslayer* is the logical culmination of the *Leatherstocking* series. It once again affirms a set of values that were always forceful in his earlier tales, if only he applied these moral values in delineating the American manners of his times in his later works. Thus, fundamental to Cooper's work in all forms, is a moral view of the world and of men that has its social aspects. However, his moral value lies in relating Man to God, as revealed in the order of nature and then to his followers in an ordered society. To this extent, the moral tales of the forest and sea have a widespread social significance, as they establish the high standards for men to follow in their social

relations. Thus, though different in their art and approach to life, these writers of the early nineteenth century, namely Washington Irving, E.A.Poe and Cooper, set the tone of the ensuing American fiction.

2.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have studied the literary ambience of Cooper's Leatherstocking tales. The nineteenth century literary mind took its origins from self-trust and expansion of the adolescent American nation of dreams and all-round enterprise. This boundless faith in self-reliance in individual's capacity for excellence and productivity established itself as optimism. This spirit of optimism became the main quality of the American Romance. The American novel, romantic in spirit, is different from the European novel, which describes the class structure. Though the 19th century, as well as the first American novel, was hoisted by Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving became the truly first American classical writer. E.A.Poe and Fennimore Cooper are the other contributors to the unique American quality of novel, which is a creative union of the narrative and romantic qualities.

2.8 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the background and qualities of Romanticism in America.
2. Trace the main qualities of the Romance in the American narrative form.
3. What are the differences between the English novel and the American novel form?
4. Study the literary background of Washington Irving, E.A.Poe and James Fennimore Cooper.

2.9 SUGGESTED READING

Sculley Bradley, ed. *The American Tradition in Literature*, NY: W.W.Norton & Company, 1956.

R.E.Spiller *et.al.*, *History of American Literature*.

Richard Chase *American Novel and Its Tradition*.

D.H.Lawrence *Studies in Classical American Literature*.

Arthur Hobson Quinn *American Fiction*

Wendell Barret *A Literary History of America*

UNIT 3 *THE LAST OF THE MOHICANS* : AN ANALYSIS

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Critical Approach to the Novel : The Initial Debate
- 3.2 The First Complete American Novel
- 3.3 Various Themes
- 3.4 Plot
- 3.5 Characterization
- 3.6 A Critique on the Red Indians
- 3.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.8 Questions
- 3.9 Suggested Reading

3.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying the cultural, philosophical and religious conditions, which shaped the romantic imagination of the 19th century American novel, in the last two units and after discussing the characteristics of the American novel, as it differs from English novel of that period, we discuss the themes, plot and characterization of *The Last of the Mohicans*, in this Unit. We should realize that landscape instructs all the aspects of novel. In fact, landscape is the womb from which the novel originates. It defines and shapes the theme, plot and characterization. As it is gruesome and yet ultimately ends on a note of sobriety at the end of the novel, Uncas and the Hawk-eye signify the true basis of human love in universal terms. This is true import of the novel, not withstanding the unconcealed racial motifs, in some form or the other.

3.1 CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THE NOVEL : THE INITIAL DEBATE

The form and interest in the critical reception and evaluation of any literary text is a responsive indication of the importance of the text in representing the mood and taste of the contemporary society. To this extent, as Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* has occupied a centre stage in the early 19th Century American novel, signifying in itself the diverse social, cultural and philosophical and romantic principles of the adolescent America of the period, a review of the widespread critical debate of Cooper, the novelist, in general and *The Last of the Mohicans*, in particular, is not out of place, in our own appreciation of this valuable text, in the next part of this Unit.

The critical debate with regard to the reception of *The Last of the Mohicans* is wideranging. While critics like James Grossman (Cooper's official biographer), Alexander Cowie, Yvor Winters (in his *Defence of Reason*) and Van Wyck Brooks do not claim any particular aesthetic merit for this novel, except considering it as nothing more than "a mere adventure story", three important critics, D.H. Lawrence, Leslie Fiedler and Mark Twain have taken up this novel for serious study. Again, while Lawrence and Fiedler focussed on the intrinsic artistic qualities of the novel, Mark Twain is devastating in his outright refusal of the novel as any artistic piece. However, according to Daniel Peck, in his recent book, *New Essays on The Last of the Mohicans*, clearly, there are at least four approaches, in which the critical debate has taken place since the nineteenth century. They are: (1) with regard to Cooper's portrayal of the Red Indians: (2) for considering the narrative qualities of *The Last of*

the Mohicans; (3) for approaching the novel for its historical and cultural concerns, and (4) for comprehending the novel's artistic immensity through other approaches, such as through its pictorial qualities, formalist and feminist considerations.

First, Cooper's portrayal of the Red Indians in *The Last of the Mohicans* has drawn much critical attention. It has drawn extreme forms of response from the critics. While many critics questioned Cooper's authenticity and insights in the portrayal of the native Red Indians, some critics, however, have accepted the true saintliness and wisdom of the natives. A review in the May 1826 issue of *London Magazine* referred *The Last of the Mohicans* as "clearly by much the worst of Mr. Cooper's performances and drew attention to the improbabilities "of its action and characterization." W.H.Gardiner, while being sympathetic in his treatment of the novel, felt that Cooper presented "an altogether false and ideal view of the Indian character". He wondered if any "such civilized warriors like Uncas ever flourished" among the native Indians. William Bird and Francis Parkman merely dubbed this ideal portrayal of the Indians as being "superficially or falsely drawn."

Notwithstanding these criticisms, the novel's popularity was unaffected, as it remained the most internationally acclaimed and widely translated of Cooper's works. Perhaps, the most uncompromising and violent attack of this novel came from Mark Twain in his famous essay, "Fennimore Cooper's Literary Offences" (*North American Review*, clxi, July, 1895).

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Mark Twain in his merciless lambasting of Cooper's art, identities, according to him, some defects in Cooper's craftsmanship at least in one of the five Leatherstocking tales, namely, *The Deerslayer*. He identifies at least eighteen rules of a romance, which Cooper violated. They include, most importantly, Cooper's inability in the organisation and accomplishment of the novel itself, in such matters as lively portrayal of characters and men in it, their conversations and action in the tale. The thoughts and activities of the characters, including that of Natty Bumppo are "crass stupidities." As the characters are drawn without any clarity, the readers do not have "any deep interest in the personages of tale and their fate". In addition to these "defects", in the handling of the plot and portrayal of characters, Mark Twain also notices defects concerning Cooper's use of language, and "good grammar". Cooper lacks "a simple and straight forward style".

Cooper's gift of invention lacks in accuracy and a sense of perfect detail. Without these "gifts of invention", he employs "eight cunning devices, tricks, artifices for his savages and Woodsman." As his inventions lacked rationality and accurate judgement, his "proudest creations suffer noticeably from the absence of the observer's protecting gift". His eye was "splendidly inaccurate." He seldom saw anything "correctly." Being not "a master in the construction of dialogue", his word-sense was "singularly dull."

Thus, Mark Twain, singularly rejecting Cooper's art in *The Deerslayer*, disclaims its greatness in any artistic manner. It is without "order system, sequence or result. It has "no lifelikeness, no thrill, no stir, no seeming of reality". As its "characters are confusedly drawn" and their humour is pathetic and "pathos is funny" and "their English a crime against the language", according to Mark Twain, Cooper's *Deerslayer* is not "a work of art in any sense. It is "destitute of every detail".

Apart from Mark Twain's attack, Cooper's art and his *The Last of the Mohicans* did have notable defenders in the nineteenth century itself. William Gilmore Simms, who wrote *The Yemassee* (which may be considered as counterpart to *The Last of the Mohicans*) praised Cooper for his [inimitable] details of Indian art and resource". Balzac in 1840 ranked this novel as having a "unique and rightful claim to fame." Conrad in his *Notes on Life and Letters* in 1921, wrote that for Cooper "nature was an essential part of his existence. He could hear its voice, he could understand its silence, and he could interpret both for us .. with a poetical conception." According

to Daniel Webster, Cooper "transmits original American character from generation to the generation, which succeed him (*Twentieth Century Views*).

However, the real analytical study of this novel has to await the early twentieth century. W.C. Brownell, while defending Cooper in his portrayal of the Indians, says that the Indian characters, without being portrayed as romanticized or racial types, "are carefully studied and as successfully portrayed as his white ones", each character with its own separate identity and individuality. However, the critical opinion, in general, in the case of other critics seem to believe that Cooper's Indian portrayals appear either as mere stereotypes or represent Cooper's mere sentimental love for them to justify the white man's dispossession of them. Further, some critics discovered a genuinely felt sense of loss and even a deep personal identification in Cooper with the Indian dispossession, when he himself was dispossessed of vast lands in the central New York. According to Daniel Peck, as no white American writer of the early or mid-nineteenth century was free of racial prejudice, towards the Indians, we need to study Cooper's works closely.

Second, the critical opinion towards his description of *The Last of the Mohicans* in his preface as a narrative with "a fidelity to fact and an efficacy of plot" has been in favour of considering this novel as a true narrative of fiction. An early review in March 1826 noted that the novel carries us through "agonizing doubt, surprise, danger and sudden deliverance." W.H. Gardiner praised the novel for "the intense and breathless interest of the story". Thomas R. Lounsbury, Cooper's nineteenth century biographer said that in this novel, our "interest not only never halts but also never sinks". Grossman, another Cooper biographer considers this novel as "a pure adventure story." D.H. Lawrence, one of the influential critics of Cooper, in his brilliant essay, believes that these Tales "go backwards from old age to the golden youth". This is the true myth founded as a "new relationship" promising "a new society". This new relationship between Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook is deeper as these two figures are abiding, representing "the inception of a new humanity". All other critical responses of Cooper in the 1950's and 1960's emerged from the study of the myth and symbol in his works. For R.W.B. Lewis (in his *American Adam*) the Leatherstocking is an archetypal American "hero in space", born out of the mythic possibilities of the American landscape. For Henry Nash Smith, the Tales dramatize "the problem of social order", while for Roy Harvey Pearce and Edwin Fussell, they exemplified American attitudes towards the frontier. However, the most influential of mythic interpretations, directly derived from Lawrence, is Leslie Fiedler's idea of a "secret theme" of miscegenation between Cora and Uncas. In place of this union of Uncas and Cora, the only alternative for Cooper, according to Fiedler, is to promote love between the Leatherstocking and Chingachgook. However, many critics in the 1960's, like George Dekker, challenging Fiedler's formulation held the view that the theme of miscegenation is hardly a secret theme. For him, Cooper's characters, like Scott's always represent national, regional and social classes.

Since 1970's and 1980's, Cooper criticism was characterized by probes into the writer's, interior landscape, by studying his historical and cultural concerns from the earlier historical treatments by V.L. Parrington and R.E. Spiller in the 1920's and 1930's. William Kelly sees in the tales, Cooper's struggle to reconcile American adamism and an opposing cultural myth of historical entailment. For him, the Fort William Henry is nexus of the meaning. Terence Williams recognized the centrality of history as a theme in the novel. Though Cooper's novels have not often been analyzed from a feminist perspective, according to Annette Kolodny, *The Last of the Mohicans* betrays Cooper's realization that he could neither accept "the guilt of the violation of the female landscape nor free Natty of that guilt." Of the other studies, James Beard's study of the importance of scenic effects in *The Last of the Mohicans* and Donald Ringe's treatment of the pictorialism of Bryant, Irving and Cooper are significant. The most important studies of the 1930's by Spiller and Dorothy Waples focussed on the novel's social and political meanings. Yvor Winters's formalist criticism recognized how well crafted are some of Cooper's lesser known works. In

the post-second war period, a number of critics like Donald Darnell identified the novel's formula by studying his double-journey structure. Minchael D. Butler examined the relation of the historical process to the novel's narrative structure. Thus, according to Daniel Peck, "no longer is it possible to regard this book simply as a well made adventure story." Undoubtedly, it has some more rewarding and evocative qualities than this. According to R.E. Spiller, Cooper, "the son of a pioneer himself became the builder and critic of civilizations."

3.2 THE FIRST COMPLETE AMERICAN NOVEL

However, in any case, his literary career, as the true pioneering American novelist is fully established, when he published *The Spy* (1821), not withstanding the earlier attempts by Hugh Henny Brackenridge's *Modern Chivalry*, written in six parts between 1792 and 1815. Following the European models of Cervantes and Fielding and Smollette, by employing the picaresque technique, he deals with the lives of Captain Farrago, bachelor, spectator of life and Teague O'Regan, his illiterate servant. Unfortunately, this book had relatively little appeal, perhaps, because of its lack of identity with the time and place at that time.

Much earlier to this attempt by Brackenridge, Charles Broken Brown, used American settings for his works, as *Edgar Huntly* can be said as the best pre-cooperian novel. However for historical reasons. William Hill Brown's novel *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) in the sentimental mould of Richardson, Susanna Rawson's *Charolette Temple* (1794), and Hanna Foster's *The Coquette* (1797) are more or less, initial though incomplete and unsuccessful forays in the art of novel writing in America, thus establishing Cooper's *Spy* in 1821 as the first complete, American novel, complete in all respects of art and theme, native meaning and identity. According to the *North American Review*, Cooper's fiction is "of the highest order of romantic interest". According to W.H. Gardiner the reviewer, Cooper had "laid the foundations of American romance". Thus, as Cooper's early novel is identified as a romance, with the qualities of mystery, picturesque setting and brilliant, pageantry, he had come to be recognized as "the American Scott", thus making the American novels most popular among reading public at home at that time, replacing the works of the current English novelists. Thus, Cooper's three phases of fictional imagination, namely, his nautical novels, romances of the forest and the European works constitute the core of his creative canon.

3.3 VARIOUS THEMES

The Last of the Mohicans (1826) is one of the five Leatherstocking tales. The other novels in this group are, *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840) and *The Deerslayer* (1841). These five novels which form the core of Cooper's imagination, won the rich confidence of the writer, when he proclaimed that "these romances would out live himself". Not only have these "romances of the forest" outlived him, they have, in general, become the focus of the American myth of progress and development in its early stages of development. By tempering the priceless value of purposeful adventure and resourceful enterprise with the qualities of humanism - in some form - Christian or not, the Natty Bumppo - in this novel he is called, the Hawk-eye is a veritable mixture of 19th century values of compassion and fellow feeling.

The Last of the Mohicans is a poem of nature, signifying moral wisdom and human values to us. Thematically, the narrative is about Natty Bumppo, "The Hawk-eye",

the scout, the Kill-Deer and the culmination of his abundant love for Uncas, the Last Mohican. He tells Uncas, in his final moments of departure into the wilderness thus:

"The gifts of colours may be different, but God has so placed us as to journey in the same path. I have no kin, and I may also say, like you, no people. He was your son, and a red skin by nature; and it may be that your blood was nearer – but if ever I forget the lad who has so often fought at my side in war, and slept at my side in peace, may He who made us all, whatever may be our color or our gifts may forget me! The boy has left us for a time; but, Sagamore, you are not alone." (p.415)

In a revealing poetic image, Cooper concludes the novel thus, bringing home the triumph of humanism as the highest achievement of the novel:

Chingachgook grasped the hand [of the Hawk-eye] that, in the warmth of feeling, the scout had stretched across the fresh earth, and in that attitude of friendship these two sturdy and intrepid woodsmen bowed their heads together, while scalding tears fell to their feet, watering the grave of Uncas like drops of falling rain. (p.415).

If the narrative meaning lies in these universal symbols of mind, drawn in epic proportions in a more particular context, to a developing nation, that will be made to resolve its racial dilemmas, this narrative resolves such a racial issue, in the manner of harmony of minds, without bitterness or animosity. Though in the process, Cooper does not seem to be idealizing the non-existent "noble savage" image of the scout, as he seems to be suggesting, according to R.E.Spiller, "a complete acceptance of Protestant ethical traditions." However, for D.H.Lawrence, Natty's union of minds with Chingachgook is Cooper's "wish-fulfilment". In a way, for Cooper, Natty Bumppo was his "inner most to be". The perpetual brother theme of the Leatherstocking tales is "a sheer myth". The Red man and the White man are not blood-brothers. The white man, betraying his own race, ultimately, is not a true companion to the Indian. As it is not true, it evades actuality. In his dream, even as Cooper dreamt of the union of minds of the Indians and the Whites, as symbolic of the maturing America, there is an unequal union, leading to the ultimate dispossession of the latter.

Thus, all the other narrative purposes are related to this union of mind, symbolic or romantic. It means that, other issues such as race, the question of the ownership of territory, the romantic love across races between Cora and Uncas, the cruelty and massacre at the Fort Williams are subsumed within this essential theme of the narrative.

Magua, "the Prince of Darkness" and Uncas, the bright son of the Delawares articulates the theme of their tragic dispossession. According to Magua:

"The spirit that made men colored them differently . . . some he made with faces paler than the ermine of the forests; and these he ordered to be traders; dogs to their women, and wolves to the slaves. . . . With his tongue, [the whiteman] stops the ears of the Indians: . . . his cunning tells him how to get together the goods of the earth; . . . God gave him enough, and yet he wants all, such are the pale-faces."

and

"Tis a long and melancholy tradition, and one I little like to think of; for it is not to be denied that the evil has been mainly done with white skins. But it has ended in turning the tomahawk of brother against brother, and brought the Mingo and the Delaware to travel in, in the same path (p.265).

Uncas appears to be more patriotic and forthright in his passionate commitment to the welfare of the Indians. He symbolizes the true spirit of the Indians. Tamenund, says: "[Uncas] is to fill my place at the council of fire. Uncas, the child of Uncas, is found! Let the eyes of a dying eagle gaze on the rising sun." (p.366).

Perhaps, the most gruesome massacre is described by Cooper in all its gory details. The massacre of the English soldiers and the Indians by the French men, under the full glare and mute acquiescence of Monteclem is beyond words. At least, three hundred people were massacred, of which the most heinous crime was the massacre of a mother with her small little child. This scene, reverberating with cries of horror, was triggered off by the betrayal of an English General Webbs, who surreptitiously ordered for the surrender of the English soldiers, without the knowledge of Hayward. This was "betrayal" of the "civilized" whiteman. According to William P. Kelley this massacre was "the extension of the European past and the fullest expression of the barbarity" of the colonial period. This moral sin without retribution in the mind of Munro was heightened even to greater levels by savagery of unimaginable proportions by the French men. This barbarism of the "civilized" Europeans certainly outmatched the savagery of the primitive Indians, in every sense of the word.

3.4 PLOT

Structurally, the narrative plot gains in its poetic, moral, dramatic (and even melodramatic) intensity in two parts. Historically, it recreates a particular moment in the European domination of the colonies. As the French and Indian forces under Monteclem press southward from Canada into the English colony of New York in 1757, General Webb despatched 1,500 British reinforcements from Fort Edward near Glens Falls, to nearby Fort William Henry, at the southern tip of Lake George. However, Cooper's purpose is not at all strictly "historical", in a chronological sense, but, as explained by Terence Martin (in his "From the Ruins of History : The Last of the Mohicans" in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* (Spring 1969), Cooper "recognized the importance of ruins of history, crumbling into legend". For "the ruins of history are the matrix of legend and romance". They appeal "to the imagination through the mist of years, replete with wonder and nostalgia." Such is the historical or a historical matrix out of which the silken threads of the narrative plot are woven into wonderful pageantry of colourful action. It is an unbelievable world, though yet reliable in its fundamental historicity. Structurally, from the beginning to the middle of the journey is the first part; the second part of the journey consists of all the vital and dramatic events, after the reunion of Hawk-eye, and his two accomplices, Alice and Cora with Hawk-eye and Chingachgook and his ever lovable son, Uncas. There is a qualitative difference in this mode of narration and rousing the reader's interest in the second part. If the first part is most elaborately descriptive and prepares the ground for the ensuing (somewhat) rapid action in the second part, the second part, slowly rising its tempo in the journey of Hawk-eye and his companions and reaching its crescendo in the massacre at Fort Williams, consummates itself on a note of sobriety and calmness. Thus, there is a steady rise, crescendo of unimaginable horror and fall leading to intense spiritual moments. The novel ends on a note of pregnant quietness.

In the first part of the journey, beginning with the description of the union of two parties in the journey – both separated racially and in their attitudes to life – a group of Whites, consisting of Hayward, Alice and Cora and a group of Indians, consisting of Chingachgook and Uncas, and also Hawk-eye in Chapter III is rendered by Cooper in these words:

While one of these loiterers showed the red skin and wild accouterments of a native of the woods, the other exhibited, through the mask of his rude and nearly savage equipments, the brighter through sunburnt and long-faded complexion of one who might claim descent from a European parentage. (p.24)

Innocent and ever lovable David, the singer, symbolizing the Christian values provides the beautiful gracious moments of joy through his song all along the journey, in particular, after the massacre at the Fort Williams. As these two groups of characters, drawn against the vast landscape try to know each other, in suspicion and innocence and fear and wonder. Landscape shapes their moods and attitudes. Nature implicitly "instructs" them. To that extent, landscape itself acts as an invisible universal character, signifying the values of purity and honesty. It is not only vast but also pure and evoking feelings of piety. Glenn's Falls, from where journey starts, described in its momentous detail, in the words of Hawk-eye is drawn with a visual particularity:

"You can easily see the cunning of the place - the rock is black lime stone, which everybody knows is soft; it makes no uncomfortable pillow, . . . the fall was once a few yards below us, and . . . as handsome a sheet of water as any along the Hudson." (p.55)

The journey of these two groups of people continues unmixed without any sort of emotional union till the French camp, which under the leadership of Monteclam, seizes the Fort William. This occurs in the novel in Chapter XIV. In the second part, the narrative action moves with greater alacrity and quickness of feelings, interspersed by the acts of savagery and moments of insecurity till the climax is reached with the massacre at Fort Williams. This massacre followed by dramatic events of the loss and recovery of Alice and the tragic death of Cora, unmatched for its sentimental love in the mind of Uncas and the villainous plot of Magua, the Heron (the Prince of Darkness) as part of his vengeance against the whites - all create images of high drama of splashing emotions. It is all along action and unremitting melodrama filled with suspense, breath-taking ordeals, and fears and wonders that crowd the action in the second part of the plot. Being mostly in the manner of a romantic tale, sheer fictional action at the physical and geographical level (in the form of landscape) crowds the novel.

However, in the concluding part of the novel, after the gory tale of the massacre of nearly three hundred people, including helpless women and children, two events evoke in us feelings of grim tragedy: first is the most tragic, yet pitiable death of Cora, the mulato girl; second is the heroic death of Uncas himself in trying to save her. Verily, Cooper takes the action at this moment to the heights of a classical tragedy. With the death of Uncas, the last Mohican, his race is decimated. It is a fatal moment of universal significance. Finally, with Magua's death in a melodramatic manner, the narrative action comes to an end. However, the grand union of minds across races and prejudices is the most celebrated and extraordinary and highly romanticized narrative moment. Ultimately, when we complete reading the novel, we may remember it not for its acts of endemic savagery, but, for its acts of compassion, fraternity and democracy of ideas. Finally, love as an experience triumphs over savagery. Even the supposed savages empathize with the suffering humanity around, by the illuminating Christian ideas of Hawk-eye, a scout without a cross. If the highest sort of true union of minds is between Uncas and Hawk-eye, there is, nevertheless, at various levels, empathy and compassion in the minds of Munro, Hayward, Chingachgook and Tamenund. Even Alice is not without Christian values of compassion for the savages, notwithstanding the death of her soul mate, Cora, her own sister in their hands. Munro's words of benediction reinforce the theme of universal union of minds as in the case of Uncas and Hawk-eye, when he proclaims thus:

Tell them that the being we all worship, under different names, will be mindful of their charity; and that the time shall not be distant when we may assemble around his throne without distinction of sex, or rank, or color." (p.412).

As the narrative action reaches its culmination from the merely descriptive detail in the first part to its heightened and ennobled moment of Christian in the second part everywhere there is a fellow feeling. Even Chingachgook's pathetic loneliness on the death of his dearest son Uncas is mitigated by Hawk-eye's words of emotional communion:

"He who made us all, whatever may be our color or gifts, forget me! The boy has left us for a time; but, Sagamore, you are not alone." (p.415)

Cooper himself takes the narrative to a nobler level, with the triumph of humanism over senseless savagery and racial 'motif' in these words:

... the tie which, through their common calamity, had united the feelings of these simple dwellers in the woods with the strangers who had thus transiently visited them, was not so easily broken. Years passed before the traditionary tale of the white maiden, and of the young warrior of the Mohicans, leaved to beguile the long nights and tedious marches, or to animate their youthful and brave with a desire for vengeance (p.413).

This is a virtual epitaph for the love and demise of Cora and Uncas. According to Lakshmi Mani, "Cooper places in sharp contrast the nightmare reality of the wilderness and fear . . . of universal love, peace and harmony." Though historically the novel may dramatize the end of the Mohicans, it also signifies the harsh reality of the dispossession for the Indians by the Europeans of the "neutral ground", as expressed by Tamenund in the last words of the novel:

"The palefaces are the masters of the earth, and the time of the Red Man has not yet come again. In the morning I saw the sons of Unamis happy and strong; yet, before the night has come, have I lived to see the last warrior of the wise race of the Mohicans." (p.415)

Thus, plot here progresses from the past into future, in a unilateral manner, as in conventional nineteenth century novel. Being mostly a romance, where even actual history is romanticized, the chronological significance of time is of minimal value; space is also stretched most elastic proportions. For, though it is supposedly meant to describe a few miles of journey between Glenn's Falls and Fort William, the sheer force of the vast immensity of nature, distorts the actual geographical space to create in our minds images of endless space. To this extent, Time and Space by a romantic distortion of its fact and detail, create gigantic images and experiences of fleeting Time and Space.

3.5 CHARACTERISATION

Thus, in a world of extraordinary cataclysms and events of the frontier of unimaginable proportions and where action predominates characterization, the novel may not be demonstrating the qualities of deft portrayal of human nature. The characters may be lacking in their complexity and subtlety of perception of human nature, because of its qualities as a romance. However, for Cooper, according to Bewley, "an action is the intensified motion of life in which the spiritual and moral faculties of men are engaged."

Of the characters, who are only eked out against the realms of the frontier and the historical war between the French and the English, for the "neutral ground", Uncas and Natty Bumppo carry the universality of purpose. They truly symbolise the virtues and nobler meanings of life for all times and in all places. Though they are not Christians by practice, their "values" carry the authentic stamp of the true Christian judgement and mind. If Uncas' morality and ethical responsibility towards his Mohican race carry with them the pagan values of fair play, and filial responsibility, the scout without a cross, celebrates the true Christian values in the medium and rhythms of the extant Nature. Though not glorified as a "noble savage", his actions are governed by practical considerations. He is shrewd, observant and above all, truly humanistic in his commitment to the larger good of the universe.

Uncas is the last Mohican of the race. He is glorified and romanticised though not a fully idealised character. As one of the three participants, who guide Heyward, Alice and Cora to Fort William along with the ever dependable Natty, and his dear and caring father, Chingachgook, he appears to be not a major player in the first part of the novel. However, in the second part, his role becomes even more central, in particular, after the French seige of the fort of William Henry. He gradually unfolds his character as a natural foil to Magua, the Heron. The contrast between him and Magua is, indeed, quite stark.

His physical, moral and intellectual prowess unfolds itself in the last part of the novel. According to Hawk-eye, he will be "an honour to his people". His heroism is gradually unleashed on his foes, the Hurons, after they take away Cora and Alice. There is a steadiness of heroism in him:

Uncas stood still, looking his enemy in the eye with features that seemed superior to emotion. Marble could not be colder, calmer or steadier than the countenance he put upon this sudden and vindictive attack (p.295).

He has "erect, agile and faultless person" (p.363). There is a steadiness of purpose in his thought and action:

Through out the whole of these trying moments, Uncas had alone preserved his serenity. He looked on the preparations with a steady eye, and when the tormenters came to seize him, he met them with a firm and upright attitude (p.365).

He is logical, too. He explains to the Tamemund, the sage, the logic of the superiority of his race:

"... my race upholds the earth! Your feeble tribe stands on my shell! What fire that a Delaware can light would burn the child of my fathers, ... the blood that came from such a stock would smother your flames! My race is the grandfather of nations!" (p.366).

His commitment to the pride of his race is ennobling.

"Once we slept where we could hear the salt lake speak in its anger. Then we were rulers and Sagamores over the land. But when a paleface was seen on every brook, we followed the deer back to the river of our nation. the Delawares were gone. Few warriors of them all stayed to drink of the stream they loved ... Our eyes are on the rising and not toward the setting sun" (p.368).

Uncas is frequently exempt from much of the violence and ferocity of the novel. A *sauve*, young man, more "civilized" than his fellow Indians, he is, perhaps, modelled seeking the values of sobriety of Heyward. He displays his "instinctive delicacy" in assisting the Female characters. The sight of Cora and Alice in each other's arms

moves Hayward to tears. Uncas "stood fresh, a calm and apparently an unmoved looker-on." He was "becoming with a sympathy that elevated him far above the (rest) and advanced him probably centuries before the practices of his nation (pp. 114-15). Even so, Uncas never lacks in his fierce some courage and thirst for battle. It is true that in the forest, he insistently displays his keen perception than his father or Natty Bumppo. In his athleticism of the body with a perfect synchronising of his eye and his hand - without many words - but all described in a quiet, heroic, methodical fashion - Cooper is almost idealizing a true warrior. He is a "hungry lion" and through the air descends "in a ball on the chest of the enemy and knocks him headlong and prostrate." In the ruins of Fort William Henry, when Huran shoots at Chingachgook from the dark, Uncas conquers the assassin and returns to the campfire with a fresh scalp at his belt. As he is attracted to Cora, whom he admires silently, courteously and unmistakably, he takes extreme risks on her account and finally gallantly perishes, in rescuing her from Magua, the Prince of Darkness. As the dramatisation of the funeral of Uncas takes the novel to glorified heights of sacrifice and enabled virtue this can be compared to "the funeral of Hector in the Iliad". His death is described in heroic terms. Uncas "appeared, arrayed in the most gorgeous ornaments that the wealth of the tribe could furnish. Rich plumes nodded above his head, wampum, forgets, bracelets, and medals adorned his person in profusion . . . (p.404).

A girl calls him "the panther of his tribe". She wants his mother to be told in the world of spirits that "the Delaware girls had shed tears above the grave of her child and had called her blessed." The maids pronounced him "noble, manly, generous all that became a warrior and all that a maid might love." For a warrior, Uncas has been like "that of the sun in the trees". His feet were like the wings of the eagle" and "his arm heavier than falling branches from the pine" and his "voice like the Manitto when he speaks in the clouds".

He is generous in his attitude to Hawk-eye. He is a typical Indian, with "a quick eye and a good cover". His love for Cora is unexpressed.

If Uncas is a glorified character, almost without any imperfection, Hawk-eye becomes his spiritual template. As between themselves these two characters subsume the ultimate message of humanism, the scout is a variously a mythicised, romanticized protagonist in the narrative in his own right. Also, according to William P. Kelley, by unifying the mind and temperament of Natty, and Chingachgook, Uncas' dear father, Cooper affirms "America's organic relationship with Europe. Their kinship of a Christian and savage perspective, defines "an intermediate state of cultural development, with its roots in European colonization." Their union signifies America's "prerevolutionary era of the national past."

Of the other characters, who are mostly drawn in their outline as mere functional types, Hayward and Munro move us by their immense politeness and commitment to any serious purpose of life. Major Hayward starts his journey to Fort William along with Alice and Cora. Though he is not drawn with any amount of far-fetched heroism (as Uncas), he, nevertheless, sufficiently demonstrates the quality of gentlemanliness and fair play. Though he may not so much play any precipitate role, in the battle at the end of the novel, he is an able companion to Alice and Cora and a good accomplice to Natty Bumppo.

The three major racial relationships, envisaged by Cooper in *The Last of the Mohicans*, are those represented by Cora and Uncas, Alice and Major Heyward and the Natto Bump and Chingachgook. They also represent broad national and historical perspectives. Cora and Uncas are both adaptable people as they symbolize the best in their respective civilizations. Cora's ability to confront the hardships and dangers of the aboriginal North America is frequently stressed. In a similar way, Uncas' freedom from the savages of his race is also equally emphasized. Though their marriage would have meant a true union of minds of the old and New World, in a

way, leading to a sort of the prophetic racial harmony it is not realized. According to Leslie Fiedler (in his celebrated essay), "miscegenation" is the secret theme of *The Last of the Mohicans*, as it is the theme of national or hemispheric significance. Fiedler argues that, though Cooper's contemporaries urged him to let Cora and Uncas be joined in marriage, his horror of miscegenation led him "to forbid even the not - quite white (that is mulato Cora) offspring of one unnatural marriage to enter into another alliance that crossed race lines". If Cora is sensible and gifted with some level of resourcefulness, Alice is utterly helpless in the wilderness. Luckily for her, Major Heyward plays his protective role.

In another way, according to Nina Baym (in *The Last of the Mohicans* ed. Daniel Deck), Heywood's attachment to Alice, but not to Cora is because of her black blood and Magus' love for Cora - is based upon deep-rooted racial concern in Cooper, thus leaving no scope for miscegenation. All along, it is true that Heyward - Munro arrangement of love - and marriage (with a momentary, though unimpressive chivalry from Heyward) done with great anxiety, perhaps, has unconcealed racial interest, to the extent, the coarseness of life and horrible death of Cora and near war situation created for her love between Uncas and Magua - with everybody except Natty Bumppo are mere observers - revivifies the racial 'motif' in the novel. It is a different matter that, Alice is merely "made up" as a lovable woman, as she is artless, thoughtless, child-like and without ingenuity. D.H. Lawrence also supports this view of Cooper is distinterested in "the blood-mixing of two races, white and red" and hence "he kills them off".

Natto's Character:

Natto Bumppo accepts the idealism of the Declaration of Independence, which says, "all men are created equal". He stands for universal brotherhood, an aristocracy of personal merit, and skill, naturally pretty. His character perhaps is "the clearest statement in literature of the archetypal American experience". As according to R.W.B. Lewis, Cooper, "most illuminating clashes and insights occur on the margins of his plots", Cooper touched a chord of imaginative energy far more compelling than that can be invested in his plot. Even as "the avalanche of adventures" occur in the narrative, Natty Bumppo is a knowledgeable, yet unemotional observer of all those events. Read in the chronology of his life, all these five tales record the loss of the ideal in the actual and more or less "they reaffirm the great American myth". Speaking of the relationship of Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, Leslie Fiedler tells us that, "these mythic figures have detached themselves from the texts of Cooper's books and have entered the free domain of our dreams: Natty Bumppo, the hunter and enemy of cities; and Chingachgook, nature's nobleman and vanishing American." (from his *Love and Death in the American Novel*, pp.192-196).

3.5 A CRITIQUE ON THE RED INDIANS

Cooper collected material for his portrayal of the Delwaraes, from *An Introduction of the History, Manners, and customs of the Indian Nations Who Once Inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighboring States* published in 1819 by the Reverend John Heckewelder, a Moravian missionary who for years had lived and worked among these people. Mohicans, Mohawks, Delawaras, Onondagas, Hurons, Sioux, Pawnees, Wynadotties, Narragansetts, Wampanoags and Potawatamies are among the entries on Cooper's roster of tribes, but they are, in many cases, little more than names. As the story was told to Cooper in the lodges of the Sachems, the Delawares and Iroquois had once fought each other to a standstill. Unable to conquer their opponents by force, the Mingoes resorted to trickery. They somehow persuaded the unsuspecting Delawares to accept Iroquois protection, abandoning military pursuits to become a nation of mediators. Since only a few would, he needed as mediators, the bulk of the Delawares were to pass their time in peaceful occupations, hunting

and tilling the soil. Thus, as a majority of the Delawares were disarmed, the Iroquois encouraged neighbouring tribes to attack the defenceless Delawares until their members were decimated and their power greatly reduced. Awakened to their helpless predicament too late to save their race, many isolated warriors involved themselves in hit-and-run guerilla attacks. Thus, doomed inevitably to their fate, the heroic Delawares calmly demonstrated their nobility in the moral victories in that unequal battles with his enemies. This is the piece of folklore, which provided Cooper the legend for describing the tragic myth of the frontier.

Though Cooper's portrayal of Red Indians, (one of the approaches to the novel) has drawn wide-spread critical attention, mostly for racial reasons, in this novel, as for example, when Leslie Fiedler believes that, "the Indian represents to Cooper whatever in the American psyche has been starved to death, whatever genteel Anglo-Saxon has most ferociously repressed, . . . and the Indian stands . . . for a people disposed in the name of a God they do not know . . ." (*Ibid.*, pp.192-96). Cooper draws them in broad outline. Except Uncas, Chingachgook, and Magua, all the other natives are drawn with a minimum of detail on types, either "good" or bad character. More than what do, in the novel, along with their umbilical cord with Mother Earth, they affect our experience of the novel, by their ways of living, their "civilized" governance (without betrayal at any level) and their own "social" norms. Their primitivism has its own logic and dispossessing them and depriving them of Nature's gifts is the most painful disorder, which this novel dramatizes.

Of all the Indians, we come across at least in our passing encounters, Magua is realized in some substantive detail and with enough narrative purpose. In a way, in a world, where nature appears to subdue everybody into humility and noble behaviour, only Magua stands out as an irredemable symbol of evil. He is a conventional villain, with cruelty, cunning and with an ability for empty political rhetoric. His only justification for abducting Cora and creating so much savagery is that, he ants to take revenge against the insult of the whiteman. Whether this has a racial justification is doubtful. For, he is a renegade, thrown out by his own people. He is base and cowardly He joins the British forces to fight against his own tribe. Betrayal is his main trait. As the novel progresses, his capacity for treachery and evil increases. His desire for Cora keeps him in direct competition with Uncas. Attracted by her dark beauty, aware too that she is contemptuous of him, he is motivated to posses her primarily by his desire for revenge against Major Munro. His death, inconsequential as it is described without any grandeur on in the case of Uncas. There are not many words of sympathy for his plight as a renegade or even for his death.

In his portrayal of the Indians, Cooper has one purpose: that is, while he romanticises their "noble savage" to demonstrate his tolerant humanity, he nevertheless, employs them to present moral and social values, glorious or otherwise. They represent some of the ideal values of life. A "social bond" holds them together, with such community values as absolute and unenforced loyalty, without internecine conflict and universally unifying traditions and rituals they lived happily till they were dispossessed. Cooper's great Indian heroes are great because of their spirit of a whole community. Their expression of a feeling of wrong doing is the utterance of the tragedy of a whole nation. Chingachgook's relationship with Natty is outside the Indian tribal past, yet it bridges them, as according to Lawrence, Cooper dreamt of "the new nucleus of a new society, the clue to a new world-epoch" in their relationship, which leads to a great release into a new world, a new moral, a new landscape". This is the moral importance of their portrayal in this novel.

Thus, *The Last of The Mohicans* is a complex, rich poetic experience. Its dramatic intensity is unmatched. The entire narrative is painted in the medium of the frontier. Here, Cooper's frontier is mythicized as a legend and a historical force. In a romance, where action supercedes characterization, Uncas and Natty Bumppo

become allegorical symbols of purity and holiness of life. To this extent, the novel has three strains, lyrical, allegorical and dramatic. What is the ultimate meaning of this poem of nature? Its message is triumph of humanism with a near saintliness of perfection. Nature and Man become one and the same. It is a religion of faith. Its goal is moral wisdom with the noblest values of compassion and fellow feeling. Historically, it may be signify the tragic dispossession of the Indians, as also expose the hypocrisy of the superiority of the European civilization by its massacre. But, aesthetically and morally, the novel is a glorious triumph of saintliness of Uncas and Hawk-eye, representing two races. Ultimately, Nature triumphs, where Man also elevates his consciousness to diviner heights. This is the message of the novel.

3.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have discussed the themes, plot and characterization in *The Last of the Mohicans*. The main theme of the novel is universal love between Uncas, Chingachgook and Hawak-eye. Other related themes are the romantic love between Cora and Uncas, the question of "neutral ground" and the unimaginable massacre at the Fort William. The plot, structurally divided into two parts, represents the gradual rise of the dramatic action to its climactic moment in the massacre at the Fort Williams, finally signifies the universal love in humanity. However, the last prophetic utterance of Tamenund brings home the stark truth of dispossession of the Indians by the Europeans. As Uncas and the Hawk-eye are the richly drawn characters in their glory and romantic excess, other characters like Alice, Cora, Hayward and Munro are drawn for their functional value. As it is a sort of romance, where action dominates characters, we may not expect much depth of complexity in their portrayal.

3.8 QUESTIONS

1. Highlight the main critical approaches to *The Last of the Mohicans*.
2. Distinguish between the novel and romance.
3. Discuss the main qualities of the American novel. How does it differ from the English novel?
4. What are the themes of this novel?
5. Study the plot and characterization of *The Last of the Mohicans*.

3.9 SUGGESTED READING

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UNIT 4 PERSPECTIVES ON THE NOVEL-I

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 The Setting
- 4.2 "A Complex Feeling"
- 4.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.4 Questions
- 4.5 Suggested Reading

4.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim in this unit is to discuss the central significance of the leather stocking hero Natty Bumppo. Various described as a symbol and aspiration, the cultural metaphor of the America's union of different races into signifying "a new humanity" in the New world, he evokes "a rich complex feeling" in us. Realized on a hierarchy of situations and moods and centrifugally representing the spectrum of American character, he is both a timeless archetypal construct, natural to all great aesthetic experiences.

4.1 THE SETTING

The Five Leatherstocking Tales, namely, *The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The Prairie* (1827), *The Path Finder* (1840) and *The Deerslayer* (1841), written over a period of eighteen years by Cooper represent two ideas; 1. the dispossession of nature by civilization; 2. using these tales as the primitivist background, Cooper, while meditating in universal terms, the moral problems of man in a civilized society, namely, greed, exploitation and indifference to the plight of others, he focusses, in particular, the evolving American manners in its phase of Westward expansion, during his times. It also studies the American experiment of liberty and individualism in a democracy in, matters of collective good in an exploitative American society during his time.

Of the eight of the Westering frontier experiences, Cooper expressed, quite rightly though, immense confidence in the permanent appeal of the five Leatherstocking tales, starting from *The Pioneers* and ending with *The Deerslayer*, in their order of writing, thus:

If any thing from the writer of these romances is at all to outlive himself, it is, unquestionably, the series of the "Leatherstocking Tales". To say this ... is to simply to express the belief a will outlast any, or all of the works from the same hand.

The tales forming an engaging biography of their protagonist, Natty Bumppo, in his various forms and moods, from his young manhood among the Delaware Indians in New York in *The Deerslayer* and Pennsylvania to his death, in his early eighties in *The Prairie*, among the Pawnee tribes just West of the Mississippi River, constitute the core of Cooper's creative imagination, at a profound level, both as a chronicler of the American civilization in its westward march, and more importantly, as the nation's conscience in focussing its moral and material dilemmas at that time. By critically commenting upon it and also dramatizing or (melodramatizing) it, of the

theme of conquering the wilderness, of the many generations of men and women, who established civilization, or destroyed by its ills, he has universalized the spirit of liberty and expansion, so characteristic to the American character of his times. By placing these adventures also above time and place, he mythicised these men and women as the archetypal symbols of human desire for survival and enterprise. His romantic portrayal of the world of wonder and mystery and the steady advancing White settlers and its receding red men shaped the imagination of readers both at home and abroad.

The purpose of the *Leatherstocking Tales* is the myth and biography of its hero, the Natty Bumppo. Cooper employs the story of the *Leatherstocking* hero, to analyse the evolving setting of the American life and American character. To this extent, the Natty Bumppo is a detached, "outside" commentator, on the American setting. If he is one unchanging monolithic symbol of purity and innocence, morally, ethically spiritually, and unconsciously to himself, even in such concrete matters as economics, politics and society, he signifies perhaps atleast in a symbolic way, the contrast and corrective to the nascent American nation in its morals and manners in its modes of expansion and individual liberty. Thus, all the five *Leatherstocking Tales* are about defining, and if necessary, even correcting the American character, when it becomes corrupt and moves away from its great experiment. Though only in *The Pioneers*, *Last of the Mohicans* and *Deerslayer* the full impact of the romance of the forests is felt, in other novels, namely, *The Prairie* and *The Pathfinder*, Natty Bumppo carries the spirit of the wilderness in himself to offer the contrast between himself and the deviant (from the experiment) America.

Thus, as the *Leatherstocking* is central to all the five tales, we may have to read them from his own point of view, from his old age in *The Pioneers* to youthfulness in *The Deerslayer*, as according to DH Lawrence, the main purpose of Cooper is to dramatise the great American "myth of golden youth", "going back from old age to youth". Also, according to Lawrence, the main purpose of these tales is "to found a new relationship" between Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook towards "the inception of a new humanity". Inevitably, these are the two aims of these Tales.

The *Leatherstocking* is "inescapably one of the great characters of world literature. Not excepting Dostoevsky's Myshkin, there is no greater 'secular saint' than 'Natty Bumppo', according to George Dekker. Like all such characters, Natty Bumppo is also a tragi-comic character, modelled ultimately on Christ. As indicated by Plato in his *Republic*, there is always this confusion between the light and darker sides in this world in the mind of these saintly characters in literature, though finally they choose the brighter side, in the process, they appear to be naive and even comical to us, with ordinary comprehension of the higher goals of human life. Though, Natty Bumppo, if seen in the tradition of Don Quixote, Parson Adams and Pickwick, has comic potentialities, Natty Bumppo, he does not appear to be merely frivolous or frolic some in these novels. He may be naive, with a purpose, but certainly not frivolous. He is serious as he is guided by the particular purpose of living with nobler values in life. As he sets example by his action beyond guilt or moral inadequacy, he is a living and effective commentator of our frailties and corrupt actions.

In *Pioneers* (1823) the first of the saga of the *Leatherstocking Tales*, Cooper describes the eventual moral conflict in these tales, through the moral vision of Natty Bumppo, based on the cult of nature for its divine qualities, and Judge Temple, who though in principle, acquisitive to Natty Bumppo's, idyllic beliefs, finds a pragmatic answer to the problem of civilization in the process of uprooting the frontier. As the novel presents these two points of view, finally, Cooper seems to uphold Judge Temple in his social and Christian values. Thus, Cooper envisioning beyond the theme of wilderness, engineers a pragmatic solution through Judge Temple.

However, Natty Bumppo's moral significance and superiority is never in doubt in the novel. Setting the scene at Ostego Lake (Cooperstown) in 1793-94, Cooper

picturises a society just past the frontier stage. It is the return of the lost heir, Oliver Effingham, to claim inheritance that he mistakenly believes that Judge Temple has wrongfully appropriated, is the main point of description in the novel. But, more vital than this theme in the novel is, the moral conflict, at a fundamental level, between Judge Temple and the Leatherstocking hero. The land on which Templeton, the judge's, settlement, is built has been occupied for some forty years by Leatherstocking who still maintains his cabin on a nearly mountain. He had befriended Temple, when the Judge had first come to survey his lands and the judge out of gratitude allowed Leatherstocking to hunt on his estate. As Templeton develops, leading to the destruction of wilderness and its idyllic world, the judge and Natty Bumppo come inevitably into conflict. The hunter maintains a pious, moral view of nature and he considers nature's, opulence as God's gift for man's use. He believes that though a man is free to use the gifts of nature as he needs them, he should not unimaginationally destroy them. Thus, he laments as the settlers who destroyed nature at will. Billy Kirby, an expert axman and Richard Jones, the Judge's cousin and sheriff belong to this tribe of lawless exploiters of nature's bounties with impurity to their sacredness. Though Judge Temple himself sees nothing morally wrong in wilful destruction of nature in the process of civilization, in order to remove the waste and recklessness in the process, he takes recourse to civil law, the law of society. By doing so, he hoped that he would accord with the moral law of the Leatherstocking. However, the Leatherstocking only realizes that the society, inspite of the civil laws is senselessly and mindlessly destroying nature. It is difficult to believe for him, like him, the society at large, will be inspired by the some Christian values of humility before the power of Nature. He helplessly laments that nature is recklessly destroyed. Thus, Cooper comments on his role in the American drama in the last part of the novel. On his own free will, he leaves the settlement and disappears into the woods. He "had gone too far towards the setting sun – the foremost in that band of pioneers who are opening the way for the march of the nation across the continent". He becomes, therefore the inevitable herald of the civilization he most wants to avoid. Though the novel ends on a note of good society, Cooper believes that such a civilization need not be built on the price of the rape of the wilderness and the indiscriminate destruction of nature. Cooper believed in *The Pioneers* and *The Prairie* that all frontiersmen are not like the saintly Natty Bumppo, as he is more an idealized exception than the rule. His character is perfectly coherent and well developed. He is an ideal citizen of an ideal republic. Perhaps, his main defeat is that, with all his innate goodness and perfect nobility of character, he lacks the strength and missionary zeal of a reformer, as in Socrates or Don Quixote making him ultimately become a helpless, tragic figure, though not a martyr, by his receding into the anonymous background.

In *The Last of the Mohicans*, Natty Bumppo's (called Hawk-eye here) highly romanticized identification with Nature and Chingachgook is inalienably complete. Here as a chronicler of the massacre of civilizations and nature alike, he fades into the wilderness once again. Perching on a tantalizing balance on fantasy and grim realities (such as the massacre of the Fort William) of unthinkable horror and yet unbelievable tenderness between two human beings of two races, this novel is a masterpiece of marvellous energy. Perhaps, the rare union of minds – whether cultural miscegenation or not – between Chingachgook and Natty Bumppo is a triumph of optimism and foundation of universal civilization in the New World, as described by Cooper, in the words of Natty Bumppo:

"The gifts of our colours may be different, but God has so placed us as to journey in the same path. I have no kin, and I may also say, like you, no people. He was your son, and a reskin by nature ... the boy has left us for a time; but Sagamore, you are not alone." (p. 415).

Unlike *The Pioneers* and *The Last of the Mohicans*, this is a novel of manners and social analysis. As in the two earlier *Tales*, here, too, man's relation to nature is fundamental as the landscape is even more vast and sublime so that characters seem

all but completely dwarfed and overpowered by the immensity of grass and sky that stretches in every direction. Here, the *Tales* appear to be moving towards the logical point of repose in the great death scene of the trapper. The relation of man to nature, as in the earlier two *Tales* is further developed in terms of the immensity of the treeless waste of the Great plains. The rape of the wilderness is described in less eloquent terms than in *The Pioneers*. The moral view of nature is reaffirmed in the abiding speeches of the aged trapper. The book is complementary to *Last of the Mohicans*. It describes the process that began in the eastern sea board with the dislocation of the Delawares and the setting of the forest wilderness now moves into the final phase. The exploiters here are not the settlers of the *Pioneers* who are building homes in the wilderness but their advance guard: Ishmael Bush and his tribe of landless squatters who admit no authority over themselves and whose function in the settling of the country, is to skim "the cream from the face of the earth and get "the very honey of nature". If the trapper represents the natural man who has disciplined himself as a result of his moral view of nature and earned his right to freedom, Ishmael Bush is the more usual type who confused liberty with licence. Dr. Obed Bat, a more sophisticated exploiter of nature, and the satirized physical scientist believes that science will become equal to the great moving principle. Though Cooper is not against the legitimate aims of freedom and knowledge in his portrayal of Bush and Bat, he is only attacking the physical and intellectual arrogance of the undisciplined man, even as Cooper dramatizes Natty Bumppo with the opposite quality of arrogance, namely-humility in the face of the immensity of Nature. In this novel, the trapper is more religious than in the two *Tales*. By the end of the this novel, as the Leatherstocking, feeling distrustful of the social and civil law, detests the aberrations of freedom in Bush and Bat. Having achieved self-discipline, he decides to lead a free and asocial life in the woods. Away from the western path, he turns to the Great plains and finally dies physically defeated, though intellectually and morally he still maintains his deeply felt philosophy. Thus, these three *Tales* give us the meaning that the moral attitude of the Leatherstocking is more enduring for our lives.

The Pathfinder and the *Deerslayer* the last Leatherstocking tales, written by Cooper after thirteen years, are naturally realized and related to the contemporary social problems. Thus *The Pathfinder* is strongly influenced by his *Home as Found*. However, the relation of this novel to the earlier three novels is obvious: the same characters of Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook reappear with the forceful evocation of the natural scenery. Here also, Cooper eulogizes God's power in each detail of Nature to process us the value of humility in the vast enormity of Nature. Though the same problems of the American waste of nature, the dispossession of the Indians and the march of civilization across the continent are recurrently present here, the real problem of the novel is social. Here, as Cooper insists that social station is important at all levels of society, since class lines exist everywhere and although they are not rigidly fixed, they are not to be crossed with impunity. The characters here are much below the level of the *Effinghams*. Viewed thus in the context of the order of Cooper's novels, this novel has less to say about American expansionism than about American social democracy. Though Cooper insists upon the class lines, he maintains that they have nothing to do with political democracy or the inherent value of men, Jasper and Pathfinder, are equal in virtue, though different in talent and experience. Though critics like Zoellner felt that this novel does not fit in the overall pattern of the Leatherstocking Tales, Cooper only moved the setting from the American past to the contemporary scene, without disturbing the moral purpose of relating Man to Nature as in the earlier Tales.

In his chronologically last, yet for the mind of the protagonist of these Tales, the youthful Leatherstocking, *Deerslayer* is one more occasion for celebrating man's pristine relationship with Nature in a productive manner without the sin of recklessness. Praised by D.H. Lawrence, and according to D.A. Ringe, this is the best of the series "in its complexity of meaning and in its affirmation of value in American life." It is also less concerned with the march of American civilization,

than with the question of popular American values. Like *The Pathfinder*, it concentrates on lovely characters and is concerned with considerable social import, with a moral purpose. This novel, with its strong religious tone finally affirms the true purpose of the Tales, that is, realise Nature as a sacred place for man's welfare, and for his happiness and comfort, if it is not exploited mercilessly. Set in the wonderful ambience of the Glimmerglass, which shines like a jewel in the wilderness of the trees, there is this story of Deerslayer and Hetty. If Hetty symbolizes the Christian values in their flawless purity, Hurry represents the pragmatic and expedient considerations of life. Between these extremes of purity and cynical expediency stands Deerslayer. He follows the law of nature (than the law of God). He is on his first war path. For, till then he has been a hunter, not a warrior. As Iyvor Winters praises this part of the book, here as Deerslayer confronts his first enemy, he graciously offers him a chance for his life and by the quickness of his eye shoots his first human being. In killing him and a second Indian, he is not the aggressor. Here, Deerslayer, discovering a practical compromise between the best and the worst in man is imperfect and fallible, but he is also, according to Brady "an embodied conscience for America". By combining the moral values of the American landscape with the moral vision of the Moravian missionaries, he represents a kind of genuine humility, unselfish and unconcerned with the impediments of the American life and he affirms the American principle by calmly enforcing his intuitive law of natural goodness to others. Yet, this novel may not end on an optimistic note as the struggle between the whiteman in his march and the red Indians will continue. The settlers will come with the axe and gun to crop the trees as in *The Pioneers*. Thus, this novel is the logical culmination of the Leatherstocking series. It affirms a set of values that were implicit in the earlier tales. Also, economic expediency in Hurry and Tom is the same idea which Cooper criticized in his other works, namely, *The Bravo*, *The Heidenmauer* and *The Monikins*. Thus, this novel fully rounds off the two themes of the Leatherstocking tales, namely, the religious view of human character of being naturally good, instructed by the pious values of the landscape and in opposition to it, the corrupt economic practices of the expedient American citizens of his times. Thus, Cooper's five Leatherstocking tales are studies in moral principles in lofty universal terms, as much as incisive and thoughtful and pertinent criticism and even disapproval of the unChristian and expedient practices of the expanding American nation of his times.

4.2 A "COMPLEX FEELING"

In all the five Leatherstocking tales, Natty Bumppo in various forms and moods, evokes "a complex feeling" of situation and circumstance and different levels of naivete as well as a profound moral sense. As it is, indeed, truly difficult to define him in a single or simple way, it is also good for us to evoke his "complex" image in a hierarchy of conditions: he is a good Samaritan without a cross, yet he is a pious Christian in practice; he is naïve and inoffensive, yet if situation warrants, he is capable of intelligent thinking; he is closest to the Indians in his fundamental emotion and sentiment, yet he seeks separate (though unknown) racial identity; he is a whiteman, yet he does not approve of the whiteman's immoral and reckless dispossession of either nature or the Indians, as they are one and the same in his view; ultimately, he is an ideal image, yet his solutions to the problems are not evasive but pragmatic. Thus, he evokes in us a complex feeling of all these apparently opposite ideas and states of mind.

As he is the myth and symbol, the means of expatiation and communion with the frontier and its Indian natives, he forms a multi-faceted centrifugal force around whom all the five Leatherstocking Tales move and eventually draw their sustenance. As he is the ideologue of these five narratives, he also becomes America's cultural and mythopaeic history. By re-creating the imaginative tales of this frontier man, Cooper has become America's myth-maker.

These Natty Bumppos, positioning themselves in a unique disjunction from both the Indians and the Whites, culturally and religiously, they are in themselves both. As they are drawn from unknown sources, they are the Boones, the Crockets, the Carsons, the advance scouts thrown out by civilization, in one of the least known humanity in history. Equally significant is the fact that he vaguely remembers his unknown White home of his early childhood. He is reared by Moravian missionaries among the friendly Delawares, where the instruction of the brethren seems to have been limited to the Gospel, as Natty remains illiterate and largely uninformed about the world without wilderness.

His religion is fruitfully ambivalent as when he repeatedly emphasizes, he is a man without a holy cross. Yet, he is a Christian in practice. His identity with the Indians is equally uncertain in all the Tales. In the *Deerslayer*, he confirms his allegiance to the young Delaware Chief, Chingachgook, by risking his life in seemingly hopeless battle to rescue his friend's beloved, Wah-ta-wah. In *The Pathfinder*, his ultimate temptation to join civilization is to overcome when he renounces all claim to the hand of Mabel Dunham. In *The Pioneers*, he is completely bewildered by the man-made laws of the town of Templeton. Thus, this novel, which signifies a symbolic, though painful cultural journey for the Natto Bumppo, from noble savagery to noble civilization, in the mystic of Nature itself, as when finally he travels to spend his last days in the Great plains among the Pawnes, thus establishing uniqueness, and a separate, though mysterious cultural identity from the Indians, though he is part of the adopted Indians called Delawares. However, it may be held, with some certainty that, between the two, Natty Bumppo, religiously, at least, appears to be closer to the White man's religion when he requests (In *The Deerslayer*) that the grave stone be inscribed with "something from the holy book."

In any case, as the Natty Bumppo is devoid of any certain definitive position of identity, religious or cultural, he takes a vantage position in objectively assessing both the Whites and the Indians in themselves as creatures of Nature. For him, as men are, in the main, much the same in feeling, he explains his theory in *The Deerslayer* thus:

God, made us all, white, black and red; and no doubt, had his wise intentions in coloring us differently ... I'll not deny that he gave each race its gifts. A whiteman's gifts are Christianized, while a red skin's are more for the wilderness. Thus, it would be a great offense for a white man to scalp the dead; whereas it is a signal virtue for an Indian. Then again the whiteman cannot ambush women and children in war, while redskin may. It's cruel work, I'll allow; but for them it's *lawful* work; while for "us," it would be grievous work.

Though driven by a variety of motives – such as discontent, misanthropy and even adventurism and thus separated from the main body of society, to live alone in the mysterious, uncharted recesses of the forest, their skills, knowledge and service, in any case, are of immense use to society. They are often called upon to be agents for a way of life, which, ironically, they wanted to flee away from. They blazed trails, hunted game, negotiated with the Indians and, in general, taught the pioneer families how to survive in the vast American wilderness, and unfortunately and even tragically, too, they were pushed still farther Westward and overtaken by the very civilization, which they helped to grow. In any case, they lived with their own philosophy of life. For them, the underlying human kinship might prevail over the traits induced by training. However, Cooper does not appear to suggest the assimilation of the Indians with Natty Bumppo. There is an intense critical debate on this issue. For critics like, D.H.Lawrence, the romanticised union of minds of Natty and Chingachgook is the true basis of future human relationships in the New World. However, for other critics, there is an attempt at cultural miscegenation. More than the failure of the union of Cora and Unces, the failure of Natty Bumppo to live with

Chingachgook forever, is more tragic and even may indicate a particular attitude of Cooper to the whole question of races in America at that time. In any case, we feel that there may be one Lord of all and in the mind of God all may be the same so that in heaven, Chingachgook's son, Uncas may be United with Cora, but on earth, there can be no such union. Thus, betrayed by circumstances of civilization of the Whitemen, Natty Bumppo carries his existence with an aura of melancholy with a profound wisdom, like a prophet, victim, as also like a victim of the Whiteman's atonement. His concern for the Indian is in two stages; first, it is his deep love for his own adoptive tribe, the Delawares; then, it extends to the whole Indian race as it confronted the white man. For him, with the decline of the Delawares and Mohicans, due to the cruel Iroquois, the noblest elements of the savage life have been lost. This melancholic reflection is the recurrent mood throughout the Tales, though most intensely felt in Uncas' funeral rites at the end of *The Last of the Mohicans*. At the end of this novel, the prophetic words of the venerable Tammany that "the pale-faces are the masters of the earth and the time of the red man has not yet come again", make the Natty Bumppo despair for the whole Indian race. He bemoans thus:

"When I look about me at these hills, where I used to count sometimes twenty smokes, curling over the tree-tops, from the Delaware camps, it raises mournful thoughts, to think that not a red-skin is left of them all ..."

Natty's intimacy and abiding love for the minds of the Indians and the spirit of the frontier is deep-rooted. He "loved" everything that is there in the frontier in a real sense. As he tells Judith Hutter of *The Deerslayer*, his love is "in the boughs of the trees, in a soft rain, in the dew on the open grass, in the clouds that float ... and in all the other glorious gifts that come from God's providence." It certainly evokes a feeling of ineradicable guilt in the minds of all the thoughtful Americans for the ruthless and criminal dispossession of the Indians. We do find such moments of national guilt in the works of Melville in the north, in Faulkner, in the south, and Miller in the east.

Natty Bumppo's qualities of mind may be simplicity and courage. According to Middleton in *The Prairie*, Natty is endowed with simplicity, because such are the habits of his mind. In courage, he is "the equal of his red associates"; in his war-like skill, he is their superior. He is gifted with a special kind of piety. Piety and natural compassion temper his justice. This is clearly manifested in *The Last of the Mohicans*, when a wounded Huron slips from the tree on a cliff, where he has been hanging, Natty uses his last charge of powder to bring an instant death in mid-air far less horrible than that awaiting on the rocks below. Also, in Delaware, when Natty is forced to shoot a human being for the first time, he is tender and merciful to his dying enemy, even though that Mingo has twice tried to take Natty's life by treachery. The innocence with which he enters the silent forest alone at dawn, his courage when attacked and his refusal to attack a disadvantaged enemy and his compassion even for a dying enemy – all carry religious significance in the manner of the pure heart for the Holy Grail. Essentially uninterested in land, and property as he believes that "if man has a chest, filled with either dollars or half-joes, he may be said to lock up his heart in the same book." He remains a celebrate throughout his life. He is religious only in its qualities of natural piety. As this religiosity sustains his thoughts and actions, he only sees the "essence" of things. He quite rightly sees the manifestations of the divine will everywhere. Scorning the written word, he explains his purity of purpose in his life and imagination in these words in *The Last of the Mohican*:

"I have heard it said that there are men who read in books to convince themselves there is a God. I know not but man may so deform his works in the settlement, as to leave that which is so clear in the wilderness a matter of doubt among traders and priests. If any such there be, and he will follow me from sun to sun, through the windings of the forest, he shall see enough to teach him that he is a fool..." (p.269)

At times, as his worship of the spirit of Nature becomes even Pantheistic and Wordsworthian, in accepting Nature as a moral guide, he believes that Nature is the house of the Lord, the only church in which he can work satisfactorily. He explains this idea in *The Pathfinder*:

“... I have endeavoured to worship garrison – fashion, but never could raise within me the solemn feelings and true affection that I feel when alone with God in the forest. There I seem to stand face to face with my Master; all around me is fresh and beautiful, as it comes from His hand; and there is no nicety of doctrine to chill the feelings. No, no; the woods are the true temple a'ter all, for there the clouds are free to mount higher even than the clouds.”

As he withdraws into the limitless frontier wilderness, he is remembered as “a man who had the simplicity of a woodsman, the heroism of a savage, the faith of a Christian and feelings of a poet. A better man than he, seldom lived!” And quite rightly, he is “the most memorable character American fiction has given the world.” To Leslie Fiedler, he is “the prototype of all pioneers, trappers, cowboys and other innocently destructive children of nature, of the Westerner. He is “a Faust without a sin”, with his denial of the calvinist or catholic theology and acceptance of the suffering in his quest for freedom. Along with Chingachgook, he represents two mythic figures: himself the hunter and Chingachgook, nature’s vanishing nobleman and vanishing American. These two timeless, mythic figures between themselves represent a third myth, an archetypal relationship of two lonely men – one dark-skinned and the other White – living together in the virgin heart of the American wilderness. They have grown up for the sake of their austere and unquestionable love, which binds them to each other and to the world of nature, which they have preferred to civilization. According to DH Lawrence, “in his immortal friendship of Chingachgook and Natty Bumppo, Cooper dreamed of the nucleus of a new society.” This is the import of their relationship. Thus, Natty Bumppo is the timeless archetype of our yearning for purity, innocence and near flawless perfection.

4.3 LET US SUM UP

Thus, the Leatherstocking hero, Natty Bumppo discussed in two parts in this unit, represents the particular stage of American history in the nineteenth century. Dramatized in the extant landscape of the frontier, which itself forms an endlessly inscrutable order of reality, the Leatherstocking symbolizes, perhaps, all that is best in human nature. Incapable of any form of evil, and nearing total perfection, the hero here evokes a rich complex feeling – of geography, history, society. He is our new vertible pure Adam, in his own Paradise of the Frontier, making *The Last of the Mohicans* a poem in execution and lyrical in appeal. It is an experience beyond words. Larger than life, as the setting is magnificent, Natto Bumppo is a supremely idealised and romanticized human self.

4.4 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the significance of setting in the portrayal of Natty Bumppo.
2. Discuss the essential nature of the Leatherstocking hero.
3. Comment on the romantic quality of the novel *The Last of the Mohicans*.

4.5 SUGGESTED READING

D.H. Lawrence *Studies in Classic American Literature*, NY; Viking Press, 1923.

Yvor Winters *In Defence of Reason*.

G.Dekker *James Fennimore Cooper*, London; Routledge and Kegan Paul,
1967.

Daniel Peck New Essays on *The Last of the Mohicans*, Cambridge University
Press, 1992.

UNIT 5 PERSPECTIVES ON THE NOVEL-II

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Order in his Social Novels and Other Novels with Political Import
- 5.2 Cooper's Moral Vision in *The Leatherstocking Tales*
- 5.3 Conclusion
- 5.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.5 Questions
- 5.6 Suggested Reading

5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we discuss the moral edifice of Cooper's works. In his extensive canon of nearly thirty works, there is recurrent moral strain in all of them. Here, we realise that the moral basis for order in his social novels and other works with political import, and his romanticization of world of moral piety through the Leatherstocking hero, is similar and identical. For, the ultimate goal of his all-round imagination is to enshrine Christian values of goodness in action and thoughts in America of his times.

5.1 ORDER IN HIS SOCIAL NOVELS AND OTHER WORKS WITH POLITICAL IMPORT

As in the imagination of any great writer, art and prophesy organically fuse themselves in a visionary moment to signify a nation's moral concerns and evoke feelings of true joy in the reader's minds, in Cooper, too, such a creative fusion occurs in realising his moral vision. As his moral vision originates from a particular milieu of the 19th century America in the throes of expansion in every material sphere as well as in its fundamental desire for self-identity culturally, spiritually and intellectually, all his creative canon has to be read as representing this singular desire and design of Cooper. For, underlying all his apparently different modes of perception of the adolescent America, after its Puritanical infant bearings, there is a continuously guiding moral purpose. That moral purpose is, leading a truly Christian life in all forms of activities in the individual and in America's social, political and economic activities. As the nation grows, a true concern for Christian values should guide their all-round activities.

Although at first glance, there appears to be a great disparity between the Leatherstocking tales of the 1820's and the social criticism which followed, and between the dark novels of the 1840's and the Littlepage series that succeed them, all are seen to be closely related, as they in their totality, dramatize a broad view of the American life and the role of the individual in it. Thus, there is no such dichotomy of any kind between his mainstay romantic Leatherstocking tales and his social criticism on the concrete issues of the American life. As observed by Brady, all his Cooper's works are much more alike in their themes. For, fundamental to his works, there is a moral view of the world and men in their social aspects. This moral view reveals man's relation first to God in the order of nature and to his fellows in an ordered society. Viewed in this perspective, the moral tales of the forest and sea have a general social significance, as they set up standards for men to follow in a social relation. His social theories were intelligible to his contemporary readers only if seen in relation to the moral concepts that in his view form the basis of all social organizations. Even the supposed contradictions in Cooper's political thought are

easily reconciled when we finally perceive the moral view that formed the basis for his criticism of both the aristocratic and democratic systems. Therefore, it is important for us to notice the consistency of his intellectual position in his creative canon. His creative canon may be studied for this purpose in two parts: in the first part, we may discuss his moral view, as a sort of individual's responsibility to society, in his social novels and other works with a sort of political import. In the second part, we may discuss his moral and spiritual view of the wilderness.

Basic themes recur throughout his fiction. From the beginning in *The Spy*, Cooper draws a picture of the loss of order in society and the moral confusion that results out of such a loss, a theme he presents again in such works as *The Two Admirals* and *Wyandotté*. The essential concern of Cooper in his social fiction and other works with a political import, is to establish a social order based on the collective responsibility of all the individuals for their welfare. In *The Spy*, he draws a picture of the loss of order in society and resultant moral confusion. He repeats this theme in the *Two Admirals* and *Wyandotté*. Without the proper subordination throughout society, man loses the ability to make intelligent choices and act on the basis of principles. In many of his characters, Cooper clearly demonstrates the dangers that are always incurred when order is destroyed. But, for him, as for any progressive visionary, order does not imply a rigidly stratified social hierarchy, sustained by vested interests. He, therefore, believes that social change is as much necessary, based on the principle of individual's responsibility for working for the total good. What he abhors is selfishness of the individuals in perpetuating social disorder. What he believes is that these values of collective responsibility and pleasure for others, and sharing the joys and difficulties with and for others sake, is a moral value, which is central to the his *Leatherstocking Tales*. But, he believes this idea in his social and other works, too, when he says that, all human actions even in modern societies can be tempered with those Christian values of good Samaritanship and honesty and purity of mind and action. To this extent, his social and other works eulogize the same Christian moral value, in varied settings, providing an organic continuity and holistic view of all his imagination.

What is his attitude to democracy? For, this is one area of his thinking, perhaps, most misunderstood. Though a steady Jacksonian - a change from the Federalist vision of his politically conservative father though with the image of a patriarch), Cooper was misunderstood that he was an advocate of the rule of the aristocracy. But, a careful reading of *Home as Found*, *The Redskins* and *The Ways of the Hour* indicates his faith in democracy not simply as a political idea, but as a much deeper faith in God's sanctioning of equality of opportunity to every individual with a capability for achieving all-round perfection.

Politically, he accepted democracy with all its defects. He detested aristocracy and oligarchy. For him, democracy was the only hope, as he believed that, if properly followed, it would bring out unity and stability in society with a progressive change. What he objected to was only that democracy should not lose itself in limitless and irresponsible freedom of a few people, to the detriment a vast majority of poor and orderly people. Hence, he wanted that every individual should have limited freedom under restraints and these restraints must come through a religious view of the world. Such a restriction of freedom for the good of the society is envisioned by him in the idyllic world of the *Leatherstocking*, where the spirit of humility before the power of God's nature is the main value and wisdom of humanity. Here, the moral of message of the *Tales* is that an individual is insignificant before the vastness of the landscape. For this reason, many of his characters such as Miles Wallingford, Mark Woolston and Roswell Gardiner are taught the lesson of their own insignificance, so that they might develop the spirit of humility they need as good members of a free society. But, Cooper also realized that mere naturalistic appeal may not make all individuals morally pious, as Ishmael Bush and Aaron Thouandacres are unaffected by the natural scene. Perhaps, it is not merely nature's intimations, but more faithful adherence to the principles of the Christian religion that would bring about a lasting

transformation of character. Thus, this Christian transformation of the soul is the implicit theme of his works from *The Wept of Wish-too-wish* to *The Deerslayer*. In the remaining works, *The Oak Openings* and *The Sea Lions*, this Christian theme becomes more explicit and dominant. Disbelieving in the mere abstract Christian virtues and the radical Protestant churches, he finally believed that proper restraints to an individual's behaviour could be found in the conservative churches, like the Episcopalian, where belief is not subject to change at the will of the congregation. He also believed that education and training would teach his gentlemen heroes humility. By turning away from the contemporary American scene, he succeeded in revivifying the native scene with greater objectivity. *The Bravo* presents a convincing picture of a complex social organization drawn with enough circumstantial detail. *The Pioneers* and *Satanstoe* reveal simpler societies without sufficient faith in their moral values. In all these three social novels, there is an interplay of plot and character and setting, as characters carry the main weight of meaning. Cooper is successful in drawing characters from a relatively low social class.

In his fiction, the creative and moral continuum between a "knowledgeable" landscape and (morally) inadequate humanity, the former "instructing" the latter, is the main focus of his imagination, starting from *The Pilot* to *The Deerslayer*. In each case, the wilderness has a fundamental religious meaning. It is variously revivified in myth and living symbol of piety and a source of divine manifestation, in itself. In particular, in the Leatherstocking tales, the reckless exploitation of nature by the whites and the inadvertently felicitating such a massacre of nature's spirit by the Leatherstocking, is itself a profound moral problem. If the whites evilsomely dispossessed nature of its spirit, the Leatherstocking heroes, in a mood of resignation, become mute witnesses, thus indirectly corroborating in the dispossession of nature and the Indians, their spiritual templates, constituting a painful moral problem in Cooper's fiction. In the Leatherstocking tales, the moral and spiritual space of Cooper's works increases abundantly manifold.

5.2 COOPER'S MORAL VISION IN THE LEATHERSTOCKING TALES

The vast frontier acts as a form of providing moral and spiritual vision of perfection of human behaviour. Though these "the romances of the forest", following his nautical experience, appear to be vastly different, they, along with his European novels, all provide a central vision and Cooper's world-view, that is to say, like Wordsworth, the frontier for him, too, is a source of empathy and moral perfection among the members of society. As his immensely special gifts lie in evocatively scaffolding his narrative experiences, they seem to echo, through their resonant life, vibrant and cruel, all alike, certain fundamental, ever-lasting truths of men and his civilization. If Natty Bomppo is the truest and closest manifestation of the purified sensibility of Nature, there is, perhaps, no character in *The Last of the Mohicans*, as in his other Leatherstocking Tales, who is not positively mystified and even made divine in one's own way by the elemental purity of the soul of Nature. According to Conrad, for Cooper, nature was "an essential factor in the problem of existence". As the frontier and the sea interpenetrate, each of his work shows the essential picture of man in a sort of creative immensity with the vast physical universe in the form of Nature. Thus, he expresses "a great religious vision of life", in depicting man's relation to his natural environment. Through his descriptions of the majestic order of the natural landscape, he is able to present the principle of divine harmony in nature, as also the fundamental need for humility in men to grasp the immensity of God as revealed thro' processes of Nature. Thus, Cooper shows the importance of religious view in his portrayal of man in relation to the enormity of physical nature.

As Heyward subsumes the racial insignificance, when he says, "who that looks at this creature of nature, remembers the shade of his skin?" (p. 54 *The Last of the Mohicans*) or as when Chingachgook proclaims thus, "with an Indian its a matter of conscience; what he calls himself, he generally is", or when Hawkeye advises Cora and Alice, "better and wiser would it be, if he could understand the signs of nature, and take a lesson from the fowls of the air, and the beasts of the fields" (p. 140) – all these are the living manifestations of the rare union of the spirit of Man and Nature in their creative continuity. They create newer realms of joy, and sense in our minds.

This interrelationship of man and Nature is demonstrated from the beginning in his work from *Spy*, where the physical setting defines both the problem as also the moral tone calling for empathy between man and nature. In the same way in *The Last of the Mohicans* also, Nature, variously manifested as violent, savage, cruel, unpredictable and wild, by including the Indians Cooper is studying the problem of the impossible and greatly inhospitable wilderness. As it is a source of moral goodness, no man or woman is unaffected by its moral force. *The Last of the Mohicans* is dominated by the virgin forest. The moment Duncan Heyward leads the girls, Alice and Cora Munro, between Forts Edward and William Henry, even as he loses control over his environment to become an easy prey to the machinations of the evil Magua, he realizes the true physical immensity of the frontier as also its moral significance in human life, in his conversation with Hawk-eye, the nature's true priest:

"What is to be done!" he said, the utter helplessness of doubt in such a pressing strait. "Desert me not, for God's sake! Remain to defend those, escort, and freely name your own reward!" (p.44)

and

"Uncas is right! It would not be the act of men to leave such harmless things to their fate, even though it breaks up the harboring place for ever. If you would save these tender blossoms from these fangs of the worst of serpents, gentlemen, you have neither time to lose nor resolution to throw away!" (p.44)

To this Hawk-eye replies thus:

"Offer your prayers to Him who can give us wisdom to circumvent the cunning of the devils who fill these woods, but spare your offers of money which neither you may live to realize, nor I do profit by. These Mohicans and I will do what man's thoughts can invent, to keep such flowers, though so sweet, were never made for the wilderness, from harm, and that without hope of any other recompense but such as God always gives to upright dealings." (pp.44-45).

From this point, till the end of the novel, all the white characters, except Hawkeye, are at the mercy of the wilderness and its red Indian inhabitants. Even Monteclem and the victorious French cannot completely govern their Huron allies after the evacuation of the fort, even as the French commander himself fails to comprehend, in any plausible way, the immensity of the problem on hand. In the massacre at Fort William Henry, the Indians clearly dominate the whites who have invaded their lands. Even the English characters, who ultimately succeed in recovering the stolen Alice from the Hurons must rely upon their Indian friends, the Delawares, to escape from being totally destroyed by the wilderness. Without Chingachgook and Uncas, even the mightily resourceful Hawkeye could have achieved little.

We should also reckon with the ghastly scale of events, out of all proportions of our "civilized" imagination, where whole armies are swallowed up in the living mass of vast vegetation, only to some how retain their mere forms. The entire struggle between the British and French troops seems trivial when viewed against the vast

canopy of nature's might. Cooper's elevation of the landscape to immense proportions of space certainly dwarfs any of our human species. Even as Heyward, at the beginning, an undoubtedly sane, and self-confident white man, is bewildered, to say the least, even as he is constantly guided by Hawkeye. As Hawkeye knows the frontier and its savage inhabitants, in every form and manner, intrinsically as well as extrinsically, he tells Heyward that his white man's judgement will never comprehend the true spirit of the frontier and the Indians there. In any case, the massacre of English whites at the William Henry, perhaps, outmatches even the unbelievable savagery of the Indian savages, by its trickery and lack of code of honour and poignant ruthlessness.

As for Cooper, wildermen is nature's manifestation of the divine moral law, as he nearly idealizes and revivifies it in myth and symbol, landscape and striking picturesqueness. The darkness and density of the virgin forest that stretches unbroken from the Hudson to the Mississippi are intensely felt in *The Last of the Mohicans*. These following images of the wilderness are evocative for their variety of feelings, of awe, wonder, sheer lyrical delight and horror, alike:

The mountain on which they stood, elevated perhaps a thousand feet in the air, was a high cone that rose a little in advance of that range which stretches for miles along the western shores of the lake, until meeting its sister piles, beyond the water, it ran off toward the Canadas, in confused and broken masses of rock thinly sprinkled with evergreens. ... To the north stretched the limpid, and as it appeared from that dizzy height, the boys, embellished by fantastic headlands, and dotted with countless islands. At the distance of a few leagues, the bed of the waters became lost among mountains, or was wrapped in the masses of vapor that came slowly rolling along their bosom, before a light morning air (p.159).

The landscape is evoked in its moments of silence, in sheer poetic detail:

The evening was delightfully calm, and the light air from the limpid water fresh and soothing. It seemed as if, with the termination to the roar of artillery and the plunging of shot, the nature had also seized the moment to assume her mildest and most captivating form. The sun poured down his parting glory on the scene, without the oppression of those fierce rays that belong to the climate and the season. The mountains looked green and fresh and lovely; tempered with the milder light, or softened in shadow, as thin vapours floated between them and the sun. (p.168).

Now, the landscape is like "some pictured allegory of life:"

The fiercer element had cropped the verdure of the plain, which looked as though it were scathed by the consuming lightning. But, here and there, a dark green tuft rose in the midst of the desolation; the earliest fruits of a soil that had been fattened with human blood. The whole landscape, which seen by a favoring light, and in a genial temperature, had been found so lovely, appeared now like some pictured allegory of life, in which objects were arrayed in their harshest but truest colors, and without relief of any shadowing (p.209).

It is also endowed with a spirit of mystery:

Within the bosom of the encircling hills, an impenetrable darkness had already settled; and the plain lay like a vast and deserted charnel house, without omen or whisper to disturb the slumbers of its numerous and hapless tenants (p.221).

Once again, the landscape is evoked with immaculate detail, like some wall painting”.

A short distance from the place where Duncan stood, the stream had seemingly expanded into a little lake, covering most of the low land from mountain to mountain. The water fell out of this wide basin in a cataract so regular and gentle that it appeared rather to be the work of human hands than fashioned by nature (p.255).

and

The scene was at once animated and still. All that pertained to nature was sweet, or simply grand: while those parts which depended on the temper and movements of man were lively and playful. (p.168).

The outposts of civilization are swallowed up in the dense wilderness. It is not merely a literary canon, as it is an instructive “*presence*.” It instructs the supposedly “civilized” humanity, in its universality, the twin values of social order and moral responsibility towards others in distress. He believes that man’s, relation to God is in fruitfully revealed in nature’s order in first achieving individual moral purpose and then social harmony. To this extent, all these Tales have a profound moral and social purpose, in that, nature evokes by its pristine purity, an immense moral piety. They establish standards for men to follow in a social relation – be it in the relationship between Chingachgook and Hawkeye or Hawkeye and Heyward or between Cora and Uncas, and so on. The cruelty of Magua is in this sense, an isolated instance of lack of any sort of desire of social or collective wisdom, making him a repeated outcast in his own race.

Cooper’s political ideas are also tempered by these democratic values of equality of opportunity and power, enshrined in the values of “civilization” (of its own variety) in the order and rule and control and regulation of power. If anything, as betrayal is unknown to their political behaviour, underlying their cruel savage habits, there is an organized and dependable political order of customs and delegation and trust of power in the natives. As they are pure and simple in their instincts, their governance is also simple and easily accountable, as it is eventually based on the principle of inviolable faith in one another. They love their instincts. As their instincts are shaped by altering nature’s moods and purposes, they, again and again, seek confirmation of their faith and accuracy and justifiability of their action, by truly understanding the spirit and meaning of nature’s message, making their judgements of men and actions instinctively infallible.

According to Hawk-eye Natty Bumppo, “with an Indian ‘tis a matter of conscience; what he calls himself, he generally is – that Chingachgook . . . understands the windings and turnings of human nature” (pp.58-59). He eulogises the spirit of nature as true wisdom in these words: “I should be but a poor scholar for one who had studied so long in the wilderness, did I not know how to set forth the movements and nature’ of such a beast” (p.303). Even Magua, the archetypal outcast in any society, most passionately glorifies the mind and true character of the natives in these words, to David: “Therein you belie the nature of an Indian. Even the Mingo adores but the true and living God. ‘Tis a wicked fabrication of the whites, and I say it to be the shame of my color that would make the warrior bow down before images of his own creation.” (p.264) Uncas reinforces the free spirit of nature in his words to Tamemund (p.366):

Men of the Lenni Lenape! . . . my race upholds the earth! Your feeble tribe stands on my shell! What fire that a Delaware can light would burn the child of my fathers . . . the blood that came from such a stock would smother your flames! My race is the grandfather of nations!” (p.366)

As they derive their moral strength from the wilderness, their logic is also shaped by a rare instinct and intuitive understanding of the universe. As their empathy with nature is spiritual, they live and relive to enact the recurrent cycle of the processes of nature in a sort of mythical cycle.

Whenever there is a reason for disorder and moral failure or confusion as in *The Spy*, Cooper seems to suggest that a proper social order, based on moral purity, is necessary for the individual survival. In many of his characters, he clearly illustrates the dangers that follow when order (of the nature) in human life is destroyed. When the settled social order on the basis of moral vision of purity and simplicity of nature is destroyed, individuals try to practise their own rather expedient practices, as in the case of Mr. Wharton, Joel Strides and Admiral Blue water and Captain Willoughby. In any case, as Cooper does not believe in a static order (but in a stable order), he recognizes the essential place of conflict between the settled order and change, in the history of progress of man and his society.

Perhaps, all the five *Leatherstocking Tales* as one group, in his canon, dramatize this idea of the conflict between progress versus old order. Certainly, the first three novels are entirely concerned with this theme. By invading the wilderness and seizing the lands of the Indians, the whites disrupt the red man's life, destroy the game, and wreak havoc with the natural scene. Leatherstocking, the man who has seen the proper course of conduct revealed in the harmony of nature, protests the ravishing of his beloved forests by men like Ishmael Bush, or the settlers of Templeton, who feel none of the restraints of the hunter. For these men, Judge Temple must impose the civil law and the Leatherstocking falls in its meshes. All this is said to be in the name of higher good, in the name of Christianity. Thus, though Cooper does approve of change, he seems to say that care must be taken so that the intrinsic values of the Leatherstocking must not be lost in the greedy exploitation of the wilderness. This is the guiding moral, democratic principle of subsisting with the essence of Nature that completes his world-view of progress with change.

As he believed that democracy is not absolute liberty but only limited freedom under proper restraints, he seems to suggest through characters such as Leatherstocking and Long Tom Coffin that through proper spirit of humility, man might achieve progress, when he perceives his own insignificance in the vastness of the virgin landscape. Even the idea of the neutral ground becomes in itself an essential factor in the action. For to a considerable degree, the characters derive their mind and thinking in their relation to the living environment.

In *The Last of the Mohicans*, we encounter space "rawly imagined, fearfully projected". In it, Cooper found the lingering wilderness of New York of his childhood days in Ostego, on the Lake Ontario, where he gained "most of his notions of a new country". This Oswego, with its limited population, and political tension with the rumour of war between England and Canada, was in real life terms, the "neutral ground", so veily the symbolic locale of his fiction. Besides, when Cooper visited Lake George in the upper Hudson valley in 1824, he decided that he should write a book on the setting of the Glenn's Fall. Thus, it is as if, he held the falls in his mind's eye. In a way, he created the nature by his imagination by "erasing history" and its "accumulated burden of culture". He created the Glenn's Falls "unburdened by human signs". He "erased" some of the events on Fort William as it was reimagined and reinvented by him. He, reconstructed the past scenes, in the larger American landscape, within "the human psyche" itself. To this extent, by internalizing nature's spirit, he erased its historical landmarks as mere topical details. As wilderness is violently heard - and seen with bizzare interest - with its own language of sounds (of yells, cries shrieks) and eeriness - displacing the "civilized" language of the whites and French, alike, the reader's fears of being lost in the wilderness for ever, are to some extent, related to Cooper's desire to take us into the primordial energy of nature itself. In this novel, though Cooper apparently bases his

fiction, on easily verifiable facts of history, he moves with "a ponderous insistence" towards a (new) vision of history by including the savagery, fact and the symbol of universality of love, demonstrated in the spirit of Nature. At least, in one instance, Cooper's account of the massacre is not without historical justification, as noted by Jonathan Carver, an eye-witness, and as also noted in the *New York Mercury* on August 22, 1757. However, as he frequently places these events against a generalized historical backdrop, he appears more like an observer, than being in it. By implicating Monteclem and by suggesting apparently one set of laws for the Indians and another for the Whiteman, he is merely subsuming well-known historical, divisive realities, of another "kind of history of requiem" for native Americans to tell them the tales of their brethren, disposed. Sadly dispossessed by the whites but always protected by nature, by its fury and savagery and warm fraternity and loyalty, alike these red Indians live by their own timeless history. Responding to the significance of killing the Colt, before the actual massacre, Shirley Samuels sees "a miscegenation between nature and culture". For, according to one of the legends, Cooper may be drawing on, the Lenni-Lenape myth, about the origin of human beings, involves a hunter encountering and killing a deer and returning to the people with its meat, who will share it. Then, all the members of the race follow the hunter into the world. This pursuit of the culture is accomplished by the pursuit and consumption of the natural. Thus, the killing and eating of the animal explicitly leads the hunter to a sort of nature worship, a worship of the Mother Earth.

Thus, finally, to round off the debate of Cooper's moral vision in both his social novels and the *Leatherstocking Tales*, the question of the content of his moral vision arises. Connecting the moral concerns in both the realms, in the contemporary American society and the *Leatherstocking Tales*, is the image of a Christian gentleman, representing the standard moral behaviour. Cooper, without anticipating the upheavals of civil war and industrialization that were to transform the American society, firmly adhered to a stable, agrarian social order, ruled by the landed gentleman who, properly schooled and with leisure to study and learn, would himself set a shining example for the rest of the society to follow. He would define the moral values and set the virtuous standards in all walks of life, by himself leading others by example, for others to emulate him. Though he is not an aristocrat, he draws his political power from his moral values he cherishes and follows. He has political power in preference to other people who might be having more education and wealth. Trained in their education and practised in their moral virtues, they are the ideal gentlemen of society. Thus, the ultimate aim of Cooper is to set up moral standards in his social novels through his ideal characters, as Natty Bumppo, Uncas, Judge Temple and Hetty. This is the main import of his imagination, to set up universal moral standards and social order through his ideal personages. This is his contribution to the American character of the nineteenth century.

5.4 LET US SUM UP

Thus, we have seen that Cooper's imagination all along, from his first work in *The Spy* to his last work in the *Deerslayer*, is instructed by a particular moral vision, that is, a Christian way of life. These moral values are focussed through the character of a Christian gentleman, who is generally the protagonist. He plays a pivotal role in rallying the society in achieving all-round welfare. Collective goodness is his goal. The *Leatherstocking* hero, in his own unique ways, though without reformative zeal, is a shining example of these "essential" values of the Christianity, though he consciously believes that he is a man without a holy cross. Thus, Cooper's creative imagination is implicitly moralistic, as it is the case with all great masters of the world.

5.5 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the Cooper's moral concern in his social novels.
2. How does the landscape evoke the feelings of piety in his Leatherstocking tales?
3. Discuss Cooper's moral vision in his canon.

5.6 SUGGESTED READING

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

The term 'naturalist' is commonly applied to the generation of writers, men like Frank Norris and Theodore Dreiser, whose work began to appear in the late 1890s and early 1900s. There is, however, no clear-cut chronological division between the American naturalists and the American realists. Norris' *McTeague* appeared before Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*, and Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* before James' *The Ambassadors*. Nor is there any rigid critical distinction between the two schools. Although the naturalists often liked to present themselves as rebels and pioneers, they were in many ways the logical and inevitable successors to the earlier generation of realists.

Like many of the realists and naturalists, Dreiser was deeply impressed by scientific thought, especially the work of Huxley and Spencer. He aims, in fact, to give his fiction the precision of a scientific statement. Its view of society or of people would be true and completely objective. To this end, rather like the British writer, Thomas Hardy, Dreiser developed several quasi-scientific theories of his own. The most important was the theory of 'Chemisms' essentially ruling passions or forces that govern human conduct, like sexual desire or greed. These are frequently invoked in his novels to explain the characters' conduct and to shape the progress of the story.

In a sense 'An American Tragedy' the title of one of Dreiser's later novels, would also be appropriate for *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser's ability to portray the unpleasant realities of American life in the 1890s accounts for no small part of the book's success. He skillfully conveys the atmosphere of various parts of America by piling up a series of small details; in fact, his use of these lists has reminded many readers of the poet Walt Whitman.

Despite its stylistic flaws, the novel remains a powerful document. Probably one reason for its success is that Dreiser, who spent so much of his own life struggling to attain money and status, could identify with all three of the major characters.

My dear student! Enjoy reading the novel, *Sister Carrie*, and this block of analysis of the masterpiece.

Good luck to you!

UNIT 1 THE LITERARY CONTEXT

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 The Changing America
- 1.2 The Literary Context of Theodore Dreiser
- 1.3 Naturalism: The European Legacy
- 1.4 American Naturalism
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Questions
- 1.7 Suggestions for Further Reading

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will discuss the social and political situation in America at the turn of the twentieth century. The significance of Theodore Dreiser lies in the fact that he captured the inner conflicts of American society at a time when the modern America was being shaped. He also invented a new idiom to narrate the nature of this emergent reality. To fully comprehend his achievement it is necessary to know the socio-political context that produced him. Since he was influenced by European naturalism its legacy will have to be analysed briefly. The major voices in American fiction before Dreiser also merit attention. Dreiser obviously learnt many things from them. Dreiser's contribution as a novelist will have to be assessed against the prevailing traditions in American literature.

1.1 THE CHANGING AMERICA

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed major transformation in every aspect of American life. From a predominantly agrarian country America turned into a major industrial power. Large-scale urbanization changed the basic structure of American society. The population increased from 23 million in 1850 to 76 million in 1900. It was a period of massive commercial expansion. Factories sprang up in urban areas, particularly in the North which was getting heavily industrialized. Railroads that linked various parts of the country opened up new modes of transport and communication. All this meant new opportunities and possibilities. America was still the New World which attracted several migrants from outside, particularly Europe.

The civil war that happened between 1861 and 1865 was a turning point in American history. America was divided into two camps on the question of slavery. While the Northern States (Union) opposed slavery, the Southern seceded states (Confederacy) justified it. Several factors such as regional conflicts, the moral indignation aroused by those who wanted the abolition of slavery ("abolitionists"), and disagreements regarding federal control of states' rights contributed towards the civil war. Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1862 ended slavery but the Civil War dragged on for three more years till the seceded Southern States conceded defeat. The Union victory was tinged with grief as President Lincoln was assassinated on 14 April, 1865. The Civil War has had a deep impact on the psyche of American nation. The South had to come to terms with its defeat while the country as a whole had to suffer the deaths of more Americans than in any other war. After the abolition of their slavery, the Afro-Americans entered a new phase of their history. The period between 1866 and 1877 is known as the period of Reconstruction when the South ravaged by the Civil War was brought under the federal control and steps were taken to ensure

civil rights for the blacks. However, the racial tensions continued to plague American nation.

The massive industrialization that went on throughout the 19th century altered the social structure of America completely. Clear divisions between the rich and the poor, the Whites and the Blacks, the industrialized North and the Agrarian South became visible now. The great expansion of American nation during the period between 1810 and 1865 had left a trail of violence in its wake. The Native American Indians were removed from their land forcibly, and on many occasions, exterminated. Slavery spread from Virginia to Texas deepening the racial divisions in the country. With the advance of market capitalism the household economy characteristic of an agrarian society went into decline. American psyche had to come to terms with the violence and guilt engendered by these events. It has been argued that the growth of evangelical religion was a reaction to the deep-rooted anxiety that plagued American nation during its formative period. Evangelical religion gave rise to several reform movements and also led to antislavery sentiments.

The developments in socio-political field have their impact on intellectual domain. The remarkable expansion of the public forum is reflected in the spread of the print media. The number of magazines increased from 100 in 1825 to 600 in 1850. Commenting on the growing popularity of newspapers C.F. Briggs remarked in his *Broadway Journal* in 1845 that 'nine-tenths of the population read nothing else'. By 1833 there were three times as many newspapers being published in the United States as in France or England. Through this impressive reach of the print medium a new sense of belonging was created in the reading community which comprised of workers, women, children, farmers and professionals from various fields. Issues of public interest found articulation in the powerful medium of the newspaper which now helped the people to come together and formulate their views.

The North and the South did not agree on many issues because of their separate histories and social structures. Garrison's *Liberator*, a journal which appeared first on January 1, 1831, soon became a platform for those who argued in favour of the abolition of slavery. By the 1850s the North-South divide on the question of slavery was deepening into a major conflict. The prose writings of this period such as diaries, letters and newspaper articles present the picture of a divided nation. It was during this period of American history that the myth of a lazy, decadent and barbaric South was born. As opposed to it, North was civilized, cultured, enterprising and vigorous. This stereotype of a benign North and an evil South has played a significant role in narrating the American nation. The South was identified with the Blacks. Charles Eliot Norton referred to the South as "transatlantic Africa". The Northerners saw both the White masters and Black slaves in the American South as black. The North was "progressive" while the South was "barbarous". These cultural stereotypes were reinforced during the middle part of the 19th century through historical narratives, travelogues and fictional works.

As we move from the first half of the 19th century to its second half, we find major changes in the status of writing and writers. In the next section we would briefly discuss the group of authors described as Transcendentalists. Here it may be mentioned that this group of authors who rose into prominence in the 1830s and 1840s still wrote in the shadow of English romanticism. In the early 19th century literary writing is not a fully institutionalised activity in America. Publishing houses and literary magazines which help authors to live on writing are yet to be founded on a large-scale. Of all American writers only one, James Fenimore Cooper, was able to make a living by writing prior to 1850. Authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) and Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) did not enjoy wide readership, *initially*. The authors were not clear whom they were addressing. Hence a Walt Whitman chooses to address everyone while an Emily Dickinson addresses none in particular.

We find a complete transformation in the cultural scene in the post-Civil War period. American authors are in demand now. Best-selling women authors such as Susan Warner and Maria Cummins have a large readership. Literary periodicals such as *Harper's Monthly*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *The Century* enjoy wide circulation. The mainstream literary culture that now gets defined has been described as genteel. It has its roots in the native Protestant culture. It shapes the literary sensibility of the age. Through schools and libraries it gets disseminated to a larger audience. The American classics become well-established in the minds of a large population, laying the foundation for a coherent national literary culture. This literary culture allowed writers respectability and ensured their security and survival. Authors like Mark Twain (1835-1910), William Dean Howells (1837-1920) and Henry James (1843-1916) were the products of this environment. American realism of the late 19th century is the achievement of this high culture of letters. Three of its best known texts - Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, James's *The Bostonians* and Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* were all published in *The Century* in 1884 and 1885.

Even as the values of this literary high culture were getting transmitted through various organs of the cultural establishment the processes of capitalist industrial development was transforming every aspect of American life. Its impact on the cultural life of the country can be seen in the rise of a new bunch of commercial magazines. In the late 1880s and early 1890s magazines such as *Lady's Home Journal*, *Munsey's*, *McClure's Magazine* and *Cosmopolitan* became even more popular than the earlier group of literary magazines. Since they accepted advertisements, they were cheaper and made more profits. Such magazines became a medium for verbal and visual entertainment which in turn helped the manufacturers gain access to the attention of a wide readership. Here we can see the beginning of a popular domain of culture which is different from the elitist domain of culture we found above. Both were trying to control the reading habits of the population at large and influence their cultural values.

By the 1890s the cultural scene has become more complex. The older literary establishment has become more reactionary and stubborn. The commercial, popular culture has risen in stature and has become a viable alternative for the elitist culture. An author like Theodore Dreiser was made possible by the culture of the popular press. It was Chicago's popular newspapers which helped him establish himself as a writer. Throughout his life Dreiser was associated with the commercial, popular press as a reporter, a columnist or editor. He wrote feature articles for such popular, commercial journals as *Ainslee's*, *Demorest's*, and *Success*. Later he became managing editor of *The Delineator*, a fashion-pattern magazine. It will be shown later that Dreiser's major works were influenced by the classics of the 19th century. But we have to bear in mind the fact that his imagination and mental world were also influenced by the environment of his daily work.

1.2 THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF THEODORE DREISER

In the last section we saw the political and cultural scene in America during the 19th century. In this section we shall discuss the literary context of Theodore Dreiser. We shall trace the evolution of American literature through its major phases in the 19th century, with special reference to fiction. The broad outline of American Renaissance which will emerge in this discussion will help us understand its major achievements. The search for a well-defined American identity is a recurring theme in the writings of the century. What is described as 'American Renaissance' is the emergence of a national literature which examines American experience from various points of view.

In the place of British models, American modes of thought and expression are evolved and perfected during this time.

The transcendentalists provide a good example of this trend. They re-interpreted the British Romanticism in American context. Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Harvard-educated Unitarian minister and Henry David Thoreau, his close associate were the major exponents of transcendental ways of thinking. They believed in the primacy of intuition and imagination. The Romantic idea of the artist as a prophetic seer is central to their concept of the world and art. For them the inspired artist is a greater source of spiritual vision than the priest or the church. They challenged the prevailing orthodoxies in religion and society. There is a strong reformist element in the idealism of their philosophy. Their assertion of intuitive understanding owes much to the German ideas of Kant and English Romantic poetry. Truth is accessible to every individual who communes with his own inner spirit. The liberating aspects of transcendentalist thinking can be seen in the renewed efforts for the abolition of slavery. In "American Scholar" Emerson declared that America should look within, and not depend on Europe for inspiration. In "Self-Reliance" Emerson declares his faith in the uniqueness of each individual. He who conforms to the given norms of the society will never create anything new. Emerson advocates non-conformism and individualism. Henry David Thoreau put into practice many of the ideas propagated by Emerson. Thoreau's *Walden* is an account of his secluded life in the words by the Walden Pond, supporting himself without any assistance from the outside world. Thoreau strongly disapproves of the materialistic values which were gaining wide currency in American society. Thoreau feels that human progress should not be measured in terms of material comforts or prosperity. He is also against excessive control of social life by the government. His essay, "Civil Disobedience" is a landmark in the American thought of the 19th century.

The achievements of the transcendentalists are primarily in non-fictional prose and lyric poetry. Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) who discovered the structure and form of the modern short story is a major figure of the first half of the 19th century. His aesthetic theory stresses the idea of beauty. He believes that the beautiful has a universal appeal. According to him a sense of the Beautiful issues from the human instinct for harmonious perfection. The intensity and elevation of poetic style has an impact on the emotions of the reader. Poe's aesthetic of taste and beauty had a great influence on the French symbolists later. Here it may be noted that American writers like Hawthorne were also deeply influenced by him.

When we examine the development of the 19th century American literature we are struck by the fact that despite the general mood of optimism and the American emphasis on action and success, there is a brooding sense of agony and evil in the major writers of the 19th century. This can be seen in Hawthorne, Melville, Poe and Mark Twain. Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) was a friend of Emerson but was not a transcendentalist. His best known novel, *The Scarlet Letter* tells the story of sin, and retribution. Hester who commits adultery refuses to name her accomplice, Dimmesdale, a priest, in public. The novel portrays the undercurrents of desire, guilt and remorse that torment the main characters. It has been observed that Hawthorne has portrayed a liberated woman in Hester. The novel has also been read as a moral allegory representing the conflict between good and evil. Hawthorne described his novels as romances. Making a distinction between the novel and romances. Hawthorne held that the novel aims at "a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience", while the romance allows greater room for deviation from realistic details.

Herman Melville merits attention for his contribution to American fiction. He was born in a middle class family in New York. He worked as a sailor in several ships and undertook some adventurous journeys. All these experiences found their way into the books he wrote in 1840s. Among his best known works are *Typee* (1846), *Red Burn* (1849), *White Jacket* (1850) and *Moby Dick* (1851). He was a close friend of

Hawthorne and in Hawthorne he found the same concern with the questions of evil and retribution as he had found in Shakespeare. *Moby Dick* which is now recognised as an American classic, explores the mystery of human mind with profound insight. Ishmael's quest is for his own identity. In Ahab we have one of the most mysterious characters in American fiction. Ahab is obsessed with the white whale which he pursues with an animal-like single-mindedness. The thematic organisation of *Moby Dick* shows that Melville was trying to exorcise the Ahabian element in himself and his culture by giving it full expression. The presence of Ishmael gives it a rational perspective. Melville's fiction is notable for the menacing presence of evil it communicates. His psychological intensity makes his narratives parables on some of the basic conflicts in human life.

Mark Twain whose real name was Samuel Clemens had a varied career as an apprentice printer, river pilot, journalist, editor and publisher. He is remembered for his episodic narratives, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), *Life on the Mississippi* (1883) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* which are set against the great river of Mississippi. His travelogue *The Innocents Abroad* was greatly popular. During his life he was greatly acclaimed as a public speaker and newspaper columnist. In his novels he made use of rustic speech in all its local colour. He portrayed his characters through their picturesque local dialects. His novels could be read as a theatre of varied voices that capture the essence of their ordinary lives. The great Mississippi river becomes a central symbol in his major novels, suggesting the vastness and mystique of nature. His novels have a strong undercurrent of satire as he directs his social criticism at the adult world of greed and folly.

The above-mentioned writers have substantially contributed towards defining the mainstream tradition of American fiction in the 19th century. Thoreau's *Walden*, Melville's *Moby Dick* and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* have in common a deep exploratory tone that investigates the inner life of man. What American fiction gained during the 19th century was the ability to conceive of man as a complex social organism. In the concluding decades of the 19th century realism as a literary mode became popular with several writers. In fact regionalism and realism which overlap in several ways can be traced in many works of the period. In the vernacular writing of Mark Twain, Sarah Orne Jewett and Hamlin Garland, there is consistent treatment of questions of race and class, thus highlighting the historical moment of the author. Both realism and regionalism can be seen as responses to the massive transformations that have changed the social structure of America. By the end of the 19th century, land has become commodified and agrarian values have disappeared. Large-scale migration of people from the rural to urban areas have displaced them both culturally and socially. The complex nature of the emergent reality demanded new modes of expression. In Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser there is a fascination with the city as in Charles Dickens, Feodor Dostoevsky or Emile Zola. The city becomes mysterious because of its economic, social and aesthetic organisations. In the next section we shall discuss the European legacy of realism and naturalism as a preface to Dreiser's texts.

1.3 NATURALISM: THE EUROPEAN LEGACY

In order to appreciate Theodore Dreiser's contribution to American fiction it is necessary to place him in the context of naturalism. Since it is an essentially European literary movement we shall discuss the legacy of European tradition of naturalism in this section. The word 'naturalism' has been used for several centuries to describe various writers ranging from Shakespeare and Rabelais to Byron and Shelley. This only means that the term has been used in the literary contexts to specify various phenomena. In the 18th century, naturalism signified a philosophical system that defined man in purely materialistic terms. It denied the possibility of transcending human existence to any higher metaphysical or divine realm. In the 19th

century art criticism, the word 'naturalist' meant a painter who reproduced an exact replica of natural objects on the canvas. The term entered literary criticism from the field of fine arts. It was Emile Zola who used the term for the first time in the modern sense, in the preface to the second edition of *Therese Raquin* (1867).

It is necessary to distinguish between 'naturalism' and 'realism' for a clearer understanding of these terms. Realistic fiction in the 19th century was considered distinct from romantic fiction. M.H. Abrams notes that "the realist is deliberately selective in his material and prefers the average, the commonplace, and the everyday over the rarer aspects of the contemporary scene". Hence there is a marked preference in realistic fiction for the middle and lower classes, and their struggles in life. It is pertinent to remember that 'realism' was used in the 19th century primarily to refer to a group of writers (Balzac in France, George Eliot in England and William Dean Howells in America) whose works showed some of the tendencies mentioned above. What the practitioners of realism and naturalism have in common is an unwavering faith in the capacity of the written word to represent reality. For both art is basically mimetic. Some critics like Harry Levin and L. Deffoux have argued that naturalism is an intensification of realism. While realism implies a commitment to the mimetic idea of art, naturalism has its own clear social philosophy. According to this philosophy, human actions are determined by two kinds of natural forces namely heredity and environment. Man is acted upon by social and economic forces in the family, class and society he lives in. The following comments by M.H. Abrams will help us understand the attitude of naturalists better:

Zola, and other naturalist writers, such as the Americans Frank Norris, Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser, and James Farrell, try to present their subjects with an objective scientific attitude and with elaborate documentation, often including an almost medical frankness about activities and bodily functions usually unmentioned in earlier literature... The end of the 'naturalistic' novel is usually "tragic" but not, in classical and Elizabethan tragedy, because of a heroic but losing struggle of the individual mind and will against gods, enemies and circumstance. The protagonist of the naturalist plot, a pawn to multiple compulsions, merely disintegrates, or is wiped out.

This is a broad generalisation but will help us understand the general direction in which a naturalistic novel moves. Here it may be added that 'naturalism' is a term used in the context of fictional works while 'realism' may be used to characterise whole or parts of a poem or a play.

The emergence of Naturalism has been variously traced to the impact of industrialisation on human consciousness, the effect of the newly established sciences and their empirical attitude to external reality. As we have seen above, the process of industrialisation ushered in a new social structure in the Western world. As it brought prosperity on an unprecedented scale, it also subjected millions of urban workers to subhuman existence. Naturalist writers depicted the plight of the urban working class in their fictional works. Zola's *Germinal* and Hauptmann's *Die Weber* describe scenes from workers' strike. In Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* we shall come across a similar scene.

Naturalism can also be understood as a reaction to Romanticism. Naturalists investigated the objective world of phenomena and described it in minute detail based on their observations. The development of the scientific method in the 19th century seems to have influenced their world-view. Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) had strongly argued that man had evolved from lower forms of animals. The naturalists were greatly influenced by the Darwinian concept of man as a creature shaped by the forces of environment and heredity. R. Chase has observed: "The protagonist of a naturalistic novel is at the mercy of circumstances rather than of himself, indeed he often seems to have no self". One of the criticisms directed against

naturalism as a literary movement is that its concept of man is highly limited as it does not recognise any metaphysical or transcendental potential in man.

Naturalism was not a single, unified movement with uniform characteristics. Each country had its own separate features with writers in the same group adhering to their own separate styles of writing. It flourished in France in the 1870s and early 1880s while it made its appearance in England in the late 1890s and lasted well into the 20th century. In America it enjoyed a long period of patronage from the late 19th century to the 1930s. In the next section we would look at American naturalism in greater detail.

Naturalism originated in France. Balzac, Stendhal and Flaubert are often considered pioneers of this movement. In their choice of commonplace themes, stress on heredity and environment and objective depiction of social life, they were closer to naturalists. However, it was Emile Zola (1840-1902) who came to be identified with Naturalism. Among his close associates were Paul Alexis (1847-1901), Henry Cead (1851-1924), Leon Hennique (1851-1935), Joris-Karl Huysmans (1848-1907) and Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893). In depicting the darker side of everyday life they were reacting to the sentimentality of the Romantics. Zola was accused of immorality in his novels but he claimed his novels to be scientific studies of human society and as such beyond the question of immorality. Naturalists argued that they were natural in their approach as they were working like doctors or scientists who studied an object dispassionately. It was in the preface to *Therese Raquin* that Zola presented his views on naturalism as a literary movement. His arguments were repeated with greater emphasis on *Le Roman Experimental*. Here he views naturalism as an attempt to internalise the methodology of sciences in the study of man. He says: "The study of abstract, metaphysical man is replaced by the study of natural man, subject to physico-chemical laws and determined by the effects of his milieu". Naturalists came in for harsh criticism for their exaggerated emphasis on the banal aspects of reality. Writers like Maupassant and Huysmans moved away from the Naturalists group by the 1890s.

In England, there was no Naturalist movement. In *Mimesis*, Auerbach has argued that the mainstream literary tradition of England has a strong undercurrent of realism. The great novelists of 19th century England among whom are Jane Austen, Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontes, Trollope, George Eliot, are all realists. This wide acceptance of realism seems to have prevented the emergence of a well-defined Naturalist movement in England. However, a few minor writers such as Gissing, George Moore, Morrison and Whiteing produced novels which closely followed the continental models of Zola and Flaubert. These works never won wide acclaim which seems to have dampened the interests of the readers and writers in this movement.

1.4 AMERICAN NATURALISM

In contrast to England where naturalism did not strike roots, America responded to this mode of writing favourably. This may have something to do with the massive socio-economic transformation that changed the country totally during the second half of the 19th century. Such sweeping changes did not take place in England. The victory of the North over the South in the Civil War also meant the defeat of agrarian economy by the forces of industrial capitalism. The new cities that became centres of great economic power concealed vast areas of corruption, squalor and cruelty behind their glitter. The advance of capitalism created a new social order which needed to be described in order to be grasped. Labour disputes, strikes and violence followed economic depression. For those who had migrated to the cities in search of their dreams, this meant widespread disillusionment. Thus, naturalism in American fiction is better understood as a response to the local conditions that developed in the second half of the 20th century.

In America, Naturalism held sway for a longer period. It is possible to speak of two groups of naturalist writers, one succeeding the other. The first group consisting of Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane and Frank Norris were influential during the period from the mid-eighties to the closing years of the 19th century. The second group consists of Theodore Dreiser (1871-1945), Jack London (1876-1916), John Steinbeck (1902-68), Sinclair Lewis (1885-1950), Upton Sinclair (1878-1968) and Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941). The individual writers of these two groups also have marked differences between one another. This gives American naturalism greater range than the French movement. Very often it is indistinguishable from realism. Hence American naturalism of the twentieth century has also been described as the new realism. It may also be added that outstanding poets such as Vachel Lindsay and Carl Sandburg also contributed substantially towards the ideology of naturalism.

We have mentioned in the earlier sections that there were strong regional traditions in American fiction in the 19th century. Bret Harte portrayed the life of the Californian mining camps in his famous book, *The Luck of Roaring Camp*. Joel Chandler Harris wrote about the South in his *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, which contained stories and tales from Negro-life. Mark Twain's fiction brought alive the manners of common people he encountered in daily life. W.D. Howells, as a very influential editor, strongly rejected the tradition of romance and argued in favour of 'Truth and Sanity' in fiction. His own works are well known for their realistic portrayal of life.

Stephen Crane also subscribed to the tenets of realism. Though we have grouped him as one of the first generation naturalists, he was known as a 'veritist' in his own time. Veritism was a creed which asserted an underlying unity between aesthetic and practical life. It held that art is mimetic and great art has its base in the personal experience. His well-known novel *The Red Badge of Courage* is set against the background of American Civil War. The ironic awareness of Henry Fleming about his own cowardice even as he is being feted as a hero imparts this novel a psychological realism which is not seen in American fiction earlier. Here we also note that Crane aims at the articulation of a higher truth through his depiction of reality.

During the 19th century several slave narratives appeared in America. Though all of them do not merit attention, as a group, these narratives are strongly autobiographical and realistic. A book like *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*, published in 1845, with a preface by William Lloyd Garrison, describes in minute detail the dehumanising aspects of slavery in a dispassionate tone. This book may be read as a social document on slavery in America. The relevance of this kind of slave narratives to the history of realism and naturalism needs to be underlined. An Afro-American novel such as *The House Behind the Cedars* by Charles Chestmutt (1858-1932), published in 1900 can be seen as a continuation of the tradition of Afro-American fiction which begins with slave narratives.

The above comment on Afro-American initiatives in the world of fiction is meant to underline the varied sources of realistic and naturalistic traditions for American fiction. In effect, something fundamental about American life gets articulated through these traditions. Hamlin Garland wrote in *Crumbling Idols* (1894) demanding a native literature free from all imitation and distinguished by such "quality of texture and background that it could not have been written in any other place or by any one else than a native". American naturalism was attempting to respond to this call by creating a literature that would represent America in all its complex details even as it searches for a native voice and identity.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit I have focused on the socio-political and cultural situations in America during the 19th century. Dreiser's works can only be understood against the

background of the social transformation taking place in America in the late 19th century. The impact of the civil war, the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation and the rise of a well-defined public sphere have been discussed in this unit in detail. The discussion of Naturalism as a literary movement brings out the nature of literary response to the far-reaching changes in the social and intellectual life of the 19th century.

1.6 QUESTIONS

1. What were the major changes that happened in American society during the 19th century?
2. Examine the socio-political factors that contributed towards the emergence of Naturalism as a literary movement.
3. What do you understand by the term 'American Renaissance'? Outline its major achievements.
4. Show how American literature in the 19th century is engaged in the quest for American nationhood.

1.7 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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UNIT 2 THEODORE DREISER: THE MAN AND THE WRITER

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 The Life of Theodore Dreiser
- 2.2 Dreiser's Major Works: An Overview
- 2.3 The Reception of Dreiser's Works in America
- 2.4 The Writing of *Sister Carrie*
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Questions
- 2.7 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will provide comprehensive information on the life and works of Theodore Dreiser. The emphasis will be on the making of Dreiser's art and vision of life. His complex relationship with his parents and brothers seems to have left a mark on his vision of life. His intellectual interests were determined by the current debates in society and culture. The nature of his reception in America is of relevance as it traces the impact of his ideas on the reading public. *Sister Carrie* came to be appreciated and understood only through decades of debates. We will review his career as a novelist and also comment on his legacy. The story of writing of *Sister Carrie* will prepare us for a close reading of the novel in the next section.

2.1 THE LIFE OF THEODORE DREISER

Theodore Dreiser was born in Sullivan, Indiana, as the ninth of the ten children. Dreiser's father, John Paul Dreiser was a German immigrant who worked as a weaver. He married Sarah Schanab, daughter of a Moravian farmer. John Dreiser raised enough money by working as production manager in a mill to set up a woollen mill of his own. However, tragedy struck the family when the mill was destroyed in a fire. Reduced to penury, the family moved to Terre Haute, where Theodore was born on 27 August 1871. Faced with the task of bringing up ten children – five boys and five girls – John Dreiser found himself drifting from one job to another. They had to constantly move houses, each time to a smaller one, as they could not afford rent. The poverty of his family in the long years of childhood left a deep impression on Dreiser's mind. With father unable to find a regular job, the family lived in constant dread of destitution. Dreiser as a young boy even had to steal coal from railway yards to help the family survive the winter. Dreiser had a clear view of society from the lower end of the social spectrum, at a very young age. In 1871, the family had to split up as they found it was impossible to survive as one large group. Theodore accompanied his mother to Vincennes and then to Sullivan, Indiana.

By the time Theodore was born, his father had already been reduced to an embittered, unsuccessful man. John Dreiser was a devout and conservative Roman Catholic, who would not make any concessions in matters of religion. His children defied him as they found him despotic and ruthless. Theodore has described his father as "a morose and dour figure, forlorn and despondent", and also as a "narrow bigot". It was his father's fanaticism that drove Theodore to atheism and communism later. It was to Theodore's credit that when he portrayed his father in *Jennie Geshardt*, he kept his

bitterness in check. In later years he even came to appreciate him despite their obvious differences in attitudes to life. Theodore was a mother's boy who adored her. She was a strong woman of quiet confidence and strong will who radiated love and cheerfulness. Children became dependent on her as they got increasingly estranged from father, as years went by. Theodore was strongly attached to "the silver tether of her affection, understanding, sweetness, sacrifice". After her death in 1890, he felt lost for years like "a lone barque on a lone sea". The character of Jennie in *Jennie Gerhardt* is considered to be a portrait of his mother as a woman of understanding and sacrifice.

Dreiser's education was erratic as the family moved from town to town. He strongly resented the suffocating atmosphere of the Catholic schools he had to attend in his childhood, at his father's instance. Theodore attended Indiana University for a year, thanks to the generosity of a teacher, Miss Mildred Fielding, who had recognised his talents in high school. He was self-taught, from life and also from his readings. His brother Paul made a name for himself as a writer of popular songs and also a performer. The delinquency of the younger brother, Rome, and the rebellious behaviour of his sisters added to the miseries of the family. At the age of sixteen, Theodore left for Chicago with the six dollars his mother gave him from her hard-earned savings. There he found employment as a dish-washer in a restaurant and then in a large wholesale hardware store. An year at Indiana University at this point only sharpened his awareness of the gulf between the haves and the have-nots. When he returned to Chicago in 1890, he worked as a salesman in a real estate office. With his mother's death in 1891, he became a lonely man drifting in the city of Chicago, doing low-paid jobs of various kinds. They provided him with rich material later for his career as a novelist.

In 1892, Dreiser joined the *Daily Globe*, one of the lowest ranking newspapers in Chicago, as a reporter. For the next decade, he would remain a reporter and an editor, moving from one publication to another. From the *Daily Globe*, he moved to the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat* from where he set out to the East, his destination being New York, through a series of short-lived jobs in cities like Toledo, Cleveland, Buffalo and Pittsburgh, on the way. In New York he was employed by Pulitzer's *World* on a temporary basis. His brother Paul who had made a name for himself in the field of musical comedy helped him get the post of editor in *Ev'ry Month*, a new music periodical. In 1898 he married Sara White whom he had first met in 1893. This marriage was unhappy. Dreiser separated permanently from her in 1909, but never sought a divorce. In his life Dreiser carried on affairs with several women, confirming his principle that a man is primarily driven by his sexual drive. He spent the summer of 1899 in Arthur Henry's home where, at the insistent request of his friend, he began writing fiction seriously. He began writing *Sister Carrie* without any clear idea of what he was going to write about.

When Dreiser submitted his first novel to Double Day, Page & Co., it was strongly recommended for publication by Frank Norris. However the publisher Doubleday developed cold feet when his wife conveyed her distaste for it, after reading the manuscript. Finally, he brought it out, fearing a law suit, with great reluctance and did nothing to promote the book. Through the efforts of Frank Norris the book received critical attention but it was not distributed. Dreiser suffered a mental breakdown and had to be sent to a "rest camp" for treatment. After this bitter experience he did not publish a novel for more than ten years. He became an influential editor in magazine journalism, editing such popular journals as *Smith's Magazine*, the *Broadway Magazine* and the *Delienator*.

After resigning from the Butterick organisation in 1910, Dreiser turned to writing fiction full-time. In quick succession *Jennie Gerhardt* (1911) and *The Financier* (1912) were published to much critical acclaim. *The Financier*, *The Titan* (1914) and *The Stoic* (1947) form a trilogy. By now, Dreiser was separated from his wife. The publication of *The Genius* (1915) established his reputation as one of the major

novelists of America. It was an autobiographical work that investigated the sources of his own creativity and the crisis it precipitated. During this period he met and fell in love with Helen Richardson, whom he would eventually marry in 1944 after the death of his first wife in 1942. *An American Tragedy* published in 1925 was a massive volume of 840 pages chronicling the life of an American boy from birth to death. The twenties were the decades of great achievements and also of frustrations. When *An American Tragedy* did not receive Pulitzer prize and also when Sinclair Lewis was chosen for the Nobel Prize in 1930, Dreiser felt deep pangs of disappointment. Now he devoted all his energy to the completion of *The Bulwark* and *The Stoic* both of which came out posthumously. He died in Hollywood, California on 28 December 1945.

2.2 DREISER'S MAJOR WORKS: AN OVERVIEW

Apart from novels, Dreiser has written stories, plays, poetry, anthropological works, a travelogue and several occasional, non-fictional pieces for periodicals. Of these the eight novels he wrote form the basis of his reputation as an American writer. These novels capture something essential about American life in the opening decades of this century. His sharp observations of the manners and mind-set of people, the portrayal of conflicts between various classes and the depiction of complications that arise out of man-woman relationships make his novels relevant even today for those interested in American society and culture. *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* have attained the status of classics in American fiction. We shall briefly review his works here so that you have a clear picture of his *oeuvre* as a writer. We shall, of course, not discuss *Sister Carrie* here as it will be extensively analysed in later units.

Jennie Gerhardt is a study in human character that Dreiser distilled from his own observations of life around him. In his sisters and mother Dreiser had found qualities of compassion, gentleness, a yielding softness and generosity which made them highly vulnerable in ordinary life. The novel is mostly based on his own family. William Gerhardt resembles his orthodox, ill-tempered father. When Jennie is seduced by Senator Brander, taking advantage of her poverty, William drives her out of the family home. Later Jennie meets Lester Kane, a rich man of great social standing, now in his mid-thirties, at the house of the Brace Bridges where she works as a maid. Lester takes an immediately liking for Jennie. Lester and Jane move to New York where, to the horror of his family and friends, they set up their home. Lester is ready to pay the price for breaking the social code of class privileges. But when, at his father's death his will threatens to disinherit him of his due share in the ancestral property, Lester deserts Jennie despite his strong feelings of guilt. Jennie not only forgives Lester but is able to grasp the dynamics of social and personal conflicts that make such decisions imperative. A dying Lester sends for her and she keeps him company knowing well that she will always be an outsider in his world. The novel is notable for the insights it provides into the subtleties of human character. Jennie rises above her personal tragedies to achieve a philosophical attitude to life as a whole, thus escaping from the disintegration of her personality. In the predatory world of commercial capitalism, she sustains the reader's faith in goodness and love.

In *Jennie Gerhardt* a remorse-stricken Lester once tells Jennie:

it isn't myself that's important in this transaction [that is, life itself] apparently; the individual doesn't count much in the situation. I don't know whether you see what I'm driving at, but all of us are more or less pawns. We're moved about like chessmen by circumstances over which we have no control.

Lester's words express a basic line of thought in Dreiser's fiction. In his trilogy which was meant to be a *Trilogy of Desire*, based on the life of Charles T. Yerkes.

Dreiser traced the inner world of a superhuman figure whose "shark-like" intensity sets him apart from other common people. The financier interested Dreiser as a character because he saw him as one of the lucky few Nature has favoured. The world of money and power intrigued Dreiser. Cowperwood is endowed with all physical and mental qualities that make him a natural leader. In the competitive world of big business what mattered was will power and ruthlessness. In the Trilogy Dreiser also wanted to prove that not even these superhuman figures could outwit nature. Nature uses them and discards them when their function is over. In the larger scheme of things all human beings turn out to be victims.

The trilogy is notable for Dreiser's use of facts in fiction. He researched his novel extensively by ransacking newspaper files, interviewing people and visiting places that figure in the narrative. The parallels between the real life of Charles Yerkes and the fictitious figure of Cowperwood are kept throughout the narrative to minute details. The social vision that makes the narrative possible is Dreiser's own contribution. He gives us insights into the manner in which the huge financial empire in the modern capitalist society works. Dreiser has said that his purpose was "to draw man as I see him - And when I get through with him he'll stand there, unidealised and uncursed for you... to take and judge according to your own lights and blindness and attitude towards life."

"The Genius" (1915) is considered another autobiographical novel where the central character is a self-portrait of Dreiser himself. It is one of his weaker novels as he failed to objectify his personal life sufficiently. Eugene Tennyson Wilta is a painter in the novel but embodies the aspirations and disillusionments of Dreiser. His search for perfect beauty leaves him perennially dissatisfied. He oscillates between peaks of creative energy and depths of depression. The first part of the novel, "Youth" resembles Dreiser's own early life. In the second book, "Struggle" we see his unhappy married life with Angela Blue. Dreiser draws heavily on his own frustrating marriage with Sallie White. Eugene's pursuit of love outside marriage complicates his personal life. He is torn between the conflicting pressures of art and fame. Eugene has a mental break-down and spends several months in an asylum before he regains mental health. After this dark period, he gets a job in an advertising agency. A meteoric rise in the world of fame and wealth follows. In the third book "Revolt" we see his infatuation for Suzanne Dale, the 18-year daughter of a friend of his employers. At the very moment when he feels he is at the height of his powers, when everything he wanted appeared within reach, things begin to go wrong. Eugene loses both his wife and lover: his wife dies in child-birth and his lover leaves him. He loses money he has invested in business. Eugene comes out of the illusory world he lives in, and returns to his art in a mood of philosophic open-mindedness. Once again Dreiser sees the individual's heroic struggles come to nothing, in a world where life is regulated according to the mysterious rules of nature. "The Genius" is not a fully accomplished piece of art as it suffers from several structural flaws. Still it carries the stamp of Dreiser's social vision.

An American Tragedy (1925) is still rated as one of the best American novels to be written in the 20th century. The novel is based on a real life incident in which a young man named Chester Gillette drowns his pregnant lover, Grace Brown as he found her a barrier to his progress in the world. From his years in the newspaper office, Dreiser had heard of several such incidents. Dreiser took almost three years to write the novel. He traced the life of Clyde Griffith, from birth to death in minute detail. The novel, divided into three parts, is a voluminous 830 pages. It was not just a fictionalised version of a crime, but a detailed sociological investigation of the seamy side of the American dream. Dreiser had visited every locale associated with the original crime and even gained entry to the death row in the jail disguised as a journalist to reproduce in graphic detail the environment of the story. As a boy, Clyde wanted to escape desperately from the squalor of his surroundings which was made even more unbearable by the religious orthodoxy of his parents. While drifting from one low-paid job to the other he became aware of the gulf between the Christian

mission of his parents and the glittering world of luxury outside. In Chicago he becomes acutely aware of his low social status. His secret affair with Roberta Alden results in her pregnancy. Meanwhile, he has become infatuated with Sandra Finchley, who moves in the affluent sections of the society due to her upper class origin. Sandra wakes him up to the possibilities of upper class life. Now he finds Roberta an obstacle on his path to the dream world of luxury and power. Dreiser's treatment of the crime is sensitive to the sociological and psychological aspects of the event. The social environment that has shaped Clyde leaves him very little option. When Roberta drowns in the lake, Clyde makes a vain attempt to convince himself that she has died in an accident in which he has no part. The third part of the book deals with the capture, trial and execution of Clyde Griffith. The conflict between the material and the spiritual and the gulf between the personal aspirations and the social constraints have never been demonstrated earlier in an American novel with such telling effect. Clyde Griffith's tragedy becomes an 'American' tragedy because it brings out the moral failures of America as a nation and a society.

The Bulwark (1946), the last novel Dreiser completed, is about Solon Barnes, a Quaker. Dreiser's interest in Quakerism was largely due its innate idealism in a grossly materialistic society. Such idealist attitudes are not easy to sustain in the material world of temptations. Solon Barnes is constantly tormented by guilt even as he grows rich in a world where austerity and sacrifice have no place. The transactions in which he makes huge profits cause him mental agony as he has no will to cut himself off from such a world. His attempt to raise his children in an insular world untouched by the temptation of wealth and luxury ends in disaster. In tracing the varied careers of Solon's five children, Dreiser demonstrates once again that it is the social environment combined with the innate "chemisms" of an individual that determines his course of life. While in *An American Tragedy* Dreiser emphasised the role of childhood in the shaping of one's personality here he seems to suggest that the influence of home environment is not crucial. Nature finally regulates all changes in individual and society.

2.3 THE RECEPTION OF DREISER'S WORKS IN AMERICA

It was with the publication of *An American Tragedy* that Dreiser became a household name in America. When he wrote his first novel, *Sister Carrie*, he was unsure of its reception. When it was rejected by Harper and Brothers, he gave it to Doubleday, Page and Company. Frank Doubleday asked the young novelist Frank Norris, a reader for the firm, to comment on the book. He was greatly impressed by the novel and strongly recommended its publication. However, on reading the proof, Mrs. Doubleday, who was a social worker, found the book immoral and unworthy of publication. When the firm's attempt to stop its publication failed, they refused to circulate and promote the book. Of the 1008 copies printed, only 465 copies were sold despite favourable reviews by many critics. However, when the book was brought out in England by Heinemann, 1500 copies were sold out in no time. In 1907, at the instance of Dreiser, the firm of B.W. Dodge reissued *Sister Carrie*, to an enthusiastic reception. We shall have more to say on the factors that contributed towards the divided opinion on *Sister Carrie*. Here it is to be noted that the initial resistance to its reception was due to the novelty of its subject matter and the naturalism of its narrative style.

Jennie Gerhardt and the first two novels of *A Trilogy of Desire* were acclaimed by critics and they established Dreiser as one of the major American novelists. The publication of *The Titan* has an eventful history. Harper's withdrew it from publication after printing it. Dreiser could have invoked the contract and asked them to bring it out, but he wanted a better publisher who would not resort to censoring the

book. After being refused by some of the most prestigious publishers of America, the book was finally published by John Lane and Company. Its publication, however, evoked no protest.

