

# AMERICAN LITERATURE - II

**M.A., (English)**

**Semester – IV, Paper-IV**

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# **M.A. (ENGLISH) – AMERICAN LITERATURE - II**

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## **FOREWORD**

*Since its establishment in 1976, Acharya Nagarjuna University has been forging ahead in the path of progress and dynamism, offering a variety of courses and research contributions. I am extremely happy that by gaining 'A' grade from the NAAC in the year 2016, Acharya Nagarjuna University is offering educational opportunities at the UG, PG levels apart from research degrees to students from over 443 affiliated colleges spread over the two districts of Guntur and Prakasam.*

*The University has also started the Centre for Distance Education in 2003-04 with the aim of taking higher education to the door step of all the sectors of the society. The centre will be a great help to those who cannot join in colleges, those who cannot afford the exorbitant fees as regular students, and even to housewives desirous of pursuing higher studies. Acharya Nagarjuna University has started offering B.A., and B.Com courses at the Degree level and M.A., M.Com., M.Sc., M.B.A., and L.L.M., courses at the PG level from the academic year 2003-2004 onwards.*

*To facilitate easier understanding by students studying through the distance mode, these self-instruction materials have been prepared by eminent and experienced teachers. The lessons have been drafted with great care and expertise in the stipulated time by these teachers. Constructive ideas and scholarly suggestions are welcome from students and teachers involved respectively. Such ideas will be incorporated for the greater efficacy of this distance mode of education. For clarification of doubts and feedback, weekly classes and contact classes will be arranged at the UG and PG levels respectively.*

*It is my aim that students getting higher education through the Centre for Distance Education should improve their qualification, have better employment opportunities and in turn be part of country's progress. It is my fond desire that in the years to come, the Centre for Distance Education will go from strength to strength in the form of new courses and by catering to larger number of people. My congratulations to all the Directors, Academic Coordinators, Editors and Lesson - writers of the Centre who have helped in these endeavours.*

*Prof. P. RajaSekhar  
Vice-Chancellor  
Acharya Nagarjuna University*

**M.A (English)**  
**Semester – IV, Paper-IV**  
**404EG21: AMERICAN LITERATURE - II**  
**SYLLABUS**

**Unit - I**

Nature Poetry, Imagism, Confessional Poetry, Feminist concerns, Modernism and Postmodernism, Theme of Alienation, Searching for Roots, Black Literature, Existentialism in drama, Absurd Drama, Realism and Naturalism, Expressionistic drama, Dramatic techniques,

**Unit -II**

Wallace Stevens : “Of Modern Poetry”, “Peter Quince at the Clavier”  
Robert Frost : “Road Not Taken”, “Birches”, “Stopping By Woods”

**Unit –III**

Eugene O’ Neill : The Hairy Ape  
Sylvia Plath : “Poppies in July”.

**Unit -IV**

Edward Albee : Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?  
Arthur Miller : Death of a Salesman

**Unit –V**

Ernest Hemingway : The Old Man and the Sea  
Ralph Ellison : The Invisible Man

**SUGGESTED READINGS:**

1. Dower, Alan. (1951). Fifty Years of American Drama. Chicago: Regonary.
2. Lawrence, Shaffer. (2000). History of American Literature and Drama. New Delhi: Sarup.
3. Clark, Barret Harper. Eugene O'Neill, the Man and His Plays. New York: Dover Publications, 1947.
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# LESSON 1

## AMERICAN LITERATURE

### OBJECTIVES

- To understand the nature poetry that includes its use of imagery, symbolism, and theme.
- To understand the key features of Imagist poetry, including its focus on concrete imagery and its use of free verse.
- To understand the elements of confessional poetry, including its use of personal experience and its exploration of difficult emotions.
- To understand the ways in which American literature has addressed feminist concerns, such as gender equality and women's rights.
- To understand the key features of modernist and postmodernist literature, including their experimentation with form and content.
- To understand the ways in which American literature has explored the theme of alienation, including its causes and consequences.

### STRUCTURE

- 1.1. Introduction to American Literature
- 1.2. Nature Poetry
- 1.3. Imagism
- 1.4. Confessional Poetry
- 1.5. Feminist Concerns
- 1.6. Modernism
- 1.7. Postmodernism
- 1.8. Sample Questions
- 1.9. Suggested Readings

### 1.1. INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN LITERATURE

American literature encompasses the written and produced works within the United States and its colonial history. Its roots can be traced back to English literature, given that America was initially a British colony. In its early stages, American literature was often seen as an offshoot of British literary tradition. However, due to its unique American characteristics and the sheer volume of creative output, it gradually emerged as a distinct literary tradition. The New England colonies, situated in the north eastern region of the USA, played a central role in the development of early American literature. The American Revolution against British rule ignited a flurry of political writings by influential figures such as Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Paine. The War of 1812 served as a catalyst for the desire to create a distinctly American literary and cultural identity. During this period, noteworthy literary figures like Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe emerged onto the scene.

In 1836, Ralph Waldo Emerson initiated the Transcendentalist movement, which emphasized individualism and spirituality. Henry David Thoreau, with his seminal work

*Walden* (1854), advocated for resistance against societal conventions. The fervent political debates surrounding abolitionism inspired the writings of William Lloyd Garrison and Harriet Beecher Stowe, renowned for her globally influential work, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Slave narratives, exemplified by Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845), further fuelled the anti-slavery cause.

Nathaniel Hawthorne is celebrated for his masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel exploring themes of adultery and social stigma. He exerted a significant influence on Herman Melville, renowned for his literary works *Moby-Dick* and *Billy Budd*. The 19th century saw the emergence of two iconic American poets, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson, who made lasting contributions to the world of poetry.

American poetry experienced a zenith in the first half of the 20th century, with the contributions of celebrated writers such as Wallace Stevens, T. S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Ezra Pound, and E. E. Cummings. Meanwhile, Mark Twain, using the pen name Samuel Langhorne Clemens, emerged as one of the earliest major American writers. Henry James achieved prominence for novels like *The Turn of the Screw*. Notable American novelists of this era included Edith Wharton, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and Gertrude Stein.

Following World War I, many American writers expressed disillusionment, with the works of F. Scott Fitzgerald and John Dos Passos capturing the prevailing mood of the era.

Ernest Hemingway garnered recognition for *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms* and received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954. William Faulkner, known for novels like *The Sound and the Fury*, made significant literary contributions. In the realm of American drama, international acclaim was achieved in the 1920s and 1930s, primarily through the works of Eugene O'Neill, who earned multiple Pulitzer Prizes and the Nobel Prize. Moving into the mid-20th century, American drama was characterized by the works of playwrights Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* stood out as a masterpiece of the Great Depression era. Henry Miller occupied a unique position in American literature during the 1930s, with his semi-autobiographical novels gaining notoriety despite being banned in the United States.

The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed the publication of enduring American classics like *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee. The American involvement in World War II spurred the creation of influential works, including Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*, Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, and Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s *Slaughterhouse-Five*. John Updike made his mark with the novel *Rabbit, Run*, and Philip Roth delved into the exploration of Jewish identity in American society. From the early 1970s to the present day, the dominant literary movement has been postmodernism, accompanied by a flourishing of literature by ethnic minority writers, marking an era of diversity and innovation in American literature.

## 1.2. NATURE POETRY

American poetry boasts a rich history spanning over 350 years, characterized by its diversity, vitality, contrarian spirit, and resilience. Its earliest verses often imitated and drew heavily from British prosody, diction, and various verse forms, including pastorals, odes, elegies, epistles, and satires. However, as the nineteenth century unfolded, American poets began forging a distinct national identity and gradually liberated themselves from foreign

literary models. By the twentieth century, American poetry had garnered global recognition and respect for its exceptional quality.

During the early and mid-nineteenth century, American poetry embarked on new creative paths. Edgar Allan Poe, a prominent figure in the American Romantic movement, captivated readers with his mesmerizing verses, notably featured in *The Raven and Other Poems* (1845). Additionally, the era saw the rise of the Fireside Poets, including William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., and James Russell Lowell. Although once beloved, their works, such as Bryant's *Thanatopsis* (1821), Lowell's *The Vision of Sir Launfal* (1848), Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* (1855), Holmes's *The Chambered Nautilus* (1858), and Whittier's *Snow-Bound* (1866), are often viewed by modern critics as sentimental, diffuse, moralistic, and overly preachy.

The influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson's ideas extended to two of the greatest American poets of the nineteenth century: Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855) is considered by some as the most groundbreaking work in American poetry, and he spent the next thirty-six years revising and expanding this collection. *Leaves of Grass* passionately embraces democratic ideals, emphasizing the freedom, dignity, and equality of individuals, as well as the naturalness and healthiness of human bodies and sexuality. Emily Dickinson, on the other hand, composed 1,775 poems during her lifetime but only published eleven of them. Her complete body of work as she intended it was not published until 1955. Drawing inspiration from the metric patterns of hymns, Dickinson delved into the inner realm, exploring themes such as pain, death, immortality, nature, imagination, and love.

Herman Melville's *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866) stands as one of the two foremost collections of poems on the Civil War, alongside Whitman's *Drum-Taps* (1865). Notable poets of the era included Jones Very and Frederick Goddard Tuckerman, known for their skilful sonnets. In the early twentieth century, two pivotal developments significantly impacted American poetry: the Imagist movement and the Harlem Renaissance. However, the most influential poets of this period were Edwin Arlington Robinson (1869-1935) and Robert Frost (1874-1963). Robinson breathed new life into traditional forms, examining the alienation and societal disillusionment of individuals struggling to adapt to a materialistic and mechanized world. In works like *Richard Cory*, *Mr. Flood's Party*, and *Eros Turannos*, published in collections such as *Children of the Night* (1897) and *The Town Down the River* (1910), Robinson tackled profound human themes.

Robert Frost, on the other hand, championed traditional metrics, favoured conversational tones and speech idioms, and demonstrated a deep fascination with metaphor, symbol, and synecdoche. In poems collected in *A Boy's Will* (1913), *North of Boston* (1914), and subsequent works, Frost explored the lives and landscapes of New England, often touching on themes of isolation, fear, and despair. Some of his most iconic poems include *Mending Wall*, *Birches*, *Home Burial* and *The Road Not Taken*.

### 1.3. IMAGISM

Imagism, an early 20th-century literary movement in Anglo-American poetry, championed the use of precise imagery and clear, concise language. It is often regarded as one of the most influential movements in English poetry after the Pre-Raphaelites and is



credited with initiating Modernism in the early 20th century. Ezra Pound, T. E. Hulme, and F. S. Flint played pivotal roles in launching what they called a *School of Images*. Hulme's two poems, contributed to an anthology, are considered the first Imagist poems.

The movement quickly encountered internal strife, with Ezra Pound's ambition and ego leading him to assume a dominant position. In 1913, Pound issued a manifesto on Imagist poetry, outlining three key rules: first, to present a direct treatment of the subject; second, to use only words that contribute to the presentation; and third, to compose in the sequence of a musical phrase rather than a metronome. These rules aimed to *make it new* and eliminate artificial language and forced sentiments from poetry. Pound drew on the ideas of T. E. Hulme and Sinologist Ernest Fenollosa in formulating these guidelines.

Pound's aggressive promotion of the movement attracted other poets like Amy Lowell and John Gould Fletcher, who enthusiastically joined in editing annual anthologies meant to engage a wider audience. Hilda Doolittle, known as H.D., also contributed to these anthologies. Despite a feud between Pound and Lowell over the term "imagist," the poets generally adhered to the principles Pound had outlined. Meanwhile, Pound's interest in another artistic movement, Vorticism, founded by Wyndham Lewis, began to grow. Vorticism incorporated elements from surrealism, Futurism, and Aestheticism, further enhancing the influence of Imagism.

The outbreak of World War I posed challenges for avant-garde literary movements, and the 1917 anthology effectively marked the end of Imagism as a formal movement. Its impact, nonetheless, resonated in the works of subsequent poets like Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, and George Oppen, who favoured the term "Objectivism." Despite its relatively short lifespan, Imagism left an indelible mark on the trajectory of modernist poetry in the English language, influencing various poetry circles and movements. Imagism also played a pivotal role in establishing free verse as a disciplined and legitimate poetic form.

#### 1.4 CONFESSIONAL POETRY:

Confessional poetry, often associated with the United States in the 1950s, represents a style of verse that delves deep into the personal "I" and is sometimes linked to the broader movement of Postmodernism. This form of poetry shines a spotlight on the most intense moments of individual experience and personal struggles, including themes that were previously considered taboo, such as mental illness, depression, and suicide, often within the context of broader social issues. The school of Confessional Poetry brought together notable poets like Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Allen Ginsberg, and W. D. Snodgrass, who left a profound impact on American poetry during the 1950s and 1960s.

The term *confessional* was first introduced by M. L. Rosenthal in 1959 when he reviewed Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* in an article titled *Poetry as Confession*. Rosenthal distinguished this confessional approach from other poetic styles. *Life Studies* marked a significant milestone in this genre, capturing readers' attention as the first officially recognized "confessional" poetry collection. Notably confessional were the poems in the final section of "Life Studies," where Lowell openly alluded to his struggles with mental illness and his experiences in a mental hospital. Sylvia Plath, in an interview, acknowledged the influence of these particular poems from *Life Studies* on her own writing.

Other prominent works within the American confessional poetry movement include Plath's *Ariel*, Berryman's *The Dream Songs*, and Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*.

Adrienne Rich also played a transitional role in this movement, while Sharon Olds emerged as a notable consciously *confessional* poet in the 1980s, building upon the groundwork laid by Ginsberg and others, particularly by addressing taboo sexual subject matter in her work.

## 1.5 FEMINIST CONCERNS

Feminist literary criticism involves the application of feminist theory and feminist politics to the analysis of literature. It aims to examine how literature portrays male dominance in the narrative concerning female bodies by exploring the societal, economic, political, and psychological forces embedded within literary works. The history of feminist literary criticism is diverse, ranging from classic works by nineteenth-century women authors like George Eliot and Margaret Fuller to contemporary theoretical contributions in women's and gender studies during the *third-wave* feminist movement. Initially, feminist literary criticism focused on women's authorship and the representation of women's experiences in literature, as well as addressing the exclusion of women from the literary canon.

Modern feminist criticism incorporates insights from Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, considering gender within the context of power dynamics. It also scrutinizes patriarchal influences in education, politics, and the workforce. The goals of feminist criticism include the development of a female literary tradition, interpretation of women's symbolism in literature from a female perspective, analysis of women writers and their works through a feminist lens, resistance against sexism in literature, and increased awareness of the gendered aspects of language and style.

Various approaches exist within feminist literary criticism, such as the Feminine Critique, which focuses on plot and characters, and gynocriticism, which highlights exemplary female scholarship in literature. Contemporary scholars often explore gender politics in relation to other identity categories like race, class, and sexual orientation, aiming to uncover underlying patriarchal tensions in novels and broaden the accessibility of literature to a more diverse readership. Modern feminist literary criticism emerged in the 1960s, challenging male-centric portrayals of women in literature. Influential theorists like Mary Ellman, Kate Millet, and Germaine Greer paved the way for critical examination of the feminine in literary scholarship. Elaine Showalter's work *A Literature of Their Own* in 1977 contributed significantly to the gynocritical method. Black feminist literary scholars emerged in response to the male-dominated narratives of Black empowerment during the post-Civil Rights era in the United States. Works like *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (1970), edited by Toni Cade Bambara, and *A Black Feminist Statement* (1977) by the Combahee River Collective played crucial roles in the rise of Black literary criticism and theory.

Prominent Black feminist scholars, including Hazel Carby, Barbara Christian, bell hooks, Nellie McKay, Valerie Smith, Hortense Spillers, Eleanor Traylor, Cheryl Wall, and Sheryl Ann Williams, made significant contributions during the 1980s. Deborah E. McDowell's *New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism* called for a more theoretical approach to criticism. Over time, the field of Black feminist literary scholarship diversified in terms of ideology and methodology, continuing to explore the identity of Black feminism in literature.

## 1.6 MODERNISM

Modernism is a philosophical and cultural movement that emerged during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in response to significant societal changes and transformations in the Western world. The early 20th century witnessed rapid urbanization, industrialization, and global conflicts, signalling the dawn of a new and modern era. Modernism, as an artistic movement, evolved from this shifting landscape of life, where tradition began to lose its grip on people's lives and new ideas and discoveries challenged established norms. Initially, modernism gained traction in Europe in the early 20th century before spreading to the United States. It was fuelled by domestic shifts like urbanization, technological advancements, and increasing wealth, as well as global events such as World War I. As the traditional structures of nations and patriotism wavered, literature of the time reflected the uncertainty and unease felt by individuals.

Factors like growth, prosperity, fear, war, death, materialism, psychology, and disillusionment all contributed to the emergence of modernist literary movements in the United States. Modernism served as a mirror to the disquiet experienced by those grappling with the irrelevance of old rules and traditions in this evolving world.

The rise of modernism in literature can be traced back to shifts in U.S. history around the turn of the century, primarily driven by industrialization. As cities expanded, technology had the power to revolutionize every aspect of life. Realism in literature, which portrayed the lives of the working class, marked a pivotal change in literary expression during this period.

In 1914, World War I marked a profound turning point in history, unleashing mass destruction and reshaping the world order. The war, characterized by its unprecedented scale of destruction, left the younger generation feeling disillusioned, unpatriotic, and unsafe, giving rise to what is known as the *Lost Generation*. A youth culture emerged, characterized by free expression and a deliberate break from tradition. During this period, the United States continued to undergo significant changes, including the 19th amendment granting women the right to vote and the 1929 stock market crash. American modernist literature, which spanned from 1914 to 1945, reflected the diverse experiences of change during this era.

It was a time of literary innovation, with authors and poets experimenting with form and language while tackling contemporary issues such as race relations, gender, and the human condition. Key figures like William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and Marianne Moore contributed to this movement.

The psychological scars and spiritual wounds left by World War I deeply influenced many American modernist writers. Additionally, the economic crisis of the 1930s left a lasting impact on literature, exemplified by works like John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath" (1939). Themes of self-loss and self-definition emerged as workers faded into the background of city life. Madness and its manifestations became prominent themes in modernist literature, reflecting the era's anxieties.

Modernist literature allowed for the development of regional trends within American literature, such as the Harlem Renaissance and southern modernism. The Harlem Renaissance celebrated African American arts and culture, with influential figures like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston using modernist techniques to represent African American life. Southern modernism similarly captured the unique experiences of the South, with celebrated

authors like William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams embracing modernist aesthetics to tell their stories.

## 1.7 POSTMODERNISM

Postmodernism, a late-20th-century movement in the realms of arts, architecture, and criticism, marked a significant departure from the principles of modernism. At its core, postmodernism contends that the world perpetually exists in a state of incompleteness and unresolved complexity. It champions the idea of radical pluralism, asserting that multiple perspectives and multiple truths coexist. From a postmodern standpoint, knowledge emerges through diverse perspectives, embracing uncertainties, complexities, and paradoxes.

Consequently, knowledge is viewed as inherently relational, and all realities are woven together on the loom of local language and context. Postmodernism extends its influence to skeptical interpretations of various domains, including culture, literature, art, philosophy, history, economics, architecture, fiction, and literary criticism. It is closely associated with movements like deconstruction and post-structuralism, emerging alongside the rise of twentieth-century post-structural thought.

The term postmodernism has been applied to a myriad of movements in art, music, and literature that reacted against the tenets of modernism. These movements typically involve a revival of historical elements and techniques.

Historically, the term *postmodern* made its first appearance around the 1880s when John Watkins Chapman proposed a *Postmodern style of painting* to diverge from French Impressionism. Throughout the early 20th century, it evolved to describe shifts in attitudes and beliefs, touching upon religious critique, and later, it was used to characterize new forms of art and music. In 1942, H. R. Hays applied it to describe a novel literary form.

Postmodernist ideas have profoundly influenced philosophy, cultural and societal analysis, and have become a pivotal departure point for works in literature, architecture, design, and the interpretation of history, law, and culture, especially in the late 20th century.

These developments encompass a re-evaluation of the entire Western value system, encompassing aspects like love, marriage, popular culture, and the transition from an industrial to a service-based economy, with a culmination during the Social Revolution of 1968, often referred to as Post modernity.

In literature, the advent of literary postmodernism in the United States can be traced to the debut issue of *boundary 2*, titled *Journal of Postmodern Literature and Culture*, which emerged in 1972. Prominent figures like David Antin, Charles Olson, John Cage, and the Black Mountain College school of poetry and the arts played integral roles in the intellectual and artistic dissemination of postmodernism during that period. *Boundary 2* remains a significant journal within postmodernist circles today.

Notable literary figures associated with postmodernism include Jorge Luis Borges, whose 1939 short story *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote* is considered a precursor to postmodernism, and Samuel Beckett, seen as an important influence. Other novelists commonly linked to postmodern literature include Vladimir Nabokov, William Gaddis, Umberto Eco, John Hawkes, William Burroughs, Giannina Braschi, Kurt Vonnegut, John

Barth, Jean Rhys, Donald Barthelme, E.L. Doctorow, Richard Kalich, Jerzy Kosinski, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Ishmael Reed, Kathy Acker, Ana Lydia Vega, Jachym Topol, and Paul Auster.

In 1971, Arab-American scholar Ihab Hassan published *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* an early work of postmodern literary criticism.

Hassan traces the evolution of what he terms *literature of silence* through authors like Marquis de Sade, Franz Kafka, Ernest Hemingway, Beckett, and others, encompassing movements such as the Theatre of the Absurd and the nouveau roman. Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) further delineates the transition from modernism to postmodernism, emphasizing that postmodern works primarily engage with questions of ontology. His subsequent work, *Constructing Postmodernism* (1992), offers readings of postmodern fiction and explores contemporary writers associated with cyberpunk.

### 1.8 SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Explain how Robert Frost uses nature to explore themes of mortality and the human condition.
2. Imagism is an early 20th-century literary movement in Anglo-American poetry. Discuss.
3. Confessional poetry, often associated with the United States in the 1950s, represents a style of verse that delves deep into the personal "I" and is sometimes linked to the broader movement of Postmodernism. Explain
4. Examine how literature portrays male dominance in the narrative concerning female bodies by exploring the societal, economic, political, and psychological forces embedded within literary works.
5. Modernism is a philosophical and cultural movement that emerged during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in response to significant societal changes and transformations in the Western world. Discuss
6. Postmodernism contends that the world perpetually exists in a state of incompleteness and unresolved complexity. Discuss

### 1.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

- 1) "A Handbook to Literature" by William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman
- 2) "Literary Terms and Criticism" by John Peck and Martin Coyle
- 3) "A Glossary of Literary Terms" by M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham
- 4) "The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms" by Ross C. Murfin and Supryia M. Ray

**Dr. K. Narasimha Rao**

## LESSON 2

# AMERICAN LITERATURE

### OBJECTIVES

- To understand the concept of alienation in literature, its causes, and effects on characters and society.
- To explore the theme of searching for one's identity and roots in literature.
- To introduce students to the rich tradition of Black literature, its historical and cultural significance, and the diversity of voices within this genre.
- To familiarize students with the philosophical movement of existentialism and its portrayal in dramatic works.
- To examine the characteristics of absurd drama and its influence on the theatre.
- To differentiate between realism and naturalism in drama and literature.
- To introduce students to expressionistic drama and its unique style.
- To provide an overview of various dramatic techniques used in plays, such as foreshadowing, dramatic irony, soliloquies, and symbolism.

### STRUCTURE

- 2.1 Theme of Alienation
- 2.2 Searching for Roots
- 2.3 Black Literature
- 2.4 Existentialism in Drama
- 2.5 Absurd Drama
- 2.6 Realism and Naturalism
- 2.7 Expressionistic Drama
- 2.8 Dramatic Techniques
- 2.9 Sample Questions
- 2.10 Suggested Readings

#### 2.1 THEME OF ALIENATION

As Alfred Kazin astutely observes in his work *On Native Grounds* (1956), a significant portion of twentieth-century American literature is deeply rooted in a tradition of opposition to the established societal norms, often characterized by a profound sense of alienation. Post-World War II American literature, while celebrating democracy and individualism, consistently reveals its skepticism and hostility towards the established order. This theme of alienation becomes palpable in the emotional turmoil experienced by characters and their deep-seated resentment of societal conventions. These experiences stem from the characters grappling with a reality that contradicts their true essence.

Contemporary American literature frequently features a substantial group of characters who grapple with defining their relationship with society, a struggle that frequently leads to their alienation from their authentic selves. Whether it's Arthur Miller's Willy Loman or the protagonist in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), the inevitability of tragedy looms large when characters come to believe that the identity imposed upon them by society is the

only one, they possess. For instance, in *Invisible Man*, the main character's invisibility is a consequence of societal prejudice. It takes nearly two decades for the narrator to realize that he cannot expect others to recognize his true identity unless he himself comprehends it.

The contemporary celebration of multiculturalism has underscored the importance of reconnecting individuals with their ethnic and cultural roots. Many modern American writers, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, have undertaken the responsibility of celebrating their ethnic and cultural heritage and reclaiming their sense of history and identity. Their works often depict characters who grapple with a lack of self-awareness, which is closely tied to their alienation from their own culture. In Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, the author portrays a group of characters who, in their attempts to assimilate into mainstream American society, have cast doubt upon their connections with their own culture.

Society has frequently been perceived as restrictive and oppressive towards individuals. Numerous contemporary American writers contend that society's workings run counter to the principles of democracy and individualism. As Ellison once posited, *all literature is about minority; the individual is a minority*. This sentiment is echoed in T. S. Eliot's narrative poem, *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, where the poet crafts a complex character in Prufrock. Prufrock, while perceptive about his problems, resists confronting them. His ambivalent relationship with society underscores his vulnerability as a human being. Even as a white, well-educated man, Prufrock remains a minority of one.

Alienation has consistently demonstrated its enduring presence in literature. Whether stemming from characters' detachment from their true selves, their cultural heritage, or society itself, this thematic concern has been effectively employed by numerous contemporary American writers to explore the intricate dynamics between an individual's authentic and constructed identities, the tension between assimilation and cultural heritage, and the individual's place within society. While for some characters, feelings of alienation are fleeting, for others, tragedy becomes an inescapable fate when they fail to reconcile who they are with societal expectations.

## 2.2 SEARCHING FOR ROOTS

The search for roots is a central theme in American literature. From the earliest English settlers to the most contemporary authors, writers have explored the meaning of home, belonging, and identity in a new land. This search is often particularly resonant for writers of colour, who have historically been excluded from the dominant narratives of American identity.

One of the earliest examples of the search for roots in American literature is Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682). Rowlandson was captured by Native Americans during King Philip's War and held captive for 11 weeks. In her narrative, she writes about her longing for her home and family in England, as well as her gradual acceptance of her new surroundings.

Rowlandson's narrative is a complex and nuanced exploration of the meaning of identity in a strange land. Another early example of the search for roots in American literature is Frederick Douglass's autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845). Douglass was born into slavery in Maryland and escaped to freedom

in 1838. In his autobiography, he writes about his experiences as a slave, his fight for freedom, and his search for his own identity. Douglass's autobiography is a powerful and moving account of the search for roots in the face of oppression.

In the 20th century, many writers continued to explore the theme of the search for roots in American literature. One of the most notable examples is Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952). The narrator of *Invisible Man* is a young black man who is searching for his place in American society. He travels across the country, encountering racism and oppression at every turn. In the end, he comes to realize that his true identity is not defined by the way that others see him, but by his own inner strength and resilience.

One more important example of the search for roots in American literature is Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987). *Beloved* tells the story of Sethe, a former slave who is haunted by the ghost of her dead daughter. As Sethe struggles to come to terms with her past, she must also confront the question of what it means to be free. *Beloved* is a powerful and moving exploration of the search for roots in the aftermath of slavery.

The search for roots is a complex and ongoing journey for many Americans. Writers have played an important role in exploring this theme in American literature. By sharing their own stories and experiences, writers have helped to illuminate the challenges and triumphs of the American experience.

### **2.3 BLACK LITERATURE:**

Black literature, also known as African-American literature, comprises the body of literary works created in the United States by writers of African descent. Its origins can be traced back to late 18th-century writers like Phillis Wheatley. Prior to the prominence of slave narratives, African-American literature was predominantly characterized by autobiographical spiritual narratives. The 19th century saw the emergence of African-American literature, particularly through compelling slave narratives. The 1920s marked the Harlem Renaissance, a flourishing period for literature and the arts within the African-American community. Over time, writers of African-American literature have received prestigious awards, including Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize.

This literature delves into various themes and issues, including the role of African Americans in American society, African-American culture, racism, slavery, and social equality. The socio-cultural position of African Americans has evolved throughout American history, prompting a shift in focus towards African-American literature. Pre-Civil War literature mainly featured memoirs from individuals who had escaped slavery, encompassing their experiences under bondage and their journeys to freedom. African-American literature serves as a platform to explore long-denied concepts such as freedom and equality, alongside subjects like African-American culture, racism, religion, slavery, identity, segregation, migration, feminism, and more. It draws inspiration from the rich African diasporic heritage while operating within the broader realm of post-colonial literature.

As the 20th century commenced, influential non-fiction works by authors like W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington engaged in debates on confronting racial prejudices in the United States. During the American Civil Rights movement, writers such as Richard Wright and Gwendolyn Brooks addressed issues of racial segregation and Black Nationalism.



Today, African-American literature holds a well-established position within American literary tradition. Works like Alex Haley's *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, Alice Walker's Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Color Purple* (1982), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* have not only achieved commercial success but also garnered critical acclaim, cementing their status in American literature.

## 2.4 EXISTENTIALISM IN DRAMA

Existentialism, a philosophical movement that emerged in the 20th century, left an indelible mark on American literature and, in particular, on American drama. Rooted in the writings of European philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Friedrich Nietzsche, existentialism grapples with profound questions about human existence, freedom, choice, and the search for meaning in an apparently indifferent universe. In the context of American literature, existentialism found fertile ground for exploration in the works of playwrights such as Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, among others.

Existentialism, as a philosophical framework, posits that existence precedes essence. In simpler terms, it suggests that human beings come into the world without predetermined purposes or meanings. Instead, they must actively construct their own identities and values through choices and actions. This existential perspective is readily evident in American drama, where characters often find themselves confronting the absurdity of life and the uncertainty of their destinies.

One of the foremost playwrights associated with existentialist themes in American drama is Tennessee Williams. His iconic play *A Streetcar Named Desire* serves as a compelling example of this philosophical influence. The character of Blanche DuBois embodies the existential struggle. She is a woman who grapples with her fading beauty, lost love, and the harsh realities of life. Blanche's descent into madness can be seen as a response to the existential crisis of her existence, as she attempts to create a more desirable identity for herself, only to be confronted by the limitations of her choices.

Similarly, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* explores existentialist themes through the character of Willy Loman. Willy's pursuit of the American Dream, his relentless quest for success, and his eventual tragic downfall exemplify the existential predicament of an individual caught in a society that places a premium on material success. Willy's realization that his life lacks meaning and that his dreams have been built on false premises is a powerful reflection of existentialist thought.

Existentialism even finds expression in the works of playwrights like Edward Albee, particularly in his masterpiece *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The characters George and Martha engage in a relentless and often brutal battle of wills, tearing down the facades of their lives and revealing the emptiness that lies beneath. The play serves as a stark exploration of the absurdity of human existence and the ways in which individuals construct illusions to cope with their inner emptiness.

Existentialist themes in American drama often revolve around the concept of freedom and choice. Existentialism emphasizes the idea that individuals are condemned to be free, which means they bear the responsibility of making choices without the safety net of external guidance or preordained meaning. In the context of American drama, characters like Tom Wingfield in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* or Joe Keller in Arthur Miller's *All*

*My Sons* grapple with the consequences of their choices, highlighting the ethical dilemmas and moral ambiguity inherent in human existence.

In conclusion, existentialism in American drama offers a profound exploration of the human condition. Playwrights like Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee use their characters and narratives to delve into the existential crises faced by individuals in an uncertain and often chaotic world. These dramas challenge audiences to confront the fundamental questions of existence, meaning, and the nature of freedom. As a result, existentialism has left an enduring legacy in American literature and drama, reminding us of the enduring relevance of these philosophical inquiries in our lives.

## 2.5 ABSURD DRAMA

The Theatre of the Absurd is a literary movement in drama that gained popularity across European countries from the 1940s to around 1989. Absurdist playwrights drew inspiration from the philosophical ideas of French-Algerian philosopher Albert Camus, particularly his essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). Camus introduced the Philosophy of the Absurd, arguing that humanity's quest for meaning and truth is ultimately futile. He likened this struggle to the myth of Sisyphus, who was condemned to endlessly roll a heavy stone up a mountain, only to watch it roll back down.

This movement emerged in response to the doubts and fears surrounding World War II and the perceived erosion of traditional moral and political values. It found fertile ground in France, Germany, England, and Scandinavian countries. Key works from the early days of the movement include Jean Genet's "The Maids" (1947), Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950), Arthur Adamov's *Ping-Pong* (1955), and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953). Samuel Beckett's death in 1989 is often seen as marking the decline of the movement's popularity.

The characteristics of the Theatre of the Absurd are distinct. These plays typically depict human existence as nonsensical and chaotic. They often lack a clear plot, and any actions that occur serve to emphasize the idea that characters, and humans in general, are helpless victims of unknown, arbitrary forces beyond their comprehension. Dialogue tends to be repetitive, and the setting and passage of time within the play remain ambiguous. Characters frequently express frustration with profound philosophical questions, such as the meaning of life, death, and the existence of God.

For example, in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the entire play revolves around two characters waiting indefinitely for someone named Godot to arrive. Their lack of information about Godot and uncertainty about his existence highlight human uncertainty regarding the existence of God. Similarly, in Tom Stoppard's "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead" (1966), the constant coin-tossing game between the two friends symbolizes the idea that life's events are governed by chance.

## 2.6 REALISM AND NATURALISM

Realism and naturalism emerged as predominant categories applied to American fiction during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, embodying distinct philosophical approaches, complementary aesthetic strategies, and encompassing literary movements. Distinguished authors associated with realism include Henry James, W. D. Howells, Mark

Twain, Bret Harte, George Washington Cable, Rebecca Harding Davis, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Hamlin Garland. Many of these writers crafted works that vividly portrayed geographically specific dialects and customs. Some provided satirical fiction or novels of manners, exposing the excesses, hypocrisies, or shortcomings within a society undergoing profound social change.

