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SEMESTER IV

ENGLISH

BLOCK 2

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SEMESTER 4

MA IN ENGLISH

COURSE 3: AMERICAN LITERATURE

BLOCK 2: POETRY AND DRAMA

DETAILED SYLLABUS

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BLOCK 2: INTRODUCTION

In this Block, we shall discuss American Poetry and Drama with reference to some of the most representative writers.

Units 5: In this unit, which serves as an introductory unit of the Block, we shall read about American poetry with reference to some of the important poets. A full range of American poetry, including the work of a large number of contemporary poets, exists today. In order, however, to trace a relatively coherent history of poetry in America, we shall begin by referring to the poets from the colonial period or from other countries of North and South America.

Unit 6: In this unit, we shall deal with Walt Whitman one of the greatest American poets. Whitman broke away from the mould of his predecessors and gave birth to a unique style in American poetry that used free verse with new idiom and flexible rhythm. Whitman is also known for his innovative ideas and values, his life and his larger-than-life image, his rise from obscurity to monumental fame. In this unit, we shall also find that the Transcendentalist movement finds itself best celebrated in Whitman's poetry.

Unit 7: In this unit, we shall discuss the poet Emily Dickinson, another most significant poet in American Literature in terms of two of her mostly anthologised poems "Much Madness" and "A Bird Came Down the Walk".

Unit 8: In this unit, we shall get to read about the life and works of the poet Robert Frost with reference to his poems "Mending Wall" and "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening". Chiefly noted for his realist descriptions and symbolism, the most dominant themes of Frost's poetry are Nature, love for humanity, nostalgia, self-realisation, etc. among others

Unit 9 & 10: In these units, we shall read about the play *Desire Under the Elms* written by Eugene O' Neil—who is considered the father of modern American drama for his experimentation with stagecraft and acting. We shall note that O' Neil transformed the art of producing drama by making it a serious cultural institution. Hence, this unit intends to offer us a brief idea of his uniquely American style of tragedies, his plays with a new vitality, originality and psychological realism.

While going through a unit, you may also notice some text boxes, which have been included to help you know some of the difficult terms and concepts. You will also read about some relevant ideas and concepts in "LET US KNOW" along with the text. We have kept "CHECK YOUR PROGRESS" questions

in each unit. These have been designed to self-check your progress of study. The hints for the answers to these questions are given at the end of the unit. We strongly advise that you answer the questions immediately after you finish reading the section in which these questions occur. We have also included a few books in the “FURTHER READING” which will be helpful for your further consultation. The books referred to in the preparation of the units have been added at the end of the block. As you know the world of literature and criticism is too big, we strongly advise you not to take a unit to be an end in itself. Despite our attempts to make a unit self-contained, we advise that you read the original texts of the authors prescribed as well as other additional materials for a thorough understanding of the contents of a particular unit.

UNIT 5: INTRODUCING AMERICAN POETRY

UNIT STRUCTURE

5.1 Learning Objectives

5.2 Introduction

5.3 A Brief History of American Poetry

5.4 Major Poets

5.5 Some Important Themes in American Poetry

5.6 Let us Sum up

5.7 Further Reading

5.8 Answers to Check your Progress (Hints Only)

5.9 Possible Questions

5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- gain a critical understanding of the ages that had shaped American poetry at different point of time
- discuss the growth of the seed of American poetry in the colonial period
- Explain the different aspects of American poetry
- acquire knowledge of the major American poets

5.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of Block 2 of the Course on American Literature. In Block I, we tried to discuss the various important aspects of the history of American literature through a reading of the history starting with the Puritan/Colonial and Transcendental literature and ending with modern literature. In this unit, which serves as an introductory unit of the Block, we shall read about American poetry with reference to some of the important poets. A full range of American poetry, including the work of a large number of contemporary poets, exists today. In order, however, to trace a relatively coherent history of poetry in America, we may begin by referring to the poets from the colonial period or from other countries of North and South

America. We can begin with the groundbreaking works of poets such as Philip Freneau, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, all of whom helped to establish a more-or-less distinctive and self-consciously "American" poetic tradition. We shall learn that the quality of a poem, its relative availability in standard anthologies, and the degree to which it lends itself to a thematic approach were important areas that we as the readers of American literature should be aware of. As we finish reading this unit, we shall be in a better position to read the prescribed poets of this Block.

5.3 A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN POETRY

American poetry arose first as an outcome of the hard work by the colonialists to add their opinions and expressions to English poetry in the 17thcentury, just prior to the unification of the thirteen colonies even though, earlier to this constitutional unification of colonies, an effective oral tradition often similar to the poetry existed amongst the Native American societies. Most of the initial literary works of the colonialists seemed to rely heavily on contemporary British models of poetic diction, form, and themes. Nevertheless, in the 19th century, a typical American idiom began to appear. In the later part of that century, the poets from the soil had started to take their place at the forefront of the English language.

The history of American poetry is not at all easy to comprehend. A considerable volume of the American poetry published in book forms from 1910-1945 appeared to remain lost in the small circulation as political periodicals. It may be mentioned that T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were possibly the most persuasive and significant poets of the age of modernism during the period of World War I. Along with these two tall figures of English literature, there were many African American as well as women poets whose works were published and read extensively in the very first half of 20th century. By the 1960s, the young poets of the British Poetry Revival looked to their American predecessors as archetypes for the kind of poetry they wished to produce. Towards the end of the millennium, consideration of American poetry had varied and diversified, as the literary scholars started giving simultaneous emphasis on poetry by women writers, African

Americans, Chicanos, Hispanics, and other cultural divisions. Starting from Anne Bradestreet to Elieen Miles, American poetry through the periods has garnered consideration for its wide range of style and its diversity of poets.

The tradition of American poetry is fortified by the major poets like Anne Bradstreet, Henry Longfellow, Walt Whitman, William Carols Williams and Langston Hughes. One of the first recorded poets of the colonies was Anne Bradestreet who remains one of the earliest known women poets writing in the English language about political and religious issues. Phillip Wheatley was another famous voice in the colonial era who was a slave and her book *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773) proved to be the known literary work of her time.

The early poets in America from the first half of the 17th century were from the Puritan colonies and were technically British, as Puritanism seemed to dominate the early socio-cultural development of America. The first American poets were mostly British Protestants like Anne Bradstreet (1612-1672), Michael Wigglesworth (1631-1705) and Edward Taylor (1642–1729). In terms of the style of writing poetry, their works can be categorised as metaphysical poetry that prevailed in America. The black slaves of America were among the first from the Southern part to pen poetry in English. Jupiter Hammon, a black American poet, expressed the commencement of black poetry against the system of slavery in America.

18th century American poetry has witnessed the cumulative emphasis on the land of America itself and the poems of that time reveal this aspect distinctively. In a nutshell, the gradual progress of American poetry in the colonies of America clearly reflects the expansion of colonies as well as the urgency felt by the natives of the independence from the shackle of colonial masters.

In the 19th century, the group of poets from Concord appeared as the epitome of Romanticism in America called Transcendentalists. As you have read in the previous Block, Transcendentalism is an idealistic literary and philosophical movement started in mid 19th century America which stressed the dominance of intuition, trust in individualism and self-reliance, nonconformity to tradition, customs and government authority. These poets

defined American poetry in a unique way. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for instance, in his "A Nation's Strength" (1847) visualised the nation and its people like the following:

…Not gold but only men can make
A people great and strong;
Men who for truth and honor's sake
Stand fast and suffer long.
Brave men who work while others sleep,
Who dare while others fly...
They build a nation's pillars deep
And lift them to the sky.

In the beginning of the 20th century, poetry was much more prominent in American literature. The publication of Hariet Monroe's *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* (1912) was an epoch making event as it projected the path for future prospect of American poetry. Poetry in the contemporary time has been moving far away from the mainstream poetic tradition as started during colonial regime. Subjects like environment and the need to maintain ecological harmony seem to be a major trend in the current flow of poetic world. The new American poetry is indeed experimental in both theme and language.

In the Preface to *Leaves of Grass* Famous American writer Walt Whitman says, "The United States themselves are great poem". The American landscape or the geographical condition is so vast and diversified that it amases human creative imagination. This vast geographical area provided ample subject matters to the young poets of America. It is the European settlers, mainly the British, who initiated writing poetry in the American colonies in the English language. The colonisers in America opposed the unpleasant colonial regime and poetry becomes the medium of expressing of their national identities. It is true that similar to other colonies, the American identity emerged in opposition to their colonial masters. The American nation was born out of the defiance of its European ancestor, only after the revolutionary wars about American poetry. M S Merwin says, "I certainly do not think of the tradition of American poetry as simply a

homogenised addition to the English tradition. I feel that we are lucky to inherit it with a particular closeness, but that we also inherit the whole tradition of poetry in the language. I don't think there is much to be gained by self-conscious efforts to write some kind of genuine American poetry. If American poets write poems they will be that".



LET US KNOW

It is seen that the trend of modernist writings especially of poetry as developed in Europe did not exert noticeable influence on America until some decades into the 20th century. Till then poetry of the American world depended more on a customary concept of verse. American poets like Edwin Arlington Robinson and Carl Sandburg used to write poetry that are comprehensible, realistic and locally coloured. However, gradually, this fashion was overshadowed by modern poetry marked by different issues related to human mind and psyche.

The complexity as well as the psychological aspects of human minds seem to be the major trends of American poetry as followed by the modern major writers like Ezra pound and T. S. Eliot. Among all the poems dealing with the complex aspects of human psychology, Eliot's poems "The Waste Land" and "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" can be considered the best embodiment to reflect the disintegration and hopelessness of the modern minds caused by the World War. "The Waste Land" describes a mood of deep disillusionment stemming both from the bitter experiences of the war as well as from the personal life of the poet himself.

Another major trend developed out of the modernist movement in poetry is Imagism that describes images with simple and easy language precisely. In London, this movement was promoted by Ezra Pound, which was previously initiated by T. E. Hulme. Pound emphasised this new trend of writing poetry for which he has also been called as inventor of Chinese poetry in modern age. His language is concrete and visual and he chooses for his poems fresh epithets and metaphors to give vent to his poetic sensations.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Mention some of the common aspects of American poetry.

Q 2: Write in short about 17th century American poetry.

Q 3: Is there any relation between the poetic works America and Britain?

5.4 MAJOR POETS

In the previous Block, we have already mentioned about many of the American poets. In this section, we shall try to discuss some of them in detail.

Ralph Waldo Emerson:

Emerson is one of the famous American writers whose essays, poems and journal entries have attained international acclamation. He is one of the original thinkers of America who is known as the sage of concord. He was a mystic poet; his poems were collected in two volumes entitled *Poems* (1847) and *May-Day and Other Pieces* (1876). Some of his famous poems are "the Rhodora", "Each and All" "The Problems", "The Snow Storm", "Hamatreya" and "Each Song". The main themes of his poetry are nature, nationalism, personal or domestic life and philosophical understanding. Emerson like Thoreau and other transcendentalists was influenced by the concept of 'selfhood' and found in Hindu scripture a well-elaborated doctrine of the self. His famous poem "Brahma" reflects the evidence of Katha Upanishad and the Gita. For example;

If the red slayer think he slays
Or if the slain think he is slain,
They know not the subtle ways
I keep, and pass, and turn again

Walt Whitman:

Whitman is a popular autobiographical and a representative poet of American soil. He has put more of himself in his masterpiece than any

other poets in any country or language. In his famous *Leaves of Grass,* he celebrates his own self and in doing so, he celebrates America too. In his poems, he writes of his age as well as his motherland. The "I" whom he seems to celebrate in his book is not Whitman, a certain historical personality, but the typical or average American. It labels him as the poet of democracy and a poet of USA. As far as the form of his verse and his method of communication are concerned, he can be considered a great revolutionary as well as a technical innovator as he broke away from the mould of his predecessors. Some of the significant poems in his *Leaves of Grass* are: "I Celebrate Myself"; "I Sing the Body Electric", "Out of the Cradle Endless Rocking and "I Hear America Singing". His "Song of Myself' is the longest and the most significant poem in *The Leaves*. A collection of lyrics in 52 clusters, the poem speaks about America in a comprehensive way. Whitman's identification with America and her common masses is complete and this makes the poem 'the epic' of America', 'the song of America', as well as 'the Bible of Democracy'.

Emily Dickinson:

Emily is one of the distinguished poets of American literature whose poems were first published in 1890. Though she belongs to the 19th century her form and style as employed in her poems put her in the category of 20th century writers. The majority of her poetry consists mostly of short lyrics, which are the manifestation of her deeply felt emotional or psychological conditions and strong spiritual experiences. The intensity of her own vision imparts intensity to her lyrics, and she remarks, her vision creates a form best suited to its expression. She is also a great nature poet and a good number of her lyrics particularly deal with the themes related to nature. Like the metaphysical lyrical poem, her lyrics, also are the battleground for the class of opposites that explore her courageous acceptance of life. The beauty of nature is minutely observed and rendered with precision in her poems. She is a great love poet and her poetry on love may be categorised into three groups: The first group expresses her devotion, love and strong faithfulness towards her lover who is not present. The second group of love

poems can be considered as poems of separation and subsequent misery. The third group of poems can be called 'poems of renunciation'. Some of the notable poems of Emily Dickinson are "A Light Exists in Spring", "Because I Could not Stop for Death", "Success is Counted Sweetest", "I Felt a Funeral in My Brain", "Hope is the Thing with Feathers" and "This is My Letter to the World".

Robert Frost:

Frost received more honours than any other present-day literary figures in America. It was in 1912 that he decided to make poetry his vocation in life. His first volume of lyrics *A Boy's Will* (1913) attracted a great deal of attention in the literary world. After the first two volumes *A Boy's Will* (1913) and *North of Boston* (1914) eight more volumes of poetry were published: *Mountain Interval* (1916), *New Hampshire* (1923), *West Running Brook* (1928), *A Further Range* (1936), *A Witness Tree* (1942), *Come in and Other Poems* (1943), *A Masque of Reason* (1945) and *A Masque of Mercy* (1947). Robert frost is a great pastoral poet who writes of rural people, various rustic events, occupations of the common people and different situations faced by them. Undoubtedly, he prospered in imparting universal validity and significance to pastoral art. He is a regional poet of America and the place Boston forms the background of his poetry. Being a poet of nature, he writes abundantly about the natural sights and scenes, hills and mountains, flora and fauna of Northern Boston. However, he does not portray the scenery of modern day lifestyle but he certainly deals with the rudimentary problems and the facts of modern industrial life. The fundamental problems of human frustration, anxiety, isolation, as well as disappointment find place in his poetry. "Mending Wall' is a symbolic poem by him that depicts modern day problems of attitude towards life, generation gap as well as issues of boundaries between neighbours. His "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is one of the famous lyrical poems, which even has touched the core of the heart of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, one of greatest personalities of the world. Another important poem "Two Tramps in Mud Time" is somewhat autobiographical that portrays a delightful picture

of Frost as a farmer. “The Gift Outright” is a poem having tone of patriotism, which is one of the finest lyrics of the poet presenting the history of American people.

T. S. Eliot:

Eliot is undoubtedly one of the most popular poets of the age of modernism whose poems as well as the poetic techniques explore elements of the popular modern movement. Two of the most prominent poems where he shows his modern orientation are “The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock” and The Waste Land”. These two poems reflect the sense of disintegration and restlessness human beings felt in that time. “The Waste Land” remains a great, positive achievement of Eliot’s life which has proved to be a massive significance in the English poetic tradition and its impact on English poetry of the time is found to be enormous. Eliot is truly a great visionary and preceptor in modern English poetry. The combination of intellectual dignity and high skilfulness, philosophic profoundness and technical mastery is a rare accomplishment, but this is essentially evident in his poetry. His significance in modern literature is enormous and enduring.

Edgar Allen Poe:

Poe was an American writer, editor, and a literary critic. He is best known for his poetry as well short stories filled with mysteries and ambiguities. His first collection of poems, *Tamerlane* and *Other Poems* was published in 1827, and in 1829, he has produced the second collection entitled *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems.* His *The Raven and Other Poems* (1845) and *Eureka: A Prose Poems* (1848) have also received fame and recognition in the world of American poetry.

Maya Angelou:

Angelou is a writer of autobiography, poet, as well as a popular screenplay black-author of 20th century. She is the icon of the civil right movement of America known for her 1969 memoir *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Though she is best known for her seven autobiographical works, she is also a prolific and popular poet known as “the black woman’s poet laureate”.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Give the names of some famous American poets.

Q 5: Who is the writer of *Leaves of Grass*? Mention the main motto of poet.

Q 6: Mention Robert Frost's significant works on poetry. What are the issues chosen by Robert Frost in his poems?

Q 7: What are the major themes in the poetry of Emily Dickinson?

Q 8: Give the names of the two famous poems by T. S. Eliot.

5.5 SOME IMPORTANT THEMES IN AMERICAN POETRY [Adapted from *Thematic Guide to American Poetry by Allan Burns*]

Civilisation:

The poets from America have always had an uneasy relationship with American civilisation as a whole. On the one hand, they have extolled ideas like liberty, democracy, possibility, prosperity, and ingenuity; on the other, they have shown their disgust against American materialism, vulgarity, greed, corruption, hypocrisy, and imperialism. Thus, poems in both praise and blame of America are numerous and they are critical of the world falling short of its promises. Some may like the more "realistic" appraisal of human limitation and the drawbacks of other civilisations, past and present; but the poets themselves, quite justifiably, allow little time for self-congratulation while self-improvement remains a possibility. Walt Whitman often regarded as the great celebrant of American democracy, freedom, and diversity, could be quite acerbic on occasions about America's shortcomings, his statements of disappointment sharpened by the very intensity of his love and hope for the nation. Whitman often felt an acute gap between the ideal of America and the reality as could be perceived in the political situation of the 1850s.

Family Relations:

The dark side of family relations is yet another important preoccupation of the American poets. Lyric poetry, both intimate and subjective, had rarely been brought to bear on the volatile theme of family relations, at least before the rise of the "confessional" mode in mid-twentieth-century American poetry. Confessional poetry, associated particularly with the work of W. D. Snodgrass, Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton, introduced a new autobiographical candour and intensity to American poetry. Poems about sex, divorce, alcoholism, and insanity suddenly became quite fashionable. A new freedom of subject matter reflected and contributed to larger shifts in American culture in the late fifties and sixties. It became possible for the mainstream poets—even those only marginally associated with confessional verse—to write candidly about family life.

The Individual and Society:

In America, where individuals and expressions of individualism are highly valued, writers tend to side with the individual against the traditional, conformist, and legal pressures exerted by society. Just like in case of fiction, American poetry too tended to side with the individual against the norms of society. The tendency is writ large in the work of perhaps our most eccentrically individual major poet, Emily Dickinson. Her poems like "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" and "Much Madness is divinest Sense" celebrate the private life of the individual and scorn the values of society. Dickinson inverts traditional values that would promote the latter at the expense of the former. She likens public existence to a frog croaking "To an admiring Bog!" The poem celebrates the private and authentic life of the individual, whose values and creative abilities need not be cheapened by publicity, politics, or self-promotion. "Much Madness," examines how individuality is not necessarily safe from society's values but can be taken by society for madness—and dealt with accordingly.

Another example can be cited of T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917) that depicts the complex tension between a neurotic

individual and the high society he finds simultaneously attractive and repulsive. J. Alfred Prufrock, the name of a furniture dealer in Eliot's home city of St. Louis, sounds like an unlikely name to be yoked to a love song, and indeed, his song is hardly conventional or straightforward. Eliot prefaces it with an epigraph drawn from Dante's Inferno, in which the damned soul of Guido da Montefeltro addresses Dante, saying he would not speak except that he knows no one returns to the surface world from Hell. The opening line of the poem invites an unspecified "you" to "go then" to an unspecified destination. The "you" may be understood as the reader of this confiding and depressing poem (although it could also be taken to indicate another figure in the poem or, perhaps, some part of Prufrock's own fractured personality; the anxious Prufrock does not clarify whom, exactly, he means). The poem as a whole is an exercise in self-revelation cast in the form of a dramatic monologue.

Life and Death:

American poets have grappled with various fundamental aspects of life and death, the transience of life, how to conduct one's life in the face of death's inevitability, the meaning or meaninglessness of life, the difficulty of fathoming one's own mortality, and the possibility of an afterlife and so on. Since every generation must face life and death, none of these aspects ever become dated, although specific ideas and emphases do evolve over time. The relative triumph of democracy over class privilege has, for instance, made the old idea of death as an equalizer—a favourite notion of aristocratic ages—less compelling as the years have passed, while at the same time poets, for reasons speculated on below, have tended to find the most universal expression of these themes not in the lives, struggles, and deaths of humans bound by civilisation but rather in those of the denizens of the natural world. Philip Freneau issued the nation's first significant poetic statement on the themes of life and death in the form of an apostrophe to a flower. Freneau's "The Wild Honey Suckle" (1786) begins by noting the kinds of death that are unlikely for the flower: it grows in a hidden retreat and is therefore safe from feet that crush and hands that pluck. Freneau conceives of nature as a benevolent entity; he personifies it as a kind of

caretaker or gardener that not only planted the honeysuckle far from human settlements but also continues to supply it with shade and water. Even in these idyllic circumstances, however, the honeysuckle's days are numbered. In Freneau's idealizing eyes, early, unspoiled America may be a kind of new Eden, but as he points out, even the flowers of the original Eden decayed after the fall. The poem's philosophical weight, resides in the final stanza. For Freneau, the problem the flower brings into focus is that the inevitability of death seems to call into question the value of life.

Love and Sex:

Walt Whitman introduced a new frankness of subject matter into American poetry. Even today, the sexual candour of some of his poems can surprise, shock, and even outrage certain readers. From the "Song of Myself", to the poems celebrating heterosexual love entitled "Children of Adam", to the homoeroticism explicit in Calamus and implicit in some of the Civil War poems and elsewhere, to such cosmic love poems that seem to embrace all of humanity as "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and "The Sleepers," Whitman defied all the prudish, puritanical conventions of early American culture. Even Emerson, who claimed that limitation was the only sin, advised him to tone down the sexual content of his work—but Whitman refused. Whereas a conservative strain of Western thought has always treated the body and sex with suspicion, Whitman unabashedly celebrates both. "From Pent-Up Aching Rivers", included in the "Children of Adam section of *Leaves of Grass,* illustrates the forthrightness with which Whitman approached these "taboo" subjects, "singing the phallus, / Singing the song of procreation". The transparent metaphor of the title refers to repressed sexual energy that Whitman's tumbling, turbulent poem seeks, symbolically, to release. Throughout the poem, Whitman associates sexual love with nature, which for him, as a modern and a romantic, is something more fundamental than laws, religions, and mores, all of which are seen as human constructs that attempt to channel and control natural impulses.

