# UNIT 6: INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN POETRY

## UNIT STRUCTURE


6.1 Learning Objectives

6.2 Introduction

6.3 A Brief Overview of American Poetry

6.4 Major American Poets and their Works

6.5 Let us Sum up

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## 6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to:

- gain a brief overview of the tradition of American poetry
- discuss briefly the life sketches of the major American poets
- particularly name the poetical works written by these poets
- develop an interest to explore the emerging trends in poetry
- further explore the life and works of several other important American poets

## 6.2 INTRODUCTION

The unit takes up and explores poetical pieces by a few select American poets and these calls for a brief idea about the history, tradition and trends practiced down the ages in America. Let us then quickly read through the ways in which American poetry has branched out in multiple forms of poetic expression from its early beginnings.

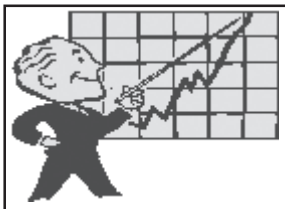
## 6.3 A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF AMERICAN POETRY

American poetry existed mostly in the form of oral tradition until the late nineteenth century when poets like Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson had

cast a new mould of poetical tradition and left a strong impact in the history of American poetry. If we trace the earliest recorded works in the archives of American poetry, we shall come across the poetical works of early settlers in the American colonies such as Rev. William Morrell or Thomas Merton Edward Taylor and among the few women poets, Anne Bradstreet and Phillis Wheatley. In the eighteenth century, we shall find the works of poets like Philip Freneau and Rebecca Hammond Lard who had significantly captured reflections on nature and environment through her poetry.

The post colonial period that followed saw a significant development in American poetry through the works of poets like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, William Cullen Bryant, James Russell Lowell among a few others who also formed the group known as the 'Fireside poets'. By the mid nineteenth century, poets such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Edgar Allan Poe and Henry David Thoreau sought to find new ways of poetic expression that defined the multiple facets of the American experience. But it was the poetic vision of Walt Whitman and later the soulful poetry of Emily Dickinson that gave American poetry a distinct character and significant direction which we shall study in the following subsection. Poets like Robert Frost, Stephen Crane and Carl Sandburg who captured real life impressions and experiences in their poetry. The high modern period and the *avant garde* movements of the early to mid twentieth century saw varied influences on poetry such as that of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1930s, Beat generation, the Confessional poets and Black Mountain poets of the 1950s to mention a few.

In this short frame of the historical overview of American poetry, some of the major poets to have emerged from the modern period and after were poets such as T.S Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, E.E. Cummings, Hart Crane, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Jean Toomer, Amiri Baraka and Jack Kerouac to name a few. Some of the major women poets who left an indelible mark in the traditions of American poetry were poets such as Gertrude Stein, Hilda Dolittle, Marianne Moore, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou and Adrienne Rich among others. Thus, further study and exploration of the poetry by some of these significant poets shall certainly enhance the learner's appreciation of the range of poetical expressions in American poetry



## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Mention the factor that gave a distinct character and significant new direction to American poetry.

Q2. Name some of the significant women poets in the American poetical tradition.

## 6.4 MAJOR AMERICAN POETS AND THEIR WORKS

In the present sub section, we shall focus our discussion on just a few major poets in the tradition of American poetry. At the same time, it is recommended that the learner widens his or her scope of study by studying the lives and works of other American poets whose literary contribution to American literature remains invaluable. The six poets discussed in the subsection are Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost.

**Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882):**

Longfellow was one of the most admired American poets who wrote wonderful pieces of lyrical poetry. He was born in the coastal city of Oregon. His parents were Stephen and Zilpah Longfellow of English ancestry. He was brought up among seven siblings and received his early education at the private Portland Academy and attended Bowdoin College, Maine that was founded by his grandfather. One can easily imagine a little boy spending the best of his early years at his grandfather's farm; that was Longfellow as a child at his grandfather's farm at Maine. He spent his college years engaged in various literary activities and joined literary societies which provided him ample opportunity to interact with American authors and intellectuals on contemporary writing. He even met Nathaniel Hawthorne at college, who was to become one of the best American writers.