In the subsequent generation of writers, figures like Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, Edith Wharton, and Jack London are often regarded as American inheritors of the naturalist approach, influenced by Emile Zola's 1880 treatise "Le Roman Experimental," which applied experimental methods akin to medical science to novel construction. Characters in naturalist fiction are typically seen as products of heredity, environment, and chance, constrained from achieving the lofty goals associated with a flawed ideology of romantic individualism. For a century, critics and literary historians have debated whether realist and naturalist texts serve as explicit critiques of the economic, cultural, or ethical deficiencies of the industrialized era or actually embody the very ideological forces they purport to criticize.

This exploration of these texts raises profound questions about the intricate relationship between literature and society. In the 1960s, there was a renewed interest in realism as an American adaptation of an international movement rooted in egalitarian and democratic ideals. A concerted effort has been made to reframe naturalist fiction as a more multifaceted component of American literary history. With the emergence of deconstructive, Marxist, and new historicist criticism in the 1980s, there came a revised, and somewhat skeptical, reassessment of realism and naturalism as more conflicted and intricate literary forms.

## **2.7 EXPRESSIONISTIC DRAMA**

Expressionism emerged as a prominent artistic and literary movement in the early 20th century, characterized by its exploration of the inner psyche, emotional turmoil, and a departure from conventional realism. Expressionistic drama, in particular, played a pivotal role in American literature, offering playwrights a powerful means to depict the complexities of the human condition in a rapidly changing world. This essay will delve into the key characteristics of Expressionistic drama in American literature, its impact on the theatrical landscape, and notable examples that epitomize this genre.

Characteristics of expressionistic drama sought to delve deep into the emotional and psychological landscapes of its characters. It often depicted the alienation, existential angst, and inner turmoil experienced by individuals in a world marked by technological advancements, societal shifts, and the aftermath of two World Wars. Expressionist plays employed various techniques to convey these themes. Distorted sets, stark lighting, symbolic visuals, and non-linear narratives were commonly used to create an atmosphere of disorientation and unease. Characters in Expressionistic dramas frequently grappled with their own insignificance in a world that valued materialism and conformity. It had a profound impact on American theatre, challenging traditional forms and narrative structures.

Playwrights began to experiment with new ways of storytelling, often deviating from linear plots and embracing subjective experiences. This experimentation opened doors to innovative staging and production techniques, creating a more immersive theatrical experience for audiences. Expressionism also provided a platform to critique societal norms

and explore pressing issues of the time, including the dehumanizing effects of industrialization, the emptiness of the American Dream, and the alienation of the individual in a modern world.

Two iconic plays that epitomize Expressionistic drama in American literature are Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. In *The Hairy Ape* O'Neill portrays the character of Yank, a stoker on an ocean liner who experiences a profound sense of alienation in the industrialized world. The play employs Expressionistic elements like distorted sets and stark lighting to depict Yank's inner turmoil and existential crisis. Similarly, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* explores the shattered American Dream through the life of Willy Loman. The play's non-linear narrative structure and symbolic visuals convey Willy's fragmented mental state and the suffocating pressures of modernity.

It continues to influence American theatre and literature. Its exploration of the human psyche, societal critique, and innovative storytelling techniques remain relevant in contemporary drama. Playwrights and directors draw inspiration from Expressionism to create thought-provoking works that delve into the complexities of the human condition in a rapidly evolving world. It represents a powerful artistic movement that sought to explore the inner depths of the human experience. Through its innovative techniques and profound themes, it challenged traditional theatrical norms and provided a platform for playwrights to critique society and depict the struggles of individuals in a changing world. The legacy of Expressionistic drama endures, reminding us of its lasting impact on American theatre and literature.

## 2.8 DRAMATIC TECHNIQUES

American drama has a rich and diverse history, dating back to the early days of the country. Over the years, American playwrights have developed a wide range of dramatic techniques to tell their stories and engage their audiences.

Some of the most common dramatic techniques used in American dramas include:

- a) **Dialogue:** Dialogue is the primary means of communication between characters in a play. It can be used to reveal character, advance the plot, and create suspense. American playwrights are often known for their realistic and well-crafted dialogue.
- b) **Monologues and soliloquies:** Monologues and soliloquies are speeches delivered by a single character, either to other characters or to themselves. They can be used to reveal a character's thoughts and feelings, or to provide exposition or commentary on the action of the play.
- c) **Stage directions:** Stage directions are instructions written by the playwright to indicate the setting, movement, and actions of the characters. American playwrights often use stage directions to create a vivid and realistic sense of place and time.
- d) **Symbolism:** Symbolism is the use of objects, actions, or characters to represent something else. American playwrights often use symbolism to add depth and meaning to their plays.
- e) **Theme:** Theme is the central message or idea of a play. American playwrights often explore complex and challenging themes in their work, such as racism, identity, and social justice.

In addition to these general dramatic techniques, American playwrights have also developed a number of more specific techniques that are unique to the American stage. Some of these techniques include:

- 1) **Naturalism:** Naturalism is a style of drama that attempts to portray life as realistically as possible. Naturalistic plays often feature ordinary characters and everyday settings.
- 2) **Expressionism:** Expressionism is a style of drama that focuses on the inner lives of the characters. Expressionistic plays often use distorted scenery, symbolism, and dream sequences to convey the characters' emotions and experiences.
- 3) **Absurdism:** Absurdist drama is a type of drama that explores the absurdity of the human condition. Absurdist plays often feature non-realistic characters and situations, and they often challenge the audience's expectations.

American playwrights have used these and other dramatic techniques to create some of the most iconic and celebrated plays in the world. Some examples of American plays that use these techniques include:

- 1) *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams (1947).
- 2) *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller (1949).
- 3) *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Edward Albee (1962).
- 4) *Fences* by August Wilson (1985).

## 2.9 SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. What is the concept of alienation in literature, and how is it portrayed in various literary works?
2. How does the theme of alienation connect to the broader human experience and societal issues?
3. Define the theme of "searching for roots" in literature. What does it symbolize or represent?
4. What distinguishes Black literature from other literary traditions, and what are some key themes and motifs found in this genre?
5. Explain the philosophical concept of existentialism and how it is reflected in dramatic works.
6. Define the characteristics of absurd drama and its roots in existentialism.
7. Differentiate between realism and naturalism in literature and drama, highlighting their key features.
8. Define expressionism in drama and how it differs from realism and naturalism.
9. Discuss various dramatic techniques such as foreshadowing, soliloquies, and dramatic irony, and their roles in enhancing a play's impact.

## 2.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

- 1) "A Handbook to Literature" by William Harmon and C. Hugh Holman
- 2) "Literary Terms and Criticism" by John Peck and Martin Coyle
- 3) "A Glossary of Literary Terms" by M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham
- 4) "The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms" by Ross C. Murfin and Supryia M. Ray.

**Dr. K. Narasimha Rao**

## LESSON 3

# WALLACE STEVENS “OF MODERN POETRY”

### OBJECTIVES

To study how Wallace Stevens' "Of Modern Poetry" is a meditative and philosophical poem.

- To analyse how Stevens' poem adapts to the changing times of the early 20th century.
- To explore Stevens' view that the modern poem should be "the poem of the mind in the act of finding/ What will suffice."
- To develop critical thinking skills by analysing and interpreting Stevens' poem.

### STRUCTURE

3.1. Introduction

3.2. Wallace Stevens' Poetry

3.2.1. Stevens' Poetic Style

3.2.2. Stevens' Poetic Themes

3.2.3. Stevens' Use of Language

3.2.4. Stevens' Influence on Other Poets

3.3. Brief Summary

3.3.1. Critical Appreciation of Wallace Stevens' "Of Modern Poetry"

3.4. Lines wise Summary

3.5. Sample Questions

3.6. Suggested Reading

3.7. Glossary

### 3.1. INTRODUCTION

Wallace Stevens was an anomaly in the erudite world. He worked as an insurance company superintendent, a putatively mundane job, but he was also a brilliant minstrel. His first book of runes, *Harmonium*, was a critical and marketable success, and he snappily rose to elevation among American aesthetes, or campaigners of beauty in art. His runes are characterized by their verismo, admiration, and sanguinity. He wrote about the natural world with a deep appreciation for its beauty and complexity, and he frequently set up stopgap and joy in the midst of everyday life. This was in stark discrepancy to the pessimism that was current among numerous pens after World War I.

He was born in Reading, Pennsylvania, in 1879. He studied at Harvard University and also New York Law School. After graduating from law academy, he worked as an insurance superintendent for the rest of his life. He was a private person, and his officemates were surprised to learn that he was a minstrel. Still, the erudite world had long honoured his genius. His runes were published in prestigious magazines similar as *Poetry* and *The Dial*, and he was awarded multitudinous prizes for his work. His poems are known for their capricious ironies, dubitation, and sensuous imagery. He frequently explored complex philosophical themes in his work, but he did so in a way that was both sportful and thought-provoking.

After moving to Hartford, Connecticut, in 1916, Wallace Stevens took a job in the legal department of the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company. He'd been writing poetry for ten times before he moved to Hartford. He was known for roving the thoroughfares in all-weather while composing his poems. Starting in 1913, he began submitting his work to erudite magazines and journals.

Harriet Monroe, the editor of the magazine *Poetry*, was one of the first to take Stevens' gift.

She published several of his poems in the magazine, including his four-stage lyric *Phases* in a 1914 issue. Stevens also won the magazine's \$100 prize for his verse play *Three Trippers Watch a Sunrise* (1915). In 1920, he'd a one-act play called *Carlos Among the Candles* produced at the Provincetown Theatre in New York City. Yet, he didn't see drama as his main calling. He continued to write poetry and submit it to magazines and compilations.

In 1923, he published his first collection of poems, *Harmonium*. The book wasn't a marketable success, but it was praised by critics and other poets. Stevens went on to publish several further collections of poems in the following times, including *Ideas of Order* (1935), *The Man with the Blue Guitar* (1937), *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction* (1942), and *The Daybreaks of Autumn* (1950). His poetry was frequently delicate to understand, but it was also largely original and thought provoking. He explored complex philosophical themes in his work, but he did so in a way that was both sportful and serious. In 1955, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry for his *Collected Poems*. He died on August 2, 1955, at the age of 75.

### 3.2. WALLACE STEVENS' POETRY

Wallace Stevens is a rare example of a poet whose best work came later in life. He published his first major poems at the age of 35, and many of his most famous works were written after he turned 50. The literary critic Harold Bloom called Stevens the "best and most representative" American poet of his time, and said that no Western writer since Sophocles had such a late flowering of artistic genius. His poetry is often characterized by its beauty, complexity, and insight into the human condition. He was also influenced by the paintings of Paul Klee and Paul Cézanne, and his work often uses whimsical, imaginative, and humorous imagery. His first book of poetry, *Harmonium*, was published in 1923. He published two more major collections of poetry in the 1920s and 1930s, and three more in the 1940s. He received the National Book Award for Poetry twice, in 1951 for *The Auroras of Autumn* and in 1955 for *Collected Poems*.

He was one of the most important and influential American poets of the 20th century. His work is known for its intellectual complexity, its rich imagery, and its exploration of themes such as reality, imagination, and the nature of poetry. He is often challenging to read, but on the other hand deeply rewarding. He was a master of language, and his poems are full of beautiful and evocative imagery. He was also a skilled philosopher, and his poems explore complex ideas about the nature of reality, the power of imagination, and the role of poetry in the world.

#### 3.2.1. Stevens' Poetic Style

Stevens' poetry is characterized by its use of dense imagery, complex metaphors, and abstract language. He often uses multiple meanings and interpretations in his poems, which make it difficult to understand at first. However, with close reading and careful reflection,

Stevens' poems can be deeply rewarding. One of the most striking features of Stevens' poetry is his use of imagery. Stevens' poems are full of vivid and evocative images of the natural world, as well as images from everyday life. He uses these images to explore complex ideas and emotions in a new and original way. For example, in the poem *Sunday Morning*, Stevens compares the sun to a *splendid quidam* and a *meddler*. This comparison allows Stevens to explore the themes of time, change, and the human condition in a new and original way. He also used complex metaphors in his poetry. He uses these metaphors to explore the relationship between the individual and the world, the nature of reality, and the power of imagination. For example, in the poem *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*, Stevens compares the human mind to a *palazzo of the mind*. This metaphor allows Stevens to explore the complexity and richness of the human mind.

He even uses abstract language in his poetry. He uses words and phrases that have multiple meanings and interpretations. This allowed him to create poems that were both challenging and rewarding. For example, in the poem *Of Modern Poetry*, Stevens writes:

**The poem of the mind in the act of finding What will suffice.**

This line is both simple and profound. It suggests that modern poetry is a process of exploration and discovery. It is a search for meaning and purpose in a world that is often complex and confusing.

### 3.2.2. Stevens' Poetic Themes

Stevens' poetry explores a wide range of themes, but some of the most common themes include:

- I. **Reality and imagination:** Stevens was interested in the relationship between reality and the imagination. He believed that the imagination is essential for understanding the world and our place in it.
- II. **The individual and the world:** Stevens also explored the relationship between the individual and the world. He argued that we are all part of a larger whole, but that we also have our own unique identities.
- III. **The nature of poetry:** Stevens was also interested in the nature of poetry. He believed that poetry is a way of exploring the world and our place in it. He also believed that poetry can help us to see the world in new and original ways.

### 3.2.3. Stevens' Use of Language

Stevens was a master of language. He used a wide range of words and phrases in his poems, and he was not afraid to experiment with new ways of using language. Stevens often used multiple meanings and interpretations in his poems, which can make them difficult to understand at first. However, with close reading and careful reflection, Stevens' poems can be deeply rewarding. One of the ways that he used language effectively was through his use of imagery. Stevens' poems are full of vivid and evocative images of the natural world, as well as images from everyday life. He used these images to explore complex ideas and emotions in a new and original way. For example, in the poem "Sunday Morning," Stevens compares the sun to a "splendid quidam" and a "meddler." This comparison allows Stevens to explore the themes of time, change, and the human condition in a new and original way.



### 3.2.4. Stevens' Influence on Other Poets

Stevens' poetry has had a profound influence on other poets. His work has been praised by poets such as T.S. Eliot, William Carlos Williams, and Elizabeth Bishop. Stevens' poetry has also been studied by scholars of literature, philosophy, and psychology.

## 3.3. BRIEF SUMMARY AND CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF THE POEM

### 3.3.1. Critical Appreciation of Wallace Stevens' "Of Modern Poetry"

Wallace Stevens' *Of Modern Poetry* is a short but complex lyric that explores the nature of modern poetry and its part in the world. It is one of Stevens' most notorious and influential poems, and it has been praised by critics for its intellectual complexity, its rich imagery, and its profound perceptivity into the nature of poetry. The lyric is divided into two parts. In the first part, Stevens discusses the challenges facing ultramodern muses. He argues that they must find a way to write poetry that's both new and original, while also remaining true to the tradition of poetry. He writes

**The lyric of the mind in the act of chancing  
What will serve. It has not always had  
To find the scene was set; it repeated what  
Was in the scene, the seasonal conjurations  
Of the form of the time; the scene  
Was made the lyric, the lyric was the scene.**

He argues that modern poets cannot simply calculate on traditional forms and themes. They must find new ways to express the gests of ultramodern life. This is a grueling task, but it is also an essential bone.

In the next part of the lyric, Stevens offers his own description of *modern poetry the lyric of the mind in the act of finding/ What will serve*. This description is both simple and profound.

It suggests that ultramodern poetry is a process of disquisition and discovery. It is a hunt for meaning and purpose in a world that's frequently complex and confusing. His lyric can be seen as a response to the social and political bouleversement of the early 20th century.

The world was in the midst of World War I, and the old order was worsening. Stevens' lyric is a hunt for new meaning and purpose in a world that is changing. His lyric is also a contemplation on the nature of language and poetry. Stevens argues that poetry isn't simply a means of communication or entertainment. rather, it's a way of exploring the world and our place in it. Poetry can help us to see the world in new ways, and it can challenge us to experience our lives in new ways. It is a lyric that rewards close reading and careful reflection. It's also a lyric that can help us to understand the nature of modern poetry and its part in the world.

## 3.4. LINES WISE SUMMARY

### LINES 1-2

**The poem of the mind in the act of finding  
What will suffice.**

Wallace Stevens begins his poem *Of Modern Poetry* with the line *The poem of the mind in the act of finding/ What will suffice*. This line can be seen as Stevens' thesis statement, or his short summary of what he means by "modern poetry". His use of enjambment in the line is also significant. Enjambment is a lyrical fashion in which a line of poetry continues onto the coming line without a punctuation mark. This creates a sense of forward instigation and movement in the lyric. By using enjambment to end line 1 on the word *finding*, Stevens sets the stage for the entire lyric as a uninterrupted act of searching. Every time we feel to reach a conclusion, enjambment causes a line to fall into the coming one, which keeps up our sense of searching for commodity.

He argues that modern poetry is *the lyric of the mind in the act of finding/ What will serve*. He believes that modern poetry should concentrate on how our minds work, rather than on the beauty of physical effects. Indeed, if a modern lyric did concentrate on physical effects, similar as flowers, he'd say that it should concentrate on how much the mind enjoys flowers, rather than on the flowers themselves.

But his description of modern poetry goes beyond just being a lyric of the mind. He also argues that modern poetry should be *in the act of finding*. This means that modern poetry should talk about commodity more specific than just the way our minds work. It should talk about commodity that we are all looking for, commodity that poetry can help us find. He doesn't specifically define what this thing is that we're all looking for, but his vagueness suggests that it's commodity huge, similar as the meaning of life. He simply says that it is commodity that will serve for us. This means that modern poetry should help our minds find commodity that is good enough for us. Stevens believes that it is over to each of us to decide for ourselves what our minds are looking for in poetry and what will be "good enough" to satisfy us. In short, he believes that ultramodern poetry should be a trip of disquisition and discovery. It should help us to understand our own minds and to find commodity that gives our lives meaning.

#### **Lines 2-4**

**It has not always had**

**To find: the scene was set; it repeated what**

**Was in the script.**

Stevens suggests that modern poems are different from older poems because they are about our minds searching for something. He creates a sense of searching in the reader's mind through the use of enjambment, which causes the reader's eyes to "fall off" to the next line as they read. He argues that modern poets face more challenges than older poets because they cannot simply rely on traditional forms and themes. In the past, poets could simply "follow the script" of traditional poetry, such as sonnets about love being like a rose. However, modern poets must find new ways to express the experiences of modern life. His poem is a reflection on the changing role of poetry in the modern world. He argues that modern poetry is a process of exploration and discovery, and that it can help us to better understand ourselves and the world around us.

#### **Lines 5-6**

**Then the theatre was changed**

**To something else. Its past was a souvenir.**

Something in the modern world changed the poetic landscape, making it more difficult for poets to write about traditional themes such as love and nature. We can assume that the world wars had a significant impact on this shift, as they made it difficult to reconcile the beauty of traditional poetry with the harsh realities of war. He suggests that the old poetry of love and roses feels like a "metaphorical souvenir" or keepsake from the past, no longer fully relevant to the modern world.

**Lines 7-11**

**It has to be living, to learn the speech of the place.  
It has to face the men of the time and to meet  
The women of the time. It has to think about war  
And it has to find what will suffice. It has  
To construct a new stage.**

Stevens argues that modern poetry must be "living" in the sense that it must be adaptable to changing times and responsive to the wants and needs of modern readers. This means using language that is accessible and engaging, and exploring topics that are relevant to the contemporary world. Unlike classical poetry, which often uses difficult language and expects readers to adapt to it, modern poetry must make the effort to meet readers halfway. It must also get to know its audience and speak to their unique experiences. Stevens emphasizes the importance of modern poetry addressing the full range of human experience, including difficult subjects such as war. Ultimately, Stevens believes that modern poetry must offer satisfaction and fulfilment to its readers, even while dealing with unpleasant aspects of life. By succeeding in these ways, modern poetry can create a "new stage" for itself in the modern world.

**Lines 12-15**

**It has to be on that stage  
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and  
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,  
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,  
Exactly, that which it wants to hear,**

Stevens uses the simile "like an insatiable actor" to argue that modern poetry must be constantly creating new and engaging works for its audience. Modern poetry must also be able to speak to the most vulnerable parts of ourselves, offering comfort and reassurance in times of darkness. His use of the word "delicate" suggests that modern poetry should be sensitive and nuanced, avoiding simple platitudes and easy answers. Instead, modern poetry should offer us insights into our own humanity and help us to find meaning in the world around us. In the end, Stevens suggests that modern poetry should tell us "Exactly, that which it wants to hear." This does not mean that modern poetry should always be comforting or uplifting. Rather, it means that modern poetry should be honest and authentic, speaking to us in a way that resonates with our deepest needs and desires.

**Lines 16-19**

**at the sound  
Of which, an invisible audience listens,  
Not to the play, but to itself, expressed  
In an emotion as of two people, as of two  
Emotions becoming one.**

Stevens argues that modern poetry should always imagine itself speaking to a metaphorical "invisible audience." This means that modern poetry should not only aim to entertain or inform its readers, but also to challenge and provoke them to think about themselves and the world in new ways. He compares modern poetry to a play on a stage, but he argues that modern poetry should not simply be a passive experience for the reader.

Instead, modern poetry should engage the reader's mind and emotions, creating a unified experience in which the poem and the reader's thoughts become "one. In other words, Stevens believes that modern poetry should be a transformative experience for the reader. It should make us see the world in new ways and help us to better understand ourselves.

### **Lines 19-20**

**The actor is**

**A metaphysician in the dark,**

Stevens uses the metaphor of an "actor" to suggest that modern poetry should be more than just a vehicle for conveying emotions. Like an actor who brings a play to life, the actor in Stevens' modern poetry is the driving force that propels the poem forward. Hethen introduces the term "metaphysician," which refers to a philosopher who studies the fundamental nature of reality. He suggests that modern poetry should explore the same profound questions about human existence that metaphysicians have grappled with for centuries. In other words, he believes that modern poetry should be a vehicle for exploring the big questions of life, such as the meaning of existence, the nature of consciousness, and the relationship between the individual and the universe.

His metaphor of the "metaphysician in the dark" suggests that modern poetry should explore the fundamental questions of human existence, even in the face of uncertainty and doubt. The darkness could refer to the spiritual darkness of the modern age, the meditative and philosophical nature of poetry, or the feeling of lostness that is inherent in the search for meaning. Eventually he suggests that modern poetry should help us to navigate the darkness and find our own way.

### **Lines 20-24**

**twanging**

**An instrument, twanging a wiry string that gives**

**Sounds passing through sudden rightnesses, wholly**

**Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend,**

**Beyond which it has no will to rise.**

Stevens compares the modern poem to a guitar player clumsily plucking a string, suggesting that it may not be the most polished or sophisticated work of art. However, Stevens argues that the modern poem is still brave and valuable because it attempts to grapple with the complexity of the universe, even if it does so in a simple and imperfect way. His metaphor of the "twanging" guitar string also suggests that the modern poem can provide us with moments of clarity and insight, even when it is dealing with difficult or uncomfortable subjects. Stevens suggests that modern poetry should be about the human mind's search for deeper meaning, rather than traditional religious or romantic themes. He insists that the modern poem should not "descend" below the mind or "rise" above it, but rather stay grounded in the human experience. It should not shy away from difficult or uncomfortable

subjects, nor should it offer simplistic solutions. Instead, modern poetry should strive to help us to better understand ourselves and the world around us.

### **Lines 25-28**

**It must**

**Be the finding of a satisfaction, and may**

**Be of a man skating, a woman dancing, a woman**

**Combing. The poem of the act of the mind.**

Stevens returns to his opening lines in the poem's closing stanza, reiterating that modern poetry should be about finding satisfaction in life, even in simple things like a man skating or a woman combing her hair. However, Stevens emphasizes that the poem must not simply be about the woman combing her hair, but about the mind finding meaning and fulfilment in the image of the woman combing her hair. This is what makes modern poetry "the poem of the act of the mind." Modern poetry may find satisfaction anywhere, but its primary focus must be the mind's search for meaning. In other words, it is not the destination of our search for meaning that matters, but the search itself.

### **3.5. SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

- 1) How does Stevens' poem respond to the social and political upheaval of the early 20th century by defining modern poetry?
- 2) What is the relationship between language, poetry, and the world in Stevens' poem?
- 3) What does Stevens mean when he says that poetry is "the poem of the mind in the act of finding/ What will suffice"? Elucidate.

### **3.6. SUGGESTED READINGS**

- a. "Wallace Stevens' 'Of Modern Poetry': A Poem of the Mind in the Act of Finding" by William Empson
- b. "Stevens' 'Of Modern Poetry': A Poem of the Mind in the Act of Finding" by Helen Vendler
- c. "The Metaphysician in the Dark: Wallace Stevens' 'Of Modern Poetry'" by Harold Bloom
- d. "Wallace Stevens' 'Of Modern Poetry': A Poem of the Mind in the Act of Finding" by J. Hillis Miller
- e. "Wallace Stevens' 'Of Modern Poetry': A Poem of the Mind in the Act of Finding" by Richard Ellmann

### **3.7. GLOSSARY**

1. Acquaintance: crony
2. Assaulted: Attacked
3. Enigmatic: cryptic,
4. Monster: Giant
5. Perceive: discern
6. Rococo: Grandiose
7. Vulnerable: Defenceless

## LESSON 4

# WALLACE STEVENS: "PETER QUINCE AT THE CLAVIER"

### OBJECTIVES

- To explore the relationship between music, feeling, and desire in the prescribed poem.
- To examine the nature of beauty and its fleeting quality.
- To explore the idea of immortality, both in the flesh and in the mind.
- To challenge the reader's expectations of poetry and language.

### STRUCTURE

- 4.1. Historical and Literary Context of the poem
- 4.2. Major themes of the poem
  - 4.2.1. Literary Devices in "Peter Quince at the Clavier"
- 4.3. The text of The Poem
- 4.4. Brief Summary
  - 4.4.1. Critical appreciation of "Peter Quince at the Clavier"
- 4.5. Lines wise Summary
- 4.6. Sample Questions
- 4.7. Suggested Reading
- 4.8. Glossary

#### 4.1. HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT OF THE POEM

*Peter Quince at the Clavier* was first published in 1915 in Stevens's first collection of poems, *Harmonium*. The poem is set in the time of the Spanish Golden Age, during the Inquisition. The title of the poem refers to Peter Quince, a character from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Quince is a rustic worker who is put in charge of writing and directing a play for the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta. His poem is not a direct adaptation of Shakespeare's play, but it does draw on some of the same themes and images.

For example, both poems explore the relationship between art and reality, and the power of the imagination to transform the world. He was also influenced by a number of other literary sources when writing *Peter Quince at the Clavier*. These include the Bible, the poetry of John Donne, and the works of the French symbolist poets.

#### 4.2. MAJOR THEMES OF THE POEM

Wallace Stevens's "Peter Quince at the Clavier" is a complex and challenging poem that explores a wide range of themes, including desire, music, the imagination, and the relationship between art and reality.

##### 1 Desire

One of the major themes of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" is desire. The speaker of the poem, who is identified as Peter Quince, is overcome with desire for a beautiful woman whom he sees bathing. This desire inspires him to create a musical composition that is both beautiful and sensual. The poem's exploration of desire is complex and multifaceted. The desire is portrayed as a powerful and transformative force. It is the desire for Susanna that

inspires the speaker to create his music, and it is her beauty that allows him to see the world in a new and more beautiful way and the poem also suggests that desire can be dangerous and destructive. The speaker's desire for Susanna is ultimately unfulfilled, and it leads him to a state of despair and disillusionment.

## 2 Music

Another major theme of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" is music. The poem itself is a musical composition, with its own rhythm, meter, and rhyme scheme. The speaker's music is also central to the plot of the poem, as it is the music that inspires Susanna's transformation.

The poem's exploration of music is also complex and multifaceted. The music is portrayed as a force for good. It is the music that allows the speaker to connect with Susanna and to experience the beauty of the world around him and the poem also suggests that music can be a dangerous and seductive force. The speaker's music is so powerful that it causes Susanna to tremble and sigh. It also causes the natural world to respond, with the winds becoming like her maids and the night becoming muted.

## 3 Imagination

The major theme of *Peter Quince at the Clavier* is the imagination. The speaker's music is not simply a representation of the real world; it is also a product of his imagination.

The speaker's imagination allows him to transform Susanna's bathing into a scene of erotic beauty. The poem's exploration of the imagination is complex and multifaceted. The imagination is portrayed as a powerful and creative force. It is the imagination that allows the speaker to create his music and to see the world in a new and more beautiful way and the poem also suggests that the imagination can be a dangerous force. The speaker's imagination ultimately leads him to a state of despair and disillusionment.

## 4 Art and Reality

One of the versatile major themes of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" is the relationship between art and reality. The poem suggests that art is not simply a representation of reality; it is also a way of transforming reality. The speaker's music is so powerful that it causes Susanna and the natural world to respond in a physical way. The poem's exploration of the relationship between art and reality is complex and multifaceted and the poem suggests that art is a way of elevating reality and making it more beautiful. The speaker's music transforms Susanna's bathing into a scene of erotic beauty and the poem also suggests that art can be a way of escaping from reality. The speaker's music allows him to forget about his troubles and to immerse himself in a world of beauty and desire.

### 4.2.1. Literary Devices in "Peter Quince at the Clavier"

Wallace Stevens's poem "Peter Quince at the Clavier" is rich in literary devices, which enhance its meaning and musicality. Some of the most notable devices include:

1. **Anaphora:** The repetition of words or phrases at the beginning of multiple lines. For example, the word "She" begins lines three and seven of the first stanza of part II.
2. **Enjambment:** The continuation of a sentence or phrase from one line to the next, without a pause. For example, the transition between lines one and two of the first stanza of part I creates enjambment, as does the transition between lines three and four of the first stanza of part II.

3. **Alliteration:** The repetition of the same consonant sound at the beginning of multiple words. For example, the words "make music" in line two of stanza one and "basses" and "beings" in line one of the fifth stanza all begin with the consonant sound /b/.
4. **Allusion:** A reference to another work of literature or art. Stevens's poem alludes to the biblical story of Susanna and the Elders, as well as to Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

### 4.3. THE TEXT OF THE POEM

#### Peter Quince at the Clavier

##### I

Just as my fingers on these keys  
Make music, so the selfsame sounds  
On my spirit make a music, too.

Music is feeling, then, not sound;  
And thus it is that what I feel,  
Here in this room, desiring you,

Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,  
Is music. It is like the strain  
Waked in the elders by Susanna:

Of a green evening, clear and warm,  
She bathed in her still garden, while  
The red-eyed elders, watching, felt

The basses of their beings throb  
In witching chords, and their thin blood  
Pulse pizzicati of Hosanna.

##### II

In the green water, clear and warm,  
Susanna lay.  
She searched  
The touch of springs,  
And found  
Concealed imaginings.  
She sighed,  
For so much melody.

Upon the bank, she stood  
In the cool  
Of spent emotions.  
She felt, among the leaves,  
The dew  
Of old devotions.



She walked upon the grass,  
Still quavering.  
The winds were like her maids,  
On timid feet,  
Fetching her woven scarves,  
Yet wavering.

A breath upon her hand  
Muted the night.  
She turned—  
A cymbal crashed,  
And roaring horns.

### III

Soon, with a noise like tambourines,  
Came her attendant Byzantines.

They wondered why Susanna cried  
Against the elders by her side;

And as they whispered, the refrain  
Was like a willow swept by rain.

Anon, their lamps' uplifted flame  
Revealed Susanna and her shame.

And then, the simpering Byzantines  
Fled, with a noise like tambourines.

### IV

Beauty is momentary in the mind—  
The fitful tracing of a portal;  
But in the flesh it is immortal.

The body dies; the body's beauty lives.  
So, evenings die, in their green going,  
A wave, interminably flowing.  
So, gardens die, their meek breath scenting  
The cowl of winter, done repenting.  
So, maidens die, to the auroral  
Celebration of a maiden's choral.

Susanna's music touched the bawdy strings  
Of those white elders; but, escaping,  
Left only Death's ironic scraping.  
Now, in its immortality, it plays  
On the clear viol of her memory,  
And makes a constant sacrament of praise.

#### 4.4. BRIEF SUMMARY

Wallace Stevens's "Peter Quince at the Clavier" is a complex and challenging lyric, rich in imagery, symbolism, and philosophical allusions. It's also a deeply musical lyric, its cadence and meter echoing the sounds of Peter Quince's harpsichord. The lyric is predicated on the story of Susanna and the Elders, a biblical tale in which a beautiful immature woman is falsely criminated of infidelity by two lecherous old men. The lyric opens with a description of Peter Quince, a fictional character from Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Quince is a humble carpenter who is called upon to direct a play for the Duke and Duchess of Athens. In the lyric, Quince is shown playing the harpsichord, and his music evokes the story of Susanna and the Elders. The speaker of the lyric also shifts his attention to Susanna herself. He describes her beauty and innocence, as well as her vulnerability to the Elders' licentious conjurations. The speaker also considers the nature of desire itself, and the way in which it can lead to both beauty and destruction. In the third section of the lyric, the speaker returns to Peter Quince and his music. He suggests that Quince's music is a way of transcending the limitations of mortal actuality and achieving a kind of eternity. The speaker also suggests that music can help us to understand the deeper meaning of the story of Susanna and the Elders. The lyric concludes with a contemplation on the nature of beauty and its temporary quality. The speaker suggests that beauty is both a source of joy and anguish, and that it's ultimately evanescent. still, he also suggests that beauty can be saved in memory and in art.

##### 4.4.1. Critical appreciation of "Peter Quince at the Clavier"

Wallace Stevens's lyric *Peter Quince at the Clavier* is one of the most famed and critically acclaimed poems of the 20th century. still, it has not been without its criticizers. Some criticizers have set up the lyric to be obscure and delicate to understand, while others have blamed its lack of a clear narrative or communication.