The "Genius", Dreiser's autobiographical novel dealing with the artist's quest, was welcomed by critics who also warned in their reviews that the book might not find favour with the conservative sections of the readership. While some reviewers compared Dreiser to Dostoevski and Tolstoy, some others denounced the novel as immoral. After a full year of its publication, in 1916, the New York Society for the Suppression of Voice accused the book of obscenity and blasphemy. The book was removed from most book stores in Cincinnati and in New York the publisher withdrew the book temporarily. What followed was a long drawn-out struggle against the blatant censor of a literary publication which culminated in a court case. A panel of five judges, despite 478 signatures from leading American writers in support of the book, refused to grant permission for the re-issue of the book. The book was finally republished five years later by Horace Liveright. This incident alerted American intellectuals to the real danger of state intervention in the domain of writing. The question of writer's freedom was debated in public extensively and helped mobilise opinion against suppression of literary works.

It was mentioned above that Dreiser established himself as a major American novelist with the publication of *An American Tragedy*. The reception of *An American Tragedy* also shows how much America has changed between 1900 and 1925. While *Sister Carrie* and *The "Genius"* faced censor and suppression, *An American Tragedy* was greeted with unanimous acclaim. H.G. Wells described the book as "one of the very greatest novels of the century". J.W. Krutch termed it "the great American novel of our generation". Initially, the book was banned in Boston but this time the verdict of the readers was overwhelmingly in favour of Dreiser. Seven editions came out within a year. The dramatised version was also a great success. Dreiser was paid \$90,000 by Paramount's Famous Players for granting them the rights to make a film version of the book. Dreiser now was a national figure whose comments on any issue were eagerly reported by the press. Publishers were eager to bring out anything he wrote. And in the ensuing years a series of books – poems, memoirs, travelogue, commentary – were published. However, he was greatly disappointed when *An American Tragedy* was not given the Pulitzer Prize for fiction that year. The Swedish Akademy also ignored his claims as a pioneer of naturalism in America when they gave the Nobel Prize to Sinclair Lewis in 1930.

After the death of Dreiser his reputation has only grown. His integrity and compassion as a writer have been recognised. He is one of the few American novelists to expand a clear philosophy of life through his fiction. He is the great narrator of the urban civilization of America. His compassion for the downtrodden has also been recognised as a major factor in his reputation as a novelist.

2.4 THE WRITING OF *SISTER CARRIE*

Since we are making a detailed study of *Sister Carrie* in the coming three sections, it would be instructive to know about its conception and execution. What were the factors that prompted the writing of the book? Dreiser came from an immigrant, working class background and had very little formal education. His formidable talent as a narrator could draw upon the resources of his first hand experience in the streets where he had seen hard days. What makes *Sister Carrie* a compelling narrative is his defiance of prevailing literary tradition which can only be described as "genteel". In an interview given in 1907, Dreiser told Otis Notman:

Well, the critics have not really understood what I was trying to do. Here is a book close to life. It is intended not as a piece of literary craftsmanship, but

as a picture of conditions done as simply and effectively as the English language will permit. To sit up and criticise me for saying 'vest', instead of 'waistcoat', to talk about my splitting the infinitive and using vulgar commonplaces here and there, when the tragedy of a man's life is being displayed, is silly. (Donald Piza, ed., 1970: 475).

Stuart Sherman in an essay in the *Nation*, in 1915 commented that Dreiser's German background prevented him from understanding the finer aspects of the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Dreiser was well aware of the compulsions of the genteel tradition in American literature but deviated from its demands under the pressure of his accumulated experience. As an immigrant's son who had lived in abysmal poverty, Dreiser could see the gulf between the mainstream tradition in American fiction and American reality.

Some of the central episodes in *Sister Carrie* were taken from his personal life. One of Dreiser's sisters had been supported in Chicago by an architect and had then been attracted by the manager of a well-known eating and drinking establishment. By the time she discovered that he was married, their affair had progressed to a level where he was ready to elope with her. He stole fifteen thousand dollars from his employers and then returned most of the money after being stricken with remorse. He, along with Dreiser's sister, settled in New York under an assumed name. It is obvious that Dreiser altered the details to lessen the harshness of reality he had witnessed. When *Sister Carrie* was charged with immorality Dreiser could see that his critics lived in an insular world of make-believe. He commented in a piece titled "True Art Speaks Plainly" published in *Booklover's Magazine*:

Immoral! Immoral! Under this cloak hide the vices of wealth as well as the vast unspoken blackness of poverty and ignorance, and between them must walk the little novelist, choosing neither truth nor beauty, but some half-conceived phase of life that bears no honest relationship to either the whole of nature or to man... The extent of all reality is the realm of the author's pen, and a true picture of life, honestly and reverentially set down, is both moral and artistic whether it offends the conventions or not. (Donald Pizer, ed., p.474).

Dreiser had lived through the scorn and humiliation heaped on his family when his sisters failed to conform to public morality.

It was at the age of sixteen that Dreiser came to Chicago first. F.O. Matthiessen has observed that "in her excited discovery of Chicago, *Carrie* is essentially Dreiser himself". It was impossible to miss the social disparity between the rich and the poor in the teeming city. Dreiser was able to see that poverty is a form of invisible violence that worked through deprivation, exclusion and rejection. In all his novels he dramatised the conflict between the affluent and the downtrodden. *Carrie Meeber*, *Jennie Gerhardt* and *Clyde Griffiths* - all of them are victims of the unequal social structure which reduce them to desperate course of action. At Indiana University, Dreiser had experienced the same exclusion in many ways. This only confirmed his conviction that all modern American institutions have internalised the logic of social inequality.

The field of journalism exposed Dreiser further to the darker sides of American society. It is significant that during his early life, Dreiser mostly worked in small time newspapers and magazines which had only local circulation. This sphere of popular culture had a great influence on Dreiser's mind and art. The newspapers he worked for were careful not to offend the rich and the powerful. While working at the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, his editor asked him not to touch on labour problems. He added: "We don't touch on scandals in high life. The big steel men here just about own the place so we can't... We have to be mighty careful what we say."

While at Indiana University, Dreiser read Darwin and Huxley. At a very crucial stage in his life, he was guided by his reading of Herbert Spencer. He has written:

At this time [i.e. around 1893] I had the good fortune to discover Howley and Tyndall and Herbert Spencer, whose introductory volume to his *Synthetic Philosophy (First Principles)* quite blew me intellectually to bits. Hitherto, until I had read Huxley, I had some lingering filaments of Catholicism trailing about me, faith in the existence of Christ, the soundness of his moral and sociologic deductions, the brotherhood of man. But on reading *Science and Hebrew Tradition* and *Science and Christian Tradition*, and finding both Old and New Testaments to be not compendiums of revealed truth but mere records of religious experiences, and very erroneous at that, and then taking up *First Principles* and discovering that all I deemed substantial... all questioned and dissolved into other and less understandable things, I was completely thrown down in my conceptions of no-conceptions of life. (Dreiser, *A Book About Myself*, p.70).

This intellectual transformation is reflected in the social vision projected by *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser, in late 1890s, is torn between conventional moral philosophy and a scientific, rational philosophy about man's evolutionary nature. In the eighth chapter of the novel Dreiser discusses the problem of choices Carrie faces, in philosophical terms. Dreiser uses fiction as a medium for philosophical speculation about man's role in society and the impact of environment on man.

The first serious advice Dreiser received regarding writing was from H.B. Wandell while Dreiser was working at *Republic*. Wandell introduced Balzac to Dreiser, and also told him: "Write it strong, clear, definite, and remember Zola and Balzac". He read Hardy, Tolstoy and Zola besides Balzac. On his way to New York he had met a young editor in Toledo named Arthur Henry, who, like Dreiser, had literary ambitions. Dreiser had thought of becoming a playwright but it was Arthur Henry who suggested that he should try fiction. When Dreiser settled down in New York, Arthur Henry invited him to come and stay in his house if he needed solitude to write a novel.

Finally Dreiser and Sallie went to Ohio to spend the summer of 1899 with the Henrys. Under Henry's constant prodding, Dreiser wrote a few short stories which were well received. Henry had started work on his first novel and wanted Dreiser to attempt something similar. Thus, at the age of twenty eight, in September 1899, Dreiser wrote on a yellow sheet of paper the words "Sister Carrie", which turned out to be a pioneering work in literary naturalism.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit was meant to familiarise you with the life and works of Dreiser. An outline of his life and an over-view of his works will help you notice the shaping influences on Dreiser's career. He was a product of the American milieu at the turn of the 20th century and a pioneer of the realistic/naturalistic tradition in American fiction. In recounting the nature of resistance his early fictional works met with, we underline the originality of Dreiser's views. It took American society more than twenty five years to recognise and accept him as a major writer. The writing of *Sister Carrie* which marked a turning point in American fiction results from an intellectual breakthrough on Dreiser's part. The nature of these intellectual currents will become more clear in the coming units.

2.6 QUESTIONS

1. Do you consider the immigrant, working class background of Dreiser of crucial significance to the development of Dreiser as an artist? Give your reasons.

2. What are some of the common themes that recur in the novels of Dreiser?
3. Give an account of Dreiser's reception in America. What were the major objections raised against his novels?
4. Discuss the intellectual currents in the late 19th century that shaped the literary sensibility of Dreiser.

2.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

- Aaron, Daniel, *Writers on the Left*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961.
- Gerber, Philip L., *Theodore Dreiser* (Twayne's U.S. Authors Series), New York: Twayne, 1964.
- Dreiser, Helen, *My Life with Dreiser*, Cleveland: World, 1951.
- Lingman, Richard, *Theodore Dreiser: At the Gates of the City, 1871-1907*, New York: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1986.
- Elias, Robert H., *Theodore Dreiser: Apostle of Nature*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1949.
- Hoffman, Frederick J., *The Twenties*, New York: Viking, 1955.
- MacNiessen, F.O., *Theodore Dreiser*, New York: William Sloane Associates, 1951.

UNIT 3 *SISTER CARRIE*: A CRITICAL SUMMARY

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Chapters 1 to 9 of *Sister Carrie*
- 3.2 Chapters 10 to 19
- 3.3 Chapters 20 to 28
- 3.4 Chapters 29 to 38
- 3.5 Chapters 39 to 47
- 3.6 The Chronology of *Sister Carrie*
- 3.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.8 Questions
- 3.9 Suggestion for Further Reading

3.0 OBJECTIVES

You will have to closely read the text of *Sister Carrie* more than once to master its thematic and stylistic intricacies. This unit is meant to guide you in the close reading. It will emphasise the progression of the narrative through various stages. The multiple levels of action and their ideological implications will be stressed. By the end of the unit you should be able to grasp the organisation of the plot and its finer points of characterisation, description, dramatisation, elaboration and focalisation. All the references to the page numbers in the text are to the Signet Classic edition of *Sister Carrie* published by the New American Library.

3.1 CHAPTERS 1 TO 9 OF *SISTER CARRIE*

The opening paragraph firmly establishes the time and place of the narrative. Caroline Meeber is leaving for Chicago in search of better prospects in life. She is 18 years old, intelligent but timid, "full of the illusions of ignorance and youth". It is August, 1889. Dreiser follows his protagonist closely and documents both her inner and outer worlds. But the emphasis is on the details of the outer world which now start piling up, as Caroline begins her journey. The city's possible effect on a novice like Carrie could be benign or disastrous because the city 'has its cunning viles'. On board the train, Chas H. Drouet, a travelling salesman makes her acquaintance. With ironical straight forwardness, Dreiser introduces this character with the words: "Lest this order of individual should permanently pass, let me put down some of the most striking characteristics of his most successful manner and method" (p.10). It is obvious that Dreiser is presenting a social type from the newly emergent urban society which believes more in appearances than meaningful existence. 'The philosophy of clothes' (p.10) is a recurring metaphor in the novel.

In her sister's flat in Chicago Carrie feels the 'drag of a lean and narrow life', mired in poverty and conservation. She realises the urgent need to secure employment. The very next day she goes round the busy commercial region of the city looking for a job only to feel intimidated by the vastness and complexity of Chicago city.

Carrie gets employed in a shoe factory for four and a half dollars a week. Her work was monotonous and tiresome but she had no choice. In the fourth chapter Dreiser gives us a glimpse of the human assembly line that functioned like machines under the most trying environment, in the manufacturing industries. The fifth chapter that

follows provides a complete contrast in that it takes us into the upper class world of Hurstwood and Drouet. When Drouet makes a casual mention of Carrie ("I struck a little peach coming in on the train tonight") in his conversation with Hurstwood, we are being prepared by the novelist for the inevitable tragedy that will befall Carrie in Chicago. There is nothing in the novel at this stage that suggests that Carrie will emerge a survivor in the predatory culture of the city. In her sister's flat Carrie is aware of her isolation and her own incompatibility with the views of Hanson and Minnie. In his characteristic manner Dreiser comments on Carrie's culture shock in the alien environment of the metropolis: "Transplantation is not always successful in the matter of flowers or maidens". With no warm clothes, she was worried about the approaching winter. She fell ill and lost her job at the shoe factory as she could not attend her work for three days.

Her sister is not in a position to retain her if she cannot find another job. During this period of uncertainty, Carrie runs into Drouet in a Chicago street. He treats her to an expensive lunch in a fashionable restaurant and persuades her to accept a gift of twenty dollars. She has no choice but to move in the direction in which Drouet leads her. In a reflective passage on the power of money (at the beginning of the seventh chapter,) Dreiser notes that Carrie had no clear understanding of the power of money. She is incapable of perceiving the complications that would come in the wake of such a gift. She cannot see it as a bait used by Drouet to trap her. Indeed, her view of Drouet at this stage admits of no criticism of his moral character. Dreiser also makes it clear that Drouet cannot be termed a villain. He says: "he was vain, he was boastful, he was deluded by fine clothes as any silly-headed girl" (p.64). In his pursuit of pleasure he is just obeying the dictates of his inborn nature. Having seen the glitter and pomp of Chicago, Carrie is not in a frame of mind to return to the provisional life of Columbia city. Carrie's mind is in a state of agitation and indecision. When Drouet suggests that she move into a room of her own and leave her sister's flat, she is forced to accept it by the compulsion of her circumstances. Carrie leaves a note for her sister before walking out of the flat to strike out on her own in the metropolis of Chicago.

- Now Carrie is sucked into the swirl of Chicago life. The seduction of Carrie by Drouet is not an elaborate affair. Dreiser comments: "Carrie had no excellent home principles fixed upon her. If she had, she would have been more consciously distressed" (pp. 78-79). Now Drouet has taken complete control of her life. The only distressing note is sounded by the description of a nightmare that occurs to Minnie. In the dream Minnie sees Carrie descending into a deep coal-pit in an old basket tied by a worn-out rope.

Drouet even introduces Carrie to Hurstwood. Since Hurstwood is going to be the third main character in the novel Dreiser spends the whole chapter 9 detailing his background and character. His family life was far from happy. While he was affluent and lived in comfort he was not devoted to wife. Mrs. Hurstwood was vain, ambitious and insensitive. There was an undercurrent of tension in their married life which constantly smouldered in their verbal exchanges, without really becoming an open confrontation. Dreiser has this to say on their loveless life: "such an atmosphere could hardly come under the category of home life. It ran along by force of habit, by force of conventional opinion. With the lapse of time it must necessarily become dryer and dryer - must eventually be tinder, easily lighted and destroyed" (p.89).

3.2 CHAPTERS 10 TO 19

Carrie's character is being delineated further in the chapters that follow. She is shrewd enough to realise that sooner or later her relationship with Drouet will have to end. He is evasive when she mentions marriage. This only confirms her resolve to think ahead. Once she sees the girls from the shoe factory on the road. This reminds

her of what is in store for her if Drouet's protection is not available to her. It is at this point that Hurstwood, a friend of Drouet, "more clever than Drouet in a hundred ways" walks into the life of Carrie. He goes out of the way to please her. He is more successful and affluent than Drouet. When they indulge in a game of euchre, Hurstwood sees to it that Carrie wins the money. Needless to add, Carrie is pleased with the attention showered on her.

Carrie is a quick learner. From Drouet's occasional comments she gathers what pleases him and what constitutes fashionable manners. Though Carrie is not stunningly beautiful, Hurstwood finds her charming and he is infatuated with her. When Hurstwood invites Drouet and Carrie to watch a play in his company, she feels elated. In the expensive box in the theatre, in the company of the elite of the society, Carrie feels thankful to Hurstwood. Dreiser shows how Carrie's attention is slowly shifting from Drouet to Hurstwood: "She instinctively felt that he was stronger and higher, and yet withal so simple. By the end of the third act she was sure that Drouet was only a kindly soul, but otherwise defective. He sank every moment in her estimation by the strong comparison" (p.108). Drouet is not intelligent enough to notice that in his very presence, Carrie is being wooed and won by his own friend.

Mr. Hurstwood's relations with his wife were coming under greater stress. The mutual antagonism between them increased as Hurstwood began to show greater irritability with her. Meanwhile, Carrie, under the influence of her neighbour and friend, Mrs. Hale, sets her eyes even higher in the social ladder. This makes her restless with desire and anxiety. When Hurstwood pays her a visit in Drouet's absence, they feel drawn to each other even more. While describing their meeting, Dreiser comments: "When the distraction of the tongue is removed, the heart listens" (p.115). When he drives away from her house, Hurstwood tells himself: "She likes me all right; that I know" (p.117). The nature of this attraction is analysed by Dreiser in the thirteenth chapter. What seems to have caught his attention was her innocence and vulnerability: "She came fresh from the air of the village, the light of the country still in her eye. Here was neither guile nor rapacity... She was too full of wonder and desire to be greedy... Hurstwood felt the bloom and the youth. He picked her as he would the fresh fruit of a tree" (pp.119-120). His irresistible attraction towards Carrie has an element of mystery about it. Dreiser would attribute it to nature and its designs. When Hurstwood declared his love to Carrie and asked her to reciprocate, he did not know that he was entering a turbulent period of his life. He had a secure job and an undisturbed home life, despite his increasing differences with his wife. He behaves like a careless youth when throws caution to wind in making his affection for Carrie public. At the end of the fourteenth chapter, there is an interesting detail that should be noted. Hurstwood, Drouet and Carrie are coming out of the theatre when a poor man in the street begs for the price of a bed. The gaunt-faced man of about thirty looked "the picture of privation and wretchedness". Drouet not only notices him but hands over a dime, while Hurstwood scarcely notices the incident. This scene becomes significant in the light of what happens to Hurstwood later in the novel. Dreiser is a conscious artist who plots his narrative carefully. The technique of omnipresent narrator allows Dreiser to comment freely on the action of the characters. The social dimension of the action becomes apparent from these comments. We shall have more to say on this when we discuss the language and style of Dreiser.

Hurstwood was moving deeper into a domestic crisis as he had begun neglecting his family. His shrewish wife had become more demanding and she was eager to be seen moving in the fashionable circles. Hurstwood was under the impression that his duplicity would never be discovered. He wrote to Carrie everyday. Carrie was now more confused than ever. She wanted pleasure and position but she was not sure of her own course of action. The sight of poorly clad girls reminded her of the fate that would befall her, once she was outside the security of her lovers. Dreiser comments: "Her sympathies were ever with that underworld of toil from which she had so recently sprung, and which she best understood" (p.140). She was physically more

mature and self-assured. She told Hurstwood that she would like to move out of Chicago if she married him. She was willing to elope with him even if it meant a sudden journey to an unknown destination.

In Dreiser's scheme of things, chance plays an important role. A friend of Drouet asked him to suggest the name of some young lady who could participate in some theatricals he was organising. It struck Drouet that Carrie could do that role if she tried. Carrie had some innate taste for imitation. She of her vanity led her to believe that given a chance, she could excel in theatre. Here we see Carrie sitting on a rocking chair by the window, lost in reveries. The image of the rocking chair recurs in the novel. In fact, the novel ends with this very image of Carrie sitting in a rocking chair, dreaming alone. Carrie is given the role of Laura in Augustin Daly's *Under the Gas Light*. In the rehearsals, she did her role so well that everyone praised her performance. On the day of the show both Drouet and Hurstwood sat in the audience watching her perform. She appeared nervous to begin with but recovered in the course of the play to win the applause of the audience. As the play progressed, she emerged as a real actress. Drouet was surprised to discover this new potential in her. Hurstwood felt elated and was determined to pursue his love even more vehemently. His state of mind is described in these words: "He walked away from the drummer and his prize at parting feeling as if he could slay him and not regret" (p. 182). Dreiser uses the episode of Carrie's performance in the amateur theatre to focus on the complex nature of the emotional relationships that are unfolding. Carrie's performance itself brings out something essential about her "pathos" and her "sympathetic, impressionable nature" (p. 484). Hurstwood's passion for Carrie now reaches a flash-point where he is ready to forsake his own family for her. At the same time, Carrie's affection for him cannot be described as blind passion. She is still in search of something she is only vaguely aware of. It is this sense of groping in the dark that makes her character both convincing and enigmatic.

3.3 CHAPTERS 20 TO 28

In Dreiser's agreement with Doubleday, the first publisher of *Sister Carrie*, the title of the novel appears as "The Flesh and the Spirit". At a deeper level, the novel may be read as an allegory where the forces of eros or desire overwhelm conscience or moral sense. But such a reading will not do justice to the complexity of Dreiser's characterisation. The struggle between flesh and spirit is not seen as a conflict between good and evil. As mentioned above, Carrie's sense of discontentment is not seen in moral terms. Similarly Hurstwood's passion is not considered immoral. In his epilogue to the novel Dreiser in fact comments: "Not evil but that which is better, more often directs the steps of the erring. Not evil, but goodness more often allures the feeling mind unused to reason". In the middle chapters of the novel, the focus is on Hurstwood. Both the chapters 20 and 21 are titled: "The Lure of the Spirit: The Flesh in Pursuit". They are largely concerned with the complications that come to the surface out of the entangled relationships between Carrie, Hurstwood and Dreiser. Dreiser is alerted to the increased frequency of Hurstwood's visits to Carrie's house in his absence. When Hurstwood tells Carrie that he cannot wait any longer her answer is, "When will we be married?" By now Hurstwood's wife has come to know about his affair. She confronts him with a direct question: "So you stay here and trifle around with someone-else?" When Hurstwood storms out of his house that morning he knows that his marital life is in crisis. Meanwhile Drouet confronts Carrie with the evidence of her interest in Hurstwood. When he informs her that he is a married man, she feels cheated. In the bitter, acrimonious exchange that follows she holds Drouet responsible for her present situation. Carrie knows that she has nowhere to go if she leaves the sanctuary provided by Drouet.

The turning point in the life of Hurstwood which is also a high point of drama in the novel comes in the 27th chapter. Hurstwood is in a state of panic. His own family has

shut him out of the house. He is in fear of losing Carrie who has stopped writing to him. Dreiser says: "His whole nature was vigorously and powerfully shaken up, and he was finding what limits the mind has to endurance" (p. 223). He spends his nights at Palmer House, as he is no more welcome at home. He is desperately waiting for a letter from Carrie. He receives a legal notice from his wife threatening to sue him for divorce and alimony.

After Drouet walked out of her flat in anger Carrie brooded on her present and future. The option of marrying Hurstwood was now closed. She still felt that she could count on Drouet for help. She made no attempt to contact him or Hurstwood. After her encouraging performance on the stage, she felt that her potential as an actress could now be given a trial. She went round many theatres in Chicago, but received no positive offer. Dreiser describes her state of mind in these words: "Evidently she would be facing the world in the same old way within a day or two. Her clothes would get poor. She put her two hands together in her customary expressing way and pressed her fingers. Large tears gathered in her eyes and broke hot across her cheeks. She was alone, very much alone" (p.237).

The scene now shifts . Hurstwood who sees Drouet at the Palmer House and concludes that he is estranged from Carrie. He calls on Carrie but discovers that she has gone to the theatre. He spends the evening drinking at the club. When he goes back to office at the closing hour to see whether everything is safely closed up for the night, he finds that the daytime cashier has forgotten to lock the safe, a thing that has not happened before. He looks in casually and sees bundles of notes. He counts the bundles and sees that there are more than ten thousand dollars. The temptation to take the money and begin a new life with Carrie strikes him suddenly. He remembers that all his property would go to his wife in the event of a divorce, which now looked certain. The desire to commit theft is forced on him by the circumstances. He takes the money but then wants to put it back. He pushes the door of the safe in excitement when it clicks shut. Here Dreiser makes it clear that behind all moral dilemmas is the human instinct for survival. As he puts it: "Men are still led by instinct before they are regulated by knowledge. It is instinct which recalls the criminal – it is instinct which gives the criminal his feeling of danger, his fear of wrong" (p.245). Once Hurstwood knows that he has taken the money and cannot put it back, he acts fast. He goes to Carrie and asks her to accompany him on the pretext that Mr. Drouet is hurt and is in the hospital. Only on the train to Detroit does Hurstwood inform Carrie that they are on their way to Canada. Carrie sees that once again she has been cheated and trapped in a situation from where she cannot escape easily. She kept repeating "I'll not have anything to do with you", knowing fully well that her options are limited. She feels better when Hurstwood promises to let her come back if she wants to do so. By noon they are in Detroit and soon board the train to Montreal. Hurstwood knows that the police would be on his track but, once he is in Canada it would take some time for them to catch up with him. He is nervous, but tries to appear calm and composed.

These chapters focus on the basic conflicts Dreiser is trying to discuss in the novel. The society he portrays is one where there are no moral standards available. As F.O. Matthiessen says, "it is a society in which there are no real equals, and no equilibrium, but only people moving *up* and *down*" (Donald Pizer, ed., 1970: 487). Dreiser clearly suggests that his characters are pawns in a larger game, the rules of which are not set by them.

3.4 CHAPTERS 29 TO 38

Structurally, *Sister Carrie* can be divided into two parts: the first part takes place in Chicago while the second part is set in New York. With Chapter 29, we leave Chicago behind. Carrie does not know about the theft committed by Hurstwood. When they check into a hotel in Montreal, Hurstwood is worried about the

consequences of his crime. When he meets an acquaintance in the lobby of the hotel, the whole conversation proves a trial for him. Soon he discovers that his movements are being watched by a detective. Later, the detective knocks at his door and enquires whether he is going to send back the money. Now Hurstwood understands that this would be his last chance to escape criminal proceedings against him. He writes a letter to Fitzgerald and Moy, his employer, explaining the circumstances under which he acted in this manner and conveys his regrets. He pays back 9500 dollars, keeping 1300 dollars for his own use. Then he moves to New York, with Carrie.

The opening sentence of the 30th chapter, "The Kingdom of Greatness: The Pilgrim Adream" sets the tone for the long struggle Hurstwood and Carrie have to face in Chicago: "Whatever a man like Hurstwood could be in Chicago, it is very evident that he would be but an inconspicuous drop in an ocean like New York" (p.273). Hurstwood has to begin from the scratch. In Montreal he had got himself formally married to Carrie. In New York, he rents a flat and begins looking for a business opportunity. He becomes a partner in a bar which fetches him about 100 dollars a month. Life is not luxurious and comfortable as Carrie has become accustomed to, in Chicago. Carrie has to curtail her purchase of clothes and entertainment. Hurstwood is now stricken by remorse and knows that he will never know the kind of luxury and security he has known in Chicago. He is afraid that he would run into some of his old acquaintances from the Chicago days.

Carrie gets used to the environment of New York quite fast. Dreiser notes that "being of a passive and receptive rather than an active and aggressive nature", Carrie accepts her altered situation without any complaints. Hurstwood now earns more from business. Carrie behaves like an ideal house-wife, never making excessive demands on him. He also appears to take her for granted. The fact is that Carrie never loves him deeply or passionately. She makes the acquaintance of the Vances who occupy the neighbouring flat. She also goes out occasionally with Mrs. Vance. A walk along the Broadway through the fashionable crowds makes her aware of her own inferior status in life. A visit to the Broadway makes her moody and dissatisfied. Dreiser comments: "Such a crush of finery and folly she had never seen. It clinched her convictions concerning her state. She had not lived, could not lay claim to having lived, until something of this had come into her own life" (p.291). A dinner in an expensive restaurant and a visit to a theatre in the company of the Vances and their friends leave Carrie even more dissatisfied with her own state of things. She wants to be rich and famous. She can see that Hurstwood is changing for the worse. He has become ill-tempered and brooding. His profits have decreased. Carrie's only friends, the Vances move out around this time. When Hurstwood decides to rent a new house which has less number of rooms, Carrie becomes even more distraught. Dreiser describes her state of mind in these words: "She began to feel that she had made a mistake. Incidentally, she also began to recall the fact that he had practically forced her to flee with him" (p.309).

The owner of the building where the saloon partly owned by Hurstwood functioned decides to sell his property, and the new owner is not willing to renew the lease. This means the end of Hurstwood's business. It is almost four years now since Carrie and Hurstwood settled down in New York. Carrie knows that her future is uncertain. Hurstwood who knows of the imminent termination of his business at Warren Street saloon, takes to hunting for a job. He has become more gloomy and Carrie is now deeply worried about her survival in the city of New York. His daily round of New York streets brings him no cheer. At the age of forty-three, having been a prosperous manager once, it is not easy for him to stoop to the level of being a clerk or a bartender, the common jobs available. He spends all his spare time reading newspapers.

It is humiliating for Hurstwood to seek the job of a salesman, but he goes through it and is politely denied the job. He wanders in the streets of New York aimlessly. A chance meeting with one of the old Chicago acquaintances proves an ordeal because he does not want to remember his past. Dreiser meticulously describes the decline

and fall of Hurstwood. He becomes indifferent to his own appearance and insensitive to the demands of Carrie. Since his savings are limited, he becomes cautious with money and, in the process, hurts each other's self-respect, through petty remarks. Carrie could see that he has no strength left to build a career or begin a new life of his own. When she decides to sleep alone, he accepts it stoically, with no protest. Now they have begun drifting apart as there is nothing that binds them.

The act of reading the newspaper is raised to the level of a ritual in these chapters. It not only frames the passiveness of Hurstwood but indicates his gradual loss of control over his life. His immersion in the make-believe world of the newspaper is the first indication that he lacks the inner strength to face reality. When Mrs. Vance drops in to meet Carrie, she is appalled to see the confused state of Hurstwood. Carrie and Hurstwood exchange bitter words and their relationship is now at the breaking point. The disorientation of Hurstwood is reflected in his compulsive gambling where he loses some of his precious savings. When he is down to his last hundred and ninety dollars, he can see the darkness that lies ahead.

Carrie is convinced that she will have to live on her own, sooner or later. Dreiser writes: "It didn't matter about him. She is not going to be dragged into poverty and something worse to suit him" (p.345). She decides to explore the possibility of getting work in theatre. Her persistence finally pays off when she is hired by the Casino, a theatre company, to be part of the chorus. Hurstwood now depends on Carrie for his survival. He still talks of finding employment and returning the money he borrows from Carrie. But it is obvious that his strength is ebbing and the tragic part of his journey downhill is about to begin.

3.5 CHAPTERS 39 TO 47

The concluding chapters portray the gradual disintegration of Hurstwood, which is juxtaposed with the emergence of Carrie as an actress. Dreiser is unsparing in documenting the compulsive drift of Hurstwood towards a state of complete alienation from the world around him. Hurstwood still maintains that he is going to get work soon and life will change for the better. Carrie has only contempt for him but still helps him with money. When the grocery man calls on them to demand the unpaid bill, Carrie knows that she will have to support both of them.

Hurstwood makes a valiant effort to find work as a temporary motorman during the workers' strike. The chapter "The Strike" has some of the most realistic scenes in the novel. As a reporter, Dreiser had covered several such events and the details are obviously drawn from his memories of those days. On the fourth day of the strike Hurstwood took out his railcar amidst tight security in a tense atmosphere. On the second day, he gets hurt and narrowly escapes further injuries. From now onwards he does not even pretend to make an effort to seek work. When creditors pester them for unpaid bills, Hurstwood hardly feels any sense of shame. Meanwhile, Carrie's performance on the stage has already drawn favourable notice from the audience and managers of theatres. She is shrewd enough to see that henceforth Hurstwood would be a liability for her. When her friend, Miss Osborne invites her to stay with her she accepts her offer. One day, when Hurstwood returns to the flat from his daily round of wanderings, he finds a note from Carrie which says:

I am going away. I'm not coming back any more. It's no use trying to keep up the flat; I can't do it. I wouldn't mind helping you, if I could, but I can't support us both, and pay the rent. I need what little I make to pay for my clothes. I'm leaving twenty dollars. It's all I have just now. You can do whatever you like with the furniture. I won't want it. Carrie.

The tone of the note is abrupt and unfriendly. Carrie has finally left Hurstwood to his own fate. When a lonely Hurstwood sits in the rocking chair, staring at the floor, he tells himself, "I tried, didn't I?"

Carrie gets her first major break when she is offered the role of a country maid in a play. When she is paid thirty dollars a week it looks an enormous sum. Still, Carrie knew that she counted for nothing in the huge metropolis where the world of wealth and distinction was not within the reach of a struggling actress. She got raving reviews for her performance in the play. With her success comes increased salary of 150 dollars a week and a contract for one year. Carrie cannot believe her luck, but now she knows that some of her dreams are going to be real. Down in a third-rate Bleecker Street hotel, Hurstwood reads about Carrie's success on the stage and knows that she has finally made it. He thinks: "Ah, she was in the walled city now! Its splendid gates had opened, admitting her from a cold, dreary outside". Carrie is now taken seriously by her colleagues and superiors. Now she moves into a more luxurious and spacious accommodation. When she meets Mrs. Vance on the road, she knows that she is as good as her now. She receives letters from her admirers and is interviewed by a theatre critic for the newspaper. Amidst all this success, Carrie still feels lonely.

Drifting from one cheap hotel to another, Hurstwood, finally is reduced to a beggar in the street. He moves about the street sizing up the passers-by before asking them for alms. He even goes to Casino with the intention of meeting Carrie to beg for some money. He has lost all his sense of self-respect and human dignity. He stands among the street-beggars waiting for charity that would ensure the night's bed. Around this time Drouet meets Carrie. He is now in New York as the manager of a branch. He makes an attempt to enter her life once again but is rebuffed by Carrie who has no desire to complicate her life further. Once, on her way to Casino, she encounters Hurstwood who has been waiting for her. At first she did not recognise the shabby, baggy figure. When she recognised him, she asked him what was wrong with him. She gives him all the money she had with her. This marks the furthest stage of Hurstwood's degeneration as a person. Dreiser's account of Hurstwood is devoid of any sentimentality. Hurstwood has no will left to live. As a tramp, living on charity, he goes without supper on many days and sleeps in a fifteen cent flop-house. Dreiser describes his condition in these words:

He was beginning to find, in his wretched clothing and meagre state of body, that people took him for a chronic type of bum and beggar. Police hustled him along, restaurant and lodging-house keepers turned him out promptly the moment he had his due, pedestrians waved him off. He found it more and more difficult to get anything from anybody.

From this stage it is only a small step to the final scene where he opens the gas jets in the room before lying down to sleep. His final words are, "What's the use?"

Carrie is not even aware of Hurstwood's death. Her life with all its promise of fame and money is haunted by a sense of loss and vacancy. Bob Ames, a young engineer takes interest in her but it looks unlikely Carrie will be tempted to fall in love again. The sense of unreality that follows her now deepens into a permanent state of anxiety. At the end of the novel we see her sitting in her rocking chair, looking through the window into the darkness outside. Dreiser writes:

It is when the feet weary and hope seems vain that the heartaches and the longings arise. Know, then, that for you is neither surfeit nor content. In your rocking chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel.

3.6 THE CHRONOLOGY OF *SISTER CARRIE*

The opening paragraph of *Sister Carrie* mentions the year 1889. The following chronology of the actions in *Sister Carrie* is reproduced from the Norton critical edition of *Sister Carrie*.

August, 1889:	Carrie arrives in Chicago
Fall, 1889:	She begins to live with Drouet at Ogden Place
Summer, 1890:	Carrie and Hurstwood elope to New York and take a flat on 78 th street.
Late, 1892:	Carrie meets Ames, who is visiting New York
Mid-1893:	Carrie and Hurstwood move to 13 Street
February, 1894:	Hurstwood loses his Warren Street saloon
June, 1894:	Hurstwood is down to his last fifty dollars
Summer, 1894:	Carrie gets a job in the chorus of the Casino theatre
October, 1894:	Carrie moves to the chorus of Broadway theatre
January, 1895:	Brooklyn street car strike Carrie gets a speaking part in her show at Broadway
Early Spring, 1895:	Carrie leaves Hurstwood
May, 1895:	Carrie in a new show at the Casino and is a great success
September, 1895:	Carrie's show goes on the road
Fall 1895-Feb., 1896:	Hurstwood works at the Broadway Central Hotel
June, 1896:	Carrie goes to London with her show
Winter, 1896-97:	Carrie in a new Play.; Hurstwood commits suicide in January or February, 1897.

3.7 LET US SUM UP

This unit is meant to give you an outline of the main narrative of the novel. You must have noticed that the characterisation of the protagonist is complex and her relationship with other characters is not developed along the line of a romantic story. The cities of Chicago and New York are not mere external settings but permeate the narrative with all their vitality, variety, gaiety, squalor, violence, crowds, railroads, factories and class conflicts. Dreiser's narrative portrays his characters from the viewpoint of an omniscient narrator. There is a surfeit of details which overwhelm our consciousness when we read the text. Please read the novel at least two times before you attempt the following questions which are meant to test your comprehension of the text.

3.8 QUESTIONS

1. Describe Carrie's experiences in Chicago in the first week of her arrival.
2. How did Carrie get her first opportunity to act on the stage? How was it received?
3. Briefly narrate the events that take place between the theft of money by Hurstwood and the arrival of Hurstwood and Carrie in New York.
4. Describe the city of New York as it is portrayed by Dreiser in the novel.
5. Give an account of the last days of Hurstwood based on your reading of the novel.

3.9 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

You may use any standard edition of *Sister Carrie*. The page numbers used in this unit are from the Signet Classic edition of the New American Library published in 1961. Another very useful edition is Norton Critical Edition edited by Donald Pizer and published by W.W. Norton and Co., New York, London, 1970.

UNIT 4 *SISTER CARRIE*: A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE MAJOR THEMES

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Treatment of Gender
- 4.2 *Sister Carrie* as a City Novel
- 4.3 Dreiser's Critique of American Society in *Sister Carrie*
- 4.4 *Sister Carrie* as a Novel of Ideas
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Questions
- 4.7 Suggestions for Further Reading

4.0 OBJECTIVES

Having read the text of *Sister Carrie* carefully, we are now in a position to analyse it critically. In this unit we shall analyse the novel thematically to highlight Dreiser's treatment of various themes such as gender, man-woman relationships, class conflict, family, and the urban reality. Questions regarding the dichotomies between free will and determinism and self and the world will also come up for discussion in these pages. Please note that there is no absolute division between substance and style or theme and narrative. Dreiser's social vision is inseparable from his use of language. Hence, this analysis of *Sister Carrie* will also deal with nuances of language, imagery and dialogue.

4.1 TREATMENT OF GENDER

It was pointed out in Unit 1.3 that Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* met with disapproval, in its initial stages, from an American readership that could not understand his radical social perspective. It is instructive to compare this resistance to a similar reception that Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* received in France in 1857. Hans Robert Jauss, in his *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* points out that in 1857, the year of publication of *Madame Bovary*, another novel namely Feydeau's *Fanny* had dealt with the same theme of infidelity in a bourgeois, provincial society. While *Fanny* went through thirteen editions in one year, *Madame Bovary* took several years to capture the imagination of the French readership. According to Jauss this difference in reception may be traced back "to the question of the effect of their narrative form" (Hans Robert Jauss, 1982: 27). While Flaubert's use of the impersonal narration shocked the audience, "the inviting tone" of *Fanny* turned it into a 'confessional novel' that did not question the basic assumptions of the morality prevailing in society. Jauss writes:

As *Madame Bovary*, however, became a worldwide success, when at first it was understood and appreciated as a turning point in the history of the novel by only a small circle of connoisseurs, the audience of novel-readers that was formed by it came to sanction the new canon of expectations; this canon made Feydeau's weaknesses – his flowery style, his modish effects, his lyrical-confessional clichés – unbearable, and allowed *Fanny* to fade into yesterday's bestseller. (Ibid.: 28).

Jauss's discussion of the differences between *Fanny* and *Madame Bovary* helps us understand the nature of problems encountered by American readers in *Sister Carrie*.

Doubleday's wife outrightly rejected the novel on grounds of immorality and vulgarity. Obviously, there was something radical about Dreiser's treatment of man-woman relationships. The genteel tradition in American fiction had certain 'regulatory conventions and taboos' which Dreiser had ignored (Dreiser, 1961: 471). According to these conventions seducers must either be punished or reformed. In Stephen Crane's *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) the heroine suffers disintegration and death after she loses her 'virtue'. Drouet who lures Carrie into the dream of a comfortable, upper class life, remains unrepentant till the end of the story. He is more prosperous when he moves into New York. Dreiser makes it clear that Hurstwood's tragic decline and final suicide have nothing to do with the moral nature of his actions. This treatment of gender relations in which the fallen woman is not viewed as a victim, obviously, went against the expectations of the conventional readership.

If we revert to Jauss's argument once again we will discover that the naturalist narration of *Madame Bovary* had turned "a predicated question of public morals back into an open problem" (Jauss, 1982: 44). This was largely achieved through the impersonal tone of narration. A similar case may be made out for *Sister Carrie* which dealt with the question of the fallen woman in a refreshingly radical manner. Convention demanded that Carrie, as a woman who goes astray, be subjected to misfortunes and suffering. The novel traces her gradual rise to fame and fortune. She is not haunted by any sense of guilt. Her actions are not guided by any passion. William Thorp notes:

Already in love with the gauds of the big city, unable to find work which will provide even her minimum wants, she falls like a ripe plum into Drouet's kind hands. There is no struggle. There is no passion. A steak dinner and "two soft, green handsome ten-dollar bills" do the trick. (Ibid.: 471).

What made such a representation of gender relations uncommon was the complete absence of any suggestion of Christian sin. F.O. Matthiessen comments:

Carrie not only escaped punishment – Dreiser did not even regard her as sinful, and this was the crux of his defiance of late 19th century conventionality. Only he hardly thought of it then as a defiance. (Matthiessen in Donald Pizer, 1970: 478).

Dreiser, obviously, was following life. He had first hand experience of the complex ways in which urban life in America was fast changing. He understood the predatory quality of the capitalist society that was emerging. It was oppressively patriarchal in character. The peculiar nature of desire bred by this patriarchal set-up was captured by Dreiser in his narrative.

Though there is no reason to suppose that feminist ideas have directly influenced Dreiser's concept of gender relations, they were very much part of the cultural debates in the late 19th century. Anti-slavery movements obviously inspired and influenced early feminists. Frederick Douglass writes in his autobiography: "When the true history of the anti-slavery cause shall be written, women will occupy a large space in its pages, for the cause of the slave has been peculiarly woman's cause" (Miriam Schneir, 1992: 83). The relation between reform movements and realistic writing may be noted here. The first organised movement for women's emancipation was founded in 1848 in the U.S. By the end of the century, voluminous writings on various issues such as suffrage and the oppressive nature of the family and marriage have already accumulated. Miriam Schneir comments: "In the late 18th and early 19th centuries many early feminists identified marriage as a primary instrument of woman's oppression" (Ibid.: xvii). In an article published in 1872, Tennessee Claflin argues that the economic dependence of women forces them to suppress their own natures and become little more than 'sexual snares' for men. She writes:

As things are in the world at present, women have not equal chances with men of earning and winning anything; men hold the purse and women are dependents and candidates for election to place. They must entice, and seduce, and entrap men, either in the legitimate or in the illegitimate way, in order to secure their portion of the spoil. (Ibid.: 150).

This graphically illustrates Carrie's plight in the novel. The significant contribution of the 19th century feminist writings is that they locate the root cause of gender inequality in the materialist forces of history and society. Dreiser could not have been unaware of their major arguments.

Lawrence E. Hussman, Jr. has observed that 'desire is the protagonist of *Sister Carrie*' (L.E. Hussman, Jr., 1983: 18). Carrie arrives in Chicago "dreaming wild dreams of some vague, far-off supremacy" (p.4). She is taken in by appearances, particularly by clothes. Early in the novel Dreiser comments that one of the things a woman fully comprehends is 'the philosophy of clothes'. Throughout the novel, clothes signify status, power, authority and class. While Carrie is moving with Drouet, she sees one of the working girls on the road and almost recoils in horror:

Suddenly a pair of eyes met Carrie's in recognition. They were looking out from a group of poorly dressed girls. Their clothes were faded and loose-hanging, their jackets old, their general make-up shabby (p.77).

Their shabby appearance instils fear in Carrie because she is also vulnerable. She understands that to be a woman is to be powerless. Gender relations imply, Dreiser suggests, power relations.

In her sister's flat she feels depressed and lonely because the shabbiness of the under-privileged lower middle class pervades the house. As Carrie drifts into a relationship with Drouet she is not perturbed by the moral implications of such an act. Dreiser suggests that she has very little choice in the matter. This is where he advances a materialist view of human actions. Dreiser holds that the lower forms of life which may not be blessed with intellectual abilities have the advantage of intuition and instinct:

Carrie was unwise, and, therefore, like the sheep in its unwisdom, strong in feeling. The instinct of self-protection, strong in all such natures, was roused but feebly, if at all, by the overtures of Drouet.

This denies agency and subjectivity to Carrie. Dreiser repeatedly comments on Carrie's passivity. Though much of the narrative is focussed on Carrie, we hardly have any clear understanding of her inner life.

Mattheissen has pointed out that Dreiser manages to crystallise Carrie's essential quality only when she gets a break in theatre where she reveals something of "the sympathetic, impressionable nature" and 'the pathos' of a true actress. On the one hand we have the picture of Carrie as a passive drifter who is vaguely aware of the need to move on and on the other, we have Carrie who is a fast learner. She is deeply agitated when she learns that Hurstwood is married. This does not correspond to the earlier impression of Carrie as an ignorant drifter who, like a pilgrim, moves towards an undefined goal. How do we account for the contradictions in Dreiser's portrayal of Carrie? The emotional centre of *Sister Carrie* is not her relationships with the men but her own awakening subjectivity. She begins as an ignorant woman unaware of the ways of the world but does not end up as a victim. Somewhere along the way, she comes into her own and emerges as an assertive woman. Her work in the theatre marks the turning point in her life. Her discovery of her own inborn talent coincides with her deepening awareness of the patriarchal nature of society. Consider this sentence which sums up Hurstwood's attitude to Carrie: "Hurstwood did not seem to realise that she had a right to anything". As Hurstwood loses his job and withdraws

from his responsibilities as a householder, Carrie is able to grasp its implications for her own future. The power relation between them is now altered, and this is reflected in their sexual relationship. She begins to sleep alone, this indicating her resolve to live alone. Long before she moves out of the flat, she has begun to assert her right to privacy and individuality. What makes Hurstwood's fall poignant is Carrie's refusal to shelter him and take care of him. In other words, Carrie refuses to sacrifice herself for his sake. This reveals the assertive side of Carrie who no more wants to be at the mercy of men. This is what makes her the first modern woman in American fiction.

Carrie is not portrayed in the novel as a woman in love. Carrie lives in such social and financial insecurity that she could not have indulged in romantic revelries. When Drouet makes an attempt to re-enter her life, she makes her disgust towards him quite apparent. The changes brought about in Carrie by experiences are clearly indicated by Dreiser:

No longer the lightest word of a man made her head dizzy. She had learned that men could change and fail. Flattery in its most palpable form had lost its force with her. (p.398).

What Carrie rejects is domesticity itself. If she now chooses to have any relationship with a man, it will be on terms of equality. She is impressed by 'the kindly superiority' of Ames but she is unable to share his idealism. At the end of the novel, we see Carrie ruminating in a pensive mood. In her moment of success, she is lonely. This is the price to be paid for individualism in a capitalist society. Dreiser, while tracing the forward movement of Carrie, never records any attempt on her part to reach out to her parents or her sister. When Carrie sees her pictures in the papers, she cannot think of anyone 'she knew well enough to send them to'. Dreiser's emphasis is on the alienating nature of urban reality. If city enables Carrie to discover her hidden self it also denies her a sense of fulfilment. As a part of the unpredictable world of the commercial theatre, she will remain tormented by uncertainties. The final image of Carrie sitting near the window in a rocking chair, dreaming alone, underlines the limitations of her new-found self. Her tragic self-awareness reflects the haunted nature of the woman's subjectivity in a highly patriarchal society.

4.2 *SISTER CARRIE AS A CITY NOVEL*

We have already noted that the cities of Chicago and New York are not mere settings in *Sister Carrie*. The novel captures the conflicts and contradictions of these large urban centres in their early phase of emergence. Dreiser himself had a love-hate relation with the cities he patronised. He spent long years in New York as he rose to fame and success. But he had known the seamy side of the city, as a struggling reporter in Chicago and many other towns. He had known the vitality of the cities as great centre of art, culture and commerce. He had also experienced the ruthlessness and violence they were capable of.

Dreiser portrays the city from the perspective of an outsider. What makes his portrayals insightful is his critical eye that looks for the contradictions behind the pomp and the glitter. As the son of impoverished German immigrants, Dreiser had tasted poverty and failure. In the early 1890s his reading of Herbert Spencer and Balzac confirmed his own vague feeling that man was not the favoured creature of divine guidance, 'but an insignificant unit in a universe of natural forces' (Donald Pizer, 1985: 385). The great advances in the fields of science, technology and commerce do not necessarily bestow security and happiness to the struggling individual. Dreiser was quick to realise that the city was essentially a colonial economic system which influenced and regulated the lives of individuals through its vast network of invisible forces. Donald Pizer notes:

Yet the city itself, as Balzac had amply demonstrated, was exciting and alluring, and not all were crushed who sought to gain its wonders. In *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser was to write, "Among the forces which sweep and play throughout the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind.

Not all survive the brutal, impersonal laws of the city. The second half of the novel juxtaposes the steady decline of Hurstwood with the gradual rise of Carrie into stardom. As noted in the earlier section, the city affords the possibilities of self-discovery.

Here it may be noted that the city novel is a distinct genre with its own internal history. Balzac's Paris, Dickens' London, Joyce's Dublin and Saul Bellow's Chicago come alive on the pages as these writers are able to combine the factual and the fantastic in the city. They are fascinated by the 'carnivals of emotion and ambition' offered by the city (Isa Kapp, 1980: 87). American writers have always been attracted by the cosmopolitan charm of New York. Isa Kapp comments:

Most of America's major writers came to New York at some time during the productive period of their lives, many of them from small towns in the Midwest - like Dreiser, Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway - and their great urge was to escape the narrowness and bigotry of provincial life. (Ibid.).

New York accommodates culture as well as counter-culture, conservatives, neo-conservatives as well as radicals. The sensual and the intellectual segments are not separated here.

The city induces a state of longing in its inhabitants. Dreiser shows how his characters live in a constant state of desire. The first time Carrie enters Chicago, the magic of the great city overwhelms her. Mattheissen notes that "in her excited discovery of Chicago, Carrie is essentially Dreiser himself" (Mattheissen F.O., 1970: 481). There is also something of Dreiser in Drouet's hedonistic quest for luxury and pleasure. Dreiser is able to invest his characters with life mainly because he projects himself into their situations. He has gone through the acute sense of insecurity bred by modern cities. The life of the city is constantly in flux, ever changing. His reading of Balzac and other European realists has taught him that the surface reality has historical value. While introducing Drouet, Dreiser comments: "Lest this order of individual should permanently pass, let me put down some of the most striking characteristics of his most successful manner and method" (p.10). Dreiser knew that man was his milieu.

In a society which was subject to constant change, money becomes central. It is the only value that acquires a sense of permanence. Dreiser conveys the mystique of money several times in the novel. The seventh chapter begins with these observations:

The true meaning of money yet remains to be popularly explained and comprehended. When each individual realises for himself that this thing primarily stands for and should only be accepted as a moral due - that it should be paid out as honestly stored energy, and not as a usurped privilege - many of our social, religious, and political troubles will have permanently passed. (p.10).

Dreiser documents the city in great detail. The interiors of Minnie's flat, the various items displayed in the department stores, the life style of the rich, all these are documented in minute detail. When Drouet hands money over to Carrie, their relationship enters a new plane which has both moral and social implications. Drouet feels: "She felt bound to him by a strange tie of affection now" (p.62). This bond develops into a bondage which slowly deprives her of her own subjectivity.

The theme of money figures in greater detail when Dreiser documents the tragic decline of Hurstwood. One of the central scenes of the novel deals with Hurstwood's theft of money in his office. Here Dreiser makes it obvious that he had no intention to steal. But the lure of a happy life with Carrie away from his present state of wretchedness forces him to commit the theft. Desire is at the root of this act though Hurstwood himself is in a confused state of anxiety and excitement:

The manager floundered among a jumble of thoughts. Now all the entanglement of the day came back. Also the thought that here was a solution. That money would do it. If he had that and Carrie.

And later:

With it once out and before him, it seemed a foolish thing to think about leaving it. Certainly it would. Why, he could live quietly with Carrie for years.

Ironically enough, he soon discovers that money does not ensure happiness. He feels miserable now though Carrie is with him:

His condition was bitter in the extreme, for he did not want the miserable sum he had stolen. He did not want to be a thief. That sum or any other could never compensate for the state which he had thus foolishly doffed. It could not give him back his host of friends, his name, his house and family, nor Carrie, as he had meant to have her. (p.258).

Hurstwood, thus, wakes up to the limitations of money and the tragic side of desire. In the concluding chapters of the novel his depleted savings, now getting progressively reduced, become symbolic of his loss of control on life. Money is a source of power and authority. When Hurstwood loses his source of steady income, Carrie decides to break away from him.

Dreiser is highly critical of the growing social disparity in the cities. In the last quarter of the 19th century, the new industrial cities in America were bursting on their seams with immigrants from Europe, all of whom were in search of a new life. The quest for better living conditions, security and material prosperity becomes the overriding concerns of those faceless millions that throng the cities. As the son of an immigrant family which moved from affluence to abject poverty, Dreiser saw the city as Janus – faced, offering possibilities of progress as well as ruin. In the second part of the novel the journeys of Hurstwood and Carrie are juxtaposed mainly to highlight the Janus – faced quality of the city. In urban society social inequality is institutionalised in its very economic structure. Mattheissen comments: "It is a society in which there are no equals, and no equilibrium, but only people moving *up* and *down*". This vertical organisation of class differences permit the privileged ones to live in blissful ignorance of the plight of the underprivileged. Hurstwood refers to the "walled city" where Carrie finally gains entry with her success even as he is being pushed down to the street. This image of 'a city within the city' effectively captures the social divisions within the American urban society:

"I guess she's struck it", he thought, a picture of the old shiny, plush-covered world coming back, with its lights, its ornaments, its carriages, and flowers. Ah, she was in the walled city now! Its splendid gates had opened, admitting her from a cold, dreary outside. She seemed a creature afar off – like every other celebrity he had known. (p.413).

If there is one image that stands out in Dreiser's portrayal of the city, it is that of the newspaper. As Hurstwood loses control on his own life, he becomes obsessed with

the newspaper. Initially he looks for possible positions he can apply for but, gradually he immerses himself in the newspaper to escape from reality:

He buried himself in his papers and read. Oh, the rest of it – the relief from walking and thinking? What Lethan waters were these floods of telegraphed intelligence! He forgot his troubles, in part.

The newspaper becomes a mirror image of the city's diversity, variety and plurality. Arts, commerce, sports and business find their separate space in the newspaper. Benedict Anderson, in his *Imagined Communities*, notes that what makes the newspaper significant as a cultural product is "its profound fictiveness" (Anderson, 1983: 33). The events that are reported on the same page have no intrinsic connection. What brings them together in the fact that all of them happened on the same day. This element of calendrical coincidence must have attracted Dreiser's notice as he attributes much significance to the element of chance in life. The newspaper is part of the economic organisation of the city. Its relationship with the market makes it a "one-day best-seller" (Ibid.) that reflects the pulse of the city. The reading of the newspaper is a modern secular ritual that brings the members of a society together, giving them a sense of identity and togetherness. Here Dreiser's own close association with several newspapers and periodicals as a reporter, columnist and editor may be remembered. Some of the great novelists of the 19th century such as Dickens and Dostoevsky had also worked in the same capacities. Through the image of the newspaper Dreiser is able to signify the sur-realistic quality of the complex urban reality, its essential vitality and bewildering plurality.

4.3 DREISER'S CRITIQUE OF AMERICAN SOCIETY IN *SISTER CARRIE*

Sister Carrie communicates the felt quality of a historically located society. The American society of the late 19th century comes alive on the pages of the novel. Dreiser's representation of this society underlines the social divisions of this society and the consequent conflicts between various groups and segments. In analysing Dreiser's depiction of social change, which is done both in covert and overt terms, our purpose is to clarify his social vision. The very nature of his descriptions and narration evoke certain view-points regarding the nature of society his characters live in. For instance, the detailed description of all the things Carrie put in her small trunk in the very opening paragraph of the novel places her in a certain social frame. Similarly the clothes worn by Drouet, the interiors of Minnie's flat and the working conditions of the girls in the shoe factory forcefully establish the disparities in social class. Outward appearances or external details are important for they mark the socially ordained limits of their existence. Donald Pizer comments:

Dreiser's ability to capture the tangible commonplace of everyday existence powerfully suggests that the commonplace and everyday are the essence of experience, particularly since he returns again and again to the unexciting details of the furnishings of an apartment or the contents of a meal. (Pizer, 1970: 570).

The normal world of ambitions, aspirations and frustrations appear as primary, solid and unalterable. In Dreiser's world there is no way of transcending one's inherited world. If Carrie climbs out of her lower middle class sphere it is through a series of coincidence. Dreiser makes it obvious that Carrie has very few choices at each point in her life.

The authenticity of Dreiser's world-view is derived from his attempt to transform his private experiences into art. Edgar Lee Masters praised Dreiser for his love of 'low

company', which made him familiar with their mental world. The central episodes in the novel have close parallels in his own family history. F.O. Matthiessen says:

When he began to develop Carrie Meeber's story, he remembered what had happened to one of his sisters, who had been supported in Chicago by an architect and then felt herself much more deeply attracted by the manager of Hannah and Hogg's, a well-known eating and drinking establishment. Only later did she discover that he was married, but by then he was enough in love with her to persuade her to elope to Toronto, explaining that while drunk he had stolen 15000 dollars from his employers.... The couple had settled in New York where they supported themselves and two children in part by renting rooms to girls whose habits they did not scrutinise.

Dreiser changed details in his novel, as Matthiessen says, to soften the actuality. Dreiser has used his own experiences as material in many novels. He understood that his sisters were rebelling against the religious orthodoxy of their father and conventional morality of their class. It is Dreiser's profound sympathy and compassion for them that enables him to portray their characters from inside.

Dreiser's characters are typical and unique at the same time. While introducing Drouet, he gives the impression that he is the representative figure of a new social order and may soon be overtaken by the fast-moving social changes. Maureen C. Howard notes that "the world of *Sister Carrie* is the world of motion – tragic and vertical motions of raising and falling, the motion of the rocking chair" (Maureen C. Howard, 2001: 4). The novel begins with a journey and a series of journeys are embedded in the main narrative. There are descriptions of street cars, railway systems, carriages and steamships. The people are shown to be perennially on the move. Drouet is a travelling salesman on the train routes of the Mid-west. Carrie and Hurstwood are shown searching for work in the vast cities of surging crowds and huge shopping arcades. Capitalist society has to generate a state of excitement and anxiety to sustain itself. The world of desire which directs the main characters shows the human mind in a flux. Dreiser notes that in American cities plate-glass windows were becoming fashionable for the first time during the late 19th century. The effect of these windows was "to awe and abash the common applicant, and to make the gulf between poverty and success both wide and deep". What the window reflects is a society polarised into the rich and the poor. Both Drouet and Hurstwood take special care to be seen with the right kind of people. When Drouet takes Carrie out to eat he selects a table near the window: "He enjoyed the changing panorama of the street – to see and be seen as he dined." This dinner marks the first stage of Carrie's seduction, and it is set against the theatrical nature of the urban scene. Carrie is an easy victim since her social location makes her vulnerable. The rocking chair in which Carrie often sits near the window glancing into the street outside signifies her own agitated self which is caught in a to and fro motion, against the flux of the spectacular urban scene.

In this world of change and desire, the individual cannot claim any solid identity. Critics have commented on Carrie's total disregard of her past. She never returns to her parents, nor does she remember her sister after leaving her. Her vision is ever pointed towards future. Her identity is ever in flux as revealed by the constant change of names she undergoes. In the opening sentence of the novel, she is 'Caroline Meeber'. Drouet fondly calls her 'Cad'. Mrs. Hale and others in the building know her as 'Mrs. Drouet'. When she is given a role in the amateur production, her name changes to 'Carrie Madenda'. In the company of Hurstwood she is first Mrs. Murdok and later Mrs. Wheeler. Once she becomes an actress, she becomes Laura, Katisha, the Country Maid, the frowning Quakeress and many other characters. Dreiser frequently refers Drouet as "the drummer" and Hurstwood as "the dressy manager". However, once Hurstwood loses his standing in the society, he becomes "the ex-manager". When he is learning to drive the streetcar, Dreiser comments: "The ex-manager laid his hand to the throttle and pushed it gently, as he thought". In the name

of "Carrie" one may note her passivity "of being carried" through life by strokes of chance and fortune. "Wheeler" suggests Hurstwood's steady decline in social status.

If the social conflict is not visible on the surface it is because this society is organised according to hierarchy. At the bottom of this social hierarchy is the homeless poor who have no place to sleep. At the end of the fourteenth chapter we find 'a gaunt-faced man of about thirty, who looked the picture of privation and wretchedness' (p.134) begging for the price of a bed. Hurstwood does not notice him, but Drouet gives him a dime 'with an unwilling feeling of pity in his heart'. This is a prelude to an elaborate scene in the 45th chapter where 'an ex-soldier turned religionist' (p.432) stands at the corner of twenty-sixth street and Broadway to solicit charity for securing beds for the homeless. (It is an irony of fate that Hurstwood ends up among the homeless, on the streets of New York, waiting near this ex-captain). In social hierarchy, above this group of the homeless are the manual labourers. Dreiser understood that the bulk of the manual work in the industrial cities was carried out by poorly paid, unorganised workers. Carrie remembers her father whose head was covered by the white flour of the mill where he worked. Carrie worked in a shoe factory where the working conditions were inhuman. Hanson, Minnie's husband, is a lifelong toiler who leaves his home early in the morning. He is a cheerless, silent man. Above these manual workers we have salesmen like Drouet who make a living by selling manufactured goods to a large network of distributors and shopkeepers. Dreiser was right in noting that Drouet belonged to a group of intermediaries thrown up by the new capitalist order. When Carrie first meets Hurstwood he appears desirable because he is socially above Drouet. Hurstwood, as manager, exuded confidence and charm but once he loses his job his commanding appearance comes in the way to secure a barman's job. When he becomes a motorman, he moves out of his class which destroys his sense of self-respect and identity. When Carrie becomes an actress, she enters the "walled city" of privileged upper class people. She moves in an insular world which is not cluttered with hard labour and exploitation. The world of New York as depicted in the novel represents the brighter side of the capitalist society from which the ugly facts of factory production have been kept away.

The novel also shows the American family in a state of transition. The forces of industrialisation and urbanisation undermined the stability of American family as a social and economic unit. In traditional societies the family is a cohesive economic group as it takes part in the production of goods. This is particularly true of agricultural families. Dreiser grew up in an urban family which was constantly on the move in search of work and shelter. He has seen his brothers and sisters revolting against the rigid religious views of his father. In *Sister Carrie* we meet Carrie's sister Minnie and her husband Hanson who represent a working class family in the city. The interiors of their small flat represents their diminished social status:

Minnie's "flat", as the one-floor residence apartments were then being called was in a part of West Van Buren Street which was inhabited by families of labourers and clerks, men who had come and were still coming with the rush of population which was pouring in at the rate of 50,000 a year.

Minnie is a subdued woman who is totally dependant on her husband. Carrie notes the conservative attitude of Hanson, and Minnie. There is very little communication between Minnie and Hanson. Curiously enough, this is also true of Hurstwood and his wife who represent the upper class family:

There was no love lost between them. There was no great feelings of dissatisfaction... They did not talk enough together to come to the argument of any one point. In the accepted and popular phrase, she had her ideas and he had his.

Dreiser also shows that there is a widening gulf between the parents and children. Both Jessica and George are not devoted to their parents and Hurstwood has very little time for them.

Both these families lack intimacy or loving relationships. In the modern capitalist society an individual is encouraged to become enterprising and autonomous. The commitment to community that underlines the values of the family become redundant in a fiercely competitive world of individualism. Dreiser himself appears nostalgic about the traditional, close-knit family when he says:

A lovely home atmosphere is one of the flowers of the world than which there is nothing more tender, nothing more delicate, nothing more calculated to make strong and just the natures cradled and nourished within it.

Carrie's isolation at the end of the novel is largely because of her separation from her family. As we noted earlier, she has no family to go back to. When she shifted her allegiance to Hurstwood she did not know he was married. She feels cheated when she discovers that Hurstwood is a married man. This obviously means that she had thought of leading a normal married life. However, in New York, she seems to have abandoned all such hopes. Her love for Ames remains unexpressed and she is wary of further entanglement with men. She now lives in a state of longing which has no fixed direction or centre:

Ames had pointed out a farther step, but on and on beyond that, if accomplished, would lie others for her. It was forever to be the pursuit of that radiance of delight which tints the distant hilltops of the world.

She is a lonely individual who has broken away from her family and feels alienated and dissatisfied even when she has attained fame and fortune. The journey of Carrie from Columbia to New York traces the social transitions American society has witnessed in the last decade of the 19th century.

4.4 *SISTER CARRIE AS A NOVEL OF IDEAS*

Dreiser's discovery of Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley effected a breakthrough in his intellectual view of the world. To what extent are his ideas central to his novels? In this section we shall discuss some of the ideas that he has articulated in *Sister Carrie* and examine whether these ideas are central to the fictional narrative. In other words, our purpose is to see how far the novel *Sister Carrie* succeeds in projecting a well-defined philosophy of life through its narrative. In his essay, "Manners, Morals and the Novel", Lionel Trilling argues that the primary responsibility of a novelist is to represent the manners of a society. By 'manners' he means "that part of a culture which is made up of half-uttered or un-uttered or unutterable expressions of value" (Lionel Trilling, 1951: 206). He goes on to say that each culture has a conflicting variety of manners, 'and one of the jobs of a culture is the adjustment of this conflict' (Ibid.). It is by constructing our version of reality that we articulate our attitude towards manners. It has been argued earlier that Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* is a critique of the genteel tradition in American fiction. Dreiser's critique is made possible by two factors. One is his own first hand experiences as a member of the lower-class family which went through deprivation and hunger. The second factor that enables Dreiser to present a critique of American society is his rational, scientific attitude towards human society. This is what makes an examination of his ideas imperative.

It is often argued that Dreiser's interest in ideas does not contribute to his achievement as a novelist. This is to say that his naturalism is a distracting

characteristic of his work. Lionel Trilling has been highly critical of Dreiser's attempt to incorporate ideas in the structure of his novel. Trilling writes:

To the extent that Dreiser's style is defensible, his thought is also defensible. That is, when he thinks like a novelist, he is worth following – when by means doubt cumulatively effective style, he creates rough and ungainly but effective characters and events. But when he thinks like, as we say, a philosopher, he is likely to be not only foolish but vulgar. (Ibid.: 17).

Trilling feels that Dreiser's ideas lack depth and he has been unable to integrate his ideas into the structure of the novel. Donald Pizer rightly points out that this hostility towards naturalism in general and Dreiser's use of ideas in the novel in particular may be traced to certain misconceptions. The naturalist novelists are considered philosophically inconsistent because their representation of characters very often does not subscribe to the determinist creed they profess. Their novels are also found to be artistically deficient. Trilling considers Henry James superior to Dreiser as a novelist because his (James's) novels are structurally 'organic'. Here it appears that Trilling is contradicting himself. In his essay, "Manners, Morals and the Novel" he says that "a shifting society is bound to generate an interest in appearance in the philosophical sense" (Trilling, 1951: 210). We have argued that Dreiser is dealing with a fast changing society where there are no clear land marks. His concern with the surface details of existence is born of an intuitive grasp of their significance in defining the essence of a society in transition. To say that his novels lack 'organic structure' is to forget that his revolt is against the romantic and sentimental elements in the mainstream genteel tradition.

Dreiser discovers Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin and Balzac at a crucial point in his intellectual evolution. We also have to underline the fact that Dreiser is the first major American novelist who came from the immigrant's stock. The critical perspective of the outsider was complicated by his rebellion against the rigid religious beliefs of his Catholic father. Dreiser was seeking confirmation of his own vague ideas in the works of Spencer, Huxley and Balzac. The amoral determinism of a materialistic world is inherent in what Dreiser saw in Pittsburgh and Chicago. The impersonal economic system did not accommodate the will of the individual. The social forces assume superhuman power pushing the individual in a certain direction with the inexorable logic of a natural event.

Let us examine a concrete instance from *Sister Carrie* where Dreiser's statements of ideas figure prominently. In the opening paragraph of Chapter VIII, Dreiser writes:

Among the forces which sweep and play throughout the universe, untutored man is but a wisp in the wind. Our civilisation is still in a middle stage, scarcely beast, in that it is no longer guided by instinct; scarcely human in that it is yet wholly guided by reason. (p. 74).

This contemplation on the paradoxical state of man is occasioned by Carrie's plight. Carrie has left her sister's flat to move into a room rented by Drouet. Dreiser is departing from the predictable course taken by the 19th century novelist. Dreiser does not see the fallen woman as a criminal. He finds it essential to comment on Carrie's situation objectively so that it is not construed as the stock theme of the popular sentimental novel. Carrie's dilemmas are, at a deeper level, emblematic of the duality inherent in human situation. Dreiser feels that unless man evolves further he cannot find harmony with the world around him:

As a beast, the forces of life aligned him with them; as a man, he has not yet wholly learnt to align himself with the forces. In this intermediate stage he wavers – neither drawn in harmony with nature by his instincts nor yet wisely putting himself into harmony by his own free will. He is even as a wisp in the wind, moved by every breath of passion, acting now by his will and now by

his instincts, erring with one, only to retrieve by the other, falling by one, only to rise by the other – a creature of incalculable variability. (p.74).

If Carrie is buffeted by forces beyond her control it only brings out her essential humanity. Dreiser implies that in choosing to go with Drouet, Carrie cannot be equated with a fallen woman. By virtue of her reason, she is able to sense the "immorality" of her decision. At the same time, her instinctive needs gain an upper hand and dictate her choices. Her desire for love, comfort, clothing and shelter can be traced to her own instinctive world. Dreiser suggests that Carrie's indecision and mental turmoil are indicative of the pull in the direction of rationality which proves to be weaker. Dreiser makes it obvious that Carrie is not morally responsible for her choices as "she was as yet more drawn than she drew" (Pizer, 1970: 585). If we look further into the role of these philosophical comments in the fictional narrative we can see that they contribute substantially to the development of the fictional narrative as well as the representation of Carrie's character. The ideas of moral determinism, natural evolution and the effect of the material conditions on the consciousness of man are not reported as "ideas" but integrated into the fictional context to critique the prevailing moral assumptions of the society. To use Lionel Trilling's words, Dreiser is attempting to articulate "the half-uttered or unuttered or unutterable expressions of value" which are inherent in American culture at the turn of the 20th century. Dreiser's moral realism succeeds in capturing the manners of American society.

In his book on Dreiser's fiction Lawrence E. Hussman, Jr. has argued that Bob Ames who appears in two extended scenes later in the novel, "appears to function as the author's spokesman in offering Carrie some perspective on her pursuits and pointing the way to what he thinks may be her higher calling" (Hussman Jr., 1983: 24). Carrie meets Ames for the first time at a pre-theatre dinner party at Sherry's restaurant. Ames, who is an engineer and inventor, works for an Indianapolis electrical company. Carrie is deeply impressed by the glamour and luxury of the hotel. However, Ames tells her that he would not care to be rich enough to spend his money in such a vulgar manner. This critical note interrogates Carrie's world-view. This must have been deliberately introduced by Dreiser to suggest that she has to move beyond the world of instinctive desire to the world of intellect and a secular form of spirituality. Dreiser's later novels assert that he himself moved towards such a world-view. Carrie's instant liking for Ames shows that she has hidden resources which need to be realised further through art and intellect. Haussman, Jr. comments: "In this first scene between the budding actress and the inventor, Ames is established as chief spokesman for Dreiser and as an incisive critic of American success formula" (Ibid.: 25-26). Ames is different from Drouet and Hurstwood. He is the first intellectual Carrie comes into contact with.

As a reporter, Dreiser had once interviewed Thomas Alva Edison extensively to find out the source of his success and also the nature of his ideas (Ibid.: 30-31). In the interview Edison had suggested that his only happiness came from the process of working on an invention. Once he has successfully completed an invention, he lost interest in it. Ames echoes this view of Edison when he underlines devotion to work. According to Edison the single-minded, focussed pursuit of an objective alone impart meaning to life. This has a parallel in the following advice Ames gives to Carrie:

The world is full of desirable situations, but unfortunately, we can occupy but one at a time. It doesn't do us any good to wring our hands over the far-off things. (p.446).

In the portrayal of Ames, we can see how Dreiser uses ideas in the novel. In being different from Drouet and Hurstwood, Ames questions the ideology of the American Dream which is founded on a materialistic pursuit of success and power. As opposed to Carrie's disquiet and desire, Ames communicates a humanistic ideal of giving and serving. In his later novels Dreiser developed these ideas further into well-defined positions. Ames is not an incidental, superfluous character who is used to project a

romantic ideal. Dreiser creates him out of his felt need to explore an alternative world-view. Dreiser disapproves of the materialistic excesses that have turned American society into an unjust and violent society. He is aware of the predatory instinct behind the glittering façade of capitalism. Carrie is seen at the end, poised between several options, afflicted by her own desire and ready to move on. Dreiser writes: "Ames had pointed out a farther step, but on and on beyond that, if accomplished, would lie others for her. It was forever to be the pursuit of that radiance of delight which tints the distant hilltops of the world."

The above discussion clearly establishes that Dreiser's ideas are not superfluous. They emerge out of his delineation of characters, descriptions of their interactions and contextualisation of their motives and impulses. In other words, they are well integrated into his fictional narratives.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

This unit was devoted to a careful examination of some of the major themes in *Sister Carrie*. In his representation of gender, Dreiser deviates from the genteel tradition of the 19th century. One of his major achievements as a novelist is the manner in which he made the city available to narrative by formulating new fictional strategies. He not only documents American society as it appears to him but also provides a critique of its ideology. Dreiser was alert to the conflicts that plagued a class-ridden society. We have examined how these conflicts are propelled by the social changes taking place at that time. Dreiser was animated by several scientific and rationalist ideas. Every debate on Dreiser has to finally tackle the vexed question of the role of these ideas in his fictional narrative. We have tried to show that these ideas are well integrated into his fictional narrative.

4.6 QUESTIONS

- 1) Do you agree with the view that Dreiser, in his depiction of Carrie, absolves her from her actions? Give your reasons.
- 2) Evaluate *Sister Carrie* as a novel about life in the modern American city.
- 3) Comment on the nature of social conflicts that characterise the urban life in America towards the end of the 19th century.
- 4) Trace some of central ideas Dreiser uses in the novel. How far are these ideas integrated into his fictional narrative?
- 5) "Dreiser's self is reflected in the characters of Carrie, Drouet and Hurstwood". Discuss.

4.7 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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UNIT 5 LANGUAGE AND ART IN *SISTER CARRIE*

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 *Sister Carrie* as a Naturalist Novel
- 5.2 Structure and Design in *Sister Carrie*
- 5.3 Language and Style - *Sister Carrie*
- 5.4 Imagery in *Sister Carrie*
- 5.5 *Sister Carrie* as a Polyphonic Novel
- 5.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.7 Questions
- 5.8 Suggestions for Further Reading
- 5.9 Glossary

5.0 OBJECTIVES

There is general agreement among critics regarding the significance of Dreiser's achievement as a novelist. However he has been found wanting in the finer aspects of language and style. In this unit we shall take a closer look at his craftsmanship and fictional strategies. We would like to propose that Dreiser's style, like his themes, deviates from the prevailing conventions because of the uniqueness of his vision and radicalism of his world-view. As noted earlier, questions of language and style cannot be totally delinked from the subject matter an author deals with. The pertinent question is what Dreiser does with his style and whether it is adequate to communicate his vision of life. We would once again return to some of his central thematic concerns, but this time in the context of his style and language.

5.1 *SISTER CARRIE* AS A NATURALIST NOVEL

Any discussion of Dreiser as a representative writer of American naturalism has to take into account the hostility displayed by the mainstream critics towards this literary movement. In Unit 4.4 we have seen how Lionel Trilling finds Dreiser inferior to Henry James. This hostility towards naturalist writing may have something to do with the concept of organic form. A naturalist novel by its attempt to incorporate external reality fails to achieve, according to these critics, aesthetic perfection. Donald Pizer has this to say on this trend of criticism:

So those writers who most clearly appear to be naturalists, such as Dreiser and Farrell, are almost always praised for qualities which are distinct from their naturalism. We are thus told that Dreiser's greatness is not in his naturalism and he is most of all an artist when not a philosopher.

Inherent in this attitude of the mainstream critics is the argument that art and ideology can be completely separated. To assume that Dreiser's novel is primarily written to illustrate a particular philosophy is to be unaware of its complex treatment of reality. Here we would examine what constitutes Dreiser's 'naturalism' by closely reading certain parts of his novel.

Naturalism involved a return to the rudimentary aspects of man's existence in nature. In a sense, this view goes back to the Aristotelian idea of mimesis. In fact Aristotle makes a distinction between the poet and the historian: the latter is concerned with

the factual and the particular while the former reflects the universal and the general. However, Emile Zola's emphasis, in his pronouncements on the naturalist novel, is on the concrete and the individual and not on the abstract and the general. Zola feels that modern scientific theories can equip a novelist with new ways of perception that will enable him to dispense with imagination. Zola writes:

The experimental novelist is therefore the one who accepts proven facts, who points out in man and in society the mechanism of the phenomena over which science is mistress, and who does not impose his personal sentiments, except in the phenomena whose determinism is not yet settled, and who tries to test, as much as he can, this personal sentiment, this idea of *a priori*, by observation and experiment. (Raman Selden, 1988: 53).

Here it has to be underlined that Zola was reacting against the mystical and metaphysical elements in Romantic and Symbolist theories of literature. Naturalism meant an attempt to reconstitute and redefine man in the modern context. Zola writes in another context:

It was a question of commencing all over again; of knowing man down to the sources of his being before coming to such conclusions as the idealists reached, who invented types of character out of the whole cloth; and writers had only to start the edifice at the foundation, bringing together the greatest number of human data arranged in their logical order. (Ibid: 54).

As an enquiry into 'nature, being and things', naturalism allowed Dreiser to move away from the genteel tradition of 19th century American fiction. If there was no 'naturalism' Dreiser would have invented something similar. F.O. Mattheson clearly understood this when he said that

Dreiser was the immigrant's son from the wrong side of the tracks, who broke through the genteel tradition by no conscious intention, but by drawing on a store of experience outside the scope of the easily well-to-do experience which formed the solid basis for all his subsequent thought. (Pizer, 1970: 480).

Unlike the European naturalist Dreiser did not go out in search of 'reality'. His first-hand experience of the lower class life is so profound and complete that he only has to dip into his memories to describe a scene, a situation or a person. Ford Madox Ford has commented that the difference between Zola and Dreiser is that "if Zola had to write about a ride on a railway locomotive's tender or a night in a brothel, Zola had to get it all out of a book. Dreiser has only to call on his undimmed memories, and the episode will be there in all its freshness and vigour" (Quoted by Mattheissen, in Pizer, 1970: 477). Novelists like Howells, Crane and Norris had dealt with the sordid side of metropolitan life but they could never enter the lower class world of deprivation and violence with the confidence of Dreiser. Kenneth S. Lynn comments: "*Sister Carrie* is the work of an insider, writing out of the heart of his own experience" (Pizer, 1970: 480).

Dreiser's discovery of naturalist philosophy came as an inevitable extension of his own sympathy for and interest in the human condition around him. In *Sister Carrie* this gets artistically transformed into a coherent narrative. Even a cursory reading of *Sister Carrie* will reveal its refreshingly radical view of representing the emergent subjectivity of a modern woman who is gradually learning to discover herself. Writers who professed realism such as William Dean Howells were patriarchal in their attitude to questions of gender. But *Sister Carrie* has no trace of such an attitude.

Dreiser's critique of patriarchy may be traced to his own awareness of capitalist order and its inherent destructive traits. Dreiser's naturalism, unlike the French authors,

does not discover any fundamental, mechanistic forces that direct the lives of his characters. At the beginning of the 7th chapter he writes:

The true meaning of money yet remains to be popularly explained and comprehended. When each individual realises for himself that this thing primarily stands for and should only be accepted as a moral due – that it should be paid out as honestly stored energy, and not as a usurped privilege – many of our social, religious, and political troubles will have permanently passed. (p.63).

The question of money stands for the larger mystery of human life itself. Charles Walcott points out how *Sister Carrie* conveys “this quality of life – shifting, elusive, unaccountable – that holds our attention rather than the spectacle of carefully analysed forces operating under experimental conditions” (Pizer: 494). Dreiser is unable to extract any laws of human physiology or psychology by the analysis of his characters. For him the only reality is the disorder and uncertainty that threaten the social realm. According to Walcott, where Zola’s theory would “put most emphasis – on the extraction of laws about human nature – Dreiser is most uncertain and most sure that no certainty can be attained” (Ibid.). In an earlier section we have discussed at length the passage at the beginning of chapter 8 where Dreiser elaborates his theory of reason and instinct. We have also noted that it is integral to the context as a meditative prelude to the ensuing action. However, its value as a theory of human actions is not convincing.

Perhaps it is necessary to re-define naturalism itself in the context of Dreiser. It has been argued that American naturalism is ‘essentially realism infused with pessimistic determinism’ (Pizer, 1970: 568). Richard Chase characterises American naturalism as realism with a ‘necessitarian ideology’ while George J. Becker considers all naturalism no more than ‘an emphatic and explicit philosophical position taken by some realists’ (Ibid.). Pizer’s nuanced view of naturalistic novel merits attention here. He maintains that:

naturalist novel usually contains two tension or contradictions; and that the two in conjunction comprise both an interpretation of experience and a particular aesthetic recreation of experience.

The two ‘tensions’ or ‘contradictions’ can be seen in *Sister Carrie*. Dreiser’s concept of man as a product of chance or a victim of chemisms is at odds with his subject matter which is life in middle class America. In the portrayal of real life Dreiser is able to convey a sense of solid reality but the fact is it does not conform to any abstract theory of human actions. Dreiser’s own personal experiences find their way into the world of his characters. Pizer says:

The tension here is that between the naturalist’s desire to represent in fiction the new, discomfoting truths which he has found in the ideas and life of his late 19th century world, and also his desire to find some meaning in experience which reasserts the validity of the human enterprise.

As we have seen above, Dreiser is unable to convey any abiding sense of order or truth. The strength of *Sister Carrie* is largely derived from its experiential content. Dreiser’s need to discover some fundamental law about human life and society comes into conflict with the contingency of existence he articulates in the novel. Still, what makes Dreiser a naturalist is the value he attaches to life on its lowest levels. Even the least significant human being is very complex and has difficult moral choices to make. Pizer says:

Naturalism reflects an affirmative ethical conception of life, for it asserts the value of all life by endowing the lowest character with emotion and defeat and with moral ambiguity, no matter how poor or ignoble he may seem.

Dreiser's naturalism is derived from a complex ethical point of view which sees human life as contingent upon historical and natural forces.

5.2 STRUCTURE AND DESIGN IN *SISTER CARRIE*

The novel is a spatial form which interprets human lives in relation to their social locations. *Sister Carrie* communicates a sense of solid reality. If it remains a classic, it is mainly because it has captured the social reality of America towards the end of the 19th century. Dreiser's occasional clumsiness of expression notwithstanding, the novel succeeding in evoking the inner contradictions of a fast changing society where everything, from man's concept of nature to man-woman relationships, is in a state of flux. Dreiser's description of low life is marked by an innate sense of compassion and sympathy. This makes him different from other realists of his period. Some of them, unlike Dreiser, were attracted to the sordid and the grotesque in low life, out of a sense of adventurism or sometimes, as an act of rebellion against the class they were born in. Dreiser, with unerring sensitivity, examines the content of human lives and with clinical precision, lays bare the delusive quality of their make-believe world and materialistic pursuits.

How does Dreiser's art make this possible? What gives unity to the novel is the omniscient narrator who walks in and out of rooms and people's minds, observing, commenting, and looking backward and forward. The authorial voice is emphatically present and this unifies the narrative to a remarkable extent. Consider these sentences:

Here was a type of the travelling canvasser for a manufacturing house – a class which at that time was first being dubbed by the slang of the day “drummers”. (p.9).

Before following her in her round of seeking, let us look at the sphere in which her future was to lie. (p.19).

Both the sentences suggest a sudden shift in that particular context in the narrative when a person or an event, which is concretely localised, is suddenly shown as part of a macro reality. In Dreiser's world we are constantly aware of a larger socio-political dimension of the everyday events narrated. When we read about Minnie's dilemma as a sister and a wife, we are aware of the larger compulsions of her lower middle class circumstances. This is to say that Dreiser embodies her point of view in the very description of her feelings and thoughts. In the process of detailing Minnie's response to Carrie's arrival in Chicago we learn about her husband's 'point of view in the attitude of work' which was, “Anything was good enough so long as it paid” and also her underlying sense of insecurity as a dependent house-wife. Thus, the micro world of human relationships is related to the macro world of politics and power.

In the course of narration, Dreiser identifies with his characters to such an extent that his voice merges into that of his character. When Carrie approaches Chicago her excitement of seeing Chicago for the first time echoes the emotions Dreiser felt when he came to the city for the first time:

To the child, the genius with imagination, or the wholly untravelled the approach to a great city for the first time is a wonderful thing. Particularly if it be evening – that mystic period between glare and gloom of the world when life is changing from one sphere or condition to another. Ah, the promise of the night. What does it not hold for the weary. (p.13).

Later, when Carrie walks through New York, once again we notice the sense of suppressed excitement in these words:

Coaches were numerous, pedestrians many, and in Fifty ninth Street and Fifth Avenue a blaze of lights from several new hotels which bordered the Plaza Square gave a suggestion of sumptuous hotel life. Fifth Avenue, the home of the wealthy, was noticeably crowded with carriages and gentlemen in evening dress. (p.296).

What accounts for the freshness of these descriptions in the fact it is being seen from the perspective of the lower class. Dreiser's point of view interrogates the nature of reality it describes. Inherent in Dreiser's descriptions of the city is a clash of values, which becomes apparent occasionally:

Once seated, there began that exhibition of showy, wasteful, and unwholesome gastronomy as practiced by wealthy Americans, which is the wonder and astonishment of true culture and dignity the world over. The large bill of fare held an array of dishes sufficient to feed an army, sidelined with prices which made reasonable expenditure a ridiculous impossibility – an order of soup at fifty cents a dollar, with a dozen kinds to choose from, oysters in forty styles and sixty cents the half dozen, entrees, fish and meats at prices which would house one overnight in an average hotel. (p.297).

The critical tone which is authorial has a moral function. It exposes the predatory nature of the upper class consumerism. For Carrie, the world of the rich has a mystique of its own. Dreiser demystifies the world of the rich, revealing its moral vacuum. The ideological function of the interrogative tone of the narrative is to evoke the mystique of the city, while demystifying its essential violence.

Dreiser's treatment of the theme of the city has already been commented upon. The narrative spread over forty seven chapters of the novel moves from Chicago to New York. The novel as a spatial form requires not only location in space but also identification of time. Dreiser uses the biographical framework of time that one commonly encounters in the 19th century novel. The novel has certain elements of *bildungsroman*, or the novel of education which became well-defined during the 19th century. The story covers a period of roughly eight years. Carrie is 18 years old in August, 1889 when she leaves Columbia for Chicago.

Here it may be remembered that Dreiser initially used 1894 but soon decided that 1884 would be more appropriate, because it was closer to his own first impressions of Chicago and to his sister's affair with her architect lover. However, when he wrote the New York portion of the novel he changed this date to 1889 because he wanted to use his experiences of New York life from the mid-1890s. It was while revising the typescript that he finally settled for 1889. This date is particularly appropriate for the chapters on New York. The Chicago he describes belongs to the mid-1880s, with its horse cars, newly developed department stores and theatre performances. The novel is structured around the two cities in such a way that the spatial and temporal aspects of the social reality are never in doubt.

The manner in which Dreiser uses the factual also merits mention. There have been novels like *The Armies of the Night* where contemporary history is recreated as fiction. As a journalist, Dreiser definitely knew what it was to report facts. But in the novel he did not attempt to do this. Dreiser's vision accommodates the deeper problem of order in real life. But his narrative art does not imitate and recreate this disorder. The omniscient point of view, the sensitive characterisation and the graphic cityscapes are various artistic means he uses to examine the disorder at the very heart of American society. Charles Townsend Ludington, Jr. feels that *Sister Carrie* presents this aspect of modernity. He says:

For Dreiser, any sense is personal, is an understanding of *why* things fall apart, and this is comprehended at best as through a glass, darkly. So at the end of his novel *Sister Carrie* sits alone, dreaming by her window and rocking... In some ways Dreiser's is the most modern of these works – "the tangle of human life" overwhelms the possibility of order. *Sister Carrie* is not a non-fiction novel; still the more we know of Dreiser's life, the more we realise that the book is at one level a chronicle of family history as well as social conditions; it is a social novel, but political as well because it engaged the issues that were and are, the very basis of political controversy. (Ludington, Charles Townsend, 1982: 58).

Dreiser chronicles political history through the depiction of relationships. History is not something that exists objectively with an identifiable order, but the attitudes and aspirations that animate identities and personal relationships. Dreiser knew that 'reality', like history, could look different if you are situated differently. What *Sister Carrie* explores is this inner nature of reality through its art.

In any discussion of a novel's structure, the ending is of great significance. *Sister Carrie* ends with this famous passage:

Oh, Carrie! Oh, blind strivings of the human heart! Onward, onward, it saith, and where beauty leads, there it follows. Whether it be the tinkle of a lone sheep bell o'er some quiet landscape, or the glimmer of beauty in sylvan places, or the show of soul in some passing eye, the heart knows and makes answer, following. It is when the feet weary and hope seems vain that the heartaches and the longings arise. Know, then, that for you is neither surfeit nor content. In your rocking chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel. (p.465).

This is a conclusion where nothing is concluded. Carrie here seems to experience her existence as a contingency. She looks towards the future which, like her yearnings, is unpredictable. The arc drawn by the rocking chair is an incomplete circle. Her movements from Columbia to Chicago and from Chicago to New York form an arc. The modernity of *Sister Carrie* lies in its vision of contingency inherent in life. Some of the remarkable modern novels such as *Women in Love* by D.H. Lawrence and *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf end with their characters and action suspended in mid-sentence, as it were. For Carrie there is neither surfeit nor content. She will ever remain a prisoner of her desires which are bred by the larger unreality of her surroundings. Through Carrie, Dreiser achieves a moment of introspection for America. The radiance of delight that tints the distant hilltops of the world reflects her own inner realm. Her self which has been in the making through confrontations with inner and outer world still feels vulnerable. It is this discovery of contingency and vulnerability that is conveyed through the inconclusive nature of the ending.

5.3 LANGUAGE AND STYLE - *SISTER CARRIE*

Dreiser's language has come in for harsh criticism for its lack of grace and clumsiness. Recalling Emerson's comment on Whitman's language that it was a strange mixture of the *Bhagvat-Geeta* and the *New York Herald*, Mattheissen says that "Dreiser's mixture was even stranger". Dreiser wrote extensively for the popular journals throughout his life and was greatly influenced by its parlance. Dreiser felt that criticism against his style was misplaced:

To sit up and criticise me for saying 'vest', instead of 'waist coat', to talk about my splitting the infinitive and using vulgar commonplaces here and

there, when the tragedy of a man's life is being displayed, is silly. More, it is ridiculous. (Pizer, 1970: 475).

This defence is not convincing because the mere fact of the author's thematic concern for a man's tragedy does not absolve him of the need to achieve greater artistic control over language. Dreiser's novel makes an impact as a narrative that conveys a strong sense of solid reality. This is what Mattheissen means when he says it is "more impressive in its main sweep than in all its details". The total effect of *Sister Carrie* is greater than the effect of its parts. Hence it will not always answer to an analysis of its language and style in the tradition of New Criticism.

It has been noted that Dreiser used words from his own conversation in the novel, such as "flashy", "nobby", "truly swell saloon", and "dress suit affair". The influence of popular magazine fiction can be seen in the stilted quality of this sentence: "Thus was Carrie's name bandied about in the most frivolous and gay of places, and that also when the little toiler was bemoaning her narrow lot." Dreiser uses clichés of expression such as "lightsome", "halcyon", "prancing pair of bays", "airy grace" very frequently.

Thomas P. Riggio has forcefully argued in an article that Dreiser's ethnic background is crucial in defining his identity as a writer. Riggio writes:

... in the context of our established literary history, Dreiser's present status has something to do with his ethnicity. That is, the way we read him as our major example of conflicted values; the stress put on the awkwardness of his heavy Germanic prose; the emphasis we give to his late flirtation with the political left... - all are in part a hangover in literary circles of the early class and ethnic bias that shaped the original bias to his writing.

Riggio informs us that the early reviewers of Dreiser emphasised his German-American status:

His (Dreiser's) earliest hostile critics saw his view of American life as radically subversive to the dominant cultural values of the time, and they associated that view with his ethnic background.

Hence, the 'awkwardness of his style' should be taken as a mark of his hybridised heritage. In the novel itself Dreiser carefully conceals the ethnic background of Carrie. He writes:

Warm with the fancies of youth, pretty with the insipid prettiness of the formative period, possessed of a figure promising eventual shapeliness and an eye alight with certain native intelligence, she was a fair example of the middle American class - two generations removed from the emigrant. (p.2).

It could be argued, as Riggio does, that Dreiser does not return to Carrie's past mainly because it would involve documenting her ethnic identity in greater details. Carrie's first lover, Drouet is half-French ("our family was half French on father's side") and Minnie's husband, Swen Hanson is half-Swedish ("a silent man, American born, of a Swede father"). Hurstwood is a native American. Thus Carrie moves from the margins of the society to American mainstream.

The title of the novel, however, reveals the ethnic character of the protagonist. Dreiser had modelled the protagonist of his novel on his own sister, Emma Wilhelmina. Emma's letters addressed to Dreiser, which are now available at the University of Pennsylvania, show that they are signed as "Sister Emma". In Germany till early 1800s, this was how younger siblings were addressed. The ethnic Germans obviously held on to this custom even after they left their mother land. Several critics have argued that Dreiser was following Balzac who named his novels *Pere Goriot*

and *Cousine Bette*. Donal Pizer says that "by writing the title Dreiser was signifying that he wished to write a Balzacian novel about the adventures of his sister Emma" (Pizer, 1976: 44). We may understand the title of *Sister Carrie* coming from two sources namely the Balzacian – realist tradition and also the German-American ethnic background.

One of the most intriguing aspects of *Sister Carrie* is its chapter titles. The chapter titles were added after the edited version of the novel came back to Dreiser from Doubleday. Perhaps, Dreiser wanted to make his novel more acceptable to his readership by adding these fancy titles. If you read the chapter titles together in sequence you will be struck by their exotic quality. It has been pointed out that he was influenced by the popular magazine verse in the choice of these titles. Mattheissen writes: "These are oddly cast in the language of magazine verse, and most of them even fall into metrical lines of eleven and twelve syllables" (Pizer, 1970: 484). Several of them are metrically patterned and can be scanned. In his note on the chapter titles of *Sister Carrie*, Philip Williams comments:

The meter is remarkable for its rocking-horse regularity: two beats on either side of the caesura, with most lines so perfectly scanned that 29 of the 47 titles have 6/5 patterns of syllabification.

He goes on to list the following chapter titles which are perfect in their rhythm:

- 2 What poverty Threatened: Of granite and Brass
- 3 We Question of Fortune: Four-Fifty a Week
- 4 The Spendings of Fancy: Facts Answer with Sneers
- 14 With Eyes and Not Seeing: One Influence Wanes
- 15 The Irk of the Old Ties: The Magic of Youth
- 16 A Witless Aladdin: The Gate to the World
- 17 A Glimpse Through the Gateway: Hope Lightens the Eye
- 18 Just Over the Border: A Hail and Farewell

The titles between chapters 27 and 39 share the same rhythm. Chapter 44 and 47 once again use the same rhythmic pattern. Philip Williams has this to say regarding the sound-effects of these titles:

The regularity of stress and caesura suggest Old English metrics, and there are obvious efforts for consonance and even alliteration. For chapter 3 the title uses "We" and "Week", "Fortune" and "Four-Fifty", "Fancy" and "Facts", "Spendings" and "Sneers" follow in title 4; the sibilant sounds seven times in this line. There are other titles (6, 7, 19, 29, 32 etc.) with deliberate alliterations; the repetition of words and parallelism of forms and sounds are consistent effects throughout.

The stark realism of the narrative stands in direct contrast with the sentimental quality of the titles. Mattheissen feels that they throw light on Dreiser's intention. Two of the chapters (20 and 21) have the same title: "The Lure of the Spirit: The Flesh in Pursuit". The basic symbolic contrast between flesh and spirit arches over the entire novel. In fact, Dreiser had titled the novel as *The Flesh and the Spirit* in his first contract with the publisher.

If the chapter titles are meant to be 'symbolic' of the content of the chapters it also reveals the contradictions in Dreiser's realism. Here briefly we shall highlight Dreiser's considerable powers of narration. As a passage gathers emotional momentum his language becomes intense and dense. In the following passage Hurstwood and his wife confront each other finally, before he walks out on his family.

She gazed at him – a pythoness in humour.

“I am not dictating to you”, she returned; “I am telling you what I want”. The answer was so cool, so rich in bravado, that somehow it took the wind out of his sails. He could not attack her, he could not ask her for proofs. Somehow he felt evidence, law, the remembrance of all his property which she held in her name, to be shining in her glance. He was like a vessel, powerful and dangerous, but rolling and floundering without sail. (p.206).

This is a scene of confrontation where the hidden selves of the husband and wife are on display. In the course of confrontation the power shifts from Hurstwood to his wife. This, of course, has something to do with her legal legitimacy as wife and the consequent access to protection under law. Dreiser is able to communicate the hidden elements of power in all human interactions. If money is a source of power and authority, erotic desire is another source of power. In the scene where both Hurstwood and Drouet watch Carrie on the stage in a performance that marks her first success on the stage we sense the mounting desire in the two men as Carrie enacts a scene of conventional romance on the stage. Here the dialogues spoken on the stage, the excited state of the lovers and the subsequent exchanges between Carrie and her lovers turn the scene into a high point of dramatic action. The following paragraph brings out the underlying contradictions in their relationships which will soon overtake their lives:

The little actress was in fine feather. She was realising now what it was to be petted. For once she was the admired, the sought for. The independence of success now made its first faint showing. With the tables turned, she was looking down, rather than up, to her lover. She did not fully realise that this was so, but there was something in condescension coming from her which was infinitely sweet. (p.181).

The world of desire manifests itself here as a theatre of appearances and conflicting interests. Dreiser clearly indicates that no one is in control here. Each one has a secret world hidden from the others. The ensuing two chapters have the identical titles of “The Lure of the Spirit: The Flesh in Pursuit”. Dreiser places the first theatre scene at a strategically crucial point in the narrative. This means that Dreiser’s overall structure merits closer attention than the smaller, individual parts.

In such emotionally charged scenes Dreiser uses plain style devoid of all embellishments or clichés of expression. As Mattheissen points out, Dreiser is at his “rare best” in conveying the growing rift between Hurstwood and Carrie. The pitiful blankness of the scene where Hurstwood begs from Carrie is a masterly creation where the language never falters. The plainness of the language works with greater effect in the passage that describes Hurstwood’s final resolve to die:

“Now he began leisurely to take off his clothes, but stopped first with the coat, and tucked it along the crack under the door. His vest he arranged in the same place. His old wet, cracked hat he laid softly upon the table. Then he pulled off the shoes and lay down. (p.462).

His final words are “What’s the use?” The above passage is in predominantly monosyllables. The only tri-syllabic word “leisurely” calls attention to his sense of final drift to death. Mattheissen comments on this passage:

Dreiser’s feeling for the dignity of man, even at the last extreme, comes through in Hurstwood’s calmness. But the key-word in bringing out Dreiser’s attitude towards life is “kindness”. Even at its worst, life contains something which he, with full compassion for his beaten how, will not reject, but will embrace with tenderness.

5.4 IMAGERY IN *SISTER CARRIE*

There are several groups of images in *Sister Carrie* that strike us as integral to the narrative. The imagery related to clothes, rocking chair, the newspaper have already been discussed in various contexts. We shall look at them again. Images of sea, animals, and the theatre have different sets of function in the narrative. But before probing these images, let us look at Minnie's dream which comes in the eighth chapter of the novel. After Carrie leaves Minnie, her sister has no idea where she has gone. As a lower-class house-wife she has no influence over her husband. In the circumstances, her own anxiety about her sister's plight is reflected in the dream, in which both Minnie and Carrie are near an old coal mine. They are looking into the dark shadows of a deep pit. Carrie gets into an old basket hanging there fastened by a worn rope. Minnie keeps shouting, "Carrie, Carrie" but Carrie disappears into the dark shadows below. Dreiser writes:

"Carrie", she called, "Carrie", but her own voice sounded far away and the strange waters were blurring everything. She came away suffering as though she had lost something. She was more inexpressibly sad than she had ever been in life.

This dream comes at a point where Drouet has found a room for Carrie, and he is about to introduce her to Hurstwood. The dream is suggestive of fall and disintegration. However, in real life Carrie does not face fragmentation and ruin as Minnie feared. Dreiser uses the dream primarily to outline the conventional attitude towards woman's attempt to venture out into the public world. It helps to establish the expectations against which the subsequent progress of Carrie through life will be chartered.

Several critics have highlighted the significance of clothes in Dreiser's narrative. Mattheissen comments: "Clothes in Dreiser are the chief means of display, of lifting a character above where he was, and by that fact above someone else" (Pizer: 492). Drouet is a flashy dresser. Carrie is impressed by his pink and white striped shirt, his cuff links set with agates, the Elkes' insigne on his watch-chain, his highly polished tan shoes, and his gray fedora hat. When Carrie is comfortably settled in the house rented for her by Drouet, Dreiser comments that she had quite an array of clothing in the wardrobe, "more than she had ever possessed before and of very becoming designs". When Hurstwood calls on Drouet and Carrie for the first time he is exquisitely dressed. Carrie is now impressed by his taste.

His cravat was a shiny combination of silken threads, not loud, not inconspicuous. What he wore did not strike the eye so forcibly as that which Drouet had on, but Carrie could see the elegance of the material. Hurstwood's shoes were of soft, black calf, polished only to a dull shine. Drouet wore patent leather, but Carrie could not help feeling that there was a distinction in favour of the soft leather, where all else was rich. (p.95).

This is the beginning of Carrie's interest in Hurstwood. In the latter part of the novel the decline of Hurstwood is graphically captured in his appearance. Ms. Vance is appalled to see him in his shabby, old clothes. The rift between Carrie and Hurstwood is final when she learns that she (Mrs. Vance) had seen him in those clothes. When he is reduced to the state of a tramp in the streets of New York, the appearance is what undergoes a change:

They had on faded derby hats with dents in them. Their misfit coats were heavy with melted show and turned up at the collars. Their trousers were mere bags, frayed at the bottom and wobbling over big, sippy shoes, torn at the sides and worn almost to shreds. (p.460).

This completes a cycle for Hurstwood who from the post of manager moves to a state of complete deprivation and loss of status. Why does Dreiser use the imagery of clothes so frequently? He is representing a society which is in a state of flux, where reality itself is constantly redefined. The inner world of desire finds expression in the metaphor of clothes.

If clothes capture the unreality of this inherently unstable world, the rocking chair corresponds to its arc-like, rising and falling motion. Philip Gerber notes: "Throughout *Sister Carrie*, Dreiser employs the rocking chair to symbolise the restlessness, the feverish activity which transports Carrie to no satisfying destination" (Gerber, Philip, 1964: 62). At the outset, we see Carrie sitting near the window in Minnie's flat, in a rocking chair, thinking of her future plans. While living in New York in a modest flat, with Hurstwood, Carrie still continues to rock in her chair, yearning for a better life. After losing his job, Hurstwood confines himself to the comfort of the rocking chair, brooding over the newspapers. In our last view of Carrie, once again we see her in a rocking chair looking towards future with anxiety and excitement. Dreiser writes:

In your rocking chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel.

The novel concludes with this image. In the concluding decades of the 19th century technology was redefining human life radically. Sigfried Giedion feels that the rocking chair is the domesticated version of the giant technological machines that were constantly on the move. Maureen Howard writes:

Giedion points out that, just as all technological facts become at some point miniaturised and domesticated as a way of enjoying what in other contexts might be frightening or oppressive in its novelty, an increasingly popular American object domesticated and routinised the steady motion of work, turning it into a lulling relaxation. That object was the rocking chair. The rocking chair permits one to rest and move at the same time, cancelling the effects of motion by allowing it to recur in the same fixed spot. The state is one of striking inbetweenness, as though a way had been found to factor out the pleasures of many conditions and fuse them while discarding all of the inconveniences that generally accompany either motion or rest, domesticity or sociability, family life or citizenship.

This makes it clear that Dreiser's recurring use of this image had something to do with his grasp of the larger socio-political movements on the macro-level of history. In an earlier section we have discussed at length how the novel *Sister Carrie* refers to movements of various kinds. The to-and-fro movement of the rocking chair is emblematic of all such journeys and movements.

Another set of images in *Sister Carrie* relate to the sea which for Dreiser, symbolises urban life itself. At the end of the first chapter, Carrie's situation is summarised as follows: "She is alone, away from home, rushing into a great sea of life and endeavour... .. a lone figure in a tossing, thoughtless sea". When Carrie is unable to cope with the turmoil of her life, Dreiser writes that she "felt the flow of the tide of effort and interest - felt her own helplessness without quite realising the wisp on the tide that she was" (p.26). The image of the ship is related to the sea. When Hurstwood and his wife are about to go on their separate ways, Dreiser says: "He was like a vessel, powerful and dangerous, but rolling and floundering without sail"

(p.206). When Hurstwood suggests that Carrie leave Drouet, Carrie feels "a wave of feeling sweep over her". Images of water are scattered throughout the novel in many forms. Hurstwood ends up as a 'driftwood' in New York. When he dies, "a slow, black boat setting out from the pier at Twenty-seventh Street" carries his nameless corpse to his grave.

In a famous passage at the beginning of the eighth chapter Dreiser noted that our civilisation was still in a state of evolution and hence, it was caught between instinct and reason. William L. Phillips notes that, "incidental animal imagery runs through the novel, although the animals specified are as often domestic as wild" (Pizer: 554). When Carrie is anxious about the onset of winter she is like "the sparrow on the wire, the cat in the Broadway, the draw horse tugging his weary load". Mrs. Hurstwood is compared to 'a pythoness in humour' when she turns to her husband angrily. Lola Osborne, the chorus girl, clings to Carrie, in "a sort of pussy-like way". When Hurstwood comes to New York, he feels like a common fish: "The sea was already full of whales. A common fish must needs disappear wholly from view - remain nothing". Several phrases such as "a snail's pace", "the grapeless fox" and "a dog's life" may be understood as part of the journalistic language Dreiser was fully accustomed with.

The worlds of fancy and fantasy that the city engenders are described through various images. The jungle is a common image for the city and, as we have seen, it is reflected in the animal images discussed above. The illusory nature of the night life in the city occasions the image of the Alladin's cave in which delights were "lights of joy that never were on land or sea". William Phillips notes that much of the action in the novel takes place at night and time is marked off by the passing of winters (Ibid.: 556). In the image of the theatre the various strands of the make-believe world of nocturnal fancies finally find their expression. Like the rocking chair and the newspaper (which we discussed in detail in the section on *Sister Carrie* as a city novel), the theatre captures something essential about the new world that was beginning to emerge in America. The worlds of dreams, desire, glamour and money meet in this world of make-believe. As an actress, Carrie becomes someone else on the stage. We have noted how she lives in the present, with no past to return to. Theatre allows Carrie to become others without the burden of being herself. It is an escape into a world of fancy and fantasy. Maureen Howard notes that most of the roles done by Carrie are those of romantic love whereas in real life she never shows any passion. In the scene where both Drouet and Hurstwood watch her performance on the stage the erotic desire which is characteristically missing in their real romantic love for her are on display. The theatre allows fantasy to enter into our everyday life. When Carrie appears as a frowning quakerness on the stage in New York, the aging businessmen in the box yearn towards her. Maureen Howard comments:

The erotic helplessness and need is what audience and actress, object and shopper, court one another with across the barrier of sales and theatre tickets. The sexualised quality of acting, protected as it is by fantasy and the barrier of the stage that separates the beloved actress from the numerous suitors in the audience repeats the paradox mentioned earlier. Within the fiction of her role the actress sells precisely the vitality of her personality. Intimacy of self-presence and intimacy of sexual relations are both paradoxically present in the neutralised, stage-lit world of pretense.

This is to say that theatre is an image built around seduction and desire. In a world where appearances matter, theatre becomes a mode of existence. The modernity of *Sister Carrie* consists in the ability of the narrative to evoke a dynamic society where the sense of the self is premised on the contingency of existence. The image of the theatre is an adequate image for realising this world-view. Dreiser's success as a novelist lies in having brought this world into the realistic possibilities of the narrative.

We have analysed the major themes as well as the fictional strategies of *Sister Carrie*. The clash of value systems represented in the novel suggests that Dreiser was alert to the conflicting currents of various ideologies at work in American society. Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian critic, has developed his theory of 'polyphonic novel' based on the novels of Dostoevsky. What makes a novel or perhaps all novels polyphonic is "the possibility of employing on the plane of a single work discourses of various types, with all their expressive capacities intact, without reducing them to a common denominator". The novel as a literary form is characterised by its 'dialogism', which means its ability to represent varieties of speech which belong to various ideological planes of reality. In a monologic work of art, the author's world-view controls and regulates the worlds of characters to such an extent that their inner worlds never find expression. In a dialogic text the authorial voice is never dominant. As David Lodge explains,

the characters are free to 'answer back', and the reader is confronted with the challenging, disconcerting, ultimately unresolved interaction of diverse discourses representing diverse attitudes and values, sometimes within the same speaking or thinking subject.

Here we would briefly examine the dialogic nature of *Sister Carrie* to see whether the characters exist as fully realised selves in their own right.

America emerged as a nation in the late 19th century. We have noted that the American literary Renaissance of the late 19th century coincided with the self-discovery of the nation. The American identity was shaped out of diverse ethnic identities which still remained discrete and disparate, despite the over-arching structure of the nationalist ideology. Dreiser's own socialisation must have involved 'Americanisation'. His writings extensively dealt with ethnic subjects. Thomas P. Riggio notes: "Even if we put aside all the conspicuously ethnic subject matter in *Dawn* and *Jennie Gerhardt*, Dreiser could still be listed among the first writers of the modern period to deal extensively and sympathetically with immigrant and ethnic life in America". As a German-American, he did not have the advantages some of his contemporaries possessed. As he wrote within the larger tradition of realism which was emerging at the turn of the century, he came to be accepted as a pioneer of a literary movement that had European roots. This literary radicalism allowed him to question elements in the nationalist ideology which would not have been possible otherwise as an ethnic American. Riggio notes:

One can trace throughout Dreiser's career the conflict between his ethnic roots (that is, his sense of being by birth less than 100% American) and his professional role as American Realist... The point, simply put, is that Dreiser's conception of himself as in the vanguard of American Realism led him naturally away from direct engagement with his ethnic past – *as ethnic*, however, he did engage his ethnicity in other ways.

In the portrayal of *Sister Carrie* two ideologies – one of his German-American background and the other of the mainstream American – came into conflict. Carrie's own formative years in Wisconsin are not described in the novel because it would have involved an investigation of Carrie's ethnic identity. At the beginning of the novel, there is one sentence that sums up her past:

A gush of tears at her mother's farewell kiss, a touch in her throat when the ears clacked by the flour mill where her father worked by day, a pathetic sigh as the familiar grove environs of the village passed in review, and the threads which bound her so lightly to girlhood and home were irretrievably broken

The consequence of this suppressed ethnic background is that Dreiser has to constantly turn to science and philosophy to rationalise Carrie's choices. Carrie, like Dreiser belonged to a conservative background where old world values flourished. But, curiously enough, in the novel, he avoids references to such values and uses literary strategies of naturalism to develop her world-view. In this very process, Dreiser brings into the purview of his narrative, an outsider's view of the emerging new world.

Dreiser says that Carrie is a fair example of 'the middle American class – two generations removed from the emigrant'. Dreiser had grown up as a German-speaking, Catholic in the Mid-West in working class surroundings. The ideological conflict that underlines the novel derives from the struggle of the marginalised to enter the mainstream. In fact this is the journey of Carrie. Riggio comments: "Carrie's famous rise upward is not simply to material success through men, but through men into the center of American life". This explains Dreiser's own love-hate relation with the mainstream life he depicts. As a German-American he finds 'the Walled City' perpetually desirable and has to make his mark there. But he is repelled by its ruthless rapacity which he thinks, will corrupt his self. In the narrative of the novel, the authorial voice interrupts and comments on the actions and events but does not inhibit the voices of characters who are fully represented in their own voices. The best example is that of Hurstwood, the native American who comes alive on the pages of the novel. Mattheissen comments that the central vitality of the novel lies in the Hurstwood. In him the man and the milieu are not separated. There is a scene at the end of the eighteenth chapter where we see Hurstwood mingling with his friends. The scene comes alive mainly through dialogues:

"Well, George" said another rotund citizen, whose avoirdupois made necessary an almost alarming display of starched shirt bosom, "how does it go with you?"

"Excellent", said the manager.

"What brings you over here? You're not a member of Custer."

"Good nature", returned the manager.

"Like to see the boys you know".

"Wife here?"

"She couldn't come tonight. She's not well".

"Sorry to hear it – nothing serious, I hope".

"No just feeling a little ill".

In representing the speech of the upper class, Dreiser differentiates their individual voices and 'generates and sustains a continuous struggle between competing interests and ideas'. Dreiser does not impose his values over them. He allows them to articulate their value system. Bakhtin says:

Plot in Dostoevsky is absolutely devoid of any sort of finalising foundations. Its goal is to place a person in various situations that expose and provoke him, to bring people together and make them collide and conflict – in such a way, however, that they do not remain within this area of plot-related contact but exceed its bounds. (Bakhtin, 1984: 276-77).

We have discussed how *Sister Carrie* deals with a world of contingency and flux. The discussion about the ending of *Sister Carrie* also may be recalled here to suggest the open-endedness of the novel. A polyphonic novel has no closure. It does not validate a monologic view of the world. The dialogues between Carrie and Amis towards the end of the novel articulate another ideological conflict. Amis questions the values of the modern American nation from within as an insider. Carrie who has entered it from the margins after great struggle, is unable to decide for herself the truth of the matter. A dialogic novel does not try to proclaim a final truth that holds

good for all time and all place. If the dialogues in the novel are analysed carefully, this will become more clear.

In *Sister Carrie* one is struck by several descriptions of streets and crowds. The novel seems to be structured around the contrast between the closed interiors and open outdoor spaces. This contrast shows a deeper ideological conflict between the private and the public. It has been noted that the mid-Victorian novels evidence a fear of working-class militancy in their treatment of crowd behaviour. Eliot Canetti in his *Crowds and Power* distinguishes between the closed and open crowds. A closed crowd assembles for a definite purpose in a defined space while the open crowd appears spontaneously and behaves in an unpredictable manner. Capitalist societies live in perpetual fear of open crowds because their eruptions can disrupt the social order and question the very basis of their productive apparatus. In the chapter "The Strike", which is not essential for the development of the plot as such, Dreiser documents the behaviour of open crowds. As opposed to this, we have the closed crowds of the theatre, modern worshippers of art, fashion and glamour that have close connection with capitalist order. If we follow the chapter "The Strike" we will notice that there is a dark world of under-paid, ill-clad workers who are essential to sustain the glamorous world of the capitalist metropolis. Many of them end up as the tramps waiting for beds near the ex-captain, another scene of crowds, stark in its depiction of deprivation and poverty. There is a curious dialogue among the tramps when Hurstwood joins them:

"Captain's a great feller, ain't he?" said the man ahead, - a little woebegone, helpless looking sort of individual, who looked as though he had ever been the sport and care of fortune.

"Yes", said Hurstwood, indifferently.

"Huh! there's a lot back there yet", said a man further up, leaning out and looking back at the applicants for whom the captain was pleading.

This passage is significant for two reasons. Firstly, Dreiser allows the speech of the tramps enter the narrative. This establishes their humanity. Secondly, their humanity interrogates the very moral basis of the entire society which allows people to end up on the streets as waste matter. The chapter, "The Strike" again allows us to interrogate the very structure of power in American society. Its ideological function is to frame Carrie's journey to the world of glamour in the larger historical context of capitalist expansion and the exploitation of the working class. What makes the novel polyphonic is Dreiser's ability to represent the conflicting ideologies in the discursive plane of the narrative.

5.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have analysed various aspects of the language and style in *Sister Carrie*. The manner in which naturalism works in *Sister Carrie* helps us grasp the breakthrough made by Dreiser in American fiction with the novel. The uniqueness of Dreiser's art has to be seen in the macro-structure of his novelistic narrative. This extends to chapterisation and the nuances of plotting. The finer aspects of his plain language have to be understood with reference to the contexts in the novel. This has been illustrated in our discussion with examples. The recurring images of *Sister Carrie* take us further into the complex narrative strategies of Dreiser. The polyphonic elements of *Sister Carrie* testify to its underlying ability to embody mutually exclusive ideological world-views within its narrative discourse.

5.7 QUESTIONS

- 1) Bring out the salient features of American naturalism with reference to *Sister Carrie*.
- 2) Do you agree with the view that Dreiser's style is clumsy and awkward? Give your views.
- 3) Analyse the structure of *Sister Carrie* with special reference to its depiction of Carrie's evolution.
- 4) Identify some of the recurring images in *Sister Carrie* and comment on their function.
- 5) Show how Dreiser represents the conflicts of various ideologies through his characters in the novel.

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5.9 GLOSSARY

Realism:

A literary movement which believes in depicting life with complete and objective honesty. It is associated with prose fiction. The pioneers of realistic fiction are Balzac in France, George Eliot in England and William Dean Howells in America. The realistic writer is selective in his material in the sense that he prefers the everyday and the commonplace over the exotic and the fantastic. Realistic novels prefer to describe the lives of the working class or the lower class.

Naturalism:

A literary movement of the late 19th century which pioneered a scientific attitude towards the representation of the objective world. It believed in minute observation of reality

with greater openness in the choice of subject matter. The philosophical basis of naturalism was that man belongs completely to the world of nature, and all his impulses, motivations, feelings, thoughts and actions were determined by heredity and environment. Naturalism denies the existence of any soul or spirit. Man is subjected constantly to the instincts of hunger and sex and also to the social and economic forces in the family, the class, and the milieu into which he is born. Since free will is non-existent, the writers following naturalism present their characters with a pessimistic determinism as pawns on the chessboard of nature, subject to the indifferent laws of a fatalistic, mechanistic universe. Emile Zola, the French novelist, developed the theoretical foundation of naturalism in his critical writings in 1870s. The American writers Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser and James Farrell tried to present their subject with elaborate documentation and a scientific attitude.

Spencer, Herbert (1826-1903):

Along with Charles Darwin and Thomas Henry Huxley, Herbert Spencer, an English philosopher, was responsible for developing the theory of evolution. He coined the phrase 'survival of the fittest' though it is commonly attributed to Darwin. In his *Synthetic Philosophy*, he tried to apply the principle of evolutionary progress to all branches of knowledge.

Huxley, Thomas Henry (1825-95):

He was an English biologist who popularised Darwin's ideas on evolution. As an agnostic, he doubted all things which could not be verified scientifically. He felt that human ethics was outside the scope of materialistic evolutionary process and believed that progress was achieved by the human control of evolution.

Howells, William Dean (1837-1920):

As the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* (1866-1881), Howells, American novelist and critic, supported realistic writings and persuaded American readers to read Zola, Ibsen and Tolstoy. He has published over 40 novels which uses the realistic mode. *A Modern Instance* (1882) which deals with marriage and divorce, *The Rise of Silas Laphan* (1885) dealing with the newly rich people of Boston and a *Hazard of New Fortunes* (1889) which describes the social problems of New York city are some of his best known novels.

Although he died at the age of 29, he became famous for *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895) which deals with the civil war. His earlier novel *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893) in a way anticipates *Sister Carrie* as it deals with the life of a 'fallen' woman from a realistic point of view. He worked as a war correspondent and authored several books based on his first hand experiences in the war.

Capitalism:

This word is used to describe the economic system that appeared in the industrialised Western World in the 19th century. It is characterised by private ownership of property and the means of production. Those who find it desirable praise the concepts of individual initiative, competition, profit motive and consumerism inherent in the capitalist system of economy. However, the ills of capitalism such as exploitation of labour, tolerance of economic inequality have come in for criticism particularly from socialists who advocate collective or government ownership and management of the means of production and distribution of goods.

Class:

From the 17th century this word has come to denote a group or division within society. The phrase 'lower classes' was used in 1772. By 1840s, 'middle classes' and 'working classes' became common terms. The middle class with which salaried people are usually associated, is an expression of relative social position and distinction. The working class is an expression of economic relationships. From the 1860s 'the middle class' began to be divided into 'lower' and 'upper' sections and later 'the working class' came to be divided into 'skilled', 'semi-skilled' and 'labouring'.



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MEG-11
AMERICAN NOVEL

Block

3

THE GREAT GATSBY

Block Introduction

UNIT 1

The Man, the Milieu and the Moment 5

UNIT 2

The Plot and The Self-Improving Hero 12

UNIT 3

***The Great Gatsby* and Fable, Symbol and Allegory** 21

UNIT 4

***The Great Gatsby* : The Narrative Technique** 26

UNIT 5

Critics and Criticism : An Overview 32

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

Although his life and writings are associated with the fashionable East Coast, Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) came from the staid American Middle West. He was born and brought up in St. Paul Minnesota. His first novel *This Side of Paradise* (1920), written at Army training camp during the First World War, established him as leader and poet laureate of the Jazz Age. His third novel, *The Great Gatsby* (1925), shows a great advance in seriousness. Today it is recognized as his finest work. Precise and compact in its form, it gives a finely objective portrait of the hedonistic world in which the Fitzgeralds themselves lived, capturing both the frantic gaiety and the underlying sadness. It is subtle yet precise in its artistry, rich in feeling, a carefully polished jewel of a book. To T.S. Eliot, never a hasty or extravagant critic, it seemed 'the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James'. Today it is obviously the work by which Fitzgerald's name is destined to be remembered, and one of the classics of modern American Literature.

Here is a master piece and a milestone, a seed book – the novel from which have sprung new novels and new ideas. So please read and enjoy this great book of American Literature.

Good Luck to you.

UNIT 1 THE MAN, THE MILIEU AND THE MOMENT

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 The Changing America
- 1.2 The Literary Context of Scott Fitzgerald
- 1.3 Scott Fitzgerald: The Man
- 1.4 Scott Fitzgerald: The Milieu 'The Lost Generation'
- 1.5 Scott Fitzgerald: The Moment 'The Jazz Age'
- 1.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.7 Questions
- 1.8 Suggested Reading

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit will discuss the historical, social and political situation in the America of the twenties. The significance of Fitzgerald lies in the fact that he captured the mood of the American society at the time when America was being forming itself between the two World Wars. To fully comprehend Fitzgerald's achievement it is necessary to know that circumstances which brought him to the fore. The major voices in American fiction who were the immediate predecessors as well as contemporaries merit attention.

1.1 THE CHANGING AMERICA

The period between 1915 and 1932 is very relevant for studying the background for the work of Scott Fitzgerald. The year 1915, the second year of the First World War, was the third year of Woodrow Wilson's first term as President. This year was also significant for The Founding of Provincetown Players at Massachusetts with which the name of Eugene O'Neill is connected. The next year Woodrow Wilson was re-elected to his second term. In the year 1917 Proclamation of the Russian Republic took place and the power was captured by the Bolsheviki between the months of March and November. In 1918, Wilson submitted the 'Fourteen Points'. 1919 saw the Versailles Peace Conference and the League of Nations set up. Prohibition Amendment (XVIII) was adopted to become effective January 1, 1920 (repealed, 1933). This event is important for the character of Gatsby in Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* because Gatsby is also considered a 'bootlegger' in the background of the 'Prohibition Era'. In 1920 Warren G. Harding was elected President. The National Womens' Suffrage Amendment took effect. Founding of Fascist party in Italy and the Washington Armament Conference took place in 1921. In 1922 the Coal and railway strikes took place and Mussolini became dictator of Italy. The U.S.S.R. was created. In 1923 President Harding died on August 2 and Calvin Coolidge succeeded him and began his administration which lasted until March, 1929. There were scandals in Harding regime and they came under investigation in 1924. There was a General Strike in Great Britain and Transatlantic wireless telephone was set up in 1926. In 1928 Herbert Hoover defeated Al Smith in presidential campaign. Trotsky and his followers were exiled from Russia. On October 29th 1929 the Stock-Market crashed. This is the

beginning of one of the most important events in the twenties in America, indeed in the entire history of America, which had a profound influence on many writers in America. Since the Stock Market crash brought to a climax the financial boom of the Coolidge-Hoover era and led to a severe and prolonged depression in the United States, it is essential, for a good understanding of the literature of the period, that the student to study the extraordinary social and political revolution that ensued not only in America but throughout the world. Such a study will help to explain the change in mood and tone from *The Great Gatsby* to *Tender Is the Night*, and it may help to place Fitzgerald himself, who epitomized the Roaring Twenties as much as any single individual, in clearer perspective. 'The Great Depression' is one of the landmarks in the entire history of American literature, along with events like The 'Boston Tea Party' with the idea of the War of American Independence, the great journey towards the West depicted in novels like John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, the Civil War between the North and the South which had a profound influence on American Literature, partly dealing with the question of slavery, Abraham Lincoln and the entire 'Literature of the American South' which produced classics like *Gone with the Wind* and the entire work of Tennessee Williams, creating a whole new area for exploring the literature of the American South. It is in this context 'The Great Depression' has to be looked at which resulted in some writing in the 1930's, which is generally considered leaning towards the 'Left' both in America and England. This led on to the influence of the Spanish Civil War in which many significant American and British writers were actively involved. 'The Great Depression', was followed later on by another important American historical event in the 1950's when the suspected Communists in America were interrogated in the McCarthy regime. One of the people was interrogated was Arthur Miller, the American playwright whose play 'The Death of a Salesman', is the popular text in the American literature courses all over India. Thus the Roaring Twenties, 'The Jazz Age', is most relevant for any study of Scott Fitzgerald. It takes its place along the other important historical and political events which had a profound influence on writing in America. The year 1929 also saw the beginning of the 'Five-Year Plans' in Russia. In 1932 Franklin D. Roosevelt defeated Hoover and began the first of his four terms in the White House. These dates and events give the background for the study of Scott Fitzgerald's times.

1.2 THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF SCOTT FITZGERALD

In the last section we saw the historical and political scene in America as a background to the age of Fitzgerald. Now, we shall trace the evolution of American literature through its major phases as a part of the background material. We shall begin with the year 1915 in order to place Fitzgerald in the context of the Two World Wars; we shall look at the quintessential literary publications between 1915 and 1932. The year 1915 is important for the establishing the writers Theodore Dreiser, Amy Lowell and Richard Aldington. Dreiser's works are usually studied as examples of the Naturalistic movement in American literature. In 1916 Robert Frost's *Mountain Interval*, Vachel Lindsay's *General William Booth Enters Heaven*, Eugene O'Neill's *Bound East for Cardiff*, E.A. Robinson's *The Man Against the Sky* and Carl Sandburg's *Chicago Poems* were published. In 1917 Ezra Pound became the Foreign Correspondent of *The Little Review*. First awarding of Pulitzer Prizes took place. The important publications were T.S. Eliot's *Ezra Pound, His Matric and Poetry*: and *Prufrock and Other Observations*. In 1918, one of the most important American novelists Ernest Hemingway was seriously wounded on Northern Italian Front. Just as many of today's well known novelists -- Norman Mailer, James Jones, William Styron, Truman Capote, and Jack Kerouac know one another and comment upon each other's work, similarly in the 1920's and 1930's writers like

Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Scott Fitzgerald, and Thomas Wolfe often met together, knew one another, and corresponded with one another. An important event in 1919 was that the Theatre Guild was founded. The beginning of the 20's saw a number of important literary achievements. *The Dial* magazine was started under the editorship of Scofield Thayer and *The Freeman* magazine. Ezra Pound left London for France. Important works of American Literature like John Dos Passos's, *One Man's Initiation*, T.S. Eliot's *The Sacred Wood*, Scott Fitzgerald's *Flappers and Philosophers* and *This Side of Paradise*, Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones*, Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, George Santayana's, *Character and Opinion in the United States* and Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* saw the light of day. 1921 is also significant in the sense that John Dos Passos's *Three Soldiers*, Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie*, Ezra Pound's *Poems 1918-1921* (including first four Cantos) and E.A. Robinson's *Collected Poems* appeared on the scene. In 1922, *The Criterion Magazine* under the editorship of T.S. Eliot made its impact. The important publications of this year were -- e.e. cummings's *The Enormous Room*, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and Damned* and *Tales of the Jazz Age*, Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* and Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*. In 1923, American literatures went on getting enriched with important publications like: Willa Cather's *A Lost Lady*, Robert Frost's *New Hampshire*, D.H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine*, and Wallace Stevens's *Harmonium*. The publications of 1924 were from Maxwell Anderson and Laurence Stallings's *What Price Glory?* Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*, T.E. Hulme's *Speculations* edited by Herbert Read, Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, Eugene O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* and John Crowe Ransom's *Chills and Fever*. These further enriched American literature qualitatively as well as quantitatively. 1925 is particularly important date this was the year of the publication of the novel under our consideration. Along with Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* appeared, Sherwood Anderson's *Dark Laughter*, Irving Babbitt's *Democracy and Leadership*, H.D.'s *Collected Poems*, John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer*, Theodore Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, T.S. Eliot's *Poems 1909-1925*, Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*, Sinclair Lewis's *Arrowsmith* and Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*. The student would do well to read what Gertrude Stein has to say about Fitzgerald and Hemingway in her *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Morley Callaghan, the well known expatriate writer from Canada who was the part of the Paris scene, in his *That Summer in Paris* tells of the incident in 1929 that led to bad feeling between the two writers. Several years later Fitzgerald said that he himself spoke with 'the authority of failure' where as Hemingway spoke with 'the authority of success'. This firmly establishes the text of The Great Gatsby in the context of Sherwood Anderson, Irwin Babbitt, H.D, John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, T.S. Eliot, Ernest Hemingway, Sinclair Lewis and above all, Gertrude Stein, significantly in her expression 'In the American Grain' who was mainly responsible for the exploration of the expatriate sensibility in American literature. The significant publications in 1926 were Hart Crane's *White Buildings*, William Faulkner's *Soldiers' Pay*, Fitzgerald's *All the Sad Young Men*, Hemingway's *The Sun also Rises*, Mencken's *Notes on Democracy*, Eugene O'Neill's *The Great God Brown* and Gertrude Stein's *Composition As Explanation*. The year 1927 saw the publication Charles Beard's *The Rise of American Civilization*, Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, E.E. Cummings's *Him*, Hemingway's *Men without Women*, O'Neill's *Marco Millions*, John Crowe Ransom's *Two Gentlemen in Bonds*, E.A. Robinson's *Tristram* and Thornton's Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. Stephen Vincent Benet's *John Brown's Body*, Robert Frost's *West-Running Brook*, Archibald MacLeish's *The Hamlet of A. MacLeish*, O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*, Upton Sinclair's *Boston* were published in 1928. Four American classics -- Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, Sinclair Lewis's *Dodsworth* and Elmer Rice's *Street Scene* appeared in 1929. The end of the decade of the 20's and a beginning of the 30's saw

some more American classics -- Hart Crane's *The Bridge*, John Dos Passos's *The 42nd Parallel*, T.S. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*, and Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. As the 1930's opened American writers like John Dos Passos and James Farrell had begun to publish their long trilogies, and it became quite clear that a new conception of reality was developing among the novelists of social protest. It would be interesting to compare and contrast Fitzgerald's view of society with those of such novelists as Dos Passos, Farrell, Faulkner and Wolfe. A significant development in the area of American Drama and Theatre, also a very important event representative of the 30's was the publications of 'The Group Theatre'. The popular writer, Pearl Buck wrote her classic novel, *The Good Earth*, Kenneth Burke's *Counter-Statement*, Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* and Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle* appeared heralding the 30's. Mark Twain and Faulkner remained the leading figures and *Mark Twain's America* and Faulkner's *Light In August* are landmarks in American literature.