Thus, at college he had received the stimulus to write from some of the leading intellectuals of the time and began contributing to the *Portland Advertiser*, *American Monthly Magazine* and *United States Literary*

*Gazette*. His wrote his first literary piece at the age of thirteen which was a tributary poem titled "The Battle of Lovell's Pond". Having studied literature and modern languages for a year and graduated in 1825, he was offered to teach as a professor of modern languages by the authorities of Bowdoin College and to train himself in European languages in order to be more deserving of the same. Therefore, Longfellow as a young man had travelled all the way to Europe and in due time of his stay had mastered the French, Spanish, Portugese, Italian and German languages. On his return in 1829, he had joined the college as a young Professor. A prestigious Professorship of Modern Languages had provided him the opportunity to learn Scandinavian languages and had taken him on a second visit to Europe. Thus, he learnt and acquired Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Finnish and Icelandic languages.

Music is woven in Longfellow's poetry. Some of his poetry collections were *Voices of the Night* (1839), *Ballads and Other Poems* (1841), *Tales of Wayside Inn* (1863), *The Masque of Pandora and Other Poems* (1875) and *Michelangelo: A Fragment* (1893) to name a few. He was a gifted translator owing to his command over languages and two of famous translations are *Coplas de Don Jorge Manrique* from Spanish (1833) and Dante's *Divine Comedy* (1867). He also wrote a Travelogue titled *Outre–Mer: A Pilgrimage Beyond Sea* (1835) and a play titled *The Spanish Student: A Play in Three Acts* (1843). On the personal front, Longfellow was married twice after having lost his first wife Mary Potter and had six children. He breathed his last on March 24, 1882 surrounded by his family and was laid to rest at the Mount Auburn Cemetery.



## LET US KNOW

You would be interested to know that Longfellow along with five poet friends namely Cornelius Conway Felton, Charles Summer and George Stilman Hillard formed together the 'Five of Clubs'. He was also a member of the group of American poets which comprised William Cullen Bryant, James Russell, John Greenleaf Whittier and Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. They wrote lyrical poetry on

everyday life and socio-political aspects which were well received among readers. Also, while writing for several years on Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, he almost ended up in forming a Dante Club with his friends and literary advisors who would visit and create discussion centered on his works.

**Quote:** "Lives of great men all remind us/ We can make our lives sublime/ And, departing, leave behind us/ Footprints in the sands of time."

H.W. Longfellow.

**Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849):**

Edgar Poe was one of the leading American writers and critic who is best remembered for his contributions to the literary genre of short stories and is considered to have introduced the genre of detective fiction in literature. We may associate him with the American Romantic Movement which was an intellectual, aristocratic and literary movement that called for the freedom of individualistic expression. Edgar Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts to Elizabeth and David Poe Jr. who were both in the profession of acting. Poe lost his mother when he was barely two years old and his father was estranged from the family leaving the three children to their fate. He was thus brought up by a couple named John and Frances Allan. Poe had received his early education at the Grammar School in Irvine and the Manor House School in North London. His foster family often faced financial crises and debts owing to which Poe discontinued his higher education at the University of Virginia, where he had studied ancient and modern languages for just one semester.

Following this phase of disappointment in his life, he had enlisted in the army in 1827 under the name of Edgar A. Perry and gradually made up his mind to be a poet and a writer. He then travelled to Boston to get away from the set-backs in his life, dabbling in news writing and working in a clerical position. He had resided at Baltimore, Maryland for a brief period with his widowed aunt, cousin, elder brother and grandmother. It was a difficult time as he had fallen out with his foster family after John Allan's second marriage in

1830 and during this period the publishing business had suffered due to economic recession. Yet, he was determined to make a career as a writer even as he had suffered financial constraints throughout his career. He had secretly married his cousin Virginia Clemm in 1837 before making it socially known.