Nature:

Ralph Waldo Emerson defined "nature" as all matter (as opposed to spirit); in a common sense, it is matter not altered by human activity. A

leaf would seem to be part of nature in both senses, whereas a chair or an automobile would be part of it in the first sense but not in the second. In the modern world, however, the leaf may be eaten by acid rain and coated with pesticides. The distinction Emerson draws has come, increasingly, to be one of relative degrees rather than of absolute kinds. Few things in the world have not been altered by human activity, and with each passing year, there is less of nature—on this planet at least—in Emerson's common sense. The history of the United States is largely a record of how nature in this common sense has been converted into human commodities. The Puritans viewed the virgin land as, in the words of their chronicler William Bradford, hideous and desolate wilderness, full of dangerous creatures and infernal savages. Their early assault on the land was, as they viewed it, both the work of God and a matter of self-preservation. Once the settlers established a foothold, however, they began to view the land not so much as an enemy but as something to be exploited for economic gain. The settlers soon came to be amased at the abundance of nature in America: tracts of virgin forest and wildlife populations seemed inexhaustible in their plenitude. American poetry has—as much as American industry—depended upon nature as a resource, but with the important difference that poems do not transform or exhaust natural objects. Natural images and symbols abound in their poetry; but relatively few of the poems that employ them are principally concerned with nature itself as a theme. The more typical procedure has been to use a natural image as an illustration of something else, as Philip Freneau does in poems like "The Wild Honey Suckle" and "On Observing a Large Red-Streak Apple."

The Idea of Self:

Some of the most innovative and vital poetry in America, starting with the publication of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855), took an inward turn and began scrutinizing the self. Whitman's idea that the self could serve as an adequate theme of poetry was confirmed—independently— by Emily Dickinson, whose hermitical habits made her own being an ideal subject for her work. It was almost as if modern American poetry took its cue directly from the conclusion of Henry David Thoreau's

Walden, published just one year before Leaves of Grass: “be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you,” Thoreau advised, arguing that “it is easier to sail many thousand miles through cold and storm and cannibals, in a government ship, with five hundred men and boys to assist one, than it is to explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one’s being alone.” William Wordsworth, often taken to be the father of modern poetry in English; but it was Wordsworth, more than any other poet in English, who confirmed and inspired these trends. Walt Whitman followed the advice of Thoreau, the prophecy of Tocqueville, and the example of Wordsworth—with a vengeance—in his “Song of Myself”.

Time and Change:

In the works of some representative American poets, such as Robert Frost, Robinson Jeffers, and A. R. Ammons, the theme of time and change seem to haunt virtually every line. Poems have long addressed themselves to the problems of mutability and loss—in fact, such phenomena are the virtual wellsprings of poetry. The way American poets have handled these themes, however, says something important not only about the protean nature of our world but also about America itself and the character of modern thought. As a tale such as Washington Irving’s “Rip van Winkle” strongly implies, American civilisation, throughout its history, has been irremediably dynamic and prone to change quite dramatically, even within a single generation. The pace of American westward expansion and technological development has challenged and practically defied the powers of an individual imagination.



5.6 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, we have learnt that the history of American poetry begins with the poets from the colonial period. We have learnt how the groundbreaking works of poets such as Philip Freneau, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman actually helped in establishing a more-or-less distinctive and self-consciously “American” poetic tradition. The various

thematic elements in American poetry, about which we have read in this unit, would help us to read the prescribed poets in the following units of the Block.



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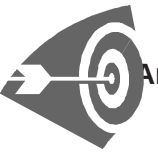
Web Resources:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_poetry

5.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: 18th century American poetry has witnessed the cumulative emphasis on the land of America itself… …reflects the expansion of colonies as well as the urgency felt by the natives of the independence from the shackle of colonial masters… …20th century poetry moved away from the mainstream poetic tradition... ...subjects like environment and the need to maintain ecological harmony seem to be a major trend in the current flow of poetic world… …new American poetry is experimental both in theme and language.

Ans to Q 2: The 17th century poets came under the influence of Puritanism that dominated the early socio-cultural development of America… …the poetry of American writers like Anne Bradstreet, Michael Wigglesworth and Edward Taylor can be categorised as metaphysical poetry… …the black slaves of America were among the first from the Southern part to pen poetry in English.



Ans to Q 3: Yes, most of the initial literary works of the American colonialists seemed to rely heavily on contemporary British models of poetic diction, form, and themes.

Ans to Q 4: Some of the famous American poets are Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, Langston Hughes, Allen Ginsberg and Maya Angelou.

Ans to Q 5: Walt Whitman is the writer of the famous American poem *Leaves of Grass*… …the chief motto of the poet in that poem is the celebration of American democracy as well as of the self.

Ans to Q 6: The major volumes of poetry of Robert Frost are: *Mountain Interval* (1916), *New Hampshire* (1923), *West Running Brook* (1928), *A Further Range* (1936), *A Witness Tree* (1942), *Come in and Other Poems* (1943), *A Masque of Reason* (1945) and *A Masque of Mercy* (1947)…. …he wrote abundantly about the natural sights… …delt with the rudimentary problems and the facts of modern industrial life... …also delt with the fundamental problems of human frustration, anxiety, isolation, as well as disappointment find place in his poetry.

Ans to Q 7: The first group expresses her devotion, love and strong faithfulness towards her lover… …the second group consists of love poems dealing with separation and subsequent misery… …the third group of poems can be called 'poems of renunciation.'

Ans to Q 8: Two of the most prominent poems where Eliot's shows his modern orientation are "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock" and The Waste Land".



5.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Give the names of the major American poets. Do you think that the country called America matters for the poets?

Q 2: Is Walt Whitman a representative poet of America? Discuss.

Q 3: Can slavery be considered a crucial aspect for some of the poems produced in America? Elaborate.

Q 4: Explain in detail how American poetry emerged? Write a comprehensive note on the major poets of America.

Q 5: Discuss the development or growth of American poetry starting from the Colonial period.

Q 6: Write a note on Walt Whitman as a celebrator of the self as well as the country.

Q7: What are the elements of Transcendentalism as imbibed by the American poets? Discuss in detail.

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UNIT 6: WALT WHITMAN: "THE WOUND-DRESSER" & "ONE'S SELF I SING"

UNIT STRUCTURE

6.1 Learning Objectives

6.2 Introduction

6.3 Walt Whitman: The Poet

- 6.3.1 His Life
- 6.3.2 His Works

6.4 The Poems "The Wound-Dresser" & "One's Self I Sing"

- 6.4.1 The Text of the Poems
- 6.4.2 Major Themes
- 6.4.3 Whitman's Poetic Style

6.5 Critical Reception of Whitman

6.6 Let us Sum up

6.7 Further Reading

6.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

6.9 Possible Questions

6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- discuss the life and works of Walt Whitman
- explain what is so unique about Whitman's poetry
- examine how Whitman incorporated current events into his poetry
- write about Whitman's use of diction, his play with language
- understand why Ezra Pound had identified Whitman with the America of his birth.

6.2 INTRODUCTION

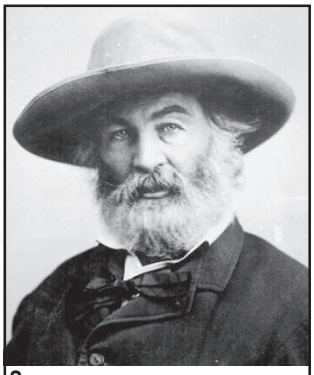
In this unit, we shall read about one of the greatest American poets—Walt Whitman with reference to two of his most famous poems. In the previous unit, we have learnt that Whitman broke away from the mould of his predecessors as well as stylistic boundaries. He is instrumental behind

the emergence of a unique style in American poetry that used free verse with new idiom and flexible rhythm. Whitman is also known for his innovative ideas and values, his life and his larger-than-life image – his rise from obscurity to monumental fame. As we read through this unit, we shall get to know that Whitman is recognised as a national figure owing to his poetic contribution to the American literature. In this unit, you will also read that the Transcendentalist movement finds itself best celebrated in Whitman's poetry. Finally, from the study of the two prescribed poems in this unit, we shall try to read about the significance of the American "I" in Whitman's poems, which makes his poetry unique.

6.3 WALT WHITMAN: THE POET

The following subsections shall deal with some of the important aspects of the life and works of Walt Whitman.

6.3.1 His life



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Walt_Whitman

Walt Whitman was born on May 31, 1819 in West Hills, Long Island, New York, in a farming community, his ancestors being English and Dutch. In 1923, when he was just four years old, the family moved to Brooklyn, where Whitman had his schooling (1825–1830). He often visited his grandparents in rural Long Island and these visits helped him realize the charms of the countryside. In Brooklyn, they lived near the Great Harbour and Whitman enjoyed the ferry rides to Manhattan Island – the metropolis of New York City. After leaving school at the age of 11, he held various jobs as office boy, nurse, typesetter, schoolteacher and finally as a journalist and editor. He was less than successful; his radical views as editor made him unpopular among his readers. It was during his association with various periodicals and newspapers that he began to compose the poems,

which were later published in the *Leaves of Grass*. He travelled extensively throughout America, which introduced him to the rich variety of his land.

In 1855, he published a thin volume of poems entitled *Leaves of Grass* containing a prose preface and twelve untitled poems. The author's name appeared nowhere in the book's title page or cover but facing the title page was his portrait. On page 29, in 'Song of Myself', the author's name appeared for the first and the last time. The volume was completely ignored in literary circles but with one significant exception. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote him a congratulatory letter saying the poet was 'at the beginning of a great career'. Whitman promptly published another edition of the *Leaves of Grass* in 1856, expanding it with twenty additional pomes. In 1860, the third edition of a much longer *Leaves*, containing some 156 poems appeared, which was issued by a trade publisher. At the outset of the Civil War in 1861, his brother George, a soldier for the Union army, was wounded and Whitman travelled to Virginia to visit him where he was touched by the sheer number of the wounded in the hospitals. Whitman volunteered as a nurse in army hospitals, also wrote dispatches as a correspondent for the New York Times. The war inspired his poetry and he composed *Drum-Taps* in 1865, which was incorporated into an 1867 edition of *Leaves of Grass*. Another volume of wartime poetry titled *Sequel* was published which included the poems composed on Lincoln's assassination. Whitman's wartime work led to a job with the Department of the Interior but soon failed because of the alleged indecency of the *Leaves of Grass* in 1865. He was later hired by the Attorney General's office and he remained there until 1873, when he suffered a mild paralytic stroke, which left him a semi-invalid. During this period came out *Democratic Vistas*, the best-known prose work of Whitman, arguing for the maintenance of democratic ideals. Then another edition of the *Leaves of Grass* appeared including more poems. Several other prose works followed, with a further extended version of the *Leaves of Grass* in 1881.

Since the mid 1870s, Whitman's health had been shaky and in his last years, when he was mostly confined to his room in the house in New Jersey, Whitman prepared his so-called 'Deathbed' edition of the *Leaves of Grass*, which came out in 1892. Whitman breathed his last that year on March 26, two months before his seventy-third birthday. Thus ended the lifelong pilgrimage of Walt Whitman, the 'Good Gray Poet', as his contemporary critic W. D. O'Connor was heard to call him often.



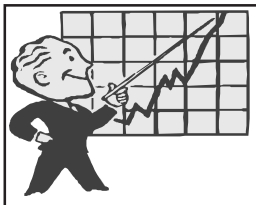
LET US KNOW

The American Civil War (1861–1865), also known as The Civil War, a four years of warfare, mostly within the Southern states in the United States, took place in response to the election of Abraham Lincoln as President of the United States. 11 southern slave states declared their secession from the United States and formed the Confederate States of America ("the Confederacy"); the other 25 states supported the federal government ("the Union"). After four years of struggle and bloodshed, mostly within the Southern states, the Confederacy surrendered and slavery was outlawed everywhere in the nation.

So, you should note that Whitman was the first modern poet who broke away from tradition and started a new trail. He chose the free verse with new idiom and flexible rhythm to express his innovative ideas and values. The rhythms of his poems deserve special attention due to their flowing and expanding nature. The *Leaves of Grass* had proved to be a pioneering work. Whitman had concentrated over this volume of poems throughout his lifetime until his death in 1892. He revised, altered, classified, re-classified, deleted, added, arranged, re-arranged and polished his masterpiece over the years. With its first publication in 1855 began the era of Whitman and he completely identified himself with *Leaves of Grass* saying, 'This is no book, /who touches this touches a man.'

Whitman was a being of paradoxes. His was a duel nature, a profound spirituality combined with an equal pride. He became a legendary figure during his lifetime due to the charm of his personality. The early critics have vehemently criticised his *Leaves of Grass* for their violation of poetic decency and representing obscenity in verse. However, Emerson, another literary giant, was the first to acknowledge Whitman's greatness. He said that the *Leaves of Grass* was the most extra-ordinary piece of art and wisdom. Whitman is known today as an outstanding personality in the history of American literature.

Walt Whitman's achievement as a poet is truly monumental. He was a witness to two major happenings in American history – the American Civil War and the rise of America as a commercial and political power. He witnessed both the apex and the abolition of slavery. The Civil War stirred his imagination and sensibility. Lincoln's assassination in 1865 moved him deeply. His poetry bears testimony of these major events during his time and focuses on the ideas of democracy, equality and brotherhood. Whitman developed a poetry that was uniquely American, surpassing the mould of his contemporaries. The *Leaves of Grass* with its multiple editions and public controversies set the pattern for the later generation of modern poets.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How did the American Civil War touch Whitman the person and the poet?

Q 2: How, according to you, Whitman was the quintessential American poet?

6.3.2 His Works

From the above section, you must have understood that *Leaves of Grass* proved to be a pioneering work in Whitman's life. From 1835 till his death in 1892, Whitman devoted his entire life to

nourish this one piece of work. The *Leaves of Grass,* ever since its first publication in 1855, with twelve untitled poems and a prose preface, has been inspiring and enthralling the reading public. Since its first edition, critics savagely criticised the *Leaves of Grass* and Whitman wrote favourable, anonymous reviews. He wrote notes to his poems, which he circulated under the pen name 'John Burroughs'. The second edition came in 1856, consisting twenty additional poems with a favourable review by Emerson printed on the back cover. Whitman not only added to this edition but altered some of the pervious poems too. The 3rd edition appeared in 1860 containing 124 new poems. The 4th volume of the *Leaves of Grass* was called the 'workshop' edition due to the numerous revisions done to the work. It contained eight new poems. The 5th edition in 1871 included the new poem 'Passage to India'. The 6th edition, in two volumes, came out in 1876. The 7th edition, which is widely accepted as an authoritative edition today, appeared in 1881. The last edition, also called the 'death-bed' edition (since it was finished and published in the year of Whitman's death), came out in 1892 carrying 423 poems. Whitman is justly famous for the *Leaves of Grass* that has displayed his poetic power, depth and richness.

The Civil War was a major event in Whitman's career, which profoundly affected the poet. The War exposed him to violence, horror, misery, pain and death. Those sad experiences helped him to control his feelings, develop a deep concern for others and learn to see things differently. During this time, in 1865, appeared Whitman's prose work *Memoranda*, which is now included in *Specimen days.* The *Memoranda* has been registered as the best record of the Civil War. However, the finest fruit of the war has been the cluster of poems included in *Drum-Taps* published in 1864. A few of his writings along with *Drum-Taps* and the *Sequel* to *Drum-Taps* can be classified as biographical sketches. Even in the *Leaves of Grass,* the poet did explore and express many aspects of his personality. Whitman also wrote a novel titled *Franklin Evans* (1842)

and a prose pamphlet named *Democratic Vistas* (1871) and another prose piece *Specimen Days*. Today the world remembers Whitman as the Father of Modernism and one of the finest poets that America has ever produced.

Whitman was a very careful craftsman, who never got tired of revising the lines of his poems until they came out perfectly in print. With patient care he self-educated himself, widened his intellectual horizon by consulting the works of the masters like Homer, Shakespeare, Spencer and Keats. He also learned by his own experiences and self-realisation. He observed and absorbed the things that he saw around him. The Civil War being an episode of prime importance in his life, his poetry reflects the horror and misery of life. Democracy is a vital theme in Whitman's poetry and his *Leaves of Grass* is regarded as the epic of democracy. To him, each one is beautiful and worthy of praise and he sang on behalf of 'them', about 'them'. He believed in democracy and fellowship. Whitman often used the term 'personalism', which indicates the fusion of the individual with the society in an ideal democracy. His doctrine of 'personalism' says that each human being has his 'self', an identity which one receives at the time of one's birth and which curves one's entire life. Man should first be aware of oneself, which makes him closer to God. He should comprehend the Divine within him, his identity and the relation to the Divine. There is an artistic expression of various aspects of mystical experiences in Whitman's poetry. He truly believed man could communicate with his soul in a mystical experience, thereby could unite with nature, universe and God. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* displays the poet's responses to the soul and his union with God.



LET US KNOW

Personalism is a term first used by F. D. E. Schleiermacher in 1799 in Germany in his book

Über die Religion. Amos Bronson Alcott was perhaps the first American to use the term, explaining it in an essay (around 1863) 'the doctrine that the ultimate reality of the world is a Divine Person who sustains the universe by a continuous act of creative will.' The term 'American personalism', coined by Walt Whitman in his essay 'Personalism,' was published in *The Galaxy* in May 1868.

Whitman was a transcendentalist and his *Passage to India* demonstrates this best. With an interesting combination of the spiritual and the worldly, the *Passage to India* lays emphasis on 'self' – the individual entity unique to each being. Whitman's poise and state of awareness were singular to him that made others around him conscious of his strengths and limitations at the same time. In the culmination of the narrative of *Passage to India*, the 'self' reaches the final phase of maturity and realisation, where it should shed all its arrogance, intellect, and senses and prepare itself to be one with God. To attain this mystic union, there must be self-awareness followed by surrender of self to the almighty.

Transcendentalism as a spiritual movement finds itself best expressed in Whitman's poetry. Many of Whitman's poems are nature-centred. His narratives present to his readers various forms of nature – the divinity of nature, the manifestation of God in nature and man as nature's child, forbidding distance between the creator and its creation. Throughout Whitman's spiritual narratives, one finds a subdued emotional narration dealing with the spiritual and the worldly, symbolised by the images of the body and the soul. To him the soul and the body are inextricably linked. While the soul is the ultimate repository of the self, the body is the vessel that allows the soul to experience the outer world. The body is the source of identity in the world and the means for connecting with others. Whitman values both the body and the soul. So when he sings of the body or its performances, he is singing of the soul too.

Several different qualities in Whitman's poems like a rare mix of the transcendent and the mundane and the sublime and the prosaic made Emerson opine that Whitman's poetry was 'a remarkable mixture of the

Bhagavad Gita and the New York Herald.' Whitman was someone who could be a sage and a monger at the same time; someone who could be equally concerned about the level of spiritual attainment of the human soul on the one hand and the sale and review of his books on the other.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Write a short note on the Transcendentalist movement. How is Whitman connected to Transcendentalism?

Q 4: Write a short note on Whitman's 'Personalism'?

6.4 THE POEMS "THE WOUND-DRESSER" & "ONE'S SELF I SING"

The following subsections will guide you to read the two prescribed poems by Whitman.

6.4.1 The Text of the Poems

The Wound-Dresser

1

An old man bending I come among new faces,
Years looking backward resuming in answer to children,
Come tell us old man, as from young men and maidens that love me,
(Arous'd and angry, I'd thought to beat the alarum, and urge relentless war,
But soon my fingers fail'd me, my face droop'd and I resign'd myself,
To sit by the wounded and soothe them, or silently watch the dead;)
Years hence of these scenes, of these furious passions, these chances,
Of unsurpass'd heroes, (was one side so brave? the other was equally brave;)
Now be witness again, paint the mightiest armies of earth,
Of those armies so rapid so wondrous what saw you to tell us?
What stays with you latest and deepest? of curious panics,
Of hard-fought engagements or sieges tremendous what deepest remains?

2

O maidens and young men I love and that love me,
What you ask of my days those the strangest and sudden your talking recalls,
Soldier alert I arrive after a long march cover'd with sweat and dust,
In the nick of time I come, plunge in the fight, loudly shout in the
rush of successful charge,
Enter the captur'd works—yet lo, like a swift-running river they fade,
Pass and are gone they fade—I dwell not on soldiers' perils or
soldiers' joys,
(Both I remember well—many the hardships, few the joys, yet I was content.)
But in silence, in dreams' projections,
While the world of gain and appearance and mirth goes on,
So soon what is over forgotten, and waves wash the imprints off the sand,
With hinged knees returning I enter the doors, (while for you up there,
Whoever you are, follow without noise and be of strong heart.)
Bearing the bandages, water and sponge,
Straight and swift to my wounded I go,
Where they lie on the ground after the battle brought in,
Where their priceless blood reddens the grass the ground,
Or to the rows of the hospital tent, or under the roof'd hospital,
To the long rows of cots up and down each side I return,
To each and all one after another I draw near, not one do I miss,
An attendant follows holding a tray, he carries a refuse pail,
Soon to be fill'd with clotted rags and blood, emptied, and fill'd again.
I onward go, I stop,
With hinged knees and steady hand to dress wounds,
I am firm with each, the pangs are sharp yet unavoidable,
One turns to me his appealing eyes—poor boy! I never knew you,
Yet I think I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that
would save you.

3

On, on I go, (open doors of time! open hospital doors!)

The crush'd head I dress, (poor crased hand tear not the bandage away,)
The neck of the cavalry-man with the bullet through and through examine,
Hard the breathing rattles, quite glased already the eye, yet life
struggles hard,
(Come sweet death! be persuaded O beautiful death!
In mercy come quickly.)
From the stump of the arm, the amputated hand,
I undo the clotted lint, remove the slough, wash off the matter and blood,
Back on his pillow the soldier bends with curv'd neck and side falling head,
His eyes are closed, his face is pale, he dares not look on the
bloody stump,
And has not yet look'd on it.
I dress a wound in the side, deep, deep,
But a day or two more, for see the frame all wasted and sinking,
And the yellow-blue countenance see.
I dress the perforated shoulder, the foot with the bullet-wound,
Cleanse the one with a gnawing and putrid gangrene, so sickening,
so offensive,
While the attendant stands behind aside me holding the tray and pail.
I am faithful, I do not give out,
The fractur'd thigh, the knee, the wound in the abdomen,
These and more I dress with impassive hand, (yet deep in my breast
a fire, a burning flame.)

4

Thus in silence in dreams' projections,
Returning, resuming, I thread my way through the hospitals,
The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,
I sit by the restless all the dark night, some are so young,
Some suffer so much, I recall the experience sweet and sad,
(Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested,
Many a soldier's kiss dwells on these bearded lips.)