1.3 SCOTT FITZGERALD : THE MAN

Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald was born in St. Paul, Minnesota on the 24th of September 1896. His father was an unreliable provider, but he was descended from old American families, the Scotts and the Kyes, who had settled in the United States early in the Seventeenth Century. His mother's father was an Irish immigrant. From his parents he inherited both the fears of failure and the dreams of social success -- the reality and romance of wealth -- that were to haunt him for the rest of his life. When Fitzgerald was just two years old, his family moved first to Buffalo, then to Syracuse, and back again, in 1908 to St. Paul. Then he attended Newman Academy at New Jersey between 1911 and 1913, where he quickly became a highly popular student. He wrote a story called 'The Freshest Boy' which draws upon Fitzgerald's experience at Newman. He went to Princeton from 1913 to 1917 and left before graduation.

Through the winter and spring of 1916-17, most undergraduates were becoming increasingly preoccupied by the war in Europe and when the United States formally declared war on Germany, students began to leave for the front in France. Fitzgerald too made his decision to apply for a commission. When he received it, he left Princeton to report to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, as a second lieutenant of infantry, in November 1917. He met a beautiful young lady of eighteen from Montgomery, Alabama, at an officers' dance. Her name was Zelda Sayre. She was as ambitious, reckless, and extravagant in her way as he was, and she was to make exceedingly heavy demands on Fitzgerald's romantic ambitions. Zelda Fitzgerald's novel *Save Me the Waltz* (1932) reveals a good deal about her competitive feelings toward her husband. He fell deeply in love, and she soon responded. Early in 1919, Fitzgerald was discharged from the army -- without having achieved his ambition of an overseas assignment. He joined a New York advertising agency, hoping to earn enough money to marry Zelda. But when she impatiently broke their engagement in the summer of 1919, Fitzgerald returned to his parents' home in Minnesota. An earlier novel of his entitled *The Romantic Egoist* which had been rejected by Scribner's, was now re-written as *This Side of Paradise* and it was accepted this time. This novel was published in 1920 in which year he married Zelda Sayre. It was an immediate success and Fitzgerald at once became not merely a historian of the postwar youth, but in fact, the symbol of the 'Jazz Age'. Fitzgerald soon became a legend. His *Flappers and Philosophers* was published in 1921 and *Tales of the Jazz Age* came out in 1922. The same year his second novel, *The Beautiful and Damned* also appeared, and it marked a distinct improvement in Fitzgerald's writing. The title reveals a good deal about Fitzgerald's own sense of his situation, the impending dissolution, he and his 'lost generation' were risking. In 1924 he moved to the Riviera along with Zelda and it was there that he finally finished his novel *The Great Gatsby* and 1925 saw its

publication. *The Great Gatsby* is probably Fitzgerald's most perfect work -- significantly dedicated to Zelda as 'Once Again to Zelda' -- and it immediately won praise from such distinguished writers like Gertrude Stein, Edith Wharton, and T.S. Eliot. It was produced successfully as a play in 1926 and sold to the movies for a good price. 1926 saw the publication of *All the Sad Young Men*. It was at this time that Fitzgerald began to see a good deal of Ernest Hemingway who had just finished his *The Torrents of Spring* (1926) and was working on his *The Sun Also Rises*. There was an interlude in Hollywood where Fitzgerald worked briefly as a script writer. In 1927 he did script-writing in Hollywood to which place he moved in 1937. He fell in love with Sheilah Graham and the film 'The Beloved Infidel' deals with this stage of his life. Sheilah Graham has written (in collaboration with Gerold Frank) of her love for Fitzgerald and his love for her, while he was in Hollywood. The book is entitled *Beloved Infidel; The Education of a Woman*, published by Henry Holt, New York, 1958. Budd Schulberg's novel *The Disenchanted* (1950), is a fictional account of his attempt to write a movie script with Fitzgerald. The unfinished novel of Fitzgerald *The Last Tycoon* can be mentioned in this category. In the summer of 1928 Fitzgerald left for Paris -- the reason being Zelda's determination to become a ballet dancer. In April 1930 Zelda broke down completely and spent most of the following year in a Swiss sanitarium. Fitzgerald had been working for a second spell at Hollywood but he took Zelda to Baltimore for treatment where she wrote her only novel *Save Me the Waltz* (1932). Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* was finished toward the end of 1933 and published in April, 1934. He published another book of short stories, *Taps at Reveille* (1933). His novel *The Last Tycoon* (1941) was only half finished at Fitzgerald's death. In November 1940 Fitzgerald suffered a serious heart attack and in December 21, another, which proved fatal. Fitzgerald's late novel *Tender Is the Night* was published in 1934. He died in Hollywood on the 21st of December 1940 and was buried in the Rockville Union Cemetery in Rockville, Maryland. In a manner of speaking *The Beautiful and Damned*, *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night* mark three stages in the work of this great writer scanning the years 1922, 1925 and 1937.

1.4 SCOTT FITZGERALD: THE MILIEU 'THE LOST GENERATION'

The name of Scott Fitzgerald is inevitably associated with 'The Lost Generation'. The expression was coined in the 1920's by Gertrude Stein at her Paris flat, No.27, Rue de Fleurus when she remarked that Hemingway and his contemporaries were 'all a lost generation'. Gertrude Stein and Fitzgerald are special in their relation to each other. Gertrude Stein had been very much impressed by *This Side of Paradise*. She said of it that it was this book that really created for the public the new generation. She thought the same of *The Great Gatsby*. She believed that Fitzgerald would be read when many of his well known contemporaries are forgotten. This group, 'The Lost Generation' consisted of brilliant writers who appeared on the American scene during the decade following the First World War and who still dominate American fiction. They included, among others novelists like Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Dos Passos and Fitzgerald himself. This is a somewhat misleading name. It describes the generation's own feeling that there was almost nothing in the tradition they inherited. It was their sense that all the maps were useless and they had to explore a new found land for themselves. Thus their generation was 'lost'. However, it was not 'lost', in the sense that it felt despair at the situation. Though it was fashionable in the 20's to talk about being disillusioned, these writers were filled with a typically American kind of energy and optimism. They scorned what they felt was provincialism of American manners and the hypocrisy of American public life. Almost all the writers of 'The Lost Generation' attacked the defects of the conventional life of their times. The 'Lost Generation' was the first coherent group of novelists in the history of American literature. It is possible to see how the First World War shaped the flowering of their

talent in the 1920's. The war forced the Americans to recognize the fact that their country was a responsible part of Western culture. One of the effects of this was that they were dissatisfied with the narrowness of American Civilization to the point where they preferred to live elsewhere, especially in Paris. A backward look at the novels of Henry James may be useful here in relation to the interaction between 'Young America' and 'Old Europe'. A typical novel would be *The Portrait of the Lady*, another great American classic. In fact, T.S. Eliot, in a letter written to Fitzgerald about *The Great Gatsby* in 1925 from the publishing firm of Faber says: 'When I have time I should like to write to you more fully and tell you exactly why it seems to me such a remarkable book. In fact it seems to me to be the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James.'

1.5 SCOTT FITZGERALD: THE MOMENT 'THE JAZZ AGE'

The decade of the 20's was of the same time the gaudiest and the shortest. It has been brought out in contradictory terms as both a 'Golden Age' and a 'hollow time between the wars'. These years have been seen as frivolous and roaring, thus acquiring the name of 'The Roaring Twenties'. It has also been referred to also by various other appellations like 'Era of Wonderful Nonsense', 'The Lawless Decade', 'The Passionate Years' and the 'Jazz Age'. The 'Jazz Age' was not so much you drinking as a dancing age. Talking about Jazz it must be remembered that this is the most characteristic contribution of America to the world of music just as the 'Musical Theatre' is the contribution of the United States to the world of the theatre. One heard Jazz everywhere from the orchestras, in the ball room, from wind up phonographs, from loudspeakers etc. Before the First World War Jazz was primarily the music of the Southern Negro, especially of the Negro in and around New Orleans. To my knowledge, this is absolutely true because I have not myself found any white man playing 'Jazz' as authentically as the black people. I am saying this after having stayed in New Orleans and after having heard 'White Jazz' in the street-side cafes as well as in the 'Preservation Hall' which is the most authentic place in New Orleans to listen to veteran black musicians with all their wonderful variations and improvisations. Even to this day the names of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington are house-hold names among jazz connoisseurs. Among the American writers the person who was most familiar with it was Tennessee Williams who actually lived in the French Quarter, and couldn't help listening to jazz all the twenty four hours. Jazz is in the air in New Orleans especially in the French Quarter. It is some time played by a jazz group on the boat which goes down the Mississippi river. In fact, Williams has used jazz music as a contrast to the Varsouviana Polka in defining the two main characters, Stanley and Blanche, in his play *Streetcar Named Desire*. After the First World War, along with the migration of the blacks to the North, Jazz moved North and to Chicago. Then Jazz really spread beyond the black community. However, it was in the twenties that Jazz reached its greatest significance and no wonder the twenties cannot be discussed without 'The Jazz Age' as a part of the Moment to study the age.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

Let me pause here and mention the main points that I have made so far. First of all, I have managed to point out that the study of the Twenties, the 'Jazz Age', 'The Lost Generation' and the 'Great Depression' have been an integral part of the study of *The Great Gatsby*. I have also tried to bring in the Expatriate writers, living in Paris at the time who form the background for the study of Fitzgerald in the proper literary context. I have adopted Taine's formula of 'The Man Milieu and the Moment' in this Unit.

1.7 QUESTIONS

- 1) What were the major political and social events that shaped the Twenties in America?
- 2) Examine the literary context of Scott Fitzgerald with reference to his contemporary compatriots.
- 3) What do you understand by the terms 'The Jazz Age' and 'The Lost Generation'?
- 4) Show how American Literature was trying to find its own 'Americanness' in relation to the 'expatriate sensibility'.

1.8 SUGGESTED READING

1. Cohen, Hennig (ed). *The American Experience: Approaches to the Study of the United States*. University of Pennsylvania. Published by American Studies Research Center, Hyderabad with the assistance of The United States Educational Foundation in India. c. 1968. First Indian Printing 1972.
2. Cohen, Hennig (ed). *The American Culture: Approaches to the Study of the United States*. University of Pennsylvania. Published by American Studies Research Center, Hyderabad with the assistance of The United States Educational Foundation in India. c. 1968. First Indian Printing 1972.
3. Crunden, Robert M. *A Brief History of American Culture*. SHS / Helsinki / 1990.
4. Hoffman, Frederick J. *The Twenties. American Writing in the Postwar Decade*. New Revised Edition. Collier Books. New York. N.Y. 1962.
5. Cowley, Malcolm, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920's*, New York, The Viking Press. 1951.
6. Callaghan, Morley, *That Summer in Paris*. New York, Coward-McCann. 1963.

UNIT 2 THE PLOT AND THE SELF-IMPROVING HERO

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The Plot
- 2.3 *The Great Gatsby* and the Integrative Method
- 2.4 A Close Reading of Chapter VII
- 2.5 The Self-Improving Hero, and The Problem of Gentlemanliness
- 2.6 The Self-Improving Hero and the Problem of his Past
- 2.7 Gentlemanliness and Love
- 2.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.9 Suggested Reading
- 2.10 Questions

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this Unit is to acquaint you with the novel in detail and help you to understand the ideas of 'The American Dream', the contradictions with in this ideal of improvement and gentility. After reading this Unit you will be able to see what kind of a novel *The Great Gatsby* is and place it in the context of the various types of novels like the 'Novel of Manners', the 'Picaresque novel' the 'Dramatic Novel', the 'Psychological Novel' the 'Historical novel', the 'Autobiographical novel', the 'Stream of Consciousness novel', the 'Self-reflexive novel', etc. The background you have studied in the previous unit helps you to see the complex relationship between literature and society

2.1 INTRODUCTION

There are three fibres in the Narrative structural strategy. 1) Gatsby's attempt to recapture Daisy Buchanan whom he had known five years before the action of the novel begins, when he was an young officer in the United States army and she was a young unmarried woman, the daughter of a rich family. 2) The second strand concerns her husband Tom Buchanan's extra-marital affair with the wife of a garage proprietor, who lives in an unattractive suburb of New York. 3) Nick Carraway, the narrator's attachment to Jordan Baker, one of Daisy's friends who is a sportswoman of some reputation. One of the crucial things in analyzing the plot is to take account of the fact of the themes of betrayal and ingratitude. It is not so much the sequence of events that leads to Gatsby's death but the fact that he has been betrayed by Daisy as well as Tom.

2.2 THE PLOT

The Great Gatsby is concerned with the disillusion of the era following World War I. James Gatz, from miserable surroundings, rises by sinister business dealings to great wealth. Masquerading under the name of Jay Gatsby, Gatz lives mysteriously in a

mansion on Long Island where he entertains lavishly with his ill-gotten gains. Gatsby persuades his former mistress, Daisy, to live with him again. Daisy's husband had as his mistress, Myrtle Wilson. Daisy, driving Gatsby's car, runs over Myrtle killing her instantly. Daisy, is now back in the good graces of her husband. Wilson, the garageman-husband of Myrtle traces the yellow car belonging to Gatsby which had killed his wife. The garageman shoots Gatsby and then himself. The 'great' Gatsby's funeral was only attended by his one friend. Nick, his aged father and one curiosity seeker. This is the Plot that unfolds itself in nine chapters.

Fitzgerald has often been called 'the Novelist of Manners' descending from Henry James and Edith Wharton, in this context a statement by Henry James about writing about American society may be remembered that it did offer the novelist a fertile enough soil for the cultivation of his art. One wonders to what extent this is relevant in the context of Fitzgerald and asks one self why the American expatriates went to Paris. However, James's statement is to about James himself. The fascination of the Americans for Paris and other Continental cities and for European culture is the main theme of young America versus old Europe. Whether it is *The Ambassadors* or *The Portrait of a Lady*, James is psycho-analyzing the American mind. He is no less a psychologist than his brother William James and it has been said that William James wrote psychology like a novel and Henry James wrote his novels like psychology. However, in *The Great Gatsby* though Fitzgerald does not take us to Europe but remains strictly within the confines of America, especially sticking himself to the East Coast, especially New York and Long Island. Nevertheless his novel is no less psychological in exploring the American psyche than James. 'Scott Fitzgerald became the novelist of the great rebellion. Perhaps this is so because Fitzgerald himself did not quite believe the age but played its game with an air of wonder, a double sense of involvement and detachment which made him the immediate historian of an age he was half living and half creating... It was not until *The Great Gatsby* (1926) that he managed to triumph over his early faults of style and achieve a novel which seemed to T.S. Eliot 'the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James'.

2.3 THE GREAT GATSBY AND THE INTEGRATIVE METHOD

What should be particularly noticed in studying the novel is the method of narration. The reader's role in reconstructing the events is very important. He has to work along with the narration of Nick as well as the direct statements by Fitzgerald. We will see more about the Narrator and the Narrative technique in Unit 5. However, It is important to consider the fact that the reader can find out what exactly happens with an effort at reconstruction. The geography of the novel represents certain moral values. West represents something traditional and absolute, though Fitzgerald does not spell out what his absolute system of values is. In moving from the Mid-West of America to New York to follow a career in the money markets Nick Carraway is entering dangerous ground. Fitzgerald maintains the geographical distinction refer to already by dividing the tip of Long Island, where the action of the novel mainly take place, into East Egg, where the Buchanans live, and the West Egg there Nick and Jay Gatsby live as neighbours.

2.4 A CLOSE READING OF CHAPTER VII

In Chapter VII Fitzgerald continues with the Gatsby-Daisy affair. At the beginning of the chapter itself we learn that Gatsby had dismissed all the servants in his house and

had replaced them with half a dozen others as he didn't want the servants to gossip in the market place, as servants do. Gatsby phones Nick inviting him to lunch at Daisy's house and informs that Miss Baker would also be there. Half an hour later Daisy herself calls him up and seemed relieved to find that he was going to her place. The narrator significantly says 'Something was up'. [p. 114]. At Daisy's house Gatsby finds himself gazing round with fascinated eyes, standing on the crimson carpet. At this point we find a typical sentence of Fitzgerald -- 'Daisy watched him and laughed, her sweet, exciting laugh; a tiny gust of powder rose from her bosom into the air'. [p. 116]. It is at this point that we get to know about Tom's mistress through a phone call that Tom receives from her. Tom enters and displays bonhomie, concealing his dislike of Gatsby. Right in her house, Daisy sends Tom to make some cold drink and he is gone she embraces and kisses Gatsby and murmurs 'You know I love you'. [p. 116]. Tom realizes that Daisy was in love with Gatsby and he is astounded. An interesting passage at this point may be quoted :

Gatsby turned to me rigidly :

'I can't say anything in his house, old sport'.

She's got an indiscreet voice', I remarked. 'It's full of --' I hesitated.

Her voice is full of money', he said suddenly.

That was it. I'd never understood before.

[p. 120]

Jordon who is also present on the occasion is told by Tom that he had made a small investigation of 'this fellow' and he could have gone deeper. Jordon makes a joke out of this and replies that he must have found out that Gatsby was an Oxford man. He can't believe it and shouts 'Like hell he is! He wears a pink suit' to which Jordon replies 'Nevertheless he is an Oxford man'. [p. 122]. We get to know more about this Oxford connection of Gatsby later on. We are also introduced to Wilson in this longish chapter -- in fact the longest chapter in the novel. The eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg which is one of the symbols in the novel comes up here and when these eyes came into sight down the road, Gatsby remembered that his car needed gasoline and suddenly puts on the brakes and comes to an abrupt stop under Wilson's sign. Wilson is the proprietor of a gas station. A very intriguing sentence occurs here in the text. When Wilson is unscrewing the cap of the tank we are told 'In the sunlight his face was green'. This is intriguing because green is symbolic in this novel especially, the green light and here the colour green seems to have a different significance from elsewhere in the novel. We also know that green is a colour indicating jealousy. Coming events seem to be casting their shadows before and ironically it is he who murders Gatsby though the apparent reason is that Gatsby has knocked down his wife on the road in a hit and run case in his easily traceable yellow car. What leads upto the yellow car of Gatsby to stop at the Gas station is that it is Tom, Jordon and Nick the narrator were in that car and Tom's car -- his coupe followed them with Daisy and Gatsby in it. Though the original idea was that all of them should go in Gatsby's car and though Gatsby had warned that there wasn't much gas in his car, Tom had brushed it aside saying that he could stop at any place where he could fill the car with gas and thus it was he who had stopped at Myrtle's husband's gas station. All this adds upto a sort of irony when later on Wilson suspects that his wife is having an affair though he doesn't know it is with Tom and not with Gatsby whose car he is able to trace out later. Wilson asks Tom whether he would sell his old coupe assuming that the new yellow car was his and Wilson says it's a nice yellow one, again drawing attention to the colour yellow. When Tom hears that his wife wants to go away to the West and so he needs some money, Tom is startled because of the possibility of his

losing his mistress. Myrtle's husband discovered that she had some sort of life apart from him and again ironically it is paralleled with Tom realizing that his wife Daisy had a life with Gatsby. These little ironies of life make the narration more interesting than telling the story in a straightforward way. There is also a dramatic element, that is added on when we at this point discover that Myrtle Wilson was watching the car down below from one of the windows of the garage. Again a bit of irony when Myrtle thinks that Jordan Baker who is in the car is Tom's wife and that is why she was gazing down at the car with jealous terror fixed on her face. At this point there is a very interesting authorial comment 'There is no confusion like the confusion of a simple mind' [p.125]. The tension between Tom and Gatsby builds up throughout this chapter as rivals. Tom is incredulous that Gatsby was ever at Oxford so there is a direct confrontation :

At this point the narrator's voice intervenes : 'I wanted to get up and slap him on the back. I had one of those renewals of complete faith in him that I'd experienced before'. The earlier skepticism of Tom when he mentions a person called Biloxi and insultingly says that Gatsby must have been at Oxford when Biloxi was at Yale, he curiously brings together the most prestigious Universities of England and the United States. After this confirmation that Gatsby was really at Oxford he comes out into the open and accuses Gatsby of breaking up his marriage with Daisy and asks him point blank 'What kind of a row are you trying to cause in my house?' [p. 130] which is answered equally directly by Gatsby 'I've got something to tell you, old sport --'. Daisy tries to interrupt this parley. However, Gatsby is bent on telling Tom 'Your wife doesn't love you. She's never loved you. She loves me'. When Tom doesn't want to believe this Gatsby rubs it in 'She never loved you, do you hear? She only married you because I was poor and she was tired of waiting for me. It was a terrible mistake, but in her heart she never loved anyone except me'. [p. 131]. Tom realizes that his wife knew Gatsby five years ago and asks Daisy 'You've been seeing this fellow for five years?' Gatsby answers the question 'Not seeing, no, we couldn't meet. But both of us loved each other all the time, old sport, and you didn't know'. [p. 131-132]. This exchange is being given here in detail because this is one of the most dramatic moments in the entire novel. This exchange is taking place right in the present of Daisy and thus it is a well known 'love triangle' situation'. Tom tries his best to convince Daisy she did love him and nostalgically recollects some of the tender and intimate moments between them mentioning Kapiolani, then the ball room and then another time when he carried her from the Punch Bowl to keep her shoes dry. These memories make Daisy also nostalgic and she cries out to Gatsby 'Oh, you want too much! I love you now -- isn't that enough? I can't help what's past' which is practically an admission that that she did love Tom. Sobbing helplessly she says 'I did love him once -- but I loved you too'. Gatsby is not satisfied and repeats like an echo 'You loved me too? Tom doesn't want to allow this concession and shouts even that's a lie and continues 'She didn't know you were alive. Why -- there're things between Daisy and me that you'll never know, things that neither of us can ever forget'. [p. 133]. Here is the authorial comment 'The words seemed to bite physically into Gatsby'. The struggle between Gatsby and Tom for the affection of Daisy continues and when Gatsby declares that Daisy is leaving Tom, he explodes 'She is not leaving me'. The ambiguity of Daisy is brought out when she says 'I am, though', with a visible effort. Tom has been making enquiries about his rival and the name of Meyer Wolfsheim, who is one of the minor characters comes up. Tom reveals the discovery he has made that Wolfsheim had bought up a lot of side-street, drug-stores and was selling grain alcohol over the counter and Gatsby was with him in this. Tom triumphantly announces that he could guess that Gatsby had been a bootlegger the very first time he saw him. The tension between the two mounts and Daisy becomes nervous. Tom asks Daisy to go with Gatsby in his car and it is now that the accident takes place when Daisy runs over Myrtle and doesn't stop the car. The narrative continues in his long chapter of bringing in two witnesses of the accident. The first one is the young Greek, whose name is Michaelis who ran a coffee shop and he was

the principal witness at the inquest. Myrtle has an argument with her husband Wilson and he locks up his wife. However, a moment later she rushes out into the dusk waving her hands and shouting and that is how she runs in front of the car. The newspapers who picked up the story called Gatsby's car 'The death car' as it didn't stop in this hit and run case. Nicholas who was an eye witness wasn't sure about its colour. Daisy was instantly killed. However, the second witness was a pale well-dressed Negro who said that it was a big yellow car. He says that though he didn't actually see the accident he saw the car going past very fast. The policeman who asks Tom whose car was following Gatsby's and what colour his car was. Tom says that it was blue and they were coming straight from New York and someone who was coming behind the car confirmed this. The narrator's voice is seen at this point. Jordan Baker was with him and when Tom invites him in, Nick says 'I was feeling a little sick and I wanted to be alone'. (p. 143) that is how the 'I narrator' comes into the picture. Nick however refuses to go in and has gone a little further he sees Gatsby stepping out from between two bushes into the path. He learnt that Gatsby hadn't realized that Myrtle had actually been killed though he suspected it. He says that he got to West Egg by a side road and had left the car in his garage and adds 'I don't think anybody saw us, but of course I can't be sure' and enquires who the woman was. He tries to take up on himself the responsibility for the accident by pretending that he was driving the car when it happened. He is not a good liar and when he says 'Well, I tried to swing the wheel --', he breaks off and Nick the narrator guesses the truth and asks him point blank 'Was Daisy driving?' to which Gatsby replies 'Yes, but of course I will say I was'. (p.144). This is crucial in the novel because there is the theme of betrayal which is quietly brought in because Daisy betrays Gatsby at the end by not owning up her guilt. Gatsby even tries to defend Daisy by saying that when they left New York she was very nervous and driving would steady her. Daisy locks herself into her room and Gatsby suspects that Tom might hurt her. An interesting detail is mentioned at this point by Nick when he mentions that if Tom found out that it was Daisy who was driving he might see a connection in it. Perhaps one can ask oneself the question whether this 'connection' could be that Daisy the 'wife' of Tom purposely ran over Myrtle if she knew that Myrtle was Tom's 'mistress'. Nick sees through the pantry window that Daisy and Tom were sitting opposite to each other and that 'There was an unmistakable air of natural intimacy about the picture and that they were conspiring together' (146). The end of the chapter sees Gatsby still hanging about the house with his hands in his coat pockets in a sort of vigil. The last sentence of the chapter is 'So I walked away and left him standing there in the moonlight -- watching over nothing'. (p. 146).

2.5 THE SELF-IMPROVING HERO AND THE PROBLEM OF GENTLEMANLINESS

The introduction to the 'great' Gatsby is through the fabulous party that he gives in his mansion. Everything is on a grand scale. Just a few sentences may be quoted here to give an idea. 'There was music from my neighbour's house through the summer nights. In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars... On week-ends his Rolls-Royce became an omnibus, bearing parties to and from the city between nine in the morning and long past midnight, while his station wagon scampered like a brisk yellow bug to meet all trains... At least once a fortnight a corps of caterers came down with several hundred feet of canvas and enough colored lights to make a Christmas tree of Gatsby's enormous garden... In the main hall a bar with a real brass rail was set up, and stocked with gins and liquors and with cordials so long forgotten that most of his female guests were too young to know one from the other'. [p.39-40] After this background the party itself is described. 'By seven o'clock the orchestra has arrived, no thin five-piece affair, but a whole pitful of oboes and trombones and saxophones

and viols and cornets and piccolos, and low and high drums... The bar is in full swing; the air is alive with chatter and laughter, the casual innuendo and introductions forgotten on the spot, and enthusiastic meetings between women who never knew each other's names... Suddenly one of these gypsies, in trembling opal, seizes a cocktail out of the air, dumps it down for courage and moving her hands like Frisco, dances out alone on the canvas platform... I believe that on the first night I went to Gatsby's house I was one of the few guests who had actually been invited. People were not invited -- they went there... Sometimes they came and went without having met Gatsby at all... [p.40-41]. This long quotation from the text is given here to mention how lavish and generous Gatsby was and how he entertained anybody and everybody who went to his parties to have food and drink and this is our introduction to the man himself. It was a sort of 'charity dinner, free for all'. Nick the narrator tells us how he had been invited to this first party of Gatsby 'The chauffeur in a uniform of robin's-egg blue crossed my lawn early that Saturday morning with a surprisingly formal note from his employer; the honor would be entirely Gatsby's, it said, if I would attend his 'little party' that night. [p. 41]. An amusing comment here concerns some Englishmen who were at the party. They are described as 'all well dressed, all looking a little hungry, and all talking in low, earnest voices to solid and prosperous Americans. I was sure that they were selling something: bonds or insurance or automobiles'. [p. 41-42]. This comment on the variety of guests at party completes the picture of the grand nature of Gatsby's parties. The irony here is of how the grandest party was modestly called a 'little party, by Gatsby. This shows the grand scale on which he operated and his magnanimity and the way he lived. This is how 'the great Gatsby' is introduced by Fitzgerald. Nick Carraway, in the course of the party meets Gatsby face to face for the first time. His meeting must be quoted in full as it is the center of the entire novel as far as our understanding of the hero is concerned. Now we get to know Gatsby through the kind of things that are said about it, some of it by nature of gossip. The contacts of Gatsby are slowly established by someone like the butler telling him that Chicago was calling him on the wire. Jordan informs Nick that Gatsby had told her once that he was an Oxford man. The entire fairy-tale atmosphere in the background of the Long Island Sound sets the scene for the tragedy.

2.6 THE SELF-IMPROVING HERO AND THE PROBLEM OF HIS PAST

Gatsby's life story can be partly known from his own autobiographical statement. He starts by saying 'Well I'm going to tell you something about my life... I didn't want you to get a wrong idea of me from all these stories you hear... I'm the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West -- all dead now, I was brought up in America but educated at Oxford... My family all died and I came into a good deal of money... After that I lived like a young rajah in all the capitals of Europe -- Paris, Venice, Rome -- collecting jewels, chiefly rubies, hunting big game, painting a little, things for myself only, and trying to forget something very sad that had happened to me long ago... Then came the war, old sport. It was a great relief, and I tried very hard to die, but I seemed to bear an enchanted life. I accepted a commission as first lieutenant when it began... I was promoted to a major, and every Allied government gave me a decoration [p. 65-66]. It is good to begin to know the character of Gatsby through his own words to start with. This is a true story narrated by him and he even shows Nick a medal which said 'Major Jay Gatsby for Valour Extraordinary... Here's another thing I always carry. A souvenir of Oxford days. It was taken in Trinity Quad -- the man on my left is now the Earl of Doncaster. [p. 67]. Gatsby's name really was James Gatz. He had changed it at the age of seventeen at the specific moment that witnessed the beginning of his career -- when he saw Dan Cody's yacht drop anchor over the most insidious flat on Lake Superior. His parents were unsuccessful farm people and he

never really accepted them as his parents at all. This was because right from the beginning he had a 'Platonic conception of himself'. He thought of himself as 'a son of God'. This is the background in which we have to understand the greatness of the 'Great' Gatsby. One aspect of Gatsby that is very important in the novel is his relationship with Daisy and her husband Tom Buchanan. The conflict for Daisy's attention rages to certain extent that it practically develops into the notorious 'the eternal triangle' with Daisy as the 'femme fatale'. The dislike of Tom for Gatsby is revealed in the following exchange.

'By the way, Mr. Gatsby, I understand you're an Oxford man.'

'Not exactly.'

'Oh, yes, I understand you went to Oxford.'

'Yes -- I went there.'

'You must have gone there about the time Biloxi went to New Haven'...

'I told you I went there', said Gatsby.

'I heard you, but I'd like to know when.'

'It was in nineteen-nineteen. I only stayed five months. That's why I can't really call myself an Oxford man...'

Gatsby continues 'It was an opportunity they gave to some of the officers after the Armistice. We could go to any of the Universities England or France'.

[pp. 129-130]

2.7 GENTLEMANLINESS AND LOVE

The picture of Gatsby establishing himself as a 'Gentleman' is through the great parties that he gives. In the novel the Social Register of New York is introduced. Some of the characters mentioned here are Chester Bockers, a man named Bunser from Yale, Clarence Endive from East Egg, Cecil Roebuck, a man named Klipspringer, Benny McClenahan and others who came to Gatsby's house. The Nick-Gatsby relationship continues when Gatsby's gorgeous car lurches up to Nick's house and the horn of the car had melodious music. It was the first time he had called on Nick though he had gone to two of his parties. Gatsby announces 'Good morning, old sport. You are having lunch with me today and I thought we'd ride up together' [p. 64]. The personal oddity of Gatsby is mentioned here that he was always tapping foot somewhere or the impatient opening and closing of a hand. 'On seeing Nick admiring his car he is satisfied and says 'It's pretty, isn't it, old sport!'. [p. 64]. It is this unique car that is ironically spotted and the owner identified. A kind of intimate dialogue is reported at this stage when Gatsby asks suddenly 'Look here, old sport, what's your opinion of me anyhow?' And adds 'Well, I'm going to tell you something about my life... I don't want you to get a wrong idea of me from all these stories you hear' [p. 65]. And indeed there were plenty of stories about him, not all of them complimentary.

2.8 LET US SUM UP

Let me quickly recapitulate the main points so that you can check out whether you have missed anything or not. *The Great Gatsby* is both a 'Romance' and a 'Novel'. It would be good to read another novel of Fitzgerald, namely *Tender is the Night* so that Fitzgerald's art as a novelist becomes clear. The important thing to notice is following the career of Gatsby from Gatz to the great Gatsby. This may be termed 'Self-Improvement'. The Unit also has dealt with the dimension of the 'romantic' love

interest. The Unit also has dealt with complications arising from the 'love triangle' in the novel.

We have analyzed one chapter in detail, so that we are able to get at the manner and method of the author in the structure of the novel. Chapter IX, being the longest was taken up with this purpose in view.

2.9 SUGGESTED READING

1. Spiller, Robert E. (ed) *A Time of Harvest. American Literature. 1910 to 1960.* with an introduction by Spiller. American Century Series. Hill and Wang, New York. 1962.
2. Allott, Miriam. *Novelists on the Novel.* London : Routledge. 1965.
3. Stevick, Philip (ed). *The Theory of the Novel.* New York: The Free Press. 1967.
4. O'Connor, William Van (ed) *Seven Modern American Novelists.* Bombay. Popular Prakashan. c 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964 by the University of Minnesota. First Published in India 1968.
5. Kazin, Alfred. *On Native Grounds.* New York, Reynal and Hitchcock. 1942.
6. Wilson, Edmund, ed. *The Crack-Up.* New York, New Directions. 1945.
7. Chase, Richard. *The American Novel and its Tradition.* Kalyani Publishers. Ludhiana. c. 1957.
8. Booth, Wayne C., *The Rhetoric of Fiction.* Chicago. University of Chicago Press. 1961.
9. Halperin, John (ed). *The Theory of the Novel.* New York : Oxford University Press. 1974.
10. Milligan, Ian. *The Novel in English : An Introduction.* Macmillan. 1983.
11. Frohock, W.M. *The Novel of Violence in America.* Dallas, Texas: Southern methodist University Press. 1958.

2.10 QUESTIONS

1. Fitzgerald has often been called 'The Novelist of Manners' descending from Henry James. Do you agree? Give illustrations.
2. Do you agree with the criticism that Fitzgerald's fiction is wholly concerned with the wealthy and many people tend to dislike him for that very reason. Discuss.

3. Comment on the Plot Construction of the novel, the way the chapters are arranged and the sequence of events.
4. Can you compare Fitzgerald's interest in the corrupting influence of money as portrayed in the other American writers you have studied?
5. What is the main theme of *The Great Gatsby*? Relate this to the idea of 'class consciousness' and the idea of a gentleman as it emerges in the novel.
6. Can it be said that Scott Fitzgerald thinks like a painter and utilizes the vocabulary of the artist in his 'pen portraits'?
7. Consider the distinction between the 'romance' and the 'novel' with reference to *The Great Gatsby*.
8. How are the opening and the closing scenes related to the structure of *The Great Gatsby*?
9. How does the novel imply a criticism of the American social structure?

UNIT 3 *THE GREAT GATSBY* AND FABLE, SYMBOL & ALLEGORY

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 *The Great Gatsby* as a Fable
- 3.3 Symbol and Allegory
- 3.4 'Realism', The Fairytale and the 'American Dream'
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Suggested Reading
- 3.7 Questions

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In spite of the fact that the story of *Gatsby* is placed in the Realistic mode, choosing an actual locale -- New York and Long Island, there are elements of non-realism in the narration using literary devices like Allegory and Symbolism and the context of the Fairy Tale and the Fable which lend certain enchantment to the tale of tragedy. In addition to being a novel of character, it is also a Fable and a Fairy Tale. Symbolism and Imagery are related to Realism and Fantasy and the Plot unfolds itself through not merely Setting but through Language and Style.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The entire Fairy-tale atmosphere in the background of the Long Island Sound sets the scene for the tragedy. Chapter V starts with a description of *Gatsby's* house at night, all lighted up from tower to cellar. This lends an atmosphere of enchantment in a fairy tale. The narrator mentions how when he went to his house that night, he was afraid for a moment that his house was on fire because of the bright light from *Gatsby's* house and it draws the remark from the narrator that the house looked like 'World's Fair'.

3.2 *THE GREAT GATSBY* AS A FABLE

Gatsby's mingled dream of love and money, and the iron strength of his romantic will, make up the essence of the fable, but the art of its telling is full of astonishing tricks. To make the rise and fall of a gentleman gangster an image for the modern history of the Emersonian spirit of America was an audacious thing to attempt, but Fitzgerald got away with it.

3.3 SYMBOL AND ALLEGORY

The symbolic and the allegorical level in *The Great Gatsby* are such an integral part of the novel that Tom Burnham remarks that there is more than 'a protagonist', a plot, and a green light. Many elements in the story, perhaps will puzzle the practical-minded, for on the level of simple narrative they cannot be accounted for. What does one make, for example, of the faded blue eyes of Dr. T.J. Eckleburg, those staring,

vacant, yet some what terrible eyes so much more than an abandoned signboard: of the ash heap and its 'ash-gray men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air' over which the eyes brood changelessly; of George Wilson's despairing mutter as he gazes at the eyes, 'You may fool me, but can't fool god'. It is interesting to note that the eyes were written into the book after Fitzgerald saw what Arthur Mizener accurately calls a 'very bad picture' on the dust jacket, a picture that originally intended to represent Daisy's face. From such remarks, it is clear that the symbolic, the allegorical, the mythical levels in the novel are most important. Telling the story through a Conradian narrator, who is half inside and half outside the action prevented the errors of self-identification. 'Above the gray land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after moment, the eyes of T.J. Eckleburg. The eyes of T.J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic -- their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose'. [p.23] The novel richly abounds in the use of symbol, metaphor and allegory. The central symbol is operated through the word 'Green'. He lifts it out of merely being a literal adjective to a non-literal significance during the course of the novel. There are about fourteen occurrences of the word 'green', four of them in the closing pages of the novel; most of them are associated with Gatsby himself. Fitzgerald has enabled the simple word for a certain colour to pick up the meanings of freshness, innocence and energy which it may have in other contexts. The green light which draws Gatsby's attention to Daisy's house across the water in East Egg becomes an apt symbol for his power to imagine the quality of life beyond anything he has actually experienced. 'If it wasn't for the mist we could see your home across the bay', said Gatsby. 'You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock'. Daisy put her arm through his abruptly, but he seemed absorbed in what he had just said. Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever. Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy it had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one.

3.4 'REALISM', THE FAIRYTALE AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

Perhaps, the green light may be connected with the idea of the well known 'The American Dream', the same dream that Willy Loman of Arthur Miller in *The Death of a Salesman* and many other American texts. It may not be out of context in the present day to connect the colour 'green' with many young people in India today who see America itself as a green light. They want to get away to the 'green pastures' by obtaining a 'green card' so that they can work as 'computer coolies' in America and become millionaires. This is the Indian version of 'The American Dream'. Raleigh points out that Fitzgerald's character Gatsby 'as has often been said, represents the irony of American history and the corruption of the American dream. While this certainly is true, yet even here, with this general legend, Fitzgerald has rung in his own characteristic changes, doubling and redoubling ironies. At the center of the legend proper there is the relationship between Europe and America and the ambiguous interaction between the contradictory impulses of Europe that led to the original settling of America and its subsequent development; mercantilism and idealism'. [p. 99] This takes us back to the Jamesian theme already referred to. However, a couple of quotations from the text make the reference to the green light quite clear :

'If it wasn't for the mist we could see your home across the bay' said Gatsby. 'You always have a green light that burns all night at the end of your dock'.

Daisy put her arm through his abruptly, but he seemed absorbed in what he had just said. Possibly it had occurred to him that the colossal significance of that light had now vanished forever.

The last lines of the novel make the point quite clear when Nick Carraway ends the story of Gatsby :

And as I sat there brooding on the old, unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn, and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter -- tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther ... And one fine morning --

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

His own romantic spirit felt deeply what an Englishman has called the 'myth-hunger' of Americans; our modern need to 'create a manageable past out of an immense present'. The poignant effect of the final, highly complex image of the novel, when Gatsby's dream and the American dream are identified, shows how deeply saturated with feeling Fitzgerald's historical imagination was. From his own American life he knew that with his generation the middle westerner had become the typical American and had returned from the old frontier to the East with a new set of dreams -- about money.

The allegorical level of the novel is brought out by John Henry Raleigh when in his essay 'Legendary Bases and Allegorical Significances' relates it with the relationship between the narrator Nick and Gatsby the protagonist : 'Allegorically considered, Nick is reason, experience, waking, reality, and history, while Gatsby is imagination, innocence, sleeping, dream, and eternity. Nick is like Wordsworth listening to 'the still sad music of humanity', while Gatsby is like Blake seeing hosts of angels in the sun. The one can only look at the facts and see them as tragic; the other tries to transform the facts by an act of the imagination. Nick's mind is conservative and historical, as is his lineage; Gatsby's is radical and apocalyptic -- as rootless as his heritage. Nick is too much immersed in time and in reality; Gatsby is hopelessly out of it. Nick is always withdrawing, while Gatsby pursues the green light. Nick can't be hurt, but neither can he be happy. Gatsby can experience ecstasy, but his fate is necessarily tragic. They are generically two of the best types of humanity: the moralist and the radical. One may well ask why, if their mental horizons are so lofty, is one a bond salesman and the other a gangster's lieutenant, whose whole existence is devoted to a love affair that has about it the unmistakable stamp of adolescence? The answer is, I think, that Fitzgerald did not know enough of what a philosopher or revolutionary might really be like, that at this point in his life he must have always thought of love in terms of a Princeton Prom, and that, writing in the twenties, a bond salesman and a

gangster's functionary would seem more representative anyway. Entering Princeton meant leaving, the Middle West, which was closed and conservative, for the East, which was rich and unprejudiced; it meant leaving the provincial city for an intellectually alive university campus; it meant, that is, confronting the reality of experience outside the shelter of the family circle. And, in fact, these years at Princeton were the most intense and determinant phase of Fitzgerald's development. It was at Princeton, especially after his return there in the fall of 1916, that he came in touch for the first time with true culture. There he met Father Sigourney Fay (Monsignor D'Arcy in *This Side of Paradise*), formed his ties of friendship with John Peale Bishop (Parke d'Invilliers in the same novel) and Edmund Wilson (his 'intellectual conscience', as he was later to describe him). He heard of Tolstoy and Whitman, read Booth Tarkington and Shaw, H.G. Wells and Compton Mackenzie, Wilde and Pater, John Masfield and Rupert Brooke to name only a few. It was at Princeton that he wrote the first drafts of *This Side of Paradise*, and by the end of 1917 the novel was already 'completed'. 'The symbols that are common to both *Gatsby* and *Daisy* are, a large house with a swimming pool, dozens of silk shirts and elaborate parties. But *Daisy* believes in the symbols themselves, and not in the purer reality which (for *Jay Gatsby*) they only faintly embody'. *The Great Gatsby* can also be read as a 'Fable'. *Gatsby's* 'mingled dream of love and money, and the iron strength of his romantic will, make up the essence of the fable, but the art of its telling is full of astonishing tricks. To make the rise and fall of a gentleman gangster an image for the modern history of the Emersonian spirit of America was an audacious thing to attempt, but Fitzgerald got away with it. The novel also has element of 'Myth'. An English critic has comments on what he calls the 'myth-hunger' of Americans -- the need to 'create a manageable past out of an immense present'. Again, it has been pointed out: 'The poignant effect of the final, highly complex image of the novel, when *Gatsby's* dream and the American dream are identified, shows how deeply saturated with feeling Fitzgerald's historical imagination was. From his own American life he knew that with his generation the middle westerner had become the typical American and had returned from the old frontier to the East with a new set of dreams.

The symbolic context of the novel is related to the two words 'wonder' and 'flower' by Raleigh. As far as the use of the metaphorical is concerned, it is the metaphor of the rock which Nick uses which appears several times in the novel. 1) It refers to firmly based moral standards. It is possible there is an echo here of the New Testament parable about the house which is built upon rock and which survives a storm of wind and rain, while the house built on sand collapses. 2) The reference to a rock occurs in Chapter Two when a photograph on the wall of the sleazy flat which Tom Buchanan rented for his Mistress, Myrtle Wilson, is described as looking like 'a hen sitting on a blurred rock'. 3) At one point Nick picks up a book entitled *Simon Called Peter*. It is easy to connect *Simon Called Peter* with St. Peter, the Apostle whose name in Greek meant 'rock' and on which Christ made the punning remark, 'Upon this rock I shall build my church'. The allegorical significance consists of connecting the references to the 'solid rock' associated with the Mid-West upon which human behaviour might be grounded, taken along with the Biblical associations of that phrase, might suggest that he is returning to a more primitive, if more conventional, way of life, rooted in 'self-disciplined Christian belief of a fundamentalist kind'. It is possible to see that the expression 'Valley of ashes' indicates a single, clear and definite meaning of a non-literal kind; i.e. allegorical. A reference in this context has to be made to the 'Eyes of Eckleburg': 'But above the gray land and the spasms of bleak dust which drift endlessly over it, you perceive, after a moment, the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg. The eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg are blue and gigantic -- their retinas are one yard high. They look out of no face, but, instead, from a pair of enormous yellow spectacles which pass over a non-existent nose. Evidently some wild wag of an oculist set them there to fatten his practice in the borough of Queens, and then sank down himself into eternal blindness, or forgot them and moved away. But his eyes, dimmed

a little by many painless days under sun and rain, brood on over the solemn dumping ground. The eyes of Eckleburg are brought back again in the picture towards the end of the novel so that their symbolic significance should not be forgotten'. Standing behind him, Michaelis saw with a shock that he was looking at the eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg, which had just emerged, pale and enormous, from the dissolving night. God sees everything, repeated Wilson'.

3.5 LET US SUM UP

The major symbols like the rock, the eyes of Dr. Eckleburg and the green light have been explained in this Unit in addition to commenting on the Allegorical level and the novel as a Fable.

3.6 SUGGESTED READING

1. Lubbock, Percy. *The Craft of Fiction*. New York. 1921.
2. Forster, E.M. *Aspects of the Novel*. New York. 1927.
3. Wilson, Edmund, *The Triple Thinkers*, New York. 1963.

3.7 QUESTIONS

1. Is there any effectively developed pattern of Imagery, Symbolism, Allegory and Fable in *The Great Gatsby*. Expatiate?
2. How does the presentation of the two scenes of murder in *The Great Gatsby* differ stylistically from the other sections of the novel?
3. Discuss the relationship of The Plot and the crucial scenes in the structure of *The Great Gatsby*.
4. To what extent does a character like Daisy represent theme or idea more than an individual personality?
5. Discuss the function of Myrtle Wilson in the novel.
6. Write an essay on the prose style of Scott Fitzgerald and compare it with that of Ernest Hemingway.

UNIT 4 *THE GREAT GATSBY* : AND THE NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Fitzgerald and the Hollywood Context
- 4.3 Gatsby's Life and the dual perception of Fitzgerald
- 4.4 Criminal Wealth and Respectability
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Glossary
- 4.7 Questions
- 4.8 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

The novel has a classic beginning. The first sentence is as significant as the first sentence in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Nick Carraway, the narrator through whose perception we see the events of the novel introduces himself with the sentence, "In my younger and more vulnerable years, my father gave me some advice that I've been turning over in my mind ever since. 'Whenever you feel like criticizing anyone', he told me, 'Just remember that all the people in this world haven't had the advantages that you've had'. His introducing Gatsby is typical of the narrative style of Nick. The objective of this final section is to make the student understand the entire novel from the point of view of what is technically known as 'the point of view'.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant aspects of *The Great Gatsby* which makes it an extraordinary novel is the introduction of the Narrator and the narrative technique in the novel. The Conradian technique has been commented on by several critics. The first person narration using the letter 'I' by Nick Carraway and how he perceives the other characters is explored here in this Unit. The narrator's voice using the letter 'I' is an interesting literary device. For example, Christopher Isherwood uses the 'I' narration in many of his novels. This 'I' is a persona as different from a person. In fact, Isherwood has four autobiographies written at different periods in his life and this 'I' becomes the 'Camera eye' which records things and events and characters quite objectively as a camera does. That is why a play version about Isherwood is entitled 'I am a Camera'. This point has been made that it is not only the Conradian narrator that has to be taken into account in the discussion of Nick Carraway as a Narrator. Part of it is to distance the hero from the narrator so that the novel does not become an autobiographical novel. Nick Carraway, the Narrator says about Gatsby: "If personality is an unknown series of successful gestures, then there was something gorgeous about him, some heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away". [p. 2]. Nick introduces himself in a matter of fact manner "I graduated from New Haven in 1915, just a quarter of a century after my father, and a little later I participated in that delayed Teutonic migration known as the 'Great War'. [p. 3]. This

places the events of the novel in its historical perspective. He describes Gatsby's house. 'It was a factual imitation of some Hotel de Ville in Normandy, with a tower on one side, spanking new under a thin beard of raw ivy, and a marble swimming pool, and more than forty acres of lawn and garden. It was Gatsby's mansion. Or, rather, as I didn't know Mr. Gatsby, it was a mansion, inhabited by a gentleman of that name. My own house was an eyesore, but it was a small eyesore, and it had been overlooked. So I had a view of the water, a partial view of my neighbour's lawn, and the consoling proximity of millionaires all for eighty dollars a month'. [p.5]. This is the Narrator's outside comment by distancing himself and describing Gatsby -- the Man and the Milieu.

It would be difficult to present a hero like Gatsby directly. Fitzgerald sought to get around this difficulty by presenting his hero indirectly, through a narrator, and by having the narrator provide the irony. He does it brilliantly, but in the end we have to recognize that he means us to be wholly on the hero's side, to believe that without Gatsby's extreme idealism, life is simply unlivable. Regarding the role of the narrator Nick Carraway and the narrative technique, The Times Literary Supplement pointed out: 'The story, told economically in the first person, keeps the narrator, Nick Carraway well in the background. He is a young bond-salesman, commuting from a cottage set between two large estates on Long Island, one of which is owned by the mysterious Gatsby, also young, who gives huge parties each week-end. A rich married couple, Tom and Daisy Buchanan, friends of Carraway, own another large house on the opposite side of the Sound. Tom Buchanan is engaged in a decidedly sordid *liaison* with the wife of a local garage proprietor; and Daisy's life is unhappy... The book ends in a ferment of ignoble behavior on the part of the Buchanans and Gatsby's former guests and associates; so that finally Carraway is driven to the inevitable conclusion that the gangster, Gatsby, embodied something more genuine -- and on the whole less depraved -- than either the parasites he entertained or the Buchanans, who represented to him (and to themselves and their set) membership of a would-be aristocratic society'. From time to time, Nick the narrator makes an 'outside comment'. For example when Daisy says that Nick reminds her 'of a rose, an absolute rose', the narrator's voice says: 'This was untrue. I am not even faintly like a rose'. While this is one kind of a comment where he is critical of himself, there is also another kind of a comment where he compliments himself half-seriously when he attributes to himself one of the 'cardinal virtues' and says 'I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known'. Even when he thinks he is falling in love with Jordan, he confesses that he is slow thinking and full of interior rules that act as brakes on his desires. His relationship with Gatsby on the one hand and Jordan on the other sets up a fine pattern to the narrative technique. When Gatsby offers him a sort of a job which wouldn't take much of his time and where he might pick up the nice bit of money -- a confidential sort of job and when Jordan Baker tells him that she was engaged to some other man accusing him of 'throwing her over' on the telephone.

Nick's double role as a narrator as well as a character in the novel constantly changes. His portrayal of the other characters as they come into contact with him also includes his judgement of them. Thus the reader of the novel has to see Nick in relation to Gatsby, Jordan Baker, Tom and Daisy, Wolfsheimer and even Gatsby's father. The narrator has two styles of narration: in one, he describes in detail what happened; in the other, he summarises, fills in the background detail, muses and moralises. Nick Carraway, the narrator, is a privileged young man from a wealthy background, but in the first page of the novel it is suggested that his main privilege is to have 'a sense of the fundamental decencies'. Elsewhere he congratulates himself upon his honesty. The presence of the narrator within the novel makes some difference to its presentation and to the reader's response to it. The reader is more aware of the colour which may be added to the story by the personality of the story-teller; there may even be some question of how far we are to accept his version of events. Although the action of the novel leads towards the death of the character from whom the novel takes its name, there is a positive goal for

the book. The moral perceptions of Nick Carraway move from a position of neu... to one of commitment. Thus the narrator who has been used most effectively in the narrative technique is one of the most important things to be explored in the study of the novel.

4.2 FITZGERALD AND THE HOLLYWOOD CONTEXT

There was an interlude in Fitzgerald's career as a writer in Hollywood where Fitzgerald worked briefly as a script writer. In 1927 he did script-writing in Hollywood to which place he moved in 1937. He fell in love with Sheilah Graham and the excellent film 'The Beloved Infidel' deals with this stage of his life. In the context of Hollywood, it could be mentioned that a separate 'genre' of novels which have come to be known as 'Hollywood novels' exists. For example, Bud Schulberg's *What Makes Sammy Run?* Indeed, a separate research study has been made on the 'Hollywood Novels'. Stephen Vincent Benet comments: 'We have had a good many books about Hollywood, including the interesting and staccato *What Makes Sammy Run?* But the difference between even the best of them and *The Last Tycoon* is not merely a difference of degree but a difference in kind. *The Last Tycoon* shows what a really first-class writer can do with material -- how he gets under the skin. It doesn't depend for success on sets or atmosphere, local color or inside stuff; it doesn't even depend for effect on the necessary exaggerations of the life that it describes. All that is there -- the Martian life of the studios, brilliantly shown. But it is character that dominates the book, the complex yet consistent character of Monroe Stahr, the producer, hitched to the wheels of his own preposterous chariot, at once dominating and dominated, as much a part of his business as the film that runs through the cameras, and yet a living man. Had Fitzgerald been permitted to finish the book, I think there is no doubt that it would have added a major character and a major novel to American fiction. As it is, *The Last Tycoon* is a great deal more than a fragment. It shows the full powers of its author, at their height and at their best. Indeed, there are many script-writers for Hollywood who are recognized novelists in their own right.

The unfinished novel of Fitzgerald *The Last Tycoon* can be mentioned in this category. Christopher Isherwood who was my own teacher may be mentioned here and his novel *Prater Violet* and his film scripts for the Hollywood Studios in general. However, a film script is different from a novel and even a novel has to be scripted again before it is made into a film. Whether it is a play or a novel or a short story -- a literary work, when it is to be made into a film has to be re-written. It must be taken note of that Fitzgerald's novel are eminantly filmworthy.

4.3 GATSBY'S LIFE AND THE DUAL PERCEPTION OF FITZGERALD

Gatsby's life is an illustration of certain 'criminal' activity on his part and his subsequent struggle for gaining respectability. He was the son of some wealthy people in the Middle West. Though he was brought up in America he spent some time getting educated at Oxford. A part of his attempt at establishing his credibility as an 'Oxford Man' consists of his using the expression 'Old Sport' which is a mannerism among addressing each other at Oxford between good friends. When his family died he came into a good deal of money. According to his own statement, 'After that I lived like a young Rajah in all the capitals of Europe -- Paris, Venice, Rome -- collecting jewels, cheaply Rubics, hunting big game, painting a little, things for myself only, and trying to forget something that had happened to me long ago. Then came the war, old sport.

It is a great relief and I tried very hard to die and I seemed to bear an enchanted life. I accepted a commission as first Lieutenant... I was promoted to a Major, and every Allied Government gave me a decoration'. [p. 65-66]. This is a good beginning to understand the double strands in his nature -- as a 'would be' gentleman and a person who had bordered upon engaging himself in criminal activity. It is this dual personality that should be explored throughout the novel.

4.4 CRIMINAL WEALTH AND RESPECTABILITY

Arising from this dual perception of the character of Gatsby, an expression from the text where Gatsby is described as having a 'Platonic conception of himself' provides a clue to the relationship between 'Criminal Wealth and Respectability'. He thought of himself as a 'son of God'. Tom Buchanan suspects his bonafides both as a gentleman and an 'Oxford Man'. He has a hunch that Gatsby was a bootlegger and is extremely jealous of his wife Daisy thinking well of him. Nick is quite fond of Gatsby and therefore his references to Gatsby are quite favourable. For example, he says: 'My eyes fell on Gatsby standing alone on the marble steps and looking from one group to another with approving eyes. His tanned skin was drawn attractively tight on his face and his short hair looked as though it were trimmed every day. I could see nothing sinister about him' [p. 50]. Gatsby's other side is seen when he makes a dubious offer of a remunerative job which wouldn't take much of his time and he would pick up a nice bit of money and ominously says that it was 'a rather confidential sort of thing'. Gatsby's positive side is seen when he dances a fox trot and is quite charming. We learn that he knew women early, and since they spoiled him he became contemptuous of them. Two characters who bring out the dark side of Gatsby are Dan Cody and Wolfsheim. Cody was a fifty year old man and a product of the Nevada silver fields and the transactions in Montana copper had made him many times a millionaire. He was physically robust. Gatsby's association with him is central to the understanding of the criminality and the respectability of Gatsby. Cody himself is described in a characteristically-Fitzgeraldian style when he says 'An infinite number of woman tried to separate him from his money'. It is the fact that Gatsby was employed by Cody in a dubious manner in a number of capacities like a mate, skipper, secretary and even jailor because Dan Cody sober knew what lavish doing Dan Cody drunk might soon be about and Code provided for such contingency by reposing great trust in Gatsby. Dan Cody at one point claims that he made Gatsby what he was which is revelatory regarding Gatsby's dark side. This is connected with Gatsby as a 'bootlegger'. It is from this questionable way of getting rich that makes him go out of the way to buy respectability which is seen in his owning a distinctive yellow car, which ironically proves to be his death. Secondly, the fabulous parties that he throws which were almost 'open house' because many people came to his parties uninvited and gorged themselves on food and drink. Throughout, Gatsby tries to project himself as larger than himself in epic proportions. However, Tom sees right away for what really he is, partly incensed by his wife's former relationship with him. Thus it is the respectable and criminal aspect are inextricably intertwined. Wolfsheim also has an association with Gatsby which is anything but respectable. He is a shifty, devious, dubious, scheming 'businessman'. He is described as 'A small flat-nosed Jew'. He claims to have made James Gatz into 'the great Gatsby'. When Nick asks him whether he had known Gatsby for a long time, he replies that he had known him for a number of years. However, he refuses to associate himself with Gatsby when he is killed and he has always 'played safe' as a businessman, owning a chain of 'drug stores' peddling dope on the side. The only letter that is found in the text of *The Great Gatsby* is Wolfsheim's letter where he does not want to get involved in any risky business, in so far as Gatsby had been murdered and Wolfsheim doesn't want to get 'mixed up' in the affair. Thus, Gatsby's background which is rather shady and his attempts to become a

'gentleman' so that he can win the hand of Daisy, connected with the symbol of the 'green light' is the essence of the novel.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

In summing up of the novel as a representative of the American 20's, before the advent of the 'the great depression' in the 30's, the tragic story of the interplay of criminality and respectability, of attempting to find fame and fortune on the one hand but attaining these things by illegal and immoral means and how it takes its toll ultimately is the essence of the novel. The worst of human nature is shown by Fitzgerald when no one turned up for his funeral, though hundreds had eaten at his place. It is a sad comment on human nature that when a man dies, he dies alone, absolutely alone. The only thing, thinking in Indian terms that accompanies him are his good deeds, especially those which had been done spontaneously and without any calculation to get something in return. To use an expression of Wordsworth 'The little, unremembered acts of kindness and of love'. Strangely enough this aspect of Gatsby is also present in the novel as he didn't even know who his guests were who enjoyed themselves at his parties. Everybody wants to 'play safe' especially a devious character like Wolfsheim. In fact, when Nick goes to New York to see Wolfsheim, his secretary blatantly tells a lie he had gone to Chicago where as he was very much behind the door. Nick the narrator knows such tricks of the trade and manages to meet Wolfsheim and invites to come to the funeral that afternoon but Wolfsheim refuses by saying 'I can't do it -- I can't get mixed up with it... When a man gets killed I never like to get mixed up in it any way. Without sounding sentimental and unduly moralistic, one can agree with Antony in Julius Caesar who says that the evil that men do lives after them where as the good is often interred with their bones. It may not be out of place to mention the geography of the United States plays its part in the novel. The moral geography of the novel represents basically that the West represents something traditional and absolute, though Fitzgerald does not spell out what is absolute system of values is. In moving from the Mid-West of America to New York to follow a career in the money markets, Nick Carraway is entering dangerous ground. Fitzgerald maintains the geographical distinction. Though *The Great Gatsby* cannot be treated as a 'Local Colour' novel and Fitzgerald as a 'Local Colourist', the distinction between the Mid-West and the East are clearly brought out in the novel. The students of American Literature must remember that though American Literature is generally talked about as a single unit differentiating it from British Literature, the regional differences within America like the New England area, the American South, The Mid-West and the Far-West are significant in 'placing' an American writer. While this summing up seems to be rather simplistic, it is still to be maintained that the significance of *The Great Gatsby* for the Indian reader lies in the fact that the novel, from the traditional Indian point of view, DEALS WITH THE the four goals of life -- the Purusharthas -- only 'Artha' (worldly position AND wealth) and 'Kama' (the fulfilment of bodily desires) have been given primary importance to the detriment of 'Dharma' (righteous conduct). Nevertheless, our consideration of the age of Gatsby, discussed in Unit 1, the analysis of the Plot Structure in Unit 2, taking into consideration characterization in Unit 3, dealing with the extra-literary devices like Symbol and Allegory in Unit 4 and the entire mode of the narrative technique in Unit 5 has given us some idea about *The Great Gatsby* as one of the most significant novels of American Literature.

4.6 SUGGESTED READING

1. Turnbull, Andrew, ed. *The Letters of F. Scott Fitzgerald*, New York. Charles Scribner's Sons. 1963.

2. Perosa, Sergio. *The Art of F. Scott Fitzgerald*. Ann Arbor Paperbacks. The University of Michigan Press. 1961.
3. Mizener, Arthur, *F. Scott Fitzgerald : A Collection of Critical Essays*. Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. 1963.
4. Ramanan, Mohan (ed). *F. Scott Fitzgerald: Centenary Essays from India*. Prestige. 1998.

4.7 QUESTIONS

1. Comment on the Narrator and the Narrative technique in Fitzgerald and Joseph Conrad.
2. Discuss the style of Fitzgerald with examples from *The Great Gatsby*.
3. What, do you think is the major theme in *The Great Gatsby*? Explain by analyzing the text.
4. Describe the Social World of the Eastern United States and the local colour especially with reference to New York, the West Egg, the East Egg and Long Island.
5. Explore the concept of 'The American Dream' in *The Great Gatsby* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

UNIT 5 CRITICS AND CRITICISM: AN OVERVIEW

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Western Critics
- 5.3 Indian Critics
- 5.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.5 Suggested Reading
- 5.6 Glossary

5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will discuss the criticism of a number of western and Indian critics on Scott Fitzgerald and his novel *The Great Gatsby*.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Fitzgerald is one of the most written about authors and naturally there are a great many critical approaches and opinions expressed by well known American critics like Lionel Trilling, William Troy, Wright Morris, John Aldridge, Edwin Fussell, Andrew Wanning, Malcolm Cowley, Leslie Fiedler, Charles E. Shain, Edmund Wilson, James E. Miller, Jr. Donald Ogden, John Henry Raleigh, Tom Burnam, A.E. Dyson, Marcus Bewely, D.W. Harding, D.S. Savage, Arthur Mizener and others. This shows how involved modern critics have been with the work of Fitzgerald, covering all aspects of his writing, both the early and the later works. Some of these critics have written exclusively on *The Great Gatsby* which is, by common consent, the best work of Fitzgerald. The Indian critics have not lagged behind in their critical appraisal of Fitzgerald – critics like A.K. Sethi, Isaac Sequeira, Somdatta Mandal, M. Sivaramkrishna, Prasenjit Biswas, Sherine Upot, Pratima Agnihotri, Pradip Kumar Dey, Suman Bala and R.K. Dhawan. A brief look at some of the opinion of these critical attitudes should provide the introduction for the who 'Block'

5.2 WESTERN CRITICS

Arthur Mizener who has edited the whole collection of essays on Fitzgerald for the Twentieth Century Views Series has written an excellent introduction which covers all aspects of the writer including the background for the Age and the contemporaries of Fitzgerald, in his exclusive essay entitled 'The Maturity of Scott Fitzgerald'. He concentrates on *The Last Tycoon* but draws a comparison between the Hollywood scene in this novel with *The Great Gatsby* where the long island society is brilliantly drawn. However, he thinks that in both these novels this aspect is a 'relatively minor part of its achievement'. Three critics have written exclusively on *The Great Gatsby*. John Henry Raleigh explores the context of symbol and allegory and comes to the conclusion that the novel does not deal with local customs or even national and international levels but in the permanent realities of existence'. Tom Burnam feels that the novel seems a deceptively simple work and hastens to point out that it is really

complex with the symbolic and allegorical aspects. He differs with Lionel Trilling, Lionel Trilling thinks that Jay Gatsby 'is to be thought of as standing for America itself' and adds 'Perhaps; everyone is Everyone in a sense and Gatsby can stand for America as conveniently as he can stand for himself. But it seems to me that the true significance The Great Gatsby is more personal and more specific'. The Times Literary Supplement in 1950 wrote on Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* under the title 'Power without Glory' where it is pointed out: 'Fitzgerald's habitual connotation in many people's minds with the 'jazz age' has sometimes obscured his merits. He is, it is true, a remarkable example of a writer of great gifts striking when the iron was hot - and failing to produce another masterpiece largely on account of the limitations of his time-bound point of view- but he stands apart from most of the American, or English, novelists, among contemporaries who might be considered in his class; and at his best he certainly rises far above recommendation merely as an interesting period piece.

The 'Lost Generation' was the first coherent group of novelists in the history of American literature. It is possible to see how the First World War shaped the flowering of their talent in the 1920's. the war forced the Americans to recognize the fact that their country was a responsible part of Western culture. One of the effects of this was that they were dissatisfied with the narrowness of American Civilization to the point where they preferred to live elsewhere, especially in Paris. A backward look at the novels of Henry James may be useful here in relation to the interaction between 'Young America' and 'Old Europe'. A typical novel would be *The Portrait of the Lady*, another great American classic. In fact, T.S. Eliot, in a letter written to Fitzgerald about *The Great Gatsby* in 1925 from the publishing firm of Faber says: 'When I have time I should like to write to you more fully and tell you exactly why it seems to me such a remarkable book. In fact it seems to me to be the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James...' As H.L. Mencken points out: 'In *The Great Gatsby* though he does not go below the surface, he depicts this rattle and hullabaloo with great gusto and, I believe, with sharp accuracy. The Long Island he sets before us is no fanciful Alsatia; it actually exists. More, it is worth any social historian's study, for its influence upon the rest of the country is immense and profound'. John Henry Raleigh sums up the importance of *The Great Gatsby*: 'At its highest level *The Great Gatsby* does not deal with local customs or even national and international legends but with the permanent realities of existence. On this level nothing or nobody is to blame, and people are what they are and life is what it is... At this level, too, most people don't count; they are merely a higher form of animality living out its mundane existence: the Tom Buchanans, the Joprdan Bakers, the Daisy Fays - only Nick and Gatsby count. For Gatsby, with all his absurdities and his short, sad, pathetic life, is still valuable; in Nick's parting words to him: 'You're worth the whole damn bunch put together'. Nick, who in his way is as much of this world as Daisy is in hers, still sees, obscurely, the significance of Gatsby. And although he knows that the content of Gatsby's dream is corrupt, he senses that its form is pristine. For, in his own fumbling, often gross way, Gatsby was obsessed with the wonder of human life and driven by the search to make that wonder actual. It is the same urge that motivates visionaries and prophets, and urge to make the facts of life measure up to the splendors of the human imagination'. Chase sums up the special characteristic of the novel: 'The special charm of *Gatsby* rests in his odd combination of romance with a realistic picture of raw power - the raw power of the money that has made a plutocracy and the raw power the self protective conventions of this plutocracy assume when they close in a united front against an intruder'. Paul Rosenfeld says: 'He is a born writer, a measuring himself with tales and pictures; and eventually nothing is interesting except the natural bent. Salty and insipid, exaggeratedly poetical and bitterly parodistic, his writing pours exuberantly out of him. Flat paragraphs are redeemed by brilliant metaphors and conventional descriptions by witty, penetrating turns. Ideas of diamond are somewhat indiscriminately mixed with ideas of rhinestone and ideas of window glass: yet purest rays serene are present in veritable abundance. They must come to this bannerman of the slickers and flappers in a sort of dream,

unexpectedly out of some arcana where they have been concealing themselves, an surprise him by smiling up at him from underneath his pen'. H.L. Mencken, talking about *The Great Gatsby* comments in not entirely complementary terms. Such views are also helpful in our study of the text critical instead of being entirely adulatory: 'This story is obviously unimportant, and though, as I shall show, it has its place in the Fitzgerald cannon, it is certainly not to be put on the same shelf, with, say, *This Side of Paradise*. What ails, it, fundamentally, is the plain fact that it is simply a story – that Fitzgerald seems to be far more interested in maintaining its suspense than in getting under the skins of its people. It is not that they are false; it is that they are taken too much for granted. Only Gatsby himself genuinely lives and breathes. The rest are mere marionettes – often astonishingly lifelike but nevertheless not quite alive... what gives the story distinction is something quite different from the management of the action or the handling of the characters: it is the charm and beauty of the writing. In Fitzgerald's first days it seemed almost unimaginable that he could ever show such qualities. His writing, then, was extraordinarily slipshod – at times almost illiterate. He seemed to be devoid of any feeling for the color and savor of words. He could see people clearly and he could devise capital situations, but as writer qua writer he was apparently little more than a bright college boy.'

As great a critic as Lionel Trilling estimates the importance of the novel this way: *The Great Gatsby*, for example after a quarter century is still as fresh as when it first appeared; it has even gained in weight and relevance, which can be said of very few American books of its time. This, I think, is to be attributed to the specifically intellectual courage with which it was conceived and executed, a courage which implied Fitzgerald's grasp – both in the sense of awareness and of appropriation – of the traditional resources available to him. Thus, *The Great Gatsby* has its sinterest as a record of contemporary manners, but this might only have served to date it, did not Fitzgerald take the given moment of history as something more than a mere circumstance, did he not, in the manner of the great French novelists of the nineteenth century, seize the given moment as a moral fact.

Talking of 'manners' Van Wick Brooks points out: 'A lesser writer might have attempted to make Nick a literal sage and Gatsby a literal prophet. But it is certain that such a thought would never have entered Fitzgerald's head, as he was only dramatizing the morals and manners of the life he knew. The genius of the novel consists precisely in the fact that, while using only the stuff, one might better say the froth and flotsam of its own limited time and place, it has managed to suggest a sense of eternity'. Richard Chase, talking about the milieu of the novel says: 'Gatsby gives us an unforgettable, even though rather sketchy, sense of 1920's and what the people were like who lived in them. We know what the people were like because we are shown the public recognized gestures and attitudes by which they declare themselves as belonging to a certain ambience at a certain time. Their manners (perhaps one should say their mannered lack of manners) are a clearly minted currency as readily negotiable as the money they all have such a lot of. At the same time the hero who comes to his spectacular grief is not only a man of the 1920's but a figure of legend. No one can doubt that the legend engaged the imagination of the author more deeply than the society in which the legend is played out'. Leon Howard, in his *Literature and the American Tradition* says: Scott Fitzgerald became the novelist of the great rebellion. Perhaps this is so because Fitzgerald himself did not quite believe he age but played its game with an air of wonder, a double sense of involvement and detachment which made him the immediate historian of an age he was half living and half creating it was not until *The Great Gatsby* (1926) that he managed to triumph over his early faults of style and achieve a novel which seemed to T.S. Eliot 'the first step that American fiction has taken since Henry James'. There was, in fact, a Jamesian quality in the book, emphasized by the use of a narrator and the method of presenting the story in scenes, in its conception of flamboyant bootlegger Gatsby as an individual of greater moral sensitivity than the wealthy and well-bred Daisy and Tom: and, although it lacks

Jamesian faith inasmuch as Gatsby is killed instead of being allowed to experience some inner triumph, it is this quality which makes it Fitzgerald's most human book rather than another fine example of social history'

5.3 INDIAN CRITICS

So much has been done by Indian scholars in American studies that this has to be taken into account. Special mention must be made A.K. Sethi. His essay 'T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and the novels F. Scott Fitzgerald and Nathaniel West' is seminal, comprehensive and insightful and the view expressed is so relevant to the study of *The Great Gatsby*. Another very significant essay is by Isaac Sequeira who is the doyen of American studies in India. Isaac Sequeira who is an authority on Popular Culture with a book on the subject to his credit is versatile with a knowledge of Jazz and Western Classical music. His essay, even without the oral and auditory dimension in the printed version is central to the understanding of the Jazz age which is also called 'The Gay Twenties, the Day of Boom and Bust. The Roller Coaster Ride Up and Down, the period of meretricious gaiety, of the lost generation, of flappers and philosophers', he points out that one critic described the Jazz Age as 'a Marx Brothers Extravaganza with a frenetic jazz orchestra in the pit and a bawdy farce on the stage. He quotes Fitzgerald's own comment: 'America is going on the greatest spree in history.'

Mohan Ramanan points out that "Fitzgerald became a 'cult hero'. His life style was representative of his age and it was careless and a moral. He, as well as his age become synonymous with affluence, high life, and liberalism of all kinds. Some of the other Indian critics who have written on Fitzgerald will be briefly mentioned here: Somdatta Mandal has commented very perceptively on the jazz age and 'The Moment' discussing the years between the two World Wars. She comments: The decade of the 1920s was at one and the same time the gaudiest, the shortest and the most misinterpreted era in American history. It has been judged both as a 'golden age' and as a 'hollow time between wars'. The years have been seen as frivolous and roaring, and, at the same time, bathed in tragedy and despair. The tremendous interest that chroniclers find in this period can be judged by the various terms that have been used to define it 0—'Roaring Twenties', 'Era of Wonderful Nonsense', 'The Aspirin Age', 'The Lawless Decade', 'The Passionate Years' and of course, 'The Jazz Age'. All these chroniclers either regard the period as an adolescent spree or with a regret approximating that of a bad hangover... The best history of the younger generation which ran wild, of the emergent debutantes, playboys and flappers find voice through the All these chroniclers either regard the period as an adolescent spree or with a regret approximating that of a bad hangover... The best history of the younger generation which ran wild, of the emergent debutantes, playboys and flappers find voice through the writings of F. Scott Fitzgerald. As the earliest chronicler of the 'Jazz Age', (he himself coined the phrase). Dr. Mandal completes the picture of 'The Jazz Age' when she quotes from Hansen Chadwick regarding 'Social Influences on Jazz style': But the Jazz Age was not so much a drinking as a dancing age. In those days, one heard jazz everywhere --- from orchestras in the ball—room, from wind—up phonographs in the parlour, from loudspeakers blaring in variety stores, lunch wagons, even machine shops ---and jazz wasn't even tapping one's feet: jazz was the music with a purpose; it was music to which people danced. Before the First World War, jazz was primarily a music of the southern Negro, especially of the Negro in and around New Orleans. But during and after the war, along with the migration of the Negroes to the north, jazz moved north as well and 'Chicago soon replaced New Orleans as the centre of the jazz world. It was then that jazz really spread beyond the black community and became the jazz men had, of course been playing for some white audience long before, but it was in the twenties that they acquired a truly national audience and found

themselves a part of the national entertainment industry, subject to all its requirements'. After quoting Chadwick she comments: 'So, to the young generation of the Twenties, jazz carried with it a constant message of change, excitement, violent escape, with an undertone of sadness, but with a promise of enjoyment somewhere around the corner next week, perhaps at midnight in a distant country. Further, the moan of the saxophone replaced the gentle hum of the violin the ball-room and men and women danced daringly close together in Gatsby's parties too, we witness how the traditional orchestras is replaced by the jazz band'. She also draws the picture of 'The Moment' in relation to the Paris of the 20s'. 'No picture of the jazz Age is complete without the mention of Paris and the part it played in shaping the conditions of the Twenties. Tom and Daisy Buchanan of *The Great Gatsby* came to settle in New York 'after spending a year in France for no particular reason' and then drifting 'here and there unrestfully wherever people played polo and were rich together'. The Paris of the young American writers in the early and middle 1920s was both a city and a state of feeling induced by the Great War and its aftermath and they went to Paris not as if they were driven into exile but in search of a spiritual home. Paris was a continual excitation of the sense — freedom to dress as they pleased, talk or write as they pleased and even make love without worrying about the neighbours. If we can believe the stories of the American literary men in Paris at that time, they had leapt at one bound from the Midwestern world of their childhood into the world of Caporetto and Dada, of Picasso and Gertrude Stein (who called them 'the lost generation'). Their detachment from the native tradition now became their own first tradition. Drunk most of the time, traveling considerably, they also managed to get an impressive amount of good writing done. The early works of Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Dos Passos, e.e. Cummings and others bear testimony to the fact that Paris for them was really 'Babylon Revisited'.

M. Sivaramakrishna in his essay 'Some Indic Pathways to Fitzgerald's Paradise takes an Indian philosophical view which is quite characteristic of him and examines Fitzgerald from the point of view of Purusharthas — the four goals of life in Indian thinking. In his opinion American fiction in general and that of Fitzgerald in particular is a dramatization of an inherent contradictions in a purely sensate level of existence exemplifying. Modern critical perspectives from the point of view of 'theory' have also figured in the Indian approach. For example Prasenjit Biswas discussed *The Great Gatsby* in a Barthesian Conspectus. He discusses the novel from the theoretical vantage point of Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*. He opines that Barthes's *Loves Discourse* provides this post-hoc outlook through its formulation of a state of suspension of the possibility of realization of love. Talking of the modern theory, Sherine Upot in her essay 'She — Centering *The Great Gatsby*: Fitzgerald, Bartheleme and the Gender Question' supplies the lacuna of the feminist perspective and gender issues. She argues that *The Great Gatsby* is 'undoubtedly a male centered text' and says that 'In spite of the stirrings of feminism in the Twenties and despite Fitzgerald's seeming enthusiasm for the movement indicated by his over admiration for Zelda. *The Great Gatsby* can be seem to represent and partake of patriarchal ideology in its portrayal of women'. Pratima Agnihotri places *The Great Gatsby* in the European tradition by invoking the proverbial Tantalus land connects this the green light of Gatsby and says 'Just as Tantalus the doomed king of the nether world, was condemned to stand in water that always receded when he tried to drink it and under branches of fruit he could never reach, Jay Gatsby almost acquires a self, almost comes to terms with its various others, almost reaches the American dream to have all these failing him and receding further away like the American Frontier itself'. Her approach is full of references to literary sources like the outlawed hero, Don Quixote and the Rousseauesque self constitution. While mentioning Eckleburg's eyes she thinks that 'they become the conscience of the American self'. Pradip Kumar Dey discusses *The Great Gatsby* in the context of the 'American Dream' and feels 'The Original idealistic determinants of the American Dream are juxtaposed with their contemporary distortion greed and acquisitiveness. Daisy represents for Gatsby the twin ideal of

eternal youth and that opulent American touch, money. In fact both these are inseparable in the present case for it is affluence that for Gatsby is the means to achieve the dream'. Suman Bala and R.K. Dhawan bring in a comparative perspective effectively. While Suman Bala writes on the two narrators, Nick in *The Great Gatsby* and Morlow in Joseph Conrad's novels, *Youth*, *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim* and *Chance* and points out how by creating an eyewitness narrator, both Conrad and Fitzgerald lend authenticity to their story and concludes 'By using Morlow an intermediary between himself and the other characters, Conrad achieves a detachment which it might have been more difficult to maintain had he dealt straightforwardly with autobiographical material. The same holds true for Fitzgerald. Nick is at once involved in the story he narates and a commentator who subtly directs the reader's response to his tale'. R.K. Dhawan concentrates on the central characters of Gatsby and Kurtz and points out that 'A sense of mystery surrounds both Kurtz and Gatsby and they remain enigmatic figures till the end... both Gatsby and Kurtz are romantic idealists; but they are not products of a social tradition but of their own imagination'. In interesting aspect of his study is his drawing a comparison from a novel by an Indian—English novelist, Arun Joshi, In his novel *The Apprentice*. Dhawan shows how both Gatsby and Kurtz are destroyed by their illusions.

5.4 LET SUM UP

From the aforementioned discussion, it is clear that Scott Fitzgerald is an extremely popular American novelist in India also and the critical appraisal that he has received from Western critics is matched by the Indian critical perspective which is most relevant from Indian students to comprehend. Some of the aspects to be covered in this Write—up which help the students to understand the varied aspects of Fitzgerald and his times from a study of the text in detail. The mood of the Twenties upto the 'Great Depression' of the thirties, the Jazz Age, the Expatriate sensibility of the 'Lost Generation', Prohibition and bootlegging from rags to riches story of the 'American Dream', the various critical attitudes and appraisals of American and Indian critics — these aspects are meant to provide the student with basic materials for study as well as finding incentives for further research. What I have tried to do in the Units is to provide this material in addition to adding my own personal experiences of the study of American literature during a number of visits to various American Universities. Unit ONE provides the Background for the Life and Times of Fitzgerald, Unit TWO concentrates on the Form of the Novel, Unit THREE on the Plot Structure, Unit FOUR on the Symbolism and Allegory in the novel and Unit FIVE on the Narrator and the Narrative Technique., each Unit with its own list of Suggested Reading and a Glossary at the very end of the Write—up.

5.5 SUGGESTED READING

1. Fitzgerald, Zelda. *Save Me the Waltz*. First Published in the U.S.A. by Charles Scribner's Sons. 1932.
2. Howard, Leon. *Literature and the American Tradition*. Doubleday & Company, Inc. Garden City, New York. 1960.
3. Wilson, Edmund. *The Shores of Light*. New York. Farrar, Straus and Young 1952.

4. Graham, Sheila, and Frank, Gerold. *Beloved Infidel: The Education of a Woman*. New York. Henry Holt. 1958.
5. Ulanov, Barry. *A History of Jazz in America*. Pyramid Books. 444, Madison Avenue. New York 22, New York. 1957.
6. Abrams M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Sixth Edition. Prism Books Pvt Ltd. Bangalore. 1995. The Glossary is prepared with the help of this book.

5.6 GLOSSARY

Novel:	The term 'novel' is now applied to a great variety of writings that having common only the attribute of being extended works of fiction written in prose. It is a narrative distinguish from both the Short Story and a work of middle length called the <i>novelette</i> .
Plot:	The Plot in a novel is constituted by events and actions performed by the characters. The Plot construction varies according to the type of novel like the Picaresque or the Historical Novel.
Narrative / Narration:	A Narrative is a story, whether prose or verse involving events and characters, and what the characters say and do. Narratology denotes a recent concern with narrative in general. It deals especially with the identification of structural elements.
Point of View:	It signifies the way a story gets told -- the mode (or modes) established by an author by means of which the reader is presented with the characters, dialogue, actions, setting, and events which constitute the <i>narrative</i> in a work of fiction.
Stream of Consciousness:	This was a phrase used by William James in his <i>Principles of Psychology</i> (1890) to describe the unbroken flow of perceptions, thoughts, and feelings in the waking mind. James Joyce developed a variety of devices for stream-of-consciousness narrative in his famous work <i>Ulysses</i> (1922).
Realism:	Realism is connected to Naturalism. Realistic fiction is often opposed to romantic fiction. The <i>romance</i> is said to present life as we would have it -- more picaresque, fantastic, adventurous or heroic than actuality; realism on the other hand is said to represent life as it really is. Fitzgerald's <i>The Great Gatsby</i> has both these elements so that it is dealt with as a 'Novel' as well as a 'Romance'.

Symbol:

In the broadest sense a symbol is anything which signifies something; in this sense all words are symbols. In discussing literature, however, the term *symbol* is applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in its turn signifies something, or has a range of reference, beyond itself. Thus the Rock, Dr. Eckleberg's eyes and the Green Light have been used as symbols in this novel.

Allegory:

It is a narrative fiction in which the agents and actions, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived to make coherent sense on the 'literal' or primary level of signification and at the same time to signify a second, correlated order of agents, concepts, and events.

Jazz:

Jazz is the most characteristic contribution of America to the world of music just as the 'Musical Theatre' is the contribution of America to the world of the theatre. Before the First World War Jazz was primarily the music of the Southern Negro, especially of the Negro in and around New Orleans.

The Lost Generation:

The expression was coined in the 1920's by Gertrude Stein at her Paris flat, No.27. Rue de Fleurs when she remarked that Hemingway and his contemporaries were 'all a lost generation'. Gertrude Stein and Fitzgerald are special in their relation to each other.



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MEG-11 AMERICAN NOVEL

Block

4

LIGHT IN AUGUST

Block Introduction

UNIT 1

American Fiction in 1920s and 1930s 5

UNIT 2

The Novel In The South 18

UNIT 3

Light In August : Structure and Narrative Strategies 24

UNIT 4

Characterisation and Critical Approaches 33

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

It is now my pleasure to introduce William Faulkner, his times and work, in a broad general way, as we shall discuss Faulkner and his work, in general, and *Light in August*, in particular, in the following Units.

Faulkner lived and wrote during a period that saw a great resurgence of literary activity in the U.S.A., and marked the rise of the Modern American Fiction. This was the second great spurt in creativity in American letters, the first being the work of the great 19th century writers like Poe, Hawthorne, Mark Twain, Melville, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, and Henry James. This second spurt in the 1920s either synchronized with or followed a migration of American writers to Paris, where new schools of art and letters like Expressionism, Impressionism, Cubism, Dadaism, Vorticism, and Surrealism started flourishing then. The older and established writers like James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and Sherwood Anderson were a source of inspiration for young writers like Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and William Faulkner. Sherwood Anderson helped Faulkner and Hemingway publish their first works and find their feet as writers.

Faulkner and Hemingway, who grew as writers in this period, became the tallest writers of this age and won the Nobel Prize for Literature in the 1950s. Now let us look at the American fictional scene in the 1920s and 1930s in Unit 1, and move on to a study of the novel in the South in Unit 2, and then to Faulkner and *Light in August* in Unit 3, Unit 4, and Unit 5.

Good luck to you!

Notes

UNIT I AMERICAN FICTION IN 1920S AND 1930S

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 The Post-World War I American Novel
- 1.3 Writing out of American Experience
- 1.4 The American Novel in the Twenties
 - 1.4.1 Scott Fitzgerald
 - 1.4.2 Ernest Hemingway
 - 1.4.3 John Dos Passos
 - 1.4.4 William Faulkner
 - 1.4.5 The Great Depression
- 1.5 American Writing in Thirties
 - 1.5.1 James T. Farrell
 - 1.5.2 Erskine Caldwell
- 1.6 Realism and Naturalism
 - 1.6.1 John Steinbeck
 - 1.6.2 Thomas Wolfe
 - 1.6.3 Henry Miller
- 1.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.8 Questions
- 1.9 Suggested Reading

1.0 OBJECTIVES

Before attempting a critical appreciation of the novel, I would like to introduce the period (1920's and 1930's) which saw not only Faulkner's best work but the best work of some famous contemporary writers. Three of them, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck won the Nobel Prize for literature.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The period also saw a lot of avante-garde writing involving experiments in painting and literature. A background study will help us understand the climate in which Faulkner wrote his novels and put him in a proper perspective. It is also necessary that you should be generally acquainted with the other great writers of the period. The themes and issues which dominated the period gave rise to new forms and techniques. Since this period followed the first World War, which caused unprecedented devastation and mauled a whole generation physically and psychologically, a close look at this period and its concerns will be a rewarding experience.

1.2 THE POST-WORLD WAR I AMERICAN NOVEL

A group of brilliant writers appeared on the American scene during the decade following the First World War and they dominated not only American fiction but the whole age and set major trends in the art of fiction. They included Hemingway, Faulkner, Scott Fitzgerald and John Dos Passos.

Gertrude Stein's remark to a group of garage mechanics 'you're all a lost generation', which Hemingway used as an epigraph for his first major novel, *The Sun also rises* describes a generation disoriented and confused by the devastating War. This chaotic scenario threw up creative geniuses and explorers of the world of literature who set out to chart new courses and draw new maps in the world of arts and literature. Expressionism and Impressionism which made a deep impact on the creative genius of the first quarter of the 20th century became first manifest in the Impressionist exhibition in London in 1910. It fired the imagination of a whole generation and prompted Virginia Woolf to remark that the world changed in 1910. The new generation of American writers poured scorn on the provincialism of American manners and narrow hypocrisy of American public life. Sinclair Lewis's satiric attack on *Main Street* is a good example of this. Lewis, however, could not present an alternative to the *Main Street*. Dos Passos's U.S.A. is filled with dishonest politicians, irresponsible Labor leaders and selfish businessmen. The writers of the *Lost Generation* not only attacked the world they grew up in but also sought to discover what Henry James called 'the great and good place' that surely existed somewhere in the American sensitivity and to learn how to organize their lives so that they may not only survive but live meaningfully. Arthur Mizener says "In an important sense, all good American novels since World War I--from Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* in 1920 to *Catonsville* By Love Possessed in 1957--are pilgrim's progresses".

The First World War forced Americans to recognise the fact that their country was a responsible part of Western culture. Many Americans were dissatisfied with the narrowness of American civilisation and opted to live elsewhere. In 1921, Harold Stearns edited a symposium called *Civilization in the United States*. At the end of it the participants concluded that there was very little civilization in the U.S.A. Stearns moved to Paris. A large number of writers of the period did the same thing.

As long as America had remained a provincial backwater, it had been difficult for the talented Americans to take it seriously. As a result, the great writers America produced in the 19th century were all alienated from their society, whether they went into exile literally like Henry James or metaphorically like Hawthorne and Melville. But the writers of the 1920s went to Europe to discover the American consciousness of experience.

1.3 WRITING OUT OF AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

The most important thing about these writers was their shared conviction that it was possible for an American, writing directly out of American experience, to produce major novels. Thus Scott Fitzgerald, an undergraduate at Princeton in 1916, said to his fellow undergraduate, Edmund Wilson, "I want to be one of the greatest writers that ever lived, don't you?" Young men with Fitzgerald's feeling for the possibilities of American experience suddenly appeared in all parts of the U.S.A. in the early 1920s. Whether it was Fitzgerald, an Irish Catholic from St Paul, Minnesota, or John Dos Passos, the son of a Portuguese immigrant or Ernest Hemingway, the son of a doctor from Illinois, or William Faulkner, who came from a backwoods county seat in Mississippi, they were all convinced of the special significance of American experience. They all felt a compulsive need to tell the truth about it.

America was afflicted by a sense of dislocation and one of the reasons for it was the first World War, the first major foreign conflict in which the U.S.A. participated. The United States entered the war in 1917. It had a deep impact on American thought and development. It left six million dead and changed the geo-political map of Europe. It saw the birth of a major revolutionary state in Russia, which was committed to the spread of communism all over the world. Even though the USA was relatively less affected and concentrated on economic and technological development, the sense of

cultural disorder, apparent in Europe, affected America also. Many American writers served as soldiers or members of the ambulance corps in Europe. John Dos Passos, Ernest Hemingway, E.E. Cummings and Edmund Wilson worked in the ambulance corps. Hemingway was wounded on the Italian front and was decorated for bravery. Fitzgerald finished Officer training, and Faulkner trained with the Royal Canadian force. The war was the first subject in their writings. From the small town milieu in which they had grown up they came face to face with the horrors of war and the utter devastation of the European culture about which they had cherished romantic ideas. It was a culture shock, the story of crumbling idols and shattered dreams—a rude exposure to the ruthless forces of history. It involved deep disillusionment and alienation and the abject failure of language. An excellent example of this predicament is Krebs in Hemingway's well-known story, "A Soldier's Home," who returns to his Midwestern home after the war only to find old values, meanings and modes of speech useless. Men seemed to need new perceptions, new styles of living and expression.

The war produced the war novel and images of barrenness and sterility in poetry. The theme of John Dos Passos' *One Man's Initiation: 1917* (1920) and *Three Soldiers* (1921) was growing disillusion. E. E. Cummings' *The Enormous Room* (1922) was about his confinement in a French prison camp. There are novels about the disillusioned protagonist and his 'separate peace' like Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1930).

1.4 THE AMERICAN NOVEL IN THE TWENTIES

The post-war novel dominated the American Twenties and became a metaphor for a world, twisted and torn beyond recognition. Hemingway's *The Sun also rises* (1926) is dominated by the emasculating war wound. The theme of impotence or sterility and barrenness pervades the novel. These images haunt not only *The Sun also rises* but T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberly* (1920), Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and William Faulkner's *Soldiers Pay* (1926). *Soldiers' Pay* focuses on the central image of the wounded soldier returning to a new world where all the traditional values are dislocated.

The Twenties in America were a conservative decade. It was marked by Wilson's Versailles Treaty, the US senate's failure to ratify his proposals for a League of Nations, the red scare and the prohibition. But this decade led to far reaching changes in America. There was a significant shift from production to consumption and consumerism. The middle class expanded, and new techniques flourished. The machines became central to life and the technical and commercial developments saw the developments of the automobile, the aeroplane, the movie, the radio, the neon lights and the high rises. Lifestyles and sexual mores changed.

In literature, realism and naturalism yielded place to the avant-garde, the experimental and the bohemian which synchronized with the mass exodus of American writers to Paris. The experimental writings of Stein and Pound made significant contributions to the already established tradition of European modernism, and made it possible for many other American writers to make newer and bolder experiments like breaking the conventional forms of fiction like the linear narration, the search for newer and harder modes of expression and the charging of language with fresh life and vigour.

John Dos Passos, in his *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) presents the changed city through expressionist techniques. William Faulkner depicts the historical disorders of modern southern consciousness through the techniques of multiple points of view in the framework of the Gospels and the stream of consciousness.

Gertrude Stein attempts to invest America with a modernist myth in her *The Making of Americans* (1925). The American writers of this period attempted to explore the new consciousness through new techniques.

1.4.1 Scott Fitzgerald

The best representative and the chronicler of the Twenties was Scott Fitzgerald, one of the most talented writers of the period. His first novel, *This Side of Paradise* (1920), in which he catches the mood and spirit of his age, was an immediate success. The novel presents Fitzgerald's main theme--the ephemeral nature of wealth and beauty. When it was first published in 1920 this side of paradise, Scott Fitzgerald's first novel, was an immediate success with both the public and the critics. It is not difficult to see why: with his elegantly disillusioned hero and his hints of romantic sadness beneath the polished charm, Fitzgerald had captured the mood of his times perfectly. As Alfred Kazin noted in *On Native Grounds* (1942), 'he was not so much a novelist as a generation speaking'. The life of Amory Blaine (obviously a romanticized version of the life of Scott Fitzgerald) is typical of the Lost Generation. Amory is born into a privileged world -- the world of the American aristocracy -- with the natural advantages of good looks and intelligence. His mother, the fashionable Beatrice Blaine, encourages him in a pose of aristocratic disdain towards life. His years at Princeton University intensify this secret rebellion against stodgy middle-class propriety. At that time the University was dominated by the concept of the 'Christian Hero' -- a devout clean -- living undergraduate who throws himself impartially into work and sport -- but Amory and his friends take a different course. He abandons his interest in football during his first term and fails his exams at the beginning of his second year, for his energies are devoted to the pursuit of style and social prominence. His friends drive fast cars, drink too much, flirt with girls in a way that would have been unthinkable only a few years earlier, and dabble in literary interest.

The effect of the war is to harden this pose of casual cynicism into a rock-bottom despair. The early parts of the novel convey an atmosphere of gay enchantment, but this vanishes with the hero's departure from Princeton. The New York sections of the book recount a series of reverses in Amory's life: his abortive romance with Rosalind, his loss of his private income and his job, and the death of Monsignor Darby, his adviser for some many years. Amory talks at one point in the story about books that describe quests. If the reader sees this side of Paradise in these terms, it is a quest that destroys rather than establishes certainties about life. Amory's surreal journey back to Princeton at the end of the novel is a final expression of his extreme emotional turbulence.

For all its novelty, *This Side of Paradise* has precedents in earlier literature. Scott Fitzgerald is particularly influenced by the work of Oscar Wilde, the English Decadent. Indeed Wilde is several times mentioned with obvious respect in the literary conversations of Tom and Amory. With his love of bright and cynical epigrams, his fascination with gilded youth, and his occasional surreal touches (like the scene when drunken Amory meets the Devil), Scott Fitzgerald sometimes seems to be a latter-day member of the Decadent movement. But he was also subject to more modern influences, especially that of James Joyce. Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* also described a young man's development of 'quest' and its experimental style obviously impressed Fitzgerald. In the middle section of *This side of Paradise* he temporarily breaks with conventional techniques of narration to present part of the story through letters and stage dialogue.

It is unlikely, however, that readers will today be as impressed by *This side of Paradise* as Scott Fitzgerald's contemporaries were. Edmund Wilson, a lifelong friend for the author, voiced an important criticism when he described the novel as a phantasmagoria of incident which has no dominating intention to endow it with unity and force'. At times it seems more like a scrapbook of undergraduate memories than

a planned work of art: a contemporary reviewer facetiously hailed it as 'the collected works of Scott Fitzgerald'. Moreover, the novel's outlook on life is often immature. Fitzgerald's cynicism seems like a shallow pose, while his ceaseless straining after brilliant epigrams quickly becomes irritating. In spite of these very real faults, *This Side of Paradise* remains an important and memorable book. It expressed the mood of a generation and it introduced, in however crude and immature a form, a novelist who was to become one of the major writers of the age.

His book of stories--*Flappers and Philosophers* (1921) and *Tales of the Jazz Age* (1922) show him as a sort of oracle - 'the prophet of the jazz age'. His *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is one of the most famous American novels of the 20th century. Though it won much critical acclaim, it did not sell well for more than two decades but it has gained great popularity during the last 40 years.

The novel's command of a larger audience during the last 40 years speaks of a better appreciation of Fitzgerald's achievement. *The Great Gatsby* analyses the failure of the Jazz Age to produce lasting values and exposes the disease corrupting American spirit. Fitzgerald employs a third-person minor character to narrate the story, a technique he seems to have learnt from Henry James and Joseph Conrad. This technique provides us with an objective view of the events and characters and helps in evoking a melancholy mood that pervades the novel. *The Great Gatsby* is the story of a gross, careless society of coarse wealth in a sterile world and of the extraordinary illusion of the protagonist, Jay Gatsby. It represents the dialectic between the old world of romance, love and dream on the one hand, and the dislocated modern world with its rootlessness and corruption on the other.

By 1930, Fitzgerald's wife, Zelda, became a victim of schizophrenia and he became an alcoholic. He started reading Springler, Henry Adams, Freud, and Marx and realised the need for a fresh look at things. This led to his next novel *Tender is the Night* (1934). A novel of psychic disorientation with autobiographical overtones. The focus is on the Diver couple--the wife is insane and the husband a psychiatrist, who seeks to heal the pains of the rich disintegrating psyches in a disintegrating world and all the while the drums of war sound in the background.

Scott Fitzgerald's own description of *Tender is the night* as 'novel of deterioration' is apt in more ways than one. He wrote the book at a time when his own life, once the epitome of the gaiety and glamour of the Jazz Age, was becoming messy and unhappy. His wife Zelda had already suffered several Schizophrenic breakdowns, while he himself was fighting a losing battle against alcoholism: *Tender is the night* stands on the edge of the abyss. After its publication Fitzgerald wrote several good short stories and an interesting unfinished novel, *The Last Tycoon*, but on the whole his talent sadly declined. These are the years so movingly described in the autobiographical essay, *The Crack-up*. After Zelda's permanent confinement in a sanatorium, he lived a life of lonely heavy drinking and financial anxieties. A desperate attempt to establish himself as a Hollywood script writer brought further suffering and no relief to his money worries.

Tender is the Night was relentlessly attacked by contemporary reviewers: it was the first major work by Scott Fitzgerald that was not an immediate success. The chief burden of complaint was that the book was messy and formless. This is largely justified, for the structure of *Tender is the Night* (especially after the precision and compartment of *The Great Gatsby*) is a great disappointment probably the most striking fault is the long opening section describing the initiation of Rosemary Hoyt into the Divers' social circle. One can see why Fitzgerald wanted to begin with a glimpse of Dick and Nicole before their troubles set in, but unfortunately the effect is to muddle the reader. It is quite a while before it becomes clear that the novel is about Dick rather than Rosemary herself. Scott Fitzgerald was fully aware of this weakness and in his extensive revisions of the novel after publication he transposed the Rosemary Hoyt section to the middle of the book. Even this major surgery did not

satisfy him and it seems likely that if he had lived longer he would have returned to revise *Tender is the Night* again.

Surrounded by waste and suffering in Fitzgerald's own life, and itself showing signs of a decline in skill, *Tender is the Night* actually takes deterioration as its main theme. It describes the gradual transformation of Dick Diver from a promising and hard-working doctor to a genteel playboy on the French Riviera, and then to a medical hack practising in obscure American provincial towns. Much of the story, of course, draws on his own experience – his alcoholism and his wife's illness – and on his fears about himself. Yet it also expresses a larger disillusion with the gay world of parties, dancing and drinking in which Scott Fitzgerald had spent much of his life. In *this side of Paradise* he had adulated the Jazz Age, in *The Great Gatsby* he had expressed a wistful disenchantment with it; in *Tender is the Night* he is its most visceral critic.

His last novel, *The Last Tycoon* (1941) is set in Hollywood, the great producer of the American illusions. Cecilia is the first person narrator, who has an ironic view of Hollywood but is in love with a producer called Stahr. Fitzgerald uses this surrealist technique here presenting distorted images of a disintegrating world amid which stands the last of the great producers, the last tycoon, trying in vain to retain command and impose an order on the crumbling world around him. The novel was unfinished owing to Fitzgerald's early death. The tragedy of the hero here is not only the tragedy of the author but also the tragedy of his times.

1.4.2 Ernest Hemingway

Ernest Hemingway, Fitzgerald's fellow expatriate in Paris, was his friend and rival in the 1920s. Like Fitzgerald, Hemingway was so deeply involved with his time that he called his first work, *In Our Time* (1925), a collection of short stories which present the violence, pain and death as well as the courage and endurance of our time. The famous Hemingway style, with its verbal economy, control and precision, became manifest in his very first book. His second work, *The Sun also Rises* (1926), a novel about the post-war generation, which was to become the famous 'Lost Generation' later, firmly established him as a major writer. He concentrated on what really happened in action and what evoked the emotion without explicitly stating it. He believed in the power of understatement and suggestion using a clean prose freed from adjective and ornament.

Hemingway was born in Oakpark, Illinois, in 1896. He served on the Italian front as an ambulance man and was wounded in 1918. This wound was to play a significant role in his life as well as in his fictional work as 'a repetitive compulsion' recurring again and again in different forms and ways. The traumatic shock and the resultant fear, which he tried to overcome by seeking danger and death again and again had a profound impact on his life and work.

His style is characterized by staccato rhythms, clipped dialogue, understatements, and hidden metaphors, all working towards a remarkable verbal economy. This style is seen at its best in *The Sun Also Rises*, set in France and Spain, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), a novel about love in the time of war on the Italian Front, and his short stories. His experiments in shifting the point view and in foreshortening time in *To Have and Have Not* (1937) lead to their masterly use in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), which is a novel about guerilla action in Spain during the civil war. In *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950), set in Venice, Italy, and *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), set in Cuba, the narrative focus is kept undeviatingly on a single character and his consciousness.

The Old Man and the Sea after the publication of which he won the Pulitzer prize in 1952 and the Nobel Prize in 1954 for his "style-forming mastery of the art of modern narration," is a great achievement in the narrative art. The dynamics of narration in this novel chiefly consist in giving the reader a clear objective view of the drama

taking place on the sea while allowing him to involve himself emotionally with what the protagonist thinks and does. When the old man does not know what he has against him and wonders if it is a Marlin or a broadbill or shark, we already have the superior knowledge that it is a marlin 100 fathoms down in the sea. Later, as Santiago looks at the Marlin and is blissfully ignorant of the approaching Mako shark, we keep track of the movements of the shark deep down in the water. It is this superior point of view that makes us aware of the tragic irony of Santiago's predicament, as he pities the flying fish and the birds.

Hemingway superimposes a paradox over the obvious ironic pattern of the novel in which Santiago's great triumph is reduced to a miserable failure as he brings home only the skeleton of the magnificent fish lashed to his skiff. But this basic irony is transformed into a paradox when we consider how the old man fights the sharks with an indomitable will and brings home his prize transforming his material failure into a moral triumph in the story. The Hemingway hero lives by a code and exemplifies "grace under pressure".

Read literally as an adventure yarn, *The Old Man and the Sea* grips young and old. The prose is simple, the appropriations of Spanish dialogue poetically affecting and appropriate the narrative pattern wild and economical. Santiago's stubborn courage, rugged strength and marvelous skill sustain suspense till the tragic end. As almost every critic has noted, however, the reader who casts for subtler meanings may net a more haul. Hemingway said of the story that the old man, the boy, the sea, the fish, and the sharks were all real, "But if I made them good and true enough," he went on, "they would mean many things."

For some readers the novel has deep, religious implications. Santiagos' scarred palms, the crosslike mast he carries up the hill – these symbols suggests the christian overtones that sound throughout the tale. Although Santiago loves the fish, his pride compels him to destroy it – a human failure for which both man and nature suffer.

Other see the struggle between man and nature as the ancient bond between hunter and prey. Respecting his prey, the hunter must nevertheless assert at any price the power of man. Ironically, the price is often death or defeat for the hunter as well. Santiago becomes an embodiment of all of Hemingway's "code" heroes the first of them, however, as Philip young observes, to have grown old.

The Old Man and the Sea is also significant as a study of initiation, for in it the boy Manolin learns what it means to be a man. He has been consummately tutored in the craft of big game fishing. More important, however, he has, like all of Hemingway's initiates, absorbed knowledge about love, death, courage and endurance.

For many readers, *A Farewell to Arms* is Hemingway's most appealing and affecting novel. The courage of Frederic and Catherine and the tragic consequences of their love, the atmosphere of the Italian war front and the powerful scenes of the debacle at Caporetto – these remains etched in memory long after other details have skipped away. Some critics have objected that Catherine is too idealized, too romantically compliant, too sentimentally a "code" heroine. As a result, they believe, Frederic's development proceeds with a slick, movie-script glibness different from the rough edged force of *The Sun Also Rises*. For other critics, the emotional force of the novel as a whole transcends its several weaknesses.

Like most of Hemingway's novels, *A Farewell to Arms* is about love and death and the kind of courage one needs to experience them. In the beginning, Frederic lacks commitment of any kind. He cannot find in love of man, woman, or God any compelling reason for existence. Until he meets Catherine he drifts with the moment. Afterward he moves inevitably towards an understanding of the fullness as well as the emptiness of life. He learns about the hollowness of abstractions'. Medals do not prove valor; a wedding need not signify a true marriage. He learns from Catherine

and from Rinaldi and Greffi as well – the potential force of the individual spirit. And he learns, above all, that those who undertake a “separate peace” win no lasting victory. But deserting the army to be with Catherine, Frederic symbolically bids farewell to military arms. Ironically, when she dies, he must bid yet another farewell – to the arms of his love.

The novel is rich in symbols. For example, the rain that opens and closes the book symbolizes death as well as life. That Frederic learns, then, is that a “Code” hero must accept the truth that all stories end in death. That truth understood, life has moments of beauty and significance well worth the living.

Hemingway's use of suggestion and symbolism is based on his belief that the dignity of movement of an Iceberg lies in only one-eighth of it being on the surface of the water. In spite of his tough exterior and his formidable reputation for boxing, big-game-hunting, bullfighting and fishing. He was a sensitive artist. This was captured in a New Yorker cartoon in the 1930s, which showed a brawny, hairy arm holding a beautiful rose in hand captioned “the Soul of Ernest Hemingway”.

1.4.3 John Dos Passos

The First World War attracted John Dos Passos who went to France and Spain to be nearer to the war and joined the ambulance corps. His first novel, *One Man's Initiation : 1917* was published in England in 1919. The protagonist, Martin Howe, sees the war as a violation of his cultural values. His second war novel, *Three Soldiers* (1921) depicts war as a massive machine crushing individualism. His third novel, *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) is an urban classic, set in the great modern city. Dos Passos sees the city as a fast moving thing, a terrible machine to give and choke life. Manhattan is a dynamo filled with throbbing energy and life. In his famous trilogy *The 42nd parallel* (1930), *Nineteen Nineteen* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936), later collected together as *the U.S.A* (1937), there is a shift towards Marxist radicalism and a historical approach. This trilogy is a modernist epic, with a wide range of characters and experimentation with the documentary matter used in a novel way, giving us a large vision of America and its corruption. It has four basic structural levels --the life stories of the fictional characters, the “newsreel” Collage of documentary data --headlines, songs, speeches and reports --and the “camera eye” sections where impressions are registered in a stream-of-consciousness flow of the novelist's perception.

To comprehend the full impact of Dos Passos' study of despair, defeat and disillusion. One must read all three volumes of the trilogy *USA*, of which *The 42nd Parallel* is the first volume. *1919 and the Big money* (published in 1932 and 1936) round out the portraits begun in the earliest novel and add several others. But even in the initial work, the sustaining purpose is clear, the pervasive technique manifest. All four narrative techniques merge to shape a nightmare vision of human exploitation.

Dos Passos' method, as critics have noted, enables him except in *The Camera Eye* – to stand apart and record events dispassionately. The testimony of history thus indicts the capitalistic system without reducing the novelist to the role of propagandist. Unhappily, the results do not entirely fulfill the promise of Dos Passos' purpose. Too often his carefully selected characters lack flesh to body forth their symbolic intent; they seem clinical specimens rather than full-blooded human beings. Similarly, in choosing subjects for his *Living Biographies*, Dos Passos has ignored many who have survived or prevailed in our society without selling out or being sold out.

Before the trilogy ends, the reader becomes aware that Dos Passos has not intended to indict only capitalism. Act of betrayal and distortion indict communism as well. What Dos Passos seems to argue for most passionately is the dignity of man and his right to freedom from the encroachments of any ideology that diminishes him.

Precisely how to achieve his goal Dos Passos fails to make clear, but his nobility of motive and dramatic force move the reader.

1.4.4 William Faulkner

One of the great novelists of America was William Faulkner, a regional writer whose reach embraced the whole of mankind. His novels are firmly rooted in the South but deal with enduring values, honour, endurance, compassion, and sacrifice. We shall discuss this great writer in detail in the next unit which will be devoted to the novel of the South preparatory to a detailed study of his famous novel, *Light in August*.

The American Twenties saw the rise of a generation of great writers who elevated writing to new heights with their sensibility, commitment, innovation and experiment with language and narrative techniques.

1.4.5 The Great Depression

The Great crash of 1929 led to a Depression, which engulfed the whole world and eclipsed the social and cultural mores of the Twenties. Banks and factories closed; farming collapsed; industries became sick; and millions were unemployed and poor. Scott Fitzgerald's 'Jazz Age' ended. The expatriate writers returned from Europe to America as their stay abroad would no longer be funded by an economically distressed home country.

1.5 AMERICAN WRITING IN THE THIRTIES

American writers who have shown a penchant for experimentation with language and narrative techniques now showed a keen interest in socially and politically relevant subjects. The 'how' of writing yielded place to 'what' as the writers showed leftist sympathies and well known writers like Sherwood Anderson, Upton Sinclair, Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, and Thomas Wolfe wrote about economic, social and political issues.

Michael Gold, editor of *The New Masses*, a communist paper, authored a radical novel titled *Jews without Money* in 1930. Dos Passos *The 42nd Parallel* also appeared in the same year. In 1928, *The New Masses* had called for a worker-correspondents and radical authors. *The New Masses* sponsored the foundation of the John Reed Club in New York for younger writers. Its slogan was 'Art is a class weapon'. In 1934 the John Reed club sponsored *Partisan Review* a major intellectual magazine of the decade. Initially, it was a magazine with communist sympathies, but by 1937, after the Moscow Trials, it reacted against the totalitarian trend in the Marxist attitude to culture and moved towards a new liberalism. This new realism caught on and coloured the American intellectual life of the Thirties. Historical factors of the time like the debates on the Spanish civil war, the impact of the Moscow trials, and the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact in 1939 battered the Marxist image.

1.5.1 James T. Farrell

James T. Farrell, who had a lot of personal experience of the streets of Chicago, wrote in the naturalist vein. His most famous work was the *Studs Lonigan Trilogy* [*Young Lonigan* (1932), *The Young Manhood of Studs Lonigan* (1934), and *Judgment Day* (1925)], written in the objective mode of naturalism. Studs, a typical young American of his time and class, walks out of the school, which has exercised no influence on him. He enters the city, where he becomes a drunkard and dies. There is a cultural degeneration in every phase of his life. Farrell's was a qualified

determinism as opposed to Dreiser's environmental determinism. Character and motivation play an important role in qualified determinism. *Studs Lonigan* is not, as James Farrell has pointed out, a tough or a gangster. Nor is he the product of the slums. In the first novel of the trilogy, at least, Studs displays many of the qualities of an average American boy – dreams of grandeur, a rebellious spirit, an essential decency. And his family, with its faith in church and home, work and duty, represents a characteristically American approach to life. Moreover, the Lonigans have the economic means and security to translate that approach into reality; what, then goes wrong?

According to Farrell, Studs' downfall is caused by "spiritual poverty," the failure of church, family, school, and community to provide a significant direction for the boy and for his friends. Platitudes have taken the place of purpose, allowing social and moral decay to deep into and rot the vital substance of youth. Studs is not a villain, then, but a victim of the world he inhabits, and his story, Farrell has asserted, is the story of an American destiny in our time".

Young Lonigan, like the other books in the trilogy, is compelling and affecting. It records disillusion, degeneration, and despair with an almost photographic accuracy and with meticulous attention to fine detail. Farrell has sought to emulate the compass of Balzac and the scientific detachment of Zola, the thundering power of Dreiser and the stylistic elegance of Joyce. Unfortunately, he achieves less than he aspires to. Farrell's prose style is almost featureless, his accumulation of details often repetitious to the point of ennui, and his sense of life's ceaseless boredom nearly suffocating. The naturalistic novel – of which Farrell has been the outstanding writer since Dreiser – often falls prey to these faults and Farrell's novel sometimes reads more like a case history than novel. Nevertheless, young Lonigan and two novels that follow it belong to the great tradition of American naturalistic writing, a tradition that sharply contracts romantic dream and hideous reality.

1.5.2 Erskine Caldwell

Erskine Caldwell, a southern writer from Georgia, wrote tales of poor farmers and their old land and passions and joys and sorrows in novels like *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *God's Little Acre* (1933) and depicted the rough face of the countryside even as Farrell presented the rough face of the city.

1.6 REALISM AND NATURALISM

Realism and naturalism ruled the world of fiction in the 1930s. While the realist presented life or a slice of life in his fiction, the naturalist's presentation of the same is coloured by scientific observation of characters under laboratory conditions.

The American naturalists like Frank Norris, Jack London and Theodore Dreiser were influenced by European naturalists and Emile Zola's theory set forth in his *Le Roman Experimental* (1879). The novelist's job was to study life and society from the scientific point of view recording facts, living conditions, genetic, environmental and historical factors. Naturalism is scientific and systematized realism.

1.6.1 John Steinbeck

A serious naturalistic writer in the tradition of Dreiser, Norris and London, John Steinbeck was interested in a biological explanation of human nature and behaviour. He was greatly influenced by the marine biologist, Edward F. Ricketts, who gave a scientific explanation of human and animal nature. This informed Steinbeck's novels in a significant way. There are sage-like characters, in many of Steinbeck's novels, who put us in mind of Ricketts.

John Steinbeck was born in the Salinas valley of California which is the setting of many of his books. His first novel, *Cup of Gold* (1929) is a historical romance about the buccaneer, Sir Henry Morgan. After this novel, he moved to novels about the life around him. His series of powerful novels like *Tortilla Flat* (1935), *Of Mice and Men* (1930s) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) flowed from his pen. *The Grapes of Wrath*, his best-known work, is a classic tale of 'Okie' migration from Oklahoma to California. Steinbeck wrote this book after travelling to California with okie migrants. The work at once expresses social and political despair as well as an optimistic view of life. Steinbeck's political sympathies are with the radicals but he did not like their attempt to impose a system on nature.

In recent years critics have grown increasingly impatient with John Steinbeck. He has been called a "naive mystic" and worse, a "hausfrau sentimentalist." Yet a quarter of a century ago, when *The Grapes of Wrath* appeared, Steinbeck's work stirred intense reactions. Supporters called his novel "The Uncle Tom's Cabin of the Depression". Antagonists joined Lyleboren, an Oklahoma Congressman in attacking the novel as "a lie, ablack, infernal creation of twisted, distorted mind."

Today distance enables us to adopt a more judicious attitude. Few view the novel as a mere piece of left wing propaganda despite the warning sounded by its title, a title Steinbeck chosen "because it is in our own revolutionary tradition and because in reference to this book it has a large meaning". The novel does, however urge the development of a communal spirit and affirms a sense of the mystical spirit of the group. Jim Casy possesses this instinctive sense of the surging force of mankind, and Ma Joad expresses it in her insistence upon the unity of the family. Tom Joad moves gradually toward awareness of this higher sanity and at the end of the novel, assumes the responsibility for pressing forward its ineffaceable truth.

Because of Steinbeck's interest in marine life, some critics have argued that he has reduced life to a series of animalistic patterns like those he had observed in the sea: Survival of the fittest, rejection of alien elements by the established group. Certainly the migrant farmers of *The Grapes of Wrath* represent intruders who upset the balance. And in this, as in other Steinbeck novel, property, ownership, indeed the land itself – all upset the natural balance disastrously. But Steinbeck is a man of compassion, not a clinical precisionist. Like Jim Casy, he seems to say, "All things are holy", and to urge all men and women to love one another, to march forward together. His confidence in man triumphs over despair.

The style and structure of *The Grapes of Wrath* seem at times overwrought the symbols transparent and the episodes – especially the much-debated closing scene of Rosasharn nursing the starving man – often melodramatic. Nevertheless, at its best – which it often is – the novel nears the level of epic in its lyric sweep and agonized others. And in *Ma Joad*, *Jim Casy*, and *Grampa*, among others, Steinbeck has created a gallery of American portraits that body forth our American heritage of courage, compassion and humor.

East of Eden (1952) is about the American west as the Garden of Eden, the virgin territory, the promised land, where the dreams and struggles of man are re-experienced. Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962.

1.6.2 Thomas Wolfe

Thomas Wolfe was one of the most celebrated writers of the Thirties. His ambition was of epic proportions, and he tried to catch the spirit of the times, places and people. His writing was anchored in his own experience, the story of his own being and becoming as his first novel, *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) demonstrates. According to him, "all serious work is autobiographical." The protagonist of this novel is Eugene Gant, a surrogate for Wolfe. Gant is the protagonist of Wolfe's next novel, *Of Time and the River* (1935). *The Web and the Rock* (1939) and *You Can't Go Home Again* (1940) are also autobiographical though Wolfe's surrogate is called by a

different name—George Webber Wolfe's novels are confessional and they present the protagonist actively interacting with his times.

Thomas Wolfe's *Look Homeward, Angel* a biographer points out, "fell on critically evil days and they have taken their toll of his reputation, in not of his steadily increasing number of readers." Published in 1929 in the month of the stock-market crash, it was regularly attacked by the critics of the thirties for its lack of social commitment. The attacks have never ceased. Only recently an influential English critic has said that Wolfe is not a novelist at all: "He is an obsessional neurotic with a gift for words who could write only about himself and who could not create other people".

The charges against Wolfe vary, but those most frequently leveled are that he is guilty of "sprawling profusion," that he is "monstrously rhetorical and oratorical," that he constructs formless, bulging pseudo-narratives that he then calls "novels" not all the charges are baseless. Wolfe himself divided writers into two classifications – those who "take out" and those who "put in", and named as the great practitioners of the selective novel, Flaubert and of the inclusive novel Tolstol.

Wolfe further wrote, to Margaret Roberts (the model of Margaret Leonard) that *Look Homeward, Angel* was the story of powerful creativity "trying to work its way toward an essential isolation; a creative solitude; a secret life – its fierce struggles to wall their part of life away from birth, first against the public and savage glare of an unbalanced nervous, brawling family group, later against school, society, and all the barbarous invasions of the world." And this analysis, may indicate the reason for the novel's continuing appeal. *Look Homeward, Angel* is intense autobiography, the record of the author's struggle for self, for individuality. People, especially but not exclusively young people, identify with that struggle, feel the novel with a force and directness that make negative criticism largely irrelevant. The novel still proves for them a vitalizing, even a liberating experience, and they still find their way to it in undiminished numbers.

Besides, the novel has three qualities that make it rise above its faults; its lyrical soaring prose which forms an effective counterpart to its harsh and bitter realism, its moving, pungent dramatic dialogue, its vivid portraiture, which has etched for us a gallery of real, memorable people. Few American novelists can boast a greater accomplishment.

1.6.3 Henry Miller

Henry Miller's novels are generally described as anti-novels of the Thirties. They are also novels of the Thirties Depression reflecting a sense of economic chaos, political anguish and reaction against conventional attitudes and judgment. He wrote in Paris when the expatriates left Paris for home. His books were printed in Paris. They were not published in the USA until the 1960s because of their sexual explicitness.

He was an iconoclast who attacked the values of the decade in his 'Tropics' series like *Tropic of cancer* (1934) *Black Spring* (1936), *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939) and in his later series of novels like *Sexus*(1945), *Plexus* (1949) and *Nexus* (1960). Miller returned to the States after the Second World War broke out, travelled extensively and finally settled at a Big Sur in California. His books were no longer banned and he attacked the USA in *the Air-Conditioned Nightmare*. He became a guru of the beat generation, who represented American romantic anarchism. He found a vehicle of expression in Surrealism, which was used by another well-known writer of the Thirties, Nathanael West in his novels, *the Dream life of Balso Snell* (1931) and *Miss Lonely Hearts* (1933).

The Twenties and the Thirties were a period of restless creativity in American literature.

1.6 LET US SUM UP

The 1920s and the 1930s saw the rise of the Modern American Novel. This period was charged with literary excitement. Some of those who started writing during this period, like Faulkner, Hemingway, and Steinbeck, went on to win the Nobel Prize for Literature later. Most writers selected for their treatment themes and problems from their native American soil. Interesting experiments in prose writing, particularly in the narrative art, were made during this period.

1.7 QUESTIONS

1. How did the first world war affect American writers?
2. Comment on Hemingway's contribution to the American novel.
3. How did the Great Depression influence the American novel of the 1930s?
4. Right a note on Naturalism in American fiction.

1.8 SUGGESTED READING

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UNIT 2 THE NOVEL IN THE SOUTH

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The Southern Novel : A Bird's Eye View
- 2.3 William Faulkner
- 2.4 Robert Penn Warren
- 2.5 Women Novelists
- 2.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.7 Questions
- 2.8 Suggested Reading

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In the unit we'll discuss the Southern Novel in general and a few of southern novelists in particular.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The south of America is a distinctive region in the United States . Apart from the geographical boundaries, the boundaries of experience and tradition and its predominantly agrarian character mark the South as a distinctive entity . The civil war gave it a taste of defeat and humiliation; enslavement and ill-treatment of the blacks gave it a sense of guilt . The obsession with the past gave it a sense of sentimental and romantic pride in its history and tradition . These attitudes went into the making of the literature of the South which is, more often than not , a tragic literature in that it deals, for the most part , with the tragedy of human experience .

2.2 THE SOUTHERN NOVEL : A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

The first two voices to rise out of the South were of Ellen Glasgow and James Branch Cabell. Ellen Glasgow presented the social history of a decadent aristocracy. Her best novels, *Barren Ground* (1925), and *Vein of Iron* (1935) put us in mind of Thomas Hardy in their tragic sense. Incidentally she was an admirer of Hardy.

Like Ellen Glasgow , James Branch Cabell was a Virginian who loved the history and tradition of Virginia . Unlike Ellen Glasgow who dealt with facts and traced a tragic pattern in the history of Virginia, Cabell involved himself with the imaginative and romantic manifestation of chivalry, gallantry, and poetry in his novels. He demonstrated that truth is found in imagination rather than in dry facts.

The 1920s and 30s were an age of protest for some writers who promoted the realistic movement. These novelists were social critics. Some of them attacked the small towns and villages like Sinclair Lewis , while others attacked the American cities like James.T. Farrell . Both the groups raised the banner of revolt against the present and the past. Southern voices found a form in *The Fugitive* , a magazine published from Nash ville, Tennessee , in 1922-25. *The Double Dealer*, published from New Orleans, was interested in the new writers like Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein and

Sherwood Anderson. While the Midwestern writers called for social reform, the Southern writers who were in love with the past looked back for inspiration and creativity. In the process they rediscovered man's relationship to the soil. Eskrine Caldwell wrote passionate tales of people who identified themselves with the land

The Southern writer always knew himself as part of history and a larger meaning. He felt burdened by the accumulation of ancestry, history and a guilty conscience related to race, superstition and the sin of slavery. His pen was pushed by a force larger and more powerful than himself. This gave a remarkable depth to his writing.

Thus the South became a fertile ground for the emergence of good literature and literary criticism in the post-war years. The South provided the right landscape and the right intellectual milieu for its creative writers and literary critics. The result was the rise of a large number of creative writers and critics whose names read like a 'hall of fame'. Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, Randall Jarrell and Cleanth Brooks, to name a few, and famous women novelists like Katherine Anne Porter, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welles and Caroline Gordon.

2.3 WILLIAM FAULKNER

In the 1920s when some of the most distinguished American writers of the North either migrated to Europe or drew their inspiration from there, the Southern writers stayed back in America and wrote of the anguish of the south. The greatest of them was William Faulkner who was born in 1897 and rarely left his home town, Oxford, Mississippi, except for brief periods when he trained with the Royal Canadian Air Force. He went to New Orleans to become a writer and found Sherwood Anderson, already an established writer, who was to influence and help him, and a literary ambience. Other strong formative influences on him were the Romantics, Keats in particular, and the new modern texts like T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Like most of his contemporaries he found modern life a wasteland and he fashioned a style for himself to help him go through this wasteland.

In his first novel, *Soldier's Pay* (1927), the protagonist, Donald Mahon, comes home to find the people around him suffering from a post-war sterility.

In *Sartoris* (1929), he discovered that his literary range extended beyond his contemporary life to embrace an extended historical and social dimension. It is a novel that reveals a deep social commitment exploring his community at various levels.

Faulkner's famous Yoknapatawpha county in which most of his fictional work was set, was born in this novel. With Jefferson as its county seat, the fictitious Yoknapatawpha becomes a functional community like Thomas Hardy's Wessex or R.K. Narayan's Malgudi. Here Faulkner presents the play of classes and races and processes of historical changes and the passions, agonies, sins and penances of a variety of men and women. *Sartoris* presents the Yoknapatawpha county against the post-World War One background. Bayard Sartoris, who inherits the reckless courage of his aristocratic ancestors, returns home and this sets off the dichotomy between the past and the present -- the virile, chivalric world of the Sartorises and the delicate, intellectual world of the Benbows, the families who have a historical and social sense like the Sartorises, Compsons and De Spains and those who were driven by commercial self-interest like the Snopeses.

Faulkner was no exception to the great experimental writing of the 1920s and 1930s. *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *As I Lay Dying* (1930) employed a multiple point of view technique of narration and the stream of consciousness technique to the best

advantage. This and *Light in August* (1932) and *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936) present the Yoknapatawpha experience from the point of settlement in the new country to the contemporary moment of decadence and disjunction. History is interwoven with personal perception and psychic time interacts with historic time. There is a great intensity in Faulkner's work. This arises from the concentrated projection of the southern experience as felt in the enslavement of the Blacks and the civil war, military, political, and cultural defeat, and the process of industrialisation resulting in the ascendancy of machines which subjugated an agrarian culture.

Faulkner's characters are unique in that they have a reality outside the stories in which they are portrayed. They recur again and again in different situations in different novels.

In the long story, 'The Bear', in *Go Down Moses* (1942), we're given glimpses into the evolution of the central character, like McCaslin who is presented at the age of 16, 18 and so on.

In *The Sound and the Fury*, we see part of the story through the consciousness of Benjy, a cretin with the mental age of five and in another part, the whole complicated levels of consciousness as the reasons for Quentin's suicide are unfolded. The structure of this novel is based on the gospels of the New Testament, which is the story of Jesus according to four of his disciples. *The Sound and the Fury* also gives four versions of the story of the Compson family. The technique of stream of consciousness is used to the best advantage in the novel.

The novel begins with the image of Caddy's dirty drawers. Benjy's tale told by an idiot in the continuous present reveals timeless memory: in Quentin's memory, the image is transformed into a sense of guilt and sin, the past impinges tragically on the present; Jason's point of view is practical, mean and selfish. Only Dilsey's account offers an enduring continuity and stability.

As I Lay Dying describes the six day funeral journey of the Bundren family from different points of view and through several interior monologues. The journey generates profound reflections on life and death.

In *Light in August*, three stories are intertwined. The central figure in the main story is the light-complexioned black orphan called Joe Christmas. This mean, selfish, amoral, unscrupulous and perverse man kills the woman who protects him, and finally pays dearly for his bad life at the hands of a lynching mob. The story of Rev. Gail Hightower is equally dark. The story of Lena Grove, who is the archetypal female representing fecundity, endurance, and stability, serves as the framework for all the three stories which make up the novel. Her untiring search for the father of the child in her womb gives deep meaning to the novel.

We shall examine this novel in depth from different angles in the ensuing units.

Faulkner fashions a style for his depiction of Southern life and history mirrored through the microcosm of Yoknapatawpha County. His regional art retains universal dimensions on the lines of the microcosm reflecting the microcosm. He was a pioneer in Southern fiction, a master craftsman who paved the way for writers like Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor. His was a major contribution to the art of fiction in the 20th century in general and to the Southern novel in particular.

2.4 ROBERT PENN WARREN

Robert Penn Warren wrote the novel of ideas dramatising the southern view of man through southern characters. His novels demonstrate technical excellence involving the special use of witty and sometimes metaphysical language. Jack Burden, the

narrator in *All The King's Men*, becomes the commentator on the universal problems which Warren finds in the carrier of a political demagogue called Willie Stark. The novel turns out to be a story of burdens self-discovery through Billy Stark and not about Stark as a politician as we are led to anticipate in the beginning.

When *All the King's Men* appeared in 1946, the obvious parallel between Willie Stark and the late Huey Long, Governor of Louisiana, aroused greater attention than the more significant merits of the novel. To those who insist that the novel is an apology for Long's life, Warren's own answer serves best. "There is really nothing to reply to this kind of innocent bone headedness or gosput-bit hysteria."