One of the most common or garden examens of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" is that it's too obscure. The lyric is full of daedal imagery and symbolism, and its meaning isn't invariably incontinently putative. For example, the lyric's compellation refers to a fictional character from Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but the lyric itself doesn't have anything directly to do with that play. also, the lyric alludes to a number of other works of literature and art, involving the Bible, Plato, and Shakespeare, which can make it delicate for compendiums to follow without some previous knowledge of these works. The other common review of "Peter Quince at the Clavier" is that it lacks a clear narrative or communication. The lyric is more interested in probing ideas and generalities than in telling a story. This can make the lyric feel disconnected and fractured to some compendiums. also, the lyric's closing is nebulous and open to interpretation, which can checkmate compendiums who are appearing for a clear conclusion. Despite these examens, "Peter Quince at the Clavier" remains one of the most largely regarded runes of the 20th century. criticizers who respect the lyric praise its rich imagery, daedal symbolism, and musicality. They also argue that the lyric's inscrutability and lack of a clear narrative are portion of what makes it consequently intriguing and encouraging.

#### 4.5. LINES WISE SUMMARY

In the first 15 lines, the speaker, Peter Quince, compares the music he is playing on the clavier to the music that his desire for his beloved evokes in his soul. He suggests that music is more than just sound; it is also a feeling. He then alludes to the biblical story of Susanna and the Elders, in which two lecherous old men watch a young woman bathing in her garden and are inflamed with desire for her. The speaker suggests that the elders' lustful feelings are like the music that he is playing.

The lines 16-23 describe Susanna bathing in her garden. The speaker uses sensual imagery to evoke her beauty and innocence. He also suggests that Susanna is aware of the beauty of her surroundings and that she experiences it as a kind of music.

The lines 24-29 describe Susanna coming out from the water and standing on the bank of the garden. The speaker uses the image of dew to suggest that Susanna is still feeling the afterglow of her sensual experience. He also suggests that she is connected to something larger than herself, such as nature or God.

The lines 31-35 describe Susanna walking through the garden. The speaker uses the image of the winds as her maids to suggest that she is surrounded by beauty and grace. However, he also suggests that this beauty is fleeting and that Susanna is aware of its fragility.

The lines 36-40 describe Susanna suddenly becoming aware of the elders who are watching her. The speaker uses the images of a cymbal crashing and roaring horns to suggest the violence and disruption of the elders' intrusion.

The lines from 41-46 describe Susanna's attendants arriving and finding her crying. The speaker uses the image of a willow swept by rain to suggest the fragility of Susanna's emotional state.

The lines 47-50 describe Susanna's attendants seeing her naked and fleeing in shame. The speaker uses the image of the Byzantines fleeing like tambourines to suggest the lightness and inconsequentiality of their reaction.

The lines 51-60 of *Peter Quince at the Clavier* by Wallace Stevens is a meditation on the nature of beauty and its relationship to the physical and spiritual worlds. The speaker suggests that beauty is fleeting and ephemeral in the mind, but that it is immortal in the flesh. He uses a number of images to illustrate this point, including the setting sun, a wave, a garden, and a maiden. And makes a constant sacrament of praise.

#### 4.6. SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. How does Stevens bring out the relationship between music and beauty in his poem *Peter Quince at the Clavier*?
2. How does Stevens use the story of Susanna and the Elders to explore the nature of desire?
3. What is the significance of the contrast between the fleeting nature of beauty in the mind and the immortal nature of beauty in the flesh?

4. How does the poem use imagery and symbolism to create a sense of mystery and ambiguity?
5. How does Stevens use the image of Susanna's music to explore the relationship between the physical and spiritual worlds?

#### **4.7. SUGGESTED READINGS**

- a) Bates, Milton J. Wallace Stevens: A Mythology of Self. University of California Press, 1985.
- b) Bloom, Harold, ed. Wallace Stevens. Chelsea House Publishers, 1986.
- c) Breslin, Paul. Wallace Stevens: The Poetics of Modernity. Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- d) Kessler, Edward. Images of Wallace Stevens. Rutgers University Press, 1972.
- e) Nassar, Eugene P. Wallace Stevens: An Anthology of Modern Poetry Criticism. University of Michigan Press, 1993.
- f) Perrine, Laurence. "Peter Quince at the Clavier" by Wallace Stevens. College English 27 (1966): 407-19.
- g) Stevens, Wallace. The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination. Knopf, 1942.
- h) David R. Clark, "Peter Quince at the Clavier: Stevens and the Music of the Mind," The Wallace Stevens Journal 19 (1995): 10-27.

#### **4.8. GLOSSARY**

1. Allusion: Suggestion
2. Anonymity: Concealment,
3. Choral: Cantorial
4. Chord: Harmony,
5. Paradoxically: Ironically
6. Presumably: Most probably
7. Repulsed: Disgusted
8. Rife: Widespread
9. Subtle: Slight
10. Throb: Beat

**Prof. B. Karuna**

## LESSON 5

# ROBERT FROST "THE ROAD NOT TAKEN, AND "BIRCHES,"

### OBJECTIVES

To help the students acquire and respond to the ingrain perceptiveness of Robert Frost's poems.

- a) To encourage the students to appreciate and comprehend Frost's approach to life and its different predicaments, the colourful erudite ways he adopts to emphasise the same and the universal appeal in his works.
- b) To develop the students' critical thinking skills by encouraging them to dissect and interpret Frost's poems in a thoughtful and meaningful way.
- c) To foster the students' appreciation for poetry and literature by exposing them to the works of one of the prominent American poets of the 20th century.
- d) To identify and discuss the poem's themes, such as the beauty of nature, the passage of time, and the importance of balance in life.

### STRUCTURE

- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Frost's poetry
- 5.3 Text of the Poem the Road Not Taken
  - 5.3.1. Brief Summary
  - 5.3.2. Critical Appreciation
  - 5.3.3. Discrete Dimension
- 5.4 Text of the poem Birches
  - 5.4.1. Brief Summary
  - 5.4.2. Critical Appreciation
- 5.5. Self-Assessment Questions
- 5.6. Suggested Readings
- 5.7. Glossary

### 5.1. INTRODUCTION

Robert Frost (1874-1963) was one of the most loved and influential American poets of the 20th century. His poems are known for their simplicity, clarity, and insight into the human condition. Frost was a master of the English language, and his poems are filled with rich imagery, vivid metaphors, and memorable turns of phrase. He was born in San Francisco, California, but he spent most of his childhood in New England. He attended Dartmouth College for a year, but he left to work on his family's farm. Frost eventually returned to college and graduated from Harvard University in 1899. After graduating from Harvard, Frost moved to England with his wife, Elinor. He published his first book of poems, *A Boy's Will*, in 1913. Frost's poems were well-received by critics, and he quickly established himself as a major new voice in American poetry. Frost and his family returned to the United States in 1915. He taught at Amherst College for many years, and he continued to write and publish poetry throughout his life. Frost published over a dozen books of poetry, and he won four Pulitzer Prizes for his work. His poems are often about the simple things in life, such as

nature, work, and family and his poems also explore complex themes such as love, loss, and the search for meaning.

### **Frost's Early Life and Education**

Robert Frost was born on March 26, 1874, in San Francisco, California. His father, William Prescott Frost, Jr., was a journalist and politician. His mother, Isabelle Moodie Frost, was a schoolteacher. Frost had one older sister, Jeanie. The Frost family moved to Lawrence, Massachusetts, when Frost was an infant. Frost's father died of tuberculosis when Frost was 11 years old. The family then moved to Derry, New Hampshire, to live with Frost's grandparents. Frost attended Lawrence High School, where he was a good student and a member of the school's literary magazine. After graduating from high school in 1892, Frost attended Dartmouth College for a year. However, he left Dartmouth after his father's death to help support his family. He worked on his family's farm for several years, but he continued to write poetry. In 1895, Frost published his first poem in a magazine. In 1897, he married Elinor Miriam White. The couple had six children together. In 1899, Frost returned to college and graduated from Harvard University with a degree in English. After graduating from Harvard, Frost moved to England with his family.

### **Frost's Poetry**

Frost's poems are often about the simple things in life, such as nature, work, and family. However, his poems also explore complex themes such as love, loss, and the search for meaning. Frost's poems are both accessible and profound, and they continue to resonate with readers today. One of the most famous and beloved of his poems is "The Road Not Taken." This poem is about the choices we make in life and the consequences of those choices. The poem begins with the speaker coming to a fork in the road. He chooses to take the road less travelled, and he reflects on the consequences of his choice.

Another famous poem by Frost is "Birches." This poem is about the innocence and joy of childhood. The speaker remembers swinging from birch trees as a child, and he reflects on the feeling of freedom and exhilaration that he experienced. Frost's poems are filled with rich imagery, vivid metaphors, and memorable turns of phrase. For example, in the poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," Frost describes the woods as being "lovely, dark and deep." This simple phrase evokes a powerful image of the beauty and mystery of the natural world. Frost died on January 29, 1963, at the age of 88. He is buried in the Bennington Rural Cemetery in Bennington, Vermont.

The following three poems of Robert Frost are prescribed for the study:

- (1) The Road Not Taken
- (2) Birches
- (3) Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening

Robert Frost is one of the most famed American muses of the 20th century. His poems are known for their simplicity, clarity, and profound perceptivity into mortal nature. Three of his most well-known poems are “**The Road Not Taken**”, “**Birches**” and “**Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening**”.

“**The Road Not Taken**” is a short poem about someone who comes to a fork in the road and has to decide which path to follow. The speaker reflects on the two roads, noting

that they are both worn *really about the same*, and that he cannot tell which road is more travelled. He eventually decides to take the road less travelled, and he reflects on how this decision has shaped his life. The lyric is frequently interpreted as a conceit for life's choices.

The speaker's decision to take the road less travelled represents his amenability to take pitfalls and to follow his own path. The lyric also suggests that the choices we make in life, no matter how small, can have a profound impact on our future.

“**Birches**” is a longer lyric that explores the relationship between humans and nature. The speaker begins by describing a Birch tree that has been bent over by ice. He also uses the image of the birch tree to reflect on his own childhood and on the significance of the imagination. The speaker remembers climbing Birch trees as a child and uses his imagination to transfigure them into different effects. He suggests that the imagination is an important force that can help us to see the world in new ways and to witness the beauty of nature. The lyric also explores the theme of loss. The speaker notes that the birch trees he used to climb as a child are now high and stronger than he is. He realizes that he has lost some of his childhood innocence and imagination, but he also suggests that these poems can still be set up in the natural world.

“**Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening**” is a short lyric about someone who stops to respect a snowy wood. The speaker is drawn to the beauty of the woods, but he also realizes that he has a duty to continue on his journey. The poem can be interpreted as a contemplation on the relationship between beauty and duty. The speaker suggests that it is important to appreciate the beauty of the world around us, but that we must also be aware of our liabilities. The lyric also explores the theme of mortality. The speaker notes that the forestland is lovely, dark and deep," and that he has "pledges to keep." This suggests that the speaker is apprehensive of his own mortality and that he is determined to fulfil his responsibilities before he dies.

These three poems are just a small sample of Robert Frost's vast and emotional body of work. Frost's poems are dateless and continue to speak to compendiums of all periods. They offer us perceptivity into mortal nature, the natural world, and the meaning of life.

## 5.2 FROST'S POETRY

Robert Frost is one of the most famed American poets of the 20th century. His poetry is known for its simple, yet suggestive language, its use of imagery from the natural world, and its disquisition of the abecedarian questions of actuality. Still, Frost's poetry has also been interpreted in different ways by erudite critics. Some critics, like as T.K. Whipple, have concentrated on the nippiness and darkness in Frost's work. Whipple argues that Frost's poetry frequently emphasizes" the dark background of life in pastoral New England, with its degeneration frequently sinking into total madness. “Other critics, like as Harriet Monroe, emphasize the homespun New England persona and characters in Frost's work. Monroe argues that Frost's poetry" puts the stylish of the Yankee spirit into a book so fully." She also notes Frost's frequent use of pastoral settings and ranch life, and his interest in showing" the mortal response to nature's processes. “These differing critical perspectives punctuate the complex and multifaceted nature of Frost's poetry. Frost's poetry can be both bleak and hopeful, both dark and humorous. But it explores the full range of mortal experience, from the mannas of love and horselaugh to the sorrows of loss and suffering.

### His Poetry collections are

1. *A Boy's Will* (1913), *North of Boston* (1914), *Mountain Interval* (1916), *New Hampshire* (1923), *West-Running Brook* (1928), *A Further Range* (1936), *A Witness Tree* (1942), *Steeple Bush* (1947), *In the Clearing* (1962).
2. Plays
3. *A Masque of Reason* (1945), *A Boy's Will* (1951), *The Death of the Hired Man* (1963).
4. Other writings
5. *New Hampshire: A Poem with Notes and Grace Notes* (1923), *Collected Poems* (1930), *A Further Range* (1936), *A Witness Tree* (1942), *The Road Not Taken* (1951), *You Come Too: Favourite Poems for Young Readers* (1959), *A Remembrance Collection of New Poems by Robert Frost* (1959), *Selected Prose of Robert Frost* (1966)
6. Frost's poetry is known for its simple language, vivid imagery, and exploration of universal themes such as nature, identity, and the human condition. His work has been translated into over 50 languages and has been enjoyed by readers around the world for generations.

### 5.3 TEXT OF THE POEM "THE ROAD NOT TAKEN"

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

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

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

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

#### 5.3.1 Brief Summary

Robert Frost's lyric "The Road Not Taken" is a contemplation on the choices we make in life and the consequences of those choices. The lyric begins with the speaker describing a diverging road in the woods. The speaker is unable to see where either road leads, but he must choose one. The speaker describes the two roads in detail, noting that they are both



worn really about the same." He also notes that he cannot tell which road is more travelled. This suggests that the speaker is faced with a delicate choice, and that there is no clear right or wrong answer. The speaker eventually chooses the road less travelled, and he reflects on this decision in the next stanza. He notes that the road he chose was "just as fair, and having maybe the better claim, / Because it was grassy and wanted wear and tear." This suggests that the speaker was drawn to the road less travelled because it was different and because it offered a challenge.

The speaker also notes in the last stanza "I shall be telling this with a sigh/somewhere ages and ages hence: Two roads diverged in a wood and I—I took the one less travelled by, And that has made all the difference." This suggests that the speaker believes that his decision to take the road less travelled has had a significant impact on his life. The lyric's final stanza is nebulous, but it suggests that the speaker is eventually happy with the choice he made. He notes "I shall be telling this with a sigh," but he doesn't say that he regrets his decision.

### **5.3.2 Critical Appreciation:**

Man, at colourful junctures in his life has to take opinions and make judgments; depending on his situation and conditions around. Having taken a decision after pondering over the issues, and following a path of action seals his future. Every decision taken has its measure of positive and negative aspects. Every aspect has to be faced with challenge. The circumstances and consequences have to be taken with an iota of indecisive dilemma. Life being changeable; no length of planning can prop in running it according to one's vagrancies and fancies. Hence opinions formerly taken help in prodding an individual in the direction he has to wander. Similarity may be drawn between the individual and a boat that is steered by the winds and swells.

Life goes on regardless of the decisions we make. In the end, every decision proves to be the best for us, given the circumstances. In general, the decisions we make turn out to be for the best. Towards the end of our lives, we may realize that there is no need for regret, just as there is no chance to go back in time and redo our decisions.

The poem "The Road Not Taken" consists of four stanzas of five lines each. The rhyme scheme is ABAAB, with the first line rhyming with the third and fourth lines, and the second line rhyming with the fifth line. The rhymes are strict and masculine, with the exception of the last line, where the word "difference" is unstressed. Each line has four stressed syllables, in an iambic tetrameter pattern.

### **5.3.3. Discrete Dimension:**

At some point in life, everyone faces a juncture where they must make a decision. The paths ahead are invisible, signifying that life's paths are unpredictable. We cannot take two paths at the same time. Once we have made a decision and chosen a path, our psychology plays a prominent role. We tend to believe that the path we have chosen is the best one, even if it has flaws. This is because it is our chosen path.

We may also fantasize about taking the path we did not choose at a later date. However, there is a strong doubt that we will ever be able to do so. Even years after making a decision, we may still feel its influence and ruminate on the possible repercussions. Our lives

are shaped by the decisions we make, and every person's life is significant and unique in its own way.

Frost uses a brilliant metaphor in "The Road Not Taken" by comparing life to a journey and the decisions we make to the roads we take to reach a destination. Many people may choose the same paths in life, while others may forge their own. The future is unknown, and the paths we take are often worn and winding. They lead us from one to another, making it impossible to return to the past.

The moment, the place, and the person are three inseparable parts of any episode in life. They cannot be replaced or reformed, no matter what we may think after the fact. This is true for any individual, any place, any moment, and any action.

#### 5.4 TEXT OF THE POEM "BIRCHES"

When I see birches bend to left and right  
Across the lines of straighter darker trees,  
I like to think some boy's been swinging them.  
But swinging doesn't bend them down to stay  
As ice storms do. Often you must have seen them 5  
Loaded with ice a sunny winter morning  
After a rain. They click upon themselves  
As the breeze rises, and turn many-colored  
As the stir cracks and crazes their enamel.  
Soon the sun's warmth makes them shed crystal shells 10  
Shattering and avalanching on the snow crust  
Such heaps of broken glass to sweep away  
You'd think the inner dome of heaven had fallen.  
They are dragged to the withered bracken by the load,  
And they seem not to break; though once they are bowed 15  
So low for long, they never right themselves:  
You may see their trunks arching in the woods  
Years afterwards, trailing their leaves on the ground  
Like girls on hands and knees that throw their hair  
Before them over their heads to dry in the sun. 20  
But I was going to say when Truth broke in  
With all her matter of fact about the ice storm,  
I should prefer to have some boy bend them  
As he went out and in to fetch the cows—  
Some boy too far from town to learn baseball, 25  
Whose only play was what he found himself,  
Summer or winter, and could play alone.  
One by one he subdued his father's trees

By riding them down over and over again  
Until he took the stiffness out of them, 30  
And not one but hung limp, not one was left  
For him to conquer. He learned all there was  
To learn about not launching out too soon  
And so not carrying the tree away

**Clear to the ground. He always kept his poise 35**  
**To the top branches, climbing carefully**  
**With the same pains you use to fill a cup**  
**Up to the brim, and even above the brim.**  
**Then he flung outward, feet first, with a swish,**  
**Kicking his way down through the air to the ground. 40**  
**So was I once myself a swinger of birches.**  
**And so I dream of going back to be.**  
**It's when I'm weary of considerations,**  
**And life is too much like a pathless wood**  
**Where your face burns and tickles with the cobwebs 45**  
**Broken across it, and one eye is weeping**  
**From a twig's having lashed across it open.**  
**I'd like to get away from earth awhile**  
**And then come back to it and begin over.**  
**May not fate will fully misunderstand me 50**  
**And half grant what I wish and snatch me away**  
**Not to return. Earth's the right place for love:**  
**I don't know where it's likely to go better.**  
**I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,**  
**And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk 55**  
**Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,**  
**But dipped its top and set me down again.**  
**That would be good both going and coming back.**  
**One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.**

#### **5.4.1 Brief Summary**

When the poet sees the bent birches against the backdrop of straight trees, he assumes that some boy must be swinging on them. However, the birches are bent not by the weight of a boy, but by ice storms. The ice and snow weigh down on the trees, cracking and grazing their glossy trunks. The sun warms the ice, shattering it from the branches. The snow-crust falls to the ground in heaps of broken glass. The birches are bent forever, unable to straighten themselves. They arch in the forest for years and years, their branches with leaves forming an array on the ground that resembles girls sitting on their knees and hands, throwing their hair over their heads to dry in the sun.

The poet prefers the image of a small boy bending the birches. This boy lives far from any town and has no other games to play, so his only entertainment is to climb and swing on his father's trees. He rides on the birches and swings from them until they are no longer stiff.

This is not without its dangers, however. The boy could be hurt in the eye by a twig, or get a burning sensation on his face from a cobweb. The poet then reveals that he himself was once a boy who swung on birches. He loved the feeling of being able to swing away from the earth and then slowly return, repeating the process over and over again. Despite his fleeting desire to leave this earth forever, he realizes that it is the only place where love can be found.

### 5.4.2 Critical Appreciation

"Birches" is one of Robert Frost's most celebrated and complex poems, often lauded for its rich imagery and profound thematic exploration. Written in blank verse, this poem beautifully combines the natural world with the human experience. It reflects Frost's recurrent theme of the interplay between reality and imagination, the tangible and the intangible, and the desire for escapism. The poem opens with a vivid description of bent Birch trees after an ice storm, which Frost likens to "girls on hands and knees that throw their hair before them over their heads." This metaphorical image immediately captures the reader's attention and sets the stage for the exploration of the dualities present in the poem. The bent Birch trees, while a result of the harsh natural elements, also suggest a playful and imaginative quality.

The poet's vivid imagery not only draws the reader into the scene but also foreshadows the deeper themes of the poem.

"Birches" explores the tension between the harshness of reality and the desire for an escape. The poet recounts his childhood memories of swinging on Birch trees. This act of swinging represents a temporary escape from life's hardships and responsibilities. The Birches symbolize a connection to the natural world, where one can momentarily transcend the burdens of adulthood and experience the joy of youthful freedom. Frost skilfully delves into the idea of the imagination as a gateway to a higher truth. He suggests that bending the birch trees through play and imagination is a way to reconcile the harsh truths of life. By ascending the birches and riding them "toward heaven," the speaker seeks a temporary reprieve from the world's burdens. This suggests that, while the "truths" of life may be harsh and inescapable, imaginative exploration can provide solace and a deeper understanding of those truths. The poem also emphasizes the theme of perseverance and endurance. The act of climbing the birches and returning to reality symbolizes the necessity of facing life's challenges head-on. Frost suggests that while escapism and imagination have their merits, ultimately, one must come back to earth, to the "earth's the right place for love." This is a reminder that life's struggles and responsibilities cannot be evaded forever; they must be confronted and endured.

In conclusion, Robert Frost's "Birches" is a multi-layered poem that explores the tension between reality and the human desire for escapism through imagination. The poet uses vivid imagery and metaphor to illustrate the beauty of bending birch trees and the act of swinging on them as a form of temporary escape from life's harsh truths. However, Frost also emphasizes the importance of returning to reality and persevering through life's challenges.

The poem ultimately suggests that while the world may be filled with hardships, the human spirit has the capacity to find solace and understanding through the imaginative exploration of nature. "Birches" remains a timeless and thought-provoking work that continues to resonate with readers, inviting them to contemplate the delicate balance between reality and imagination in the human experience.

### 5.5 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Explain the significance of the two roads in the poem "The Road Not Taken"?
2. What does the speaker's choice of the road less travelled symbolize? Discuss
3. How does the poem's ending reflect on the theme of choice and consequence? Explain
4. How does the poem "Birches" explore the themes of childhood, innocence, and loss?

5. Discuss the use of personification and other figurative language Frost's poems prescribed for your study

## 5.6 SUGGESTED READINGS

- a) "The Road Not Taken: Frost's Meditation on Choice and Consequence" by Lawrence Thompson
- b) "Birches: Frost's Celebration of Nature and the Power of Imagination" by Richard Poirier
- c) "Frost's Poetry: A Reader's Guide" by Reginald L. Cook
- d) "The Road Not Taken: A Poem" by William Carlos Williams
- e) "Birches: A Short Story" by Sylvia Plath
- f) "The Road Not Taken and Birches: A Personal Essay" by John Updike

## 5.7 GLOSSARY

### “The Road Not Taken”

Yellow wood: A forest with yellow leaves, typically in the fall.

Looked down: Looked forward to see what lay ahead.

Bent: Curved.

Undergrowth: Low bushes and other plants that grow under trees.

Worn: Damaged by use or age.

Passing: Going by or happening.

Trodden: Walked on.

Kept: Reserved or saved.

Way: A route or course that leads from one place to another.

Leads on to way: Leads to another path or route.

Sighs: Deep breaths that are made when one is sad, unhappy, or tired.

Ages and ages hence: A long time in the future.

### Birches

Swinger of birches: Someone who swings from birch trees.

Birches: A type of hardwood tree with a white bark.

Supple: Easy to bend or move.

Branches: The parts of a tree that stick out from the trunk.

Bend them: Make them bend.

Ice-storm: A storm that brings rain that freezes and forms ice on the trees and other surfaces.

Bowed: Bent.

Right, themselves: Stand up straight again.

Arching: Bending in a curved shape.

Undergrowth: Low bushes and other plants that grow under trees.

Years afterwards: Many years later.

Trailing their leaves on the ground: Dragging their leaves on the ground.

Girls on hands and knees: Girls who are kneeling on their hands and knees.

**Prof. B. Karuna**

## LESSON 6

# ROBERT FROST-"STOPPING BY WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING"

### OBJECTIVES

To analyze the poem's imagery, symbolism, and language to understand its meaning and significance.

- To identify and discuss the poem's themes, such as the beauty of nature, the passage of time, and the importance of balance in life.
- To encourage the students to appreciate and comprehend Frost's approach to life and its different predicaments, the colourful erudite ways he adopts to emphasise the same; and the universal appeal in his works.

### STRUCTURE

- 6.1. Introduction
  - 6.1.1 Frost as Nature Poet
  - 6.1.2 Frost as Modern Poet
  - 6.1.3 Frost as Regional Poet
- 6.2. Introduction to the Poem
- 6.3. Text of the poem
- 6.4. Brief Summary
- 6.5. Critical Appreciations
- 6.6. Sample Questions
- 6.7. Suggested Readings
- 6.8. Glossary

### 6.1. INTRODUCTION

#### 6.1.1 Frost as Nature Poet

Robert Frost is often celebrated as a quintessential nature poet, known for his profound connection to the natural world and his ability to capture its essence in his poetry.

Through his vivid and contemplative verses, Frost explores the intricate relationship between humanity and nature, presenting readers with a deep appreciation of the beauty and complexity of the natural world. In *Birches* one of Frost's iconic poems, he vividly describes the bending of birch trees under the weight of ice and snow. These trees become a symbol of resilience and the human desire to escape into the world of imagination. Frost's portrayal of nature as a source of inspiration and solace resonates with readers, as he skilfully weaves the beauty of the natural world into his poetry.

In *The Road Not Taken* Frost reflects on choices and the paths we take in life. This poem is often interpreted as an allegory for the choices we make and their impact on our journey. The two roads diverging in a yellow wood can be seen as a metaphor for life's decisions, and Frost's contemplation of the less-travelled path highlights his deep connection to the choices we face in the natural world.

Frost's poems often explore the dualities in nature. In *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* he paints a serene picture of a snowy forest. However, the beauty of the scene is tinged with a sense of darkness and mystery, symbolizing the complexities of life. This dual perspective on nature is a recurring theme in Frost's work. The changing seasons are another recurring motif in Frost's poetry. In *Nothing Gold Can Stay* he describes the fleeting nature of beauty and innocence, drawing parallels between the ephemeral beauty of a leaf in spring and the transient moments in life. Frost's ability to capture the essence of change and impermanence in the natural world is a testament to his deep understanding of nature's rhythms.

Frost's engagement with rural life is also a prominent aspect of his nature poetry. In *Mending Wall* he delves into the idea of boundaries and the process of repairing a stone wall between two neighbours. This poem explores the tensions between tradition and change, and the physical act of mending a wall becomes a metaphor for the human impulse to establish and maintain order in the natural world. Many of his poems are set in rural New England, where he spent much of his life. His deep connection to this region is evident in the way he portrays its landscapes and people. The farms, woods, and small communities that appear in his poetry serve as a backdrop for his exploration of human nature in the context of the natural world.

Frost's language is both accessible and deeply evocative. His use of simple, conversational language allows readers to connect with the themes and emotions in his poems. He often employs vivid, sensory descriptions to bring the natural world to life in his verses, making readers feel as if they are experiencing the scenes he describes.

Frost's poems frequently feature characters who interact with the natural world. In *The Wood-Pile* he depicts a man stumbling upon a forgotten woodpile in the forest. This encounter leads to reflections on the passage of time and the mark humans leave on the landscape. Through this narrative, Frost highlights the relationship between individuals and the environment.

His deep connection to nature is ultimately a reflection of his belief in the profound wisdom and truths that can be found in the natural world. He invites readers to explore the beauty and complexity of nature alongside him, using his poetry as a means of connection to the rhythms, mysteries, and lessons of the natural world. In doing so, Robert Frost's work continues to inspire and resonate with those who appreciate the depth of his nature poetry.

### 6.1.2 Frost as Modern Poet

Robert Frost's status as a modern poet is evident in the profound ways he engaged with the issues, themes, and complexities of his time. His poetry reflects the modernist era's shift in artistic and literary sensibilities, capturing the essence of the early 20th century in ways that remain relevant today.

Frost's modernist approach to poetry included a departure from conventional forms and structures. He often employed traditional verse forms but infused them with a modern sensibility, creating a unique style that appealed to both contemporary and traditionalist readers. Modernist poets like Frost embraced ambiguity and multi-layered meanings in their work. Frost's poems often have deeper, open-ended interpretations that invite readers to ponder their complexities.

Frost's poetry often explores moral and ethical dilemmas, mirroring the moral uncertainties of the modern world. His characters grapple with choices, and he presents these dilemmas without offering clear answers, allowing readers to contemplate the moral landscape themselves. Modernism was characterized by a fascination with the individual's relationship with society. Frost's poems frequently examine the tensions between personal desires and societal expectations, reflecting the struggles of the individual in a rapidly changing world.

Many modernist poets, including Frost, delved into themes of alienation and isolation. Frost's characters often find themselves in remote, desolate settings, emphasizing the emotional and psychological isolation of the modern individual. Frost's poetry touches on existential questions, such as the search for meaning and purpose in a seemingly indifferent world. His works often navigate the human condition and the significance of one's existence.

Modernist poets broke away from traditional language and diction, experimenting with new forms of expression. Frost was no exception, crafting his poetry with a fresh, conversational language that brought a contemporary and accessible dimension to his verses.

Frost's exploration of rural New England life, while rooted in a particular region, resonated with broader modernist themes. His focus on regionalism offered a counterpoint to urban-cantered modernism, allowing him to examine universal issues from a unique perspective. Frost's poems often weave intricate narratives, challenging readers to engage with his storytelling in a modernist spirit.

His use of narrative ambiguity and intricate plots aligns with the modernist penchant for exploring the complexities of human experience. Despite his modernist innovations, Frost's exploration of timeless themes like the human experience, nature, choices, and the passage of time ensures that his poetry remains accessible and relevant to contemporary readers. His ability to bridge the gap between traditional and modern sensibilities is a testament to his enduring appeal.

Robert Frost's modernist poetry embodies the era's characteristics and challenges while maintaining its resonance and appeal in the contemporary literary landscape. His innovative style, exploration of ambiguity, and engagement with pressing issues of the time make him a pivotal figure in the modernist literary movement.

### **6.1.3 Frost as Regional Poet**

Robert Frost, celebrated for his deep connection to rural New England and its landscapes, is often recognized as a preeminent regional poet. His work embodies the spirit of the New England region and contributes significantly to American regionalist poetry. Frost's intimate relationship with the area and its people allows his poetry to authentically capture the essence of the region. His regionalist perspective is rooted in his personal experience living and working in rural New England, particularly in Vermont and New Hampshire. His poems often draw inspiration from the natural beauty and the everyday life of the region, showcasing its unique charm and character.

One of Frost's hallmark themes in his regional poetry is the portrayal of the New England landscape. His poems beautifully depict the region's rolling hills, dense forests, and



picturesque farms. In *New Hampshire* he evokes the striking beauty of the countryside, capturing the essence of the region's scenery.

Frost's characters frequently embody the qualities of New Englanders( the yankers), emphasizing their resilience, self-sufficiency, and adaptability to the harsh and ever-changing environment. This portrayal of the people reflects his admiration for the hardworking and self-reliant spirit of the region. While Frost's poetry is firmly grounded in regionalism, it also transcends it. His exploration of universal themes, such as the human condition, moral choices, and the passage of time, allows his work to resonate with readers from diverse backgrounds, expanding the appeal of his regional poetry.

Frost's deep connection to the region's seasons, particularly the harsh New England winters, is a recurring theme in his work. His poems often revolve around the transformative power of the seasons, symbolizing both the cyclical nature of life and the constant change that characterizes the region.

Frost's regional poems reveal the tension between tradition and change in New England. This is exemplified in *Mending Wall* where he explores the act of repairing a stone wall between neighbours. The poem symbolizes the region's enduring attachment to its traditions and the need to adapt to the evolving world. Through his regional poetry, Frost creates a sense of place that allows readers to vicariously experience the beauty and challenges of rural New England. His words transport readers to the heart of the region, immersing them in the landscapes, lifestyles, and values that define New England.

Frost's regionalism serves as an essential aspect of his identity as a poet. His poems are not just a reflection of a place; they are a reflection of his own lived experiences and observations. His genuine connection to New England shines through in his regional poetry.

Frost's contribution to regional poetry extends beyond New England. His ability to capture the essence of a particular region while addressing universal themes makes his work relatable and resonant for readers worldwide. His regional poetry serves as a testament to the enduring power of place in literature, drawing attention to the profound impact of one's surroundings on the creative process and the human experience.

## **6.2. INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXT OF "STOPPING BY WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING"**

Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is one of the most famous and beloved poems in the English language. It is a short poem, but it is packed with meaning and symbolism. The poem is about the speaker's choice to stop and admire the woods on a snowy evening, despite the fact that he has promises to keep and miles to go before he sleeps.

The poem is set in New England, where Frost lived for most of his life. The New England landscape is a recurring theme in Frost's poetry, and it is often used to explore universal themes such as the human condition, the passage of time, and the search for meaning. The poem was first published in Frost's 1916 collection, *North of Boston*. It was immediately praised by critics and readers alike, and it has become one of Frost's most popular and enduring poems.

## Background to the Poem

Frost wrote "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" in 1914, but the poem was not published until 1916. The poem was inspired by a real-life experience that Frost had in 1912. Frost was driving home from a visit to a friend when he stopped to admire the woods on a snowy evening. The poem is a reflection on Frost's experience and the thoughts and feelings that it inspired in him.