One's-Self I Sing

One's-self I sing, a simple separate person,
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.
Of physiology from top to toe I sing,
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse, I say the Form complete is worthier far,
The Female equally with the Male I sing.
Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,
Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine,
The Modern Man I sing.

6.4.2 Major Themes

The following are some of the important themes in the two poems by Whitman you have just read in the previous section.

Influence of American Civil War

The American Civil War (1861–1865) was an incident that altered the course of history of the country forever and the violence threatened to destroy the newborn America. The War had a profound impact on Whitman's career and imagination. It not only touched his sensibility but also made him a dresser of spiritual as well as physical wounds as he offered his service as a volunteer in hospitals in Washington until the end of the War on April 9, 1865. During this period appeared his prose work *Memoranda*, which is regarded as the faithful and accurate record of the Civil War. But the collection of poems in *Drum-Taps* with his classic composition 'When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd', a pastoral elegy for Abraham Lincoln, written shortly after his assassination, is known to reflect the finest reflection of horror, misery and chaos of war. Therefore, a class of his later poetry deals with themes like death, suffering, trauma, catastrophe and war – making it a darker group of poems. The poem "The Wound-Dresser", one of the poems that form a part of *Drum-Taps*, portrays death and suffering due to the Civil War; as well as love, humanity and spirituality. The poem brings the readers face-

to- face with the cruelties of war, the horrific pictures of those truths that are a part of the battlefield. The narrator of the poem is the wound-dresser – someone who attends to the injured soldiers. He vividly presents to the readers things that he sees and feels during his job as a wound dresser. As a medic, the narrator watches over and soothes the dying. Recollecting his experiences, he writes about the traumatic events that he is a witness to.

Sensitisation/Comprehending Pain

Seeing intense suffering around him, the wound dresser feels that sometimes death is the only thing that heals. A poor man, in the care of the wound-dresser struggles with life to die and escape the pain of the bullet that had pierced his neck, pleads, 'Come sweet death! be persuaded, O beautiful death! /In mercy come quickly'. This is just like the other soldier with a pale face who has not been able to bring himself to look at the stump where his hand once was. With the 'amputated hand' and 'putrid gangrene' of the soldiers 'so sickening, so offensive', the readers delve into the horrific aspects of wars. The wound-dresser knows no one in person, yet he goes on aiding the suffering individuals. He knows 'I could not refuse this moment to die for you, if that would save you'. The speaker is faithful to his duty as a nurse, has developed compassion as he tends to the soldier's physical wounds. While dressing the wounds he feels 'the pangs are sharp yet unavoidable'. While examining the wounded soldiers he suffers seeing in them 'yet life struggles hard'. There is a burning sensation inside the narrator – 'deep in my breast a fire, a burning flame' but outside, he must remain calm and comfort these people. He tries to pacify the wounded with his soothing hand and comfort them. He offers them the only thing he can – company – while they are alive. The poem ends with the speaker's sad remembrance of 'Many a soldier's loving arms about this neck have cross'd and rested, /Many a soldier's kiss dwells on his bearded lips.' The narrative on war depicts the poet's stance to the subject, which evoked in him feelings of pity and concern for those young,

dying soldiers. From the perspective of a wound dresser, the war cannot establish brotherhood and equality as it violates basic human rights.

Faith in Democracy

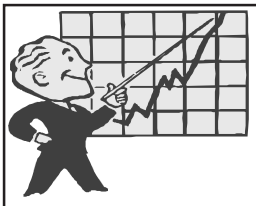
Whitman has been claimed as America's 'first poet of democracy'. The title imparts to his poetry a uniquely American character. Whitman had a deep faith in democracy as a way of life – a way of experiencing the world. In the early 19th century while the world still had doubts regarding survival of the United States of America (which was a newly born country) with its democratic principles, Whitman believed that America could be best expressed through the common folks who had the guts and the urge to fight for freedom. Whitman believed that one could attain true freedom only in a democratic state where it was possible for all to attain 'self-hood'. 'Song of Myself' specially notes that democracy depends on the fact that all human beings are equal and democracy would fail if it were unsuccessful in establishing equality. Whitman tried to be democratic in both life and poetry. Whitman composed the *Leaves of Grass* to eulogize democracy and the American nation. Princes and nobles hold no charm for him, in fact he sings of the common folk. A leaf of grass, for him, is as significant as the heavenly motions of the stars in the sky.

Though Whitman never discussed politics in his poetry, most of his poems deal with democracy. His poems describe people coming together, mingling with one another and many voices pouring into a unified whole. Democracy is an idea to be felt in day-to-day life. Whitman is the singer of the 'self' as well as a trumpeter of the common man. Throughout his poetry, Whitman praises the individual and 'self' in his own peculiar way. While most of his poems carry the pronoun 'I', it does not denote an individual, but talks of everything and everyone. He, thus, has his own way of dismissing the boundary between the self and the world using the contrasting metaphor 'I' – that could denote the individual and the world at the

same time. Imagining a character carrying the entire world within him, Whitman created an elaborate analogy about the ideal democracy.

Idea of the Self

'One's Self I sing', a composition of nine lines, is often regarded as the preface to the *Leaves of Grass*. In the beginning, the poet sings of the self as 'a single separate person', but in the next line, he utters the word 'democratic', which implies his identification of self with the common populace. Throughout the narrative, he has a unique identity and at the same time, he visualises himself as part of the crowd. He sings of all physiology (creation) for he knows that neither physiognomy (outward appearance) nor brain alone can be celebrated independently. He sings of 'the Form complete' (the kinship of the body and the spirit makes it complete). He represents both male and female qualities and praises 'life immense in passion, pulse and power'. He sings of 'Modern Man'. To the poet a modern man is one who is conscious of 'self', yet fully aware of his responsibilities of being a part of a democratic set-up. The other idea that Whitman believes in is that the self bears qualities of both physical and spiritual entity and the self is an indivisible part of one Divine soul. The self is one's own identity – a quality that distinguishes one individual from another and yet bears a similarity with the others. So, while Whitman sings of an 'I' (which is an individual being), that 'I', at the same time, is universal and a part of the Divine. Thus, individuals are different, yet similar in certain aspects.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: How did Whitman try to project the negative aspects of wars in the poem "The Wound-Dresser"?

Q 6: Who is the 'I' in the poem "One's Self I Sing"?

Q 7: Write a note on Whitman's idea of democracy.

Q 8: Who is the Modern Man in "One's Self I sing"?

6.4.3 Whitman's Poetic Style

In the Preface to the 1855 edition of the *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman wrote that he truly believed that there was a vital, symbolic relationship between the poet and the society. In 'Song of Myself', using an all-powerful first person narrative, the poet assumed the identity of a common man. His inspirational writings on the topics of human dignity and man's right to be free had a profound effect on society. Walt Whitman experimented with content, meter, rhythm, form and style in poetry, for he believed that experimentation was the law of the changing times and innovation was the gospel of the modern world. He was an admirable technical innovator. He played with new subjects as well as diction. It was the vernacular, the common man's language that he preferred; his writings aimed to make 'an attempt to put a Person, a human being ... freely, fully and truly on record'. His unconventional poetic style reflects his democratic ideals. In his poetry, he used the language of the common people; in his diction, he included colloquialism, slang and regional dialects rather than the stiff 19th century poetic language. 'The Wound-Dresser' is a free verse in five sections of unequal lines and strikes its readers due to its prose-like style. In the poem, the poet's feelings are expressed within brackets. The use of irregular, broken, long or short lines, a striking aspect of Whitman's verse, sets the poem apart. He is compact as well as exact in his use of words. It is only the war, the wounded soldiers and the dresser in the hospital he is concerned with. His experiences in journalism inspire him seek the plain, unvarnished truth.

Whitman often makes use of lists in his poems that help him bring together a wide, assorted range of various things to express his idea. A line in his poem is, at times, broken into many clauses, separated by commas. Each clause describes several

different scenes. In the poem 'The Wound- Dresser', he provides a cold, practical list of wounds of the soldiers, describing the places where they bleed. These vivid descriptions relate the horror of the war to the readers who realize that each casualty of war that they hear is not just a name, but also actually a soldier, a unique human being, who has a normal, family life like the rest of the world. In the second section of the poem 'The Wound-Dresser' the glorious memories of the battles fought so bravely and won are compared to footprints in sand that melt away as soon as they appear. The poet witnesses the trauma of war, feels the great loss of human lives and realises the meaninglessness of such violence, which threatens the entire human race. The first person pronoun 'I' in many of Whitman's poems is symbolic. 'I' never stands for the poet or the speaker, but symbolises 'Everyman'. 'I' stands for the modern American individual. In 'One's Self I Sing', the letter 'I' appears five times, with an undertone of the presence of the universal, a part of the Divine, thereby referring to Whitman's idea of the Self. Whitman's borrowing terms from technical, commercial or scientific field adds colour and variety to his style. The poet in the poem uses medical terms like physiology and physiognomy to make his idea clear.

The intricate structure of his unique style inspired many of the later poets of his time and played a major role in transforming American poetry. He meticulously wrote and rewrote passages of his compositions, heavily revising the entire draft then strictly instructing his printers to be careful with the production. Lack of metrical regularity and conventional rhyming is a characteristic of his poetry. As substitutes for regular rhyme and rhythm, he preferred the use of multiple ideas, distinct images, various symbols exuberant phrases, catalogues, enumerations, sometimes-idiosyncratic spellings and punctuations. For vocabulary, Whitman borrowed from every discipline like astronomy, anatomy, carpentry, construction, medicine, military etc., from various businesses and from America's flora and fauna. Critics have come to agree that Whitman was an

inspired poet but a skilled craftsman who had full control over the newly discovered free verse style.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: What are the poetic devices that Whitman uses in his poems "The Wound-Dresser" and "One's Self I Sing"?

Q 10: Do you think "One's Self I Sing" belongs to an accepted form of poetry? Illustrate.

Q 11: Mention the main features of Whitman's poetry.

6.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF WHITMAN

In 1920, Van Wyck Brooks (1886-1963), the American Literary critic, biographer and historian, stated that Walt Whitman was the 'focal centre' of American creative experience and literary expression. Whitman was a quintessential American poet he gave to America 'the romantic desire for a native experience'. He was not only a poet but a philosopher, a mystic and a critic too. Ezra Pound had admired Whitman as the Spiritual Father of America as he embodied qualities typical of the American experience – its curiosity, diversity, adventure and pioneering spirit. His work symbolises variety, largeness and the tendency towards innovation. He faithfully projected the essential, positive American spirit and captured in his poems the hopes and aspirations of the Americans and their philosophy of life along with guidelines for the realisation of their dreams.

Beginning with World War I and the work of Wilfred Owen, it became widely possible to grieve for soldiers without being patriotically inspired by them and without representing them as sacred martyrs. Sensitive poets like Whitman who had direct experience in warfront found it acceptable to grieve on behalf of the less-fortunate soldiers who were crippled for life in battlefields. His forceful and vivid narratives had great, unpredictable impact on countless poets that was even beyond Whitman's imagination. William Carlos Williams once remarked rightly that the only way to write like Whitman

is to write unlike Whitman. As both a poet and a prophet, Whitman's achievement is undoubtedly monumental. His immediate men of letters in America were deeply influenced by him. Emily Dickinson, Hart Crane, Marianne Moore and many others were inspired by his style. Whitman broke with tradition. In fact not only in his writings but also in choosing themes for his poetry, Whitman was always innovative and ahead of his time. The reiterations of 'I' in his poetry do not stand for the speaker alone but embodies Everyman.

Whitman's craft of drawing on popular imagery from quotidian existence and imparting a new meaning to the object attracted the interest of many modern poets. With his rare imaginative power and deep sensory perceptions, he made the past alive by his images and could show the immediate future. Richard Chas, a critic, who wrote several books on Whitman – *Walt Whitman Reconsidered* (1955) and *Walt Whitman* (1961), justly describes him as 'the poet of American optimism and pragmatism'. Randall Jarrell finds Whitman 'grand, elevated and comprehensive and real with an astonishing reality.'

His magnum opus *Leaves of Grass* has been translated into almost all major languages of the world like French, German, Spanish, Italian, Chinese and Japanese. Not only for his formidable contribution to the world of literature, Whitman gained wide admiration from the socialists and communists for his stand on liberty, revolution and democracy. In literary circles, he is seen as an author who praised the beauty, strength and exceptional qualities of democracy. Whitman claimed in 1885 that 'the proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.' Over a century after his demise, Whitman continues to inspire the creative world.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 12: In what ways, do you think, Whitman inspired the modern poets?



6.6 LET US SUM UP

From the above sections, we have found that Whitman turned to poetry at a much-advanced age. Over the years, many critics have been intrigued by this mystical transformation on this poet's part. We have found that Walt Whitman was a true representative of his age who reflected in his works the varied crosscurrents of his time. His poetry portrays the impact of the romantic idealism, which reached its peak before the Civil War and also shows the scientific realism that dominated literature after 1865. American patriotism in the 19th century along with the Transcendentalist Movement, which influenced the American renaissance, had profound impact on the poet. No doubt, his association with transcendentalist poet, philosopher Emerson had greatly influenced and shaped his mind. Whitman could visualise the role of a poet as a seer. Whitman's ideal poet is a singer of the self who completely understands and acknowledges the socio-political scenario of the world and the spiritual universe. As Emerson believed on self-reliance, Whitman had faith in the Inner Light of man that led to the authority of the Self – the 'I' in Whitman's poetry. The *Leaves of Grass* is not only the celebration of his Self but a celebration of the spirit of the nation too. Whitman's 'I' is the prime character of the *Leaves of Grass* where it symbolises the common man that believes in the ideas and values of America. Being a true spiritual democrat, he first stressed on the revival of the individual, and later on the reformation of the masses. His idea of democracy is a rare combination of the socio-political as well as the spiritual well-being of an entity, as well as for equal share of rights, duties and laws for each individual. He equally emphasised the development of one's inner power and the measureless possibilities of spiritual attainment in man. This unique thinking regarding man and society was a part of his poetic programme as one can also find in the poems prescribed.



6.7 FURTHER READING

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Reynolds, David S. (1995). *Walt Whitman's America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

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3.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Whitman's brother George, a soldier wounded during the Civil War… …Whitman was touched by the sheer number of the wounded in the hospitals... …his experiences as a nurse... …the poet's attitude to the subject of war in *Drum-Taps* and *Sequel*... … catastrophe, death, decay, suffering, surgery, survival, trauma, medicine, human limbs, blood, tragedy finding place in his verse.

Ans to Q 2: Whitman combined many qualities of the American 'character' in his poetry... …'I' in Whitman's poems never stands for the poet or the speaker alone, but symbolises the masses… ...democracy, a

way of life for the author, stands for equality, responsibility, freedom, humanity… ... he stressed listening to and assuming voices of others... …he expresses the very American tendency towards innovation… …manifestation of geographical, ethnic, and economic diversity of America in his works.

Ans to Q 3: Transcendentalism is a philosophical movement… …basic idea is going beyond one's self through the soul to be one with the superior Soul... …the sensory perceptions must be transcended to achieve a mystic union with the Almighty... …Emerson is the shaping spirit and guiding force… ...Whitman defined the efficacy of Emersonian transcendentalism in his poetry.

Ans to Q 4: 'Personalism' is a significant doctrine in Whitman's poetry... …it relates to his idea of the Self... …the fusion of the individual with the community in an ideal democratic society... …everyone possesses distinct individual identity at the time of birth that makes the individual different from the others... …the individual's soul/personality is a part the Divine Soul etc.

Ans to Q 5: "The Wound-Dresser" describes the American Civil War years... …the poet's attitude to the subject of war... …catastrophe, death, decay, suffering, surgery, survival, trauma, medicine, human limbs, blood, tragedy influencing the poem.

Ans to Q 6: 'I', in Whitman's poems, never stands for the poet or the speaker alone, but symbolises mass – Everyman... …in "One's Self I Sing" "a single separate person" can sing a song for the whole nation "En-Masse"... …the author sings of 'I' which is universal and a part of the Divine, not egoistic.

Ans to Q 7: Whitman had deep faith in democracy... …democracy, a way of life for the author, stands for equality, responsibility, freedom, humanism… ...the narrator stressed the importance of each individual and the voice within ... ...his faith in the individual's attainment of self-hood is possible only in democracy

Ans to Q 8: One who is conscious of 'self'... …also aware of his being a part of the mass, a part of democracy... ...man has an individual self

whereas the world or cosmos has a universal or cosmic self... …the poet wishes to maintain the identity of his individual self yet desires to merge it with the universal self which involves the identification of the poet's self with mankind and the mystical union of the poet with God, the Absolute Self.

Ans to Q 9: Whitman believed that poetry should be spoken, not written... …must contain musical elements... …exuberant phrases, images, symbols, free verse , catalogues, anecdotes, motifs, metaphors... …Whitman used figurative language and symbols... … vocabulary borrowed from different disciplines... ...to him words have both a "natural" and a "spiritual" significance.

Ans to Q 10: No ... ... The poems don't belong to any common/accepted form of poetry... …the form is distinctively the author's own... …'One's Self I Sing' seems unsystematic and disorganised... …but, in fact, is democratic in both subject matter and language... …the poetic structure seems unconventional but represents his democratic ideals.

Ans to Q 11: Liberal use of content and innovative style of writing... …rejection of traditional approach... …he aimed at exploring, discussing and celebrating America as a nation and the Americans as people... …with expansive lines and elevated expressions tried to embrace the whole of America... …absence of metrical regularity and conventional rhyme... …use of free verse as the basis of his poetic structure... …use of unique vocabulary

Ans to Q 12: A host of modern poets have been influenced by his unique use of symbols, images and vocabulary... ... exercising liberty in poetic theme, form and meter... ... cultivating a style of his own in literature.



6.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: List the characteristics of Walt Whitman's poetry as seen in "The Wound-Dresser" and "One's Self I sing" that make him 'America's' poet? What is so uniquely 'American' about his poetry?

Q 2: How do the different themes in Walt Whitman's poetry reflect the time in which he lived?

Q 3: What are some of the traits of Walt Whitman's literary style? Discuss with reference to the poems prescribed.

Q 4: Attempt a critical appreciation of "One's Self I sing" focussing on the idea of the 'self'.

Q 5: What is the main theme of the poem "The Wound-Dresser"? What does the narrator try to convey?

Q 6: How does Whitman portray the themes of war, freedom, and democracy in the poems you have read?

Q 7: Whitman's poems broke new grounds in their subject matter and language. Explain.

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UNIT 7: EMILY DICKINSON: “MUCH MADNESS IS DIVINEST SENSE” & “A BIRD CAME DOWN THE WALK”

UNIT STRUCTURE

7.1 Learning Objectives

7.2 Introduction

7.3 Emily Dickinson: The Poet

- 7.3.1 Her Life
- 7.3.2 Her Works

7.4 The Poems: “Much Madness is Divinest Sense” & “A Bird Came Down the Walk”

- 7.4.1 The Text of the Poems
- 7.4.2 Major Themes
- 7.4.3 Dickinson’s Poetic Style

7.5 Critical Reception of Dickinson

7.6 Let us Sum up

7.7 Further Reading

7.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

7.9 Possible Questions

7.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- discuss Emily Dickinson’s secluded life and her works and how that influenced her writings
- infer why she has been regarded an innovator in her poetic technique and treatment
- explain Dickinson’s wide range of themes treated in the prescribed poems
- assess Emily Dickinson’s influance on the later generation American poets
- discuss why Emily Dickinson is regarded as one of the two founders of American poetics alongside Walt Whitman

7.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit introduces us to Emily Dickinson, one of the most significant poets in American Literature. Dickinson, who has been enjoying an ever-increasing reputation in the literary world many decades after her death, never liked her works to come to the public eyes and had never intended to see them in print. Her private life was secluded and uneventful. In her lifetime, hardly a few poems (fewer than ten of her nearly two thousand poems) were published in campus magazines and journals of limited circulation. Upon her death Dickinson's family discovered her note books – some forty hand bound volumes of nearly two thousand poems and the first volume of her work was published posthumously in 1890. To her publisher's surprise, the first volume became popular at once and slowly the literary circle of America woke up to the merits of this neglected poet. Then more volumes would be published in the years to come as word of Dickinson's magnificent works of poetry spread throughout America. However, it was in 1955 that T. H. Johnson brought out the definitive edition of *The Poems of Emily Dickinson*. Due to their unique ideas and imagery her letters, which to critics were as valuable and interesting as her poetry, appeared finally in 1958. In this unit, we shall get an opportunity to discuss two of her mostly anthologised poems "Much Madness" and "A Bird Came Down the Walk".

7.3 EMILY DICKINSON: THE POET

The following sub sections will help us to read about the life and works of Dickinson.

7.3.1 Her Life

Emily Dickinson was born in the quiet community of Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 10, 1830. She was the second daughter of Edward and Emily Norcross Dickinson. Dickinson was raised in a traditional New England



Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Emily_Dickinson

home in the mid 1800 shaded by a stern and authoritative father. The Dickinson family was prominent in Amherst. Emily's grandfather, Samuel Fowler Dickinson, was one of the founders of Amherst College; her father, Edward Dickinson, was actively involved in state and national politics, serving in Congress for one term. Unlike her father, Emily never enjoyed popularity and public life and yet remained relatively active in Amherst social circles. Her brother, Austin, and younger sister, Lavinia, were not only family, but also her intellectual companions for lifetime. During her youth, Emily shared interests in intellectual pursuits, nature, and local affairs with her brother. Lavinia, two years younger to her, was extremely close and a significant person in Dickinson's life. All her life Lavinia took pride in her brilliant sister and was fully devoted to protecting her.

Being the daughter of a prominent politician, Emily received the benefit of a good education. From the time she started school, Dickinson distinguished herself as an original thinker. She entered Amherst Academy in 1840 and graduated in 1847. From 1847–1848 she attended Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, in South Hadley, where she acquired limited notoriety as someone unwilling to publicly confess faith in Christ and one with "no hope" of salvation. She was familiar with Emerson's essays, which helped her develop into a free willed person. She keenly started feeling her isolation. Emily was good at College but severe homesickness led her to return home after a year in 1848 and then she began her life of seclusion. The religious awakening peaked around 1850 – the time she began to write seriously. In the meantime, she withdrew from public view. Throughout her life, Dickinson seldom left her home. She read widely and lived in total physical isolation from the outside world. However, she remained open to visits from close friends and family.