Most critics since those first days of stormy dissension have recognized the novel for its more relevant qualities. They have seen that Willie Stark and Jack Burden are alike in their quest for self knowledge and for the identity that enable a man to shape his destiny in a chaotic world. Willie's moral neutrality leads him at last to destruction, but so too does Adam's moral absolutism. Jack Burden alone comes to maturity that permits survival. He experiences the extremes of idealism and despair but settles at last for a kind of pragmatic realism that opens the way to meaningful life.

The novel has tremendous narrative impact, even though its episodes occasionally border on the melodramatic. The prose style has energy and sweep, except when the contract between Jack Burden's rhetorical asides to the reader and his hard-boiled, laconic dialogue tan the reader's credulity. Warren draws upon a rich fund of imagery and certain basic mythic patterns - the motifs of journey and return, birth and death, sin and repentance - to deepen the implications of his narrative. The abiding strength of *All the King's Men* remains in its characterization, not only the masterly handling of Willie Stark, but also the shrewdly and vividly portrayed minor figures who cluster about him.

His *World Enough and Time* is a novel of philosophical speculation about the meaning of justice, death, and the end of man arising out of the authors reflections on an early 19th century murder case. *Band of Angels* is a slave narrative about a supposedly a white girl with negro blood in her. The novel explores the nature of freedom.

In *The Cave*, Warren describes the events happening around a man trapped in a cave and the attempts to rescue him. In the process he explores the characters' search for identity.

2.5 WOMEN NOVELISTS

Eudora Welty and Catherine Anne Porter were famous for their 'perfect' or 'almost perfect' stories. Ms. Porters 'faultless' stories fascinated a whole generation of Americans are with their beautiful prose and laconic irony. It is difficult to achieve this sort of perfection in a long narrative like the novel and Ms Porter strove long and hard to achieve it in her *Ship of Fools*. The novel depicts the world as a ship load of fools bound on a voyage into the dissolution of Western society. She regards Nazism as the centre of a world sickness. *Ship of Fools* was planned as an epic but, in fact, it is a harsh personal statement of a point of view.

In contrast, the fictions of Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor are so artfully constructed that they do not strike as statements of a single point of view.

Carson McCullers writes about man's spiritual isolation and his desperate but futile bid to break out of it. Her first novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is a story of five

lonely people, each of them isolated yet tragically incapable of the kind of love and understanding they need from one another .

The central figures are Singer , a deaf mute , and Antonopoulos, a cretin. The other three lonely people pour out their hearts to Singer as if he were God for, like God, he neither hears nor responds. Singer, in his turn , pours out his heart to Antonopoulos, who can neither think nor hear nor respond , and on whom Singer's emotional dependence is total. These are grotesques like Amelia, Lymon and Marvin Macy in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*.

The action of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, which Carson McCullers wrote when she was twenty-three, is contained within the winter of one year and the summer of the next. It is a tightly constructed and intensely concentrated novel. Yet remarkably, it presents a panorama of the "Strangled Smith." As Ihab Hassan notes, "the novel finds a way of acknowledging the social realities of its time."

Its central theme is the inevitable isolation of each man. Each reaches out, lonely and longing, for communion with another human being. And each finds it is only an illusion – an illusion that must be ultimately shattered, nevertheless, the illusion is what makes life livable.

The characters in the novel are realistically sometimes ironically drawn – but always the quality of mercy mitigates the irony. Mick Kelly, who loves music and strives dimly for a kind of beauty, perhaps touches readers most poignantly. But the unexpressed tenderness of Biff Brannon, the futile rage of Jake Blount, the unfulfilled purpose of Dr. Copeland - those, too evoke compassion. Richard Wright, an important Negro novelist, especially praises Mrs. McCullers for "the astonishing humanity that enables a white writer, the first time in southern fiction, to handle Negro characters with as much ease and justice as those of her own race."

Singer, a deaf mute, is the centripetal force of the novel. Toward him all the character gravitate to speak their deepest wants and to hear the saving words – and he can neither hear nor speak. Though *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is set in the deep South during the early thirties, it is more than reportage, even spiritual reportage, dealing with a particular place and time. It is a parable on the human condition, men's fragile visions, their frustrated aims, their shut-in agonies, their necessary self-deceptions and, not least, their valorous endurance.

In spite of the preponderance of grotesque and symbolic overtones , or may be because of them, McCullers would always be remembered as one of the greatest practitioners of the aesthetic of pain and loneliness in American fiction.

She has a theory of the nature of love, which she states in clear terms in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and all her novels read like illustrations of a theory . According to her, love is a one-way traffic and generates hostility in the beloved. Hence everyone wants to love only and not to be loved.

In dramatising the tragic view of man, trapped in his own nature, suffering loneliness and loss of identity or reduced to a grotesque trying to reach out and communicate , and starved of sympathy, the southern novelists present a vision of human experience which is at variance with that of much of America. In their revolt against the modern world they look backward to a tradition of human dignity.

2.6 LET US SUM UP

The American South got its distinctive character not only from its predominantly agrarian character but from its treatment to the Blacks and its defeat in the Civil War.

The mainsprings of literary creativity in the South were its history and guilty conscience related to race, superstition, and the sin of slavery. It gave rise to several well known writers, including women writers, and influential literary critics. The greatest writer from the South was William Faulkner.

2.7 QUESTIONS

1. What are the main attitudes that went into the making of the literature of the South?
2. What is the Yoknapatawpha County?
3. Compare it with Thomas Hardy's Wessex and R.K.Narayan's Malgudi.
4. Give an estimate of Faulkner as a novelist.
5. Write a brief note on some women novelists of the South.

2.8 SUGGESTED READING

Bradbury John M. *Renaissance in the South : A Critical History of The Literature After 1920-1960* (Chapel Hill, N. C .1963)

Gary Richard . *The Literature of Memory : Modern Writers of the Americans South* (London/Baltimore , 1977)

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UNIT 3 *LIGHT IN AUGUST* : STRUCTURE AND NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 What happens in *Light in August*?
- 3.3 The sad saga of Joe Christmas
- 3.4 The Three Plots
- 3.5 A Sampling of the Original Reviews
- 3.6 Private Selves and Public Roles
- 3.7 Narrative Strategies
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Questions

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, William Faulkner and *Light in August* will be introduced. I propose to discuss what happens in the novel giving an outline of the story with an analysis of the relationships and interactions and calling attention to the themes and issues involved like the racial problems, psychological problems, human foibles, and alienation, against which the simple and the good are presented.

Also in this Unit I propose to acquaint you with some early responses to the novel and with the view of eminent critics on the dialectic between the private self and the public social role of some of the *characters* in *Light in August*. I shall also discuss the polyphonic nature of the narration and the narrative strategies adopted to unfold the events and their meanings in the novel.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

William Faulkner was born in a distinguished family in the southern state of Mississippi and became the most distinguished Southern novelist. It was one of the ironies of literary history that Faulkner, like many other great writers in literary history, never had a formal education. He never graduated from a high school and failed in the only English course that he took. But he worked hard at the craft of writing, and won Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize for Literature. Faulkner started as a poet, but after his meeting with Sherwood Anderson, who was already an established writer, he began working on his first novel, *Soldiers' Pay* (1926), which he later published with Sherwood Anderson's help. Three years later, he published his most famous novel, *The Sound and the Fury*, and became a major writer. He married in the same year and had to earn a living by doing odd jobs. In 1931 he published *Sanctuary*, mainly with a view to making money. The novel brought him a fortune and he was tempted to write for Hollywood where he made more money.

Faulkner lived and worked in his home town of Oxford, Mississippi. Out of this town and its environs, he created the fictional Yoknapatawpha county, a miniature representation of the southern American society. It presents a cross section of different classes of the society like the aristocratic but decadent Sartoris and Compson families, and Snopes family, the *nouveau riche* usurpers, and the enduring

Blacks, the stable and stabilizing factor in a society suffering from moral decadence, insecurity and a guilty conscience.

Faulkner was a very private person, who avoided publicity. When he won the Nobel Prize, he delivered a memorable acceptance speech in the course of which he emphasized the verities of life and expressed his conviction that man will not endure but will prevail.

Acknowledged as one of Faulkner's finest and most readable novels, *Light In August* is nevertheless a difficult work. The sources of its difficulty are many: complex structure, diversity of points of view, intricate imagery and symbolism and involved themes. A summary merely suggests the novel's dazzling technical complexity and its profound insight into human behaviour.

3.2 WHAT HAPPENS IN *LIGHT IN AUGUST*?

A novel is representation of life. A good novelist imposes an aesthetic order on discordant elements in life and create a work of art. Let us see how Faulkner achieves it in *Light in August*.

There are three strands in the narrative of *Light in August* --the stories of Lena Grove, Joe Christmas, and Gail Hightower. They are separate stories but they interact with one another and bring about a unity of plot.

Lena Grove's story provides not only the framework for the novel but also a meaning and a message. The novel opens with Lena travelling from Alabama to Jefferson in search of one Lucas Burch, the father of her unborn child. She learns that Lucas is working at a lumber planing mill in Jefferson. The way she trudges on calmly and confidently, braving a lot of discomfort in her advanced state of pregnancy, speaks volumes of her patience and endurance. When she finally arrives in Jefferson on a Friday morning she sees a house burning at a distance.

On another Friday morning, three years before, a taciturn young stranger, called Joe Christmas, started working at the mill. Six months before Lena's arrival, a brash, garrulous and irresponsible young man called Joe Brown (he is Lucas Burch for home Lena has been searching), also started working there.

Joe Christmas and Joe Brown were partners in a bootlegging operation. Another important mill worker, who represents the moral values and his strength of character celebrated in novel after novel by Faulkner, he is Byron Bunch who has worked in the mill for nine years. The three strands in the novel are linked together by Byron Bunch, the friendly and helpful man. On weekends he sings with a Church choir and every now and then he visits Gail Hightower with whom he spends a long time in conversation. He is Gail Hightower's, only link with the outside world.

Gail Hightower came to preach in Jefferson with his young wife many years earlier. This one time Presbyterian minister is now a recluse who has abandoned his ministry and lost his wife. She was a strange lady. She rarely attended Church services and, one day, when she attended a service, she interrupted the proceedings by going into hysterics. She was treated as a mental patient for some time. Her mysterious disappearance from Jefferson on weekends was the subject of rumours. One day she was discovered with a stranger in a Memphis hotel room and leaped out of a window to her death.

Hightower got too deeply involved with his ancestors' exploits in the civil war that he got his sermon all mixed up with them. As a result his sermons were confused and frenzied. After his wife's death he was asked to resign his post but he refused. He was

then accused of adultery with his Negro cook and beaten by The Ku Klux Klan hoodlums and was forced to resign and live in virtual isolation shunned by everybody except Byron Bunch.

On the evening of Lena Grove's arrival in Jefferson, Byron tells Hightower about the significant events of the day like Lena's visit to the mill, the murder of Joanne Burden and the burning of the house. At the mill Lena tells Byron about Lucas and his identification mark. Byron understands with a shock of recognition that Joe Brown is none other than Lucas Burch. Hightower guesses from Byron's protective attitude towards Lena that he's in love with her. Byron tells Hightower about Joe Brown's involvement in the murder of Joanne Burden and the burning of her house. Hearing about a reward for the capture of Joanne Burden's murderer, Brown tells the police that Joe Christmas is the culprit and that he is a Negro in spite of his complexion.

Listening to Byron's narration, Hightower feels a sense of insecurity that these events may disrupt his detached way of life and that he may be deprived of the only human companion in the world viz. Byron Bunch.

3.3 THE SAD SAGA OF JOE CHRISTMAS

Joe Christmas's story unfolds through multiple flashbacks. He recollects a childhood experience. In his fifth year he lived in a white orphanage. He hid behind a curtain in the room of Ms Atkins, the dietician, eating toothpaste. Meanwhile Ms Atkins and a young doctor entered the room and from behind the curtain Joe Christmas heard the sounds of their love making. The toothpaste makes him sick and vomit and he was discovered. She was furious and called him 'a nigger'. This memory haunts him in all his life. Ms Atkins sought the help of Doc Hines, the janitor, who tried to steal the child and admit him in a Negro orphanage this attempt was discovered and Joe was brought back. The matron then entrusted him to the care of the McEachern's, a white family.

On account of his racial identity and his white complexion, Joe is neither here nor there. He is haunted all his life by this contradiction. His experiences in the McEachern home aggravate his racial and sexual bitterness. He is mercilessly beaten by McEachern, a stern moralist, for failing to learn his catechism. He messes up his first sexual venture with a black girl by brutally beating and kicking her. He has his first real sexual experience with a white woman in her Thirties called Bobbie Allen whom he tells that he is a mulatto. He later learnt that she is a prostitute, beats her up but remains her lover, paying her from the money stolen from Mrs McEachern, his foster mother.

McEachern discovers Joe at a dance with Bobbie Allen and attacks him. Joe hits him with a chair, returns home, steals Mrs McEachern's money and their horse and rides to Bobbie's home. There he throws the money on her bed and strikes her. She calls for help and tells her friends that Joe is a Negro. They beat him up.

Later, Joe works at several jobs, sleeps with several women, tells them he is a Negro and suffers insults or beatings. He gets used to this masochistic self-flagellation. When one of his women is indifferent to his race he beats her mercilessly. Thus the crisis of his racial identity results in either sadistic aggression or masochistic suffering.

He is thirty-three when he arrives at Jefferson. He is drawn to the large home of Joanne Burden who asks him to stay on in a cabin near the house. Intolerant of her haughtiness he rapes her one night. He expects Joanne to take revenge on him. But nothing happens, and one day Joanne comes to his cabin and tells him everything

about herself, the sacrifice made by her, her abolitionist family and a feeling of guilt which she must atone for. She has an obsession with the Negroes. During their love making, at the height of her passion, she whispers 'Negro, Negro, Negro'. Her demanding and domineering nature frightens Joe but he stays on although he longs to escape from her.

Joanne is repentant of carnal sins and tries to expiate them but finds temptation too hard. She tries to force Joe to share her expiation. She wants him to attend a Negro College. He refuses. She wants him at least to pray for his soul. He refuses again. The conflict grows between them. One night she points a revolver at him and he cuts her throat and flees. His room-mate, the drunken Lucas Burch discovers the body and accidentally sets the house on fire.

Lucas betrays his friend, Joe Christmas, by informing the police that Joe is the killer and that he is a Negro. He does this to claim the reward for information about the murderer--an act reminiscent of Judas betraying Jesus Christ for a few pieces of silver.

Joe's flight turns into a violent and catastrophic manhunt. The police and the hounds chase him. He barges into a Negro revivalist meeting, knocks down the preacher on the pulpit and makes a speech against God. He breaks the head of the preacher's son, who attacks him with a knife. On the seventh day of his flight, Joe enters Mottstown, twenty miles from Jefferson. He has his hair cut, buys new clothes and walks along the main street where he is recognized and arrested. Doc Hines, former janitor of Joe's boyhood orphanage who has been a preacher in Mottstown, preaching the gospel of hatred of the Negroes tries to rouse the mob to lynch Joe. But lynching is averted and Joe is shifted to the jail in Jefferson--he to get Joe lynched and she to learn the truth about Joe, her daughter's son, whose existence has been kept secret by Doc Hines. She discloses this to Hightower to whom she is introduced by Byron Bunch.

Joe Christmas, the son of the daughter of the Hineses by a man she describes as a Mexican but believed to be a Negro by Doc Hines. Doc Hines kills him and allows his daughter to die by denying her the medical care she needs. He takes the child without the knowledge of his wife and leaves him at the doorstep of a brothel. Thus Joe Christmas's origin is a mock parallel of Jesus Christ's. Joe is the son of an unmarried girl and he grows up separated from his home.

On his way to the courthouse, Joe breaks free and runs, threatening the shocked crowd with a gun. Percy Grimm, a young chauvinistic and rascistic national guardsman, keeps Joe in sight and chases him along with the crowd. Grimm chases Joe from behind a Negro's cabin into Hightower's house. Joe strikes Hightower on the face with his gun, runs into the kitchen, overturns a table and hides behind it. Grimm follows him into the house and is told by an injured Hightower that Joe is innocent and that he was with Joe on the night of the murder. Grimm brushes him aside and enters the kitchen firing. When the other deputies arrive, they find Grimm bending over the dying Joe and castrating him.

Even as Joe dies in Hightower's house, Lena Grove gives birth to her child in the cabin once occupied by Joe and Lucas (Brown) on Joanne Burden's premises. Byron, who takes care of Lena, sends Mrs. Hines to help deliver the child. Mrs. Hines, driven crazy by the violent and tragic happenings, mistakes Lena for Millie and the child for his grandson Joe.

Byron Bunch uses his good offices with the sheriff to bring Lucas (Joe Brown) to Lena Grove. Lucas spends a few minutes in the cabin and leaves promising falsely to return. Byron chases him but is thrashed by Lucas who boards a freight train and escapes.

As the novel ends we understand from the conversation of a furniture dealer and his wife that he gave a lift to Lena with her son and Byron Bunch on his truck, that Byron said to Lena "I done come too far now. I be dog if I'm going to quit now," and Lena replies, "Ain't nobody never said for you to quit." This suggests that they are going to stick together as a patient, optimistic, enduring couple. Joe Christmas, who led a lonely life, never giving or taking love, giving and taking only pain, is killed in the end in the most brutal fashion. Rev. Gail Hightower, another sad forsaken character, loves his only friend, Byron Bunch, and slips back into his isolated cocoon. Lucas Burch is on the run again. Lena Grove is on the road again, this time with Byron Bunch to help her physically, morally, emotionally and materially. She has a little one with her—*the Light in August*, the month in which the story takes place.

This is what happens in *Light in August*.

3.4 THE THREE PLOTS

Now let us take a closer look at the story and read between the lines where necessary. I have already called your attention to the separate plots in the novel— of Lena Grove, Joe Christmas, and Gail Hightower which almost never meet one other. The stories of Lena and Joe run parallel without the two meeting and this serves two purposes—(1) underlining the theme of alienation and frustration and (2) showing the contrast between Joe's tormented soul and Lena's tranquil self. Even when people meet in the novel, they cannot communicate with one another. Major characters like Joe, Joanne and Hightower, and minor characters like the McEacherns and the Hineses have communication problems of different kinds.

Let us take a closer look at the interaction of these plots and the narrative strategies adopted in the following unit.

3.5 A SAMPLING OF THE ORIGINAL REVIEWS

The original reviewers of *Light in August* did not go beyond the recognition that the novel was about the South and was set in Jefferson, Yoknapatawpha county. They did not take into consideration the relationships and interreflections that Faulkner was working on and the texture and technical strategies he was adopting. George Marion O'Donnell's Review in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, however, hinted at the possibilities this novel held for the discerning reader.

The author has employed third person, past tense and present tense narration, the stream of consciousness, first person narration and conversation, blending the various methods that he has used separately in previous books into a whole that is admirably effective if not always smooth. This synchronization gives the impression that Faulkner is striving for a novel form in which all modes will be blended into a perfect narrative. This perfection is not attained in *Light in August*, but it is approached (John Bassett, 1975, p.139).

The following is an anonymous reviewer's comment on the novel's first impression on a reader:

From threads of horror, hatred, lust, brutality, and obsession (Faulkner) weaves the intricate pattern of a tapestry dark indeed, yet rich and glowing with a thunderous threatening beauty. Life as he portrays it is terrible but vital; it is life, not merely existence; and the reader, even against his will, is compelled to participation by the sheer intensity and expression, an almost

rhapsodic assurance in intuition, a nearly tactile sensitiveness in the use of colloquial prose (*The Times Literary Supplement*, February 16, 1933, p.106).

3.6 PRIVATE SELVES AND PUBLIC ROLES

Olga Vickery's *The Novels of William Faulkner*, published in 1959, was the first of the book length studies of Faulkner's work. She emphasized the tension between the private selves of the major characters of *Light in August* and the public roles forced upon them by society.

A somewhat similar view is voiced by Irving Howe in his *William Faulkner: A Critical Study* when he says:

In *Light in August* a central concern is with the relation between a man's social role and private being: Hightower as a failed minister who rots in quiet neglect and Hightower as a ruminative observer of human folly, Joe Christmas as a harried mulatto who starts life without even a name and Joe Christmas as a bewildered man struggling towards the rudiments of consciousness. The one character, Lena Grove, in whom the distance between social role and private being is slight, necessarily emerges as a comic figure (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1991, p.201).

3.7 NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

The tension, the contrapuntal relation between a man's private self and his public social role could be seen in the disjointed, fragmented structure of the novel. If you look for direct narration or simple dramatization in Faulkner's novels you will be disappointed. They are polyphonic sections representing different narrative perspectives and consciousnesses. Faulkner makes use of juxtaposition and counterpoint to tell his story. The structure is based on the principle of dressing a showcase window as Faulkner said in a class conference at the University of Virginia in 1957. He was asked why he had placed the chapter on Hightower's early life towards the end of the book and he answered thus:

Unless a book follows a simple direct line such as a story of adventure it becomes a series of pieces. It is a good deal like dressing a show case window. It takes a certain amount of judgment and taste to arrange the different pieces in the most effective place in juxtaposition to one another. That was the reason. It seemed to me that was the most effective place to put that, to underline the tragedy of Christmas's story by the tragedy of his antithesis (*Faulkner in the University*, 1959, p.45).

This method forces the reader into an active role rebuilding the different blocks into a more comprehensible structure.

While the opening of the novel gives us the impression that it is Lena Grove's story, the subsequent chapters belie our expectations and make us feel that we are on a false scent. When we begin to feel that it is Byron Bunch's story or Joe Christmas's story, we are in for a surprise with the focus shifting from Gail Hightower to Joanne Burden and to the flashbacks. At every turn fresh expectations are generated in our minds only to remain unfulfilled like the lives of the characters in the novel.

The novel opens *medias res* with Lena Grove traveling from Alabama to Jefferson in search of Lucas Burch, the father of the child in her womb. There is a slow-moving

wagon in the opening chapter reminiscent of one of Thomas Hardy's rural scenes in content, manner, and style.

The sharp and brittle crack and clatter of its weathered and ungreased wood and metal is slow and terrific: a series of dry sluggish reports carrying for a half mile across the hot still pinewiney silence of the August afternoon. Though the mules plod in a steady and unflagging hypnosis, the vehicle does not seem to progress. It seems to hang suspended in the middle distance forever and forever, so infinitesimal is its progress, like a shabby bead upon the mild red string of road. So much is this so that in the watching of it the eye loses it as sight and sense drowsily merge and blend, like the road itself, with all the peaceful and monotonous changes between darkness and day, like already measured thread being rewound onto a spool. So that at last, although out of some trivial and unimportant region beyond even distance, the sound of it seems to come slow and terrific and without moving, as though it were a ghost traveling a half mile ahead of its own shape (*Light in August*, p. 7).

The first chapter ends again with Lena's words "My, my. A body does get around," making the first chapter look like a prologue to the novel. This is balanced by the last chapter in which the story returns to Lena's unhurried travel through the Mississippi of her life. This chapter reads like an epilogue and underlines the great truth of life presented by Thomas Hardy (Hardy again!) in his well known poem, "In Time of the Breaking of Nations":

Yonder a maid and her weight
Come whispering by:
Wars annals will cloud into night
Ere their story die.

Lena is the eternal female representing the life force. She is not affected by the news of violent happenings around her and goes through it all with an unruffled calm.

Chapter 2 and the subsequent chapters present a new direction and, instead of taking us forward in Lena's search, take us backward towards the past in flashbacks involving Joe Christmas, Joe Brown, Miss Burden, and Gail Hightower.

As we go back from the flames enveloping Miss Burden's house to Joe Christmas and Joe Brown, we find an air of mystery hanging over them. While we have glimpses of Joe Christmas's past we have virtually no information on Joe Brown except that he figures in the stories of Joe Christmas, Joanne Burden, and Byron Bunch in a peripheral manner, and in Lena Grove's in a more material way becoming the cause of her great journey with which the novel starts and which does not end with the novel.

Faulkner plays upon the names, 'Burch' and 'Bunch', which lead to some confusion in the story and, as the novel ends, Bunch is very close to taking the place of the elusive Burch.

The story centers on the 'burning house' or the 'burned house', for this house harboured a couple of bootleggers and the lady of the house had an immoral liaison with one of them—a half Negro at that, which had sinister implications in the time of the action of the story. It transpires that they are not just bootleggers but are amoral, greedy, and unscrupulous. One of them, Brown, not only ditched a girl after making her pregnant but changed his name from Lucas Burch to Joe Brown to escape detection, while the other, Joe Christmas, the white man with black blood, who could not live down this truth and had a burning rage within him, which made him violent in the extreme, either giving pain or taking it, and finally came to Jefferson for his tryst with destiny.

We meet another character called Gail Hightower in chapter 3 and are propelled backwards into another flashback about the twenty-five years he lived in disgrace in Jefferson.

The first three chapters are expository. In the fourth chapter we find Byron narrating the events connected with Lena's arrival to Hightower. Hightower acts as the 'narratee' representing our (readers') responses and doubts, e.g., when Byron tells Hightower about the fire and Lena's lover who has been identified through the scar (a classical means of identification with echoes of *Odyssey*, Hightower voices our doubts: "The house that burned yesterday. But I don't see any connection between . . ." It is this connection that engages the reader in the rest of the novel. This is very subtly suggested in Byron's narration leading to the slow unfolding of the story as a reference is made to Byron's problem in telling Lena about her lover's involvement in illegal activities like bootlegging. This naturally points to Christmas's involvement in the same crimes and his further and more serious involvement with Miss Burden, which throws us backward into Christmas's past and brings us back to the present, to the central event of the novel – the burning of the house.

Here, like a railway train unobtrusively changing its track, the story takes us along a different road as Byron offers the seemingly simple and routine information: "About Christmas. About yesterday and Christmas. Christmas is part nigger. About him and Brown and yesterday." The whole narrative is encapsulated in these cryptic statements.

If you were a discerning reader you would suddenly find your expectations revolving around Christmas ("About yesterday and Christmas," "Christmas is part nigger," and "About him and Brown and yesterday").

3.8 LET US SUM UP

There are three strands in the narrative – the stories of Lena Grove, Joe Christmas and Gail Hightower. They interact with one another resulting in the unity of action. As the novel ends, Joe Christmas, who has given and taken only pain dies a brutal and painful death. Hightower slips back into his isolated cocoon, Lucas Burch is on the run again and Lena is on the road again. Lena's story give a circular structure to the narrative and lends a meaning and a silver lining in the end in the form of a little child – the light in August, the month in which the story takes place.

Some of the early review of the novel were very insightful and appreciative. The contrapuntal relation between a man's private self and his public social role causes an aesthetic tension in the novel. This is emphasized by eminent Faulkner critics like Olga Vickey and Irving Howe.

The narrative strategies involve a polyphonic narration from multiple points of view and flashbacks and a lot of moving back and forth and suggesting a great deal and building up narrative tension and suspense through short, cryptic and vague and, sometimes, half expressed or much suppressed utterances. Every now and then the reader's expectations are raised only a remain unfulfilled but this strategy makes the reader an active participant in the story.

3.9 QUESTIONS

1. Trace the circumstances leading to the murder of Joanne Burden.
2. Why does Lena Grove travel from Alabama to Jefferson? How successful is her journey?

Light in August

3. Discuss the parts played by the McEacherns and the Finches in the novel.
4. What does Faulkner mean by "dressing a show case window"?
5. Do you find any echoes of Thomas Hardy's prose and verse in *Light in August*? Explain their significance.
6. Attempt a critique of the plot-structure of *Light in August*.
7. Comment briefly on Faulkner's narrative strategies in *Light in August*.

UNIT 4 CHARACTERIZATION AND CRITICAL APPROACHES

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Critical Analysis of *The Sound And The Fury*
- 4.3 Main Characters
 - 4.3.1 Joe Christmas
 - 4.3.2 Joanne Burden
 - 4.3.3 Gail Hightower
 - 4.3.4 Lena Grove
 - 4.3.5 Byron Bunch
- 4.4 Some Critical Approaches
 - 4.4.1 Light in August in the light of Bakhtin's Views
 - 4.4.2 Religious Approach
 - 4.4.3 Psycho-Analytical and Feminist Approach
- 4.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.6 Questions
- 4.7 Suggested Reading

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit we will discuss the main characters. Also, we will provide you with an analysis of some of the critical approaches to *Light In August*.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

A novel is a fictional world peopled by characters and a novel's quality like a play's depends upon characterization. In this unit I propose to analyse the main characters in the novel viz. Joe Christmas, Joanne Burden, Gail Hightower, Lena Grove and Byron Bunch. I also propose to discuss some critical approaches to the novel like the dialogical, the Biblical, the psycho-analytical and the feminist approaches.

Modern literature offers both the frustration of a journey without maps. The supportive paraphernalia of definitive biographies and major critical books is often missing, and in its absence the student can enjoy the freedom of discovering and judging for himself. But although the literary history of the present age cannot yet be written adequately, the American novelists represented in this section can still be placed in a tentative historical framework.

The two earliest writers considered here William Faulkner and John Steinbeck, are close in time to the Lost Generation but significantly different in spirit. Faulkner is distinguished from men like Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald by the idiosyncratic (and sometimes wayward) nature of his own genius with his deep involvement in southern culture Faulkner ploughed a brave and rather lovely furrow; his work is now beginning to seem one of the main achievements of twentieth century fiction. Steinbeck differs from the Lost Generation in a simpler way. Deeply influenced by the Depression, he abandoned wistful romanticism for a gritty and naturalism with undercurrents of racial protest; he became, in fact, the heir to that earlier tradition pioneered by Norris and Dreiser.

Critics have often succumbed to the temptation of presenting Faulkner and Steinbeck as opposing models between whom subsequent writers have had to choose. The American novelist, so this argument goes, may write either in the romance tradition epitomized by Faulkner or the realist tradition represented by Steinbeck. There is certainly evidence to support this view. There has been, for example, a whole school of Southern Writers using Faulkner's mode of Gothic romance: Paul Bowles, Truman Capote, William Styron and Flannery O' Connor. And one can certainly see the influence of *The Grapes of Wrath* on Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*. Yet this interpretation simplifies contemporary American fiction to the point of distortion.

4.2 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*

The Sound and the Fury was Faulkner's own favourite amongst his novels. 'I have the most tenderness for that book,' he told an audience of students at the University of Nagano. Earlier, in a preface to the Modern Literary edition of *Sanctuary* (1932), he spoke of 'having written my guts into 'The Sound and the Fury''. Modern Criticism has concurred with this preference. Today *The Sound and the Fury* is widely acknowledged to be Faulkner's finest achievement – and hence one of the finest achievements of modern American Literature.

Yet at the time of the Novel's publication in 1929 its critical reception was discouraging; as he confessed in the *Sanctuary* preface, Faulkner 'believed then that I would never be published again. I had stopped thinking of myself in publishing terms.' The most frequent voiced objection was the baffling obscurity of Faulkner's narrative technique. Indeed, when the novel was published as part of Malcolm Cowley's *The Portable Faulkner* in 1946, the editor and publisher persuaded Faulkner to add an Appendix elucidating much of the plot. The author had, after all, a simple enough story to tell. He wanted to recount the traumatic and unhappy lines of the four Compson Children – Caddy, Quentin, Jason and Benjy – and suggest the ways in which their separate tragedies echoed the general decline of the old Southern aristocratic families.

Faulkner took his title for the novel from Macbeth's nihilistic speech about life's futility; and the fate of the Compson family would seem to fulfill this pessimistic note yet the decision to add a fourth section to the novel, concentrating on the black servant Dilsey, introduces a lot of qualified optimism. Alone amongst the characters in the novel Dilsey retains an ability, not to enjoy life or even to ask much from it, but to survive and help others to survive. As she goes about her depressing round of chores – gathering firewood, cooking breakfast, comforting the querulous Mrs. Compson and the tearful Benjy – Dilsey radiates an atmosphere of warmth and stability. In the final sentence of his 1946 Appendix Faulkner paid a cryptic but moving tribute to Dilsey and her fellow blacks: 'they endured'. In his Nobel Prize speech Faulkner returned, though in more confided and ascertive vein, to this notion of endurance. He believed, he said, 'that man will not merely endure. He will prevail...because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance.'

4.3 THE MAIN CHARACTERS

The southern myth is a story or a cluster of stories that expresses the deepest attitudes and reflects the most fundamental experiences of a people. Its subject is the fate of a ruined homeland. The homeland—so the story goes—had proudly insisted that it alone should determine its destiny. Provoked into

a war impossible to win, it had nevertheless fought to its last strength, and it had fought this war with a reckless gallantry and a superb heroism that, as Faulkner might say, made of its defeat not a shame but almost a vindication. Yet the homeland fell, and from this fall came misery and squalor; ravaging by the conquerors, loss of faith among the descendants of the defeated, and the rise of a new breed of faceless men . . .

[Irving Howe, *William Faulkner: A Critical Study* (Chicago: Elephant Paperbacks, 1952), pp.27-28]

Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels are representations of this myth. Jefferson is the locale of this myth in *Light in August*, and the main characters in the novel are creatures of this myth whether they are native to the soil or immigrants there. As Olga W. Vickery points out,

Collectively Jefferson is Southern, White, and Elect, qualities which have meaning within a context which recognized something or someone as Northern, or Black or Damned. This antithesis is periodically affirmed through the sacrifice of a scapegoat who represents, in fact or popular conviction, those qualities which must be rejected if Jefferson is to maintain its self-defined character.

[*The Novels of William Faulkner: A Critical Interpretation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), pp.67-68].

Joe Christmas, Gail Hightower and Joanne Burden serve as such scapegoats while Lena Grove and Byron Bunch belong to a land outside the limits of this myth.

4.3.1 Joe Christmas

Joe Christmas is a bundle of contradictions and thus poses a threat to all established and accepted categories. He does not belong to any category. He feels a Black before Whites and a White before Blacks. He is, in Shakespeare's famous phrase, an 'unaccommodated man' (*King Lear*, III). He is rootless and becomes the antagonist.

Mrs. Hines's account throws light on the pathetic nature of Christmas's birth and life. Hines, who is unable to forgive his daughter Millie's pregnancy, calls her lover a nigger, kills him, and looks for a scapegoat to bear the guilt and punishment. Later this identification finds support in the dietician's outburst when she and her lover are surprised in the midst of their love-making. Both Hines and the dietician, motivated by personal reasons, contribute to Christmas's awareness as a Negro and force the matron to act on that assumption.

He accepts Mr. McEachern's Calvinistic discipline as an escape from responsibilities and self-judgment. But when he finds a human relationship with Bobbie, the waitress, based on love, he rebels against McEachern's religious discipline. But this relationship is short-lived for Bobbie turns against him after he beats her for not being horrified by his confession that there is Negro blood in him. She watches as her friends beat him up. This further intensifies his awareness of his predicament. He now finds that he provokes racial violence from Negro and White alike.

His tensions become more acute during his relationship with Joanne Burden. Her racial, political and religious obsessions contribute to the heightening of the tensions between them. Their love-making reflects this tension and the inbuilt contradiction. In the ecstasy of her love she mutters *Negro! Negro! Negro!* Instead of *Joe! Joe! Joe!* or any other endearing term. This reflects her obsession and agonizing tension.

She insists that he accept the role of a Negro and that of a repentant sinner. This is a choice he has been avoiding all along and when it is his razor against her old civil

war pistol we are not surprised. The knife he uses to kill her is used towards the end to castrate him.

During his flight Christmas pauses at a Negro church. He assaults the elderly parson, stands in the pulpit, and declaims against God. He strikes an attitude characteristic of the anti-Christ. This completes the parallel course of Christmas's passion, running through the episodes involving Hines, the dietician, McEachern, Bobbie, and Miss Burden, and leads to his crucifixion. As he is shot and castrated by Grimm, he transcends the categories of Black and White, and experiences for a moment the awareness that he belongs to the human race. He ascends neither as the son of a Negro nor as the son of a White man but as the son of Man:

He just lay there, with his eye open and empty of everything save consciousness, and with something, a shadow, about his mouth. For a long moment he looked up at them with peaceful and unfathomable and unbearable eyes. Then his face, body, all, seemed to collapse, to fall in upon itself, and from out the slashed garments about his hips and loins the pent black blood seemed to rush like a released breath. It seemed to rush out of his pale body like the rush of sparks from a rising rocket; upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever.

(Light in August, p. 407)

The other two main characters barring Lena Grove, who serves as a foil to these three and a frame for the novel, are Joanne Burden and Gail Hightower. Joe Christmas, Miss Burden and Hightower represent the three categories in terms of which the South establishes its identity – the racial, the geographical and the religious. As Olga Vickery observes, "The Negro, the Yankee, the Apostate – these are the key figures in a society which defines itself by exclusion" (*The Novels of William Faulkner*, p. 75)

4.3.2 Joanne Burden

Joanne Burden's father, Nathaniel Burden, injects a moral attitude into her perception of the physical black and white. She learnt to see them "not as people, but as a thing, a shadow in which I lived, we lived, all white people, all other people. I thought of all the children coming forever and ever into the world, white, with the black shadow already falling upon them before they drew breath. And I seemed to see the black shadow in the shape of a cross (*Light in August*, p. 221)

Miss Burden thinks of herself as a martyr to the "black cross". She is a Northern woman carrying the burden of the cross. The conflict between the female in her and her intellectual heritage makes her a dual personality. Her identification of sex with sin and sexual superstitions associated with a Negro make her feel that "she is not having intercourse with a man but with an image of her own creation, with the idea of Negro for which she has given up her life. Accordingly, she emerges from the affair with her instincts once more crystallized and intensified" (*Olga Vickery*, p. 76).

Christmas becomes an obsession with Miss Burden. She cannot leave him alone. He is Miss Burden's burden. He represents her responsibility, her sin and her salvation. She insists that he admit his black blood and act in accordance with her concepts of race and religion. Joe's refusal to do so draws a violent reaction from her. It is an interesting irony that what she fails to do the mob does later forcing him to become a Negro by lynching him and castrating him. He is at last nailed on the black cross.

4.3.3 Gail Hightower

If Christmas and Joanne are obsessed with race and religion, Gail Hightower is obsessed with the exploits of the Southern heroes, represented by his grand father, in the civil war. He finds it impossible to live down these legends, which come to

dominate his mind completely. This eventually destroys him for he becomes indifferent to the quality of his actual expression.

And they told Byron how the young minister was still excited even after six months, still talking about the civil war and his grand father, a cavalryman, who was killed, and about General Grant's stores burning in Jefferson until it did not make sense at all. They told Byron how he seemed to talk that way in the pulpit too, wild too in the pulpit, using the religion as though it were a dream. (*Light in August*, P.52-53)

Like Christmas, Hightower is isolated from his community. He is the religious face while Christmas is the racial face of this isolation. His every action becomes a defiance of the will of the community, and he invites humiliation and violence against himself. Forced to resign from the church, beaten by the Ku Klux Klan and by Joe Christmas and brushed aside and pushed away by Percy Grimm he is the ever rejected and alienated figure living in his lonely house visited by only one man, Byron Bunch, his only link with the world. It is only at the instance of Byron that he attends the birth of Lena's child and makes a feeble and infructuous attempt to save Christmas--gestures of momentary participation in life; otherwise he remains only a spectator of life. In both the cases his participation in life has a vital significance in that it aims at saving life, assisting at a birth and staving off death.

4.3.4 Lena Grove

Lena Grove's story enfolds the entire action of the novel with the warmth of life transcending moral and social considerations and categories. Her calm provides a foil to the obsessions and agonies of Christmas, Joanne and Hightower. Lena lends a circular structure to the story. The story begins with her as an unmarried pregnant woman -- a Virgin Mary figure--and ends with her as a happy mother holding her baby--a Madonna figure. She provokes different reactions from different people. Some of them are contemptuous but not unkind. Mrs. Armstid regards her as a fallen woman. The men at the store treat her with scorn and pity. Brown (Lucas Burch), who is the father of her child, considers her as a responsibility to be shunned. Byron, who loves her looks upon her as an innocent girl seduced by a scoundrel.

As the curtain rises on the novel, we see Lena sitting beside the road, watching the wagon, and thinking ' I have come from Alabama: a fur piece. All the way from Alabama a-walking . A fur piece'. (*Light in August*, p.3)

Look at this portrait of her in Faulkner's words:

From beneath a sunbonnet of faded blue, weathered now by other than formal soap and water, she looks up at him quietly and pleasantly: young, pleasant faced, candid, friendly, and alert. She does not move yet. Beneath the faded garment of that same weathered blue her body is shapeless and immobile. The fan and bundle lie on her lap. She wears no stockings. Her bare feet rest side by side in the shallow ditch. The pair of dusty, heavy, man looking shoes beside them are not more inert. (*Light in August*, p.10)

The words chosen to sketch her personality are 'young', 'pleasant faced', 'candid', 'friendly' and 'alert'. Her immobility and her feet resting and inert indicate how calm and relaxed she is. Lena commits an offence against conventional morality. Still society treats her leniently and sympathetically. Some people express their disapproval of her pregnancy without marriage but they help her in her need. Even the Sheriff is not rigid about the law and permits her the use of Miss Burden's cottage. The truck driver gives up his bed for her. This is because of Lena's calm, candid and friendly attitude in which there is no place for any kind of antagonism or bitterness. While Joe Christmas, Joanne Burden and Gail Hightower build barricades between themselves and society and alienate themselves, Lena Grove demolishes all barriers with her humility and friendliness. She accepts the food and shelter offered

by others as sustaining things and is indifferent to the spirit or prejudices behind the offer. This is in sharp contrast to Christmas's rejection of the food offered thus because of his obsessive ideas and his hypersensitiveness to the thoughts and attitudes of the giver.

4.3.5 Byron Bunch

Byron Bunch is an uncommitted person leading an isolated life. He takes no interest in affairs which do not concern him. But his love for Lena brings about a transformation in his character and world view. It is love and the desire to care for Lena that bring about this change. This makes him flow out and help others. He goes to great lengths to persuade the Sheriff to arrange a meeting between Lena and Lucas Burch. He persuades Hightower to try to save Christmas. He is the only source of comfort to the unfortunate and lonely Hightower.

Byron's love and loyalty towards Lena put us in mind of a solid character like Thomas Hardy's Gabriel Oak. As we develop sympathy for Lena, it is comforting to know that she is not left alone and that Byron's love is not spurned if not accepted without any reservations.

And he (Byron) came around the back of it and he stood there and her not even surprised "I done come too far now," he says "I be dog if I'm going to quit now." And her looking at him like she had known all the time what he was going to do before he even know himself that he was going to, and that whatever he done, he wasn't going to mean it.

"Aint nobody never said for you to quit." She says (*Light in August*, 443)

4.4 SOME CRITICAL APPROACHES

Critics have taken pains to demonstrate how Faulkner's technique serves his theme in the novel. The separate plots about Joe, Lena, and Hightower, for example, testify powerfully to man's isolation. And even when people do meet, or, as with Joe and Joanna, collide, they never do really communicate with one another. Each is sealed off in his own traumatic world of self. The same fate befalls even the minor characters: Doe Hines, McEachern, and Percy Grimm. By keeping characters like Joe and Lena from ever meeting, Faulkner not only underscores the theme of alienation and frustration but counterpoints Joe's agony against Lena's serenity.

Similarly, the varied points of view used to narrate the story suggest how impossible it is for any single mind to comprehend the range of experience. Shifting from Lena's intuitive mind to Joe's inwardness and then to Hightower's agonized detachment, the reader begins to appreciate the kind of omniscience required to understand the power and weakness of man.

Many critics have seen in the story of Joe Christmas an ironic parallel to the New Testament account of Jesus Christ. Among the more obvious analogies are these: Joe's wandering in his early manhood, and his inevitable progress towards crucifixion during the last seven days of his life. But Joe is no savior. His death saves no soul, frees no spirit. Indeed, as Edmond Volpe points out, Joe alone finds release, not the society whose racist concept crucifies him: "the fear and guilt of his society... are reinforced... and the concept will be imposed during childhood, for the heirs of the executioners and make these victims, in their turn, executioners." Joe cannot save the south from its puritanical mentality. He can serve only as a scapegoat, suffering torment for a tormented people, white and black alike.

Joe dies trying to discover some justification for living. Hightower, on the other hand, surrenders his quest. "I am not in life any more," he says, rejecting at last the forces

of life and death symbolized by Lena and Joe. Only Byron Bunch and Lena Grove survive to face the future. Yet Faulkner holds forth no shining promise for them: Lena is too primitive, Byron more dogged than delighted about his commitment to experience. Lena's delivery of her child is only an affirmation of a natural process. She is "Light in August", as a cow might be; she has delivered her bodily burden. But no other "light" shines through to beckon her or the others. The "shadow" of Joe Christmas still falls darkly across the land when the novel ends.

4.4.1 Bakhtin's Views

Faulkner seems to be interested in the dualism of order and disorder, art and reality. His creations of Yoknapatawpha was a way of imposing an order on contemporary history which was a panorama of futility and anarchy. By creating a region, which was a parallel reality ruled by art, Faulkner creates a world which he could deal with on his terms.

As Barthes says, it is a word-oriented world that confronts the myth of reality by mythifying it in turn to produce an artificial myth. This reconstituted myth may be described as a counter myth that subverts reality by recreating it (Barthes, p.147).

Light in August may be viewed as a significant attempt on Faulkner's part at exploring the polyvalent significance of self, history and art in the modern world. This novel may be called, in Bakhtin's famous phrase, a 'polyphonic novel', which views reality as multiple in nature. The multiple discourses in the novel construct different versions of reality from different points of view. Here we find Faulkner subverting the mimetic tradition using multiple perspectives. We do not find a fictional rendering of objective reality here, for Faulkner's discourse tries to establish a dialogical contact between the subjective and the objective. This militates against the notion of the unity of a work of art.

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin decries the attempt to find in Dostoevsky's novels a specific monological authorial idea (Bakhtin, 1984, p.229). He expresses himself in favour of 'the living mix of varied and opposing voices' (The Dialogic Imagination, 1981, p.49). Thus the two main character-zones of the novel, Christmas's and Lena's remain separate and antithetical, each qualifying the other. This underlines the truth that life is too large and complex for definitions.

The multiple voices and perspectives break down the definitiveness of authorial omniscience and assert the fluidity of experiential reality. Faulkner employs the dialectic of motion and stasis. As he says, "the aim of every artist is to arrest motion which is life and hold it fixed so that 100 years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life" (*Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner*, 1968, p.253). This is also adopted in the cinematographic technique of arresting motion and restoring it. Manisha Mukhopadhyay points out: 1

The dialectic of dynamism and inertia is the governing artistic principle of the novel, embodied by the central image of the novel, that of the road with which the novel begins and ends; the road that Christmas travels in circles and the road that stretches out before Lena in an uncomplicated linearity; the road through which Percy Grimm pursues Christmas (*William Faulkner: A Centennial Tribute*, 1999, p.131).

Now look at what Bakhtin says on the metaphor of the road:

On the road the spatial and temporal series defining human fates and lives combine with one another in distinctive ways even as they become more, complex and more concrete by the collapse of social distances. The chronotope of the road is both a point of new departures and a place for

4.4.2 Religious Approach

We find Faulkner using a Biblical frame-work in *The Sound and the Fury*. The first four sections of the novel, narrated by four people from their different points of view, are patterned on the four Gospels. In *Light in August* also, Faulkner uses a Christological frame-work playing on the words, *Christmas, rise, Light, and The Player*.

In the *New Testament* story, Jesus was crucified and killed, but the 'The Light of the World', promising eternal life, was born. In *Light in August*, Christmas was killed on the black cross, and the Light was born in the form of Lena's child. Jesus knew that he would be killed and walked to his death. Christmas also knew that he would be killed and moved towards his doom. In both the cases, it was 'The Player', the supreme power that moved them. Faulkner, in the course of the man-hunt after Christmas, uses the word, 'The Player' for the inexorable and irresistible force that propels everybody and everything including Christmas and his executioner, Percy Grimm. Gail Hightower, the holy man, assists in the birth of the 'Light in August' (Lena's child) even as the wise men of the East were present when 'The Light of the World' was born, and John, the Baptist, was present at Jesus's Baptism. The thought that he is the author and instrument of his wife's death leads Hightower to this self-knowledge: "If I am the instrument of her despair and death, then I am in turn instrument of someone outside myself" (*Light in August*, p.465).

The child, who represents the continuity of life and hence is called the 'Light in August' is set off against the dark background of Joe Christmas's violent death and the flight of Lucas Burch, the Judas figure who betrays his friend, Christmas, for the reward announced. The allusion to the ascension of Jesus in the use of the word 'rise' while describing Christmas's death is also significant. The child, who appears briefly in the novel, is given a great deal of symbolic importance in that it provides an emotional comfort to the alienated characters in the novel. As Manisha Mukhopadhyay says, "Mrs. Hines perceives him as an incarnation of Joe; he further parallels Joe in his status as a potential Christ-figure – with Byron as surrogate father, his family is an image of the holy family of Christ. Hightower too views him as his link with posterity" (*William Faulkner: A Centennial Tribute*, p.129).

4.4.3 Psycho-Analytical and Feminist Approach

French feminism has been deeply affected by psycho-analysis, especially by Lacan's reworking of Freud's theories. French feminists, by following Lacan's theories, have overcome the hostility towards Freud shared by most feminists. Before Lacan, Freud's theories, especially in the United States had been reduced to a crude biological level. "According to Freud, 'Penis-envy' is universal in women and is responsible for their 'castration complex', which results in their regarding themselves as *hommes manques* rather than a positive sex in their own right."

(Raman Selden, *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory*, 1990 P.146)

Ernest Jones's term 'phallogocentric' for this theory is widely adopted by Feminists when discussing male domination in general. They have reacted bitterly to a view of woman as passive and penis-envying rather than as a woman in her own right as a man is a man in his own right.

Lena is an example of the passive woman badly exploited by Lucas Burch, the man whom she trusts implicitly. Even after he deserts her she goes in search of him traveling great distances. In spite of his betrayal, she never even once talks ill of him. She is the innocent, dedicated, passive woman who never loses her trust in her man however bad he may be. This is a case of phallogocentrism where the man takes the woman for granted and abuses her innocence and goodness.

Joanne Burden is an example of the penis-envying woman. She is the kind of woman who would like to be a man--dominating and dynamic. She is haughty and superior with a white-woman's-burden-complex, which Christmas finds insufferable. She is demanding and dominating, in complete contrast to Lena. She has plans for Christmas's future but Christmas does not fit in with those plans. In the end the two self-willed people confront each other-- Joanne with an old revolver and Christmas with a knife. Christmas kills her and this act sets off a chain of events culminating in the end of Joe Christmas's search for identity.

Let us forget for a moment Freud and Lacan and look at Lena and Joanne as two remarkable women. Both are strong in different ways. Lena's unruffled calm gives her an inward strength, which helps her not only to endure but to prevail in the end when she strikes us as a Madonna figure holding in her arms the 'light of life' in a strife-torn world. Her simplicity, love, and faith, positive virtues in any age, give her this inward, unruffled calm.

On the other hand, Joanne's loneliness and passionate nature get her involved with a psychologically abnormal, violent man. Her desire to dominate and impose her will on him leads to a bitter hostility and her untimely and tragic death.

Light in August seems to uphold simplicity, love, faith, and gentleness rather than a superior attitude and a desire to dominate as qualities that give strength to a woman. Mrs. Hines and Mrs. McEachern, like Lena, offer a striking contrast to Joanne, and they also endure.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

We have attempted to discuss Faulkner and *Light in August* from different points of view. There may be things in a novel which we do not like and do not want to happen in our lives but, in the hands of a master craftsman like Faulkner, they give us a sense of life and its deeper meanings. Faulkner's style and narrative strategies, sometimes, pose initial problems to the reader, but once he overcomes these initial resistences and gets into the text of the novel, he will be richly rewarded. *Light in August* is no exception. It is a challenging novel. Take up the challenge and enjoy the text.

4.6 QUESTIONS

1. Write a note on the character of Joe Christmas.
2. "Lena Grove's story enfolds the entire action of the novel, *Light in August*". Discuss.
3. Do you find any religious meaning in *Light in August*? Explain.
4. What do you find interesting in the role of Gail Hightower.
5. Write a long notes on Bakhtin's Views on *Light In August*.

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MEG-11
AMERICAN NOVEL



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Block

5

BLACK SPRING : HENRY MILLER

Block Introduction

UNIT 1

Sexual Revolution In Modern American Literature **5**

UNIT 2

The Great Tradition **15**

UNIT 3

The Outsider **25**

UNIT 4

The Indelible Impact **34**

UNIT 5

Henry Miller's Works : Black Spring **40**

UNIT 6

Critical Approaches **55**

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

"Henry Miller is likely to outlast a great many writers who at the moment seem more important. Fifty years from now, a hundred years from now, he will remain a significant figure of our time. The future will remember him for a variety of reasons, not all of them literary. For Henry Miller is not only a writer, he is a phenomenon. His life, his creed, his motives, and his work are all of interest to an enormous public. He is venerated by an extraordinary number of people at home and abroad, His name is news and is bound to become history. He epitomizes a movement, a trend, perhaps a revolution in mores. To many he represents a cause, for such reasons his work and reputation are as difficult to appraise now as were those of Rousseau and Byron in their day. Like them he should probably be viewed first as a public figure, and only then as a writer," proclaimed George Wickes.

Miller had his share of praise, and such literary maharajahs as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Edmund Wilson, George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Kenneth Rexroth, Karl Shapiro, Wallace Fowlie, and William Gordon have made their contributions.

Miller belongs to the Great Tradition of Transcendentalism. Even a cursory reader of his writings such as *The Cosmological Eye*, *Stand Still Like The Hummingbird*, *Sunday After The War*, *Tropic of Cancer*, *Black Spring*, *Tropic of Capricorn*, and other books would not miss Miller's references to and quotations from oriental classics, oriental personalities, and oriental concepts. As an inveterate reader, Miller should interest in oriental philosophy even at an early age. The writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whithan influenced him to become an ardent admirer and serious student of Eastern Culture. In his writings, there are some passages and situations wherein the oriental influence is direct and unmistakable, in some other places, one finds some similarities between oriental thought and Miller's.

Black Spring (1936), which was published two years after *Tropic of Cancer*, deals with many of the same themes, but in a different mood. The black spring of the title is a metaphor for the world's blight. It may also be interpreted as the season of ecstatic despair. In this narrative, Miller presents a series of monologues, meditations, reminiscences, dreams, and visions, shifting back and forth – from his Paris surroundings to his early years in Brooklyn and New York. Underlying its chaotic variety in style and technique, is a coherence of theme and symbol.

I am sure you will enjoy reading the block as well as the novel.

Good luck to you!

Notes

UNIT 1 SEXUAL REVOLUTION IN MODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 The Dialectic of sex-motif in American Literature
- 1.3 Psychoanalysis and sexuality
- 1.4 The Influence of Freud, Jung and the revisionists
- 1.5 Some Literary Implications
 - 1.5.1 The Approach of William Dean Howells
 - 1.5.2 Naturalism on the March: Theodore Dreiser
 - 1.5.3 Sherwood Anderson
 - 1.5.4 Fitzgerald And the Jazz Age
 - 1.5.5 Eugene O'Neill
 - 1.5.6 Ernest Hemingway
 - 1.5.7 William Faulkner
 - 1.5.8 Henry Miller
 - 1.5.9 The Beat Generation
 - 1.5.10 Norman Mailer
- 1.6 Summing Up
- 1.7 Questions
- 1.8 Glossary & Notes

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will discuss (i) the dialectic of Sex-motif in American literature (ii) the influence of Freud, Jung, and the Revisionists; (iii) the approaches of William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Scott Fitzgerald, Eugene O'Neill, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and Henry Miller towards sexuality.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Sex plays a vital role in life. It is an integral and essential part of life. In literature in general and in American literature in particular, it plays only a small though aggressively righteous part. In every society, primitive as well as modern, the sexual instinct is – for good or evil – always subject to some measure of regulation and restraint. In literature, where the battle between love and sex, spirit and flesh, is fought in terms of symbolic action, the writers support their cause – for or against sexual freedom – with varying degrees of evangelical order and outspokenness. On this issue, there is no unanimity for the simple reason that human nature or culture is not unified in its beliefs concerning the nature of man. The central conflict between instinctual needs and the claims of the ideal, between physical desire and the inner check, between Dionysus and Christ, goes on all the time.

1.2 THE DIALECTIC OF SEX-MOTIF IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

The twentieth century gave rise, especially in the United States, to a number of movements designed to redress the balance and cure man of his sexual neurosis. The strident call for a return to primitivism was accompanied by the glorification of

instinct and later, by the apotheosis of the orgasm. The revolt initiated in the twenties by the members of the *Lost generation* was carried out in a more thorough going militant fashion by the *Beat generation* in the fifties. The quest for the apocalyptic orgasm, the spokesman of the Beat generation contended, was motivated by the highest morality. As Norman Mailer, the prophet of the hipsters declared in an interview: "After all, if my generation of writers represents anything, if there is anything we have fought for, it is sexual revolution."² He cites the fact that what was forbidden fare twenty years ago – books like *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and *Tropic of Cancer* – is now published without fuss or hindrance and allowed to circulate freely. The sexual revolution that Norman Mailer says his generation fought for and won had its antecedents in the contribution made by such iconoclastic figures as Sherwood Anderson, Theodore Dreiser, and Eugene O'Neill – all of whom warred against the repression imposed by the Puritanic ideal.

If the practice of sexual freedom for the lost generation of the twenties ended time and again disastrously, it was because the sexual problem was vastly more complex than the libertarians of that gaudy and irrepressible decade realized. Sexual love transcends the physiological basis of instinct; it is a metaphysical as well as physical passion'. Thielicke rightly speaks of the mystical component in the sex urge, alongside the physiologically determined libido: the mystery can be unveiled along with another person.³ The spirit enters into the mystery of the sexual encounter. Sex is a mystery because it is not a function of organs – especially reassured for this purpose; it involves the whole man. Though the biological basis of sex is common to all men, the experience is psychologically and spiritually differentiated for each individual.

1.3 PSYCHOANALYSIS AND SEXUALITY

The literary sex-rebels were supported in their position by the science of psychoanalysis.⁴ Freudism refutes the idea of original sin which is associated primarily with the sexual act. It explodes the fiction that sex exists or should exist, exclusively for the purpose of perpetuating the species. Moreover the science of psychoanalysis taught them a great deal about the subliminal working of sexual desire, the inter dependence of body and mind, the role of the unconscious, the significance of dreams, the vagaries of instinct and how it is shaped or twisted out of shape by society. Like Whitman, they boldly affirmed their belief in the flesh and the appetites.

"I do not press my fingers across my mouth
I keep as delicate around the bowels as around the head and heart
Copulation is no more rank to me than death is"

1.4 THE INFLUENCE OF FREUD, JUNG AND THE REVISIONISTS

The American writers of the twenties were attracted to Freud for a variety of reasons, one of which was his radical reinterpretation of the nature and functions of sexuality. Waldo Frank, like Dreiser, harped insistently on the traumatic impact of Puritanism, the sinister sex repression from which American culture suffered. Floyd Dell, an aggressive leader during the twenties in the cause of sexual freedom, found in Freudianism another mighty weapon to be used in his fight against bourgeois morality. During this decade, Freudianism was converted into a veritable crusade. By utilizing the Freudian discoveries of dream displacement and the dynamic role of

the unconscious, writers were able to arrive at a better understanding of the self and its relation to reality.

It is not at all surprising that Freud, in the United States as well as Europe, was fiercely attacked for violating the taboo of silence and scenery surrounding the subject of sex, Freud disclosed the secrets hidden behind the multifarious disguises assumed by the sexual instinct. It was this outspokenness on Freud's part which called forth emotional resistance to his theories both in the United States and abroad, and prompted the charge that psychoanalysis was guilty of pansexualism, though **Freud had never recommended unrestricted sexual indulgence.**

The protest against such excesses in interpreting the significance of sex in life and literature was bound to come. The quarrel over the implications to be drawn from the conception of the libido broke out in the inner circle of Freudian disciples long before psychoanalysis became a popular cult. Freud had accused Jung of suppressing the sexual factor in psychoanalysis as a concession to the prejudices of a prudish-minded public. Jung desexualized the libido whereas for Freud the libido was electrically charged with the elemental force of sex, the instinctual energy that motivates all human striving. Jung, on the contrary contended that sex is but one of the forms this energy can take. Sex, he felt, was not the central, sustaining power in the psyche. No society, primitive or modern, permitted the sexual instinct uninhibited modes of expression. Why, Jung asked, should all cultural manifestations, including art, be interpreted in terms of the sexual drive? Though Jung did not deny the importance of sexuality in psychic life, he wished to put sexuality itself in its proper place. But what is its proper place? It is the question to which not only psychologists but writers of all kinds earnestly addressed themselves. Increasingly Jung came to feel that this disproportionate emphasis on the power of sex was symptomatic of the spiritual malaise of his time; the age had gone mad on the subject, enough to indicate that the sexual life of modern man was profoundly disturbed. Only a change of heart, an allegiance sworn to the kingdom of the spirit, could save man from this biological bondage. "It is not the children of the flesh, but the "children of God" who know freedom." In short, according to Jung, there is much between heaven and earth not included in the Freudian philosophy of sexuality.⁵

If the mystique of sex encountered spirited resistance in some quarters; it found one redoubtable champion who withdrew from the psychoanalytic school on the ground that Freud did not go far enough in his psychology of sex. Wilhelm Reich called for a world wide sexual revolution. In *The Sexual Revolution*, he charged that the capitalist society was engaged in a vast conspiracy to frustrate the sexual needs of the young and rob them of mental independence and creative originality. Rejecting wholesale the Freudian theory of sublimation, he denied that repression was either necessary or desirable. Insisting that the full gratification of the sexual instinct would result not only in the integration of the individual but also in the salvation of society; Reich assails the idea of life long, monogamous marriage as a species of enslavement not to be borne. Sex thus emerges as the new religion of life - a religion which the hipsters and the members of the beat generation have enthusiastically taken over. Reich went far beyond Freud in tracing all our troubles - social disorders, political strife, the outbreak of Fascism, the eruption of war - to disturbances in the sexual life of man. All of culture, in fact, is essentially governed by sexual needs.⁶ It is the signal distinction of Erich Fromm, whose work had a marked influence on a whole generation of American writers, that in opposition to the scientific and statistical approach to sex, he highlighted those elements in the experience of love which are not included in the Freudian or Kinsey outlook. The aim of love is to break down the walls of isolation that hem us in, to achieve a deep feeling of intimacy and union. It is more than that: it is an art that calls for sensitiveness, insight, and a readiness to give generously of oneself. Instead of analyzing sexual love in physiological and instinctual terms, he looks upon it as a quest for union with another person. Physical desire is not to be confused with the

complex feeling of love. He makes the point that every theory of love grows out of a theory of human nature. When love inspires the desire for sexual union, it is always blended with the element of tenderness.

1.5 SOME LITERARY IMPLICATIONS

To what extent each of these men-Freud, Jung, Reich and Fromm – influenced twentieth century American Literature in its portrayal of the sex motif is still an open question. Undoubtedly the major influence was that of Freud. Psychoanalysis made it possible for the writer to explore new, hitherto tabooed areas of experience, unconscious as well as instinctual. He could utilize the stream of consciousness technique and the interior monologue, break up the sequence of time in the ordering of the narrative, exploit the rich resources of dream symbolism, and, finally, uncover traits of human nature that had until then not been allowed to be discussed in literature. He could rely on biology and psychology for many of his controlling insights. **Whatever was “natural” was not only “normal” but “moral” as well and perfectly legitimate material for literary presentation.**

The scientific outlook, moreover, helped to develop an attitude of tolerance toward all forms of sexual behavior. The existence of sexual abnormality could be accepted without branding it with the stigma of moral corruption. The knowledge and improved practice of birth control served to emancipate woman from her oppressive fear of pregnancy outside the covenant of marriage. **All these influences contributed to the revaluation of the traditional Victorian attitude toward sex.**

1.5.1 William Dean Howells

Deeply concerned about the social function and moral effect of the novel, Howells upheld the established canons of decency. According to him, the Anglo-Saxon tradition was in this respect – truer to life than the practice honored in French Fiction. He did not deny that “vicious” types of love were at work beneath the surface of society. The numerous divorce trials told their own sordid story of marital conflict, sexual incompatibility, and flagrant infidelity, but all this Howells insisted, was in no way the characteristic of American society. A moralist at heart, he contended that the effects derived from the literary exploitation of sex were sensational and cheap though the theme of guilty love afforded a sure-fire recipe for success, the serious novelist would not – he really meant should not – thus be willing to soil his artistic conscience. Basically, when the issue came to a showdown, Howells was more interested in preserving the laws of propriety in such matters than in defending the right of the artist to complete freedom of expression. Why should the novelist, in the name of a restrictive morality, be held back from dealing with the theme of “guilty” love? Why should the honest depiction of “the beast-man” – Howells’ own epithet – tend to defile and corrupt?

While serving as editor of ‘The Atlantic Monthly’, Howells carefully respected the moral sensibilities of the audience for which the magazine was intended. He advised Mark Twain to eliminate in his work all sexual references which could possibly offend the taste of the public. When compared with novelists like Samuel Butler, Hardy; or Dreiser, he seems needlessly fearful and genteel in all areas that touch on the sexual love of man and woman.

1.5.2 Theodore Dreiser

The literary rebels of the twentieth century ceased to look upon man as a responsible agent, ruled by reason, endowed with free will, superior to the animal kingdom. Freudianism exposed the erring rationalizations to which civilized man resorts in order to justify his irrational and often perverse behavior. The naturalist writers

focused their interest on the instinctual life of man. Dreiser, Sherwood Anderson, Eugene O'Neil, Hemingway, and Faulkner depicted human nature without attempting to gloss over the biological facts – and the facts showed plainly that man was at bottom a promiscuous animal, the victim of his sexual compulsions. Hailing sex as the deliverer rather than enslaver, a number of American writers went to great lengths to identify love with sex.

When the novelist appeals to Nature as the norm, he is in effect trying to lift a heavy burden of guilt ("original sin") from the shoulders of the descendants of Adam shaped by heredity, instinct and the pressure of the social environment. Man, as Theodore Dreiser portrays him is no longer responsible for his actions and therefore the question of innocence or guilt, good or evil, does not arise. Moreover, the naturalistic writer of fiction aims ambitiously to report the whole truth of life, from the lowest reaches to the highest. He seeks to picture conditions as they actually exist and refrains as far as possible from passing moral judgment on human behavior. Though his object is not to shock, unless the truth itself proves shocking, his outspokenness on matters hitherto considered taboo often produces precisely that effect on the reading public. In his efforts to delineate people as they are, not as they ought to be, he directs attention to those biological passions which in many temperaments are the determinants of fate.

As Somerset Maugham declares in *The Summing Up*, most men follow the call of desire, while keeping a prudent eye open for the policeman around the corner. The conflict between instinct and culture cannot be avoided. Society, concerned solely about the perpetuation of the species, the protection of the family, the safe guarding of the rights of children born into the world, labors, with all the institutional power of enforcement at its disposal to deflect the mighty energies of the sex instinct into morally sanctioned channels. Somerset Maugham like Dreiser, adheres to a physiological conception of love. "However much people may resent the fact and however angrily deny it, there can surely be no doubt that love depends on certain secretions of the sexual glands.... People are very hypocritical in this matter and will not face the truth".

A naturalist who from the opening of the twentieth century dared write what he believed was the truth, however maligned or unacknowledged, about sex, Dreiser led the revolt against the hypocritical moral conventions that were crippling the intellectual and spiritual development of America. The younger generation accepted him as one of their spokesmen. His work, together with that of Sherwood Anderson, Eugene O'Neil, and Ernest Hemingway, was instrumental in effecting a radical change in the love ethic of the lost generation during the roaring twenties. Viewing life through the scientific perspective, Dreiser affirmed that sex was the dominant instinct in man. Society for its protection attempted to enforce a strictly monogamous code of morality, but human beings in America and elsewhere, Dreiser asserted, long before Kinsey, were incorrigibly polygamous. Hence a bitter conflict that rages between society, and the individual who obeys the voice of his instinct. The law, the courts, the police, the churches, the weight of public opinion, are all arrayed on the side of the social order, and the weak individual is virtually coerced into submission. Dreiser, like Sherwood Anderson, openly champions the cause of the victims of sexual repression: the frustrated, the maladjusted, the neurotic sufferers. He would allow greater room for the play of instinct and give people the opportunity to find some measure of happiness in life.

1.5.3 Sherwood Anderson

The cause of naturalism finally triumphed. The determined battle on behalf of sexual freedom that Dreiser had fought and won encouraged other writers to explore this hitherto forbidden area of experience. Freudianism prepared the way for the full-bodied emergence of the literary gospel that sex was salvation, and Sherwood Anderson became its anointed prophet. In opposition to the conspiracy of silence that

puritanism had imposed on all matters relating to the sexual life of man, Anderson endeavoured to picture the total personality. He would make no concession to conventional morality or traditional notions of human nature. Whatever lay beneath the surface of consciousness – nameless longings and erotic fantasies and libidinal impulses, however perverse or lawless they turned out to be – would find expressions in his work. In probing the subliminal recesses of the self, he revealed what Freud had already discovered in his theory of the neuroses: how thin is the boundary line that divides the so called normal from the abnormal. In his stories he uncovered the crippling effects of sexual frustration upon emotionally starved and lonely people. In his fiction the urgent need for love inevitably over takes the voice of reason and the restraints of public morality. When that is not the case, when the individual suppresses her deeper instincts, neurotic suffering and misery is the end result. Notable among his stories and novels which reflect Anderson's attitude towards sexuality are: *Winesburg, Ohio*, *Many Marriages*, *Winney's Dry Goods Store*, *"The Strength of God"*, *"The Untold Lie"*.

1.5.4 Fitzgerald and The Jazz Age

About Jazz Age, Charles Glicksberg avers:

"During the twenties, the young came exuberantly into their own, they ushered in a ten-year period of irreverence, iconoclasm, and boundless insurgency. Youth was not only its own excuse for being but also a warrant for reckless uninhibited behavior.... / The decline of religion, the aftermath of the First World War, the militant rise of feminism, the effects of prohibition, the popularization of psychoanalytic doctrine – these combined influences led them to throw off the restraining traditions of the past and invoke a new moral order. In Greenwich Village, Floyd Dell proclaimed to gospel of 'free' love, which the young intellectuals found eminently to their liking...."⁹

Fitzgerald showed many of these libertarian beliefs, but even as a lapsed catholic he was – still inwardly affected by the dogmas of the Church he had renounced. As Andrew Turnbull sums him up in this respect:

"He was normally out not overly sexual. Perhaps one could say that with him a strong sex drive had been geared to beauty and creation, while the destructive side of his nature found an outlet in drink. For someone who had been instrumental in relaxing censorship his writing was remarkably chaste."¹⁰

1.5.5 Eugene O'Neill

The contributions of psychoanalytic theory left their impress on all branches of American literature at the time O'Neill was first launching forth on his career – on biography and literary criticism as well as poetry, drama, and fiction. What was originally a therapeutic method became a literary cult, a salvatory faith, a surrogate for the lost faith. Analysing O'Neill's attitude towards love in general and sexual love in particular, Charles Glicksberg declares: "A lapsed catholic like Fitzgerald, O'Neill is always aware of the transcendental element in love, the dimension of the mystical, the ineffable, the numinous that includes and yet transcends the plane of physical passion – the power of love, in the fleeting fraction of time that measures out a life span, to hold at bay the forces of darkness and the ever-present threat of death."¹¹

Like Dreiser, O'Neill pictures the universe as basically aural. God is an efflux of energy that is infinite but, from the human point of view, meaningless. In such a godless universe, love is stripped of the aura of the sacred. O'Neill's naturalistic nihilism conditions his depiction of the dialectic of love and sex. The heart of his message emerges in *Welded*, when Michael Cape voices his realization: "To love the truth of life – to accept it and be exalted – that's the one faith left to us."¹²

Hemingway underlines the cruel necessity that compels men and women in war time to reach out desperately for fulfillment in love while they still have the opportunity, -- they be destroyed and left with nothing at the end. Hemingway in his fiction, thus, exalts 'the natural' man. It is the animal in man that is holy. Nature is not a moral teacher but it will not betray the heart that loves her truly. Viewed from this perspective, Hemingway appears as the spokesman of a romantic naturalism that effects a trans-valuation of the conventional notions of good and evil. The characters he presents are intensely concerned about their instinctual urges. The myth of romantic love as passion spiritualized, is debunked. The natural man has come into his own and is not to be cheated of his erotic happiness by moral taboos. Complete fulfillment in sexual love is what counts; the rest is the product of illusion and neurotic evasion.¹³

1.5.7 William Faulkner

Unlike many of the important writers of the lost generation or the sex-obsessed American novelists who have sprung up in the fifties and sixties, William Faulkner promulgates no mystique of sex. He propounds no thesis and points no moral. A naturalist in his attempt to depict the human condition in all its fascinating diversity, he does not pass moral judgement on his characters -- however criminal or depraved they may be if Faulkner is interested in examining the anomalies of sexual behavior, it is not because they provide him with a rich mine of sensational material, Faulkner never panders to the public. Though his fiction includes scenes of seduction, adultery, rape, incest, and sodomy, these are never brought in for their own sake but form part of a larger plan. They are designed principally to reveal the potentiality for evil present in each human being. Faulkner is aware of the profoundly irrational character of much human behavior and of the extent to which the biological will rather than abstract reason or ethical principles are in control. Faulkner had some knowledge of Freudianism and, like O'Neill, he took from the science of psychoanalysis what he could put to creative use namely those insights that confirmed his own observations and experience.¹⁴

1.5.8 Henry Miller

Talking about Henry Miller -- the prophet of the sexual revolution -- Karl Shapiro proclaims: "Miller writes hundreds of pages describing in the minutest and clearest detail his exploits in bed. Every serious reader of erotica has remarked about Miller that he is probably the only author in history who writes about such things with complete ease and naturalness." Like the mystics, Henry Miller deliberately seeks to focus on the most repulsive aspects of existence in order to recognise them as intrinsically beautiful, an organic part of the cosmic scheme of things. He glories in anality, and thus, as Kingsley Widmer points out, transmutes the naturalistic facet thus curiously brought into focus, into a metaphysical vision. Like the surrealists with whom he has much in common without swallowing their aesthetic as a whole, he finds everything in the world -- the ugly the hideous, the feculent, a source of wonder, a miracle in the making. Long before the beat writers made this transcendental discovery and intoned in rapt worship a hymn of praise for all things holy, Miller had included as an integral part of his philosophy of being. For strange as it may seem, there is in this joyous nihilist, a Transcendental echo.¹⁵ We shall discuss this transcendental aspect of Henry Miller in the subsequent units.

1.5.9 The Beat Generation

Lawrence Lipton, in *The Holy Barbarians* stresses that for the best generation, sex is more than a fountainhead of pleasure, it is a mystique Glickesberg avers: "their private language is rich in the multivalent ambiguities of reference so that they dwell in a sexualized universe of discourse. The singular uncompromising force of their

revolt against the odious cult of restraint is illustrated by their eagerness to dance in a public place. The social dance is but a disguised ritual for the expression of ungratified sexual desire. For this reason, too, their language is more forthright and earthy. The beatniks crave a sexual experience in which their whole being participates. Henry Miller is their literary patron saint whose fictional treatment gave inspired expression to the new religion of sex. In addition, they have been converted to Zen. Buddhism, with the glorification in the world is flowing. They make no attempt in their novels, or their critical proclamations, to reconcile Zen with their determined quest for the beatific bliss of the orgasm. . . . They are sex-obsessed, but they also resort to religious metaphors."¹⁶

1.5.10 Norman Mailer

As you read in Unit 1, section 1.3, Norman Mailer, the prophet of the hipsters declares in an interview: "After all, if my generation of writers represents anything if there is anything we have fought for, it is sexual revolution." You may note that we have included an article on Norman Mailer in the "Readings".

1.6 SUMMING UP

Sex is an integral and essential part of life. Freud's radical interpretation of the nature and functions of sexuality attracted the attention of the American writers in the twenties. Sex emerged as the new religion of life – a religion which the hipsters and the members of the beat generation enthusiastically took over. The naturalist writers focused their interest on the instinctual life of man. Dreiser, Anderson, O'Neill, Hemingway, and Faulkner depicted human nature without glossing over the biological facts, and the facts showed plainly that man was at bottom a promiscuous animal, the victim of his sexual compulsions. Hailing sex as the delivered rather than enslaver, a number of American writers went to great lengths to identify love with sex. The prophet of sexual revolution, Henry Miller deliberately tries to focus on the most repulsive aspects of existence in order to recognize them as intrinsically beautiful, an organic part of the cosmic scheme of things.

1.7 QUESTIONS

- i. Write a short note on the dialectic of sex-motif in American literature.
- ii. Write an essay (about 400 words) on the impact of Freud and psychoanalysis on the American writers.
- iii. Write a short note on "the Prophet of Sexual Revolution."

1.8 NOTES AND GLOSSARY

Notes

1. Charles I. Glicksberg, *The Sexual Revolution In American Literature*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971.
2. "The Realist", No. 40, December 1962, p. 15.
3. Helmut Thielicke, *The Ethics of Sex*. Translated by John Doberstein. New York: Ewawston, and London; Hareer & Row, 1964 p. 74.
4. See Frederick Hoffman, *Freudianism and the Literary Mind*. New York: Grove press, Inc. 1959, p p 63065.

5. C.G.Jung, *Modern Man In Search of a Soul*. Translated by W.S. Dell and Cary F Baynrs. London: Keagaw Paul Trewch, Trubner & co., 1941 p. 140.
6. Ginsberg, *The Sexual Reutilites*, p. 19.
7. Ibid, p. 31.
8. Somerset Maugham, *The Summing Up*. New York: Penguin Books Inc, 1946. p. 216.
9. Ginsberg, *The Sexual Revolution*, p. 7
10. Andrew Turnbull, *Scott Fitzgerald*. New York: Charles sCribner's Sons. 1962. p. 262.
11. Ginsberg, *The Sexual Revolution*, p. 72
12. Ibid, p.81
13. Ibid, p. 81
14. Ibid, p.97
15. Ibid, p.129
16. Ibid, p.155-156

Glossary

- This material is taken from **A Glossary of Literary Terms** by M.H. Abrams.

i. Stream of Consciousness:

It was a phrase used by William James to characterize the unbroken flow of thought and awareness in the waking mind; it has now been adopted to describe a narrative method in modern fiction. The stream of consciousness is a mode of narration that undertakes to capture the full spectrum and flow of a character's mental process, in which sense perceptions mingle with conscious and half-conscious thoughts, memories, feelings, and random associations.

ii. Interior monologue:

Some critics use "Stream of Consciousness" interchangeably with the term "Interior monologue". It is useful to use the former as the inclusive term: denoting all the diverse techniques employed by authors to describe or to represent the overall state and process of consciousness in a character. "Interior monologue" denotes specifically the technique that undertakes to reproduce the course and rhythm of consciousness just as it occurs in a character's mind, with no-or with minimal - intervention by the author as guide or commentator and without tidying the vagories of the mental process into grammatical sentences or into a logical and narrative order. The interior monologue - in its radical form - is sometimes described as the exact reproduction of consciousness.

iii. Surrealism:

"Surrealism" was launched as a concerted movement in France by Andre Breton's **Manifesto on Surrealism**, 1924. The expressed aim was a rebellion against all restraints on the free functioning of the human mind. These restraints included the logical reason, standard morality, social and artistic conventions and the control of artistic creation by forethought and intention. To ensure the unhampered operation of the deep mind, which they regarded as the only source of valid knowledge and art, surrealists turned to "automatic writing". The influence, direct or indirect, of surrealist innovations can be found in many modern writers in prose and verse who have broken with conventional modes of artistic organization to experiment with free associations, violated syntax, nonlogical and nonchronological order, dream like and nightmarish sequences, and the juxtaposition of bizarre, shocking, or seemingly unrelated images.

iv. **Apotheoses of Sex:**

If a particular thing is the apotheosis of something, it is an ideal or perfect example of it. For example: He seemed to be the apotheosis of generosity.

When a person's or a thing's apotheosis happens, they become or declared to be, a god or goddess. It means the writers like Norman Mailer, Jack Kerouac, Alex Ginsberg declared "sex" as a god or goddess.

UNIT 2 THE GREAT TRADITION

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 American Transcendentalism
- 2.3 Ralph Waldo Emerson
- 2.4 Henry David Thoreau
- 2.5 Other Members of Transcendentalist Club
- 2.6 Walt Whitman
- 2.7 Melville, Whittier, & Twain
- 2.8 20th Century Scenario
- 2.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.10 Questions
- 2.11 Notes & Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we have discussed (i) American transcendentalism (ii) the contribution made by Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, Whittier, Twain to American transcendentalism and (iii) the 20th century scenario.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

“The East has ever been a romantic puzzle to the West, the home of adventures like those of *Arabian Nights*, the abode of magic, the land of heart’s desire, one to which even men of waning faith may turn for confirmation in the hope that after all the spiritual counts”.

- Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan¹

The Oriental – Occidental intercourse began in Graeco-Roman times. The humanism, the idealism, and the spiritualism of the Oriental philosophies have been attracting the attention of the catholic, the eclectic, and the fertile minds of America for about two centuries.² It would be very interesting to know how far the American mind has been influenced, directly or indirectly, by the Oriental philosophies.³

Shortly after the American Declaration of Independence, American ships started sailing for India. The most important American ports connected with this vigorous trade between America and India were Salem and Boston. The American ships, from the Indian ports like Calcutta and Bombay, brought a great variety of Indian products: Indigo, sugar, gunny sacks, silk and cotton goods, and Indian classics translated into English by Sir Henry Thomas Colebrook, John Stevenson and others of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. In course of time the translations of Indian classics rendered by French scholars like Anquetil-Duperron, Alexandre Langlois, Eugene Burnouf, and J.H. Graçin de Tarry; by German scholars like Christian Larsen and Max Mueller, and by Indian scholars like Raja Rammohan Roy also reached the American shores. Moreover Indian wisdom reached America through the writings of British poets like Coleridge and Shelley, and German Philosophers like Herder and Schopenhauer also. Thus the splendrous expression and the sonorous music of the Vedic hymns; the lofty, esoteric thought of the Upanishadic seers; the profound insights and

unfathomable wisdom of the *Manu dharma Sastra*, the *Ramayana*, and the *Mahabharata*; the eclectic philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita* – which appealed to the idealists and the materialists, the men of contemplation and the men of action like-became accessible to the American intellectuals in the first quarter of nineteenth century.⁴

These seeds of oriental thought fell on the receptive soil of America, which was already, by that time, fertilised by religious movements like Puritanism, Quakerism, Calvinism, and Unitarianism⁴, Puritanism imparted a deep sense of religiousness and a pervasive moral outlook to Americans; Quakerism increased their mystical proclivities; Calvinism injected the idea of suprarational revelation into their minds; Unitarianism made them reject the idea of the Trinity and declare their belief that there was one god. Moreover, the American intellectuals of this period had catholic and eclectic minds. They learnt through their special upbringing to be responsive and sensitive to all great thought irrespective of region or religion. They had an idealistic disposition and a speculative bent of mind. They were deeply moral and religious people. They possessed unflagging optimism and staunch individualism. The outcome of the meeting between the great Oriental thought and the receptive American minds under propitious conditions was the birth of American Transcendentalism.

2.2 AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM

American Transcendentalism is so profound and so comprehensive that it is very difficult to define or describe it. Nevertheless, many critics of great reputation and immense discretion have attempted to define and describe it: "The very word 'Transcendental' has a German flavour", said Leyla Goren; and she dilated: "It was originally used by Kant, who replied to the empiricism of Locke that recognised nothing in the intellect not previously existent in the experience of the senses, by showing that at least one class of ideas did not come by experience. Kant said there were institutions of mind itself and called them Transcendental forms. The Kantian distinction between Reason and Understanding suited Emerson well".¹⁶ In his essay, "Transcendentalist," Emerson wrote: "What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us is idealism; idealism as it appears in 1842." Broadly, he compared it with "the very oldest of thoughts... Buddhism... an expression of it".⁷ When a critic like Frederick I. Carpenter proclaimed that American Transcendentalism was "primarily a reassertion of the mystical basis of all religion" and was therefore "primarily religious rather than philosophical," another critic called it "a distinct philosophical system" that was "essentially poetical." According to H.C. Goddard it was a literary movement, a philosophy and a religion all in one. Further, Kenneth Walter Cameron comprehensively described Transcendentalism as "a warm and intuitional religion, aesthetic, philosophical and ethical movement – the American tributary of European Romanticism, a theoretical and practical way of life and a literary expression within the tradition of 'idealism' – a new humanism based upon ancient classical or Neo-Platonic Super-naturalism and colored by Oriental mysticism"⁸. All the aforementioned definitions can be considered various interpretations of the same truth – "Ekam Sat Viprah Bahudha Vadanti".⁹

The Transcendentalist club or circle flourished in Concord, Massachusetts from 1836 for some years. The important members of the club were: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Frederick H. Hedge, Amos Bronson Alcott, George Ripley, James Freeman Clarke, Theodore Parker, Elizabeth Peabody and Margaret Fuller. They were, as mentioned earlier, receptive and fertile minds concerned with social reform and individualist who questioned authoritarian tradition and thinkers whose goal was the amelioration of mankind.

"Transcendentalism," said Robert E. Spiller, "emerged as a full-fledged movement of New England thought between 1815 and 1836. The first date marks the maturing of the liberalizing ministry of William Ellery Channing; the second, the publication of Emerson's 'Nature,' the original- and probably the best systematic expression of the Transcendentalist philosophy. Thereafter the movement continued to expand, first as a revolt against the continuing cultural dependence of America on Europe, and finally as a profound exploration of the spiritual foundations and moral implications of the new democracy. The source of this vitality lies in the intellectual background of transcendentalism; in its appropriation of certain insights of Puritan, Quaker and other colonial theologies".¹⁰

Renowned researchers, both American and Indian,¹¹ have proved that American Transcendentalism was profoundly influenced by Oriental thought.¹² Thus proclaimed Spiller: "The close affinity between the idealism of contemporary European philosophy and the romanticism of Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne, and Whitman must not be pressed to the point of identity or to the exclusion of other influences. . . . Nor was European philosophy the only such force on the nineteenth century American mind. . . . Historians have demonstrated the catalytic effect of Plato and Plotinus on Emerson and of the *Bhagavad Gita* and other Oriental talks and poems of Emerson and Thoreau".¹³ "It was Orientalism", declared V.K. Chari "that gave American transcendentalism its distinctive character and tone. Transcendentalism without orientalism is inconceivable".¹⁴

2.3 RALPH WALDO EMERSON

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) was the high priest of American Transcendentalism. "To Emerson," wrote Frederick I. Carpenter, "the word 'Asia' had an emotional as well as an intellectual meaning. 'Asia' was more than an Eastern continent, and it was more than the literature produced by that continent. It was a symbol for the unknown - for the other half of the world - for mystery, and romance, and poetry, and love, and religion".¹⁵ To young Emerson, Oriental books were recommended by his aunt, Mary Moody Emerson. Though he could not initially fathom the intricacies of Oriental thought for some years, he found in it later much material favourable to his own system of values and ideas. It made his own thought very rich and universal. According to him, Hindu philosophy expressed the core of Oriental thought. As a voracious reader, he read the following on oriental thought: Robert Southey's "the Curse of Kehama"; Sir William Jones's "Hymn to Narayana," *The Ordinances of Manu*, and fragmentary translations of *the Vedas and Upanishads* found in his works; Sir Charles Wilkins's *The Bhagavad Geeta*; Horace Hayman Wilson's *The Vishnu Purana*; Henry Thomas Colebrooke's *Essays on the Vedas*; Eugene Boumouf's *Bhagavat Purana*, and Raja Rammohan Roy's translation of *Several Principal Books*, etc. The Prince of New England Brahmins was deeply interested in Indian philosophical concepts like "Brahman",¹⁶ "Atman", "Paramatman", "Maya", "Karma", and "Punarjanma". His poems and essays like "Brahma",¹⁶ "Hamatreya",¹⁷ "Maya",¹⁸ "Illusions", "Representative men", "The Over-Soul", "the Progress of Culture", "Poetry and Imagination", "Inspiration," "Greatness," and his journal are permeated with the aroma of Indian thought. He declared in his journal: "The Indian teaching, through its clouds of legends, has yet a simple and grand religion, like a queenly countenance seen through a rich veil. It teaches to speak the truth, love others as yourself and to despise trifles. The East is grand and makes Europe a land of trifles."²⁰ Moreover, he thought that Hindu books were the best gymnastics for the mind²¹. He propagated Oriental ideas and ideals through the periodical, "The Dial".²² "Amidst this ceaseless, sleepless din and clash of Western materialism, this heat of restless energy, the character of Emerson" wrote. Pratap Chunder Mazoomdar, "shines upon India serene as the evening star. He seems to some of us to have been a geographic mistake. He ought to have been born in India. Perhaps Hindus were closer kinsmen to him than his own nation"²³ In the

same vein wrote Mahatma Gandhi, an admirer of Emerson: "The essays to my mind contain the teaching to see our own sometimes thus differently fashioned".²⁴ Thus the impact the Indian thought on Emerson is undeniable.²⁵

2.4 HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Emerson's bosom friend, Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) also showed avid interest in Oriental thought. His works, *Walden*, and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* reflect his exuberant and unreserved admiration for and his erudite knowledge of Indian scriptures.²⁶ Further evidence of his interest in Indian philosophy can be found in the fact that when he edited portions of the "Ethnical Scriptures" for "The Dial", he selected passages from "The Laws of Manu", "The Sayings of Confucius", "The Chinese Four Books", and "the Preaching of Buddha." From Langlois's French version of the *Harivamsa*, he translated a story "The Transmigration of Seven Brahmins" into English. He read the following Indian scriptures: Jones's translation of *Shakuntala*; Wilson's translation of the *Hitopadesa* and of the *Bhagavad Gita*; Stevenson's translation of the *Harivamsa*; and Garaisé de Tassy's *Histoire de la littérature hindouie et Hindoustan* and other books. He was deeply interested in Indian discussions and views on individualism, transmigration of souls, solitude, action without attachment, austerity, chastity, divinity, morality, renunciation, and illusion. Thoreau, with all admiration for Indian sages, declared: "... the contemplations of those Indian sages have influenced, and still influence, the intellectual development of mankind. In comparison with the philosophers of the East, we may say that modern Europe has not yet given birth to none".²⁷ In *Walden*, he proclaimed: "In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the *Bhagavad Geeta*, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial".²⁸ Further, in his letter (dated 10 August 1849) to his friend, H.G.C. Blake, he wrote: "Depend upon it that rude and careless as I am, I would fain practice the Yoga faithfully... To some extent, and at rare intervals even I am a Yogi".²⁹ Thoreau's main achievement was not the creation of a system, but the creation of himself. Thoreau, like the ancient Hindus, led a simple and ascetic life; and believed that solitude and contemplation would enable one to attain spiritual heights.³⁰ Moreover, Thoreau, like ancient Indians, did not frown upon sensuous pleasures. "See, hear, smell, taste etc., while these senses are fresh and pure", he said.³¹ He was, unlike many, not shocked by Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.³² He commended the Hindus for their frankness in discussing sexual relations. He wrote: "We are so degraded that we cannot speak simply of the necessary functions of human nature. In earlier ages, in some countries, every function was reverently spoken of and regulated by law. Nothing was too trivial for the Hindu law-giver, however offensive it may be to modern taste. He teaches how to eat, drink, cohabit, void excrement and urine and the like, elevating what is mean, and does not falsely excuse himself by calling these things trifles".³³ Further, "Even in style", said John T. Reid, "there is an affinity between the Indian classics and Thoreau's writing (.....): one finds in them the same love of the pithy, often startling epigram making oracular and arbitrary statements".³⁴ Thus there is an indelible impact of Indian thought on Thoreau.

2.5 OTHER MEMBERS OF TRANSCENDENTALIST CLUB

Other members of Transcendentalist Club Frederick H. Hedge, Orestes A. Brownson, and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody derived inspiration from Indian idealism and tried to propagate Indian ideas and ideals through their writings as well as deeds. Among

them, Alcott was the most zealous propagator. A haunter of libraries he was, he read Wilkins's *The Bhagavad Geeta*, Joseph Marie Degerando's *Comparative History of Philosophical Systems*, Heinrich Ritter's *The History of Ancient Philosophy*, Spence Hardy's *Eastern Monotheism* and other books. The passages on food in *The Bhagavad Geeta* impressed the rabid vegetarian in him. His subsequent experiment of 'Fruitlands' became well known among visionaries. He planned an ambitious project, "Mankind Library", which was to be a series of collected sacred books, including Oriental literature. He was primarily responsible for popularising Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia* in America.³⁵

2.6 WALT WHITMAN

On reading the first edition of the *Leaves of Grass* written by Walt Whitman, Thoreau commented that the book was "wonderfully like the Orientals." Emerson found in it a mixture of the *Bhagavad Geeta* of the Hindus and the New York Herald. Sir Edwin Arnold and Romain Rolland perceived the Indian parallels in Whitman. Swami Vivekananda read and re-read the "Song of Myself" and concluded that Whitman was a great Sanyasin. Swami Ram Tirtha too found in Whitman a great Sadhu. Rabindranath Tagore declared that no American caught the Oriental spirit so well as Whitman. Anand K. Coomaraswamy pointed out many parallels between Buddhist thought and Whitman's in *Buddha and the Gospel of Buddhism*. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, in his *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, wrote: 'Whitman turns to the East in his anxiety to escape from the complexities of civilisation and the bewilderment of a baffled intellectualism'.³⁶ V.K. Chari, an authority on this aspect of Whitman, averred: "Whether impelled by native or foreign influences or by his own innate disposition, Whitman came to express in his poems a body of mystical beliefs which are also the fundamental assumptions of the Hindu Advaita Vedanta. The *Leaves of Grass* is to be studied and understood rather as a body of mystical verse comparable to the apocalyptic utterances of the *Upanishads and the Gita* than as a finished work of art. In respect to some of his fundamental beliefs Whitman approximates the Advaita Vedantic philosophy. In fact, the affinities are so deep that Whitman's writings lend themselves to a consistent interpretation in the light of the Vedanta".³⁷ T.R. Rajasekhariah in *The Roots of Whitman's Grass* confirmed that Whitman read Indian scriptures.³⁸ Thus scholars, both American and Indian, averred that the poetry of Whitman contained many parallels to the philosophical and religious concepts of India. Walt Whitman's admiration for the East is reflected in the following passage! "The East-what a subject for a poem; Indeed where else a more pregnant, more splendid one? The East, answering all lands, all ages, peoples, touching all senses, here, immediate, now-The East-long stretching... the Orient, the gardens of Asia, the womb of history and song... Always the East-old, how incalculably old; And yet here the same-ours yet, fresh as a rose... today and always will be".³⁹ His writings like "Democratic Vistas," "Song of Myself"⁴⁰ "A Broadway pageant"⁴¹ "Song of the Broad Axe",⁴² "Passage to India",⁴³ "Salut au Monde",⁴⁴ "Song of the Redwood Tree",⁴⁵ and "Chanting the Square Deific"⁴⁶ contain the essence of the profound Indian philosophy. Like ancient Indians, Whitman recognised the important role played by sex in life. In "A Backward Glance over Travel'd Roads", Whitman reaffirmed the sexual bias of his book: "*Leaves of Grass* is avowedly the song of sex... The espousing principle of those lines... gives breath of life to my whole scheme".⁴⁷ Like Tantriks, he believed that sexual ecstasy would lead to supraconsciousness. Thus we find considerable impact of Indian thought on Whitman.

2.7 MELVILLE, WHITTIER, & TWAIN

Herman Melville (1819-1891) did a great deal of haphazard reading about the hoary Indian past. Besides Jones's and Wilkins's translations, he was acquainted with W.J. Mickle's essay, "Inquiry into the Religious Tenets and Philosophy of the Brahmins";

and Thomas Maurice's *Indian Antiquities*; Melville's knowledge of Indian mythology is reflected in his works like *Moby Dick*.⁴⁹

John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892), a contemporary of Emerson was also influenced by Indian thought. Besides a copy of *The Bhagavad Gita* lent to him by Emerson, Whittier read Alger's *The Poetry of the Orient*; Clarke's *Ten Great Religions*; Bayard Taylor's *Poems of the Orient*; John Muir's *Metrical Translations from... Sanskrit Writers*; Kendersley's *Specimen's of the Hindu Theatre*; Max Mueller's *Sacred Books of the East*; and Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*. In his poems: "Miriam", "the Cypress Tree of Ceylon," "The Dead Feast of the Kol-Folk," "The Khan's Devil," and "The Browing of Soma," Whittier's admiration for Indian mythology and history is strikingly present.⁵⁰

Mark Twain also showed avid interest in India and Indian culture. In his travelogue entitled *Following the Equator*, he recorded his impressions on his trip to Bombay, Banaras, Allahabad, Darjeeling and Calcutta; his account of his meeting with a Sadhu in Banaras is interesting and instructive. He declared: "India is the only foreign land I ever day dream about or deeply long to see again".⁵¹ "Mark Twain", said John T. Reid, "found Hindu customs, rituals, and traditions a fascinating subject, particularly as he saw them in Banaras. He confesses that he believed Hindu theology to be too intricate for his comprehension, but with the warmth of his human understanding he found in the faith of the Hindus something which he instinctively recognised as genuine and remarkable."⁵²

Thus all the foremost American writers of the nineteenth century were deeply touched by the East. Even later several American intellectuals of exceptional sensibility evinced keen interest in Eastern thought.⁵³

2.8 TWENTIETH CENTURY SCENARIO

In the twentieth century, many great American writers like Eugene O'Neill,⁵⁴ Theodore Dreiser,⁵⁵ John Steinbeck,⁵⁶ T.S. Eliot, and Henry Miller were influenced by Eastern thought.

T.S. Eliot, did courses on Sanskrit, Pali, and Patanjali's *Yogabhashya* under famous indologists like Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More, and James Haughton Woods at Harvard University. Besides the books on Sanskrit and Pali languages, Eliot read *The Vedas. The Principal Upanishads, The Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Yoga aphorisms of Patanjali. The Bhagavad Gita*, texts on Hinayana Buddhism, and Sankaracharya's works like *Vivekachudamani*. His poems like *The Wasteland* and *Four Quartets*, and his plays like *the Family Reunion* and *The Cocktail Party* reflect his knowledge of Hinduism and Buddhism.⁵⁷

Henry Miller (1895-1980), the sage of Big Sur, also belonged to this great tradition. Even a cursory reader of his writings: *The Cosmological Eye, Stand Still like the Hummingbird, Sunday After the War, Tropic of Cancer, Tropic of Capricorn* and other books, would not miss Henry Miller's references to and quotations from Oriental classics, Oriental personalities and Oriental concepts. As an inveterate reader, Miller showed interest in oriental philosophy even at an early age. The writings of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman influenced him to become an ardent admirer and serious student of Eastern culture. In his writings, there are some passages and situations wherein the Oriental influence is direct and unmistakable; in some other places one finds some similarities between Oriental thought and Henry Miller's.⁵⁸

The lives and the works of men like T.S. Eliot and Henry Miller illustrate a tendency in modern times not unlike the Transcendentalism of an earlier day in New England.

"These Transcendentalists," said William York Tindall, "are not a group united by locality or friendship like their predecessors in New England, but they have been forced into a pattern by the times and by their romantic aspiration."⁵⁸ Thus the Great Tradition of Transcendentalism-of love of and admiration for Oriental thought-has been continuing for centuries and, perhaps, will continue forever.

2.9 LET US SUM UP

Transcendentalism emerged as a full-fledged movement of New England thought between 1815 and 1836. The first date marks the maturing of the liberalizing ministry of William Ellery Channing; the second, the publication of Emerson's 'nature', the original and probably the best systematic expression of the Transcendentalist philosophy. The movement continued to expand, first as a revolt against the continuing cultural dependence of America on Europe, and finally as a profound exploration of the spiritual foundations and moral implications of the new democracy. It was orientalism that gave American transcendentalism its distinctive character and tone. Transcendentalism without orientalism is inconceivable. Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Melville, Whittier, Twain drew a lot of inspiration from Indian thought. In the 20th century, many great American writers like O'Neill, Dreiser, Steinbeck, Eliot, and Henry Miller were influenced by Indian thoughts. The lives and works of men like T.S. Eliot and Henry Miller illustrate a tendency in modern times not unlike the transcendentalism of an earlier day in New England. These transcendentalists are not a group united by locality or friendship, but they have been forced into a pattern by the times and by their romantic aspirations.

2.10 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the Transcendentalist movement at length
2. Analyse the influence of Indian thought on Emerson
3. Analyse the impact of Eastern philosophy on Thoreau and Whitman.
4. Discuss the 20th century scenario in terms of Eastern influences.

2.11 NOTES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

1. S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* 2nd ed. (1940); rpt. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1975), p.251.
2. "For a good many years writers of England and America troubled by the civilization around them, have turned to the East. To some it has meant mystery, color, and freedom from habit, but to more it has promised a spiritual enlargement which the West appears to have denied". From William York Tindall, "Transcendentalism in Contemporary Literature", in *The Asian Legacy and American Life* ed Arthur E. Christy (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 175.
3. "Indeed the civilization of our modern world is a product of the interchange between the eastern and western hemispheres; and there are peculiar reasons why the American manifestations of the reciprocal contacts are particularly worthy of study. The New World from the time of Columbus, has stood midway between Europe and Asia. It is the laboratory in which many values are tested, the field in which everything from oriental flora and fauna to exotic modes of life and thought is being domesticated". From Arthur E. Christy, "The sense of the past", in *Asian Legacy and American Life*, p. 1.

4. Also "The Spirit of the East, through the genius of its great thinkers, has been made available to the West and has found interpreters and sympathetic readers through the course of America's literary history. At no time has that interacting influence been greater or of more importance than now" *Studies in American Literature* p.173.
5. "Even before the Indian doctrines were introduced into the country, there already existed in America a predisposition towards Vedantism". V.K. Chari, "Whitman and Indian Thought" (Banaras: A Ph.D Dissertation submitted at Banaras Hindu University, 1950), p.18. Also "In the American tradition there is an element of mysticism bearing a remote affinity with certain Vedantic concepts" J.P.R. Rayapati, *Early American Interest in Vedic Literature and Vedantic Philosophy* (Bombay: Asia Book House, 1973) p.24
6. Leyla Goren, *Elements of Brahmanism in the Transcendentalism of Emerson* (New York: 1959)
7. Donald N. Koster, *Transcendentalism in America* (Boston: Twayne, 1975), p.5
8. Quoted in *Transcendentalism in America* p.8
9. It means: "There is one Truth; Scholars describe it in different ways".
10. Robert E. Spiller, et al, ed., *Literary History of the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1975), p.355
11. Arthur E. Christy, Frederick I. Carpenter, Gay Wilson Allen, Leyla Goren, Dale Riepe, Chaman Lal, Swami Paramananda, S. Radhakrishnan, P.C. Mazoomdar, and V.K. Chari
12. There are some prejudiced critics who understated the importance of Eastern influence.
13. Spiller, *Literary History* pp.355-356
14. V.K. Chari, "Whitman and Indian Thought". P.29
15. Frederick I. Carpenter, *Emerson and Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930)", Introduction, p.ix.
16. Critics, both American and Indian recognised the resemblance between Emerson's 'Brahma' and the following sloka of the *Bhagavad Gita*:
ya enam vethi hantaram
yati cai nam manyate hatam
ubhau tau na vijanito
na yam hanti na hanyate (2.19)
(He who thinks that this slays and he who thinks that this is slain, both of them fail to perceive the truth; this one neither slays nor is slain)" S. Radhakrishnan, *The Bhagavad Gita*, 2nd ed. (1970: rpt. Bombay: Blackie & Son (India) Ltd., 1975), p/107.
17. 'Hāmatreya' was inspired by a passage of the *Vishnu Purana*. This passage is about the vanity and ignorance of kings who take pride in their possessions and conquests, forgetting that death and the earth will reclaim them.
18. "Illusion works impenetrable
Weaving webs innumerable.....('Maya')
Emerson's knowledge of the Indian concept of 'Maya' is reflected in his poem 'Maya'.
19. "Without any question, Emerson is the first great American literary figure in whose thought and works the prominent mark of India is evident. In fact, he is probably the first major author of the Western World in whose world view the ideas of Hindu philosophy were clearly and demonstrably etched" *Indian Influences*, p.19.
20. Quoted in Krishnanad Joshi, *The West Looks at India* (Bareilly: Parkash Book Dept., 1969), p.14
21. Quoted *Indian Influences*, p.28
22. "He seldom assimilated any foreign idea till he had come upon it several times. When he did find such an idea to his liking, he copied the significant outline of it into his journals, and gradually absorbed it more completely into his mind. Finally, he reinterpreted it in his Essays, and gave it new connection and meaning". *Emerson and Asia*, p.13

23. Quoted in Arthur E. Christy, *The Orient In American Transcendentalism* (New York: octagon Books Inc., 1963), pp. 263-64
24. Quoted in Frederick I. Carpenter, "American Transcendentalism in India", *Emerson Society quarterly*, II Quarter, 1963, p.59.
25. "...to have shown that Emerson was pre-occupied with oriental thought and that he possessed certain temperamental affinities with it, is far from proving that he accepted the organised Vedanta system in toto. There was much in the system of which he remained ignorant. He took only that which he could accept and mix successfully without inhibitions and preconceptions". *The Orient*, p.182 also, "Emerson was the best of Brahmins only in one sense. Like them he had acquired wisdom and spiritualism partly from their own books. He had reinterpreted their ideas in his essays and poems" and "If Emerson did not accept the whole, of Hindu Literature, he did value the essential spirit of it". *Emerson and Asia*, pp.25-26 and 155.
26. "It has been evident, I believe, that Thoreau not only was well-acquainted with some of the key-books of Hindu thought, but also found in them nutritious food for meditation and even some patterns of living which fitted rather closely with those woven by his own inclinations. It is more doubtful, although possible, that he understood or accepted fully the inmost spirit of the Hindu doctrines". *Indian Influences*, p.42.
27. Quoted in Krishnanad Josh, *The West Looks at India*, p.8.
28. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (New Delhi: S. Chand & Co., 1975), p.266
29. Quoted in Walter Harding, *A Thoreau Handbook*, (New York: New York University Press, 1959), p.68
30. "I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time. To be in company, even with the best, is soon weasome and dissipating. ... I never found a companion that was so companionable as solitude". *Walden*, p.27.
31. Quoted in *A Thoreau Handbook*, p.133
32. "Most surprising of all, for his times, was his frequent practice of wading along the steams of Concord in the nude. Modern sunbaths have hailed him as 'the pioneer American nudist'" *A Thoreau handbook*, p.121
33. *Walden*, p.199
34. *Indian Influences*, p.37
35. *Indian Influences*, p.46-47
36. *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, p.249
37. V.K. Chari "Whitman and Indian Thought", *Western Humanities Review*, 13, No.3 (Summer 1950), 291-301.
38. See T.R. Rajesekhariah, *The Roots of Whitman's Grass* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson Univ. Press, 1970)
39. Quoted in *The West Looks at India*, p.43
40. In his book: *Walt Whitman and Yoga*, O.K. Nambiar proved that Whitman's account in Sec.5 "song of Myself", had described the whole Yogic movement and that the incidents and symbols he referred to were similar to those mentioned in the works on "Kundalini".
41. In "A Broadway Pageant" Whitman characterized the Indians as the race of Brahma and paid glowing tributes to their intense spiritual qualities, hailing the Oriental as the originatress.
42. In this poem, India is referred to by Walt Whitman as "the most ancient Hindustanee"
43. In "Passage to India", the poet celebrated the marriage of intellectual life of the West with the spiritual life of the East.
44. In this poem, with great love he referred to the rivers and the hills of India and visualized the immensity of India in her rivers and hills.
45. In this poem the poet talked about the reputation gained by Indian traders and about the ships coming from and going to India.
46. Whitman in this poem, identified himself with the Hindu god Brahma and says "old Brahma I" and added that he was both ancient and modern and so time did not affect him.

47. Quoted in James E. Miller, Jr. et al., ed. *Start with the Sun: Studies in Cosmic Poetry* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1960), p.28
48. See O.K. Nambiar, *Mahayogi Walt Whitman: New Light on Yoga* (Bangalore: Jeevani Publications, 1978)
49. See Mohamed Elias, "the Indian of Melville and Mark Twain" Trivendrum: A Ph.D. Dissertation, 1977)
50. See *Indian Influences*
51. Quoted in Mohamed Elias, p.68
52. See *Indian Influences*, p.74
53. Arthur Lincoln Forthingam (1859-1923); William James (1842-1920); Charles Rockwell Lanman (1850-1941); Josiah Royce (1855-1916); Henry Clarke Warren (1854-1899); James Flaughton Woods (1864-1935); George Foot Moore (1851-1931); Irving Babbitt (1865-1933); George Santayana (1863-195); John Dewey (1859-1952); Anand K. Coomaraswamy (1863-1947); Maurice Bloomfield (1855-1952); Edward Washburn Hopkins (1857-1963) Robert Ernest Home (1877-1948); Walter Eugene Clark (1881-1960) Franklin Edgerton (1885-1963); Clarence H. Hamilton (1886-); Will Durant (1885-1967); Waldo Frank (1889-1967); George William Brown (1870-1932); Stuart C. Northrop (1893-); Charles William Morris (1901-); Charles A. Moore (1901-1967); Joseph Campbell (1904-85); Christopher Isherwood (1904-85); Gerald Heard (1889-); Dale Riepe (1918-); Alex Wayman (1921-); William Henry Harris (1922-1966); Richard Hugh Robinson (1926-); and several others. Also, "though the early nineteenth century American might have conceived of India as a land of snake charmers, idols, elephants, and mysteriously veiled ladies, a land of extreme wealth and extreme poverty, and of discordant and mutually antagonistic groups of peoples-the end of the century found a much more widespread realization of the richness of its arts, the depth of its culture, the value of its philosophy, and the human quality of its people", and "the interest in the Orient proceeded so rapidly with the turn of the century that it might almost be maintained at the present time that the proper place to study Oriental art is in the American museums from Boston to Seattle-and in the departments of oriental studies in the American universities, from Harvard to the University of California". *Studies in American Literature*, pp.215-216 and 223.
54. His *Marco Millions*, *Lasarus Laughed*, and *the Great God Brown* are suffused with the strong flavour of Eastern thought.
55. See R.N. Mukherjee, "Dreiser's use of Hindu Thought in *the Stoic American Literature*, 43, No.2 (May 1971), 273-78
56. See M.R. Satyanarayana, "the Unknown God of John Steinbeck", *Indian Journal of American Studies*, 3 (June 1973), pp 98-102. Steinbeck's novel, *To a God Unknown* contains references to the *Rig Veda* and some myths of ancient India.
57. In this regard, T.S. Eliot said, "Two years spent in the study of Sanskrit under Charles Lanman, and a year in the mazes of Patanjali's metaphysics under the guidance of James Woods, left me in a state of enlightened mystification". T.S. Eliot, *After Strange Gods* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934), pp.40-41. Also, see Damayanti Ghosh, *Indian Thought in T.S. Eliot* (Calcutta: Sanskrit Pusthak Bhandar, 1978); and A.N. Dwivedi "Indian Thought and Tradition in T.S. Eliot's Poetry". (Meerut: A Ph.D. Dissertation submitted at Meerut University, 1973)

UNIT 3 THE OUTSIDER

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Omnivorous Reader
- 3.3 Emotional Life
- 3.4 Beginnings of a Writer
- 3.5 Paris Days
- 3.6 Big Sur Days and After
- 3.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.8 Questions
- 3.9 Notes & Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we have discussed the intellectual and emotional aspects of Henry Miller's personality. Also, we have discussed Miller's Paris days, his visit to Greece, his Big Sur days and his writings from the beginning to the end of his life. In other words, we have discussed how Henry Miller started his life as a seeker of truth, how he passed through his life through many phases and experiences, how he became a vagabond, a bohemian, and outside and how he ultimately reached the stage of a sage.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

I am a sinner and you are a sinner, but someday the sinner will be Brahma again, will someday attain Nirvana, will someday become a Buddha, ... *I learned through my body and soul that it was necessary for me to sin, that I needed lust, that I had to strive for property and experience nausea and the depths of despair in order to learn not to resist them, in order to love the world, and no longer compare it with some kind of desired imaginary world, some imaginary vision of perfection, but to leave it as it is, to love it and be glad to belong to it.*

From Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*¹

The life of everybody is a road to himself, to self realization... No man has ever yet attained to self-realization yet he strives after it, one plodding, another with less effort, as best as he can. Each one carries the remains of his birth, slime and eggshells, with him to the end.

From Hermann Hesse's *Demian*²

There's the sensual me, the philosophical me, the religious me, the aesthetic me, I like to regard myself as many-faceted ... I can talk on different levels. I can talk gutter language and I can talk like an angel.

From Henry Miller's *My Life and Times*³

My emphasis in the last twenty years is in moving from doing to being. *I am more interested in being than doing.*

From Henry Miller's *My Life and Times*⁴

To parents of German descent, Henry Miller was born in the Yorkville section of New York on 26 December 1891.⁵ His father's side consisted of jovial and convivial people while his mother's of austere and abstemious people. Miller seemed to have inherited the best qualities of the people of both sides. When Miller was about a year old, his parents moved to Brooklyn area, Miller went to school there and to the last day of his life retained much of his Brooklyn accent. About his life in the streets of Brooklyn, Miller wrote with nostalgia: "To be born in the street means to wander all your life, to be free. It means accident and incident, drama, movement. It means, above all, dream. A harmony of irrelevant facts which gives your wanderings a metaphysical certitude. In the street you learn what human beings really are, otherwise, or afterwards, you invent them. What is not in the open street is false, derived that is to say literature.../In my dreams I come back to the 14th Ward as a Paranoiac returns to his obsessions".⁶

3.2 OMNIVOROUS READER

Miller was very fond of books even at the school level. *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Romances of Rider Haggard*, *Alice In Wonderland* and other books introduced him to the world of imagination and adventure. Flabbergasted by Miller's love of books, his grandfather complained to his parents that the boy read too much. The stories of his relatives who lived in Germany and other parts of Europe and the lectures of visiting lecturers like Dr. Brown excited him and made him think about distant lands in Asia, Africa, and Europe. As he was a prize pupil, Miller's teachers and neighbours were very fond of him. Even as a boy, Miller was convivial and gregarious and made many friends-one of them being Emil Schnellock. Regarding Miller's penchant for friendship and his friends, Alfred Perles wrote: "Henry had always had a talent for making friends. His sympathy, his enthusiasm, and exuberance were infectious... Although he soon became the hero of the local dead-end kids, he never quite became a dead-end kid himself. He was aloof, curious, and detached... Henry treated his friends with great gentleness and affection, but he was not unaware of their deficiencies and idiosyncrasies.../Although superficially obedient as a child, Henry always went his own way. He picked his friends for reasons of his own, and whether his parents approved of them or not was a matter of indifference to him." Along with his friends-at a later stage-he formed associations such as "Deep Thinkers" and "Xerxes Society." Hockey, ice skating, Boxing, Wrestling, Music, and Dance were some of their activities.⁷

Though he was busy with all these activities, the bibliophile in Miller was always active and aggressive. He devoured the Greek classics, the Elizabethan plays, the works of the Restoration period, and the writings of Goethe, Schiller, Coleridge, and Shelley. Miller was so fond of books that he frequently dreamt that he was in possession of a big library. The books he read supplied the food necessary for his thought and imagination. Besides books, the lively theatre of New York also helped him to enliven his imagination.

Miller's financial positions did not allow him to attain his goal of becoming a Yale man. Having failed to get a fellowship at Cornell, he joined as a freshman at City College, New York. The dull academic routine bored the lover of freedom and variety in him and drove him out of the college.

Later, for a period of ten years or more, Miller worked at a great variety of jobs- as dish-washer, bill sticker, book salesman, liquor salesman, typist, librarian, charity worker, insurance collector, mechanic, garbage collector, gymnasium instructor and drifted across the country and back.

During this period, Miller continued his education on his own by reading tomes, attending lectures, and discussing with famous or unknown people. He sometimes

bought books and magazines on his own and sometimes he borrowed books from libraries like Brooklyn Public Library. He read Sinnett's *Esoteric Buddhism*, Madame Blavatsky's *the Letters from the Mahatmas*, and the *Works of Rabindranath Tagore*; he inbibed the philosophies of Heraclitus, Marcus Aurelius, and Petronius; Nietzsche, Bergson, and Spencer; he enjoyed the writings of Jack London, Walt Whitman, Joseph Conrad, and Leo Tolstoy.⁸ The friendship of Stanley Borowski, Emil Scannelock, William Dewar, and Robert Hamilton Challacombe, profited him immensely. Challacombe,⁹ a believer in Theosophy divined that Miller had a vast reservoir of spirituality within him. He attended the lectures of the ex-evangelist, Benjamin Fay Mills. These lectures deepened his interest in theosophy in particular and spirituality in general. He attended Emma Goldman's lectures religiously and listened to them attentively. Her profound theories of anarchism influenced him. These meanderings in the world of thought and imagination enabled him to discover his vocation, writing. His first serious attempt at writing was an essay on Nietzsche's Anti-Christ. Miller tried to express himself because that was the means by which he could get to know himself and his unknown possibilities. He realized that self-expression would lead first to his evolution as a man and then to self-realization. In 1917 Miller met John Cowper Powys, the author of *Visions and Revisions* and tried to understand his views on self, society and the cosmos. At his father's tailor shop also-where he worked as a tailor for sometime-Miller met men of letters like Frank Harris, Walter Pach and Boardman Robinson. These acquaintances boosted his interest in the writer's profession. In these days he maintained a small note book entitled, "The Intellectual Tailor's Son." The growth of Miller as a thinker can be seen from the following extract taken from his note-book. "To tell the truth, I am getting more disgusted and pessimistic everyday over the situation here in America. It may be that I am living in a narrow sphere, being only a tailor, but from using my powers of observation, I am able to form some judgment of the masses that surround me and I can truthfully say that I loathe them thoroughly. Their own sheer stupidity will be the death of them."¹¹

3.3 EMOTIONAL LIFE

Miller's emotional life-during this period-was full of conflicts and tribulations. He had a sordid affair-for seven years, - with a widow, Pauline who was old enough to be his mother. After disentangling himself from the clutches of the widow, Miller married a pianist, Beatrice who was conservative and pusillanimous. In September 1919, Beatrice gave birth to his daughter, Barbara whose birth compelled him to settle down to a steady job.¹²

3.4 BEGINNINGS OF A WRITER

At Western Union, New York, Miller started at the bottom in the typical American tradition, but after a few months' apprenticeship, he reached the top and became its personnel manager. The man who hired Miller must have sized up his quick perception, his ability to manage people, and his essential toughness.¹³ It was a dull, drab, soul killing and heart-breaking job. He had to interview, hire, and fire messengers everyday. He met all kinds of people-mostly-the desperate and derelict. They educated him in cynicism and humanism; they made him altruistic, compassionate, and even hard-boiled; they enabled him to realize how hollow was the so called successful life. The experience opened his eyes and caused a spiritual reawakening in him. In his *Tropic of Capricorn*, Miller gave a graphic picture of Western Union-which he humorously called the Cosmodemonic Telegraph Company or the Cosmoccoccic Telegraph Company in the following manner, "It was a slaughter-house, so help me God. The thing was senseless from the bottom up. A waste of men, material and effort. A hideous force against a backdrop of sweat and misery. The whole system was so rotten, so inhuman, so lousy, so hopelessly corrupt

and complicated, that it would have taken a genius to put any sense or order into it, to say nothing of human kindness or consideration. I was up against the whole rotten system of American labor, which is rotten at both ends"¹⁴

One day the Vice-president of Western Union hinted that Miller might write a sort of Horatio Alger book about the messengers. Miller wanted to take the opportunity to vent his fury against the company and the American dream and to wipe Horatio Alger out of the North American consciousness.¹⁵ In 1922, Miller wrote his first book—"Clipped Wings" during a three week vacation. It was the story of twelve Western Union messengers.¹⁶ The characters were out of Dostoevski: gentle souls, insulted and injured, who run amok or suffer violence; the stories are full of bitterness and horror, ending in murder or suicide, usually both. The book was bad, inadequate, and faulty, the author confessed; but it gave him the necessary urge and impetus to go on writing. "I had to learn," Miller said, "as I soon did, that one must give up everything and not do anything else but write, that one must write and write and write, even if everybody in the world advises you against it, even if nobody believes in you"¹⁸

In 1924, when he firmly decided to be a writer and to give himself to it completely, Miller quit Western Union: he resolved never to take up another job and to live by writing. Walt Whitman had proclaimed himself his "one master absolute" His ardent admirer, Miller wanted to follow his master, Emulating Whitman he peddled his prose-sketches from door to door. During this period, Miller wrote two novels, "This gentle World" (or "Moloch") and "Crazy Cock," which were not published.

By this time Miller had divorced Beatrice and married June, the femme fatale of his autobiographical novels. June encouraged her husband to write, deployed her charms in selling his prose sketches, and supported him financially though she made him suffer a lot in the later phase of their married life.

In 1928 she found the necessary money which permitted her and her husband to spend a year in Europe; the trip opened up new vistas for Miller. He went to Paris again in 1930 to live and write there. Thus the life of a vagabond in New York ended and the life of an expatriate in Paris began.¹⁹

As Ezra Pound proclaimed: "Paris is the laboratory of ideas; it is there that poisons can be tested, and new modes of sanity be discovered. It is there that the antiseptic conditions of the laboratory exist. That is the function of Paris." Dissatisfied and disillusioned with the overwhelming material values, the lack of spiritual depth, the mechanisation, the falsity, the hypocrisy, and the repression that were present in American civilization,²⁰ many an American artist left America to be an expatriate in Paris—the citadel of culture and the El Dorado of artists.²¹ When a number of expatriate Americans were asked: 'why do Americans live in Europe?' they replied as follows "because an artist needs a place away from home' (Gertrude Stein); 'because in America there are no facilities for the enjoyment of leisure' (Halaire Hiler); 'because in Europe there is less interference with one's private life' (McAlmon); 'because in America each citizen functions with pride in the American conspiracy against the individual' (Key Boyle).²² Moreover, the factors such as: a favourable rate of exchange, the ideal conditions for a bohemian life, a chance to criticize one's own country from a distance, and the freedom to make one's life according to personal taste are also responsible for the enticing attraction of Europe for American artists.

3.5 PARIS DAYS

Being a frustrated American artist, Miller found Paris very congenial and ideal for the fulfilment of his ambitions. In an interview, he told George Wickes, "...I found a freedom such as I never knew in America. I found contact with people so much

easier—that is, the people that I enjoyed talking to. I met more of my own kind there. Above all I felt that I was tolerated... In America I never felt that".²³ By the time Miller entered Paris, the prosperous Twenties²⁴ were over and the Great Depression of the Thirties²⁵ just began. During his first two years in Paris, Miller lived in penury; but according to him, starving in Paris was better than thriving in New York; this experience gave him a wealth of new material for his books²⁶. With his wits, his conversational skills and his charm, Miller made several friends and lived on their generosity.²⁷ The education of his senses continued here²⁸. Miller found erotic life in Paris harmonious and joyous. He led the life of a bohemian²⁹ and had adventures and encounters in bars and bedrooms, warehouses, streets and trains.

With his penchant for friendship, Miller got acquainted with Walter Lowenfels, Samuel Putnam, Dos Passos, Sherwood Anderson, and John Steinbeck. Michael Frankel, Lawrence Durrell, Alfred Perles, and Anais Nin became his close friends. With his acquaintances and friends, Miller had myriads of discussions and widened his intellectual and spiritual horizons. When he was asked to help a youngman, Millard Fillmore Osman who was a friend of June in writing his thesis for an advanced degree in Psychology, Miller studied and discussed the intricate problems of Psychology. As a result of his association with Anais Nin, Miller started showing interest in the work of Otto Rank,³⁰ the psychoanalyst and the author of *Art and Artist*, and *The Trauma of Birth*. During this period he kept a 'Dream book', where from he got material later for his novels.³¹

In his emotional life some remarkable developments took place. June visited Paris a number of times, made Miller suffer a lot, and finally got divorce from him. Meanwhile, the friendship between Miller and Anais Nin grew.³² Nin became his benefactor, counsellor, and guide. She persuaded him to believe that he had a destiny to work out but not a fate to suffer,³³ Nin boosted his confidence and encouraged him to complete the projects on his hands.

The major projects that Miller was working on during this period were: revision of *Tropic of Cancer*, and the drafts of *Black Spring*, *Tropic of Capricorn*, and a critical work on D.H. Lawrence.³⁴ His assiduity and the moral as well as material support given by his friends like Anais Nin and Alfred Perles enabled Miller to complete these projects—except the book on Lawrence. The Obelisk Press—owing to the persistent efforts of Miller and his friends—published *Tropic of Cancer* in 1934, *Black Spring* in 1936,³⁵ and *Tropic of Capricorn* in 1939. The publishers later discovered to their amazement that they published three classics. Miller received letters containing favourable comments on all the three books from persons like Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Havelock Ellis. In 1939, having loved nine years in Paris, Miller decided to go on a prolonged vacation and he accepted the invitation of his bosom friend, Lawrence Durrell to spend a few months in Greece³⁶.

Greece impressed Miller immensely. It stirred antediluvial memories in him and opened up new vistas for him. He talked to several persons, well-known like Ghikas and Katsimbalis,³⁷ and unknown persons like factory workers and peasants. He liked the landscape there and enjoyed the climate. He proclaimed to himself that Greece was what the American dream aimed at. His stay in Greece³⁸ for a few months gave Miller the much needed peace and spiritual direction. He left Greece at the end of 1939 and reached America as a repatriate.³⁹

In America also Miller led a vigorous life⁴⁰ but it was full of tranquility and serenity. He had discussions with a number of writers, painters, and philosophers John Dos Passos, Sherwood Anderson, Kenneth Patchen, John Steinbeck, Hilaire Hiler, Aldous Huxley, and Swami Prabhavananda of Vedanta Center, California,⁴¹ *The Cosmological Eye*, a collection of his essays written in Paris, was already published in America by New Directions. Working assiduously Miller produced a number of books, booklets and pamphlets: *The World of Sex* (1940); *The Colossus of Maroussi* (1941); *The Wisdom of the Heart* (1941); *Sunday after the War* (1944); "The plight of

the Creative Artist in the United States of America" (1951); *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945); *Remember to Remember* (1947); *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* (1948); *Sexus* (Book one of *The Rosy Crucifixion*) (1949); *The Books in My Life* (1952); *Plexus* (Book two of the *Rosy Crucifixion*) (1953); *Quiet Days at Clichy* (1956); *The Time of the Assassins* (1956); *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* (1957); *Nexus* (Book Three of *The Rosy Crucifixion*) (1960); and *To paint is to Love Again* (1960); and *and Still Like the Hummingbird* (1962);

3.6 BIG SUR DAYS AND AFTER

His emotional life during this period-though turbulent at times-led him not to the despair of a vagabond (of New York days) nor to the disillusionment of an outsider (of Paris days) but to the serenity and wisdom of a sage. After his father's death, Anais Nin found Miller to be resigned, mystical, and quiet.⁴² As it was his wont, Miller was asking himself: Where did he come from? Where was he going? Who was he?- the questions of a seeker of truth, especially an Eastern seeker. He made Big Sur-a peaceful, quiet, and isolated area-his home. Miller, as mentioned earlier, wanted to visit India and other Eastern countries and settle somewhere in Nepal or Tibet.⁴³ "Big Sur seemed," Miller wrote to a friend, "the nearest to Tibet one can find in this country of bustle and hustle".⁴⁴ Big Sur was Miller's Walden.⁴⁵ "The idyllic setting of Big Sur quite naturally brought to mind, Thoreau, the American frontier, and Utopian communities".⁴⁶ Soon his legend grew; Big Sur was made a centre of pilgrimage; and Miller became the sage of Big Sur.⁴⁷

In December 1944, soon after moving to Bug Sur, Miller married-for the third time-Janina Martha Lepaska. In 1952, after about seven years of married life⁴⁸ with him, Lepaska walked out of his life leaving for him two small children to look after. Miller married again in December 1953 and his fourth wife Eve McClure shared some of his child-rearing duties. Harried by enormous correspondence, innumerable visitors and household chores, he could hardly find time to write. When his life in Big Sur became extremely complicated, Miller left it in 1960. Lionised by publishers and writers, he toured Europe for a year. Then he returned to America and found a home in Pacific Palisades, Southern California. Here Miller devoted himself to painting water colours - an art he always loved-and led a very peaceful life till his death on 7 June 1980. *Henry Miller started his life as a seeker of truth; he passed through many phases and varied experiences; he became a vagabond, a bohemian, an outsider; and he ultimately reached the stage of a sage.*⁴⁹

3.7 LET US SUM UP

We have discussed the multi-facted life of Henry Miller: his intellectual life, his vast reading, his exposure to great thinkers; his emotional life, his liason with a number of women; his life as a writer, and finally Miller reaching the stage of a Sage at Big Sur.

3.8 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Miller's life in Brooklyn days.
2. Analyse Miller's Paris days and their contribution to his development as a writer.
3. Discuss Miller's output as a writer
4. Analyse critically Miller as an Omnivorous reader.

5. Comment on his trip to Greece.

6. "Miller started his life as a seeker of truth, passed through many phases and varied experience, became a Vegetarian, a bohemian, an outsider, and finally reached the stage of a sage" Discuss.

3.9 NOTES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha* (Calcutta: Rupa & co., 1972). Pp.150-152
2. Quoted in Colin Wilson, *The Outsider* (Great Britain: Pan Books Ltd., 1978), p.63
3. Henry Miller, *My Life and Times* (New York: Germaine Smith Inc., 1971), p.56
4. *Ibid.*, p.10
5. About his birth, Miller wrote: "Slated for Christmas I was born a half hour too late. It always seemed to me that I was meant to be the sort of individual that one is destined to be by virtue of being born on the 25th day of December, Admiral Dewey was born on that day and so was Jesus Christ. Perhaps Krishnamurti too, for all I know. Anyway that's the sort of guy I was intended to be. But due to the fact that my mother had a clutching womb, that she held me in her grip like an octopus. I came out under another configuration..." Henry Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn* (Great Britain: Panther Books Ltd., 1975), p.56
6. Henry Miller, *Black Spring* (Great Britain: Panther Books, 1974), p.33
7. Miller wrote about his early years lyrically and vividly in two sections of *Black Spring*: "the Fourteenth Ward" and "The Tailor Shop".
8. About the bibliophile in Henry Miller, George Wickes wrote: "Voraciously and indiscriminately he absorbed works on a wide range of subjects. And he read with the autodidact's sense of discovery, oblivious to received opinion. The result, reflected in *The Books in My Life*, proves a rather erratic liberal education, with emphasis on Oriental mysticism and adventure fiction. Here Bellock and Madame Blavatsky rub elbows with Nietzsche and Spengler". George Wickes, "Henry Miller", in *American Writers*, Vol.III.
9. Miller dwelt on his early associations and their impact on him in the section "The Theatre" of *the Books In My Life*.
10. As a result of these lectures and his omnivorous reading, Miller "was attracted to all kinds of universalizing ideas-world literature, the one religion" concept, the Spiritus Mundi, universal history and he was always trying to make everything bind together as if his life would become harmonious where his ideas cohered. Sitting in a café with Dewar, George Wright, or Stanley, he could endlessly discuss the possible relations existing between Herbert Spencer and Friederich Nietzsche, Edward Bellamy and Lewis Carroll, Paul Eltbacher's Anarchism and Rider Haggard's Romances, *The Secret Doctrine and the Figure of Saladia...*" *Always Merry and Bright*, p.39.
11. Quoted in *Always Merry and Bright*, p.46.
12. About Miller as job hunter, Kenneth Rexroth wrote: "...he had the typical spirit of a young white collar worker, living in a furnished room, migrating from job to job in the jungle of the city, a life only marginally distinguished from that of hustlers, scufflers, and drifters, the lightweight, white collar underworld", Kenneth Rexroth, "Henry Miller" in *Contemporary Novelists*, ed. James Vinson (London: St. James Press, 1976), p.6.
13. George Wickes, "Henry Miller", p.173.
14. *Tropic of Capricorn* pp.18-19.
15. *Ibid.*, p.32.
16. Earlier, for one or two years, Miller wrote critiques on the stories published in the magazine "the Black Cat", which were published in the same magazine; Steadily he became the star critic of "the Black Cat" and won a little money and fame.