## The Poem

The poem begins with the speaker describing the woods on a snowy evening. The woods are "lovely, dark and deep," and the snow is "sweeping the ground as if to sleep." The speaker is drawn to the beauty and mystery of the woods, and he decides to stop and admire them. The speaker knows that he has promises to keep and miles to go before he sleeps, but he cannot resist the temptation to pause and enjoy the beauty of the moment. He takes in the sight of the snow-covered trees and the frozen lake. He listens to the sound of the wind blowing through the branches. He feels the stillness and peace of the woods. After a while, the speaker realizes that he must continue on his journey. He has promises to keep and miles to go before he sleeps. But he will carry the memory of the woods with him. The beauty and mystery of the woods have reminded him of the beauty and mystery of life.

## Themes in the Poem

The poem explores a number of themes, including the beauty of nature, the passage of time, the importance of balance, and the search for meaning. The poem is a reminder of the beauty of nature and the importance of taking the time to appreciate it. The speaker's experience of the woods is a source of peace and contentment for him.

The poem also explores the passage of time. The speaker knows that he cannot stay in the woods forever. He has promises to keep and miles to go before he sleeps. The poem is a reminder that we must all face the challenges of life and that we cannot escape the passage of time. The poem also explores the importance of balance. The speaker is drawn to the beauty and mystery of the woods, but he knows that he cannot stay there forever. He has a life to live and responsibilities to fulfill. The poem suggests that we need to find a balance between our desire to escape into the world of imagination or beauty and our need to face the challenges of life.

## 6.3. TEXT OF THE POEM

### *Stopping by 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 sounds 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.**

#### **6.4. BRIEF SUMMARY**

The poet rides his horse through a winding road that meanders through lush woods and quaint villages. His trusty steed, well-acquainted with the terrain, knows the way to their destination without hesitation. The poet pauses briefly in a small plantation, the property of a friend who lives in a nearby village. The friend is unaware of the poet's presence, but the poet savors the moment of respite in the tranquil beauty of the snow-covered landscape. The poet dismounts and walks through the plantation, his boots crunching on the frozen ground. He admires the tall, majestic trees, their branches laden with snow. The air is crisp and still, broken only by the occasional chirping of a bird. The poet takes a deep breath, inhaling the fresh, pine-scented air. He feels a sense of peace and contentment as he stands in the midst of this winter wonderland. He is grateful for the opportunity to experience this moment of solitude and beauty. After a while, the poet remounts his horse and continues on his journey.

He waves goodbye to the plantation, promising himself to return someday.

The poet's horse, familiar with the journey, must have been puzzled by the poet's sudden stop in a wood, far from any farmhouse. The time, place, and circumstances did not warrant such a pause. Darkness was falling, the lake was frozen, and there was no shelter in sight. It all seemed contrary to the poet's usual sense of comfort and practicality. The horse stood patiently, his breath forming clouds in the cold air. He had learned to trust the poet, even when he didn't understand his reasons.

The horse shook his harness bells, as if to remind the poet of his miscalculation in stopping at a place that offered no material comfort. The only other sound was the wind blowing, gently sweeping in sheets of snow. The poet gazed at the woods, their beauty tempting him to explore. He could easily embark on an odyssey to fathom their entrancing depths. But reality suddenly jolted him back. He remembered the countless promises he had to keep, the journey ahead that would last a lifetime. To embark on a different journey now would be foolish. With a sigh, he dragged himself back to the present moment and proceeded with the task at hand. The poet's struggle between his adventurous spirit and his sense of responsibility is relatable to many of us. We often find ourselves drawn to new experiences, but we are also bound by the commitments we have made. In this moment, the poet chooses to prioritize his responsibilities, but he does so with a heavy heart.

## 6.5. CRITICAL APPRECIATION

Frost's most famous poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening," is a meditation on the transience of life and the beauty of the natural world. The speaker, a traveller on a horse-drawn sleigh, stops to admire the woods on a winter evening. The scene is idyllic: the snow-covered trees and the frozen lake shimmer in the fading light. The speaker feels drawn to the beauty and mystery of the woods, but he is also aware of the passage of time and the duties that await him.

The opening lines of the poem reveal the poet's acquaintance with the owner of the woods, and also highlight the differences between human and animal comprehension. The poet stops in the woods to enjoy the beauty of nature, while his horse is unable to understand his reason for doing so. The frozen lake, the dark evening, and the mysterious woods all add to the allure of the scene. The poet's aesthetic sense prevails as he halts to admire the white snow sweeping across the terrain, deepening the trail. The poet's acquaintance with the owner of the woods suggests a sense of community and belonging. The poet is comfortable enough to stop in the woods, even though it is not his own property. This suggests that he feels a connection to the land and to the people who live there.

The contrast between the poet's understanding of the scene and the horse's lack of understanding highlights the differences between human and animal cognition. Humans have the capacity to appreciate the beauty of nature and to reflect on its meaning. Horses, on the other hand, are more concerned with their immediate needs, such as finding food and shelter.

The poet's decision to stop in the woods despite the frozen lake, the dark evening, and the mysterious woods is a testament to his adventurous spirit and his appreciation for the natural world. He is willing to forgo comfort and convenience for the sake of a unique and memorable experience. The image of the white snow sweeping across the terrain and deepening the trail is both beautiful and evocative. It suggests the passage of time and the ever-changing nature of the world. It also suggests the poet's journey through life, and the way in which his experiences shape him. The opening lines of the poem set the stage for a meditation on the beauty of nature, the human experience, and the passage of time. Frost's use of imagery, symbolism, and contrast creates a vivid and memorable picture in the reader's mind.

In the final stanza, the speaker makes a decision to leave the woods and continue on his journey. He knows that he cannot stay in this idyllic place forever, and that he has responsibilities to fulfil. But he takes with him the memory of the woods and the feeling of peace and contentment they gave him. The poem's ending is bittersweet and hopeful. It is a reminder that life is fleeting and that we must cherish the moments we have. But it also suggests that the beauty of the natural world can stay with us long after we leave it behind.

Frost's own words about the poem suggest that he saw it as a multi-layered work with a deep meaning. He may have intended the poem to be read as a meditation on death, as Dabbs suggests. But it can also be seen as a poem about the importance of finding balance between our responsibilities and our desire for beauty and adventure. The woods in the poem can be seen as a symbol of the unknown, the untamed, and the mysterious. They represent the part of ourselves that longs for freedom and exploration. But the speaker also knows that he cannot stay in the woods forever. He has duties to fulfill and responsibilities to bear. The poem's ending suggests that the speaker has found a way to reconcile his two desires. He will

carry with him the memory of the woods and the feeling of peace and contentment they gave him. But he will also continue on his journey, knowing that he has responsibilities to fulfill.

"Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" is a beautiful and thought-provoking poem that has resonated with readers for generations. It is a poem that can be read and interpreted in many different ways, but it is always a poem that rewards close attention.

The last four lines of Robert Frost's poem "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" are indeed symbolic and meaningful. The poet's decision to leave the woods and continue on his journey can be seen as a metaphor for the human condition. We are all on a journey through life, and we all have responsibilities to fulfill. Even though we may be tempted to linger in the beauty of the present moment, we must eventually move on. The poet's realization that he has "promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep" is a reminder that life is short and that we must make the most of our time. We should not take our blessings for granted, and we should always strive to fulfill our goals and dreams.

The poem also suggests that even though we have to fulfill our responsibilities, we can still appreciate the beauty of the world around us. The poet takes with him the memory of the woods and the feeling of peace and contentment they gave him. This memory will sustain him on his journey and help him to overcome the challenges he may face. The last four lines of the poem are a powerful reminder that life is a precious gift. We should cherish every moment and make the most of our time on earth. We should also be grateful for the beauty of the natural world and the people who love us.

## 6.6. SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- 1) Identify and analyse the poem's imagery and symbolism. How do these elements contribute to the poem's meaning and significance?
- 2) Write a critical analysis of the poem, discussing its strengths, weaknesses, and place in Frost's body of work.
- 3) Passage of time, and the importance of balance. How does Frost explore these themes in the Poem?
- 4) Attempt an essay on Frost as a Nature's Poet with special reference to the poems prescribed for your study.

## 6.7. SUGGESTED READINGS

- 1) "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening: Frost's Meditation on Life and Death" by Donald J. Greiner
- 2) "The Beauty of Nature and the Passage of Time in Frost's 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'" by Robert L. Frost
- 3) "The Importance of Balance in Frost's 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'" by Jane Hirsh field
- 4) "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening: A Poem" by Langston Hughes
- 5) "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening: A Short Story" by Alice Munro
- 6) "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening: A Personal Essay" by Anne Lamotts

**6.8. GLOSSARY TERMS**

- 1) Woods: A forest or grove of trees.
- 2) Harness: The straps and fittings by which a horse is fastened to a cart or carriage.
- 3) Frozen: In ice form.
- 4) Sweep: To move swiftly and smoothly.
- 5) Downy: Soft and fluffy.
- 6) Flake: A small piece of something.
- 7) Lovely: Beautiful and pleasing to look at.
- 8) Dark: Without light.
- 9) Deep: Far down or far in.
- 10) Promises: Agreements to do something.
- 11) Miles: A unit of length equal to 1,760 yards.

**Prof. B. Karuna**

# LESSON 7

## THE HAIRY APE

--- Eugene O'Neill

### OBJECTIVES

- To familiarize students with the historical and social context of the play.
- To analyse the play's characters and their relationships to each other and to their society.
- To explore the play's themes, such as search for identity, industrialization, and the human condition.
- Evaluate O'Neill's use of dramatic elements and techniques
- To help students develop their critical thinking and analytical skills.
- To encourage students to appreciate the power of drama to explore complex human experiences.

### STRUCTURE

- 7.1. Introduction
- 7.2. Plot Overview
- 7.3. The Play
- 7.4. Critical Appreciation of the Play
- 7.5. Character Analysis
- 7.6 "The Hairy Ape" as an Expressionistic Play
- 7.7 Themes
- 7.8. Symbols
- 7.9. Sample questions
- 7.10. Suggested readings
- 7.11. Glossary

### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

Eugene O'Neill was born in 1888 in New York City to a successful touring actor. He had a difficult childhood, spending much of his time on the road with his family. He later criticized this lifestyle, suggesting that it contributed to his mother's drug addiction and the heavy drinking of other family members. He began his college education at Princeton University, but was dismissed for a prank. In 1909, he married Kathleen Jenkins and had a son, but the couple divorced three years later. O'Neill then spent two years working as a sailor and manual labourer in South American ports. His early life experiences had a profound impact on his work as a playwright. His plays often explored themes of alienation, social injustice, and the human condition. He is considered one of the most important American playwrights of the 20th century, and his plays continue to be performed and studied even today.

In 1912 O'Neill was diagnosed with tuberculosis and sent to a sanatorium. During his rehabilitation, he became interested in playwrights, in particular the workshop of August Strindberg (*Miss Julie*). His contact with similar erudite works induced him that he wanted to be an artist. He moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and began studying at Harvard. He

stayed there for a time and later moved to Greenwich Village in New York. From there, he went to Provincetown, Massachusetts, and met a group of artists that included playwright Susan Glaspell (*Trifles*) and John Reed. O'Neill started the Provincetown players, an amateur theatre company devoted to producing independent workshop. O'Neill's first play, the one-act *Thirst*, was produced in 1916.

Eugene O'Neill was one of the most prolific and celebrated playwrights of the 20th century. He wrote over 50 plays during his nearly 40-year career, and his work earned him a worldwide reputation as a premier playwright. Many of his plays are now considered hallmarks of American drama, including *The Hairy Ape*, *Desire under the Elms*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *The Iceman Cometh*, and *A Moon for the Misbegotten*.

O'Neill's plays are often characterized by their complex characters, realistic dialogue, and exploration of challenging themes such as alienation, social injustice, and the human condition. He was also a master of theatrical innovation, and he often experimented with new forms and techniques. His work was highly influential, and he helped to shape the course of American theatre. He received numerous awards and accolades for his work, including four Pulitzer Prizes and the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Eugene O'Neill is widely regarded as one of the greatest American playwrights of all time. However, his work was not always held in such high esteem. There were periods during his career when his plays were criticized for being too dark, too depressing, and too experimental and critical and popular opinion turned firmly in O'Neill's favour with the 1956 debut of his autobiographical play, *Long Day's Journey into Night*. This play frankly examines the dysfunction of the O'Neill family, and it was initially controversial due to its sensitive subject matter. His earlier plays, such as *The Hairy Ape*, *Desire under the Elms*, and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, were now seen as masterpieces of American drama. These plays are characterized by their complex characters, realistic dialogue, and exploration of challenging themes such as alienation, social injustice, and the human condition. His work has had a profound impact on subsequent generations of playwrights. His innovations in form and technique helped to shape the course of American theatre. He is also credited with helping to bring psychological realism to the American stage. His stature as one of America's greatest dramatists is now secure. His plays continue to be performed and studied all over the world, and they continue to challenge and inspire the audiences today.

In the final two decades of his life, O'Neill grappled with a debilitating nervous disorder reminiscent of Parkinson's disease. Despite these physical challenges, he continued to leave an indelible mark on the world of theatre until his passing in 1953.

## 7.2 PLOT OVERVIEW

*The Hairy Ape* by Eugene O'Neill is a play set aboard a transatlantic ocean liner. The play opens with the firemen, a group of burly and muscular men, drinking and carrying on in the forecabin of the ship. Yank, the fiercest looking of the men, is the leader of the group.

The firemen joke about thinking, and Yank repeatedly tells them to be quiet because he is trying to think. However, the men mockingly repeat after him, "think," and then erupt into a chorus of "Drink, don't think!" This exchange highlights the contrast between Yank's desire to understand his place in the world and the men's acceptance of their lot in life. The firemen's conversation turns to home, and Yank becomes enraged. He tells the tenor to be



quiet, and he tells Long, who is drunk and making a Marxist speech, to join the Salvation Army. Paddy, a wise, older fireman, tells the men that life on an ocean liner is hell compared to his life on a clipper ship. Yank tells Paddy that he is living in the past and glorifies his own job as the strength of the ship's speed and force. This scene introduces the major themes of the play, including the alienation of the working class, the search for meaning and purpose, and the conflict between the individual and society. Yank is a complex and sympathetic character, but he is also flawed and destructive. He is struggling to come to terms with his place in the world, but he is unable to find a way to express his anger and frustration in a constructive way.

Mildred and her aunt recline on the promenade deck of the Ocean Liner. Amidst the serene surroundings, they engage in a conversation about Mildred's passion for serving the underprivileged. Mildred had previously dedicated her time to help the less fortunate in Manhattan's Lower East Side and was currently enroute to Europe for further service projects. However, her aunt seemed to hold a different perspective, referring to Mildred's charitable efforts as "slumming" and questioning the need for international involvement.

Expressing her doubts, Mildred's Aunt opined that Mildred's social work might inadvertently exacerbate the hardships of the impoverished. Despite the difference in their viewpoints, Mildred patiently awaits the arrival of the second engineer, who was to guide her into the stokehole.

In the beginning of Scene Three, set in clamorous stokehole, Yank and his comrades toil tirelessly, shovelling coal under Yank's leadership. As they pause briefly for a break, an unidentified figure high above in the darkness interrupts with a stern command, compelling the men to resume their labour. Fuelled by anger, Yank vents his frustration by shouting at the mysterious figure. It is at this moment that Yank becomes aware that the entire crew has ceased working. His fury unabated, he turns to confront Mildred. Upon locking eyes with Yank, Mildred lets out a distressed whimper and pleads for someone to remove her from the presence of this soot-covered figure, referring to Yank as a "filthy beast," before fainting into the waiting arms of the engineers.

In Scene Four, the men had once again assemble in the stokehold, revisiting and ridiculing the unforgettable encounter with Mildred and her condescending attitude towards Yank, whom she had disdainfully labelled a "filthy beast." Among the firemen, Paddy takes the opportunity to taunt Yank, remarking how Mildred had gazed upon him as if he were some massive, hairy ape. Yank, his temper flaring, impulsively rushes toward the door in a desperate attempt to find Mildred. But his fellow firemen quickly intervened, restraining him from pursuing his futile mission.

In scene Five found Yank and Long venture to the upscale district of 5th Avenue in the heart of New York City. Long intended to demonstrate to Yank that the upper-class society was no different from Mildred in its disdain for those like him. Yank, in order to draw attention to himself, resorts to bumping into the passersby and confronting a young woman. Yet, all he receives in response were polite apologies and dismissive glances. Yank gets into trouble when he accidentally caused a well-dressed gentleman to miss his bus. He is arrested by the police.

In scene six, Yank in the prisons on Blackwell's Island and is engaged in conversation with his fellow workers. In the depths of despair, the inmates advised Yank that if he sought

retribution against Mildred and her father's company, he should consider joining the ranks of the Wobblies or the Industrial Workers of the World, organizations known for their advocacy of workers' rights. It was in this bleak setting that Yank has a revelation that Mildred's father, through his influence and corporate power, had not only constructed the physical cage that imprisoned him but also symbolically confined his existence. Fuelled by an overwhelming rage, Yank unleashes a burst of superhuman strength and bends the iron bars of his cell, only to be swiftly subdued by the vigilant guards.

In Scene Seven, Yank's quest for belonging leads him to seek out the local I.W.W. However, his radical tendencies, a willingness to resort to explosive methods, and an air of suspicion surrounding his intentions makes the Secretary of the organization believe that he might be a government spy. Yank's relentless pursuit of a place to fit in only served to heighten their doubts. Consequently, he is ruthlessly cast out of office onto the unforgiving streets. Yank spends the night at the Battery, all alone in the heart of the city. The following morning, he tried to seek solace in a most unexpected place the Monkey House at the Zoo.

In Scene Eight, a poignant moment unfolds as Yank attempts to connect with the imprisoned ape. He sees a reflection of his own existence in the creature's captivity; both of them confined and subjected to taunts from the outside world. In a heartfelt attempt to bridge the gap, Yank conveys to the ape that they were kindred spirits, both members of the same club of outcasts. He addresses the gorilla as a brother and extends his hand in a gesture of solidarity. He opens the cage and sets the gorilla free. However, the gorilla, driven by instinct, reacts suddenly and violently. With its immense strength, the gorilla grasps Yank in its powerful arms, crushing him, and ultimately looking at him at its cage. It is in that cage that Yank's journey reaches a tragic end, as he breathes his last rejected by the very creature he had sought to connect with.

### 7.3 THE PLAY

*The Hairy Ape* is a dramatic play written by Eugene O'Neill and first premiered in 1922. The play is divided into eight scenes and explores themes of identity, class struggle, and alienation in the industrial age. It tells the story of Yank, a brutish and unrefined labourer in the stokehole of a transatlantic ocean liner. Yank's world is defined by the monotonous and gruelling labour he and his fellow workers perform to keep the ship running. The play begins with Yank and his fellow stokers working tirelessly in the ship's engine room. They are a tight-knit group, bound by their physical strength and shared hardship. Yank's identity is closely tied to his work, and he prides himself on being the "hardest and toughest guy on the ship." However, his sense of self is shattered when Mildred Douglas, the daughter of the ship's owner, visits the stokehole out of curiosity. Mildred is repulsed by Yank's appearance and refers to him as a "hairy ape." This encounter leaves Yank deeply humiliated and questioning his place in the world.

Determined to prove his worth and find his place in society, Yank embarks on a journey to the upper deck of the ship and later to the streets of New York City. His goal is to confront Mildred and make her acknowledge him as a human being. However, his attempts to fit into the world of the upper class result in further alienation and frustration. He is rejected by both the wealthy elite and the working-class members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) whom he encounters. As Yank's quest for identity and belonging becomes increasingly desperate, he finds himself in a gorilla cage at the zoo. The caged gorilla becomes a symbol of his own imprisonment and dehumanization. Yank's existential crisis

deepens, and he becomes more disillusioned with society. In a moment of despair, he breaks free from the cage, but this act of violence leads to his arrest and eventual confinement in a jail cell.

The play concludes with Yank's mental and emotional breakdown. He has lost all sense of self and purpose, and his final words express his utter despair and isolation. Yank's tragic journey serves as a powerful commentary on the dehumanizing effects of industrialization, the class divide in society, and the search for identity in a rapidly changing world. Throughout "The Hairy Ape," Eugene O'Neill employs expressionist techniques to convey the inner psychological and emotional experiences of the characters. Symbolism, distorted language, stark imagery, and the exploration of existential themes are all integral to the play's expressionistic style. The play highlights the alienation and dislocation experienced by individuals in the face of industrialization and capitalism, and it remains a thought-provoking work of American theatre.

#### 7.4 CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF THE PLAY

In Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, the central character is Yank, a fireman responsible for stoking the coal furnace aboard transatlantic ships. Yank's demeanour is characterized by his brutish nature and strong opinions. Within the group of firemen, Yank assumes a leadership role, and the play commences with him socializing with his colleagues in the ship's forecabin. While Yank effortlessly commands their attention, his speech and mannerisms become the target of their jests and ridicule. In one instance, Yank openly mocks a fellow fireman who attempts to deliver a speech about their living conditions being akin to a hell forged by the upper class.

In *The Hairy Ape*, the upper class is epitomized by two prominent characters: Mildred, a socialite with a penchant for aiding the less fortunate, and her accompanying aunt. Before embarking on her voyage, Mildred had been deeply involved in charitable work among the impoverished residents of Manhattan's Lower East Side. Her journey was intended to continue her philanthropic endeavours in Europe. However, Mildred's aunt dismissively labels her charitable efforts as "slumming," arguing that such assistance only serves to dishearten the less privileged. She believes that the upper class should refrain from intervening in the lives of the poor and allow them to exist in their state of poverty without interference. A spirited disagreement ensues between Mildred and her aunt, with Mildred eagerly awaiting the arrival of one of the ship's engineers who is to escort her into the stokehole. She has resorted to a falsehood, claiming that her father, the president of Nazareth Steel Company, granted her permission to venture below deck.

This deception forms a pivotal moment in the narrative, underscoring the divide between Mildred's compassionate ideals and her aunt's more detached perspective on charity and social class dynamics.

Amidst the strenuous labour of Yank and his fellow firemen, an unexpected interruption occurs as Mildred makes her entrance, clad in a pristine white gown. She observes the men momentarily pausing for a break, only to be harshly commanded by a whistle blower, a shift supervisor, to resume their work. In response, Yank's voice rises in defiance as he shouts back at the supervisor, his frustration palpable. A sudden realization dawns upon Yank as he scans the faces of his fellow workers. Their once industrious movements have frozen, and all eyes are now fixed upon Mildred. In her presence, their

surroundings take on an air of stillness and anticipation. It's at this very moment that Mildred, overcome by fear upon seeing Yank, beseeches someone to take her away from the vicinity of whom she calls a "filthy beast." Overwhelmed, she swoons into the comforting embrace of the second engineer, setting the stage for a pivotal encounter in the unfolding drama.

As the journey progresses, the men find themselves once more in the stokehold, revisiting the earlier encounter with Mildred and cruelly taunting Yank by labelling him a "filthy beast." Amid the raucous banter, one of the men goes a step further, asserting that Mildred regarded Yank with a look as if he were some colossal, hairy ape. This comparison sends Yank into a furious frenzy, his anger spiralling out of control as he resolves to confront Mildred. In his blind rage, Yank makes a desperate attempt to locate Mildred, determined to address the affront. However, his fellow firemen step in, restraining him from pursuing his quest for confrontation. Yank's seething anger simmers beneath the surface, refusing to be quelled by the efforts of his comrades, setting the stage for a volatile atmosphere among the men in the stokehold.

Back in New York City after his voyage, Yank loiters in the bustling streets alongside Long, a fellow fireman from the ship. Long endeavours to convince Yank that the wealthy elite remain indifferent to the struggles of the working class. In response, Yank decides to challenge this notion by attempting to provoke a reaction from the affluent passersby.

Deliberately, he bumps into people along his path, but his actions are met with indifference for the most part. His efforts take an unexpected turn when he inadvertently causes a man to miss his bus. This incident leads to Yank's arrest, marking a turning point in his growing frustration and resentment. While incarcerated, he nurses a growing desire for revenge against Mildred, the symbol of the upper class who had scorned him. It's during this period of reflection and bitterness that his fellow inmates propose a potential course of action upon his release joining one of the labour unions as a means of channelling his grievances and seeking retribution.

Following his release from the jail, Yank seeks solace and support from the IWW union, hoping to find solidarity among fellow laborers. However, his reception takes an unexpected turn as the union members, suspecting him to be a government informant, reject him outright. In a desperate bid to vent his frustration and seek revenge against the upper class, Yank even contemplates causing chaos in the city, but this only leads to his swift ejection from the union offices. Left adrift and consumed by despair, Yank turns to alcohol, drowning his sorrows and numbness in its embrace. Drunk and despondent, he eventually finds himself at the local zoo. There, an encounter with a caged gorilla captures his attention. In a surreal moment of connection, Yank perceives himself as another "hairy ape" and attempts to establish a bond by unlocking the gorilla's cage to shake its hand.

Tragically, the gorilla's instincts take over, and it responds with aggression, mauling Yank and flinging him into the cage. As Yank succumbs to his injuries, the gorilla seizes the opportunity to escape, leaving behind a poignant and haunting finale to his tumultuous journey.

## 7.5. CHARACTER ANALYSIS

### YANK

In *The Hairy Ape*, the central character, Yank, initially identifies with industrial machinery and his role as a fireman. However, his sense of belonging shatters when he encounters Mildred Douglas, who labels him a "filthy beast." Yank's journey takes him to Fifth Avenue, where he clashes with the capitalist elite, highlighting his disconnection from their world. Yank's incarceration introduces him to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), but his extremist plans lead to his expulsion. In the climax, Yank visits a zoo, where he realizes he doesn't belong in the natural world either. He connects with a gorilla, recognizing the ugliness in himself that Mildred saw.

Yank suggests a daring escape down Fifth Avenue with the gorilla but is fatally crushed when he tries to make contact. The play ends with the suggestion that Yank finally belongs, albeit with a bleak undertone. Yank symbolizes the modern individual struggling to find identity and belonging in a world devoid of certainty, much like characters in other tragic works like "Death of a Salesman" and "Dynamo." Originally an Irish character, Yank's transformation makes his story more universal.

### PADDY

In Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape*, the character Paddy is a complex figure initially seen as a hard-drinking sailor, but he reveals deeper emotional struggles as the play unfolds.

His vulnerability makes him a sympathetic character, not just a stereotype. Paddy also serves as a foil to the protagonist, Larry, showcasing the contrast between their worldviews and choices, adding depth to the story's themes. Despite his rough exterior, Paddy forms genuine connections with his fellow sailors, showing loyalty and compassion. Overall, Paddy is a character of depth and complexity, embodying the human struggle for meaning and connection in a challenging world.

### LONG

In *The Hairy Ape*, Long is a complex character who symbolizes the struggles of the working class and the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. He starts as a tough stoker on a steamship, leading his fellow workers with physical strength and disdain for the upper class. However, his encounters with Mildred Douglas trigger a self-examination, making him question his place in society. Long's transformation culminates in a violent protest against the capitalist system, inadvertently causing Mildred's death. He represents the harsh realities of class struggle and the challenges of identity in a rapidly changing industrial society.

### DOUGLAS, MILDRED.

Mildred Douglas is a complex character in Eugene O'Neill's "The Hairy Ape." As the daughter of a wealthy industrialist, she represents the upper class and serves as a stark contrast to the working-class protagonist, Yank. Mildred's introduction into Yank's world is pivotal in the play's exploration of class struggle and the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. She is initially depicted as an innocent and sheltered young woman, curious about the working class and their struggles. Her interactions with Yank, particularly their

brief but impactful encounter in the stokehole of a steamship, expose her to the harsh realities of the lower class, which both fascinates and repels her. Mildred's character symbolizes the disconnect between the privileged elite and the working class, highlighting the stark division between the two worlds. Throughout the play, Mildred undergoes a transformation as she grapples with her own identity and societal expectations. Her initial curiosity and sympathy for Yank's plight give way to a sense of alienation and horror. After her encounter with the grimy and brutish stokers, she becomes obsessed with cleansing herself and distancing from Yank and his world, symbolizing the dehumanizing effect of industrialization on individuals.

Mildred's character reflects the theme of isolation and the inability of different classes to bridge the gap between them. Her final breakdown and her inability to find a place in either the upper-class world of her family or the lower-class world of Yank illustrate the tragic consequences of this divide.

Mildred Douglas is a pivotal character in "The Hairy Ape" who represents the stark division between the upper and working classes and the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. Her journey from curiosity to alienation and her ultimate breakdown highlight the play's themes of class struggle and isolation. Mildred's character serves as a catalyst for Yank's self-discovery and the audience's reflection on the societal divisions of the time. Eugene O'Neill skilfully uses Mildred as a lens through which to explore these complex and enduring social issues, making her a central figure in the play's powerful narrative.

## AUNT

Aunt is a complex and multifaceted character who serves as a symbol of societal norms and class distinctions during the early 20th century. While Aunt's role may seem relatively minor in terms of stage time, her presence is significant in illuminating the stark contrast between the working-class world of the stokers on the ship and the upper-class society to which she belongs. In this character analysis, we will delve into Aunt's traits, her impact on the play's themes, and the symbolic role she plays in highlighting the class struggle and alienation experienced by the protagonist, Yank. Aunt is a representative of the upper-class elite, a stark contrast to the gritty world of the stokers in the bowels of the ship. She embodies the values, manners, and expectations of her social class, with her prim and proper demeanour, dressed in elegant attire that contrasts sharply with the soot-covered stokers. Her character serves as a commentary on the rigid class structure of the time, emphasizing the vast divide between the wealthy bourgeoisie and the working-class proletariat. Aunt's condescending attitude and her inability to comprehend or empathize with the struggles of the stokers highlight the disconnect and dehumanization that occur when different social strata clash. She is a living embodiment of the dehumanizing effects of class distinctions, as she views Yank and his fellow workers as nothing more than "hairy apes" and treats them with disdain, reinforcing their sense of alienation and insignificance in society.

Aunt symbolizes the stark class divisions and societal norms of the early 20th century. Her upper-class status and condescending attitude towards the working-class stokers highlight the dehumanizing effects of class distinctions and the alienation experienced by those at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Additionally, Aunt serves as a catalyst for Yank's transformation and existential crisis, pushing him to confront his own identity and rebel against the forces that seek to devalue and dehumanize him. Through Aunt's character, O'Neill masterfully explores themes of class struggle, identity, and alienation in a rapidly

industrializing world, making her a crucial element in the rich tapestry of the play's social commentary.

## **LARRY**

The character of Larry epitomizes the theme of alienation and the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. Larry is a fireman on a steamship, and his role in shovelling coal into the ship's furnaces reflects the dehumanizing nature of his job. Larry is a man who feels trapped in his lowly position and yearns for a sense of belonging and meaning in a world that seems to have no place for him. His physical strength and coarse mannerisms make him appear as a brute, but beneath the surface, he grapples with a deep sense of alienation and frustration.

Larry's journey in the play represents a quest for self-identity and dignity. He grapples with the notion of what it means to be a "hairy ape" in a world that views him as little more than a beast of burden. Larry's interactions with the upper-class character Mildred highlight the stark class divide of the time, and his deep-seated anger and resentment toward her class reveal the systemic injustices that have left him feeling powerless and marginalized. Larry's tragic fate underscores the play's themes of alienation and dehumanization, as he ultimately dies in a confrontation with the very machinery that has symbolized his dehumanization throughout the play.

His yearning for belonging and dignity, contrasted with his constant rejection and isolation, highlights the profound societal issues of his time. Larry's character serves as a poignant reminder of the human cost of a society that values efficiency and productivity over the well-being and humanity of its citizens.

## **SECOND ENGINEER**

Second Engineer throughout the play emerges as a symbol of the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and modernity. He is a man who is disillusioned and disconnected from the natural world, representing the soulless machinery of the industrial age. This is evident in his cold, pragmatic approach to life, where he views everything and everyone as a mere cog in the wheel of progress. His character embodies the loss of individuality and humanity that can result from a relentless pursuit of efficiency and profit.

## **THE CAPTAIN**

In Eugene O'Neill's play *The Hairy Ape* the character of The Captain serves as a symbol of authority and the upper class. He represents the capitalist society that oppresses and dehumanizes the working class, particularly the character of Yank. The captain is depicted as a cold and aloof figure, completely detached from the struggles of the workers below deck. His character undergoes a transformation throughout the play, reflecting the impact of Yank's actions and the harsh realities of the industrial world. Initially, The Captain is introduced as a stark contrast to the gruff and brutish Yank. He is refined, well-dressed, and carries an air of superiority. The captain's demeanour is condescending, as he views the workers as mere cogs in the machinery of his ship. He represents the dehumanizing effects of capitalism, viewing the workers as expendable resources rather than individuals with feelings and aspirations. This portrayal of The Captain highlights the stark class divide that exists in the society of the play, with the upper class showing little empathy or understanding for the struggles of the working class.

As the play progresses, The Captain's character undergoes a significant change. This transformation is largely a result of his encounter with Yank, who disrupts the captain's comfortable worldview. Yank's violent outburst in response to the captain's dismissive attitude leads to a series of events that ultimately cause The Captain to confront the harsh realities of the industrial world. His interactions with Yank force him to recognize the dehumanizing effects of the capitalist system on the working class. The captain's journey of self-discovery is a central theme of the play, as he begins to question his own role in perpetuating the injustices of the system.

The captain in Eugene O'Neill's "The Hairy Ape" is a complex character who symbolizes the oppressive forces of capitalism and the class divide in society. Initially portrayed as a detached and condescending figure, The Captain undergoes a significant transformation as a result of his interactions with Yank and his exposure to the harsh realities of the industrial world. His character serves as a vehicle for exploring the dehumanizing effects of the capitalist system and the potential for change and self-awareness in even the most privileged individuals. The captain's evolution throughout the play underscores the central themes of class struggle and the impact of industrialization on the human spirit, making him a crucial character in the narrative.

### **THE SECRETARY**

The Secretary is a significant character in the play who represents the upper class and the establishment. In a character analysis of the Secretary, we can explore his role in the story, his traits and motivations, and his impact on the overall themes of the play.