Emily was a gifted conversationalist. Especially as a young woman, Dickinson was at ease socially and always the centre of attention. She charmed all the important people she met but Emily never married. The few people she was in touch with had an

enormous impact on her thoughts and poetry. In her entire life, she took one trip to Philadelphia, one to Washington and a few trips to Boston. Fortunately, during those rare trips she met two very influential men that later became her source of inspiration and guidance – Reverend Charles Wadsworth, a clergyman whom she called 'my closest earthly friend' and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the eminent literary figure of the time. It was in 1862 when she had a sizable backing of poems Emily promptly wrote a letter to Higginson for literary advice and received a discouraging reply warning against publishing her poetry because of its unconventional form and style. As a result, only seven of her poems were published in her lifetime and that too anonymously, the rest would wait until after the poet's death. Since she was 'discovered', critical and popular reaction has historically trailed the various publishing strategies for her work.

The later years of Dickinson's life were mostly spent in mourning. Her father died in 1874 and both Emily's mother and Charles Wadsworth died in 1882. Emily's poetic flow came to a stop with her terminal illness. Throughout the year of 1885, Emily was confined to bed and on May 15, 1866, Emily Dickinson took her last breath at the age of 55 in her Amherst home where she had lived her entire life. She was buried in West Cemetery, located in the centre of Amherst with her sister, parents, and paternal grandparents. Her original tombstone simply had her initials, 'E.E.D.', inscribed on it. That headstone was later replaced by her niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi, who included Dickinson's birth and death dates as well as the phrase 'Called Back', the only words in her last known letter, written to her cousins Fannie and Loo Norcross in May 1886.



LET US KNOW

In 2003 was constructed The Emily Dickinson Museum comprising two historic houses in the

centre of Amherst, Massachusetts, associated with the poet Emily Dickinson and her family with an aim to educate diverse audiences about Emily Dickinson's life, family, creative work, age and enduring relevance, and to preserve and interpret The Homestead, the poet's home and The Evergreens as historical resources for the benefit of scholars and the general public.

Emily Dickinson greatly influenced American Romanticism. In her works, Dickinson sought answers to events that she saw around her, especially the ones concerning life and death as well as 'life after death'. Her poems deal with a varied range of themes like nature, love, death, eternity, relationships, religion, etc. She rebelled against the church, which had a profound impact on her throughout her life. Like Emerson, she defended maintaining one's individuality. She was fascinated by both nature and death, which she attempted to explain in her writings. Some of her mature verses deal with the difficulty and necessity of conforming to faith, which relates directly to the subject of romanticism. Mortality is a repeated theme in her work through which she tries to evaluate life beyond death. Dickinson's obsession with truth gave her writings a special slant towards allusions, ambiguities, circumlocutions, definitions, humour, irony and riddles. Her themes are abundant with moral values and theological questions composed in elevated language.

Emily Dickinson wrote with some self-imposed limitations. Hers was a time when America – the New England – was reeling under the chaos of the Civil War, the tragedy of Lincoln's assassination and the turmoil of Reconstruction. Though Dickinson lived in troubled times, none of the events touched her poetry. Though social values and historical ideas had an impact on her character and mind, she confined her emotions to herself. Therefore, she is often described as a poet of 'inwardness'. She looked inward and not at the outside world for the substance of her poetry. Her world was bound by her home and the countryside. To a great extent, her

contemporaries did not impact her writing. She was original and innovative in her poetry. Despite the contradictory general impression made by her work and personality, Dickinson's popularity is a great tribute to her genius. Today Dickinson's place as the founder of a uniquely American poetic voice along with Walt Whitman is secure.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: Do you think Emily's family background and upbringing had a role to play in the making of the poet?

Q 2: How did the friendship with Reverend Charles Wadsworth and Thomas Wentworth Higginson affect Dickinson?

7.3.2 Her Works

Emily Dickinson had left behind nearly two thousand poems. The period between 1858 and 1865 was one of her greatest creative periods. She had the habit of writing her poems on any piece of paper that came to her hand. Those were stored in all sorts of places in her room. As the poet had no idea of publishing them, she did not give finishing touches to many of her poetic output. Some of the poems were found in various states of composition – fair copies, semi-final drafts and rough drafts. Her handwriting was difficult to decipher and many poems listed alternate choice of words, lines and stanzas. Four years after her death, Lavinia Dickinson resolved to display Emily's poetic genius to the literary world. She first approached their brother Austin's wife, Susan Huntington Gilbert Dickinson (1830-1913), who had been one of the poet's closest friends for editing, but later Lavinia had to turn to Mabel Loomis Todd. Mabel Todd was a good choice in terms of Emily's artistic and literary sensibilities. T. W. Higginson assisted with the publication and promotion of Emily's work. In 1890, Higginson with Todd published some of Emily's poems in *First Series* (1890); next year he brought out *Second Series* (1891) and in 1896, responding to public interest,

Mrs. Todd alone brought out the *Third Series* (1896). These volumes of 499 poems of Emily Dickinson attracted reader's attention but failed to impress the critics.

In the second decade of the 20th century, the poet's niece Martha Dickinson Bianchi, Austin and Susan Dickinson's daughter came across many unpublished pieces her poet aunt had sent to her mother and with Alfred Leete Hampson's help, she edited and brought out *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson* (1924). More poems turned up and were published in *The poems of Emily Dickinson* (1937). All the editions of those collections took fewer liberties with the texts and misread many terms of the original. In 1945, Millicent Todd Bingham issued her compilation of her mother; Mabel Loomis Todd's edit of another 668 poems in their possession, under the title *Bolts of Melody: New poems of Emily Dickinson* (1945) which was a carefully edited work. However, the publications of her selected poems were horribly botched in an attempt to 'clean up' her verse which was restored by the definitive edition of Thomas H. Johnson (the text is also known as Johnson text) in 1955. He edited all known manuscripts of the poet's works including variant readings, tried to arrange the poems according to their dates of composition, and published them with complete accuracy. In 1960, Johnson simplified the variorum edition into a single volume, reader's edition, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*. In 1961, Johnson issued *Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems*, a selection of 575 poems. In prose, under M. L. Todd's editorship, in 1894 and 1931, appeared two editions of selections of Dickinson's letters – *Letters of Emily Dickinson* and *Emily Dickinson Face to Face: Unpublished Letters with Notes and Reminisces.* In 1958, T. H. Johnson gathered all known letters into the 3 volume *The Letters of Emily Dickinson.* Johnson was responsible for making Dickinson's art available to readers in its full brilliance.

Emily Dickinson was a child of rural America of 19th century. Throughout her work, there are evidences of natural scenes and images drawn from it. She was familiar with Wordsworth, Bryant

and Emerson and she looked in nature for meaning, imagery, and spiritual rejuvenation and oneness. However, unlike them, her view of nature as beneficent was balanced by a feeling that nature was elusive and at times destructive. Nature, to Emily Dickinson, as she wrote once in a letter to a friend, was 'a Haunted House'. This expression implies that the natural world is replete with mystery, which deceives man as to the purpose of things in nature as well as to God's purpose in the creation of nature. However, she always tried to establish a relationship with the natural world. Her desire to feel at home amidst nature and to become a part of it is expressed in 'The Grass so little to do'-'I wish I were a Hay'. In Dickinson's poetry, there is a morbid preoccupation with death and life beyond the grave. The Puritan blood in her makes her brood constantly upon good and evil; life and death. Her contemporaries, Poe and Bryant, were also obsessed with the theme of death but there is a delicacy in Emily Dickinson's treatment of death. She suffered constantly from death-wishes and with such contemplation, she attempted to come to terms with death, through familiarisation so that when it approaches her, she can face it boldly.

Her poem 'Because I Could not Stop for Death', a masterpiece in English poetry, shows her attempt to receive death politely as befits a lady receiving the attention of a gentleman caller. Death is personified and she waits for it with all eagerness of a beloved waiting for her man. In 'Dying', she investigates the physical process of death. In 'Behind Me–dips Eternity', death is the normal state but life is an interruption. No two poems have exactly the same understanding of death – sometimes death is gentle and sometimes just inevitable. Her paintings portray death with many facets. In her poems, she narrates what religion had taught her – death is not the end but the gateway to immorality and eternal life. Dickinson's poetry is highly centred on religion and faith. Most of her poems are modelled on traditional religious hymnal stanza form. Dickinson was a religious poet and God was essential to her, but unlike others,

who saw themselves as subordinate to god, she rejected traditional dogma in her poetry.

She challenged God's domination throughout her life and tried to explore the relationship between an individual and God in her work. She refused to submit to His divine will. In the poem 'Mine by the Right of the White Election!' she makes a fiery challenge where the speaker roars in revolt against God, claiming the earth and heaven for herself. In many of her poems, Dickinson criticised god for man's suffering He causes and His various affronts to human being's sense of self. Perhaps hundreds of verses portray god as aloof, cruel, insensitive, vindictive, and 'a murderous hunter of man'. Grief is virtually omnipresent in her work. It is only 'Agony' as emotion she believed in. Only grief could be a bond between her and the other person. Knowing that both are grieving makes her closer to the 'other' and makes her burden of grief lighter. Nevertheless, grief has a positive side too. It offers her acute perception and strength to face reality. Another interesting aspect of Dickinson's poetry is her love for freedom, which she expresses through her poems. Many of her poems act as great liberating forces for her. While the society acts as a limiting force, the speaker in her poems creates the setting for what liberates her – poetry. Time and again the limitations of the society inspire her, rather fuel Dickinson, the poet, to write poems.

Mabel Loomis Todd (1856-1932), a pretty, vivacious, talented young woman, was an amateur naturalist, poet, and storywriter, who cultivated the art of writing. She spent nine years ordering, transcribing, and editing hundreds of poems into three volumes of Poems by Emily Dickinson published in 1890, 1891, and 1896 respectively and delivered lectures about the mysterious poet of Amherst to influence the public's initial image of Dickinson. With a lecture career for almost fifteen years she was instrumental in founding the Amherst Historical Society, the Amherst Woman's Club, and the Amherst chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: Do you really think it was a limited world depicted in Dickinson's poetry?

Q 4: How does Dickinson's poetry differ from that of her contemporaries?

7.4 THE POEMS: "MUCH MADNESS IS DIVINEST SENSE" & "A BIRD CAME DOWN THE WALK"

7.4.1 The Text of the Poems

"Much Madness is divinest Sense"

Much Madness is divinest Sense—
To a discerning Eye—
Much Sense—the starkest Madness—
'Tis the Majority
In this, as all, prevail—
Assent—and you are sane—
Demur—you're straightway dangerous—
And handled with a Chain—

"A Bird came down the Walk"

A Bird came down the Walk—
He did not know I saw—
He bit an Angleworm in halves
And ate the fellow, raw,
And then he drank a Dew
From a convenient Grass—
And then hopped sidewise to the Wall
To let a Beetle pass—
He glanced with rapid eyes
That hurried all around—
They looked like frightened Beads, I thought—
He stirred his Velvet Head

Like one in danger, Cautious,
I offered him a Crumb
And he unrolled his feathers
And rowed him softer home—
Than Oars divide the Ocean,
Too silver for a seam—
Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon
Leap, plashless as they swim.

7.4.2 Major Themes

The following are some of the important themes of the two poems prescribed for your study.

Truth and Faith:

Emily Dickinson's world was small, insular and limited to her garden; her experience of life was not too wide, yet the range of themes she handled is quite impressive. Her life proved that travelling wide in search of themes is not the only way to compose great poetry. Alone in her house at Amherst, Dickinson pondered over her experiences fully and felt acutely. She explored a variety of subjects like divinity, purity and beauty of nature; experiences of love, affection, longing and loss, grief and her own sceptical attitude towards God and religion, immortality as well as her playful fascination with death. Dickinson had a passion for truth, which she sought to find in the inner world of experience. This is an interesting aspect of her poetry. Dickinson was fascinated as well as obsessed with the idea of truth and its tenuous nature. According to her, it is impossible to find out the true nature of truth as it has many faces. She never searched for it in the external world. In her search for truth, she rejected the Christian Puritan idea of God. This New England faith was based on the concept that man was sinful and was entirely at the mercy of a loving but arbitrary God and salvation depended on the will of Almighty. In Dickinson's time, this faith was wearing thin as poets persistently tried to elevate man's spirituality and self-esteem with

the steam of nature to the level of divine without ever denying the Godhead. They could see God's will everywhere in the signs of nature. Dickinson too felt that God, the Creator, could be seen and felt in His creatures. She tended to see man's spirit manifested in nature. She observed all the objects of nature, both animate and inanimate, lovingly and carefully.

Nature:

Nature has been a significant theme in Dickinson's poetry. She never claimed to have understood the deep mystery of natural phenomena. She believed that God and nature were two unknowable entities beyond the range of human mind. Man must admit the complexity of natural phenomena; their inner significance and how insignificant man is in the enormous spectacle of nature with its limited identity. Dickinson has over a hundred poems dealing with all possible creatures, objects, forces and phenomena of nature.

'A Bird came down the Walk' is an extraordinary poem based on nature. Apparently simple, it goes to the very heart of nature. The bird that figures in this poem symbolises the unyielding mystery of nature. The bird comes down the walk unaware that it is being watched. The poet keenly depicts the bird as it eats an angleworm, then drinks a drop of dew from a grass leaf, hops sideways to let a beetle pass by. The bird is expected to be aggressive towards the worm, which it eats in order to survive. However, its shocking conduct of allowing the beetle politely to pass on intensifies the basic tenet that nature believes in – live and let live! The insecurity of the bird's life is conveyed by the expression 'frightened beads'. Its frightened, bead-like eyes glance all around. While the speaker with all good intentions offers it some crumbs, out of suspicion and fear, the bird unrolls its feathers and flies away home softly. The natural creature is freighted by the observer into flying away gracefully without disturbing the environment like a butterfly. It merges smoothly with nature. At once, the bird becomes a symbol of the quick, lively wild essence that distances nature from the human world, which aims

to tame or appropriate it. The quotidian experience of observing a bird and its movements inspires the poet to exhibit her extraordinary poetic power of observation and description. Emily Dickinson never claimed to have understood the deep mystery of the phenomena of nature. She believed God and nature were two unknowable entities beyond the range of human perception. Man must admit the complexity of natural phenomena, nature's inner significance and their own relative insignificance.

Assertion of the Self:

Another significant theme in Dickinson's poetry is the assertion of the self. To her, the 'self' means an understanding of identity, believing in one's own values, goals and judging the world as one perceives. The body can be imprisoned but not he mind which remains free and roams around. In many of her poems, a strong sense of personal suffering can be heard. This suffering arises from the poet's deep remorse of being trapped. A mocking tone can be felt throughout some of the poems. These poems deal with the theme of suffering and rebellion against the social bondage and the establishment of the self.

'Much Madness' expresses a strong feeling of anger, frustration and suffering as an intelligent female living in a world dominated by dictators. She feels trapped and a sense of rebellion permeates the narrator's voice at all levels. The author uses irony, and wit, to express anger. The paradox in the initial line of the poem prepares the readers for the twisted meanings that appear later. The narrative offers a powerful message – madness could be the manifestation of sanity and could make absolute sense to some while ideas that are taken to be 'sane' by the larger mass could actually imply insanity to a sensitive person. Because following one's own way, choosing one's own values lead to an intense life with many upheavals. It is a voice against the majority, dictating standards for personal values and conduct, as well as all organisations in the society. From a personal perspective, the speaker moves to social

dictatorship in the last three lines of the poem. These lines confirm the speaker's sense of being imprisoned. A social satire, the poem starts with illustrating the daring of independent souls in the first three lines, moving from the personal to the social level in the two middle lines and at the end showing how independent souls are restricted.

While for other poets, the society provides a context for their treatment of love or perhaps a clear delineation of a world from which they quit into love, Dickinson's social satire criticises all kinds of shallowness and pretensions of the society. In Dickinson's poetry, critics have discovered a voice that critiques social norms though she prided herself on her indifference to broader social concerns. She does comment occasionally on the social landscape when it catches her satirical eyes. Since the voice of majority rules, the act of agreeing to the voice of the majority implies being sane in public eyes while revolt against the voice of the majority projects insanity. The act of disagreeing with the majority may lead to the loss of freedom to stand up to one's own thoughts. Dickinson was against god and the society for imposing compromising conditions upon individuals according to their whims in her poetry. Self should be essentially defined. To her, an individual may be subject to any amount of torture or suffering but as long as they remain a sovereign self, free in thoughts and beliefs, they possess that which separates man from other animate and inanimate beings.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: How has Dickinson described nature in the poem "A Bird Came down the Walk"?

Q 6: What is Dickinson trying to convey through the poem 'Much Madness'?

Q 7: What are the varied themes that Dickinson dealt with in her poems?

7.4.3 Dickinson's Poetic Style

Emily Dickinson was an innovator, who displayed marked originality in choosing her themes and in their treatment, determining form, diction and technique. A quick glance through her poems reveals their strikingly different forms. Her poems are often extremely short, do not waste words, and thus subvert the traditional forms of poetry of her days. Dickinson constructed a distinctively elliptical language for expressing what was possible but not yet realised. She had her own rules of grammar, punctuation and use of capitals. She was very fond of the dash as a tool to signify a pause or to emphasize. These apart, her use of vertical lines, slanting lines, sloping double lines to indicate pauses need careful reading. Particular attention should be given to grasping the sense of her whole sentences, straightening out inverted word order and expanding the sense of telescoped phrases and metaphors. Each of her words, sentences, stanzas need careful reading due to her aphoristic style whereby substantial meanings are compressed into very few words. It is her brilliant diamond-hard language that makes her poems difficult to understand on one's first reading but surely, it has added to her greatest achievement. Dickinson demands her readers to tune their ears to the peculiarity of her language.

Drawing primarily from musical forms such as hymns and ballads and then modifying them with her sense of rhythm and sound, Dickinson always had something unusual about her poems. The poetic form used by Dickinson along with her customary four-line stanzas, ABCB rhyme schemes and alternations in iambic meter between tetrameter and trimeter is largely influenced by Psalms and Protestant hymns. No doubt, her poetic rhymes had their main source in the standard Protestant hymns of her time, largely from those of Isaac Watt's 'Christian Psalmody'. Yet the poet interposed her long, rhythmic dashes designed to interpret the meter and indicate short pauses. Dickinson was highly influenced by folk line,

the oldest and the most popular form of verse in the English language. She used Common Meter or Hymn Meter, long metre, short metre and their dozen variations, but never forgot to add her own variations. Violating conventions, she stubbornly struck to her ways.



LET US KNOW

Isaac Watts: Isaac Watts (1674–1748), a descendant of 17th century Independent Dissent, a churchman, an educator, a true shaper of the modern congregational hymn rightly known as the "Father of English Hymnody" who composed some 650 hymns incorporating strong theology into them, also a theologian and logician, writing many books and essays on these topics. He mixed the language of scripture with a meter known today as hymn meter, a lyrical quatrain based on English folk poems. Emily Dickinson made this same hymn meter – and the emotionally spiritual content of Watts' biblical adaptations – the foundation of her poetic style.

Common meter: Also known as Hymn Meter, a close poetic quatrain rhyming A B A B, where iambic tetrameter alternates with iambic trimester.

Dickinson developed a personal style of using symbols and allusions, assigning complex meanings to colours, places, times, and seasons. Not only with unusual rhyme schemes and enjambment, she also experimented with compression and employed an idiosyncratic use of capitalisation and punctuation, thereby creating a poetic style that further distinguished her work from contemporary American poetry. Like the metaphysical poets of the 17th century England, Dickinson was very fond of using metaphors, which shocked the readers. She used metaphors extensively in her poems. Her imagination led her into a very peculiar territory from where she borrowed her metaphysical conceits. The most famous and daring image is the bold metaphor of a bar with God-the-Almighty as the bar tender in her "I taste a liquor". A superb

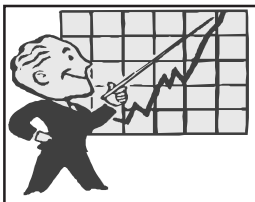
example of her use of metaphor is represented in the poem 'Because I could not stop for death', where the entire poem is a metaphor. In English poetry, it is hard to find a better-illustrated co-extensive metaphor that is as large as the poem. Nature, which appears widely in her work, is her endless source of metaphors and symbols. Other sources include domestic activities, industry, warfare, law and economy. Her poems exhibit her extraordinary power of observation and description. She was equally deft in composing striking poems with conceits borrowed from everyday life. This blending of the homely and exalted, the trivial and the valuable in her works and represented through her metaphors is typically Dickinsonian.

Often in her poems, Dickinson created mouthpieces to voice her ideas. She confessed that the speakers in her poems were not her own self but imaginary persons. She frequently employed the first person in her narratives and her poems often looked as if they were dialogues between two people – the speaker and the reader. At times she employed multiple speakers in a poem with the use of plural personal pronoun 'we'. The speaker's unique voice allowed the narrator to write about specific experience in the world. Often in her poems, the readers experience a tinge of an ironic voice. 'Much Madness' is a brief poem of eight lines. The poem starts with a statement that immediately catches the reader's attention. It begins with a paradox – madness could actually imply the most profound kind of sanity. What is often declared by the 'majority' (read 'the majority of the people that is formed by the powerful/dominating section') as sense/sanity could imply insanity. The poet's use of alliteration in the beginning with the use of double 'm' in 'much madness' and the 's' towards the end of the words-'madness', 'is' and 'divinest'. Note the word 'sense' that has an 's' at the beginning as well as at the end. Thus, the initial line not only makes it a catchy read for the paradox, but alliteration makes it fun to read as well. The narrator plays with the two key words – madness and sense in the third line. Completely turning the first line upside down, the poet

inserts the word 'sense' where there was madness earlier while 'starkest madness' replaces 'divinest sense'.

Structurally 'A Bird came down the Walk' is absolutely typical of Dickinson; it uses iambic trimeter with occasional four-syllable lines; her stanza forms, typically quatrains following a loose ABCB rhyme scheme and rhythmically breaking up the meter with long dashes'; her unusual emphasis on words, either through capitalisation or line position. In the poem, in each quatrain, specific words are capitalised to stress. Her quatrains are typically closed in the poem, meaning that while the first and third lines rhyme with each other, so do the second and the fourth.

This nature poem deals with man's alienation from nature. The bird is an emblem of the unyielding mystery of nature. Dickinson keenly depicts the bird that is at home among nature being aggressive towards the warm and politely indifferent beetle. While the speaker is enjoying her secret spying which adds to the tension, the scene becomes more explicit in the third stanza with the description of the bird's frightened uneasiness. The speaker appreciates the bird's increased beauty under stress, a stress which is implied by the metaphors of its eyes being like beads and head being like velvet. As the natural creature is about to flee, it becomes a symbol of the wild essence that distances nature from the artificial world of man. However, the most remarkable feature of the poem is the imagery used in the final stanza. Here the poet provides one of the most breath-taking descriptions of the bird's flight. Just by offering two quick comparisons of flights and by using aquatic motion (rowing and swimming) the poet presents the bird's power, ease and union with nature. The bird departs into an ocean of air where the entire creation blends seamlessly in itself. The flight through the air is equated with movement through water, leading to the image of butterflies leaping 'off Banks of Noon'; and 'plashlessly swimming through air' is one of the most remarkable comparisons in all of Dickinson's writings.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: What does it feel like to read a Dickinsonian poem? What do you feel about her musicality, sound, rhythm, and use of space, capitals or punctuation?