17. George Wickes, "Henry Miller", pp.176-177.
18. *Tropic of Capricorn*, p.32.
19. When Miller passed from one stage to another, his evolution-like that of the hero Siddhartha of Hermann Hesse-was fast and steady.
20. Miller's attack upon America-which is a major theme in his work-is a part of a larger crusade against the modern, mechanised civilization.
21. Regarding the atmosphere in Europe which is congenial for an artist, Miller wrote: "They (artist) prefer their own way of life even if it entails poverty, bitterness, defeat. Dollars do not inspire artists, nor do they sustain them. It takes something new, something infinitely better, something which quite obviously we are not able to offer. What that something is you feel every minute of the day in Europe". *Remember to Remember*, pp.315 and 318.
22. Quoted in Frederick J. Hoffman. *The Twenties: American writings in the post-War Decade* (New York: The Viking Press, 1955), p.32.
23. George Wickes, "Henry Miller", in *Writer's at Work: The Paris Review Interviews: Sound Series*, ed. Van Wyck Brooks (New York: The Viking Press, 1963), p.178.
24. "The 1920's were marked by a disrespect for tradition and an eager wish to try out any new suggestions regarding the nature of man-his personal beliefs, convictions, or way to salvation", said Frederick J. Hoffman in *The Twenties* (p.14). The other hallmarks of the 20's are: expatriation; bohemianism; revolt against the bourgeoisie and the puritans; the popularity of psychoanalysis and Freudian theories and an insatiable curiosity about sex.
25. Though Miller lived in Paris during the Thirties most of the salient features of the Twenties were conspicuously present in him.
26. Graphic descriptions of Miller's life in Paris are available in his *Tropic of Cancer*.
27. Writing about his life and his friends in Paris, Miller remarked "the three principal questions we put to each other every time we met were: 1) is there food? 2) Was it a good lay? 3) Are you writing? Everything centered around these three exigencies". *Remember to Remember*, p.350.
28. Regarding the education of his senses, Miller was like the hero Siddhartha of Hermann Hesse's novel who said "Everything is necessary, everything needs only my loving, understanding; then all is well with me and nothing can harm me", *Siddhartha*, pp.151-152.
29. About the bohemian life, Hoffman wrote: 1) It was a rebellion against authority: the bohemian preferred to become a literary anarchist rather than endure authority he did not respect; 2) it was an attempt, however poor, to find the ideal life and the free one-that is when the attempt was genuine and not mere taking; 3) it was a natural result of the defeat of respect and prosperity that the war had caused". *The Twenties*, p.21.
30. In *The Diary of Anais Nin*, we find the details about Miller's personal relationship with Anis Nin and the profound influence of Rank on Miller and Nin in the early thirties. Also, as Gordon said: "Rank was especially important to Miller because he emphasised the self-construction aspects of personality.../When we add Rank's theory of the birth trauma and its ramifications to the theory of the artist, we have the main outlines of Miller's principal themes". *The Mind and Art of Henry Miller*, p.50.
31. During the period, Miller prepared a time table for his work and stuck to it as scrupulosuly as Benjamin Franklin. He tried to organise his life for attaining his goals. He wanted to become more than a writer-a great man, a saint. He knew quite well that writing was merely an instrument through which he was practising sainthood.
32. The marriage of Miller and Nin did not materialise owing to financial reasons.
33. About the outsider - men like Henry Miller who are different, in many ways, from millions and millions of their fellow human beings-Colin Wilson wrote as follows and his description applied aptly to Miller: "the outsider's way of salvation, then, is plainly implied. His moment of insight he must formulate laws that will enable them to move towards his goal in spite of losing sight of

it. It is unnecessary to add that these laws will apply not only to him, but to all men, their goal being the same as his", and "Let the outsider accept without further hesitation: 'I am different from other men because I have been destined to something greater; let him see himself in the role of predestined prophet, or world-betterer, and a half of the outsider's problems have been solved". *The Outsider*, pp.71-72 and 154.

34. This book was later published posthumously in 1980 with the title: *The World of Lawrence*.
35. A detailed discussion of the criticism on Miller and his work can be found in *The Mind and Art of Henry Miller*.
36. About the importance of Paris days in Miller's life, George Wickes wrote: "It is hard to imagine Miller without Paris. French culture suited him as no one would have done; it liberated him and permeated him, satisfying his psychic and artistic needs." George Wickes, "Henry Miller", p.177
37. Miller described his experiences and spiritual development that took place in Greece in his book, *The Colossus of Maroussi*.
38. Jay Martin wrote "What Gorguin had found in Tahiti and D.H. Lawrence in Mexico, Miller had experienced in Greece". *Always Merry and Bright*, p.370.
39. The Second World War was responsible for Miller's repatriation to America.
40. The period covered under this section is forty years from the date of Miller's repatriation to America in 1940 till his death in 1980.
41. Miller wrote in eulogising terms about Swami Prabhavananda-a holy man in *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (p.18) Gerald Heard (now Swami Vidyatmananda of Centre Vedantique Ramakrishna, France) in his letter dated 2 October 1989) to the author confirmed that Miller had met the Swamiji before 1950.
42. Quoted in *Always Merry and Bright*, p.385.
43. In his letters to Anais Nin and Lawrence Durrell, he mentioned that he had invitations from institutions like Sri Ramakrishna Mission for settling down in Nepal or Tibet.
44. Quoted in *Always Merry and Bright*, p.405.
45. Miller described his life in Big Sur in his book, *Big Sur and The Oranges of Hieronymus Bosh*(1957). Further, as Ihab Hassan wrote: "the theme of Big sur is reconciliation, reconciliation to everything. Stay out and watch the world go round; if there are flaws in your paradise, open the windows, Miller cries." Ihab Hassan, *the Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* (New York: Alfred A. KnopfIncc., 1967), p.43.
46. George Wickes, "Henry Miller", p.139
47. Regarding Miller's life in Bug Sur, Jay Martin wrote "... there was more love, and certainly more companionship and mutual collaboration than sex. Sex was not by any means out of Henry's mind, but he was bent on fashioning a new public image, as a happy clown and a man of wisdom. He corresponded with Krishnamurti (on stationery emblazoned with his own photo), he wrote a Yemen amulet which Schatz had given him; he practiced sainthood in public. He rid himself of all desire for success. He rejected offers that he had once solicited...." *Always Merry and Bright*, p.425.
48. In Miller's life, this period of association for seven years recurred in his relationship with Pauline, Beatrice, June, Lepska, and even Eve; this cycle of seven years is quite enigmatic; Miller got separated from Eve in 1960-after about seven years of married life with her. He married again; his fifth wife, Hoki Tokuda was a Jazz pianist.
49. In Indian mythology and history, there are many instances of persons who had started their lives as "sinners" but became saints ultimately, Valmiki the author of the *Ramayana* in Sanskrit, rose from the stage of a dacoit to that of a poet-saint. Bilvamangala transformed his lust for a woman into devotion for the Almighty. Vemana, a famous Telugu poet, rose from the level of a womaniser to that of a yogi.

UNIT 4 THE INDELIBLE IMPACT

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Eastern Influences: Comments by critics
- 4.3 External and internal Evidence
- 4.4 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.5 Questions
- 4.6 Notes & Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we will mainly discuss impact of Eastern thought on Henry Miller. Also we will analyse the external and internal evidence.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

One of the most mysterious of all the intangibles in life is what we call influences.

—Henry Miller in *The Books in My Life*

What were the subjects which made me seek the authors I love, which permitted me to be influenced, which formed my style, my character my approach to life? Broadly these: understanding, mystery... the purpose of existence, the oneness of every thing, self-liberation, the brotherhood of man, the meaning of love, the relation of sex to love, the art, ... mysticism more particularly the mystics themselves, the varieties of faith and worship.

—Henry Miller in *The Books in My Life*

It is clear that influence is not so much a thing that bears down on one accidentally, out of a blue sky, as it were, but a thing one seeks, every truly influential influence is sought, willed, conjured up. And it is in the make-up of the individual that we must look for the reason why one kind of influence is desired rather than another.

—Alfred Perles in *My Friend Henry Miller*

An inveterate thinker and incorrigible quester he was, Henry Miller questioned himself: "What is life?" "Who am I?" "What is the meaning of this activity? To what end?" to arrive at appropriate answers, Miller studied many a philosophy of the West as well as the East. From Plato's Dialogues to the existential philosophy of Nietzsche, Sartre and Camus; from the esoteric sutras of Upanishadic seers to the anarchic writings of Emma Goldman; the Buddhist literature, the Tantra of Tibet, the Advaita of Adi Sankara, the Raamakrishna-Vivekananda literature, and the lofty thought of J. Krishnamurti.

4.2 EASTERN INFLUENCES: COMMENTS OF CRITICS

The writing of Henry Miller are permeated with the aroma of Eastern thought, Renowned critics, both American and Indian, have acknowledged the presence of Oriental element in his writings—"My greatest neglect...", declared William A.

Gordon, "seemed to be of the Oriental thought which had been important for Miller from the earliest times. That aspect of his work remains a field for investigation". Lawrence Durrell stated that one might ascribe Miller's intellectual pedigree partly to Bergson and Spengler, partly to Freud, and partly to Hindu and Chinese religion. While discussing the influences on Henry Miller, Karl Shapiro averred: "Like a true poet, he (Henry Miller) found his way to Rimbaud, Ramakrishna, Blavatsky, Huysmans, Count Keyserling, Prince Kropotkin, Lao-tse, Nostradamus, Petronius, Rabelais, Suzuki, Zen Philosophy" Else where the same critic stated categorically that Miller frequently immersed himself in modern Indian mystics like Krishnamurti and Ramakrishna, without any of the flopdoodle of the cultist. Another critic, Alwyn Lee testified that Miller had peopled his private world with Blake and Madame Blavatsky, Rimbaud and Abe Rattner, Buddha and Anais Nin, Christ and Swami Vivekananda. About Miller the following is written in Contemporary Authors: "Miller has always been attracted to Eastern religious systems. Durrell believes that 'only those holy men (of the East) would be able to read his spiritual adventure without prejudice and would regard his books as a spiritual autobiography.'" Alfred Perles, a close friend of Henry Miller proclaimed that no Chinaman, no Hindu, could be so wildly enthusiastic about the marvels of the Orient as a simple American with the peculiar spiritual make-up of a Henry Miller. D.V.K. Raghavacharyulu too acknowledged the Indian impact on Miller.

4.3 EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL EVIDENCE

Miller himself reiterated categorically that he was influenced by Eastern thought. "Way back when I was 21 years of age, I became acquainted with an Indian theosophist in California, Swami Vivekananda was the most powerful influence on me. He was a flaming sword. Years later I read Ramakrishna's books and gained better understanding of life," Miller told Kunhi Krishnan, an Indian interviewer. In a letter to William A. Gordon, Miller wrote that persons like Milarepa, Swami Vivekananda, Krishnamurti, Jacob Bohme and Madame Blavatsky influenced him profoundly.

Further, in his letter to his friend, Lawrence Durrell, Miller averred: "Influences... My loyalty and adoration have been constant for the same men, all through my life: Whitman, Emerson Thoreau, Rabelais, above all. I still think that no one has ever had a larger, freer, heal their view of man and his universe than Walt Whitman. If my memory serves me right, here is my geneological line: Boccacio, Petronious, Whitman, Emerson Thoreau, ... Romain Rolland, Plotinus, Heraclitus, Nietzsche, Dostoiivsky, (...)... D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Ellie Faure, Oswald Spengler, ... Balzac... everything I read on Zen Buddhism, *everything I read about china, India, Tibet, Arabia, Africa...*"

Further, while discussing the part played by books in his life, Miller mentioned the following under the title: "*The Hundred Books which inflenced Me Most*" Siddhartha by Hermann Hesse; Tao The Ching by Lao Tse; The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna by Esoteric Buddhism; A.P. Sinneh; Kirshnamurti by Carolo Saures; Zen Buddhism by D.T. Suzuki; Prophets of The New India by Romain Rolland and The Secret Doctrine by Madame Blavatsky. Miller's other favourite books are: the biographies of Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda by Roamin Rolland; Kamasutra by Vatsayana; Ananga Ranga by Kalyan Mallah; The Spirit of Zen by Alan Watts; the translations of the Ramayana the Mahabharata, the Bhagvad Gita and the Dhammapada.

Besides these sources, Henry Miller derived Eastern wisdom from the Hindu messenger boys at the Telegraph company, New York where Miller worked as its manager; the Swamijis of Vedanta Centre, California and of other branches of Sri Ramakrishna Mission, friends like David Edgar, Christopher Isherwood, and Aldout

Haxley, the writings of Emerson Thoreau and Whitman, and the writings of contemporary Indophiles like Aldous Huxley, Ellie Faure and Erick Howe.

It is no exaggeration to say that very few Indians have more love for India, more admiration for and more interest in Indian scriptures, and more adoration for Indian thinkers than Henry Miller. "The very mention of such words as Bengal, Gujarat, Malabar coast, Kali-ghat, Nepal, Kashmir, Sikh, Bhagavadgita, Upanishads, raga, stupa, Prakriti, ... guru, Hanuman, Shiva, was enough to put me in a trance for the rest of the evening proclaimed Miller.

Moreover, Miller was so much infatuated with the East that he wanted to migrate to Tibet or Nepal or any other place near the Himalayas. In a letter (dated 25 October 1938) he wrote to Lawrence Durrell: "...if I could get to that Tibetan frontier, either side, if I could live somewhere there in the Himalayas I haven't the slightest doubt but that I would be content for the rest of my life". In another letter (dated 15 September 1943) Miller informed Durrell that he was offered hospitality in a Ramakrishna Vivekananda Centre situated on the border of Nepal.

Among the modern thinkers of the East, Miller admired and adored Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda and J. Krishnamurti most-though he had some admiration for Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi. On one hand condemning America for its materialism, Miller extolled Sri Ramakrishna in *The Air Conditioned Nightmare*: "I was full of Ramakrishna on leaving Pittsburg, Ramakrishna, who never criticized, who never preached, who accepted all religions, who saw God everywhere in everything, was the most ecstatic being, I imagine, that ever lived"

Speaking about Swami Vivekananda, Miller went into raptures: "I had just been reading Rolland's book on Vivekananda. I had put it down because I couldn't read anymore, my emotions were so powerful. The passage which roused me to such a state of exaltation was the one in which Rolland describes Vivekananda's triumphant return to India. No monarch ever received such a reception at the hands of his countrymen; it stands unique in the annals of history. And what he had done, Vivekananda, to merit such a welcome? He had made India known to America; he had spread the light. And in doing so he had opened the eyes of his countrymen to their weaknesses. All India greeted him with open arms; millions of people prostrated themselves before him, saluting him as a saint and savior, which he was. It was a triumph of love, of gratitude, of devotion. I am coming back to him later, to his clear, powerful words spoken like a fearless champion not of India but of the human race." Miller's admiration knew no bounds when he wrote about J. Krishnamurti, a contemporary Indian philosopher. In *The Books In My Life*, he devoted an entire chapter to Krishnamurti, "There is a name I have withheld", exhorted Miller, "which stands cut in contrast to all that is secret, suspect, confusing, bookish and enslaving. Krishnamurti. Here is one man of our time who may be said to be a master of reality, he stands alone. He has renounced more than any man I can think of, except the Christ, Fundamentally he is so simple to understand that it is easy to comprehend the confusion which his clear, direct words and deeds have entailed.

4.4 LET US SUM UP

All the afore-mentioned information evokes an interesting question: what were the factors responsible for Miller becoming a serious student and ardent admirer of Eastern philosophies and personalities? To answer: 1. Like the other great transcendentalists Miller had a catholic and eclectic mind which made him responsive and sensitive to all great thought irrespective of region or religion. 2. Like any great thinker, Miller had a speculative and philosophical bent of mind. His pursuit of Truth, his longing for the unknown, and his zeal for self-realization forced him to

look into Eastern literatures—for finding answers to his enigmatic philosophical questions.

While the aforementioned factors were innate in Miller's personality, there were some external factors such as the following:

1. The presence and the impact of the Transcendental, the Theosophical, and the Ramakrishna–Vivekananda movements.
2. The enriching Eastern philosophies themselves entice all great thinkers.
3. The disillusionment caused by the materialism of West and the havoc created by the two world wars compelled more of the Western thinkers to turn to East and Eastern thinkers. Whatever may be the reasons, Miller's admiration for Oriental philosophies and personalities is unquestionable and the Eastern impact on Miller is indelible.

4.5 NOTES & SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Henry Miller, *The Books in My Life* (London Peter Owen Limited, 1961). p. 33.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
3. Alfred Perles, *My Friend Henry Miller* (London: Neville Spearman, 1955), p. 216.
4. Henry Miller, *Tropic of Capricorn* (Great Britain: Panther Books Ltd. 1974), p. 283.
5. Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (Great Britain: Panther Books Ltd., 1974), p. 283.
6. Henry Miller, *The Air Conditioned Nightmare*. (New York: New Directions, 1970).
7. The Books Miller read and the movements of thought he was influenced by are discussed in detail in Chapter 2.
8. In *The Wisdom of the Heart* (New York: New Directions, 1960), Henry Miller wrote about the psychoanalyst, E. Graham Howe: "Many influences, of astounding variety, have contributed to shape his philosophy of life which, unlike most philosophies, takes its stance in life, and not in a system of thought. His view embraces conflicting world-views; there is room in it to include all of Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, as well as Taoism, Zen Buddhism, astrology, and so forth. It is a thoroughly religious view of life, in that it recognises 'the supremacy of the unseen.' Emphasis is laid on the dark side of life on all that which is negative passion... mysterious, and unknowable" (p. 35). Henry Miller's analysis of the renowned psychoanalyst is aptly applicable to himself.
9. Elsewhere Gordon said: "He (Henry Miller) mentioned from time to time various Oriental philosophies especially the ideas of the Tao and of Zen Buddhism... Two books for which Miller expressed admiration will show sufficiently his use of Oriental Philosophy: *The Spirit of Zen*, by Alan Watts and *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse. *The Mind and Art of Henry Miller*. p. 73.
10. William A Gordon, *Writer & Critic: A Correspondence with Henry Miller* (Baton Rouge; Louisiana State university, 1968), 'Introduction', p. xii.
11. Lawrence Durrell, "Studies in Genius: 'Henry Miller' in *Henry Miller and The Critics* ed. George Wickes (Carbondale; Southern Illinois University Press, 1966)p. 89.
12. Karl Shapiro, "The Greatest Living author: In Defense of Ignorance" in *Henry Miller: Three Decades of Criticism*, ed. Edward Mitchell (New York: New York University Press, 1971), p. 78.
13. Karl Shapiro, "The Greatest Living Patagonian" in *Start with the Sun: Studies in Cosmic Poetry*. p. 203.

14. Alwyn Lee, "The pathology of isolation", in *Henry Miller: Three Decades of Criticism*, p. 68. Also the same critic observed; "Among the photographs on his wall are those of Krishnamurti and Rimbaud (He is remarkably like Yeats in these matters...), p. 73.
15. Clare D. Kinsman and Mary Ann Tennen Mouse, eds., *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 9-12 (First Revision) (Detroit: Gale Research Company 1974), p. 628.
16. *My Friend Henry Miller*, p. 217.
17. D.V.K.Raghavacharyulu, "Indian influence on American Writers", *Trivent*, 42, No. 3 (October-December 1973), 47-52.
18. T.V.Kunhi Krishnan, "Miller Karma Yogi or Sexualist?" (An Interview with Miller in New York) *Hindustan Times*, 23 June 1980 p. 7.
19. In his correspondence with Willam A. Gordon, the author of *The Mind and Art of Henry Miller*, Miller repeatedly referred to Indian influence.
20. Alfred Perles wrote "....David Edgar... who initiated Miller into the secrets of the Bhagvad Gita, the occult writings of Madame Blavatsky, The spirit of Zen and the doctrines of Rudolf Steiger...." *My Friend Henry Miller*, p. 132.
21. In his letter (dated 19 May 1941) the Anais Nin, Miller wrote: "Well I see Huxley tomorrow and perhaps Isherwood and perhaps Gerald Heard too." Gunther Stuhlmann, ed. *Henry Miller Letters to Anais Nin* (London Peter Owne, 1965), p. 290.
22. The influence of the great transcendentalists: Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman on Miller is conspicuous in his writings. He frequently referred to them and called them his 'Gurus'
23. See Henry Miller *Nexus*, p. 264.
24. Henry Miller, *Black spring* p. 179.
25. Geore Wickes, ed. *Lawrence Durrel and Henry Miller: A Private Correspondence* (Newyork: E. Dutton & Co., 1962). p. 139.
26. George Wickes, ed., *Lawrence Durrel and Henry Miller: A Private Correspondence*, p. 175.
27. Among the ancient Eastern thinkers, Miller adored Gautama and Buddha, Lao-tse, and the Zen masters most.
28. Miller referred to Rabindranath Tagore and his Santiniketan a few times in his writings. At one place, he said "I had hundreds of extraordinary messages from extraordinary people, not the least of them coming from an Indian guru.... That and the one from Tagore via a mutual firebrand Hindu communist friend (...) are outstanding in my memory". *Lawrence Durrell and Henry Miller: A Private Correspondence*.
29. Karl Shapiro said that Miller was a Gandhi with a penis.
30. *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, p. 14 Also, Miller wrote elsewhere: "The greatest face of all perhaps because it was registered in ecostasy is that of Ramakrishna. Take one good look at this face and you will understand why men of God are joyous men. The eyes are everything. All holy men have dear, spherical, untroused eyes. Often they are like the eyes of a dove." *Remember to Remember* p. 104.
31. Miller wrote about Swami Vivekananda's triumph in America in the following eulogising terms: "About Detroit... it was here that Swami Vivekananda kicked over traces. Some of you who read this may be old enough to remember the stir he created when he spoke before the Parliament of Religions in Chicago back in the early Nineties. The story of the pilgrimage of this man who electrified the American people reads like a legend. At first unrecognised, rejected, reduced to starvation, and forced to beg in the streets, he was finally hailed as the greatest spiritual leader of our time..." *The Air Conditioned nightmare* p. 18.
32. *Ibid.* p 28.
33. In a letter to Lawrence Durrell (dated 17 December 1945). Miller wrote: "Have just been reading Krishnamurti. Ten Talks... Expect to visit him very soon. He is about 150 miles away." *Lawrence Durrell and Henry Miller A Private correspondence*, p. 214. In the same vien, he wrote in *The Books in My Life* "I have never met Krishnamurti, though there is no man living

whom I would consider it a greater privilege to meet than he. The Books in My Life. p. 152.

34. The Books in My Life. Pp 151.

35. A detailed study of this aspect of the other great transcendentalists is present in unit 2.

36. In this regard Alfred Perles said: "... Miller's leaning towards the mysterious the occult, and the esoteric East, are conditioned, I should say, by the polarity of his nature..." *My Friend Miller* pp. 216-217.

37. In a letter to Alfred Perles, Miller stated: "my whole life is a kind of sparkling activity. I spark. I don't glow steadily, like a Sun. Hence my adoration for the sages, the masters, the great teachers of life. The truth is that from a very early age this thought formed itself and led me to seek out strange individuals, strange books, even strange adventures." *Art and Outrage*, p. 57.

UNIT 5 MILLER'S WORKS: BLACK SPRING

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Bibliography of Miller
- 5.3 Critical Analysis of Miller's works
- 5.4 *Black Spring*: Plot and Narrative Technique
- 5.5 Style in *Black Spring*
- 5.6 Let us sum up
- 5.7 Questions
- 5.8 Notes and Suggested Readings

5.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this course is to critically analyse some of the major works of Henry Miller in general and *Black Spring* in particular.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Henry Miller was a prolific writer. He wrote autobiographical novels (auto-novels), essays, treatises, reminiscences, letters, and travelogues. We will analyse in the following sections some of the major works of Miller.

5.2 BIBLIOGRAPHY OF MILLER

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5.3 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF MILLER'S WORKS

Henry Miller writes in two main genres. His work is almost evenly divided between narrative and expository modes. He is best known for his narrative works such as *Tropic of Cancer*, *Black Spring*, *Tropic of Capricorn*, *Sexus*, *Plexus*, *Nexus*, etc. Critics have usually treated these books as novels, because Miller's method is that of fiction, but Miller has always insisted that he is writing autobiography or

autobiographical novels or auto-novels. Miller appears in them primarily in the familiar role of the artist-hero who dominates modern fiction. They might be described as confessions and the method is picaresque. They are confessions in Rousseau's sense of the word-introspective, autobiographical monologues like those of Rousseau. Miller usually tries to argue a thesis from his personal experience.²

The expository writings are harder to classify. They would usually be defined as essays, but they assume a variety of forms: letters, criticism, travel, portraiture, anecdotes, reminiscences, opinions. The personal essay admits plenty of latitude, which Miller has used, incorporating a good deal of narrative technique. The essays represent Miller in his shorter flights of imagination, and most commonly serve as a vehicle for his ideas, or rather, opinions. Most of them were originally written for periodicals and later collected for publication in book form. Miller himself has no use for literary genres - or literary criticism for that matter. To him all of his work expresses a man.

The richest period of Miller's writing career is also the most varied. This is the period he spent in Paris and its immediate aftermath. In a volcanic creative outburst, he produced stories, articles, books, at the rate of a volume a year. During this decade, he wrote the three picaresque narratives generally regarded as his best and most characteristic works namely, *Tropic of Cancer*, *Black Spring*, and *Tropic of Capricorn*. He also wrote two books in epistolary form: *Aller Retour New York* and *Hamlet* (the latter in collaboration with Michael Frankel); he wrote several stray pamphlets and articles, and stories to fill two miscellanies: *Max* and *The White Phagocytes*, and *The Wisdom of the Heart*. Upon his return to New York in 1940, he wrote a manifesto entitled *The World of Sex*; and the narratives that constitute *Quiet Days in Clitchy* and an account of his visit to Greece in 1930: *The Colossus of Maroussi*. We will give a critical analysis of some of the major works ut infra.

A) *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) is an account of the adventures and encounters of an American in Paris-Written in the first person and the present tense, it conveys a strong sense of the speaking voices and the continuing moment. The narrator is named Henry Miller and the technique is basically interior monologue, reporting successive states of mind as they occur, with all the fragmentary nature of the true stream consciousness, a hodge podge of incidents, memories, hallucinations, rights, ruminations, conversations, nightmares. There are frequent interruptions and shifts, back and forth in time, or altogether out of time into dream and fantasy. The disorder is intentional. Miller wanted "to get off the gold standard of literature", to write as he spoke, and to revise nothing that he had written. Behind his bewildering technique, there is some organization, however. The structure is roughly chronological, with distinct episodes succeeding each other following the calendar from autumn to summer. The book is also divided into chapters, unnumbered and untitled, but each with a name. Then there is the overriding theme of "cancer and delirium". These organising principles are not readily apparent, the first impression created by this book is one of chaos, with the first chapter being the most chaotic. In fact, the uninitiated reader is likely to win the underlying themes altogether, for what is far more striking at first is Miller's intention to write "all that which is omitted in books." The reaction of many readers is shock; others are unimpressed by Miller's attempt to shock: still others are bored. But those who can accept obscenity calmly can find meaning behind it.³

B) *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939), the third of Miller's personal narratives - you may note here that *Black Spring*, the prescribed novel, is the second of Miller's narratives - is more strictly autobiographical whereas *Tropic of Cancer* portrayed the author-narrator living in the eternal present, *Tropic of*

Capricorn goes back to the years he had discovered himself as a writer. In trying to explain how and why he became a writer, he reviews more than thirty by years of his past experience. He succeeds mainly in conveying his sense of alienation from American life. Capricorn, the sign of the zodiac symbolizes his destiny and complements the rich symbolism of cancer. For, cancer is not only the symbol of disease and corruption, it is also the zodiacal sign of the poet and the versatile, maneuverable crab "opposite cancer in the zodiac extremes (of the Equinox - turning points) is capricorn." Miller wrote in a letter to Anais Nin at the time he was finishing his second *Tropic*: --- "the house in which I am born, which is religious and represents renaissance in death. Cancer also means for me the disease of civilization, the extreme point of realization along the wrong paths- hence the necessity to change one's course and begin all over again."⁴ Also, it is the dominant theme of resurrection which runs all through the work in man: images of suffering, death, and revival as well as more explicit allusions. In *Tropic of Capricorn*, the character he presents is that of the solitary, self-reliant-rogue, at odds with society, improving his life from day to day, accepting wind falls or hard knocks as they come. The narrative alternates between good luck and bad; the windfalls are usually sexual, the misfortunes his sufferings as an alienated individual. Since his luck is often good, it is hard to take his sufferings too seriously.⁵

- C) Five miscellanies present Miller in a new guise as a critic. In *The Cosmological Eye*, he admires the mystic perception akin to madness that produces visionary paintings. Miller makes an excellent critic of the visual arts. He has the years of appreciation, the understanding of the media, the taste, and the ability to express his vision that make a successful critic. The two major literary essays in *Max and the White Phagocytes*, both provocative, nevertheless reveal certain limitation. *The Wisdom of the Heart* (1941) is the best source for his reflection on philosophy and its expression in art-philosophy in a broad sense, embracing psychology and mysticism, the book includes two essays on Balzac, whose illuminism appealed profoundly to Miller. *Sunday after the War* (1944) is noteworthy for its three selections from *Sexus*, then unpublished. *Stand still like the Humming Bird* (1962) sweeps together as a very uneven collection of essays, mostly on literary subjects.⁶
- D) *The Colossus of Maroussi* is one of Miller's finest books. The visit to Greece had been a high moment in his life, deeply affecting him in a number of ways. His account is much like a travel book, though it dramatically conveys the spirit of place through the observer's personal intuitions. To Miller Greece was a holy land that aroused all his religious awe. Miller's experience of the sacred places of Greece is deliberately unhistorical; what he wanted was not archeology or history but a feeling of kinship with the men of the past. Disheartened by his own time, Miller preferred to take a millennial view of the human race. In Miller, Greece not only stirred antediluvian memories, it opened up several new worlds. It was both ancient and modern, with its pastoral landscape and the cities like Athens being a blaze of electric lights. Also, the book is a record of great friendship and casual encounters with ordinary folk, with whom he communicated effectively by pantomime.⁷ He is most intolerant of the American Greeks he meets every where he goes, who appreciate the worst of American materialism and nothing of their own culture. Underlying many of his attitudes is the war - the final proof that the modern world is dehumanized and death-driven.
- E) The same attitudes pervade another travel book, *The Air-Conditioned Nightmare* (1945): When Miller returned after a stay of ten years in Europe, he decided to tour the United States and record his impressions as he went. He spent a year zigzagging across the country and back. His account of the

journey is as erratic as his route. It would hardly serve as a guide to the United States, but it provides a good index to Miller's opinions. He is mainly appalled by his native land. The country is magnificent but the people are dead – all but the Negroes, Red Indians, and an occasional non conformist. The American way of life has created a spiritual and cultural waste land, with its obsession for objects and money, its modern conveniences, advertising, radio programs, movies, comic stories, battle ships, bombs, and canned foods. For all its anathemas, *The Airconditioned Nightmare* is a thoroughly American book. Miller rages because he is truly American, because he believes in the national ideal with a fundamentalist fervor. The book is very American in flavor. The very notion of a transcontinental odyssey is in the best native tradition, with unexpected adventures and excursions off the beaten track a part of the pattern.⁸

- F) Miller planned originally to write two volumes of *The Air Conditioned Nightmare*, but like many of his projects, the one had a way of changing as it went along. The second volume, *Remember to Remember* (1947) is a sequel only in the sense that it preserves the same man airing similar opinions. Both volumes are miscellaneous collections of sketches. The second is built around persons rather than places, for Miller's travel had ended in 1944, when he settled in Big Sur. Here again, as in the earlier volume, he makes a point of discovering unsung genius and prefers to believe that the genuine artist is always unrecognized.
- G) *Quiet Days in Clichy* (1940), as the title suggests, narrates personal experiences of the early forties when Miller was living in Clichy with his friend, Perles. The material is similar to that of *Tropic of Cancer*. It is good story telling and realistic reporting, but it has none of the vehemence that made the *Tropic of Cancer* "a cry of passionate protest", and none of the 'ecstasy and none of the heightened subjective vision that informed the earlier writing.
- H) *The World of Sex* (1957) is the *biographia literaria* of Henry Miller – a key statement that defines the role of sex in his writings and in his life written at midpoint in his career as a kind of postscript to *Tropic of Capricorn*, it serves to explain his purpose in that book and to introduce the other autobiographical volumes that are to follow.⁹
- I) *Sexus, Plexus, and Nexus*, taken together (called *The Rosy Crucifixion*) are simply an enormously expanded *Tropic of Capricorn*. The three volumes of the trilogy differ considerably. *Sexus* is the most obscene of all Miller's works, and the *Sexus* episodes which alternate regularly with neutral passages, often seem gratuitous. The other two volumes contain hardly any obscenity. *Sexus* is also the most disorganized with constant digressions, reminiscences, and other excursions, interrupting the main thread. In *Plexus* and *Nexus*, the narrative becomes more factual and straightforward, and as a result offer a clearer explanation of Miller's emergence from the past. "The *Rosy Crucifixion* is, says George Wickes," is four times as long as *Tropic of Capricorn*, with little of the humor, ferocity, or pyrotechnics."¹⁰
- J) *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* (1957) presents Miller's meditations from his own *Walden*. The idyllic setting of Big Sur, quite naturally brought to mind Thoreau, the American frontier, and utopian communities.

About Miller's position as a writer, George Wickes avers: "Gradually a calmer view of his work is emerging not only in the public mind but among literary historians. His final place has yet to be determined, but he is being generally

recognized as one of the important writers of his time, one of the most expressive of the thirties, and certainly the best surrealist writer America has produced."¹¹

5.4 *BLACK SPRING: PLOT AND NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE*

Black Spring, published in 1936 – two years after the publication of *Tropic of Cancer* – deals with many of the same themes, but in a different mood. “I am Chancre, the crab which moves sideways and backwards and forwards at will. I move in strange tropics,” Miller announces, explaining the connection between *Black Spring* and *Tropic of Cancer*. And the black spring of the title is a metaphor for the world’s blight. It may also be interpreted as “the season of ecstatic despair.” Instead of taking place only in the immediate present, the narrative moves in time and place, from Paris to memories of Brooklyn and New York and on to other planes to reverie and fantasia. He is less fierce now, less hungry, more euphoric; There is less sex and obscenity, less action and violence. There is more delirium than cancer now, more dream, hallucination, and Schizophrenia, as Miller explores different modes and levels of perception. *Black Spring* was written partly before and partly after the delayed publication of *Cancer*. Miller repeatedly refers to post-cancer period as “euphoric”, “ultra-happy”. Miller presents a series of monologues, meditations, reminiscences, dreams, and visions, shifting back and forth from his Paris surroundings to his early years in Brooklyn and New York. Underlying its chaotic variety in style and technique is a coherence of theme and symbol.

The theme of the book is universal death and dark regeneration, humanity caught in the season of “black spring”. “Schizophrenia!”, Miller cries, pointing to the characteristic malady of our age; the whole world is diseased.¹² And yet “a brand new world is coming out of the egg and no matter how fast I write the old world doesn’t die fast enough. I hear the new machine guns and the millions of bones splintered at once; I see dogs running mad and pigeons dropping with letters tied to their ankles”. “Smash it, smash it,” he seems to be constantly shouting, adding for ironic effect, “Always merry and bright.” Miller can hardly wait for Doomsday. He is an alien in his homeland—though a citizen of the universe and his favorite fantasy is to know the crowds of our wasteland down: “Men and women promenading on the sidewalks, curious beasts, half-human, half-crazy, their teeth polished, their eyes glazed, the women clothed in beautiful garbs, each one equipped with a cold storage smile, The men smiled too now and then, as if they were walking in their coffins to meet the Heavenly Redeemer.....I had a gat with me and when we got to Forty-Second street I opened fire, Nobody paid any attention.” (189)¹³

The Surrealists – some of you who have studied Surrealism know this – advocated firing at random on a crowd, a gesture of ultimate defiance; unlike them, Miller forecasts the millenium, his fantasy betokens not absurdity but faith. “I am thinking of that age to come when god is born again,” he writes, “when men will fight and kill for god as now and for a long time to come men are going to fight for food. I am thinking of that age when work will be forgotten and books assume their true place in life, when perhaps there will be no more books, just one great book – a Bible.” (23)¹⁴

The personality behind these statements: contradictory, shrill, humble, provides the deeper sense of unity in *Black Spring*. Apocalypse is the gloomy theme of the book, but a cynic may say that apocalypse is also Miller’s personal vindication. Without false modesty, Miller claims that his history will have a scar on the face of the earth, that it will burn up other meaningless histories. Yet Miller is too genuinely incongruous a man to inspire the sneer we reserve for charlatans.

The book contains ten sections. These are:

1. The 14th word
2. Third or Fourth day of Spring

3. A Saturday afternoon
4. The Angel is My Watermark
5. The Tailor Shop
6. Jabberwhorl Cronstadit
7. Into the Nightlife
8. Walking up and down in China
9. Burlesk
10. Megalopolitan Mania

Each of its ten self-contained sections is an exercise in a different medium of art or the imagination, or in several media, "The Angel is My watermark" for instance investigates literary inspiration, the vision of the mad, and water color technique. Further, Miller is both the angel and the horse's ass in the metamprphia picture of "The Angel is my WaterMark," his happy task is to relate the sublime to its animal origins. He is many selves, squabbling among themselves, warring on the world, lost to memory, "There are huge blocks of my life which are gone forever. Huge blocks gone, scattered, wasted in talk, action, reminiscences, dream. There was never any time when I was living one life....." (23).¹⁵

Moreover, he absolves himself from all conventional unities. His home is the present, grimy and sodden with glory, but his home, too, is in his beloved China—the symbol of a reconciled being. "I am here in the midst of great change, he writes in "Walking up and down in China," "I have forgotten my own language and yet I do not speak the new language, I am in China and I am talking Chinese." (164).¹⁶

Yet, he remembers repeatedly to yell: Primary colors! Primary passions! Even in China, the world must always be covered in snow or perpetually aflame. This is finally an extremist's vision of life, an artist's dream. It is the flawed artist in Miller, even more than the crippled seer, who puts his stamp on each page. The task is sometimes solitary. Like Robinson Crusoe, Miller carries his desert island with him, building his fort in his wilderness. In this view of himself as an artist, Miller may strike as an excessively romantic, yet the same man states: "THE GREAT ARTIST IS HE WHO CONQUERS THE ROMANTIC IN HIMSELF." (194).¹⁷ Like Whitman, Miller loudly proclaims his contradictions, unlike Whitman, he ends by saying to his reader: "...tonight I would like to think of one man, a lone individual, a man without name or country, a man whom I respect because he has nothing in common with you— Myself." (206) It begins with Miller possessed by "the dictation" that goes on in his head, beyond his control. He can only water down what is being dictated to him until finally it causes, leaving him exhausted. He then turns to a fascinating book on art and which prompts him to do a water color. the rest of the piece explains how a water color happens, through a process as fortuous as his writing; "when you're an instinctive water colorist everything happens according to God's will."¹⁸

Another section "Into the Night life..." is the scenario of a surrealist nightmare or rather, a dozen nightmares lumped together. Vividly pictorial, it is like a surrealist film, full of irrational sequences, screaming terrors, Freudian guilt and logic. Like any good nightmare it is experienced; one is there, being personal, unable to run, locked in, frantically trying to find a way out. The world tilts and the scene shifts in this "Coney island of the mind," where memories are jumbled together with Gothic visions in a world of crazy symbols that make sense. Miller has written a great deal about the creative process elsewhere, but never so effectively, *Black Spring* demonstrates the creative imagination at work on all levels. "In ordinary waking life", Miller explains in his surrealistic vocabulary: "... The author suffers from normal vision but in the frontispiece he renders himself myopic in order to grasp the immediacy of the dream plasm. By means of the dream technique he peels off the outer layers of his geo-logic mortality and comes to grips with his true mantic self, a non stratified area of semi-liquid character. Only the amorphous side of his nature now possesses validity. By submerging the visible I, he dives below the threshold of

his schizophrenic habit patterns. He swims joyously, ad lib. in the Amniotic fluid, one with his amoebic self.¹⁹ Miller believes that writing should be as spontaneous and unconscious as possible. His own writing is full of free associations and improvisations. There are passages of automatic writing—cadenzas, as Miller sometimes calls them when the dictation possesses him, Miller at the type writer is like a centaur; he becomes one with the machine, and in furious bursts. The result is a succession of discontinuous virtuoso passages that show where he sat down to write and where he left off.

This work shows the to-be-expected frenzied journeys, horrendous transformations, snakes coming out of female organs, disintegrating bodies, mechanized desert landscapes, and threatening menageries of night life. Perhaps, the material would be of some interest in providing psychogenetic patterns for a biographer of Miller: The "poor, desperate father (holding a rust razor) with whom the son can't communicate, (177)²⁰; the injured girl-child (his sister or his daughter?) whom he can't save, the recurring images of surgery and dismemberment; the agonized stumbling into childhood scenes next to cemeteries and the recurrent nostalgia for the "street of early sorrows," the images of sexuality always turning into grotesque mechanisms (including wives); and the italicization of personal guilt – his customs declaration: "I want to declare that I am a traitor to the human race." (168).²¹

In the section entitled "Third or Fourth Day of Spring"—which can be characterized as an apocalyptic essay—Miller simply states his two gestures of escape: "You have the dream for night time and the horse laugh for day time." (30) But they are not really separate for Miller, and the laugh is emphatically nightmarish and diseased. Each great period, he suggestively notes, is followed by its characterizing malaise: "The crusades – Black Death; Columbus–syphilis; nineteenth century–Schizophrenia. The twentieth century laugh thus tends hysteria, toward cackling at catastrophe."²²

However, Miller also claims a different stance of "gay, hard wisdom" (33). He would like to possess the sardonic delight of Petronius (whose Trimachio's "piss warm and drink cold" provides the epigraph here; of Rabelais and his pan-human hyperbole; and of Whitman's embracing song. But, Miller more often sees "only catastrophes, and his longings are messianic. He claims to be on the way, with his escape from the 'black curse' of America and with his awareness of millennial circumstances. ("I am dazzled by the glorious collapse of the world." (32).²³ More crudely, he accepts himself deified; his wife is of great 'importance' and 'significance'; his words become 'divine stuttering', his megalomania raises up an image greater than Christ or God Almighty, 'Myself' (Here you ponder—as an Indian student – whether it is megalomania or the Indian concept of Aham Brahmasmi – I am Brahman.)²⁴ He is the "new reality" in the "Universe of Death" Miller shrewdly qualifies Schizophrenic pretensions by comic hyperbole, as in his burlesque horoscope:

"I am Chance, the crab, which moves sideways and backwards and forwards at will. I move in strange tropics and deal in high explosives, embalming fluid, jasper, myrrh, smaragd, fluted snot and porcupine's toes. Because of Uranus which crosses my longitudinal I am inordinately fond of cunt, hot chitterlings and water bottles. Neptune dominates my ascendant. That means I am composed of watery fluid, that I am volatile, quixotic, unreliable, independent, and evanescent. Also quarrelsome. With a hot pad under my ass I can play the braggart or the buffoon as good as any man, to matter what sign he be born under. This is a self-portrait which yields only the missing parts—an anchor, a dinner bell, the remains of a beard, the hind part of a cow. In short, I am an idle fellow who pisses his time away. I have absolutely nothing to show for my labours except my genius. (29).²⁵

Burlesque or not, then, Miller does have a destiny, his role as artist; his gestures are confined to sitting before the typewriter; and the wild images ("missing parts") may cover the longing to be more than the Comedian in him. He ends his apocalyptic

essay by using the strategy of extremes, insisting that the choice is between song and histerine, "Fourth Eclogue or 13th Arrondissement." (41)²⁶

The rhapsodical memories of his Brooklyn–Newyork life start with the much worked first piece, entitled "The 14th ward". With a "patriotic" love of its streets, though not of the neighbourhood's Luthran morality. Miller joys over his boy–herds and the lost richness of the time when "foam was on the lager and people stopped to chat." (13)²⁷ No doubt that the pre–world War–I, German–American neighbourhood did have a sense of community no longer to be found; but this is not really Miller's interest since most of his nice concrete details and rhetorical flourishes point to the sense of mystery in the good old days of beer, burlesque, and boys. The single Mexican male ethos, which underlies so much of Miller's work and response, holds him in the "clutching brilliance" of memory. The insistence on returning to the world of memory reveals a longing for the time when his life, hounded by a simple masculine code, seemed "whole"; and therefore the ways of the 14th ward become holistic. One of the curious forces driving all through Miller's work is a sense of Edenic loss which he can never quite pin down. Maturity he sees, accurately for himself, as a "grant fragmentation" (18).²⁸ The awesomeness of youthful vision with its awareness of mystery in common things", and, probably later, of literary discoveries not as ideas but as rituals, had a brightness which now belongs only to dream and longing. He ends with an apostrophe to a lost world which seems to have doomed all other worlds since they cannot awaken the innocent eye of a poignant memory.

The longest piece in *Black Spring* is "The Tailor Shop," with Miller's own pathetic clown epigraph: "I have got a mother: always merry and bright" (71)²⁹. This genre piece about the days when he worked in his father's tailor shop (i.e. in his early twenties, before and during World War I) reveals nostalgia going bitter. The first part consists of a series of character sketches—with broad sentiment but shrewdly sardonic detail – of cursing Irish bartenders, earnest Jewish cutters, irascible well–to–do customers, loquacious and drunken drummers, and several pathetic imposters. As he later notes, "The men who passed through my father's shop reeked with love," (133).³⁰ more exactly, they were endearing failures, and Miller's recognition of that bed–rock type provides a solid American motif of the pathetic role of sensitivity in our society.

In the first part of the narrative, Miller subordinates the elaborate verbal play of his other sketches to an only slightly exaggerated account. Only when he is dallying with sex—the too easy seduction of the too–beautiful widow of one of his father's customers—does really get lost, and we have a presentation suitable to one of the "old cronies", in the shop. But as the peace programmes, customers die off, the narrator fights with his wife and outrage graves. While Miller—again claiming the example of Rabelais (115) insists on boisterous gaiety, the misery twists humor. He turns from the tailor shop—never able to maintain dramatically intense narrative—to the reunions of the "freaks who made up the family tree" (116), and he catalogues the heavy food and heavy troubles of his jolly germanic tribe. Tante Melia, who went "completely off her nut" (121)³¹ and had to be taken to the asylum by Miller, focuses the horror; the "too good" – the half–witted angel" type – are, he says always destroyed. He thus laments the lost innocence of Henry Miller. As a narrative, "The Tailor Shop" now disintegrates. Hyper–awareness becomes verbal hyperbole, with fragments of events (apparently drawn from various years) obscurely linked in an enlarging and often surreal rhetoric. His claimed artiotic gropings (dream–writing in his head a vast ancestral book, of which only the title—The Island of Incest—exists) attempt to counter the decline of his actual world. The disordered prose insists on an anguish whose cause remains unspecific and dispropionate to the obvious problems of reaching manhood which the situation suggests. The pyrotechnical fragments world seem to mark, in Miller's consciousness, the simultaneous decline of his father's tailor shop, the pre–war world, and a whole way of life. Decay, death, madness, and suffering—Miller does want to accept them, and so shores fragments of memory against the loss which threatens to become his one reality.³²

Miller writes, as D.H. Lawrence once said of himself, not for art's sake but for his own sake. Midway in one of his burlesque pieces, entitled "BURLESK," Miller sloganizes: "The Greatest Artist is he who conquers the romantic in himself" (209)³³ But his own means of conquests turns out to be violent surrender. TO overcome his past and his obsessions, he makes them his one subject; to cure himself of overstatement, he exaggerates and shouts. A weird and rather forced tone of associations leads from the Paris of the present to New York of his past. The mania for title becomes the heavy repetition of capitalized signs and "Don't spit on the Floor" and "Amen! Glory! Glory! Hallelujah" (197)³⁴. These incongruities come from a store-front gospel tabernacle in New York. Then, by natural antilogic, we move to Cleo, the of a burlesque show. The style sometimes turns from shouts and violent yokings into just bad verse: "The night is cold and men are walking in lockstep. The night is cold but the queen is naked save for a jock-strap (205)³⁵. The nuclear experience UNDERNEATH these vernal gestures - "The grotesque and the void, with the heart breaking love times. (206)³⁶ - intermittently comes through the mannerisms, sometimes with vivid detail. The cathartic process, rather than any narrative sequence or logical coherence, apparently provides the rationale for a group of brief anecdotes. These include a sadistic-obscene one of a friend punishing his frigid and unfaithful wife, which is told with a moral relish (one of the few obscene bits in *Black Spring*). Of the sketchy sordid-fantastic anecdotes from his youth, Miller says: "I am speaking of things that brought me relief in the beginning" (204)³⁷. But better therapy for his longings appears in the super-romantic conceit of writing a "beautiful book" which "will contain the absolute truth" of his life. (204) and will be of religious significance. To obscure the crude naivete of this confession, Miller switches to parody of academic explication, supposedly of the frontispiece of his projected holy writ. The burlesque concludes with an apocalyptic longing for "a new heaven and a new earth" (202), a plea for the assolution of his own disorder and disappointments.³⁸ There are some lively bits here, but the gusto is really hysteria. Miller is struggling to accept himself and his world, which he is of but not in. he can only glue the fragments with the "opiums of dream". (166) and the gestures, but not the full substance, of art.

The brief conclusion to *Black Spring* has the cute title of "Megalopolitan Maniac." The self made epigraph does equally well: "Imagine having nothing in your hands but your destiny. You sit on the doorstep of your mother's womb and you kill time- or time kills you. You sit there chanting the doxology of things beyond your grasp outside. Forever outside." (198)³⁹. Outsiderness is the quality of the city with its "glittering desert streets and sardine people, for whom he writes a sardonic parody to the Vulcanized loneliness for God. mixing sharp mechanical tropes with swelling romantic rhetoric, he hyperbolically, insists on the intensity of living the apocalyptic last moments until all is "blotted in final annihilation (201). God and the song of love, of course have become a stinking fraud, but they print by their absence to a new and greater dynamo of love ten thousand years hence. Waiting on a Nietzschean mountain top for the new revelation, he meanwhile wishes to contemplate "a lone individual, a man without name or country, a man whom I repeat because he has absolutely nothing in common with you - Myself." (206).⁴⁰

5.5 STYLE IN BLACK SPRING

Stylistically *Black Spring* is a dazzling book, the work of a rampant imagination intoxicated with words. Miller is a poet of reckless abandon, his language exuberant and prodigal often used for sound rather than meaning. Fond of jargon and parody, he readily spins off into nonsense and jabberwocky. 'Jabberwhorl cronstadt is a verbal caricature of a friend, parodies his multisyllabic pontification and turns it into nonsense. During the course of his conversation, Jabberwhorl grows progressively drunk and in language reels: Miller drags in his usual catalogue of exotic names and

miscellaneous tidbits of information, and his joking delight in scientific jargons: "...the great vertiginous vertebration... the zoospores and the leucocytes ...Wamroths and hollenlindens... everyone's poem, the jellyfish is a poem too—the finest kind of poem. You poke him here, you poke him there, he slithers and slathers, he's dithy and claborous, he has a colon and intestines, he's vermiform and ubisquishous...."⁴¹

As that final pun indicates, Jabberwohl jellyfish is described from James Joyce as well as Lewis Carroll. It is not only the section entitled "Jabberwohl Cronsbtadt," but the whole of *Black Spring*, is full of Joycean passages. Like the great parodist, Miller writes not in one style, but in many. Not only is each section of *Black Spring* written in a different style, but individual sections are written in Chameleon style that borrows its constantly changing colors from a dozen sources. Besides Joyce the authors he most frequently resembles are Proust and Whitman. Like the Tropics, *Black Spring* is Proustian in its view of coexistent time and place stimulated by memory and the senses; Miller's writing is evocative and nostalgic. His affinity to Whitman is more fundamental, for Whitman contributes to his stance as well as his style, "For me the book is the man," Miller declares, "and my book is the man I am, the confused man, the negligent man, the reckless man, the lusty, obscene, boisterous, thoughtful, scrupulous, lying, a diabolically truthful man that I am." Miller's rhetoric is like Whitman's, with long rhythmic lines pushing along through present participles. His descriptions of the Seine could be scanned as Whitmanesque verse:

....this still yet rushing on from out of a million billion roots,
 this still mirror bearing the clouds along and stifling the past,
 rushing on and on and on while between the mirror
 and the clouds moving transversally
 I, a complete corporate entity,
 A universe bringing countless centuries to a conclusion.
 I and this that passes beneath me
 And this that floats above me
 And all that surges through me....⁴²

The method of *Black Spring* is clear: burlesque and poetic description, vignette, and reminiscence, caricature, and revelation, all pointing to the same theme, reflecting always the same urgent sensibility. The style even more than the subject matter carries the burden of variety. Looking down from Brooklyn bridge, Miller can suddenly spin a net of images that hauls back large, symbolic meanings. A whimsical description of two spigots in a kitchen sink ends with a fugue of cosmic acceptance. A bland sentence takes a quick turn, leaping over the metaphysical contrasts of space and times. Here is an instance:

"Such a day it may be when first you encounter Dostoevski. Remember the smell of a table cloth on which the book rests; you look at the clock and it is only five minutes from eternity. Now every door of the cage is open and whichever way you walk is a straight line toward infinity; a straight, mad line over which the breakers roar and great rocks of marble, and indigo swoop to lower their fevered eggs. Out of the waves beating phosphorescent step proud and prancing the enameled horses that marched with Alexander, their light proud bellies glowing with calcium, their nostrils dipped in laudanum. Now it is all snow and ice, with the great band of Orion slung around the ocean's crotch." (14).⁴³

The passage, in Miller's own fashion, moves from the prosaic to the poetic, and on to the fantastic, and suggests the kind of vocabulary— anatomical, pharmaceutical, astrological, a vocabulary in fact derived from all the sciences and pseudo-sciences— in which he sometimes revels.

The distinctive quality of *Black Spring*, probably written before and after the publication of *Tropic of Cancer*, is not really created by new techniques. It is created, rather, by a curious aura of vindictiveness and nostalgia; an attitude toward

time even more unresolved than Cancer's. For though one of its motifs is that man must act as if the past were dead and the future unrealizable, its pervasive sense is one of loss. "Whenever I have made my bed, I have thought like a maniac to drive out the past," he writes, "But at the last moment it is the past which rises up triumphantly, the past in which one drowns. With the last gasp one realizes that the future is a sham...." (194)⁴⁴. In *Black Spring*, Miller is indeed like a drowning man, clutching at his old selves as one might clutch at straws, mouthing imprecations and prophecies in the same breath. Yet if Miller's vision is more turbulent in *Black Spring*, his style is frequently bolder.

Kenneth Rexroth says: "what will preserve Miller and make him a minor classic is his style... He has been compared to the French 18th century naive writer *Bestif de la Bretonne* and the resemblances are marked. He is almost as garrulous, almost as sex-obsessed, Miller is unassignable and his style is a careful cultivation of all these elements of communication—the speech of interpersonal relations which violates the mechanisms of the dominant society. It is not just that the sexual capers of his characters expose the social lie. His prose disrupts acceptable speech. It does this so easily by simply being the common talk of his declassed caste. The lumpen intelligentsia talked this way in the days of Villon. His writing is spontaneous and uncontrolled on principle, but the control is in the principle, in the intention. If Miller just tells you the time of day he could never be mistaken for Edith Wharton. *The Tropics* established a method of which Saroyan early and Kerouac later were outstanding practitioners, a method which would become dominant in the fiction of the latter half of the century—the roman fleuve in a different sense—the pages go by like a river in flood. The overwhelming flow of Proust or Joyce or Gertrude stein is highly contrived and recognizably so. In Miller and his descendants, the author begins by overwhelming himself. This is a method where nothing succeeds but success. Miller can sweep you away.... Miller can be hilariously funny, but his humor is the humor of old time burlesque."⁴⁵

In following passages Miller's surrealist style is reflected. Also in some of the passages you find long catalogues which are Whitmanesque:

However, always merry and bright! If it was before the war and the thermometer down to zero or below, if it happened to Thanksgiving Day, or New Year's or a birth-day, or just any old excuse to get together, then off we'd trot, the whole family, to join the other freaks who made up the living family tree. It always seemed astounding to me how jolly they were in our family despite the calamities that were always threatening. Jolly in spite of everything. There was cancer, dropsy, cirrhosis of the liver, insanity, thievery, mendacity, buggery, incest, paralysis, tapeworms, abortions, triplets, idiots, drunkards, ne'er-do-wells, fanatics, sailors, tailors, watch-makers, scarlet fever, whooping cough, meningitis, running ears, chorea, stutterers, jail-birds, dreamers, story-tellers, bartenders – and many there was Uncle George and Tante Melia. The morgue and the insane asylum. A merry crew and the table loaded with good things—with red cabbage and green spinach, with roast pork and turkey and sauerkraut, with kartoffel-klosse and sour black gravy, with radishes and celery, with stuffed goose and peas and carrots, with beautiful which cauliflower, with apple sauce and figs from smyrba, with bananas as big as black-jack, with cinnamon cake and Streussel Kuchen, with chocolate layer cake and nuts, all kinds of nuts, walnuts, butternuts, almonds, pecans, hickory nuts, with lager beer and bottled beer, with white wines and red, with champagne, kummel, malaga, port, with schnapps, with fiery cheeses, with dull, innocent store cheese, with flat Holland cheeses, with limburger and schmierkase, with home made wines, elderberry wine, with cider, hard and sweet, with rice pudding and tapioca, with roast chestnuts, mandarines, olives, pickles, with red caviar and black, with smoked sturgeon, with lemon meringue pie, with lady fingers and chocolate eclairs, with macaroons and cream puffs, with black cigars and long thin stogies, with Bull Durham and Long Tom and meerschaums with corn-cobs and tooth-picks, wooden tooth-picks which gave you gum-boils the day after, and napkins a yard wide with your initials stitched in the corner, and a blazing coal fire and the windows steaming, everything in the world before your eyes except a finger bowl. (92)⁴⁶

Once in a while they worked in unison, Froid and Chaud, but that was seldom. Saturday nights, when I washed my feet at the sink, I'd get to thinking how perfect was the world over which these twain ruled. Never anything more than this iron sink with its two faucets. No beginnings and no ends. Chaud the alpha and Froid the omega. Perpetuity. The Gemini, ruling over life and death. Alpha-Chaud running out through all degrees of Fahrenheit and Reaumur, through magnetic filings and comets' tails, through the boiling cauldron of Mauna Loa into the dry light of the Tertiary moon; Omega-Froid running out through the Gulf Stream into the marsupials and the foraminifera, through the mammal whales and the Polar fissures, running down through island universes, through the follicles and tentacles of worlds unformed, worlds untouched, worlds unseen, worlds unborn and forever lost. Alpha-Chaud dripping, dripping; Omega-Froid working, working. Hand, feet, hair, face, dishes, vegetables, fish washed clean and away; despair, ennui, hatred, love, jealousy, crime....dripping, dripping, I, Jabberwhorl, and my wife Jill, and after us legions upon legions...all standing at the iron sink. Seeds falling through the drain: young cantaloups, squash, caviar, macaroni, bile, spittle, phlegm, lettuce leaves, sardine bones, Worcestershire sauce, stale beer, urine, blood-clots, Kruschen salts, oatmeal, chew tobacco, pollen, dust, grease, wool, cotton threads, match sticks, live worms, shredded wheat, scalded milk, castor oil. Seeds of waste falling away forever and forever coming back in pure draughts of a miraculous chemical substance which refuses to be named, classified, labelled, analysed or drawn and quartered. Coming back as Froid and Chaud perpetually, like a truth that can't be downed. You can take it hot or cold, or you can take it tepid. You can wash your feet or gargle your throat; you can rinse the soap out of your eyes or drive the grit out of the lettuce leaves; you can bathe the new-born babe or swab the rigid limbs of the dead; you can soak bread for fricadellas or dilute your wine. First and last things. Elixir, I, Jabberwhorl, tasting the elixir of life and death. I, Jabberwhorl, of waste and H₂O composed, of hot and cold and all the intermediate realms, of scum and rind, of finest, tiniest substance never lost, of great sutures and compact bone, of ice fissures and test tubes, of semen and ova fused, dissolved, dispersed, of rubber schnausel and brass spigot, of dead cathodes and squirming infusoria, of lettuce leaves and bottled sunlight....I, Jabberwhorl, sitting at the iron sink and perplexed and exalted, never less and never more than a poem, an iron stanza, a boiling follicle, a lost leucocyte. The iron sink where I spat out my heart, where I bathed my tender feet, where I sang like a diamond-backed terrapin and I am singing now and will sing forever though the drains clog and the faucets rust, though time runs out and I be all there is of the present, past and future. *Sing, Froid; sing transitive! Sing Chaud, sing intransitive! Sing Alpha and Omega! Sing Hallelujah! Sing out, O sink! Sing while the world sinks...* (127)⁴⁷

III

Over the foot of the bed is the shadow of the cross. There are chains binding me to the bed. The chains are clanking loudly, the anchor is being lowered. Suddenly I feel a hand on my shoulder. Someone is shaking me vigorously. I took up and it is an old hag in a dirty wrapper. She goes to the dresser and opening a drawer she puts a revolver away.

There are three rooms, one after the other, like a railroad flat. I am lying in the middle room in which there is a walnut bookcase and a dressing-table. The old hag removes her wrapper and stands before the mirror in her chemise. She has a little powder puff in her hand and with this little puff she swabs her armpits, her bosom, her thighs. All the while she weeps like an idiot. Finally she comes over to me with an atomizer and she squirts a fine spray over me. I notice that her hair is full of rats.

I watch the old hag moving about. She seems to be in a trance. Standing at the dresser she opens and closes the drawers, one after the other, mechanically. She seems to have forgotten what she remembered to go there for. Again she picks up the powder puff and with the powder puff she daubs a little powder under her armpits. On the dressing table is a little silver watch attached to a long piece of black tape. Pulling off her chemise she slings the watch around her neck; it reaches just to the pubic triangle. There comes a faint tick and then the silver turns black. (131)⁴⁸

IV

I am here in the midst of a great change. I have forgotten my own language and yet I do not speak the new language. I am in China and I am talking Chinese. I am in the dead centre of a changing reality for which no language has been invented. According to the map I am in Paris; according to the calendar I am living in the third decade of the twentieth century. But I am neither in Paris nor in the twentieth century. I am in China and there are no clocks or

calendars here. I am sailing up the Yangstaze in a dhow and what food I gather is collected from the garbage dumped overboard by the American gunboats. It takes me all day to prepare a humble meal, but it is a delectable meal and I have a cast-iron stomach.(164)⁴⁹

5.9 NOTES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 6 CRITICAL APPROACHES

Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Critical Appreciation-1
 - 6.2.1 George Orwell
 - 6.2.2 Aldous Huxley
 - 6.2.3 Wallace Fowlie
 - 6.2.4 Philip Rahv
 - 6.2.5 Frederick Hoffman
 - 6.2.6 Karl Shapiro
 - 6.2.7 Norman Mailer
- 6.3 Critical Appreciation-2
- 6.4 Feminist Criticism
 - 6.4.1 Kate Millet
 - 6.4.2 Susan Griffin
 - 6.4.3 Erica Jong
 - 6.4.4 The analysis of Marx Kellie Munsil
- 6.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.6 Notes & Suggested Readings
- 6.7 Questions

6.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we will discuss the views of T.S. Eliot, Edmund Wilson, George Orwell, Lawrence Durrell, Norman Mailer, Karl Shapiro, Wallace Fowlie, and William Gordon. Also, we will analyse at length the feminist approach to Henry Miller.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

From the publication of *Tropic of Cancer* in 1934 to about 1950, Henry Miller was a major influence in world literature and enjoyed a vast, underground popularity with an audience that stretched from T.S. Eliot and Edmund Wilson to Parisian chambermaids and taxi drivers. In the years around the Second World War, Miller had an explosive effect upon the young. His books were eagerly passed from hand to hand in every literate country. Many writers—including the Beat generation – were profoundly influenced by him.

As the rigors of censorship died away and his major works have been legally published in cheap editions and have come close to being best sellers, that influence had died away. *Black Spring*, *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn* have become social-historical documents. People once suffered severe penalties for sending his books through the mail. Today they seem little more pornographic than many a successful Hindi movie. Anarchism, pacifism, oriental philosophy, occultism, pop-surrealism, sexual freedom, copulation on demand, had all become common place all over the world, a few generations after the first underground publications in Paris of the Tropics.

If ever a writer was a success, Miller was, so much so that he now is in danger of being ignored, like the inventor of the wheel or the safety pin. "Arthur Rimbaud spoke to only a handful of intellectuals, D.H. Lawrence to a limited audience of highly literate sophisticates. Henry Miller was the first to reach a mass audience with

6.2 CRITICAL APPRECIATION-1

Henry Miller has had his share of praise, and such literary maharajahs as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Edmund Wilson made their contribution. Pound contented himself with a cryptic remark: “Here is a dirty book worth reading”; and Eliot, who found Shelley Satanic, nonetheless became a closet devotee of Miller’s, and even sent a letter to Miller. Wilson wrote one of the earliest laudatory reviews to be printed of *Tropic of Cancer*.

6.2.1 George Orwell

It is difficult to summarize so insightful and far ranging an essay as that written by George Orwell on Henry Miller’s work. In his long essay, “Inside the Whale” he declares: “when Henry Miller’s novel, *Tropic of Cancer*, appeared in 1935, it was greeted with rather cautious praise, obviously conditioned in some cases by a fear of seeming to enjoy pornography. Among the people who praised it were: T.S. Eliot, Herbert Read, Aldous Huxley, John Dos Passos, Ezra Pound... And in fact the subject matter of the book, and to a certain extent its mental atmosphere, belong to the twenties rather than to the thirties.”² Orwell perceived the crucial distinction between *Tropic of Cancer* and such work as *Ulysses* and *Voyage to the Bottom of Night*. He was also among the earliest to point out Miller efforts to reproduce throughout his narration the syntax and rhythms of our spoken language rather than to use the rhetorical devices of the interior monologue. But the most revelatory sections of Orwell’s essay are found chiefly in his comments on the similarities between Miller and Whitman, Orwell declares: “So far from protesting, he is accepting, and the very word ‘acceptance’ calls up his real affinity to, another American, Walt Whitman.” Miller’s outlook is deeply akin to that of Whitman, and nearly everyone who has read him has remarked on this. *Tropic of Cancer* ends with an especially Whitmanesque passage, in which, after the swindles, the fights, the drinking, and the imbecilities, he simply sits down and watches the seine flowing past, in a sort of mystical acceptance of thing-as-it-is.”³

6.2.2 Aldous Huxley

Aldous Huxley’s essay entitled “Death and the Baroque” is one of the few essays which links Miller’s work with something more than a narrowly literary cult or ism. In other words, it offers a truly comparative base in the arts from which Miller’s work might be viewed. As many critics had noticed there is something gorgonian, something bordering upon caricature in Miller’s art. The value of Huxley’s essay is that it offers a wider perspective from which the “art of the inordinate” can be viewed. If Huxley is correct in his contention that these experiences which are inescapably, inavoidably private—death, sex, the mystical—are also unavoidably ‘comparable, unsocial, a historical, then we may have a more adequate explanation than ‘pornography’ for the ambivalence and discomfort which Miller’s work seems so often to arouse.⁴

6.2.3 Wallace Fowlie

Not the least provocative aspect of Wallace Fowlie’s essay—entitled “Shadow of Doom”—is his contention that Miller has “interrupted the traditional American treatment of evil,” which is another way of acknowledging that there is a large and always easily divided stream in American literature one branch of which is best represented by Melville; the other by Whitman. However, the principal subject of “Shadow of Doom” is the role of the artist in the modern world. While Fowlie shares

the view that modern life presents itself to man as particularly dislocated and atomized, he differs from Rahv and Hoffman in that he takes the view that modern life should not tempt us into artistic self dissolution, but modern life should oblige us to organise the chaos of experience into coherent partners. Fowle locates Miller's literature heritage of in the work of Rimbaud, thereby offering some literary context for such terms as "prophet" and "seer" as these are applied to Miller. The modern artist is captured particularly well by Miller in the projections of the artist-hero who is "the little man who is terrified and who in reality greater than that which terrifies him."⁵

6.2.4 Philip Rahv

"If Henry Miller's status in our literary community is still so very debatable, it is probably because he is the type of writer who cannot help exposing himself to extreme appraisals with every page he adds to his collected works" proclaim Philip Rahv. His essay is note worthy as several counts. It was one of the first to call attention to the need for drawing a distinction between merely exploiting one's personality and the more general necessity of exploiting any material for artistic purpose. The failure to draw such distinction leads, particularly in the case of a writer like Miller, to critical partonaship. More important is it frustrates a comprehension of the "biographical" as a narrative strategy. While it would probably no longer be possible to agree that the ego of Miller's persona is 'confused and helpless' in the face of exterior reality, there is no doubt that Miller is of the opinion that man can no longer afford the continual sacrifice of personality required by creative acts of the kind represented by Joyce and Proust.⁶

6.2.4 Frederick Hoffman

Frederick Hoffman was one of the first to explore in any detail the Freudian implications in Miller's work. Hoffman particularly calls attention to the relation between the nonrational, nonlogical aspects of man's experience as Miller and portray them and the functioning of the preconscious and unconscious as Freudian theory deduces it. Hoffman also distinguishes Miller's happy acceptance of "the rare opportunity which psychoanalysis affords of viewing a world previously shut off from consciousness" and Miller's rejection of the uses to which psychoanalysis, as a clinical practice, has been put.

6.2.5 Karl Shapiro

Karl Shapiro is one of the critics who ardently defended Henry Miller. Comparing Miller with Walt Whitman and D.H.Lawrence, he avers: "Whitman, Lawrence, Miller, and even Blake all have the reputation of being sex-obsessed whereas Whitman writes "copulation is no more rank to me than death is," Miller writes hundreds of pages describing in the minutest and cleanest details his exploits is bed. Every serious reader of erotica has remarked about Miller that he is probably the only author in history who writes about, such things with complete ease and naturalness."⁷ Comparing Miller with the Orientals, Shapiro proclaims: "...His aim was not to write about the erotic but to write the whole truth about the life he know. This goal demanded the full vocabulary and iconography of sex, and it is possible that he is the first writer outside the orient who has succeeded in writing as naturally about sex on a large scale as novelists ordinarily write about the dinner table or battlefield."⁸

6.2.6 Norman Mailer

His friend and fellow writer, Norman Mailer was almost eulogistic "... Miller provided his considerable qualifications. One had to go back to Melville to find a rhetoric which could prove as noble under full sail. Indeed one has to ask Miller could not outwrite Melville if it came to describing a tempest at sea.

Miller at his best wrote a prose grander than Faulkner's, and wilder—the good reader is revealed in a farrage of light with words heavy as velvet, brilliant as gems, eruptions of thought over the page. Men with literary styles as full as Hawthorne's—appear by comparison stripped of their rich language, stripped as an A style book; one has to take the English language, back to Marlowe and Shakespeare before encountering a wealth of imagery equal in intensity."⁹

6.3 CRITICAL APPRECAITION—II¹⁰

Miller has something in common with Lawrence and Joyce; in his detestation of the abstract, depersonalized life of his time he is on the side of Lawrence, and he is like Joyce in that all his work is a confession. But it is undertaken in a very different temper from Joyce's; it completely dispenses with dignity and is all the better for it... He pours out everything, getting over his shame by a sort of braggadocio, as Rebelais did; not so completely as Rebelais, but more completely than Joyce.

Edwin Muir. *The Present Age from 1914 (Cresset)*. 1939. p.149

Miller invokes food and sex as heroic sentiments and even generalizes them into principles. For the man who is down and out has eyes only for that which he misses most frequently; his condition makes him a natural anarchist, rendering irrelevant all conventions, moral codes or any attempt to order the process of experience according to some value-pattern. The problem is to keep alive, and to that end all means are permissible... Miller's claims as a guide to life and letters or a prophet of doom can be easily discounted... He is remarkable, however, as the biographer of the hobo-intellectual and as the poet of those people at the bottom of society in whom some unforeseen or surreptitious contact with art and literature has aroused a latent antagonism to ordinary living, a resolve to escape the treadmill even at the cost of hunger and degradation.

Philip Rahv. *NR*. April 21, 1941. pp.557-9

He has always been a martyr in his idolators' minds and it must be said that Henry Miller has done nothing to remove the opinion that he is a genius who can expect nothing but contempt and more martyrdom from his countrymen. It may well be that he is one of the truly great writers of his time, as his admirers believe; it may be that the strain of willingly suffering indignities, plus an ego as large as all outdoors, will prevent the fulfillment of his genius.

Harrison Smith. *SR*. Aug. 16, 1947. p. 18

Both (Gertrude Stein and Henry Miller) are tremendously good Americans, because they are wholly concerned. America is the background of all their thinking and writing... And in spite of continual disillusionment (and how Miller can describe the etiolated, emasculated blotting paper Americans call bread! And how he can suggest the anonymity, the forlornness, the tastelessness of Main Street!) Miller yet has a faith Walt Whitman would have envied... So, at the end, these two great expatriates do not have to come home, because they never went away. With lance and probe for armor, these are valiant Americans, because they have suffered to discover what America is, and why, and to relate America with Europe, with the world, and with the Creator of the world.

Anne Fremantle. *Com*. Dec. 12, 1947. pp.229-30

He spruces up words conventionally regarded as vulgar and taboo and brings them out on parade, thus achieving an effect of daring originality, what Kenneth Burke calls perspective through incongruity. The solemn he treats with ribald mockery and iconoclastic disdain, the sublime with profane levity; the erotic, the sensual, the luridly carnal—prohibited themes—he honors with lyrical fanfares, almost mystical exaltation. Since the time of the Greeks, sex has been proscribed by Western

civilization: Henry Miller considers it his mission to redress the balance, to restore sex to its position of primacy.

Charles I. Glicksberg. *SWR*. Summer, 1948. p. 229

You don't walk beside Henry, you are conveyed, practically levitated. His relish of the miraculous outburst of nature that is Big Sur seems to hoist you into a sultan's howdah beside him. Like a potentate greeting his subjects, he bows left and right to the Big Sur flora and fauna. Cars pass unnoticed; a roar of planes overhead will not divert his attention from an interesting bug. I constantly had the feeling that he was on leave of absence from ancient Greece or China, pledged to observe in our day only those things that had eternal currency.

Harold Maine. *AQ*. Autumn, 1951. p. 200

Henry Miller is a really popular writer, a writer of, for, and by real people. In other countries he is read, not just by highbrows, or by the wider public that reads novels, but by the people who, in the United States, read comic books. In the United States he has been kept away from a popular public and his great novels have been banned. Only highbrows who could import him from France have read him... I should say he has become part of the standard repertory of reading matter everywhere but in England and in the United States. If you have read Balzac, or Baudelaire, or Goethe, you are also expected to have read Miller.

Kenneth Rexroth. *Nation*. Nov. 5, 1955. P. 385

Even in books like the two *Tropics* where Miller was piling sordidness upon sordidness to get the effect of reality, the thing (on rereading) does not come off as real, especially if you compare him with writers in the same genre like Celine and Beckett. The excitement of the books as good sexual pornography has also considerably worn off, partly perhaps because we have got used to those things from other sources, but chiefly because Miller's own interest in sex (as a writer, of course, not in life) is not fully authentic, but there again seems a little forced. It is not the genuine interest in sex as a thesis, as in Lawrence, or in sex as sensuality, as in Colette; it is not the experience of sex itself that is important to Miller but the symbol of it—symbol of the violent quest for experience that flung Miller out of an ordinary office job and a bourgeois career into the streets of Paris. As a writer Miller has never dealt with experience as such but with himself having the miraculous adventure of having experience. He is an innocent abroad—he is even now the innocent abroad in California.

William Barrett, *SR*. Aug. 3, 1957. P. 10

It is difficult to say how far such an instinctive writer as Miller has realized his own importance. Probably he arrived at it through a process of trial and error: looking for a fixed point in a world of shadows he found only himself, and in the depths of himself nothing but a longing, nihilistic and pre-natal, a violent attraction toward the darkness of the womb. There is however, no doubt that his transition from the objectivity of the third person to the subjectivity of the first, from a narrative to an autobiographic style, from reticence on certain subjects to the most brutal frankness, was deliberate and conscious. With him the American novel, which with many of the imitators of Hemingway, Faulkner and Saroyan had become merely a literary machine, reached a turning point. Like the spring-time rush of a turbid and riotous mountain stream breaking up the winter's ice (or if you prefer it like the filthy gush from a drain busting up through the cracks in the surface of a road), we see in Miller the moment when that precarious balance between American society and its opponents, which had never been completely achieved broke down altogether.

Alberto Moravia, *SwR*. Summer, 1960. Pp. 474-5

Henry Miller can use the language. He writes strong, biting, memorable, vivid prose... Style, style, style: burshwork, the drive of the hand into the clay, the thrust of the lines of structure against each other, the movement of the musical phrase between keys and modes, the balance and rivalry of colors, the rise and fall and timing of an

actor's voice-style is a chief aim of all artists in all media. This Henry Miller has achieved: he is a wonderful stylist.

Spontaneous, his style appears. He writes prose which often seems to run absolutely naturally, like the flow of eager conversation or a rapidly written letter or the current of nonlogical ideas in one's own mind. If in the future he is remembered for anything more than his interest in obscenity, he will be recalled as an agile, often graceful, sometimes powerful manipulator of word and phrase and sentence and paragraph, and sometimes (although less often) of those larger units which are called chapters.

Gilbert Higher. *Horizon*, Nov., 1961. Pp 104-5

The form he uses is sometimes called "the autobiographical novel," but this is a misnomer; the word "autobiographical" obtains merely because the narrator (that is the created I) sounds so very real. It is now generally recognized that all that is dramatically engaging—whether tragic or comic—must appear to stem from a bedrock of reality. In narrative, this means a straight-faced delivery. This straight face can extend as it does with Miller, beyond the work itself, so that, when questioned about it he can say: "Oh yes, that's all real, that really happened, that's me I'm writing about, etc." which is, of course, nonsense, but, in any case, does not alter the new form which he has brought into being. This form—the narrative using a wholly created, but entirely convincing I—is one of the great forms of the future, even as it is today, in the work, for example, of William Burroughs and John Reechy.

Terry Southern. *Nation*. Nov. 18, 1961 pp.406-1

What is more, Miller has developed a style that is very well fitted for this continuous act of celebration. He writes a hurrying, turbulent prose that gives the impression of complete spontaneity, but only the most naïve reader will imagine that such prose can be produced without a great deal of hard work. The rhythms never get out of hand, the pauses are varied with considerable skill, and the words are chosen with great effectiveness. If this is anti-art, it is at least not anti-craft.

John Wain *NR* Dec. 1, 1962. P. 22

He is childlike, sensitive, very proud, high-spirited, totally uncritical, alternately to the point of euphoria and despairing to the point of suicide. He curses a civilization that he does not understand, reviles a country he is unable to leave, and dismisses as worthless all the major authors he has never taken the trouble to read. He refuses to make any effort to commercialize himself, to "earn a living," but harasses his acquaintances to support him ("You call yourselves my friends") in petulant open letters—and they do. I do not pretend wholly to understand such a man—even Durrell, who should of all people be able, all too obviously fails. But his letters... cleared of the cant and rhetoric of his books, offer as clear a picture as we are ever likely to get. They prove, at least, if proof were needed, that the Dirty Old Man who still represents the greater part of his public image is really only a fractional, though integral, fragment of the whole—a whole that is huge, unchanging, probably unique, and the closest thing our century is likely to produce to a genuine Noble Savage.

David Littlejohn. *Reporter*, April 11, 1963, p. 45

Sexus, *Plexus*, and *Nexus*, taken together, are simply an enormously expanded *Tropic of Capricorn*. All these books deal with Miller's life during the twenties when he was trying to discover himself. This is the central story that he has been trying to tell ever since 1932., when he started writing *Tropic of Capricorn*, the story of his "rosy crucifixion," when he died as an ordinary mortal and was resurrected as a writer. Originally he thought he could explain the miracle in one volume. It took him five or six years to finish *Tropic of Capricorn*, only to discover that the mystery had eluded him. The events he narrated were in some mysterious way deeply significant to him, yet he had not succeeded in explaining the significance even to himself... Miller's method [in the trilogy] is rather like psychoanalysis. He seems to be putting down everything he can remember about the period, in hopes that some meaning will ultimately emerge from the mass.

George Wickes. *Henry Miller (Minnesota)*. 1966. Pp. 38-9

Tropic of Cancer could have been written by no one else, a good deal of Tropic of Capricorn and Black Spring by any one else. Capricorn is the book of Miller's adolescence, Cancer of his maturity; and these categories apply in some measure to his treatment as well as his subject. In all his work Miller is affected with the romantic fallacy that anything that happens to a writer is worth our attention. Or perhaps he felt that a scandalous subject was enough. But in Capricorn and Black Spring his scandals are adolescent. Much of what he records in these works in the way of sexual improprieties is familiar enough, yet he sets it all down like a boy out to shock his elders. But whether his subject is scandalous or not is irrelevant: the weakness in the later books, what makes them so tiresome, is that he is not able to give his subject the larger meaning it had in Cancer, a sense of the age. If these later works have a larger value at all, it is that Americans remain incorrigibly innocent no matter what they do. And incorrigibly sentimental! After Cancer who would have predicted Miller's moonstruck nightly walk past the house of the girl he "loved," or his tears at the news of her engagement?

Isadore Traschen. SAQ. Summer, 1966. P. 346

6.4 FEMINIST CRITICISM

Henry Miller's writing has proved deeply troubling to feminist critics, given the seemingly misogynist and sexually violent inclinations of the protagonist/author. We will study the approaches of a few major feminist writers.

6.4.1 Kate Millett

Kate Millett boldly proclaims: "Certain writers are persistently misunderstood, Henry Miller is surely one of the major figures of American literature living today, yet academic pedantry still dismisses him as beneath scholarly attention. He is likely to be one of the most important influences on our contemporary writing but official criticism perseveres in its scandalous and systematic neglect of his work. To exacerbate matters, Miller has come to represent the much acclaimed 'sexual freedom' of the last few decades----- However attractive our current popular image of Henry Miller the liberated man may appear. It is very far from being the truth. Actually, Miller is a compendium of American sexual neuroses, and his value lies not in freeing us from such afflictions, but in having had the honesty to express and dramatize them. There is a kind of culturally cathartic release in Miller's writing, but it is really a result of the fact that he first gave voice to the unutterable. What Miller did articulate was the disgust, the contempt, the hostility, the violence, and the sense of filth with which our culture, or more specifically its masculine sensibility, surrounds sexuality"¹¹ Yet, Millet argues that Miller's work expresses a 'neurotic hostility' towards women, 'the yearning to effect a complete depersonalisation; in his prose, ' Miller simply converts woman to 'cunt'. -thing, commodity matter; "At the heart of Millett's view is," avers Michael Woolf, "an ideological rejection of Millett's representation of women. There is though, a sense of distance between ideology and art in Millett's writings... Millett is torn between a political and ideological alienation from Miller's work, and a repressiveness to his creative method and artistic vision. In this respect, her autobiographical work dramatises the supremacy of art over ideology. In *Sita and Flying* she reveals a profound sympathy for many of Miller's attitudes and narrative strategies. Eventually, *Flying* owes much to *Tropic of Cancer* in both method and ideas. Both books occupy a place in the study of the relationship between sex and introspection in American culture. They belong within a tradition of fiction that uses sexual action to assert an anti puritan position, and that further sees sexuality as a means of liberating an essential self from social restraints and convention. The ideological and historical distinction between these books observe the underlying correspondences, Millett's understanding of Miller is best expressed in the

6.4.2 Susan Griffin

Another major feminist writer, Susan Griffin has branded Millet's writing pornography and lumped it with works more traditionally considered to be of that genre. Griffin's influential book, *Pornography and Silence* (which was first published in 1981) discusses an enormous range of 'pornographic' texts and images, including works by Miller, Sade and Reage. Griffin does not differentiate between the various approaches taken by these texts to the subject of sexuality much less evaluate their relative literary or external value. Indeed she suggests that all contribute to the material oppression of women in the same way and to the same degree. 'While Griffin's book is important in that it attempts to analyse, in psychoanalytic and cultural terms, the attractions for men of certain pornographic images, it falls far short of its goals. *Pornography and Silence* is undermined by Griffin's refusal to make important distinctions and her tendency to overgeneralize. Her insistence that women are always and everywhere victimized by the very existence of pornography runs counter to the experience of many women who are aroused and sexually empowered by such materials. Likewise, Griffin's reliance on essentialist assumptions about the nature of gender and gender relations, for instance that there is a 'natural' female sexuality that excludes both violence and abuse of power, but includes what Ellen Willis calls the 'goody-goody concept of eroticism, the idea that 'love making should be beautiful, romantic, soft, nice,' are disturbing in their implications for those women and men who do not experience sexuality, in Griffin's approved way", declares Mary Kellie Munsil.¹²

6.4.3 Erica Jong

Erica Jong, who calls herself one of the disciples of Henry Miller, is eulogistic about her guru. In her book on Miller entitled *The Devil at Large*, she proclaims: "why must we read? Because he invented a new style of writing a style as revolutionary in his own way as Joyce or Hemingway's or Stein's a style that reveals, as he says, "the inner pattern of events."¹³ Also, she calls him a sage: 'Henry is, above all, a wisdom writer like Hesse or Krishnamurti', and the narrative is far less important to him than the philosophical digressions. He uses his life as a parable; this is not the usual novelist's dance. He seeks to instruct for more than to please. Beyond that, he wants to liberate—both himself and the reader." In her "Introduction", she declares: "perhaps enlightenment is the ancient function of the poet prophet seer. "The Divine literature" was Whitman's term for this being. And Henry Miller had deputies to Whitman, as he did to Hesse and Thoreau. He wanted to be more than just a writer; he wanted to be a prophet for his readers, and he became one— — — — —"¹⁴

6.4.4 The analysis of Mary Kellie Munsil

In her insightful essay entitled "The Body in the prison-house of language: Henry Miller, Pornography, and Feminism," Mary Kellie Munsil avers that Henry Miller is misunderstood by the Feminists due to the complex interplay of language and bodily experience. She says: "Only a few critics—few of them feminine—have been willing to acknowledge that Miller's work represents a new form of autobiography and to accept this fact in the light of its potential for positive cultural subversion. Kenneth Rexroth's excellent 1955 review of Miller's work in the *Nation* is one of the few he suggests that Miller offends because he refuses to lie about life. Discussing Miller's disturbing literary approach to sexual relationships, Rexroth writes that "a real wedding of equals may exist but it certainly isn't very common. I don't see why Miller should be blamed if he has never found it. Hardly anybody ever does, and those who do usually do it in some sordid fashion. This of course, is the point... of all his encounters in parks and telephone booths and brothels.. Better this than the lie. And this is why these passages are not pornography, but comic. A feminist reading

might be that these passages are not only comic, but subversively so, as they undermine male sexual supremacy precisely by insisting upon it so hysterically. That is, by accentuating his persona's sexual need. Miller, consciously, or not makes the persona seem laughable, even pitiable. This treatment is similar to the excesses of emotion and gesture typically found in melodrama, and as theorists of melodrama such as Peter Brooks have pointed out, the locations in a text readers or viewers are most likely to find "excessive" are also those that tend to draw attentions to themselves and, often to themselves. Read in this light, the excesses of Miller's on going self creation as virile male border on a self-parody that he may well not have intrended."¹⁵ Further says Mary Kellie Munsil. "If feminists have failed to address the subversive potential of sexually explicit writers like Henry Miller, it can be attributed more to the historical content in which the most recent wave of feminism arose than to any inherent blindness. Because the initial period of any civil rights movement is quite naturally marked by the identification of wrongs and demands for redress of those wrongs, it is not surprising that early criticism tends to focus on external forces of oppressions and to vilify those figures who seem to embody these forces such has been Henry Miller's. fate at the hands of some feminists."¹⁶ Talking about the failure of cross-gender communication, the learned critic declares: "Feminists often lay the blame for failures of gender communication on men (or, more obliquely, on male created language), while refusing to ask women to take responsibility for their own participation in the process of linguistic creation and self-creation. As women, we have, until recently, retreved behind the role of external victim of patriarchal culture and language, often referring to acknowledge out own participation in those structures. Perhaps it is time now to seek out the significant gaps in the fabric of cross-gender communication and to take advantage of such openings to create ways out of the "prison-house of language."¹⁷

6.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed the views on Henry Miller of some of the well known critics like George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, Wallace Fowile, Philip Rahv, Frederick Hoffman, Karl Shapiro Norman Mailer and those of some of the less known critics. Also, we have analysed the comments—some caustic, some favourable of some of the famous feminists like Kate Millett, Susan Griffin, Erica Jong, and the comments of the critic, Marie Kellie Munsil on the comments of the feminist critics. So, plenty of information is given here to help your further understanding of Henry Miller.

6.6 QUESTIONS

1. What are the views of T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and Edmund Wilson Henry Miller?
2. Write a long note (about 400 words) on the comments of
 - i) George Orwell
 - ii) Aldous Huxley
 - iii) Walace Fowlic
 - iv) Philip Rahv
 - v) Frederick Hoffman
 - vi) Karl Shapiro
 - vii) Norman Mailer
 - viii) Kate Millett
 - ix) Susan Griffin
 - x) Erica Jong
3. Give your assessment of Henry Miller as a writer. (400 words).

6.6 NOTES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Vinson, James ed. *Contemporary Novelists*. London: St. James Press, 1976.
2. George Orwell, "Inside The Whale"
3. Ibid
4. Edward Mitchell (Ed.) *Henry Miller : Three Decades of Criticism*.
5. Wallace Fowle, "Shadow of Doom": An Essay on Henry Miller., Ronald Mitchell (Ed.) *Three Decades of Criticism*, p.38. New York: New York University Press, 1971, p.4.
6. Philip Rahv: "Sketches In Criticism: Henry Miller"
7. Karl Shapiro, "The Greatest Living Author : In Defense of Ignorance," in *Henry Miller: Three Decades of Criticism*, ed. Edward Mitchell (New York: New York University Press, 1971), p. 81
8. Ibid, PP 81-82
9. Norman Mailer, *Genius And Lust*
10. Dorothy Nyren Curley. *Modern American Literature*, Pp.345-52
11. Kate Millet, *Henry Miller in Sexual Politics* P. 145
12. Mary Kellie Munsil, "The Body in the Prison-house of Language: Henry Miller, Pornography and Feminism", p. 291
13. Erica Jong, *The Devil At Large*
14. Ibid
15. Mary Kellie Munsil, "The Body in the Prison-house of Language"
16. Ibid
17. Ibid



Block

6

THE CATCHER IN THE RYE

Block Introduction

UNIT 1

The Author and The Plot

5

UNIT 2

The Main Themes and Characters

12

UNIT 3

The Language In The Catcher In The Rye

24

UNIT 4

Critical Interpretations

29

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

In **Unit 1**, we have provided the background to the novel, particularly those aspects, which evolved right through colonial period and went into the making of the American fictional imagination. For example the idea of the pastoral, which remains the major preoccupation of the novelists from Hawthorne. The emergence of the Adamic figure in American Novel which has immediate relevance to the novel we are studying. The colonial settler, imagining himself as the new Adam in the new land encounters the native Indian who not only challenges this notion but even problematizes it, nonetheless continues to move ahead with it. American novel has continued to throw up versions of this figure since its beginning. The pastoral ideal, after the frontier receded, manifested itself in memory and other forms. The protagonist tries to space out from the civilization to that which lies beyond. We traced these outlines and relate them to the novel and the protagonist in the novel. Also, we have critically analysed the plot.

In **Unit 2** we have provided for the evolution of the concept of preparatory school as a consequence of some social changes that took place in America. The social space prep school occupies and the role it plays will be linked to the functions of such institutions like the family, office and other spheres of public activity in individualistic and industrial society. The student and his peers will be seen as following a way of interaction which, seen from a positive angle, will extend the influence of a liberal society. In other words the school is going to be seen as an institution encoding the values of the society. Also, we have critically analysed the character of Holden Caulfield, protagonist.

In **Unit-3** we have take a look into the colloquial forms of speech and the teenage preparatory school language adopted by Salinger to give both authenticity and immediacy to the novel. We have to shown that though Salinger achieves a triumph in giving the teenage slang a form, it is not his chief aim. The first person narrative also adds to the immediacy of the language while at the same time giving an edge to the psychological make-up of the main character in the novel.

In **Unit-4** we have discussed Salinger's interest in Buddhism which started after his disillusionment with the war and disappointment with the market-place values of competition and surface appearances in American society. An attempt is made to show that his understanding of Buddhist ideals have gone in to the making of the text. In ways not direct and immediate-such problems like sickness, old age and death have been looked into from the Buddhist perspective. Holden Caulfield is made to realize the need to come to terms with change, which keeps affecting continuity, again a Buddhist ideal. We have discussed the critical opinions of some critics.

UNIT 1 THE AUTHOR AND THE PLOT

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction: The Author as Recluse
- 1.2 Summary of the Novel
- 1.3 The Plot
- 1.4 Critical Analysis of the Plot
- 1.5 Summing Up
- 1.6 Questions

1.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this unit is to critically analyse the plot of the novel; also, the author's personality is discussed to make you understand the connection between the work and the psychology of its author.

1.1 INTRODUCTION: THE AUTHOR AS RECLUSE

For a novel, which was banned from the reading list of schools and colleges, *The Catcher in the Rye* has come a long way to make it to the canon. It is only in the fitness of things that you should read the text as part of your course in American Novel. Its popularity apart, there are themes in the novel which are typically American: New York setting, growing up, adolescent nonconformity and final affirmation of the family as a lasting institution.

A word about its famous author. Jerome David Salinger who became the most avidly read author of his generation after the publication of *The Catcher in the Rye* on July 16, 1951. Interested to know more about the protagonist of the novel Holden Caulfield, the critics keenly looked for the details of early life of the author; but Salinger remained obsessively elusive and silent, steadfastly refusing to talk or write about his life. He became famously reclusive.

But true to the best selling tradition, which was peculiarly American before it became truly international, the American public, even that part, which demanded that the book be not read, became "hungry" to possess the famously elusive Salinger. Till date, this authorial silence has not helped in knowing how far the book is an autobiographical enterprise- that is how many scenes and characters have cognates in actual events and in Salinger's own life. Even now a lot of speculative writing is done to link the details of Holden to the early life of Salinger-though in America the impulse to see fiction, not as fact or history, but as autobiography is questioned by critics as dubious in value.

At one point in *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield remarks: 'What really knocks me out in a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it. 'J.D. Salinger himself obviously does not share this attitude. In an age and country where writers delight in making extravagant, public appearances - 'wearing funny hats', to use James Dickey's phrase - he has lived a deliberately 'reclusive life. No photos or biographical details appear on the dust jackets of his books, and he has consistently refused to be interviewed or to let his works be reprinted in anthology. He recently defended this policy of reticence. 'It is my rather subversive opinion that a writer's feelings of anonymity - obscurity are the

second-most valuable property on loan to him during his working years' virtually all that is known about Salinger's life is that he was born in New York in 1919 of a Jewish father and Irish mother, and now lives in New Hampshire with his second wife and two children.

Yet even without the usual paraphernalia of personal publicity, Salinger's prominence has been assured since the appearance of his (and still his only full-length) novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*, in 1951, with its distaste for the blandness and 'phoniness' of urban middle-class culture the novel perfectly caught the mood of young Americans of the day. High-school and college students idolized and imitated Holden Caulfield much as their earlier counterparts had aped Hemingway's Jake Barner or Scott Fitzgerald's Blanche Amory.

Subsequently Salinger published *Nine Stories* (sometimes titled *For Esme - with Love and Squalor*; 1953). Since then he has been working on what he calls 'a narrative series....about a family of Settlers in twentieth-century New York the Glasser.' Any echoes of Galsworthy's Forsyte Saga that his discription may conjure up are entirely misleading. Salinger's narrative of the Glass family has so far been confined to a handful of cryptic and tantalizing fragments. Seymour Glass, the eldest child, is described on the day of his suicide in 'A perfect Day for Bananafish in *Nine Stories*. Other members of the family appear in *Franny and Zooey* (1961), and *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour! An Introduction* (1963) a total of four long short stories originally published in the *New Yorker*. Their theme is essentially an expansion of the basic situation of *The Catcher in the Rye*: The effort of the sensitive and intelligent individual to come to terms with the complacent ad-mass culture that surrounds him. That quality of sensitive innocence which Holden Caulfield retained beneath his rebellious mannerisms has developed into a note of religious mysticism.

At the moment Salinger's critical reputation varies wildly. He has been hailed as a great novelist and dismissed as a passing fad. *The Catcher in the Rye* is viewed by some as an established classic and by others as a dated piece of sentimentality. Salinger's later work have been greeted as the fertile preliminaries to some future masterpiece along the lines of Proust's *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* and cited as evidence of a dwindling and fading talent.

Moreover, Salinger was born in 1919 to Jewish parents. After being expelled from several private preparatory schools, he finally graduated from Valley Forge Military Academy in 1938. He then went to Ursunius College in 1938 only to stay there for just nine weeks. Not long after, enrolled in Whit Burnett's short-story writing class at Columbia University where he wrote "The young folks", a short story for class assignment. Burnett later published this story in the literary magazine *Story* in the spring of 1940. After brief appearance as a writer in the *University Kansas City Review* ("Go see Eddie") and *Collier's* ("The Hang of it"). Salinger started writing for *The New Yorker*. His writing career however, was halted for a brief period when he had been drafted into the army. He received training for counter intelligence and served in Europe till he was discharged in 1945. A series of stories from "Bananafish" to "F'retty mouth and Green My eyes" appeared in *The New yorker* which not only showed his consummate artistry but went on to be recognized, with such authors as John O'Hara and John Cheever, as the New York school of fiction. (The term is used to describe the sharp, ironic style that characterizes the fiction of these writers). After *The Catcher in the Rye*, he kept writing stories intermittently till 1961 when he published *Franny and Zooey* to a huge critical acclaim and public reception. He published another collection of previously published stories *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters and Seymour: an introduction*. He last published Seymour Glass story in *The New Yorker* in its issue of June 19, 1965. Salinger has since been completely silent.

1.2 SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL

The Catcher in the Rye opens in a sanatorium, where Holden is recuperating from a mental breakdown. Holden, all of sixteen years, begins by describing his expulsion from Pencey Prep, a select preparatory school, prior to Christmas vacation. He spends the following two days in hiding in New York City.

Holden's roommate at the School is Stradlater, a handsome, gross amorist. On Holden's last night, a Saturday night, he is in a frenzy of jealousy because Stradlater has dated up Jane Gallagher, with whom he is in love. Jane and Allie, who is Holden's dead brother, never appear in the novel. They with Phoebe constitute Holden's emotional frame of reference. Holden loves Jane, but never calls her up. Instead, he keeps calling Sally Hayes, whose manifest phoniness gives him "royal pain". When Stradlater is out with his date, Holden agrees to do his classroom composition for him. He writes a descriptive essay about his dead brother, Allie's baseball mitt.

Holden, who feels he has written about a subject dear to him, finds that Stradlater crudely rejects it. Holden tears the composition up and gets into a fight with Stradlater who gives him a bloody nose. Holden decides he cannot stay in Pencey any longer.

Holden goes to say goodbye to Mr. Spencer, his nice old history teacher. He tells Mr. Spencer that, though he could not do well in the school, he liked him. He then gets worried that while his teacher is saying edifying valedictory things to him, he becomes acutely concerned about the quarters of the ducks in the Central Park lagoon.

To delay confronting his parents about his expulsion, Holden decides to loiter in New York City. While on a train to Manhattan, he meets the mother of an unpopular student he knew at Pencey and purposely embellishes her son's reputation to spare her feelings. Once in the City, he ventures into an adult life: visiting a Jazz club, asking for drinks and trying unsuccessfully to lose virginity to a prostitute.

Dissatisfied he wanders through the Central Park to see what the ducks are doing. Keen to find them, he pokes in the Grass and nearly falls in the water. Shivering and apprehensive of getting Pneumonia, he sneaks into his parent's apartment to see his dear sister, Phoebe.

The clever, precocious Phoebe, all of ten years, functions as Holden's salvation. She keeps trying her hand at novel writing. When Holden tiptoes into Phoebe's room, he finds her asleep. After a good look at her notebooks, where he finds she has changed her middle name to Weatherfield from Josephine, he wakes up Phoebe. She opens her eyes and tells him excitedly about the role she is going to do in a school play, then she gets to know that Holden has been expelled from the school. She hits him with her fists and then cries. He tries to explain that the school was full of phonies, which really depresses him. "You don't like anything that is happening" she asks. He tells her about his wish to be a "Catcher in the Rye", to stand at the edge of the cliff where a thousand children play. He elaborates further, "what I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff... That is all I'd do all day." He then tells about his intention to go west.

Holden then meets Mr. Antolini, another teacher he admires; after listening to his words of advice, comes back disappointed by the latter's gestures. He then goes to Phoebe's school to leave a note, then sees some obscenities written on the walls of the building. Horrified that children may see them he erases the vulgarities. But he finds the same obscene graffiti on the walls of National History Museum. Despondent, he accepts the fact that the world will not change despite his efforts to keep innocence.

1.3 THE PLOT

Holden Caulfield is a sixteen year old American boy, cynical and rebellious but deeply sensitive. He is expelled from Pencey Prep, the exclusive School to which his parents have sent him, for his failure to work. One Saturday he returns early from an abortive fencing match (he managed to use all the team's equipment on the underground) and stands in the school grounds trying to inculcate a sense of sadness about leaving. He then goes to say goodbye to his history teacher Mr. Spencer, who is ill at home. The interview is embarrassing, for Mr. Spencer is anxious to justify himself for failing Holden in his history exams, he insists on rehearsing the boy's mistakes. Holden gets increasingly annoyed and takes advantage of the earliest opportunity to leave.

He goes to his room and reads until he is interrupted by Ackley, an insensitive youth who lives in the same dormitory. They are joined by Stradlater, Holden's handsome and good-natured room-mate. Stradlater is going out on a date that evening and wants Holden to write an English Composition for him. Holden agrees but is jealous when he learns that Stradlater is going out with Jane Gallagher, a girl whom he himself had almost fallen in love with the previous summer. After a desultory evening in the nearby town Holden returns to his room and writes Stradlater's composition. He finds himself thinking of Allie, his young brother who died several years before. When Stradlater's comes back Holden's jealousy about Jane Gallagher returns. He provokes a fight, which he loses badly.

On impulse he decides to run away from school without waiting for the end of term. He takes the train to New York, travelling part of the way with the mother of one of his classmates, he tells her extravagant and untrue stories about how popular her son is. On arrival in New York he checks in at a hotel, rather than going to his parents' flat to tell them about his expulsion. He is annoyed that it is too late at night to phone his younger sister Phoebe.

He spends a restless night. In the bar he is refused alcohol because of his age and flirts unsuccessfully with a group of girls from out of town. In his room he finds himself thinking about Jane Gallagher again and resolves to go out. He pays a brief lonely visit to a nightclub. Back at the hotel he is accosted by the liftman, who offers to send a prostitute to his room. Holden accepts but when the girl, Sunny, arrives he does not feel like sleeping with her. She is puzzled and angered, even though he insists on paying. Left alone, he sits in bed smoking and brooding until the liftman and Sunny return to extort more money from him. Holden objects but the man hits and rifles his wallet Holden goes to bed miserably.

In the morning he phones to make a date with Sally Hayes; he does not like the girl much, but is lonely and desperate for company. He breakfasts near Grand Central Station. During the meal he falls into conversation with two nuns and, on a sudden impulse, insists on giving them a charitable donation from his own dwindling reserve of money. He goes over to Broadway to buy theatre tickets for his date with Sally and a record for his sister Phoebe. He wanders around Central Park on the off-chance of meeting his sister, but is unlucky.

Despite his mixed feelings about Sally, he is pleased to see her at the theatre that afternoon. During the interval, however, she is joined by a sophisticated young college boy and Holden gets increasingly annoyed at their affectedly intellectual conversation. When the play is over he takes Sally skating. As they drink coffee afterwards he launched into an inarticulate tirade against conventional people. He ends up by proposing that she run away and live with him in the country. When she will not take his suggestion seriously, they quarrel and part in anger. Holden goes to a bar to meet an old school friend Carl Luce, an intelligent but supercilious young man. He is angered by Luce's air of amused condescension and starts another quarrel. He

sits in the bar alone getting drunk, before making an incoherent apologetic phone call to Salley, Wandering around Central Park he drops the record that he had bought for Phoebe.

Anxious to see his sister, Holden takes the risk of creeping into his parents' flat. Phoebe is awake and tells him that his parents are out for the evening. They chat together, and Holden feels relaxed and cheered by her company. He phones Mr. Antolini, a former English teacher, and makes arrangements to stay the night at his house. Holden's parents return unexpectedly but he is able to sneak out of the flat unseen. Antolini and his wife greet him sympathetically, but the teacher warns Holden that he is a dangerously confused and directionless young boy. In the middle of the night Holden wakes to find Antolini stroking his hair. Assuming the man to be making a homosexual advance, he storms out of the house angrily and spends the rest of the night in the waiting room of Grand Central Station.

The next morning he walks through the city feeling tired, hung-over and nervous. At last he resolves to leave and seek some rural hideaway where he can live in peace and quiet. But before departing he wants to say goodbye to Phoebe, so he leaves a note at her school asking her to lunch with him. When she hears of his plan she is desperately insistent on being allowed to come as well. To placate her Holden takes Phoebe to the zoo; for all his confusion and anxiety, he still finds a strange pleasure in her company.

In a brief concluding chapter Holden gives a summary account of the end to his weekend as a runaway. He finally goes back to his parents and is sent to a psychiatric hospital. There he is visited by his elder brother. D.B., once a promising novelist but now a Hollywood scriptwriter.

1.4 CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE PLOT

"The Central and controlling image of recent fiction is that of the rebel-victim." Few American novels bear out Ihab Hassan's generalization more strikingly than *The Catcher in the Rye*. Salinger transforms an apparently simple account of a high-school dropout's weekend excursion in New York into a poignant expression of modern alienation. For all his confused immaturity Holden Caulfield is an ideal iconoclast: he rejects the simple-minded esprit de corps of Pencey Prep, the classic American success story embodied in his brother's career as a Hollywood script writer and the pseudo-intellectualism of chic middle-class New Yorkers.

Holden's witty and cynical impiety does not steer from either rational thought or simple bloody-mindedness. It is the result of an honest sensitivity a type of holy innocence that recurs as one of the central values in Salinger's fiction. Holden's absolute refusal to accept the 'Phoney' so later alienates him from the established way of life that he can identify only with the oddballs and losers. He sympathizes with the prostitute who comes to his hotel room and even with the pimp who beats him up. He admires the child like vulnerability and wisdom of Phoebe and obviously more than half envies his dead brother, Allie. Unable to envisage any place for himself in society (the most he can manage is an extravagant fantasy about a cabin in the woods) he becomes society's victim. His only refuge, as the novel's closing pages reveal, is the mental hospital.

From this account it is obvious that Holden Caulfield is a twentieth-century version of those loner heroes so beloved by American novelists. Most critics have been struck by the parallels with Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* in particular. In each case a young boy narrates, in conversational idiom, his flight from society. Holden, of course, flies into the heart of New York rather than the world of nature. But even in the city he dreams that familiar dream which has so long haunted the American

imagination – the simple country life ennobled by honest manual labour and the joys of romantic love.

Yet at the time when *The Catcher in The Rye* first appeared readers were struck more by its topicality than its traditionality. It was linked with other rebellious works of the 1950s like Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim* and John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*. Psychologists found in *The Catcher in the Rye* an embodiment of Erik Erikson's theory of the adolescent 'identity crisis', while sociologists saw it as an illustration of David Reisman's conception of American society as a 'Lonely Crowd'. On a simpler level, millions of young people recognized in Holden Caulfield an image of themselves. The book became a cult. As Lawrence Lipton has testified in the *Holy Barbarians* (1960), it exerted a crucial influence on the Beat Generation. (In this connection it is interesting to note that Salinger, like the Beats, has subsequently trod the path toward mystical religion)

The book's very pertinence as a sign of its times has tended to obscure the question of its literary value. Viewed as a work of art, rather than a social or psychological document, *The Catcher in the Rye* raises considerable problems. It is, of course, a superb technical feat. Its rendition of New York life is a triumph of realistic observation: the atmosphere of shabby hotels or of Central Park on a winter dark is brilliantly conveyed. Moreover, Salinger shows a mastery of Holden's rhythm and idiom of speech that can at times rival Twain's use of Huck Finn as narrator. Yet the very invocation of Huckleberry Finn serves to underline the weaknesses of *The Catcher in the Rye*. The essence of Twain's achievement is, that, while appearing to reproduce the artless narrative of a fourteen-year-old boy, he in fact manages to establish a mature and detached attitude to his hero. Salinger, by contrast, seems to identify almost completely with Holden; the result is a book which often shares the immaturities of its hero.

Some critics have been troubled by the novel's streak of sentimentality and morbidity. Holden Caulfield's compassion for other people – one can see it in his encounter with the nuns in Grand Central Station – and his innocent love of his sister can be genuinely moving. Yet the total effect is exaggerated, as Alfred Kazin has complained, it is 'too obviously touching'. In a similar fashion, Holden's almost obsessive preoccupation with his dead brother is presented without critical detachment. In fact, Frank Kermode suggests that the novel has a 'built-in-death wish'. Other readers have felt that the book asks them to accept Holden on his own evaluation as the last sensitive person alive. The portraits of the insensitive adults are very convincing but is it really credible that in all his wanderings Holden should encounter nobody, whether peer or adult, who is intelligently sympathetic towards his problems? As Philip Roth has pointed out, this note of spiritual elitism has come to sound increasingly loud in Salinger's work: 'this place and time is seen as unworthy of those few precious people who have been set down in it only to be maddened and destroyed.'

1.5 SUMMING UP

The novel, *The Catcher in The Rye*, which was banned in the 1950's is being prescribed in the colleges and universities where American literature is taught. A critical analysis of the plot tells you that *The Catcher In The Rye* is a witty story where protagonist, Holden Caulfield has become a classic example like Huck Finn. The novel has exerted a crucial influence on the Beat Generation.

1.6 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss Salinger's personality and his work.
2. Give a brief summary of the plot of *The Catcher In The Rye*.
3. *Critically analyse the plot of the novel.*
4. What are the special features of the prescribed novel.

UNIT 2 THE MAIN THEMES AND CHARACTERS

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Adamic figure
- 2.3 Pastorality
- 2.4 Evolution of preparatory school
- 2.5 From Sickness to Health
- 2.6 Main Characters
- 2.7 Holden Caulfield: A Critical Analysis
- 2.8 Summing Up
- 2.9 Questions

2.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading the text you will be able to follow the evolution of the Adamic figure in the imagination of America. This figure, while defining American literature in very important ways, is closely linked to the theme of Pastorality. We have made an attempt in this unit to show the linkage between these themes. At the end of the unit you will understand how Salinger makes use of these themes in the novel. From the title to the effective deployment of the portal metaphors an attempt is made to trace these themes. After reading this unit, you will understand: the evolution of preparatory school in the light of the changes brought by modernization in the role of some of the educating agencies. The preparatory school has appropriated to itself some of the functions of the family and other agencies like the Church. The narrative includes Salinger's subtle critique of the culture of the preparatory school in the novel.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Friends let us look into the background to the novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*; there possibly is no better way of looking into it than with a possible consideration of the title. The words 'Catcher' and 'Rye' instantly invoke the pastoral ideal that has been integral part of American experience, as well as American imagination.

In American literature, particularly in American novel one often comes across the themes of civilization, spatiality or the frontier and pastorality; they, apart from being focussed exclusively and intensely, are explored in their inter-connectedness. The importance of these themes has to do with the origin and idea of America itself.

Also one of the important aspects of the novel is the way it describes the atmosphere in the preparatory school. The reader cannot but notice the fact of its importance in the scheme of the novel. The novelist takes a hard look at the culture of the preparatory school. The protagonist too is made to speak about the school in unsatisfactory and inadequate terms.

There possibly are two meanings that could be read in the text: one is the general malaise or the psychic disturbances caused by the industrial or postindustrial societies. Characters who occasionally appear in the text, like the parents of Holden Caulfield particularly his lawyer-father, give indications of not only transferring their authority over their child to the preparatory school, but also having psyches which are

deeply anxiety-ridden. The second meaning, which gives Holden Caulfield the context to his actions, is the large conformity which informs or controls the preparatory schools in America. Salinger, rather ingeniously, makes Holden to hop from prep school to prep school in search of that space not yet affected by conformist control and gives in the process the prevailing atmosphere of the preparatory school.

2.2 ADAMIC FIGURE

When the puritan set his foot on the American soil his desire was as much to flee from the malcontents of European civilization as to give pure forms to his ideal, the idea of living the life of New Testament. He began to see himself unencumbered by ancestry, and inheritances; he sees himself as a 'new personality', 'an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling ready to face and come to terms with the new environment with the help of his own unique and inherent resources. In the vocabulary of puritan ideology, he saw himself as an Adam, an American Adam.

But this new Adam met another pristine figure on the American soil, who did not carry any trace of European civilization; what more he was living a life more innocent than that prefigured by him. This encounter gives the Adamic figure his first challenge and the American experience its ambiguity. However hard he tried to be different and begin his life anew, he was only reminded that he carried with him the traces of a civilization from which he wanted to flee. So he entered into a problematic relationship with the Indian; seeing the Indian as the other and at the same time trying to ingest the values of the Indian he encountered almost at every step on the territory. The civilizational man and the Indian in his natural environment, their interesting encounter over time, gave American Literature its major themes: the frontier, the pastoral and the dialectical images of machine and the garden. The Adamic figure variously became the source for the American writer to advance his theme and craft. From Hawthorne and Melville to Mark Twain and Salinger he constitutes an integral part of American fictional imagination.

2.3 PASTORALITY

The pastoral ideal has remained the persistent, even obsessive, theme in American literature. America as the new Eden, as a haven for those seeking perfect freedom, as a land in which such freedom is associated with a pastoral or purely natural dream, illuminates the imagination of large number of American novelists. That vision of innocence is the key ingredient in the American novel.

The 'little house on the prairie' or a hut, invokes the dream of magical existence. The house, in the vast prairie, while being the image of the world, is associated with innocence, spirit, freedom and even physical strength. These associated virtues of the pastoral have inspired writer after writer from Hawthorne, Melville and Thoreau to Mark Twain and Jack London. If Melville found the sea as the source of irresistible appeal and meaningful mystery in Twain, meaningful experience lies in mythical places, the river, the northwest territory, even in black Jim.

The postwar novelist might not have stayed in a hut on the prairies, may be by the time he arrived on the scene, the prairies have been filled or spaced out and the frontier receded to closure. He felt it in the memory and as an archetype which made the loss all the more intense. This made him set his protagonist on search for the mythical locale in the next town, road or outpost. The obsessive seeking of a spatial dimension recurs in much of modern American novel. Though such seeking out of space found its archetypal expression in Moby-Dick, what marks the search and mobility of modern protagonist is a note of despair. For him the pastoral is only in

memory, the prairie is a lost world. The reason why he conveys his experience of limiting even stifling space through portal metaphors, and expresses the need to find a door which would liberate him from restraint to and sell him on a road to renewal and recreation.

So in the postwar novel, you will find versions of the pastoral. Many a novelist would set his protagonist, trying to come out of the his limiting civilized space, be it school, or some such civilizing institution, towards that magical locale where he could have feel of his dispossessed Eden. In Malamud's *A New life*, S. Levin, a representative European culture, seeks renewal, goes whale hunting, leather stocking experiences, floating on Mississippi raft, hunting 'big game', negating with every outing cultural assumption he has. You have many protagonists who, following Huck Finn's lighting out for Montana territory, reject the civilizational trap as unconnected to any primitive sources of energy. Brautigan's Trout fishing Kesy's *One flew Over Cuckoo's Nest* only testifies this need to break from the stifling traps. Friends, coming back to the point of relating *The Catcher in the Rye* to the above material discussed as background we will start with a consideration of the title of the text.

Let us start with the portal metaphor or reference to the door, which we have discussed above. Holden is not worried about his flunking, but about the stifling environment of the school. He hates Pencey Prep; the fact of his not being able to adjust to any of the preparatory schools, brings out the clear indifference, even hostility of the preparatory school. The hostility is obliquely expressed through his persistent rejection of his surroundings as 'phony' and his desire to go west, to space out. He would not like to do anything but allow his self to reach out in the rye fields, protect innocence and be part of it. His recurrent use of the word 'phony', his reference to various experiences with fellow students and other acquaintances as depressing point to a lack in and around the school, a lack which could be interpreted as the lost virtue of innocence, freedom and magical feeling associated with the pastoral. He, hence, would like to cross the door of the school to engage himself in the acts of renewal. The freedom of the American west and the vast rye fields just suit the intentions of Holder.

2.4 EVOLUTION OF THE PREPARATORY SCHOOL

A brief history of the evolution of the preparatory school in societies like the American society would help us in furthering our analysis. Analyzing the role of the preparatory school in terms of relating the individual to the American society Daniel F. Davis and Norman Langer articulate the views of David Riesman in the following words:

As societies become more technologically advanced... parents give up some of their authority to other institutions such as schools, the mass media, and peer groups....Riesman called this society "other directed"... other directed societies lead to stability and tolerance, but also foster conformity and loss of individuality.

Holden attended three preparatory schools: whooton, Elkton Hills and Pencey. These schools are representative enough for Salinger to delineate specific ambience of the preparatory school. Holden, in spite of his inability to adjust to the demands of the school, stays within the finely tuned collegiate culture of dates and movie going. Through the description of Holden's actions that Salinger situates all those agencies that seek to influence his development such as peer group, parents, and the mass media.

Livingston School, a boy's preparatory school... draws on the top of the Social system. Its masters are mostly graduates of Ivy League colleges....

The evolution of single-sex school boarding school has specific function. This kind of school was created in the nineteenth century "to educate, socialize, and monitor the male offspring of the professional and business classes". As modern societies began to develop in diverse industrial and administrative structures, traditional institutions like the church and the family began to cede some of their powers and functions. One such function which came to be transferred from them was the duty of educating and controlling the children. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries these institutions were supplanted, if not wholly replaced, by a whole range of new institutions like the school, the college and the firm. These new institutions became places where the young future professionals got extended periods of training and socialization.

Preparatory Schools can be seen in the context of the evolution of these new institutions in modern societies. They draw from the culture of the well-to-do social groups of the whole nation and blend into a kind of homogeneity. The school fits them to "behavioral uniform signifying to the world the social group to which they belong or aspire to belong." The endeavor is usually to cultivate "manly, christian character, having regard to moral and physical as well as intellectual development." Salinger, as if were to illustrate this motto of the preparatory school, includes the promotional statement of the Pencey prep which reads, "since 1888 we have been moulding boys into splendid and clear thinking young men".

The portrait of the culture of the Preparatory school is realized mainly through two ways. First is the way Holden invariably debunks the assessment of preparatory School customs and traditions. Second is Holden's ritualistic encounters with particular members of his peer group. These encounters assume ritualistic significance when they are repeated like exercises and interspersed with commentaries. Holden's commentaries on the value system of Pencey prep usually have the conclusion that the official vision of the school as cooperative caring family is a mask for an ideology of intense competitive struggle between its individual members. The idealization of the preparatory school contrasts sharply with Holden's expressed opinion of the ideology of the Pencey system He describes to Sally Hayes:

You ought to go to a boy's school sometime...everybody sticks together in these dirty little goddam cliques.... Even the guys that belong to the goddam Book-of-the-month club stick together.

The philosophy of the preparatory school is also expressed in the metaphor of life as a game which is conducted according to the rules of fair play. The headmaster of Pencey, Dr. Thurmer, tells the same to Holden when he goes and tells that he is thrown out. "You should play it according to the rules", tells the headmaster. Holden's response to the advice just exposes the contradiction.

Game, my ass. Some game. If you get on the side where all the hotshots are, then it's game; all right -I'll admit that. But you get on the other side...then what's a game about it?

While such remarks of Holden as the above expose the contradictions of the culture of the preparatory school, he also exploits the system. He is very much the college man-about-town, adept at telephone dating techniques, habits of night clubs and hotel lounges. His ability to fathom the mind-set of his peers gives him an awareness of social and psychological messages. The way Holden negotiates various mediating agencies endears him to the readers.

2.5 FROM SICKNESS TO HEALTH

One of the mistakes in reading *The Catcher in the Rye* is to assume— since Holden is under the treatment of a psychoanalyst— that the novel closes with some unsettled psychoanalytical questions concerning Holden's experiences and his future. This is not the case at all. Holden has been sick, but he has already been cured, and the resources of his personality are strong at the end, so strong that it is he, not the psychoanalyst, who possesses the insights. This can be seen in the three seemingly puzzling statements he makes in the final chapter. The first is when he responds to the doctor's question of whether or not he is going to apply himself when he goes back to school, by saying, "I mean how do you know what you're going to do till you do it?" (p.276). The second is when his brother D.B. asks him what he thinks about the story he has just finished telling, and Holden replies, "If you want to know the truth, I don't know what I think about it" (pp 276–277). And the third is when he ends by saying that he misses everybody he told about, even the pimp who beat him up after a pathetic encounter with a prostitute at the Edmont Hotel, and adds "don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody" (p.277). The meaning of these statements may be puzzling, but their purpose is not. They intended as Zen riddles or Koan, designed to present intellectual impasses that serve to indicate, sharpen, and define the elusiveness and indefinability of life. As Allan W. Watts explains it in *The Way of Zen*, "when the disciple comes to the final point where the Koan absolutely refuses to be grasped, he comes also to the realization that life can never be grasped, never possessed or made to stay still whereupon he 'let's go and this letting go is the acceptance of life as life——". This is the insight, the illumination Holden has reached by the time his story is over and he has left his precept-laden anxieties behind.

Holden is thus not, as many of Salinger's critics have maintained, a tragic figure, a victim of modern society. He is not mentally defeated at the end, and he has surprisingly come to terms with the world in which he must live. Salinger's gospel is a positive one, showing "how exposure of the sensitive soul to the darkness of this present age can lead not only to sickness but also to healing."

What actually happens to Holden Caulfield as he moves from sickness to health in *The Catcher in The Rye* was not understood by most reviewers when the novel came out. Given the reputation and huge sales the book eventually achieved, it is surprisingly to look at the early reviews and discover that so many of them were negative, and quite a few even hostile. Jocelyn Brooke, writing in *The New Statesman and Nation*, was something of an exception, coming close to describing the novel as it is: "This is an odd, tragic and at times an appallingly funny book, with a taste of its own." The opinion of R.P. Charaues in *The Spectator* is more typical. "Intelligent, humorous, acute and sympathetic in observation, the tale is rather too formless to do quite the sort of thing it was evidently intended to do." And in a direct attack on the book, Anne L. Goodman expresses an opinion she shared with a number of other critics in 1951. "The book as a whole is disappointing, and not merely because it is a reworking of a theme that one begins to suspect must obsess the author"

2.6 MAIN CHARACTERS

The main characters in this novel are as follows:

- i) Holden Caulfield – a seventeen year old boy who believes that world is dominated by 'phonies' and is in frantic search of some refuge;

- ii) Stradlater – a classmate at Pencey Prep whom Holden regards as a lecher;
- iii) Mr. Spencer – one of Holden's teachers who is kind but ineffectual
- iv) Phoebe Caulfield – Holden's younger sister who is sweet, innocent and precocious; and
- v) Mr. Antolini – a former teacher of Holden who is bright and sophisticated

2.7 HOLDEN CAULFIELD : A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

The *Catcher in the Rye* appeared in a sober and realistic time, a period when (by comparison with the 1960s) there was a general disenchantment with ideologies, with schemes for the salvation of the world. Salinger's novel, like the decade for which it has become emblematic, begins with the words, "If you really want to hear about it," words that imply a full, sickening realization that something has happened that perhaps most readers would not want to know about. What we find about directly in the novel is, of course, what has happened to Salinger's hero narrator, Holden Caulfield; but we also find out what has happened generally to human ideas on some simple and ultimate questions in the years following World War II. Is it still possible to reconcile self and society? Is it any longer possible to separate the authentic from the phony? What beliefs are essential for survival? What is the role of language in understanding the nature of our reality? Is it possible to create value and endow the universe with meaning? That Salinger deals with these questions in one way or another point to a problem with *The Catcher in the Rye* that has often been ignored or simply not taken seriously – that the climate of ideas surrounding the novel is dense, and that the book is not just the extended and anguished cries of a wise guy adolescent whose main trouble is that he does not want to grow up.

From the start in *The Catcher in the Rye*, we are struck with the bleakness of Holden Caulfield's life. His existence seems so gratuitous and contingent, so absurd and without apparent meaning that we wonder where Salinger could possibly go with such a story (or why he would want to go any where with it? Holden is so full of despair and loneliness that he is literally nauseated most of the time. He realizes how different he is from other people, yet his own personality barely exists. He is filled with a penetrating nothingness, and for all the advice he gets, no one can tell him what he must do. There is no rational way he can discover a way out of his dilemma, yet he must take action of some sort, and suicide is not it.

In describing Holden's predicament, one cannot avoid using existential platitudes, for Holden is, undoubtedly in the midst of an existential crisis. Yet for all his despair, Holden is not a character who adequately illustrates the bitter pessimism and seriousness of a character out of the writings of Sartre not does he convey the simple message of popular existentialism as suggested by Camus – choose a path, commit yourself, be yourself, realize your own dignity. Salinger conceives of character much the same way Sartre and Camus do, but his use of language, his humor, and his ultimate willingness to look elsewhere for his answers make him a far different writer, even though he begins at the same point: The world with all its obscenities.

The way Holden Caulfield sees the world is stated in the novel's most famous line: "If you had a million years to do it in, you couldn't rub out even half the 'suck you' signs in the world" (pg.262). It is ironic that this sentence is the one that is most responsible for the various bannings of the novel in the years following its appearance. The Detroit Police did not understand Salinger's point at all when they pulled the book out of the city's bookstores – that the controversial line, instead of being obscenity itself, is directed, as almost all of Salinger's fiction is, against obscenity. Holden tries to explain to us not only what is offensive, disgusting, and

repulsive to him in human behavior, but also what goes against prevailing notions of modesty and decency. "The things Holden finds so deeply repulsive are things he calls 'phony,'" writes Dan Wakefield, "and the 'phoniness' in every instance is the absence of love, and, often, the substitution of pretense for love."² Holden is a rebel, but he is hardly a rebel without a cause. He begins in a screaming rage against a society of convention, immorality, and the patently false, but he ends by establishing love and acceptance as a saving grace.

When Holden first introduces himself to us, it is difficult to believe that he is going to establish anything. He comes across as the classic screw-up. He has been thrown out of a series of schools, the latest being Pencey Prep in Agerstown, Pennsylvania, and he is undergoing psychiatric treatment in California. A remark by Stradlater, his old roommate at Pencey seems to pretty, well define his character. 'You don't do one damn thing the way yu're supposed to' (p53) – Holden fails all of his subjects but one (English) his last term at Pencey, he succeeds in alienating himself from the other students, and he even fails as manager of the fencing team (he loses the team equipment on the subway). Yet he is a character type who has his own fascination for the reader. As Arthur Heiserman and James E. Miller, Jr, emphasize, "American Literature seems fascinated with the outcast, the person who defines traditions in order to arrive at some pristine knowledge, some personal integrity.

Integrity – or at least frankness – is one of Holden's most engaging qualities as he starts his story with an extended flashback to the day he left Pencey, the kind of school that advertises itself in the back pages of certain magazines with a picture of a guy on a horse jumping over a fence (Holden says that he has never seen a horse anywhere near the place). It is the day of the year's last football game, but Holden goes instead to see "Old Spencer," his history teacher, who asked him to stop by before leaving school. Spencer, in a question that echoes throughout the book, asks Holden, "What's the matter with you, boy" (p.14)? As Spencer tries to lecture him that he flunked history because he simply did not know anything, Holden's mind wanders to a question of his own, one he returns to time after time in the novel. He wonders what happens to the ducks in the lagoon near Central Park South when winter comes. It is now winter for Holden, and what will happen to him?

Much has been made critically of Holden's obsession with the ducks, and in some ways the symbolism seems too obvious. But the ducks are another one of Salinger's signs, and they suggest a verse from the New Testament; "The foxes have holes and the birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." Holden, in his perception of the phony, in his outrage against the obscene, and in his own ineptitude is estranged from both his society and nature. He is not, in this respect, a Christ figure, but he is most certainly a fool for Christ. Once he leaves Pencey, he does not have a place to rest, and his odyssey becomes the story not of a seeker after truth so much as the story of one who seeks relief from his madness through some saving grace, through some healing stroke.

Holden has often been compared to earlier characters in Literature. A substantial amount has been written showing his relationship to Huckleberry Finn – a connection that seems obvious enough given the first – person narration, the colloquial language, the emphasis on the problems of adolescence and the motif of the journey." Holden has also been compared to the hero of Goethe's *The sorrows of young*, Byron's *Childe Harold in Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and, more significantly, to Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, in *The Great Gatsby*. The latter point has considerable validity, because both *Gatsby* and Holden are model characters of innocence and illusion in American Literature, and as one critic has stressed, "The central common characteristic of both *Gatsby* and Holden is adherence to a powerful, abiding illusion, while swirls around them a corrupt, hostile, essentially phony world." Salinger even goes so far as to have Holden say, "I liked Ring Lardner and *The Great Gatsby* and all I did, too. I was crazy about *The Great Gatsby* – old *Gatsby* old sport" (p 183). Surprising similarities to William Saroyan's *The Human Comedy* (1943) have been noted.⁶ In both novels there is an objectionable boy named Ackley, and the name of Saroyan's

hero, Homer Macauley, bears some metrical and orthographical similarity to Holden Caulfield. Each of the characters has a sister and two brothers (with one of the brothers either dead or dying), each gets into trouble in a history course, and each has an encounter with a prostitute.

But the similarities, as great as they are end there between Saroyan and Salinger: Holden is a much more memorable character than is Homer Macauley, and *The Catcher in the Rye* is, without argument, a much more important book than is *The Human Comedy*: its story is more subtle, its structure more complete, and its humor more outrageous.

Holden himself suggests another literary comparison that has not been given much emphasis in interpretations of the novel. About half-way through his monologue, Holden says, "If you want to know the truth, the guy I like best in the Bible, next to Jesus was that lunatic and all, that live in the tombs and kept cutting himself with stones. I like him ten times s much as the Disciples, that poor bastard" (p.130) **Holden is the lunatic in the tombs. He lives surrounded by death. One of his obsessions is his younger brother, Allie, who died from Leukemia at the age of ten.** Another one of his obsessions is James Castle, a boy at one of his former schools. Eikton Hills, who committed suicide by jumping from the window after being cruelly harassed by some of the other students. Holden is also like the lunatic in another way – he keeps hunting himself as he masochistically puts himself in one situation after another that can only lead to pain and revulsion. He goes places where he should not be, he calls up people who do not really want to see him or even begin to understand him, and he dwells on thoughts that can only cause him pain. Like the lunatic, he is possessed by not one demon, but many (the lunatic's name is "Leagion" because of his multiple possession) – the demon of fate and death, the demon of emptiness and meaninglessness, the demon of guilt and condemnation, the demon of despair, and the demon of jealousy. The casting forth of these evil spirits is what his story ultimately comes down to.