You will be interested to know that Poe was opposed to the lyrical or moralistic poetry and that had caused him to criticize the style of Wadsworth. Some of his works include poems such as "Al Araaf", "Annabel Lee", "The Bells", "The City in the Sea", "The Conqueror Worm", "A Dream Within a Dream", "Eldorado", "Eulalie", "The Haunted Palace", "To Helen", "Lenore", "Tamerlane", "The Raven" and "Ulalume." Some of his best short stories are "The Black Cat", "The Castle of Amontillado", "The Fall of the House of Usher", "The Gold Bug", "The Murders in the Rue Morgue, "The Purloined Letter" and "The Tell-Tale Heart". Some of his essays are *The Philosophy of Composition, Eureka: A Prose Poem* (1848) and *The Poetic Principle* (1848). Poe's last incomplete work was "The Light-House" (1849).

Poe worked as an assistant editor of Brunton's *Gentleman's Magazine* and wrote for the *Evening Mirror* and editor of *Broadway Journal*. He then moved to Fordham, New York to a little house named "Poe Cottage" He had lost his wife in 1847 and had passed away with medical complications at the Washington Medical College. Today, Poe is considered as one of the precursors of modern literature.

**Quote:** "Ah! What is not a dream by day/To him whose eyes are cast/ On things around him with a ray/ Turned back upon the past."
Edgar Allan Poe

**Walt Whitman (1819-1892):**

Walt Whitman was one of the leading American poets who is best remembered for his work *Leaves of Grass* (1855). He was born in Long Island to Walker and Louisa Van Velsor Whitman. He was the second eldest among nine siblings and theirs was a humble working class family. Owing to financial problems their family had moved several homes. As a child he loved crossing the East River to and fro, in ferries and amidst all difficulties in life, he found a way to cheer up with his visits to his grandparent's home at Long

Island. It was at this stage that he had first felt the stirrings of poetry in him. Initially, he had attended the Brooklyn Public School but did not really enjoy formal schooling. Thus, he left school at the age of eleven and a year later was taken into apprenticeship in the printing establishment of the weekly *Patriot* where he learnt the technicalities of printing. He then went on to search for better prospects with a private printer named Erastus Worthington in Brooklyn and later with the weekly *Long Island Star*. This was an enriching experience to him as he was suddenly introduced to the world of books and joined a local debating society, indulging in writing.

During the late 1830s, Whitman had considerable problem in finding employment owing to the economic recession in America. He even had several stints as a teacher but true to his calling had started his own newspaper establishment known as the *Long Islander* in New York in the year 1838. This had made him proficient in all aspects of the profession but this venture was short lived following which he worked as a typesetter for the *Long Island Demon* in Jamaica, New York. He even took up writing a series of editorials, engaged in free lancing and therefore, he switched working for several newspapers before gaining the editorship of the *Aurora* and the weekly newspaper *Brooklyn Eagle*. Some of his best works are: *Franklyn Evans* (1842), *Drum Taps* (1865), *Democratic Vistas* (1871), *Memoranda During the War* (1876) and *Specimen Days* (1882). His early years as a child, his literary vision, philosophical perspectives and national pride are reflected through the body of his poetical works.