Q 9: Where does Emily Dickinson depart from these patterns and forms?

7.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF DICKINSON

Though never taken seriously or given due acclaim, Emily Dickinson's poetic genius was recognised from the moment her first volume of poems appeared in 1890. It was only with the publication of 'Poems by Emily Dickinson' containing 1,775 poems published by Thomas H. Johnson that the poet became a centre of interest in all quarters. During her lifetime, Emily Dickinson had only one literary critic – the American minister, author, abolitionist, and soldier – Thomas Wentworth Higginson. After he wrote a piece encouraging new writers in the Atlantic Monthly, Dickinson sent him a small selection of poems, knowing from his past works that he was particularly sympathetic to the cause of female writers.

Though opposed to publishing her poems, Higginson was her only critic and literary mentor calling her 'wholly new and original poetic genius.' Critic Willis Buckingham has noted that in the 1890s Dickinson was praised for her 'inspired"' thoughts and emotions rather than her poetic techniques. Only modern critics have come to appreciate Dickinson's achievements for their unique language and poetic structure. Margaret Dickie has challenged critics who have attempted a narrative explanation of Dickinson's poems by a collective study. Dickie maintains that her poems were composed as lyrics and should be examined as such. Karen Oakes has explored Dickinson's use of metonymy to establish an intimate, feminine discourse with her readers.

Other critics, such as Judy Jo Small and Timothy Morris, have analysed Dickinson's rhyme structure; Small noting the acoustical effects

of this structure and Morris observing how Dickinson's patterns of rhyme and enjambment developed over time. The enigmatic details surrounding Dickinson's personal life continue to fascinate readers and critics. Special mention is to be made of her biography by Alfred Habegger. Critics like Jane Donahue Eberwein, who has examined Dickinson's poems concerning a romantic love reciprocated but unfulfilled in her life; Nadean Bishop, who has studied Dickinson's spirituality, specifically the poems that seem to indicate the poet's rejection of God and heaven; Paula Hendrickson, who has examined Dickinson's poems focusing on the precise moment of death and notes that her poetry should be subcategorised as death. However, to all Emily Dickinson remains an enigma.

Dickinson had no school of poets to carry on her poetic tradition. She was an obscure poet until she was discovered. Even today, when she has won much critical attention, she has no imitators because Dickinson's technique is inimitable. All attempts in following her kind of expressing thoughts and approaching her style and tone fall flat. Her poems are subjective and inextricably bound with her being. Many innovations in literature of modern times in the field of technique and diction were curiously, seriously and sincerely anticipated by Dickinson. On this point, she was very modern. Her stylistic form in poetry, manipulating iambic/trochaic metres, full/half rhymes, alliterations, puns, short/long lines in poetry are some areas that need special attention by readers. Pouring out the pangs of the soul without being too sentimental, raising the private self into the dimension of art – the poets of later generations have much to learn from Dickinson. The rare combination of emotional as well as intellectual energy in her poems makes them a class apart. Her furious and strong defiance of male dominated social as well as literary authority has been appealing the feminist critics who have placed Dickinson along with the major writers like Anne Bradstreet, Elizabeth Browning, Sylvia Plath and Adrienne Rich. Today she is regarded as the most widely recognised women poet in English. The technical originality of her poetry, the variety of themes she addressed, and the range and depth of intellectual and emotional experience she explored have established Dickinson's esteemed reputation as a major American poet.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 10: How, do you think, did Emily Dickinson leave her mark in American literature?



7.6 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, we have learnt that Emily Dickinson, along with Walt Whitman, gained wide recognition and stunning success for her strong artistic control, brilliance in innovating and handling themes, stylistic complexity, emotional and intellectual energy and strangeness and versatility. Dickinson challenged the existing definitions of poetry and the poet's work. Like her notable contemporaries Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Walt Whitman, she too experimented with expression in order to free it from conventional restraints. Not only for her personality but for her craft, Dickinson has become an inspiration to all the women writers. Her literary ambition was in conflict with societal restrictions on women. Her resistance to patriarchal authority and stimulated interest in the revolutionary nature of the self-presented in her work have been attracting Feminist authors. Dickinson accepted the transcendental cultures and at a difficult time of anxiety and tension due to the Civil war, she stood firm that proved to be the most intense period of productivity in her career, announcing the emergence of poetic modernism. Undoubtedly, Dickinson's inventive poems helped to initiate modern poetry. She was one of the most enigmatic and creative thinkers as her secluded life and poetic work still fascinate readers and are studied widely. She was reclusive and these tendencies caused gossip to build around her even while she lived – some Amherst townspeople referred to her as "The Myth." Whereas to some feminist scholars and critics, behind her reclusive nature was the usual female artist's urge for privacy, in matters of heart and emotion, it was inspiration and creativity.



7.7 FURTHER READING

Brantley, Richard E. (2004). *Experience and Faith: The Late-Romantic Imagination of Emily Dickinson.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Eberwein, Jane Donahue. (1988). An Emily Dickinson Encyclopaedia. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.

Kirk, Connie Ann. (2004). *Emily Dickinson: A Biography.* Westport: Greenwood Press.

Mac Neil, Helen. (1986). *Emily Dickinson*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Pollack, Vivian R. (2004). A Historical Guide to Emily Dickinson. New York: Oxford University Press.

Vendler, Helen Hennessey. (2004). *Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

7.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Yes… …Emily Dickinson was raised in a traditional New England home… …had a stern and authoritative father… …Emily never enjoyed popularity and public life … …siblings were good intellectual companions for a lifetime... … Emily shared interests in intellectual pursuits, nature, and local affairs… ...Emily received a good education and distinguished herself as an original thinker… …developed into a free willed person.

Ans to Q 2: Reverend Charles Wadsworth, a clergyman was called by the poet 'my closest earthly friend'… …Thomas Wentworth Higginson, an eminent literary figure, whose intellectual brilliance influenced her… …he inspired her love poems… …Higginson's intellectual prominence helped Dickinson gain poetic merit… …after her demise, Higginson collaborated and published volumes of her poetry.

Ans to Q 3: Yes… …Dickinson's life was that of solitude ... ...she focused on her own private world rather than the world outside ... …known as

'poet of inwardness'... ...was a highly introspective poet... …additionally, her poems have their root in the 19th century Amherst society she knew.

Ans to Q 4: Dickinson is an extensively prolific poet with inward depth... … dealt with her own feelings and emotions, recorded painfully and honestly… …known for their universal poetic appeal and thought provoking ideas... ...nature poems exhibit excellent power of observation and description... …death poems carry bizarre conceits and unusual death fantasises showing heights of imagination… …religious poems explore a complex relationship of individuals with god... … novel poetic methods… …forceful language and use of dashes ...

Ans to Q 5: "A Bird Came down the Walk" deals with man's alienation from nature ... the bird a symbol of the unyielding misery of nature ... elusive, incomprehensible ... close observation of the bird and minute details as it eats, flies in fear or shies away from humanity ... depiction of nature in its brilliance distinguishes the poem ...

Ans to Q 6: "Much Madness" shows her personal suffering as an independent mind... …rejection of authority and institutions... …anger towards society trying all to control or to formalize/restrict... …mocking tone.

Ans to Q 7: Themes like love, religion, individuality and nature… …they gave an intense emotional and intellectual energy never seen before... …her love poems are scornful towards an indifferent god for subjugating human identity... …importance of 'Sovereign Self'… …natural world is full of mystery... …death is the most prominent theme… ... impressive sensitivity and imaginative handling of a morbid subject like death.

Ans to Q 8: Dickinson wrote lyric poetry instead of common prose ... …poems in rhythmical stanza forms... …partial/slant/off-rhymes to focus only on selection of diction and metaphors... …language is aesthetically marked... …lexical craft includes antithesis, synonymy, kennings, polysemy, puns, symbols, idioms and metaphors drawn

from diverse sources... …violating conventional linguistic rules... ...excessive use of space, capitalised words, punctuation showcasing intense emotion… …attempt to express complex psychological state of mind.

Ans to Q 9: Dickinson is always innovative in technique... …her poems are tightly condensed… …modernising traditional forms of writing... … manipulating iambic or trochaic metres, short and long lines, full and half rhymes and extensive use of alliteration, puns and dashes... …playing with diction ... …her ironic wit, adaptation of personae, varied imagery, allusions... …separate her, make her style distinctly different.

Ans to Q 10: Dickinson was far ahead of her time ... … had her own thoughts, style, diction … ...incomprehensible to readers and critics, contemporaries of her time... …original in themes and innovative in technique... …her themes range from nature, love, friendship, society, suffering, death, immortality, faith, poetry, art, and imagination... … brilliant images and metaphors, fine blending of symbolism and allegory, subtle ironies, unique and varied poetic voices.



7.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss some of the major themes that appear in Emily Dickinson's poetry with special reference to the poems prescribed for you.

Q 2: In what ways does Dickinson share place with the modern poets of the 20th century?

Q 3: Examine Emily Dickinson from the feminist context. In what ways has she been an inspiration to all women writers?

Q 4: "Dickinson a rarity not only because of her poetry but as one of the first female pioneers into the field of poetry." Discuss.

Q 5: Discuss the poetic techniques of Dickinson with reference to her poems.

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UNIT 8: ROBERT FROST: “MENDING WALL”& “STOPPING BY THE WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING”

UNIT STRUCTURE

8.1 Learning Objectives

8.2 Introduction

8.3 Robert Frost: The Poet

8.4 Reading the Poems

8.5 Major Themes

8.6 Frost’s Poetic Style

8.7 Reception of Frost

8.8 Let us Sum up

8.9 Further Reading

8.10 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints Only)

8.11 Possible Questions

8.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

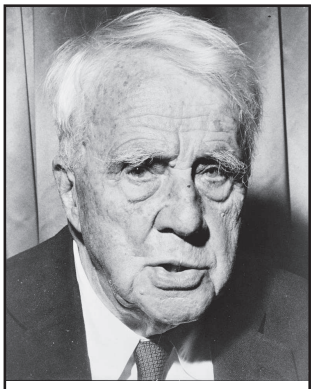
- get a fair idea about the famous American poet Robert Frost
- discuss his works in general and the two poems that have been prescribed in particular
- highlight the important themes reflected in both the prescribed poems
- analyse the poetic style of Frost

8.2 INTRODUCTION

This unit deals with one of the most popular American poets, Robert Frost whose works contributed to American literature to a great extent. The learners are provided with a description of the life and works of the poet in the first section of the unit since it is very crucial for the understanding of the works of the poet. An idea regarding the influences, inspiration and philosophy of Frost shall enable us to appreciate his works more

meaningfully. Chiefly noted for his realist descriptions and symbolism, the most dominant themes of Frost's poetry are Nature, love for humanity, nostalgia, self-realisation, etc. among others. Besides this, the unit includes two of his well-known poems, namely, "Mending Wall" and "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening" with detailed explanation. The learners shall in this unit, also be acquainted with Frost as a poet and gain an idea about the major themes that Frost deals with in his poetry. Apart from these, the poetic techniques that characterise Frost's poetry shall also be laid down in detail in the unit. Lastly, as we finish reading this unit, we shall be able to familiarise ourselves with the reception of Frost's poetry that is very essential to assess Frost as a poet.

8.3 ROBERT FROST: THE POET (1874-1963)



Source:
https://commons.wikimedia.org

Robert Frost, one of the most celebrated American poets, was born in San Francisco, California in the year 1874. He lost his father, William Prescott Frost, at the age of eleven in the year 1885. It may be noted that severe addiction to drinking and gambling led to the deterioration of his father's health. However, his mother Isabelle Moodie was a poet and a teacher. After his father's demise, the family moved to New Lawrence, Massachusetts. As a young boy, Robert Frost was quite offended with the choice they had made, that is, moving to New England to be with his father's relatives; it was the last wish of his dying father. However, along with his mother and sister, Jeanie, Robert Frost settled down in New England with his paternal grandparents. It was not very easy for Frost to cope up with the environment at New England, as he mostly felt isolated. Unfortunately, his grandparents were not able to shower their love on either him or his mother as they considered Isabelle the cause of their son's death. This background is very relevant to our understanding of the poet, Robert Frost. He turned to poetry while in high school because "the solitary nature of the activity suited him and helped

ease the loneliness he felt as a teenager" (DeFusco 15).In 1892, Frost graduated from Lawrence High School and notably, his first poem appeared in the school magazine, Lawrence High newspaper.

In 1895, he married Elinor White, for whom he had fondness since his high school days. Their first son Elliott was born the following year but unfortunately, died due to cholera when he was only three years old. Along with their second child Lesley, Frost and his wife moved to Derry farm in New Hampshire. However, there was another setback when Frost's mother succumbed to cancer six months after their son's death. It may be mentioned that the transition from city to rural life was well adjusted by Frost who engulfed himself in works, as a means to deal with the grief caused by the death of his dear ones. Among his works during this time, the poem "Home Burial" is one. Frost and his wife had four more children- Carol, Irma, Marjorie and Elinor. The youngest child Elinor died in infancy that posed emotional challenge for the couple.

All these incidents at the personal front affected Frost's education to a great extent that he dropped from college twice, first Dartmouth College, and then Harvard University from where he matriculated. In between, he worked in a wool mill and then took to farming before joining the teaching profession in 1906 at Pinkerton Academy in Derry. As a poet, Frost had a hard time publishing his works in America; coupled with the challenges of his personal life Frost had to live amidst frustration. However, his short stay at England, over a period of three years, proved to be quite lucky for him. When he moved to England with his family, he befriended several well-known British poets like T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Butler Yeats, etc. whose influence enhanced his image as a poet. In fact, his first collection of poetry titled *A Boy's Will* (1913) was published in England. Some of the poems from this book are "Mowing", "Reluctance", "Into my Own", "Tuft of Flowers", "In a Vale", "Storm Fear", "My November Guest", etc. Thematically, the poems of this collection deal with rural life, nostalgia, closeness with nature, etc. – the subjects close to him in personal life.



LET US KNOW

Robert Frost borrowed the title of his book *A Boy's Will* from the American poet, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The first stanza of Longfellow's poem "My Lost Youth" is provided below for your reference:

Often I think of the beautiful town
That is seated by the sea;
Often in thought go up and down
The pleasant streets of that dear old town,
And my youth comes back to me.
And a verse of a Lapland song
Is haunting my memory still:
"A boy's will is the wind's will,
And the thoughts of youth are long, long thoughts."

Following many positive reviews of his first book, especially Ezra Pound's review further earned Frost publisher in America for his second volume of poems namely, *North of Boston* (1914) which contained seventeen poems. It was well received both in America and England. Frost had returned to America as War broke out that year, that is, in 1914. Some of the poems that appear in this collection are "The Mountain", "Home Burial", "The Code", "Mending Wall", "After Apple-Picking", etc. among others.

Interestingly, his return to America was glamorous as he was already popular as a poet and hence approached by many Colleges of New England where he worked as a teacher. In 1916, his third book namely *Mountain Interval* came out with poems like "The Road Not Taken", "Birches", "The Encounter", "The Bonfire", etc. Notably, his fourth collection of poems titled *New Hampshire* (1923) displaying simplicity and colloquialism earned Frost his first Pulitzer Prize in the year 1924. Poems like "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", "Fire and Ice", etc. You must note that Frost won Pulitzer Prize for other three other collections, namely, *Collected* Poems (1931), *A Further Range* (1936) and *A Witness Tree* (1942). Apart from these, another poetry collection by Frost is *West-Running Brook* (1928).

On the personal front, the death of his wife in 1938 and his son, Carol in 1940 caused major distress to the poet. However, he immersed himself into poetry, which helped him overcome, to some extent, his personal grief. *Steeple Bush* (1947) marks Frost's concern about the effects of World War II and upheld the poet's emphasis on the role of poetry during such times. Frost's poetry was not political even during wartime and hence provided solace to the nation. It was very well noted that his reputation as a poet rose during the war through to the fifties. He experimented by writing the drama *A Masque of Reason*. Frost won the Bollingen Prize in 1962 for his last work titled *In the Clearing* (1962). He breathed his last on January 29, 1963.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What are the three aspects in poetry that Robert Frost emphasised?

Q 2: Name the first collection of poetry by Frost?

Q 3: What are the works for which Frost received Pulitzer Prises?

8.4 READING THE POEMS PRESCRIBED

I. "MENDING WALL"

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the **yelping** dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;



Yelping: barking in a high-pitched tone.

And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of out-door game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apple trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "Good fences make good neighbours."
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbours? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not **elves** exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours."



Elves: fairies that are somewhat mischievous.

The poem "Mending Wall" has been taken from his second volume of poetry titled *North of Boston* (1914). In this poem, though Frost takes into account the discourse between two neighbours on mending a wall, it is written in the form of a dramatic monologue. The speaker of the poem is not very keen about the whole idea of mending walls whereas his neighbour, who is more of a silent participant, believes in the old traditions that have laid emphasis on mending the walls for "Good fences make good neighbours". (L 27) Generally speaking, the poem throws light upon two opposing ideas or notions about boundaries. While the speaker concentrates on the absurdity of such boundaries, on the other hand his neighbour reflects the conventional mind set of having such boundaries for maintaining good relationship as well as for security. Let us read the poem in more details.

The poem begins by striking a note on the idea of "walls" which metaphorically creates boundary. It also reflects an important idea, that is, Nature in opposition to concrete forms: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall". (L 1) The first four lines of the poem, in fact, overtly addresses how Nature or the mysterious forces of Nature are against 'walls' because it perturbs the way natural things occur. For instance, in the poem it has been noted that the natural forces do not identify with walls because it:

"sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun;
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast".

The speaker mentions how the gaps appear every year even after repair work. It is beyond their comprehension because suddenly during mending time in spring season, the gaps become visible again.

Ironically, it is the speaker who informs his neighbour about the gaps in the wall that has to be mended:

I let my neighbour know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.

"One on a side", both the speaker and his neighbour toils throughout the day to mend the gaps in the wall by placing the fallen boulders and

stones of varied shapes on either side. The speaker even goes to call it a "kind of out-door game" because they have to balance all the stones, some of which are flat, square or uneven; they had to repeatedly balance the boulders and the stones because it keeps falling down. It is very aptly expressed in the following lines:

We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"

Here, in the following lines we get a glimpse of the sceptical attitude of the speaker. From taking active part in mending the wall, suddenly there is a change in his tone. He throws light on the fact that his apple orchard and his neighbour's pine yard do not actually need a wall for the gardens are not going to shift themselves. However, the speaker again brings to light the way his neighbour emphasises on "good fences" to maintain a sound relationship. There are two contradictory views- one favours 'walls' as a means to protect property, maintain cordial relation with neighbours, and also defines one's acknowledgement of the limitation of boundaries, while the other questions the absurdity of creating differences due to 'walls' which prevents closeness and creates imaginary division between people. You must keep in mind that the speaker is the one who believes that walls are useless structures that disrupts the harmony of nature thereby creating differences among people. In addition, it is only through the following line that the readers find the presence of a second person (that is, the speaker's neighbour): "Good fences make good neighbours."

The speaker then informs the readers that it is the spring season that makes him playful. On such a note, he intends to influence his neighbour to rethink on the importance that he lays to 'walls'. He points out that there is no necessity for walls where there are no cows or other animals that may cause injury. He further reflects on the fact that he is not going to harm anyone if he does not have a wall. By opposing the idea of a wall, the speaker not only creates trouble for anyone but also brings to light a crucial aspect. Symbolically, walls are associated with divisions. A close look at the poem reveals a tendency of the speaker against any boundaries between men,

be it in home or nations, in general and between individuals in particular. Frost deals with this idea to reflect on how differences or divisions lead towards a crippled future of a society and a country at large.

The speaker once again stresses that walls are against the creative forces of Nature and wants his neighbour introspect himself about the same. Regretfully, the speaker on being aware of his neighbour's ignorance or "darkness" of the uselessness of walls finds him repairing or mending the wall:

I see him there
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.

The poem ends with the adamant neighbour believing in the importance of 'walls' as laid down by his forefathers. However, in the speaker's views, we find an urge to adapt in the common interest of human beings for sustaining harmonious relationship and brotherhood. Structurally, we have seen that the poem is written in first person narrative and contains forty-five lines. Let us look into the second poem included in the unit.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Does the poem "Mending Wall" present two opposite views? Explain.

II. "STOPPING BY THE WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING"

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near

Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and **downy flake**.

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.

The second poem by Frost prescribed for you is one of the most popular and anthologised poems that appear in his first Pulitzer Prize winning volume titled *New Hampshire* (1923).The poem begins with the speaker in the woods who stands there wondering to whom the woods belong. While admiring the woods, the thought runs through the speaker's mind that he might know the owner who lives in the 'village' and assures himself that the owner cannot see him 'stopping by the woods' that is filled with snow:

He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

In the second stanza, the speaker makes it clear that it was the 'darkest evening of the year' and hence, reflects that his "horse must think it queer/ To stop without a farmhouse near". On one side of the speaker, there is a frozen lake while on the other side, there are the woods. Being surrounded by darkness, the speaker imagines that even his horse might be troubled to think over the reason behind stopping amidst such lonely surrounding.

The third stanza further establishes in the speaker's mind the notion regarding the horse. As if in agreement to what the speaker imagined, his horse shakes his 'harness bells' to question if the speaker mistakenly stopped there. Except the bells, the only sound came from the sweeping winds and the snow.



Downy: soft, fine feathers.
Flake: a crystal of snow.

You might be familiar with the idea of a 'foil'. In the poem, the horse represents the foil by allowing the speaker to introspect. John Ciardi in the article "Rhyme and Symbols in "Stopping by Woods""maintains that "a foil is a character who "plays against" a more important character…by presenting a different point of view or an opposed set of motives" which leads to the exposure of the more important character, that is, the speaker in case of this poem. (DeFusco, 1999, pp. 95). The second as well as the third stanza uses the 'horse' as a foil to point towards the condition of the speaker who is engulfed completely by the sight of the woods and the mysterious forces at work in nature.

However, the poem ends abruptly without giving the readers any clue about the intention of the speaker who stopped by the woods that are "lovely, dark and deep". It is not clear as to what compels the speaker to stop in such a lonely, cold and snowy evening. The fourth stanza reflects that the enchanting view could not be enjoyed by the speaker forever because there are other promises to be fulfilled. The repetition of the line:"And miles to go before I sleep" may be interpreted as "social obligation, or personal commitment, or duty, or just the realisation that a man cannot indulge a mood forever" (DeFusco, 1999, pp. 96).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 5: Provide a brief critical summary of the poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening."