The extent of his possession is indicated early in the book when he learns that his roommate Stradlater's date for the evening is Jane Gallagher, girl Holden met the summer before last and with whom he is vaguely and uncertainly in love. After Stradlater leaves, Holden sits in his room and begins to think about what Stradlater might do to Jane. "God, how I hated him——" Holden later explains. "Most guys at Pencey just talked about having sexual intercourse with girls all the time.....but old Stradlater really did it...That's the truth." (pp 55, 63). He is driven by his jealousy to provoke a fight with Stradlater, who knocks him down and bloodies his face – the first of several injuries that Holden manages to inflict on himself in the course of the novel. But he is unable to stop thinking of Jane and Stradlater, and his own sexual insecurities along with his despair over the obscenity he sees all around him (Stradlater had a way of calmly sweet – talking girls into believing that he actually cared for them). Send him off on a self-destruction spiral that, paradoxically, leads to his redemption at the end.

Holden's demonic possession is apparent when he catches the train to New York with the idea of staying in a cheap hotel until the day when his parents expect him home. A lady board the train at Trenton, notices the Pencey sticker on Holden's luggage, and asks him if he knows her son at the school. Holden automatically adopts another personality. He tells her that his name is Rudolph Schmidt, casually lies to her about how popular and respected her obnoxious son is, and explains his own early departure by saying he is going to have an operation for a brain tumor. He evokes sympathy from her, and she is pleased with what he had said about her son, but it is all deception. In a phony world, phoniness works, but Holden's actions become increasingly those of a madman who seems less and less in control of them.

He goes into a phone booth at Penn station, but he cannot think of any one he could reasonably call at that late hour. He gets a cab, mistakenly gives the driver his home address, asks him to turn around, and then asks him if he knows what happened to the

ducks in the winter. The driver thinks Holden is nothing more than a wise guy, and drops him off at the Edmont Hotel. Holden checks in, goes up to his room, and finds no comfort in his anonymity and isolation. He looks out his window and watches a transvestite dressing up and parading in front of a mirror in a room on the other side of the hotel. In another window he sees a man and woman squirting water at each other out their mouths. "Sex is something I really don't understand too hot" (p.82), he says. He impulsively decided to call up a woman named Faith Cavendish, a part time paste into, whose number he obtained from a Princeton student a few months before, and asks her if she would like to have a drink with him. She offers to meet him the next day, but he loses his courage and backs off.

Shaken by his encounters with the inexplicable and the obscene, he goes down to the bar in the Lavender room of the hotel and begins to think of his sister, Phoebe – one of Salinger's infuriatingly precocious children. "You should see her," Holden says, "You never saw a little kid so pretty and smart in your whole life." (p.87) The same age as Allie was when he died – i.e. ten years – Phoebe, like him has had nothing but A's since she started school. She has learned the dialogue of her favourite movie, *The 39 steps*, by heart. And she writes books about a girl detective named "Hazzle" Weatherfield. Phoebe and Allie symbolize innocence to Holden, but they are more than that. A major theme in the *New Testament* is that to enter the Kingdom of Heaven one must have the purity of heart that can be achieved only by becoming like little children, or as the critic Robert G. Jacob has stated it, "For Salinger, childhood is the source of the good in human life; it is in that state that human beings are genuine and open this love for one another. It is when people become curious in their relationships to one another, become adults, those they become 'phony' and 'cal' and come to love the reasons for love more than the loved person."

That Holden himself sees childhood as the source of good in human life is indicated in the title of the novel. At one point in his wanderings through New York, he sees a father, a mother, and their six-year-old son who had all apparently just come out of church. The parents are talking to one another, paying no attention to the child who is walking in the street, next to the curb, with traffic zooming by dangerously close. Disturbed and fascinated by the scene, Holden gets close enough to hear the boy singing a song. "If a body catch a body coming through the rye." Late that night he sneaks into his parents' apartment to see Phoebe and tries to explain to her why he has left school by saying that he did not like anything that was happening at Pencey. She replies by suggesting that perhaps his problem is just that – that he does not like anything, that he does not want to become anything (a lawyer, for instance, like his father), and that he does not want to do anything. Holden passes, and then he tells her what he would like to be. He asks her if she knows the song the boy in the street was singing. Wise child that she is, she, of course, knows that it is a poem by Robert Burns, and further more, Holden has the words wrong. It actually goes, "If a body meets a body coming through the rye—" a significant difference, because it indicates Holden's subconscious desire to "rewrite," to change an order of things that he finds unacceptable. His reply to Phoebe is one of the most famous passages in the novel.

"I thought it was 'if a body catch a body,' "I said." Anyway, I keep picturing all these little kids playing some game in this big field of rye and all. Thousands of little kids, and nobody's around – nobody big, I mean—except me And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cliff. What I have to do, I have to catch everybody if they start to go over the cliff – I mean, if they're running, and they don't look where they're going I have to come out from somewhere and catch them. That's all I'd do all day. I'll just be the catcher in the rye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd really like to be I know it's crazy" (p.225)

The 'fall' he is talking about is the fall from the innocence of childhood into the obscenity of adulthood. Holden, in his anger at the phoniness of Pencey Prep and other institutions imposed upon the young by the old wants a world populated by

sweet children whose skates need lacing, and by nuns who can teach English literature and be untouched by the sexual over tones in it.

The problem, with all of this for Holden is that he is sixteen, he cannot remain a child— he cannot stand at the edge of the cliff and be the catcher; he must fall off into a adulthood. But there are ways to fall, and ways not to fall, a lesson that is pointed out to Holden after he sneaks back out of the apartment and goes to visit Mr. Antolini, his old English teacher at Elkton Hills and now an instructor at X.Y.U. Mr. Antolini cannot approve of Holden's behavior, and tells him in a thematic echo of the work to be the catcher in the rye that Holden expresses to Phoebe, that Holden is riding for a fall. "This fall I think you're riding for — it is a special kind of fall, a horrible kind," Mr. Antolini explains. "The man falling isn't permitted to feel or hear himself hit by anything. He just keep falling and falling. The whole arrangement is designed for men who, at sometime, or other in their lives, were looking for something their own environment couldn't supply them with. So they gave up looking. They gave it up, before they ever really even got started." (p244). In other words, one may fall into disillusionment giving up on the possibilities in life as the innocent dreams of childhood are by necessity abandoned. Or one may break the fall, may even land, by realizing, that indeed there are things one's environment cannot supply, such as innocence, selfless love, freedom from obscenity.

Mr. Antolini expands his lecture to Holden by reading him a quotation from Wilhelm Stekel, a psycho analysis who was the colleague of Freud and Jung and the author of numerous works expressing his theories on the relationship between infantilism and maturity cites." The mark of the mature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause," Mr. Antolini, "while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one." (p.244) Holden's immaturity on this point is apparent: As *The Catcher in the Rye*, he sees himself risking his own life — in fact, denying it through his refusal to grow up and through his wish to keep other children from doing so — on the edge of the crazy cliff. His conception is an over dramatized vision himself as a 'savior', nobly sacrificing himself for the sake of preserving what he takes to be the innocent and the good what he needs is to find something he can live for, instead of something he wants to die for.

At the centre of Holden's difficulties is the dangerous symbolism of childhood and its innocence. His disgust with the adult world is so great that he is blinded to the realities of childhood. Infantile sexuality was once considered one of the most shocking aspects of Freudian thought. And one does not have to be a social worker to know that children often delight in writing the words on walls that Holden finds so offensive. Even Phoebe is depicted as being much more world than Holden perceives her being. For example, she indicates that she knows quite clearly what is going on when a boy in her class, Curtis Wrintraub, persists in following her around. What Holden must come to understand is that the scriptures do not say that one can become a child again.

Holden's experience with Mr. Antolini is a case in point. Mr. Antolini illuminates Holden's life, but Mr. Antolini's own life is representative of the kind of 'maturity' that is shallow and phony in itself. He has married an older woman for her money, and it is apparent that he does not love her. He is an alcoholic, he is drunk when he talks to Holden. His practical suggestion concerning Holden's future is a lame and unthinking defence of "applying' one self in school and pursuing a conventional academic career. And in the middle of the night, as Holden is asleep on the couch, Mr. Antolini makes a homosexual advance toward him. All this provides Holden with an emblem of what the adult world he has fallen into is true — the true and the obscene all mixed together." The more I thought about it, though, the more depressed and screwed up about it I got" (p.253), he concludes when he wakes up the next morning in the waiting room of Grand Central Station.

While talking to Mr. Antolini, Holden explains why we flunked his class in oral expression at Pencey: Mr. Vinsoa, the teacher spent most of his time arguing about

the importance of sticking to the point and avoiding digression. But, Holden says he likes listening to a speech better when someone digresses. Holden says this of Mr. Vinson. "He could drive you crazy some times, him and the goddam class. I mean he'd keep letting you to unify and simplify all the time. Some things you just can't do that to" (p.240). **Here you may note that Holden's life itself is not unified and simplified; it is in itself an extended digression leading in fits and starts toward a movement of illumination that is not the result of logical ordered thought.**

Going back to the story, Holden leaves the waiting room and is suddenly surrounded by the trappings of Christmas – Santa Clauses at every sweet corner. As he walks, he sees some workmen unloading a Christmas tree off a truck, and hears one of them saying to the other, "Hold the sonuvabitch up. Hold it up, for Chirtsave!" (p.255). Holden starts to laugh and then he is overcome by nausea – his dual reaction to the duality of the world. **As the humor in his monologue shows, Holden perceives the comic nature of human life. Yet this comedy is often the result of a depressing juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane, a juxtaposition that is central to Salinger's art. Further, how to maintain a sense of the holy in the midst of obscenity is what Holden's character development all about.**

As Holden walks up Fifth Avenue, he experiences an hallucination that brings together all of his anxieties at once. Every time he comes to the end of a block and steps off the curb, he has the feeling that he will never get to the other side of the street; he will fall off the curb and disappear. He begins to pray to his brother, Allie not to let him disappear. In the midst of his anxieties over fate and death, emptiness and meaninglessness, guilt and condemnation, and despair, he appeals to Allie to save him, yet the memories of Allie and the seeming sacrilege of his death embody all of those anxieties in themselves. What he is actually praying for is a means of saving himself from himself through himself.

He rests for a time sweating on a park bench and thinks about escaping by hitch hiking out west and getting a job working at a filling station. He would pretend to be a deaf-mute so he would not have to talk to anyone, and he would love by himself out in the woods in a log cabin. **This is both a theme and a means of escape that run through American Literature and through the adolescent mind.** Holden, in what turns out to be the last gasp of his rebellion, buys the idea. He decides that he will go away, that he would never go home again, and that he would never go to another school. For saying good by to Phoebe, he goes to her school, and leaves a note telling her that he is learning town and that she should meet him at the Museum of Natural History at quarter past twelve if she can.

While waiting for Phoebe, Holden goes into his favourite room in the Museum– the mummies' tomb. He likes the room because it is always the same, just as he would like his world to be. **You must – as an intelligent student – note here that the only thing that interested him in his history course at Pencey is the ancient Egyptians' secret of preservation.** Then, in what leads to a moment of revelation, he notices an obscenity written with a child's red crayon on the wall! "That's the whole trouble," he finally realizes, "You can't ever find a place that's nice and peaceful, because there isn't any. You may think there is, but once you get there, when you're not looking, somebody'll sneak up and write 'Fuck You' right under your nose (p. 264). He even concludes that when he dies, someone will write "Fuck you" on his tombstone. Right away he is sickened and goes to the toilet, where he passes out and falls to the floor. This fall, which results from his realization of the essential obscenity of life itself, is the one he has been dreading, the fall from adolescence into adulthood. But he survives, although he is not sure why "I was lucky, though," he says. "I mean I could've killed myself when I hit the floor, but all I did was sort of land on my side. It was a funny thing, though I felt better after I passed out. I really did" (pg 265).

This is a lucky fall, a fortunate "fall. Only through coming to terms with the fallen nature of the world through his own fall can Holden achieve release. And in the next

scene, when he goes to the zoo with Phoebe and sits on a bench in the park watching her ride the carousel we see that he has left his idea of being *The Catcher in the Rye* behind" all the kids kept trying to grab for the gold ring, and so was old Phoebe, "he says quietly," and I was sort of afraid she'd fall off the goddam horse, but I didn't say anything or do anything. The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the gold ring, you have to let them do it, and not say anything. If they fall off, they fall off, but it's bad if you say anything to them" (p 274) And suddenly Holden is surrounded by symbols that suggest rebirth, blessing, and hopefulness. It is raining, it is Christmas, and in the carousel's circular movement he obtains a true and vital vision of eternity to replace his old lunatic's love for the mummies tomb.

In the epilogue, we learn that Holden did finally go home, that he got sick, and that he wound up out in California in the psychiatric ward – an ending that at first seems to be another digression or, much worse, that contradicts the joyous scene at the zoo with Phoebe and the carousel. But the final chapter works to show the progress Holden has made in moving toward authenticity and understanding the essential question that is behind every good novel: what is the nature of reality? The answer resides in the dynamic relationship between childhood and maturity, between the static and the changeable, between thought and action, and between the outer and inner worlds – a reality that is "an existentialist datum of physical and emotional experience." This datum, which has its immediate basis in Christian thought finds its ultimate rationale in Buddhism – a crucial point in understanding the end of the novel, an ending that points directly to *Nine Stories*.

2.6 SUMMING UP

The major themes have been discussed in this unit. Also, the character of Holden Caulfield has been critically analysed.

2.7 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the theme of pastorality in the novel.
2. Comment critically on the Preparatory School system
3. Critically analyse the character of Holden Caulfield

UNIT 3 THE LANGUAGE IN THE CATCHER IN THE RYE

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 The Language In *The Catcher In The Rye*
- 3.3 Use and interpretation of the colloquial idiom
- 3.4 Summing Up
- 3.5 Questions

3.0 OBJECTIVES

At the end of this unit you will be able to know Salinger's effort in not only giving permanent shape to a particular colloquial form of speech but also using it to achieve considerable authenticity in the portrayal of the character of Holden Caulfield. Salinger, however, takes care to fit such use of language to the total scheme of the novel.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The merit of *The Catcher in the Rye* can be justified not only on the basis of literary interest but also on the basis of linguistic significance. Just like *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is studied for its dialect of 1884, *The Catcher* can be studied as an example of teenage vernacular in the 1950s. As such the book will be a significant historical linguistic record of a type of speech rarely made available in permanent form. However, the language of Holden, however authentic, is not the major intention of Salinger. Friends, what is of importance to us is the nice balance Salinger achieves between the artistic task of creating an individual character and investing him with a recognizable teenage language. Salinger achieves this difficult task by giving Holden an extremely trite and typical speech so that he can be both typical and individual in his use of them. Holden uses the phrases commonly used by the teenagers like 'I really did' to such a overpowering degree that they become a clear part of the flavor of the book.

3.2 THE LANGUAGE IN *THE CATCHER IN THE RYE*

Despite the praise the novel did receive and despite its success as a Book of the Mouth club selection, it was looked upon by many readers as a potentially dangerous, even seditious book. The character of Holden Caulfield was hardly the kind of model parents wanted for their children. "Fortunately, there cannot be many of him yet" T. Mom's Longstreth wrote with apprehension in *The Christian Science Monitor*, "But one fears that a look like this given wide circulation may multiply his kind - as too easily happens when immorality and perversion are recounted by writers of talent whose work is countenanced in the name of art or good intention. This reaction, based on a misreading of the novel that is now difficult to understand - Salinger is making a strong statement against immorality and perversion, was hardly confined to the pages of the Monitor.

A review in "Catholic World" centers on an objection that soon become the pivotal point in the controversy over *The Catcher in The Rye* and its being banned in bookshops, libraries and schools across the United States. "Not only do some of the events stretch probability, but Holdens character as iconoclast, a kind of latterday Tom Sawyer or Huck Finn, is made monotonous and phony by the formidably excessive use of amateur swearing and course language."²⁰ Again and again, reviewers, critics, and general readers passed over the essentially moral and religious themes of the book to profess shock at the language. For some, of course, it was not the language itself that was so disturbing, it was that Salinger puts the words in the mouth of a sixteen year-old boy. As Virgilia Peterson explained in making just such a comment about the book in the New York Herald Tribune Book Review, "Recent war novels have accustomed us all to ugly words and images, but from the mouths of the very young and protected they sound peculiarly offensive. There is probably not one phrase in the whole book that Holden Caulfield would not have used upon occasion, but when they are piled upon each other in cumulative monotony, the ear refuses to believe."²¹

It is Salinger's use of language that is one of the most distinctive qualities of *The Catcher in the Rye*, and an analysis of that language is essential to an appreciation of just what Salinger accomplishes artistically in the novel. If we look at the language in isolation it is crude, profane, and obscene by the standards of most people even in 1979 as well as in 1951. But if we look at the language and its relationship to the overall effect of the novel, another conclusion emerges, "Given the point of view from which the novel is told," Edward P.J. Corbett argues in a sensible article on the whole matter of *The Catcher in the Rye* and Censorship, "and given the kind of character that figures as the hero, no other language was possible. The integrity of the novel demanded such language"²² It is not simply a matter of realizing that Holden's language would not seem at all unusual or shocking to a real-life prep-school boy. His swearing is habitual and so unconsciously ritualistic that it contributes to, rather than diminishes, the theme of innocence that runs through the novel. In addition, Holden is characterized by a "desperate bravado"²³ - he wants to appear older than he is, and his rough language fits in with his concept of the corrupt adult world.

Holden's way of talking is, it must be realized, a device. Salinger is not directly interested in merely depicting the way a boy like Holden would actually speak - no more than Mark Twain was attempting to be "realistic" in the literal sense when he invented an idiom for Huckleberry Finn (an important thing to remember here is that Twain's novel, like Salinger's was widely castigated for its language and even banned because of it." Neither J.B. Salinger nor Mark Twain really 'copied any thing' Heiserman and Miller remind us. "Their books would be unreadable had they merely recorded intact the language of a real life Huck and a real-life Holden Their genius lies in their mastery of the technique of first person narration which, through meticulous selection, creates vividly the illusion of life gradually, and surely their narrators emerge and stand revealed, stripped to their inner most brings."²⁴ or, as Mary Mc Carthy has observed, "the artless dialect is an artful ventriloquial trick of Salinger's, like the deliberate halting English of Hemingway's waiters, fishermen, and peasants - anyone who speaks it is a good guy, a friend of the author's, to be trusted."²⁵

Salinger's genius does derive in large part from his ability as a literary ventriloquist. He is a writer concerned with messages, with stressing moral prints and suggesting ways to move from despair to illumination. Holden Caulfield thus comes to embody Salinger's thought, but the language Salinger chosen to give him is so artfully controlled that the voice seems to come from some other source than the author. The problem a ventriloquist must always get around is to make his audience forget that the figure on his knee is just a wooden dummy, not "real", and this is what Salinger succeeds in doing in *The Catcher in The Rye* - something that does not always happen in his later work, where it is often all too apparent that he is carrying on a pretended conversation with characters who are only lovable puppets.

But even though Holden's language is artful pretense, it never seems pretended. Donald P. Costello in his thorough and insightful study of Salinger's use of language in the novel has uncovered some of the reasons why this is so.²⁶ First of all, Salinger does know enough about authentic teenage speech to establish a basic level of believability that he never departs from in the novel. Holden never says anything that he conceivably could not have said. Salinger manages, however, to individualize Holden though having him make use of certain repetitions in an unusually significant way. Like other teenagers of his time and place, Holden repeats and all and I really did, as well as the famous, if you want to know the truth. But these repetitions have a purpose beyond simple realism. Holden repeats I really did to establish that he is not phony. He repeats and all because of his eventual mystic ability to find the all in the other as he moves toward his final vision. And he repeats if you want to know the truth because that is what the book at last is about.

A second point about Salinger's language is that Holden's speech at first seems to be typical school boy vulgarity. But a closer look reveals that it is actually restrained to indicate Holden's sensitivity. After all, Holden is offended by certain uses of course language. The word fuck appears four times, but it is never a part of Holden's speech. Holden uses goddam often; but never the more offensive Jesus Christ or even for Chrissake except in repeating the speech of others one soon notices that the crudity of language increases when Holden is reporting what others say and other decreases significantly when he directly addresses the reader.

A third point concerns something Salinger has in common with Sinclair Lewis – his love for slang words and expressions. But unlike Lewis' work, Salinger's does not seem strikingly dated in its reliance on jargon, because the slang words Salinger selects are narrow in choice and carefully repeated words like lousy, pretty, crummy, terrific, quite, old and stupid. The repetition of identical words and expressions in different situations is, however, humorous and also. Shows the American characteristic of adapting nouns into adjectives and nouns into adverbs. He turns nouns into adverbs simply by adding a y, and we have vomity – looking, show-offy, pimpy and pervery. Perhaps more distinctive is his ability to use nouns as adverbs. "She sings it very Dixieland and wherehouse, and it doesn't sound at all mushy" (p. 149)

But Holden is no mere illiterate adolescent. He reveals his education in the way he discourses on two levels at once. He uses, for example, the colloquial take a leak at one time and then the more genteel relieve himself at another – a shift in word – choice that contributes to the humor in the novel. Like a typical kid his age might do, Holden does violate some rules of grammar. He consistently misuses lie and lay, is uncertain about relative pronouns, and is a devotee of the double negative. But he is extremely conscious of his own speech and is especially critical of the language of others. His character builds through this consciousness and his eventual self awareness is made more acceptable through his ability to recognize the phony, the untrue, in his objections to the over use of such words as grand, prince, travelling incognito, and little girl' room. And it is often forgotten that Holden in revealing his character, is speaking, not writing. If he were writing, his grammatical mistakes would be fewer and he would never write so many fragments.

A close look at the language in *The Catcher in the Rye* leads to a conclusion stated memorably by Costello: "The language of *The Catcher in the Rye* is an authentic rendering of a type of informal; it is crude and trite, yet often somewhat individual; it is crude and slangy and imprecise, imitative yet occasionally imaginative, and affected towards standardization by the strong efforts of schools. But authentic and interesting as this language may be, it be remembered that it exists.....as only one part of an artistic achievement."²⁷ But, it is certainly a powerful part of Salinger's artistry and is a reminder of how careful a writer he is. His relatively small. output is not due to a limited, imagination, it is more likely due to his extreme care in choosing the words he is going to use.

Salinger's attitudes towards language further suggest a conceptual relationship between him and the philosophies of what was called The School of Linguistic analysis, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951), an Austrian who did much of his work at Oxford University.

3.3 USE AND INTERPRETATION OF THE COLLOQUIAL IDIOM

Holden's informal, school boy vernacular is noticeably typical in its 'vulgarity' and 'obscenity'. Some familiarity with prep school tells us that Salinger achieves an effect by not overplaying it. In fact Holden's restraints, an effect of Salinger's judicious use of the speech, help to characterize him as a sensitive youth who avoids the most strongly forbidden terms. When such terms are used or appeared he disapproves of them. He uses the divine name habitually in the weak form of 'God's sake', 'God' and 'Goddam'. The stronger words like 'Chrissake' or 'Jesus' or 'Jesus Christ' are used habitually by other characters like Allie and Stradlater. Holden never uses them in an unemotional scene; his favorite term is 'Goddam' which he uses to convey range of feelings (towards an object) Holden makes versatile use of the word 'hell'. While he had 'hell' of time with Phoebe, things can be either 'hot as hell' or 'cold as hell' 'sad as hell' 'playful as hell' or even 'pretty as hell'. Like other words this word too suggests a deviation from its original usage and meaning.

Friends when you observe the narrative, Holden's use of crude language or increases when he is reporting schoolboy dialogue. The slang increases when any one of the characters is excited or angry.

Holden's slang, typical of a teenager, is narrow and impressive, but very expressing imprecise. His choice of words, adjectives and, adverbs, is repetitive: 'lousy' 'pretty', 'crumbly' 'terrific', 'quiere' 'old' 'stupid- all used with little regard to specific meaning. He himself admits of his vocabulary:

Trite and repetitive as his vocabulary may be, he can be highly effective in generating power with it, like when he asks Stradlater, " get your dirty stinking moron a knees off my chest'.

Another typical aspect of Holden's language is that it shows adaptability and certain hilarious effect. For example he talks of handling, the 'exam paper like it was a turf or something'. Or 'that Geri Morrow was about as sensitive as a fodder triplet seat'. He sometimes turns nouns into adjectives with the simple addition of a '-y', 'pervert'. 'Vomity-looking', 'whory-looking', 'hoodlenny-looking', 'pimpy', 'snobby'. Often he chooses words rather cautiously to add on to the colloquial idiom an overlay of the individual. This also helps in communicating to his adult reader clearly and properly.

Salinger achieves an authentic rendering of a type of informal colloquial teenage American spoken speech. The immediacy of the speech is somehow kept alive in the entire book. The first person narrative, apart from serving other purposes, conveys this immediacy. Add to that the conscious choice of words by Holden. Salinger not only succeeds in creating a realistic character in Holden Caulfield, but conveys the ambience of a prep school as well.

The language, however authentic and interesting may be, is not written for itself, but forms part of a greater whole. It is only part of an artistic achievement.

3.4 SUMMING UP

Use of language is important for any author. It is Salinger's use of language that is one of the distinction qualities of the novel. The language of *The Catcher In The Rye* is an authentic rendering of a type of informal, crude and trite language of a teenager.

3.5 QUESTIONS

1. Write a long note on the language in *The Catcher*
2. Comment on the use of Colloquial words by Salinger.

UNIT 4 CRITICAL INTERPRETATIONS

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Critical Opinions
- 4.3 Manifestations of the Eastern influence
- 4.4 Huckleberry Finn and The Catcher
- 4.5 Summing Up
- 4.6 Questions
- 4.7 Bibliography

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit an attempt is made to look at the influence of Buddhism on Salinger in creating the character of Holden Caulfield. Salinger, you may have understood at the end of the unit, makes Holden slowly come to terms with his problems and failures. This may help you in linking up your study of the novel to the larger aspect of the influence of eastern thought on American thought. Also, you will be able to appreciate the other criticism approaches discussed in this Unit.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Friends let me come to the aspect, which, if not very apparent in the novel, interest us, the eastern readers of *The Catcher in the Rye*: the importance of eastern thought, especially Buddhism to Salinger. One can almost say Salinger made Holden speak of his interest to go west and to the frontiers after he himself developed interest to go east, much in the manner of the saying by the Zen masters, "sometimes we go east, sometimes we go west". Salinger, after a brief stint in the army during the Second World War became disillusioned with his native culture and society and turned to the study of eastern thought. The portrayal of American society in the novel conforms to the radical nature of his disillusionment.

4.2 CRITICAL OPINIONS

The Catcher in the Rye is Salinger's only published novel. (It may be that the stories about the class family will take the shape of a novel of sorts eventually.) Its hero, Holden Caulfield, is a modern version of Huckle Finn, like him a moralist in spite of himself, racked by the frauds and shams and cruelties he sees everywhere about him. Huck, of course, comes through sound, and Holden may, too, but at our last glimpse of him he is still under treatment by a psychoanalyst.

The dominant objection to Salinger is that he is sentimental that he holds a number of unrealistic attitudes about life and society, especially his notion, that children are basically innocent and good and that they degenerate as they grow older, Salinger has confused his fondness for children: "Some of my best friends are children. Infact, all my best friends are children. It's almost unbearably for me to realize that my books will be kept on a shelf out of their reach." (In Windsor, at the library nearest Salinger's home, it is.)

However, not Salinger's attitudes but Holden's are relevant to *The Catcher in the Rye*. And it is completely believable that Holden—an adolescent with nerve endings where he ought to have skin—might love the innocence he sees (or thinks he) in children but not in adults. The psychoanalyst Ernest Jones, though less than enthusiastic about the novel, says it reflects "what every sensitive sixteen-year-old since Rousseau has felt, and of course what each one of us is certain he has felt."

Even antagonistic critics agree that *The Catcher in the Rye* is a fascinating, witty story. Indeed, one may extract from their comments a small anthology in praise of Salinger. For example, George Steiner, a hostile critic who objects that the reputation of the book is inflated, admits that "Salinger has caught with uncanny precision the speech and thought — rhythms of the young". And Harney Breit, discounting *The Catcher in the Rye* as a serious novel nonetheless declares it. "A brilliant tour de force, one that has sufficient power and cleverness to make the reader chuckle and — rare indeed — even laugh aloud."

In his article entitled "Against obscenity" *The Catcher in the Rye*, James Lundquist avers; "While it is dangerous to argue that *The Catcher in the Rye* derives from any particular earlier work or school of thought, it does, in many ways, embody the general intellectual interests of the 1950s. There was, for instance, considerable interest in anthropology and psychology in the decade. Margaret Mead's *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) and Ruth Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (1934) became popular and influential when they appeared as paperbacks after World War II. Depth psychology, with its emphasis on the unconscious and the impact of myth, ritual, and archetype on the theory of instincts and man's primordial nature, shows up in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949), C.G. Jung's *Psychology and alchemy* (1953), Lionel Trilling's *Freud and the Crisis of Our Culture* (1955), and Otto Rank's *The Myth and Birth of the Hero* (1959). Holden Caulfield's story is not only told against a background of myth and archetype (like Ulysses, he is on a quest, and at the end of the novel we see him going through a symbolic death and resurrection), it is also an anthropological study of the rites of passage from adolescence into adulthood for an American of Holden's type".

In his book entitled *Contemporary American Literature*, Ihab Hassan writes;

"The meteoric career of J.D. Salinger (born 1919) seems to end in silence and voluntary obscurity. There is a time in the early postwar years when histories, deft and teasing, satisfy the needs of a youthful generation opposed to the spiritual vulgarity of their culture. Collected in *Nine Stories* (1953), the best of these narratives portray children or adolescents, various misfits in middle-class suburbia, who long for simplicity and truth. Their longing expresses itself in tender or bitter quixotic gestures; the gestures suggest something beyond satire or sentimentality. —

—/The novel mocks hypocrisy, egoism, compromise, and also comes close to sounding the note of dread. But whimsy and slapstick keep terror at bay; and Holden, though he can love only his sister Phoebe, retains the saving grace of vulnerability."

4.3 MANIFESTATIONS OF THE INFLUENCE

It may look far-fetched but one can say that the story of Holden Caulfield is modeled after the story of Buddha's royal origins and affluent upbringing. We have the rich and protective environment of a Prep school. Holden's lonely Journey starts with his alienation from the non-seeing groups of people around him. Salinger presents us with first glimpse of Holden's disinterest and disillusionment when Holden observes the excitement and involvement of the crowd over "the two teams bashing each other all over the place" and finds it ridiculous. He also wonders about the importance

attached to results of the football game. At Pencey one is supposed "to commit suicide or something of old Pencey didn't win".

To think and make references to death is significant. In fact Holden shows continuing pre-occupation with death that keeps him from participating in day-to-day activities of the school. As in the story of the Buddha, the reader, following the journey of Holden, meets death in the form of Allie and old age in the form of his teacher Mr. Spencer. In fact there is considerable focus on the theme of death in Holden's encounter with Mr. Spencer. Holden explains to Mr. Spencer, his teacher, his precise problem: he can not see life as a game because winners only have fun from this game. He would possibly like to see life at a deeper level that is without any disillusionment.

Holden has nobody to guide him to cope with death. One ordinarily turns to oldest people for guidance and wisdom. But the old people he meets seem to be "out of it". His grandmother, whom he describes as lavish with money and other gifts, does not see the needs of Holden beyond. Old Spencer, of course, "didn't know his ass from his elbow". And he fails to get guidance from the adults he meets, not even from his parents. Remarkably in the entire novel his father never appears even once whereas his mother is shown as talking to Phoebe as Holden hides in the closet. He tells about the different religions of his parents and their abhorrence at the mention of anything personal. When Phoebe suggests he become a lawyer like their father, he, describing the unconnected life style of his father's, says it doesn't appeal him at all. He finds his mother too is not of much help, particularly after his brother's death. He clearly finds that they live in two worlds; one of reality and the other of appearance which only convinces him of the phoniness of the adult world. Through several episodes in the text Holden reveals his anguished isolation from his family.

In spite of such set backs one positive value Holden holds dear to his heart is his attempt to see people as human beings who should not be hurt. He takes care not to use people as means to his ends. Even when he meets the girls, he essentially tries to establish a deeper and more meaningful relationship. He hates aggression, for him aggression may lead to violence or even death, which drives him "crazy if somebody is killed". He even shows signs that he has not come to terms with his brother Allie's death.

Holden dreams of an Edenic world beyond aggression. He would like to keep in fact the innocent world of childhood. He holds on to many things, which keep him from the reality of change. He tells, "certain things should stay the way they are" and then talks of glass cases to keep them from the walls, there by trying to keep children from assaults on their innocence. He also tries to be a catcher who keeps children from falling off the cliff or, one can say even innocence.

If suffering remains one of the noble truths of Buddhism, Holden qualifies for that because he goes through terrible states of suffering. Maybe the cause for his suffering is his failure to accept change and the concomitant effort/attempts to avoid change by clinging to things like Allie's Baseball glove or the broken pieces of Phoebe's record. He even avoids meeting Jane because he does not want to acknowledge her dates with Stradlater. This belief in continuity, Buddhism interpretations would say, is one great source of suffering.

After meeting Phoebe, he "felt good for a change". One reason is he meets a person who precociously sees through his lie and tells as much, without even hurting him. He sees in her what Buddhism would call of taking "care of each other". It is Phoebe who helps him to turn away from suffering and accept the work of natural forces which could lead him towards happiness.

A reading of the novel, *The Catcher in the Rye* will only convince the reader of a certain cultural and literary continuity. This continuity manifests itself when the text is read along with some earlier American fictional texts like *Huckleberry Finn*. The literary relationships make the continuity rather obvious.

Let us first see some narrative patterns and styles.

Huck initially flees conventionalities, constraints and the terrors of his place and father. On the river he meets murderous thieves, a treacherous fog, Negro hunters and a steamboat that rips through the raft and thrusts him among feuding country gentility. He sees a harmless drunk shot dead and a southern colonel almost lynched, observes some theatrical obscenities and at great personal risk saves the inheritance of three innocent girls. Experience teaches Huck that truth is usually weak, trouble best avoided and evil often inevitable. It confirms his love of beauty and peaceful security. But notably, in his greatest struggle, over Jim he acts spontaneously and defiantly for goodness. Huck eventually comes to the Phelps plantation, the homelike place where Jim finds freedom and where Huck will take leave of "sivilization" by going west.

Holden Caulfield, intensely troubled, escapes initially from the stupid constraints and violence of his prep school life. Like Huck, he enters a jungle world, New York City, where he knows his way around but from which he is alienated. There for two hectic days and nights he steers his course through battering adventures with fearsome dopes, morons and sluggers. On this journey Holden's Jim is primarily the recurring image of Jane Gallagher, an old friend who needs love and whom he loves with strange unawareness. Holden's Jim is also all little children, whom he would save from adult sexuality. Like Huck, Holden has a conflict. His adolescent sexual urges are somehow entangled with what is predatory in the "mean guys" he hates. They befoul his sense of the fine and good. Although not as self-sufficient as Huck, Holden is usually as realistic, and he too loves beauty and peace. Yet he values goodness above know-how, sophistication, style, and success. After a secret visit home, he plans to lead a hermit's life in the west, but is reconciled to the city by the love of his little sister Phoebe. Physically weakened and psychically wounded, he is last seen recuperating in a sanitarium. Clearly Mark Twain and J.D. Salinger present parallel myths of American youth confronting his world—Huck Finn over many months, when time was expendable; Holden over two days when, Salinger seems to imply, time is rapidly running out.

Each novel employs an appropriate first person vernacular, Holden has the more "educated" vocabulary; he speaks with a modern schoolboy's idiom and slang and he can spell. Both boys observe accurately and swiftly. Huck's speech, usually dispassionate and matter-of-fact, is relaxed and flexibly rhythmical. Holden, frequently conscious of the smothering omnipresence of sex, draws most things taut. Nervous and jerky reiteration often points up his emotional tensions. His speech is sometimes raucous and jarring. He tends to rail and condemn. Huck's direct apprehension gives us an objective recording rich in implication. His version etches an open world, clear, solid, real, with living characters moving autonomously in it. Holden's tense outpouring is a convincing expression of his psychological unrest and of the release he is finding in psychiatric treatment. Both styles are effectively ironic and humorous.

In the characterization of the protagonist, *The Catcher in the Rye* is clear reminder of *Huckleberry Finn*. Holden wants to shepherd the young, to be the only big person around; But Huck is the youthful liberator of a grown man, and whether he knows or not his effort is directed toward making maturity possible. Holden is a conscious idealist who yet says, "I kept wishing I could go home." The hope in Mark Twain's

novel is that a ragamuffin preadolescent acts maturely for what is good in an open society. The underlying despair of Salinger's book is that a privileged adolescent wants to act immaturely for what he believes is good in a society thickened into vulgarity.

Yet Holden is truly a kind of latter-day urbanized Huck. He is acutely sensitive to places and times, whether groping through a dark foyer in the early morning hours or relaxing in the cozy auditorium of the Museum of Natural History, where it "always smelled like it was raining outside, even if it wasn't..."

Huckleberry Finn and *The Catcher in the Rye* are akin also in ethical-social import. Each book is a devastating criticism of American society and voices a morality of love and humanity.

In many important matters, as we have just seen, Huck and Holden- not to speak of others like Jim and Phoebe- affirm goodness, honesty and loyalty. Huck does so almost unconsciously, backhandedly, often against his conventional conscience, and Holden does so with an agonizing self-consciousness and a bitter spirit. In each the perception of innocence is radical: from their mouths come pessimistic judgments damning the social forms that help make men less than fully human. Human beings can be awful cruel to one another", observes Huck after seeing the Duke and Dauphin tarred and feathered. And Huck assumes his share of the guilt. Holden, with searingly honest insight that gets to the root of sadistic practices and class jealousies, remarks: "I can even get to hate somebody, just looking at them, if they have cheap suitcases with them.... It's really hard to be roommates with people if your suitcases are much better than theirs.... You think if they're intelligent.... they don't give a damn whose suitcases are better, but they do. They really do". To aunt Sally's question whether anybody was hurt in the steamboat accident, Huck replies, "No'm. Killed a nigger", and the blindness of a civilization is bared with terrible casualness. The same ironic exposure comes in Holden's apology for having to like a girl before he can get sexy- "I mean really sexy"- with her. So he remarks, "My sex life stinks". And Carl Luce, the modern expert on love, answers: "Naturally it does, for God's sake".

Such examples might easily be multiplied: the vision is often identical. Yet we must grant that the reliability and quality of Holden's vision are complicated, far beyond Huck's straightforward objectivity, by the loss he has sustained. As Holden recognizes, he is mentally ill. "I don't get hardly anything out of anything. I'm in bad shape. I'm, in lousy shape". Bad as the modern world is, his view of it adds a distortion not found in Huck's picture. Almost everyone in Holden's world is "phony"- headmasters, students, alumni, bartenders, movie actors, moviegoers, people who say "Glad to've met you" or "Good luck"! or "Grand!", virile handshakers, Holy Joe ministers, even partially bald men who hopefully comb their hair over the bald spot. The book reeks with Holden's revulsion and nausea. He experiences things in an aura of disgusting physical details. The park is "lousy" with "dog crap, globs of spit and cigar butts. A chair is "vomity" looking. A cab smells as though someone had "tossed his cookies in it". Moreover, although Holden keeps his innocent heart, his adolescence has riddled the innocence of mind, that naivete, which Huck in good measure still possesses. What Holden's heart seeks and responds to, his mind sees is violated everywhere by the mere fact of human maturity. Adult activities become expressive masks for adult sexuality. The four-letter word he reads with horror and erases on the wall of Phoebe's school follows him wherever he goes. In the quiet tomb of Pharaoh in the museum, he feels at peace for the first time- until suddenly he sees the same word in red crayon on the wall. Despairingly, hysterically, he thinks that even in death he will not escape that word which someone surely will write on his tombstone. A great difference between the two boys is measured by Huck's sensitive but reserved opinion of the obscene words on the wall of the abandoned house floating down the June rise; "the ignorantest kind of words...."

Certainly if Huck's vision reveals both the limitations and promises of democracy- the hope and despair- Holden's, in direct descent from Hunck's, focuses upon the despair. In the predatory wasteland of the city, Holden can foresee no future refuge or good. (Is it by accident that some lines of weary futility from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" are echoed in Holden's words to Sally Hayes: "It wouldn't be the same at all. You don't see what I mean at all"?) If he and Sally were married, Holden knows he would be an office worker "making a lot of dough, and riding to work in Madison Avenue buses, and reading newspapers, and playing bridge all the time, and going to the movies and seeing a lot of stupid shorts and coming attractions and newsreels". He accurately describes the commercialized Christmas spirit as something over which "old Jesus probably would've puked if He could see it". He damns the competitive drive for status. Even the can drivers, primitives of the city, are suspicious, raw-nerved. And nowhere is there peace. Holden's view of modern war concludes: "I'm sort of glad they've got the atomic bomb invented. If there's ever another war, I'm going to sit right the hell on top of it. I'll volunteer for it....." Neurotic or not, Holden's criticism often hits home.

Given such contrasting conditions, what moral destiny confronts the individual in the worlds Salinger and Mark Twain create? Like the Central Part ducks in winter, Holden is essentially homeless, frozen out. But Huck, although an outcast, is a true homemaker wherever he is. Allie's baseball mitt is all that is left to Holden of Allie's love, an unlike Huck, he seems unable to break through the ring of hostility to find new sources of affection. Deprived of real opportunity for the sort of soul-shaking sacrifice Huck makes for Jim, Holden expresses his love for Phoebe by the gift of a phonograph record-which breaks. Of greater significance, Huck has Jim; but Holden, so desperately in need of love, is one of the loneliest characters in fiction. Obviously Huck is not as critically wounded as Holden. He has far more resilience, a stronger power of renewal. Necessity shows him the wisdom of prudence, and his natural environment provides therapeutic primal sanities. Both boys are rebels-with a difference. Huck can often go naked, but Holden can defy convention only by wearing his "corny" red hunting cap. Capable of making a free choice, Huck outwits his enemies and rises above the compulsions within. He is a practical rebel like Thoreau. He runs away to confront and modify reality, and thereby he proves, for his day, the explosive force of individual ethical action. Holden runs off too, but his actions are usually ineffective, and the path of escape leads him deeper into the mire of his personal difficulties.

Huckleberry Finn, in short, recognizes necessity and freedom, the restrictions limiting moral accomplishment and its possibility. *The Catcher in the Rye* leaves us doubtful that the individual, even assisted by the analyst's best efforts, can ever truly escape the double trap of society and self. How well the two concluding scenes contrast these moral outlooks! Throughout *The Catcher in the Rye* Holden makes, and is, a telling criticism of our civilization: his "madness" in itself is a damning fact of our times; yet, doubly damning, what the "madman" says is often true, what he feels often unimpeachable. Supremely ironical, then, is our last glimpse of Holden making recovery and adjustment in the sanitarium-a prelude to compromise in the outside world-as Father Peter in Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger* cannot do. Holden says: "I sort of miss everybody I told about. Even old Stradlater and Ackley, for instance. I think I even miss that goddam Maurice. It's funny. Don't ever tell anybody anything. If you do, you start missing everybody". Modern therapy takes over; Holden will return. For Holden's sake we wouldn't have it otherwise, even though it's a return to the big money and the dopey newsreels. But we remember Huck with admiration and with confidence in his personal future as, Jim freed and the Duke and Dauphin in limbo, he says: "I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before".

No wonder Holden wants to remain forever the catcher in the rye-his free Territory-oblivious to the trap that maturity finally springs. His recessive traits suggest that the logical, perhaps desirable, end for him and his civilization is the pure silence of death,

the final release from imperfect life. Huckleberry Finn, as Philip Young has recently realized, appeals to rescuing death in the series of escapes—gliding, still and dark-made by Huck and Jim as the raft slips into the flowing, mythic river. Huck, too, has guilt feelings that, if sufficiently intensified, could conceivably lead to self-destruction. But such suggestions are muted in Huck's story, for Huck is committed to life. In Salinger's book death symbols are more pronounced, and death openly fascinates Holden not only for its horror but for the peaceful refuge it offers from the consciousness of life. Beneath the appealing and often hilarious humor, comparable to some of the best of Mark Twain's, life is felt in this book fundamentally as a ceaseless, pushing round of activity that one would be well rid of. Holden carries with him a dim sense of the eternal and transcendental.

We have seen that Huckleberry Finn and *The Catcher in the Rye* share certain ethical and social attitudes. Yet Salinger's critical view assumes a cultural determinism that in Huckleberry Finn, although always present, permits freedom through self-guidance. Salinger's viewpoint also draws upon a mystical sense merely inchoate in Mark Twain's imagination. We have seen too that Holden's neuroticism is both literary cause and social effect. It is Salinger's means of etching the modern picture the more deeply, and a product of the culture it so sweepingly condemns on moral grounds. But Mark Twain's moral vision is projected through the prevailing normality of Huck's temperament. It is eminently central; fundamentally there is nothing rigged about Huck's experience or eccentric in his responses. So Huck on a raft, as profoundly symbolic today as Thoreau in his cabin, is ever more meaningful as our national experience hurtles us along routes more menacing than the Mississippi. *The Catcher in the Rye*, always cautionary, often horrifying in moral tone, creates an overwhelming sense of that hurtling. The point is not that Salinger's moral vision is therefore defective. Rather, because his vision is lit by the sick lamps of civilization, *The Catcher in the Rye* is as appropriate to our age as Huckleberry Finn is to an earlier America. Salinger's novel, in fact, suggests great truths about our times, as Whitman's *Democratic Vistas* did, in polemic form, about an earlier age that was cankered, crude, materialistic, depraved. *The Catcher in the Rye* has the same awesome relevance to our collective civilized fate that more subtly pervades Mark Twain's masterpiece. Nowhere is its literary descent from Huckleberry Finn more clearly seen than in its critical modern dramatization of moral and social themes.

To conclude, the two novels are clearly related in narrative pattern and style, characterization of the hero and critical import—the three areas discussed in this paper. The relationship argues the continuing vitality of Huck's archetypal story, absorbed by generations and still creatively at work in contemporary thought and art. *The Catcher in the Rye* takes its place in that literary tradition spreading beyond Anderson, Lardner, Hemingway, Faulkner—that has one of its great sources in Huckleberry Finn. But the literary kinship of these two novels presupposes a type of cultural continuity more basic than the dynamics of literary tradition or than the persistence of Huck's story in the popular imagination.

4.5 SUMMING UP

In this Unit we have discussed the various critical interpretations of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Having read the unit, we hope that you will come out with your own interpretations of the novel.

4.6 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the opinions of various critics
2. Critically compare *The Catcher with Huckleberry Finn*
3. Discuss the influence of Eastern Thought on Salinger



Block

7

JOHN BARTH: THE FLOATING OPERA

Block Introduction

UNIT 1

The Postwar American Novel **5**

UNIT 2

The Experimental Novel **15**

UNIT 3

The Floating Opera: An Analysis of the Text **21**

UNIT 4

Philosophic Formulations And The Farce of Reason **29**

UNIT 5

From Modernity to Post Modernity **36**

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

John Barth is an important American novelist in the 20th century. Firstly, he wrote at a time when Europe and America were poised for an intellectual and artistic reappraisal in the aftermath of the second world war. But for this crucial period, Barth would have been merely one of the numerous American novelists of the 20th century. Barth wrote at a time when the whole edifice of modernism—with which 20th century began—started crumbling. The devastation of the second world war was not simply physical but, more importantly, signalled the failure of modernist values. The post war American writer inherits the modernist tradition and, at the same time, revalues the same in terms of the changing intellectual and cultural experience. John Barth is one of them. He is significant because he is one of the earliest American writers in the post war period to see the need for a new kind of literary experience that would go with the changing rhythms of American cultural thinking. Barth's importance in American literature emerges from the fact that, unlike many of his contemporaries who began thinking totally anew, he persisted with the traditional modernist values in literature while initiating gradually a paradigm shift in his novels. If we take the whole literary output of John Barth, we find a steady journey from a sort of quiet modernism to a gradual postmodernization or contemporization of literary and cultural experience.

This block on John Barth begins with (unit 1) a discussion on Postwar American novel—starting with the post first world war American novel through the post second world war novel. The major point of discussion is in what ways the post second world war novelists are different from the post first world war novelists. Then, the whole phenomenon of the post second world war novel is discussed (unit 2) in terms of its significant tendency to intellectual and artistic experimentation. Further, the prescribed text, *The Floating opera* (unit 3) is analyzed in terms of its content. Next, the novel is discussed (unit 4) as, what Barth calls, a nihilistic Comedy. Finally, (unit 5) the steady journey from the cherished modernist text to its postmodernization is discussed.

The five units, each emerging from the preceding one, present a broad overview of the trends in 20th century American novel besides an in depth analysis of *The Floating Opera* from several perspectives.

UNIT 1 THE POSTWAR AMERICAN NOVEL

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 The post Second World War American Novel
- 1.2 The American Novel since the Twenties
- 1.3 The Second World War and its impact on America
- 1.4 America in the postwar years
- 1.5 The postwar American Novel
- 1.6 Saul Bellow
- 1.7 Norman Mailor: War as a Civilizational Value
- 1.8 John Barth: The European Inspiration
- 1.9 John Barth: The novelistic Vision
- 1.10 Summing Up
- 1.11 References
- 1.12 Key words
- 1.13 Questions
- 1.14 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall see the whole phenomenon of the postwar American novel, the novel of the late 1940's and 1950's when a new set of writers with a distinct philosophy and fictional mode emerged on the American literary scene-Saul Bellow, Norman Mailor, Thomas Pynchon and John Barth. Understanding Barth substantially requires understanding the intellectual and artistic phenomenon of the postwar fiction. Not that the phenomenon exhausts Barth's creativity but Barth's individualist response is a part of a broader response of the novelists in the late 1940's and 1950's to the impact of the second world war and to the emerging cultural scene in America. Hence, we begin with postwar American novel for a fuller understanding of John Barth and his novel, *The Floating Opera*.

1.1 THE POST SECOND WORLD WAR AMERICAN NOVEL

In a seminal essay called, "The Literature of Exhaustion", John Barth sums up the postwar literature as the literature of exhaustion. The genre is minimally American, for the postwar experience is largely Euro-American. The effective American participation in the war and the emergence of America as a cultural center for many of the refugee European writers enabled America to experience the war intellectually. The Europeanization of the American novel is simply its cultural expanse beyond its national boundaries. The catastrophe of the war brought a cynical disillusionment about the modernist values of liberal individualism. These values became particularly strong after the first world war with the enthusiastic American responsiveness to the European modernism. There was disillusionment with the first world war too, but that was more in the nature of a concern for the negation of human values in the war. The first world war did not bring in cynicism as did the second world war but intensified humanist concerns whereas the second world war, which was a sheer holocaust made humanist convictions almost impossible. The American novel in the aftermath of the war presented a new intellectual ambience vastly different from that of the predecessors. Saul Bellow, Norman Mailor, Thomas Pynchon and John Barth reshaped the American novel in

the postwar years. There was a renaissance necessitated by the postwar cultural perspectives. Together, they heralded a new phase in the American fiction, a phase that became markedly clear not only in their writings but also among the novelists who came into prominence during the sixties and the subsequent decades. The significance of these writers is comparable to that of Mark Twain and Henry James who shaped the American fiction in the 19th century and to that of Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne who constituted another phase in American fiction in the 19th century. More importantly, Bellow, Mailor, Pynchon and Barth present a contrastive tradition to the modern champions of American fiction in the early 20th century like Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner and Scott Fitzgerald.

One understands the postwar fiction of Bellow, Mailor, Pynchon and Barth only if we see what the earlier postwar fiction of Hemingway, Faulkner and Fitzgerald was like and what Bellow and others were subsequently looking askance at that tradition in fiction.

1.2 THE AMERICAN NOVEL SINCE THE 1920'S

The twenties began a modern or modernist period in American literature. More than any other genre of art, novel received a powerful fillip from the European tidings of modernist thought and imagination. In the 19th century, Henry James laboured hard to give a European form and sophistication to the American novel. William Dean Howells' endeavours in the direction of literary realism/naturalism. Their efforts, among other things, brought a sea change to the literary scene in America at the turn of the century. The ethos of the ever expanding Frontier having ended by 1900, and America having grown into an industrial giant by 1920, America was particularly receptive to the European strain of literary realism/naturalism which appealed to the American imagination for its scientific temper and method. particularly because the American nation owed its economic boom in the early 20th century to the various advances in Science.

The American novel since the 1920's presented a new canon vastly different from the 19th century American novel of, essentially, rural and Frontier America. The early American novel of Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Jack London, Theodore Dreiser strove in the direction of perfecting realistic/naturalistic art.

There was another wave of modernist individualism, as opposed to modernist realism/naturalism cherishing the irrepressible human will and the infinite powers of human intellect and imagination. This was largely an inheritance from the 19th century rationality and individualism intensified with the keen modernist perceptions of the world, and an equally felt, modernist self-awareness. Consequently, one notices in the American fiction of the twenties a growing complexity of human character, unknown in the 19th century literature, at odds with the emerging socio-cultural situation and at odds with the traditional American morality of puritanism. This discomfort becomes conflictual with the invasion of Marxist ideology into the capitalist ethos of the American socio-economic situation and Freudian awareness of one's own sexuality into the realm of personal and social morality conditioned by puritanism.

The early twentieth century novel recognizes, as never before, the manifold challenges man faces in his situation and also asserts, for the first time, infinite human capacity to face up to the challenges. Furthermore, modernism posited a positive concern for the minutiae of everyday life.—the trivial and the actual is given a significance hitherto unknown. A Hemingway hero lives his life nonchalantly in the immediacy of experience unencumbered by any ideas or concepts. The only thing to do is to see what one could make of oneself in the given

situation. Faulkner believed in the little things of life "sublimating" what he called "the actual into the apocryphal"

The concern for the actual is realism but the heightened concern of the self-assertive human mind has tragic implications. In fact, the tragic predicament of the 20th century man, particularly the 20th century American lay in the growing modernization of his situation and the growing modernism of his mind. The American novel emphasized the human and the situational possibilities of tragedy. Tragedy in the 19th century European literature was the sheer pathos of the human situation. Man was a pitiable victim of his situation with no capacity either to challenge his situation or to assert his dignity.

The modern American novel is significant for the tragic affirmation of human dignity. Hemingway's characters are all losers but heroes of lost causes. As a Hemingway character puts it, "a man can be destroyed but not defeated". Hawthorne refused to accept "the end of man" and asserted that human will does not simply "endure" but would "prevail" itself against all failures. For Fitzgerald, tragedy is the very process of civilization, of its romance and realism and of its exuberance and irony.

More than the power of its realism and tragedy, Modern American novel acquires the strength of the genre. Under the realistic and naturalistic mode, it acquired a precision and compactness of form and simplicity, naturalness and directness of expression and emerges as a powerful medium of cultural statement and reflection.

As the American novel enters the thirties, the economic depression of the decade brought overwhelming Marxist perspectives of economic determinism overshadowing its human values. Marxist perspectives intensified naturalism in the novel and when Marxism is the overriding passion, naturalism took the shape of regionalism and ethnic literature. So much so, realism/naturalism became the predominant mode of American fiction either to present a slice of life or the repressive pathos of living in an age of machine or to assert the indefatigable human and its infinite promise.

1.3 THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND ITS IMPACT ON AMERICA

The second world war was catastrophic not only for the devastation it caused but for exploding the modernist edifice built in America from the twenties through the forties. The first world war created a humanist aversion for the destruction the war caused but did not stifle civilizational values. The second world war brought a cynical attitude towards the very process of civilization. The self-confident and vibrant modernism that explained the western world finds itself at the crossroads calling for a redefinition of human identity. The notion of man-made world gives way to an apprehension of a self-destructive human world. Though America came out unscathed in the second world war, the fact that the nation was the residence for many refugee intellectuals from Europe felicitated America's intellectual involvement in the war.

The war traumatised the European intellectuals to no end. In sheer desperation, they gave up all conventional modes of thinking and embraced a sort of intellectual and artistic iconoclasm. The successful American intervention in the war made the European context come irresistibly to the American thinking. The result was an emphatic response to the holocaust of the war and a weariness with its own cherished values which in the succeeding decades emerged as a critical reappraisal of its own cultural values.

1.4 AMERICA IN THE POSTWAR YEARS

The Europeanization of America was rather unprecedented for the nation in the postwar years. Rather suddenly, America looked uncomfortable at its own philosophy of individualism. The shift in national or cultural attitudes is not entirely due to the European factor. Quietly over the decades, America walks past the stage of an individualist industrial society and emerges as a postindustrial mass society. It was the socio-psychologist, David Reisman who pinpoints, for the first time a revision in the cultural format of the nation. America has become an "other-directed lonely crowd in the place of its traditional individualistic "inner direction". Several economists and anthropologists follow Reisman: the American has become an organizational man. And the nation an "affluent society" with "mass culture" or "mass leisure" The fifties came to be known as the gilded age in American history.

An affluent mass society is no unmixed blessing as America witnessed during the fifties and the sixties. Affluence notwithstanding, mass society puts a heavy premium on the creative and aesthetic instincts of man-"homogenization" of language and behaviour and their disjuncture from ideas and feelings. The fifties were incipiently explosive in America for what was a revolt against mass society begins in the fifties mainly as a rejection of representational/realistic values in art, a rejection that becomes explosive during the sixties. The fifties witnessed non-representational paintings of Jackson Pollock, Martha Graham's dance. Jack Kerouac, who coined the term, beat, a word that came to refer to a whole young generation which rejected all social values and preferred to live as nomads, begins the most unorthodox writing America witnessed. In a path-breaking fictional effort, *ON THE ROAD*(1957), he fashions out spontaneity in the place of order and control, as the artistic value. Writing, for Kerouac, should be an undisturbed flow in a wild form that would purify the mind and achieve a sort of orgasm for the writer. Kerouac finds a companion in Allen Ginsberg who believed that music and poetry based on nothing but chance and spontaneity would combat the sheer falsehood of homogenized culture.

1.5 THE POSTWAR AMERICAN NOVEL

The changing cultural patterns of the nation make the novelist in the post second world war period seek to bypass the culturally ingrained individualism and the established literary values of realism/naturalism. In fact, he inherits a singular task-combating what has become the modernist despair of the post war years. The post war fiction of the first and second world wars assumes a contrastive pattern. The novel in the aftermath of the first world war passionately sought modernist values whereas the novelists in the aftermath of the second world had to fight the despair these values have brought. One could still cherish modernism as Saul Bellow does while the world negates it in every possible way. Bellow held the last flicker of humanist hope.

1.6 SAUL BELLOW

Saul Bellow is the most outstanding of the postwar novelists who belongs, by his faith and commitment to the human values, to the prewar novelists like Hemingway and Faulkner but the frustrating experience with the everfailing civilizational values aligns him with Norman Mailor, John Barth and Pynchon. A Jewish moralist to the core, though does not write ethnically, Bellow sees a tendency to slip into a moral

abyss where it should be humanly possible to transcend the distrought postwar situation. Likewise, he holds on to the modernistic novel for all its realism and intellectuality instead of debunking it like his contemporaries as unrepresentative of the postwar situation.

Bellow's novels in the postwar period, *Dangling Man* (1944), *The Victim* (1947) and *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953) present sheer despair of living in postwar America. His heroes, Joseph, Asa Leventhal, Augie March go about life with an intellectual and moral sensitivity but only to be continually frustrated and thwarted by the engulfing human chaos. With divisive and alienating contexts between man and man, humanism of the Enlightenment type or of the modern liberalism does not work. On the other hand, a positive unconcern for all these values appears to register success in the contemporary world. *Dangling Man* debates with his ironic spectator about joining the war into which he is listed, a war which is inauthentic in terms of its professed values. Jobless, living on wife's income, and alienated from everyone around him, life doesn't offer any authenticity either. Finally, he joins the army as inauthentically as, he, otherwise, lives.

The significant thing about Bellow's earliest novel is the powerful modernist perspectives it throws on contemporary living- its immobility, inaction, purposelessness and waste. Joseph couldn't do anything other than a critical self-condemnation. Bellow's second novel, *The victim* moves into the realm of interpersonal relationship where well-meaning concern and compassion for others could be a premium on their lives, for the nature of contemporary living does not admit these qualities. The lot of Bellow's hero, Asa Leventhal has a tremendous sense of guilt for intending to better the lives of others, who succeed rather callously in life. Of course, they do not know why they succeed. In one of Bellow's best novels, *The Adventures of Augie March* the intellectual adventure into the realm of liberalist and romantic thought proceeds simultaneously with the growing immorality, a situational requirement of contemporary existence.

More than any other postwar novelist, Bellow dramatizes the utter contrast between the modernist human tradition contemporary man continues to cherish the contemporary postwar situation that doesn't admit modernist or individualist perspectives. The agony lies in hoping for individualism in a mass society.

1.7 NORMAN MAILOR: WAR AS A CIVILIZATIONAL VALUE

Saul Bellow persists with human values, with a ray of hope, in the postwar situation that negates human values in every possible way. His contemporary, Norman Mailor deciphers war, besides being human catastrophe, as a civilizational value of war and domination of one over the other. For Mailor, war has not produced the state of dehumanization in the 1940's but itself a product of civilized society whose inherent sadism existed before and after the war. Mailor's first novel, *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), possibly the first and the best of the postwar novels, chronicles the second world war both as a political fact of the American nation and a personal fact of the American character.

The Naked and the Dead presents the American invasion of a tiny Japanese island called Anapei. The particular infantry regiment of the American army, that leads the attack on the Japanese island, consists of men who present a broad spectrum of human possibilities. At the one end is general Cummings who runs the power machine of the war -power of decimating any number of people in or through war. Hoping for the war to bring totalitarian power and the historical condition of middle ages, Cummings sees a vision of "renaissance of real power in the post war period. Allied to him and partly used by Cummings as an instrument of his grandiose plans

for a brutal attack on the island is Sergeant Croft, who on account of a mishap in life, emerges as the cynical killer of the invading American army.

In the course of the invasion, war emerges not only at a physical level with the Japanese but psychologically manifests itself in the racial animosities of the American character. The Irish officer abuses the Jewish American soldier, Roth as a Jewish bastard making the latter feel that the target of war is turned inwards towards him. It was a moment of truth to Roth--- the war he is fighting belongs to human character rather than to the battling nations. In another inversion, rather a positive one, of the emotive relationship that should exist among the American soldiers, Sergeant Brown displays compassion for the dying Japanese soldier. Equally a moment of truth for Brown that the divisions made by war are arbitrary and superficial and do not simply exist at a purely human level.

That the war is fought not only physically with the Japanese but more inimically with American soldiers becomes clear in Cummings and Sergeant Croft's manipulating to send Lieutenant Heron, a liberal who hated Cummings and Croft's cynical pursuits of power, on the reconnaissance mission resulting in the latter's death. Cummings doesn't win the war but the victory comes unasked through Dalleson. Similarly, Croft has to withdraw the reconnaissance mission as his men rebel against the impossible task.

Roth, Brown and Hearn had moments of truth in the novel when they become targets of the hysterical animosity of the fellow American soldiers, for whom the enemy targets lie within their army though outwardly and physically they fight the Japanese.

The naked and the dead emerge as two clear cut categories in the novel. The liberal minded Ruth, Brown and Heron who had their moments of truth are the naked for they have seen the perversion of the war wherein the enemy is cynically killed or the power hungry officers target their soldiers for enmity. For the Generals and Sergeants who successfully lead the war machine are the dead. They remain stagnant or dead in the cynical pursuit of power and war is the only one context for the exercise of power. The prewar and the postwar are as warlike in the cynical pursuits of power games, nations and individual play.

Mailor's is a grim vision of the world as well as of the postwar America. The moments of truth or understanding that Mailor presents are minimal and contrastive to the overall deadness of human feeling and understanding that one finds in postwar America.

Unlike Bellow who presents the possibility of human transcendence in a desperate situation, Mailor presents a virulent critique of civilizational values implying that a resurgence of romanticism could alone correct the negation of human values.

1.8 JOHN BARTH

Among the novelists who ushered in the postwar novel, Bellow and Mailor, with different perspectives, may be called the novel's progenitors. John Barth and Thomas Pynchon are the formulators of the tradition of the postwar novel. -Barth exploring the Bellowian concern for the inauthenticity of human existence and Pynchon carrying forward the mailoresque critique of civilizational values. Pynchon writes in the 1960's when the postwar novel assumes the form of an experimental novel. Barth is particularly significant in the postwar novel for he writes in the immediate postwar period-the fifties which offer crucial transition to the intensely reflective sixties that mark a stage in American literature like the twenties did earlier.

It fell to the lot of John Barth to formulate, in the first instance, the axioms literature has acquired by 1950s. As Barth sees it, literature has ceased to be creative having exhausted its perceptive and literary faculties. The cultural change necessitates new artistic and literary forms as the new cultural norms remain inaccessible to the traditional literary forms which could only present the outlived cultural norms. Barth calls it the literature of "exhausted possibility" or "the literature of exhaustion".

Barth's focus on the primacy of literary form in generating cultural reflection makes him, to a certain extent, theoretician of the new postwar literature. New modes of thinking break up conventional forms of art or the conventional forms of art block new modes of thinking. The literature of exhaustion points the "used upness" of certain forms of exhaustion of certain possibilities". Barth writes:

.....to be technically out of date is likely to be a genuine defect: Beethoven's Sixth Symphony or the Chartres Cathedral if executed today would be merely embarrassing. A good many current novelists write turn of the century type not only in more or less midcentury language about contemporary people and this topic makes them considerably less interesting.¹

A technically up-to-date writer, Barth feels, alone capture contemporary reality.

"An artist's mode or form", for Barth, is a "metaphor for his concerns --- it is a paradigm or metaphor for itself. Not the form of the story but the fact of the story is symbolic; the medium is the message."

1.9 JOHN BARTH : THE EUROPEAN INSPIRATION

Barth views Jorge Luis Borges and Samuel Beckett as ideal literary artists who are technically up-to-date and in tune with the spirit of the times. In an age of "final solutions and felt ultimacies", Barth notes, they deal with "ultimacy both technically and thematically". Both Borges and Beckett write at a point of cultural and artistic history wherein creativity has reached a dead end and a creative writer has to turn upon the very used up cultural and literary artifacts and make the very used upness, quite ironically, into a powerful cultural and literary statement. In fact, Barth writes, as Borges and Beckett have proved, irony by itself produces great literature and originality in literature is quite often a myth. Barth writes:

An artist may paradoxically turn the felt ultimacies of our time into material and means for his work- paradoxically because by doing so he transcends what had appeared to be his reputation, in the same way that the mystic who transcends finitude is said to have enabled to live, spiritually and physically in the finite world. Literary forms certainly have histories and historical contingencies and it may well be that the novel's time as a major art form is up, as the "times" of classical tragedy, grand opera, or the sonnet sequence came to be. No necessary cause for alarm in this at all, except perhaps to certain novelists, and one way to handle such a feeling might may be to write a novel about it.²

Borges, Barth observes, never admits that anyone has a claim to originality in literature--"all writers are more or less faithful of the spirit, translators and annotators of preexisting archetypes".³ A continual renewal of literary forms by way of reshaping the existing literary forms to meet the situational requirements of time becomes a greater literary effort than attempting something original at a time originality and creativity have reached a dead end.

1.9 JOHN BARTH: THE NOVELISTIC VISION.

Barth embarked on his novelistic endeavours with a conviction that, in his literary efforts, he has to explore novel as self-conscious genre, for the artistic medium he uses itself is the message. Similarly, in the ambience of negated cultural values, he seeks life as self-consciously as he makes his literary endeavours-----"to acknowledge what I am doing while I am doing it is exactly the point", as one of Barth's characters puts it.

While ushering in the self-conscious tradition in novel, Barth recognizes the weight of modernist tradition. Frank D. MC Conell writes:

In Barth's fiction, two complementary impulses are held in a precarious balance which, while it often creates dilemmas of vertiginous complexity, is also one of the truly original and valuable achievements of recent American writing. For Barth, this task means not simply to write stories which blatantly or cynically point out the fact that they are stories: rather it means to reclaim the humanizing power of literature, of story, in an age which appears in many to have lost its ability to feel that power. It is a self-consciousness which, like Bellow's, insists upon the primacy of tradition, of the perennial myth of consciousness, over our daily lives: but which, at the same time, like Mailor's, searches strenuously for the radical articulation of the individual mind, the outsider's vision, which can at once corrode and refine the structures of the human tradition.⁴

However, as Barth shares the dominant concerns of Bellow and Mailor, he brings in a more acute awareness of the ability of the medium, than the cultural values shaping it, to offer self-critical reflection. Frank D. McConell further writes:

To describe Barth's universe in terms of Mailor's or Bellow's emphasis Barth's central position within the mainstream of American fiction but in it can also distort the dimensions of his talent. The deepest "influences" upon his work are not Mailor, Bellow or indeed any American novelist of this century. Perhaps more than any writer of his age, he is a *literary* man: that is, a man for whom the tradition itself is a matter of the highest concern, delight and -may be- despair. The novel, for Barth, is not a distinct cultural or political mode of expression, not a form of self-testing and existential risk, but primarily a version of the most archaic and inexhaustible of human activities, story or myth. Barth's fiction develops, quite logically, toward an exploration of the primal power of story telling itself, and a corresponding effort to return the forms of contemporary narrative to an approximation of the earliest, world creating power of myth, legend and epic.⁵

Barth is primarily interested in delineating the human situation. The changing parameters of human situation and concern is one aspect of Barth's concern. More importantly, he is concerned with literature, particularly with the novel, its ability to mirror the whole spectrum of human concern and its ability to be an analogue to life in all its complexity.

1.10 SUMMING UP

The postwar American novel is a phenomenon by itself. It is self-conscious and self-explorative. It tries to shape up itself as a distinct genre that explore itself as much as it explores the cultural situation. It is modern but doesn't carry the burden of the tradition of modernism. It is contemporary but continues tradition, though self-critically. More importantly, it is a product of the times and looks beyond its time and attempts to reshape and reformulate the intellectual and aesthetic norms of the times.

1.11 REFERENCES

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2. Ibid p.52
3. p.33
4. Frank d. mc Conell *Four Postwar american novelists. Bellow,maior, barth and pynchon.* The University of chicago press. Chicago 1977. P109.
5. Ibid p.109-10.

1.12 KEY WORDS

Apocryhal:	Something that is inauthentic and spurious. originally referred to religious writings considered inauthentic and unacceptable in terms of religious authority.
Canon:	a standardised discipline in thought, belief and genre or discipline. Originally referred to accepted biblical laws.
Genre:	Class or Category of artistic endeavors, having a particular form, content or technique. Genre particularly means a distinct literary type.
Jorge Luis Borges:	A twentieth century Argentinian writer who influenced John Barth greatly.
Modern:	Attitudes based on the approaches of Scientific method, objectivity and rationality.
Modernism:	Modernism assumes a different stance from modernity or modernisation in that opposes the dehumanization of on account of techonogical progress Modernism believes in believes in the validity of one's immediate situation as against the traditional values and the significance of a subjective response to the situation. The most important of modernist assumption is the belief that art is the best expression of human authenticity.
Realism/Naturalism:	Realism is a belief in objective and verifiable truth. Naturlism is the truth. Naturalism is the application of the perspectives of natural science of human nature and behaviour as aspects of modernism, realism and naturalism presented man as a victim of his instincts as well as a victim of technological and societal forces.

1.13 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the broad differences between the Post First World War American novel and the Post Second World War American novel.
2. Examine the process of the Europeanization of the American novel.
3. Critically examine the contribution of Saul Bellow and Norman Mailor to the evolution of the Post Second World War American novel.
4. Examine the centrality of John Barth in the American novel since the Second World War.

1.14 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. John Barth "The Literature of Exhaustion" *The Atlantic Monthly* August 1967. Barth discusses how literature in Europe and America has reached the point of intellectual and aesthetic dead end by the time of Second World War.
2. Frank D. Mc Connell *Four Postwar American Novelists. Bellow, Mailor, Barth and Pynchon*. University of Chicago press. Chicago. 1977. Mc Connell discusses Saul Bellow and Norman Mailor, Barth and Pynchon as the early formulators of the tradition of post Second World War American Novel.
3. John O Stark *The literature of Exhaustion* Duke University press. Durham, Nc. 1974 Stark discusses the literature of Jorge Luis Borges, Vladmir Nabokov and John Barth as one particular phenomenon after the Second World War.
4. Charles B. Harris. *Contemporary American Novelists of The Absurd* College of University Press. New Haven. Conn. 1971. Harris discusses the fiction of Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, Thomas Pynchon and John Barth as novelists of the Absurd.

UNIT 2 THE EXPERIMENTAL NOVEL

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Metafiction
- 2.2 Aesthetics of Absurdity
- 2.3 Irony
- 2.4 Black Comedy
- 2.5 The Experimental Novel: Social Indirection & Individual Empowerment
- 2.6 Summing Up
- 2.7 References
- 2.8 Key Words
- 2.9 Questions
- 2.10 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

The unit examines the phenomenon of the post second world war American novel in terms of its range of thematic and technical experimentation. The novel of this period is highly experimental in that it varied and diversified every postulate that characterized modern American fiction since the first world war. John Barth's fiction is highly characteristic of this experimental phenomenon in American fiction. Let us understand the various features of this experimental fiction.

2.1 METAFICTION

Metafiction, as the term indicates, is fiction that attempts to go beyond its own laws of existence. This is, of course, achieved by assaulting the accepted laws of fiction. The literary mode of fiction, instead of approximating or illusioning real life, becomes a construct about what life could be or would be. In the years to come, Metafiction chooses, basically, to be prophetic or apocalyptic rather than realistic in the accepted sense of the term. It is primarily intellectual than perceptive. Robert Scholes writes: Metafiction assimilates all the perspectives of criticism into the fictional process itself..... metafiction must either lapse into a more fundamental mode of fiction or risk losing all fictional interest in order to maintain its intellectual perspectives.¹

John Barth sets out the metafictional task of a contemporary novelist in his novel, *Lost in a Funhouse*:

The boy protagonist, Ambrose is lost in a funhouse and Barth finds the funhouse a fictional equivalent for the contemporary man's existence which is no different from being lost in a funhouse. Barth's metafictional hero "envisions a truly astonishing funhouse, incredibly complex, yet utterly controlled from a great central switchboard like the console of a pipe organ".² For Barth, life and literary fiction it represents have a certain amorphousness ungratifying to the intellectual instincts of man--- hence the craving for a metafictional construct that betters both life and literary fiction. The dichotomy between life and fiction, on the one hand and fiction and metafiction, on the other hand, would have been unsatisfying a few years ago in terms of the given modernist values but for the contemporary man, who has taken leave of the artistic values of transcription, conformity and coherence, the chasm between life and its metafictional mode is enticing in itself. He does not accept that life should precede fiction- he would rather fabricate a fiction that models life

rather than is modelled after it. Scholes sums up Because life is a rather badly made funhouse, the artist tries to imagine a better one. Because God was a realist, man must be a fabulator. The energizing power of Barth's universe is the tension between the imagination and the conditions of being which will prevail. *Lost in a Funhouse* is concerned with philosophical questions, but its metaphysics is inside its esthetics (life is bad art)³

Barth, in fact, explains the whole metafictional thrust of the postwar American novel that tends to create life rather than be created by it. The contemporary novelist is a "fabulator" for he seeks to forge a new reality in the postwar fiction. The need for fabulation arises, as Barth would say, from the fact that literature has exhausted itself of all the accepted perspectives and could only fabulate new ones. Jorge Luis Borges believed that literary possibilities symbolized by objects in the story are "used up" and imagination which has infinite possibilities can alone throw perspectives on reality. Vladimir Nabokov creates a world of metaphors and imagination, a world more carefully patterned than the realm usually called real. Donald Bartheleme creates antinaturalistic slices, more in the manner of surreal juxtaposition of found pieces of junk. All these writers attempt to capture the fractured human consciousness in the contemporary times, a consciousness that has lost the kind of unified sensibility it always had. That sensibility could map up the world and the human reality reductively and functionally. The postwar situation renders this perceptivity impossible. Language which embodied human sensibility presented an effective correspondence between human thinking and the objective world, both communicatively and metaphorically, lost its representative ability and function. In fact, the whole edifice of traditional realism along with the realistic/naturalistic fictional mode stood eroded and in its place anti-realistic/antinaturalistic experimentation making fiction a fabulation or meta fiction groping for a reality beyond what is perceived as reality arose in the late 1950's and 1960's. The broad shift is from what is perceived as stable reality to a continually changing patterns of human thinking and behavior. Robert Scholes sums up the perspectives of experimental fiction.

The fiction of existence seeks to imitate not the forms of fiction but the forms of human behavior. . . . The novel is doubly involved in time: as fiction in the evolution of fictional forms, and as a report on changing patterns of behavior. In a sense, the continual development of material offers it a solution to the problem of formal change. If it succeeds in capturing changes, it will have succeeded in changing its form: discovery will have created its appropriate technique. . . . Notions like control of personality by angels and devils, by humours in the body, by abstract ruling passions by phenomological or physiognomical characteristics, by heredity, gifts and failings, by environmental shapings and twistings, by psychological needs- all these have been indispensable to the novelist as ways of making human behavior manageable. Tracing the history of novel, we trace the shift from religious perspectives of behavior through pseudo-scientific view toward a behavioral science which is perhaps close to achievement. at last.⁴

2.2 AESTHETIC OF ABSURDITY

Metafiction negates modernist novel, particularly the realistic/naturalistic fictional mode. The loss of faith in the modernist edifice of reality gave rise not only in the essential absurdity of the human world but also to a philosophical belief in the cosmic absurdity governing everything including the human world. Samuel Beckett heralds the Theater of the Absurd and the the absurdist novel in Europe during the 1950s which presented man as totally deracinated and psychologically denatured. Human life, as Beckett viewed, does not entail living but only a game to be played. The game begets its own goals and vice versa. Expectation is the process of life which generates exhaustion in an inexhaustible way of every aspect of human

existence and rates exhaustion in an inexhaustible way. The process partakes every aspect of human existence. Occasional attempts at lending meaning to life, as Beckett's characters, Estragon and Vladimir in his seminal play, *Waiting for Godot* (1953) attempt unsuccessfully. Beckett's notion of human and cosmic absurdity renders human existence a matter of trivialities like eating carrots, putting on boots, scratching the head and playing charades. Habit is the only unifying feature of human life. Only a passage of time, devoid of chronology and history but significant in its repetitive and unceasing patterns, gives a conceptual order, if there could be any. Beckett dispenses with the western notions of literary art based on the Aristotelian postulates like plot or narrative, characterization and linear progression etc. Beckett subjects the whole literary art to deliteralization and language, the vehicle of reason and communication is irrationalized. The dramatic and fictional narrative becomes a matter of ritual. The literary art is totally inverted and the inversion becomes the literary art. Beckett exercised a profound influence even on the writers in the 1950s and 1960s, who did not ascribe to the philosophy of Absurdity. The dissatisfaction with the modernist art made many writers, particularly in America, look up to an art style that would help them to present the disjointed sensibilities in the post war period. In characterizing literature in the postwar period as one of exhaustion, John Barth comes close to accepting Beckettian antistyle as the new literary canon. The other American writers like Joseph Heller and Thomas Pynchon accept the Beckettian anti-style or the aesthetic of absurdity to present their own disillusionment with the absurdities that have crept into the American society and values as a feature of their experimental novel.

The new anti-style or the aesthetic of absurdity notwithstanding, the perspectives of the American experimental writer are totally different from European absurdists like Samuel Beckett in that he is a more a rebel against the stultified and homogenized American value system than against them as such. The American writer in the postwar period has come to recognize that human reality has multiple forms and the earlier modernist sensibility was rather reductive. Charles Harris writes:

Life, these novelists believe, resists any impositions of order because its realities are multiple. Any attempt to order these meanings, unless done ironically, results in a falsification of reality. This view of a multiple reality reflects the influence of quantum physics. ...The multiple Vs in Pynchon's *V*, the multiple identities of Fausto in that same Novel, of Henry Burlingame in Barth's *The Sot Weed Factor* and of Harold Bray in *Giles Goat - Boy*, the doubt cast upon whether not characters like Doc Daneeka in Heller's *Catch 22*, Malcolm in Purdy's *Malcolm* and Jacob Horner in Barth's *The End of the Road* even have identities-- each of these suggests that truth is not ambiguous, but multiple; that it is not merely elusive, but, as quantum physics tells us, by its very existence uncertain.⁵

The aesthetic of absurdity for the American novelists has become a metaphor for their unease frustration with what they consider as the cultural stultification of America. The American novelist has not lost faith in the vitality of his culture but finds a chasm between its possibilities and actualities---- hence a style that does not reflect his faith but only his frustration. The aesthetic of absurdity for the Europeans presented their vision of life while for the Americans it is a protest against what he considers as the failure of his culture. In fact, the 1960's witnessed the rise of a new artistic style known as Camp which emphasized the values of unnaturalness, artifice, exaggeration, flamboyance and amorality.

2.3 IRONY

Irony becomes the chief literary mode for the experimental writer whose immediate target is not so much the absurd universe but the absurdity of the literary forms and conventions. Tracing the growth of literature in a creative use of parody by

Cervantes, Fielding and others, Barth believed that an ironic use of the exhausted literary forms alone would rejuvenate the stultified literary forms. While the original parodies did not parody the literary form as such but parodied the narrative action to give it its own perspectives, experimental novelists choose to parody not so much the narrative action but the way human reality is represented in the fictional mode. Irony for the European absurdists was a metaphysical statement, whereas for the experimental novelists, it is a generic endeavour to map up the post war realities and absurdities. Writing about Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor* that imitates *Tom Jones*, Charles Harris writes:

Barth reflects this view of an ordered universe ironically in *The Sot Weed factor*. Like *Tom Jones*, it possesses a highly structured plot, one carefully conceived. *The Sot Weed Factor* is a "formal farce" the order reflected in its highly structured plot becomes an object of parody rather than affirmation. The novel turns back upon itself, rejecting the very order reflected in its form. By pushing the novel's "harmony of parts" in to the realm of farcical exaggeration, Barth suggests disorder by inversion. Moreover, since the novel's theme clearly concerns absurdity, an incongruity exists between the novel's form and its philosophy. Like the ironic structure, however this incongruity becomes functional, serving to reflect that incongruity which is a part of an absurd universe.⁶

Most of the experimental novels, besides those of Barth, of Heller, and Vonnegut offer a critical and creative parody of one literary form or the other. Irony becomes the literary mode itself, not the part of a comic or tragic denouement.

2.4 BLACK COMEDY

The new ironic mode of the experimental novel, like the theater of the absurd, blurs the generic divisions of comedy and tragedy. True comedy and its delightfulness and tragedy with its moral affirmation are not simply possible in a world that is perceived as an absurdity. The implications of comedy are horrifyingly tragic and that of tragedy, pathetically or grotesquely comic. The absence of order and rationality in the world is simultaneously comic and tragic and the experimental novelists, like the European absurdists, look up for humour in the very inversions of what is considered real, beautiful and delightful. The ironic fictional mode that the novelists use could only heighten the comic and tragic inversions. Black comedy or humour owes its origin to the European surrealists of the 1920s who attempted to break the traditional modes of perception by removing the traditional connotations and meanings of words and objects in order to enable them to reflect the unconscious strivings and the dream processes. The American experimental novelists do not go that far but use the concept of black humour or comedy as a part of their critical or creative ironic mode to illustrate the absurdities of American mass society.

Heller's *Catch 22*, where irrational is the rational is an example of American black humour. *Catch 22* is the rule by which the military bureaucracy creates a chaotic world of its own power wherein reality has to yield to what it projects as reality. Charles B. Harris writes:

Should reality and official records clash, reality must yield? When McWatt, distraught over killing Kid Sampson, crashes his plane into the side of the mountain, Doc Daneeka, whose name appeared on the official flight list, is declared dead. Though obviously alive, Doc is treated from that moment on as if he doesn't exist. The records are absolute. Mudd "the dead man in Yossarian's tent" receives similar treatment. Because he reported to the wrong tent upon his arrival at Pianosa, Mudd does not receive official credit for ever having reported to the squadron at all. He is killed two hours later over Orvieto but his name can not be from the official roster

since it was never officially added. Just as Doc Daneeka, still very much alive, is dead according to bureaucratic logic, so Mudd, quite dead, is denied death⁷.

Kurt Vonnegut considers schizophrenia as a boon to modern man for it is through intense psychic state alone, could he deal effectively the absurd world of contemporary mass society. Thomas Pynchon, similarly, presents a world of multiplicity and uncertainty where negation of humanness equips a person to deal with the world. In the place of human interaction, there is a fallback on a feverish psychic activity as a way of ordering the absurd world. John Barth calls it the cosmopsis, an excess of consciousness along with a lack of intrinsic values that characterize the protagonists in the postwar experimental novel. The novel does not offer any perspectives, literary or humanist other than presenting a sort of wry humour or wild comedy on what has become, afflictively, an obsessive reality.

2.5 THE EXPERIMENTAL NOVEL: SOCIAL INDIRECTION&INDIVIDUAL EMPOWERMENT

The attempt to reject and transcend modernist notions of life and art is born of a frustration with social reality presenting modernist value system. Consequently, there was a tendency to internalize social problems to the extent of an infictive self-awareness. A flight from social concerns or an evasion of social problems marks the thrust of the postwar experimental novel. Having come to believe in the incorrigible absurdity of the human world, these novelists sought a withdrawal from the social world as a superior attitude than any social concern and attempted survival strategies to cope with what they considered as the incorrigibly absurd world. It is to the credit of the experimental novel that it attempted to evolve fiction emerge from the cerebral power of man and relied on sheer artistic virtuosity to reflect the cerebral power of man. It was a paradigm shift from the social instincts of man as celebrated by the modernist novel. The reliance on cerebral power is a search for individual empowerment, the individual who hitherto felt victimized either by societal or technocratic power. There was a certain nobility in the suffering of the human individual as presented by the modernist novel but the new experimental novel focuses on a tendency to show the violence of the individual either towards himself or towards others as a way of empowering himself. The violence is more aggression and cruelty than physical. The protagonists of Barth, Heller, Pynchon and Vonnegut are the self-empowering individuals seeking to conquer the world through the stratagems of intellect.

2.6 SUMMING UP

The experimental novel, to sum up, transcends modernist notions of life and art. In seeking a literary form to reflect postwar realities, it becomes metafictional in its very approach to fiction. It accepts a philosophy of non-reason and an aesthetic of absurdity. It offers perspectives of a wild comedy on postwar situation. It internalizes the social concerns and deemphasizes the social man and focuses on the cerebral man.

2.7 REFERENCES

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2. John Barth. *Lost in a Funhouse* New York: Double Day and Co. 1960 p.97.

3. Robert Scholes *Fabulation and Metafiction*
4. Ibid p.109-110
5. Charles B.Harris *Contemporary American Novelists of The Absurd* New Haven College & Heaven press p.26
6. Ibid.117.
7. Ibid pp 39-40.

2.8 KEY WORDS

- Apocalyptic: Revelatory of future. Apocalypse, originally, was the last book o of *New Testamen*, the book of Revelation.
- Vladmir Nabokov: A twentieth Russian writer who lived in America during the war.

2.9 QUESTIONS

1. Explain the difference between fiction and metafiction as illustrated in Barth's novel, *Lost in a Funhouse*
2. Explain how the Europeans and Americans use the aesthetic of absurdity.
3. What are the perspectives of black humour ?
4. Discuss the broad shift of focus in the experimental novel form the earlier tradition in the novel.

2.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Robert Scholes *Fabulation and Metafiction* Chicago University of Illinois Press 1980 Discusses Postwar experimental fiction in America.
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UNIT 3 *THE FLOATING OPERA* : AN ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 An Approach to *The Floating Opera*
- 3.2 The Narrator Hero: Todd Andrews
- 3.3 The Suicide that never was
- 3.4 Love Triangle
- 3.5 Animality
- 3.6 The Lawyer
- 3.7 Masking the mind and the heart
- 3.8 Towards an Understanding of life
- 3.9 The Floating Opera
- 3.10 References
- 3.11 Key Words
- 3.12 Questions
- 3.13 Annotations

3.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit analyses the text of *The Floating Opera* in terms of the narrative and thematic content of the novel. The first person narrative through the protagonist is the basic design and structure of the novel. The focus of the analysis is both on the fragmentoriness and totality of human experience and attitudes. The novel has to be understood both as a compendium of human experiences and as a consistent view of life.

3.1 AN APPROACH TO *THE FLOATING OPERA* *Chapter 1*

Metaphoric titles are not uncommon. The writers sum up the quality of life in what they write through a metaphor. Barth, at once, likens the human story to that of a floating opera: a make-believe and a continually fluctuating world where credulity of any kind is a premium and a tentativeness of ideas, morals and action is the norm. One has to be constantly questioning the very *raison d'être* of life and living but the very act of questioning suffers from a similar lack of purpose or validity. Similarly, the very act of writing faces the problem of relevance. Even if the art of writing is to be relevant, how could it encompass the highly disjointed and fragmented world? Nevertheless, Barth keeps the art of writing alive just as we keep ourselves alive and keep alive the questions regarding the worth of things irrespective of whether questioning itself is worthwhile. The floating opera is both floating and operatic or incredulous. The 'show boat' is an apt metaphor, for it sums up the fragmentariness of human reality in all its entirety. The narrative hero writes:

Why *The Floating Opera*? I could explain until Judgement Day, and still not explain completely. I think that to understand any one thing entirely, no matter how minute, requires the understanding of every other thing in the world. That's why I throw up my hands at the simplest things; That's why I throw I up my hands sometimes at the simplest things: It's also why I don't mind spending a lifetime getting ready to begin my *INQUIRY*.¹

The Floating Opera syndrome also operates at the level of human perception where a given reality in time and space keeps inspiring us. The narrator points out:

It always seemed a fine idea to me to build a showboat with just one big flat open deck on it, and to keep a play going continuously. The boat wouldn't be moored, but would drift up and down the river on the tide, and the audience would sit along with both hands. They could catch whatever part of the plot happened to unfold as the boat floated past they'd have to wait until the tide ran back to catch another snatch of it, if they still happened to be sitting there. To fill in the gaps the tide they'd have use their imaginations, or ask more attentive neighbours, or hear the word passed along from upriver or down river. Most times they wouldn't understand what was going on at all, or they'd think they knew, when actually they didn't. Lots of times they'd be able to see the actors, but not hear them. I needn't explain that that's how much of life works: Our friends float past; we become involved with them; they float on, and we must rely on hearsay or lose track of them completely. They float back again, and we either renew our friendship- catch up to date- or find that they and we don't comprehend each other any more.²

The novelist has a different task on hand- requiring "artifice and craftsmanship required to build such a fictive vessel even as the image denigrates the role of fiction as the ideal mirror of reality"

And that's how this book will work, I am sure. It's a floating opera, friend, fraught with curiosities, melodrama, spectacle, instruction and entertainment, but floats willy-nilly on the tide of my vagrant prose³

The reader's task is less strenuous:

You'll catch sight of it, lose it spy it again; and it may require the best efforts of your attention imagination-together- with some patience, if you are an average fellow- to keep track of the plot as it sails in out of view⁴.

3.2 THE NARRATOR HERO: TODD ANDREWS CHAPTERS 1&2

The novel is a self-appraisal by the first person narrator, fifty-five year old Todd Andrews-a partner in the Law firm of Andrews, Bishop & Andrews in Cambridge. Though a successful lawyer, he was never a careerist.

I consider it no more my career than a hundred other things: sailing, drinking, walking the streets, writing my INQUIRY, staring at walls, hunting ducks and coons, reading playing, politics. I am interested in any number of things, enthusiastic about nothing. I read often and unsystematically-that is, I have my own system, but it is unorthodox. I am in no hurry. In short, I live my life-or have lived it, atleast, since 1937.⁵

Todd lives rather ambivalently, neither enthusiastic nor non-chalant, partaking little of every possible attitude. Upsetting his attitude to life is his illness-deformity in fingers to begin with, Todd has been suffering from "subacute bacteriological endocarditis" with a tendency to myocardial infaction". The burden of the ailment is the possibility of death at any moment. In addition, there was the chronic infection of the prostate gland. Indifferent health and ambivalent living make Todd irectionless, a predicament he tries to avoid by an INQUIRY into his life which he shapes up as novel. The decision to write the novel comes on one night in June 1937. The day is significant for Todd in two ways. Firstly, he decides to put his life on perspective that

day whose happenings in terms of thoughts and actions have driven him to an inquiry into himself. Secondly, the day like any other day presents life in its totality. The job of recollecting, all that happened on that day, making sure nothing was left out, took 16 years. The vast reading, writing and editing have taught him an important lesson. Everything is significant and nothing is finally important. The lesson has come from his inquiry and perspectives both his life and the novel he writes about it.

3.3 THE SUICIDE THAT NEVER WAS CHAPTERS 2&25

On the fateful day, June 21, 1937 at the Dorchester club, Todd wakes up to a realization of the problems bothering him over a period of time.

Momentous day! Inspiration, to have closed my eyes on the old problem; to have opened them on the new and last and only solution! Suicide⁶

What is a definite solution soon becomes an opinion

My opinion? My opinion? SUICIDE! Oh, light step, reader! Let me tell you: my whole life, at least a great part of it, has been directed toward the solution of a problem or a mastery of a fact. It is a matter of stances-of stances- of masks, if you wish, though term has a pejorativeness that I won't accept.. During my life I've assumed four or five such stances, based on certain conclusions, for I tend, I am afraid to attribute to abstract ideas a life-or-death significance. Each stance, it seemed to me at the time, represented the answer to my dilemma, the mastery of my fact; but always something would happen to demonstrate its inadequacy, or else the stance would lose its persuasiveness, imperceptibly, until suddenly it didn't work⁷

In fact, Todd indulges in death in life syndrome. His own name Todd, German root in Todd is almost death. Todd's stay at the hotel, Dorset begins with the suicide of his father in 1930 and the possible causes of the suicide present themselves continually as a possibility in his life.

Suicide is a family tradition for Todd. His father, Thomas Andrews committed suicide when he collapsed financially and was unable to face the creditors. Todd embarks on an INQUIRY into his father's life in order to understand the causes of his death. The INQUIRY begins with his intention to suicide on account of his heart problem. Todd wanted to explain to his father through a letter, to be delivered after his death, as to why he committed suicide. However, he could never write to his father. Communication with him was not possible, or imperfect, and the source of imperfection was himself. Todd found no adequate reason for his father to commit suicide, an assumption that qualifies his own intention to commit suicide several times

The beginning of the affair with Jane warded off the possible attempt at suicide and the decision of Jane and Mack to sever the relationship with him, after the birth of a child, ignites the inclination to suicide but wouldn't like it become his response to Jane and Mack.

I suddenly wavered in my resolution to die-was shaken, in fact, by reluctance. The reason was simply that my suicide would be interpreted as evidence that their move had crushed me: that I was unable to endure life after their rebuff.⁸

3.4 LOVE TRIANGLE

Life acts as a countervailing force to the sense of death. Sex dilutes Todd's sense of death. Though it comes to him in a triangle. Harrison Mack, a disenchanted Marxist takes such a strong liking to Todd that he enthusiastically and even proudly shares his wife, Jane with Todd. For the bachelor Todd, Jane offers a fulfilling sexual life. The "jubiliant adultery" with Jane, Todd finds is offered to him by her husband, Harrison in a gesture of self-transcendence. Harrison loves his wife and in the heightening of love incites Jane to seek sexual fulfilment beyond marriage. He tells Todd that they are not stupid enough to be affected by things like jealousy and conventions.

You can have sexual attractions apart from love. We both enjoy love making... If I was attracted to any girl, Jane wouldn't be silly enough to object to me going to bed with her, because she knows there wouldn't be any love in it.⁹

The separation of love from sex eminently suits Todd.

"It's like playing Tennis" "Just for the fun and exercise. Some guys would get jealousy if their wife played tennis with another man, or danced with him"¹⁰

Though Harrison doesn't expect Todd to feel "obligated", he expects a sort of marital fidelity in the extramarital triangle. Later on, he was angry with Todd for being friendly with a Negro girl.

"You've been unfaithful to Jane and to me; You've defiled yourself and us in that black hussy"¹¹

Todd would not accept fidelity in a love triangle or friendship for, when it need not exist in marriage which could allow extramarital relationships, how could it exist in other relationships. The basic fact about all relationships is that they are ridiculous, simply a theatre of the absurd. We live in the moment. We cannot order life, for that implies a self-sustaining individuality. When death stalks man in every moment, he lives from moment to moment.

3.5 ANIMALITY CHAPTERS 7 & 23

At 17, Todd begins his sexual alliance with Betty Jane Gunter. It was an unusual alliance, for Betty Jane was unsuccessfully in love with Smitty Herrin and Todd was violently sympathetic. Unimpressive but intelligent, Betty provided a satisfying encounter with the opposite sex to Todd. Beginning with the loss of "Spiritual innocence", Todd-Betty relationship becomes desperately sexual when it is learnt that Smitty Herrin has married someone else. Sheer physicality of the relationship, when reflected in the mirror, turns Betty away for, the experience was a foregrounding in sheer cynicism, -that there was nothing but animality in what could be a romantic and emotional experience.

Todd recounts a second incident at Argonne forest during his army career. "Inadequate fighting material" that he was, Todd reacts hysterically when confronted with a German soldier. Todd cruelly beats him in what he thought was the duty cast on him. Having subjugated him, he was all-tender sharing rare moments of comradeship with the enemy. However, the friendship does not last long and Todd kills him in a fit of suspicion.

The incident disturbs Todd deeply for he experiences animality at the core of his being.

It is one thing to agree intellectually to the proposition that man is a of animal species : quite another to realize, thoroughly and for good, your personal animality to the extent that you are actually never able to oppose the terms man and animal, even in casual speech ¹²

3.6. THE LAWYER – Chapters 10 & 20

As a lawyer, Todd was choosy about the cases he would fight. He is not interested in what the law is but is curious about the things that the law can be made to do. Todd's test case was Harrison Mack Senior's will where the court had to decide as to which of the several wills is the right one to be executed. More than the change of circumstances, several of Harrison's foibles necessitated the wills. For the court too, what mattered was not the point of law but the nature of arguments and its own predilections. Courts in America, right up to the Supreme Court engage themselves with the sheer absurdities of Harrison's will. Todd wins the case by a cynical perception of where the absurdities lay and could use them. It is this understanding of law that makes his friend Harrison richer by 3 million dollars.

Morton vs. Butler's case presents another face of law –

Never did there exist such an unparalleled floating opera such as the law in its less efficient moments, and seldom had the law such inefficient moments as those during which it involved itself- nay, diffused, dissipated, lost itself- in Morton v. Butler. 13.

The cars Butler and Morton drive collide causing minor injuries to Mr. and Mrs. Morton. The matter goes to the court after a month mainly on account of the political actions to which Butler and Morton belong. For years together, the case doesn't come up for hearing on account of procedural wrangles. Todd gets procedural wrangles terminated at the Supreme Court after six nearly- legal wrangling explains law.

3.7 MASKING THE MIND AND HEART CHAPTER 25

Could one believe in anything or the beliefs, which are more in the nature of situational responses could explain the human individual with the medium of stability. Todd feels that several things that happened were masks. His early illness became more a mask than illness. When Marvin Rose found an infection in his prostate gland, he became a saint. His father's death makes him a cynic. None of the masks lasted beyond a period. They explain a schism between his mental and emotional life hiding his mind from his heart and his heart from the mind.

To be sure, each mask hid other things as well, as a false face hides identity and personality as well as the nose and mouth; but it was to hide my enigmatic heart that I became a rake, a saint, and then a cynic. For when one mask no longer served its purpose of disguise, another had perforce to take its place at once all my masks were half-conscious attempts to master the fact with which I had to live; that none had made me master of the fact; that where cynicism had failed, no future mask could succeed; that, in short, my heart master of all the rest of me, even of my will. It was my heart that had

my masks, not my will. The conclusion that swallowed me was this. *There is no way to master the fact with which I live.*¹⁴

Only despair can not be a mask. Rather it is the end of masks as Todd realizes when Jane points out the deformity in finger. He lived in "mirth" through Betty June, "fear" in Argonne, frustration with his father. Each of them lasting until the next one is taken up. Only the last one could be faced or mastered with the idea of self-destruction.

There was no way of mastering the fact with which I lived; but I could master the fact of living with it by destroying myself, and the result was the same-I was the master. I choked back a snicker¹⁵

3.8 TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE CHAPTER 5

There is no certainty in life about anything except death- hence the attempt to reach it as a way of mastering life. Life can not be mastered but could be understood.

Todd's basic approach to life, on account of several factors, is that "everyday he is renting another day from eternity...lea sing my bed on the chance I may live to sleep on it once more". However, "he doesn't want to live as though each day may be his last and needs... something to counterbalance the immediacy of one day-at a-time existence, a life on the installment plan". Todd begins each day with a gesture of "cynicism" and closes it with a "gesture of faith."¹⁶

A gesture of temporality, a gesture of eternity. It is in the tension between these gestures that I have lived my adult life¹⁷

Amid this suspended living between temporality, and eternity, one has to live to realize that "nothing in life has intrinsic value". Secondly, "the reasons for which people attribute value to things are always ultimately irrational. There is, therefore, no ultimate reason for valuing anything."¹⁸

Todd arrives at an organized value system that negates all values. To look at life as valueless becomes a new value.

3.9 THE FLOATING OPERA CHAPTERS-7, 20& 27

The Floating opera is both a metaphor and a recurring preoccupation of Todd. Right from childhood, boat making was a passion with Todd. He experimented with several designs but never succeeded in building a boat with perfection. This was one of the things he wanted to explain to his father in the proposed letter. In fact boat making symbolised many of his failures-

I tell you this story because it's representative of a great many features of my boyhood. My daydreams, my conceptions of how things should be, were invariably grandiose and I labored at them prodigiously and always secretly. But my talent for doing correctly the small things that constitute the glorious whole was "defective"-I never mastered first principles-and so the finished product, while perhaps impressive to the untutored, was always mediocre to the knowledgeable.¹⁹

The wandering boat image comes back to him when he hears a "stream calliop" coming from a floating opera *Adam's ORIGINAL & UNPARALLELED Floating Opera* having gone past Hambrooks Bar light and heading upto the channel to the bell buoy. The floating opera , at once , symbolises law in its chaotic and irrational moments.

Todd enters the show boat, the floating opera not only to bring an end to the utter artifice and chaos of his life but also to the artifice and chaos of the lives of 649 people on board – suicide combined with homicide .The relationship with Jane and its termination is definitely a factor in this effort. Its not just the heightening of cynicism but a cumulative accentuation of several things – deformity, illness, selfishness, valuelessness, existential chaos , artifice , amorality and immorality – whose logical or rational end is death. When death stalks life in every possible way, death rather than life is the rational fact.

Todd did not succeed in blowing up the travelling show boat as the acetylene gas he has freed fails to explode. He then considers drowning himself, but providence having failed him in the execution of his unwavering attempt at suicide and homicide, he loses the motivation to die , a motivation which for the first time lasted for a considerable time to become possible.

The tenuous distinction between life and death that existed all through making death constantly overwhelm life is finally lost – "why bother" either about life or death.

T

There is no final reason for living (or for suicide):²⁰

Life goes on floating like an opera as long as it could go on.

3.10 SUMMING UP

The Floating opera is the predicament of human life in the cross currents of mid-century America. The distinctions man has made between himself and animality, between morality and immorality, values and valuelessness, and life and death are all lost. The impulse to live or even to die are lost. Man simply exists- floating as there is nothing to anchor himself in life and operatically, for life divested of meaning and value is a show.

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6. Ibid. P11.
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12. Ibid p.63
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3.12 KEY WORDS

- Cynicism:** a contemptuous disbelief in human goodness and progress. A sect of Greek Philosophy which believed that goodness is not possible in society.
- Opera:** a dramatic work in which all or most of the words are sung to the accompaniment of music most popular form of entertainment

3.13 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss how the narrator, Todd Andrews lends design and structure to *The Floating Opera*.
2. Discuss *The Floating Opera* as an episodic and reflective novel.
3. Barth's novel exhausts itself in its title, *The Floating Opera*. Discuss.
4. Discuss how *The Floating Opera* negates both existential euphoria and cynicism.

3.14 ANNOTATE THE FOLLOWING LINES

- a) A gesture of temporality, a gesture of eternity. It is in the tension between these gestures that I have lived my adult life..
- b) For when one mask no longer served its purpose of disguise, another had perforce to take its place.
- c) Living is action. There's no final reason for action. There's no final reason for living.
- d) There's no final reason for living (or for suicide)
- e) The truth is that nothing makes any difference, including that truth. Hamlet's question is, absolutely, meaningless.

UNIT 4 PHILOSOPHIC FORMULATIONS AND THE FARCE OF REASON

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 *The Floating Opera*: Philosophic Formulations
- 4.2 Nihilistic Comedy
- 4.3 The Farce of Reason
- 4.4 Comedy of Masked Games
- 4.5 Irony: Comic Vision
- 4.6 Summing Up
- 4.7 References
- 4.8 Key Words
- 4.9 Questions
- 4.10 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

John Barth called *The Floating Opera* a nihilistic comedy. This unit helps you to understand what a nihilistic comedy is and in what ways *The Floating Opera* is a nihilistic comedy. An attempt is made to see what exactly specifies a nihilistic comedy and how it is different from a nihilistic tragedy.

4.1 THE FLOATING OPERA: PHILOSOPHIC FORMULATIONS

For John Barth, the earliest of his two novels, *The Floating Opera* and *End of the Road* are exercises in formulating a philosophic view of life. He called *The Floating Opera* a "nihilistic comedy" and *End of the Road* a "nihilistic tragedy". Barth's nihilism was never absolute the way it was to the European absurdists like Samuel Beckett who envisioned a state of metaphysical stasis in the world. In Beckett's tragi-comical farce, *Waiting for Godot* (1953), human beings are presented totally deracinated and psychologically denatured. Life does not entail living but is only a game to be played. The games beget their own goals. Expectation is the process of life which generates exhaustion in an inexhaustible way. The process partakes of every aspect of human existence bringing forth an occasional attempt to lend meaning to life. Beckett's characters Estragon and Vladimir do not go beyond themselves as human efforts lead nowhere. Human existence, consequently, becomes a compilation of trivialities like eating carrots, putting on boots, scratching the head, playing the charades. Habit, "the great deadner" explains their life, for they have no other way of leading their lives other than living habitually.

Barth, like many American writers of the 1950s and 1960s became disillusioned with American experience and easily yielded to nihilism presented by the European absurdists like Beckett. But nihilism and American experience, whatever be the cultural frustration are basically antagonistic. The Americans always look up to a vibrant and joyous cultural experience. The American Experience, as L.E. Chabrowe says, is "hopelessly idealistic" and the American feels his isolation to such an extent that he wants to belong in spite of himself. The hostility between him and the philistine Establishment is so sharp-edged that he usually writes as a wounded outsider trying to get in rather than (like most Europeans, at least, on the continent) as one who can have in or out as he pleases. But if the American artist feels this

hostility so acutely, it is probably because, without realizing it, he still has faith in the American democracy.

However, compelling is the tendency to nihilism, it has to be qualified for the sake of the irrepressible cultural euphoria. The absoluteness of nihilism has to make way to a relative and tentative value system. For the absurdists, the cultural experience is tragi-comic. In its sheer repetitiveness and meaninglessness, life is comic but the implications of comedy are horrifyingly tragic. Barth's focus in *The Floating Opera* is not on the tragic implications implicit in the mid-century American cultural experience. It is essentially on the comedy of American lives resulting from the loss of faith in their lives. The comedy is farcical for the valueless cultural experience exists at a physical level. For the average American, worse than the loss of value and the sheer physicality of living, life is a static entrapment in his person. Sheer comedy, as Barth sees it, for a nation or culture which believed itself to be the Chosen of God on earth for the human and spiritual regeneration of man.

4.2 NIHILISTIC COMEDY

Nihilistic comedy has to be defined as a genre. Nihilism, by itself, can not promote a comedy of jovial humour. A comedy would not entail a cynical view of life or of human nature nor does it entail any aesthetic or moral depravity. It presents a sympathetic view of human foibles. It is witty and satirical. It presents a pleasant irony inherent in human intentions and achievements. Comedy explains people's zest for life. It simply celebrates life in all vivacity. Only in its virulent form, it presents a sheer farce or burlesque ..

Barth's comedy is a farcicalization of life. Farce emerges from the depletion of human meaning or value in contemporary American experience.

1. Nothing has intrinsic value II. The reasons for which people attribute value to things are always ultimately irrational. III. There is, therefore, no ultimate "reason" for valuing anything.²

When one goes about life, as Todd does, with the attitude that there is nothing intrinsically valuable, it is so much irrationalized and that attributing value to anything does not stand to reason, life becomes a bare existentiality-life without a sense of it. Social ambitions, morality and aesthetics generate a value system and commitment to life. Bereft of values and commitment, one can hardly find a sense of life in living. This is Todd's problem. The rationality he banks on helps to dissect life rather than feel or "have" it. Todd, the name that indicates death, continually looks up to death, since one can not respond to life without values and feelings. But death is as valueless as life itself. -Hence the oscillation between life and death. One responds to life with ideas of death and responds to death with bare living.

Life as Barth sees it is a nihilist's or a cynic's game but for a fallback on life from its alternative. Death, it is a comedy. Falling back on life from an inclination to death is a dilution of nihilism and cynicism and relativisation of both the valueless life and death. Consequently, the very cynicism becomes valueless to an extent creating a psychological flux of total relativism. Barth explores a comedy of valuelessness that is partly the result of nihilism and partly the result of a valueless indirection. in life. John Stubbs writes:

Primarily, John Barth is a novelist of ideas. The situations in his comic works are always directed towards establishing his twin themes of the individual's quest for value and identity in a world of gratuitous events. Barth forces his hero to see the world without an absolute value, to see it in its most comically absurd, and then Barth leads him to accept and affirm such

a world essentially, Barth and his contemporaries have such a romantic strain in their works. It is not that they honor man's dignity, for this they systematically strip from him; it is rather that they admire his persistent ability to pull together what relative value or what hope he can have in a world without order.³

For Jac Tharpe, "Barth is the completely intellectual comedian" who makes comedy of all things through the simple method of observing inconsistency, limitation, relativity, and paradox.⁴ Nevertheless, Barth does not parody or criticize. Tharpe writes:

... Barth avoids criticism of all kinds—not merely social criticism. He does not criticize; he records, even his theory of farce may suggest fabulation and the unrealistic. What is unrealistic about Barth's novels is the art. What happens—what is recorded—is realistic, though, as a whole the effect is one of some fabulous and unreal universe. From the point of view of the cosmophilist which is Barth's term for the world lover, everything is wonderful. From the point of view of the nihilist, everything is ridiculous. All these elements go into Barth's concept of the universe.⁵

4.3 THE FARCE OF REASON

The comic absurdity of *The Floating Opera* emerges from the farcicalized belief in reason. When Todd falls into the company of a German soldier in a foxhole, he reasons love to him overcoming the enmity of the war. Though not warranted by any facts or reasons, the fear of the German soldier grips him and, in an act of unreason, kills the soldier. His faith in reason is so facile and tenuous, fear kills the reason instantly. Similarly, Morton vs Butler's case depends more on Morton's feelings about his wife's behaviour with Todd at a New Year's Party and on the public slight by President Roosevelt than on the nature of the automobile accident, the cause of the litigation. In the same way, Harrison Mack's inheritance case is decided against Harrison's mother by her failure to preserve the sanctity of 129 bottles of her deceased husband's feces. Law, the instrument of reason, is in practice in America is anything but a farce of reason—hence Todd the lawyer doesn't look into the legalities of a case but into all possible absurdities that would decide the case.

Todd's love triangle with Mack and Jane illustrates that reason is an excuse for one's physicality or animality. Harrison and Jane reason that love and sex should be independent of each other and feelings of jealousy and possessiveness in love are irrational. They soon prove that much of their rationalized sex relationship does not stand by itself but is rooted in feelings. Harrison and Jane betray jealousy and possessiveness in their attitude towards Todd when they find him being intimate with a Negro girl. Similarly, his sexual encounter with Betty Gunter results from his rationalized sexual needs and the latter's frustrated love but Todd's reason brings greater sense of absurdity when he looks at himself in the mirror during the act of copulation and Gunter feels the sheer horror of the sexual relationship as seen through the mirror.

From the beginning, Todd contemplates suicide as a rational answer to what he considers the irrationality of life but at every stage the suicidal tendency proves to be an instance of emotional despair and consequently a non-event. Todd does not commit suicide from the very reason he wanted to commit suicide—“Why bother either about life or death. Both emotion and reason have no final value or meaning. Both are essentially comic.” Jac Tharpe writes:

... Barth does not write fantasy. As he says, he writes farce. He deals with the fantastic and the grotesque by observing them realistically. Satire and parody may be elements in the composition. The serious may be there too, as well as the ordinary and the realistic.⁶

The Floating Opera proves continuously that the exclusivity of reason in life could be only a sheer comedy. Richard W. Noland writes:

Todd is not completely paralyzed. But neither is he the man of reason he thinks he is. It is Todd, not Barth who thinks of himself in this way. To Barth, he is a man in whom reason and emotion run in separate directions. Without emotion, reason give him no purpose for living. It can not establish permanent value or affirm life. It can only determine that there are no absolutes.⁷

4.4 COMEDY OF MASKED GAMES

Todd Andrews as a protagonist in the novel is only a pretext for Todd's narrative of a nihilistic comedy. Nihilism creates the terror of existential vacuum and a sheer desparateness to fill the vacuum. The rational choice of suicide for a life of chronic illness and lack of intrinsic meaning and value is a non-event since the same lacks any reason or value. Living is an inexorable task requiring the performance of many functions or roles, but any role-playing or functionality requires investing the role or function with a value. When such an ascription of value is not forthcoming and, nonetheless, presents an existential performance, games or masked roles become the predicament of even the bare existentiality. Todd leads a masked life fully knowing that he is playing at living and the games he plays have no authenticity as games and the games themselves become masks. The game and the mask of it becomes a comedy on comedy rendering every attempt at living a double comedy.-the attempt as well as living become a comic foible on foible.

Todd's life has been a series of masks. When Dr. Frisbee looked up from his stethoscope, he became a "rake", the "first mask". When June Gunter "slashed" and Marvin Rose found his infection, he became a "saint". When he hanged himself, he became a "saint". For Todd, each of these masks was a "half-conscious attempt to master the fact" with which he had to live. When Jane points out the deformity in his fingers, he realizes that there could be no mask to hide the deformity. Self-destruction is the answer to his life as well as to its masks. Niverly Gross sums up the comedy of games in *The Floating Opera*.

Nihilism is merely a quirk of character in *The Floating Opera* and *End of the road*, it is not much more than a setting for comedy, a device for irony. All this talk about nihilism suggests the greatest paradox of all. Barth is the most immediately a humorist. For a novelist like Bellow, the comedy of life is a realization of the moral and emotional depth of life. The comedy of Barth is the mockery of emotions and moral values: What his characters feel and perceive is further grist for hilarity. The suicide issue of *The Floating Opera* is an existential put on; all issues in Barth's novels come down to some sort of game. And so does the emotional life of the characters. They love as they suffer: it is something they check in and check out. Love is simply a comic absurdity, another game.⁸

Though Todd Andrews is the protagonist of *The Floating Opera*, it is Todd Andrews the narrator who lends meaning to the novel. However, the meaning is more in the nature of a suspensive irony, for what Todd presents by way of narrative is uncertain and ambiguous. Irony as a trope of intellectual reflection is a characteristic feature of great literature. Irony contrasts and alternates the narrative and the thematic force of a work of art and presents tragic perspectives. Todd's ironic narrative trivializes his own life story in a postmodern fashion. In trivializing the life story, Todd questions not only the absoluteness of his rationality but also presents the pervasive direction it can take in the human mind. For the essential comedy of the novel, it is not simply a farce that Todd the narrator dramatises and at which the reader can merrily laugh over but rather a grotesque laughter on the part of the narrator evoking a similar response on the part of the narrator.

Todd's description of the mating of the crabbers and the reductive analogy of Plato's singular prototype of male and female is an example of sardonic irony on Todd's rationalized love triangle.

I laughed and made a mental note to make a physical note, for my *Inquiry*, of the similarity between the crabbers and Plato, and to remind Jane that there were creatures who took longer than I.⁹

Todd's point is not that his rationalized sex relationship has descended to the level of animals but that his mating lacks the resilience and duration that crabbers are capable of. Jac Tharpe writes:

Barth's genius lies in his awareness of magnificent ironies and his ability to dramatize paradox. He is able even to suggest that, since the universe operates consistently on paradox, the universe may to that extent in that respect actually be rational instead of absurd. The right approach to such a universe would be an appreciation of its paradoxes; which amounts to developing a transcendentalist view, cosmophily instead of Cosmopsis, with all the ironies implied in the tortured misuse of "transcendentalism". The result is *farce splendide*. outdo the universe with laughter and enthusiasm, realizing that in fact the universe seems out to get you and, with despair and death as methods, will get you. But you can laugh hilariously, and even genuinely, while you are being garroted.¹⁰

Similarly, Todd's first sexual encounter with Betty June for Todd the narrator is not that its "going at it like dogs" but the protagonist's aborted erection and June's life time condemnation to prostitution. The irony is horrifyingly absurdist in the Beckettian manner—everything fails—Todd's chance sexual encounter, Betty June's frustrated sexual response, the rationality and the Physicality of sex itself.

The narrator, Todd's key phrase "imperfect communication" explains the metaphor of the floating opera. The floating opera is not the quality of the protagonist, Todd's life. Barth's ironic vision is not basically tragic, may be tragic concomitantly or cumulatively. *The Floating Opera* is only a "side show for a human life in imperfect communication with itself." Like all else, Todd the narrator presents, the floating opera is also a presentation-elusive and indefinite and unrealisable., Barth does not attempt, or at least succeed, in seeking the tragic; for, it is beyond Todd's elusive narrative. It is a self-seeking comedy of life and living which does lend itself to any statement or meaning but presents suspensive irony characteristic of contemporary postmodern situation.

Thus, *The Floating Opera* presents a new genre-nihilistic Comedy- unknown earlier. It is a product of the postwar intellectual climate which eroded the generic distinction between tragedy and comedy. It is closer to tragedy in its presentation of the gloomy view of human situation and closer to comedy in its presentation of a comically pathetic predicament of man in his situation. *The Floating Opera* evolves a new genre which chooses to present human situation cynically and nihilistically but finds human activity essentially comic-man sees no hope for himself and yet looks up for excitement and pleasure.

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4.8 KEY WORDS

Samuel Beckett:

The British playwright in the 1950s who is credited with nihilistic philosophy of life wherein he considers the human world as a theatre of the absurd. His epoch making play, *Waiting for Godot* presents this view of the world as a theatre of the absurd

4.9 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss John Barth's Philosophy of life as presented in *The Floating Opera*.
2. Define nihilistic comedy and show how it differs from the genres of tragedy, comedy and nihilistic tragedy.
3. Discuss how personality masks build up the comic environment in *The Floating Opera*.
4. Examine how Todd the protagonist and Todd the narrator give a dual structure to *The Floating Opera*.
5. Examine how irony structures the novel, *The Floating opera*.

4.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Jac Tharpe John Barth *The Comic Sublimity of Paradox* Carbondale Southern Illinois University Press 1974 pp 133. Discusses John Barth's novels as intellectual comedies.
2. Partard W. Noland "John Barth and the Novel of Comic Nihilism" *Wisconsin Studies*, 3 pp240-57 Noland discusses *The Floating Opera* and *End of the Road* as nihilistic comedy and tragedy respectively.
3. Niverly Gross "The Antinovels of John Barth" *Chicago Review* 20, 3 pp95-109. Discusses the nihilism of John Barth's novels as an existential "put on".

UNIT 5 FROM MODERNITY TO POSTMODERNITY

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 John Barth: The Modern in a Postmodern Age
- 5.2 *The Floating Opera* as a modern novel
- 5.3 Todd Andrews: The failed Modernist
- 5.4 From Modernity to Postmodernity
- 5.5 *The Floating Opera*: The postmodern narrative
- 5.6 *The Floating Opera*: The postmodern Writer, narrative and the Reader
- 5.7 Summing Up
- 5.8 References
- 5.9 Key Words
- 5.10 Questions
- 5.11 Suggested Readings

5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall discuss *The floating Opera* both in the modernist tradition as well as in the emerging tradition of postmodern narrative. Barth inherits the modernist tradition in the novel that has shown a sense of sheer exhaustion by 1950s. He believed in contemporizing the tradition in a truly modern way. He foregrounds several postmodern notions of a writer, narrative and the reader. Further, in a substantial departure from the essential realism and integrity of the modern novel, Barth brings in the postmodern reflexivity, uncertainty, tentativeness and multiplicity or intertextuality of the text into the writing of a novel.

5.1 JOHN BARTH :. THE MODERN IN A POSTMODERN AGE

Very few writers present a binary of crosscurrents of the times they live in as John Barth does. Like Bellow and Mailor, Barth is preeminently a modern writer against the rising tide of postmodernism during the 1950s. The postmodern stance that Barth eventually takes results from his own modernist agenda. Modernists believed in the primacy and the specificity of the literary form as a significant intellectual value. Barth resisted the cultural diffusion and amorphousness that characterizes contemporary literature. Barth emphasized literary values over and above everything. He never allowed of any intensity of cultural attitude dilute literary vigor. Literature in the hands of Barth is an independent and effective medium of cultural reflection, not a byproduct of cultural activity.

Modernism contemporizes literary form and concern. Barth felt that the modern literature itself requires to be contemporized. By 1950s, Barth observed that the western literature became a literature of exhaustion both in terms of form and concern. No writer, for Barth could disregard the failure of modernist values such as individualism, aestheticism, emotional authenticity and the artistic values of realism and naturalism. The literature in the postwar years could not help present tides of anti-intellectualism, amorality and various forms cultural dystopia. Modernity, for a writer as Barth views, lay in responding to these predilections. Only a technically up-to-date writer, Barth argues, can capture contemporary reality. In fact, for the

modern writer. his literary mode or form is a metaphor for his concerns. The diversification or dispensing with many of the modernist literary values is not a rejection of modernism *per se* but an assertion of modernist spirit in historicizing literary form and concern. John Barth presents a modern understanding of all that has ceased to be modern.

5.2 THE FLOATING OPERA AS A MODERN NOVEL

The *Floating Opera* is a rational inquiry by the protagonist, Todd Andrews into his life. The inquiry takes the shape of a realistic and linear presentation, beginning with his childhood. Todd analyzes every one of the major events of his life. Similarly, he analyzes every one of his attitudes and opinions. What is apparently a self-trial, becomes an examination of various issues like sex, love, friendship, enmity, socio-political institutions like law are examined clinically in their functioning.

The most crucial issue of the novel is Todd's neurotic inclination to commit suicide. The obsessional neurosis is inspired by a continual upsurge of nihilism. But reason dominates eventually and aborts the planned suicide. Todd's whole life is rationally organized to the minutest detail. The room at the Dorchester Explorer's club is well organized. He leaves at the same time, attends the office regularly and does the same kind of work everyday. He floats above his life instead of "having it, classifying, categorizing and quantifying" his work and experiences.

The well ordered emotionless life suffers a psychic trauma whenever he faces an adverse situation. When he learns that his heart is weak, he becomes a rake. The experience with Betty June makes him a saint. His father's suicide makes him a cynic. Basically, the psychic reaction to the experiences is the burden of modernist angst one faces in the contemporary world. The aesthetic, intellectual and moral correlation that existed between man and the external world is seriously ruptured on account of the materialism that describes the contemporary world. The result is a schizophrenic state of mind, a deep sense of existential vacuum and the attendant dread.

Todd's problem is that he is not able to intellectually master his life. The failure, particularly with his given ability to critically reflect on his life and effectively deal with several of its absurdities terrifies him. He is a modern intellectual unable to accept any challenge to his chosen order of rationality. Situations and emotions impinge on him but can not engulf him for his irrepressible intellect fights back with cynicism. The attempt at suicide is the assertion of intellect against his person. Similarly, the failure to commit suicide is his inability to dispense with an intellect that the suicide implies.

5.3 TODD ANDREWS :A FAILED MODERNIST

In a way, Todd's disinclination to live and failure to die asserts his rationality. However, he is a failed rationalist who does not go about his life with the foresight of reason but would rather think "after the fact" made by way of "effect of circumstances". Todd's rational analysis is often contradicted by his actions. The killing of German soldier, Todd maintains, cured him of day dreaming but he continued to do so. Feelings become a mask against his own ideas. Todd's rationality becomes a victim of his masked personality. The mask of indifference "Why bother", that Todd adopts against his own rationally arrived decision to commit suicide, though positive in itself, lacks strength. What stands out at the end of the novel is Todd's inability to remain an individual in terms of his organized system of ideas.

5.4 FROM MODERNITY TO POSTMODERNITY

The postwar intellectual situation brings about a shift from the modernist literary values such as order, rationality, realism, linearity and individualism. The focus shifted to the biodiversity of the individual from his intellectuality. Similarly, total personal reflexivity replaces cultural concern. Further, the literary form becomes diffuse in postmodern orientation. At times, sheer formlessness becomes the form. The modernist focus on the structural center of a work of art gives way to a shift to the margins. In fact, the postmodern thinking views structural center as a conceptual violence.

Artifice, elusiveness, extravaganza and sheer virtuosity explain the postmodern temper.

5.5 THE FLOATING OPERA: THE POSTMODERN NARRATIVE

Notwithstanding his masked life, the protagonist, Todd Andrews is a credible rationalist. However, Todd as first person narrator lacks credibility. Barth brings about a disjuncture between the protagonist and his narrative. A reductive modern thinker, Todd creates a narrative of "outrageous artifices", "virtuosity" and "idiosyncrasy". Barth meant the narrative to be a metaphor not only for the "form" of the story but also for the "fact" of the story Thomas Le Clair says:

.....The floating Opera fully and skillfully exploits its narrative mode- radically unreliable first person narration- and one of Barth's favorite aesthetic-thematic devices- the multiplying replications of the regressus in infinitum."¹

Todd's account of his life is more a construct than an account. The need for the construct emerges from his growing failure to integrate his person and experiences with his essential rationality. Todd sets out the problem for his novelistic presentation of life.

Good heavens, how does one write a novel! I mean, how can anybody stick to the story, if he's at all sensitive to the significances of things? As for me, I see already that storytelling isn't my cup of tea: every new sentence I set down is full of figures and implications that I'd love nothing better than to chase to their dens with you, but such a chasing would involve new figures and chases, so that I'm sure we'd never get the story started, much less ended, if I let my inclinations run unleashed.²

Todd imagines that there is a strong death instinct in his bio-social situation.

Todd is death, and this book hasn't much to do with death. Todd is almost - Todd-that is almost death- and this book, if it gets written, has very much to do with almost -death³

The 'almost death' concept is a strategem to capture a grip on his living. In fact, the obsessive neurosis of suicide is directly proportionate to his zest for life. The more he talks of suicide, the more he betrays a charm for his life- Todd is the absurd man, but the continual confuting of his expectations suggests his absurdity lies in the innocent belief that the world should respond to reason.⁴

Todd himself is aware of the absurdity. He saves Haecker from suicide, having rationalized committing suicide. He would not accept Haecker's reasons for committing suicide. Todd's attitude towards himself and his life, as he would say is one of "irresponsibility", "basic" and "ultimate". The whole metaphor of the floating opera structures the unreliability of the narrative. Thomas Clair sums up:

... the work Todd has entitled *The Floating Opera* is a narrative about his experiences on Adam's *Floating Opera* which itself mirrors Todd's work as a lawyer and the work of which it is a part. Todd's account is also the product of a man who used the floating opera as a metaphor for his aesthetic principle. However, the ideal floating opera, as he defines it early in the novel- a show with an order paralleling that of life and therefore difficult to follow. It is not the floating opera principle at work in the novel. The real floating principle, as revealed by Todd's statements about the law, his association with the nature of Adams's opera, denies man's responsibility to the integrity of fact and what the mundane world would seriously call truth and affirms his right to manipulate given conventions for his protection and interest. For the holder of this principle, fact can be evaded by its inclusion in artifact. Life is a fiction to be created. The book (and the life behind the book) has, then, a purely an aesthetic order. This hidden aesthetic order, not the expository order Todd claims is the rationale behind *The Floating Opera*.... The mind is purely aesthetic, has no use for the integrity of fact on which personal relations, intellectual systems (including the autobiography) and the world in general are erected⁵

The essential realism of the novel is "epistemological first and valuative second". However, Barth does not allow nihilism to creep into the craft of fiction. Thomas Clair writes:

The nihilism of the novel is not complete, however, for it does not extend to the aesthetic act, which ignores the fact for the willful creation of an imagined "reality" more satisfactory to the creator. This is the mode of action by which Todd lives and constructs his book. Todd is, in one respect, the modern man who constructs illusions by which he can live, but he is also the novelist at work. Todd, as devious fictionist, serves up an illusion of reality-a portion of his autobiography- for the sake of truth but recognizing any truth is illusive, he builds into his illusion its own destruction. In Barth's work, constructs-intellectual or aesthetic-falsify reality, whatever it is. The more naive or elaborate that construct or form, the more comic is its failure. That the illusion is necessary makes the comedy black.⁶

Thus, the postmodern narrative begins with a modernist premise, debunks its credibility and ushers in a postmodern unreliability of contemporary man and his existence. The only silver lining is the integrity of the aesthetic that remains pure and undilutable. Without the integrity of the aesthetic act, a response to life fictively and aesthetically is not possible.

5.6 THE POSTMODERN WRITER, NARRATIVE AND THE READER

Though haltingly, but surely, John Barth makes a conscious departure from the perspectives of modernist novel. He does not leave the novel to shape itself, nor the characters become independent from him as is the wont in the postmodern literature. I am not going to let those scoundrels take over. I am in charge.⁷ Barth wouldn't allow his characters to become independent of him in any way. They have to be his creations whether the character is the protagonist or the first person narrator

distancing himself from the protagonist. In fact, Barth creates the duality between the rationalist protagonist and the cynical narrative for, he is writing at a time modernist values are declining and the new postmodern perspectives are becoming necessary for a writer. Todd the narrator is Barth's surrogate discharging novelistic responsibilities in explaining new cultural and fictional possibilities. Having realized that literature has reached a dead end in mid 20th century, Barth could not help looking at fictional tasks as, essentially, non-writing since the old dictum that art is the best expression of human life gives way to an assumption that art is life in all its desultoriness and chaos. Consequently, the writer is not, need not be a literary craftsman. Barth, through Todd Andrews, attempts to promote the postmodern stance right at the beginning of the novel.

To someone like myself, whose literary activities have been confined since 1920 mainly to legal briefs and INQUIRY-writing, the hardest thing about the task at hand-Viz., the explanation of a day in 1937 when I changed my mind-is getting into it. I've never tried my hand at this sort of a thing before, but I know enough about myself to realize that once the ice is broken the pages will flow all too easily.⁷

Todd erases the distinction in his person between the "existential subject" and the "writing subject". He feels that he could be a writer effortlessly. He looks up to the complicity of the reader in his literary task in a marked departure from the traditional role of the reader to understand the story and its thematic and the axiomatic burden in the rigors of the narrative logic. Todd bypasses the normative fiction and invites the reader to participate lightheartedly in his reflections on his life or inquiry he makes into it

... It has always seemed to me, in the novels that I've read now and then, that those authors are asking great deal of their readers, who start their stories furiously, in the middle of things, rather than backing or sliding slowly into them. Such a plunge into someone else's life and world, like a plunge into the Choptank River in Mid March, has, seems to me, little of pleasure in it. No, come along with me, reader, don't fear for weak heart. I've one myself, and know the value of inserting first a toe, then a foot, next a leg, very slowly your lips and stomach and finally your whole self into my story, and taking a good long time to do it. This is after all, a pleasure-dip I am inviting you to, not a baptism.⁸

The reader is not simply evoked as a matter of duty but sought through out the novel as a literary companion in the act of writing the novel. Further, the continual companionship of the reader in the making of fictional art has given a fictionalizing role to the writing of a novel.