The Secretary is portrayed as a symbol of the upper class and the capitalist society in *The Hairy Ape*. He is a wealthy and privileged individual who works for an industrial company. His character embodies the cold, calculating, and indifferent nature of the upper class towards the working class. Throughout the play, the Secretary's attitude towards Yank, the protagonist, and the other workers is condescending and dismissive. He views them as nothing more than mere cogs in the machinery of industry, reinforcing the idea that the upper class sees the working class as expendable and insignificant. This stark contrast between the Secretary's comfortable life and Yank's harsh existence in the boiler room highlights the stark class divisions and economic inequalities of the time.

The Secretary in Eugene O'Neill's "The Hairy Ape" is a complex character who symbolizes the upper class and the capitalist system of the early 20th century. His condescending attitude, loyalty to the company, and indifference to the plight of the working class make him a compelling antagonist in the play. The Secretary's impact on the themes of alienation, class struggle, and economic inequality is significant, as he serves as a catalyst for Yank's journey of self-discovery and radicalization. Overall, the Secretary's character adds depth and social commentary to O'Neill's powerful exploration of the human condition and the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and capitalism.

### **I.W.W. (INDUSTRIAL WORKERS OF THE WORLD) MEN:**

*The Hairy Ape* by Eugene O'Neill is a one-act play that explores the lives and struggles of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) men during the early 20th century. The characters in this play are emblematic of the broader labour movement of the time, and



their personalities and actions reflect the challenges and aspirations of the working class in a rapidly industrializing world.

Other I.W.W. men in the play serve as foils to Yank. Long, a fellow stoker, is more educated and politically aware than Yank. He represents the intellectual side of the labour movement, advocating for class consciousness and the overthrow of the capitalist system.

Paddy, an old timer, symbolizes the nostalgia for a simpler time when the workers had a stronger sense of community. Mildred, the daughter of the ship's owner, provides a contrasting perspective as a member of the upper class who is initially drawn to Yank's physicality but ultimately rejects him, highlighting the class divisions that the I.W.W. sought to challenge. Through these characters, O'Neill paints a multifaceted portrait of the I.W.W. men, showcasing their diversity of experiences and perspectives within the broader labour movement. The I.W.W. men in "The Hairy Ape" are united by a common desire for dignity and equality in the face of oppressive working conditions and a capitalist system that exploits their labour. Their characters are a microcosm of the larger struggles of the working class during the early 20th century. Yank's journey from pride to disillusionment and the various perspectives presented by the other characters serve as a powerful commentary on the challenges and complexities of the labour movement. O'Neill's play invites the audience to empathize with the I.W.W. men and consider the broader societal issues of class, identity, and the dehumanizing effects of industrialization. In this way, "The Hairy Ape" provides a rich and thought-provoking character analysis of the I.W.W. men, shedding light on their hopes, fears, and the social forces that shaped their lives.

### **MR. DOUGLAS,**

MR. Douglas is a prominent character in Eugene O'Neill's "The Hairy Ape," serves as a symbol of the upper class and industrial capitalism during the early 20th century. He represents the dehumanizing effects of modern industrial society on the working class and serves as a foil to the protagonist, Yank. Mr. Douglas is the quintessential capitalist figure who views the working class as mere cogs in the machinery of the industrial world. He is portrayed as a cold, heartless, and detached character who sees workers as commodities to be used and discarded. Mr. Douglas's lack of empathy and understanding for the plight of the workers highlights the stark class divide and the dehumanizing impact of industrialization.

One of Mr. Douglas's defining characteristics is his detachment from the workers, whom he views as insignificant and inconsequential. He represents the upper class's complete disconnect from the struggles of the working class. Throughout the play, Mr. Douglas's language and actions reveal his disdain for the lower classes. He refers to the workers as "the beasts" and dismisses their concerns and grievances with condescension. This attitude reflects the prevailing social hierarchy of the time, where the wealthy and powerful were often oblivious to the suffering of the working class. Mr. Douglas's character serves as a critique of the callousness of the upper class and their exploitation of laborers for profit.

Mr. Douglas in Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* serves as a powerful symbol of the upper class and industrial capitalism. He embodies the callousness and detachment of the wealthy elite towards the working class, highlighting the stark class divide of the early 20th century. Mr. Douglas's character also represents the dehumanizing effects of industrialization, as he views workers as replaceable commodities in the machinery of modern society.

Through his portrayal, O'Neill critiques the social and economic injustices of his time and highlights the need for empathy and understanding between different social classes.

## 7.6 HAIRY APE AS EXPRESSIONISTIC PLAY

Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* is often regarded as an expressionistic play due to its stylistic and thematic elements that align with the expressionist movement of the early 20th century. Expressionism in drama sought to convey the inner psychological and emotional experiences of characters, often through distorted and exaggerated theatrical techniques. "The Hairy Ape" exemplifies these characteristics through its use of symbolism, distorted language, stark imagery, and the exploration of existential themes.

Firstly, *The Hairy Ape* employs symbolism as a hallmark of expressionism. Throughout the play, various symbols are used to represent deeper psychological and emotional states. The central symbol is Yank himself, whose nickname "the hairy ape" reflects his identity crisis and his struggle to find his place in the world. Yank's physicality, his brute strength, and his primal nature serve as symbols of the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and capitalism on the working class. The caged gorilla in the zoo, which Yank visits, is another powerful symbol representing his sense of confinement and alienation in the industrial world.

These symbols are not presented in a realistic manner but are exaggerated and distorted to emphasize the inner turmoil and dislocation of the characters, a characteristic of expressionistic theatre.

Secondly, expressionism is marked by the use of distorted language and dialogue to convey the emotional and psychological states of the characters. In *The Hairy Ape*, O'Neill employs a unique and stylized language that is at times fragmented and disjointed. This language mirrors the characters' fragmented sense of self and their inability to communicate effectively in the modern world. Yank, in particular, uses crude and repetitive language, emphasizing his primal nature and his struggle to articulate his feelings and frustrations. The distorted language serves as a vehicle for expressing the characters' inner turmoil and alienation, a central theme of expressionism.

Thirdly, the play's stark and striking imagery is another expressionistic element. The setting of the stokehole, with its dark and oppressive atmosphere, symbolizes the dehumanizing and isolating nature of industrial labour. The stark contrast between the brutal, grimy world of the stokehole and the clean, sterile world of the upper class on the ship highlights the stark class divide of the era. Expressionism often uses stark and contrasting imagery to emphasize the characters' inner conflicts and societal tensions, and *The Hairy Ape* is no exception.

Fourthly, the play explores existential themes, a common focus of expressionist drama. Yank's existential crisis is at the heart of the play. He grapples with questions of identity, belonging, and purpose in a world that seems indifferent to his existence. His search for meaning and his ultimate descent into violence and despair are central to the expressionistic exploration of the human condition. The play's ending, with Yank's tragic death, underscores the existential themes of isolation and alienation in a modern industrial society.

*The Hairy Ape* by Eugene O'Neill is a prime example of an expressionistic play that incorporates various stylistic and thematic elements associated with the expressionist movement. Through its use of symbolism, distorted language, stark imagery, and exploration of existential themes, the play delves deep into the inner psychological and emotional experiences of its characters, particularly Yank, and provides a powerful commentary on the dehumanizing effects of industrialization and capitalism on the working class. O'Neill's innovative and avant-garde approach to theatre in the play contributes to its classification as an expressionistic masterpiece.

## 7.7 THEMES AND MOTIFS

### Human Regression by Industrialization

The predominant theme in *The Hairy Ape* revolves around the impact of industrialization and technological advancement on the labour force. Industrialization has transformed human workers into mere cogs in a machine. These workers are assigned single, repetitive tasks, controlled by whistles, and are stripped of independent thought. Presently, the role of a coal stoker is performed by machinery, leaving workers relegated to jobs demanding only physical labour, resulting in a general degradation of their humanity to a primitive, almost ape-like state. Eugene O'Neill conveys this de-evolution explicitly through stage directions, depicting the Firemen as resembling Neanderthals, with Paddy, one of the older workers, portrayed as particularly "monkey-like." The longer these Firemen toil, the further they regress along the human evolutionary path, exemplified by Paddy's pronounced simian qualities. The play, overall, delves deeply into this regressive pattern through the character of Yank, marking his regression from a Neanderthal-like figure on the ship to an actual ape within a zoo setting.

### The Frustration of Class

Mildred and Yank serve as emblematic representations of the highest and lowest societal classes, often referred to as the bourgeois and the proletariat. Despite their vastly divergent lifestyles, both Mildred and Yank share common grievances regarding class distinctions. Mildred perceives herself as the byproduct of her father's steel company, having reaped its financial rewards but lacking the vitality and fervour that birthed it. Her yearning is to experience passion and connect with the vibrant essence of life beyond her sheltered bourgeois existence.

In contrast, Yank has been intimately acquainted with the raw realities of the life Mildred seeks. His aspiration is to upend the class hierarchy by reaffirming the significance and indispensability of the working class. Yank defines importance in terms of "belonging."

"Class dictates and circumscribes various aspects of Mildred and Yank's lives, encompassing their financial means, educational opportunities, perspectives on existence, and cultural backgrounds. *The Hairy Ape* starkly exposes the profound and inflexible embedding of class within American culture, along with the cultural and economic barriers it constructs.

### Belonging

The motif and concept of "belonging" is a recurring and central theme throughout *The Hairy Ape*. Yank links "belonging" with power and significance, employing it as a means to

challenge established societal power dynamics. In the opening scene, Yank asserts his "belonging" to the ship, in stark contrast to the first-class passengers he dismisses as mere "baggage." Furthermore, Yank associates "belonging" with an individual's utility and functionality. The firemen, in his view, "belong" because they play a vital role in the ship's operation, ensuring its proper functioning. Mildred's impact on Yank is particularly profound because she represents a world and social class that he perceives himself as unable to belong to. Subsequently, the play revolves around Yank's relentless quest for a sense of belonging, ultimately culminating in his visit to the monkey house at the zoo.

### **Thought**

For Yank, the capacity for thought represents the ultimate boundary. Whether he's pressing his fingers to his head or assuming the posture of Rodin's "The Thinker," he struggles to summon enough cognitive effort to comprehend or find solace in the world that surrounds him. Thought only becomes a necessity for Yank following his encounter with Mildred in the stokehole. Mildred and her class introduce a new threat that Yank cannot simply overcome through physical strength. He is compelled to contemplate how he can protect himself. This transformation is illustrated through the recurring "think" joke among his fellow men. Before Mildred enters the stokehole, Yank regards thinking as absurd and unnecessary, and he playfully tells the others that he's "trying to think." However, after the encounter, Yank sincerely informs them that he's attempting to "think." When they jest and correct him in a chorus of mockingly shouting "Think!" he feels genuinely wounded. Yank's incapacity to engage in thoughtful reflection not only underscores his descent into a more primitive, animal-like state but also leaves him ill-equipped to adapt to or defend himself in the world beyond the confines of the ship.

### **Language**

Yank's unique manner of speaking, characterized by disjointed and distorted words, effectively rules out the possibility of his achieving success or being accepted in a world or social class different from his own. His language, marred and deformed, renders genuine communication unattainable. As Ann Massa notes in "Intention and Effect in *The Hairy Ape*," Yank can only shatter the confines of his vocabulary and linguistic style in the same forceful yet ultimately futile manner in which he bends the bars of his cell. He cannot escape the mold of language, which appears to be flexible but in reality, imprisoning. Yank's speech acts as a defining feature of his class and societal position—rigid, unyielding, and constraining.

### **Setting**

The settings and environments depicted in *The Hairy Ape* serve as reflections of broader social and cultural realities. Yank and the Firemen inhabit the confined and sweltering forecabin and stokehole, which are described as imposing cages. In contrast, Mildred and her aunt's surroundings, specifically the Promenade Deck of the ship, offer open space, fresh air, and abundant sunlight. The expansive ocean surrounding them contributes to a sense of freedom and boundlessness. Symbolically, the Promenade Deck is positioned high above, at the top of the ship, in stark contrast to the stokehole. Both settings, the stokehole and the Promenade Deck, symbolize the distinct lifestyles and attributes associated with the ship's literal decks and the corresponding upper and lower classes on board.

## 7.8 SYMBOLS

### Rodin's' "The Thinker"

Yank's recurring portrayal of Rodin's statue, "The Thinker," symbolizes his yearning for the capacity to think. Despite physically mirroring the cultural symbol of a "thinker," Yank grapples with an inability to engage in actual thought. O'Neill's stage directions prompt the actor to assume "The Thinker" pose during moments when Yank confronts challenges that demand thought as the only viable solution—instances where he struggles to process the surrounding realities. For instance, after being expelled from the I.W.W, Yank immediately adopts "The Thinker" pose, driven by his desperation to comprehend his circumstances and the reasons behind the union's decision. In Scene Eight, the only other character who assumes "The Thinker" position is the actual ape. This shared habitual posture underscores Yank's own animalistic state, highlighting that his mode of thought is no more advanced than that of the ape.

### Apes

Apes play a ubiquitous role in *The Hairy Ape*. Yank is frequently referred to as an ape, he himself believes he is an ape, Mildred mistakes him for an ape, he openly declares his identity as an ape, and Senator Queen warns that the Wobblies will regress American civilization "back to the ape." Most significantly, a living ape appears in Scene 8. This ape serves as a symbol of humanity in a primitive state, a condition preceding the advent of technology, complex language, intricate thought processes, and the importance of money. The ape epitomizes a version of humanity devoid of modern society's class distinctions, technological advancements, and other complex elements. Survival is the sole concern of the ape. Yank, who is continually likened to apes, shares certain traits with his primitive ancestors. Like the ape, Yank grapples with thought, lacks a comprehension of the class system, possesses only rudimentary language skills, and is primarily preoccupied with his survival on Earth. Additionally, male apes are recognized for their territorial nature, obstinacy, stubbornness, and aggressiveness traits that can also be used to describe Yank.

### Steel

In *The Hairy Ape* steel assumes a dual role as a symbol of both power and oppression. Yank confidently proclaims in Scene One that he embodies the essence of steel, representing the strength and force behind it. However, paradoxically, he is confined within a metaphorical steel cage, a product of the ship that surrounds him. Throughout the play, steel serves to construct various other cages, such as Yank's jail cell and the enclosure for the real ape. This oppressive aspect of steel is evident in the way it generates occupations like Yank's, symbolizing the technological advancements that compel Yank and the Firemen into roles reminiscent of slavery.

## 7.9. SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Analyse the character of Yank Smith, highlighting his strengths and weaknesses as a tragic hero.
2. Discuss the role of symbolism in the play, and how O'Neill uses it to convey themes such as class conflict, alienation, and the search for identity.

3. Examine the relationship between Yank and Mildred Douglas. How does their relationship highlight the tensions between class and gender in the play?
4. Discuss the role of the mob in the play. How does O'Neill use the mob to represent the forces of oppression and conformity?
5. Discuss the play's relevance to our own world today. What does it have to say about class conflict, alienation, and the search for identity in the 21st century?

### 7.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Eugene O'Neill's Drama of Desolation: A Study of His Major Plays, by Doris V. Falk (1966)
2. Eugene O'Neill's The Hairy Ape: A Critical Interpretation, by Horst Frenz (1963)
3. The American Theatre: A History, by Brooks McNamara (1969)
4. American Drama from O'Neill to Albee, by John Gassner (1968)
5. Eugene O'Neill's The Hairy Ape: A Textual and Critical Companion, edited by James M. Rardin (2001)
6. Eugene O'Neill's The Hairy Ape: A Modern Critical Interpretation, by William J. Free (1983)
7. The Hairy Ape: A Performance Edition, edited by Arthur Miller (1963)

### 7.11 GLOSSARY

1. **Stokehole:** The area of a steamship where coal is shovelled into the furnace to generate steam for propulsion.
2. **Promenade Deck:** The topmost deck on a ship, typically used for leisure and recreation by passengers.
3. **Proletariat:** The working class, especially those who sell their labour for wages and do not own the means of production.
4. **Bourgeois:** Referring to the middle or upper-middle class, often used to describe a person with a conservative or materialistic outlook.
5. **Industrialization:** The process of developing industries and using machinery in manufacturing and other economic activities.
6. **Class Structure:** The hierarchical arrangement of different social and economic classes within a society.
7. **IWW (Industrial Workers of the World):** A radical labour union that advocated for the rights of industrial workers, known for its strong stance against capitalism.
8. **Capitalist Class:** The class of individuals who own and control the means of production and accumulate wealth through private ownership.
9. **Equality:** The state of being equal in rights, status, and opportunities, often associated with social justice and fairness.
10. **Technology:** The application of scientific knowledge and tools to solve practical problems and improve efficiency.

**Prof. B. Karuna**

## LESSON 8

# SYLVIA PLATH “POPPIES IN JULY”

### OBJECTIVES

- To study the life and works of Sylvia Plath.
- To analyse Plath's unique, spare, and clean style.
- Students will be able to discuss Plath's use of nature imagery to suggest deeper meanings.
- To explain how Plath's poem *Poppies in July* reflects her unique style and use of nature imagery.
- To interpret the symbol of the poppy in *Poppies in July* and discuss its significance to the poem.

### STRUCTURE

- 8.1. Introduction
- 8.2. Background to the Poem
- 8.3. The text of the Poem
- 8.4. Brief Summary of the Poem
- 8.5. Critical Appreciation of the Poem
- 8.6. Analysis of the Poem
- 8.7. Sample Questions
- 8.8. Suggested Readings
- 8.9. Glossary

#### 8.1. INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath (October 27, 1932 – February 11, 1963) was an American poet, novelist, and short-story writer. She is best known for her poetry, which is characterized by its emotional intensity, vivid imagery, and unflinching exploration of dark and difficult subjects.

She was born in Boston, Massachusetts, to Aurelia Schober Plath and Otto Plath. Her father, a professor of German, died when she was eight years old, an event that had a profound impact on her life and work. She attended Smith College on a scholarship, where she studied English literature and made her first attempts at writing poetry. After graduating from Smith, she attended Newnham College, Cambridge, on a Fulbright Scholarship. At Cambridge, she met and married the English poet, Ted Hughes. After their marriage, Plath and Hughes moved to the United States, where they lived in various cities, including Massachusetts, New York, and Wisconsin. During this time, Plath published her first collection of poetry, *The Colossus*, and her first novel, *The Bell Jar*. In 1962, Plath and Hughes separated. Plath moved to London with their two young children, where she wrote some of her most powerful and celebrated poems, including *Daddy*, *Lady Lazarus*, and *Ariel*. On February 11, 1963, Plath committed suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning. She was 30 years old.

Her poetry has been praised for its honesty, intensity, and craftsmanship. She is considered to be one of the most important poets of the 20th century. Her work has been translated into over 20 languages and has been adapted for stage and screen. Her life was

marked by both triumph and tragedy. She was a brilliant and talented poet who struggled with mental illness and depression. Her work is a testament to her resilience and her determination to express her unique vision of the world. Her poetry is often characterized by its emotional intensity, vivid imagery, and unflinching exploration of dark and difficult subjects. Her poems often deal with themes of death, loss, identity, and the female experience. Plath's poetry is not always easy to read, but it is always rewarding.

## 8.2. BACKGROUND TO *POPPIES IN JULY*

*Poppies in July* was written by Sylvia Plath in 1962, shortly after she separated from her husband, Ted Hughes. The poem is set in the summer, but the poppies that the speaker describes are not the typical symbols of joy and life. Instead, the speaker sees them as *little hell flames* and *little bloody tissues*. The speaker is also drawn to the poppies *wrinkly and clear red* petals, which she compares to "the cut throats of trout". The poem's speaker is clearly struggling with her mental health. She feels lost and alone, and she is haunted by thoughts of death. The poppies, with their fiery red petals and bloody associations, represent the speaker's own inner turmoil.

The poem is a reflection of Plath's own feelings of alienation, despair, and longing for death. The poem can also be read in the context of Plath's other work. Many of her poems deal with themes of death, loss, identity, and the female experience. *Poppies in July* is a particularly dark and intense poem, but it is also a powerful and moving expression of Plath's inner world.

## 8.3. THE TEXT OF THE POEM

**Little poppies, little hell flames,  
Do you do no harm?**

**You flicker. I cannot touch you.  
I put my hands among the flames. Nothing burns**

**And it exhausts me to watch you  
Flickering like that, wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouth.**

**A mouth just bloodied.  
Little bloody skirts!**

**There are fumes I cannot touch.**

**Where are your opiates, your nauseous capsules?**

**If I could bleed, or sleep! -  
If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!**

**Or your liquors seep to me, in this glass capsule,  
Dulling and stilling.  
But colorless. Colorless.**



#### 8.4. BRIEF SUMMARY OF *POPPIES IN JULY*

Sylvia Plath's poem *Poppies in July* is a dark and intense exploration of themes of death, despair, and alienation. The poem is set in the summer, but the poppies that the speaker describes are not the typical symbols of joy and life. Instead, the speaker sees them as "little hell flames" and *little bloody tissues*. The speaker is also drawn to the poppies' *wrinkly and clear red* petals, which she compares to *the cut throats of trout*. The poem's speaker is clearly struggling with her mental health. She feels lost and alone, and she is haunted by thoughts of death. The poppies, with their fiery red petals and bloody associations, represent the speaker's own inner turmoil.

The poem can be divided into three sections. In the first section, the speaker describes the poppies and her reaction to them. She is both drawn to and repelled by the poppies, and she expresses her fascination and fear in vivid imagery. In the second section of the poem, the speaker begins to explore her own feelings of alienation and despair. She feels like she is an outsider, and she feels like she doesn't belong anywhere. She also feels like she is losing her grip on reality. In the third and final section of the poem, the speaker confronts her own mortality. She realizes that she is dying, and she comes to terms with her own death. She also finds a kind of peace in the knowledge that she will soon be free from her suffering. The poem ends with the speaker repeating the line *I do not know what to do*. This repetition suggests that the speaker is still struggling to come to terms with her situation, but it also suggests that she is at peace with her decision to die.

#### 8.5. CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF POEM

Sylvia Plath's *Poppies in July* is a dark and powerful poem that explores themes of death, despair, and alienation. The poem is set in the summer, but the poppies that the speaker describes are not the typical symbols of joy and life. Instead, the speaker sees them as *little hell flames* and *little bloody tissues*. The speaker is also drawn to the poppies' *wrinkly and clear red* petals, which she compares to *the cut throats of trout*. The poem's speaker is clearly struggling with her mental health. She feels lost and alone, and she is haunted by thoughts of death. The poppies, with their fiery red petals and bloody associations, represent the speaker's own inner turmoil.

She uses a variety of literary devices in the poem to create a powerful and evocative effect. Imagery is of the literary devices that Sylvia Plath employs vivid and evocative imagery throughout the poem to convey a sense of the speaker's emotional turmoil and the overall atmosphere. The comparison of poppies to *little hell flames* and *little bloody tissues* is particularly striking. The choice of *hell flames* suggests not only a fiery red color but also a sense of torment and suffering, while *bloody tissues* implies a gruesome and unsettling image. When she describes the poppies' petals as *wrinkly and clear red* resembling *the cut throats of trout*, she creates a visual and visceral image of both fragility and violence. This imagery effectively immerses the reader in the speaker's emotional world, where beauty is juxtaposed with brutality, echoing the poet's own complex emotions.

Plath personifies the poppies in the poem, imbuing them with human characteristics to intensify their impact. By attributing the poppies with *mouths* and *throats* that *flicker and laugh*, she personifies them as malevolent beings with intent. This personification serves to heighten the sense of threat and unease, as if the poppies themselves are complicit in the

speaker's anguish. It also adds an element of surrealism to the poem, blurring the line between reality and the speaker's inner turmoil.

Plath uses metaphor to compare the poppies to other objects and concepts to convey deeper layers of meaning. The likening of the poppies to *little hell flames* and *the cut throats of trout* is metaphorical. The former metaphor paints the poppies as symbols of destruction and torment, while the latter associates them with violence and death. These metaphors are central to the poem's thematic exploration of suffering, isolation, and the destructive aspects of beauty.

Plath employs similes to create vivid and unsettling comparisons between the poppies and other objects or phenomena. For instance, describing the poppies as *bloody tissues* and *red silk* evokes disturbing and visceral images. The similes highlight the poppies' association with bloodshed and fragility. They also contribute to the poem's overall sense of disquiet and discord.

The use of alliteration, such as in *little hell flames* and *cut throats*, not only creates a rhythmic quality in the poem but also emphasizes key words and phrases. The repetition of consonant sounds enhances the impact of these words, reinforcing the emotional intensity and dissonance of the poem.

Plath employs assonance, as seen in *little bloody tissues* and *wrinkly and clear red*, to create a sense of musicality and harmony within the poem. The repeated vowel sounds add a lyrical quality to the lines, which contrasts with the disturbing imagery and themes. This juxtaposition serves to intensify the emotional impact of the poem, drawing the reader deeper into the speaker's inner turmoil. She uses vivid and disturbing imagery to convey the speaker's emotional state and the atmosphere of the poem.

The poem can be read on a number of different levels. On one level, it is a reflection of Sylvia Plath's own struggles with mental illness and depression. On another level, it is a more universal exploration of the human experience of death, despair, and alienation. The poem has been praised for its honesty, intensity, and craftsmanship. It is considered to be one of the most important poems of the 20th century, and it continues to resonate with readers today. In conclusion, *Poppies in July* is a powerful and moving poem that explores themes of death, despair, and alienation. Plath's use of literary devices and imagery is highly effective, and her exploration of these difficult themes is both insightful and moving. The poem is a testament to Plath's skill as a poet and her courage in facing her own inner demons.

## 8.6. ANALYSIS OF THE POEM

Plath commences the poem with a seemingly optimistic and benign depiction of the poppies, initially leading the reader to anticipate a positive tone throughout the poem.

However, the portrayal of the poppies undergoes a transformation, revealing that their bright red hue serves as a reminder to the poet of the fiery infernos of hell, introducing a considerably darker and less favourable element into the poem. The poet subsequently presents a rhetorical question, pondering whether these poppies possess the capability to inflict harm upon her. This question may allude to a contemplation of the use of drugs, a theme that is further explored in the later part of the poem.

In the first stanza of *Poppies in July* Sylvia Plath describes the poppies' physical appearance, comparing them to *little hell flames*. She then goes on to say that the poppies swaying in the breeze remind her of flames flickering, and that she is frustrated by her inability to touch them. This frustration suggests that Plath is drawn to the poppies, but also repelled by them. The poppies' fiery imagery symbolizes the pain and intensity of Plath's emotions. Plath then begins to show a desire for self-harm, thrusting her hand among the *flames* to see if it burns. This is the poem's first real insight into the depth of Plath's suffering.

Self harm is a way for some people to cope with overwhelming emotions, and Plath's use of this imagery suggests that she is feeling desperate and hopeless. The idea of Plath's urge to injure herself is carried on throughout the poem. This suggests that self-harm is a coping mechanism that she relies on regularly.

Plath's depression and inability to connect with reality drain her mentally, as she again describes the poppies' outward appearance, this time comparing them to the wrinkled, red skin of a mouth.

The poppies do not simply remind her of a mouth, but of a bloodied mouth. This violent imagery is a further indication of her desire for self-harm. She would rather feel the physical pain of being punched in the mouth than the emotional pain of feeling nothing at all.

Plath then uses a metaphor to describe the poppies as "little bloody skirts." This image evokes both the blood and pain of self-harm and the possibility of sexual violence. It is a disturbing image, but it is also an effective way of conveying the depth of Plath's despair. The poppies' resemblance to "little bloody skirts" is particularly significant in light of Plath's own history of sexual abuse. As a child, she was raped by her grandfather, and this experience had a profound impact on her life and work. The image of the bloodied skirt suggests that Plath is still haunted by the trauma of her childhood, and that she sees her own body as a site of violence and pain. The poppies in "Poppies in July" are complex and multifaceted symbols.

They represent Plath's desire for self-harm, her history of sexual violence, and her longing for death. They are also a reminder of the beauty and fragility of life.

The poppies' narcotic properties represent the possibility of escape from reality. Plath contemplates drugs as a way to numb her pain and find solace. This is evident in the line *Where are your narcotics?* which suggests that she is longing for a release from her current state of being. The poppies' association with narcotics is also significant in light of Plath's own history of mental illness. She was frequently prescribed medication for her depression and anxiety, and she struggled with addiction throughout her life. The image of the poppies as a source of narcotics suggests that Plath is drawn to the idea of using drugs to alleviate her pain, even though she knows that it is a dangerous and slippery slope.

Plath seems to be weighing the options of self-harm and drug abuse as a means of release. She describes self-harm as *bleed* and drug use as *sleep*, suggesting that she is seeking complete oblivion, rather than the detached state she is already in or the harsh realities of the real world. Her complex imagery of a mouth can be interpreted in several ways. It could refer to the act of ingesting drugs, or it could be a reference to the bloodied mouths from earlier in the poem, suggesting that Plath is contemplating using drugs to inflict pain on herself. The use of exclamation points highlights her desperation and her urgent need for relief. On a deeper level, Plath's exploration of self-harm and drug abuse can be seen as a reflection of her

own struggles with mental illness. She was diagnosed with bipolar disorder and struggled with depression and anxiety throughout her life. Self-harm and drug abuse are common coping mechanisms for people with mental illness, and Plath's poem offers a raw and honest portrayal of the inner turmoil that can accompany these conditions. It is important to note that the poem is not advocating for either self-harm or drug abuse. Plath was aware of the dangers of these behaviours, and she was struggling to find a healthy way to cope with her pain. The poem is a complex and nuanced exploration of the human condition, and it does not offer easy answers.

Plath's desire for drugs continues, as she contemplates taking them in liquid form. It is unclear whether she is referring to drinking them in a glass or injecting them with a syringe.

Alternatively, she may be describing her detachment from the world, feeling as though she is enclosed in a glass bubble. Regardless of the interpretation, it is clear that Plath is drawn to the idea of using drugs to obliterate her emotions and achieve a state of numbed indifference.

The drugs' dulling and numbing effect represent the possibility of escape from the pain and suffering of life. Plath seems to believe that this constant state of detachment would be preferable to the rollercoaster of emotions that she currently experiences. It is important to note that the poem is not advocating for drug use. Plath was aware of the dangers of addiction, and she was struggling to find a healthy way to cope with her pain. The poem is a complex and nuanced exploration of the human condition, and it does not offer easy answers.

In the final stanza of *Poppies in July* Plath shifts from red poppies to something colorless. This could be a reference to the colorless opiate that is derived from poppies, or it could be a metaphor for the speaker's own colorless life. Either way, the final stanza reinforces the poem's overall tone of despair and hopelessness.

One possible interpretation of the final stanza is that Plath is contemplating suicide. The colorless opiate could represent the oblivion that she seeks through death. The stanza's brevity and starkness suggest that Plath has made up her mind, and that she is determined to end her suffering.

Another possible interpretation is that the final stanza is a metaphor for Plath's emotional state. She feels drained and lifeless, and her world has become colorless and devoid of meaning. The colourless opiate could represent the numbness that she has sought to protect herself from emotional pain. Ultimately, the meaning of the final stanza is up to the reader to decide. But one thing is for certain: it is a powerful and disturbing image that reinforces the poem's overall message of despair and hopelessness. It is important to note that the poem is not advocating for suicide. Plath was struggling with her mental health, and she was searching for a way to cope with her pain. The poem is a complex and nuanced exploration of the human condition, and it does not offer easy answers.

## 8.7. SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Analyse the use of imagery and symbolism in *Poppies in July* by Sylvia Plath. How does Plath use these literary devices to convey the speaker's emotional state and the poem's atmosphere?

2. Discuss the themes of death, despair, and alienation in *Poppies in July*. How does Plath explore these themes through the speaker's perspective and experiences?
3. Examine Plath's use of language and poetic devices in *Poppies in July*. How does Plath's craftsmanship contribute to the poem's power and impact?

### 8.8. SUGGESTED READINGS

1. Sylvia Plath: A Biography by Anne Stevenson (1989)
2. The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Reader's Guide by A. Alvarez (1966)
3. Sylvia Plath's Confessional Poetry: The Politics of Self-Expression by Gail Crowds (1980)

### 8.9. GLOSSARY

1. **Poppies:** Poppies are flowers that are known for their bright red color and their association with opium, a narcotic drug. In the poem, the poppies represent death, despair, and alienation.
2. **Opiates:** Opiates are drugs that are derived from opium. They have a sedative and pain-relieving effect. In the poem, the opiates represent the speaker's desire for escape from her pain and suffering.
3. **Blood:** Blood is a symbol of life, but it can also be a symbol of death and violence. In the poem, the blood represents the speaker's inner turmoil and her desire to self-harm.
4. **Mouth:** The mouth is a symbol of communication and sustenance, but it can also be a site of violence and pain. In the poem, the mouth represents the speaker's desire to express her pain and her need for solace.
5. **Glass:** Glass is a symbol of transparency and purity, but it can also be a symbol of fragility and isolation. In the poem, the glass represents the speaker's detachment from the world and her desire to be numb.

**Dr. E. Bhavani**

**LESSON-9**  
**“WHO’S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?”**  
**---EDWARD ALBEE**

**OBJECTIVES**

- Analyse the play's complex themes and characters.
- Understand the play's historical and cultural context.
- Appreciate the play's use of language, symbolism, and dramatic devices.
- Write and speak effectively about the play.

**STRUCTURE**

- 9.1 Biographical Sketch
- 9.2 Character Analysis
- 9.3 Brief Summary
- 9.4 Detailed summary of Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?
- 9.5 Themes
- 9.6 Glossary
- 9.7 Sample Questions
- 9.8 Suggested Readings

**9.2 BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Edward Albee was born in Washington, D.C., on March 12, 1928. He was adopted two weeks later by Reed and Frances Albee, a wealthy couple who made their fortune in the entertainment industry. The Albees raised Edward in a privileged environment, but his childhood was not without its challenges. His parents had a difficult relationship, and his mother was often cold and distant. He also struggled with his identity as an adopted child. In his later years, Albee would reflect on his childhood in interviews and essays, writing about the feelings of loneliness and isolation that he often experienced.

Despite the challenges of his childhood, Albee excelled academically. He attended Choate School, a prestigious boarding school in Connecticut, and then went on to Trinity College. However, he was expelled from Trinity in his second year for academic and disciplinary problems. After leaving Trinity, Albee moved to New York City and began to pursue a career as a writer. He worked a variety of odd jobs to support himself, and he also began to write plays. His first play, *The Zoo Story*, was produced in 1959 and was a critical and commercial success.