8.5 MAJOR THEMES

After reading both the poems, one important theme that becomes pertinent is **the theme of Nature**, which engulfs not only these two poems but also Frost's works in general. However, one has to note the difference between Frost's treatment of Nature from the Nature-poet William Wordsworth. Unlike the latter, Frost believes in 'detachment' and his poems thereby prove the poet's accurate description of Nature as it is, rather than dependency. In fact, Lionel Trilling, calling Frost a "terrifying poet" points out

that "the manifest America of Mr. Frost's poems may be pastoral; the actual America is tragic" (DeFusco, 1999, pp. 55-56). For instance, in the poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", tells about the experiences of not only one man- anyone who stops by the woods on a snowy evening is tend to feel like that. The dark woods mesmerise the speaker to such an extent that he stops at such a worse time. The fact that he is not seen by the owner trespassing is first mentioned, which also points to his loneliness. Then, the queerness of the whole situation further pushes him into isolation, which he very much welcomes. In a way, though dealing with woods that are lovely, it depicts wildness. In comparison to "promises" that are bounded by social obligation or family, restraint as well as order, wildness is the reverse (DeFusco, 1999, pp. 80). Thus, we see how through the theme of nature, Frost engages with crucial aspects of his time such as loneliness, isolation, terror, fear, etc. In the poem "Mending Wall" also, Frost's treatment of nature is proof of the way he realistically portrays the bare facets of nature without exalting it. Admitting about the power of nature, Frost in this poem brings out the man-nature conflict very well.

Frost's **preoccupation with rural landscape** is another prominent theme in his poetry. How could he not invest in depicting rural themes in his poetry being a poet-farmer? It is obvious due to his association with rural life in New Hampshire. This fascination of Frost with New England brings a fine tune of regionalism into his art as well. John F. Lynen (DeFusco, 1999, pp. 67) while discussing Frost's use of pastoral elements in his poetry noted that the very idea of pastoral poetry is based upon a 'basic duality', that is, through the lenses on the rural life; the pastoral poet always envisions a 'world beyond'. It is through the 'dissimilarities' that the poet portrays "universal experience by revealing the basic realities common to both worlds". For example, in the poem, "Mending Wall", Frost refers to the yearly tradition of mending wall; however, the walls are not just restricted to country walls that separates only neighbours. The 'wall' goes on to be infinitely interpreted as any kinds of divisions- economic, religious, social, political, etc.

Besides these, it is seen that Frost is concerned about humanity. Behind his description of nature in its various forms, Frost's engagement with the theme of humanity is obvious as in both the poems of this unit. In "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening", for instance, Frost deals with human obligations on the one hand and escapist tendencies of human beings by dwelling into the wilderness of nature. Interestingly, his poetry also reveals his interest in the theme of loneliness and isolation. He is very well aware of the isolation of modern human beings from society as well as from nature. Frost has very high **regards for individualism and humanity**. Though many critics were perplexed by Frost's distance from his contemporaries in language and style, yet he has a wide readership unlike the others. The rift between tradition and modernism is found in Frost to a great extent. His inclination towards Nature has to be read in terms of the scientific development: "He wrestled with the relationship of poetic knowledge and scientific knowledge of the world, acknowledging an interesting, if uneasy, relationship between the two seemingly disparate realms" (Faggen, 2008, pp. 24).



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 6: In what way is Frost's treatment of nature different from that of the Romantic poet William Wordsworth?

Q 7: Describe Frost's concern for humanity with reference to any of the poems discussed in the unit.

8.6 FROST'S POETIC STYLE

Frost's popularity as a poet rests on various aspects like symbolism, language, simplicity, rhymes, choice of words, etc. His poetry is known for simplicity of language as well as thought. His language is often 'deceptive' in a way because under its simplicity, Frost brings forth some very serious issues concerning modern human beings. As a farmer poet, his poems have a flavour of the language of common people. Another feature of his poetry is the conversational style.

Repetition is also used by Frost, which serves as an important component in poems like "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening". However, in this poem it is very closely associated with the rhyme scheme. The rhyme scheme of the first stanza is a-a-b-a. John Ciardi has pointed out that "English is a rhyme-poor language" and Frost has adopted a hard rhyme scheme in this poem where three out of four lines rhyme. An interesting view put forward by Ciardi on this aspect of the poem is provided below for your reference:

Frost could not have known what a stunning effect his repetition of the last line was going to produce. He could not even know he was going to repeat the line. . . for in picking up the rhyme from the third line of stanza one and carrying it over into stanza two, he has created an endless chain-link form . . . so by stanza four, feeling the poem rounding to its end, Frost had to do something about that extra rhyme. (DeFusco, 1999, pp. 99)

Therefore, the repetition of the line "And miles to go before I sleep" might be suggestive of the poet's difficulty at first, and then his victory, over the difficulty of experimenting with rhyme schemes. Nevertheless, the poem is widely accepted as unique and has also created an impression of Frost as an excellent poet.

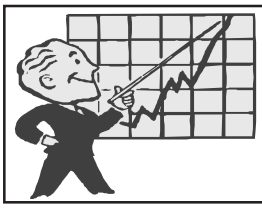
As mentioned earlier, Frost's poems are enriching because of the layered meanings and symbols. Indeed, symbolism runs through his poetry largely, which gives a vibrant significance to his poems. In "Mending Wall", for example, wall can be interpreted into any wall that divides not just two individuals but also an individual from himself or herself. Other implications of 'wall' can be from societal factors to nation-wide concerns. In "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", the 'woods' are merely referred to as dark and deep. If we further move deeper into the poem, the poet's fascination for the woods is not clearly mentioned, as to what caused him stop and withdraw himself in the woods. While the woods are a contrast to the 'promises', the only thing that the reader knows is the speaker's decision to leave the wood as he has much work to do before 'sleep'. In fact, through the symbol of 'sleep', Frost tends to give scope to his readers to interpret it in various forms. Another example from his famous poem, which you might

be familiar of, "The Road Not Taken" also, uses symbol of 'roads' to discuss the problem of choice. Hence, behind Frost's use of symbols, it is clear that his aim was to move from particular to general and encompass the humanity into the ambit of his poetry. Frost's symbolism can be understood in the following lines: "…in all good poetry symbolic meaning will be manifold and ambiguous, but in Frost's it tends to be so broad as to seem indefinite..." (DeFusco, 1999, pp. 70).



LET US KNOW

Let us spare some time to know Frost's idea of poetry. He laid emphasis on three aspects- "sound of sense", figurative language (particularly metaphor) and pastoral mode. The concept of "sound of sense" implies that "sentences have meaningful tones that precede the words, "abstract vitality" and "pure form" (Faggen, 2008, pp. 26). In fact, this brings him closer to his contemporaries because of "the desire to shed the perceived archaic literariness of Victorian and Edwardian verse. In the essay "The Constant Symbol", Frost mentioned that "there are many other things I have found myself saying about poetry, but the chiefest of these is that it is metaphor, saying one thing and meaning another, saying one thing in terms of another, the pleasure of ulteriority. Poetry is simply made of metaphor. So also is philosophy –and science, too, for that matter, if it will take the soft impeachment from a friend. Every poem is a new metaphor inside or it is nothing. In addition, there is a sense in which all poems are the same old metaphor always (pp. xvi). With the pastoral mode, Frost emphasises that "poems become subtle meditations on the relationship between man and the rest of the creaturely world, and tend to challenge the romantic tendency to use nature in purely symbolic and emblematic ways" (Faggen, 2008, pp. 114). An idea of this basic concept of Frost's poetry shall be helpful to you for reading and discussing his works. In the following section, we shall discuss the poet, his personal life as well as his literary outputs.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 8: Identify few aspects of Frost's poetic style that exalted him as a poet.

8.7 RECEPTION OF FROST

As we have learnt, Robert Frost faced difficulty finding publishing houses. He initially published his poem in magazines. However, when his first book was published and was able to garner good reviews, especially from Ezra Pound, he became a sensation not only in England but also in America. Though he has a wide readership, many critics were harsh on Frost for omitting highly significant issues of gender, race, etc. It can never be denied that "Frost gives a powerful and compelling vision of the world, with insight into nature and human nature that stirs thought and brings one continually back to the poems (Faggen, 2008, pp. 164-165). After the publication of *West-Running Brooke* in 1928, Frost for the first time, encountered criticism. For Frost, who already won two Pulitzers by then, it was a difficult time. Except the title poem of the volume, none of the other poems could put an impression on the readers/critics. Regarding the absence of current concerns like "industrialism, the disruptive effects of scientific effects of scientific hypotheses, and…Freudianism" in Frost's *Collected Poems*, Granville Hicks in his review wrote Frost's inability to "contribute to the unification, in imaginative terms, of our culture. He cannot give us the sense of belonging in the industrial, scientific, Freudian world in which we find ourselves" (Faggen, 2008, pp. 165).

In 1944, in an essay entitled unambiguously "The Case Against Mr. Frost", Faulkner Malcolm Cowley, not only directs his criticism to Frost but also his supporters. Cowley in the essay "claims Frost dismissive of scientific matters (a poignantly ironic claim in light of recent scholarship), and for not following in the politically revolutionary paths of his New England predecessors, particularly Thoreau and Emerson, or at least Cowley's version of the latter" (Faggen, 2008, pp. 166). This was directly linked to literary politics from which Frost kept a distance unlike his other contemporaries.

Despite such criticism, Frost's reputation as a poet did not stop from growing because of various positive reviews of his later books from poets and critics like W. H. Auden, Robert Lowell, Jarrell, etc. Jarrell praised the "psychological and the largely tragic vision" as reflected in Frost's poetry in two of his essays "To the Laodecians" and "The Other Robert Frost". Referring Frost as a "terrifying poet", Lionell Trilling considers him a poet "who assures us by his affirmation of old values, simplicities, pieties, and ways of feeling" (Faggen, 2008, pp. 168). Noted poet W.H. Auden appreciated Frost for his matured and wise outlook. He praised Frost's shorter lyrics as well.

Some of the books that contributed to Frost's reception as a poet are Reuben Brower's *The Poetry of Robert Frost: Constellations of Intention* (1963), John Lynen's *The Pastoral Art of Robert Frost* (1964), John C. Kemp's *Robert Frost and New England* (1979), George Monteiro's *Robert Frost and the New England Renaissance* (1988), Judith Oster's *Toward Robert Frost: The Reader and the Poet* (1991), Katherine Kearns's *Robert Frost and a Poetics of Appetite* (1994). All these critical works on Frost are suggestive of his popularity as a poet. Frost had a wide readership despite all the criticism and this proves his greatness as a poet.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 9: Write a note on the critical reception of Robert Frost.



8.8 LET US SUM UP

After reading the unit, we have become familiar with the poet Robert Frost. Four-time winner of Pulitzer Prize, Frost is a farmer poet whose poetry is replete with pastoralism and symbolism. We have looked into the various works, which have created him into a renowned poet. In this unit, we have dealt with two of his notable poems "Mending Wall" and "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and reflected upon the various thematic

concerns identified in both the poems. Often considered a nature poet, it has to be remembered that Frost deals with themes of isolation, nature, humanity and so on. We have also discussed the various aspects of his poetic style. Further, we have got an idea regarding the reception of Frost. To get a better understanding of his poetry you are advised to go through his other poems too.



8.9 FURTHER READING

DeFusco, Andrea. (Ed.) (1999). *Readings on Robert Frost*. San Diego: Greenhaven Press.

Faggen, R. (Ed.). (2008). *The Cambridge Introduction to Robert Frost*. New York: Cambridge University Press. E-book.

Frost, R. (2001). *Poems by Robert Frost: A Boy's Will and North of Boston*. Penguin. E-book.

Frost, R. (1930). *The Poems of Robert Frost: With an Introductory Essay "The Constant Symbol" by the Author.* New York: The Modern Library. E-book.

8.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: He laid emphasis on three aspects- "sound of sense", figurative language (particularly metaphor) and pastoral mode.

Ans to Q 2: *A Boy's Will* (1913).

Ans to Q 3: *New Hampshire* (1923), *Collected* Poems (1931), *A Further Range* (1936) and *A Witness Tree* (1942).

Ans to Q 4: Two contradictory views presented in the poem through the speaker and his neighbour… …one favours 'walls' as a means to protect property, maintain cordial relation with neighbours, and also defines one's acknowledgement of the limitation of boundaries… …while the other questions the absurdity of creating differences due to 'walls' which prevents closeness and creates imaginary division between people.

Ans to Q 5: Refer to section 8.4

Ans to Q 6: Unlike the Nature-poet William Wordsworth, Frost believes in 'detachment' and his poems thereby prove the poet's accurate description of Nature as it is, rather than dependency.

Ans to Q 7: Frost is concerned about humanity… …Frost's engagement with the theme of humanity is obvious as in both the poems of this unit… …in "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening", Frost deals with human obligations and escapist tendencies of human beings by dwelling into the wilderness of nature.

Ans to Q 8: Frost's popularity as a poet rests on various aspects like symbolism, language, simplicity, rhymes, choice of words, etc… …his poetry is known for simplicity of language as well as thought… …language is often 'deceptive' in a way because under its simplicity… …Frost brings forth some very serious issues concerning modern human beings.

Ans to Q 9: Refer to Section 8.7



8.11 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss Robert Frost as a nature poet.

Q 2: What are the major thematic concerns found in Frost's poetry? Discuss in detail.

Q 3: Analyse the poems prescribed in the unit with reference to Frost's use of symbolism.

Q 4: Interpret the following poems critically:

a) "Mending Wall"

b) "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"

Q 5: Comment on the life and works of Robert Frost. Do you agree that his background has influenced his concept of poetry? Discuss.

Q 6: Discuss the salient features of Frost's poetic style. Illustrate your answer with reference to the poems you have read.

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UNIT 9: EUGENE O'NEILL: *DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS* (PART I)

UNIT STRUCTURE

9.1 Learning Objectives

9.2 Introduction

9.3 Eugene O'Neill: The Playwright

9.3.1 His Life

9.3.2 His Works

9.4 Sources of the Play

9.5 Critical Reception of O'Neill

9.6 Let us Sum up

9.7 Further Reading

9.8 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints only)

9.9 Possible Questions

9.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- discuss the life and works of Eugene Gladstone O' Neill
- explain *Desire Under the Elms* as an experimental, symbolic, tragic, and emotionally probing play
- acquaint yourself with the various sources of the play
- make a survey of the various critical studies done on Eugene O'Neill and his works
- discuss the importance of Eugene O'Neill in the history of American literature

9.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall deal with the American playwright Eugene O'Neill with particular reference to his *Desire Under the Elms.* O'Neill was an American playwright and Nobel laureate in Literature. His poetically titled plays were among the first to introduce into U.S. drama techniques of realism earlier associated with Russian playwright Anton Chekhov,

Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, and Swedish playwright August Strindberg. O'Neill's plays were among the first to include speeches in American English vernacular and involve characters on the fringes of society. They struggle to maintain their hopes and aspirations, but ultimately slide into disillusionment and despair. Nearly all of his other plays involve some degree of tragedy and personal pessimism. As we finish reading this unit, we shall have not only discussed the life and works of this famous American playwright, but have also looked at the sources of the play *Desire Under the Elms* and made a survey of the different critical studies done on Eugene O'Neill and his works.

9.3 EUGENE O'NEILL: THE PLAYWRIGHT

In this section, you will get to read about the life and works of O'Neill.

9.3.1 His Life



Source:
https://commons.wikimedia.org

Born in a hotel on Broadway, in New York City, in 1888, Eugene O'Neill never saw any stability in life. His father James O'Neill being an actor, young Eugene spent most of his childhood days accompanying his busy father on tours around the country. His summers were spent in their only permanent home in New London, Connecticut. He literally grew up in the world of theatre seeing and understanding the front and back stages. These experiences unfolded the difficulties of maintaining artistic integrity. The sense of insecurity, a common trait in most of his plays, came from his personal life. The playwright's search for a meaning of life prevails all his plays. He had a strict Catholic education during childhood. Though a bright student, his career suffered a setback when he was dropped out of Princeton University for his indiscipline, which was a mark of the end of his formal education. O'Neill took up various occasional jobs and then

served as a cub reporter in New London Daily Telegraph. During this period, he composed many poems and plays. In 1912, when he was diagnosed with tuberculosis, he was highly inspired by his studies, and decided to become a playwright upon recovery.

He enrolled in a brief course in writing plays at Harvard under Prof. George Pierce Baker in 1914. From 1924 to 1943, O'Neill composed plays and explored theatrical forms and literary techniques. In 1916 was staged his first one act play, *Bound East for Cardiff*, a story about sailors and their lives at sea. In 1920, came out *Beyond the Horizon*, his first full-length play that not only introduced him as a genius to the American audience but also earned him the prestigious Pulitzer Prize, the first of the three in his lifetime. After *Beyond the Horizon* followed many of his great plays proving the periods the most productive age in his life as an artist. *The Emperor Jones* (1920), *The Hairy Ape* (1922), *Anna Christie* (for which in 1922 O'Neill received his second Pulitzer), *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), *Strange Interlude* (for which in 1928 he won the third Pulitzer), *Mouring Becomes Electra* (1931) are some of his major plays. The only comedy he composed was *Ah, Wilderness* in 1933. In 1936, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature for his contribution to the art of theatre and he became the first and only American playwright to be honoured with the Nobel Prize. He was honoured with Pulitzer Prize again for the fourth and last time posthumously for *Long Day's Journey into Light*.

O'Neill married thrice and he knew the hardship and mental turmoil of broken marriages and homes. Oona, his 18 year old daughter (from his second wife, Agnes Button) married film star Charlie Chaplin, who was 54 in 1943 which deeply hurt him. He never met his daughter again. Then in 1948, his son, Shane O'Neill (from his second marriage) was arrested in charge of possessing heroin and O'Neill never met his younger son. In 1950 Eugene O'Neill Jr, (from his first marriage to Katherine Jenkins) committed suicide. Due to his ill health, O'Neill could not attend the funeral of his oldest

child. His final years were marked by physical suffering (that had robbed him of his ability to write and for long twenty years he battled a crippling nervous disorder), by isolation and family issues. However, those could not stop him from composing two great works that the American theatre has ever seen – *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*. Both were produced posthumously.

During his lifetime, his plays were received warmly, were highly appreciated by public and critics; though they created much controversy sometimes, but those established him as the master of the craft and America's leading playwright. In 1953, O'Neill passed away in the Shelton Hotel in Boston.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: How did O' Neill's life and relationships influence his works?



9.3.2 His Works

O'Neill composed twenty long plays and many shorter ones between 1920 and 1943. In 1916, young O'Neill began his career with *Bound East for Cardiff*, the first work to be publicly performed. It was a one act romantic melodrama about seafarers and their lives at sea. The playwright's unhappiness with life is obvious in the play. As in his other plays, this play not only reflects the tragedy of human lives but also the author's point of view. The sailors in the ship hate the sea but they do not try to escape. The play has the lonely sea and the oppressive fog as symbols of approaching death. The play was primarily staged for the amusement of a special audience by an enterprising group of young Greenwich writers and painters at Provincetown, Massachusetts. O'Neill's joining the Greenwich group was remarkable, for the group unknowingly prepared his way for experimental dramas on stage, which was indeed O'Neill's revolt against the traditional forms.

In 1920, O'Neill's first full-length play, *Beyond the Horizon*, a tale of two brothers beaten up by wrong choices, was enacted on Broadway at the Morosco Theatre, New York City. The play not only achieved production on commercially minded Broadway but won O'Neill the first of the four Pulitzer Prises too. It was an incredible literary and productive period in O'Neil's life. The same year, following the success of *Beyond the Horizon* came out *The Emperor Jones*. The play depicts the hero's ascent in social ladder from a porter to an emperor who has got control of an island in West India, followed by his descent and destruction. In 1922 was staged O' Neill's first real box office success *Anna Christie*, a story about a prostitute returning to her seafaring father and falling in love with a sailor. The play won the second Pulitzer of his life.

In 1924 came out *Desire Under the Elms* about which you are reading in detail in this unit. In 1928, O'Neill staged *Strange Interlude*, a play in nine acts that bought him his third Pulitzer for bringing novelty in theme and treatment. The play depicts the life of a lady from the death of her fiancé to her countless marriage that follow. In 1931, O'Neill finished his most ambitious work *Mourning Becomes Electra.* In 1933, he composed *Ah, Wilderness!* which was the only comedy the playwright wrote. In 1939, O'Neill completed *The Iceman Cometh*, one of his masterpieces, a play about 'pipe dreams' of a drunken group in New York. One of his best-known plays, *Long Journey Into Night*, depicting the embattled bond of his parents, came out in 1941. The play won him Pulitzer (posthumously).

O' Neill was 27 when he bounced back to life and left the sanatorium with a sure knowledge of what he wanted to do with his life. It was indeed a spiritual as well as physical rebirth on his part. O'Neill's early life contributed a lot to his writing. Like O'Neill as a boy, many characters in his plays are caught in destructive situations from where they cannot escape. Many of his plays reflect O'Neill's introspective view into the family life. His plays also deal with issues

like moral and physical entanglements, which bring complexity into family life. Man in search of his identity and his struggle within himself are two major themes of most of his acclaimed plays. His poetic dialogues (not the verbal beauty but the emotional lines, moods, feelings, imaginations etc.) have made his plays distinctly different from any other playwright.

O'Neill was restlessly seeking peace and was dissatisfied in life. Therefore, his successful plays reflect his tragic vision of life. His tragedies are the reflections of modern life; his tragic heroes are drawn from the humblest class of society who bring about their own downfall. O'Neil continuously experimented with various dramatic techniques. His plays are expressionistic. Therefore, exaggerations, symbolic ideas, mask and use of distortion, elliptical language are common elements in his plays. Before him, American Drama was farcical or melodramatic. O'Neill was the first American playwright who made theatre a means to project the inner life of people and dealt with serious social issues and ideas. He made American drama a serious cultural institution.

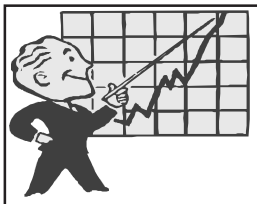


LET US KNOW

The Legacy of O'Neill [https://www. britannica. com/biography/Eugene-ONeill]

O'Neill was the first American dramatist to regard the stage as a literary medium and the only American playwright ever to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. Through his efforts, the American theatre grew up during the 1920s, developing into a cultural medium that could take its place with the best in American fiction, painting, and music. Until his *Beyond the Horizon* was produced, in 1920, Broadway theatrical fare, apart from musicals and an occasional European import of quality, had consisted largely of contrived melodrama and farce. O'Neill saw the theatre as a valid forum for the presentation of serious ideas. Imbued with

the tragic sense of life, he aimed for a contemporary drama that had its roots in the most powerful of ancient Greek tragedies—a drama that could rise to the emotional heights of Shakespeare. For more than 20 years, both with such masterpieces as *Desire Under the Elms, Mourning Becomes Electra,* and *The Iceman Cometh* and by his inspiration to other serious dramatists, O'Neill set the pace for the blossoming of the Broadway theatre.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 2: Name some of O'Neill's significant works.