When the American Civil War had begun, Whitman was aggrieved to see the wounded soldiers that he had moved to Washington in 1862. There he had found work in the army paymaster's office and volunteered to help as a nurse in the army hospitals. While struggling for a government post, on the family front, his brothers had their own share of problems and he had even lost one of his brothers to tuberculosis. He had finally landed a job in the Bureau of Indian Affairs in 1965. Whitman lost his mother in 1873 with whom he shared a close bonding and to add to his depression, he had also suffered a paralytic stroke. Having lived awhile with his brother, he had moved to his own home

in Mickle Street. Gradually, he had begun to spend much of his time with his friend Mary Oakes Davis who was an animal lover. Thus, he had spent his last years at Camden, New Jersey and breathed his last on March 26, 1892. He was laid to rest at Harleigh Cemetary in Camden. In his honour, a postal stamp was released in the year 1940. Today, Walt Whitman is known as America's national poet and as the first 'poet of democracy'

> **Quote:** "Vast and Starless, the pall of Heaven/ Laps on the trailing pall below;/ And forward, forward, in solemn darkness,/ As if sea of the lost we go."
> Walt Whitman

**Emily Elizabeth Dickinson (1830-1886)**:

Better known as Emily Dickinson, she was one of the leading American women poets who grew up in a reputed family in the small hometown of Amherst, Massachusetts. She was the daughter of Emily Norcross Dickinson and Edward Dickinson, a well known figure in their community. Among her siblings, she shared a special bonding with her younger sister Lavinia and her elder brother William Austin. Emily was mostly educated at home and first entered the Amherst Academy in the year 1840 along with her sister Lavinia, to graduate from there after a period of seven years. Although, she was an intelligent student, she was often given to frail health and emotional suffering. Following her graduation, she went on to study for a year at the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary. Partly owing to her longing for home and the flowering of her intellectual free-thinking, she left the Seminary to head home after a year. But it was not long, before she began to distance herself from the circles of her immediate family and friends.

Gradually, Emily began to withdraw into her own space- the confines of her room. She turned detached and aloof, preferring to be on her own, or rather, being left alone. Emily spent most of her time reading extensively, writing poetry and jotting letters to her close friends, particularly to Benjamin F. Newton. In the year 1874, Emily lost her father, a year after which her mother suffered paralysis and these sad events of her life had completely distanced her from others. Although, she suffered a great setback after her father's demise,

she took good care of her mother for a long seven years until her demise. She chose to never marry and despite being single, she lived a fulfilling life along with Lavinia.

The period from 1858–1865 saw some of her most creative years as a poet and she had produced wonderful poems during this phase of her life. Some of her best poems were: "I Robbed the Woods", "Frequently the Woods Are Pink", "Some Rainbow –Coming from the Fair", "Cocoon Above! Cocoon Below!", "Whose Are the Little Beds, I Asked", "Two Butterflies Went Out at Noon", "The Soul Selects Her Own Society", "I Tend My Flowers For Thee", "This is My Letter to the World", "I Started Early-Took My Dog", "To Hear An Oriole Sing", "I Measure Every Grief I Meet", "The Spider Holds a Silver Ball", "God Gave a Loaf to Every Bird", "Grief is A Mouse", "By My Window Have I For Scenery" and "The Earth Has Many Keys."

Through her lifetime as a poet only a handful of her poem had the fortune of being published. Emily breathed her last in the year 1886 at the young age of fifty-five, following a prolonged period of illness which had begun in the summer of 1884 when she had lost consciousness while baking. She was laid to rest in a white coffin at the West Cemetery where her ancestors along with her parents were buried.

**Quote:** "The soul should always stand ajar. Ready to welcome the ecstatic experience"
Emily Dickinson

**Robert Frost (1874-1963):**

Born as Robert Lee, Frost was an American poet who had received four prestigious Pulitzer Prizes for Poetry from 1924 to 1943 and the Congressional Medal in 1960. Frost was born in San Francisco to William Prescott Frost Jr. and Isabelle Moodie. He had lost his father at the tender age of eleven and their family had to move to Massachusetts with his grandfather William Frost. He received his higher education at the Dartmouth College, New Hampshire

but had left the college to join Harvard University, Boston although he did not acquire any formal degree. After his return home, he worked in a factory, delivered newspapers, helped his mother and published his first poem titled "My Butterfly: an Elegy" in 1984 in the *New York Independent*. After his marriage with Elinor White, the couple had settled in a farm in New Hampshire that Frost's grandfather had brought for them.