...I've got this book started now, and though we're probably a good way from the story yet, at least we're headed toward it, and I for one have learned to content myself with that. Perhaps when I've finished describing that particular day I mentioned before-I believe it was about June 21, 1937- perhaps when I reach the bed time of that day, if ever, I'll come back and destroy these pages of piano-tuning⁹

Todd writes self-consciously and Barth definitely intends him to do so. Modernism posited impersonality of the writer, writing and of the readership as well. The artistic impersonality foregrounded values based on art and life. Since, as Todd would say, nothing has intrinsic value, the writer, the writing and the reader have to partake an existentiality which exhausts in itself and leaves nothing beyond itself. The human experience doesn't have to be related to anything-no signifier to the signified. Literary experience is a continual process of signification. There is no closure, thematic or artistic. The process of signification is simultaneous to the writer and the

reader. The modern writer and the reader are unchained by the erosion of the novelistic closure. Maurice Couturie writes:

The novelist must unburden himself of the "original curse" under which he is laboring-writing and the printing press- that have imposed a giddy distance between author and the reader and fostered the development of countless counterfeit stand-ins: the narrator, the narratee, the implied, the ideal reader, the implied author... The truly modern novelist, from Joyce to Kafka, Beckett Nabakov, Pynchon, and Barth passionately struggles to annul these print born fictions, while seemingly creating more and more of them. By saturating the reader's imagination with endless plot lines, multilayered texts, some of them belonging to previous books, these novelists break the linearity and the closure of the story.¹⁰

Mauric Couturie writes:

Print gradually produced the illusion that the linear and closed story was the ideal representation of reality, that it was reality that made the text. Such contemporary novelists as John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, or Nabokov explode this myth and to show that text is a text is a text and not a reflection of anything else¹¹

The multiplicity of the author, narrator and the reader and the dualities of the text postmodernize the novelistic craft: The intertextual connotations make *The Floating Opera* a recurring tale in a postmodern narrative. First, there is the "autopsy" of modern novel when the narrator questions the form, "beginning in the middle of things" The narrative of the novel becomes an intertext or a critique of a modern novel. The love triangle in the novel becomes a repetition of their love triangle in Virginia Wolf's *Mrs.Dalloway*. Todd, like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, wants to develop an occult communication with his father. The significance of a single day in the life of the protagonist takes us back to James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs.Dalloway*.

5.7 SUMMING UP

If we were to ask what is *The Floating Opera* in terms of the intellectual and literary currents of 20 the century, the answer is -- *The Floating Opera* is a modern novel with a tremendous postmodern reach. Even much of the postmodernity of the novel reflects the restless modern spirit to contemporarize itself both intellectually and artistically. Intensely modern in upholding the primacy of literary art in understanding the human situation. *The Floating Opera*, nonetheless, initiates authorial presence, diluting his textual absence, self-conscious, tentative, multivocal and reader centric writing *The Floating opera* is truly a turning point in the history of the American novel.

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5.9 KEY WORDS

Postmodern:

A broad term to explain the intellectual temper in the west since the Second World War. On the one hand, postmodernism reflects disillusionment with modernist self-consciousness and its realist/naturalist perspectives and, on the other hand, it runs through several contemporary ideas like self-conscious and tentative art, poststructuralism, Deconstruction reader response, reader-response studies and New Historicism. The most important difference between from modernism to postmodernism is the shift of focus from the primacy of human mind to the primacy of the human person.

5.10. QUESTIONS

1. Briefly discuss the philosophic formulations underlying *The Floating Opera*.
2. Decline of the modernist literary values explains the postmodern novel. Discuss.
3. Discuss how *The Floating opera* presents a response to what John Barth calls *The Literature of Exhaustion*.
4. Discuss the broad features of the postmodern narrative.

5.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Maurice Couturier . "From Displacement to Compactness: John Barth's *The Floating Opera*" *Critique* 33,1,1991 pp 3-20. Discusses *The Floating Opera* as a postmodern novel.
2. Thomas LeClair. "John Barth's *The Floating opera*: Death and the craft of fiction" *Texas Quarterly* 14,1972 pp713-30. Discusses *The Floating Opera* as a postmodern narrative.

BLOCK CONCLUSION

As you have gone through these units scanning the history of 20th century American novel up to the late fifties and examining Barth's novel, *The Floating opera* from several perspectives, you would have seen the essential nature of the Postsecond world war American novel which defines the contemporary American novel as on to day. Barth's first novel defines the genre of American novel in the second part of the 20th century. Like *The Floating opera*, the genre continues to be experimental seeking both ideational and artistic innovation. The novel does not present life's positive struggles as its counterpart did in the first part of the decade. It presents a cynical and, evens a nihilistic, view of life. In a way, what is presented is a reversal of modernity, its intellectuality, positivism, morality and aesthetics, not so much by way of rejecting modernity but by way of postmodernization, an attempt to go beyond modernist values.

More importantly, for the craft of fiction, *The Floating opera* introduces dynamism in the art of writing a novel. Gone are the days when writing a novel was a discipline. So also was reading a novel. Writing the novel is writing anything. So also reading a novel. One could go about both the tasks as one goes about any other task in life. In fact, life itself does not exist as a concept. It is living. Writing and reading are just like living.

Still more important, *The Floating Opera* introduces another feature of contemporary novel - The impersonality of the writer and the writing along with the authenticity of what is written is dispensed with. The writer and the writing are multivocal and not amenable to any singular perception.

Lastly, *The Floating Opera* brings in a sense of the reader. Contemporary novel is not the singular effort of the writer, it is written along with a sense of a companionship with the reader. The possible reader response, not any Muse, inspires the reader.

The Floating Opera will help you to understand the essential rhythms of contemporary American fiction Good Luck!



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MEG-11
AMERICAN NOVEL

Block

8

SCOTT MOMADAY : *A HOUSE MADE OF DAWN*

Block Introduction

UNIT 1

Native American Literature **5**

UNIT 2

Native American Fiction **11**

UNIT 3

The Making of Momaday **19**

UNIT 4

House Made of Dawn: An Analysis **26**

UNIT 5

Critical Perspectives **34**

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

This block of five units will introduce you to Native American literature and specifically to Momaday's prize-winning novel, *House Made of Dawn*. It may be useful for you to know that Native American literature is included, perhaps for the first time, in the M.A. syllabus by IGNOU. No other university in India, to my knowledge, has a text by a Native American author on its M.A. (English) course. Even in the United States, Native American literature was taught at the university level from the early 70s only. So you have a rare opportunity to study a work of literature produced by an inheritor of one of the most ancient cultures in the world. Your study of Momaday's novel and the following five units in this course will, I hope, stimulate further study of Native American literature, explore its riches and enjoy its beauties.

I have used the term, "Native American", to refer to the aboriginal people of the United States. They were also called Red Indians, American Indians or Amerindians earlier. Curiously, the native people were not aware of these descriptive terms. They had only heard the term, "Indians", without any qualification.

Let us now take a bird's eye view of native American literature and then proceed to a detailed discussion of Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*.

UNIT 1 NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Origins of Native American Literature
 - 1.2.1 Oral Literature
 - 1.2.2 Themes of Oral Literature
 - 1.2.3 Genres of Oral Literature
- 1.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.4 Questions
- 1.5 Suggested Readings

1.0 OBJECTIVES

I shall discuss the variety, diversity and richness of Native American cultures and literature in this unit. The innumerable tribes, their languages, the genres of their oral literature will figure in this introductory unit. I shall also give you samples of Native American literature to provide you some idea of the cultures, concerns and literary skills of these peoples.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

America, both North and South, was inhabited by native tribes for thousands of years before the Europeans colonized the continent in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It is estimated that there were five million natives in what is now the United States when the Europeans came. The American Indians are believed to have migrated from Asia over a land bridge (now submerged) near Alaska about 28,000 years ago. They spread far and wide over many parts of North and South America and the adjacent islands. The Indians represented a broad spectrum of cultures. Some of them were small groups dependent on agriculture; at the other end of the cultural spectrum were the great civilizations of Mexico and Peru. These had well-developed economic and political structures, art-forms and advanced technologies.

The Indians built cities by the beginning of the Christian era. They grew corn, potato, and another plants. They account for half the food supply of the world now. In astronomy, mathematics and related disciplines, the Mayas were more advanced than the Europeans. It is significant that their great achievements were their own and did not receive any help from outside. Some of the great Indian civilizations which flourished were Olmec (in Southwest Mexico) from 1500 B.C. to 300 A.D., Maya (in Yucatan peninsula) from 1000 B.C. to 1517 A.D. (the arrival of the Spanish); Zapotec (in Mount Alban Oaxaca) from 600 B.C. to 900 A.D. and Teotihuacan (in the valley of Mexico) from 200 B.C. to 600 A.D. The Aztecs controlled the land from the Pacific to the Atlantic for three centuries until they were defeated by the Spanish in 1521.

The Indian tribes maintained their tribal identities as Cherokees, Apaches, Hopis and so on; they had not thought of all the tribes as Indians. The linguistic and cultural diversities among the tribes were many. The Algonquian of the North East, the Sioux of the Plains, the Pueblos of the Southwest have different histories, religions, cultures and languages.

Among the Indians living in America there were between one thousand to two thousand languages and as many cultures. However, at the time of the European contact, there were some three hundred cultural groups who spoke over two hundred languages. These were further reduced to about 150 by the middle of the twentieth century. These surviving languages have been classified into forty-two language families. Some of the Indian languages such as Olmec, Maya and Zapotec developed their own writing systems. They used ideographic glyphs comparable to ancient Egyptian and Chinese writing systems. The Mayas produced paper books known as codices which can be folded like a screen. The largest of these codices is called the Madrid codex which measured 23 feet with 56 leaves; each leaf was 9" x 5". We shall discuss later how highly the Indians regarded the word. Speech for them was as vital as breath.

1.2 ORIGINS OF NATIVE AMERICAN LITERATURE

The European settlers wrongly assumed that American literature started with them in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. It started and flourished many centuries, perhaps millenia, before the European arrival. N. Scott Momaday stated the position correctly: "American literature begins with the first human perception of the American landscape expressed and preserved in language". The history of Native American literatures reflects the tribal cultures and the experience and imagination of its authors. It also tells us something about relations between the Indian tribes and the whites.

1.2.1 Oral Literature

Given the long history of Native Americans, oral literature in several forms was dominant in many cultures. The oral tradition influenced even the written works which came later. The central belief of Native Americans, to whichever tribe they belonged, was the need to live in harmony with the physical and spiritual universe. In their understanding, breath, speech and verbal art (songs, oratory, etc) are closely connected. In fact, in many cultures these three are often signified by the same word. For instance, in Navajo culture, the emergence myth shows that in the beginning there were the word and the thing, the symbol and the object. For the Navajos, "symbol is word, and word is means by which substance is organized and transformed". The inter-relation among knowledge, thought and speech in Navajo culture is expressed in their "Beginning of the Earth Song".

The earth will be, from ancient
times with me there is knowledge of it.
The mountains will be, from ancient
times with me there is knowledge of it.
[and so on mentioning other things to be]

The earth will be, from the very
beginning I have thought it.
The mountains will be, from the very
beginning I have thought it.
[and so on]

The earth will be, from ancient times
I speak it.
The mountains will be, from ancient times
I speak it.
[and so on]

-(Qtd. by Ruoff p.6)

The songs which are sung at their magic rituals direct the thought which is the source of generative power. The native Americans had great reverence for the word because they believed in the symbolic power of the word to change the world for better or worse. Even silence has its own power. Silence is described as the sanctuary of sound. "Words are wholly alive in the hold of silence; there they are sacred". The following Yokut's prayer illustrates the power of the word to help a person to adapt to the universe:

My words are tied in one
With the great mountains,
With the great rocks,
With the great trees,
In one with my body
And my heart.
Do you all help me
With supernatural power,
And you, Day
And you, Night!
All of you see me
One with this world!

(Qtd. by Ruoff pp.7-8)

1.2.2 Themes of Oral Literature

Let us now consider some of the important and recurrent themes in the oral literatures of the native Americans. These literatures voice a strong desire for harmony which is related to their deep reverence for land. In his *The Way to Rainy Mountain*, Momaday says: "Once in his life a man ought to concentrate his mind upon the remembered earth, I believe. He ought to give himself up to a particular landscape in his experience, to look at it from as many angles as he can, to wonder about it, to dwell upon it". The native American literatures, both oral and written, stress directionality and circularity frequently. The numeral *four* is a sacred number in the native American mythology. The directions, seasons, stages of human life are counted as four in each category. This sacred number recurs in the content and form of literatures. Multiples of four are also frequent. Number six representing the four main directions and above and below the earth are also common. The circle is another recurring symbol in native literatures. It symbolises the sun and the earth. Human life is seen as cyclical. The circle is important in tribal ceremonies and dances. The mythic culture heroes and heroines who leave the tribe come back after many trials and adventures, thus completing a circular journey. Yet another recurring theme in native American literature is the strong fellow-feeling and helpfulness. The sense of solidarity with the community and with the land may be noticed in the following Keres song:

I add my breath to your breath
That our days may be long on the Earth
That the days of our people may be long
That we may be one person
That we may finish our roads together
May our mother bless you with life
May our life paths be fulfilled.

(Qtd. By Ruoff on p.11)

The native's realization of the importance of harmony is seen in their literary composition. Age and experience are respected and valued. An Ojibwa (an Indian tribe) writer, George Copway says, "if you reverence the aged many will be glad to hear of your name". Apart from these themes which are common to the literatures of many Indian tribes, there are a few which are specific to certain tribes. For instance, the Hopis stress hard work; the Navajos who are nomads stress movement.

American literature reflects the mythology and past history as well as the experiences of the present. For instance, there is considerable improvisation each time a performer begins an Iroquois ritual. He does not repeat what he had memorized, but composes afresh on each occasion. The oral literatures are held sacred by the tribes and outsiders are not allowed access to them. In the performance of American Indian verbal arts, audience participation is very important since the audience is bound to the performer.

1.2.3 Genres of Oral Literature

American Indian oral literature uses many genres. The most popular is perhaps *ritual drama* in which chants, ceremonies, and ritual play a part. Words are endowed with occult power; they are the key to the idea of a song, the sacred language used during these rituals is not understood by the common people. It is meant for communication among medicine men and their helpers only. In certain tribes like the Sioux, common words are transformed into sacred vocabulary by certain linguistic processes like affixation, reduplication, inversion and the use of a variety of stylistic features. The ritual dramas are performed by priests, singers, shamans and special groups. Priests are found among planters and medicine men; they don't need inspiration to perform. Shamans are found among hunter gatherers. They perform spirit flight, find lost souls, cure illness and foretell future events.

A second form of oral literature is song. In fact, it is the largest part of the oral literature. Songs are the greatest pleasure for Ojibwas. For them, every phase of life is expressed in music. Songs are so much a part of their daily life that "if an Indian visits another reservation one of the first questions asked on his return is: "What new songs did you learn?" for the Papago tribe, a song is "magic which calls upon the powers of Nature and constrains them to man's will". For the Navajo, a song is a form of prayer. The songs may be composed by individuals or by a group. The songs may be religious, ceremonial, social, secular, recreational or occasional, or combinations of these elements. Repetition, enumeration and incremental development are among the technical features of the songs. The Tewa prayer given below shows incremental development of the metaphor of the sky loom:

Song of the Sky Loom

Oh our Mother the Earth, Oh our Father the Sky
Your children are we, and with tired backs
We bring you the gifts that you love.
Then weave for us the garment of brightness;
May the warp be the white light of the morning,
May the weft be the red light of the evening,
May the fringes be the falling rain,
May the border be the standing rainbow.
Thus weave for us a garment of brightness
Thus weave for us a garment of brightness

That we may walk fittingly where grass is green.
Oh our Mother the Earth, oh our Father the sky

(Qtd. by Ruoff p.30)

The songs celebrate major events in human life, birth or naming, arrival of puberty, healing, death and burial. Songs are also part of the fertility rites which ensure survival of the group. There are personal lyrics like the wind songs of the Kiowas. (Momaday was a Kiowa). These wind songs are actually war songs which describe loneliness and longing on the vast open prairies where only "the sweep of the wind broke the silence". The personal lyrics also include lullabies, women's work songs, hunting songs and elegies.

Yet another genre of the oral literature is narrative. These are of three types:

- i) true and fictional
- ii) sacred and non-sacred
- iii) combination of (i) and (ii)

These narratives emphasize external behaviour. The characters are one dimensional and they rarely express thought or emotion. The settings are simple, and the style terse. The narratives are compressed and episodic. There are inconsistencies of time, logic and detail.

The narratives in Papago, for instance, have a neat structure: introduction, one or more episodes, and conclusion. In the introduction, the time, place (setting) and participants in harmony are presented. Each episode which follows will have a thesis such as disruption of harmony and antithesis which describes measures taken to overcome the disharmony. The conclusion describes the restored harmony.

The common themes of the narratives are the creation of the world, origins and migration of the tribe and adventures of culture heroes. The emergence myths describe the "ascent of beings from under the surface of the earth to its surface and their subsequent settlement or migration". There are variations on the theme of the creation myth in different cultures. In the southwest, the native myths depict the formation of the world through struggle and robbery; in the northwest, the Iroquoians believed that the world was created by a fall from the sky world to the water world.

There are a number of stories about culture heroes who are of divine origin. Their father is usually the sun, wind or stone and mother a lesser being. The culture hero has extraordinary powers to change various aspects of nature into their final shapes; he can also transform beings into animals or humans. The culture hero is superior to all; he is cunning; he is a trickster. He stole fire. The trickster transformer is a male in many tribes; he could be a female as in the Hopi tribe.

Another oral form of native literature is *oratory*. This could be of three types (i) ceremonial, (ii) non-ceremonial, (iii) a combination of (i) and (ii). Oratory is used for settling political and legal questions. In ritual oratory, the hero's journey from one place to another is described. There are speeches for initiation ceremonies. Among non-ceremonial speeches may be mentioned council meetings, welcome addresses and exhortation to warriors. Protest speeches against white invaders call for solidarity of the Indians.

Autobiography is another, popular genre in Indian literature, oral and written. The first autobiography was that of a Pequot, William Apes, and it is entitled *A Son of the Forest* (1829). George Copway set a trend with his autobiography, *Life, History and Travels of Kah-ge-gah-bow-h* (1847). He is an Ojibwa who presents Indian family life to counteract the negative image of savagery. He blends myth, history and personal experience and uses an oratorical style. Charles Eastmen (Ohiyesa), an Indian doctor, moved from nomadic tribal life to sophisticated homes and institutions in the United States and England. He interacted with Matthew Arnold, H.W. Longfellow, R.W. Emerson and Theodore Roosevelt. He narrates his experiences in his life story, *From the Deep Woods to Civilization* (1916). John Joseph Matthews (Osage) was inspired by Henry David Thoreau. His autobiography *Talking to the Moon* (1945) is structured on Osage names and individual months. N.Scott Momaday's (Kiowa) *Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) is a sophisticated account of Kiowas' origin and migration to Oklahoma. It depicts a quest for tribal roots. Three chapters in this book deal with the emergence, ascendance and decline of Kiowa culture. The author uses myth, history and personal experience. The book pays tribute to tribal, family and personal memory and emphasizes the inevitability of change and loss. Momaday uses a poetic style. His *The Names* (1976) is also an autobiographical narrative in which he uses the stream of consciousness technique. He believes that individuals are shaped by the location they inhabit.

Native American literatures have a rich and varied tradition. They dealt with the principal concerns of their tribes, origin and migration of the tribes, the relationship of the tribe to the land and to the community. Oral literature flourished for millennia among the Indian tribes.

1.3 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, I attempted to introduce ancient American Indian literature, its traditions, themes, genres and techniques. It was a predominantly oral literature celebrating the life, beliefs, aspirations, successes and frustrations of the Indians over many millennia. American Indian literature existed and flourished long before the Europeans colonized America.

1.4 QUESTIONS

1. Write a note on the Indian cultures before the European contact.
2. What are the major themes in the Indian literatures? Briefly discuss them.
3. Discuss with appropriate illustrations the main genres used in oral literatures by the Indian tribes.
4. Describe the several prose forms in Indian literatures.

1.5 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. *Encyclopedia Americana*, Article on "American Indians", vol.15.
2. Ruoff, A. LaVonne Brown. *American Indian Literatures: An Introduction, Bibliographic Review and Selected Bibliography*; New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1990.
3. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* (Macropedia) Article on "Native American Peoples". Vol.13 Fifteenth Edition, 1997.
4. Velic, Alan R. *American Indian Literature: An Anthology*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979.
5. Wiget, Andrew. *Native American Literature*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985.

UNIT 2 NATIVE AMERICAN FICTION

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 The Beginnings
- 2.3 Fiction in Early Twentieth Century
- 2.4 Recent Fiction
- 2.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.6 Questions
- 2.7 Suggested Readings

2.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, I wish to trace the main contours of Native American fiction. I shall discuss the work of the prominent novelists and their contribution to the American Indian fiction. Such a background will provide a proper perspective for the appreciation of Momaday's work which I will examine in the next three units.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The oral tradition of Native American literatures continues even to this day. It is modified and adapted to suit changing conditions. The growth of written literature in Indian cultures has impacted beneficially on oral literatures. Written creative work supplements, but it does not supplant, the rich and resilient oral traditions of American Indian literature.

We noticed in Unit I that prose narratives like autobiographies are popular among the Indians; we also observed that several of the successful autobiographies were skillful blends of myth, history and personal experiences. With the use of prose for generations, it is only natural for American Indian writers to attempt prose fiction for self expression.

2.2 THE BEGINNINGS

It is believed that Elias Boudinot's (Cherokee) small book, *Poor Sarah, or Religion Exemplified in the Life and Death of an Indian Woman*, which was published in 1823 was the first book of fiction by a native American. In this book, a white woman describes through a series of sketches her relationship to a poor Indian woman, Sarah. The faith of Sarah makes the sophisticated narrator feel embarrassed. Boudinot may have had a dual purpose in writing this fiction. He may have wanted to show that Indians like Sarah can be educated and converted to Christianity. He may have wished to teach a lesson to the New Englanders who thought that they were superior to Indians. Perhaps Boudinot's book is not strictly a work of fiction because its religious tone is rather obtrusive. However, John Rollin Ridge's *Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta* (1854) may be taken as a novel meant for entertainment. It is a story of revenge of a Mexican who was ill-treated and deceived by the Anglos. His farm was taken away by force, his wife was raped before him and his half-brother was killed on an unsubstantiated charge of stealing horses. He takes to a career of

crime including robberies and murders. The novel is formless, but it became popular because of the desperado's daring acts. Joaquin Muriet became a folk-hero in California.

Alex Posey of the Creek Nation added the dimension of humour to a series of letters supposedly written by a fictitious man called Fus Fixico. The Creek Nation was expecting statehood for Indian Territory. Fixico exposes the manipulative politics of the government. He puns on the names of those involved to show the seamy side of their character. Thus, Stewart becomes Stew it, Robert Owen is Rob It Owing, Hitchcock is It's Cocked and Roosevelt is Rooster Feather.

Charles Eastman, a Sioux doctor, whom I mentioned in Unit I in connection with his autobiography was also a short story writer. Some of these are animal fables. For instance, "The Great Cat's Nursery", presents the story through the point of view of a puma mother who sacrifices her life for her cub. The theme of the relationship of knowledge, respect and communication between the hunter and his quarry is dramatized in the story, "The Grey Chieftain". Another writer of stories, Zitkala-sa (Red Bird) deals with problems of acculturation of the natives in a white society. What the natives are when they are at home, and their age-old beliefs and customs are ridiculed and discouraged in the mission schools. The conflict arising out of two faiths, tribal and Christian, in conflict is vividly brought out by Zitkala-sa in her story, "The Soft-hearted Sioux".

Simon Pokagon's *Queen of the Woods* (1899) is autobiographical and apocalyptic. Pokagon had the distinction of meeting President Abraham Lincoln to negotiate a higher price for the sale of the land which later became Chicago. He was known as the "best-educated full-blooded Indian of his time" and as the Indian Longfellow. In his novel which was published posthumously, the hero, Simon, sees Lonidaw with a white deer wearing a multi-coloured wreath. She is the future "queen of the woods". Lonidaw falls in love with Simon, but the white deer pines away. Simon and Lonidaw marry and raise two children, Olondaw and Hazeleye. The boy is sent away to school although his mother had a premonition. She dreams of a snake which eats two small robins one of which is changed to Olondaw. Dream becomes reality as Olondaw returns home an alcoholic and dies soon. As for the daughter, Hazeleye, her canoe overturns after a drunken fisherman's boat hits it. The mother jumps in to save her, but in vain. Lonidaw contracts pneumonia and dies later. Simon promises his wife to fight for temperance. There is an apocalyptic vision of King Alcohol, robed in America's stars and stripes; snakes and ravens come out and stalk the land, parodying a popular painting of the period, *American Progress*, by John Gast. The destruction of the Indians is complete when they perish on account of spontaneous combustion. The earlier sections of the novel are idyllic and the final section, apocalyptic. Pokagon's aim is great, but he is unequal to the task of realizing it in convincing fictional terms. He uses a number of symbols and motifs to reinforce his meaning: the snake, the white deer, the drunken fisherman, etc. There is also an undercurrent of irony in this tragic story.

Thus the foundation for the growth and development of prose fiction authored by Native American writers was laid in the nineteenth century.

2.3 FICTION IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

The twentieth century produced Native American novelists with greater sophistication in the selection and handling of their themes. Hum-ishu-ma (Mourning Dove) is of mixed Irish and Indian parentage. Her novel, *Cogewea, the Half-Blood* (1927) depicts the fortunes of Cogewea. Cogewea is brought up by her Indian grand mother as her Irish father went to Alaska, leaving her behind. The girl returns from an Indian school and starts working for John Carter, her brother-in-law, on his Idaho

ranch. Two young men, Jim LaGrinder (another halfblood) and Alfred Densmore, an easterner, are attracted to her. During the summer, the grand mother and her younger sister join the girl on the ranch. They advise her against any liaison with Densmore. As it turns out, he has a fiancée in the east and is wooing Cogewea with an eye on her property. Cogewea disregards the advice of her grand mother and elopes with Densmore. He finds out soon that she is not wealthy, robs her of whatever money she had with her and runs away. This experience with a white man is a bitter lesson for Cogewea. She then responds to Jim LaGrinder's affection and marries him. Fortune smiles on her as she gets a large amount of money through her father's gold prospecting. This was possible because of a legal lacuna in her father's will.

The characters are all types fitting into a romance which was popular in the first few decades of the twentieth century. This is the first novel written by a woman which provides sidelights on relations between the natives and the whites and on their sexual morality

John Milton Oskison, a Cherokee Indian fiction writer, published both short stories and novels. The Indian Territory is the setting for his novels. *Wild Harvest* (1925) is another frontier romance. The principal characters are Tom Winger and Nan Forest. Rival suitors, seduction and crime complicate the plot of this novel. Indian characters have a marginal role. Oskison's second novel, *Black Jack Davey* (1926) deals with the romance of Davey Dawes and Mary Keene. Dawes and other white men settle on allotted land in Oklahoma, but they are resisted by Jerry Boyd who marries a Cherokee woman so that he can own the land in his wife's name. Boyd is killed in the end. The Depression of the 30s provided the subject matter for the next novel, *Brothers Three* (1935). The three Odell brothers have Cherokee blood in them: they grow up on their father's ranch in Indian Territory. The eldest of the three, Timmy, becomes a businessman in a small town. Roger, the second brother, mismanages cattle business, loses heavily in mining industry and becomes a drunkard. He is paralysed after a road accident. The third brother, Henry, becomes a writer in New York. Initially he recovers his brother's losses on the stock market, but loses everything in the Great Crash of 1929. The part-Cherokee wife, May persuades the family to get back to their traditional land and work hard to re-build their fortunes. Thus, loyalty to land and to the native's moorings hold hope of recovery and survival for the Odells.

John Joseph Mathews (Osage) has had a distinguished academic career before he published his novel, *Sundown* (1934). The novel is set in Osage country at the end of the nineteenth century. That was a time when oil business raked in huge profits. That was also a period during which the full-blood Osages and the mixed-blood Osages were drifting apart. Mathews was conscious of his own mixed-blood. Chal Windzer, the hero of *Sundown*, is born of a progressive father and a full-blood mother who is attracted to the land and distrusted the whites. Chal seeks the approval of girls even though he does not like them; he envies the full-blood boys although they bully him now and then.

Education is an important shaping force in Chal's life. An eastern teacher who taught him at reservation school, wants to make sure that Indians as described by Fenimore Cooper in his novels do not exist in contemporary America. He enrolls in college along with two of his full-blood friends, Running Elk and Sun-On His Wings. They are all admitted because of their football power's. Chal's two friends cannot reconcile themselves to the patronizing attitudes and demands for conformity at the college. So they go back to the reservation. Chal also wants to be accepted even by those whom he hates because of their hypocrisy. He is humiliated at college, but he hides his anger under a smile; later he transfers his pent-up anger to the quarter back (in football). When Chal stands behind the other player he feels like slashing off his neck. When his friend, the full-blood Running Elk, resists punishment, Chal compares him to a noble buffalo, opposing a pack of wolves. While Chal admires the integrity of his companion, he feels ashamed of his own meek submission to paddling. When his two friends leave the college, he is in a way happy because the others can no longer

accuse him of keeping the company of such "backward" people. The full-blood Indians stubbornly refuse to join the world of the white man: Chal is sorry for them. At the same time he hates himself for not being a true Indian who can give vent to his desire to run, to strip down, to dance, to swim or to sing at the highest pitch.

Because of his inner conflicts and ambivalence, Chal fails to build mature relationships. At college he meets the college queen, Blossom Daubeny. He dreams of transforming himself into a successful business man or an "elegant man of the world" and get rid of his Osage inheritance. As he goes to sleep, he wishes that "I didn't have a God damn drop of Indian blood in me". During World War I, he joins the Army Air Corps; he meets a married white woman, Julia Kerry, who mistakes him for a Spaniard. Chal is a changed man after the war; he has no motivation and is indolent. He feels like a stranger among traditionalists and in the small town. He is not interested in material prosperity. The novelist depicts the rise of indolence and vice as a consequence of the oil boom in Osage country in the second half of the novel. This is symbolically presented through the ebb and flow of derricks over the prairies. On his father's death, Chal inherits \$25,000; he moves to Oklahoma. He has neither the need nor the inclination to work now. Occasionally his conscience is pricked because he has traveled too far from his tribe. But his attitude does not change. The first intimations of his metamorphosis flash on his mind's eye when he listens to Watching Eagle's speech on the consequences of following the white American's way of life. At this speech the murder of Running Elk is announced. The full-blood Osage had become a drug addict and an alcoholic. Chal is troubled by the import of the speech and the impact of the murder. He drives his car at high speed, stops in a field, and asserts his independence by dancing. He realizes that he is a glorious male.... a brother to the wind, the lightning and the forces that came out of the earth".

The collapse of the oil boom brings in its wake a trail of misery including suicides and murders. Roan Horse tells the Senate's investigating committee that it was late by a quarter of century. Chal feels Roan Horse is the champion of the Osages. On his return home his mother questions Chal about his return home, his mother questions Chal about his future plans. He says that he will become an orator and go to Harvard Law School. The mere thought of it reassures him.

Chal may not have changed in a fundamental sense after a turbulent life. He is impressed by two speeches, that of Watching Eagle and of Roan Horse. These speeches articulate in a succinct manner Chal's own experiences and strong emotions. His experience, he comes to realize, is but one episode in the long history of the Osages. That something significant had occurred to their small world is a valuable insight he gains and gets it confirmed in the speeches of Watching Eagle and Roan Horse.

Sundown deals with the delicate issue of race relations between the Indians and the whites, the humiliations and aspirations of the Indians, the misery caused to the Indians by abandoning their land, people and mores, and by running after the alluring but false models of progress and success. Chal Widzer is a stereotype of a man, who is "caught between two worlds" one fading, the other moving forward menacingly.

The next novelist of importance among the Indians is D'Arcy McNickle. He was an administrator, historian, and an anthropologist. He believed in the multiplicity of tribal cultures and was against assimilation. *The Surrounded* (1936) is the story of Archilde Leon, who returns from school in Oregon to his Flathead reservation. The reservation is located in a valley known as *Sniel-emen*. This Indian expression means "mountains of the surrounded". The natives are surrounded and destroyed there. The novel brings out clearly the sense of entrapment felt by the Indians in the midst of alien laws, religion and exploitation by the whites. The Indians are constantly under watch so no one can escape the ring of oppression.

With the advantage of education and interaction with "Progressive" elements, Archilde Leon, the central figure in the novel, is expected to break the vicious circle. His father, Max Leon, has high hopes for him. But the Jesuit, Fr. Grepilleux, likens Archilde to Big Paul who was killed when he attempted to bring the Indians and whites together. The priest feels that education and Christianity have replaced the old world of the Indians. He hopes the boy might be the "promise of a new day". Archilde's father and the priest are cut off from the harsh realities of life on the reservation. He is disturbed by the agony of his tribe.

The alienation and agony of the son are paralleled in his mother's life. Catherine Running Wolf, becomes a convert to Christianity and earns the nick-name, "Faithful Catherine" because of her devotion. Her marriage to Max Leon shattered her life because the culture of the white men was different. The whites changed their place of residence; they lived by the clock; they turned away relatives. The white man's way of life and value-system are very different from the Indian's. As the wife and husband drift apart, she implicates Max Leon in a cattle-rustling scheme. She withdraws into her traditional life and he lives apart following his own customs. They communicate through intermediaries.

Catherine persuades her son, Archilde, to take her for hunting on the mountains. There they find Louis who has killed a doe. A game warden shoots Louis while trying to arrest him for poaching. Catherine who could not control her pent-up anger throws a hatchet into the game warden's skull. It is an unpardonable sin for a woman reputed to be "Faithful Catherine". She abandons Christianity as she feels that she is segregated in a heaven inhabited by whites exclusively. She refuses the services of a priest.

Archilde takes upon himself the murderous actions of his mother. He escapes with Elise LaRose, an attractive and assertive boarding school runaway. He takes Louis's boys also with him. Sheriff Quigley attempts to arrest them. Elise shoots him, but the Indian Agent arrests them and handcuffs them.

Most of the characters in this novel feel ensnared; they are victimized by the system which they perpetuate. The Indians are not alone in being entrapped. Archilde's father, Max Leon, realizes the utter folly of the actions of the white Christians when he says: "people are freezing to death in those shacks by the church. They don't know why; they had nothing to do with it. You [Moser the trader] and me and father Grepilloux were the ones brought it on. For what good?"

Modern education which was expected to assimilate the two cultures, tribal and white, widened the chasm between them. It also alienated the Indians from their own communities, after such an education, Archilde returns home only to hate the changeless character of the place. Louis, after his schooling, becomes brutal and disrespectful of the elders and hates authority.

The entrapped Indians find a sort of inner peace and strength when they return to their tribal values. Modeste the elder impresses upon Archilde and others the importance of traditional values. Archilde's faith in his people is recovered because "he had really seen it happen". When they dance on July 4, they do so with dignity and refuse to be burdened by circumstance. Catherine's "repaganization" is exemplified in the secular dance on Independence Day. The conclusion of the novel is not exactly on a hopeful note. Archilde, through his education, is rendered a misfit in his tribal culture. Education gave him an alien perspective which does not brook total surrender which a pagan religion sternly demands.

2.4 RECENT FICTION

Among contemporary Indian novelists Leslie Marmon Silko occupies an honoured place. Her novel *Ceremony* (1977) is about a veteran of World War II. Tayo enlisted in the war with his cousin Rocky; they were raised together. The family expected

much from Rocky. So Tayo was particularly concerned about Rocky's safety and welfare. Unfortunately, Rocky died in Tayo's arms while being sent to a Japanese POW camp. The jungle rain was a nuisance to Tayo. On his demobilization, Tayo returns to his tribe of Laguna Pueblo after active service in the Pacific. Before coming home, he spends sometime in a veterans' hospital in California. He suffers from the burden of war guilt.

On his return, he finds his land hit by drought; he blames himself for it. His uncle Josiah to whom he entrusted a new herd of Mexican spotted cattle had died when he was on combat duty. In his younger days, his Christian aunt taunted him for his mixed blood and for his mother's promiscuous life.

The horrifying experience of the war alienates him from his land, his family, his tribe and his culture. His aunt's Christianity rubs salt into his wounds. Christianity "separated people from themselves; it tried to crush the single clan name, encouraging each person to stand alone, because Jesus Christ would save only the individual soul". Teachers teach girls to dress like the white girls. The science teachers talk of science as offering rational explanations to drive away superstitions. The war climaxing in atomic annihilation convinces Tayo that the white world is difficult for the tribal people to understand. His past is of no use to him. His memories are tangled. He experiences a strange physical dissociation from everything around him. He is shattered physically, emotionally and psychologically. The elders tell him that it takes only "one person to tear away the delicate strands of the web, spilling the rays of the sun, and the fragile world will be injured". A ceremony to reintegrate the broken shreds of Tayo's self is required. His identity could be re-established by imposing on him once again his personal and communal history. But their own rituals do not restore Tayo to good health. The tribal leaders send him to a Navajo medicine man who adapts traditional practices to modern conditions. There is an endless mythic struggle between Witchery seeking death and nurture sustaining life.

Ceremony is a metaphor for the conflict between Tayo and Emo (a witch). Navajo ceremony which is central to Silko's plot needs myth, rites and medicines. While myth outlines the event, rites reproduce prototypical events, and medicines bring about harmony between the prototypical and the historic. The people learn the ceremonies from mythic heroes. These heroes learnt the same from the Holy people, the supernatural patrons. The roles of the patient and medicine man thus become interchangeable. Silko uses the Laguna Myths of Arrowboy and the Gambler and also the Navajo myths of Coyote transformation and Cub Boy. These diverse myths are woven into the myth of Earth Woman's flight and Hummingbird's quest to retrieve her. Betonio, the Navajo medicine man, sends Tayo on a quest for a woman, the spotted cattle, a mountain, and a constellation of stars. Pollen and water are important ingredients of traditional medicine; uranium and alcohol deal death. The Earth Woman figures, the positive forces seek rain, healing, fertility and Tayo's recovery. His restoration and purification contribute to the rejuvenation of his community and its continuance.

Silko uses a narrative structure which like her hero's consciousness is fractured and fragmented in the beginning; But through tribal healing processes and rituals it is re-integrated and becomes a coherent whole. The narrative structure of *Ceremony* reflects the transformation of Tayo's own consciousness. Silko uses the Native American myths to provide a credible structure to her narrative.

In James Welch's novel, *Winter in the Blood* (1974) there is a nameless narrator. He suffers from alienation. When he returns from a hospital after knee surgery to High Plains, where he sees lots of people, he exclaims, "Not one of them meant anything to me. And for no reason. I felt no hatred, no love, no guilt, no conscience, nothing but a distance..... The country had created a distance as deep as it was empty". Theresa, the narrator's mother, is an assimilationist and hates Indians (she is herself an Indian) and makes derisive comments. She is very assertive and claims to have killed her son's

pet duck and served him on Thanksgiving Day. His father, First Raise, is a dreamer and a wit. He froze to death in a snowdrift. The narrator's grandmother who lives with them belongs to Blackfeet tribe who are enemies of the Cree tribe. As it happens, the narrator loves a Cree girl, Agnes. Before the narrator returns from hospital, she runs away with his rifle and razor.

The narrator goes in search of Agnes in the nearby towns. He has two types of encounters on the way. A white "airplane man" seeks his help to avoid the F.B.I who are chasing him. It is full of comic incidents. The second set of encounters are with women who drag him into bed. The women remind him of all the domineering women in his life. Watching a film poster in a town, he remembers how his brother, Mose, was killed in a road accident by a speeding car.

When he returns home, he learns that his grandmother is dead. He rides his horse, Bird, to visit Yellow Calf an old Indian who tells him the story of his grandmother and how he helped her in difficult times. Young Calf is the real grandfather of the narrator. On the way back, he finds a cow stuck in a slough and dying of exhaustion. He tries to pull the cow out with his horse's help. The horse dies, the cow goes deeper in the mud, and the narrator crawls out exhausted and drenched in the rain. The story ends with the grandmother's burial and the narrator throwing the tobacco pouch into her grave. There is a thaw in the weather, heralding happier times ahead for the narrator.

Jim Loney, the central figure of Welch's second novel, *The Death of Jim Loney*, is born in a broken home. His father is a white and mother an Indian. She leaves her husband and marries another man. Loney has no love for his home or culture. His girl friend, Rhea, plays a surrogate mother and smothers him; his sister, Kate, intimidates him through sibling rivalry. Loney dreams of a dark bird hovering over him and beckoning him; he also dreams of meeting a woman in a graveyard who is looking for her lost son; Loney wants to help her. He goes hunting and shoots at his step father mistaking him for a bear in the "immense darkness" which symbolizes his own meaningless existence. He attributes his failures and depression to his mother abandoning him. As he awaits his arrest in the mountains, he yearns for a place where there are no lost sons, no mothers searching for them. "There had to be that place, but it was not on this earth". Symbolically he takes shelter in Mission Canyon a place believed by the Indians to be an entrance to the next life. When he is shot and he falls, he sees "the beating wings of a dark bird as it climbed to a distant place".

In his two novels, which display a deep love for the land and the people. He has an intimate knowledge of the complex problems of the Indians, problems which drive them to drink, depression and death.

There are other Indian novelists in the last couple of decades who strike new paths, both in themes and in forms. D'Arcy McNickle's *Wind From an Enemy Sky* focuses on water rights and sacred places. It is also a commentary on the mistaken attempts to displace tribal culture by white customs and values. The natives are more secure in their paganism. Hyemeyohsts Storm (Cheyenne) also stresses the importance of religion in the lives of Native Americans. His first novel, *Seven Arrows* (1972), deals with the decline of the Sun Dance religion and the Brotherhood of the Shields, which together unified the Plains tribes. There are several chain stories connecting the leaders of Cheyenne, Crow, and Sioux tribes. The medicine men tell stories within a larger historical framework which are allegorical. Storm attempts a complex structure in his novel.

In Gerald Vizenor's (Chippewa) *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart* (1978), Saint Louis Bearheart is a bureaucrat in the Bureau of Indian Affairs. His manuscript is discovered by a radical American Indian woman. It depicts the dark future awaiting the Indians. Because of oil shortages, the U.S. government orders felling of trees in the forests including some cedars which are sacred to the Indians. The Indian leaders, Proude and Rosina, lead their people on a journey. The group includes several types

and freaks. The novel has picaresque overtones. Many of the travellers suggest the traditional trickster. The pilgrims encounter Sir Cecil Staples who barter away their lives for the oil. Vizenor has used the themes and forms of the rich oral tradition of Native American literature. He tries to blend the picaresque element of European fiction with the emergence myth of the Native tradition.

2.5 LET US SUM UP

The Native American novelists primary concern is to articulate the trials and tribulations of their people who find it increasingly difficult to come to terms with the transformation of their life from a tribe- and family-oriented small communities to alien social and religious systems which have encroached on them and are fast obliterating their culture and traditions. The overall picture we obtain is one of the Indians being squeezed out, literally and metaphorically. American Indian fiction provides a window on this heart-rending experience of ancient people.

2.6 QUESTIONS

1. Trace the origins of Native American fiction.
2. Discuss "alienation" as a running theme in early twentieth century Indian novels.
3. What significant changes have occurred in Chal's life?
4. Discuss the theme of entrapment in *The Surrounded*.
5. Examine "Ceremony" as a central metaphor in Leslie Marmon Silko's novel: *Ceremony*.
6. Consider miscegenation as a destructive factor in tribal culture.
7. Write an essay with appropriate illustrations on race relations as depicted by Native American novelists.

2.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 3 THE MAKING OF MOMADAY

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 Education
- 3.3 Verbal Universe
- 3.4 The Significance of Land
- 3.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.6 Questions
- 3.7 Suggested Readings

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, I propose to acquaint you with several factors which contributed to the emergence of N.Scott Momaday as a writer, more specifically as a novelist. His Indian inheritance, his education, his literary mentors and models and his interest in drawing and painting are among the shaping forces which need consideration. This Unit also aims to examine Momaday's own views on a variety of topics related to literature. The background, the influences and the views will be of great help in understanding Momaday's novel, *House Made of Dawn*.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

N.Scott Momaday is an American Indian writer. Although a writer cannot completely shake himself off from his racial and cultural legacy, it is not fair to consider the work of any writer from any single perspective. Labelling a writer with ethnic or racial epithets is hardly conducive to a proper and comprehensive study of literature. Ralph Ellison has stated: "Literature is colour-blind, and it should be read and judged in a larger framework". A salutary approach to the study of Momaday's work or the work of any other literary artist is to consider the multiplicity of biographical, cultural, literary and other factors. I shall deal with as many of these as possible to ensure a fuller and better understanding of Momaday's novel.

3.2 EDUCATION

N.Scott Momaday was born on February 27, 1934 in Lawton, Oklahoma. His ancestors belonged to the Kiowa tribe. While many Indians suffered due to disease, military conquest, and deprivation of cultural and religious freedom in the nineteenth century, some managed to survive by adapting themselves to the changed situation. Momaday's grandfather took to agriculture, although it was not in the Kiowa grain. Momaday's father accepted change by getting educated. He retained his Kiowa identity and painted pictures of Kiowa life and culture. Momaday's mother, Natachee Scott was a Cherokee. She too was educated. She too was a painter and author of short stories. She learnt a good deal about the Indian culture by living among seventy different tribes for two years. Thus, both the parents of Momaday learnt to adapt themselves to the white man's culture through education while they kept their tribal ties with Kiowa and Cherokee Indians alive and active. Many other Indians are helplessly caught between two contending cultures and got confused. But Momaday could benefit by absorbing the best of both the cultures. He did not learn the Kiowa

language, but he heard the history and tales of that tribe. He also lived for seven years with his parents on the Navajo reservation. This gave him an idea of Navajo culture and language. He also spent some time at Jemez Pueblo, New Mexico, and got exposure to Pueblo Indian culture. Rio Grande Valley made a deep and lasting impression on the young boy. The grandeur and glory of the dawn and sunset made him feel "the sense that you have lived through genesis and seen into the watch works of geologic time". Momaday is witness to the vast changes taking place in Jemez in the space of a few decades. American culture and technology has transformed the Pueblo country by bringing alcoholism, juvenile delinquency, etc. Momaday observes: "Jemez is in a sense a late chapter in the history of White-Indian confrontation.... the age-old cultural conflict now centers upon the sedentary reservations of the south western United States". Such conflicts are vividly portrayed in *House Made of Dawn*. His mother foresaw the importance of education to preserve one's self from cracking-up. She insisted on her son learning English. He acquired a good command of English which stood him in good stead in his creative work. At the University of Virginia where he was a student in the faculty of law, he attended a meeting addressed by William Faulkner. He was impressed by Faulkner and wanted to write like him. He taught school on an Indian reservation for a year. During his free time he wrote and his writings attracted the attention of Yvor Winters, professor of English at Stanford University. He was awarded a fellowship for creative writing in poetry. This award changed the course of Momaday's life and career. His close association with Yvor Winters turned out to be a most rewarding experience which launched him as a creative writer. When he was at the University of New Mexico, he read D.H. Lawrence and Hart Crane; both of them left an indelible impression on him. In Crane's attempt to blend the mythic and the scientific in a poem like "The Bridge", Momaday saw a possibility for a harmonious relationship between the pastoral societies of the Indians and the technological society of America.

At Stanford University, Winters was a guide and adviser to Momaday. He taught him traditional English verse forms, post-symbolist method and the art of syllabic poetry. Winters's lectures on Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens helped Momaday in forming his literary tastes. He obtained his doctorate from Stanford in 1963 for a dissertation on Frederick Goddard Tuckerman. He taught at the University of California, Santa Barbara, for six years. During this period, he wrote his novel, *House Made of Dawn* which won the coveted Pulitzer Prize in 1969. He also taught at the University of California, Berkeley, and at Stanford University. He teamed up with the well-known photographer David Muench, to produce *Colorado*. The beautiful photographs of Colorado landscape are introduced with lyrical text by Momaday who claims affinity with the Colorado landscape: "For my ancestors were native to the highlands of the continent.... A child who is born in the mountains has them forever in his mind. They bear upon the mind like a magnet. I have seen evidence of this in my own racial experience".

From writing commentaries to photographs, he moved to drawing. This happened during the spring semester, 1974, when he taught at the University of Moscow. From sketching he graduated to painting and etching. He won awards for his paintings. He is a rare combination of the best in the Indian and the American cultures. His mentor Yvor winters has said of his prize pupil: "You are an Indian in the white man's world and are doubly isolated, but the fact gives you a remarkable point of view. But ... you are isolated by something else, and far more isolated: you are what the biologists call a mutation".

3.3 VERBAL UNIVERSE

We have seen in Unit 1 how important words are to the Native Americans who nourished a rich oral tradition for millenia. Word and breath are synonymous in the Native American imagination. Momaday subscribed to this essential tenet of his

culture. He wrote an essay, "The Man Made of Words", in which he explains his views on language which is the vital medium of a creative writer. In the context of the importance attached to words by the Native Americans and by Momaday himself it is useful, even essential, to examine Momaday's views on the verbal universe. Such an examination will enable us to understand Momaday better.

Momaday stated categorically: "we don't really begin... to exist until we convert ourselves into language". In several of his well-known works, he repeatedly makes the same point. Discovery of language, he claims in *The Names*, has enabled him to gain awareness of himself. He depicts the emergence of the Kiowas from the hollow log into the world through their naming themselves. The sixth section of *House Made of Dawn* is an essay on the results of lack of articulation. Abel, the central figure in this novel, fails to get "the right words". The final reality of existence in the Native culture is not physical, but linguistic, and this is shared by the tribe.

In Yvor Winters's words, Momaday's works are "forms of discovery". He attempts to explore his identity through his writings. In a significant statement Momaday says: "It seems to me that in a certain sense we are all made of words; that our most essential being consists in language. It is the element in which we think and dream and act, in which we live our daily lives. There is no way in which we can exist apart from the morality of a verbal dimension". He is more forthright on another occasion, "we are determined by our language; it holds the limits of our development. We cannot supercede it. We can exist within the development of language and not without. The more deeply we can become involved in language, the more fully we can exist". The two autobiographical narratives, *The Way to Rocky Mountains* and *The Names*, are his attempts at self-realization through the medium of language. In his prose works he grapples with the question, "who am I?" He seeks to reconcile his Indian heritage and contemporary American society. The Indian tradition keeps his traditions alive, and "works with in the verbal dimension". Momaday understood how language, reality and imagination are related by his research in the Kiowa oral tradition. His study of Emily Dickinson's poems gave him an insight into "the mystery and miracle of language". The power of language in promoting self-awareness may be noticed in Wallace Stevens's poems such as "Man Made of Words", and "The Idea of Order at Key West". In the first of these Stevens says:

The whole race is a poet that writes down
The eccentric propositions of its fate.

In the second poem, he says that the singer

Knew that there never was a world for her
Except the one she sang and singing made.

Momaday explains in his essay, "The Man Made of Words": "Only when he [man] is embodied in an idea, and the idea is realized in language, can man take possession of himself". He compares the creation myths in the Indian and Christian traditions. Creation through the word is a common feature of several cultures. For the Kiowa woman in *House Made of Dawn*, "words were medicine, they were magic and invisible. They came from nothing into sound and meaning". The Navajo Indians believe that "thought and speech can have a powerful impact on the world of matter and energy". This is contrary to the western view. As Gary Witherspoon puts it: "In the Navajo view of the world, language is not a mirror of reality; reality is a mirror of language". The Kiowa exists because of his name: "The name and the existence are indivisible. One has to live up to his name".

Native Indians who depend on oral literature laid great emphasis on songs, prayers, myths and legends, for giving vent to their imagination. Modern writers such as James Joyce also realized the importance of the verbal dimension. Joyce and Momaday consider human development as growing up to an awareness of language. The literary artist uses words and only words for the depiction of reality. Thus

language becomes reality. The verbal dimension assumes importance because it preserves ideas from annihilation or oblivion.

Nostalgia plays an important part in Momaday's work. The tradition of the Kiowa people on which he relies enables him to live in the presence of the past. Expressions like "blood memory" which appear frequently in his writings describe reality and provide a link to one's cultural identity.

Momaday did not know his grandfather who died two years before his birth. And yet he had heard stories about the old man. The power of language in the oral tradition is such that it is itself experience, not a narration of experience. Also, reality as presented through language is outside the Western concept of time measured by the clock. Such reality which is inseparable from the words has an immortal aspect to it.

Oral literature is living speech. When it is reduced to writing it loses its vitality. Momaday is aware of this: "when you translate the spoken to the written word, you freeze it, paralyze it. It loses something of its vitality and flexibility". In order to experience the inner vitality of a song or a story, the reader has to look upon words as events. Much of the vitality of language as a medium is lost in a passive reading of written texts. In Momaday's view, man's existence is ordered, controlled and preserved through language. The American Indians thought of language as creative and imperishable and as a vehicle for the continuance of human existence across time and space. Schubnell says that this idea is important for understanding Momaday's work in which "the dividing lines between reality and imagination, between past, present and future, and between individual and racial experience are blurred".

Momaday thinks that oral and written literatures are stages in an evolutionary process. He endeavored to blend both these. He finds support for his view in the work of great American writers like Herman Melville and Emily Dickinson: "the things which separate oral tradition and written tradition are more apparent than real, ... they can be virtually one and the same thing. That is, they can be informed by the same principles and they should be. I hope that's one of the things that will happen in time. We should be working to bring those traditions closer together than they are".

The study of oral tradition makes Momaday believe that life is a story, story is a real experience and a name is the concentration and preserver of personal being. In such a perception imagination is the ultimate form of existence. Momaday finds corroboration of his views in the work of Joyce, Proust, Dickinson, Stevens and others. He concludes: "man achieves the fullest realization of his humanity in such an art and product of the imagination as literature and here I use the term 'literature' in its broadest sense. This is admittedly a moral view of the question, but literature is itself a moral view, and it is a view of morality". These views of Momaday on the verbal dimension have special relevance because he described himself as a man made of words.

3.4 THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LAND

The American Indians' deep attachment to land is briefly mentioned in Unit 1. They think that their land supports them not only physically, but even spiritually. Their understanding of the world is shaped by the mythology and history of their homelands. In Momaday's work also landscape has an important place. The varied landscape of the regions in which Momaday lived, deserts, canyons, plains, find crucial space in his writings. We cannot underestimate the cultural significance of land in an author who belongs to the Kiowa tribe.

House Made of Dawn presents a Native view of the land. *Colorado*, the photographic essay, includes many lyrical passages which recreate ancient myths about land, water.

and mountains. Momaday believes that land shapes an individual both physically and spiritually. The people in turn, relate to their land. The Indians consider it a sacred tie. Such a relationship offers a sense of belonging. They worshipped mountains, lakes, caves, etc. They see the land as a link between innumerable generations of the tribe. Their basic attitude towards Nature is one of living in harmony with it, not conquering it. This is in stark contrast to the attitude of later European colonizers. They offered prayers and accepted the land as a spiritual site which is at once the place of origin, source of sustenance, home of gods, of culture heroes, of ancestors. What is more, it is the same land which provides for and protects future generations. Momaday interprets the relationship of the Indians with the land as "reciprocal appropriation".

Momaday draws his inspiration for his commitment to the land and environment from his ancestors, but also from the voices of protest on the plundering and pillaging of America's natural resources. Perhaps it is proper to place him among the writers who celebrate the American wilderness in their writings. He expressed the opinion: "If there is anything that distinguishes American literature from European literature, it is that [American emphasis on land]". Momaday feels that man and land cannot be separated. He says: "the Indian conceives of himself in terms of the land. His imagination of himself is also and at once an imagination of the physical world from which he proceeds and to which he returns in the journey of his life. The landscape is his natural element; it is the only dimension in which his life is possible".

Momaday was influenced by a number of writers in his attitude to the land. Among them are William Faulkner, D.H. Lawrence and Isak Dinesen, a Danish writer who lived in Africa for a long time and who was commended to Momaday by Yvor Winters. Both Faulkner and Momaday condemned the desecration of the American wilderness. Faulkner says "then came the Anglo-Saxon, the pioneer, ... turning the earth into a howling waste from which he would be the first to vanish... because ... only the wilderness could feed and nourish him". Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* is also critical of the growing urbanization and encroachment on the wilderness. A related idea which is strongly embedded in Native American consciousness, as we have seen earlier is that the land (physical environment) shapes an individual. Joe Christmas in Faulkner's *Light in August* was moulded by his environment: "He had grown to manhood in the country, where like the unswimming sailor his physical shape and his thought had been molded by its compulsions without his learning anything about its actual shape and feel". Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, was also shaped by the land. Both Faulkner and Momaday plead for adapting oneself to the land, to the natural environment and for cultivating a code of honour.

Isak Dinesen writing about Africa also made a deep impression on Momaday. Dinesen's *Out of Africa* is rated as "one of the great books of our time" by Momaday. It has influenced his view of the relationship of land to man. Both the writers have made use of geographical environment to advantage; both are interested in the reciprocal relationship between land and man. Dinesen sees everything in Africa, its geography, its vegetation, its animals, and even its native people as expressions of the same theme: they are all Africa in flesh and blood. Momaday says: "The landscape is his [Indian's] natural element; it is the only element in which his life is possible". The relationship between man and his earth does not end with death as he returns to earth: The dead live in the soil, as it were.

Thoreau was another writer who made a fervent plea through his Walden experiment and his writings for striking a balance between wilderness and urban civilization "In wilderness is the preservation of the world. ... I believe in the forest, and in the meadow, and in the night in which the corn grows". The aboriginal people believe that the physical world is inhabited by spiritual beings. But Christianity does not believe in this. Consequently, in the Christian world, the bonds between man and earth, the individual and his natural environment are loosened. The growth of science

and technology has further jeopardized the faith of the ancient people in the reciprocal relationship between man and land. D.H. Lawrence, among others, felt that the devitalization of modern civilization was due to man's alienation from the natural environment. He says: "We are bleeding at the roots, because we are cut off from the earth and sun and stars, and love is a grinning mockery, because, poor blossom, we plucked it off from its stem on the tree of life and expected to keep blooming in our civilized vase on the table". The title of Lawrence's essay on the subject of man-land relationship is "The Spirit of Place". Momaday also believes in the spirit of place. There is a "deep, aboriginal intelligence in the soil" which both creates and moulds cultures. This spirit of place provides valuable insights to several important characters in Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. The land influences not only Indians, but the whites also. Reverence for the land can lead to a communion between man and the soil. Land also influences art. Momaday subscribes to this view: "The land itself seems to inspire artistic expression".

We find that in Momaday's depiction of the sexual relationship between Abel and Argela in his novel, he is in tune with Lawrence's own diagnosis of the malaise affecting modern civilization and his prescription to cure it, to revive a dying civilization. In both writers we observe a tension between a technology-based civilization and land-based, aboriginal culture. Both emphasize through their writings the need for harmony between man and land, and the reciprocal influences between these two.

4.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we considered several factors which are crucial for the development of Momaday as a literary artist. We saw how his English education brought him into personal contact with important writers and how it provided him an opportunity to study other writers. We discussed the importance of the word in an oral literature such as the American Indian, and how language influences people. For Momaday who is a man made of words, the dividing line between oral and written traditions is rather thin. Next to language, the American Indian is shaped by the land, by his natural environment. We saw that this is a two-way relationship between man and land. We also discussed in this unit, some of the significant literary influences on Momaday. Among these are Thoreau, Faulkner, Dinesen and D.H. Lawrence, apart from the perennial Kiowa heritage. These writers are kindred spirits in their concern for land, for preserving the environment, for maintaining harmony between man and land.

3.6 QUESTIONS

1. Shew how Momaday's education laid the foundation for his career as a writer.
2. Discuss the importance given to language in the American Indian scheme of things.
3. Comment on the reciprocal relationship between man and the land.
4. Compare Momaday's commitment to land and natural environment with that of Thoreau's and D.H. Lawrence's.

3.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 4 HOUSE MADE OF DAWN: AN ANALYSIS

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 The Structure
- 4.3 The Theme
- 4.4 Images and Symbols
- 4.5 Significance of the Title
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Questions
- 4.8 Suggested Readings

4.0 OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this Unit is to analyze the various aspects or components of Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. We shall attempt to know the structure, the theme, the characters before we consider interpretations and criticism.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The award of the Pulitzer Prize for Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* in 1969 has a double significance. It is a recognition of "the arrival on the American literary scene of a matured, sophisticated literary artist from the original Americans." It is a tribute to a novel for its "eloquence and intensity of feeling, its freshness of vision and subject, its immediacy of theme." The novel grew out of a short story, "The Well," by the same author. Some of the characters and themes of the story are used again with refinements and elaborations in the novel. Alienation, violence, alcoholism, witchcraft and disintegration are themes which occur in both.

There is a perceptible autobiographical element in *House Made of Dawn*. The novelist's search for his roots may be observed in Tosamah's speech which deals with Kiowa history. The description of Jemez and Navajo cultures are based on the writer's personal experiences. Similarly, the landscape of the southwest and the way of life of the tribal people are important for the novelist. Witchcraft which he observed among Jemez people informs the novel. The depiction of witchcraft in the novel is only a recognition of a fact of life. Momaday says: "It is something which exists, it is part of the world we live in Everybody has a deep conviction that it exists." He had seen "runners after evil" who guard Jemez Pueblo against witches. Tosamah in the novel is like Momaday to a certain extent. Both are deeply interested in Kiowa history, language and the oral literature. Tosamah airs Momaday's views on several matters. Both have a fascination for words. The novelist's interest in Navajo culture is shown in several ways in the novel: the title of the novel, the symbolic healing, the Night Chant. The character, Benally, narrates Momaday's own experience of Navajo culture.

The novel portrays a crisis of identity for the Indians. Abel, the central figure of the novel, embodies this crisis. The Indian veterans of World War II found it difficult to re-enter the native cultures. Abel is unable to determine his place in his community and define himself. Each generation must seek its identity afresh. Momaday observes "We are what we imagine.... Our best destiny is to imagine, at least completely, who and what, and that we are." Abel's problem is that he hovers between two cultures.

When he re-establishes his relationship with his tribal culture, he is saved. In the novelist's own words, Abel "tries desperately to live in the present; yet he is hopelessly determined by the past." The novel is a strong plea for search for identity and a realistic description of the forces which impede such a search.

4.2 THE STRUCTURE

The novel is enclosed between two Jemez formula words, *Dypaloh* and *Qtsedaba*, which are used for opening and closing a Native American story. Through this device, the novelist suggests that his novel has the potential of a tribal myth. The Prologue anticipates the closing and thus presents a circular structure. The novel, divided into four parts, is a complex and skillful juxtaposition of flashbacks.

Part I of the novel is located at Walatowa (Jemez) in July 1945. It has six sections each of which deals with selected events for a particular day. As Abel returns home after World War II his father Francisco rushes to meet him. Abel alights from the bus in a drunken state and falls into his grand father's arms. The resident priest, Father Olguin, and Angela Grace Martin St. John, a wealthy doctor's wife from Los Angeles, are also on hand. Angela has come to recoup her health. She is alienated from the land and her own body. She is attracted to Abel. During the feast of Santiago, the patron saint of Pueblo, Abel attempts to re-enter the community life, through a Chicken Pull. He appears without his uniform for that purpose. An albino pulls the rooster skillfully from the ground, drives Abel to a wall, beats him with the bloody chicken, and humiliates Abel. The same night, Fr. Olguin goes through the seventy-five-year old journal of Fray Nicolas. It shows the self-deception, self-righteousness, and presumption of the author. Abel realizes that although he wished "to enter into the old rhythm of the tongue... he was no longer attuned to it. [Abel was] not dumb - silence was the older and better part of custom still - but inarticulate." The events of part I climax in the feast of Porcingula on August 1. Francisco realizes the difficulty of playing the bull who chases boys pretending to be Spanish invaders during the feast. He finds it awkward to be a "a kid of victim, an object of ridicule and hatred." When the feast was over Abel murders the albino and escapes.

Six years later, Part 2, "The Priest of the Sun," begins. An image of grunion (cod fish found off the California coast) is made on the California beach. Then the scene shifts to the basement church of John Big Bluff Tosomah who was the urban Indian trickster. He was the focus of a community of relocated Indians among whom were Abel and his Navajo friend, Ben Benally. The first section is subdivided into two. The first subsection begins with Tosomah's homily on St. John's gospel, "In the beginning was the word." The second sub-section presents Abel's flashbacks after he was brutally beaten by Martinez, the policeman, and as he rests on a cliff near the ocean. Abel's memories include the grunion, peyote services in the basement church, his trial for the murder of the albino, Fr. Olguin's defence that Abel had killed what appeared to him to be a witch, and the kindness of the social worker, Milly. He also sees Indians running, an intimation of the end. Abel who is totally alienated finds in the running and the image of the grunion some re-assurance to re-shape his future. The last section of Part 2 is an adaptation of Momaday's introduction to his own *The Way to Rainy Mountain*. He had to make this journey to recover his past as he was displaced from his roots. The "vision of deicide" and the Kiowa disaster at Palo Duro Canyon become sources not just of mourning but of rage.

Part 3 is entitled "The Night Chanter". It is told by Benally after Abel leaves for his home. This focuses on Abel's problems of adjustment to the city. Benally speaks of the inability of the Relocation program to compensate for important emotional and spiritual losses to enable the Indians to manage the transition to wage work and urban life. They prefer to find some sense of self and community in alcohol and Pow-wows

light on a hill overlooking the city. The American Dream attracted them there and they are sorry now. Benally had to accept a menial job and live in a small tenement. The contrast between the idealised reservation and the reality of a harsh life is clear. Abel cannot stick to a job or keep friendly relations with Benally and Milly. He gets addicted to drink and goes into fits of rage. Benally promises to Abel a happy life on the reservation, a life without drink, a life when they can ride good horses in the mountains and sing old songs. More than Abel, Benally himself needs a dream like that because he has sworn to city life. Martinez, the sadistic cop, strikes Abel once again. Abel vows revenge. He regains consciousness after his confirmation with the cop. His hands are broken, his body is wrecked. After he was discharged from the hospital, he goes home by train.

Part 4 is entitled "The Dawn Runner" It contrasts Fr. Olguin engaged in a study of Fray Nicholas's old journals, and Abel, attending to his grandfather on his deathbed. The grandfather's incoherent sounds for the past six days make no sense to Abel. On the last night, Francisco narrates memories that are soothing to Abel. These memories refer to relations with women, the land, whites, his Kiowa community. At the end is the flashback of the running race, started "at a better man's pace" which had brought pain quickly. Francisco dies before dawn and Abel prepares the body for burial as per their tribal customs. He requests Fr. Olguin to bury the dead man and leaves suddenly. Then he daubs his body with ash at the outskirts of the village and joins a group of runners racing for rain and fertility in the new year. It rains at dawn and washes off Abel's ashes. He recalls Benally's prayer, "House Made of Dawn," from the Night Chant: "There was no sound, and he had no voice; he had only the words of a song. And he went running on the rise of the song."

4.3 THE THEME

The main theme of this novel seems to be the search for identity. This can be analyzed and understood from the story of Abel. He is caught between two opposing cultures and unable to come to terms with either. Abel seeks his identity in his own tribe before he faces modern American culture. Historically, his struggle for identity in his tribe is a crisis of a culture which refuses to allow any compromise amidst changing conditions. The older generation which resists change would not allow any accommodation to the younger generation which is eager to adapt to change. Abel finds it difficult to accept fully or adopt the customs of his culture. He moves away from his tribal culture and moves into modern American culture. He suffers from a confusion of identity. He does not belong in either of the culture fully. His personal relationships are unsatisfactory. He returns to his tribe hoping that the tribe would accept new values without sacrificing its traditional values. It is not only Abel who seeks identity, but the Indian tribes are also seeking their identity in the new situation brought on by the white man's culture. The people in Walatowa to which Abel also belongs are isolated in the canyon. So they are able to keep their languages, religions, customs largely intact. Abel grows up in such a society. Francisco in the novel is the preserver of the Pueblo culture. He is also a teacher who will pass on traditional wisdom to the next generation. He teaches Abel and Vidal, his grandsons, to observe the sun because most of their activities are guided by the sun. The sun and the land shape the rhythms of tribal life. Francisco's teaching impresses on Abel the crucial role of the environment. Abel participates in several activities of his tribe like herding sheep, hunting deer, and other ceremonies. But Abel feels like an outsider in his community. He did not know who his father was. With the death of his mother and brother he feels lonely. His grandfather, Francisco, domineers over him, controls his education and regulate his social contacts. Abel is unable to integrate fully into his community because of these circumstances. The conflict between a growing individual and unchanging tribal customs is also a conflict in Pueblo culture which is at the crossroads.

Abel finds that his grandfather's teachings are constraining; he must leave his tribe to find his identity. During his boyhood, he witnessed an eagle carrying a serpent in its talons. Both these creatures have religious significance for the Pueblo Indians. The serpent is the harbinger of water; it is worshipped by the Hopis in their snake dance. The eagle is endowed with supernatural powers on its flights. It is celebrated in the eagle dance. The eagle signifies freedom, beauty and life for Abel. He envies the freedom of the bird to soar high in the sky. Abel does not understand fully the deeper meaning of tribal rituals like, for instance, killing animals. It is not a snapping of the tie between man and animal if the killing is done as per traditional customs. His shame and disgust are due to his lack of understanding of the tribal culture. The failure of his grandfather's healing methods which include prayers, chants, herbs, powders, potions, etc., to cure his backache deepens Abel's distrust of the traditional ways. The chasm between the grandfather and the grandson widens. When Abel leaves his tribe he repudiates its rigid rules. Symbolic of his rejection of his native culture, he wears shoes as he moves away. The tribals' respect for land is such that they can wear shoes only if the heel is cut off, so that the sacred earth is not injured. Abel disregards this rule.

World War II in which Abel participated is another shattering event in his life. The de-humanization of this war is symbolized by the tank, or simply "the machine". The machine destroys life whereas the eagle of his adolescent experience stands for freedom and life. His fellow soldiers who are white refer to him as Indian and do not give him an individual status. In his community the rigid customs made him rebel; in the other world, the dehumanization and non-acceptance make him alienated.

On his return from the war, he finds it hard to re-enter the culture of his tribe. The game of the Chicken Pull illustrates Abel's inability to reclaim his lost faith. This ritual game was introduced by the Spaniards and adopted by several pueblo tribes who endowed it with their own ritual significance. In this game, the chicken is first buried in the ground and then pulled out, symbolizing the twin activities of planting and reaping. The scattering of the rooster's feathers and the spilling of its blood are a ritual enactment of the coming of rain. The tribes believe that this celebration would enhance the fertility of their land and ensure a good harvest. Abel fails at this ritual game, but the albino succeeds and torments him. Abel's failure is a measure of his estrangement from his native culture. His effort to re-enter that culture through his participation in the Chicken Pull proved disastrous. Abel gets a second chance in the Pecos Bull Dance to return to his culture. This dance offers catharsis of rebellious behaviour. Abel could have purged his aggressive tendencies in this ritual dance. Abel is reluctant to participate in the dance held on August 1. He may have several reasons for that. He is unable to identify himself with the tribal rituals; he does not have faith in the effectiveness of ritual dances. His failure in the Chicken Pull also dampens his enthusiasm to try a second time. It is also difficult for the upcoming young Indians like Abel to follow the old traditions. The pull of the old traditions and the counter-pull of the encroaching white culture create a crisis of identity for both individual Indians like Abel and for Indian cultures.

Abel's problem of identity is compounded by his handicap of loss of articulation. His return to his homeland and to his culture is impeded by his inability to speak: "Not dumb ---- silence was the older and better part of custom still ---- but *inarticulate*." The power of the word which is so vital and so sacred to the tribal cultures fails Abel at a crucial time. When the word is lost, culture and identity are lost. One's integrity or wholeness can be established only by the word. He regains his voice only at the Night Chant at the end of the novel.

Abel's problem of identity has another dimension, albeit a sexual one. After he fails to re-enter his culture through participation in its rituals, he seeks some stability in his relationship with Angela, a white woman. This also fails. This failure aggravates his isolation. He could not forge meaningful relationships in his younger days. He lost his parents and brother quite early in his life and did not have a sense of belonging to the community. Abel's lack of the power of words prevents him from establishing an

intimate rapport with Angela: "There he stood, dumb and docile at her pleasure, not knowing, she supposed, how even to take his leave."

Abel's identity crisis manifests itself in his inability to give vent to his aggressive tendencies properly. He directs his multiple failures against the albino and kills him. He is unable to understand the intricacies of witchcraft and so he reacts violently against the albino. The albino is his successful rival at the Chicken Pull. There is something strange in the albino. He is an Indian, but he is an outsider. Abel associates him with the evils of the world of the whites. The albino is believed to be a witch and an embodiment of evil. Abel's killing of the albino, is at once an act of self-defence and an attack on the corrupting forces of Anglo-American culture. This killing is a ritual killing of an evil force which is within his tribal cultural norms.

The albino is difficult to understand. Fray Nicolas's old journal says that he has historical precedents in the community. He stands for the impersonal and malicious power of the white race. He shares serpent-like qualities with Martinez, the cop. The latter is *culebra* or snake. More significance is attached to the albino. His death evokes references to Christ's passing. Before dying, the albino embraces Abel "in benediction" and "drew him in close, and the terrible strength of his hands was brought to bear only in proportion as Abel resisted them."

4.4 IMAGES AND SYMBOLS

Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* is rich in imagery and symbols. These devices are used to clarify the meaning in an impressive way. The fence is used as an image to reinforce the cultural and racial barriers which contribute to Abel's isolation. "There was a fence on the bank before him.... The fence was made of heavy wire mesh.... He raised himself to reach for the fence and the pain struck him again." The fence is a barrier between Abel and the white American society. Later, it is with the help of the fence that he lifts himself.

The setting of Abel's fight with Martinez is significant. He is "lying in a shallow depression in which there are weeds and small white stones and tufts of long grey grass." This is a feature of rituals related to initiation. The man is placed in a shallow grave from which he emerges a new person. Martinez's beating of Abel is the initiatory mutilations. The multiple injuries are symbolic death.

Water is another symbol. Abel lies on the beach, close to the sea. Water is source of life, of creation and fertility, Abel's association with water shows his estrangement and the possibility of rebirth in his tribal culture like the grunion (the small silver-sided fish off the California coast), Abel too is out of his element when he is cut off from his tribal roots. As the fish find their way back to the sea, so Abel returns to his community in the end.

The moon is a recurring symbol. It is connected with the sea and initiation rites. Abel realizes that the moon is a unifying and controlling force in the universe. He learns that the moon controls both the sea and the land. The moon and the sun are instruments for the tribes to mark the annual cycle for their activities. Momaday mentions that the moon influences the growth of plants. The moon is also a symbol of rebirth. In the Indian view of the universe, land and sea, man and animal, fish and bird are inter-related. As Abel becomes aware of this subtle relationship of all elements in the universe, he feels that he too has a place in the universe and he is tied with all other elements in the universe.

Dreams and vision are important in American Indian culture. They have almost a religious significance. Abel understands through his vision the significance of tribal

ritual. He realizes that the tribal elders use rituals to control the supernatural through his vision.

As Abel's understanding of the cosmic order improves, he realizes that his alienation from his community is the source of his loss of identity. Once the problem is identified, he is on the way to recovery. He knows that the Indian world of his youth is the place for a meaningful existence. With his understanding, Abel prepares to enter the tribal heritage through the Night Chant conducted by Benally. The Night Chant has healing power over Abel. It is one of a series of ritual activities which aid the regeneration of Abel. The others are the funeral rite for his grandfather and his participation in the ceremonial race at the end.

The Night Chant restores Abel's integrity which was disrupted by an alien culture. Indian ritual aims at integration of the individual with the environment. Abel regains physical and mental health and also the power of the word. The Night Chant says, "restore my body to me" and also "restore my mind to me". Thus physical and mental health of Abel are restored to him through ritual and song. "Restore my voice to me" gives Abel the power of the word he had lost on account of his estrangement from his community. The Night Chant also includes an entreaty: "Restore my feet for me. Restore my legs for me." That this prayer too is granted is borne out by Abel's participation in the race. We may recall that the power of motion is important for the Navajo.

4.5 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE

Abel passes through the visionary, subconscious and ritualistic levels to the rational plane in his return to his community in Jemez. This recovery begins in his hallucinatory visions, aided by Benally's Night Chant, and continues after his return. His grandfather is on his deathbed for six days. He speaks of his memories during the dawn. Abel listens to Francisco; he fails to understand in the beginning. The dying man's voice was "whole and clear and growing like the dawn." As he grapples to grasp his grandfather's parting words, Abel remembers that the old man is talking of the solar calendar, of the ceremonial races and celebrations of Jemez, of the traditional hunting ways and rituals. Abel finally makes sense of the memories of his grandfather mumbled in the dawn: he recovers his faith in the ancient customs of his community. Then on the seventh day he conducts a ceremony and prepares for the funeral as per tradition. By doing so, he has assumed the mantle of Francisco, the medicine man.

Abel's return to his community also takes place just before dawn. There is a series of dawn images throughout the novel. Abel runs at dawn across the land at the beginning and at the end. After his struggle with Martinez, he lies on the beach; he awaits dawn, symbolically a rebirth. Dawn and the idea of creation are linked in Abel's attempt at a creation song: "He would have sung lowly of the first world, of fire and flood, and of the emergence of dawn from the hills." The references to the first world, fire and flood are common to the creation myths of many Indian tribes like Hopi and Navajo. Dawn is the moment of emergence through flood or fire from the underworld. It is the beginning of tribal life, the beginning of tribal culture. Momaday stresses the importance of dawn. It is "the moment of invigoration, when new life awakens and all creation is astir -- it is creation itself, as 'in the beginning'.... From the dawn comes generation and birth."

The dawn image pattern suggests the migration of a tribe, its cultural crisis, and its potential rebirth: "then everything would be restored to an older age, and time would have returned upon itself and a bad dream of invasion and change would have been dissolved in an hour before the dawn." *House Made of Dawn* deals with the cultural survival of a traditional tribe in the context of an encroaching alien culture. The tribe

requires strict adherence to its traditions; the pressure of the alien culture is strong. The resulting crisis leads to identity problems like in Abel's case. The Pueblos believed in the cyclical view of history and so there is another dawn for their tribe and its culture.

Abel performs his grandfather's funeral rites "a while... before the dawn." It is a moment of a new birth for Abel and also for his tribe. The Kiowa's migration from the north to the south and then to the east is truly "a journey towards the dawn." Abel is a dawn runner; his migration between the ancient and the modern worlds is a sign of a new era of Pueblo culture.

The cyclical structure of the novel appropriately fits in with the cyclical concept of time embedded in Indian myths. Abel returns after a circular journey to his community. He has recovered his faith in his tribe and its traditions. Momaday explains: "I see the novel as a circle. It ends where it begins and it's informed with a kind of thread that runs through it and holds everything together". The race is itself a symbol. It is a race for individual and tribal identity. The ceremonial race at the end is symbolic of Abel's reconciliation with his native culture and universe. In the novelist's words: "It is a long race, and it is neither won nor lost. It is an expression of the soul in the ancient terms of sheer physical exertion. To watch those runners is to know that they draw with every step some elemental power which resides at the core of the earth and which, for all our civilized ways, is lost upon us who have lost the art of going in the flow of things."

Abel runs at dawn. As he runs he sings the Night Chant; he has found his identity in his community. His place is in the house made of dawn. In the dawn over Jemez Valley, he "could see the canyons and the mountains and the sky. He could see the rain and the river and the fields beyond. He could see the dark hills at dawn." Abel appears as a link between the past and the future of his culture. Dawn is full of promise.

4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we have analyzed the structure, the theme and the characters of the novel. We also attempted to explain the significance of the images and symbols used in the book. Finally, we figured out the meaning of the title of the novel. These are important and inter-related aspects of this novel.

4.7 QUESTIONS

1. Comment on the cyclical structure of *House Made of Dawn*.
2. Discuss Abel's identity conflict as the underlying theme of the novel.
3. What is the role of the albino in the novel?
4. Explain the significance of the imagery in the novel.
5. Justify the appropriateness of the title, *House Made of Dawn* by referring to the recurring dawn image.

4.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

Schubnell, Matthias. *N.Scott Momaday: The Cultural and Literary Background*
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UNIT 5 CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Bildungsroman
- 5.3 The Biblical Myth
- 5.4 Momaday and Melville
- 5.5 Momaday and Faulkner
- 5.6 Momaday's Pessimism
- 5.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.8 Questions
- 5.9 Suggested Readings

5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we shall consider different perspectives, interpretations and viewpoints on Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*. The novel has several layers of meaning; the characters have different facets; the incidents have multiple significance. It will be useful to look at the novel from different perspectives.

5.1 INTRODUCTION

We can discuss the theme, the technique, the characters and other aspects from various points of view. Such critical considerations enrich our understanding and provide a comprehensive view of this great novel.

4.2 BILDUNGSROMAN

Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* may be described as a *Bildungsroman*. This is a subgenre of the novel. It is also called the "apprenticeship novel," the "pedagogical novel," the "formative novel," or "novel of character development." These terms are descriptive and indicate the nature of the theme in these novels. Generally the protagonist of these novels is a young man who matures and learns the ways of the world. This learning experience is often, but not necessarily, accomplished with the help of a teacher or a series of mentors. Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh* (1903) and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) are fine examples of the *Bildungsroman* in English. If we examine the life of Abel in the light of this definition we find enough justification to call *House Made of Dawn* an apprenticeship novel. Abel, almost an orphan, matures through his travels, his exposure to the white man's world and his participation in World War II. He also learns through his encounters with the albino and the policeman Martinez. His involvement with Angela and other women also shapes his growth. His observation of and participation in many ritual activities of his community contribute to the development of his personality. There is, finally, the direct teaching of his grandfather, Francisco. As he lay dying, the old man recalls from memory the significant events in the history of his community. These memories are uttered at dawn for six days in succession. The traditional wisdom of the tribe is passed on by the old medicine man to the novice who duly assumes his mantle. Whatever doubts and dissatisfaction troubled Abel at

born, as it were. The tribal rituals, traditions, practices, games, ceremonies, and chanting and singing contribute to the maturation of Abel and his integration into his tribal community. He literally goes through several initiation ceremonies of his community and thus graduates from a state of ignorance to a state of wisdom, from innocence to experience.

5.3 THE BIBLICAL MYTH

The central figure of *House Made of Dawn* is named Abel. The biblical association of such a name is too obvious to ignore. In the biblical story Abel was the second son of Adam and Eve. He was a shepherd. Cain was his elder brother and he was "a tiller of the ground." When the Lord favoured the offering of Abel, Cain was envious and angry. He "rose up against his brother Abel and slew him." The Lord then cursed Cain, saying: "when thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth." This story has been used by writers to illustrate sibling rivalry and its evil consequences.

In *House Made of Dawn*, the protagonist is named Abel. He does not have an elder brother. In fact, there is no character specifically named Cain in this novel. But there are three characters who have an inimical attitude towards Abel. One of them is John Tosamah, the Kiowa "Priest of the Sun" who drives Abel to drink. Eventually Abel returns from the war as a drunk. The second rival to Abel is the Tanoan albino named Juan Reyes Fragua. The albino is successful at the game of the Chicken Pull and Abel fails. The albino pursues Abel, pins him to a wall and flails him with the rooster, thus injuring and humiliating Abel. The albino is an Indian, but because of the whiteness of his appearance he may be said to represent the evil forces of the white race. Abel kills the albino who in Abel's mind stands for a witch. By this murder Abel frees himself from all those forces which he has internalized. These forces stripped him of his pride, weakened his resolution, and blocked his re-entry into his community. Abel is the murderer, not the victim, as in the biblical story. Abel goes to jail as a punishment for his crime.

5.4 MOMADAY AND MELVILLE

There is another aspect of the albino which needs comment. The most striking feature of his appearance is his "white immensity." The other immense white creature in literature which comes to our mind is Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, the white whale. Momaday refers to the similarity between the white whale and the albino: "He is a white man, or rather a 'white man' in quotes, in appearance, but in fact he is neither white nor a man in the usual sense of those words. He is an embodiment of evil like Moby Dick, an intelligent malignity." If the albino is evil or a witch as Abel thinks of him, he needed to be killed.

The episode involving Abel and the albino is actually closer to Melville's *Billy Budd*. Billy and Abel share several qualities even as Claggart and the albino have some common features. Claggart, like the albino, is referred to as a "snake" and had a "pallid" complexion as a sign of his depraved character. He harasses and torments the innocent Billy and bears false tales against him to Captain Vere. Billy, kills Claggart unintentionally in a fit of emotion; Abel kills the albino, his tormentor. Billy is inarticulate; he fails to explain his position; he could not defend himself at his trial. Although every one knows that Billy is as innocent as a lamb, he is hanged. Abel kills what he thought was a witch. He too is inarticulate. The judges dispose of him "in language, *their* language, and they were making a bad job of it. They were strangely uneasy, full of hesitation, reluctance." Abel is sent to jail.

The third character in *House Made of Dawn* who resembles Cain is the sadistic oop, Martinez. His severe beating of Abel is like Cain killing Abel. Despite the three tormentors who make his life difficult and unhappy, Abel enters the race and survives and achieves integration into his tribal culture.

5.5 MOMADAY AND FAULKNER

Momaday had great respect for Faulkner. He wanted to write like him. He borrowed some of the technical features from Faulkner for writing his novel: the fragmentation of chronology and scattering the time-segments like in a jigsaw puzzle, multiple points of view, stream of consciousness technique, a jumbled up series of flashbacks and flash forwards of Abel and Francisco, symbolic patterns of meaning and the use of different styles to suit different characters. Their thematic concerns are also similar. While Faulkner writes about the disintegration of the Southern society, Momaday writes about Indian cultures in the Southwest which are under great pressure in modern times. Racial prejudice and miscegenation also figure in the writings of both. Both these writers recognize the importance of tradition for a happy life. Both put a premium on the past, on history for the successful functioning of a community. Faulkner says: "no man is himself, he's the sum of his past, and in a way... of his future too." In a similar vein, Momaday says: "notions of the past and future are essentially notions of the present." Joe Christmas in Faulkner's *Light in August* and Abel in Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* suffer untold misery because they lost grip over their pasts. Both are pursued and attacked; both are rather inarticulate; both are addicted to drink; both travel from place to place; both do not have cordial relations with the white people. Their ends are, however, different. Joe Christmas is killed while Abel succeeds his grandfather as the medicine man of his community.

Both Faulkner and Momaday are critical of urbanization. Faulkner's writings are "a criticism of the prevailing commercial and urban culture, a criticism made from the standpoint of a provincial and traditional culture." The Americans pillaged and plundered the land and desecrated the wilderness for material gains. Faulkner asserts that only the wilderness could feed and nourish man, but the Anglo-Saxon colonizers made the wilderness vanish rapidly. In his novel, Momaday also depicts the city in similar terms. Both the novelists believed in what may be termed "geographical determinism". According to this both individuals and cultures are shaped by the physical environment. It is therefore necessary for individuals and societies to maintain harmony with the land. In *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner writes: "That's the trouble with this country: everything, weather, all, hangs on too long. Like our rivers, our land: opaque, slow, violent; shaping and creating the life of man in its implacable and brooding image. In Momaday's novel, Francisco's pursuit of the bear and later his initiation as a hunter may have been based on Faulkner's story, "The Bear." Like Faulkner in some of his novels, Momaday also gives dates as chapter headings to narrate the events on particular days.

5.6 MOMADAY'S PESSIMISM

While a good number of critics and commentators on Momaday's novel, *House Made of Dawn* including Marian Willard Hylton, Martha Scott Trimble, Carole Oleson, Harold S. McAllister, Mathias Schubnell, and Lawrence J. Evers have given a positive interpretation of the novel and explain the ending as spiritual renewal and cultural rejuvenation for not only Abel, but his tribe as a whole, there is an opposite view presented by Charles R. Larson in his essay, "Rejection: The Reluctant Return." The structure of the novel is important for unravelling the meaning. The structure is circular and a circle encloses or traps. The Indian cultures are trapped or surrounded

in a helpless way by the Anglo-American society. A circular journey which Abel undertakes is a journey to nowhere. Returning to the point of departure is not a significant progress.

Larson observes obscurity as a major problem in understanding the meaning of the novel. Obscurity leads to ambiguity on factual matters within the narrative. For instance, there is ambiguity in the age, parentage and racial origin of the albino. Does he belong to Francisco's generation or Abel's? Is he Indian or white? Why is he called the "white man" if he is Indian? What are his motives in attacking Abel? There are many questions like these which are not answered either in the novel or in the several interviews given by Momaday.

Francisco tells his grandsons pointing the dawn runners that they are "dead runners." After his grandfather's funeral, Abel runs the ceremonial race. Larson interprets this race as a race towards death. According to this view Abel is an unaccommodated man at the end and so he seeks death. The ceremonial race is a suicide run.

House Made of Dawn cannot be properly understood without reference to Momaday's two other later works, namely, *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969) and *The Names* (1976). The first of these has a three-part structure and the parts are interwoven. The three parts are:

- 1) the Kiowa legend
- 2) the historical facts about that legend
- 3) Momaday's own experience with those events or facts.

This book records the historic movements of the Kiowa people from the North to the Southern Plains. Tosamah's sermon in the novel also narrates the migration of the Kiowa people. The second book, *The Names*, is an autobiographical narrative which also deals with the same material essentially.

Larson is quite clear in his mind that the overall picture of American Indians which emerges from a study of *House Made of Dawn* is one of pessimism. It is eloquent, but depressing. There is a deep sense of futility and nihilism informing the lives of the individuals as of the Indian tribes. The future has nothing to offer; the past can be recaptured in fleeting moments only. A people who are denied a future are all but doomed. The Indians are a vanishing breed and not a rejuvenated breed. Larson thinks that almost all Indian characters in Momaday's novel are headed for "spiritual suicide." Abel is a primary example for this unfortunate, but inescapable, conclusion. Abel is associated in the novel with trapped creatures consistently. On the reservation, he is associated with caged eagles. He hunts eagles and kills one of them. Outside the reservation, he is likened to fish out of water. The grunion are laid out on the beach in a helpless way. Abel lies on the beach ruminating about his past. He is physically wounded by Martinez and feels a spiritual void in his life. There is no security for him. He becomes a zombie, a dull, stupid, unattractive person. He is wounded by Martinez's severe beating; he is widowed in spirit after a series of unhappy experiences during his wanderings. So he is practically dead in body and mind. Of course, Abel returns home completing a circular journey. But Larson says Abel returns to die; he has no choice. His physical health fails him and so he cannot survive on the reservation.

Let us now look at some of the other Indians and see how they fare. Ben Benally and Tosamah are urban Indians, that is, Indians relocated in cities. They are cut off from their roots; they are also like fish out of water or ensnared eagles. They find city life terrible; they live in small tenements in slums. In the impersonal urban environment nobody cares for them. There is no sense of belonging; there is no spirit of place. The city life is stifling. Benally lives in the midst of a spiritual vacuum. The city has no interest in helping the ethnic minorities; they are left to fend for themselves or perish. Tosamah is a fascinating character. He is the traditional trickster, his life is a sham. He is the Kiowa tribal historian. He indulges in double talk to hide his identity. His

second sermon in the novel is much like *The Way to Rainy Mountain* dealing with the culture and history of the Kiowas. Both Benally and Tosamah do not fare any better than Abel or other Indians. They are also on the verge of spiritual suicide. Tosamah's oral recital of Kiowa history depicts the cultural disharmony of the tribe. Fray Nicolas's journal is written history on the same subject. It points to the cultural disillusionment and collapse of the Kiowas.

Momaday attempts to balance several sets of opposites: oral history and written history, tribal religion and Christianity, reservation and city, Indians and whites. The older, the primitive cultures, traditions and ways of life are squeezed out by the encroachment and onslaught of the Americans. It is an unequal battle and the result is predictable.

Attitudes to language among the Indians and among Americans are diametrically opposite. Tosamah attacks the white man for diluting and proliferating the word which is sacred to the Indians. Word is as sacred as breath for the natives. Ironically, Tosamah also dilutes words. Abel does not simply understand the language of the judges at his trial: "Word by word these men were disposing of him in language, *their* language, and they were making a bad job of it". Abel is confused and helpless.

Another important dimension of *House Made of Dawn* is the racial problem. Larson demonstrates how one ethnic group slowly, but surely, strangles another through "the subtle and insidious ways." Not only do these antagonistic people speak different languages, but even when they use the same language, they do fail to communicate or understand. Abel's trial is an illustration of this. They strangle by deeds that is, historical patterns. They stifle the culture of the minority groups by imposing their own culture. After listing a number of depressing aspects of the novel, Larson declares: "Taken together, along with the over-riding images of death and destruction, these issues make Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* the most searching indictment of the white world by a Native American novelist."

In Larson's view the recurring images of death, pain and sickness reinforce the meaning of the novel that there is no hope for the Indians and their culture. Abel returns home, not to rejuvenate himself, but to die; he prepares to die when he covers his body with pollen and ashes which are symbols of life and death. His ceremonial run at the end is a ritual suicide. His grandfather refers to the participants as "dead runners" and calls it a "race of the dead". The goal of the race itself is death. Tosamah's church is juxtaposed with death because "everyone thought of death." The American Indians have a short life-span. Abel's mother, his elder brother Vidal, and Abel himself die prematurely. The idea of death is underscored in other ways also: mass slaughter in World War II, death of the eagle and killing of the rooster in the game of Chicken Pull on the reservation, the death-room of Abel's mother and brother, Francisco's death.

The circular structure of the novel is capable of different interpretations. One way of looking at the end of the novel is that it is an illustration of "self-realization." Therefore there is a return to life - giving forces within traditional cultures. The second view of the closing of the novel is that it is an example of defeat, of destruction and of spiritual suicide. Francisco passing is the passing of an older way of life. The younger generation of Indians comprising Able, Ben Benally, Tosamah, have no satisfactory means of coming to grips with the world of the white man. They are being erased or obliterated, slowly but surely and steadily. Their world is a *cul-de-sac*. The conclusion is ambiguous. What's Abel's fate? Does he return to his roots? Or does he withdraw into the hollow log? In the latter event, it is symbolic of the murder of Abel's past.

Whatever interpretation one may make, "*House Made of Dawn* is the most radically experimental, the most obscure piece of fiction written by a Native American, an intellectual puzzle" (Larson).

In this Unit we considered Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* as a Bildungsroman or apprenticeship novel. We discussed the biblical myth. Then we examined the literary relationship of Momaday with Herman Melville and William Faulkner. In theme, images, symbols, and techniques he has much in common with the great American novelists. Then we discussed the novel as an expression of pessimism about the Indian culture. Such a view is supported by the imagery, incidents, character analysis and overall impact. This pessimistic view is contrary to the view discussed in Unit 4. Finally, Momaday's novel is an "intellectual puzzle."

5.8 QUESTIONS

1. Consider *House Made of Dawn* an apprenticeship novel/Bildungsroman.
2. Discuss Momaday's indebtedness to Melville and Faulkner.
3. Justify the view that the novel presents a pessimistic view of Indian culture.
4. Charles Larson calls the novel "an intellectual puzzle." What puzzling qualities can you find in this novel?
5. There are two opposite interpretations – affirmative and pessimistic – of *House Made of Dawn*. Which interpretation do you prefer. Defend your preference with evidence from the text.

5.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

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MEG-11
AMERICAN NOVEL



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Block

9

THE COLOR PURPLE

Block Introduction	
UNIT 1	
The Woman, The Moment and The Milieu-I	5
UNIT 2	
The Woman, The Moment and The Milieu-II	15
UNIT 3	
<i>The Color Purple</i> and Its Structure	25
UNIT 4	
Analysis of Celie's Letters-I	34
UNIT 5	
Analysis of Celie's Letters-II	46
UNIT 6	
Themes Emerging from Celie's Letters	55

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BLOCK INTRODUCTION

“Since the beginning of the seventeenth century, Europeans had wondered aloud whether or not the African “species of men,” as they most commonly put it, could even create formal literature, could ever master ‘the arts and sciences’. If they could, the argument ran, the African variety of humanity and the European variety were fundamentally related. If not, then it seemed clear that, the African was, destined by nature to be a slave (Henry Louis Gates, Jr. 1985:8)”

In the seventeenth century questioning of the African man’s ability to create formal literature, we can see the earliest points of friction between western whiteman and the black man. Through the years Afro-American men and women have proved that they indeed belong to the human species and not to the lower orders. This they have proved amply through all forms of literature.

In this block on Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, we talk about African-American feminist issues and try to make you comprehend the layers of meanings of racism, classism, and sexism in a new way from a different perspective. One of the major contributions black feminists have made to feminist theory is to provide the historical and cultural analysis that weaves the various forms of oppression into a coherent theory for action. As racism is not just an issue for African-American, feminism is not just a woman’s issue. Black feminist theory is not about reforms of the present system that will benefit only the few who can fight their way to the top over the bodies of others, but about the creation of a system that allows full participation by all. *Feminism, in all its diversity, can enlighten, enlarge and empower everyone.*

Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* is one of the milestones in the history of the American Novel. We hope that your reading of *The Color Purple* and the discussion on the novel, will benefit you in many ways.

Good luck to you!

Notes

UNIT 1 THE WOMAN, THE MOMENT AND THE MILIEU-I

Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction : The Author and Her Creativity
- 1.2 Selected Works of Alice Walker
- 1.3 Afro-American Novel : Its Early Roots
- 1.4 A Brief history of Black Fiction
- 1.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.6 Questions

1.0 OBJECTIVES

This Unit will familiarise you with

- The life and important works of Alice Walker
- The early roots of the Afro-American novel.
- A brief history of Black Fiction.

1.2 INTRODUCTION: THE AUTHOR AND HER CREATIVITY

Alice Malsenior Walker was born 9th February, 1944 to Willie Lee and Minnie Grant Walker who were sharecroppers in the small southern town of Eatonton, Georgia. Many of Walker's short stories, poems and novels have the south as their setting. She refers to the injustice, violence and brutality of the south against the blacks and admires the resilience of the blacks in hoping for change. Walker was the youngest of the eight children. Her parents had five boys and three girls. Of the five brothers, Walker states, that she only knew four because one brother had left home when she was barely three years of age. At the age of eight Walker was partially blinded in one eye by a pellet from her brother's BB gun that accidentally hit her. Although the scar was removed through a simple operation six years later, Walker suffered immense emotional and psychological isolation because of it. She says about this incident "I believe . . . that it was from this period—from my solitary, lonely position, the position of an outcast—that I began really to see people and things, really to notice relationships and to learn to be patient enough to care about how they turned out. I no longer felt like the little girl I was. I felt old, and because I felt I was unpleasant to look at, filled with shame. I retreated into solitude, and read stories and began to write poems" (*In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* San Diego: Harcourt, Brace Jovanowich, 1983, pp. 244-245).

Ironically, it is due to this injury that she was eligible for a scholarship to Spelman College, a Black Women's school in Atlanta. She entered this college in 1961. When Walker left Eatonton Georgia for Spelman college in Atlanta—where she was for two and half years—she says "I deliberately sat in the front section of the Greyhound bus. A white woman complained to the driver. He—big and red and ugly—ordered me to move. I moved. But in those seconds of moving, everything changed. I was eager to bring an end to the South that permitted my humiliation" ("From an Interview," *In Search* p. 253).

According to Mary Washington, while leaving for school Walker's mother gave her three gifts: a suitcase, a typewriter and a sewing machine that she said had a symbolic

and practical value. These gifts were bought by her on less than 20 dollars a week that she made as a domestic. The sewing machine, Walker stated, symbolized self-sufficiency to her mother. The suitcase, she says was "as nice a one as anyone in Eatonton had ever had. That suitcase gave me permission to travel and part of the joy in going very far from home was the message of that suitcase." The typewriter clearly stated "Go write. . ." (Mary Helen Washington, "Alice Walker: Her Mother's Gifts," *MS.*, June 1982, 38).

Walker's mother greatly encouraged her to write and made her choose literary pursuits over household chores. She states that her mother was the main source of her "surviving whole" from each vicious, racist encounter. Speaking of her mother Walker states, "And this is how I came to know my mother: she seemed a large, soft, loving-eyed woman who was rarely impatient in our home. Her quick, violent temper was on view only a few times a year, when she battled with the white landlord who had the misfortune to suggest to her that her children did not need to go to school. She made all the clothes we wore, even my brothers' overalls. She made all the towels and sheets we used. . . . There was never a moment for her to sit down, undisturbed, to unravel her own private thoughts; never a time free from interruption—by work or the noisy inquiries of her many children. And yet, it is to my mother—and all our mothers who were not famous—that I went in search of the secret of what has fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman has inherited, and that pops out in wild and unlikely places to this day" ("In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" from *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* p. 239). About her father she says: "My father, near his death, was a gaunt, coffee-colored man, with a fine large nose and immense dark and intelligent eyes. All his life he worked for other people; rough, unpleasant labor that forced him (along with a wife and eight children) to subsist on as little as three hundred dollars a year. My father, then, was a poor man exploited by the rural middle-class rich, like millions of peasants the world over. But as a child I was not aware of any others. I thought it was my father's own peculiar failing that we were poor" (In search "My Father's Country is the Poor" from *In Search* p.213).

Later, in 1963 Walker transferred to Sarah Lawrence College, which was an exclusive and prestigious women's school in Bronxville, New York. She received in 1965. Walker did not find her college education very fulfilling. She said that the focus was on a white literary canon and writers like Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, Gwendolyn Brooks and Margaret Walker were never talked about. She realized that her college education would not groom her to be a black writer. She also realized two things while she was in college: One, there are definite links between art and politics. Two, that she must write to liberate black people. She said in an interview, "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival *whole* of my people. But beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women" ("From an Interview," *In Search* p. 250). She started looking for literary ancestors and found one in Zora Neale Hurston whom she referred to as her "literary progenitor." Hurston's second novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), had an impact on her. The heroine of the novel Janie Crawford, grows from a submissive girl to an independent woman, who educates herself through two unhappy marriages and strikes out on her own, cutting through all barriers. In "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and A Partisan View," Walker refers to her as a "cultural revolutionary . . . who gave us racial health, a sense of Black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings. (For details regarding Hurston's influence on Walker, see section on Zora Neale Hurston).

It was during her junior and senior years that Walker got a chance to travel to east Africa. During her travels there she realized that she was pregnant and was suicidal. She even kept a razor blade beneath her pillow and practiced the art of slitting her wrists. Later, a friend took her to an abortionist and she had the child aborted in 1965. It was during this phase of intense emotional and psychological anguish that she

started to write poetry which she showed to Muriel Ruykeyser, a teacher and well-known poet. Ruykeyser arranged to have them read by an editor at Harcourt, Brace, and Jovanovich, which published them in 1968 in a collection entitled, *Once*.

After her graduation from college in 1965, Walker worked in voter registration projects in Georgia and in the welfare department in New York city. In 1966 she received a fellowship which enabled her to work in civil rights programmes in Mississippi. Here she met Melvyn Rosenman Leventhal, a white civil rights lawyer. They lived together in New York for a year during which time her first essay, "Civil Rights Movement: What Good Was It?" and her first story, "To Hell with Dying" were published. They were married in March 1967 and the same year they moved to Jackson, Mississippi. Here she worked as a writer in residence at Jackson State University and Tougaloo College. Their daughter Rebecca Grant was born during this time. About her experience of having a child she says: "It is perfectly true that I, like many other women who work, especially as writers, was terrified of having children. I feared being fractured by the experience if not overwhelmed. I thought the quality of my writing would be considerably diminished by motherhood—that nothing that was good for my writing could come out of having children. My first mistake was in thinking "children" instead of "child." My second was in seeing The Child as my enemy rather than the racism and sexism of an oppressive capitalist society. My third was in believing none of the benefits of having a child would accrue to my writing ("One Child of One's Own" *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* pp. 362-363). Her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* was also written around this time. It was published by Harcourt Brace, and Jovanovich in 1970. This novel deals with her fictional portrayal of domestic violence. She writes: "In my immediate family too there was violence. Its roots seemed always to be embedded in my father's need to dominate my mother and their children and in her resistance (and ours), verbal and physical, to any such domination" (*Gardens* pp. 330-331).

In 1972 she accepted temporary teaching positions, at Wellesley College and the University of Massachusetts, Boston, while her husband remained in Mississippi. In 1973 she published three books: *Revolutionary Petunias*, (a collection of poems) *In Love and Trouble* (a collection of short stories) and *Langston Hughes* (A Children's Biography). In 1974 the Leventhals moved back to New York where Walker accepted a position as a contributing editor of *MS* magazine. They were divorced in 1976. Her novel, *Meridian* was published the same year. After her divorce she moved to San Francisco and then to a farm outside the city. The reason for this second move was because she was having problems writing amidst the hustle and the bustle of the city. She said that the characters just would not emerge and it was only when she moved to a place much like the rural Georgia that she could bring the characters out again. *The Color Purple* (1982) was written here. It was in *The New York Times* best seller list for over six weeks and Steven Spielberg made it into a film the next year and popularised it even more. The film was nominated for several academy awards. In 1983 she wrote *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* which she called "womanist" prose. Her important works are listed separately in this unit. Among her numerous honours and awards are: the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference Scholar in 1966, Merrill Writing Fellow in 1966-1967, McDowell Colony Fellow in 1967, the Rosenthal Award in 1974 for *In Love and Trouble*, The Lillian Smith Award in 1975 for *Revolutionary Petunias*, and the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1982. She was the first Black woman to have won this Prize. Walker now lives in northern California.

1.2 SELECTED WORKS

Walker has written in a variety of genres: Poems, short stories, essays and novels. Here is a selection of some of her works:

Once (1968). This is a collection of poems which deal with Africa, the south, love and suicide.

The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970). This was her first novel. It is set in the south and centres around three generations of a black family who worked as sharecroppers. It foregrounds the pain, abandonment, abuse and self-hatred of the blacks in the racist south.

Revolutionary Petunias (1973). A collection of poems that extend some of the concerns of *Once*, and, the themes in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*

In Love and Trouble (1974). This is a collection of short stories, and, as the title suggests, deals with both love and trouble in the lives of black women.

Langston Hughes: American Poet (1974). Deals with the life of the black poet.

Meridian (1976). Walker's second novel, links itself with her first in that, Meridian Hill can be seen as a Ruth Copeland grown up and involved in the Civil Rights Movement.

Good Night, Willie Lee, I'll See You in the Morning. (1979) goes back to the earlier volumes of poetry but with a more feminist thrust.

I Can't Keep a Good Woman Down (1981) are basically ideological statements on women's issues in fictional forms.

The Color Purple (1982) is what made her into a celebrity. Its epistolary form was suited to its subject matter viz. the life of black families in America.

In Search of Our Mother's Gardens (1983) is a collection of her essays written from 1962-1982. It refers to women's issues, the writers who influenced her, her political statements and her personal experiences.

Horse Make a Landscape Look More Beautiful (1984). *This is a collection of poems about various kinds of love.*

In addition to these Walker has written several stories and essays which appear in MS where she worked as a contributing editor.

1.3 AFRO-AMERICAN NOVEL: ITS EARLY ROOTS

Blacks in America are called by several names: Negro, coloured, Pan-African, Afro American, black, black-American. The term African is not a homogenized term. Historians state that the term comes from Afri, Afriqui or Afrigi. Originally, it was the name of a small Tunisian ethnic group which then extended to a larger geographical area from eastern Morocco to Libya. The colonialists used the term for administrative purposes therefore the term has certain implications.

In America, unlike the first wave of white immigrants, the blacks (who reached the country in the seventeenth century) were the only ethnic people who were denied their links with their old culture and support systems. The impulse behind this was to enslave them for life. Bernard W. Bell observes, "this development, which began as early as 1640, was the result of the interplay of the economics of slavery and the psychology of racism" (*The Roots of the Early Afro-American Novel* Amherst: MUP, 1987, p.7). The main reason why the Puritan whites wanted to convert the blacks into Christianity was to make them servile, obedient and loyal servants. Cotton Mather's *Rules for the Societies of Negroes* (1693) is illustrative of it.

According to the first census taken of the colonies, 91% of the black population lived in the old south. It was only with World War I that the Blacks started to move up north to cities like New York and Philadelphia. In fact, several scholars have found the old antebellum south a repertoire of Afro-American traditions. This is because several blacks carried with them certain oral traditions from their home country. Africa, and, despite the efforts of the whites to suppress these traditions the blacks clung on to them for continuity and stability. There were several other factors too, which contributed to the Blacks establishing links with their African roots. In general, prevailing in America, there was a notion that the black American had no culture of his/her own. They were treated as barbarians and savages. Moreover, racism in America prevented the blacks from identifying themselves with the mainstream culture. But most importantly, the blacks in America were deprived of the "written word." In the antebellum south, teaching them to read or write was against custom and law. All of these determinants contributed to the blacks going back to their African roots to find a language in which to express themselves. This included hoodoo, magic, field holler, oral narratives, myths and legends. Soon "a separate Negro subculture formed within the shell of American life, [having missed] the bounties of general education and material progress, it [remained] largely an oral, self-contained society with its own unwritten history and literature." The chief characteristics of the Afro-American subculture were its collectivity and functionality.

For nearly four centuries this form created the core of black literature. Use of colourful metaphors, daily language, playful improvisation and repetition were all part of this tradition. There was a certain flexibility in these oral narratives. Ruth Finnegan refers to this in relation to the stories of the Yoruba kings (who claimed to be descendants of Odudwa, the creator of the earth in the Yoruba tradition). She states, that "Yoruba diviners used myth to reinforce belief in the need for making the ritual sacrifices they prescribed to maintain the harmony of the individual and the nation with the rhythms of nature" (*Roots* P. 16). Often, she adds that there were no clear cut categories into which these stories fell because the sacred and the profane, myth and reality, were intermingled in these stories and different African societies interpreted the hero to be either a god or a trickster. Other legends, which either justified or denied the position of blacks in America, also influenced the works of Afro-American novelists. "The legends of black heroes and heroines such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Cinque, Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, Harriet Tubman, John Henry, and Booker T. Washington are common leitmotifs in the early novels" (*Ibid.*, p. 24).

Within this oral tradition, musical forms--using the spirituals--were slowly incorporated. The spirituals came out of the sermon chants and work songs which encompassed the pain and sorrow of the situation of the blacks in America. These spirituals were written by anonymous composers and sung by black people as an emotional release. The chanted sermons based itself on the African musical practice of alternating an improvised line with a fixed refrain. Accompanying these spirituals were hand clapping, body swaying, shouting and tambourine playing. The Bible was also a primary source of these spirituals. Parables and miracles from the gospel were put to music and its message passed down. This form of music was nurtured in front of churches and stores. The spirituals were a bridge between religious and secular worlds. It gave the Blacks tolerance to put up with injustices in a racist America in the hope of a reward in the next world. Here is an example of a Spiritual written by an anonymous composer:

Steal Away to Jesus

Steal away.

Steal away.

Steal away to Jesus!

*Steal away
Steal away home,
I ain't got long to stay here.*

*Steal away
Steal away
Steal away to Jesus!*

*My Lord, He calls me,
He calls me by the thunder,
The trumpet sounds within my soul,
I ain't got long to stay here.*

From the sorrow of the spirituals sprang the blues which dealt with the experiences of common black people. It referred to the pain and suffering emanating from the southern legacy. What formed the core of the blues was the "shouts" and "hollering" in the fields and the lamentations on the slave ships. Dance, foot tapping and head bobbing accompanied the songs. Blues were written down only in the 1920s after it had evolved in its classical form. The black novelist, Ralph Ellison, defines blues as "an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by consolation of philosophy, but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near-comic lyricism" (Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* Amherst: MUP, 1987 p.26). The impact of these musical forms is reflected in Jean Toomer's *Cane* (1923), Countee Cullen's *One Way to Heaven* (1932), Zora Hurston's *Joniak's Gourd Vine* (1934), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and Margaret Walker's *Jubilee*. If blues deals with sadness and pain, Jazz—a corollary of it—deals with hope and joy through its upbeat rhythms. These musical forms, apart from establishing a sense of bonding among the blacks, also enabled them to maintain self-control in expressing their anger and disgust against a discriminatory white culture.

In the 1960s, The Black Power concept and the Black Arts Movement, revived the Afro-American traditions as a critique of white, western aesthetic. The desire to delve into the symbolism, iconology and mythology of an African past by the blacks was also a desire for self-determination by them in an otherwise racist country.

1.4 A BRIEF HISTORY OF BLACK FICTION

(Primary Source: *The Dark Tower: African American Writers 1900-1960* (Arthur P Davis, Washington D.C. Howard University Press, 1974).

African American fiction can be divided into three groups: First, writers who raise political questions about the predicament of African-Americans. In this category we have, James Weldon Johnson (b. 1871), W. E. Du Bois (b. 1868), Richard Wright (b. 1871) and Ralph Ellison (b. 1914). In the second category we have authors using the theme of "passing." This means that you are born fair enough to pass as a white. Frank Yerby the African American writing romances of life in the south best example of this. His characters in the novel and his language sound white. James Weldon Johnson's only novel, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912) deals with the theme of "passing." However, the first Black writer to deal with this theme was Williams Wells Brown's *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* (1853). The other Black Americans who talk about this theme are Charles Chestnutt in *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900), Jessie Fauset's *There is Confession* (1924) and *Pill in the Hat* (1928), Nella Larsen's *QuickSand* (1928) and Walter White's *Flight* (1926). Several Blacks found this very alienating because their experience as Blacks was not reflected

Other examples in the same category are Richard Wright's *Savage Hope* (1954) and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956). Third group concerned with Afro-Am problems in the community Paul Marshall's *Brown Girl* (1950) and James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953).

The Harlem Renaissance is an important landmark in outlining the development of Black literature in America. According to Abraham Chapman, "From the writers of the 20's and the 30's to Wright, Ellison, Baldwin and the younger Negro writers who are now coming up, we can appreciate the literary validity and continuing historical significance of the Renaissance" ("The Harlem Renaissance in Literary History," *CIA Journal*, XI (Sept. 1967, P. 19). The Harlem Renaissance is usually dated from 1925-1935. That is, with the publication of Alain Le Roy Locke's *The New Negro* in 1925, the year of the Harlem Riots. Locke's *The New Negro* which included five essays was a landmark in Black literature. The essays were: "Foreword," "The New Negro," "Negro Youth Speaks," "The Negro Spirituals," and "The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts." Locke basically spoke of the emergence of the New Negro not only in terms of social change but also in terms of a new way of thinking. He stated that previously Americans wrote about Blacks "not of him." This became the manifesto of the Renaissance which for Locke was a symbol of this new awareness. Some date the Harlem Renaissance from 1920 and state that it ended with the wall street crash in 1929. Others place it between 1925-1960 when the Black Renaissance actually begins.

It was basically a cultural outpouring among blacks. Although New York city was its centre the movement spread to other cities as well. The Harlem Renaissance was seen primarily as a Black male movement. This explains the fact that although several women writers (including poets and dramatists) were also writing during this period, only few got noticed. Their names included Zora Neale Hurston, Jessie Redman Fausset and Nella Ines Larsen.

Before we go any further it is necessary to outline here the various factors that contributed to the Harlem Renaissance:

- 1900-1925: These were very harsh years for the blacks. They were seen as brutes and portrayed as barbarians in the press.
- 1902: Segregation laws were passed in all of the southern states and it had become the custom in the north.
- Political leaders--like Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson--whom the blacks had trust on betrayed them. In the case of Theodore Roosevelt although he made two important appointments of Blacks in the Customs Service, during his second term he turned against Blacks in an attempt to gain Republican votes. Again, although the Blacks voted Woodrow Wilson, the southern Democrat into power, he introduced several segregated facilities in Federal buildings in the capital.

In general, in the 1920s in America, there was a lot of violence against the Blacks. Between June-December 31, 1919-20 major race riots took place in most cities of which Chicago was the worst. It left 38 persons dead, 537 injured, and over 1000 families most of them blacks homeless. 83 Negroes were lynched that year, 10 of them in the uniform of their country" (Arthur P. Davis, *The Dark Tower* Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974). During the years 1900-1925 the Blacks were in general patient, waiting for some sort of "delayed justice." The chief spokesman for this school of thought was Booker T. Washington. He was the founder and the principal of the Tuskegee Institute. The whites liked him for his pacifist policies. After his death in 1915, W. E. B. Du Bois emerged on the scene. He was educated in Harvard and Germany and was a trained sociologist and historian. In 1903 he published *The Souls of Black Folk* which exposed America's treatment of the blacks. He was not a pacifist and directed the blacks to a new brand of expression. Du Bois was instrumental in the emergence of the New Negro Movement. In 1910 he set up

(along with some whites) the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People or, the NAACP and its official organ *The Crisis*. Marcus Garvey, a British West Indian from Jamaica, emerged as the first leader of the black proletariat. He started the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in New York city. Between 1917-1927 he had a huge following of over 500,000 negroes. He spoke of black pride and the possibility of returning to Africa. He was crucial in building up a new confidence in the emerging Black writers. Apart from Washington, Du Bois and Garvey, the most crucial factor that brought about radical changes during the first quarter of the twentieth century to the Black experience in America was World War I. This war cut off the passage of European immigrants into America. The industries in the north were now forced to look to the south for black labour force. Many of the blacks who had started moving to the North by 1915 found the north easier to live in. Apart from the labour force required from the Blacks, the American army also needed Black soldiers to fight the war. There were over 367,000 Black soldiers and 1,400 Black officers in the American army. These factors, that is the Blacks shift to the north which exposed them to union activities, along with their experience in the war which took them to countries like France where the whites and the blacks mixed freely, made them aware of their rights.

The Harlem Renaissance was important in drawing writers from other cities as well to New York. Several Blacks found the city an exciting place to be in with Blacks from Africa, South America and the West Indies forming a sort of Black community. Apart from the social forces the two primary forces that created the "artistic upsurge" of the period were: First, literary influences from mainstream America. Second, influences from within the Black community of writers in New York city. Of course, The New Negro Renaissance was very particularly influenced by the "Planters." That is, Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer and Alain LeRoy Locke. Regarding the first set of influences:

The New Poetry Movement, dated around 1912 was significant. During this time several writers (which included poets, novelist, and dramatists), brought out works that had an impact on American literature. Among these were Edgar Lee Masters, Carl Sandberg, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Many of the writers like Eugene O'Neill, Sherwood Anderson, Paul Green and Carl Van Vechter showed an understanding of the Negroes in their works although they often sentimentalized or romanticized them. From these works of White writers the Black writers learnt about anti-didacticism, anti-Victorianism and anti-sentimentalism.

Among the influences from within the Black community were the following.

Two well known Black writers, Paul Laurence Dunbar and Charles W Chestnutt, who belonged mainly to the nineteenth century, were almost at the end of their writing careers at the turn of the century. Their works were published by the best American publishers. Dunbar was an accommodationist and Chestnutt was a militant. The two represented the range of writings for Blacks. Both these writers used folk material for their novels. What kept alive the Black tradition of literature at the beginning of the twentieth century were several minor writers. Among the minor novelists were Sutton Elbert Griggs. He was a Baptist minister and had his own publishing house. His novels, *Imperium in Imperio* (1899) *Overshadowed* (1901) etc. gave insights into the mind set of the Negroes before the Renaissance. *Imperium in Imperio* is considered to be a very political novel written by a Black. His novel *Overshadowed* attacked Booker Washington's accommodationist policies. The other minor but important writers were Charles Spurgeon Johnson. He was a sociologist and the editor of *Opportunity*. It gave new black writers a chance to publish even before Du Bois' *The Crisis* appeared. In her biography, Zora Neale Hurston states that she was indebted to Charles Spurgeon Johnson, the father of the New Negro Renaissance. The other two

influences were Benjamin Griffith Brawley and William Stanley Braithwhite. Brawley's *A Short History of the American Negro* (1913) and *The Negro in Literature and Art* traced the historical cultural contributions of the Blacks. Braithwhite inspired Black writers to write because he was admired even by the whites. Walter White's *Rope Faggot: A Biography of Lynching* published in 1929 was another significant work from a minor writer. He exposed through this book the horrible American custom of lynching Blacks. His novel, *The Fire in the Flint* (1924) also deals with it.

The Woman, The
Moment and The
Fiction

Among the first crop of writers emerging from the Harlem Renaissance were Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Jessie Redman Fauset, Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston. Each contributed to the Black tradition in their own way. Hughes (who was born in Joplin, Missouri on February 1st 1902) was a poet, novelist and dramatist. He went back to African-American roots in his works. His use of Black dialect, folk tradition, jazz and spirituals had an impact on the New Negro writers. He won several awards for his poetry which dealt with themes of protest and talked about Harlem. Countee Cullen (born in New York on May 3rd, 1903) talked about race relations in his poems and the idyllic life that the Blacks had left behind in Africa which could not be got back. Cullen's romanticizing of Africa enabled several Blacks to cope with the harsh realities of America. Fauset and Larsen in their works dealt with the life of middle class Negroes and through their works they tried to sensitize the whites about the superficial differences that separated them. (For details on the history of Black women fiction writers see Unit 2.1). All through world war II Black writers were writing protesting against racism. Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) William Attaway's *Blood on the Forge* (1941), Carl Ruthven Offord's *The White Face* (1943). However once the process of integration between the Blacks and the Whites started in the forties many of these writers abandoned themes of protest and moved on to problems and conflicts that existed within the community. Gwendolyn Brooks' *Maud Martha* (1953) demonstrates this shift. Her focus is the Black family with its problems. Langston Hughes' *Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955) which minimizes interracial conflicts, is another example in point.

The integration movement had just caught roots when the Civil Rights movement took over with its assertion of Black Nationalist elements. Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *Black Boy* (an autobiography) made Negro literature important. His work emerged from the 20s and 30s. He ushered in the modern Black American fiction. He was born on a farm near Natchez, Mississippi in 1908. In this novel, Wright uses contemporary techniques and shows the impact of depression and racism on the lives of Black Americans. Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) was important in many ways. Ellison was born in Oklahoma in 1914 and came from a lower middle class family. His *Invisible Man* won the National Book Award. Both Marxists and Black nationalists objected to his approach. The former did not like his notion of universal brotherhood and the latter, stated that he was part of a western Humanistic tradition. His use of myths, episodic structures etc. in the novel contributed to the development of Black fiction. James Baldwin, was another important author contributing to the Black tradition in fiction. He was born in New York city in 1924. His novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) deals with the Harlem ghetto life in a realistic way. The novel is set in the home and storefront church of the main character's preacher father. The Church with its music and the family are all important topics picked up by Black writers in their works later. By the 1960's Black writers were breaking away from the Western tradition which was anti-Negro. The Black Arts movement (an offshoot of the Black nationalist movement) headed by Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Larry Neal was advocating a Black aesthetic by proposing "a radical re-ordering of the Western cultural aesthetic. It propos[ed] a separate symbolism, mythology, critique, and iconology" (from the section heading reference). They do not see this tradition as a derivative of the white tradition. Several young Black writers today are influenced by this.

Interestingly, although the Harlem Renaissance started on a note of hope disappointment soon set in. For one, with the Depression the conditions of the Negroes were the worst. Life in the city—particularly within the context of world war I—was becoming like a ghetto existence. Garvey who spoke of African roots was jailed in 1927 and deported which shattered several Blacks. During this period several Blacks joined the communist movement. The works of Frank Marshall Davis, Langston Hughes and Richard Wright reflect this. In 1935 the Harlem Riots began which was an offshoot of poverty and frustration in the ghettos. These riots put an end to the positive slant of the Harlem Renaissance.

1.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we discussed the following issues

- Alice Walker as a spokesperson for Black American community
- Black Americans' struggle for a sense of identity because of several pejorative labels being imposed on them
- Black suffering being at the root of black culture and literature
- The emergence of Blacks with courage and a sense of Black pride despite exploitation and oppression.

1.6 QUESTIONS

1. Comment on some of the influences on Alice Walker's life.
2. What are the significant characteristics of African-American culture?
3. Trace the milestones in the history of Black American fiction.

UNIT 2 THE WOMAN, THE MOMENT AND THE MILIEU-II

Structure

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 A Brief history of Black women's fiction
- 2.2 Chief Characteristics of Black women's Fiction
- 2.3 What Does Feminism Mean?
- 2.4 Feminism And The Ideology of Individualism
- 2.5 The Double-Whammy of the Black Mammy Myth
- 2.6 Black Feminism and the Civil Rights Movement
- 2.7 Black Feminism and Capitalism
- 2.8 A Critique on Black Women's Movement
- 2.9 Literary Influences on Alice Walker
- 2.10 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.11 Questions

2.0 OBJECTIVES

We will help you to analyze i. the history of Black women's fiction, ii. the chief characteristics of Black women's fiction iii. history of Black Women's Movement iv. literary influences on Alice Walker v. the meaning of Feminism, vi. Feminism and the Ideology of Individualism, vii. The Double Whammy of the Black Mammy Myth, viii. Black Feminism and the Civil Rights Movement, and ix. Black Feminism and Capitalism

2.1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF BLACK WOMEN'S FICTION

Black women writers in present times Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Ntozake Shange, Gayl Jones, Audre Lorde, Toni Morrison, Margaret Walker and Sonia Sanchez emerged from a black literary tradition beginning in the eighteenth century. Autobiographical writings and slave narratives were the starting points for Black women's fiction. Voices of African-American women such as Phillis Wheatley, Jarena Lee, Harriet Jacobs and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper were significant in shaping African-American Women's fiction. In her essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" (1977), Barbara Smith argued that since the "feminist movement was an essential precondition to the growth of feminist literature, criticism, and women's studies," the lack of an autonomous black feminist movement contributed to the neglect of Black women writers. Individual White women helped Black Women publish books but the texts of Black women from ex-slave Harriet Jacobs to educator Anna Julia Cooper reveal the racist practices of the suffrage and temperance movements and the various ways in which white women were complicit with a racist patriarchal order against all black people. The first novels written by Blacks had a White audience in mind. This is because Black people, according to the laws of many states, were not allowed to read or write.

Despite obstacles to literacy several Black women wrote such as Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784), Maria Stewart (1803-1879) and Ann Plato (who wrote early nineteenth century). In fact as early as 1831 and 1832 black female literary societies appeared in Philadelphia and Boston. The text, *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black*, edited and introduced by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. is an early text. Referring to Frances E.W. Harper's publication of her short story, "The Two Offers," also in September 1859, Gates writes, "That two black women published in the same month the first novel and short story in the black woman's literary tradition attests to larger

shared cultural presuppositions at work within the black community than scholars have admitted before. . . . The transformation of the black-as-object in to the black-as-subject; this is what Mrs. Harriet E. Wilson manifests for the first time in the writings of Afro-American women."

However, throughout the period of slavery and reconstruction, novels written by Anglo-American writers dealt with negative images of Blacks but during this same period the Blacks were writing about the "tragic mulatta" (a hybrid, Children White and Black parentage). Frances Harper's *Iola LeRoy* (1892), the first published novel by a black woman made this character cast a lasting image. Several mulattas tried to pass for whites. We see this in Jean Toomer's *Cain* (1923) and in the novels of Nella Larsen *Passing* (1929).

Until the 1940s black women wrote confronting negative images of black women. Pauline Hopkin's heroine in *Contending Forces* (1900) wants to advance her race. Zora Neale Hurston tried to project positive images of women in her novels. But in reality these images had no impact because of the hostility surrounding the blacks. Characters in novels where they tried to be like the mainstream white culture such as Lutie Johnson, in Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), and, Cleo in West's, *The Living Is Easy* become frustrated and destructive and alienated from themselves. With Gwendolyn Brooks *Maud Martha* (1953) one sees a shift in African-American fiction. The focus here is more on the process of self-definition. Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959) was influenced by Brook's *Maud Martha*. Marshall's work is a landmark in Black women's fiction. The novel deals with the life of a Black mother and daughter. Very few early writers of Black women's fiction wrote about Black motherhood because of the negative definitions surrounding it. The image of the Black woman became even more complex with the shift of Black women to the north. From cotton pickers, and cooks they now became prostitutes and garment-factory workers. In this transition the works of Ann Petry and Zora Neale Hurston were instrumental. Their works influenced writers like Brooks and Marshall both of who focus on Black community and culture which influenced many writers of the sixties and made them aware of the importance of community in developing one's identity. They made several writers aware that the animosity and patriarchal attitudes between Black women and men had larger links with capitalism and racism. With this new perspective on the Blacks the attitudes to their own community changed. The internalized notions of racial stereotypes that affected Blacks are seen in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*. In these novels the communities are directly responsible for the tragedies. The madness of Pecola Breedlove, the suicide of Margaret Copeland and the murder of Mem Copeland by her husband all stem from it.

In the 1970s and 80s black community was seen as a threat to the survival of Black women. These novels protested against the sexist and racist attitudes in society. Not just Whites but the Blacks too had to change. The fiction of this period Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1978), *Tar Baby* (1980) Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Street*. (1980), Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), Joyce Carol Thomas' *Marked By Fire*, Ntozake Shange's *Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo* (1982), Audre Lordes' *Zami* (1982) and Paule Marshall's *Praise Song for the Widow* (1983) all talk about how Black women's lives were affected by sexism and racism. Ntozake Shange, Gloria Naylor and Audre Lordes also indicate the diversity of language in contemporary African-American literature. Shange in *Sassyfras* goes back to African culture in drawing upon dreams, letters and recipes. Naylor uses weaves in Afro-American folk dialect to her narrative which itself is very Afro-American.

In the 1990s a lot of fiction by Black women have appeared Marsha Hunt's *Joy* (1990), Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* (1990), Xam Cartier's *Muse-Echo Blues* (1991), Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories* (1991)

2.2 CHIEF CHARACTERISTICS OF BLACK WOMEN'S FICTION

- The theme of search for identity. This expresses itself in the form of a journey which is sometimes inward and sometimes outward. For example, Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* the journey is from the plantation back to Edenton, from North Carolina to New York city and Boston and from Boston to England and back. In Walker's *The Color Purple* the journey for Celie is from silent object to speaking subject. The journeys are also expressions of the search for the African-American women's spirit that has not been destroyed by racism and sexism. In Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Janie Crawford journeys from her West Florida home to Eatonville, from Eatonville to the Florida Everglades, the Muck, and back to Eatonville. The form of journey is also linked to the concept of mobility. Most Black women writers talk about mobility because in the context of slavery this mobility was restricted.
- Renegotiating of identities is basic to Black women's writings. This has partly to do with their cross-cultural context and the history of slavery. Blacks had constantly to fight the identities imposed on them by the White mainstream culture. The stereotypes of Black women portrayed by Whites showed them as Mammies, aunt Jemimas etc. Also, Blacks were called by several names: Pan Africans, Black-American, African-American, Negroes etc.
- Images of powerlessness, entrapment, restricted mobility and helplessness are seen in most of the works by Black women writers.
- Low self esteem in women. Most of the Black women writers discuss issues arising from the intersections of race and gender and how women strive to gain respect and dignity amidst the flashpoints of this intersection. "Surviving whole" therefore becomes a corollary to this.
- The theme of lesbianism is another important characteristic of Black women's writings. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) Audre Lorde's *Zami* (1982) Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) and Ntozake Shange's *Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo* (1982) have lesbian relationships. Lesbianism in Black writings is seen as bulwarks against sexism and racism.