Q 3: Do you think O'Neill's major works appear to be a criticism of the society at large?

9.4 SOURCES OF THE PLAY

Desire Under the Elms is influenced by O'Neill's personal tragedies. However, for inspiration he turned to authors like Freud and Jung and to Greek tragedians including Euripides and Sophocles. The set is New England in 1850.

The action of the play centres around the Cabot family, with a "hard and bitter" father Ephraim and his three young sons who hate him as he treats them with scorn whenever they fail to match his physical strength or fail to live up to his 'standards'. Simeon and Peter sell their rights to the farm to Eben to join the California gold rush and finally to become free of their father's oppressive ways. The California gold rush as a new American dream must have touched the playwright. California came up with a hope for a better life despite numerous hardships. The rush was however not without some negative impacts on the people like the genocide of Native Americans and environmental damage, which ultimately helped in establishing California's statehood in 1850. Again, this trip to California could have turned into one of the worst nightmares imaginable and so this American dream symbolised taking risks in life and one's readiness to

gamble one's future. In the play, Eben's two elder half-brothers represent the groups of such fortune hunters.

The play definitely communicates to the readers O'Neill's study of Greek theatre. Since tragedy as a genre flourished in Greece, it is obvious that generations of playwrights have been greatly influenced by their timeless themes. The *Desire Under the Elms* might not have been derived directly from any particular play, yet the themes like incest and infanticide echo several mythical themes from Greek tragedies. The sense of an inevitable destiny awaiting the major characters – Ephraim, Eben and Abbie remind one of the Greek tragedies. All the characters are forced to consciously choose the evil and it is destiny that structures events to bring about the downfall of otherwise noble characters.

The play seems to be influenced by other tales like that of Phaedra's—the tale of a queen—who is pressurised by the gods to fall in love with her husband's son from another marriage. The king's son, Hippolytus, rejects his stepmother's advances, prompting Phaedra to seek revenge on him by falsely accusing Hippolytus of raping her. The father King Theseus curses poor Hippolytus to death. An angry Phaedra kills herself. The myth inspired many playwrights to compose plays, with a few variations but presenting Phaedra as a source of Hippolytus's demise. It also served as O'Neill's principal model.

Another myth, the story of Medea (later made into a drama by Euripides), must have inspired O'Neill. Medea, the wife of Jason, is infamous for seeking revenge against Jason (who left her for another young princess) by murdering her own sons then leaving Jason alive to suffer. Medea, for committing such a sin, is often portrayed as a witch or sorcerer. Medea can be identified with Abbie when she deliberately decides to kill her own blood. The innocent son would have secured the property of Ephraim.

Furthermore, O'Neill complicates the classic tales by introducing Old and New Testaments motif in the play. God in the play is judgemental, angry and hard. The moment Eben knows about his child's murder, he rushes off to inform the Sheriff. This is the Old Testament rage - the superiority of justice over mercy. Abbie faces the wrath of Ephraim who

suddenly becomes the personification of the punishing God. However, Ephraim in despair thinks of abandoning his harsh God and in sharp contrast to his son says that he would never have told the police. He declares to turn the livestock loose and burn everything. Yet by the end of the play, the hardness has won and Ephraim's life on the farm continues as usual. Then, Eben's rage over Abbie proves short-lived and his instinctual side wins over. He comes back to her realizing his love for her and to share her blame and punishment by accepting part of the guilt. This love, charity reminds us of "Now there remaineth Faith, Hope, and Love, these three; and the greatest of these is Love." in the New Testament.

So, several myths are brought together in the play. The sensitive use of Greek sources to draw on the archetypal plot as well as resonances from Old and New Testaments, American history, Sigmund Freud together have provided extraordinary power, flavour and colour to the characters of the play, thereby making the play one of the finest in the American theatre.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: What parallels/differences do you find between some Greek mythical characters and the characters in *Desire Under the Elms*?

9.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF O'NEILL [Adapted from *Cambridge Companion to Eugene O'Neill*. pp 236-243]

The reception of O''Neill falls essentially into two categories: (I) the reception of his plays in critical reviews following their performances, and (2) the interpretation and evaluation of his plays by scholars and historians. The former have obviously appeared in newspapers like the *New York Times* and magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek*, *The Nation*, and *The New Yorker*; the latter in scholarly journals and in books devoted to his life and works.

From the early 1920s until the late 1930s—the period of O'Neill's heyday as a popular dramatist - journalistic reviews were the chief category, though some quasi-scholarly studies also appeared in that period, most notably Barrett H. Clark's *Eugene O'Neill*, which was originally published in

1926. With the appearance of Sophus Winther's *O'Neill: A Critical Study* in 1934, evaluation of the playwright as a major American dramatist and a significant figure in world drama has come to predominate, though obviously reviews of individual productions in the United States and, increasingly, abroad continue to appear.

The most comprehensive survey of what has been written on O'Neill until the year of its publication is Jordan Y. Miller's *Eugene O'Neill and the American Critic* (1973). Miller's work is unique in giving equal attention to newspaper reviews and scholarly studies. Another important work is Oscar Cargill, N. Bryllion Fagin, and William J. Fisher, eds., *O'Neill and his Plays* (1961) which actually juxtaposes reprints of selected journalists' reviews with both reprinted and original scholarly articles. Other listings and discussions of O'Neill criticism appear, of course, in general bibliographical discussions—e.g., Madeline Smith and Richard Eaton's *Eugene O'Neill: An Annotated Bibliography* (1988) or Margaret Loftus Ranald's *An O'Neill Companion* (1984) - and in general surveys of American drama criticism, notably Floyd E. Eddleman's *American Drama Criticism,* second edition.

Sophus K. Winther's *Eugene O'Neill: A Critical Study*, originally published in 1934, and Richard Dana Skinner's *Eugene O'Neill: A Poet's Quest*, first published in 1935, are other pioneering critical works written without the understanding that Long Day's Journey and the biographies of the 1960s and 70s would bring. John Gassner's *Eugene O'Neill* (1965), Frederick I. Carpenter's *Eugene O'Neill* (1979), and Normand Berlin's *Eugene O'Neill* (1982), all works analyzing the O'Neill canon in the entire context of the man and his theatre. To this latter group, Virginia Floyd's *Eugene O'Neill: A New Assessment* (1984) might appropriately be added.

Four studies deal with the playwright's emerging dramaturgical techniques: Egil Tornqvist's *A Drama of Souls: O'Neill's Study in Supernaturalistic Techniques* (1969), which deals with his methods of characterization. Jean Chothia's *Forging a Language: A Study of the Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (1979), which is rooted in Chothia's unique perception of growing sophistication in the playwright's dialogue; Michael Manheim's *Eugene O'NeillS New Language of Kinship* (1982) which reaches

conclusions for the entire canon based both on the autobiographical context and language of the late plays; Doris Alexander's *Eugene O'Neill's Creative Struggle* (1992), which uses an autobiographical context to concentrate on the years 1924-33; and most recently Kurt Eisen's *The Inner Strength of Opposites*, which sees inner psychological conflict in the plays from the perspective of the twentieth-century novel.

O'Neill's relationship to earlier writers—Ibsen, Strindberg, and the Greek tragedians—has been included in several critical studies, but comparisons of his plays with the work of two writers he is not normally compared with is the exclusive focus of two full-length works: Peter Egri's *Chekhov and O'Neill* (1986), which deals more with Chekhov's short stories than his plays; and Normand Berlin's *O'Neill's Shakespeare* (1993), one of the most original approaches to the playwright in recent years.



9.6 LET US SUM UP

O'Neill has been acknowledged as one of the foremost American playwrights of the early 20th century. A realist, O'Neill, writes of "things as they are", neither gloomy nor moralistic. O'Neill in his life was passionately dissatisfied; his restless soul dominates his major plays. His restless spirit was deeply conscious of man's tragic predicament that has been caused by forces powerful and unknown to man. He believed that man is a mixture of good and evil encounters with incidents and accidents that make up his life. He presents some real characters on the stage with the secrets of their thoughts, their planning, their appearance and all. O' Neill's plays try to find out the meaning of human life. There is a constant quest for identity on man's part that ends in death and destruction. His characters fail to have any comfortable foothold to find life's meaning and fall into tragic dilemma. They are isolated and frustrated souls even in the times of modern science and technology.



9.7 FURTHER READING

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Web Resources:

https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eugene-ONeill

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eugene_O%27Neill

9.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: Intense personal point of views can be found in O'Neill's plays... ...plots derived directly from the scarring consequences of tragic relationships within O Neill's own family... ...disturbing relationships between parents, tragic deaths of O'Neill's older brother, who died of alcoholism ... ... caught and tormented between love and rage ... ... themes of incest, lust, infanticide, revenge, conflicts etc. in his plays have their roots in his own family's conflicts.

Ans to Q 2: *Bound East for Cardiff… …Beyond the Horizon… …Desire Under the Elms… …Mourning Becomes Electra… …Long Journey Into Night… …The Emperor Jones*

Ans to Q 3: O'Neill's works criticise society's labelling something right or wrong ... … something that appears wrong can later prove right and vice versa ... ... sometimes sins are justified and forgivable ... ... at times impulse or human desire prove very dangerous ... ... also the reason behind committing sins ... ... the play criticises man's less control over passion, vanity, obsession and desire and his conscious decision to move towards disaster.

Ans to Q 4: Both gods and fate play significant roles in Greek myths... …in the play individuals appear as if modern embodiment of mythic characters... …Abbie resembles Phaedra who attempted to seduce Hippolytus... …Abbie also resembles Medea who kills her own blood... …Eben is Oedipus who has an incestuous relationship with his (step) mother by which Eben supplants his father... …Eben resembles Hippolytus as well who becomes the victim of his mother's revenge...

…Ephraim too seems a mythic figure haunted by destiny and must pay for his wrong deeds ... ... characters accepting punishment for committing sin is derived from the Greek concept of tragedy.



9.9 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Who is Eugene O'Neill? Discuss the life and works of the American playwright Eugene O'Neill.

Q 2: What aspects of Eugene O'Neill's life and relationships are seen to manifest in his works?

Q 3: Provide a detailed account of the sources of the play *Desire Under the Elms.*

Q 4: Write in detail about the critical studies done on the Eugene O'Neill and his works.

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UNIT 10: EUGENE O'NEILL: *DESIRE UNDER THE ELMS* (PART II)

UNIT STRUCTURE

10.1 Learning Objectives

10.2 Introduction

10.3 Reading the Play

- 10.3.1 Act Wise Summary of the Play
- 10.3.2 Major Themes
- 10.3.3 Major Characters

10.4 Critical Reception of the Play

10.5 Let us Sum up

10.6 Further Reading

10.7 Answers to Check Your Progress (Hints only)

10.8 Possible Questions

10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- make act-wise summary of the play
- trace its experimental and rather complicated themes, as well as the complex major characters
- gain ideas about its critical reception of the play among the audience and critics
- appreciate the play in its nuanced totality

10.2 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we shall mainly discuss Eugene O' Neil's play *Desire Under the Elms* in terms of its various important aspects. From the previous unit, that deals with the life and works of Eugene O'Neill, we have learnt that O'Neil transformed the art of producing drama by making it a serious cultural institution. This unit deals with O'Neill's play *Desire Under the Elms* which is a story about a young woman married to an old man who cements her relationship with her stepson. The play ends with a tragic note—the

lady kills her new born in order to prove her love and loyalty to her stepson-lover. The overtone of incest in the play caused much controversy. By the time we finish reading the unit, we shall learn why O' Neil's plays are a continuous inspiration to the newer generation of authors from America as well as readers across the world.

10.3 READING THE PLAY

The following section will help you to read the play in some detail.

10.3.1 Act Wise Summery of the Play

Act I, Scene I

As the curtain rises, audience see Eben Cabot with his half-brothers Simeon and Peter who have just come back from work. Eben calls them in for supper. They stop in front of the house to remark on the beauty of the setting sun. They talk of going to California in search of fortune for an easy life. They are tired of the hard life of working in the fields. The farm belongs to their father Ephraim Cabot who went missing without anyone's knowledge two months ago. They are not sure of his being alive. However, Eben who has been busy in the kitchen comes out and he shows no interest in going to California leaving his farm behind.

Act I, Scene II

Scene II takes the readers inside the house where the three brothers have their supper. While the two elder brothers share their doubts about their father, Eben violently reacts to them saying that Ephraim is not his father. However, Eben fondly remembers his dead mother.

Act I, Scene III

Next morning, Eben wakes up his half brothers to inform them that their father is alive and has married at New Dover for the third time a lady who is about 35 years old. The brothers realise that all their fortune, the field will go to that lady now. Eben strongly rejects this notion and says that the farm actually belongs to his mother

and he is the rightful heir to the farm. Eben tells them that he hates his father who has murdered his mother. However, his two elder brothers believe that two-thirds of the farmland belongs to them too. Eben strongly rejects the idea. Eben lures them so that they relinquish any claim to the land, promising money, which he stole from his father, for their trip to California. The brothers agree to leave the property if Eben pays them 300 dollars in lieu of their share in the farm. Eben becomes happy to find that they agree. He prepares to visit Minnie, a local prostitute, in the town and the two bothers taunt him.

Act I, Scene IV

Eben is seen brooding over his food, thinking something deeply. He senses his father approaching home with his new bride. He goes to the gate and with glowing possessive eyes stare at the farm, which he believes, cannot go to anyone but him. Both brothers get emotional while planning to leave the house and the land where they have given 30 years of sweat and blood. Soon they compose themselves thinking California will not only give them fortune but some freedom too. As their father proceeds home, angry Simeon and Peter sign on the papers leaving their claim on the land. They wait to see their new mother. Ephraim Cabot enters with Abbie Putnam, his new bride, and introduces her to his two elder sons. Abbie is more interested to see the house, which she mentions, as "my house" instead of "our house" than to know her new family. Abbie goes inside the house in search of Eben to tell him that she is the lady of the house from now. Meanwhile insulting their father, Simeon and Peter leave the house for California as free men. As Abbie goes in to explore her new home, she finds Eben in the kitchen. She at once tries to befriend Eben, a handsome young man, but he rejects her. Abbey tells him that in her past she had been in search of her own home. Now she has found her own home and the property belongs to her. These revelations make Eben furious. Older Cabot enters the room and prays to God to smite his two undutiful elder

sons. He asks Eben to go to work in the field but Eben answers that he cannot work alone.

Act II, Scene I

Two months later, on a hot Sunday afternoon, Abbie, dressed in her best, is seen sitting at the end of the porch. Very carefully, trying not to make any noise and later when caught by Abbie, ignoring her existence, Eben goes out of the house. Abbie passionately makes advances towards him. She very swiftly asks Eben not to hide his emotions towards her. She sees his desire in his lustful eyes. Abbie tries to come close to him at times through seduction and at times through a commanding voice. Though Ebenis confused, he agrees with her and leaves. Abbie knows what is he up to and angrily asks him if he is to see Minnie, the prostitute. Eben replies that he finds the village prostitute better than her for at least she does not want to steal his fortune. Later Abbie asks her husband if he has plans to leave the farm to Eben. Old Cabot brushes it aside and says that when he dies he would rather burn his property that was earned with his sweat and blood than leave it to anyone. He says that he will turn the livestock free. Even Abbie becomes free thereafter. Abbie asks whether she has any right over the property but as the field needs a son to work for it, Abbie cannot inherit the farm. Abbie declares that she wants a son from Cabot. At this idea, the old man is overcome with pride, joy and emotion and both pray to God to bless them with a son. While Cabot is joyous hoping for a son in his old age to replace his loneliness, Abbie becomes busy plotting her future.

Act II, Scene II

That night, in their bedroom, old Cabot is excited dreaming of a son from Abbie. It turns out an unsuccessful attempt at making a baby that puts Abbie into another thought. Old Cabot remembers his past – how much hard work he put in the farm and how lonely he was after the death of his first and second wives. Now his only hope

is Abbie and the son she will bring. Abbie promises him a son too, veiling the threat in her voice. Cabot, feeling cold and lonely in the room, goes off to the barn. He finds peace talking to the cows.

In another room, Eben, also alone, thinks of the oppression created by the stonewall. He and Abbie stare at each other through the wall. He senses Abbie's closeness. Both feel nervous and uneasy. Abbie moves to Eben's room and kisses him. Forgetting his hatred of her, Eben too returns her love. Abbie declares her love for him. The scene ends with a confused Eben remembering his dead mother as Abbie goes to the open parlour downstairs.

Act II, Scene III

Totally confused, Eben goes to the parlour. Abbie tells him that she senses someone inside the parlour; Eben replies it's his mother who, he believes, hates Abbie for stealing her place at home. Eben misses his mother who was so kind and soft to him and who used to sing for him. Abbie promises to be kind and soft to him too and would love him like his mother. However, passion overcomes her and soon they passionately express their love for each other.

Act II, Scene IV

Next morning, as Eben, now has a bold and confident expression, leaves for the farm; Abbie expresses sadness over the parting for the whole day.

Act III, Scene I

The next spring, Abbie bears a baby boy. Neighbours gather at Cabot's house for celebrating the arrival of Cabot's new family member. But the guests suspect that the father of the baby is Eben and gossip about it. However, no one dares say that in front of Cabot. As Cabot very proudly announces his ability to make a boy at the age of 76, Abbie looks for Eben among the invitees.

Eben in a room closely watches his boy and tells Abbie that he does not like his baby to be related to Old Cabot. Abbieasks him to be silent and wait for the right time. Eben, unable to tolerate the

celebrations and the locals' gossips about him and Abbie, goes out. On the other side, even old Cabot comes out to the barn to have some peace and solace. The party goes on.

Act III, Scene II

On the set is shown the exterior of the Cabot house after half an hour. Eben with a dumb face is standing at the gate gazing the night sky. Old Cabot comes up from the barn with his eyes on the ground. As he sees Eben standing there, with a cruel triumphant smile he slaps Eben's back and asks him why has he been outside and not being part of the dance in honour of the new born inside. Soon quarrel over the farm follows and Eben says that he will possess the farm anyway. A furious and suspicious Cabot discloses Abbie's secret in plotting against Eben to secure the farm for herself and her son. Abbie wanted her husband to cut off Eben from the property after his death. Trusting his words, Eben breaks down with grief and tries to kill the woman in rage. While Cabot resists him, he attacks the old man but Cabot overpowers him. Abbie comes out to find Eben beaten badly. When Cabot goes inside to party, Abbie tries to kiss Eben asking if he is hurt. Eben, sobbing violently, reacts by asking her if she had designed the whole game of love with him. Abbie admits that initially when she first met him, she had conspired, but with time she has fallen in love with him. Abbie asks Eben to forgive her. He calls her a liar, wishing his dead mother come back to life to help him in murdering the woman. He wishes the baby had never been born and vows to join his two brothers in California, since Abbie has used him to get a son so that she can be heir to the land. It wasn't love for him but the desire for the farm had driven her to him. Abbie keeps on saying that her love for Eben is true and she desperately wants him in her life. As Eben goes inside the house, Abbie, confused and alone, promises to prove her loyalty to Eben.

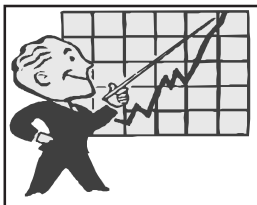
Act III, Scene III

After a few hours, just before the dawn, Abbie rushes to the kitchen to meet Eben and kisses him wildly and informs him that

she has proved that she loves him more than anything in the world. But Eben, cold and unmoved, prepares to leave the house, saying that one day he will be back to his son, who will look just like him. Abbie tells him that she had killed the baby to prove her love to Eben. Eben falls to his knees. Horrified and in deep rage and grief, he accuses her of committing such a sin and rushes away to summon the Sheriff. Eben starts hating her more. The scene ends with Abbie running to the door after Eben saying that she loves him and she does not care what he does but she would still love him. She faints on the floor.

Act III, Scene IV

After an hour, Abbie is seen in the kitchen waiting for Eben to come back with the Sheriff. Cabot, not finding Abbiein the bedroom beside him, goes to the baby and wishes him good morning. He becomes happy finding the baby in sound asleep and remembers that the baby did not cry all night as he usually does. Quietly he leaves the room to find Abbie in the kitchen. Abbie confesses to him that she has killed the baby. Abbie also tells him that the baby is Eben's. Cabot is amased to learn that Eben has gone to bring the Sherriff. Eben returns alone and tells Abbie that while describing everything to the Sheriff, he realised how much he loves her and hopes that they can run away together. However, Abbie insists that she must be punished for committing the sin. Eben also realises that he too has to take his share of punishment in the sin. As the Sheriff arrives to arrest the criminal, Eben tells him that he planned the killing. Both are taken away to prison by the Sheriff. Old Cabot turns the livestock loose in the forest and plans to leave for California. As he seeks his hidden money, he discovers that it has already been stolen. Eben confesses that he had given those to his brothers to pay the passage to California. Old Cabot gives up his plans and accepts God's will to make him lonesome again and to work in the farm alone.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What ideas do you form in your mind about the characters after going through Act I of the play?

Q 2: Consider the essential nature of Abbie as the central female character as it appears in Act II of the play.

Q 3: After studying Act III, do you think there are larger forces at work, other than God and Faith, guiding the three major characters to their ends?

10.3.2 Major Themes

The following are some of the important themes of the play.

Human greed, passion, desire, lust and aversion

The play deals with themes like intense greed, lust, passion, desire, etc. that end in despair. The characters are somehow influenced by intense desires. As the play begins, the three Cabot brothers Eben, Peter and Simeon are introduced and by the end of the first scene, it is clear that they hate their old father. While the older sons hate their father for he made them work hard in the farm, Eben, the youngest sibling, hates him, as he believes that the man had snatched his mother's property and had overworked her to death. Eben thinks that he is the only inheritor and must be the landowner. Eben's greed and passion lead to his later tragic life. He plans to win his inheritance through Abbie, and at the same time avenge his father.

Both Eben and Abbie fall in love and their passions sow the seeds of a greater tragedy. Initially both want to possess the farm and the house, but over time they change due to their passion. Initially Eben hates Abbie for she assumes the position of his dead mother in the house. However, through his passionate relationship with her, Eben realises his hidden desire. He discovers comfort in Abbie who not only has become his lover but a mother figure too. Abbie too

starts loving him and to prove her allegiances he smothers the infant in its cradle. The passions of Eben Cabot and Abbie Putnam lead to a complicated relationship that causes their tragedy.