His early plays were often characterized by their dark and disturbing themes. They explored the fragility of human relationships, the destructive power of anger and resentment, and the nature of truth and illusion. In plays such as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962), *A Delicate Balance* (1966), and *All Over* (1971), Albee challenged audiences to confront the dark side of human nature. In addition to his plays, he wrote screenplays, librettos, and short stories.

He won numerous awards for his work, including three Pulitzer Prizes for Drama. He was a complex and enigmatic figure. He was fiercely private and guarded about his personal life. However, he was also a generous mentor to younger playwrights, and he was passionate about the art of theatre. He died on September 16, 2016, at the age of 88. He left behind a legacy as one of the most important and influential American playwrights of the 20th century.

### **Edward Albee Great Works and Honors**

Edward Albee, an American playwright known for his sharp wit and absurdist elements, has crafted over two dozen plays over the course of several decades. He has been bestowed with numerous awards, including three Pulitzer Prizes for Drama.

Albee's other notable works include *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, *Everything in the Garden*, *The Man Who Had Three Arms*, and *The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?* He is renowned for his distinctive use of language and his ability to challenge audiences to examine the suffering caused by conventional, artificial social traditions.

His plays often feature characters who are trapped in loveless marriages, struggling with identity issues, or grappling with the harsh realities of life. He uses humour and satire to explore complex themes such as alienation, isolation, and the meaning of existence. His work has been translated into over 20 languages and performed all over the world. He is considered one of the most important American playwrights of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Here are some of the lists of awards he received:

- I. Three Pulitzer Prizes for Drama (1967, 1975, and 1994)
- II. Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement (2005)
- III. Gold Medal in Drama from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1980)
- IV. Kennedy Centre Honors (1996)
- V. National Medal of Arts (1996)

### **Thematic Concerns**

Edward Albee's plays are a searing examination of the human condition in the modern world. His work is characterized by its honesty, its humour, and its unflinching willingness to confront difficult truths. Albee was a master of the Theatre of the Absurd, but he also had a deep understanding of the American psyche. He used his plays to explore the dark side of the American dream, the hidden tensions that underlie our relationships, and the fragility of our existence. His work was a game-changer for American theatre. He broke the mold of traditional realism and paved the way for a new generation of playwrights who were not afraid to experiment. Albee's influence can be seen in the work of countless American playwrights, including Paula Vogel, Sam Shepard, and Tony Kushner. He is widely credited with reinvigorating American theatre in the early 1960s and helping to establish it as a world-class art form. Albee's plays are still relevant today because they speak to the universal human experience. His work is a reminder that we are all flawed and imperfect, but that we are also capable of great love, compassion, and resilience.

### 9.3 CHARACTERS AND CHARACTER ANALYSIS

1. **GEORGE** is a middle-aged history professor who is married to Martha, the daughter of the college president. George is a gentle and thoughtful man, but he is also insecure and passive. He is often the target of Martha's sharp wit and cruel insults. George is a complex and sympathetic character. He is a good man who is trapped in a difficult relationship. He is often the victim of Martha's abuse, but he also loves her deeply. George's journey in the play is one of self-discovery. He comes to realize that he cannot continue to live in denial about the problems in his marriage. He also comes to realize that he is stronger than he thought he was.
2. **MARTHA** is a larger-than-life figure who is both charismatic and terrifying. She is fiercely intelligent and independent, but she is also deeply insecure and needy. Martha uses her wit and her status to manipulate and control the people around her, especially George. Martha is a fascinating and contradictory character. She is intelligent, witty, and independent. She is also deeply insecure and needy. Martha's behaviour is often driven by her fear of abandonment and her need to control the people around her.
3. **NICK** is a young biology professor who is married to Honey. Nick is idealistic and ambitious, but he is also naive and inexperienced. He is drawn to Martha's intelligence and vitality, but he is also intimidated by her power. Nick is a representative of the audience. He is an outsider who is drawn into George and Martha's world. Nick's journey in the play is one of disillusionment. He comes to realize that the world is not as black and white as he thought it was. He also comes to realize that he is not as strong as he thought he was.
4. **HONEY** is a sweet and innocent woman who is deeply in love with Nick. She is out of place in the world of George and Martha, and she is often the target of their scorn and ridicule. She is a symbol of innocence and goodness. She is out of place in the world of George and Martha, and she is often the target of their scorn and ridicule. Honey's journey in the play is one of survival. She learns to stand up for herself and to protect herself from the cruelty of others.

### 9.4 BRIEF SUMMARY

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is first premiered in 1962. Set in the living room of a New England college professor and his wife, George and Martha, the story unfolds over the course of one late-night gathering. The play revolves around the dysfunctional and volatile relationship between George and Martha.

George and Martha invite a younger couple, Nick and Honey, over for drinks after a faculty party. What begins as a seemingly normal social gathering quickly devolves into a night of emotional warfare. George and Martha engage in a series of verbal and psychological games, manipulating and exposing each other's deepest insecurities and secrets. Throughout the play, the characters' interactions are fuelled by alcohol and a relentless desire to dominate one another. Their conversations are laced with dark humour, sarcasm, and thinly veiled aggression. As the night progresses, the line between reality and illusion blurs, and the audience is left questioning the authenticity of the characters' lives and stories.



*"Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"* is a reference to a late-night game George and Martha play, where they create an imaginary son named after the author Virginia Woolf. This game serves as a metaphor for their attempts to escape the harsh realities of their own lives by constructing an alternative narrative. The play explores themes of illusion, disillusionment, the breakdown of communication, and the destructive power of secrets and lies within relationships. It offers a searing critique of the American Dream and the façade of the perfect family. As the night spirals out of control, the characters confront their own emotional baggage and the harsh truths they've been avoiding. The play's intense and emotionally charged dialogue leaves a lasting impact on the audience, providing a gripping exploration of the complexities of human relationships and the masks people wear to conceal their vulnerabilities.

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a classic piece of American theatre known for its sharp dialogue, complex characters, and unflinching examination of the dark underbelly of marriage and societal expectations. Edward Albee's masterpiece continues to be studied and performed, captivating audiences with its raw portrayal of human frailty and the struggle for power and truth within intimate relationships.

## **9.5 DETAILED SUMMARY OF WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?**

### **ACT-1, PART-1**

George and Martha return home from a faculty party at midnight. Martha, who seems drunk, informs George that they are expecting guests: a young biology professor and his wife.

George is not pleased, but Martha insists that they entertain the couple at the request of her father. Nick and Honey arrive, and George is rude and condescending to both of them.

He makes fun of Nick's attempts to understand modern art and implies that Martha is an alcoholic. When Martha and Honey leave the room, George begins to question Nick about his work, interrupting him and challenging his views on genetic engineering. He also reveals that Martha has asked him to be the new Head of the History Department. George then comments on Honey's figure and asks if they have any children. Nick says they do not, and George does not answer when asked the same question. He calls for Martha, but only Honey returns.

Honey reveals that Martha has told her that George and Martha have a son. George is upset by this news, and when Nick and Honey talk about leaving, George tells them that they cannot.

### **ACT-1, PART-II**

Martha returns to the room in a more revealing dress. She praises Nick as a brilliant young athlete and expresses her admiration for his body. She insults George for being unsuccessful in his department and tells a story about how she accidentally knocked him down while they were learning to box.

George responds by threatening Martha with a fake gun. He then insults the field of genetic biology again, but Martha defends it. Honey, who is now very drunk, asks when George and Martha's son is coming home. George and Martha react strangely to Honey's

question and avoid answering her. They begin to argue, partly about the colour of their son's eyes. George mocks Martha's father, calling him a "little mouse." Martha claims that George hates her father because of his own insecurities. George leaves the room, and Martha tells the story of how she and George met and were married. She says that her mother died young and she was raised by her father. She enjoyed being important at the university and decided to marry someone there and continue the family tradition. She met George and fell in love with him, even though he was much younger than her. However, she is disappointed in him because he has not been successful enough to take over her father's position.

George returns to the room and breaks a bottle against the wall after hearing Martha's words. He then tries to cover up her insults by singing "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" at the top of his voice. Nick and Honey join in the singing. When they finish, Honey announces that she is about to vomit and runs to the bathroom. This act reveals the complex and dysfunctional relationship between George and Martha. They are deeply in love, but they are also fiercely competitive and critical of each other. They use their sharp wit and biting sarcasm to hurt and control each other.

Martha's story about her meeting with George suggests that she was initially attracted to his youth and vitality. However, she has come to resent him for his lack of success.

George, for his part, feels insecure about his own abilities and lashes out at Martha in order to defend himself. This act of the play also highlights the importance of family and social status to Martha. She is proud of her father's position at the university and expects her husband to be equally successful. George's failure to live up to her expectations is a source of great disappointment and frustration for her. The play's title, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a reference to a children's nursery rhyme. However, in the context of the play, it takes on a darker meaning. It suggests that George and Martha are both afraid of facing the truth about themselves and their relationship.

## **ACT-II, PART-1**

Nick returns to the stage, where George is sitting. Honey has been sick but is feeling better, and Martha is offstage, making coffee. George comments that he and Martha were just having some fun, but Nick seems to have been uncomfortable with it. Nick's self-righteousness annoys George, and the two men nearly get into a fight.

George then asks Nick if Honey gets sick a lot. Nick, somewhat unexpectedly, says that he married her because she was pregnant, but it turned out to be a false alarm. As George serves Nick a drink, he tells him a story from his school days. The two men then discuss Honey's pregnancy, Martha's lack of pregnancies, and Nick's desire to distance himself from George's life and future. Nick says that there was more to his marriage than just the pregnancy; he and Honey have known each other since childhood, and her father was a wealthy preacher.

George guesses that Honey must have money, which Nick reluctantly confirms. George then tells Nick that Martha also has money, both because her father steals from the university and because her second wife was also very rich.

George explains to Nick that he wants to know more about him because he sees him as a direct threat to his position. Nick is young, ambitious, and successful, and he is sure to

attract the attention of all the women on campus. Nick argues that Martha is one of the most powerful women on campus, as she is the daughter of the university president. The conversation becomes increasingly heated, and George laments the fact that after trying to create a noble civilization out of mankind, inevitably all of the structures will crumble in the hands of others.

This passage reveals the complex and competitive relationship between George and Nick. George is jealous of Nick's youth and success, and he feels threatened by Nick's presence on campus. He tries to intimidate Nick by asserting his own power and status, but Nick refuses to be intimidated. The passage even highlights the importance of money and social class to George and Martha. George is resentful of the fact that Nick has money, and he feels that this gives Nick an unfair advantage in life. Martha, for her part, is proud of her family's wealth and status, and she expects to be treated with deference.

George's lament at the end of the passage suggests that he is aware of the fragility of his own position and the inevitability of change. However, he is also determined to fight for what he has, even if it means destroying others in the process.

## **ACT-II, PART-II**

Martha and Honey return, and everyone has more drinks. Honey decides to dance, and she puts on some music. Martha and Nick dance together, while Honey and George watch.

George comments that this is a very old ritual. Despite George's protests, Martha tells Honey and Nick about the book that George tried to publish. Martha's father, the president of the university, refused to let George publish the book because it was trash. George becomes enraged and attacks Martha. Nick tries to defend her, and they all struggle on the floor for a few minutes. The scuffle ends, and George announces that it's time for a new game. He says that his second novel is about a young couple coming to a new university. In other words, he tells the story of Nick and Honey, insulting everything about them. He says that Honey's father took advantage of women while preaching. He calls Honey a mouse and says that she drinks too much and throws up. He even recounts how they got married: she got pregnant, but then had a false alarm.

It takes Honey a while to realize that George is talking about her. When she does, she becomes very angry with Nick for revealing their secrets and runs offstage. Nick is also upset and leaves to help his wife. Martha is sarcastic towards George for playing such a brutal game. George feels numbed by their fantasy life and how Martha reveals their life to the world. Nick returns to say that Honey is alright and is lying on the tiles in the bathroom. George goes to get ice, and Martha tries to seduce Nick.

George walks in and finds them kissing and touching each other. He turns around and re-enters, singing "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" He fixes drinks and sits in a chair where he cannot see Martha and Nick on the sofa. Martha and Nick start kissing again and hit chimes, making bells sound. George tells Nick that he can have Martha. Nick and Martha go into the kitchen to continue. Honey arrives in the living room and asks what the bells are.

George improvises a plan as he talks to her. He tells her that someone arrived to tell him that his son has died. He laughs and cries as the act ends.

This part of the play is a powerful and disturbing exploration of the themes of marriage, family, and betrayal. George and Martha's relationship is deeply dysfunctional and characterized by mutual hatred and contempt. They use each other as weapons to hurt and control each other. George's novel is a thinly veiled attack on Nick and Honey, and his decision to read it aloud to them is a cruel and vindictive act. Martha's attempt to seduce Nick is further evidence of her disregard for George's feelings. The ending of the act is particularly bleak and nihilistic. George's announcement that his son has died is a cruel joke, and his laughter and tears suggest that he has completely lost touch with reality. The play's title, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a reference to a children's nursery rhyme. However, in the context of the play, it takes on a darker meaning. It suggests that all of the characters in the play are afraid of facing the truth about themselves and their relationships.

### ACT-III

Martha and Nick enter the living room. Martha is talking to herself and playing with the ice in her glass. Their conversation reveals that Nick failed to seduce Martha. For once, Martha speaks positively about George, saying that he is a polite man and that she loved him once. She believes that their relationship is now sad and that she has broken his back. George enters with flowers and begins to tell stories about his time in Majorca, enjoying the natural beauty.

These stories are lies, but Martha enjoys the conversation. George then announces that they are going to play one more game: "bringing up baby." Everyone returns to the stage, including Honey, who is drunk and incoherent. George begins to talk about their child, and he and Martha recall in detail his birth and childhood. Finally, as the tension mounts, George announces that someone has come by to tell them that their son has died in a car accident.

Martha is furious, telling George that he does not have the right to decide these things. Nick then realizes that George and Martha's son is not real. George confirms this, saying that he killed the son because Martha mentioned him to someone else, which was against their rules.

Martha is devastated and angry. She tells George that he cannot kill their son. It then becomes clear that George and Martha invented their son. They never had a son. He was a fantasy, an illusion that they created to bring some comfort to their empty lives. Quietly, Nick and Honey leave the room. In the end, George and Martha are left alone, with no more illusions. This is a powerful and heartbreaking exploration of the themes of loss, grief, and the fragility of the human mind. George and Martha's relationship is built on a foundation of lies and illusions. Their imaginary son is a symbol of their deep-seated insecurities and their inability to cope with reality.

When George "kills" their son, it is a metaphor for his destruction of the last vestige of their shared fantasy. Martha is left devastated, and she realizes that she has been living in a lie. The ending of the play is bleak and nihilistic. George and Martha are left alone, with no illusions and no illusions to sustain them. It is a reminder that reality can be a cruel and unforgiving place, and that we must be careful not to lose ourselves in our own fantasies.

## 9.6 THEMES

### **Illusion vs. reality**

One of the central themes of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is the conflict between illusion and reality. George and Martha's marriage is built on a foundation of lies and illusions. They have invented a son who does not exist, and they use this illusion to escape from their own pain and unhappiness. As the play progresses, the illusions begin to crumble. Nick and Honey, the young couple who come to visit George and Martha, see through their illusions and force them to confront the harsh reality of their situation.

### **The destructive nature of marriage**

The play also explores the destructive nature of marriage. George and Martha's relationship is characterized by mutual hatred and contempt. They use each other as weapons to hurt and control each other. Their marriage is a microcosm of the larger society in which they live, which is also characterized by violence and conflict. The play suggests that marriage can be a trap, and that it can sometimes be more destructive than liberating.

### **The importance of family**

Family is another important theme in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* George and Martha's relationship is dysfunctional, but they are still deeply connected to each other. They need each other, even though they also hate each other. The play suggests that family is important, even when it is difficult. It is a source of both love and pain, and it is something that we cannot escape.

### **The role of social class**

Social class is also a major theme in the play. George and Martha are both members of the upper class, but they are struggling to maintain their status. Nick and Honey, on the other hand, are from the lower class, and they are trying to rise above their circumstances. The play suggests that social class is a powerful force in society. It determines our opportunities, our relationships, and our sense of self.

### **The importance of truth**

Truth is another important theme in the play. George and Martha's relationship is built on lies, and this ultimately leads to their destruction. The play suggests that truth is essential for healthy relationships and a healthy society. When we lie to ourselves and to others, we create a world of illusion that is ultimately unsustainable.

### **The fragility of the human mind**

The human mind is a complex and delicate organ. It is susceptible to a wide range of factors, both internal and external, that can disrupt its delicate balance. These factors can include stress, trauma, illness, and substance abuse. When the mind is disrupted, it can lead to a variety of mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, and psychosis.

The fragility of the human mind is theme in Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The play follows two couples, George and Martha, and Nick and Honey, as they engage in a night of increasingly intense and destructive emotional warfare. As the evening progresses, the characters' vulnerabilities and insecurities are exposed, and their carefully constructed illusions of reality begin to crumble. Martha, in particular, is a character who struggles with the fragility of her mind. She is a highly intelligent and articulate woman, but she is also deeply insecure and prone to emotional outbursts. Her fragile mental state is evident in her tendency to distort reality and engage in self-destructive behaviour. In one scene, Martha describes to Nick and Honey her imaginary son, George Jr. George Jr. is a perfect and idealized child who represents the happiness and fulfilment that Martha and George have never been able to achieve. It is clear that George Jr. is simply a figment of Martha's imagination. He is a way for her to escape from the harsh realities of her life and to create a world of her own making. Martha's fragile mental state is also evident in her relationship with George. The two characters have a deeply love-hate relationship. They are drawn to each other, but they are also constantly at war with each other. Their arguments are often cruel and destructive, and they frequently resort to personal attacks and insults.

Through the characters of Martha and George, Albee explores the fragility of the human mind and the dangers of living in a world of illusion. He suggests that we are all vulnerable to mental health problems, and that we must be careful not to let our illusions get the best of us.

## 9.7 GLOSSARY

1. ABSTRUSE: Complex and Cryptic
2. ALICE FAYE: 1940s Blonde Movie Star
3. BUCOLIC: Rustic and Pastoral
4. CHROMOSOMES: Genetic Material
5. CLIP JOINT: Overpriced
6. DAGUERREOTYPE: Antique Photo Process
7. EXORCISM: Demon Expulsion
8. FLOOZIE: Call Girl

## 9.8 SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- 1) Analyse the relationship between Martha and George. What are the sources of their conflict? How do they use language and behaviour to control each other?
- 2) Examine the themes of truth, illusion, and reality in the play. How do the characters' perceptions of reality differ? What do they reveal about the nature of reality itself?
- 3) Interpret the play's ending. What does Martha's assertion that "we have each other" mean? What is the play's overall message about human relationships?

**8.9 SUGGESTED READINGS**

- 1) Albee, Edward. Selected Plays of Edward Albee.. arden City, New York: Nelson Doubleday, Inc., 1987.
- 2) Bloom, Harold, ed. Modern Critical Views: Edward Albee.. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1987.
- 3) Paoluci, Anne. From Tension to Tonic: The Plays of Edward Albee.. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972.
- 4) Vos, Nelvin. Eugene Ionesco and Edward Albee. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968.
- 5) [misskcoogan.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/virginia-woolf-summary.docx](http://misskcoogan.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/virginia-woolf-summary.docx)
- 6) [www.sparknotes.com/lit/afraidofwoolf/section4/](http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/afraidofwoolf/section4/)
- 7) [misskcoogan.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/virginia-woolf-summary.docx](http://misskcoogan.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/virginia-woolf-summary.docx)

**Dr. E. Bhavani**

# LESSON 10

## DEATH OF A SALESMAN

– ARTHUR MILLER

### 10.0 OBJECTIVES

- To explore the theme of loss of individual identity and the struggle to embrace change both within oneself and within a rapidly evolving society.
- To offer a poignant portrayal of the internal conflicts within a family, while also shedding light on broader issues surrounding American core values.
- To scrutinize the toll exacted by unwavering faith in the American Dream, a dream deeply entwined with material success.
- To discuss fundamental American values and the prevailing notion of the American Dream, which emphasized material prosperity.
- To study and understand the historical and social context of the

### STRUCTURE

- 10.1 Biographical Sketch
- 10.2 Representation of the American Dream *In Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller
- 10.3 Character Analysis
- 10.4 Summary
- 10.5 Critical Appreciation of *Death of a Salesman*
- 10.6 Themes and Motifs
- 10.7 Symbolism in the Play
- 10.8 Glossary
- 10.9 Questions
- 10.10 Suggested Readings

### 10.1 BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Arthur Asher Miller (October 17, 1915 – February 10, 2005) was an American playwright, essayist, and screenwriter in the 20th-century American theatre. Among his most popular plays are *All My Sons* (1947), *Death of a Salesman* (1949), *The Crucible* (1953), and *A View from the Bridge* (1955). He wrote several screenplays and was most noted for his work on *The Misfits* (1961). The drama *Death of a Salesman* is considered one of the best American plays of the 20th century.

Miller was born in Harlem, New York City, to Polish-Jewish immigrant parents. His father owned a successful garment manufacturing business, but the family lost everything in the Great Depression. This experience had a profound impact on Miller, who often explored themes of social injustice and the American Dream in his plays.

He began writing plays while he was a student at the University of Michigan. After graduating, he moved back to New York City and worked as a freelance writer. He had his first Broadway success in 1947 with *All My Sons*, which tells the story of a manufacturer who knowingly sells defective aircraft parts during World War II. His most famous play, *Death of a Salesman*, premiered in 1949. It is the tragic story of Willy Loman, a salesman who has worked his entire life to achieve the American Dream, only to find himself disillusioned and defeated in the end. The play won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama and is considered one of the greatest American plays ever written. His other notable plays include *The Crucible* (1953), a historical drama about the Salem witch trials, and *A View from the Bridge* (1955), a tragedy about a longshoreman who



becomes obsessed with his young niece. In addition to his work as a playwright, Miller was also a successful screenwriter. He wrote the screenplays for *The Misfits* (1961), starring Marilyn Monroe and Clark Gable, and *Focus* (1966), starring Kirk Douglas and Laurence Harvey.

Miller was a vocal critic of McCarthyism and the House Un-American Activities Committee. He was subpoenaed to testify before the committee in 1956 and refused to name other writers whom he believed to be communists. He was convicted of contempt of Congress, but the conviction was later overturned. He was married three times, including to actresses Marilyn Monroe and Inge Morath. He had five children. He died in 2005 at the age of 89. He is considered one of the most important playwrights of the 20th century. His work continues to be performed and studied around the world.

Miller has received numerous honours and awards in his career. They include the Michigan's Avery Hopwood Award, 1936 and 1937; the Theatre Guild's Bureau of New Plays Award, 1937; the New York Drama Critic's Circle Award, 1947; the Pulitzer Prize, 1949; the New York Drama Critic's Circle Award, 1949; the Antoinette Perry and Donaldson Awards, 1953; and the Gold Medal for Drama by the National Institutes of Arts and Letters, 1959. Miller was also elected president of PEN (Poets, Essayists, and Novelists) in 1965. He lived for 89 years and died on February 10, 2005.

## **10.2 REPRESENTATION OF THE AMERICAN DREAM IN *DEATH OF A SALESMAN* BY ARTHUR MILLER**

Arthur Miller's Pulitzer Prizewinning play *Death of a Salesman* is a tragic masterpiece that explores the American Dream and the human cost of pursuing it relentlessly. The play tells the story of Willy Loman, a salesman who is struggling to achieve his dreams of success and fortune. Willy's life is a series of failures and disappointments, and he is unable to cope with the reality of his situation. The American Dream is the belief that anyone can achieve success and prosperity through hard work and determination. It is a myth that has been ingrained in American culture for centuries, and it is one of the central themes of the play.

Willy Loman is the embodiment of the American Dream. He has always believed that he could achieve great things, and he has worked hard all his life to make his dreams come true.

However, Willy's dreams have never been realized. He is a mediocre salesman who has never made a lot of money. His sons, Biff and Happy, are also struggling to achieve success. Biff has been unable to find a steady job, and Happy is working in a dead-end job.

Willy's inability to achieve the American Dream is a source of great pain and frustration for him. He feels like he is a failure, and he is unable to come to terms with his reality. He retreats into a world of fantasy, where he relives his past glories and imagines a better future. Miller's play is a powerful and moving exploration of the American Dream and the human cost of pursuing it relentlessly. Willy Loman is a tragic figure who is unable to cope with the reality of his situation.

His death is a cautionary tale about the dangers of putting too much emphasis on material success and social status. It is often associated with materialism and the accumulation of wealth. Willy Loman is obsessed with material success. He believes that if he can make enough money, he will be happy and fulfilled. However, Willy's pursuit of material wealth ultimately leads to his downfall. It is associated with social status. Willy Loman believes that if he can achieve a high social status, he will be respected and admired. However, Willy's social status is ultimately based on his material wealth, and when he loses his job and his income, his social status also disappears. It is often seen as a celebration of individualism and self-reliance. Willy Loman is a self-made man

who believes that he can achieve anything he sets his mind to. However, Willy's individualism is ultimately destructive. He refuses to accept help from others, and he is unable to adapt to changing circumstances. The American Dream is not without its costs. Willy's obsession with material success and social status leads to his downfall. He loses his job, his family, and his dignity. In the end, he is forced to take his own life. Willy Loman's story is not unique. There are many people who have sacrificed their relationships, their health, and their happiness in pursuit of the American Dream. Miller's play is a reminder that the American Dream is not always attainable, and that there is a human cost to pursuing it relentlessly.

*Death of a Salesman* is a powerful and moving exploration of the American Dream and the human cost of pursuing it relentlessly. Willy Loman is a tragic figure who is unable to cope with the reality of his situation. His death is a cautionary tale about the dangers of putting too much emphasis on material success and social status. Miller's play is a timeless masterpiece that continues to draw the interest. It is a reminder that the American Dream is not always attainable, and that there is a human cost to pursuing it relentlessly.

### 10.3 CHARACTER ANALYSIS

#### **Willy Loman**

Willy Loman is a tragic figure who is trapped in a cycle of self-delusion and failure. He is obsessed with achieving the American Dream, but his definition of success is narrow and materialistic. He believes that wealth and status are the keys to a happy and fulfilling life, but he is unable to achieve either of these things. His failures are due to a number of factors, including his own unrealistic expectations, the changing economic landscape, and his own personal flaws. He is also unable to adapt to the changing world around him, and he clings to his outdated beliefs and values. As his illusions begin to fade, he becomes increasingly disillusioned and depressed. He begins to suffer from hallucinations and delusions, and he eventually takes his own life. Willy's death is a tragic reminder of the dangers of self-delusion and the importance of living a life that is true to oneself. Willy is a deeply flawed character, but he is also a loving father who wants the best for his sons.

#### **Linda Loman**

Linda, the devoted and loving wife of Willy, bears the brunt of her husband's grandiose aspirations. While she occasionally appears to embrace his dreams of future success, Linda is, in fact, grounded in a more pragmatic and resilient reality compared to her husband. Throughout their journey, she shoulders the responsibility of tending to the family's needs amidst Willy's misguided quests for achievement. Linda's emotional fortitude and unwavering determination serve as a pillar of support for Willy, sustaining him until his eventual breakdown. Her enduring strength plays a pivotal role in the family's stability during challenging times.

#### **Biff Loman**

Biff, Willy's older son at the age of thirty-four, experienced a golden period during his high school years, marked by his status as a football star and promising scholarship opportunities. He relished the camaraderie of close male friends and the adulation of admiring female peers.

However, despite these early triumphs, Biff's academic journey fell short, preventing him from graduating. Furthermore, his career endeavours ended in a series of dismissals.

In a larger context, Biff serves as a reflection of Willy's vulnerable and tragic dimension. He grapples with an inability to align his life with the towering expectations his father harbours for him. Biff's journey is one of unfulfilled potential and a struggle to find his own path amidst the weighty aspirations imposed upon him by Willy's dreams.

### **Happy Loman**

Happy, Willy's younger son at the age of thirty-two, has spent his life in the shadow of his elder brother, Biff. He possesses a strong drive for professional success and often projects an air of self-importance, despite holding a position as an assistant in a department store. Additionally, Happy's professional conduct is questionable, as he engages in unethical business practices and pursues relationships with the girlfriends of his superiors. His character represents a complex blend of ambition, insecurity, and moral ambiguity within the context of the play.

### **Charley**

Charley, the neighbour who lives next door to Willy, boasts a thriving business, and his son, Bernard, has achieved substantial success as a prominent lawyer. Willy grapples with feelings of envy and resentment toward Charley's accomplishments. Despite this envy, Charley extends financial assistance to Willy to help cover his expenses. At a poignant moment in the story, Willy, struggling to hold back tears, confides that Charley is his sole confidant and true friend, highlighting the depth of their relationship within the context of the narrative.

### **Bernard**

Bernard is portrayed as a stark juxtaposition to Willy Loman's son, Biff. While Biff is athletic and popular in high school, Bernard is portrayed as nerdy and studious. He excels academically, and his success in life is a direct result of his hard work and dedication, unlike Biff, who struggles to find his place in the world. This contrast highlights the theme of the American Dream, showing that success is not solely determined by charisma but also by intelligence and diligence. Bernard serves as a foil to Willy Loman himself. Willy often dismisses Bernard as a "pest," failing to recognize his accomplishments. This reflects Willy's skewed values, where he prioritizes charisma and image over substance and hard work. Bernard's success as a lawyer emphasizes the play's critique of the shallow values of American society, where those who conform to traditional success measures are ultimately more successful than those who try to live up to unrealistic ideals. Bernard's character provides a sense of continuity in the play's timeline. He is present in both the past and present timelines of the story, and his interactions with the Loman's help the audience understand the passage of time and the consequences of past actions. His transformation from a nerdy kid into a successful lawyer underscores the idea that hard work and consistency can lead to success, which contrasts sharply with Willy's delusions and failures.

Bernard's relationship with Biff is central to the play. As Biff's childhood friend and academic rival, Bernard represents the road not taken by Biff. Bernard's success in law school and his ability to offer Biff a job opportunity highlights the choices and regrets that Biff faces. This dynamic adds depth to the exploration of dreams, choices, and the impact of parental expectations.

Bernard in *Death of a Salesman* serves as a multifaceted character who embodies the themes of the play. He symbolizes the attainability of the American Dream through hard work, contrasts with Willy's values and failures, and plays a pivotal role in the development of other characters, particularly Biff. Bernard's character enriches the narrative, providing insight into the complexities of success, ambition, and the consequences of one's choices.

## Ben

Ben Loman is a captivating and enigmatic character in *Death of a Salesman*. He is the older brother of the play's protagonist, Willy Loman. Ben's character stands in stark contrast to the other characters in the play, as he represents a mysterious and alluring figure who has achieved the American Dream. Ben's success as a wealthy diamond magnate in Africa serves as a constant source of fascination and envy for Willy. One of the defining traits of Ben is his self-confidence and assertiveness. He exudes an air of self-assuredness that is lacking in Willy. This confidence is evident in his advice to Willy about the importance of taking risks and seizing opportunities. Ben's success is a testament to his willingness to embrace the unknown and venture into uncharted territory, a lesson that he tries to impart to his brother throughout the play.

Ben also embodies the theme of the American Dream and its elusive nature. He serves as a symbol of what could be achieved in a land of opportunity, but his character also highlights the harsh realities and sacrifices that come with pursuing that dream. His decision to leave his family in pursuit of adventure and fortune in Africa underscores the idea that success often comes at a personal cost.

Despite his impressive achievements, Ben remains somewhat of an enigma. The exact details of his life in Africa and the events that led to his success are left largely unexplored in the play, adding to the sense of mystery that surrounds him. This deliberate ambiguity serves to emphasize the mythic quality of the American Dream and the allure of the unknown.

He represents the tantalizing promise of the American Dream, yet his character also serves as a cautionary tale about the sacrifices and uncertainties that come with pursuing that dream. Ben's self-confidence, assertiveness, and mysterious background make him a compelling and thought-provoking figure in the play, serving to highlight the complexities of the American Dream and the human desire for success.

## The Woman

The Woman is a character who plays a brief but significant role in the narrative. She serves as a symbol of Willy Loman's infidelity and the consequences of his actions. She represents temptation and the allure of a life that is different from the one Willy Loman leads. She is depicted as a seductive figure who tempts Willy away from his family and responsibilities. Her presence underscores Willy's inner conflicts and dissatisfaction with his life as a travelling salesman. She even reflects Willy's insecurity and his desire to be admired and valued. In his affair with her, Willy seeks the validation and attention he feels he lacks in his professional life. This affair is an attempt to escape the harsh realities of his existence and find a sense of importance and attractiveness.

Her character is shrouded in irony. Despite her relatively small role in the play, her actions have a profound impact on the storyline. She indirectly contributes to the unravelling of Willy's life and the ultimate tragedy that befalls him. Her presence underscores the destructive consequences of Willy's actions. Her character brings forth themes of betrayal and guilt. Willy's infidelity is a betrayal of his marriage vows and family, and his guilt over this betrayal is a contributing factor to his mental decline throughout the play. The guilt and remorse he feels for his affair haunts him. Her appearance in the play serves as a catalyst for self-reflection in Willy Loman. Her presence forces him to confront the consequences of his actions and the impact of his choices on his family. While The Woman herself remains a somewhat enigmatic character, her role in the play is pivotal in exposing the inner turmoil and moral conflict within Willy.

## Howard Wagner

Howard Wagner plays a crucial role in the unfolding of the story. He is the young and unsympathetic boss of Willy Loman, the play's protagonist. Through Howard's character, Miller explores themes related to corporate culture, generational differences, and the dehumanizing effects of capitalism.

He is depicted as a symbol of the corporate world's cold and impersonal nature. He is dismissive of Willy, who has served the company for many years, and he represents the callousness of a business environment that values profit over loyalty and personal relationships. Howard's refusal to provide Willy with a more comfortable job reflects the company's lack of concern for its aging employees, emphasizing the harsh realities of the American business landscape. His character embodies a generational gap. He is part of a younger generation that is more focused on technology and efficiency, which further alienates him from Willy, who clings to traditional values and a bygone era. This generational conflict highlights the changing nature of work and the challenges faced by older employees in adapting to a rapidly evolving corporate world.