As he had been raised at his grandfather's farm he found sufficient time to work on his writings while also looking after the farm. He had gone ahead to join Tinkerton Academy, New Hampshire as a teacher from 1906 to 1911. Although, the couple had decided to settle down in London in 1912, they had returned home during the First World War in 1915. Having brought a new farm in New Hampshire itself, he settled down into writing again. During this phase, Frost also taught at the Amherst College, Massachusetts, Bread Loaf School of English Middlebury College and at the University of Michigan. His poetry collections include works like *A Boy's Will* (1915), *North of Boston* (1914), *Mountain Interval* (1916), *New Hampshire* (1923), *West Running Brook* (1929), *A Witness Tree* (1942), *Come In, and Other Poems* (1943) to name a few. Some of his best known poems are "Mending Wall", "Birches", "The Road Not Taken" and "The Silken Tent." A good compilation of his letters can also be found in the volume titled *The Letters of Robert Frost 1886- 1921* (2001).

Frost lost several of his family members which had brought him much grief through his lifetime as his father suffered from tuberculosis, his mother dies of cancer and he lost his sister too. Also, among his six children, he had lost four of them followed by his wife who had suffered from breast cancer and heart ailments. Yet, amidst the difficulties of life, he emerged as a remarkable poet. He had won four Pulitzers for the works *New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace Notes* (1923), *Collected Poems* (1931), *A Further Range* (1937) and *A Witness Tree* (1943). He breathed his last on February 29, 1963. A stamp was issued in his memory in 1974.

**Quote:** "The woods are lovely, dark and deep/ But I have promises to keep/ And miles to go before I sleep, /And miles to go before I sleep." Robert Frost



## CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3. Which languages did Longfellow learn on his first trip to Europe?

Q4. Why did Poe discontinue his higher education?

Q5. Mention the great literary honour that was given to Walt Whitman.

Q6. Why did Emily Dickinson leave the Mount Holyoke Seminary?

Q7. What are some of the best known poems of Robert Frost?



## 6.5 LET US SUM UP

After having gone through the unit, you will be able to trace the history of American poetry and gain an idea of its changing forms. The short entries on the select major American poets will enrich your knowledge and further encourage you to explore the life and works of other American poets together with reading some other famous poetical works of American literature. All things considered, the unit will prepare the learner to proceed with the poetry block with ease and enjoyment.



## 6.6 FURTHER READING

1. Alfred, Bendixen and Stephen Burt. (2014).*The Cambridge History of American Poetry.*Cambridge: CUP.



## 6.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Ans to Q 1 :** The poetic vision of Walt Whitman and later the soulful poetry of Emily Dickinson gave American poetry a distinct character and significant direction.

**Ans to Q2 :** Some of the significant women poets were poets like Gertrude Stein, Hilda Dolittle, Marianne Moore, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Sylvia Plath,

Anne Sexton, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou and Adrienne Rich among others

**Ans to Q3 :** He learnt French, Spanish, Portugese, Italian and German languages on his first trip.

**Ans to Q4 :** His foster family often faced financial crises and debts owing to which Poe discontinued his higher education at the University of Virginia.

**Ans to Q5 :** Walt Whitman is known as America's national poet and as the first 'poet of democracy'.

**Ans to Q6 :** Partly owing to her longing for home and the flowering of her intellectual free-thinking, she left the Seminary

**Ans to Q7 :** Some of his best known poems are "Mending Wall", "Birches", "The Road Not Taken" and "The Silken Tent."



## 6.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

**Q1.** Discuss the literary tradition of American poetry in your own words

**Q2.** Write a short note on the life and works of the following poets:

a. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

b. Edgar Allan Poe

c. Walt Whitman

d. Emily Dickinson

e. Robert Frost

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