Ephraim is not free of faults. He does not love his sons and never thinks of passing on his property to his rightful heir after him. Rather he intends to have a baby from Abbie to inherit his property.

Complex relationships between parents and children

The most complicated relationship dealt with in the play is the relationship between parents and children. It is the core thematic focus of the play. Conflict takes place between Eben, who is emotionally volatile, his young stepmother Abbie and his eccentric, controlling father. The relationship between Eben and his long dead mother is quite interesting. Eben hates his father like his other two half-brothers. After his mother's death, the property has been transferred to his father, which Eben cannot take easily. He still remembers her fondly and sees his mother around him in the house. Eben's resentment of his father is due to his hunger to own his farm. When after a lengthy, unannounced absence, Ephraim returns with a new bride less than half his age, Abbie, he seems her as a new competitor for 'his' farm. His relationship with his stepmother actually is his mother's revenge on his father.

Then, there is clash between love for his mother and sexual love for Eben. After his mother's death, Eben has been constantly missing her. Abbie seduces Eben saying that she will be his mother. His Oedipal search for a mother in Abbie is very hard to miss. Symbolically, Eben and Abbie consummate their love in his mother's parlour. It is the same place where child Eben had bonded with his mother. Throughout the play, Eben feels his mother's presence in the farm in a supernatural form. When Abbie says that she feels something in the parlour, Eben responds with "Maw…Maw allus loved me." After their union in the parlour, the restless spirit of Eben's mother vanishes. At once, it becomes difficult for the audience/ readers to accept this complex, inappropriate, morally wrong

relationship between a mother and her young son. Unaware, both Ephraim and Eben compete with each other. Not only visiting Min, the village prostitute, but in having a passionate relationship with Abbie, Eben competes against his father and his hatred and anger is deep. However, these love triangles lead to the final tragedy.

When Abbie tells her old husband that she wants to have a baby, Ephraim rejoices at the idea. When the son is born, though the entire world guesses it right that it is Eben's, the old man is proud of his fatherhood. Eben, the real father of the son, becomes depressed for to him once again his father had stolen something that was 'rightfully' his. The child brings more complications to the parents that end in gruesome, tragic consequences.

Abbie kills her child, to regain Eben's love. Eben's first reaction is his desire to have Abbie pay for her sin. However, he too claims participation in the crime and shares her punishment. The lovers depart from the farm in the custody of the Sheriff. Thus, the complicated relationships between (step) mother and son, lovers, and competitors determine their tragic fates.

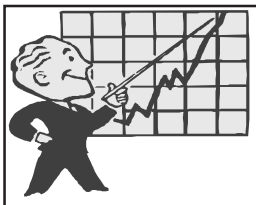
Search for a "Home"

The action of the play takes place entirely in and around the Cabot farmhouse, which is quite appropriate, as the house is the focus of the conflict between the major characters. All of them claim ownership of the house and all have their own reasons. To Eben, the two large Elm trees whose branches surround the Cabot farmhouse, symbolize his mother who is dead. Eben's loss of his mother marks the loss of the farm since it was hers. At the beginning of the play, a description about the kitchen of the farmhouse informs us:". . . Kitchen utensils hang from nails. Everything is neat and in order but the atmosphere is of a men's camp kitchen rather than that of a home." It signifies that the farmhouse has failed to offer Eben the satisfaction of a home and Eben a reason to this dissatisfaction—the farmhouse does not belong to him. His father

has stolen the farmhouse. Thus, Eben yearns for a home of his own. Similarly, Abbie has the same desire. When Abbie arrives at the farmhouse, she utters: "Hum! It's purty—purty! I can't b'lieve it' sr'ally mine". Abbie says in Scene iv, Part I: "A woman's got t' hev a hum". Both Eben and Abbie are aware of their desire that make them plot, plan which lead them to the passion for love, that destroys both. Initially both are afraid of each other's intention, so both feel hostile toward each other. Even at the end, Eben misunderstands that Abbie's final goal is to possess the farm and the house. Thus the land and the farmhouse are two most essential and significant elements in the play.

The Oedipal father

The play is further indebted to the Greeks in its classical oedipal hatred of the father. Sophocles' play "Oedipus Rex" had the very themes of incest and immoralities. Oedipus, the mythical king of Thebes in Greece was left behind after his birth fearing the prediction according to which he would kill his own father and marry his mother. After an unfortunate series of events, he fulfils the prediction that brings destruction to his city and disaster to his family. Influenced by the story, Sigmund Freud talked about "Oedipus Complex," signifying a state in which the child feels sexual desire for the parent of the opposite sex and yearns for the death of the parent of the same sex. Eben is so loyal to the memory of his dead mother that he feels her presence everywhere in the house; his mother has a strong influence over his life; he hates his father Ephraim for there is an unconscious rivalry for mother's love. Ephraim appears to be the oedipal father whom Eben wishes to destroy. To Eben, the stonewalls of the farmhouse are a protection, a shield, where he lives with the spirit of his mother and the sheer hatred of his father.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 4: Comment briefly on the parent-child relationships in the play.

Q 5: Do you think *Desire Under the Elms* qualifies as a "tragedy of the common man"?

10.3.3 Major Characters

The following is a list of the major character of the play.

Eben Cabot

Eben, the third son of Ephraim Cabot by his second wife and half-brother of Simeon and Peter is the central character and protagonist in *Desire under the Elms*. The twenty five year old is a "tall and sinewy," dark and rather good-looking, but with an expression that "is resentful and defensive. His defiant, dark eyes remind one of a wild animal in captivity." Eben is impetuous, volatile and emotional. Eben's relationships with his father Ephraim and his stepmother Abbie are the focal points of the play. Like his older half-brothers, he hates his father for the way the self-righteous old hypocrite treated his mother but even more for having held the farm as his. He believes his mother died of over work. He thinks his father married his gentle mother because she had a legitimate claim to ownership of the vast land. Eben is determined to retain control over the farm and land his mother had possessed.

As audience meet Eben in the first scene of the play on the farmhouse porch, they are sure of Eben's impulsive, curious and soft nature. He is different from his older half-brothers Simeon and Peter. Where Eben is busy in the kitchen preparing supper for them, his brothers come from the field (digging stones and laying them into a boundary around the farm). Eben differs from his brothers in his thoughts. Eben is determined to possess the farm whereas Simeon and Peter long for a better life in distant California. Eben is

so determined to gain the land that he buys out the potential claim of his half-brother' shares with money stolen from his father. He offers each three hundred dollars. Ebenis calculative. The first act of the play also reveals Eben's not-so-normal relationship with his father. He prays for the death of his father who has been away for two months.

That Eben resolves to get his land back from his father and does not want to share it with his two elder half-brothers actually resembles his father. In spite of his alleged "softness", Eben is the closest to the old man in his yearning to own the farm, in his vengefulness, and finally in his acceptance of punishment from the "hard" God. Eben's offering them gold in exchange for renouncing the farm and having an adulterous relationship with his stepmother to avenge his father, shows how closely he resembles the latter. Then Eben's attachment to the farm is similar to the nature of the old man.

Eben's first reaction towards Abbie is also quite normal. When Ephraim arrives home with his new wife, Eben immediately starts hating his young stepmother. In fact, he exchanges bitter words with her. Despite his initial hatred, he enters into an adulterous affair with Abbie and fathers her child. Eben's fatherly love for his baby is reflected when he really wishes the community to learn that the baby is his. But when Abbie urges Eben to be patient, with no option left, he goes out of the house and eventually becomes the cause of his father's humiliation. Believing his father's words, Eben denounces Abbie. He suffers and angrily wishes his baby, who to Ephraim has the claim to the farm, were dead. But he goes to the authority to get Abbie arrested for infanticide. However, like a true lover, he also takes the responsibility of the action. Eben realises that they both have sinned in the name of love and both must share the punishment. Together they are taken away by the sheriff and they depart from the farm for prison.



LET US KNOW

One interesting point in the play is Eben's constant connection with the of his dead mother whom he remembers very fondly every time. He is so influenced by his mother that he actually "sees" her at home, which prompts him to keep his vow to avenge her murder (reminding us of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*). He keeps alive the loving memory of his mother. There is a constant search of a mother in Abbie who also convinces him saying in the parlour "I'll be your mother". His loss of his dear mother also symbolises his loss of the inheritance of his land. Once Eben and Abbie fall in love, the ghost of his mother disappears.

Ephraim Cabot

The old widower's character is built much before he is physically introduced to the audience. As the play begins, we learn that one day without exchanging any word, Ephraim had gone away, leaving his three sons in charge of the farm. Eben, his youngest son (from his second wife), blames him to be his mother's murderer, insisting that he killed her with overwork and had taken over the farm. To Eben, he is a greedy old fellow. His other two brothers also throw light on Ephraim's brutal nature and after years of slavery to the old man, they prefer to go away to California. Ephraim is a farmer who works in the New England farm with the help of his three sons. He has made his sons work like animals on his farm. They all hate their father bitterly. Eben has a reason to hate his father whom he believes has stolen his rightful inheritance.

Ephraim marries three times. His first wife was a hard worker who bore Simeon and Peter and was much like himself. Second was Eben's mother who was a softer person. The lady's parents had some claim to the farm. The final marriage, that to a much younger Abbie Putnam is held some twenty-five years after his second wife's death.

As Ephraim enters the stage, he comes with his third wife—a thirty-five-year-old lady called Abbie Putnam. Old Cabot, a myopic, is seventy-five years old, "gaunt, with great wiry power, but stoop-shouldered from toil with a face as hard as the rocks on his farm", yet at the same time "there is a weakness in it, a petty pride in its own narrow strength." His three sons see this marriage as their father's deliberate intention to cheat them of their inheritance. However, over and over again, we hear old Ephraim Cabot lamenting his loneliness. The ineffable loneliness of the man manages to arouse pity among the audience. He marries to gratify his loneliness. Therefore, when Abbie convinces him that they should have a son, he is overwhelmed with the idea of a company and a suitable son to whom he can leave the farm. He is sensitive to Abbie and to the baby, seeks love and wants to love. Unfortunately, he finds only coldness within his house and among other people. However, the old man accepts the harsh truth that the baby he is so proud of doesn't belong to him; it's Eben's son. Ephraim, who fears "lonesomeness", is left isolated. Ephraim, who is left alone by all, presents a bleak view of human condition.

There is no apparent reason of Ephraim's selfish and stern nature. No clue is provided to understand the man's negative disposition. Ephraim has the best farm in the village. His three young sons work really hard giving their sweat and blood in making it prosperous. However, the old man announces that he would love to burn all his property upon his death than leave the land to Eben. Eben, like Ephraim, identifies with both the land and its livestock (sleeping in the barn with the cows is comforting to him). He considers that none of his sons has the right to inherit since each is a rebel against the hardness of their father, in a different way. The man seems so vengeful when he taunts Eben on the day of the celebration that Eben should better hope nothing to inherit after the arrival of the baby. The proud Ephraim is oblivious as his neighbours openly mocking him as a cuckold. He complains to Eben how Abbie

has tricked him out of his inheritance. This false news leads to Abbie's final act of infanticide.

The two positive traits shown in the character is his religious mind-set and his firm belief in hard work; both have made the character a typical New England Puritan. He is a God-fearing, God-obsessed patriarch. His constant reference to God is a significant aspect of his character. His God is an angry god, as he says—"God's hard, not easy," and his state of loneliness is a punishment from Him. Like other farmers, once he headed to the Middle West where the land was so fertile that one merely had to plant the crops and wait them to grow. However, this comfort distressed him there, and he heard God guiding him that this is not what He wanted. He came back to the farm listening to God's order and forced the earth into fertility. He very often recites passages from the Bible. Even at the end, old Ephraim says nothing more than crying "God's hard". The long monologue in Part II, Scene ii from Ephraim, full of Biblical quotations, is an excellent example of poetic eloquence and lyricism.

Abbie Putnam Cabot

Abbie Putnam, an ambitious, good looking young widow is the only woman character in the play. She is the thirty-five-year-old third wife of the seventy-six-year-old Ephraim. Her face is marred by an obstinate chin and a "gross sensuality."

Abbie is no exception to others in the play in terms of having a desire in life. She is a woman in constant search of a home of her own. Her marriage to an old man is solely to gain possession of a home. Later she wishes to get hold of the farm. Eben, whom she later begins to love, acquaints her with how hard her life was until Ephraim came along. She has no love for him, only a desire to have a place where she could belong.

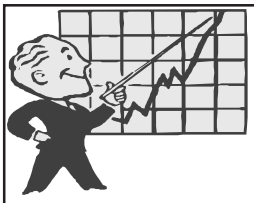
When Abbie enters the farm with her husband, she is at once attracted by Eben's youthful good looks. Whenever she talks to him, she does it with her most seductive tone to attract him. Firstly, it was to gain acceptance of her as his mother since Eben is

deeply attached to his dead mother. Initially Eben considered her as no better than a lady who sold herself for the property. However, two months later, she approaches him and unable to control his emotion, Eben enters in an adulterous union with her. It is interesting to note their adultery is committed "with a horribly frank mixture of lust and mother love." She not only convinces him that he can avenge his father by making love to her, but she also influences him to court her in the parlour, the room where his mother's funeral wake had taken place and assumes the role of his dead mother.

The following year, when a son is born to Abbie, Ephraim, duped by flattery, believes the child is his and makes the baby his heir. The heir's arrival occasions a party and Abbie can clearly see that the celebrants realize that old Ephraim is probably not the boy's father. When Eben hates to pretend what is rightfully his, belongs to his father just like the farm, Abbie tries to make him calm. Taunted by his father, Eben threatens to kill Abbie and wishes the baby dead. By this time, Abbie is so madly in love with Eben that she cannot take his hatred. Destiny plays a cruel game and to prove her love and gain Eben's faith, the mother smothers the baby. However, she later realises that instead of the baby, she should have killed the old man. A devastated Eben, on the discovery of the murder of his own flesh and blood, rushes to the sheriff only to realize that he loves Abbie. He understands her intention—that she loves him than anything else in the world. On his return, very unexpectedly Abbie discovers with strange joy that Eben admits the responsibility of the crime and punishment due to his love for her. Abbie is a tragic character portraying a woman in love with a man who murders her own children; then in her tragedy, she finds some consolation but no way can escape her destiny or punishment.

Both Eben and Abbie's characters share some common traits. The farm holds immense significance to both the lovers. To Abbie, it is a place to belong to and set down roots; to Eben it is a place of kinship with his dead mother and something rightfully his.

Both are closer to the natural order of human existence than any other characters in the play. Their attraction towards each other has been mutual and natural. Both are the children of nature and natural laws bring them together in love. Both become slaves of physical desire and later destiny. They both cannot and do not escape their destiny at the end.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

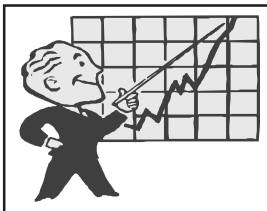
Q 6: Discuss how does each character in the play feel that he/she is the rightful heir to the farm and the land.

10.4 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF THE PLAY

When O'Neill's *Desire Under the Elms* was written and staged in 1924, it was greeted less enthusiastically by the New York press for its frank depiction of lust, desire, incest, passion, infanticide, etc. During its first staging, one critic called it "distresses" that "range from unholy lust to infanticide, and include drinking, cursing, vengeance, and something approaching incest." Not only the play but the playwright also became the subject of heated controversy. However, the notoriety made the play an instant success among public. In addition, a part of the audience was scandalised by the comments of the critics.

Composed about midway through Eugene O'Neill's career, the play with no humour at all, fuses rustic melodrama with elements of Greek tragedy in a modern American landscape. Set in 1850 the play revolves around the struggle for dominance on a New England farmstead headed by the tyrannical Ephraim Cabot over three unhappy, exploited sons – Peter, Simeon and Eben. It is a moralistic tale of lust, love and ambition that came out to be so shocking in its presentation that it was banned in Boston and didn't receive a licence in England till 1940. Even the entire cast went behind bars in Los Angeles in 1925 and were tried in the court for having preformed a lewd, obscene and immoral play. During the trial, the entire court witnessed a special private performance of the play.

The structural set, showing the entire farmhouse with one wall removed, was an innovation during that age. Today *Desire* is one of O'Neill's most admired and frequently performed plays. Almost eight decades later, it got its rightful place among the audience. Due to its sparse style *sans* melodrama and over written language, frank revelation of unconscious drives and primordial fears of the human heart and its projection of honest emotions, the play has been acclaimed as a powerful tragedy among later generation of playwrights and has continued to rank among the great American plays of the 20th century. The brutal realistic depiction of the tale in one way or other has been a source of inspiration of the 21st century playwrights. A difficult piece to perform even today, the epic tale showcases excellent power and intensity of O'Neill as a playwright. The play, the last of Eugene O'Neill's naturalistic plays, presents daring human motives and impulses of love, hate, lust, and greed to offer an honest, convincing, complex and complete impression of human nature for which the play has been influencing modern writers.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 7: Why, in your opinion, did the play create controversy during its first staging?



10.5 LET US SUM UP

We have learnt that *Desire Under the Elms*, subtitled 'A Play in Three Parts', is perhaps the most maturely composed play by O'Neill. This play is full of tragic gloom, irony and challengingly complex themes. It is a story of isolation–physical and of man's dreams, hopes, love and life. Each character in the play is shaken by events and lonely in this world–but they share a common trait. They all are full of passion or desire, either the desire for fortune or love. Each of them is a sad soul after an experience of denial in life. They are tough, crude, but honest people. Life had no pleasure to give

them. The play today is hailed as the first important American tragedy, was banned in Boston and England and narrowly escaped a ban in New York on the charge of obscene themes like incest, adultery and infanticide etc. dealt with in the play. O'Neill's play is surely a modern tragedy of passions, treating varied themes like love, hate, revenge, incest, infanticide and intense possessiveness.



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10.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS (HINTS ONLY)

Ans to Q 1: When Ephraim disappears without exchanging any word, the three sons appear happy guessing that their brutal father may be dead ... ... for Eben, the farm belongs to him ... ... Eben, who is kind, sensitive and gentle seeks maternal love ... ... the brothers' fond hopes are shattered when old Ephraim brings home a new bride ... ... Peter and Simeon go off to the gold fields of California, leaving Eben, his father and Abbie locked in a complicated triangle that ends in disaster for all.

Ans to Q 2: Abbie, the only female character, except the invisible presence of Eben's mother's spirit and frequent references to Min, the village prostitute, desires a "home' of her own... …a place to identify with... …Ephraim's farm comes as a new desire to her... …marries the old man and seduces Eben to fulfil her dream to own the farm... …can go to the point of becoming an adulterous wife... …Abbie comes to light as both a motherly and a sexual figure to Eben.

Ans to Q 3: Neither social and economic circumstances nor fate determine their tragic end ... ...but conscious choice of favouring hidden passion for love prove uncontrollable and destruction drives them to the tragedy.

Ans to Q 4: The father hated most by Eben who believes his mother's death was induced by his father... …Ephraim too has no kindness and love for his sons... … Oedipus complex is apparent with seeking revenge on father and mother's love that ends in Abbie... …fills the void created by mother's death with sheer hatred for father... …Eben

loses faith in love when misled by father into believing that he has been used to steal the farm by Abbie, he wishes the death of his own son.

Ans to Q 5: Yes… …earlier tragedies were about kings, queens and royal families... ... there was no emphasis on the middle and lower classes... … modern tragedies focus on common people, about everyday problems in households instead of kingdoms… …in 1949, Arthur Miller, coined "Tragedy and the Common Man"... ... the Cabot family is no royalty... ... but farmers... ... issue is regarding true ownership of the land... ... the battle among sons for the farm... ... not fate but conscious decision is to be blamed.

Ans to Q 6: The Cabots are farmers ... land is a significant source of their livelihood as well as happiness... …Ephraim is obsessively dedicated to the farm so much that he alienates from his own people... …to him it is land where the Almighty blesses His devotees with prosperity... …for Abbie the farm signifies something a sense of belonging.... ... Eben is possessive of the land and believes that he is the sole inheritor of the farm.

Ans to Q 7: Treatment of sexual relationships... …obsessive and unhealthy relationship between the step-mother and the son... …Eben's adoration of his dead mother and hunger to avenge his father shows the Freudian psychology... …subjects like infanticide, crudity, incest, passion, adultery, violence, etc... …Abby luring Eben into the parlor and declaring her love... …her promise to Eben to take his dead mother's place before the adultery is consummated... …these were topics of heated controversy at that time.



10.8 POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Q 1: Discuss the parent-child relationships as the theme of the play. What sort of love is evident between them?

Q 2: How does the play put forward the playwright's versions of the American dream, individual identity, self-reliance, social exclusion and the development of consciousness?

Q 3: O'Neill once suggested that modern life is more difficult for women than for men. Mark the character of Abbie in this light.

Q 4: Discuss how O'Neill's play "*Desire Under the elms*" is a work of realism.

Q 5: What is your opinion on the sense of 'belonging' after reading the play *Desire Under the Elms*?

*** ***** ***



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Web Resources:

https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eugene-ONeill

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eugene_O%27Neill

Name of the Paper: Course Code:

Centre for Internal Quality Assurance (CIQA)
Krishna Kanta Handiqui State Open University
City Office, Housefed Complex, Guwahati- 06

Learner's Feedback on Course

Dear Learner,

Regarding the course as mentioned above, we would like to know your opinions and comments so as to improve the quality of self learning materials in future. Please respond to the following statements by ticking the number you feel most reflect your opinion. After completion of the additional comments, please detach the page and send/mail the same to us at the address given below.

The Director, Centre for Internal Quality Assurance, KKHandiqui State Open University
Housefed Complex, Dispur, Guwahati- 781006
(E-mail id: ciqa@kkhsou.in)

1. Approximately how many hours did you spend for studying the units in the course? | | | |
2. Please give your opinions (by √ mark) to the following items based on your reading of the block:

Sl. No.	Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I.	The SLMs of the course fulfil the learning objectives set out in the beginning of each unit					
II.	The units of the SLM could satisfy my academic needs and expectations					
III.	The Unit writers have excellent knowledge about the course contents					
IV.	Language and contents of the units were presented at a level which I could readily understand					
V.	Ample opportunity for participation in the activities provided in the units					
VI.	Used enough Illustrations (Diagrams, tables etc.) for conceptual clarity					
VII.	Quality of content is engaging, relevant, and up-to-date					
VIII.	The self check questions are very helpful					
IX.	The Possible/model questions and the answers to check my progress have benefited me a lot					

Additional Comments: *(Please feel free to provide your open comments)*

1. Which aspects of the SLM, according to you, worked well?

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2. What sort of changes/improvements do you feel KKHSOU could implement to improve the overall quality of the SLM?