His dictatorial manner also serves as a critique of the dehumanizing effects of capitalism. His insistence on the use of a tape recorder instead of shorthand typists reflects a cold, mechanized approach to work that reduces employees to mere cogs in the corporate machine. He represents a system that values profit and efficiency at the expense of the human beings who work within it.

He symbolizes the ruthless and dehumanizing nature of corporate culture. He highlights the generational divide and the harsh realities faced by older employees in a changing workplace. Howard's character serves as a stark contrast to Willy Loman's nostalgia for a bygone era and underscores the play's themes of disillusionment and the American Dream's decline.

## 10.4 SUMMARY

Willy Loman, a sixty-year-old traveling salesman, returns home after leaving New England earlier that morning. He confides in his wife Linda about his inability to focus on driving, a sign of his growing inner turmoil. Linda suggests that he needs a rest, recognizing that the strain of his job has taken a toll on him. During their conversation, Willy also inquires about his sons, who are visiting home after being away for years. Willy is deeply puzzled by his son Biff's struggles to find and maintain a steady job. Biff, now thirty-four, possesses striking good looks and was once a high school football star with numerous scholarship offers. However, his education was left incomplete, and his trust in his father shattered when he discovered Willy having an affair with a stranger during a visit to Boston.

As Biff and his brother Happy brainstorm potential job opportunities that would allow Biff to settle down in New York, Biff recalls a man named Bill Oliver, whom he worked for previously. Biff believes he can secure a ten-thousand-dollar loan from Oliver to start his own business.

Eagerly, Biff and Happy share their plans with Willy, hoping for his support and guidance. Willy imparts his life philosophy to his sons, emphasizing the importance of being well-liked and attractive. He reassures Biff of his attractiveness and his favourable relationship with Oliver, believing that these qualities will open doors for his son. In this complex family dynamic, the play explores themes of ambition, betrayal, and the pursuit of the American Dream.

The following day, Willy is scheduled to meet his sons for dinner at a restaurant to hear the outcome of Biff's loan request from Oliver. However, before that, Willy approaches Howard Wagner, the current owner of the company he has devoted years to, and requests a transfer to New

York City. To his dismay, Howard informs him that there is no place for him in New York and, even more devastatingly, that he can no longer represent the firm in New England. This sudden revelation shatters Willy's sense of security and self-worth, leaving him feeling frightened and adrift. Desperate to keep his life insurance policy active, Willy turns to his old friend Charley for a loan.

Charley, in a gesture of goodwill, lends Willy the money he needs to pay his insurance premium. With the borrowed money in hand, Willy proceeds to the restaurant to meet his sons.

Prior to Willy's arrival, Biff confides in Happy that Oliver didn't even recognize him during their meeting. He expresses his weariness of perpetuating a life built on illusion and resolves to confront his father, relinquishing any expectations Willy might have of him.

When Willy finally arrives at the restaurant, he bears the devastating news of his termination. Unfortunately, he brushes off Biff's attempt to share his own story and simply assumes that Biff will secure another appointment the following day. Frustration overwhelms Biff, leading him to exit the restaurant in disillusionment. Happy, preoccupied with two women he's met, follows Biff, leaving Willy to grapple with his newfound loneliness and despair. This pivotal moment underscores the family's unravelling dynamics and the harsh realities they must confront.

On the night of Willy's suicide, Biff comes home and finds him planting seeds in the backyard and talking to his deceased brother, Ben. Biff tries to explain to Willy that he lacks the skills and leadership qualities to succeed, but Willy refuses to listen. Biff suggests that they never see each other again in order to save Willy from disappointment. Willy tells Biff how great he is and how successful he can be, despite reality. Biff is frustrated by Willy's refusal to face the truth and breaks down crying, telling Willy to forget about him.

Willy Loman's decision to kill himself in order to provide his son Biff with \$20,000 in insurance money is a tragic act of desperation. Willy has always dreamed of seeing Biff succeed, but Biff has struggled to find his place in life. Willy believes that the insurance money will give Biff the chance to start his own business and achieve his full potential. Willy's death is also a reflection of his own sense of failure. He has always seen himself as a successful salesman and a good father, but he has been unable to live up to his own expectations. He has lost his job, his sons are struggling, and he is deeply in debt. Willy sees his death as a way to redeem himself and provide for his family. Willy's death is ultimately meaningless. The \$20,000 insurance payout is not enough to cover his debts, and Biff is too emotionally distraught to start a business. Willy's funeral is poorly attended, and his death is quickly forgotten. Willy dies a pathetic death, neglected and forgotten by the world.

## **10.5 CRITICAL APPRECIATION OF *DEATH OF A SALESMAN***

Arthur Miller's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Death of a Salesman* is a tragic masterpiece that explores the American Dream and the human cost of pursuing it relentlessly. The play tells the story of Willy Loman, a salesman who is struggling to achieve his dreams of success and fortune. Willy's life is a series of failures and disappointments, and he is unable to cope with the reality of his situation. One of the most striking aspects of the play is its fluid treatment of time. Past and present flow into one another seamlessly and simultaneously, as Willy's mind wanders back and forth between his memories and his current reality. This technique allows Miller to explore Willy's inner world and to show how his past experiences continue to shape his present.

Another important aspect of the play is its focus on Willy's relationships with his family. Willy's relationship with his wife Linda is loving but strained. Linda is devoted to Willy, but she is also aware of his flaws and his unrealistic expectations. Willy's relationship with his sons Biff and Happy is even more complex. Willy loves his sons deeply, but he also puts a great deal of pressure on them to succeed. Biff is struggling to find his place in the world, and he feels like he has failed Willy's expectations. Happy is more successful than Biff, but he is also less fulfilled. Willy's inability to achieve his dreams and to live up to his own expectations leads him to despair. In a tragic act of desperation, he decides to kill himself so that his family can collect the insurance money. Willy's death is a cautionary tale about the dangers of pursuing the American Dream at all costs. It's exploration of the American Dream and the human cost of pursuing it, *Death of a Salesman* also deals with other important themes such as family, identity, and success. Miller's play is a timeless masterpiece that continues to resonate with audiences today.

## 10.6 THEMES AND MOTIFS

### Abandonment

Willy's life follows a path marked by a series of abandonment experiences, each leaving him in deeper despair than before. His father's early departure from his life, leaving Willy with neither material wealth nor a sense of ancestral history, casts a shadow of emptiness over his formative years. Ben, his adventurous brother, eventually sets off for Alaska, leaving Willy to grapple with a distorted vision of the American Dream, one he desperately clings to. These early instances of abandonment contribute to Willy's enduring fear of being left behind, fuelling his fervent desire for his family to conform to the idealized version of the American Dream that he holds dear.

Willy's efforts to mould his sons into the embodiment of this dream reveal his fundamental disconnect from reality. The young Biff, whom Willy once saw as the embodiment of promise, distances himself from Willy and his lofty aspirations when he discovers his father's infidelity.

Biff's persistent struggles in the business world further widen the gap between father and son. It all comes to a head at Frank's Chop House, where Willy, for a fleeting moment, believes that Biff is on the brink of greatness. In a heartbreaking turn of events, Biff shatters Willy's illusions, and alongside Happy, he abandons his deluded, incoherent father in the restroom. This poignant sequence underscores the profound impact of abandonment on Willy's life and the tragic disintegration of his family bonds.

### Betrayal

Willy's central preoccupation throughout the play revolves around what he perceives as Biff's betrayal of his own aspirations for his son. Willy firmly believes that he has every reason to expect Biff to live up to the inherent promise he holds. When Biff distances himself from Willy's ambitions, Willy interprets this rejection as a deeply personal wound, equating it with feelings of "insult" and "spite." Willy's identity as a salesman plays a significant role in his perspective, as Biff's crushing repudiation reflects Willy's inability to successfully "sell" him on the concept of the American Dream a belief that Willy himself upholds with unwavering faith.

Willy's assumption is that Biff's perceived betrayal stems from the revelation of Willy's affair with the woman a betrayal not only of their father-son relationship but also of Linda's love.

From Willy's viewpoint, Biff's actions feel like a breach of trust and a personal affront. Conversely, Biff sees Willy as a "phony little fake," viewing his father's incessant stream of false compliments and ego-boosting lies as the ultimate betrayal. This clash of perceptions deepens the

rift between father and son and underscores the profound breakdown of trust and communication within the Loman family.

### **Identity**

Another important theme in *Death of a Salesman* is identity. Willy Loman's identity is inextricably linked to his success as a salesman. He sees himself as a valuable member of society because he is able to sell things. When Willy is unable to make sales, he feels worthless and lost.

Willy's sons, Biff and Happy, are also struggling to develop their identities. Biff is unsure of what he wants to do with his life, and Happy is defined by his job and his social status. The play suggests that identity is complex and multifaceted. It is not based solely on one's career or social status. Rather, identity is shaped by a variety of factors, including one's relationships, values, and experiences.

### **Success and Failure**

Success and failure are also important themes in *Death of a Salesman*. Willy Loman is obsessed with success. He believes that if he can make enough money and achieve a high social status, he will be happy and fulfilled. However, Willy's definition of success is narrow and materialistic. He does not value other important aspects of life, such as relationships and personal growth.

### **Family**

Family is also an important theme in *Death of a Salesman*. Willy Loman loves his family deeply, but he is also unable to connect with them on a meaningful level. He is too focused on his own problems and ambitions to really listen to his wife and sons. As a result, Willy's relationships with his family are strained and distant. Biff and Happy feel resentful and misunderstood by their father. Linda feels lonely and neglected. The play suggests that family is important for our well-being. We need to be able to connect with our loved ones and feel supported by them. When our family relationships are strong, we are better able to cope with the challenges of life. These are just a few of the many themes that are explored in *Death of a Salesman*. It is a complex and thought-provoking play that continues to resonate with audiences today.

### **Mythic Figures**

Willy's habit of idealizing individuals contributes significantly to his distorted worldview. He elevates figures like Dave Singleman to legendary status, envisioning a noble and dignified end to his life. Likewise, Willy draws parallels between his sons, Biff and Happy, and mythological Greek icons such as Adonis and Hercules. In his eyes, they represent the epitome of "personal attractiveness" and the power of being "well-liked," embodying the very essence of the American Dream.

Willy's penchant for myth-making proves to be myopic. He fails to grasp the harsh reality of Dave Singleman's solitary, job-centric, and nomadic existence, which ends in a less-than-glorious manner. In his quest to attain what he perceives as Singleman's heroic status, Willy unwittingly condemns himself to a pitiable demise and a legacy devoid of meaning. Even if Willy's life insurance policy were to pay out, Biff, his son, remains resolute in rejecting his father's ambitions for him.



Similarly, neither Biff nor Happy manages to achieve the idealized, godlike lives that Willy envisions for them. While Happy remains a believer in the American Dream, it appears increasingly likely that he will end up in a situation no better than Willy's, far from the divine aspirations that his father once held. This illustrates how Willy's idealism and myth-making ultimately lead to a tragic disconnect between his dreams and the reality experienced by himself and his sons.

## 10.7 SYMBOLISM IN THE PLAY

Symbols are tangible or abstract elements, including objects, characters, figures, or colors, that are employed to signify and convey deeper and more complex ideas or concepts within a narrative.

### Seeds

In the story, seeds take on a symbolic role that represents Willy's quest to prove his worth both as a dedicated salesman and a responsible father. His desperate and secretive act of planting vegetables under the cover of night carries the weight of his shame, stemming from his inability to provide adequately for his family and the fear that he won't be able to leave anything meaningful behind for his children after he's gone. Willy believes he has toiled diligently throughout his life, yet he harbours concerns that he'll be as ineffectual in aiding his children as his own absent father was for him.

Furthermore, the seeds symbolize Willy's profound sense of disappointment and failure regarding his son Biff. Despite his unwavering faith in the infallibility of the American Dream's success formula, Willy's efforts to nurture and guide Biff have gone awry. Seeing his once-promising, all-American football star descend into a lethargic, directionless existence, Willy internalizes Biff's failures and lack of ambition as a direct reflection of his own abilities as a father.

The seeds thus become a poignant representation of Willy's struggles and his conflicted emotions about the dream he has pursued for so long.

### Diamonds

To Willy, diamonds serve as potent symbols of tangible wealth, embodying the validation of one's life's work and labour, as well as the capacity to leave behind material prosperity for one's descendants—both of which are fervently desired by Willy. In his relentless pursuit of these aspirations, diamonds also carry the weight of symbolizing Willy's perceived failure as a salesman.

Despite his unwavering belief in the American Dream, a conviction so steadfast that he passed up the opportunity to join Ben in Alaska, Willy finds himself consistently falling short of the Dream's promise of financial security.

At the play's conclusion, Ben's presence symbolizes a turning point for Willy. Ben encourages him to venture into the metaphorical "jungle" to retrieve the elusive diamond an act that can be interpreted as Willy's ultimate decision to take his own life for the sake of the insurance money, which he believes will bring meaning to his existence and fulfil his desire to leave something valuable behind for his family. The diamonds, in this sense, encapsulate Willy's deep yearning for validation, success, and legacy, as well as the tragic and desperate measures he feels compelled to take to attain them.

### The Rubber Hose

The rubber hose serves as a theatrical symbol that poignantly evokes Willy's desperate encounters with suicide. It bears witness to his past endeavours to end his own life through gas inhalation, which is tragically ironic, considering that gas is an essential element required to provide

warmth and comfort for his family's well-being in their home. The literal act of seeking death through inhaling gas parallels the metaphorical death that Willy senses in his relentless battle to afford such a fundamental necessity. It underscores the profound emotional and financial struggles that Willy faces, creating a poignant connection between his personal anguish and the hardships of maintaining a basic standard of living.

### **The Light**

The light in *Death of a Salesman* symbolizes Willy Loman's hope for a better future. It is a beacon that guides him through the darkness of his present situation. Willy is constantly chasing after the light, but it is always out of reach. This symbolizes the fact that Willy's dreams are ultimately unattainable.

The light is also associated with Willy's past. In his flashbacks, Willy often sees himself in bright sunlight, surrounded by his family and friends. This symbolizes Willy's nostalgia for a time when he was happy and successful. The light is also a reminder of Willy's failure. He has been unable to achieve his dreams, and he is now trapped in a dead-end job. The light is a constant reminder of what Willy could have been, but never will be.

### **The Music**

The music in *Death of a Salesman* symbolizes Willy Loman's longing for the past. Willy often hears music from his youth, when he was full of hope and ambition. The music reminds him of a time when he believed that anything was possible. The music is also a reminder of Willy's lost opportunities. He failed to live up to his potential, and he now regrets his choices. The music is a source of both comfort and torment for Willy. It reminds him of his past happiness, but it also highlights his present failures.

### **The Apartment Building**

The apartment building in *Death of a Salesman* symbolizes the American Dream. It is a symbol of success and prosperity. Willy and his family live in the apartment building because they believe that it represents the best that America has to offer. The apartment building is also a symbol of the emptiness of the American Dream. Willy and his family are trapped in the apartment building, unable to escape their financial problems and social status. The apartment building is a reminder that the American Dream is not always attainable, and that even those who achieve it may not be happy.

### **The Alleyway**

The alleyway behind Willy Loman's house symbolizes his inner life. It is a place where he can go to escape the pressures of the outside world and be himself. Willy often retreats to the alleyway to daydream and reflect on his life. The alleyway is also a symbol of Willy's isolation and despair. He is trapped in his own mind, unable to connect with his family and friends. The alleyway is a reminder that Willy is a deeply troubled man who is struggling to cope with his reality.

### **The Car**

The car in *Death of a Salesman* symbolizes Willy Loman's freedom and independence. It is a way for him to escape from his problems and travel to new places. Willy often drives his car aimlessly, without any real destination. The car is also a symbol of Willy's recklessness and his inability to plan for the future. He drives his car recklessly, and he often gets into accidents. The car is a reminder that Willy is a man who is living in the moment, without any thought for the consequences of his actions.

### The Briefcase

The briefcase in *Death of a Salesman* symbolizes Willy Loman's job as a salesman. It is a symbol of his livelihood and his identity. Willy carries his briefcase with him everywhere he goes, even when he is not working. The briefcase is also a symbol of Willy's failure. He is unable to make a living as a salesman, and his briefcase is often empty. The briefcase is a reminder that Willy is a man who has lost his sense of worth and purpose.

### 10.8 GLOSSARY

1. Adonis: Attractive youth
2. Babble: Prattle.
3. Buck Up: Cheer up
4. Buckle Down: Apply oneself energetically
5. Chippie: Promiscuous young woman
6. Contemptuous: Scornful
7. Dime a Dozen: Common

### 10.9 SAMPLE QUESTIONS

- 1) Explore the theme of the American Dream in *Death of a Salesman*. How does Willy Loman's pursuit of this dream contribute to his downfall?
- 2) Analyse the character of Willy Loman. What are the key traits and flaws that define his character? How do these traits contribute to his ultimate tragedy?
- 3) Examine the relationship between Willy and Biff. How does Biff's discovery of Willy's affair impact their relationship, and what does it reveal about the theme of betrayal in the play?
- 4) Consider the role of Linda Loman in "Death of a Salesman." How does she contribute to the family dynamics, and what does her character reveal about the challenges of being a woman in the 1940s?

### 10.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

- 1) Hurrell, John D. (1961). *Two Modern American Tragedies: Reviews and Criticism of Death of a Salesman and A Streetcar Named Desire*. New York: Scribner. pp. 82–8. OCLC 249094.
- 2) Bigsby, Christopher, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Arthur Miller*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- 3) Bloom, Harold, ed. *Arthur Miller: Modern Critical Interpretations*. New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 2006.
- 4) Bloom, Harold, ed. *Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman: Contemporary Literary Views*. New York: Chelsea House Publishing, 1995.
- 5) *Death of a Salesman: A Critical Guide* by Harold Bloom

**Dr. E. Bhavani**

**LESSON 11**  
**THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA**  
----**ERNEST HEMINGWAY**

**OBJECTIVES**

- To identify and analyze the novel's major themes, including perseverance, courage, and the human spirit.
- To identify and interpret the novel's symbolism in the novel
- To understand Hemingway's writing style and philosophy.
- To appreciate the novel's literary significance and its enduring appeal to readers.
- To develop their student's critical thinking and analytical skills as they apply the novel's lessons to their own lives.

**STRUCTURE**

- 11.1. Introduction to the author
- 11.2. Importance of *The Old Man and the Sea* and its place in American Literature
- 11.3. Significance of the Title, *The Old Man and the Sea*
- 11.4. Brief summary of the Novella
- 11.5. The Symbols, Imagery and Motifs
- 11.6. Self-Assessment Questions
- 11.7. Suggested Readings
- 11.8. Glossary

**11.1. INTRODUCTION TO HEMINGWAY**

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) was one of the most influential American writers of the 20th century. His novels and short stories are known for their spare, direct prose style and their focus on themes of masculinity, courage, and the human condition. He was born in Oak Park, Illinois, in 1899. He began writing as a young boy and published his first professional story in 1917. After serving in World War I, Hemingway moved to Paris, where he joined a group of expatriate writers and artists that included F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, and Gertrude Stein.

His first major success came with the publication of his novel *The Sun Also Rises* in 1926. The novel tells the story of a group of young Americans living in Paris after the war. It was a critical and commercial success, and it established Hemingway as one of the leading voices of the Lost Generation. He went on to publish a number of other acclaimed novels and short stories, including *A Farewell to Arms* (1932), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), and *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). His work has been translated into number of languages and has sold millions of copies worldwide.

His writing style is characterized by its simplicity and directness. He avoids using overly complicated language or flowery prose. Instead, he relies on simple, declarative sentences and concrete imagery. His style was influenced by his work as a journalist, where

he learned to write clearly and concisely. His work also explores a number of recurring themes, including masculinity, courage, and the human condition. His characters are often men who are struggling to find their place in the world. They are often outsiders who are facing difficult challenges. Hemingway's work often celebrates the courage and resilience of the human spirit. His writing has had a profound influence on American literature. He is considered one of the masters of the short story and the novel. His work has inspired generations of writers, including John Updike, Philip Roth, and Raymond Carver.

### **Hemingway's Contribution to American Literature**

Hemingway's contribution to American literature is vast and significant. He is considered one of the most important and influential writers of the 20th century. His work has had a profound impact on the way that American literature is written and taught. One of his most important contributions is the development of a new style of writing. Hemingway's style is unique and is characterized by its simplicity, directness, and clarity.

His style was a major departure from the more ornate and decorative prose styles that were popular in the early 20th century. His style was more realistic and direct, and it had a significant impact on the way that American literature was written. He even made significant contributions to the development of the short story and the novel. Hemingway was a master of the short story, and his stories are considered to be among the best ever written. His stories are known for their tight plots, well-developed characters, and spare language.

Hemingway's novels are known for their complex characters, realistic settings, and exploration of important themes such as masculinity, courage, and the human condition. His work has had a profound influence on American literature. He is considered one of the most important and influential writers of the 20th century. His style, his mastery of the short story and the novel, and his exploration of important themes have all had a significant impact on the way that American literature is written and taught.

### **11.2. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA AND ITS PLACE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE**

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is one of the most important and beloved works of American literature. It is a short but powerful novella that tells the story of an old Cuban fisherman named Santiago who struggles for three days and nights to reel in a giant marlin. The novella is a testament to the human spirit and its ability to endure adversity.

It is also a meditation on the nature of life and death, and the interconnectedness of all living things.

*The Old Man and the Sea* was published in 1952, and it was an immediate critical and commercial success. It won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1953, and it helped to cement Hemingway's reputation as one of the greatest writers of his generation. The novella has since been translated into many of languages and has sold millions of copies worldwide. *The Old Man and the Sea* is important for a number of reasons. First, it is a beautifully written and deeply moving story. His prose is spare and direct, but it is also evocative and poetic. He creates a vivid sense of the sea and the old man's struggle. Second, *The Old Man and the Sea* is a powerful allegory of the human condition. Santiago's journey represents the journey of life itself, with its ups and downs, its victories and defeats. The marlin represents the

challenges and obstacles that we all face in life. And Santiago's eventual victory over the marlin represents the human spirit's ability to overcome adversity. Third, *The Old Man and the Sea* is a meditation on the nature of life and death. Santiago is an old man, and he knows that his time is running out. But he is also a proud and determined man, and he is not afraid to face death. The marlin's death represents the death of all living things, but it also represents the cycle of life and death.

The novel is a celebration of the interconnectedness of all living things. Santiago has a deep respect for the sea and all of its creatures, including the marlin. He knows that he is part of nature, and he accepts the fact that he will eventually die. It is an American classic for a reason. It is a story that resonates with readers of all ages and backgrounds. It is a story about the human spirit, the nature of life and death, and the interconnectedness of all living things.

*The Old Man and the Sea* occupies a unique place in American literature. It is a novella that is both deeply American and deeply universal. It is a story about the American experience, but it is also a story about the human experience. The novella is set in Cuba, and it features a Cuban protagonist. But Santiago is an American archetype. He is a self-reliant, individualistic man who is determined to overcome adversity. He is the embodiment of the American dream.

*The Old Man and the Sea* explores universal themes that are relevant to readers of all cultures. It is a story about the human spirit's ability to endure adversity, the nature of life and death, and the interconnectedness of all living things. The novella's spare, direct prose style is also characteristic of American literature. Hemingway was a master of the short story and the novel, and his work has had a profound influence on American writers. *The Old Man and the Sea* is a classic work of American literature because it is a story that resonates with readers of all ages and backgrounds. It is a story about the American experience, but it is also a story about the human experience. It is a story about the human spirit's ability to endure adversity, the nature of life and death, and the interconnectedness of all living things.

### **11.3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE, *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA***

*The Old Man and the Sea* is a novella written by American author Ernest Hemingway, first published in 1952. This title holds significant thematic and symbolic weight, encapsulating the essence of the story in several ways. The title highlights the central characters of the novella. Santiago, the "Old Man," is the aging Cuban fisherman who is the story's protagonist. His character embodies the wisdom, experience, and resilience that come with age, making him a symbol of the enduring human spirit. The sea represents the vast and unpredictable nature of life, symbolizing both its beauty and its challenges. The juxtaposition of these two characters in the title sets the stage for the novel's exploration of the relationship between humanity and the natural world. It suggests a sense of isolation and solitude.

Santiago's solitary battle with the marlin in the vast expanse of the ocean reflects his isolation from the rest of the world. He is a man who has spent the majority of his life at sea, and this isolation is both physical and metaphorical. The sea itself becomes a character in the story, indifferent to Santiago's struggle, emphasizing the theme of man's existential isolation in the face of nature. The novel alludes to the timeless and universal nature of the story.

While the novella is set in a specific time and place, the themes it explores such as the struggle for purpose and the endurance of the human spirit are universal and transcend cultural and temporal boundaries. The title, *The Old Man and the Sea*, hints at the timeless quality of the narrative, making it relatable to readers from different backgrounds and eras. It underscores the importance of the sea as a symbol and setting in the story. The sea is not merely a backdrop but a dynamic and integral element of the narrative. It represents both the source of Santiago's livelihood and the formidable challenge he faces. The title invites readers to consider the sea as a complex and multifaceted character in its own right, with its own role in shaping the story's events. It invites readers to contemplate the themes of aging and the passage of time. Santiago's struggle with the marlin can be seen as a metaphor for the challenges and trials that come with old age. The title encourages readers to explore the significance of Santiago's journey and the lessons he imparts about the resilience of the human spirit, even in the face of physical decline. *The Old Man and the Sea* serves as a multi-layered and evocative introduction to the novella's themes, characters, and settings. It encapsulates the enduring human spirit, the relationship between humanity and nature, the universal nature of the story, the importance of the sea, and the exploration of aging and time.

Hemingway's choice of title is a masterful way to draw readers into the profound and timeless narrative that unfolds within the pages of the novella.

### Characters and Characterization

There are five characters in *The Old Man and the Sea*

**Santiago** is an old Cuban fisherman who has gone eighty-four days without catching a fish. He is a proud and determined man, and he is not afraid to face adversity. Santiago is a complex and well-developed character. He is both humble and proud, and he has a deep respect for the sea and all of its creatures.

**The marlin** is a giant fish that Santiago hooks on the eighty-fifth day. The marlin is a powerful and elusive creature, and it represents the challenges and obstacles that we all face in life. The marlin is also a symbol of the interconnectedness of all living things.

**Manolin** is a young boy who is Santiago's only friend and companions in the novella *The Old Man and the Sea*. He is a skilled fisherman and has learned everything he knows from Santiago. He is devoted to the old man, even though he has been struggling to catch fish for a long time. At the beginning of the novella, his parents have forced him to fish on another boat, hoping that he will have better luck. He still cares deeply for Santiago and visits him every day after fishing. He helps the old man with his boat and gear, and he brings him food and bait. When Santiago returns from his long journey at sea, Manolin is the first person he sees. He is horrified to see the old man's condition, but he is also amazed by the giant marlin that Santiago has caught. Manolin helps Santiago carry the marlin's skeleton back to his shack, and he stays with him until he falls asleep. He is a symbol of hope and renewal in the novella. He represents the future of fishing and the importance of passing on knowledge and skills from one generation to the next. He also represents the power of human compassion and friendship.

**The Sea** is a character in Ernest Hemingway's novella *The Old Man and the Sea*. It is more than just a setting; it is a living, breathing entity with its own personality and moods. The sea is both nurturing and destructive, and it is to the sea that Santiago must turn for his livelihood

and his sense of self. Santiago is constantly identified with the sea and its creatures. His sea-colored eyes reflect both the sea's tranquility and power, and he refers to the marlin he catches as his brother. This identification suggests that Santiago sees himself as part of the natural world, and that he respects the sea's power and unpredictability. The sea can be seen as a feminine complement to Santiago's masculinity. Santiago is a strong, independent man, but he is also humble and in awe of the sea's power. The sea's nurturing side is seen in its provision of food and livelihood for Santiago, while its destructive side is seen in the sharks that attack the marlin. The sea might be seen as the unconscious from which creative ideas are drawn. Santiago's struggle with the marlin is a metaphor for the creative process. Just as Santiago must use all of his skill and strength to land the marlin, the artist must use all of their talent and creativity to produce a work of art.

**The Sharks** are a manifestation of the unforgiving and relentless aspects of nature. While Santiago has conquered the marlin, he must now face the destructive forces of the sea, represented by these predators. Hemingway portrays the sharks as pitiless and voracious creatures that exist solely to feed. This underscores the idea that nature is both beautiful and harsh, capable of providing sustenance and life while also posing threats and challenges.

They serve as a stark reminder of the inevitability of death. Despite Santiago's triumphant battle with the marlin, his success is fleeting. The sharks reduce his prized catch to a skeleton, stripping away his hard-earned victory. This illustrates the transient nature of life's achievements and how even our greatest successes can be eroded by time and unforeseen circumstances. Santiago's encounter with the sharks represents the continuation of his lifelong struggle against adversity. Throughout the novella, he faces numerous challenges, including his long streak of unsuccessful fishing trips, physical exhaustion, and the relentless ordeal with the marlin. His battle with the sharks becomes another test of his endurance and unwavering determination. Despite the odds stacked against him, Santiago refuses to give up, defending his catch until the very end. The sharks can be seen as a metaphor for the trials and obstacles that individuals encounter in their journey through life.

Santiago's relentless battle with these creatures mirrors the human experience of facing adversity, setbacks, and challenges. It underscores the idea that life is a series of tests that require resilience and courage to overcome.

### **Characterization**

Hemingway uses a variety of techniques to characterize Santiago and the marlin. He uses physical descriptions, dialogue, and internal monologue to reveal the characters' thoughts, feelings, and motivations.

For example, Hemingway describes Santiago as a "lean and weathered man with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck." He also describes Santiago's hands as "gnarled and brown." These physical descriptions help to create the image of a strong and experienced fisherman.

He also uses dialogue to reveal Santiago's character. For example, Santiago often talks to himself, and he often speaks to the marlin. This dialogue reveals Santiago's thoughts and feelings about his struggle with the marlin.

In conclusion Hemingway uses internal monologue to reveal Santiago's deepest thoughts and feelings. For example, when Santiago is struggling to reel in the marlin, he



thinks to himself, "I wish I could see him. He is my brother." This internal monologue reveals Santiago's deep respect for the marlin and his understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things.

Hemingway's characterization of Santiago and the marlin is complex and nuanced. He creates two characters who are both believable and relatable. Santiago is a complex and well-developed character who embodies the human spirit's ability to overcome adversity. The marlin is a powerful and elusive creature that represents the challenges and obstacles that we all face in life.

#### **11.4. SUMMARY OF *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA***

*The Old Man and the Sea*, written by the renowned author Ernest Hemingway, is indeed a masterful novella that paints a vivid and poignant portrait of Santiago, a seasoned Cuban fisherman. Santiago's story is one of resilience, determination, and the enduring human spirit, set against the backdrop of the unforgiving and unpredictable sea.

The novella opens with Santiago's 84-day dry spell, during which he has not caught a single fish. This barren period reflects the harsh realities of a fisherman's life, where the line between sustenance and despair is drawn by the capricious nature of the sea. Hemingway's prose immerses the reader in Santiago's world, where the ocean is not just a source of livelihood but also a formidable adversary and a source of profound connection.

On the eighty-fifth day, Santiago embarks on a solitary voyage into the deep waters of the Gulf Stream. This departure from his usual fishing grounds symbolizes his determination to take risks and challenge the status quo. It is in these unfamiliar waters that he encounters the colossal marlin, an awe-inspiring embodiment of the sea's untamed power. Santiago's battle with this magnificent creature becomes the central focus of the novella.

The epic struggle between Santiago and the marlin unfolds over three relentless days and nights. Hemingway's narrative skillfully conveys the physical and emotional toll this battle takes on Santiago. Hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and the relentless elements of the open sea become constant companions in his quest. Despite these hardships, Santiago's unwavering determination remains resolute. The marlin represents not just a potential prize but also a challenge to Santiago's sense of identity and purpose. His struggle with the marlin becomes a metaphor for the broader human experience – the unyielding pursuit of one's goals and the resilience required to face life's challenges head-on.

The story takes a tragic turn when Santiago finally conquers the marlin. His monumental achievement is marred by the arrival of bloodthirsty sharks drawn by the scent of the marlin's blood. These predators symbolize the relentless forces of nature and the cruel indifference of the universe. Santiago's valiant adversary, which had become a symbol of his defiance in the face of the sea's cruelty, is reduced to mere bones. The sharks, in their merciless assault, snatch away the physical bounty of his triumph.

Despite this physical loss, Santiago's spirit remains indomitable. His journey, marked by suffering and sacrifice, ultimately becomes a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. He returns to shore with the skeletal remains of the marlin, a symbol of the intangible victory he has achieved. The novella's closing lines reveal the profound theme that Santiago is not defeated; he is, in fact, victorious in spirit. Hemingway's portrayal of Santiago's

character and his unwavering commitment to his goal demonstrates the capacity of the human spirit to endure and triumph against the harshest of odds, a theme that resonates deeply with readers and elevates "The Old Man and the Sea" to a timeless classic.

### 11.5. SYMBOLS, IMAGERY, AND MOTIFS IN THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA

Ernest Hemingway's novella *The Old Man and the Sea* is rich in symbolism, imagery, and motifs. These literary devices help to create a deep and meaningful story that explores universal themes such as the human spirit, the cycle of life and death, and the interconnectedness of all living things.