2.3 WHAT DOES FEMINISM MEAN?

In the US the contemporary feminist movement has popularly been identified with the movement defined by white, middle-class, college educated women. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) is often cited as the first book of what is called the 'second wave' of feminism. It was a work around which many white women of this socio-economic class rallied as it expressed their frustrations at being excluded from the positions of privilege and power occupied by white males in American society. It also hit a nerve with women who are rankled by seniors within their families or personal lives. To vastly oversimplify, the goal of feminism became to eliminate sexist oppression imposed by the patriarchal society which, it was thought, would end discrimination against women on the job, in the home and in all areas of women's lives. **Equality of opportunity was the objective, and sexism was the enemy.** This often got translated into 'men are the enemy', which made many women uneasy and men defensive. In effect the women's movement seemed to interpret equality of opportunity to mean the achievement of parity – or better – with white, middle – or – upper – class man. For a number of reasons, black women did not see this as addressing their concerns.

One of the basic issues that divides feminists is whether they consider the goal to be reform of the present social system or its revolution. And it is on this point that black feminists and the mainstream of the white feminist movement have diverged. Frances Beal (1970), in her essay **'Double Jeopardy'. To be Black and Female**, is only one of the many black feminists who has criticized the women's movement for its limited focus. She says: "Any white group that does not have an imperialist and anti-racist ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the Black Women's struggle's (Beal 1970:98), Black women and men, along with other minority groups, understand that equal opportunity with white male power elites is not only out of reach for the majority of the population but also is not going to alter an oppressive system in any significant way.

Brought to the American continent as slaves in the 17th century, African women were deprived of every basic human right in order to serve the plantation economy of the American South. Even their reproduction, sexual and material prerogatives were appropriated for the benefit of their white masters. This history inexorably impacts the thinking of every black woman's understanding of the connection between sexism, racism, and classism. And they know that the ending of slavery has not ended the systematic exploitation of their labor in American society and that the capitalistic system has created a tier of socio-economic issues which ranks them at the bottom.

Bell Hooks, one of the most eminent and articulate spokespersons of black feminist thought, has pointed at that black feminists are concerned about economic survival and ethnic and racial discrimination as well as sexism, and she faults the mainstream white women's movement for failing to speak to these issues. Speaking of the movement as it took shape in the sixties and as espoused by feminists such as Betty Friedan, Hooks (1984:4) says:

"White women who dominate feminist discourse, who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politic, of the psychological class, of their political status within a racist, sexist, capitalist state."

Feminism is not, she says, about **dressing for success or becoming a corporate executive or taking skiing vacations or the career marriages.** Furthermore, as long as any group, whether it is black or white males or white females, defines liberation as "gaining social equality with ruling class white men, they have a vested interest in the continued exploitation and oppression of other (Ibid. 15) "Because black women are on the margins of the whole system, Hooks argues, they have a special vantage point from which to criticize the dominant racist, classist and sexist hegemony as well as to imagine and create a system that does not rely on oppression of one segment of population for the benefit of another.

Throughout the history of women's movement in the US, there have been women, black and white, who have objected to the limited – however valid – focus on sexism and patriarchy as the cause of women's position in society. Moreover, working women of all races and ethnic backgrounds felt the effects of classism. But, either because racial or class discrimination were not experienced by white, middle-class women or because they themselves were unwilling to give up the privileges accruing to them by virtue of their class women were either ignored or rejected as important targets for feminists. White feminists were eager for black women to join their movement and seemed perplexed that they were not eager to do so. Black women, however, were as a group unwilling to ally themselves with white women in opposition to black men who, inspite of their sexist behaviors, were closer in identity to them than white, middle-class women. Various studies have shown that class differences are greater than differences between the sexes within the same class.

2.4 FEMINISM AND THE IDEOLOGY OF INDIVIDUALISM

As all of us know, the 'cult of individualism' is especially pronounced in American society. Americans pride themselves on their individual initiative. While the ideology of individualism has no doubt been responsible for much American innovation and personal achievement, it like all ideologies, has its blind spots, and proponents of individualism ignore the unequal access that minorities and working class people have to economic, educational, and social opportunities. Bell Hooks (ibid:84) has noted that 'The ideology of "competition, atomistic liberal individualism" has permeated feminist thought to such an extent that it undermines the potential radicalism of feminist struggle.' One of the promises not questioned by early leaders of the white feminist movement was how American women accepted the same materialistic and individualist values as did American men. It simply did not occur to them that women may be just as reluctant as men to struggle for a new society based on new values of mutual respect, cooperation, and social responsibilities.

The ideology of individualism also was well - adopted to the feminist model of the 'new woman': assertive, capable, strong; the leap-tall buildings super woman image that the movement wished to project, an image that has, incidentally caused untold grief for women who found they could not live up to it. Another unfortunate consequence has been to re-enforce the myth of the amazonic black woman - strong, nurturing, uncomplaining, and all accepting - which has contributed to the acceptance by both white and black males of the theory of black matriarchy and that the myth that the black woman, next to the white male, is the most liberated member of society. The white women's movement, no doubt unwittingly, has contributed to this myth by highlighting the achievements of exceptional black women as if they were representative of what all black women could aspire to within a reformed system.

Phyllis Palmer (1983) in her article "White women/Black Women: The Dualism of Female identity and Experience in the United States," has an interesting discussion about the attraction of white feminists to such black heroic figures as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. Basically, she says that the strong black female figure corresponds neatly with the racist - inspired image of the 'black mammy': disguising the fact that, as Barbara Smith and others have pointed out, black women have been the recipients of the lowest pay, the worst poverty, the least access to child care and the most frequent victims of all kinds of violence, including battering, rape and involuntary sterilization. Smith (1985:5) also says: "An ability to cope under the worse conditions is not liberation, although our spiritual capacities have often made it look like a life."

2.5 THE DOUBLE-WHAMMY OF THE BLACK MAMMY MYTH

From various sections, the myth of the strong black woman has been perpetrated, and in the 1960s Daniel Moynihan lent popular support to it in his report on the black family in which he described the black family as matriarchal, basing his theory on the statistics that 25% black families had female heads of household. One of the many repercussions of this distortion was that it deflected the cause of the problems of the black family away from the economic and social system and onto the black woman who was portrayed as domineering, castrating and the cause of the black man's low self-esteem.

Many black women, too, bought this analysis and blamed black women for their problems which exacerbated the conflict between black men and women. This was a

prime example of blaming the victim. You should, as a good student, note that Moynihan conveniently ignores such systemic causes of the problems of the black family as the high rate of unemployment, especially among black males, which contributes to the break up of families and the lack of opportunity for black men and women to marry and form family units in the first place.

Further, Barbara Smith (1985:5) has listed *five* myths that have been used by white men to 'divert Black woman from our own freedom'. These are:

- 1) The myth that black women are already liberated;
- 2) the myth that racism is the primary (or only) oppression black women have to confront;
- 3) the myth that feminism is nothing but man-hating;
- 4) the myth that women's issues are narrow, apolitical concerns and people of color need to deal with the 'larger struggle', and
- 5) the myth that "these feminists are nothing but lesbians.

Regarding the myth of the liberated black woman, as many writers have illustrated, the black woman in American society has the fewest choices and is the lowest paid, being the triple victim of racism, classism, and sexism. To the charge that racism should be her only concern, Babara Smith (Ibid:6) says: "A Black feminist perspective has no use for ranking oppression; but instead demonstrates the simultaneity of oppressions as they affect Third world women's lives". Waiting until racism is ended before tackling sexism which cuts across all racial, national, age, religious, ethnic and class groups would mean waiting a 'long, long time.'

To the accusation that feminism implies man-hunting, Smith and others have repeatedly denounced this claim, 'it is only sane,' she counters, 'for us to try to change that treatment by every means possible.' With all of the violence against women in society, the problem seems much more to be one of woman-hating. For example, one in three American women will be raped in her life time, if the current trend continues.

As far as women's issues being narrow and apolitical, Smith asks *how a movement committed to fighting* sexual, racial, economic, heterosexual oppression as well as imperialism, anti-feminism, militarism and all other kinds of oppression - against the young, the old, the physically handicapped, etc. can be called 'narrow?' And, to the charge that feminism implies lesbianism, the fear merely exposes the homophobia in society and the ignorance of both feminism and lesbianism. "Feminism is a political movement, and many lesbians are not feminists' while some are.

2.6 BLACK FEMINISM AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

In addition to the myths perpetrated about black women that have sought to undermine their participation in a woman's movement and the white feminist's rejection of issues of paramount concern to minority and working class women, the Civil Rights movement also highlighted sexist discrimination as it affected black women. Many black women have written about their banishment to the kitchen and the clerical corps by black male civil rights leaders who also discouraged them from using birth control because they decided that the black woman's role was to produce more black children for 'the cause'. **Adding insult to injury, many black civil rights leaders rejected black women and took white women as lovers, causing great enmity both between black women and men and women of both groups. Historically, since the days of slavery, the white woman-sometimes even more than the white man - has been responsible for the mistreatment of black woman; thus, to find herself in competition with white women for the only men usually available to her as partners severely damaged any fragile chance for a relationship of trust and mutual understanding between black and white feminists.**

2.7 BLACK FEMINISM AND CAPITALISM

As an avid reader, you must read the books and articles by Angela Davis in which Davis gives many examples of linkages between women's and men's oppression and the system of capitalism. If you ruminate over the examples, there will be little wonder that black feminists have been unable to rally around a feminist platform that excludes class and race as co-equal women's issues.

2.8 A CRITIQUE ON BLACK WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

In this section, we have reiterated some of the important issues discussed in sections 2.3 to 2.7. In distance education, repetition is meant for reinforcement.

The counter-cultural movements in the 1960s in America—anti-Vietnam war, Civil Rights movement etc.—were instrumental in the resurgence of feminism. Several women students worked for the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), a campus based mass organization. It was a radicalized, unorganized movement. Its aim was to pull down the old order which made its participants feel alienated, pawns in the hands of "big military / industrial complexes." Changing the old order meant ending the Vietnam war, putting an end to the draft, reforming the university and fighting racism. Most of the members of the SDS were radicalized students from middle-class backgrounds and included anarchists, socialists, Maoists, Trotskyites, and Castroites.

For all its openness and democratic idealism the SDS from its very inception operated in a style which favoured the domination of men in the movement. Very few women occupied high positions and women had little say in policy making. Women in the SDS also felt sexually exploited. The counter-cultural activities inside and outside the movement and the invention of oral contraceptives created new forms of sexual exploitation. More and more women were becoming aware of the contradiction between their hierarchical position in the movement and the democratic goals of the movement. From the SDS women had learnt the "Gautemala Guerilla Approach." This was an approach acquired by the SDS which made individuals talk about the process of their own realization and commitment to the movement and was an important technique in consciousness raising. They were realizing their oppression in the movement. The increased draft call from the mid-sixties further alienated women from the SDS. It made these women see themselves as "auxiliaries" to the draft resisters.

Prior to and paralleling the activities of the SDS were several civil rights movements. These movements sprang up within the context of already existing racial tensions and those compounded by the problems posed by neocapitalism. It is necessary to delineate the nature of these problems.

Industrialization and technological developments not only displaced most Blacks from farms in the thirties, but the new economy offered them few alternatives since it sought highly trained, hi-tech workers. The undereducated Black was at a disadvantage. In other words, the industrial and technological revolution which had improved the quality of life for most middle-class Americans further marginalized blacks. Urban ghettos were a visible consequence of this. These ghettos were rife with poverty and crime and were the hotbeds of racial tension. It is not surprising, then, that when in 1964 a 15 year old Black youth was shot to death by an off-duty officer in Harlem, riots broke out. The Harlem riots were followed by riots in other Black ghettos all over the country. Blacks demanded the expulsion of white control from Black ghettos.

In fact, as early as 1957 Martin Luther King Jr. had already organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Influenced by Gandhian philosophy, the SCLC advocated non-violent ways to obtain civil rights. In Atlanta, in 1960 middle-class Black students were forming the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). SNCC was pivotal in organizing Freedom Rides against segregation on public buses. As a movement, SNCC worked closely with King's SCLC. Since these movements were more community based than the northern SDS, women were far more involved within them. In fact, local women—called "mamas" in the community—were instrumental in building up the network for civil resistance. Yet, by 1964 Black women in SNCC were agitating for sexual equality. These women were becoming increasingly aware of the dichotomy between their own hierarchical position within the movement and its democratic goals. For example, while women were always positioned where the action was viz. the communities, in the "freedom house" itself, they were treated as cooks, typists, etc. by their male counterparts.

By winter 1965 SNCC had over 50% whites in the movement. This created its own tensions. The feminist slogan, "Sisterhood is Powerful" had not yet evolved. Black and White women in SNCC did not trust each other. Moreover, as Evans observes, while for "black men, sexual access to white women challenged the culture's ultimate symbol of their denied manhood," for Black women, it implied that they were still positioned as the other, the not beautiful. Interracial sex often seemed to duplicate the biases of the mainstream culture against which SNCC was claiming to fight. Anger and frustration was building up in Black women. They felt doubly oppressed and marginalized for being both Black and female. Not surprisingly, the first voices of protest for female equality came from these women.

Though the Women's movement got its impetus from the sexism within the New Left and the Civil Rights movements, it grew outside of these. By mid-sixties, a separate women's movement was in the offing. By 1973 Black women located in New York felt that they needed to go national therefore National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) was formed. The Black women did not want to repeat the mistakes of the early Civil Rights movements by including the opposition in their forces and allowing them to define their issues. The impulse behind the Black women's movement was not just to fight sexism but racism as well. Compounding this were the factors of poverty and the history of slavery. The intersection between these factors created flashpoints which made the experiences of Black women different from that of their white counterparts. However, this is not to say that Black women did not draw from the theories of the Radical Feminists but they gave them their own twist. For instance, the whole notion of self-definition which is so integral to the women's movement, is redefined by black women to include ethnic and cultural factors as well. For the Black American woman self-definition necessarily includes tracing their roots to African-American history and culture. Language also became an important tool in redefining one's self. Many Black writers use Black English because they believe that the best way one can express oneself is through one's own language which encompasses their experiences. Notion of motherhood also underwent a radical redefinition in the hands of Black women. This redefinition did not take place only within the context of patriarchy but also within the context of racism. For example, with the abolition of the international slave trade the white cotton-growing industry in collusion with the slave-holding class forced Black women to have as many children as possible to create more hands to do the field work. The Black woman was seen as a potential bearer of 12 to 14 children. They were treated as breeders rather than as mothers. The "mammy" figure who was sexually exploited and abused but which projected Black women as being "sexually promiscuous" was slowly eroded. Again, domestic work at home was not derided by Black slave women as much as by the white women. This is because most of them worked in the fields so working at home was seen as the only space for them to have control in. In short, the priorities of Black women were different from those of their White counterparts. Even in terms of literary history, Black women created their own literary history rather than be defined by the literary history of the White women.

from which they felt alienated and excluded. (For details see Unit 2.1 for Black Women's Fiction)

Important Historical Names to Remember

- Sojourner Truth (1797-1833)
Nationally known speaker of human rights for women and slaves.
- Harriet Jacobs (1813-1897)
Wrote the book. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.
- Harriet Tubman (1821-1913)
Led around 300 slaves to freedom as part of her Underground Railway Network.
- Ida Wells Barnett (1862-1931)
Anti-lynching leader, suffragist, journalist and speaker.
- Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955)
Educationist, political advisor and civil rights leader.
- Mary Burnett Talbert, Carrie W. Clifford and Gertrude Morgan were all associated with the foundation and proliferation of the Niagara Movement (1905-1909).
- Lucille Black, Odette Harper, Daisy Lampkin and Ella Baker were associated with the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) started in 1910 and which is still continuing.

Black Women Theorists

- Darlene Clarke Hine developed the notion of Politics of Silence
- Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Eileen Boris and Anne Meis Knuffer have all written about the notion of Politics of Responsibility.
- Beverly W. Jones has written about Motherhood and Victorian womanhood.
- Deborah Gray White has developed the notion of Politics of Self-Denial
- Bell Hooks writes about the otherness and difference in the experience of African-American women, and wonders why postmodernism cannot be applied as a critical theory of enquiry to the Black experience.
- Cornell West writes about the decadency in the Black middle-class. Also highlights that Rap music is the Afro-Americanization of American Youth and the commodification of the Black rage.

2.9 LITERARY INFLUENCES ON ALICE WALKER

Walker associates writing with magic. This is not surprising because for several Blacks literary authority was associated with a Christian God or White people. Therefore, many delved into their African-American roots which included shamanism, animism and voodoo. In 1899, Charles Waddele Chestnutt in *The Conjure Woman* (1899) wrote out of the magic of Black folk life. Zora Neale Hurston went a step further and collected Black lies or folk tales and included them in *Mules and Men* (1935). Several Black women writers were influenced by these ideas. Walker says in *The Color Purple* "I thank everybody in this book for coming" (A.W., author and medium). With this ending note to the novel Walker creates a literary tradition in which several Black women who were unable to express themselves through writings because of the historical moment of slavery in which they lived, are

acknowledged. This is one way she brings together her ancestors who were denied the right to read and write. In *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* she writes, "Yet so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories" (p. 240). By associating her writing with magic, Walker is also reaching out to her African-American roots which goes "deeper than any politics, race, or geographical locations." She therefore like women writers like the Bronte sisters, Kate Chopin, Simone De Beauvoir, and Dorris Lessing.

Walker states that she was influenced by Russian, Greek, African and Asian literatures. However, the Black woman writer, Zora Neale Hurston is whom she calls her "literary progenitor." Walker was struck by her sense of self. In "Zora Neale Hurston: A Cautionary Tale and A Paritsan View," she refers to her as a "cultural revolutionary . . . who gave us [black people] racial health: a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings." It was after reading Hurston that Walker felt that Black people should be connected to each other as a community.

Hurston died in poverty and was not given importance as a writer. In her essay "Looking for Zora" Walker imagines herself to be Hurston's niece while searching for her grave and establishes an imaginary, biological link with her. She writes "By this time I am, of course, completely into being Zora's niece, and the lie comes with perfect naturalness to my lips. Besides, as far as I am concerned, she is my aunt—and that of all black people as well" (102). She acknowledges her indebtedness to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. She says "there is no book more important to me than this one." Henry Louis Gates Jr. has shown several parallels between this book and *The Color Purple*. He adds that Shug Avery in Walker's novel could be modeled after Zora Neale Hurston.

Apart from Hurston, Walker acknowledges Rebecca Jackson, Phillis Wheatley and Ida B. Wells-Barnett as the first African-American feminists in the country who had an impact on her. She also lists other writers among the many who influenced her: Russians Greeks, Africans, Asians and such Americans, black and white, as Jean Toomer, Arna Bontemps, Emily Dickinson, Robert Graves, Williams Carlos Williams, e.e.cummings, and Flannery O'Connor.

2.10 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we discussed the following main points:

- Despite being denied the right to education under slavery, Black women have a history of literary works that go back to the eighteenth century.
- Black American women's movement is distinct from the mainstream White women's movement in America because of the different nature of their experiences
- The search for identity is a significant theme in most Black women writers in America
- Black women go to different sources for creative inspiration

2.11 QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the significant milestones in the history of Black Women's fiction
2. How is the Black women's movement different from the mainstream women's movement in America.
3. What are some of the significant influences on Alice Walker?
4. Discuss the various aspects of Black Feminism.

UNIT 3 THE COLOR PURPLE AND ITS STRUCTURE

Structure

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 The origins of *The Color Purple*
- 3.2 The story line of the novel
- 3.3 The novel's epistolary form
- 3.4 Music and Shug in *The Color Purple*
- 3.5 Detailed summary of Celie's letters 1-25
- 3.6 Critical Issues emerging from Celie's letters
- 3.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.8 Questions

3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will discuss i. The origins of *The Color Purple* ii. The story line of the novel iii. The novel's epistolary form iv. Music and Shug in *The Color Purple*, and Critical Issues emerging from Celie's letters.

3.1 THE ORIGINS OF THE COLOR PURPLE

(The following extract is taken from *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* by Alice Walker published in 1983 Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich)

I don't always know where the germ of a story comes from, but with the *Color Purple* I knew right away. I was hiking through the woods with my sister, Ruth, talking about a lovers' triangle of which we both knew. She said: "And you know, one day The Wife asked The Other Woman for a pair of her drawers." Instantly the missing piece of the story I was mentally writing—about two women who felt married to the same man—fell into place. ...

I also knew *The Color Purple* would be a historical novel, and thinking of this made me chuckle. ... When I was sure the characters of my new novel were trying to form (or, as invariably thought of it, trying to contact me, to speak *through* me), I began to make plans to leave New York. Three months earlier I had bought a tiny house on a quiet Brooklyn street, assuming—because my desk overlooked the street and a maple tree in the yard, representing garden and view—I would be able to write. I was not. ... I disposed of the house, stored my furniture, packed my suitcases and flew alone to San Francisco. ... [The characters] muttered "It's pretty," but "us ain't lost nothing in no place that has earthquakes." [California is known for its earthquakes].

They also didn't like seeing buses, cars, or other people whenever they attempted to look out. "Us don't want to be seeing none of this," they said. "It make us can't think."

That was when I knew for sure these were country people. ... Eventually we [her lover and her] found a place in northern California we could afford and that my characters liked.

And no wonder: it looked a lot like the town in Georgia most of them were from, only it was more beautiful and the local swimming hole was not segregated. It also bore a slight resemblance to the African village in which one of them, Nettie, was a missionary.

Seeing the sheep, the cattle, and the goats, smelling the apples and the hay, one of my characters, Celie, began, haltingly, to speak.

But there was still a problem [with my finances]. I was accepting invitations to speak. Celie and Shug [told me] give up all this travel and talk shit anyway? So, I gave it up for a year. . . .

There were days and weeks and even months when nothing happened. Nothing whatsoever. I worked on my quilt, took long walks with my lover, lay on an island we discovered in the middle of the river and dabbled my fingers in the water. I swam, explored the redwood forests all around us, lay out in the meadow, picked apples, talked (yes, of course) to trees. My quilt began to grow. And, of course, everything was happening. Celie and Shug and Albert were getting to know each other, coming to trust my determination to serve their entry (sometimes I felt reentry) into the world to the best of my ability, and what is more—and felt so wonderful—we began to love one another. And, what is even more, to feel immense thankfulness for our mutual good luck.

Just as summer was ending, one or more of my characters—Celie, Shug, Albert, Sofia or, Harpo—would come for a visit. We would sit wherever I was sitting, and talk. They were very obliging, engaging, and jolly. They were, of course, at the end of their story but were telling it to me from the beginning. Things that made me sad often made them laugh. Oh, we got through that don't pull such a long face, they'd say. Or, You think Reagan's bad you ought've seen some of the rednecks us come up under. The days passed in a blaze of happiness.

The school started, and it was time for my daughter to stay with me—for two years.

Could I handle it?

Shug said, right out, that she didn't know. (Well, her mother raised her children.) Nobody else said anything. (At this point in the novel, Celie didn't even know where her children were.) They just quieted down, didn't visit as much, and took a firm Well-let's-us-wait-and-see attitude.

My daughter arrived. Smart, sensitive, cheerful, at school must of the day, but quiet with tea and sympathy on her return. My characters adored her. They saw she spoke her mind in no uncertain terms and would fight back when attacked. When she came home from school one day with bruises but said, You should see the other guy, Celie (raped by her stepfather as a child and somewhat fearful of life) began to reappraise her own condition. Rebecca gave her courage (which she *always* gives me)—and—they grew to like her so much she would wait until three-thirty to visit me. So, just when Rebecca would arrive home needing her mother and a hug, there'd be Celie, trying to give her both. Fortunately I was able to bring Celie's own children back to her (a unique power of Novelists), though it took thirty years and a good bit of foreign travel. But this proved to be the largest single problem in writing the exact novel I wanted to write between about ten-thirty and three.

I had planned to give myself five years to write *The Color Purple* (teaching, speaking, or selling apples as I ran out of money). But on the very day my daughter left for camp, less than a year after I started writing, I wrote the last page.

And what did I do that for?

It was like losing everybody I loved at once. First Rebecca (to whom everyone surged forth on the last page to say good-bye), then Celie, Shug, Nettie, and Albert. Mary Agnes, Harpo, and Sofia. Eleanor Jane Adam and Tashi Omatangu. Olivia. Mercifully, my quilt and my lover remained. I threw myself in his arms and cried.

3.2 STORY LINE OF THE COLOR PURPLE

The novel evoked mixed responses in the people because it redefined notions of female selfhood, family, God, race-relations and sexuality.

The Color Purple, written in the form of letters, deals with the story of Celie, a fourteen-year old Black girl who has been raped by a man she considers to be her father. His name is Alfonso but she calls him Pa. Later in the novel she comes to know that he is her step and not her biological father. She has had two children through this man. Both the children are given away by him. She has a sister, named Nettie, whom she loves very dearly. Celie gets married to Albert, referred to as Mr.—who was actually interested in marrying Nettie but Pa did not allow it. His wife, Annie Julia, has been killed by her lover and Mr.—is left with four children to look after. This is the reason why he marries Celie, to act as a caretaker. Mr.—also has a woman in his life called Shug Avery. She is a big singer and leads an unconventional life. When she is very sick Mr.—brings her home to take care of her because no one in town wants her. She has had three children with Albert or Mr.—and has left the children with her parents to take care of them. Nettie in the meantime has gone to Africa with the missionary couple Samuel and Corrine. Through a strange twist of events Celie's two children Olivia and Adam have been adopted by Samuel and his wife Corrine. Nettie is working for them and she looks after these children. When Nettie had left Celie—whose house she had come to stay in—in order to protect herself from her abusive stepfather, Alfonso or Pa (before working for Samuel and Corrine), she had told Celie that she would write to her. She left Celie's place because Mr.—was trying to molest her. In all the time when Celie and Nettie were together the latter had been teaching the former to read and write. After her pregnancies Celie was not allowed to go to school by her stepfather. When Celie does not hear from Nettie at all she thinks she is dead. Eventually through Shug—with whom Celie has developed a lesbian relationship—finds Nettie's letters hidden away by Mr.—as an act of vengeance against Nettie for not responding to his sexual advances. Celie's letters to god are now replaced by her letters to Nettie. The novel ends with Celie building a community around her and discovering her self in an empowering way.

Historical Parallels and Characters in the Novel

Celie, the protagonist of the novel, is based on Walker's great-great-grandmother, who was raped and impregnated at age eleven by her master. Walker's great-great-grandfather.

Shug Avery, is based on Zora Neale Hurston whom Walker greatly admired and on Walker's own aunts who were domestics up in the north and dressed beautifully.

3.3 THE EPISTOLARY FORM OF THE NOVEL

Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, is written in an epistolary form. That is, in a series of letters. In this it continues the tradition of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe* (1748) and William H. Brown's *Power of Sympathy* (1789). What is unique about the novel is its attack on Black men and the abuse of Black women by them. *The Color Purple* is written in 1982 but set in the early part of the twentieth century. A time of

legal segregation for Blacks. The novel covers more than thirty years between the two world wars. The letters which form the structure of the novel weave in the personal and the historical. For example, Celie's biological father was lynched in the novel for being a successful business man and therefore, a threat to the White folks. He was a farmer and ran a store in the local Black community which was very successful. Celie's mother becomes unhinged mentally after seeing her husband's mutilated body. Lynchings were common in the south at the turn of the century. The lynching of Celie's father is based on a real life incident in Memphis in 1892 which roots the novel in a certain historical context. Those who were not lynched suffered other forms of violence for example, Sofia is put in prison unfairly for eleven and half years for "passing the mayor's wife" (89). Even after she is released she is made to work for the mayor's wife and the daughter's family.

There are ninety-four letters in total. These letters are from Celie to God, from Nettie to Celie, and, from Celie to Nettie. In a sense the novel is postmodern in its use of many genres such as autobiography, slave narrative, oral tradition all of which are incorporated into the letter form. Celie's letters to God are fifty-one in total. Celie incorporates two letters into her story one from her sister which she includes in a letter to God, and one from Shug which she presents in a letter to her sister, Nettie. In two of her letters to God she makes Squeak and Sofia tell their experiences. Celie's letters are not signed and nor are they dated but they are chronological for the most part. The present tense is used which is part of the oral tradition but it also graphically conveys the presence of rural south with all its ideological underpinnings as it affects the lives of the African-Americans even today. Her letters range in length from two paragraphs to two-three pages which reflect her development from an abused selfless and helpless victim to a woman with a sense of self and who is in control of her life.

Celie's letters to God are disrupted by her discovery of Nettie's letters to her which have been hidden from her by Albert. God is now replaced by Nettie. This is a deliberate technique used by Walker to tell us about the significance of female bonding and empowerment. Celie's decision to stop writing to God after learning about Nettie's letters to her (which have been kept away by her husband, Albert) is the beginning of her autonomy, a feminist sense of self. She writes only three more letters to God after she comes to know about Nettie's letters to her. Nettie's letters are presented separately in the novel and not incorporated into Celie's letters. This is one way Walker makes her protagonist learn about the existence of another world in Africa. This world too, like America, exhibits forms of racism in its imperial form, and also patriarchal oppression in the lives of the Olinka women.

3.4 MUSIC AND SHUG IN *THE COLOR PURPLE*

Many African-American writers were not trained musicians but they use music in their works. Both Alice Walker and Toni Morrison proudly declare that their work is influenced by African-American music. Walker, in an interview with John O'Brien discusses the relationship of her writing to the musical tradition: [T]he most I would say about where I am trying to go is this: I am trying to arrive at that place where music already is; to arrive at that unselfconscious sense of collective oneness; that naturalness, that (even when anguished) grace." This response explains the importance of music in *The Color Purple* in which Shug, a blues singer, transforms the sordid lives of the Black people with whom she interacts. Calvin C. Hernton (1987) comments about Shug:

She is a representative of the genre of black blues/jazz women who emerged during the beginning of the twentieth century. Similar to Bessie Smith, Mammy Yancey, Billie Holiday and uncounted others along city streets, in nightclubs and joints and in our prisons and graveyards, Shug Avery is the

...jazz singer articulating the sorrows, brutalities, endurances and love-fleeting moments of all those women who, like Celie, are shackled down and rendere inarticulate in this woman-hating world. (19)

In the novel, Shug affects a lot of characters through her love. The men in the novel who are often referred to as beasts, hogs and savages are humanized by her. Harpo begins to appreciate Squeak's and Mr.—learns to cook and sew and love Celie. Among the women characters, Celie and Squeak offer the best examples. Shug teaches Squeak how to sing and makes her realize that her kind of singing is far more humanizing than "all them funny voices you hear singing in church." She further tells Squeak,

I tell you something else, Shug say to Mary Agnes, listening to you sing, folks git to thinking bout a good screw.

Aw, *Miss Shug*, say Mary Agnes, changing color.

Shug say, What, too shamefaced to put singing and dancing and fucking together? She laugh. That's the reason they call what us sing The devil's music. Devil's love to fuck. (99)

Shug's philosophy of life is anti-patriarchal and anti-white. She goes by feelings and desires and not by biased and gendered conventions and traditions. This leads to her redefinition of God, family, notion of motherhood and attitudes to sexuality. It is because of her that Celie begins to believe in a God who is pantheistic. Shug explains to Celie that God is neither He or She but It. Someone that resides within people. This is the sermon that she preaches. A sermon of love and caring. In the novel, Shug's music is more powerful than the sermon of the preacher. Her songs and their fluidity which preach love and growth and acceptance contrast with the cliches stated by the preacher about God's love and wrath. Her music is nurturing and develops the soul. All the characters who change for the better in the novel are affected by her. They can listen to music therefore they are good people. Conversely, the bad people in the novel are those who are deaf to music. In this sense Shug Avery becomes the spiritual centre of the novel. Appropriately, Celie's last letter addressed to the stars and trees to illustrate her belief in Shug's living God.

3.5 DETAILED SUMMARY OF CELIE'S LETTERS 1-25

(Text used Alice Walker *The Color Purple*, New York: Pocket Books, 1982).

In her letters to God written in black, rural dialect, Celie tells us her awful story. The first letter is preceded by a warning from Pa (whom she mistakes to be her biological father) who has raped her—a fourteen year old girl—and told her "you better not never tell nobody but God. It'd kill your mammy" (p.1). Through Celie's opening letter we learn that her mother is very sick and when she went to visit her sister doctor in Macon, she left the children with Celie. Pa (Alfonso), whom she assumes to be her biological father, rapes her to fulfill his sexual desires which his wife is unable to meet. In the second letter we are told that the mother dies cursing her pregnant daughter. We are also told that Pa "kilt it [the child] out there in the woods" (p.3). The third letter informs us of how her Pa perceives her as "evil" and how he took her "other little baby, a boy this time" (p.4). It is in Celie's fourth letter that Nettie, her sister, is mentioned. She is a very important character in the novel particularly in nurturing Celie and contributing to her growth as an empowered woman. In this fourth letter, Celie tells us that Nettie is being paid attention to by a man almost her father's age who has three children and whose wife (Annie Julia) was killed by her lover. Celie writes that "I tell Nettie to keep at her books. It be more then a notion taking care of children ain't even yourn. And look what happen to Ma" (p.5). Through this we come to know that Celie is very protective of her younger sister and she does not want her to ruin her life marrying young. In this same letter

we are also informed about Pa's marriage to a girl from "round Gray" who is the same age as Celie.

As the letters begin to unfold we come to know about life in the South. About the violence not only against the Blacks by the Whites but also within the Black community which has internalized the mainstream attitudes towards them. Very early in her letters Celie tells us that "he[pa] beat me." She says that he accused her of winking at a boy in Church which she says is not true. She confesses openly "I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them"(p.6). As early as this Walker is slowly paving her way for a "womanist" text—a point we will discuss subsequently. Celie informs us of the fact that Pa has his eyes on Nettie and therefore she advises her to marry Mr.—without telling her the reason for it. Celie's complete lack of awareness of her sexuality is revealed when she says "A girl at church say you git big if you bleed every month. I don't bleed no more" (p.6). We are soon told through one of Celie's early letters that Mr.—has asked Pa for Nettie's hand in marriage and that he has refused it on two counts. First, relates to the scandal surrounding the murder of Mr.'s—wife by her lover. The second, is to do with Mr.'s— relationship with Shug Avery. Shug (short form for sugar) is another very important character in the development of Celie. Through her stepmother, Celie manages to get a picture of Shug and she writes: "Shug Avery was a woman. The most beautiful woman I ever saw. She more pretty then my mama. She bout ten thousand times more prettier then me" (p.7). In the following letter, Celie tells us that she pleaded with Pa not to touch Nettie and take her instead. She even dresses with furs and high heeled shoes for him. He calls her a tramp but "takes her" anyway. That same evening Mr.—comes to ask for Nettie's hand in marriage. Pa refuses saying that he wants her to complete her schooling and become a teacher. He however, offers him Celie's hand instead, saying "she ain't fresh tho" but being the oldest should marry first. He also adds "She ugly. But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean" (p.9). Pa further describes her as "too old to be living at home," a "bad influence" on the other children, she "ain't smart either," and that she tells lies (p.9). Celie is at the centre of a bargaining between Mr.—and Pa quite like the way in which slaves were sold. Pa even throws in her cow as an added incentive if Mr.—marries her. Celie is about twenty years of age when this episode takes place. Through this letter, Walker is making us realize the negative way in which Celie is perceived by people and how she has to combat these images of herself before she begins to relate to her self in an empowering way.

By about the eighth letter Celie tells us that she is being taught by Nettie and that Nettie told her that "I ain't dumb." She narrates to us why she was taken out of school by Pa even though she loved it. He told her "You too dumb to kecp going to school." Even when Nettie told Pa that Celie is bright and smart and that their teacher Miss Addie Beasley had said so too, he refused to send Celie to school dismissing Ms. Beasley as "Whoever listen to anything Addie Beasley have to say. She run off at the mouth so much no man would have her. That how come she have to teach school"(p.11). One fine day Miss. Beasley even came to their home to persuade Pa to send Celie to school but when she saw Celie in her pregnant state she quietly left. It is in this very letter that Mr.— asks for another look at Celie because the woman who was looking after his children, left. Celie plans to marry the man as an escape route so that Nettie and she can eventually run away. The way Mr.—surveys her brings to mind the slave trade. Celie writes: "I go stand in the door. The sun shine in my eyes. He's still up on his horse. He look me up and down... Turn round Pa say. I turn round. . . Mr.—say, That cow still coming? He say, Her cow" (p.12). Soon she gets married to him and discovers that he has four and not three children as stated by him. We are also told about how the eldest son hates her and threw a stone at her and hurt her very badly. The girls are also very unkempt and dirty and she begins to make them look clean and tidy. When Mr.—makes love to her at night she says that she thinks of Shug Avery and feels warmly towards him. Celie in another letter tells us that she met her "baby girl" while she was waiting in the wagon for Mr.— who had gone to the dry goods store. She tells us the girl's eyes were just like

hers and she refers to her as Olivia. The lady with whom she has come seems very pleasant. Celie says the woman says she has come to buy cloth for her daughter. To this Celie asks who was her father and she responds one Reverend Mr. While the mother and daughter are waiting for the Wagon taken by Reverend, Celie invites them to sit in her wagon and the two women chat. It is this woman to whom Nettie is sent later. Her name is Corrine. The eleventh letter of Celie gives us some crucial information. One, that Nettie has run away from home and has come to live with Celie. Two, that she is helping Celie "with spelling and everything else she think I need to know" (p.17). She also teaches Celie how to handle Mr.—'s very demanding children. She tells Celie, "Don't let them run over you You got to fight" (p.18). Celie responds to this by saying "But I don't know how to fight. All I know how to do is stay alive" (p.18). Walker here is trying to tell us about the basic struggle for survival in the lives of ordinary Black women. It is in this letter again that we are told that Nettie decides to leave Celie's place because of Mr— making advances on her. Each time he gives her a compliment she passes it on to Celie. This makes Celie feel good. It is Celie who gives Nettie the address of Reverend Mr.— before she leaves and they part with Celie telling Nettie to write. Nettie says "Nothing but death can keep me from it." Celie tells us "She never write" (p.19). It is in the later letters that we come to know the reason for this. By now it is very clear to us that Celie and Nettie are very close to each other and that there is a deep bonding that they have between them.

In the next letter to God we are told that Albert or Mr's— two sisters named Carrie and Kate come to visit. They are impressed by the neat and clean way in which Celie keeps the house and also the children. One of the sisters complain about Albert's previous wife, Annie Julia who, she claims, did not look after the children or the house. Kate intervenes and states that no one can blame her because Albert was fooling around with Shug Avery. There is a little discussion between the sisters about Shug Avery and the way she dresses and the kind of life that she leads. Celie listens carefully. In the next visit also mentioned in the same letter, Kate comes by herself. She is about twenty-five years old and an "old maid." She tells her brother to buy Celie some clothes. The two go clothes-shopping to the store. Celie thinks of what Shug would have worn and says "She like a queen to me" and tells Kate that she would like "somethin purple, maybe little red in it too" (p. 22). The colour purple is mentioned in relation to royalty here. This link is picked up later in the text as well. Kate tells Harpo, the oldest boy, that he must help Celie carry the water. He says that it is a woman's job to do it and goes and gets a firing from Kate. She calls him a "trifling nigger." He complains to his father. Kate has an altercation with Mr— she finally storms out of the house telling Celie what Nettie had told her earlier "you got to fight them. Celie, I can't do it for you. You got to fight them for yourself." Celie says that she does not say anything in reply because she thinks of Nettie who fought back by running away and is now probably dead. She adds, "I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive" (p.22). In the thirteenth letter, Harpo asks his father why he beats Celie and he replies "cause she my wife." Celie tells us that Mr.—beats her with a belt and that she makes herself like wood and not cry. Harpo tells Celie about a girl he met at church and whom he wants to marry. He is seventeen years of age and she is about fifteen. In the next letter we are told that Shug Avery is in town and is going to sing in the "Lucky Star out on Coalman road" (p.25). Mr.— is all excited getting ready for the evening and Celie moves "round darning and ironing, finding hanskers" (p.25), for him. Celie longs to go to the Lucky Star but as she says not to hear Shug Avery sing "I just thankful to lay eyes on her" (p.26). Somehow, from the beginning of the relationship of Celie and Shug, Walker imbues it with sexual undertones. The next letter tells us that Mr.— is very tired after visiting the Lucky Star. Celie is dying to ask him a thousand questions about Shug but refrains from doing so. She continues to work very hard in the cotton fields.

In the fifteenth letter, Celie tells us that Harpo is as big as his father but no good in fighting him. He tells his father that he is tired of working in the fields all day but his dad tells him that he has to do it. Celie tells us that Harpo's face "looks like a woman.

face" (p.29). In letter 17 we get three important facts. These are that Harpo's girl friend is Sofia Butler who is "big, strong, healthy girl," whose father does not like Harpo to marry her because of the scandal surrounding his mother's death. We are also told about the episode in which Annie Julia died in Harpo's arms in a nightmare sequence. In this same letter we are informed of the fact that Sofia is expecting a baby and that she has visited Harpo's place to ask his father's permission to marry her. Harpo's father insults her and Harpo is unable to handle the situation. She leaves telling Harpo that he should visit her and the baby after he is out of his father's clutches. In the next letter Harpo gets Sofia and the child and takes them home and gets married in "Sofia sister house. Sister's husband stand up with Harpo. Other sister sneak way from home to stand up with Sofia. Another sister come to hold the baby. Say he cry right through the service, his mama stop everything to nurse him Finish saying I do with a big ole nursing boy in her arms" (p.35). Harpo also fixes up the creek house which Mr.—used as a shed for them. Celie helps doing it up by making curtains out of sacks. After three years of marriage Harpo complains to Mr.— that Sofia does not listen to him and that she is always running to her sister's place. He asks him if he beats her. To this Harpo answers in the negative. The Mr.—says "Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating" (p. 37). Celie also tells Harpo to beat his wife and he does and pays a price for it. In the next letter the fight has gone to a bigger scale with both Harpo and Sofia flinging things at each other. The whole house is turned upside down. Next we are told that the two along with their children are going off for the weekend to visit Sofia's sister.

In letter 21 Celie feels guilty for having told Harpo to beat Sofia. She feels that she has "sin against Sofia spirit." In the meantime Sofia comes to know that Celie had advised Harpo to beat her. She returns all the things that Celie had given for the house saying that "I looked to you for help" (p.42). Although Celie initially denies it she finally admits to it saying that she said so because she was jealous of Sofia and her ability to fight. Sofia tells her that all her life she has had to fight her father, brother and men within the family. Sofia tells her that they come from a family of twelve children; six boys and six girls. She adds "All the girls big and strong like me Boys big and strong too, but all the girls stick together" (43). She also tells Celie that she pities her because she does not stand up for herself. Celie tells her that the times when she was mad with her parents the words of the Bible came to her. "Honour thy father and thy mother" and she would just take it. She adds "This life soon be over, Heaven last all ways" (44). The two soon start talking and laughing and Sofia suggests that they make quilt out of the "messed up curtains" that she had torn and returned to Celie. Celie says that she runs to get her "pattern book" (p.44) In the 22nd letter Celie tells us that Shug Avery is very sick and nobody in town (not even her parents) want to keep her. She is suffering from "two berkulosis." Even the preacher takes her condition for his text and vilifies her and her lifestyle. Celie expects Mr.— to come to her rescue but he does not. However, soon we are told that Mr.—has brought Shug home. Celie is very happy and observes every single detail about her clothes, make up etc. Shug looks at Celie and says "you sure is ugly" (p. 48). In the following letter Celie tells us that Mr.—is in Shug's room trying to keep her company. In the 24th letter Celie says that Mr.—asks Celie to give Shug a bath. She says "First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into a man" (p.51). Walker here is showing us the sexual attraction that Celie has for Shug which eventually leads to a lesbian relationship. In this same letter Celie comes to know that Shug and Mr.— have had three children and that they are being looked after by the grandparents. When Celie asks her if she misses them she says, "Naw, I don't miss nothing." Walker here is touching on the theme of motherhood which is very important in the text and which we will discuss later. The next letter talks about Celie and Shug having breakfast together.

3.6 CRITICAL ISSUES EMERGING FROM CELIE'S LETTERS 1-25

There are several important issues that emerge from these letters which are developed later in the novel. Let us enlist them:

- Violence in Black families (See Unit 4.2)
- Racist / Patriarchal attitudes among Black people
- Nettie and Celie relationship
- Celie's low self-esteem
- Concept of Motherhood and Mothering (See Unit 6.5).
- The theme of "sisterhood is powerful," lesbian relationship and the move to a Womanist text (See Unit 2.3)
- Introduction of significant characters

3.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we discussed the following issues:

- Through the epistolary form Walker communicates her heroine's anguish.
- Blacks have internalised racist/patriarchal attitudes from their experiences with the mainstream white culture
- The quilt metaphor is significant in Black culture
- Motherhood is redefined in Black culture within the context of a slave history

3.8 QUESTIONS

1. Trace the growth of Celie in letters 1-25
2. Comment on the Celie/Nettie relationship as revealed in letters 1-25
3. Discuss the significance of the novel's epistolary form.
4. Comment on the importance of music in *The Color Purple*.

UNIT 4 ANALYSIS OF CELIE'S LETTERS-I

Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 A detailed summary of Celie's letters 26-51
- 4.2 Critical issues Emerging from Celie's letters 26-51
- 4.3 The context of Nettie's letters
- 4.4 A detailed commentary of letters 52-58 (Nettie's letters 1-7)
- 4.5 Critical issues Emerging from letters 52-58 (Nettie's letters 1-7)
- 4.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.7 Questions

4.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will discuss i. the issues arising from Celie's letters 26-51 ii. the context of Nettie's letters and iii. the issues arising from letters 52-58 (Nettie's letters 1-7)

4.1 DETAILED SUMMARY OF CELIE'S LETTERS 26-51

In Celie's 26th letter she says that Shug has slowly started sitting up in bed and that Celie is continuing to nurse her. When she combs her hair she feels that Shug is like her daughter, Olivia, or, like her own mama. Through these details Walker makes generational links with the women which is important for her Womanist text. In the following letter she informs us that Mr.—'s father, the old Mr., has come on a visit. He asks his son what he sees in Shug. He says, "She black as tar, she nappy headed. She got legs like baseball bats" (p.56). The racism that is internalized by the Blacks is brilliantly encaptured in these lines where we see the Blacks themselves hating their own image. Mr.—tells his father that he loves Shug and should have married her. Father tells him that "Nobody even sure exactly who her daddy is. ... Plus all her children got different daddys" (p.57). In the same letter we are also told about the visit of Tobias, Mr.—'s brother. He has come to see Shug Avery. The letter ends with Celie saying that she felt good "quilting tween Shug Avery and Mr.— us three set together gainst Tobias and his fly speck box of chocolate. For the first time in my life, I feel just right" (p.60). Letter 28 mentions Celie and Sofia making the quilt. Shug Avery has donated "her old yellow dress for scrap" (p.61). The pattern on the quilt is called "Sister's Choice." Here again the term "sister" is significant pointing to the female bonding that is essential to the growth of the female characters in the novel. While Celie and Sofia are quilting together Sofia complains to Celie about the vast quantities of food that Harpo is consuming. Later on Celie herself notices it. Later we come to know that Harpo is trying to be strong and big so that he can be in control over his wife, Sofia. We also come to know that Harpo loves housekeeping "he love cooking and cleaning and doing little things round the house" (p.63). Sofia, on the other hand, loves to do "manly jobs." When Celie looks out across the yard she says "I see Sofia dragging a ladder and then lean it up against the house. She wearing a old pair of Harpo pants. Got her head tied up in a headrag. She clam up the ladder to the roof, begin to hammer in nails. Sound echo cross the yard like shots" (p.64).

The following letter tells us that Harpo has come to spend the weekend with Celie, Mr.—and Shug. While they are asleep Celie hears someone sniffing and finds out that Harpo is crying. He tells her that he is upset because his wife Sofia does not

listen to him. He then compares Celie to Sofia and says that Celie always listens to Mr.— Celie responds by saying that Harpo's father still beats her. She tells Harpo that Sofia loves him unlike her who does not love Mr.— and married him because her Pa asked her to. Here we see a certain growth in Celie in that she is able to analyse her situation and she is also in a position to give Harpo support. In letter 30 three things are mentioned. One that Harpo is eating a lot so that he can be as strong as his wife. Two, that Sofia is getting a little tired of Harpo and in this context the two talk about their sex life and, three, when Sofia mentions moving in with her sister, she remembers Nettie "thought so sharp it go through me like a pain" (p.69). In letter 31 Sofia's sisters come to pick her and her children up. Celie writes "Sofia right at out her sisters. They all big strong healthy girls, look like amazons" (p.71). Harpo pretends that he is not bothered about Sofia leaving. Celie also decides to give the quilt to Sofia. In the following letter we are told that Sofia is six months pregnant. Harpo is also now very busy and excited building a jukejoint with his friend Swain. As he tells Celie "one thing he learned is that he cute. Another that he smart. Plus, he can make money" (73).

Letter 33 tells us that Harpo's jukejoint has very few customers. Occasionally Shug and Mr.—go and listen to Swain sing. One day Harpo asks Celie to find out if Shug can sing at their jukejoint. Shug, who has been recovering from her illness, decides to do so and "the first Saturday night many folks come they couldn't git in" (p.76). Celie is delighted because she can at last watch Shug sing. When Celie hears Shug sing she feels very strongly for her and is unable to understand the stirrings in her heart "why my heart hurt me so" (p.77). Shug also dedicates a song to Celie and Celie says that this is the first time "Somebody made something and name it after me" (p.77). Here Walker is showing the connections between sadness and the blues that Shug sings. Celie is a source for a song and Celie, we all know has been abused in life. In the following letter Celie tells us that Harpo's joint is doing well with Shug Avery belting out songs. She also tells us that Shug tells her that she is planning to leave. On hearing this she tells Shug not to leave because Mr.—beat her when she is not around. Shug asks Celie you mean "Albert?" For the first time Celie realizes her husband's name is Albert. Shug tells Celie not to worry and that she will not leave until Albert stops beating her.

Celie's 35th letter is important for several reasons. In this letter she tells us that it is nearing the time for Shug to leave them. The two of them talk about Albert and about having sex with him. Shug says that she loves him with a passion but that he is too weak. Celie says that she has never enjoyed having sex with him. In fact, she says that he just did "his business" and went off to sleep. Shug laughs and says that it sounds like as if he is going to toilet on her. She replies that that is how it felt. Shug then asks her if she never felt any sexual excitement doing it with Pa. She replies in the negative and Shug tells her that she is still a virgin. She advises her to explore herself sexually which she does under Shug's guidance.

In the next letter (letter 36) Celie narrates that one day when Shug is singing at Harpo's Jukejoint, Sofia walks in with a man who looks like a prizefighter. His name is Henry Broadnax but everybody calls him Buster. Celie and Mr.—are both happy to see Sofia. Mr.— and she exchange notes on their children. Mr.—tells her that his girls have "bigged and gone." But "Bub [is] in and out of jail" (p. 85). Here again Walker shows us the kind of life Blacks—who are marginalized in that culture—lead for lack of better alternatives. Sofia also tells them that she has six children now. She looks archly at Celie and tells her (but more for Harpo's benefit) "Life don't stop just cause you leave home, Miss Celie. You know that" (p.85). Shug come across after her song and hugs Sofia telling her that she looks like "good time." Celie comments that this is the first time that she realized that "Shug talk and act sometimes like a man. Men say stuff like that to women, Girl, you look like a good time. Women always talk bout hair and health" (p.85). She also confesses to us that like all the men who are ogling at Shug's bosom, she too feels very excited sexually. She says, "I feel my nipples harden under my dress. My little button sort of perk up too" (p.85).

In this letter we are also told about a fight that takes place between Sofia and Harpo's yellow-skinned girlfriend called Squeak, who like Celie, does whatever her man asks her to do. When Harpo and Sofia start to dance she objects and a fight ensues. Squeak slaps Sofia who retaliates more aggressively breaking Squeak's teeth. Finally, Sofia and the prizefighter leave the joint.

Harpo is looking disturbed in the 37th letter and Squeak does not what is bothering him. Celie informs her that Sofia is in jail for "Sassing the mayor's wife" (p.89). She also asks Squeak for her real name which she says is Mary Agnes. Celie tells her that she should tell Harpo to call her by that name so that she can be noticed by him. Here again we see Celie in her capacity of giving advice. She is obviously growing. Celie then narrates what one of Sofia's sisters told her and Mr.—about how Sofia got into jail. Apparently, one day Sofia, the children and the prizefighter got into prizefighter's wagon and went to town. There the mayor and his wife (Millie) met them. The mayor's wife was very struck by how clean Sofia's children were and asked her if she could be her maid. Sofia replied "Hell no." The mayor was annoyed and asked Sofia "What you say to Miss Millie?" and Sofia repeated "Hell no." and "he slap her." Next Sofia "knock the man down. The polices come, start slinging the children off the mayor, bang they heads together. Sofia really start to fight. They drag her to the ground" (p.90). Celie then tells Squeak (Mary Agnes) and she asked Sofia's sister, Odessa, what the prizefighter did all this while? He wanted to "jump in" we are told but Sofia wanted to fight her own battle. In any case "Policies have they guns on him anyway. One move, he dead. Six of them, you know. Bub's "grandaddy" who was "the colored uncle of the sheriff" allows Celie and Mr.—to visit Sofia in jail. He tells them that she is insane but he "know how womens is." Walker here shows us how all the men in the novel are patriarchal. When Celie sees Sofia in jail, she wonders how she is alive. She says "They crack her skull, they crack her ribs. They tear her nose loose on one side. They blind her in one eye. She swofe from head to foot. Her tongue the size of my arm, it stick out tween her teef like a piece of rubber. She can't talk. And she just about the color of a eggplant"(p.92). Celie then tells us how she cleans her up. Celie's nurturing role is seen here once again. She was the one who nursed Shug back to health and she was the one who looked after her siblings and also Mr.'s—children. The irony is that she cannot look after her own children.

Letter 38 is beautiful insofar as we see a black community emerging. Sofia is now working doing the prison laundry. She tells Celie, Mr.—, Harpo and Shug—who has come from Memphis to see her—that "everything nasty here." When they ask her how she manages she replies that she does what Celie does namely, "do just what they say." At this "Mr.— suck in his breath. Harpo groan. Miss Shug cuss" (p.93). Sofia has been imprisoned for twelve years. Maybe, Harpo tells her that she could get out on good behaviour. To which Sofia replies, "Good behavior ain't good enough for them. Nothing less than sliding on your belly with your tongue on they boots can even git they attention. I dream of murder, she say, sleep or wake" (p.94). Walker is showing us here the anger that was building up in the Blacks against an unjust society. When she asks about her children Harpo says that "Tween Odessa and Squeak, they git by." Sofia responds, "Say thank you to Squeak. Tell Odessa I think about her" (p.94). We see the notion of "sisterhood is powerful" emerging here. In the following letter they are all sitting around the supper table Celie, Shug, Mr.—, Squeak, the prizefighter, Odessa and two more of Sofia's sisters. They are trying to find a way to get Sofia out of prison because they feel that she is not going to last out. Harpo suggest blowing up the place, the prizefighter thinks in terms of smuggling a gun but Odessa says that if Sofia gets out that way they will come for her later. Celie says that she does not say anything but she adds that "I think bout angels. God coming down by chariot, swinging down real low and carrying ole Sofia home. I see 'em all as clear as day. Angels all in white, white hair and white eyes, look like albinos. God all white too, looking like some stout white man work at the bank" (p.96). We get an insight into Celie's notion of God here. Walker is showing us how even the Blacks have internalized God as being white. When Squeak, who has also

been silent. hears that the jail warden's name is Bubber Hodges, the "old man Henry Hodge's boy." Squeak asks Mr.— if he had a brother named Jimmy. To this Mr.— replies in the affirmative and Squeak says that Jimmy (who is now married to another woman) is her daddy and that "He got three children by my mama. Two younger than me). Only once did Bubber come with Jimmy to their house and he "give us all quarter, say we sure do look like Hodges" (p.96). It is very clear now that Squeak has to go see the warden, her uncle to get Sofia out of the prison.

In letter 40 they all advise Squeak what she should tell the warden to go get Sofia. They tell her that she should tell him that Sofia is having a very good time in jail and that what she hates more is to be the maid to some white woman like the mayor's wife. She is also told to say that she is now living with Sofia's husband. They also tell her to mention to Bubber the time when he gave her a quarter. Squeak is all dressed up as a white woman for this event. The next letter shows us Squeak "come home with a limp. Her dress rip. Her hat missing and one of the heels come off her shoe"(p.100). When Harpo enters saying that his wife is "beat up" and his "woman rape," Squeak tells him "Shut up" and that she's "telling it." Here Walker shows us how the women in the novel are slowly learning to speak up and be heard. Squeak does not want anyone to appropriate her story. She says that when she walked into the jail, the warden recognised her immediately and asked her what she wanted. She said that she wanted justice to be done by punishing Sofia more. She told him (what she had been instructed to say by Shug Mr.—, Odessa etc.)namely, that what she hates is to be the maid to a white lady. life and work in jail in comparison to that is fine. The warden kept staring at her and asked her who her father was. Squeak hesitates to tell the rest but Shug says that "if you can't tell us, who you gontell. God?" We can certainly see a sympathetic bonding that is now developing among all these characters. Squeak then tells them that she was raped and asks Harpo if he loves her only for the colour of her skin. Harpo replies that he loves her and calls her Squeak. She protests that she is Mary Agnes. Through such subtle details Walker shows us the growth of her characters and their developing a sense of self. In this case, it was Celie who had told her that she should tell Harpo to call her by her real name and not by the name of Squeak.

In letter 42, six months have passed since Squeak and the jail episode. She has started singing at Harpo's jukejoint. Although she does not have a very good voice she manages. At first she sings with Shug and then she manages all by herself. The letter ends with a song by her in which she picks up the theme of racism. "But if yellow is a name / Why ain't black the same; Well, if is say Hey black girl/ Lord, she try to ruin my game" (p.104). In the next letter Celie tells us that she visited Sofia at the mayor's house where she is working as a maid for the two children. She is out of the jail after three years to do this job for the mayor's family. When Celie and Sofia talk, the latter says how come that they have not murdered any White as yet. Celie says that Sofia is always talking about "killing somebody." Celie tells her that there are "too many to kill off". She further adds, "Us outnumbered from the start. I speck we knock over one or two, though, her and there, through the years" (p. 105). We are next shown the two children of the mayor (a boy and a girl) who are playing ball in the yard. When the ball rolls under Sofia's foot and the boy commands her to throw the ball back at him, Sofia refuses. He comes storming up to her and hurts his foot in the process. He is just six years of age but Walker shows us the latent racism even in little children. Although the little girl, Eleanor Jane is fond of Sofia, Celie tells us "Sofia never notice, she as deaf to the little girl as she is to her brother" (p. 106). Walker is telling us how the Blacks have just switched off feelings in their interactions with the Whites because of the way they have been treated in general by them. Celie had told us that when Mr.—used to beat her she pretended she was a tree. Now Sofia also deadens herself.

In letter 44 Celie tell us about Sofia's experiences with the mayor's family. She says that they have the nerve to tell her that slavery was destroyed (as if it was worth upholding anyway) because the Blacks did not know how to handle it. They would

let the "mules loose in the wheat," "break hoe handles" etc. We are also told by Sofia that the mayor has bought his wife a car. He said that if coloured people can own cars so could she. However, she has not been taught to drive the car. We are also told that she has "no friends." Compare this to the black community that is slowly building up in the novel. The mayor's wife, Miz Millie, as she calls her, asks Sofia (whom she has seen driving with Prizefighter) to teach her how to drive. She tells us that she has a pokey little room in the mayor's house which is kept barely warm in winter. She also adds that she has been kept away from her children and is at the Mayor's family's "beck and call all night and all day" (p.108). Sofia continues with her story. She says that she eventually taught the mayor's wife how to drive and one fine day she told Sofia that she wanted to take her to her children so that she could spend the day with them. When Sofia gets into the seat next to Miz. Millie she tells her that in the south "have you ever seen a white person and a colored sitting side by side in a car, when one of 'em wasn't showing the other one how to drive it or clean it?" (p. 109). They finally drive off with Sofia in the back seat of the car. When they reach Odessa's home (where Sofia's children are) all her children come running up "Nobody told them [that she] was coming so they don't now who [she] is. Except the oldest two. They fall on [her]" (p.109). Odessa and Jack her husband did not see Sofia sitting at the back of the car. She continues, "us all stand round kissing and hugging each other" Miz. Millie watches all this and tells Sofia that she will come back at five to pick her up. Sofia says that she thought that she had driven off but Marion(one of Sofia's children) says that the "white lady still out there" (p.110). Sofia discovers that she is not able to drive off because she does not know how to back and Odessa's home is full of trees for her to get out without backing. When Sofia tries to help her out she discovers that the engine has died on them. But Odessa says that not to worry and that Jack can drive Miz. Millie back in his pick-up. To this Miz. Millie says "I couldn't ride in a pick-up with a strange colored man" (p. 110). So Sofia tells her that maybe Odessa can also go along because this way she will get more time to spend with her children. But Miz. Millie does not agree. Finally, Sofia goes with Jack to drop her and later picks up a mechanic to fix up the car engine and by the time it is five o'clock she is heading back to Miz. Millie's having spent only 15 minutes with her children. She ends by saying "And [Miz. Millie] been going on for months bout how ungrateful I is" (p. 111). Walker through a masterful stroke tells us all about slavery. In letter 45 Shug has come with her husband Grady to visit Mr.— in their new car. Mr.—seems upset by the news of her marriage and Celie too feels bad. In the next letter we are told that Mr.—and Brady are drinking "all through Christmas" while Celie and Shug "cook, talk, clean the house, talk, fix up the tree, talk, wake up in the morning, talk" (p.114). Shug has become rich and famous. She tells Celie that once she heard that Mr.—was beating her she began to feel differently for him. She says, "If you was my wife, I'd cover you up with kisses stead of licks, and work hard for you too" (p.115). Celie responds by saying that he does not beat her as much now "just a slap now and then when he ain't got nothing else to do" (p.115). When Shug asks her about her sexual life with Mr.—she says that there is still no joy in it.

The 47th letter is crucial because in it Celie recalls her rape. In this letter Grady and Mr.—have gone out for a drive. Shug asks Celie if she can sleep with her because she is cold. Soon they start talking about "making love." Shug asks Celie if she ever enjoyed it with Pa and she recounts her rape. She tells us how he raped her by asking her to trim his hair. She recounts how shocked she was and in great pain. When her mother questions Pa about finding his hair in the girl's room where nobody but she went, he says that the hair is from one of Celie's boyfriend's head. She begins to cry while narrating all this to Shug and Shug hugs her and says "don't cry, Celie... don't cry. She start kissing the water as it come down side my face" (p.117). Shug also says that "I thought it was only white-folks do freakish things like that [referring to the rape]" (p.117). Here Walker is making a comment about how Blacks too have their own notions of Whites. Celie goes on to say that her mama died, Nettie ran away and Mr.—forced and love to her even when her head was bandaged. "Nobody ever love me" she says. It is at this point that Shug says that she loves her and begins

to kiss her. Celie reciprocates and she writes "then us touch each other" (p.119). In the following letter Celie tells us that lying with Shug is like being with her mother or with Nettie but it feels better. Clearly a Womanist text is emerging here. Celie says that she has still not developed a liking for Grady. She also informs us that Shug likes Squeak and trains her to sing. "They sit in Odessa's front room with all the children crowded round them singing and singing. Sometime Swain come with his box, Harpo cook dinner, and me and Mr.—and the prize fighter bring out preshation" (p.120). Shug encourages Squeak to sing and tells her that men would like to hear her. She also tells her that music, dance and sex all go together "that's the reason they call what us sing the devil's music" (p.120). In the 49th letter, Celie discloses the contents of the letter from Nettie that she has in her hand. In it Nettie writes that Mr.—had told her that she would never hear from Celie and the silence from Celie's side has confirmed her fear. Nettie says that she had been writing regularly to Celie but now she writes only on Easter and Christmas hoping that her letter would get to Celie through with other greeting cards. She is not even sure whether this letter will get through but she tells Celie that she is fine and loves her dearly and that Celie's children are also fine. In Celie's letter which follows the disclosure of Nettie's letter, she says that Shug tells her that she has seen Mr.— removing mail from the mailbox, letters with stamps on them. She also asks Celie all about Nettie because, as she says, Nettie is the only other woman whom Celie loves.

In letter 50 Celie comes to know through Shug that Mr.— has been hiding the letters from her. She gives Celie one of Nettie's letters which has a stamp that says Africa. But the stamp has "little fat queen of England" on it. Celie says that since she does not know where England and Africa are she still does not know where Nettie is. However, she is murderous with anger against Mr.—for hiding the letters and almost develops a fever. Shug whose real name is Lillie as we are informed in this letter sleeps with Celie and tells us about her three children through Albert. Shug also tells us that after her third child she was thrown out and went to stay with her mother's wild sister in Memphis. She tells us how she was very hurt when Albert married Annie Julia who was in school with her. She describes her as "she was pretty, man. Black as anything, and skin ust as smooth. Big black eyes look like moons" (p.127). But that was because his people objected to her. In any case, Shug says that she continued to sleep with Albert even after his marriage in a very blatant way. She would keep him away from Annie Julia for weeks and she would come and beg Albert for grocery money to buy food for the children. Annie Julia also neglected by her husband started to have an affair with the man who finally shot her. Shug sheds a few tears and then tells Celie that she feels bad about the way she treated her too when she moved in with Albert treating her like a servant. She tells us that she does not want Albert for a husband anymore because he beats Celie and hid her sister's letters from her. The 51st letter addressed to God Celie tells us that she has discovered Nettie's letters which are hidden by Mr.— in a trunk. She says " bunches and bunches of them. Some fat, some thin. Some open, some not" (p.129). Shug advises her to steam open the letters and leave the envelopes in the trunk. Shug then puts the letters in order using the postmark as an indication. And Celie begins to read these letters. Appropriately the next lot of letters are from Nettie.

4.2 CRITICAL ISSUES EMERGING FROM CELIE'S LETTERS 26-51

In these letters we see the following issues emerging:

1. Celie as a nurturer
2. The notion of Black is beautiful
3. The quilt metaphor
4. Reversal of roles between male and female which demonstrates *The Color Purple* as Womanist text

5. The slogan, "Sisterhood is Powerful" is further developed particularly through Sofia's sisters.
6. Celie's sexual awakening
7. Racism. Anger building up in the Blacks against the Whites
8. Black community life emerging which is necessary for the growth of the characters
9. The notion of God as White perceived by Celie
10. Nettie's letters important in widening the scope of the novel.

1. Celie as Nurturer

There are at least three specific examples we have of Celie as nurturer. One is the way in which she looks after Shug Avery when she is very sick. She nurses her back to health. The second is the episode in the jail when Mr. — and Celie go to visit Sofia. Celie cleans Sofia's wounds and bonds with her and the third is when she counsels Harpo about his marriage—which he feels is not working out—and she tells him about how much Sofia loves him. In this episode, Celie analyses her own situation of a loveless marriage with Mr. — and explains to Harpo the strengths in his marriage as compared to hers. We can see from these scenes that Celie has grown from being a helpless victim—who is unable to understand her situation—to a person who understands life and feels holistic enough to nurture people.

2. Black is Beautiful

The notion, Black is Beautiful, is repeatedly emphasized in the novel. Walker, emerging from the influences of the countercultural revolutions of the sixties in America, is drawn to Black Pride. (see Harlem Renaissance in Unit 1 section on History of Black Fiction). The White bourgeois notion of beauty is shunned in the novel and what is instead foregrounded is that Black is very beautiful. The description of Shug—the glamorous singer, and, who is pivotal in the novel—in particular, is an example in point. Celie tells us about Shug whom she finds the "most beautiful woman." She says: "First time I got the full sight of Shug Avery long black body with it black plum nipples, look like her mouth, I thought I had turned into a man" (p. 51) Yet another example, is when Shug describes Annie Julia to Celie and says, "She was pretty, man. Black as anything" (p. 127) There are several such instances where black is described in relation to beauty. This is done deliberately as a backlash against White racist culture which excluded Blacks from their definition of beauty.

3. The Quilt Metaphor

This will be discussed in detail in Unit 6.4.

4. Role Reversals and the Womanist Text

In Celie's letters we are told that Harpo loves to do "womanly" things like cooking, housekeeping etc. and that his wife Sofia loves to do "manly" things like fixing up the roof and other such jobs. We are also told that Harpo looks like a woman sometimes. At Harpo's Jukejoint Celie says that when Shug talks to Sofia she sounds like a man giving her compliments. About her own self too, Celie says that when she saw Shug naked for the first time "she had turned into a man." Walker, through such examples, is telling us the need for both men and women to move out of fixed spheres of work that patriarchy has determined for men and women. Her Womanism is different from feminism in that she believes that ultimately man, woman and nature are all one and should live in harmony. (For Walker's Womanism see Unit 5.7).

5. The Slogan Sisterhood is Powerful

This slogan of the Radical Feminists is further elaborated in Celie's letters 26-51. We see a bonding between the women characters. Celie, Nettie, Shug, Squeak, Sofia and her sisters all form a nice group who nurture each other. When Sofia is in prison, for example, Sofia's sisters and Squeak look after her children. Celie, visits Sofia and is supportive of her. These female networks are important in building up confidence in the women leading to a self awareness. For example, Celie tells Squeak that she should ask Harpo to call her by her name Mary Agnes. Later, we see Squeak telling Harpo to call her by that name. In the episode following Squeak's visit to the jail, when Harpo tries to tell the family about what happened to Squeak in the jail, she tells him to "shut up" adding that she would like to tell her own story. Walker makes Sofia's sisters "all big strong healthy girls, [and who] look like amazons"(p.71). She does this to make us realize that physical strength is also important in women contrary to stereotypes floated by patriarchy that states that women should be delicate.

6. Celie's Sexual Awakening

Although Celie's Sexual Awakening had begun towards the end of letters 1-25, we see it in a more developed form here, that is, in letters 26-51. At Harpo's Jukejoint she is very puzzled by the fact that her heart pains when she sees Albert and Shug kissing each other. At this stage she is still grappling with her sexual feelings for Shug. By letter 35 Shug has asked her to explore her own body and Celie does so under Shug's guidance. Soon they make love to each other. The theme of lesbianism is important in the novel because it feeds into Walker's Womanism. She believes that women should bond with each other and love each other even sexually if they feel like it. This is also an offshoot of Radical feminism which advocated lesbianism as a way out of oppressive, heterosexual, patriarchal relationships.

7. Racism

In the letters we are told about racism about how the Whites treat the Blacks. This is seen in letter 38 when Harpo tells Sofia that maybe she will be sent out of prison soon for good behaviour. Sofia replies, "Good behavior ain't good enough for them say Sofia. Nothing less than sliding on your belly with your tongue on they boots can even git they attention. I dream of murder" (p. 94). The song that Squeak (Mary Agnes) sings at Harpo's jukejoint is another example of racist attitudes to the Blacks by the Whites. She sings "But if yellow is a name/ Why ain't black the same."(p. 104). Walker develops the theme of racism particularly through the White Mayor's family. It is because Sofia refused to work for the Mayor's family that she is put behind the bars. The Mayor's son also shows racist attitudes in his treatment of Sofia. The Mayor's wife best articulates the racist attitudes of the South when she tells Odessa (Sofia's sister) and Jack who have been kind enough to drop her home after her car has broken down "Oh, she say, I couldn't ride in a pick-up with a strange colored man" (p. 110). There are numerous such examples to show the kind of segregated society that the Blacks lived in the South in the thirties when the novel is set.

8. Development of the Black Community

There are some very beautiful vignettes that we get of the Blacks enjoying family and community life despite all odds. One is when Sofia goes to visit her children from the Mayor's place: "us pull into the yard and all the children come crowding round the car. . . They fall on me, and hug me. And then all the little oncs start to hug me too" (p.109). The other episode is when Shug teaches Squeak to sing and Celie writes, "They sit in Odessa's front room with all the children crowded round them singing and singing. Sometimes Swain come with his box, Harpo cook dinner and me

and Mr.—and the prizefighter bring our preshation” (p. 126). Try and find other such passages from the text that shows the Black community in an empowering way.

9. Notion of White God

Celie sees God as White. This is seen in the way she describes Sofia who is near to death in the prison in letter 39. “I think bout angels. God coming down by chariot, swinging down real low and carrying ole Sofia home. I see ‘em all as clear as day. Angels all in white, white hair and white eyes, look like albinos. God is all white too, looking like some stout white man work at the bank” (p. 96). It is this image of the White God that Celie abandons later on in the novel which shows her moving away from internalized White values to a Black identity that she can relate to. Her mistreatment by men is what destroys Celie and it is these experiences which make her reject a God defined in male terms and worse still as a White man. Celie is unable to change because she has placed herself in a subservient position. After she displaces her fear of men with anger, she begins to redefine God. God is in everything as Shug tells Celie. He is not a static being but is related to creativity and self-definition. Just as Celie realizes that God is not there for her when she hears about her parent’s history and the fact that Mr.—has kept Nettie’s letters away from her. Nettie too realizes that the African people are not there for her. She tells us that the relationships that she has formed there are not enduring because the Africans don’t see her and Samuel and the children as part of them. If Celie realises that God is in loving and appreciating the stars and feeling connected with the environment, Nettie too realizes that love is what will connect people to each other across the world. God is within people and not some indifferent being. In *The Color Purple* traditional notions of divinity are discarded.

10. Discovery of Nettie’s Letters

Discovering Nettie’s letters are important because they widen the scope of the novel. This will be discussed in the next section of this Unit (4.3).

4.3 THE CONTEXT OF NETTIE’S LETTERS

Letters 52-58 in the novel are letters from Nettie (who is working as a missionary in Africa) to Celie. In contrast to the rural, Black dialect of Celie’s letters, Nettie’s letters are written in standard English. Although these, like Celie’s letters, though undated are signed by her. Celie’s letters to God are disrupted by the discovery of Nettie’s letters to her which have been hidden away by Albert as an act of vengeance against Nettie, for not responding to his sexual advances to her. Many critics find this a flaw in the novel. But a careful examination of these letters reveal that these “letters are an embedded discourse within *The Color Purple*.” Celie incorporates the letters into her narrative but she does not edit or revise them. In this sense, Nettie becomes the other narrator in the novel. Significance of the letters:

- God is deliberately replaced by Nettie (after reading these letters) to show the strength of female bonding and understanding in developing an empowering sense of self.
- The two women—Celie and Nettie—create two different communities of womanhood. Celie does so in the American South and Nettie in Africa.
- Walker deliberately presents Nettie’s letters structurally separate from Celie’s to widen the scope of the novel. These letters are not filtered through Celie’s consciousness. They are presented separately the way they way written by Nettie. Reading of these letters is what impacts on the consciousness of Celie and makes her aware of a world outside of the American South. The racist and

patriarchal oppression that Celie experiences in the South—seen in her relations and interactions with people—she realizes, after reading Nettie's letters, is part of a greater international network and has a longer history. Christianity's evangelizing mission precedes the onslaught of Western Imperialism in the African continent. In this sense, Nettie's letters widens the ideological and geopolitical scope of the novel.

- Nettie's letters also document European imperialism as it uproots the lives and culture of the Olinka people in Africa.
- The conflation of Celie and Nettie's letters show the links between oppressed people. Celie's personal tragedy parallels the tragedy of the Olinka people who have also, like her, faced patriarchal, racist, imperialist oppression.
- Most importantly, Nettie's group of African-American missionaries are knowledgeable about their ancestral link to Africa. This undermines the American myth that the Black Power Movement was an off shoot of the American sixties.

4.4 A DETAILED COMMENTARY OF LETTERS 52-58 (NETTIE'S LETTERS 1-7)

Nettie's first letter is told to us by Celie with the comment "*the first letter say.*" This is significant, in that, it is Celie who is choosing to show us these letters. It is her voice that we hear in this comment. Earlier, when the novel started, we had heard the voice of Celie's stepfather—whom she imagines to be her biological father—who after raping her had told her not to tell about it to anyone but God. This shift in voice which prefaces Nettie's letters clearly indicate a growth in Celie. Nettie's first letter says that after leaving Celie, Mr.—followed her and tried to rape her. She tells Celie to leave Mr.—because he is a nasty man and that he had told her that she would "never hear from [Celie] again" (p. 131). She also informs Celie that she was able to manage to get to the Reverend's place and that the girl who opened the door for her looked like Celie's child. Nettie's next letter tells us that she misses Celie and has not heard from her. She also tells us that the address of the people she is staying with (that is, the name of the woman that Celie had met when she was waiting in the wagon for Mr.—to finish with his shopping) are very nice to her. The woman's name is Corrine. Her husband's Samuel, who is a preacher. The names of the two adopted children are Olivia and Adam. In Nettie's third letter she is desperate because she has not heard from Celie at all and is convinced now that Mr.—meant business when he told her that the sisters would not hear from each other. She even mails her some stamps so that she can write to her. Nettie tells us Samuel and Corrine and the "children are part of a group of people called Missionaries, of the American and African Missionary Society. They have ministered to the Indians out west and are ministering to the poor of this town" (p. 134).

The 4th letter, Celie tells us is "fat, dated two months later." In this letter, Nettie writes that she wrote to Celie almost everyday on the ship to Africa but tore it into bits and threw them into the water because she knew that Albert would not give Celie the letters. But, she says, that she feels differently now. She remembers what Celie told her about writing to God to express herself when she felt ashamed. Nettie says that whether god read the letters or not Celie had continued to write to him. Similarly, Nettie wants to continue to write to Celie whether she gets the letters or not. She tells us how she got to Africa because one of the missionaries, who was supposed to go dropped out at the last minute and Nettie was sent instead. In this letter she tells us that prior to her departure to Africa she accidentally met the Mayor's wife and her maid (Sofia) shopping. She also adds that she is reading a lot

about Africa and tells Celie "Didi you know there were great cities in Africa, greater than Milledgeville or even Atlanta, thousands of years ago? That the Egyptians who built the pyramids and enslaved the Israelites were colored? That Egypt is Africa? That the Ethiopia we read about in the Bible meant all of Africa?" (p. 138). She also tells Celie that she did not know how "ignorant" she was and that her real education has only just begun. Nettie, also realizes that there are coloured people who want other coloured people to know unlike Albert, Alfonso and others back home. She tells us that Samuel and Corrine have good marital relationship, very different from that of Pa. and mother. What Nettie is saying is that with education and awareness, even the Blacks can live fully. It is in this letter that she informs Celie that she is indeed looking after Celie's children who are being raised in a very nurturing way by Corrine, Samuel and Nettie herself.

In the 5th letter, Nettie talks about their parting from the shores of America to Africa. She says that she has slowly begun to realize the Ethiopians in the Bible were all "colored people" but it is the pictures in the Bible that fool people into believing that they were all Whites. She goes on "That's why the bible says that Jesus Christ had hair like lamb's wool. Lamb's wool is not straight, Celie" (p. 141). In this letter she informs us about her trip through New York to Africa. She mentions Harlem and how well the "colored" people live there better than the White man. She tells us that "they love Africa." Nettie gives another crucial detail in this letter viz. that the White people—particularly men—are given visibility where missionary work is concerned. She says, "My spirits sort of drooped after being at the [missionary] Society. On every wall there was a picture of a white man. . . . I looked for a picture of the white woman but didn't see one" (p. 143). She concludes the letter with the following lines about what Samuel said "We are not Europeans. We are black like the Africans themselves. And that we and the Africans will be working for a common goal, the uplift of black people everywhere" (p. 143). In the 6th letter Nettie gives us details about the ship in which she sailed to Africa. En route they stopped in England. Nettie describes English custom and culture to us. She also tells us about their long history of working as missionaries in Africa, China and India. She also realizes the imperial / racist tendencies of the English people. She comes to know that the Blacks were captured and sold into slavery by "slave catching wars" which involved Whites. The first stop in Africa is Monrovia. She describes it as "an African country 'founded' by ex-slaves from America who came back to Africa to live" (p. 146).

In the 7th letter Nettie says that the first glimpse that she had of Africa was Senegal. She adds that she was struck by how black the people were there "blueblack people wearing brilliant blue robes with designs like fancy quilt patterns" (p. 147). She also sees the links between the African people and African-American people in the American South. The workers, she says, sing while returning from the fields "just like we do at home." She also tells us that she had not expected to see White people in Africa "but they are here in droves. And not all are missionaries" (p. 148). She soon realises that even the president of Monrovia Tubman does not "own own the cocoa fields" and that the Dutch do. Here we get an insight into Walker's subtle ways of expanding the scope of the novel by talking about imperialism at an international level. This scope is also widened through Nettie explaining to Celie the details of each state or country that they pass through on their way to serve the Olinka people in Africa.

4.5 CRITICAL ISSUES EMERGING FROM NETTIE'S LETTERS 1-7

- The Blacks have a history
- There are common links between the Blacks in Africa and in America

- Patriarchy cuts across cultures
- Imperialism and its outreach
- Cultural / National details through the countries that Nettie passes through en route to Africa. This expands the scope of the novel

4.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit we discussed the following main points:

- We see the notion of Black is beautiful emerge
- Black American culture has deep roots in Africa
- The building up of a Black community is important for the growth of Black people
- Alice Walker's womanism includes men and women by blurring the boundaries between the separate spheres
- Blacks have a history
- The outreach of Imperialism is wide

4.7 QUESTIONS

1. What are the episodes in letters 26-51 that make you feel Celie is a nurturer?
2. How do Nettie's letters widen the scope of the Novel?
3. Comment on the significance of Celie's sexual awakening

UNIT 5 ANALYSIS OF CELIE'S LETTERS-II

Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Letters 59-61 (Celie's letters 52-54 to God after she reads Nettie's letters)
- 5.2 Critical issues arising from the above letters
- 5.3 Letters 62-73 (Nettie's letters 8-14 to Celie; Celie's letter 55th letter to God (the 69th letter in the novel) and Celie's 1st letter to Nettie (letter 70 in the novel); Nettie's letters 15-17 to Celie (letters 71-73 in the novel)
- 5.4 Critical issues that emerge from these letters
- 5.5 Letters 74-80 (Celie's letters 2-8 to Nettie)
- 5.6 Critical issues arising from letters 74-80
- 5.7 Black Womanist Fiction
- 5.8 *The Color Purple* as a Womanist Text
- 5.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 5.10 Questions

5.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will continue with the analysis of Celie's letters. Also, we will discuss Black Womanist Fiction

5.1 LETTERS 59-61

These three letters are written by Celie to God after she reads Nettie's letters. In the 59th letter Celie is very shocked and upset with Mr.—for having hid the letters from her. She writes that both she and Shug found it difficult to “puzzle out words us don't know” (p. 150). Walker here is showing us Celie's education. Nettie, through her letters is teaching Celie about new words, ideas and different cultures. Celie wants to kill Mr.— but Shug tells her that if she tries to do so she will probably meet the same fate and will be in the condition Sofia was in at the jail. Shug tells her that even Christ found it hard to deal with the people around him. To this Celie states that she is no Christ. When she continues thinking about taking vengeance on Mr.— for hiding Nettie's letters from her Shug tells her she should think of Nettie and also of her. Shug. Shug says, “Me, Celie, think about me a little bit. Miss Celie, if you kill Albert, Grady be all got left. I can't even stand the thought of that” (p. 151). Here we see Shug declaring her feelings for Celie. In the following letter Celie says that she feels no sexual excitement sleeping with Shug because she is so upset by Mr.— hiding the letters. Shug tells her that in times like this “us ought to do something different”(p. 152). She tells Celie that they should make pants for Celie. Celie protests saying Mr.— would not like it. To which Shug replies Celie is the one working in the fields doing all the ‘manly’ jobs Mr.— has no right to prevent her from wearing pants. Shug finally convinces Celie that they should make pants together and Celie agrees to it saying “everyday we going to read Nettie's letters and sew. A needle and not a razor in my hand” (p. 153). The shift from a razor to a needle indicates the growth in Celie and Shug is instrumental in it. In her 61st letter, Celie says that she has started feeling a little bolder now because she knows Nettie is alive and that one day the two of them along with Celie's two children will get away and live happily somewhere else. Celie also tells us that she feels ashamed when she thinks of the two children. Shame rather than love because Shug has told her that children born from incest belong to the devil.

5.2 CRITICAL ISSUES ARISING FROM CELIE'S LETTERS 59-61

- In these letters we see Celie in a mood for revenge. She is angry with Mr.— for hiding the letters from her. She tells Shug that she is no Christ.
- Through Nettie's letters we see Celie learns about new things. These letters further educate Celie about the world.
- We see Shug and Celie getting closer to each other. Shug openly tells Celie that she needs her.
- The effect of the Bible on the characters is seen when Shug tells Celie about the devil and children born from incest. Celie feels ashamed
- Shug is important in making Celie leave angry emotions against Mr.—behind and move on to more positive things like sewing. In short, the razor is replaced by a needle.
- Celie has hope that one day Nettie and her along with her two children will go somewhere and live happily.

5.3 LETTERS 62-73 : NETTIE'S LETTERS TO CELIE

In the 62nd letter (which is Nettie's 8th letter) she tells us that Samuel and the rest of the family including her were met by an African, Joseph when they reached the port close to the African village of Olinka. He spoke "pidgin English" which is different from the English they were used to in the American South. She states that unlike the Seneghalese who were very black, Joseph and the others were a "chocolate brown." She refers to the strong, white teeth of the Africans and compares it to the bad teeth of the English "so crooked, usually, and blackish with decay" (p. 155). Walker is showing us how Nettie is slowly becoming aware of beauty in Black people. Nettie tells us further that most of the place is run by a white man "but some of the stalls that sell produce are rented out to Africans" (p.156). In order to reach the Olinka village they had to walk through the jungle for four days. She adds that the village people love meat and that they remind her of "folks at home" (p. 156). All the huts have rootleaf as the roof. She says that it is part of the woman's job to pick these leaves and dry them. "Menfolks drive the stakes for the hut and sometimes help build the walls with mud and rock from the streams" (p.157). When they reached the Olinka village, Nettie says that everybody crowded around them. One of the villager asked Samuel if the children belonged to her [Nettie] or Corrine. Another woman asked Samuel if she was his wife. When he responded by saying that she was a missionary, he remarked that he never knew that missionaries could be Black. In this letter we are also told about the history and significance of the rootleaf by one of the villagers. His story is interpreted by Joseph to Samuel and the rest of the family members (pp.158-159). Rootleaf is like God to them. Here we see Walker re-defining God to us which is a theme picked up later on in the novel by Shug.

In Nettie's 9th letter, she gives us some details about her routine in the village and the kind of work that she does in the school. She also tells us about the sexist approach that the Olinka people have. The Olinka "do not believe girls should be educated" (p. 161). When Nettie questioned a mother who said this, she replied, "A girl is nothing to herself, only to her husband can she become something" (p.162). When questioned further by Nettie, the mother stated the "something" referred to being the

mother of his children. To this Nettie replied that she was not the mother of children and yet she was something. Nettie was alarmed by what she said, "you are not much, the missionary's drudge" (p. 162). Tashi, an important character in the novel, is the daughter of this lady with whom Nettie has a conversation. Nettie tells Celie, that Tashi is the friend of Olivia and that in school only Adam ever speaks to Olivia. Usually the boys and the girls do their own things. Nettie then says something very important. She writes, "But never fear, Celie, Olivia has your stubbornness and clear-sightedness, and she is smarter than all of them, including Adam, put together" (p. 162). It is in this same letter that Corrine tells Nettie that they should refer to each other as brother and sister because the villagers are getting a wrong idea about them. Nettie says that since Corrine has come to Africa she seems changed as if her "spirit is being tested and that something in her is not at rest" (p. 164). She also tells Nettie to tell the children not to call her [Nettie] mama. This disturbs Nettie because she does treat them like her children without taking Corrine's place. The notion of motherhood is brought out here again. The rest of the letter describes Nettie's hut and its structure.

In the 10th letter, Tashi's parents come to complain about Tashi's changed ways after hanging around with Olivia in Nettie's hut. Tashi's father tells Nettie that the Olinka women are well looked after—unlike the American women—by their father, brother and husband. When Nettie tells them that the world is changing and that Tashi is a bright girl who can study and become a teacher or a nurse, the father replies that in the Olinka community "there is no place for women to do those things" (p. 168). Nettie ends her letter by saying that they way Olinka men speak to their women reminds her of Pa. (p. 168). In the 11th letter, Nettie tells us some important things 1) that a road is being built in the village and the workers are from the north of Africa. The Olinkas feed them and look after these road builders very well. 2) Nettie and the rest have been living in Africa for five years now. 3) Corrine and she are not very close now. In fact, Corrine has asked her not to let Samuel visit her hut when Corrine is not around. 3) Tashi comes over and tells Olivia and her stories "popular among the Olinka children." The stories that Olivia know, Tashi has the original version of it. 4) Tashi's father has died of malaria and Tashi's mother, whose name is Catherine, has decided not to marry again because she has become an "honorary man" by virtue of the fact that she has had five sons. 5) Olinka women often share a bonding having married the same man. There is a community that they build up looking after each other's children and feeding them etc. But if one of the wife's fall sick then the bonding snaps because sorcery and witchcraft by the other women is suspected. In fact the Olinka man has "life and death power over his wife" (p. 175). Samuel finds it difficult to teach the Olinkas about the Biblical notion of one man one wife.

In the 12th letter, Nettie tells us that the road that was being built in the village of Olinka was not for them and that now the road was being extended cutting through the Olinka fields—including Catherine's yam fields. Apparently, when the Olinka chief went to find out from the coast what was going on, he returned with more disturbing news that the English owned the place and that they were planting rubber trees there. Nettie further states that the Chief tells them that since the Olinka people no longer owned the land or the water in the village, they had to pay a house tax and a water tax. Fighting the White man was of no use because they had guns and a trained army. Nettie ends her letter by saying that Corrine is very sick and that the women in the village are slowly educating their daughters. In the next letter, Nettie says that Corrine questioned her very closely about Olivia and Adam and if she knew Samuel earlier on. Nettie says that she has become suspicious unnecessarily and this is reflecting on her treatment of the children. She also states because of the new road coming up the women have to go further and further away to work. The 14th letter is very important because it tells us that Samuel himself thought that the children were Nettie's which is why he made her come to Africa to look after the children. When Nettie asked Samuel how he got the children he told her a story that was very unsettling (pp. 181-182). Embedded in this story is the information about Celie and

Nettie's biological father's background and the most important news that Pa. is not their father, only their stepfather.

Letter 69-70: Celie's letters

Letter 69 which is Celie's 55th letter to God is a short but a very crucial letter. In this letter we are informed that Shug has asked Celie to go with her to Tennessee. But Celie states that she is still in a daze after hearing about the violent history about her biological family. She now knows that her father was lynched by the Whites for being a successful businessman. She also knows that Pa. is not her biological father. She is shaken up by all these facts and makes the most important statement directly to god saying "you must be sleep" (p. 183). Letter 70 is the first letter that Celie writes to Nettie. In this letter she tells us that she feels a desire to meet Pa. So she and Shug head towards her childhood home. While they are driving, Celie tells us that after she left home she visited Pa. once. At that time he was still with May Ellen (his second wife) and she recalls a little scene of May trying to bend down and fix her stocking and Pa. "was standing over her tap-tap-tapping on the gravel with his cane. Look like he was thinking bout hitting her with it" (p. 184). Walker, through such scenes shows us the misogyny in the men. An important difference that we see in Celie as she drives down with Shug to visit Pa. the second time is the way she observes the beauty in nature. She says that the first thing the two (Shug and she) notice is "how green everything is" (p. 184). In this letter we also come to know that Pa. is now living in a big house which has a domestic named Hetty. He has remarried for the third time to a girl not more than 15 years of age by the name of Daisy. She is the daughter of one of his workers. We learn that May Ellen went away with the children because as Pa. says "Got too old for me" (p. 187). Celie tells him that she got a letter from Nettie in Africa stating that Pa. is not their biological father. He knows that Shug is aware of what he has done to Celie but he does not care. Daisy is impressed by the fact that Pa. never really told Celie and Nettie about their biological father being lynched. She believes the story that Pa. has told her regarding how selfless he was etc in raising the children. In this letter, Pa. also tells Shug and Celie how to be a successful businessman. He says that Blacks don't know how to run businesses and he give us his theory of including the Whites by giving them part of the profits in any business for it to be successful (p. 188). When Shug and Celie leave searching for Celie's parents graves, once again the beautiful landscape is described with birds in the air etc. Walker is showing us how the ugly childhood episodes are now being replaced by more positive aspects of life.

Letters 71-73: Nettie's Letters to Celie (15-17)

Letter 71 in the novel is Nettie's 15th letter to Celie. In this letter, Nettie says that she went to Corrine to tell her the truth about Olivia and Adam but that she is too sick and does not believe her or Samuel. The notion of motherhood is picked up again here by Walker when Nettie tells Corrine that she had shown evidence to her by showing her her stomach which did not have any stretch marks from pregnancy. To this Corrine says, "What do I know about pregnancy, I never experienced it myself" (p. 190). Nettie then tells Corrine about the time when Celie met her shopping. But Corrine, she says, cannot recall the incident. Letter 16 from Nettie to Celie states that Nettie in an attempt to make Corrine recall the episode of Celie meeting her in town shopping for cloth, she pulled out the quilts which Corrine made with the cloth from the clothes that the children had outgrown. Nettie also tells us that Olinka men make beautiful quilts. Finally, Corrine remembers when Nettie points out a piece from the dress material that Olivia wore in her early years. Corrine admits that Celie looked a lot like Olivia and she was worried if Celie would take the child away. She also remembers the humiliation that she faced in the store by the clerk there who treated her like any "nigger" (p. 193). Corrine dies after remembering the event and realizing that the children were not Nettie and Samuel's as she had suspected. Nettie's 17th letter reports about the funeral that they had for Corrine which was conducted the Olinka way. She also tells us about the taboo surrounding menstruation in the

village. Menstruating women should not be seen around. She also tells us of the friendship between Olivia and Tashi and the family that she has in Samuel, Catherine and the children. Nettie redefines family and community here (p.196).

5.4 CRITICAL ISSUES ARISING FROM LETTERS 62-73

- Through the above letters we learn more about Africa and African culture particularly of the Olinka people
- The theme of imperialism is developed further expanding the scope of the novel
- Patriarchal rituals and customs of the Olinka people are shown to demonstrate that patriarchy cuts across class and culture.
- God is replaced by Nettie in Celie's letters
- We get through flashbacks, details about Celie's parents and her visit to Pa.
- Nettie, like Celie, is building up her own community in Africa.
- The tension between Corrine and Nettie is important in the novel. It tests the slogan "Sisterhood is Powerful."

5.5 LETTERS 74-80 (CELIE'S LETTERS 2-8 TO NETTIE)

Celie's 2nd letter to Nettie tells her how she has now moved away from the White, patriarchal notion of God. She narrates to us how this change happened in her. She states how after hearing the story of her biological parents, she realized that there was no God. She told Shug, "the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And acts like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown" (p.199). She then goes on to say that Shug told her to break out of the male, White notion of God and instead think of God as neither "he" nor "she" but "it." Shug explained to her that God is everywhere and present most in the things we enjoy. "God is everything. Everything that is or ever was or ever will be. And when you can feel that, and be happy to feel that, you've found it" (p.203). Shug further tells her that the trees, environment everything is part of God and enjoying it and feeling connected with the cosmos is the best way you can pray to God. Celie admits to Shug that "this hard work, let me tell you. He been there so long, he don't want to budge. He threaten lightening, floods and earthquakes. Us fight. I hardly pray at all" (p.204). In the next letter, Celie says that Shug is amused by the fact that God has been replaced by Nettie in Celie's letters. In this letter, Celie explains to Nettie that the woman that she saw with the Mayor's wife was Sofia and how she was in jail for three years and was later placed as a maid in the Mayor's house. There she worked for eleven and a half years and was sent six months early for good behaviour. When Sofia returns home her older children are married and gone and the younger ones do not recognise her and are puzzled by her affection for the little White girl, Eleanor Jane (the daughter of the Mayor). When Sofia sits for dinner the children act as if she is not there. "Children call Odessa mama. Call Squeak little mama. Call Sofia 'miss'" (p. 206). Notion of motherhood is played upon again over here. Later on we are told that Sofia is willing to look after Suzie Q (Jolentha, the child of Squeak and Harpo). It is in this letter that Celie confronts Mr.—about the way he has treated her. She is ready to leave with Shug for Memphis when Shug makes the offer to her. Squeak on her own says that she wants to go north. She says, that since Suzie Q was born she has not been able to sing which is what she wants to do. Harpo is surprised to hear this

because he felt that he had provided for her. All that Mr.— is worried about is what will people say. Both him and Harpo begin to stammer and stutter. They are slowly being silenced by the women. When Grady tries to tell Celie that no man will consider a woman if people talk negatively about her for leaving house and family, Celie and Shug giggle and the other women join in as well: “Shug look at me and us giggle. Then us laugh sure nuff. Then Squeak start to laugh. Then Sofia. All us laugh and laugh” (p.208). Sofia also implies to Harpo that he is not the father of her sixth child. The letter ends with Celie telling Nettie that Eleanor Jane came to talk to Sofia because their family was having a hard time “A lot of drinking in that family, say Jack. Plus, they can't keep that boy of theirs in college. He got drunk, aggravate his sister, chase women, hunt niggers, and that ain't all” (p.211). Walker is deliberately using Black stereotypes to describe a White family. In the 4th letter to Nettie, Celie describes her parting with Mr.— she says that he acted as if she was not there. He also told her “You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, he say, you nothing at all” (p.213). Celie, however, also tells him what she feels about him. She curses him and leaves.

In Celie's 5th letter to Nettie she describes to her Shug's big house in which she is living. Celie informs us that Shug is working very hard on a road show and is not looking after herself properly. When Celie offers to travel with her in order to take care of her she says “You not my maid. I didn't bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet” (p.218). Celie tells in this letter that she has started making pants for a living. Shug has helped her with the money for the material and also the orders from her band and later she is swamped with orders from everywhere. Shug gives her dining room as a factory space for Celie and tells her “You making your living, Celie” (p.221). Celie signs her letter as Celie, Folkspants Unlimited/Sugar Avery Drive/Memphis, Tennessee. In the next letter Celie tells Nettie “I am so happy. I got love, I got work, I got money, friends and time” (p.222). She also tells us that Jerene and Dalene who are twins come and help her with her business. They are unmarried. Darlene tries to teach Celie how to talk correctly. In the 7th letter, Celie goes to visit Harpo and Sofia because Sofia has lost her mother. She tells us that Harpo has built a big house just below the juke-joint. When she goes to Harpo's place she passes Mr.— who does not recognise Celie with her different look. Celie tells us “Got on some dark blue pants and a white silk shire that look righteous. Little red flat-heel slippers, and a flower in my hair” (p.224). Before she reaches Harpo's house she hears an argument between Harpo and Sofia. Harpo objects to Sofia saying that she wants to be a pallbearer for her mother's funeral. Harpo tells her that men do such jobs but Sofia says that she and her sister will be the pallbearers. (p.225). Here again we see role reversal which is crucial to the Womanist text. In this letter we are also told that Squeak is now doing well in Memphis, she and Grady are a twosome (a sexual relationship is implied) and they all smoke Reefers. In the 8th letter, Celie tells us that when she met Mr.— at Sofia's mother's funeral he looked clean and good. But he seemed somehow scared of her. Celie says “Well good, I think, Let his feel what I felt” (p.230). Sofia tells Celie that the man has changed over a new leaf and now talks of religion, does house work like cooking and cleaning. When Celie asks her what made his change like this. She says that he went through a very bad phase and started living badly, neglecting his house and himself. He was scared of everything finally when things got bad Harpo started nursing his back to health. But what made him really pull through was the fact that Harpo made him send Celie” the rest of [Nettie's] letters. Right after that he start to improve” (p.231). Sofia then adds “You know meanness kill” (p.231). It is in this letter that we are also told that Sofia is still looking after Eleanor Jane (the Mayor's daughter) whose mother is no more and who is herself is not too well. Sofia's daughter, Henrietta, we are told is also very sick with some blood disease. This reminds Celie of what Nettie had written to her about children in Africa dying of some blood disease. Walker is clearly making connections here between Africans and African-Americans, pointing to their common history.

5.6 CRITICAL ISSUES ARISING FROM LETTERS 74-80

Critical Issues arising from the above Letters

- Celie moves away from the notion of a White God. Shug is instrumental in this. (p.199). Shug teaches her about God in nature etc.(p.203).
- Celie confronts Mr. - about the way he has treated her and is ready to leave for Memphis with Shug.
- Squeak decides to go north so that she can start singing again. She tells Harpo that ever since Jolenta was born she has not been able to work
- The men in the novel are slowly being silenced.
- Reversal and change in the men folk too can be noticed. (p.225).
- Celie starts her own business and is now economically independent.

5.7 BLACK WOMANIST FICTION

Black women in America are triply burdened. They suffer from racial, sexual and class prejudices and are forced to occupy a very marginal place in male dominated America. As a result, their humanity and the black female self are denied by white men. This made them feel insignificant, faceless, subservient and devoid of identity. The responsibility of giving them back their rejected humanity and their womanhood falls on the shoulders of black women writers. These writers can be labeled as black womanist writers. Alice Walker is one of those pioneers who believes in the black womanist tenets.

The term womanist has been described by Alice Walker in detail in *In Search of our Mother's Garden*. She writes that the word 'womanist' means (Walker 1938: xi-xii):

- From womanish (opposite of "girlfish", i.e. frivolous, irresponsible, not serious). A black feminist or feminist of color.....**
- Also: A woman who loves other women sexually and /or non sexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture women's emotional flexibility ...and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or non-sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female....**
- Loves music. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit, loves love and food and roundness. Loves struggle. Loves the folk. Loves herself. Regardless.**
- Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.**

It is obvious, from the passage quoted above, that black womanism celebrates blackness, black people, and presents a balanced picture of black womanhood. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1985-64) thinks that the black womanist will recognize "along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations.....".

Sherley Anne Williams (1986:304) has also approved and accepted this term propounded by Alice Walker. Its premises and compulsions demand, of course, that black women must believe in the wholeness of community.

Black womanism does not believe dividing black society from within on sex lines, but stands for integration and has faith in the "wholeness" of black society. Black womanism also indicates a notion of sisterhood developed by Fran Sanders (1970-78).

I am not and never have been a sister to any man except my brother, Danny, and I feel that the whole thing is about to go too far. It seems positively incestuous. I mean, how does one make the transition from brother to lover if need be? Do I suddenly see this man who has previously been addressing me as sister as a potential lover? Not hardly?... Better to see the woman as a woman and treat her accordingly while at the same time trying to upgrade the quality of the relationship.

Since times of slavery, black womanhood has been destroyed, distorted, dismantled and abused with racial, sexual and inhuman practices by blackmen and white men and also white women. In the process, they have lost their genuine "self" and have developed a triple consciousness – white, black, and female. They see themselves with the eyes of white men and women and black men. This has ultimately been responsible for the destruction of their self-confidence and the feeling of being human. They looked upon themselves as chattel. The task of the black womanist writers, therefore, is to give back to black women their own black woman self, their beauty, physical and sexual strength, motherhood, sisterhood, wifehood, etc. At the same time, they need to recover from psychological and mental traumas of inferiority. This is possible only if their wholeness and roundness as women are restored.

5.8 THE COLOR PURPLE AS A WOMANIST TEXT

At one level *The Color Purple* is a typically Radical American text because it speaks about female bonding and lesbian relationships. Yet Walker does not call herself a feminist but a womanist. Walker's womanism is her brand of feminism (for a brief history of Black Feminism see Unit 2.3). She started writing at a time when the feminist movement was at its height. But she rejects the term feminist for womanist. She defines "womanist" as a "feminist of color" and a woman who "loves other women sexually or nonsexually" but is committed to the "survival" and "wholeness" of people at large. In an interview, she says "I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival, the survival *whole* of my people... but beyond that, I am committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women... For me, black women are the most fascinating creations in the world. Next to them, I place the old people—male and female—who persist in their beauty in spite of everything."

In her novel *The Color Purple*, Walker through two women—Celie and Nettie—challenges several patriarchal notions about family, women's identity and role and community. Each women character in the novel occupies a conflictual space between demands of father and husband. All of them suffer some form of violence. Sofia survives mutilation, brute labour, unjust imprisonment due to racist attitudes. Squeak is raped by a White male. Celie is raped by a man she consider to be her father. But through all this degradation these women find a place for themselves in life. Walker makes her character achieve this through female bonding and nurturing. The womanist perspective is what bonds people in love and caring. The quilt metaphor (discussed in Unit 6.4) picks up Walker's womanism, in that, a quilt is associated with bits of pieces sewn together women too pull themselves out of their fragmented lives and piece their stories together and gain and identity and a self confidence

which is empowering. For example, Celie does not die in this world in order to be born blessed in the next. She is reborn in this world which enables her to enjoy life and life it to its full. Just as Celie tries to link herself with other women so does Alice Walker link herself with her literary maternal ancestors and her African-American roots. In fact, the very form of the novel is evolutionary and points to Walker's womanism. Letters and diary entries were the only forms traditionally available to women. Through letters, Walker shows us the growth of her characters. The very inception of the story line of the novel was inspired by a sisterly chat between Walker and her sister Ruth (for details see Unit 3.1)

The reversal of roles that we see in the novel where women dress like men (as in the case of Sofia), and where men cook and clean (as in the case of Harpo), and where women love women as men love women, sexually, is part of Walker's womanist agenda. She believes that womanism must include women as men. But women will be the centre in building up family and community. We see this in the novel through the impact that Shug has on Mr --, Celie and the others. It is her love that brings about radical changes in the lives of the characters in the novel. It is interesting that even God is replaced in the novel by Walker's womanism to mean beauty in nature and the universe. Her pantheism is an offshoot of her womanism. Celie best represents this when she addresses her last letter to "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God." This including "peoples" and "everything" is for Walker womanism. In her prose work *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* she says, "so many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories. Only recently did I fully realize this; that through years of listening to my mother's stores of her life, I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories --like her life-- must be recorded"(p.240).

5.9 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we discussed the following issues:

- Lesbianism is an important issue with Black women writers
- Life and culture of African particularly the Olinka people is shown
- To redefine God from being a white male to an all encompassing energy is crucial for the Blacks to relate to him
- Life in South of America during slavery is exposed

5.10 QUESTIONS

1. What are the details that we get of Celie's childhood in letters 62-63?
2. Comment on the significance of the Shug/Celie relationship
3. What are some of the patriarchal rituals of the Olinka people that you see?
4. Discuss the changed attitudes of the men in the novel

the Bishop was more curious to know why Nettie had not returned to America after Corrine's death. Here we see the typical patriarchal attitude of the Bishop who is more interested in what people will say about Samuel and Nettie together rather than about the problems of the Olinkas. In this letter we get information about Samuel's childhood. He was a New Yorker and met Corrine through his aunt who was a friend of Corrine's aunt—both of whom were missionaries in the Belgian Congo. Corrine was sent to Spelman Seminary where Aunt Theodosia had gone. This place was started by two White missionaries from New England. These two ladies got huge donations and spread their missionary work by starting a school. We are also told that "sixty years or so before the founding of the school, the Cherokee Indians who lived in Georgia were forced to leave their homes and walk, through the snow, to resettlement camps in Oklahoma. A third of them died on the way" (p. 241). Du Bois is mentioned in this letter indicating the time period to us. In reality he as the Black leader who was a radical and believed in Black pride without any compromise unlike the pacifist approach of Booker Washington. When Aunt Theodosia narrates to Edwards Duboyce (as Du Bois is referred) and the other youngsters gathered at her place about how she got a medal from King Leopold of Belgium for her missionary work, he says that in accepting and feeling proud of that medal she is an accomplice to the exploitation of the Blacks by the White imperialists. He states that the king was a "despot who worked to death and brutalized and eventually exterminated thousands and thousands of African peoples" (p. 243). Here Walker is making links with Christianity, its missionary work and imperialism. The letter concludes with Nettie telling us that Adam has developed an interest in Tashi and that she has told the children about their biological mother, Celie and she goes in to some more details about the Olinka culture—female circumcision, scarring of the face etc. Samuel's feelings about the Africans not really accepting them is also highlighted. Through all this Walker is showing us that Africa too is no ideal paradise. In her 19th letter to Celie, Nettie says that they have returned back to Africa after their trip to England where they had gone to get support for the Olinkas from the ruthless exploitation of the White Plantation owners. When they go back to the Olinka people they realise that Tashi has gone through the African rituals of female circumcision and "facial sacrifice" ceremony. We are told that Adam has conflicting feelings for Tashi now and that Nettie and Samuel are very happy with each other.

Letters 83-86 (Celie's Letters to Nettie 9-12)

This is a crucial letter because in it Celie tells Nettie about the death of Pa. (Alfonso). She says that Pa.'s third wife, Daisy, called him and told her about it. Contrary to the violent death that Celie expected Pa. to die he died in his sleep. Daisy informs Celie that both she and Nettie have inherited Pa.'s house because all the property he owned actually belonged to their biological father who was lynched. He had willed it to his wife, their mother after her it passed on to the sisters. Alfonso hid this information from them. At first Celie says that she did not want anything that belonged to Pa. but later Shug tells her not to be foolish and she inherits the big house and the dry grocery store along with Nettie. She ends the letter saying that "you have a home to come to" (p. 253). In this letter we are also told that she visits pa.'s grave and tells us of the words written on her tombstone: "Sure enough it's got Alfonso's name on it. Got a lot of other stuff on it too. Member of this and that. Leading businessman and farmer. Upright husband and father. Kind to the poor and helpless" (p. 252). The irony in these lines are self explanatory. In her 10th letter Celie writes to Nettie that Shug is in love with somebody else and that Celie's heart is broken. She feels that if she had stayed on in Memphis last summer this would not have happened but she wanted to fix up the inherited house before the arrival of Nettie, Samuel and the children. Shug tells Celie that she is in love with a nineteen-year-old boy named Germaine. He played the flute in her band. Celie tells Shug that she wants to move out and that she cannot live with her. Shug pleads with her but to no avail. Mary Agnes and Grady have got together and are in Panama owning land with reefers in it. She occasionally sings there and both she and Grady are in general doing well. Cuba is mentioned and about coloured folks who live there. All this expands the scope of

the novel. In the 11th letter to Nettie, Celie tells us that she watching over Henrietta who is very sick and as told by Nettie that in Africa people take yam to get cured they are all making yam dishes for her. Everybody in the community comes over with yam dishes. A Black community is certainly building up (p. 258). She also tells us that she meets Mr. who has sobred down a little. He asks about her and she tells him that she is making pants and doing it as a business. She also tells him that she started the business in his home to prevent herself from killing him. In the 12th letter Celie says that the only mail that Mr. placed in her hand directly was a telegram "that come from the United States Department of Defense. It say the ship you and the children and your husband left Africa in was sunk by German mines off the coast of someplace called Gibraltar. They thinkd you all drowned. Plus, the same day all the letters I wrote to you over the years come back unopen" (p. 262).

6.2 CRITICAL ISSUES EMERGING FROM THE ABOVE LETTERS

Letters 81-82 (Nettie's letters to Celie 18-19)

- Nettie tells us of her marriage to Samuel
- Plight of the Olinka people due to imperialism is further highlighted. Nettie informs us how they have to pay land and water taxes in their own land.
- The White missionary worker, Doris Baines is described in detail. She has adopted a Black boy called Harold.
- Samuel's childhood in New York and how he met Corrine is described.
- The links between Christianity and Imperialism are made more clear.
- Adam develops an interest in Tashi
- Adam and Olivia are told about their biological mother, Celie.

Letters 83-86 Celie's Letters to Nettie 9-12

- Celie informs Nettie about the death of Pa. and also about his third wife Daisy
- Celie and Nettie have inherited all the property after Pa.'s death because it was theirs from the beginning
- Shug is involved with Germaine who is a 19year-old flute player in her band
- Mary Agnes and Grady are together in Panama and doing good business there
- Cuba, Gibraltar, German mines and Panama all expand the scope of the novel. Also important to note the imperial powers at work through America, England, Germany, Belgium etc.
- We are informed about Henreitta, Sofia's youngest child as being very sick
- Mr. and Celie are oncc again in contact and Mr. has sobred down a lot.

6.3 LETTERS 87-91 (ALTERNATING LETTERS FROM CELIE TO NETTIE TO EACH OTHER)

In Nettie's letter to Celie she tells her that Tashi and her mother, Catherine have joined the Mbeles. These are people who live deep in the jungle and are anti-White. We are also told about the fact that the Whites by destroying yam and planting rubber for money have ruined the ecological balance. People are very sick with malaria. The Olinkas combated with malaria by eating yam. We are told that "nearly thirty years have passed without a word" (p. 264) between the two sisters. Wonders if Celie will still be an open person or would years of abuse have changed her. Nettie also writes that "God is different to us now, after all these years in Africa. More spirit than ever before, and more internal. Most people think he has to look like something or someone—a roofleaf or Christ—but we don't. And not being tied to what God looks like, frees us" (p. 264). She further adds that American society will not be a shock to the children except of course the racism there. Nettie also confesses that despite spending a lot of time with the Olinkas they have not developed any strong ties except with Tashi and her mother. She says "After all, the Olinka know we can leave, they must stay. And, of course, none of this has to do with color. And—" (p. 265). The letter ends with her informing Celie that Adam is missing and may have gone in search of Tashi.

Significance of Nettie's Letter to Celie

- In this letter we come to know about the passing of thirty years since the sisters last met.
- God is redefined in keeping with African notions which eventually feed into Shug's definition of God that influences Celie
- Nettie tells Celie about Samuel and her inability to make any lasting ties with the Olinkas except with Tashi and Catherine. Walker here points to the notion of Blacks feeling displaced both in Africa and in America.

Celie's Letter to Nettie

This is one of the longest letters in the novel clearly pointing to Celie's growth. The letter begins with self doubt about herself and her physical appearance and moves on to Mr.—and how she does not hate him anymore. She also adds that he is the only one who understands her feelings about Shug and he listens to people now. We are told about Sofia and Eleanor Jane who has now married a man called Stanley Earl. Their son named Reynolds Stanley becomes the target of a rift between Sofia and Eleanor. The former tells the latter that she will never be able to love Reynolds the way Eleanor wants her to love him because Sofia feels that he will ultimately become a White man. Shug is in touch with her and has written that she and Germaine now live with James, Shug's third son. He is married to Cora Mae and they have two children Davis and Cantrell. Although Celie is upset with Shug about living with Germaine, she adds, "Shug got a right to live too. She got a right to look over the world in whatever company she choose. Just cause I love her don't take away none of her rights" (p. 276). We see a certain maturity in Celie here which indicates her growth. Celie also reports a conversation that she and Mr.—had about Shug. He says that he loves her style because "Shug act more manly than most men. I meant she upright, honest, Speak her mind and the devil take the hindmost" (p. 276). To this Celie states that all these qualities that Mr.—has outlined about Shug is what she considers to be womanly qualities because she has seen them in Sofia and Shug. The Mr.—says that Shug told him that she could not love him because he was beating Celie. He says that when Shug and he fooled around with each other after he had married Annie Julia, his wife had no one to complain to. Her own family had

abandoned her. He now understands her pain. He also understands Celie's pain after Shug got involved with Germaine. He says, "I am real sorry she left you, Celie. I remember how I felt when she left me" (p.278). They then have a moment of togetherness as she says "two old fools left over from love, keeping each other company under the stars" (p. 278). She also comes to know from Mr.—that while he was growing up he had learnt how to sew. Celie encourages him to start sewing again. She tells him to stitch pockets for her pants. She adds, "Now us sit sewing and talking and smoking our pipes" (p.279). Here Walker is demonstrating to us her philosophy of womanism where men and women do each other's work and there is no division of labour in the patriarchal sense between men and women. Celie narrates to Mr.—Nettie's African version of the creation myth in the Bible (p. 278). She also tells him that Adam is called something that sounds like Omatangu. She says, "It mean a un-naked man somewhere near the first one God made that knowed what he was. A whole lot of the men that come before the first man was men, but none of them didn't know it" (p. 283). She concludes the letter by saying that she feels that she can talk to Mr.—now. She says, "he ain't Shug, but he begin to be somebody I can talk to" (p. 283).

Significance of Celie's Letter to Nettie

In this letter we see Celie's growth. This is seen in at least three instances:

- Her attitude to Shug. She feels that Shug has a right to lead her own life.
- Her feelings of hate towards Mr.—have now turned over a new leaf. This is partly because Mr.—has also changed for the better.
- When Mr.—delineates qualities such as honesty, directness and an ability to speak up as those associated with men she immediately states that these are qualities that she sees in women like Shug and Sofia. In short, she sees women in a positive life. They are no longer seen as victims by her.

Nettie's Letter to Celie

In this letter we are told that Adam has gone to the Mbeles to find Tashi. We also get a description in this letter about the African people who are fighting Imperialism (p. 284). Adam has asked Tashi's hand in marriage and Tashi says that she is not looking forward to going to America because she will be different there what with her "sacrification marks." To prove her wrong Adam goes and gets "scars identical to Tashi's on his cheeks" (p. 286). He is referred to as Tashi Omatangu. They were married by Samuel.

Significance of the above letter

- In this letter we get some information about the way the Mbeles try to combat imperialism.
- We also get some insights through Tashi's comments about America as to how the Africans view the country.
- Adam has identified himself with Africa and is now clear about his roots when he goes back to America.

Celie's Letter to Nettie

In this letter Celie writes that Mr.—informed Shug about the lost ship in which he presumes Nettie and her family were travelling. Shug feels horrible when she thinks of Celie suffering. Celie also tells Nettie that she has hired Sofia to clerk in the store that the two sisters have inherited. Celie also tells us that Eleanor cooks yam dishes

for Henrietta and her White folks pretend she does not work for these Niggers. Mr.—and Celie also have a heart to heart talk which is narrated in this letter. Celie says that Mr.—was telling her one day about how he felt that his life was not as successful as Shug's because no body loved him except Shug whereas all love Shug. Celie told him that if he felt sorry in his heart then there is still hope for him. Mr.—tells Celie that after much thinking he has realised that "in wondering bout the big things and asting bout the big things, you learn about the little ones, almost by accident. But you never know nothing more about the big things than you start out with. The more I wonder, her say, the more I love" (p. 290). Celie tells him that is how people love him back and he agrees with her. Celie then tells us that just when Mr.—asked her to re-marry him in "spirit as well as in the flesh, and just after I say Naw" (p. 290), she gets a letter from Shug that she is coming back. She says something which shows her maturity and growth: "I be so calm. If she come, I be happy. If she don't, I be content. And then I figure this the lesson I was suppose to learn"(p.290). The letter also tells us about Shug's visit to Celie's inherited house and about Celie's room in which everything is "purple and red" (p.291). The mantle piece has a purple frog when Shug asks her where she got it from, she says Albert carved it for her. Walker shows her growth by the fact that she calls Mr.—Albert now. The color purple shows that Celie is queen over herself now.

The last letter in the novel is also written by Celie but is addressed to "Dear God. Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God." This letter records the visit of Nettie and her family who have come to be reunited with Celie. When they come Celie and Shug and Mr.—are sitting out on the porch. The novel ends with Nettie, Samuel, Olivia, Adam and his wife, Tashi all reuniting with Celie and Harpo and the rest feeling very happy.

Significance of the above letters

- Role reversals, Eleanor cooks for Henrietta
- Mr.—and Celie develop a friendship.
- Celie has grown. This is evident from the fact that she is willing to say no to marriage when Mr.—asks for her hand. Also, she is very mature about handling Shug's visit.
- The "color purple" is mentioned to show that Celie is queen over herself now.
- The last letter is addressed to a pantheistic god.

6.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE QUILT METAPHOR

Quilting literally means stitching together pieces of cloth. The concept of the quilt gained significance in American academia with the resurgence of the feminist movement in the sixties. Nineteenth century writers like Louisa May Alcott and Harriet Beecher Stowe had incorporated the metaphor of the quilt into their texts (in *Aunt Jo's Scrapbag* and "The Minister's Wooing" respectively) and this tradition continues today with Alice Walker and other twentieth century writers like Gloria Naylor and Toni Morrison. Elaine Showalter stated in 1986 "the strongly marked American women's tradition to piecing, patchwork, and quilting has consequences for the structures, genres, themes, and meanings of American women's writing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries." Today the metaphor of the quilt is used to express women's writings in which personal stories that throw light on social and cultural histories are quilted into the text. The personal and the public aspects that are woven into the literary quilt makes it "double-voiced." The making of a quilt involves a process of piecing together of discontinuities. The letter writing or

epistolary mode that Walker has used in *The Color Purple* reflects this. For several women this was the only form of writing available. Most women were constantly denied any quality time by their family and children. Whatever creative work they undertook was disrupted by duties within home. Letter writing, is like quilting, in that you write a bit and then if you are disrupted from it, you get back to it later. The reversal of roles necessary for a Womanist text is also shown by Walker through the metaphor of the quilt. Shug, Mr.—and Celie sit and quilt together. For the world to be a happy place, men and women have to work together. Quilting as a metaphor also shows that for Walker, one genre is not adequate to express her varied experiences. She uses slave narrative, spiritual autobiography, personal letters etc. to express herself.

Critics state, that the act of tearing which defines the patchwork quilt, is symbolic of women beginning their lives afresh from a past that was painful. For example, in *The Color Purple* Celie who is raped at 14 by a man she considers to be her father tears herself away from this past and quilts a new life for herself at the end of the novel. For feminists quilting also represents putting yourself together from fragments. Connection to self, they believe, is related to connection to others. Celie, in her growth, quilts together other women's experiences and stories. They all widen her horizons and helps her develop as a holistic woman. In the novel Sofia and Celie begin quilting together after a little showdown the two have had over Celie telling Harpo to beat Sofia to "mind" her. Upset at this Sofia returns the curtains that Celie had made for her house. But the two reconcile "mak[ing] quilt pieces out of these messed up curtains." They are involved in a process of healing. From passive victims they become agents of their life. Similarly the relationship between Shug and Celie also begin with them quilting: "[Shug] pick up a random piece of cloth out the basket. Hold it up to the light. Frown. How you sew this damn thing? She say. I hand her the square I'm, working on, start another one. She sew long crooked stitches, remind me of that little crooked tunc she sing." Later Shug gives a piece of her yellow dress to Celie to make the quilt that she has been making called "Sister's Choice." Nettie and Corrine too reestablish faith in each other over a quilt. It is a piece in the quilt that makes Corrine, who is very sick, recall the time when she went to buy cloth with Olivia and had met Celie near the shop. This recollection dismisses all fears that she had in her mind regarding the parentage of Adam and Olivia. Quilting, as we have seen, helps women come together in the novel. Jointly made by women, Quilts are not used like objects—as in patriarchy—but becomes a symbol of women's love and openness in sharing and helping each other. Celie gives the quilt to Sofia as an act of love. She says she does not know how cold Sofia's sister's place will be.

In this novel African quilting patterns are mentioned linking up Black Americans with a tradition in which they have roots. In fact one of the first things that Nettie writes to Celie about is about the "brilliant blue robes with designs like fancy quilt patterns" that the Senegalese wear. In another letter she states "the Olinka men make beautiful quilts which are full of animals and birds and people." Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker through the African links of the quilts talk about a different aesthetics which situate their works in a different context from a white, bourgeois, European form.

In terms of the form of *The Color Purple* too, there is a quilting of different genres such as biography, music, poetry, letters and diary entries. Celie's life in the American South is quilted with Nettie's life in Africa. Celie too, who begins with feeling that she is nothing quilts her experiences into something and develops an empowered notion of her self. Her quilt pattern "Sister's Choice" is metaphoric of her journey through life. Her new bond with her community lies not with men as much as with women as is indicated from the name of her quilt. Similarly, Walker quilts a Black literary history and fills its gaps of silences and stereotypes of Black people with words and empowering notions of Black women.

6.5 THE NOTION OF MOTHERHOOD AND MOTHERING

In the novel *The Color Purple* images of birthing, gestation and nurturing are abundant which foreground the concept of motherhood and mothering in the novel. Different kinds of motherhood are seen in the novel. Celie is a mother through rape but has to give away her children and look after Mr. 's—children. Nettie is childless and raises Celie's two children. Sofia has six children and is not always there for them because she has been forced to be the "mammy" for the White Mayor's children. Squeak has her child Suzie Q (Jolentha). When she wants to pursue her singing career Celie offers to look after Suzie Q. Squeak, along with Odessa, looks after Sofia's children while she is in jail. Shug's three children are looked after by her own parents. Eleanor Jane, who is a mother herself also looks after Sofia's daughter, Henrcitta, while she is sick. Corrine who is childless, adopts two children Adam and Olivia (who happen to be Celie's children). Through these examples, Walker is showing to us that women and children were treated as moveable property by patriarchy. This was further compounded by racism and slave history. In most of Walker's novels, violence is inflicted on mothers because they are helpless. Although there is so much of motherhood and mothering shown in the novel it is not privileged. It shows how women are defined by it. That is, the complexities involved in the maternal role for women is demonstrated through these examples. Walker elides literary motherhood with biological motherhood by tracing a maternal ancestry. She admired Zora Neale Hurston, her own mother and other women writers who came before her.

6.6 SELECT ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Christian, Barbara. "Alice Walker." *Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Volume 33. Edited by Thadious M. Davis and Trudier harris. Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1984. pp.258-271.

Presents a discussion of the major influences on Walker's writings; her life at Spelman and Sarah Lawrence Colleges, her female ancestors, her familiarity with other Black writers and writers from other countries. Explores the themes of all her works through *The Color Purple*. Includes brief secondary bibliography.

----. "No More Buried Lives: Theme of Lesbianism in Audre Lorde's *Zami*, Gloria Naylor's *The Women in Brewster Place*, Ntozake Shange's *Sassafras, Cypress and Indigo*, and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." In *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspectives on Black Women Writers*, 187-203. New York: Pergamon Press, 1985.

Describes lesbian relationships in four contemporary novels. Sees Walker's work as distinct from Lorde's and Shange's in that it does not create a lesbian subculture; instead the love between Shug and Celie helps to create a truly human community for both men and women. Celie's affection for Shug is in part a reaction to her mistreatment by men. The emphasis is on female bonding rather than sexuality.

Evans, Mari, Editor "Alice Walker." *Black Women Writers (1950-1980): A Critical Evaluation*. Garden City, New Jersey: Anchor Press/ Doubleday, 1984. pp.494-495.

Provides brief listing of personal data, awards and honors and primary and secondary sources.

Fifer, Elizabeth. "A Bibliography of Writings by Alice Walker." *Contemporary Women Writers*. Edited by Catherine Rainwater. Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1985, pp 165-171.

Themes Emerging
from Celie's
Letters

Contains primary sources which include books, short stories, poems, articles, and reviews.

---. "The Dialect and Letters of *The Color Purple*. In *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies*. Edited by Catherine Rainwater and William J. Scheick, 155-71. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1985.

Discusses the relationships between the letters and diction of Celie and Nettie. The letter form itself allows for both narrative intimacy and authorial distance. Celie's language gives very precise shape to her experience, while Nettie's standard usage is a foreign form in Celie's world. Celie's letters progress from a simple reporting to insight and humor. The dialect gives us both the positive qualities of Celie's world and the sinister aspects. The principal value of Nettie's letters is in establishing that Celie's values have validity in the macrocosm. Includes a bibliography of primary materials.

McFadden, Margaret. "The Color Purple." In *Magill's Literary Annual, 1983: Essays—Reviews of 200 Outstanding Books Published in the United States During 1982, Volume 1*. Edited by Frank Magill, 139-43. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Salem Press, 1983.

Argues that the epistolary form makes the story more intimate, since no authorial voice stands between Celie and the reader. Suggests that while Nettie's letters are important in making cultural connections between Africa and America and in providing plot information, they nonetheless are weaker than Celie's. Sees the main themes as redemptive love and female bonding. Finds the language of black folk English to be crucial to our appreciation of the novel. "Alice Walker's triumph here is in creating a unique set of people who speak to the human condition."

Rush, Theresa G., Carol F. Myers, and Esther S. Arata, Editors. *Black American Writers: Past and Present*. Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1975, pp. 727-729.

Lists Walker's collected and uncollected writings, with a brief selection of criticism and reviews.

Taylor, Daniel. *Masterplots II: American Fiction Series, Volume I*. Edited by Frank N. Magill, 311-14. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Salem Press, 1986.

Examines the novel critically in addition to summarizing the plot. Provides themes, meanings and character analysis.

Washington, Mary Helen. "An Essay on Alice Walker." In *Sturdy Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women I Literature*. Edited by Roseann P. Bell, Betty J. Parker and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 133-56. Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1979.

Argues that a basic belief for Walker is that black women suffer the greatest oppression.

Says that in this writing this suffering often emerges as psychological distortion.

Traces an evolution in the fiction from pure victimization to control for women.

Willis, Susan. "Black Woman Writers: Taking a Critical Perspective." In *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*. Edited by Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn, 211-31. London: Methuen, 1985.

Identifies three issues in fiction by Black women: community, journey, and sensuality/ sexuality. Focuses on work by Walker, Toni Morrison, Paule Marshall, and Zora Neale Hurston.

6.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we discussed the following issues:

- the plight of the Olinka people due to imperialism is highlighted
- The links between Imperialism and Christianity are made clear
- The significance of the color purple is highlighted

6.8 QUESTIONS

1. Trace the development in Celie from her belief in a white male Christian God to a pantheistic genderless God.
2. What is the importance of the Mawr's family in the novel?
3. Discuss the title of the novel in relation to its theme.
4. Discuss the men characters in the novel and their importance in it.

UNIT 6 THEMES EMERGING FROM CELIE'S LETTERS

Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Letters 81-82 (Nettie's letters to Celie 18-19) & Letters 83-86 (Celie's letters to Nettie 9-12)
- 6.2 Critical Issues emerging from the above letters
- 6.3 Letters 87-91 (Alternating letters from Celie and Nettie to each other) and the critical issues arising from these letters.
- 6.4 Significance of the Quilt metaphor
- 6.5 The Notion of Motherhood and Mothering
- 6.6 Select Annotated Bibliography
- 6.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 6.8 Questions

6.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit we will mainly discuss the themes emerging from Celie's letters.

6.1 LETTERS 81-82 (NETTIE'S LETTERS TO CELIE 18-19) & LETTERS 83-86 (CELIE'S LETTERS TO NETTIE 9-12)

Letters 81-82 (Nettie's Letters to Celie 18-19)

Nettie, in her 18th letter to Celie informs her of her marriage to Samuel in England. In this letter she also tells us about the plight of the Olinka people because of Imperialism. Their village has not only been taken over for Rubber plantation but now they have been told to leave the village and have been "placed on a barren stretch of land that has no water at all for six months of the year. During that time, they must buy water from the planters" (p. 232). Worse still, the roofleaf that the Olinka people worship have been destroyed by the White plantation owners and since the Olinka people protested that they would not live in a house without roofleaf for a cover, their houses have been left uncovered. Now they have put corrugated metal sheets as roofs and made the Olinka people pay for it. This has rendered several Olinka people very poor because it drained their meagre savings. It is in this long letter that we are given details about Doris Baines, the White missionary working in Africa—about whom we were told earlier by Nettie. She was on the ship with Samuel and Nettie sailing to England after her retirement. She is described as about 65 years of age and has adopted a Black boy called Harold whom she calls her grandson. She says that her pen name is Jared Hunt and she is as successful as a writer in America and England. In England she hails from a very wealthy family and had decided to work in Africa where she owns the village of Akwee. She, like Samuel and Nettie, wants to help the African people who are being victimised by imperialism. Walker is telling us here that there were White people too who felt very strongly about the way Africa and its people were being exploited. Doris Baines is also important in that she tells us about the time period of the novel. She says "a big war is coming. Bigger than the one they were starting when I left. It'll go hard on England, but I expect we'll survive. I missed the other war, she said. I mean to be present for this one" (p. 234). Nettie writes that when she reached England and went to present the Olinka's grievances to the Bishop of the English branch of the church,