#### Symbols

- a) **The Marlin:** Within the narrative of *The Old Man and the Sea*, Marlin takes on a profound symbolic significance. It serves as a potent emblem of the myriad challenges and obstacles that confront individuals in their life journeys. Santiago's relentless battle with the marlin is emblematic of the indomitable human spirit's capacity to confront and surmount adversity. The Marlin's immense size and elusiveness mirror the formidable nature of life's trials, demanding unwavering determination and resilience to overcome.
- b) **The Sharks:** In contrast, the sharks that descend upon Santiago's prized Marlin carry a stark symbolism of death and destruction. They embody the relentless and malevolent forces that perpetually seek to undermine our pursuits and ambitions. Yet, Santiago's ultimate triumph over the sharks serves as a powerful testament to the enduring strength of the human spirit, demonstrating that even in the face of mortality and impending doom, one can emerge victorious.
- c) **The Lions:** Santiago's dreams of lions, which manifest in his moments of respite, hold a multi-layered symbolism. They represent his intrinsic strength and resilience, reflecting the enduring spirit that sustains him through the harshest trials. These dreams also underscore the interconnectedness of all living beings, highlighting the fundamental unity of the natural world and our place within it.
- d) **Joe DiMaggio:** The presence of Joe DiMaggio in Santiago's thoughts serves as a beacon of American masculinity and success. DiMaggio embodies the quintessential image of a strong, accomplished man, universally admired by society. Santiago's imaginative companionship with DiMaggio while out at sea reinforces his determination and motivation during his epic struggle against the marlin. DiMaggio symbolizes the aspirational qualities that many individuals strive to embody, offering Santiago a source of inspiration amidst the vast expanse of the ocean.
- e) **Imagery:** Hemingway's masterful use of imagery throughout the novella paints vivid and evocative pictures in the reader's mind. The sun-baked, unforgiving sea, the relentless pull of the fishing line, and the voracious sharks circling their prey all contribute to a rich tapestry of sensory experiences. This imagery not only enhances the narrative's emotional impact but also underscores the universality of Santiago's journey, making it a profound reflection of the human condition and the enduring human spirit's ability to confront, endure, and transcend life's trials and tribulations.

- f) **The Sea:** is a complex and multifaceted symbol. It represents the natural world, which is both nurturing and destructive. It is also a symbol of the human unconscious, from which creative ideas are drawn. It provides him with food and livelihood, but it is also home to the sharks that attack his marlin. The sea is also a powerful force of nature, capable of both beauty and cruelty. Santiago knows that the sea is unpredictable and dangerous, but he also respects its power and beauty. The sea can be seen as a symbol of the human unconscious. The unconscious is the part of the mind that contains our deepest thoughts, feelings, and desires. It is also the source of creativity and imagination. Santiago's struggle with the marlin can be seen as a metaphor for the creative process. Just as Santiago must use all of his skill and strength to land the marlin, the artist must use all of their talent and creativity to produce a work of art.

The sea is a complex and multifaceted symbol in the novel. It represents the natural world, the human unconscious, and the creative process. The sea is both nurturing and destructive, and Santiago accepts its duality, just as he accepts the quality of life. Hemingway uses vivid and evocative imagery to bring the story to life. He describes the beauty of the sea, the sky, and the creatures that inhabit them. He also describes the harsh realities of life as a fisherman, including the hunger, thirst, and exhaustion that Santiago experiences.

- g) **Manolin:** The boy Manolin represents hope and the future. He is also a symbol of the importance of human connection.
- h) **The Mast:** The mast of Santiago's skiff becomes a symbol of the cross, suggesting that Santiago's journey is a Christ-like one.

### Motifs

- a) **The Endless Cycle of Life and Death:** Hemingway weaves the theme of the life-death cycle throughout "The Old Man and the Sea." The marlin's demise serves as a poignant symbol, representing not only the passing of individual creatures but also the eternal cycle of birth and death inherent in all living things. Santiago's eventual triumph over the sharks further underscores the enduring principle that from the depths of destruction, new life can inevitably emerge, mirroring the perpetual rhythm of existence.
- b) **The Interconnectedness of All Living Beings:** Santiago's profound reverence for the sea and its diverse inhabitants reflects a deep understanding of the intricate web of life. He embraces his role as an integral part of nature, acknowledging both his interconnectedness with the natural world and his own mortality. The recurring dreams of lions in Santiago's slumber serve as potent symbols, illustrating the profound interconnectedness that binds all living beings together, emphasizing the unity that underlies the tapestry of existence.
- c) **The Resilience Forged Through Perseverance:** Santiago's compelling journey serves as a testament to the enduring value of perseverance. Even amid an arduous 84-day dry spell without a single catch, his story resonates with the unwavering commitment to his craft. Santiago's unyielding determination exemplifies the vital lesson that resilience and persistence can lead to ultimate success, regardless of the seemingly insurmountable obstacles faced.

- d) **The Dignity in All Forms of Labor:** Santiago's labor as a fisherman radiates with a profound sense of dignity and importance. He approaches his work with unwavering pride and steadfast dedication, refusing to surrender his belief in himself even when confronted by daunting adversities. Santiago's unwavering commitment underscores the universal message that all forms of work are imbued with inherent dignity, and individuals should take pride in their contributions to society, regardless of the nature of their labor.

### 11.6. SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. What is the significance of the title *The Old Man and the Sea*?
2. What are the themes in novella *The Old Man and the Sea*?
3. Attempt an essay on Hemmingway's characterization of the main character, Santiago?
4. Discuss Hemmingway's use of imagery and symbolism in *The Old Man and the Sea*?

### 11.7. SUGGESTED READINGS

- 1) Hemingway's Boat: Everything He Loved in Life and Letters by Paul Hendrickson
- 2) Hemingway's Cuba by Philip Brenner
- 3) Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story by Carlos Baker
- 4) Hemingway: A Biography by Jeffrey Meyers

### 11.8. GLOSSARY

1. Albacore: Longfin tuna
2. Brisa: Light breeze
3. Calambre: Muscle cramp
4. Carapaced: Hard-shelled
5. Fathom: Six feet (naut.)
6. Filament: Strand
7. Gaff: Fishhook
8. Gaunt: Emaciated
9. Grippe: Flu
10. Iridescent: Rainbow-colored
11. Mysticism: Esotericism
12. Phosphorescent: Luminescent

**Dr. K. Narasimha Rao**

# LESSON 12

## INVISIBLE MAN

--- Ralph Ellison

### OBJECTIVES

- To introduce the students to Ralph Ellison and his work, particularly the novel *Invisible Man*.
- To help students understand the historical and social context in which the novel was written.
- To analyze the novel's major themes, including race, identity, and the African American experience.
- To examine Ellison's use of literary devices, such as symbolism, imagery, and stream-of-consciousness narration.
- To develop students' critical thinking and analytical skills.
- To foster students' appreciation for literature and the arts.
- To inspire students to reflect on their own identities and experiences in relation to the novel.

### STRUCTURE

- 12.1. Ralph Ellison and his contribution to American Literature.
- 12.2. Importance of *The Invisible Man* and its place in American Literature.
- 12.3. Significance of the Title, *Invisible Man*
- 12.4. The Characters and their characterization
- 12.5. Themes in the novel
- 12.6. The Symbols, Imagery and Motifs
- 12.7. Summary of the Novel
- 12.8. Self-Assessment Questions
- 12.9. Suggested Readings

### 12.1 INTRODUCTION TO RALPH ELLISON AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TO AMERICAN LITERATURE

In the late 1940s, Ralph Ellison introduced a groundbreaking protagonist in his novel *Invisible Man* setting him apart from the characters created by the prominent black novelist of that era, Richard Wright. While Wright's characters often depicted anger, lack of education, and inarticulateness as consequences of societal oppression, Ellison's *Invisible Man* stood in stark contrast. Ellison's protagonist was educated, articulate, and self-aware. Ellison's perspective challenged prevailing notions about African-American culture and sensibility, countering the portrayal of black individuals as downtrodden and unsophisticated, as depicted by writers, sociologists, and politicians, both black and white. He argued instead that African-Americans had cultivated their own traditions, rituals, and a rich history that constituted a complex and cohesive culture, forming the bedrock of a profound sense of identity. When the protagonist encounters a yam seller named Petie Wheat straw in the streets of Harlem and

reflects on his childhood with deep emotion, his declaration, *I yam what I yam!* Encapsulates Ellison's message of embracing one's culture as a path to liberation.

Unlike Richard Wright, whose protest literature was deeply influenced by a harsh upbringing in the racially charged deep South, Ellison's more affirmative approach stemmed from a different background in Oklahoma. Oklahoma, a "frontier" state devoid of a legacy of slavery, offered a unique opportunity to explore racial fluidity between blacks and whites, even more so than in the North. Despite modest circumstances, the Ellisons in Oklahoma City were not among the most affluent, but Ralph had access to a quality education and the motivation to seek out mentors, both black and white, among the city's accomplished individuals. Ellison once noted that as a child, he observed two kinds of people: those who reserved their best attire for Sundays and those who dressed elegantly every day. He aspired to be among those who wore their *Sunday clothes* daily.

Ellison's lifelong receptiveness to the diverse culture surrounding him, beginning in Oklahoma City, became a crucial element in his creation of a unique perspective on literary modernism in *Invisible Man*. The novel draws upon African-American folklore, songs, the blues, jazz, and black cultural traditions such as "playing the dozens," much in the same way that T.S. Eliot and James Joyce incorporated references to classical Western and Eastern civilizations in their works *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*. What set Ellison apart was that his modernist narrative also served as a platform for conveying his own and the broader black identity, offering guidance to those who felt "invisible" and unseen. As "Time" magazine essayist Roger Rosenblatt aptly put it, "Ralph Ellison taught me what it is to be an American."

In Ralph Ellison's perspective, unlike that of protest writers and later proponents of black separatism, America provided a fertile ground for the exploration of authentic personal identities. He believed that it offered African-Americans the opportunity to craft their own unique culture. In Ellison's view, black and white cultures were intricately intertwined, influencing nearly every aspect of American life. This influence extended to music, language, folklore, clothing styles, and even sports. Moreover, he saw the role of the writer as transcending the boundaries of class, race, and religion to illuminate the unity of the American experience. Ellison's forward-thinking views were somewhat ahead of his time, often out of sync with both the literary and political landscapes of black and white America. It would take until the 1980s for his perspectives to gain widespread acceptance.

Ralph Ellison's own life was marked by a diverse range of interests, mirroring his integrative imagination. He displayed expertise in fishing, hunting, car engine repair, and the assemble radios and stereo systems. His knowledge of textiles was so extensive that his haberdasher in New York remarked that Ellison knew more about fabrics than anyone he had ever encountered. Saul Bellow, his friend, referred to him as a "thoroughgoing expert on the raising of African violets." Ellison also demonstrated proficiency in sculpture, music, and photography. His vast intellectual and creative pursuits may have contributed to the ambitious, decades-long effort he devoted to his eagerly anticipated second novel, which he envisioned as a three-book saga encompassing the entire American experience. Tragically, the novel remained unfinished when Ellison passed away in New York in 1994 at the age of eighty.

Ellison's groundbreaking novel *Invisible Man* and the essays found in *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory* were transformative in reshaping one's understanding of race,

identity, and the essence of American identity. Through these works, Ellison not only propelled American literature forward but also played a pivotal role in shaping and clarifying the discourse surrounding race in the United States. Ellison's perspective transcended racial boundaries, presenting the predicament of African-Americans in America as a universal metaphor for the broader human struggle to establish a meaningful identity in a tumultuous and sometimes indifferent world. The enduring influence of Ellison's writing is evident in the wide-ranging impact he has had on subsequent writers, from Toni Morrison and Charles Johnson to Kurt Vonnegut and the late Joseph Heller. Even fifty years after the publication of *Invisible Man*, Ralph Ellison's voice continues to resonate, speaking to a diverse and appreciative audience.

## 12.2 IMPORTANCE OF *THE INVISIBLE MAN* AND ITS PLACE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Ralph Ellison, the grandson of former slaves, was born in 1914 in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and spent much of his upbringing in Tulsa, Oklahoma. His father worked in construction, while his mother served as a domestic worker and was actively involved with the local Socialist Party. During his youth, Ellison developed a deep passion for jazz music and formed close bonds with musicians associated with the regional band, Walter Page's Blue Devils. Many of these musicians would later become part of Count Basie's renowned big band in the late 1930s. Ellison too learnt to play the cornet and trumpet with aspirations of pursuing a career as a jazz musician.

In 1933, he went to Oklahoma to embark on a music education at the Tuskegee Institute in Tuskegee, Alabama. Established in 1881 by the prominent black educator Booker T. Washington, the institute, now known as Tuskegee University, stood as one of the nation's leading historically black colleges. It would later serve as a model for the fictional black college attended by the narrator in Ellison's magnum opus, *Invisible Man*. His journey led him to New York City in 1936, where he settled in the vibrant Harlem community. While working for the Federal Writers' Project, he forged significant friendships with key African-American literary figures of the era, including Langston Hughes and Richard Wright. Ellison also established a meaningful connection with the distinguished jazz writer and sociologist, Albert Murray, resulting in a substantial and influential literary correspondence collected in the book *Trading Twelves*.

Ellison enlisted in the Merchant Marines during World War II. After the war, he was awarded a Rosenwald Fellowship, which provided the opportunity to write his groundbreaking novel, *Invisible Man*. The first chapter of this remarkable work was published in 1948 in the "Magazine of the Year," with the full novel being published in 1952.

His *Invisible Man* employs a dynamic and improvisational narrative style, directly inspired by his experiences with jazz performances. The novel encompasses a broad spectrum of tones, ranging from realism to surrealism, from tragedy to biting satire, and even near-slapstick comedy. Laden with symbolism and metaphor, the novel showcases Ellison's virtuosity in employing diverse styles and tones. Rooted in the African-American experience in America and the universal struggle for individuality, *Invisible Man* achieved remarkable success. It stayed sixteen weeks on the best-seller list and earned Ellison the National Book Award in 1953. Considered a landmark publication, the novel received acclaim from influential writers like Saul Bellow and garnered praise from critics such as Irving Howe.

Some critics even hailed it as the most significant American novel to emerge after World War II.

Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* drew significant inspiration from the existentialist thought of several twentieth-century French writers, famous figures like Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Existentialism delved into profound questions of individuality and the quest for meaning in a universe that often appeared devoid of inherent purpose. Ellison skillfully adapted these universal themes to the specific context of the African-American experience, marked by the weight of oppression and prejudice in the United States. Furthermore, his novel engaged deeply with the tradition of African-American social discourse.

Within *Invisible Man*, the character of Dr. Bledsoe provides a powerful repudiation of Booker T. Washington's philosophy, which advocated that black individuals should strive for economic success as a means to attain racial equality. Ellison's work also critiques the ideology of Black Nationalism, as represented by the character Ras the Exhorter, who echoes the principles of Marcus Garvey.

Despite the tremendous success of *Invisible Man* Ralph Ellison did not publish another novel during his lifetime. Instead, he released two collections of essays: *Shadow Act* in the 1960s and *Going to the Territory* in the 1980s. Ellison devoted his later years to a vast and ambitious novel project, which regrettably remained incomplete upon his passing in 1994. His legacy included over 2,000 pages of unedited and unfinished manuscript. In a truncated and edited form, this manuscript was eventually published five years after his death under the title "Juneteenth," receiving generally unfavorable reviews from critics.

### 12.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TITLE, *THE INVISIBLE*

The title of Ralph Ellison's novel *The Invisible Man* is significant on a number of levels. First, it literally refers to the narrator's invisibility, which is both physical and symbolic. The narrator is invisible in the sense that he is ignored and dehumanized by the white society around him. He is also invisible in the sense that he is struggling to find his own identity and place in the world.

On a deeper level, the title of the novel is a metaphor for the African American experience in America. African Americans have long been invisible in the sense that they have been ignored and marginalized by white society. They have also been invisible in the sense that their stories and experiences have been largely ignored by American literature and culture.

### 12.4 THE CHARACTERS AND THEIR CHARACTERIZATION

**The narrator** is an unnamed black man who is struggling to find his place in the world. He is intelligent and ambitious, but he is also frustrated and disillusioned by the racism and discrimination he faces. The narrator is a complex and well-developed character. He is both flawed and sympathetic. He is capable of great acts of courage and kindness, but he is also capable of anger, violence, and self-destruction.

**Dr. Bledsoe** is a black man who has achieved success in white society. He is the president of a black college and a respected leader in the black community. However, Dr. Bledsoe is also a complex and contradictory figure. He is both admired and hated by the narrator. He is a



symbol of success for African Americans, but he is also a symbol of the compromises that African Americans must make in order to succeed in white society.

### Characterization

Ellison uses a variety of techniques to characterize the narrator and Dr. Bledsoe. He uses physical descriptions, dialogue, and internal monologue to reveal the characters' thoughts, feelings, and motivations. For example, Ellison describes the narrator as a "man without a name." This physical description is symbolic of the narrator's invisibility and his struggle to find his identity. He uses dialogue to reveal the characters' thoughts and feelings.

For example, when the narrator first meets Dr. Bledsoe, he is impressed by Dr. Bledsoe's success and charisma. However, as the narrator gets to know Dr. Bledsoe better, he begins to see his flaws. Dr. Bledsoe is a complex and contradictory figure, and Ellison's dialogue reveals his different facets.

Ellison uses internal monologue to reveal the narrator's deepest thoughts and feelings. For example, the narrator often thinks about his grandfather's deathbed line: "Son, keep your eye on the prize." This line represents the narrator's desire to succeed in white society.

However, the narrator also realizes that the "prize" is often out of reach for African Americans. His characterization of the narrator and Dr. Bledsoe is complex and nuanced. He creates two characters who are both believable and relatable. The narrator is a complex and well-developed character who represents the African American experience in America. Dr. Bledsoe is a complex and contradictory figure who represents the compromises that African Americans must make in order to succeed in white society.

### Analysis of Characters

- I. **The Protagonist:** The central character in the novel, the protagonist remains unnamed, embodying the "invisible man" of the story's title. A black man living in 1930s America, he perceives himself as invisible because society refuses to recognize his true self beyond the stereotypes and racial biases forced upon him. Although intelligent, deeply introspective, and gifted with language, the narrator's experiences reveal his youthful naivety. As the story unfolds, his illusions are gradually shattered through his college years, his employment at Liberty Paints, and his involvement with the political organization known as the Brotherhood. Shedding his metaphorical blindness, he grapples to construct an identity that embraces his complexity as an individual while honoring his social responsibilities.
- II. **Brother Jack:** Brother Jack serves as the white and unwaveringly loyal leader of the Brotherhood, a political group professing to champion the rights of the socially marginalized. Initially appearing compassionate, intelligent, and benevolent, Brother Jack ultimately reveals racist beliefs, reducing people to mere tools. His glass eye and red hair symbolize his blindness and commitment to communism, respectively.
- III. **Tod Clifton:** An African-American member of the Brotherhood residing in Harlem, Tod Clifton possesses passion, good looks, eloquence, and intelligence. He eventually severs ties with the Brotherhood, leaving it unclear whether he experienced a falling-out or simply became disillusioned with the organization. He begins selling Sambo dolls on the

streets, a complex act that appears to simultaneously perpetuate and satirize the offensive stereotype of the submissive and indolent slave represented by the dolls.

- IV. **Ras the Exhorter:** A charismatic, fiery, and stout figure, Ras ardently advocates for Black Nationalism, advocating for the violent overthrow of white supremacy. Ellison appears to draw parallels between Ras and Marcus Garvey, a prominent Black Nationalist leader who believed that freedom for black individuals was unattainable within white society. A maverick, Ras often opposes the Brotherhood and the narrator, frequently inciting riots in Harlem.
- V. **Rinehart:** A surreal figure never physically present in the narrative but spoken of extensively through reputation. Rinehart adopts an array of identities, including pimp, bookie, and preacher who expounds on the concept of "invisibility." When the narrator dons dark glasses in Harlem, many mistake him for Rinehart. The narrator realizes that Rinehart's shape-shifting ability represents a life of profound freedom, complexity, and opportunity. However, he also acknowledges that this adaptability fosters a cynical and manipulative lack of authenticity. Rinehart plays a pivotal role in the novel's exploration of identity and self-conception.
- VI. **Dr. Bledsoe:** As the president of the narrator's college, Dr. Bledsoe proves to be a selfish, ambitious, and treacherous figure. He is a black man who wears a façade of servility in the white community to maintain his status and power. Driven by his desire to preserve his position, he disavows his own race and puts his personal interests ahead of the welfare of his community. He would see that every black man in the country is lynched before he would give up his position of authority.
- VII. **Mr. Norton:** one of the rich white trustees on the narrator's college. Mr. Norton is a narcissistic man who treats the narrator as a tally on his scorecard that is, as proof that he's liberal-minded and philanthropic. Norton's wistful feedback about his daughter upload an eerie nice of longing to his fascination with the tale of Jim True blood's incest.
- VIII. **Reverend Homer A. Barbee:** A preacher from Chicago who visits the narrator's college. Reverend Barbee's fervent reward of the Founder's "imaginative and prescient" moves an inadvertently ironic be aware, because he himself is blind. With Barbee's first name, Ellison makes connection with the Greek poet Homer, any other blind orator who praised tremendous heroes in his epic poems.
- IX. **Jim True blood:** An uneducated black guy who impregnates his very own daughter and who lives at the outskirts of the narrator's college campus. The students and faculty of the university view Jim True blood as a shame to the black community. To Trueblood's surprise, but whites have proven an elevated interest in him for the reason that story of his incest unfold.
- X. **The Veteran:** An institutionalized black guy who makes bitterly insightful feedback approximately race relations. Claiming to be a graduate of the narrator's college, the veteran tries to reveal the pitfalls of the college's ideology. His ambitious candor angers both the narrator and Mr. Norton the veteran exposes their blindness and hypocrisy and factors out the sinister nature of their dating. Despite the fact that society has deemed him "shell-greatly surprised" and insane, the veteran proves to be the only person who speaks the fact within the first a part of the novel.

- XI. **Emerson:** The son of one of the wealthy white trustees (whom the textual content also calls Emerson) of the narrator's university. The more youthful Emerson reads the intended advice from Dr. Bledsoe and reveals Bledsoe's treachery to the narrator. He expresses sympathy for the narrator and enables him get a task, but he remains too preoccupied with his personal issues to assist the narrator in any meaningful manner.
- XII. **Mary:** A serene and motherly black lady with whom the narrator stays after studying that the guy's residence has banned him. Mary treats him kindly and even lets him live free of charge. She nurtures his black identification and urges him to end up active within the fight for racial equality.

## 12.5 THEMES IN THE NOVEL

### **The Retrogressive force of Racism:**

Because the narrator of *Invisible man* struggles to reach at a theory of his very own identification, he finds his efforts complex by the reality that he is a black guy residing in a racist American society. During the novel, the narrator unearths himself passing through a sequence of communities, from the freedom Paints plant to the Brotherhood, with every microcosm endorsing a distinct idea of ways the blacks have to behave in society. As the narrator attempts to define himself through the values and expectations imposed on him, he unearths that, in every case, the prescribed position limits his complexity as a man or woman and forces him to play an artificial part.

In the long run, the narrator realizes that the racial prejudice of others causes them to see him best as they need to look after him, He concludes that he's invisible, in the sense that the arena is filled with blind individuals who can't or will not see his real nature.

Correspondingly, he remains not able to act consistent with his very own persona and will become literally not able to be himself. Even though the narrator to start with, embraces his invisibility in an effort to throw off the limiting nature of stereotype, ultimately, he unearths this tactic too passive. He determines to emerge from his underground "hibernation," to make his own contributions to society as a complex character. He will try to exert his power on the sector out of doors of society's device of prescribed roles. By making proactive contributions to society, he will force others to recognize him, to acknowledge the existence of ideals and behaviors outside their prejudiced expectancies.

### **The constraints of Ideology**

Over the direction of the unconventional, the narrator realizes that the complexity of his internal self is limited no longer only with the aid of people's racism, but also through their greater popular ideologies. He reveals that the ideologies advanced with the aid of establishments prove too simplistic and one-dimensional to serve something as complicated and multidimensional as human identity. The novel contains many examples of ideology, from the tamer, ingratiating ideology of Booker T. Washington subscribed to at the narrator's college to the extra violent, separatist ideology voiced by Ras the Exhorter. The text makes its factor maximum strongly in its discussion of the Brotherhood. The narrator is taught an ideology that promises to keep "the humans," though, in reality, it constantly limits and betrays the freedom of the character. The radical implies that life is simply too rich, too diverse, and too unpredictable to be bound up well in an ideology; like jazz, of which the

narrator is particularly fond of lifestyles reach the heights of its beauty in the course of moments of improvisation and marvel.

### **The danger of combating Stereotype with Stereotype**

The narrator isn't the most effective African American in the book to have felt the limitations of racist stereotyping. At the same time as he tries to break out the grip of prejudice on any character stage, he encounters different blacks who attempt to prescribe a defense approach for all African individuals. Each provides a theory of the meant right way to be black in the US and attempts to outline how blacks have to act according with this concept. The espousers of those theories believe everyone who acts contrary to their prescriptions betrays the race. In the end, however, the narrator finds that such prescriptions best counter stereotype with stereotype and update one proscribing position with every other.

Early in the novel, the narrator's grandfather explains his notion that with a purpose to undermine and mock racism, blacks need to exaggerate their servility to whites. The narrator's university, represented by way of Dr. Bledsoe, thinks that blacks can achieve success by way of operating industriously and adopting the manners and speech of whites..

## **12.6 THE SYMBOLS, IMAGERY AND MOTIFS**

### **Blindness**

Probably the most critical motif in Invisible man is that of blindness, which recurs at some point of the novel and typically represents how people willfully avoid seeing and confronting the truth. The narrator time and again notes that humans's incapability to see what they wish not to look their incapacity to see that which their prejudice doesn't permit them to peer has compelled him right into a existence of powerful invisibility. But prejudice towards others isn't always the only type of blindness inside the ebook. Many figures also refuse to well known truths about themselves or their groups, and this refusal emerges continually within the imagery of blindness. For that reason, the lads who combat within the "struggle royal" wear blindfolds, symbolizing their powerlessness to recognize their exploitation on the arms of the white men. The Founder's statue on the university has empty eyes, signifying his ideology's cursed forget of racist realities. Blindness also afflicts Reverend Homer A. Barbee, who romanticizes the Founder, and Brother Jack, who's discovered to lack an eye a lack that he has dissimulated by means of carrying a tumbler eye. The narrator himself experiences moments of blindness, inclusive of in chapter sixteen whilst he addresses the black network beneath good sized, blinding lights. In each case, failure of sight corresponds to a loss of insight.

### **Invisibility**

Due to the fact he has determined that the arena is complete of blind men and sleepwalkers who can't see him for what he is, the narrator describes himself as an "invisible guy." The motif of invisibility pervades the radical, frequently manifesting itself hand in hand with the motif of blindness one man or woman becomes invisible because another is blind. At the same time as the radical nearly continually portrays blindness in a negative mild. Invisibility can bring disempowerment it can additionally carry freedom and mobility.

Indeed, it is the freedom the narrator derives from his anonymity that allows him to tell his story. Furthermore, both the veteran at the Golden Day and the narrator's grandfather seem to suggest invisibility as a position from which one might also correctly exert strength over others, or as a minimum undermine others' strength, without being stuck. The narrator demonstrates this strength within the Prologue, whilst he actually attracts upon electrical energy from his hiding vicinity underground; the electrical company is aware of its losses but can't find their source. At the quite of the unconventional, however, the narrator has decided that whilst invisibility might also convey safety, movements undertaken in secrecy cannot in the end have any significant impact. One may also undermine one's enemies from a position of invisibility, but one cannot make enormous adjustments to the world. Thus, within the Epilogue the narrator decides to emerge from his hibernation, resolved to face society and make a visible distinction.

### **The Sambo Doll and the Coin bank**

The coin financial institution inside the form of the grinning black man and Tod Clifton's dancing Sambo doll serve comparable functions within the novel, every representing degrading black stereotypes and the harmful power of prejudice. The coin financial institution, which portrays a grinning slave who eats coins, embodies the idea of the coolest slave who fawns over white guys for trivial rewards. This stereotype literally follows the narrator, for even after he has smashed the financial institution and attempted to discard the pieces. Additionally, the statue's hasty swallowing of cash mirrors the behavior of the black youths in the "battle royal" of bankruptcy 1, as they scramble to gather the cash on the electrified carpet, reinforcing the white stereotype of blacks as servile and humble.

The Sambo doll is made in the image of the Sambo slave, who, in step with white stereotype; lazy but obsequious. Moreover, as a dancing doll, it represents the bad stereotype of the black entertainer who laughs and sings for whites. Even as the coin bank illustrates the energy of stereotype to follow a person in his or her each motion, the Sambo doll illustrates stereotype's electricity to control a person's movement's altogether. Stereotype and prejudice, just like the invisible strings by way of which the doll is made to transport, regularly determine and manipulate the range of movement of which someone is successful.

### **The liberty Paints Plant**

The liberty Paints plant serves as a complicated metaphor for American society in regards to race. Like America, it defines itself with notions of liberty and freedom however contains a deeply ingrained racism in its maximum primary operations. Optic White is made through a technique that entails the aggregate of a number of dark-colored chemicals, one of which seems *lifeless black*. but the dark colors disappear into the swirling mixture, and the paint emerges a glowing white, displaying no hint of its true components. The labor relations within the plant appear a similar pattern: black employees carry out all the crucial labor, but white people promote the paint and make the highest wages, by no means acknowledging their reliance upon their darker-skinned counterparts. This dynamic, too, appears to reflect a larger one at paintings within America on the whole.

## **12.7 SUMMARY OF THE NOVEL**

*Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison is a semi-autobiographical novel that delves into the journey of an unnamed black man navigating the challenges of the Jim Crow South and

ultimately grappling with disillusionment regarding the American Dream. The novel is structured into three distinct parts, each of which tracks the narrator's progressively radicalized response to the pervasive racism and oppression he encounters.

### **Part I**

The story commences with the narrator, a recent college graduate, delivering a valedictory address to a white audience. Although lauded for his intelligence and eloquence, the speaker's address includes a veiled warning, cautioning him to adhere to societal expectations. This warning resonates deeply with the narrator, spurring him to prove himself within the white-dominated world.

Following his graduation, the narrator relocates to New York City in pursuit of employment. He secures a position with Dr. Bledsoe, the black president of a college fervently committed to showcasing Negro progress. Dr. Bledsoe assigns the narrator to work at the Liberty Paints plant, a white owned company that has recently hired its first black laborer's Liberty Paints plant. Assigned to hazardous and menial tasks, he endures constant scrutiny and surveillance from his white colleagues and superiors. Ultimately, the narrator succumbs to his pent-up frustration, resulting in a violent altercation with a white co-worker and his subsequent dismissal.

### **Part II**

After his dismissal from the Liberty Paints plant, the narrator aligns himself with the Brotherhood, a communist organization dedicated to advocate racial equality and social justice. While initially drawn to the Brotherhood's ideals, he becomes disenchanted with its rigid and authoritarian methods. The Brotherhood assigns the narrator to lead a protest against a white-owned grocery store. The demonstration takes a violent turn, leading to the narrator's arrest and brutalization by the police. Subsequently, a group of black nationalists secure his release, perceiving him as a martyr to their cause. The narrator becomes a leader in the black nationalist movement, but is betrayed and shot by his own associates. The narrator survives and goes into hiding.

### **Part III**

In the novel's third segment, the narrator adopts a reclusive existence. He resides in a basement apartment in Harlem, dedicating his days to reading and writing. Eventually, he emerges from his self-imposed isolation and joins a circle of black intellectuals committed to forging a new society founded on principles of freedom and equality.

## **12.8 SELF-ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS**

- 1) Discuss the significance of the narrator's invisibility in the novel. How does his invisibility affect his relationships with others, his perception of himself, and his understanding of the world around him?
- 2) Analyze the role of the Brotherhood in the narrator's journey. How does the Brotherhood's ideology appeal to the narrator at first? How does he eventually

become disillusioned with the Brotherhood, and what does this disillusionment reveal about his own evolution?

- 3) Compare and contrast the narrator's relationship with Dr. Bledsoe and his relationship with Mr. Norton. What do these two relationships reveal about the different ways that black people are treated in American society?
- 4) Discuss the importance of symbolism in the novel. What are some of the key symbols in *Invisible Man*, and how do they contribute to the meaning of the novel?
- 5) Analyze the narrator's character development throughout the novel. How does he change and grow over the course of the story? What does his character arc reveal about the themes of identity, racism, and the American Dream?

## 12.9 SUGGESTED READINGS

- 1) "Invisible Man" by Ralph Ellison (1952).
- 2) "Shadow and Act" by Ralph Ellison (1964).
- 3) "Going to the Territory" by Ralph Ellison (1986).
- 4) "Ralph Ellison: A Biography" by Arnold Rampersad (2007).
- 5) "Ralph Ellison and the Politics of the Novel" by H. Ralph Ellison and the Politics of the Novel" by H. Lawrence Freeman (1987).
- 6) "Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: A Casebook" edited by John F. Callahan (2004).
- 7) "Invisible Man: Race and Identity" edited by Robert G. O'Meally (1995).
- 8) "Reading *Invisible Man*: A Reader's Companion" by Marc C. Conner (2007).
- 9) "Invisible Man: An Interpretation" by Stanley Edgar Hyman (1953).
- 10) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph\\_Ellison](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph_Ellison)

**Dr. E. Bhavani**

(404EG21)

**MODEL QUESTION PAPER**  
**M.A. DEGREE EXAMINATION**  
**Fourth Semester**  
**English**  
**Paper IV — American Literature - II**

**Time : Three hours**

**Maximum : 70 marks**

**Answer ONE question from each Unit.**  
**All questions carry equal marks.**

1. (a) Write short notes on any FOUR of the following:
  - (i) Imagism
  - (ii) Feminism
  - (iii) Black Literature
  - (iv) Existentialism
  - (v) Expressionistic Drama
  - (vi) Absurd Theatre

Or

(b) Identify what characterizes American Literature with special reference to the prescribed texts.
  
2. (a) Bring out the major themes of the prescribed poems of Wallace Stevens.

Or

(b) Identify and analyze the philosophy of Robert Frost with reference to his prescribed poems.
  
3. (a) Discuss the de-humanizing impact of Capitalism on the American working class as depicted in Hairy Ape.

Or

(b) Bring out the themes of Poppies in July, and comment on their cultural significance.
  
4. (a) Treat Death of a Salesman as the failure of American Dream.

Or

(b) Elucidate the absurdist elements in who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf.
  
5. (a) Unravel the major themes of The Old and the sea, and comment on their relevance to the American Spirit.

Or

(b) Comment on the title, The Invisible Man, and establish its racist connotations.